

Chapter 14:

A Virtuous Circle?

This final chapter highlights the major findings of this book and outlines an alternative interpretation of the evidence whereby the process of political communications can be understood as a 'virtuous circle', a ratchet that, in the long-term, gradually reinforces the activism of the active. This interpretation remains theoretical, we lack direct proof, but it does make sense of the consistent patterns found throughout the book. The conclusions echo an earlier era of political communications research of the Columbia school, unfashionable in recent years, when the news media were widely believed to exert a positive force in democracy.

The accounts of videomalaise discussed in this book claim that coverage of public affairs by the news media contributes towards civic disengagement, including ignorance of public affairs, disenchantment with government, and political apathy. In understanding accounts of videomalaise it helps to draw a clear distinction between the explanans and explanandum. Authors agree about the *effects* of videomalaise but differ in the reasons given for this phenomenon.

The modern idea of videomalaise originated with the Langs in the 1960s, developed with the work of Michael Robinson in the mid-1970s, and gained credibility as it was subsequently expanded, with variations on a theme, by different American and European scholars in the 1990s. This idea spread more widely as it fed a mood of self-doubt and angst in contemporary American journalism. In recent years dissenting voices in the literature have been overwhelmed by the current popularity of videomalaise. Many accounts imply a general pattern that, if true, should be evident across post-industrial societies. Others provide a narrower focus, suggesting a more purely American phenomenon. Many stress the distinct role of television journalism (Robinson) and newspapers (Miller). Yet another perspective, not directly examined in this book, looks even more broadly at the association between watching television entertainment, social trust and engagement in voluntary associations and community affairs (Putnam). Another strand in the literature criticizes the political marketing techniques used by politicians, spin doctors, image consultants, and pollsters. As already stressed in Chapter 1, although the term originated with Robinson, there is no single canonical theory of videomalaise which influenced all subsequent writers, rather there are multiple perspectives in the literature. But by the 1990s a broad consensus had emerged that some, or all, practices in political communication have contributed towards public disenchantment with civic life.

Understanding videomalaise matters because concern about the impact of the news media has rippled out well beyond a small circle of scholars to become fashionable among policymakers, journalists and broadcasters. In the United States there is much self-doubt within the industry; the majority of American journalists believe, for example, that the press pays too little attention to complex issues, blurs the distinction between reporting and commentary, is out of touch with the public, and is too cynical¹. "*A large majority of news professionals sense a degradation of the culture of news,*" Kovach and Rosensteil suggest, "*From one that was stepped in verification and a steadfast respect for the facts, towards one that favours argument, opinion-mongering, haste and infotainment.*" Instead of covering political

events - such as the Lewinsky affair or gun violence or the GOP primaries, American journalism seems increasingly transfixed by American journalism, looking at itself obsessively in an endless hall of mirrors. Like night follows day, the first wave of stories concern 'real' events; the second bemoans how poorly the news media covered the events. In Europe too, although the debate seems more muted, there are periodic bursts of angst about the standards of journalism, often surrounding coverage of particular events by the more aggressive paparazzi and checkbook tabloids. Concern about the news media has also spread to the public². According to the 1995-97 World Values survey, less than a third of the public had any confidence in the press in Britain, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany, and similar proportions trusted television in Switzerland, Germany, Australia and the United States.

The Emergence of Post-Modern Communications

Before evaluating how far the news media fulfils its democratic functions we need to agree upon some common normative standards. Theories of representative democracy suggest that the news media should act as a civic forum providing serious and extended political coverage for all voices in society, as a watchdog checking abuses of civil and political liberties, and as a mobilizing agent encouraging learning, stimulating interest, and encouraging participation in public affairs. To analyze whether the news media fulfill these functions we can draw a distinction between the production, contents and effects of political communications. The central thesis of this book is that although the structure of the news industry and the process of political campaigning has undoubtedly altered almost beyond recognition from the post-war era of wireless airwaves, inky linotype and town hall meetings, it is far less clear that developments have eroded the standards of political coverage, still less contributed towards political malaise. Instead in Europe and the United States, due to a 'virtuous circle', attention to the news media gradually reinforces civic engagement, just as civic engagement strengthens attention to the news.

The News Industry

Part II of the book describes how the structure of the news industry has been transformed in recent decades by technological, economic and political developments common to post-industrial societies. Rather than new media displacing the old, these developments have created a proliferation and diversification of news sources, formats, and levels. There is widespread concern that serious and in-depth reporting of government, public policy issues and international affairs has been increasingly displaced by 'infotainment' or 'tabloidization', with more and more human-interest stories about popular celebrities, consumer affairs, and scandal.

Yet the most plausible interpretation of the evidence is that many post-industrial societies have seen a diversification in the channels, levels, and formats of political communications that have broadened the scope, reach and audience for news, at both highbrow and popular levels. Newspaper sales have not declined in post-industrial societies, the proportion of regular readers of European newspapers has doubled in the last three decades, and the social profile of readers has broadened. If the definition and scope of 'news' stories has widened across diverse outlets, so that today we often see less about

events in the White House, No. 10, and the Kremlin, and more about the latest studies of cancer or news about the popular arts, this tendency may challenge old-fashioned (male?) assumptions of what constitutes 'real' or hard news. The amount of news shown on public service TV in OECD countries has tripled in the last thirty years, not contracted. Three-quarters of all Europeans watch TV news everyday, up from half three decades earlier. Even in the United States, the country where criticism of the quality of journalism has been harshest, *C-SPAN* coexists with *MTV*, the *New York Times* with the *New York Post*, the *Jerry Springer Show* with *Nightline*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* with *Playboy*. The diversification of the market means that in many sectors, quality journalism, serious electoral news, and thoughtful coverage of policy debates remains strong and flourishing, along with the tabloid trash.

Post-Modern Campaigning

Campaigns have been transformed by these changes in the news industry and also by the widespread adoption of professional political marketing. As with developments in the media, new forms of electioneering essentially supplement, rather than replace, older techniques.

The book conceptualizes the evolution of these developments as stages representing the pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras of campaigning. The traditional techniques of door-to-door party canvassing, town meetings and local hustings, volunteer grassroots labour, community mobilizing and leadership tours with standard stump speeches, supplemented by a partisan-sympathizing press, were the primary forms of campaign communications at least until the 1950s and the rise of the Television Age.

The modern campaign, which predominated from the early 1960s until the late 1980s, was characterized by greater professionalization as more specialist advisors were employed by central party headquarters, and the techniques of public opinion polling and market research were brought into political marketing. The campaign lengthened and costs rose as volunteer labour was displaced by hired guns. The central focus of attention became the publicity generated in television studios. The development of political marketing techniques raised fears of a widening rift between politicians, surrounded by a coterie of professional advisors, but increasingly isolated from direct connections with voters.

The growth of post-modern campaigning, which emerged in many countries with the rise of the Internet and other new media in the 1990s, has the potential to restore some of the older forms of campaign interactivity. Use of party intranets, online discussion groups, party web sites, email and even 'old' media in new guises, like talk radio, can be characterized as located somewhere between the traditional and modern forms of campaigning. The new types of interactivity remain under development, and these channels have probably gone much further in some societies which are more fully wired, like the US, Sweden and Finland, than in others like Italy and Portugal. But analysis of Internet users suggests that newer forms of campaign communications supplement older ones, rather than replacing them. Even in the United States, the proportion of citizens active through traditional forms of campaigning remains remarkably stable in the post-war era. Political uses of the Internet, while primarily empowering the most active, add another layer of complexity to elections.

The Impact on Civic Engagement

How have structural developments in political communications influenced political knowledge, trust and mobilization? The more pessimistic scenario suggests that the news media in general, and television news in particular, have fuelled political disenchantment. Much of the literature, however, focuses on changes in the news industry without looking directly at public opinion.

The analysis in this book suggests two main conclusions. The weaker version of the videomalaise thesis claims that a consistent pattern of negative news erodes *specific* support for particular leaders, governments, or policies, for example that extensive coverage of George W. Bush's 'youthful indiscretions' can reduce his popularity, or that bloody pictures of school shootings diminishes support for the NRA. From the evidence reviewed here, this version does seem convincing. Chapter 9 shows that a persistently Euroskeptic press did damage early public confidence in the euro. News coverage of Community affairs was usually quite limited, most routine European Union business went unreported. When EU affairs were reported, however, newspapers and television tended to provide a steady diet of bad news about Brussels. The extent of the bias was by no means large but it was consistent. When the public reads stories about the EU, they are more likely to form an impression of inefficiency, incompetency and failure than of European cooperation and good governance. Moreover, this influenced the public; monthly fluctuations in the direction of news coverage of the euro were significantly related to public opinion on this issue. Negative news probably reduced public support for the new currency.

Yet does attention to the news media produce any deeper signs of civic malaise, in Europe or the United States? After all, public support for particular issues, leaders, or governments can be expected to rise and fall as part of 'normal' politics, without thereby undermining more deep-rooted faith in the political system. The stronger version of the videomalaise argument claims that news coverage directly harms public engagement, for example that strategic frames or negative news activate political cynicism.

The second major conclusion from this study proved contrary to this thesis. The survey evidence in the United States and Western Europe consistently offers no support for the claim that attention towards the news media in general, and towards television news in particular, contributes towards deep-rooted indicators of civic malaise and an erosion of diffuse support for the political system.

Successive tests established that those most exposed to the news media and party campaigns consistently proved more knowledgeable, not less; more trusting towards government and the political system, not less; and more likely to participate in election campaigns, not less. These positive associations are found in a succession of models, in Europe and the United States, despite a battery of structural and attitudinal controls that could plausibly affect media use and civic engagement. The association between use of the news media and civic engagement was often only modest. Given the limited measures available to gauge news exposure, however, the fact that the results proved significant and remarkably consistent across different datasets, in different years, in different countries, and with different dependent variables, increased confidence in the reliability of the results. No

single finding can be regarded as decisive, there is no elegant and succinct way to test videomalaise, but the weight of cumulative evidence was ultimately persuasive.

Therefore even if we accept the videomalaise claim that the structure of the news industry and the pattern of political coverage have changed in recent decades, as working assumptions, this still does not mean that the news media contribute towards civic malaise. Let us assume the worst, namely that political news has become more negative, campaign stories commonly adopt a strategic frame, the popular press and tabloid TV devote more attention to gaudy sensationalism than serious public affairs, and the Internet has far more sites devoted to porn than politics. Yet, even if we go along with the multiple criticisms of modern journalism, the survey evidence demonstrates that attention to the news media is not associated with public ignorance, political cynicism, and electoral apathy. If there have been any systematic changes in journalism, these have not had the dismal effects upon civic engagement that so many fear.

A Virtuous Circle?

Certain potential criticisms to this argument deserve special attention. One response to the European evidence is that perhaps the videomalaise thesis could be a case of 'American exceptionalism'. After all, previous studies in Europe have found little empirical support for videomalaise³. Differences in news systems, historical experiences, and political cultures could, perhaps, make the United States different to other post-industrial societies. Yet a direct examination of survey evidence in the US provided no support for the videomalaise thesis at individual-level. Those most exposed to the news media and campaigns in America proved more politically engaged, not less, a pattern that was remarkably similar to that in Europe, strengthening the conviction that we have established reliable generalizations that can be found in many post-industrial societies. Attention to the news media proved either positively linked to a wide range of indicators of civic engagement in the US and Europe, or neutral in its effects. People who regularly watched, read or surfed the news usually had greater political knowledge, trust and participation, even after controlling for their social background and prior political interest.

Another potential criticism is that the results could be a methodological artifact. It could be argued that we have only analyzed individual-level effects of exposure to the news media, among the most regular readers and viewers, whereas there may well be pervasive and diffuse effects upon society as a whole. Yet when long-term trends in American public opinion were examined this provided no support for diffuse theories of videomalaise which suggest that the news culture became more cynical after the events of Vietnam/Watergate in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Attention to the campaign media and levels of campaign activism proved largely stable, rather than experiencing a gradual erosion over time, or a sudden decline in the post-Vietnam years. American trust in government has fluctuated sharply in recent decades, with peaks and troughs, not experienced a steady and continuous fall. Electoral turnout and interest were relatively low in the early 1960s, experienced a higher plateau in the heated politics of the 1960s, and returned to the status quo ante in subsequent decades. Given the slippery periodization of the diffuse videomalaise thesis, some of the trends could perhaps be interpreted as supporting the case,

but the timing remained loose and untidy, and the evidence was far from consistent across all the indicators of civic engagement in America.

The last, and potentially most fatal, criticism of the interpretation presented in this book is that there are serious problems in using cross-sectional surveys to examine the causal direction of dynamic processes. This is true. Correlation, no matter how consistent, does not equal causation. Experiments are far more satisfactory ways to resolve causality and this is probably the most fruitful avenue for further research.

As mentioned in the introduction, the consistent association between use of the news media and civic engagement is open to three alternative explanations. Critics could argue that the associations established in this study could flow in a single one-way direction, from prior political attitudes towards media use. In other words, because someone is interested in public policy and international affairs they could select to read *The New York Times* or watch *CNN*. This is indeed plausible, especially given the range of choices about where to go and what to do in a multi-channel multimedia environment.

Alternatively the direction of causality could flow one way from habitual news use to civic engagement. Someone who regularly watches the evening news or reads a paper or listens to the radio (for whatever reason) could be expected to learn more about public affairs, reducing the costs of political involvement like casting a vote.

But it is unclear theoretically why these flows should operate in a single direction, and it seems more plausible and realistic to assume an iterative and interactive process with two-way flows. That is to say, we do probably turn on C-SPAN, skim the Sundays, catch the radio headlines, or surf online news because of our prior interest to learn about events in D.C., London and Brussels, because we are already engaged in the political process, and because of long-standing news habits. But at the same time, in the long-term repeated exposure to the news seems likely to improve our understanding of public affairs, to increase our capacity and motivation to become active in the political process, and to thereby strengthen civic engagement. Far from a negative impact, the most convincing picture to emerge from this study is that attention to the news media acts as a virtuous circle: the most politically knowledgeable, trusting and participatory are most likely to tune into public affairs coverage. And those most attentive to coverage of public affairs become more engaged in civic life. This interpretation remains theoretical, as we cannot prove causation here, although it is fully consistent with the association we have established between news exposure and positive indicators of civic engagement.

If the actives are activated by political communications, why are the apathetic not similarly reinforced in their apathy? The simplest answer is that those less engaged in politics are naturally immunized against the influence of the news media messages by a triple process. First, as they are less interested, when they encounter political news the disengaged are more likely to turn over, turn off, or click to another site. In a multimedia multi-channel environment, with remote or mouse in hand, the captive audience is as passé as the phonograph. Why listen to pundits and pollsters when there are so many alternative channels and programs? Second, if the disengaged continue to watch or read, perhaps because of routine habit, since they lack prior interest

they pay less attention to political coverage. Lastly, even if they watch and pay attention, because trust in the news media and in government go hand in hand⁴, the disengaged are less likely to regard political news as credible.

The result is that the ratcheting effect of political communications function in a positive direction. Focusing only on the structure of the news industry or the contents of coverage, while neglecting the reaction of the audience, leads to many fundamental misconceptions inherent in videomalaise accounts. The public is not passively simply absorbing whatever journalists and politicians tell them at face value, rather with increased cognitive skills and greater diversification of media outlets the public is actively sifting, sorting and thereby constructing political messages in line with their prior predispositions. This conceptualization harkens back to an earlier tradition that has long emphasized the role of reinforcement in political communications. A virtuous circle represents an iterative process gradually exerting a positive impact upon democracy. The causal steps in this thesis cannot be demonstrated, anymore than we can examine the lifelong socialization process whereby the family, workplace and community shapes formative political attitudes. The effects are understood as diffuse, operating cumulatively over a lifetime of exposure to the news, rather than specific to the impact of particular media messages. Nevertheless this theory provides a reasonable interpretation that makes sense of the consistently positive association between use of the news media and civic engagement established throughout this book.

This view also receives confirmation from the results of experimental research where groups in Britain were exposed to positive and negative television news, with full details about the methodology and results published elsewhere⁵. Experiments provide some of the most convincing and elegant tests for resolving issues of causality, overcoming many of the limitations of cross-sectional survey research. The results showed that, even after applying a battery of social and attitudinal controls, watching *negative* television news had no impact upon party preferences, whereas exposure to *positive* news significantly increased that party's support⁶. If we can extrapolate from this context, this strengthens the argument for an interactive two-way virtuous circle, where prior positive attitudes stimulate attention to the news and campaign messages, and this attention reinforces positive engagement. Through repeatedly reading or watching news about politics and public affairs, broadly defined, people gradually acquire practical information that helps them to make voting decisions, to get involved in community organizations, and to trust the political process. Through the virtuous circle, the news media serves to activate those who are already most active. Those already less predisposed towards political life will be more immune to political messages.

If the pool of activists is gradually shrinking, so that society is dividing between the information-rich and information-poor, then this process could legitimately raise fears about its effects on mass democracy. But if, as we argue, in post-industrial societies the news media has diversified over the years, in terms of channels, availability, levels and even the definition of news, this means that today information about public affairs (broadly defined) reaches a wider variety of levels and interests in the audience. In this situation, the effects of the virtuous circle should gradually ripple

out to broader sectors of society. Such an effect is still consistent with other trends in society, for example the growth of more critical citizens, discussed elsewhere⁷. A more informed and educated citizenry, with higher cognitive skills, and more sources of information, may well become more critical of governing institutions, with declining affective loyalties towards traditional representative bodies such as parties and parliaments. But the growth of critical citizens does not necessarily reduce civic engagement; indeed it can have the contrary effect.

This conclusion does not diminish the gravity of many major problems diminishing the vitality of democracy in post-industrial societies, whether low levels of electoral turnout in the United States and Switzerland, violent conflict in Northern Ireland and the Basque region, pervasive political cynicism in Italy and Japan, and endemic political corruption in Mexico and Turkey. The multiple hazards facing consolidating democracies like Russia, Indonesia and Nigeria, stranded midway between an authoritarian past and an uncertain future, are even more deep-rooted and serious. But these problems can best be understood as rooted in deep-seated flaws within the political system and institutional arrangements in each of these societies, rather than representing general problems common across democracies, still less problems caused by political communications per se. Blaming the news media is easy, but it ultimately proves a deeply conservative strategy, especially in a culture skeptical of regulation of the free press, which deflects attention from the real reforms to democratic institutions that demand our urgent and undivided attention.

¹ *Striking the Balance: Views of the Press on Their Performance and the People.* Washington DC: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

² For example, a 1998 Pew survey found that the majority of Americans think that news stories and reports are 'often inaccurate'; up from one third who believed this a decade earlier. *Striking the Balance: Views of the Press on Their Performance and the People.* Washington DC: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

³ Kenneth Newton. 1997. 'Politics and the News Media: Mobilisation or Videomalaise?' In *British Social Attitudes: the 14th Report, 1997/8*, eds. Roger Jowell, John Curtice, Alison Park, Katarina Thomson and Lindsay Brook. Aldershot: Ashgate; Pippa Norris. 1996. 'Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam.' *P.S.: Political Science and Politics* XXIX (3); Pippa Norris. 1997. *Electoral Change since 1945.* Oxford: Blackwell; Christina Holtz-Bacha. 1990. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Media Exposure and Political Alienation in West Germany.' *European Journal of Communication.* 5: 73-85.

⁴ Stephen Earl Bennett, Staci L. Rhine, Richard S. Flickinger and Linda L.M. Bennett. 1999. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Reconsidering the relation between the public's view of the media and trust in government.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4(4): XXX-XXX.

⁵ The study was only conducted in one country, but we should be able to generalize from the findings to understand the direction of causality in correlations found elsewhere. The experiments used a 'before' and 'after' research design with over 1000 participants representing a cross-section of the London electorate. Party preferences were first measured with a brief questionnaire. Groups were then exposed to 10 minutes of either positive or negative stories about the Labour or Conservative parties, embedded within a typical 30-minute evening television news broadcast during the election campaign in April 1997. Attitudes were then measured again. Analysis was based on comparing the change in party preferences among groups exposed to different video stimulae. For details see Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell, and Holli Semetko. 1999. *On Message: Communicating the Campaign.* London: Sage. Chapter 9.

⁶ See Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell, and Holli Semetko. 1999. *On Message: Communicating the Campaign.* London: Sage. Chapter 9. The estimated short-term effects of exposure to positive news on levels of party support were considerable; in a 30-minute news program, exposure to 10 minutes of positive news about either the Conservative or Labour party produced a 10 percent boost to their level of party support, using a pre-post experimental design. For more details see also David Sanders and Pippa Norris. 1998. 'Does Negative News Matter? The Effects of Television News on Party Images in

the 1997 British General Election.' *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 1998, eds. Charles Pattie et al. London: Frank Cass.

⁷ Pippa Norris. Ed. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.