

Lecture III: Causes and explanations of the crisis of civic engagement in the United States

Technology and Mass Media (Putnam, # 13)

- Some changes introduced by technology and mass media in news and entertainment:
1. News and entertainment are more and more personalized: no longer do people have to coordinate their tastes, but the information and entertainment business can now offer a wider and wider choice of products that are tailored to many different tastes and kinds of people. Even though there is still a “mainstream”, there are more and more subcultures of taste that are served well by the market.
 2. Electronic technology allows people to consume the mass media products utterly alone, while in the past it was necessary to gather with other people (to see a band play or an actors’ company perform). **News and entertainment have moved from public to private spaces.**
 3. These technologies, and especially television, have brought us home.
- How has the consumption of mass media and mass media technologies evolved over the last half century?
1. Television was introduced in the U.S. in 1948, and took only 7 years to reach 75% of American households. By 1959, 90% of American households had a TV set. This was the most spectacular ever process of introduction of a new technology. Similarly, average daily households viewing hours increased from 4.5 in 1950 to 7.5 in 1995. The average American now watches 4 hours a day, almost 40% of his free time.
 2. Newspaper readership decreased dramatically: in 1948, every family read 1.3 newspapers. Fifty years later, despite the increase of schooling, that figure has dropped by 57 percent, entirely due to a generational effect.
 3. Interest in the news, whether taken from newspapers or television, is declining generationally: around 70% of those born before 1930 feel they need to get the news, while less than 40% of those born before 1960 think so. News on television do not replace news from the press. Those who are interested both watch and read the news, those who are not interested simply turn it off or avoid it.
 4. Only 7 percent of Americans say they watch TV primarily for information, while 41 percent say they watch primarily for entertainment and the rest say they watch for both.
 5. Consequently, TV news viewership is declining rapidly.
 - a. The regular audience for nightly network news went from 60 percent in 1993 to 38 percent in 1998. (Also due to cable and the explosion of other sources for news and entertainment.)
 - b. The average age of the audience of nightly newscasts is 57, while the average age of the audience of prime-time programs is 42. (See the kinds of commercials that are aired during network news.)
 6. The new technologies such as cable and the Internet could expand the market for news, but they rather draw on the same shrinking audience of television and newspaper news. As Internet use is growing rapidly, its use to follow public affairs is declining in comparison with entertainment and communication with other people (email, chat rooms, instant messaging...)
- What are the consequences of television watching for our everyday life?

1. Television brought us home: the house has become more a place of isolation from the world than a place of connection with it. Television merges our private spaces with the public spaces, so that “the outside world has become an abstraction filtered through television, just as weather has become an abstraction filtered through air conditioning.”
2. People in the households spend much more time watching together than talking together.
3. As the number of TV sets per households multiplies, people are increasingly watching alone. Among children aged 8-18, less than 5% of TV watching is done with parents, and more than one-third is done utterly alone.
4. Habitual viewers (those who just turn on the TV to see what’s on) outnumber selective viewers (those who turn the TV on just to see a specific program). Habitual viewers mostly come from younger generations, who have grown up and have been socialized with television. Younger generation are also much more likely to do channel surfing.
5. Half of the U.S. population reports that television is their primary form of entertainment.

→ What is the impact of television on civic engagement?

- Generally speaking, and holding other factors constant, **“each additional hour of television viewing per day means roughly a 10 percent reduction in most forms of civic activism”**. “A major commitment to television viewing – such as most of us have come to have – is incompatible with a major commitment to community life.”
- Moreover, television viewing reduces engagement in activities that we do together with other people (e.g. attending public meetings or serving in a local committee) more than it hampers political activities that we do alone (e.g. writing a letter to Congress). **“Just as television privatizes our leisure time, it also privatizes our civic activity, dampening our interactions with one another even more than it dampens individual political activities.”**
- While television news watching is positively correlated with civic engagement, television watching for entertainment is “the single most consistent predictor” of civic disengagement that Putnam has discovered.
 - “TV dependence is associated not merely with less involvement in community life, but with less social communication in all its forms”.
 - TV watching for entertainment is more strictly associated with social disengagement and social disconnection than low education, full-time work, long commutes in urban areas, poverty and financial distress.
 - Heavy entertainment watchers are also less civil: they report having given the finger to another driver three times as much than those who consider themselves light watchers.

→ TV and civic disengagement: correlation or causation?

To prove causality completely, one would need experimental evidence that goes on for years. This is not possible given that humans are not rats. However, “several sorts of evidence make the attribution of guilt in this case more plausible.” “At the very least, television and its electronic cousins are willing accomplices in the civic mystery we have been unraveling, and more likely than not, they are ringleaders.”

1. “The epidemic of civic disengagement began little more than a decade after the widespread availability of television”
2. “The greater the youthful exposure of any cohort of individuals to television, the greater their degree of disengagement today” → Exposure to television might partially explain the generation gap in civic engagement
3. Case studies of towns where television was introduced show decreases in civic life

4. Studies of the influence of television on children prove that heavy TV watching by young people is associated with civic ignorance, cynicism, and lessened political involvement in later years, along with reduced academic achievement and lower earnings in their adult life.

→ Why could television threaten civic life? Three hypotheses:

1. Television competes for scarce time. Unlike other leisure activities, which are usually positively correlated to each other (“the more, the more”), television is negatively correlated with most leisure activities, especially those that take place outside the house.
2. Television has psychological effects that inhibit social participation. TV seems to encourage “lethargy and passivity”.
 - a. Heavy viewers report less satisfaction with television, as if there were nothing else to do, and develop a sort of dependence on TV entertainment or on similar stimuli.
 - b. Television, generally speaking, seems to require low levels of concentration, alertness, challenge, and skill.
 - c. This is why TV producers now edit programs with a faster pace, try to present exciting material, and to “make noise”. TV audience is becoming harder and harder to “keep awake”.
3. Specific programmatic content on television undermines civic motivation. Not all TV is anti-social: news watching is associated with higher levels of civic participation and social connectedness, while entertainment watching shows an opposite pattern.
 - a. Television can also create a sense of community and of belonging, as in those “media events” (JKF assassination, the war, Presidential inaugurations ceremonies) that most of us watch and talk about after watching.
 - b. It also gives us some “everyday rituals” that we all share and talk about, just as reading the newspaper every morning created, in Benedict Anderson’s words, an “imagined community” of people belonging to the same nation.
 - c. But there also media events and rituals that are “uncivic”: Lady Diana, O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, arguably create a sense of disconnectedness, of individual voyeurism, of cynicism towards public life. News as entertainment, politics as a game breed a “spiral of cynicism” (Jamieson and Cappella).
 - d. Television might also breed a materialistic culture, especially through advertising and the presentation of narratives and images of certain lifestyles. The latest generations, who have been socialized by and through television, are much more materialist than their parents or grandparents. → Keep this in mind for next class.

“The apotheosis of these trends can be found, most improbably, at the Holiday Bowling Lanes in New London, Connecticut. Mounted above each lane is a giant television screen displaying the evening TV fare. Even on a full night of league play team members are no longer in lively conversations with one another about the day’s events, public and private. Instead each stares silently at the screens while awaiting his or her turn. Even while bowling together, they are bowling alone.”

What Killed Civic Engagement? (Putnam, # 15)

→ Possible explanations for the decline that do not fit with Putnam’s data:

1. The decline of the family unit. Even if it is manifest and very strong, such decline did not have a strong impact on civic life and political participation. The correlations between marriage and participation in various groups and associations are neither strong nor consistent.

2. Race. Though race is a very important factor in most American politics, racial differences in associational memberships are not large, and the erosion of social capital has affected all races. (One has to consider, of course, that racial minorities are often disadvantaged in terms of income and education, which must be taken into account when calculating variations in political participation and civic engagement.)
3. Big government. Civic engagement shows no correlation with government spending or size in different states of the U.S. Among Western democracies, social capital is highest in the high-spending Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, the structure of U.S. government spending has not changed much over the last half century, while civic engagement has.
4. Capitalism and the market. As the economy has become more nationalized and globalized, small companies run by local people have been substituted by big franchise stores and multinationals whose headquarters are far away from where they operate. This could imply corporate disengagement from the local politics and a loss of civic leadership.

→ Possible explanations that fit Putnam's data:

1. Pressures of time and money. Two-career families, other than disrupting traditional family ties, have displaced our energies for social and civic participation. **Around 10%**.
2. Suburbanization, commuting and urban sprawl have weakened our ties with the places we live in and stimulated a retreat into private spaces. **Around 10%**.
3. Electronic entertainment and especially television has privatized our leisure time. **Around 25%**.
4. Generational change is replacing civically involved cohorts with disconnected ones. **Around 50%**.
→ But there is a relationship between generational change and the diffusion of television and electronic entertainment. **The X generation is largely a TV generation.**

Bennett, "The Uncivic Culture": It's the economy, stupid!

→ Key question that Bennett asks: has the decline in group participation, identified by Putnam and attributed mostly to television and electronic media, caused a real decline in individual participation and interest in politics, or rather created the conditions for the emergence of new forms of political interest and engagement?

→ Bennett's findings:

- Social and economic changes have most affected recent generations entering the labor force, disrupting social and family roles, flexibility in time budgets, and conceptions of self and society.
- Related shifts in values and interests feed widespread concerns about the relevance of traditional institutional politics. People are withdrawing from the national public sphere because they feel that the national government no longer serves their needs well and that the real problems are much closer to home.
- Despite the drop in formal group memberships, people continue to engage each other through volunteer work and loosely organized networks. U.S.: citizens volunteer just as much as they did fifty years ago, with an average of four hours a week. Volunteer work does not require individuals to adjust to an organization's schemes and demands.
- Despite doubts about the role of government, people continue to be involved politically with lifestyle issues including environmental politics, health and child care, crime and public order, surveillance and privacy, job security and benefits, the organization of work, retirement conditions, morality in public and private life, the control and content of

education, civil rights in the workplace, the social responsibility of corporations, and personalized views of taxation and government spending.

The new political culture is not an “antipolitical culture”: Bennett terms it “uncivic” to signify that it is a culture in which uncertainty, social dislocation, and anger that are characteristics of change can coexist with high levels of political engagement and interest, and the search for new political forms. One dilemma that this new, more fragmented and fluid environment poses is the possibility of a “governing crisis”: publics that emerge from shifting lifestyle groups are harder to represent and to satisfy politically.

- The “mass society” created institutions through which conflicts could be compensated and resolved more or less quietly and peacefully through compromise.
- On the other hand, “lifestyle issues” that have become popular after the 1960s, “are issues about which publics are either uninterested or unalterably divided. Either way, the impossibility of compromise has undermined support for many institutional remedies”.
- Therefore, “the new patterns of political engagement may not be particularly polite”. First, because “it is not surprising that people get personal about issues that are increasingly close to home”. Second, because there are no lively institutions through which such issues can be channeled and compromise facilitated. Third, because the decline of groups and the increase of individualism gets most of us to think that problems and solutions arise from individuals’ personal failures and capacities, not from structural and social conditions.

→ Why the change? It’s the economy

The change from a regional to a national and global economy, and from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy, has been accompanied by changes in working conditions that have created “continuing shock waves in job security and work time, and related disruptions of family life, group memberships, social roles, and individual lifestyles”.

Key facts:

- Reduction in real wages for hourly workers since 1973.
- Significant parts of the populations experienced income reduction.
- Women’s earnings have increased, but almost only due to increased work hours. The same is true for working couples’ income.
- 40% of families report additional member entering the workforce of taking extra jobs due to money pressures.
- Employment change more often means unemployment or displacement to other careers than it means promotion and pay rise.
- Part-time jobs have increased, but more part-time workers are looking for full-time jobs than in the past.
- Work instability affects many more people than in the past.
- Men who changed employers no more than once earned 75% more than men who changed employers more than four times. Job stability brings to economic security.

→ “Social life has become unbalanced and stressful for the majority of Americans whose lives revolve around the increasing uncertainties of work”. Moreover, the distress and dissatisfaction with work is not healed by group belonging and support because group membership and identification have declined. “The double circle of poverty”.

→ On the other hand, “most individuals also reject the inefficiencies and costs of centralized, heavily regulated economies, meaning that social and economic insecurities are typically defined as personal issues for which governmental solutions are deemed ineffective, if not outright unwelcome”. Citizens are dissatisfied with their democracies and institutions because they feel that

they do not provide viable solutions for today's problems, but on the other hand changing these institutions gets people angry that the rules are changing in the middle of the game.

→ Consequences on politics

- **Lifestyle politics is identity politics:** politics for individuals who feel more and more distant from groups and collective endeavors. "Because personal identity is replacing collective identity as the basis for contemporary political engagement, the character of politics itself is changing... Where parties and elections were once the primary mechanisms for interest aggregation and mobilization, these functions are increasingly shared by direct marketing, issue advocacy campaigns, and action networking. As a result, elections and everyday issue and image campaigns all use similar marketing strategies to construct networks of individuals whose attentions and loyalties are reassessed and reassembled in the next campaign".
- **Changes in political communication and civic life depend on social fragmentation, which in turn depends on economic change:** Bennett argues that, even if there is an interaction between society and technology, technologies, and communication technologies, mostly respond to society's demands: "the economic fragmentation of social structures and identities also constitute strong demand characteristics pushing the technological sophistication of communication."
- **Personalized political communications and the decline of traditional institution occur when traditional forms of communication and participation are no longer sustainable:** "Arguing that social change is as much the producer as the product of the current state of political communication does not mean that the resulting negative, dramatized, and often populist content is either what people want, or, much less, what they need. However, it does follow that the spiraling expenses and human efforts devoted to contemporary communication campaigns would not be necessary if simpler, cheaper, and broader social appeals were effective in delivering audiences, customers, or voters." If groups have lost much of their significance in mediating information from the media (*two-step flow*), then professionals have to resort to other resources to assemble audiences of targeting individuals.

→ Identity and quality of life

- Critics of the mass society and of nation states feared that collective institutions, especially the nation (consider totalitarian regimes) could damage their members' identity by asking them to identify completely with them and to devote most of their energies to their activities. Example: George Orwell, *1984*, Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*.
- Today, we face the opposite dilemma: too weak collective identities leave people alone "Collective identifications in many societies appear to be weakened to the point of jeopardizing the social support and recognition that contribute to secure identities and self-images. In most cases, feelings of personal insecurity or loss of control come in the form of vague anxieties that have boosted the sales of designer tranquilizers and mood toners. For many, the psychological distress is even more severe, as registered in an alarming rise of clinical depression and other severe psychiatric disorders throughout the industrial world."