

Lecture IV: Mass media, political participation and civic engagement: optimistic views

Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*

→ Key issue addressed in the book: media malaise, which we could better define as “media-induced civic malaise”

“The term *media malaise* refers to accounts claiming that common practices in political communications by the news media and by party campaigns hinder “civic engagement”, meaning citizens learning about public affairs, trust in government, and political activism. That is, all the theories we consider, by definition, make two core assumptions: (1) that the process of political communication has a significant impact upon civic engagement, and (2) that this impact is in a negative direction.”

- Note that this argument implies that it is news consumption, and not media consumption, that causes disengagement and cynicism: Putnam’s argument, however, is that *news consumption* is positively related with civic engagement, while it is *entertainment consumption* that depresses social capital and civic engagement. From Putnam’s standpoint, the problem does not lie with journalism. However, changes in journalism that bring it closer to entertainment may well be a problem in Putnam’s terms as well.

The media malaise argument is made from different standpoints:

- Blaming journalists and the media system:
 - Structural accounts: economic and social forces moving the media industry downmarket (“tabloidization”, infotainment, “all talk, all of the time” cable channels), the erosion of public-service broadcasting, the increasing fragmentation of the media.
 - Cultural accounts: some key events such as Vietnam and Watergate have created a climate of suspicion towards politicians and politics among journalists: journalists do not trust and value politicians, so they cover politics in a way that deprives politicians of their “aura” and therefore disengages citizens.
 - Key issues:
 - Image vs substance (news as entertainment, “infotainment”)
 - Politics vs policy
 - Horse race vs issues
 - Analysis vs factual information (news vs feature)
 - Strategic frame vs policy frame
 - Polls vs debate of opinion
 - Bad news vs objective news
 - “Pack” journalism, “feeding frenzy”
- Blaming politicians:
 - Politics and “the people”: impact of mass marketing on politics, and consequent reduction of face-to-face interaction, direct access to politicians, local connections between individuals working for parties or taking part to political events (remember Putnam’s analysis of how parties have evolved over the last three decades from “social capital” organizations to “financial capital” organizations).
 - Politics and the press: “spin”, selling and persuasion are undermining the credibility of political leaders. “If everything in politics is designed for popular appeal, with “catch-all” parties adopting whatever slogan, message, or image will resonate with

focus groups, then people may become more reluctant to trust the messages or messengers”. The language and strategies of spin doctors are more and more covered in the news (the media system as a self-reflecting mirror). Vicious circle of packaging and counter-packaging.

- Blaming the media and the entertainment industry: Hollywood, the consumer culture and other trends initiated and expressed by and through the media create a culture in which individuals matter more than groups and politics is seen as pointless.

→ Norris’s argument: “this book indicates that, contrary to the media malaise hypothesis, **use of the news media is positively associated with a wide range of indicators of political knowledge, trust, and mobilization**. People who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the Net, and pay attention to campaigns are consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory... The survey evidence indicates that news exposure has not been associated with civic disengagement at diffuse level in America and Europe... As a result, too often we are “blaming the messenger” for more deep-rooted ills of the body politic”.

→ How can we evaluate media performance in a democratic regime?

Key concepts in Schumpeter’s definition of democracy:

1. **Pluralistic competition** among parties and individuals for all positions of government power.
2. **Participation** by citizens in the selection of parties and representatives through free, fair, periodic and consequential elections.
3. **Civil and political liberties** to speak, publish, assemble, and organize, as the conditions necessary to ensure effective competition and participation.

→ In this view, if the elites compete for citizens’ preferences in a “free marketplace of ideas”, if citizens participate in the political process and are free to make their voices heard and to gather information about government, then the governing elite will know and have to respond to the needs and desires of the governed mass.

→ Consequently, three basic roles for the news media emerge:

1. **Civic forum** encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs (*pluralistic competition*).
 - a. For sure the media provide a forum in which information can be exchanged both horizontally (among members of the governing elite) and vertically (between governing and governed, both top-down and bottom-up).
 - b. Do the media provide a sufficient *amount* of political coverage?
 - c. Do the media provide a sufficient *quality* of political coverage? Do the news reflect the diversity of views that are present in a given society?
 - i. External diversity (among different media outlets).
 - ii. Internal diversity within the same outlet: objectivity as a ritual. Problems: middle-of-the-road coverage? Journalists denying responsibility? Manipulation?
2. **Mobilizing agent** encouraging public learning and participation in the political process (*participation*). The news media should stimulate:
 - a. Learning about politics.
 - i. Information must produce *practical knowledge* that helps people predict the consequences of their political choices (mostly voting and participating).
 - ii. Information must be contextual to electoral choices.
 - iii. Information must be distributed at different levels of complexity to satisfy the different needs and cognitive resources of different strata of the population.
 - b. Interest in politics.
 - c. Participation in politics.

3. **Watchdog** against the abuse of power (*civil and political liberties*).
 - a. Good side: keeps government accountable, helps establishing a notion of “truth” in the political debate, increases the cost of lying and of pursuing unpopular or unfair policies.
 - b. Bad side: too much skepticism and distrust of politicians among journalists might damage the respectability of politics and make it hard for politicians to communicate with citizens: “gotcha” questions, “bad news is good news”, negativity.

→ After a series of studies done with different methodologies (surveys of populations, content analysis of mass media, and case studies reporting the media’s role as watchdog), Norris concludes that the media are doing better for our democracies than they used to three decades ago.

Reasons for optimism:

- Changes in the news industry
 - o The new channels and outlets have promoted a diversification of contents and points of view, where the *New York Times* can coexist with *USA Today* targeting different kinds of audiences. → What about the cost of free choice?
 - o The definition of news has changed: political news have expanded and moved from the places of institutional power (the White House) to other realms, closer to reality (e.g. news about crime, or scientific discoveries, or widespread diseases).
- Postmodern campaigning
 - o More precise targeting and improved communication efficiency might be seen as helping leaders to give citizens exactly the information they (think they) need.
 - o New media of communication (the Internet) might ensure forms of political participation that are more inclusive and active than the old techniques based on mass marketing.
- The media and civic engagement: testing the media malaise theory
 - o Weak version: a consistent pattern of negative news erodes specific support for particular leaders, governments, and policies. This version is well grounded in the political reality and makes perfectly sense from a democratic standpoint, provided that the media are free and unbiased in their criticism.
 - o Strong version: news coverage erodes public engagement: this claim is not confirmed by Norris’s data: “Successive tests have 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”.

→ Possible explanations? (Perfectly resemble the ever-lasting discussion about mass media effects)

1. **Selective effects:** those who are most predisposed to participate politically (whatever the reasons) are more interested in the news. Causation goes from prior attitudes to the use of news media (consistent with the “uses and gratifications” theory).
2. **Media effects:** news habits influence subsequent political attitudes, for whatever reason. Since news habits can be influenced (by scheduling, leisure patterns, and the decisions of those who produce the news) it is important to make sure that such influences work in the right direction.
3. **Both selective and media effects:** the news media and party campaigns further activate the active. There could be a “virtuous circle” through which those who are already involved become more involved because of the news.
 - o By contrast, the media would have little power to further disengage the disengaged: those who are not interested have plenty of choice among different options.

- “If the disengaged do catch the news, they are likely to pay little attention. And if they do pay attention, they are more likely to mistrust media sources of information (because trust in politics and in the news media go hand in hand). Repeatedly “tuning out” political messages inoculates against their potential impact”.

→ My objection: who says this is not a “vicious circle” just as the other is a “virtuous circle”? In what proportions are engaged and disengaged citizens distributed in the population of our democracies? Can we be happy with the fact that the media can not do any good or bad to those who are disengaged from the political process? Should we not hope that those people be remobilized?

“Consumers have more opportunities than ever before to find news sources most congruent with their prior interests and political predilections. The power of the news media to influence the public is therefore limited and counterbalanced by the growing power of media users to select their preferred information sources.”

Norris thinks that the divide between information-rich and information-poor, between the shrinking mass of politically involved citizens and the growing pool of apathetic and disengaged “independents” might well be filled by two virtuous processes:

- Increasing media outlets provide differentiated levels of coverage and information, so that “the effects of the virtuous circle should gradually ripple out to broader sectors of society”.
- The virtuous circle of interest in politics and consumption of news media does not take place in the reverse for the disengaged citizens.

→ **Passive learning** as a possible way through which citizens casually exposed to the news pick up information that is useful for making political decisions and therefore reduces the costs of participating and acquiring other information.

Swanson, Good news and bad news for the future of journalism and civic engagement

→ Swanson argues from a different perspective: **both the political system and the information system are changing due to social, economic, and political pressures**: the kind of news, the kind of politics, and the kind of relationship between news and politics is therefore bound to change.

→ **Politics is becoming more porous**: traditional political institutions are being challenged in a struggle for “relevance and coherence”. “Economic, cultural, and other changes in postindustrial societies are creating life circumstances with which traditional partisan appeals – based on long-standing cleavages of class, occupation, religion, and the like – do not resonate as strongly as they used to in the post-war era... In the face of such issues, political institutions may seem less effective than new power centers that have emerged outside the political system”.

- Global institutions (both corporate and political)
- NGOs
- Single-issue groups, protest movements, voluntary associations (remember Putnam’s description of such associations)

“Traditional political institutions are coming to be seen as less responsive to the most important issues, less effective in controlling events, and in charge of a declining portion of what is now regarded as the political arena” (remember Bennett’s discussion of lifestyle politics).

→ **News is becoming more porous**, because of increasing competition caused by the increase in media outlets and formats due to both technological developments (new communication technologies invented and implemented, old technologies reinvented and redirected) and to social change (fragmentation, same changes that affect politics). Journalists' reaction to this challenge has been twofold:

- On the one hand, news has become more similar to entertainment and has been “dumbed down”, at least in certain outlets, in order to compete for the attention of a larger size of the public, who was being drawn to other, lighter channels and contents.
- On the other hand, mainstream journalism providers have scrambled to create presences in new media (especially cable and the Internet), where the reputation of their brand name may attract those who seek reliable, up-to-the-minute information.

Mixed Media System. News and entertainment, their logics and their sources increasingly coexist in the current media environment. The logic of the new concept of news has started to influence the logic of traditional, serious and objective news providers. Best example: the outbreak of the Lewinski *affaire*. Since politicians cannot live without news coverage, they have to adapt their communication strategies to the new media environment.

→ Dangers and opportunities for democracy and civic engagement:

- Citizens can now choose from an array of news and news providers as wide as ever, and even directly express their views in certain formats (on-line discussion, radio and TV call-in shows).
- The concept of news has changed and has become less reliable and substantial. The new media (including all-talk cable) often mix facts with innuendo and rumors (O.J., Monica Lewinski, Elian...). The burden is heavy on the public to scrutinize such news and decide what is important and what is not important, what is credible and what is not credible.
- With more alternatives to choose from, consumers might well decide to escape news about politics and public life entirely and switch to entertainment and lifestyle content.
- Journalism's agenda-setting role is undermined by cable and especially the Internet, which allows surfers to choose whatever information they want and to construct their personal news bulletins or viewing schedules (this is not entirely true because we all need some forms of orientation and pre-selection of what we see and read, and building a Web site implies organizing its contents in some way or the other).
- “Perhaps the most disturbing news is that the future of serious journalism as we have known and valued it is itself uncertain. Over time, market pressures may well relegate serious news to the status of just another specialized offering for a small taste culture, equivalent to many offers available in the constantly expanding world of cable television”.

→ Can quality information and journalism be transformed into a niche product, available to everyone but bought and consumed only by few? Can news be considered, from a democratic standpoint, as just another commodity in the market? Economic and market basic mechanisms might well make news either too costly to produce or too expensive to buy for most of the people.