

# Lecture III: Causes and explanations of the crisis of civic engagement in the United States – part I

## 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.**