Recent years have seen growing tensions between the ideals and the perceived performance of democratic institutions. While there is no 'crisis of democracy', many believe that all is not well with the body politic. Concern in the United States has focused on widespread cynicism about political institutions and leaders, fuelling fears about civic disengagement and a half-empty ballot box. The common view is that the American public turns off, knows little, cares less and stays home. Similar worries echo in Europe, particularly at the supranational level. Commentators have noted a crisis of legitimacy following the steady expansion in the power and scope of the European Union despite public disengagement from critical policy choices. An important indicator is plummeting turnout in European elections, falling to under half the electorate in 1999, down from three quarters two decades earlier. The growth of critical citizens is open to many explanations, explored in a previous study, including the failure of government performance, changing cultural values, and problems of institutional effectiveness.

One common explanation concerns developments in political communications. During the last decade a rising tide of voices on both sides of the Atlantic has blamed the news media for growing public disengagement, ignorance of civic affairs, and mistrust of government. This idea has developed into something of an unquestioned orthodoxy in the popular literature, particularly in the United States. Another related viewpoint, more prevalent in Europe, regards the growth of professional political marketing by parties as also contributing towards greater public cynicism.

But is the conventional wisdom correct? This book, based on a systematic examination of the role of political communications in post-industrial societies, argues that the process of political communications by the news media and by parties is not responsible for civic malaise. Rather than mistakenly 'blaming the messenger', we need to understand and confront more deep-rooted flaws in systems of representative government.

The Conventional Critique of Political Communications

Let us first outline popular accounts of 'media malaise' or 'videomalaise', which have become so pervasive, and then consider the alternative perspective developed in this book. The political science literature on this topic originated in the 1960s, developed in a series of scholarly articles in the post-Watergate 1970s, and rippled out to become the conventional wisdom in the popular culture of journalism and politics following a flood of books in the 1990s. The chorus of critics is loudest in the United States but similar echoes can be heard in Europe. There is no single theory or canonical text.

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

Accounts differ widely in the reasons given for this phenomenon. One school blames trends in journalism. Structural perspectives emphasize institutional developments common to many post-industrial societies, such as economic pressures moving the news industry down-market, the erosion of public service broadcasting, and the emergence of a more fragmented, multi-channel television environment. Cultural accounts stress historical events specific to journalism in the United States, notably the growth of a more adversarial news culture following Vietnam and Watergate. Others blame politics. Campaign accounts focus on the growth of political marketing with its attendant coterie of spin-doctors, advertising consultants and pollsters, reducing the personal connections between citizens and representatives. The earliest theorists made restricted claims, focused primarily upon common practices in television news. Later versions extended the scope far more widely to blame a news culture shared across many types of journalism. Yet others focus upon the social impact of the mass media more generally, including everything from Hollywood movies to TV entertainment adverts and rap music, which fall well outside the scope of this study.

Multiple interpretations therefore cluster within this perspective. Irrespective of these important differences, what all media malaise accounts share, by definition, is the belief that public disenchantment with the political process is due, at least in part, to the process of political communications.

There is nothing particularly novel about these claims. Many critics expressed concern about the effects of the popular press on moral decline throughout the nineteenth century as newspapers became more widely available. The phenomenon of the 'yellow press' in the 1890s caused worry about its possible dangers for public affairs. In the 1920s and 1930s, the earliest theories of mass propaganda were based on the assumption that authoritarian regimes could dupe and choreograph the public by manipulating radio bulletins and newsreels. Recent decades have seen multiple crusades against the supposed pernicious influence of the mass media, whether directed against violence in movies, the 'wasteland' of television, the impact on civic engagement of watching TV entertainment, the dangers of tobacco advertising, or the supposedly pernicious effects of pop music. While hardly new, what is different today is the unquestioning orthodoxy that has developed as a chorus of complaints has decried the impact of political communications on public life.

The American Literature on Media Malaise

The modern idea of 'media malaise' emerged in the political science literature in the 1960s. Kurt and Gladys Lang were the first to make the connection between the rise of network news and broader feelings of disenchantment with American politics. TV broadcasts, they argued, fuelled public cynicism by over-emphasizing political conflict and downplaying routine policymaking in DC. This process, they suggested, had most impact on the 'inadvertent audience', who encountered politics because they happened to be watching TV when the news was shown, but who lacked much interest in, or prior knowledge about, public affairs. The Langs proved an isolated voice at the time, in large part because the consensus in political communications stressed the minimal effects of the mass media on public opinion.

The idea gained currency in the mid-1970s since it seemed to provide a plausible reason for growing public alienation in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era. Michael Robinson first popularized the term 'videomalaise' to describe the link between reliance upon American television journalism and feelings of political cynicism, social mistrust, and lack of political efficacy. Greater exposure to television news, he argued, with its high 'negativism', conflictual frames, and anti-institutional themes, generated political disaffection, frustration, cynicism, self-doubt and malaise. For Robinson this process was most critical during election campaigns, where viewers were turned off, he argued, by TV's focus on the 'horse-race' at the expense of issues, analysis rather than factual information, and excessive 'bad news' about the candidates. Many others echoed these claims over
the years. According to Samuel Huntington, in a widely influential report for the Trilateral Commission, the news media had eroded respect for government authority in many post-industrial societies, contributing towards a widespread 'crisis' of democracy evident on the streets of Washington DC, Paris and Tokyo. Others argued that the problem was rooted less in TV news than in mainstream entertainment. For Gerbner, TV drama about violent crime and urban conflict cultivated fear, alienation, and interpersonal mistrust. The prevailing view in the early 1980s was expressed by Austin Ranney who thought that television, while not solely responsible for civic disengagement, was a major contributory factor. TV, Ranney claimed, "... has altered the culture by intensifying ordinary Americans' traditional low opinion of politics and politicians, by exacerbating the decline in their trust and confidence in their government and its institutions, and by helping to make them even less inclined to vote than they used to be." 

During the 1990s the trickle of complaints about the news media, from voices within and outside journalism, became a popular deluge. This reflected a new mood of angst about the vitality of democracy, at a time of widespread cynicism about political leaders and government institutions, and stronger claims about media effects. For Entman, the free press falls far short of its ideals, leaving too much of the American public ignorant and disconnected from politics. For Neil Postman the major networks, driven by their hemorrhage of viewers to cable, have substituted entertainment-oriented, crime, celebrity and consumer-obsessed, tabloid television for serious political coverage of national and world affairs. The result is endless coverage of Hollywood, the 'health beat' and sports rather than the problems facing America, so that we are 'entertaining ourselves to death'. For Roderick Hart, television charms the modern voter into an illusion of political participation and information, while encouraging couch potato passivity, thereby seducing America. Neil Gabler echoes these claims, arguing that entertainment has come to be the predominant value on television news, with the result that the political process has been repackaged into show business. Serious political debate, serious policy problems, serious election coverage becomes marginalized in an entertainment-driven celebrity-oriented society where the one standard of value is whether something can grab and hold the public's attention.

Larry Sabato warns of the dangers of pack journalism, with all the press corp focusing obsessively on a few sensationalist stories, (O.J., Dianne, Lewinsky) producing a 'feeding frenzy'. For Thomas Patterson, the press, in its role as election gatekeeper, has become a 'miscast' institution, out of order in the political system. The core reasons, he suggests, lies in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate adversarial culture of American journalism combined with the rise of interpretative journalism. As a result, he suggests, echoing Robinson and Sheehan, today campaign coverage by all the news media (not just TV) provides excessive focus on the poll-driven horse-race ('who's ahead, who's behind'), on conflictual and negative news (bad news), and on strategic game frames (the insider scoop about what's behind proposals). Due to a cultural shift the routine campaign news frame for American journalists, he believes, routinely criticizes politicians for shifting positions, wavering on tough decisions, pandering to groups, and making promises they do not intend to keep. Based on public dissatisfaction with coverage in the 1996 Presidential campaign, Cappella and Jamieson stress that strategic news frames of politics activate cynicism about campaign politics, government and public policy. Dautrich and Hartley conclude that the news media 'fail American voters', since many citizens believe that journalists place too much emphasis on campaign strategy and tactics, coverage is politically biased, and too little attention is devoted to information about political issues.

James Fallows is concerned that down-market trends have produced the relentless pursuit of sensational, superficial, and populist political reporting on network news, in the attempt to maintain ratings before surfers click to other channels. All this breathless flim-flam, Schudson argues, comes at the expense of detailed and informed debate about policy issues and 'hard' (real) news. The result is that although there is more information abundantly available for Americans than ever before, this does not create informed citizens. Hachten complains that public affairs journalism, in particular,
has been trivialized and corrupted by a melange of entertainment, celebrity, sensationalism, self-help and merchandising driven by advertising, PR and corporate profits. Coverage of international affairs has been one of the worst casualties, many argue, as America has turned away from the complexities of the post-Cold War world. Marvin Kalb has drawn attention to the ‘new news’, with commercial journalism driven further down-market due to new technology and economic restructuring in the industry. The role of public television in the US, long under-funded as a poor cousin, has been unable to compensate for the relentless drive for ratings of network and cable TV. Many conclude that the news media can be blamed for a host of political ills assumed to be plaguing America, whether widespread ignorance about government and public policy issues, declining electoral turnout, or widespread cynicism about government institutions. Criticisms have moved well beyond the halls of academe: many U.S. journalists share the belief that something is badly wrong with their profession in terms of traditional standards of accuracy, fairness and balance. The Committee of Concerned Journalists, led by Tom Rosensteil and Bill Kovach, has debated potential reforms to the profession.

The European Literature on Media Malaise

In the European literature similar, although perhaps less strident, voices can also be heard. European accounts emphasize structural developments in the news industry and in party campaigning. Many fear that growing competition from commercial channels has undermined the quality and diversity of public service television. The multiplication of media outlets, chasing the mass-market audience with low-cost, low-quality scheduling, is believed to have reduced the choice of program types. This development may have eroded the audience's ability to make sense of public affairs and, echoing Habermas, there is widespread concern from commentators like Dahlgren that the displacement of public service television by commercial channels has impoverished the public sphere. During the 1980s, the public sector experienced a massive program of privatization throughout Western Europe. During the same era, the growth of alternative commercial channels, breaking down the monopoly of public service broadcasting, undermined the rationale for subsidizing television through state resources. Schulz argues that in Germany the decline of public service broadcasting and the rise of commercial channels, the latter emphasizing the more sensational and negative aspects of political news, may have increased public cynicism. Kaase fears that these developments may produce audiences segmented according to the amount of political information to which they are exposed, possibly reinforcing a ‘knowledge gap’.

In the print sector, there is widespread concern that increased competition for readers has increased the pressure on traditional standards of news, leading to ‘tabloidization’ or ‘infotainment’. ‘Yellow journalism’ in the 1890s routinely highlighted the moral peccadilloes and sexual proclivities of the rich and famous. Sensationalism, crime and scandal in newspapers are hardly new, providing a popular alternative to the dull business of politics. But today routine and daily front-page news about government scandals appears greater than in previous decades - whether sleaze in Britain, Tagentopoli in Italy, Recruit and Sagawa in Japan, or l'affaire Lewinsky in America. This coverage is believed to corrode the forms of trust underpinning social relations and political authority. The process of ‘tabloidization’ seems to have gone further in Europe than in the American or Japanese press, with papers like The Sun or Der Bild leading the pack, each with many millions of readers. But similar phenomenon are evident in the chase for ratings in local TV news and ‘all talk, all the time’ cable news magazines in the U.S.

Many hope that the Internet can escape these problems, but others fear that this medium may reinforce political cynicism. Owen and Davis conclude that the Internet provides new sources of information for the politically interested, but given uneven levels of access there are good grounds to be skeptical about its transformative potential for democratic participation. Murdock and Golding argue that the new medium may merely reproduce, or even exacerbate, existing social biases in conventional political participation. Hill and Hughes believe that the Internet does not change people; it simply allows them to do the same things in a different way. Moreover with news on the
Internet the speed of transmission, and the absence of gatekeepers who exercise professional standards of editorial accuracy, may produce anarchy where rumor replaces fact. The pace of breaking headlines on the net may in turn undermine journalistic standards in the old media, like the way The Drudge Report on the web scooped Newsweek in breaking the first Lewinsky story. The net also provides a platform that may exaggerate the voice of those well outside mainstream democratic politics, from white supremacy groups to bomb-making terrorists.

A related stream of European literature attributes the problems of political communications primarily to the practice of professional marketing. One of the most striking developments in many countries has been the declining importance of the 'pre-modern' campaign involving local party meetings, door-to-door canvassing and direct voter-candidate contact. The rise of the 'modern' campaign is characterized by the widespread adoption of the techniques of political marketing. Strategic communications use a coordinated plan which sets out party objectives, identifies target voters, establishes the battleground issues, orchestrates consistent key themes and images, prioritizes organizational and financial resources, and lays out the framework within which campaign communications operate. This is part of the 'professionalization' of campaigning, giving a greater role to technical experts in public relations, news management, advertising, speech-writing and market research.

The rise of political marketing has been widely blamed for growing public cynicism about political leaders and institutions. The central concern is that the techniques of 'spin', selling and persuasion may have undermined 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 it may become harder to trust the messages or messenger. The attempt to manage the news is nothing new, but more stories are published about this process, so that the language of 'spin-doctors' and 'image consultants' has entered the popular lexicon, drawing attention to these developments. Although lacking direct evidence of public opinion, Bob Franklin provides one of the clearest statements of this thesis, decrying the 'packaging of politics', the manipulation of the public by official government advertising campaigns, and the rise of image over substance in British election campaigns. Some regard the adoption of strategic communications as just one more way for parties to connect with voters in modern campaigns. Yet many others have expressed concern about the 'Americanization' of election campaigning, in Britain, Germany and Scandinavia, and the possible impact this may have had upon public confidence in political parties. The use of 'negative' or attack advertising by parties and candidates has also raised anxieties that this practice may demobilize the electorate.

Along related lines, Jay Blumler suggests that a 'crisis of civic communication' has afflicted Western Europe. In increasingly complex societies, Blumler argues, governing has become more difficult, popular support more contingent, and mass communications more vital. Yet at the same time structural failures in the news media have reduced their capacity to function in a way that promotes civic communications and the public sphere. The core problem, for Blumler, lies in the more adversarial relationship that has developed between politicians and journalists. In their struggles to control the news agenda, parties have increasingly tailored their messages to journalistic formats, news values and predilections, while in response reporters have intensified their efforts to put their own stamp on the 'political story' to expose what politicians are up to. The net result, Blumler argues, has impoverished campaign coverage, such as the quality of debates about serious policy issues facing the country.

The number of skeptics questioning the evidence for all these claims has been growing in recent years. Earlier studies by the author found that, contrary to media malaise, although TV watching was related to some signs of apathy, attention to the news media was associated with positive indicators of civic engagement, in the United States and Britain, as well as other countries. Kenneth Newton showed that reading a broadsheet newspaper in Britain, and watching a lot of television news, was associated with greater political knowledge, interest, and understanding of
politics. Christina Holtz-Bacha demonstrated similar patterns associated with attention to the news media in Germany, while Curtice, Schmitt-Beck and Schrott reported similarly positive findings in a five-nation study from elections in the early 1990s. The most recent examination of the American NES evidence, by Stephen Earl Bennett and his colleagues, found that trust in politics and trust in the news media went hand-in-hand, with no evidence that use of the news media was related to political cynicism. But so far these findings have been published in scattered scholarly studies, and thereby drowned out by the Greek chorus of popular lament for the state of modern journalism. Claims about the negative effects of news coverage on the public, which lie at the heart of this book, deserve an extended and thorough re-examination. A chorus of voices can therefore be heard, a few optimistic, but most decrying the impact of modern political communications. Before we all jump on the media malaise bandwagon, is the conventional critique correct? This book seeks to provide an alternative interpretation that interprets recent developments in a far more positive light.

The Core Argument and Structure of the Book

The overall plan of the book can be summarized as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the normative standards available to evaluate the functions of the news media. Conceptions of representative democracy suggest three core roles for the news media: as a civic forum encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs, as a watchdog guarding against the abuse of power, and as a mobilizing agent encouraging public learning and participation in the political process. These concepts provide normative benchmarks, rooted in Schumpeterian theories of representative democracy, available to compare media performance.

Chapter 3 discusses the methods available to examine how well the news media meet these standards. Three approaches are common in the literature. Longitudinal analysis has compared trends in the contents of news coverage and public opinion at macro-level. Experimental studies have analyzed differences between groups of news users shown different stimuli. Survey analysis has examined the individual-level relationship between news exposure and indicators of civil engagement, using cross-sectional or panel studies. After discussing the pros and cons of these different approaches, Chapter 3 then outlines the multi-method research design and the sources of evidence used throughout the book. Part II of this book compares structural trends in all OECD member states, twenty-nine countries sharing similar levels of political and economic development, yet with political and media systems that differ in important regards, such as the role of public service television, levels of penetration by cable or satellite television, and regulations for election broadcasting and advertising. The aim this part of the book is to see whether there are common trends transforming the news environment and campaign communications across post-industrial societies. Subsequent chapters then use content analysis and survey data comparing the effects of news exposure on civic engagement in the fifteen member states of the European Union. Since much of the media malaise thesis originated in the United States, Chapter 13 then uses fifty years of NES data to demonstrate similar patterns in American public opinion.

Structural Changes in the News Industry:

The central argument developed in this book distinguishes between the production, contents and effects of political communications. The process can be seen as a sequential systems model, from the development of political messages, through the contents of news media coverage, to the effects upon the public (see Figure 1.1).

Part II examines how the structure of the news industry has evolved in response to technological, socio-economic and political developments in the post-war era. Since the 1950s, the printed press has seen greater concentration of ownership and a reduction in the number of available independent outlets, although at the same time newspaper sales have remained stable, not declined as some fear. During the 1980s public television, which had enjoyed a state monopoly throughout much
of Western Europe, faced increased competition from the proliferation of new terrestrial, cable and satellite television channels. Since the mid-1990s, the explosion of the Internet has challenged the predominance of television, a pattern most advanced in Scandinavia. The news industry has undergone major structural changes during the late twentieth century although post-industrial societies continue to bear the imprint of their historical origins, providing important contrasts even within the European Union, as well as between the US and Europe.

**The Contents of Political Coverage**

Yet it is not immediately obvious that developments in the communications environment have necessarily transformed political coverage for the worse. Commentators have expressed concern about a decline in long-term 'hard' news, such as coverage of international affairs, public policy issues, and parliamentary debates. In its place, many suggest, news has 'dumbed down' to become 'infotainment', focusing on human-interest stories about scandal, celebrities and sex. 'Tabloid' papers in Britain, the 'boulevard press' in Germany, and local television news in the US, share many common characteristics.

The available comparative evidence suggests two important trends, each with important implications for claims of media malaise. First, the new information environment has greatly expanded the opportunities to learn about public affairs in different channels, programs, formats and levels. Since the 1970s, the amount of news and current affairs broadcast on public service television in OECD countries more than tripled. During the last three decades the proportion of Europeans reading a newspaper everyday almost doubled, and the proportion watching television news everyday rose from one half in 1970 to almost three quarters in 1999. Access to the Internet is exploding. By the late-1990s, about a fifth of all Europeans, and half of all Americans and Scandinavians, surf online. Getting news is one of the most popular uses of the Internet in the US and Europe. In short, news consumption is up. We often generalize based on the American literature but compared with other post-industrial societies, the U.S. proves exceptionally low in consumption of newspapers and TV news. Moreover formats have diversified from the standard flagship evening news programs and current affairs programs, incorporating 24-hour rolling news, on-the-hour radio headlines, TV magazines and talk shows, as well as the panoply of online news sources. It has become easier to bump into the news, almost accidentally, than ever before. This process has broadened the background of the news audience.

Second, rather than an inexorable downwards erosion in the standards of serious journalism, which has been termed the ‘tabloidization’ of news, or the growth of ‘infotainment’, it seems more accurate to understand trends during the 1980s and 1990s as representing a diversification of the marketplace in terms of levels, formats and topics. Soft news and ‘infotainment’ has undoubtedly grown in some sectors of the market, but serious coverage of political events, international affairs, and financial news has also steadily expanded in availability elsewhere. Endless Senate debates shown on C-Span coexist today with endless debates about sex and personal relationships on the Jerry Springer Show. The Sun sits on the same newsstands as The Economist. News.bbc.co.uk is as easily available as Amsterdam pornography sites. Diversification does not mean that the whole of society is being progressively 'dumbed down' by trends in the news media. By focusing only on excesses in the popular end of the market, such as the wasteland of endless punditry on American cable TV talk shows or 'if it bleeds it leads' on local American TV news, we overlook dramatic changes such as the ability to watch live legislative debates, to witness Kosovo refugees at the moment they crossed the border, or to find online information about local government services. Potentially diversification may lead to another danger, namely greater divisions between the information have and have-nots. But chapters also demonstrate that in fact the audience for news has greatly expanded in size and broadened socially during the last quarter-century, not narrowed.

The evidence remains limited and systematic data is lacking to confirm or deny whether other assumed long-term changes in the news culture have occurred in post-industrial societies, for
example whether there has been a growth in negative coverage of politicians during election campaigns, or whether a more adversarial relationship has developed between journalists and governments. The available studies, however, strongly suggest that developments in political coverage observed in particular countries are often highly contextual, rather than representing trends common across post-industrial societies. For example, the most comprehensive comparison of news cultures in twenty-one countries, based on surveys of journalists, found almost no consensus about professional roles, ethical values and journalistic norms. Rather than the emergence of a single prevalent model of journalism, based on American norms, this suggests considerable diversity worldwide.

Political campaigns have been transformed by the diversification in the news industry, and also by the widespread adoption of political marketing techniques. Other countries have not simply imported American campaigning practices lock, stock and barrel. But politicians in many democracies are often paying more attention to formal feedback mechanisms like polls and focus groups, with an expanding role for campaign professionals from marketing and public relations. Comparative surveys have found that in a 'shopping' model, parties adopt whatever techniques seem well suited for their particular environment, supplementing but not discarding older forms of electioneering. Even in America, chapter 13 demonstrates that traditional forms of grassroots voter contact have been maintained, alongside newer forms of campaign communications. Rather than decrying the 'black arts of spin doctors', the professionalization of political communications can be regarded as an extension of the democratic process if these techniques bind parties more closely with the concerns of the electorate. The key issue is less the increased deployment of marketing techniques per se, which is not in dispute, than their effects upon politicians and voters, which is.

The Impact on Civic Engagement

This brings us to the issue at the heart of the book: whether changes in political communications have contributed towards civic disengagement. The fundamental flaw in accounts of media malaise is less the claims about developments in the news industry and campaigns, and their impact upon the contents of political coverage, than the assumptions about the audience. Theories of media malaise argue that exposure to the news media discourages learning about politics, erodes trust in political leaders and government institutions, and dampens political mobilization. The net result, it is argued by proponents, has been a decline in active democratic citizenship.

Part III of the book presents extensive evidence from a battery of surveys in Europe and the United States, as well as experiments in Britain, that cast strong doubt upon these claims. Instead this book argues 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. Far from a case of 'American exceptionalism', this pattern is found in Europe and the United States. Repeated tests using different datasets, in different countries, across different time-periods during the last half-century, confirm this positive relationship, even after controlling for factors that characterize the news audience like their education and prior political interest. The public is not simply passively responding to political communications being presented to them, in a naive 'stimulus-response' model, instead they are critically and actively sifting, discarding and interpreting the available information. A more educated and literate public is capable of using the more complex range of news sources and party messages to find the information they need to make practical political choices. True, Chapter 9 demonstrates that a persistent pattern of critical coverage of the Euro in the European news media was found to be associated with a decline in public support for this policy issue. But this represents 'normal' politics, rather than a crisis of support for democracy per se. The
survey evidence shows that news exposure was not associated with civic disengagement at diffuse level in America and Europe.

Why should we find a positive link between civic engagement and attention to the news media? There are three possible answers.

One interpretation is selection effects. In this explanation, those who are most predisposed to participate politically (for whatever reason) could well be more interested in keeping up with current affairs in the news, so the direction of causation could be one-way, from prior attitudes to use of the news media. This view is consistent with the ‘uses and gratification’ literature, which suggests that mass media habits reflect prior predispositions in the audience: people who love football turn to the sports results, people who invest in Wall Street check the business pages, and people interested in politics read editorials about government and public policy. But if we assume a purely one-way selection effect, this implies that despite repeatedly turning to the news about public affairs, we learn nothing whatever from the process, a proposition that seems inherently implausible.

Another answer could be media effects. In this explanation, the process of watching or reading about public affairs (for whatever reason) can be expected to increase our interest in, and knowledge about, government and politics, thereby facilitating political participation. The more we watch or read, in this interpretation, the more we learn. News habits can be caused by many factors such as leisure patterns and broadcasting schedules: people may catch the news because it comes on after a popular sit-com, or because radio stations air headline news between music clips, or because the household subscribes to home delivery of a newspaper. In this view, the direction of causality would again be one-way, but in this case running from prior news habits to our subsequent political attitudes.

Both these views could logically make sense of the associations we establish. One or the other could be true. It is not possible for us, any more than for others, to resolve the direction of causality from cross-sectional polls of public opinion taken at one point in time. But it seems more plausible and convincing to assume a two-way interactive process. The conclusion argues that in the long-term through repeated exposure, like the socialization process in the family or workplace, there may well be a ‘virtuous circle’ where the news media and party campaigns serve to activate the active. Those most interested and knowledgeable pay most attention to political news. Learning more about public affairs (the policy stances of the candidates and parties, the record of the government, the severity of social and economic problems facing the nation) reduces the barriers to further civic engagement. In this interpretation, the ratchet of reinforcement thereby moves in a direction that is healthy for democratic participation.

In contrast, the news media has far less power to reinforce the disengagement of the disengaged, because, given the easy availability of the multiple alternatives now available, and minimal political interest, when presented with news about politics and current affairs this group is habitually more likely to turn over, turn off, or surf to another web page. 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. Repeatedly tuning out political messages inoculates against their potential impact. This theory cannot be proved conclusively from the available cross-sectional survey evidence, any more than can theories of media malaise, but it does provide a plausible and coherent interpretation of the different pieces of the puzzle found in this study.

To substantiate this argument the study uses multiple sources of evidence. Trends in the structure of the news industry since 1945 are analyzed using data from UNESCO, the most authoritative source monitoring worldwide patterns of news consumption. To compare news coverage, the analysis draws upon systematic content analysis of newspapers and television news about the European Union in the mid-1990s in the fifteen member states of the EU. To compare public opinion the study draws upon the 30-year series of Eurobarometer surveys, produced by the European Commission, monitoring public opinion from 1970 to 1999 in EU member states. The surveys measure use of newspapers, television and radio news, and more recently the Internet, as well
as attention to political campaigns, and indicators of political knowledge, trust and mobilization. To partially unravel the complex issue of the direction of causality the book uses experimental research on the effects of positive and negative television news conducted in Britain, involving over 1000 subjects.

For the American analysis, chapter 13 utilizes a half-century of National Election Surveys in the United States, running from 1948 to 1998. Because so much of the media malaise literature is American, we pay particular attention to examining both specific and diffuse effects there. At individual level, as in Europe, Chapter 13 establishes that Americans most exposed to the news media prove the most politically knowledgeable, active and trusting. At diffuse-level, the timing of long-term secular trends across a range of indicators of civic engagement since the early 1950s fails to fit media malaise accounts. Instead patterns show either broad stability over time (such as in attention to election news and campaign activism), or alternatively a temporary plateau in the heated politics of the 1960s both preceded and followed by slightly lower levels (such as in turnout for presidential elections and political interest). There is little evidence for civic malaise in America, according to these indicators, let alone malaise produced by changes in the culture of the news media.

For reasons explained fully in subsequent chapters, claims of media malaise are methodologically flawed so that they are at best unproven, to use the Scottish verdict, or at worse false. As a result too often we are 'blaming the messenger' for more deep-rooted ills of the body politic. This matters, not just because we need to understand the real causes of civic disengagement to advance our knowledge, but also because the correct diagnosis has serious implications for public policy choices. This is especially important in newer democracies struggling to institutionalize a free press in the transition from authoritarian rule. ‘Blaming the messenger’ can prove a deeply conservative strategy, blocking effective institutional reforms, especially in cultures that idealize protection of the press from public regulation.

This book does not seek to claim that all is for the best in the best of all possible political worlds. If not 'broken', there are many deep-rooted flaws embedded in the core institutions of representative democracy; we are not seeking to present a Panglossian view. To mention just some of the many contemporary challenges to democracy, in Russia widespread corruption and political instability threatens to undermine fragile electoral gains. In America, the sea of political money, the unending campaign, combined with legislative do-nothingism, probably fails to serve the public well. In the European Union, the lack of transparency and accountability in the policymaking process, and the growing powers and scope of EU institutions, causes a worrying disconnect with the European public. Ethnic conflict, violence and intense poverty continues to plague many emerging democracies in Africa. Worldwide, women’s voices continue to under-represented in the decision-making process. The list could go on and on. The important point for this argument is that these, and many other related political problems, have deep-seated structural causes. If we stopped blaming the news media’s coverage of politics, and directed attention to the problems themselves, perhaps remedies would be more forthcoming. The media malaise thesis is not just misleading; it is also deeply conservative. The concluding chapter summarizes the core findings, expands on the theory of a virtuous circle, and considers the implications for public policy and for strengthening democratic governance.
Figure 1.1: The Schematic Model of Political Communications

Exogenous Conditions

Message Source

Type of Media Exposure

Effects on Civic Engagement

Social, Economic and Political Conditions

Party/Candidate Messages

Newspapers

Television News

Internet

Trust in Leadership and Government Institutions

Political Mobilization, Social, Economic and Political Conditions

Trust in Government Institutions

Political


This study focuses on the effects of news journalism and therefore excludes sociological theories that are concerned primarily with the impact of watching television entertainment on matters like social trust, community engagement and voluntary activism. For a discussion see Robert Putnam. 1995. 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America'. PS: Political Science and Politics. 28(December): 664-83.


Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang. 1966. The Mass Media and Voting. In Reader in Public Opinion and Communication edited by Bernard Berelson and M. Janowitz. New York: Free Press. According to the Langs: “Television’s style in chronicling political events can affect the fundamental orientation of the voter towards his government... The media, we contend, can stir up in individuals defensive reactions by their emphasis on crisis and conflict in lieu of clarifying normal decision-making processes.”


52 John Curtice, Rudiger Schmitt-Beck and Peter Schrott. 1998. 'Do the Media Matter?' Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago. The study found that those most attentive to TV news or newspapers proved more likely to be politically interested and engaged in Britain, Germany, Japan Spain and the US.


55 The surveys of journalists found no consensus about the relative importance of providing analytical coverage, acting as government watchdogs, serving public entertainment, and reporting accurately or objectively. For example, the proportion of journalists who thought that their role as watchdog of government was 'very' or 'extremely' important ranged from 33% in Germany, and 67% in the US, to 88% in Britain. See David H. Weaver. 1998. The Global Journalist: News People Around the World. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. Pp.466-7.
