Chapter 9

Negative news

One of the most popular explanations for any growth in public disaffection is based upon theories of political communications. Two alternative versions of this thesis can be distinguished in the literature. The first, arising from the theory of ‘video-malaise’, focuses upon the type of media. This perspective argues that television broadcasting in general, and the accumulated effects arising from the standard tone of TV news reporting in particular, usually fosters public mistrust of government, dissatisfaction with regime institutions, and thus contributes towards civic disengagement. A related argument shares similar concerns but it emphasizes the tone of media coverage, particularly the impact of watch-dog journalism when covering scandals, malfeasance, and corruption in public life, irrespective of which media conveys such news. A steady diet of negative news is thought to encourage a rising tide of political disenchantedment.

Although plausible and popular claims, the evidence supporting each of these arguments remains scattered and inconclusive. The concept of ‘negative’ news is far more complex in practice than is often assumed in popular commentary; for instance, studies have found that Americans distinguish between critical coverage of issues and ‘mud-slinging’ personal attacks. Any impact from negative news may also prove highly contingent upon attitudinal predispositions; research suggests that the effects arising from strategic campaign news coverage and from negative campaign advertising in the U.S. are mediated by citizens’ prior levels of political sophistication, partisanship, and involvement, as well as by their media habits and by the broader political climate. Moreover while many anecdotal cases of unethical behavior in public life are often cited – such as Watergate, Tangentopoli, and the Westminster expenses scandals – nevertheless the impact of revelations about these events on public opinion, especially on more diffuse levels of system support, remains unclear. The public may also be capable of distinguishing the type of scandal; after all, for all the immense publicity and the congressional expressions of outrage over the Lewinsky affair, President Clinton’s public popularity was found to have depended far more upon economic conditions than his sexual behavior, with the public rejecting elite frames.

Accordingly this chapter considers the arguments of alternative theories of media affects -- arising from habitual exposure to television news and from the amount of negative news coverage -- and then analyzes empirical evidence to test these claims. The chapter concludes that the cross-national data considered here provides no support for the video-malaise theory, instead, contrary to this perspective, regular exposure to television and radio news strengthened democratic aspirations and satisfaction with democracy, thereby reducing the democratic deficit. In addition, two detailed case-studies in Britain and the United States are used to examine the impact of the extent of negative news coverage upon subsequent political attitudes. The results showed that in Britain, neither the amount of scandal coverage nor the degree of negative news depressed satisfaction with government. In the U.S., negative news also proved insignificant, although the amount of scandal coverage did depress approval of Congress. Complex patterns are therefore revealed in each country, rather than a simple narrative. The evidence from the British and American cases highlights the need for considerable caution in any sweeping claims about how journalism is to blame for any public dissatisfaction with government.

I: Is television news to blame?

The news media are thought to play a particularly important role in system support by priming citizens about the criteria which are most appropriate for evaluating the quality of democratic governance, as well as by framing whether the performance of the government is perceived positively
or negatively against these standards. For many decades, theories of video-malaise have dominated the literature, especially in the United States, although during the last decade this approach has come under challenge from a growing body of literature emphasizing the alternative ‘virtuous circle’ thesis.

The modern idea of ‘videomalaise’ emerged in the political science literature during the turbulent 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. In this view the general accumulated effect of exposure to television news coverage about government, politics and public affairs has negative consequences for system support. The idea gained currency during the mid-1970s since the rise of television 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. This perspective was taken up again by a series of authors during the early 1990s, when Thomas Patterson highlighted a pattern of growing negative coverage of public affairs in the American news media, a shift he attributed to the move from descriptive to interpretative reporting. Over time, he argues, U.S. journalists have provided increasingly critical and unfavorable coverage of politics, and these trends are correlated with rising political mistrust in American public opinion. Along similar lines, Capella and Jamieson argued that strategic frames, depicting U.S. election campaigns as competitive games by each candidate, damaged public trust in politicians and government, generating a ‘spiral of cynicism’, a claim sparking an extensive debate in the literature. In Bowling Alone, Putnam echoed these concerns, blaming TV entertainment for sapping American social trust and associational activism, and thus gradually eroding the reservoir of social capital. Others have attributed declining American confidence in the military and organized religion with the growth of negative news coverage of these institutions.

Scholars in other countries have also echoed these types of concern. Hence, for example, research in the Netherlands argued that public cynicism was due to strategic campaign coverage by the press, focused on stories about spin and party tactics rather than issues. Content analysis of the news media in several countries, not just the U.S., suggests that journalism has become increasingly critical of politicians and the policymaking process, shifting from ‘watch-dog’ to ‘attack-dog’ mode. In Germany, for example, Kepplinger argues that increasingly negative press coverage led to the long-term decline in public esteem about politicians which has occurred since the late-1960s. Content analysis of leading German newspapers found that the growth in negativity was associated in particular with coverage of politicians’ personal qualities (such as their honesty, credibility and integrity) and their problem-solving skills (including their decision-making abilities and knowledgeability). In this regard, the media may encourage the public to regard elected officials as untrustworthy or, at least, incompetent and ineffective. The personal behavior of political leaders, which would have remained in the private domain a generation ago, has now become the fodder of front-page headlines. In Japan, Susan Pharr monitored reports on corruption in Asahi Shimbun, a major national newspaper, finding that this expanded over time, with peaks around specific scandals. Pharr concluded that the amount of reporting about official misconduct during a period of more than two decades was strongly correlated with polls monitoring Japanese confidence in government.
Nevertheless, although video-malaise theories are common in the scholarly literature and in editorial commentary, the survey evidence supporting claims that television journalism generally undermines political trust and satisfaction with democracy remains inconclusive. Although a popular view adopted, especially in the American literature, these claims have been strongly disputed over the years. In contrast, the theory of a ‘virtuous circle’ suggests positive reinforcement effects arising from frequently watching TV news, with similar effects to those derived from habitual use of newspapers and the internet. 

Indeed considerable survey and experimental evidence in established democracies has now accumulated suggesting that regular TV news users typically display more positive attitudes towards politics and government, not less. The alternative ‘virtuous circle’ thesis holds that prior political interest and knowledge stimulates exposure and attention to news and this process, in turn, gradually reinforces practical knowledge, political trust, and civic activism. Elsewhere I have presented a range of American and cross-national survey evidence demonstrating that news media exposure consistently leads towards greater political trust and engagement, not less. Some recent studies in Britain, the Netherlands and the United States have confirmed similar results. Most of this body of work has focused upon the effects of news media exposure on political trust and activism, however, and it needs to be extended to see whether democratic aspirations and satisfaction fall into the same pattern. Some recent accounts also emphasize more complex conditional media effects on political trust, which depend heavily upon the type of news outlet, prior levels of political trust, the tone of campaign advertising, the type of issues, and the heated style of modern commentary. The previous chapter in this book demonstrated that the information provided by news media use strengthened democratic knowledge; in a similar way, news media use may have beneficial effects by bolstering democratic aspirations and satisfaction with the way that democracy works.

The debate between the video-malaise and the virtuous circle thesis remains difficult to resolve, however, in part because of difficulties when disentangling media effects from cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. Even if the contents of routine political journalism and television commentary has indeed become increasingly negative and critical of government over time, as video-malaise theories claim, this does not prove that these developments necessarily caused any greater public disenchantment with politicians. Any correlations between these two time-series trends could always be spurious, for example if a third factor, such as the recent deep and prolonged global economic recession arising from the banking sector, undermines both media evaluations of government performance and a sense of political trust. External events, such as a rally-around-the-flag effect from 9/11, can also spur a spike in confidence in the federal government and more supportive and patriotic journalistic commentary. Alternatively, it is also possible that the presumed direction of causality in any relationship could be reversed, for example if the public’s deepening disenchantment with political leaders and government gradually encourages news organizations competing in the marketplace to respond to reader’s interests by expanding scandal coverage (hence, thereby, maximizing potential newspaper sales). Moreover explanations based on the effects of historical trends in the culture of journalism, such as any shift thought to have occurred from descriptive reporting towards more interpretative commentary, fails to provide a convincing account of the dynamic fluctuations in systems support which chapter 4 documented are evident in the United States and in European democracies. If reporting practices have gradually altered in recent decades, this cannot account for sudden recoveries in confidence in political institutions, or similar short-term improvements in satisfaction with democracy.

In the light of this debate, in this chapter we can reexamine the general effects of regular exposure to television news to see whether they either weaken or strengthen democratic orientations. In particular, the fifth wave of the World Values Survey covering a wide variety of media systems and societal contexts can be used to analyze the usual or habitual effects of watching or listening to
broadcast television and radio news on the democratic deficit, compared with the impact of reading newspapers and surfing the internet. Table 9.1 presents the multilevel models, including micro-level exposure to newspapers, television and radio news, and the internet, controlling for the prior demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (age, gender, income, education, and knowledge) which are commonly associated with political attitudes, as well as predicting regular patterns of media use. The models, including 42 societies where data is available from the 5th wave of the World Values Survey, also control at macro-level for freedom of the press, on the grounds that the independent media could well serve to strengthen democratic orientations.

[Table 9.1 about here]

The results of the analysis confirm that all these types of habitual media exposure are positively related to democratic aspirations; the strength of the positive effects of television and radio news on political values is particularly striking. Contrary to the video-malaise thesis, the results demonstrate that the more often that people tune into broadcast news, the more strongly they express aspirations for democracy. Regular use of television and radio news also strengthened democratic satisfaction, although no significant effects emerged from newspapers readership, while internet users proved significantly more critical about how democracy worked. In terms of the net effect on the democratic deficit, use of all the media reduced the gap between democratic expectations and perceived performance, and thereby shrunk the size of the democratic deficit. There is no support for the video-malaise claims that exposure to broadcast news damages democratic orientations; instead this evidence further confirms the ‘virtuous circle’ thesis.

II: Negative news and scandal coverage

Yet general use of television news does not address the alternative argument which emphasizes the impact of negative news on political trust and confidence in government. It is commonly assumed that the reputation of particular public officials, and more diffuse attitudes towards the authorities, government institutions and even the regime, can be deeply damaged through negative media coverage. The concept of negative news is often loosely defined in the literature, for example where this is seen as skeptical, cynical, or hostile coverage of government, or as an adversarial journalistic tone towards political leaders and institutions. Negative news can be evident in all types of reporting but it is exemplified most dramatically by coverage of ‘scandals’, defined as any action or event regarded as ethically or legally wrong which causes general public outrage, reproach, or disgrace, commonly, but not exclusively, arising from financial or sexual behavior. Scandals transgress social norms, especially regarding money, sex or power. Corruption, understood as the abuse of entrusted office for private gain, can be seen as a sub-category of financial scandal, although also covering multiple types of behaviors, typified by bribery, extortion, inducements, malfeasance, fraud, racketeering, and illegal monetary contributions, services or gifts given to parties, politicians, or public officials, and irregular financial receipt or payment for contracts, licenses or permits. The events themselves are the primary cause of any political disaffection but they can only shape public opinion if they come to the light of day.

Of course incidents of sexual improprieties and financial malfeasance in public affairs are hardly new; one only has to reflect upon the 18th century cartoons of Gillray or the depictions of politics in engravings by Hogarth to realize that the world of politics has often been held in low regard. But the impact of scandals is expected to be reinforced in contemporary societies characterized by a 24/7 media-saturated and personalistic news environment, emphasizing ‘gotcha’ headlines, combined with a dramatic increase in the role and powers of official monitoring agencies and special investigative prosecutors. This process is most dramatically illustrated in the United States by the Watergate crisis in 1972, the House Banking scandal in 1992, and the Lewinsky imbroglio in 1998. Similarly in Italy, public
disaffection has been attributed to the Tangentopoli (bribesville) financial scandal which occurred in the early-1990s, and a long series of charges against Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi for tax evasion, judicial bribery, and sexual scandals. In Britain, as well, trust in political parties and in the government is widely believed to have been badly damaged by the series of minor sexual and financial shenanigans which undermined the reputation of John Major’s administration during the mid-1990s, leading to a series of ministerial resignations. Public trust was widely believed to be further eroded in Britain by the scandal surrounding the expenses claimed by Members of Parliament, which came to light in May 2009, fuelling the resignation of the Speaker and many incumbent MPs, the legal prosecution of several members, public outrage and protests about these practices, and a general disgust and ennui with Westminster politics. In Latin America, as well, the rise of corrupt leadership, election fraud, bribery, and clientelism has also been regarded as deeply detrimental to the consolidation of democracy and to economic development. For all these reasons, multilateral development agencies, including the World Bank, Transparency International and Global Integrity, have prioritized the fight against political corruption in their programs designed to strengthen transparent governance around the world.

In open societies, the news media has traditionally long played the role of ‘watch-dog’ as the fourth estate of government. As ‘watch-dogs’, the news media has a responsibility to help guard the public interest, ensuring the accountability of powerful decision-makers by highlighting cases of malfeasance, misadministration, and corruption, thereby strengthening the transparency and effectiveness of governance. The defining feature of investigative journalism is not the political stance of the individual reporter, story, or media outlet, but rather the role of asking hard or probing questions of the powerful in order to maximize transparency and to serve the public interest. On a routine basis, timely and accurate information provided by news coverage of public affairs should help citizens to evaluate the performance of political leaders and parties, for example the government’s record in reducing poverty or improving economic growth. Investigative reporting commonly highlights failures in government, especially those arising from cases of bribery, corruption, and malfeasance, from abuse of power, or from incompetent management of public service delivery. The notion of reporters as watchdogs is one common in many democratic states, as confirmed by surveys of journalists in Sweden, the United States and Britain. Yet many factors can inhibit the extent to which this is practiced; for example a Nigerian study emphasized that journalists often engage in clientalistic practices and bribery due to poor pay and working conditions, lack of professional training, and limits on reporting imposed by owners and politicians.

Corruption and scandal are therefore widely regarded today as one of the most important causes of political mistrust of incumbent officials. According to these accounts, the blame for any growing or pervasive lack of trust rests with the reckless behavior of politicians and low standards of public life, combined with negative coverage of scandals and politics in the news media. Despite the popularity of these claims, however, it remains difficult to document this process with systematic evidence. As Dogan notes, a substantial lag can occur between the time when a specific scandal occurs or breaks into the light of day and its cumulative impact in eroding public trust. Major scandals are often both idiosyncratic and episodic. Particular scandals may prove to be ephemeral events, entertaining spectacles which rapidly fade from public consciousness, possibly damaging the reputations of the individuals concerned and generating public debate, but leaving little lasting imprint upon public attitudes towards government. Nevertheless in general a long series of repeated scandals is widely expected to have a corrosive impact upon public trust in social institutions, such as way that the rising tide of reported cases of child sex abuse by priests is believed to have undermined faith in the Catholic Church. Moreover most previous studies have examined evidence for the impact of negative news and particular scandal events on specific levels of political trust, such as confidence in the U.S. Congress, rather than looking for effects on more diffuse levels of system support, such as support for democratic
values. The type and severity of any scandal may also matter, for instance the public may prove more forgiving about the personal standards of sexual behavior of elected officials rather than problems of financial ethics.

The most systematic empirical studies have generally either focused upon analyzing time-series evidence within particular societies, to see whether scandal events influence subsequent trends in political trust, or else they have compared patterns of corruption and political attitudes cross-nationally. Some of the most systematic longitudinal evidence supporting strong claims about the effects of scandals was demonstrated in an American study by Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn, measuring the impact of congressional and presidential scandal events on quarterly changes in trust in the American federal government. The authors concluded that Congressional (but not presidential) scandals significantly depressed trust in American government; events such as the House Banking scandal and the Post Office scandal each led to an approximately 4% decline in trust in the federal government. Some time-series studies also suggests that scandal events are capable of exerting an even stronger impact on changes in American presidential popularity, although there is no consensus in the scholarly literature, and other research indicates that, compared with the role of economic conditions and foreign policy, these events often have minimal effect.

Among the cross-national studies, Anderson and Tverdova compared Transparency International’s 1996 Corruption Perception Index (estimated from expert elite judgments) against measures of at macro level institutional confidence among the general public, derived from the 1996 ISSP survey in sixteen post-industrial democracies. TI’s Corruption Perception Index was found to be related to lower trust in civil servants and more negative evaluations of the overall performance of the political system. A similar comparison of fifteen industrialized societies by Andrain and Smith also reported that the Corruption Perception Index was linked with public support for democratic ideals, as monitored by the World Values Survey during the mid-1990s. Yet the results are not conclusive as these multilevel studies used standard OLS regression models to analyze national contextual effects. This approach may have over-estimated the appropriate degrees of freedom, and thus generated potentially misleading tests of statistical significance. Wells and Krieckhaus carefully replicated the Anderson and Tverdova study using more conservative multilevel analysis methods, concluding that the Corruption Perception Index has no significant impact on citizen’s satisfaction with democracy.

Moreover the CPI index is a noisy and imprecise measure; what matters for public attitudes is less the incidence or frequency of financial scandals per se than their reporting and media coverage in each society; after all many cases of corruption remain unknown until investigative journalism headlines the evidence. Buried scandals may not come to light if corrupt practices are widely accepted in certain cultures, if journalists, broadcasters and editorial gatekeepers are part of the problem rather than part of the solution, and if government or commercial pressures limit watchdog reporting by the independent media. The coverage of corruption could also have grown without having any significant impact on public opinion, for example if people are already deeply cynical about government so that further stories about malfeasance and sexual misconduct lose their ability to shock, or if attitudes towards democracy are shaped by long-term processes of values change, as cultural theories suggest. Moreover the direction of causality is further complicated by the fact that news media coverage of corruption is also likely to influence corruption perceptions, measured by the TI index. Any correlation between the frequency of major scandals and public opinion could also be produced either by the direct impact of the experience of bribery and petty corruption, for example on political trust, confidence in government institutions, and general satisfaction with democracy, or by the indirect role of the news media as an intermediary in this process. Therefore the general idea that public faith in politicians deteriorates when standards of public life worsen, especially where investigative reporters reveal major
scandals, is a plausible proposition, but the independent evidence to corroborate this claim is far from simple and straightforward.

**Correlating corruption perceptions and democratic satisfaction**

Several approaches can be used to crack this nut. First, to start, we can replicate previous cross-national correlation studies. Data on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) can be analyzed in countries worldwide, derived from Transparency International’s annual surveys of experts in 2005, to measure the perceived incidence of corruption in each society. This data can be compared against the standardized Democratic Satisfaction scale in each country, derived from the World Values Survey 2005-7. Moreover, since watchdog journalism is more likely to occur where there is an independent news media sector, the correlations are expected to strengthen in societies with a free press, as measured by Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom index, 2005.

[Figure 9.1 and Table 9.2 about here]

The simple macro-level correlations generated by this process are illustrated in Figure 9.1. The results display a strong and significant relationship between each society’s perceived level of corruption and how satisfied the public felt about the performance of democracy in their own country. Hence countries in the top-right corner of the scatter-gram, such as Finland, Australia and Switzerland, have the cleanest government, according to Transparency International’s index, and also relatively high levels of public contentment with the way that democracy works. By contrast, states in the bottom-left quadrant, such as Ethiopia, Ukraine and Russia, score exceptionally poorly on both criteria. At the same time the exact role of the news media as an intermediary in this process remains unclear; in the regression models presented in Table 9.2, confirms that the corruption perception index is a significant predictor of democratic satisfaction but freedom of the press proved to be an insignificant, either by itself or in alternative models testing interaction effects. Moreover as discussed in the next chapter, it was not simply lower corruption which generates more positive political attitudes among citizens; as observed later (see Table 10.1), all the World Bank Institute indices of good governance (such as those measuring government effectiveness and rule of law) are linked with democratic satisfaction.

**Trends in public opinion and the news media**

Overall, therefore, accounts blaming growing media negativity and scandal coverage for any supposed loss of trust and confidence in government are popular, calling attention to changes in the behavior of political elites, public expectations of public officials, and/or the role of the news media. The cross-national evidence to examine these propositions remains limited, however; ideally to determine the linkages studies need time-series data about the contents of the news media in many countries, as well as survey data monitoring public opinion (and media use) during subsequent years. Unfortunately such evidence is unavailable. As an alternative strategy, we can compare selected paired case studies in two countries, Britain and the United States. These countries share many cultural and social characteristics, as Anglo-American cousins, affluent post-industrial economies, and established democracies, although they also differ substantially in the structure of their broadcasting systems and newspaper industries, as well as in their presidential and parliamentary political systems, and in their experience of particular financial and sexual scandals which occurred during these years. Hence during the years of the Bush administration, America experienced ‘Lawergate’, the Jack Abramoff affair, and the Plume affair, while the British government had to cope with effects of the Kelly suicide and the Hutton Inquiry, Cash for Honors, and the Westminster expenses scandal.\(^{39}\) Both administrations were also implicated in the ‘sexed-up’ Downing Street memo, which functioned as the ‘smoking gun’ in the run up to the invasion of Iraq. Content analysis data from Media Tenor Institute allows us to monitor
detailed trends in news media coverage from 2000-2008 and this can be compared with indicators of system support derived from monthly public opinion polls conducted in these countries.

**Media content analysis 2000-2008**

The Media Tenor Institute Systematic content analyzed news coverage gathered from a series of major broadcast and print media outlets in both countries. In Britain, this included all stories broadcast in the main BBC and ITV evening news programs, as well as coverage in three broadsheet Sunday newspapers (the Telegraph, Times and Observer). In the U.S., Media Tenor analyzed stories broadcast in the NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox main evening news programs, as well as stories reported in the New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal, and the magazines Time and Newsweek. From 2000-2008, Media Tenor monitored in total 1,260,401 stories in both countries, analyzing the content of all articles appearing in the politics, news and business section of the print media, and all stories featured in TV news programs. The content analysis coded (i) the directional tone of each news story (as positive (-1), neutral (0), and negative (1+)), as well as (ii) the main subject of the story and (iii) the issue topic. The mean directional tone of stories, and the amount of scandal coverage, was estimated per month where the main subject concerned the government and government leaders. The directional tone was recoded to form a standardized 100-point scale, for ease of interpretation. The daily data points were aggregated to create monthly averages, to match against the public opinion polls, generating 106 monthly observation points in total. For analysis, the mean tone of news coverage and the amount of scandal coverage were both lagged by one month, on the assumption that the impact of negative news should gradually affect subsequent levels of public confidence and trust.

**British public opinion**

The monthly indicators of news coverage was compared against the available survey trend data in both countries monitoring indicators of systems support, such as trust in politicians, satisfaction with the performance of the government and party leaders, and confidence in core regime institutions. For Britain, Ipsos MORI Research provide a series of regular monthly surveys of public opinion measuring a range of social and political attitudes, including voting intentions and party leadership popularity, as well as trends in satisfaction with the government. The latter is gauged in monthly polls by Ipsos MORI using the following question: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that the Government is running the country?” This does not tap into more diffuse levels of attitudes towards democracy, the core issue at the heart of any democratic deficit, but it provides a suitable measure of public evaluations about regime performance. Throughout these years, the Labour Party was in government, first under the leadership of Mr. Tony Blair and then under Mr. Gordon Brown, who succeeded him as Prime Minister in June 2007. Public satisfaction with the prime minister, also monitored in the Ipsos MORI monthly polls, closely tracked (R=0.93**) satisfaction with the British government.

[Figure 9.2 about here]

Therefore public opinion concerning satisfaction with the government and trust in politicians, drawn from Ipsos MORI polls, was compared against the monthly trends in the positive-negative directional tone of news coverage of the government, and also the amount of news stories about government scandals carried in the British media, as monitored by Media Tenor. First to look at these patterns visually, Figure 9.2 illustrates the trends in both indicators. The graph shows some common fluctuations in both series and some periodic peaks and troughs can also be observed. The most important periodic events during this period included the May 2001 and June 2005 general elections, returning Labour to power, as well as the events of 9/11, which reverberated across the Atlantic, and the replacement of Blair with Brown’s leadership. Hence the events of 9/11 saw a peak in public satisfaction with the British government along with a sharp uptick in positive news coverage about
government. Similarly, the mid-term blues, which effect most government cyclically, saw highly negative news coverage in the fall of 2003 and low public satisfaction as well. This period followed the Hutton inquiry, which examined the death of Dr David Kelly, a Ministry of Defence official who apparently committed suicide after being identified as leaking that the Labour administration had ‘sexed up’ the report into Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, in other months there is clearly divergence between the series, for example with public opinion becoming increasingly disenchanted with the government during the fall of 2008, although media coverage had not deviated from a mildly-negative tone.

[Table 9.3 about here]

To analyze the data, following the approach of Betz and Katz, the multivariate ordinary least squares regression model used with panel corrected errors. The observable fluctuations in the series suggest the need to control for the periodic effects of general elections, events which typically generate an improvement in satisfaction with government which gradually erodes over time, as well as the effects of leadership changes in any of the three major parties, and the rally-round-the-flag impact of terrorist shocks arising from the aftermath of the dramatic events of 9/11 and the London bombings of 7 July 2005. The regression model of the British time-series analysis, incorporating these controls, is presented in Table 9.3. The results show that overall government satisfaction benefitted most clearly by general elections, and by the impact of ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effects arising from the aftermath of major terrorist events. The change in party leadership had a positive but insignificant effect, in part because this variable captured changes in each of the major parties, not just the Labour succession from Blair to Brown. Finally, after introducing all these controls, the lagged tone of news coverage proved to significantly improve satisfaction with government. This result is in the contrary direction to that predicted by the negative news thesis. The amount of scandal coverage proved to reduce government satisfaction but this effect was statistically insignificant. Overall, then, despite the popularity of the claims, the results of the British time-series analysis are unable to provide conclusive confirmation of the negative news thesis.

U.S. Public opinion

What of the situation in the United States? Although both countries share an Anglo-American culture, the institutional context differs in many important regards. The UK system of parliamentary democracy, cabinet government, programmatic parties, and a unitary state means that public satisfaction with government refers collectively to the major party in power. In contrast, the U.S. federal government, where power is divided among the presidential executive, the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court, makes it more difficult for the public to attribute collective praise or blame. Moreover the media systems also differ substantially in both countries; the UK has a dual broadcasting system which is heavily regulated, where the British Broadcasting Corporation plays a major role in television and radio, and the daily tabloid and broadsheet newspapers are predominately national. In America, by contrast, the commercial sector predominates in network and cable television news, and with a few notable exceptions, most broadsheet newspapers have a limited regional circulation. Moreover the incidents and timing of major political scandals during the Bush and Blair administrations also differ in each case. As a result, the impact of negative news and scandals may well differ in each country. For comparison with satisfaction with government in the UK, in the U.S. Gallup Polls has long provided a regular monthly series monitoring American public opinion, including job ratings for the legislative branch of the federal government, using the following standard question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?” These items allow us to track monthly fluctuations in popular approval at regime level. Accordingly American public opinion can be compared against the
lagged monthly trends monitored by Media Tenor in the positive-negative directional tone, and the amount of stories about scandals, covered in the U.S. news media.

[Figure 9.3 and Table 9.4 about here]

The visual illustration of trends in Figure 9.3 suggests that Congressional approval shows a dramatic surge following the events of 9/11, as many others have observed, before gradually falling back a year later to the level found before these events. Thereafter, approval erodes from fall 2003 until the end of the series in 2008. In contrast, the tone of news coverage shows fluctuations over time in the negative zone but no accompanying steady increase in negative news from 2003-8.

The multivariate analysis presented in Table 9.4 demonstrates that the rally-round-the-flag effect following 9/11 was the greatest single factor affecting Congressional rob ratings, reflecting even stronger effects than those recorded in the British analysis. At the same time, contrary to the British results, Congressional job ratings were sharply depressed by the lagged amount of news coverage of scandals. The directional tone of American news coverage slightly reduced public satisfaction with Congress, but these results proved statistically insignificant. The U.S. analysis therefore does provide partial support for the claim that news stories about corruption and scandal serve can damage confidence in governmental institutions in some cases. It remains unclear, however, why there are contrasts between the British and American results. These differences could be attributed to contrasts in the specific types and severity of the financial and sexual scandals which occurred in politics during these years, or to the typical pattern of ‘watch-dog’ journalistic coverage which followed these events in each country, or else to the way that the public attributes blame when evaluating responsibility for scandals under presidential and parliamentary political systems. Further research, ideally involving many cases, is needed to disentangle these sorts of factors.

Conclusions

The broadest data to examine the video-malaise thesis – and thus how far levels of democratic aspirations and satisfaction are affected by different types of news media use (comparing regular exposure to newspapers, television and radio news, and the internet) -- is available from cross-national comparisons covering almost fifty societies contained in the 5th wave World Values Survey. Multilevel models examine these relationships controlling for the social characteristics typical of news users, as well as the societal or macro-level impact of the independent news media and corruption perceptions. The analysis demonstrates three main findings which undermine the video-malaise thesis. Firstly: (i) general exposure to news and information from television and radio news, along with newspapers and the internet, usually strengthened democratic aspirations, even after controlling for factors such as age, income and education which typically characterize the news audience. (ii) The effects on democratic satisfaction proved more mixed, but contrary to the core claim in the video-malaise thesis, users of television and radio broadcast news proved more satisfied with democracy, not less. Lastly, (iii) regular use of all these news media, including television and radio, reduced the democratic deficit, or the size of the gap between expectations and perceived performance. The survey analysis therefore provides no support for the video-malaise claims about the damaging effects thought to arise from regular exposure to television news.

Yet this evidence cannot fully respond to the alternative thesis that public trust is damaged by regular exposure to negative news and to coverage of political scandals by any media outlet. Previous studies have examined these claims by comparing cross-national patterns of perceived corruption against levels of democratic satisfaction. This chapter replicates this approach, establishing that a moderate correlation does link perceived corruption with democratic satisfaction. At the same time,
however, the precise role of the news media in this process remains unclear. Presumably the amount of coverage of political corruption reported by the news media may help to shape democratic orientations and political trust, but this linkage has not been fully established in existing research. It remains possible that direct experience of petty bribery in payment for goods and services in the public sector, such as contracts, licenses, and permits, could influence perceptions irrespective of journalistic coverage.

To go further, ideally studies need to compare the news coverage with public opinion in many countries and over time. The content analysis data across many countries is unavailable, but evidence from the selected case-studies of Britain and the United States from 2000-2008 can throw some light on this issue. The longitudinal studies of the effect of negative news and scandal coverage on satisfaction with government in Britain and approval of Congress in America provided a partial test of these claims. In Britain, the results showed that neither the amount of scandal coverage nor the degree of negative news depressed satisfaction with government. In the U.S., negative news proved insignificant, although the amount of scandal coverage did depress approval of Congress. Complex patterns are therefore revealed in each country, rather than a simple narrative. Overall, while providing some limited support for the claims that scandal can damage confidence in government institutions, the lack of consistency among the two cases means that the results cannot be regarded as highly robust. The analysis therefore suggests the need for considerable caution and for further research into any general claims about how negative news or scandal coverage impacts public opinion.
**Figure 9.1: Corruption perceptions, the free press, and democratic satisfaction**

Note: Democratic satisfaction: V163. “And how democratically is this country being governed today? Again using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is “not at all democratic” and 10 means that it is “completely democratic,” what position would you choose?” Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International, 2005. Freedom of the Press, Reporters without Borders, 2005. Countries were dichotomized around mean scores in Freedom of the Press.

Figure 9.2: Tone of news coverage and government satisfaction, Britain 2000-2008

Notes:

Government satisfaction is monitored from Ipsos/MORI monthly Polls: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way (i) that the Government is running the country?”

Tone of news coverage: Media Tenor International: content analysis of the positive or negative tone of UK news media coverage of the Labour party, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown. The mean news tone per month was standardized to a 100 point scale, ranging from most negative (0) to most positive (100).

Reference line events: (i) June 2001 General Election; (ii) events of 9/11; (iii) May 2005 General Election; (iv) Gordon Brown becomes PM.

Sources: Ipsos/MORI Political Monitor Satisfaction Ratings; Media Tenor International
Figure 9.3: Tone of news coverage and Congressional approval, U.S. 2000-2010

Notes:
The tone of all news coverage is defined as all the American news stories about the U.S. Congress, its members and leaders, coded as positive, neutral or negative in the content analysis conducted by Media Tenor International. The mean news tone per month was standardized to a 100 point scale, ranging from most negative (0) to most positive (100).

Approval of Congress is derived from the monthly U.S. Gallup Polls: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?"


Sources: Gallup Polls; Media Tenor International
Table 9.1: Media use and democratic orientations, 2005-7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic aspirations (i)</th>
<th>Democratic satisfaction (ii)</th>
<th>Democratic deficit (iii)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td><strong>1.32</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>.362</strong></td>
<td><strong>-956</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.091)</td>
<td>(.108)</td>
<td>(.124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male=1)</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td><strong>-208</strong></td>
<td><strong>-237</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.080)</td>
<td>(.096)</td>
<td>(.109)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socioeconomic resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income 10-pt scale</td>
<td><strong>.315</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>2.27</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.92</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.096)</td>
<td>(.114)</td>
<td>(.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education 9-pt scale</td>
<td><strong>1.50</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>-428</strong></td>
<td><strong>-1.87</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.103)</td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic knowledge</td>
<td><strong>3.92</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>.549</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>-3.42</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.092)</td>
<td>(.101)</td>
<td>(.127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media use</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper use</td>
<td><strong>.564</strong>*</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td><strong>-470</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.094)</td>
<td>(.111)</td>
<td>(.127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television and radio news use</td>
<td><strong>1.10</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>.733</strong></td>
<td><strong>-349</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.090)</td>
<td>(.108)</td>
<td>(.124)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet use</td>
<td><strong>.368</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>-484</strong></td>
<td><strong>-831</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.097)</td>
<td>(115)</td>
<td>(.131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NATIONAL-LEVEL</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.840)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
<td>(1.41)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Constant (intercept)</strong></td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>-22.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schwartz BIC</td>
<td>455,203</td>
<td>465,358</td>
<td>474718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. respondents</td>
<td>52,522</td>
<td>51,713</td>
<td>51,277</td>
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<tr>
<td>N. nations</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** All independent variables were standardized using mean centering (z-scores). Models present the results of the REML multilevel regression models (for details, see Appendix C) including the beta coefficient, (the standard error below in parenthesis), and the significance. The 100 point scales are constructed from the items listed in Table 6.1. See appendix A for details about the measurement, coding and construction of all variables. Significant coefficients are highlighted in **bold**. Freedom of the Press is measured by the Freedom House index 2005, standardized to a 100-point scale.

**Source:** World Values Survey 2005-7
Table 9.2: Corruption, press freedom, and democratic satisfaction, 2005-7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>Standardized beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corruption perception index, TI 2005</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.533</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press Freedom, RSB 2005</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>-.050</td>
<td>N/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. countries</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.223</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** The dependent variable is the 100-point democratic satisfaction scale. Models present the results of the macro-level OLS regression model including the beta coefficient, the standard error, the standardized beta, and the significance. See appendix A for details about the measurement, coding and construction of all variables. Significant coefficients are highlighted in **bold**. Models were checked through tolerance statistics to be free of problems of multi-collinearity.

Table 9.3: British news coverage and satisfaction with government, 2000-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>Standardized beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lagged tone of news coverage</td>
<td>.409</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>.311 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagged amount of scandal coverage</td>
<td>-3.31</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>-.122 N/s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months since last election</td>
<td>-.090</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>-.173 N/s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>.178 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership change in any major party</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>.099 N/s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist events (9/11 and 7 July 2005)</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>.214 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constant 13.7
N. monthly observations 93

Adjusted R² .278

Notes: The dependent variable is government satisfaction, measured from Ipsos/MORI monthly Polls: “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way (i) that the Government is running the country?”

Tone of news coverage: Media Tenor International: content analysis of the positive or negative tone of British news media coverage of stories about the British Labour government, Tony Blair, and Gordon Brown. The mean news tone per month was standardized to a 100 point scale, ranging from most negative (0) to most positive (100), and the scale was lagged by one month.

The OLS regression analysis model used panel corrected standard errors.

Sources: Ipsos/MORI Political Monitor Satisfaction Ratings; Media Tenor International
### Table 9.4: U.S. news coverage and satisfaction with Congress, 2000-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>Standardized beta</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lagged tone of news coverage</td>
<td>-.201</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>-.074</td>
<td>N/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagged amount of scandal coverage</td>
<td>-37.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>-.312</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Months since last election</td>
<td>-.322</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>-.328</td>
<td>***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>-10.5</td>
<td>6.61</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td>N/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major terrorist events</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>.257</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. monthly observations</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.262</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** The dependent variable is Congressional satisfaction, measured from Gallup monthly Polls: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Congress is handling its job?”

*Tone of news coverage:* Media Tenor International: content analysis of the positive or negative tone of American news media coverage of stories about the U.S. Congress. The mean news tone per month was standardized to a 100 point scale, ranging from most negative (0) to most positive (100), and the scale was lagged by one month.

The OLS regression analysis was used with panel corrected standard errors.

**Sources:** Gallup Polls; Media Tenor International.


7 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.”


about the causes of corruption from ten years of cross-national empirical research?’ Annual Review of Political Science 10: 211-244 2007. S


40 For full methodological details, see http://www.mediatenor.com/

41 Details of the survey methodology and British results from Ipsos MORI are available from http://www.ipsos-mori.com

42 Nathaniel Beck and Jonathan Katz. 1995. ‘What to do (and not to do) with Time-Series Cross-Section Data.’ American Political Science Review. 89: 634-647.