

A Virtuous Circle? The Impact of Political Communications in Post-Industrial Democracies

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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 (Nye et al., 1997; Putnam, 2000). The common view is that the American public turns off, knows little, cares less and stays home. Similar worries echo in Europe. 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 (Hayward, 1995; Anderson and Eliason, 1996, Pharr and Putnam, 2000). The growth of critical citizens is open to many explanations, explored in a previous study (Norris, 1999).

One of the most popular accounts attributes public disengagement to political communications. The political science literature on 'media malaise' or 'videomalaise' 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. These accounts claim that common practices by the news media and by party campaigns hinder civic engagement, meaning learning about public affairs, trust in government and political activism. Media malaise theories share two core assumptions: (a) that the process of political communications has a significant *impact* upon civic engagement; and (b) that this impact is in a *negative* direction.

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 avail-

able (Curran and Seaton, 1991). 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 (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). 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 (Starker, 1991).

While hardly new, what is different today is the widespread orthodoxy that has developed around this theory. Let us first outline the American and European accounts of media malaise and then consider some evidence surrounding this thesis.

Theories of media malaise

American theories of 'media malaise' emerged in the political science literature in the 1960s. Kurt and Gladys Lang (1966) were the first to connect the rise of network news with broader feelings of disenchantment with American politics. TV broadcasts, they argued, fuelled public cynicism by overemphasizing 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. Robinson (1976) 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 process was seen as 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 (Robinson and Sheeney, 1983).

Many others echoed these claims over the years. According to a widely influential report for the Trilateral Commission, the news media had eroded