

# A Virtuous Circle

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS IN  
POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

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## Evaluating Media Performance

Commentators often have suggested that newspapers or television should fulfill certain obligations, such as raising public awareness about AIDS, encouraging interest in international affairs, or stimulating community activism. Many believe that during election campaigns the news media have a particular responsibility to help strengthen democracy by providing political coverage that will educate the public about the major issues, inform citizens about the contenders for office, and mobilize people to turn out. If judged by those standards, the news media have largely failed in their democratic functions, media malaise theories suggest. Embedded in these claims are certain normative assumptions about what political coverage the news media *should* provide. But what are the appropriate standards for evaluating the roles of the news media?

This chapter starts with the theory of representative democracy developed by Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl, based on the concepts of pluralistic competition, public participation, and civil and political rights. We then consider the benchmarks available to evaluate journalism that flow from this understanding. The strategy we use follows the idea of a democratic audit, developed to evaluate how institutions like elections, legislatures, and the judiciary work in any particular society.<sup>1</sup> Our approach identifies three core political functions of the news media system – as a civic forum, as a mobilizing agent, and as a watchdog. Based on these functions, we develop more specific benchmarks, or a checklist, that can be used to audit the performance of the news media system in any democracy. Subsequent chapters go on to examine the evidence for media performances judged against these standards.

## DEMOCRATIC THEORIES OF THE NEWS MEDIA

Following the Schumpeterian tradition, we can define representative or liberal democracy in terms of its structural characteristics.<sup>2</sup> Understood in this way, democracy involves three dimensions:

- (1) *pluralistic competition* among parties and individuals for all positions of government power,
- (2) *participation* by citizens in the selection of parties and representatives through free, fair, and periodic elections, and
- (3) *civil and political liberties* to speak, publish, assemble, and organize, as the conditions necessary to ensure effective competition and participation.<sup>3</sup>

This definition focuses particularly on how democracies function through elections – their primary mechanism for holding governments accountable for their actions. Representative democracies require competition for elective offices, allowing citizens to choose from among alternative candidates and parties. Information should be available from parties and from the news media so that citizens can understand the electoral choices and estimate the consequences of casting their ballots. Citizens need opportunities to formulate their preferences, signify their preferences, and have their preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government. Free and fair elections should be held at regular intervals to translate votes into seats and to allow for alternation of parties and officeholders. If these conditions are met, then citizens can exercise an informed choice, hold parties and representatives accountable for their actions, and, if necessary, ‘kick the rascals out’. Of course, many other definitions are available, especially those based on alternative conceptions of direct or plebicitary democracy, but the Schumpeterian perspective reflects one of the most widely accepted understandings of democratic institutions.<sup>4</sup> It has the advantage of having been used extensively for cross-national and longitudinal comparisons.<sup>5</sup> The Schumpeterian conceptualization has been operationalized and measured with the Gastil index, which Freedom House has published annually since the early 1970s, ranking countries worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

On this basis, we can identify three political functions for the news media system during election campaigns – as a *civic forum* for pluralistic debate, as a *watchdog* for civil and political liberties, and as a *mobilizing agent* for public participation – that flow from this understanding of representative democracy (Figure 2.1). Obviously, many other crite-

Conditions for Representative Democracy	Pluralistic Competition	Public Participation	Civil Liberties and Political Rights
Role of the News Media  Performance Indices	Civic Forum  Availability, and balance of news in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stopwatch balance</li> <li>• Directional balance</li> <li>• Agenda balance</li> </ul>	Mobilizing Agent  Civic engagement of news users in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practical knowledge</li> <li>• Political interest</li> <li>• Civic activism</li> </ul>	Watchdog  Independence and effectiveness of the news media in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuses of power</li> <li>• Public scandals</li> <li>• Government failures</li> </ul>
Measurement of Performance	Content analysis: Amount and balance of news coverage	Mass surveys: Knowledge, interest, and activism of news users	Case studies: The role of the news media in exposing abuses of power, public scandals, and government failures

Figure 2.1. Standards of media performance.

ria for evaluating the performances of the mass media are available, such as those concerning educational or cultural goals.<sup>7</sup> But only the core political functions for the news media that we have identified are central to the Schumpeterian understanding of representative democracy. What does this conceptualization imply for evaluating the performances of the news media?

#### THE NEWS MEDIA AS CIVIC FORUM

The concept of the news media as a civic forum is most closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, who has been widely influential, although our argument does not depend upon his conceptualization. Habermas's ideal notion of a public sphere was predicated on the notion of widespread discussion about public affairs in civic society.<sup>8</sup> A 'public sphere' represents a meeting place or debating forum mediating between citizens and the state, facilitating informed deliberation about the major issues of the day. In the eighteenth century, a diverse range of intellectual journals and public affairs periodicals among fashionable society were regarded as providing the ideal media in this process, and there were meeting places in the political salons and coffee houses of London, Paris, and Vienna.

In the late nineteenth century, changes in the nature of liberal democracy – particularly expansion of the franchise beyond the bourgeois elites, the growth of the popular press, and the increasing specialization and complexity of government – transformed the conditions that sustained the traditional channels of elite political discussion and enlarged the public sphere. Habermas deplored the effects of developments in the news media, including the growing role of the mass-circulation popular press, the concentration of corporate ownership in large media groups, and the rising power of advertisers, a process that, he argued, would lead to a homogenization of political information and a shift from 'real' to 'virtual' political debate.

Despite those developments, today the ideal of the press as a civic forum for pluralistic debate, mediating between voters and government, remains highly influential.<sup>9</sup> Traditional meeting places have been altered, but not beyond recognition: Venues such as newspapers ('op-ed' features, editorial columns, and letter pages), public affairs magazines, and newer outlets (talk-radio programs, CNN's *Larry King Live*, the BBC2's *Newsnight*, *Meet the Press*, and Internet discussion forums) all provide regular opportunities for political debate among a network of politicians, government officials, journalistic commentators,

advocacy-group spokespersons, think-tank analysts, and academic policy experts, in addition to providing opportunities for public input through phone-in or studio discussions.

As a civic forum, it is widely assumed that the news media should function at the most general level as a conduit providing the government and the governed with opportunities to communicate effectively with each other.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the news media provide an essential linkage connecting horizontally between political actors and vertically between these actors and the electorate. The central priority in this process should be accorded to the parties, which are the core representative institutions that aggregate interests, nominate candidates, and provide collective responsibility for government. Parties attempt to influence newspapers and television headlines, and thereby reach 'downward' towards the electorate, through activities such as news conferences, photo opportunities, and professional political marketing techniques. Equally important, to make sure that electoral choices reflect public priorities, citizens need to be able to express their concerns and convey their preferences 'upward' to parties and elected representatives. Opinion polls, focus groups, and traditional doorstep canvassing are all ways by which representatives can learn about the preferences of the electorate, but often politicians rely on the news media as a proxy for public opinion. This process is important at any stage of the political cycle, but particularly so during election campaigns, when citizens have their greatest opportunity to influence the political process and choose the government.

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIC DEBATE

If we accept that the news media should function as a civic forum, then specific indicators can be used to audit how well the media perform in this capacity. We assume that the news media, to prove effective, should provide extensive political coverage that is widely and easily available to all sectors of society. A rich information environment, with multiple sources of regular news about politics available from different outlets, is most likely to promote effective government communications, to provide multiple venues for public debate, and to reduce the costs of becoming informed about public affairs. In contrast, if, as some claim, there has been a decrease in the amount of political coverage because of trends such as the decline of public-service broadcasting or the rise of 'infotainment', then civic affairs may be impoverished.

Yet the amount of political news tells us nothing about its quality. Pluralist theory emphasizes that as a civic forum the news-media system should reflect the political and cultural diversity within a society, providing a fair and impartial balance, so that all voices can be heard in political deliberations. 'Balance' can be defined in terms of either external or internal diversity.

Notions of *external* diversity stress competition between different media outlets. In Britain, for example, although direct financial links between parties and newspapers have weakened, the press remains broadly partisan in its political leanings. Papers like the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* have long sympathized with the Conservative party, while the *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* have provided a more left-liberal slant to news and editorial commentary. Although the overall balance of the press in the postwar era has traditionally leaned towards the right, competition between papers, offering voters choices of alternative political perspectives at the newsstand, preserves pluralism. The role of the news media as a civic forum becomes problematic if most major news outlets consistently favour only one party or viewpoint, if they systematically exclude minor parties or minority perspectives, or if citizens rely upon only one news source.

The alternative conception emphasizes the *internal* diversity of reporting. In this model, typified by the American press, each paper provides multiple and contrasting perspectives within its columns, often balancing liberal and conservative op-ed commentary. Internal diversity preserves pluralism, even with a restricted choice of newspapers within a particular market. The monopoly once enjoyed by public broadcasters meant that most emphasized the need for strict partisan balance in news coverage, especially during election campaigns. Television editors and producers commonly stress the need for equidistant coverage of the main political parties, balancing favourable and unfavourable stories about each party, as well as evenhandedness in coverage of all sides of an issue.<sup>11</sup> The typical story in this regard tends to present one party's policy proposals or record, followed by a rebuttal from opponents, in a familiar 'on the one hand, and on the other' sort of format. Studies have found that balance, or 'expressing fairly the positions on both sides of a dispute,' is one of the most common ways for journalists to understand objectivity, especially in the United States and Britain.<sup>12</sup> Many broadcasters seek to ensure that the major parties or candidates are given equal, or proportional, airtime during election campaigns. This is also the principle commonly used for allocating time

to political or election broadcasts,<sup>13</sup> as well as for the time rules governing presidential debates. A comparison of election coverage in the early 1990s found that the British and Spanish press displayed greater external diversity, while in contrast the American and Japanese press, and broadcast news in most countries, displayed higher internal diversity.<sup>14</sup> A potential danger with internal diversity is a possible bias towards middle-of-the-road coverage, excluding the radical left and right. The multiple and conflicting signals in news coverage may also complicate the process of trying to use the news media as cue-givers in political choices, thus reducing the ability of the news media to mobilize voters.<sup>15</sup>

To what extent the news media meet these standards can be tested by examining the amount and direction of news coverage of major controversies on the policy agenda. For example, in the context of the European Union, Chapter 9 analyzes television and newspaper coverage of the debate about the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and the adoption of the single currency (the euro). If the European news media system worked well as a civic forum for those issues, then we would expect to find extensive political coverage of the EMU debate available in the news, and this coverage would provide a platform balancing different political and cultural viewpoints for and against monetary union. On the other hand, the news media can be seen to have failed by this standard if serious political coverage of Europe was driven out by 'infotainment' values, 'soft' news, and 'tabloidization', if news systematically excluded major voices from the public debate, or if only one perspective for or against monetary union was given a platform.

#### WATCHDOG OF THE POWERFUL

Equally important, a viable democracy requires that there be extensive political rights and civil liberties, to protect the interests of minorities against abuses of power. In their watchdog function, it has long been recognized that the news media should scrutinize those in authority, whether in government institutions, in nonprofit organizations, or in the private sector, to hold officials accountable for their actions.<sup>16</sup> Since the time of Edmund Burke, the 'fourth estate' has traditionally been regarded as one of the classic checks and balances in the division of powers. In this role, investigative reporters seek to expose official corruption, corporate scandals, and government failures. In the more popular notion, the press is seen as a champion of the people, guard-

ing the public interest, taking up grievances, and challenging government authorities.<sup>17</sup>

In political coverage, the watchdog role implies that journalists and broadcasters should not simply report on political speeches, campaign rallies, or photo opportunities 'straight' or unfiltered from politicians to the public without also providing editorial comment, critical analysis, and interpretive evaluations of political messages to help readers and viewers place these events in context. Critical coverage can help to safeguard effective political competition by ensuring that claims, for example, about the government's record or a candidate's qualifications for office, are open to external scrutiny and evaluation. Analyses of party strategy and tactics can also be regarded as part of this watchdog role, for contextual information about the aims of spin-doctors and campaign managers can help citizens to evaluate the reliability and meaning of political messages. The watchdog role can also be seen as vital for the protection of civil liberties and political rights, exposing the actions of governments and major corporations to the light of public scrutiny.

Clearly there is the potential for conflict between the need for the news media to act as a pluralistic civic forum, setting the platform and rules of engagement for others to debate public affairs, and for journalists to function as active watchdogs of the public interest. The conventional distinction between 'factual' reporting on the front pages and 'editorial' commentary in the middle of the paper is one way to make this distinction, although the line between 'reporting' and 'interpretation' often becomes blurred in practice. To see how journalists balance these different functions, we can examine case studies of the coverage of issue debates or election campaigns. The key issue is whether the news media act as independent, fair and impartial critics of powerful interests or whether abuses of public standards go unchecked.

#### THE NEWS MEDIA AS A MOBILIZING AGENT

We now come to the issue at the heart of this book, which is concerned above all with unraveling the impact of political communications on public engagement. The roles of the news media as civic forum and as watchdog essentially ensure the appropriate conditions for maintaining political competition at the elite level. As defined earlier, public participation through free, fair, and periodic elections is the third Schumpeterian precondition for representative democracy. By this criterion, the news media succeed if they encourage *learning* about poli-

tics and public affairs so that citizens can cast informed ballots, if they stimulate grassroots *interest* and discussion, and if they encourage the public to *participate* through the available channels of civic engagement, including voting turnout. For classical liberals, like John Stuart Mill in *Representative Government* and *On Liberty*, one of the major reasons for extending the franchise to the working classes was to encourage civic education, because he believed that citizens could best learn about public affairs through active engagement with the democratic process.

Does the news media system perform according to these expectations? As discussed earlier, media malaise theories blame the news for widespread apathy about public affairs, cynicism about political leaders and institutions, ignorance about the basic facts of politics, and low turnout at the ballot box. Recent decades have seen an erosion of support for the core institutions of representative government in many advanced industrialized societies, and support for parliaments, parties, and political regimes remains low in many new democracies.<sup>18</sup> Many hold the common practices in journalism responsible for this situation, particularly the way that routine news headlines often are dominated by ‘negativism’, conflict, personalization, and crime and violence, with political coverage characterized by a focus on horse-race polls and insider strategy, rather than political issues.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as will be discussed further in Part III, the evidence that exposure to the news media has deleterious effects on political learning, interest, and participation remains a matter of considerable debate.

In this chapter, as the basic premises for my argument, we begin with three simple assumptions about the ideal conditions for acquisition of political knowledge. The empirical evidence supporting these propositions will be examined in Part III. First, there is much controversy as to whether or not the public learns enough from the news media to cast an informed ballot, because there is no consensus on what counts as ‘political knowledge’. We start with the premise that what voters need for effective citizenship, and therefore what the news media should provide, is *practical knowledge about the probable consequences of their political actions*. To cast an informed vote, citizens need to be able to minimize uncertainty and predict the results of their political decisions, such as whether voting for X or Y will maximize their preferences.<sup>20</sup> As discussed later, practical knowledge is only one form of knowledge – it focuses on prediction, not on explanation or analysis such as is characteristic of knowledge in the natural sciences. For example, understand-

ing the principles of the internal-combustion engine, while of intrinsic interest for engineers, provides no practical guidance to a driver wanting to know how to accelerate a car. In the same way, a civics-class understanding of how a bill becomes law, or of all the details of the government’s transport policy, or of party manifestos on regional aid, is of little help for citizens who want to know what will happen to the issues they care about if they vote for a particular party of the left, center, or right. We therefore assume a distinction between prediction and explanation: We can explain without necessarily being able to predict, and predict without necessarily being able to explain.

Second, in seeking practical knowledge, we further assume that *the type of information most useful for citizens is contextual to the electoral decisions they face*. The reason is that the information most relevant for voting choices will depend on the kinds of electoral and party systems. There is no single ‘gold’ standard. In parliamentary general elections contested by programmatic parties, for example, voters need information about political issues, party platforms, and the government’s record, which may well prove useful in predicting the consequences of casting a ballot. But in other contexts, different kinds of knowledge may also help citizens predict the consequences of their actions. For example, information from opinion polls about party rankings is useful to guide tactical voting choices. Insights into communication strategies may help voters to evaluate the reliability and meaning of party messages. Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses and the personal background and experience of candidates can prove invaluable in presidential primaries. Therefore, although information about policy issues can provide the basis for practical knowledge, voters may seek many alternative types of information to guide their decision-making, depending upon the context.

Third, we assume that *the news media should provide citizens with political information at a variety of different levels*, ranging from the most technical and thorough details to the most simple accounts. The reason is that citizens come to politics with different backgrounds, interests, and cognitive skills. Some may seek detailed policy briefings and analysis, provided by journals such as *The Economist*, newspapers like the *New York Times*, or radio programs like the BBC World Service *News Hour*. Others may require information in more popular or accessible formats, typified by sources like tabloid newspapers, brief radio news bulletins presented ‘on the hour’ by music stations, or local television news. The hurdles preceding informed choices are exceptionally high in

some contexts, such as examining the pros and cons concerning ballot initiatives about protecting the environment or electoral reform. The information barriers are relatively low in others, as in deciding how to cast a ballot in a parliamentary general election contested by only two major parties. Given the different skills, experiences, and understandings that voters bring to the forum, we assume that news should be available at different levels, rather than one format being ideal for all. The serious image of the gray columns of the *Wall Street Journal* may well suit the political cognoscenti within the beltway or East Coast establishment, but we assume it will thereby exclude many other types of voters. In this regard, the down-market tabloids can be seen as playing a legitimate role in democracy by reaching groups who are uninterested in the up-market broadsheets. Just as democratic elections require competition for office, we assume that there should be pluralistic competition at different levels for various types of information.

Lastly, the role of the news media as mobilizing agent assumes that journalists share some responsibility, along with parties, for stimulating interest in public affairs and encouraging the different dimensions of civic engagement. Citizens have many opportunities for political participation, ranging from following events during the campaign to discussing the options with friends and family, voting in elections and referendums, and engaging in party work like fundraising and canvassing, helping in voluntary organizations, new social movements, or community associations, as well as 'unconventional' activities like direct action. Ever since the early studies by Paul Lazarsfeld and colleagues, traditional theories of the news media have emphasized their mobilizing potential in election campaigns.<sup>21</sup> More recently in the United States, the decline in voter turnout has commonly been blamed on negative campaign coverage in the news media, and Putnam has argued that television is largely responsible for a long-term erosion of social capital in the baby-boom generation.<sup>22</sup> The conception of the news media as a mobilizing agent – generating practical knowledge, political interest, and civic engagement – is therefore widely accepted, although many doubt its capacity to perform up to the ideal.

#### CONCLUSIONS: EVALUATING PERFORMANCE

There are many approaches to defining appropriate standards that can be employed to evaluate the performances of the news media. Discussions are commonly based on certain middle-range ethical principles

understood as given ends in themselves. Debate often revolves around the priority that should be given to different values, such as 'balance', 'freedom of expression', 'objectivity', 'accuracy', 'independence', 'impartiality', and 'diversity' in the news.<sup>23</sup> Blumler, for example, identifies certain general values underlying public-service broadcasting in Western Europe, including program quality, the maintenance of regional, linguistic, and political diversity, the protection of cultural identities, the welfare of children, the independence of program producers, and the integrity of civic communication.<sup>24</sup> Gurevitch and Blumler argue that the news media should perform eight different functions for the political system, including agenda-setting, providing platforms for advocacy, and holding officials to account.<sup>25</sup> Arguably these are all important standards, but it is difficult to rank these values, when they conflict, in the absence of any broader theoretical principles. Moreover, these values are accorded different priorities by those who lean towards the libertarian view and those espousing the social-responsibility view of the news media.<sup>26</sup>

Others have attempted to identify common features in the principles embedded in public-policy regulations, or in the values held by different journalistic cultures, but it has proved difficult to find generally agreed standards in such sources. Within western Europe, communications policies differ significantly in their relative emphasis on broadcasting independence, diversity of access, protection of national languages and cultures, and promotion of the local media.<sup>27</sup> Worldwide, the sharp contrasts between the free market and developmental vision of the role of the media were illustrated by the heated debate that erupted in the mid-1980s over UNESCO's proposed 'New World Information and Communication Order'.<sup>28</sup> American, British, and German journalists place different priorities on core values such as 'objectivity'.<sup>29</sup> Any attempt to specify certain 'universal' yardsticks to evaluate the functions of the news media therefore runs the risk of ethnocentrism – assuming one set of cultural values that may be seen as inappropriate elsewhere. An important reason for the lack of consensus about appropriate standards for the political performances of the news media is that values often are only loosely linked to broader notions embedded in democratic theory.

The premise for the argument advanced here begins with certain general propositions about the nature of representative democracy and the role of the news media in that context, which serve as normative assumptions for the book. We then develop certain specific indices of

media performance that we argue flow from these premises. To summarize the argument, in the Schumpeterian tradition we define representative democracy procedurally as a set of institutions that function to allow pluralistic competition for power, public participation through free, fair, and periodic elections, and civil rights and political liberties. If this conception of representative democracy is accepted as a starting point, it is then argued that the following specific indicators can be used to audit the performances of the news media in any political system:

In order to facilitate *pluralistic competition*, we assume that the news media should act as a *civic forum* for debate. As such, to judge its performance we can ask the following:

- Do the news media provide extensive coverage of politics and government, especially during election campaigns?
- Over time, has the total amount of political coverage diminished, for example due to the decline of public-service broadcasting and newspaper sales, or has it increased and diversified across different media outlets?
- Do the news media provide a platform for a wide plurality of parties, groups, and actors?
- Do the news media provide equal or proportional political coverage for different parties?

The most appropriate way to evaluate whether the news media system meets these standards is systematic content analysis of the amount and type of news and current-affairs coverage, comparing media outlets like newspapers and television over time and across different countries.

In order to preserve the conditions for *civil rights and political liberties*, we assume that the news media should act on behalf of the public as a *watchdog* holding government officials accountable. To see how well the news media fulfill this function, we can ask the following:

- To what extent do the news media provide independent, fair, and effective scrutiny of the government and public officials?

The most effective way to explore this issue is with historical case studies describing the role of the news media in classic examples of the abuse of power, public scandal, and government corruption, to see how far journalists have acted fairly and independently in the public interest to hold officials to account.

Lastly, to promote conditions for *public participation*, we assume that the news media system should act as a *mobilizing agent* to encourage political learning, interest, and participation. To evaluate how well the news media function in this regard, we can ask the following:

- How far do the news media succeed in stimulating general interest in public affairs?
- How far do the news media encourage citizens to learn about public affairs and political life?
- How far do the news media facilitate and encourage civic engagement with the political process?

The media malaise thesis casts doubt on the capacity of the news media to function according to these standards. If the public remain stubbornly unaware of the political facts of life and choose to stay home on election day, if civic debate about the major issues of the day degenerates into a dialogue of the deaf, incivility, and personal name-calling, and if abuses of public standards go unchecked, then often the news media are blamed. Before we can start to evaluate the empirical evidence, we need to consider the methodological approaches available to analyze these issues.