MEDIATED POLITICS AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract  Since the birth of the nation, concepts about the political duties of citizens have changed drastically to keep pace with growth and development. The information needs have changed as well, as have the institutions that supply this information. In this essay I analyze the interrelation between citizenship in the twenty-first century and the information supply that nourishes it. I focus on studies that explore how political news is shaped to attract public attention and how citizens select it and make sense of it. Evidence from content analyses, focus group data, and intensive interviews supports the conclusion that the news supply is adequate for citizens' civic needs and that they use it judiciously. To accept that conclusion requires abandoning outdated paradigms of citizenship that ignore information-processing capabilities of human beings, the basic motivations that drive the search for political information, and the impact of the ever-increasing complexity of politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy means government controlled by the people. Democracy can be direct, where people actually participate in town meetings or vote on referenda to make rules and laws and provide for their execution. Or democracy can be indirect, where people elect representatives who act as their agents in making and executing laws that govern society. In either case, it is assumed that participants in direct or indirect democracy know enough about the situations with which they are dealing to make intelligent, rational decisions.

How can people acquire such information? In simpler times, when political units were small, democracy could work through face-to-face contacts or written interpersonal communications. Most of the situations with which citizens were dealing involved matters with which they were personally acquainted. In modern democracies, involving millions of people living in widely dispersed locations, democracy via direct or even two-step contacts between citizens is impossible. Most people are no longer in personal contact with their fellow citizens and most of the matters with which governments deal are beyond their personal ken.

Modern journalism developed out of the necessity to professionalize news gathering, news interpretation, and news distribution tasks. When the job became too time consuming and difficult for average people, societies needed specialists who devoted their energies to collecting significant information deemed of interest to their communities and to distribute it cheaply and quickly to interested fellow citizens. The initial distribution venues were printed pages. As technology progressed, electronic transmissions in the form of radio came into vogue. Various forms of television followed.

NEWS MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first thinkers to hail American news media as a powerful force for the promotion of democracy. In the 1830s, in a chapter on “Liberty of the Press in the United States,” he wrote that the press “causes political life to circulate through all the parts” of the vast territory of the United States. Its function is “to detect the secret springs of political designs” and to rally “the interests of the community round certain principles.” Besides providing “a means of intercourse between those who hear and address each other without ever coming into immediate contact,” the press also serves to promote accountability of public officials by summoning “the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion” (Heffner 1984, pp. 94–95).

Similarly, Thomas Jefferson argued in 1787 that liberty in America hinges on a free press. People need “full information of their affairs thro’ the channel of the
public papers. . . . [W]ere it left to me to decide whether we should have government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter" (Kurland & Lerner 1987). Such great faith in the importance of the press was expressed by a man who had previously complained about "...the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed and the malignity, the vulgarity, and mendacious spirit of those who write for them..." (Levy 1963, p. 67).

Put into modern language and current social science concepts, what are the functions that news media perform that de Tocqueville and Jefferson deemed so vital for democracies? The French scholar, famous for his keen observational skills, outlines them best (Heffner 1984, Chapter 11): (a) The press is a tool for shared political socialization through which people learn basic values and political orientations to which their society subscribes. Democratic governance requires populations that share a sense of national identity and a consensus about major public actions required to protect the collective welfare. (b) The press collects information about important political events and frames it into news stories that report the salient facts in a context that gives them meaning. (c) The press mobilizes citizens to take action when needed for the public good. (d) The press monitors what government officials are doing and alerts citizens to misbehaviors. Impressive! Modern scholars may disagree about the specifics of each of these functions, but they do not contest that the performance of the press is crucial in a democracy.

In the pages that follow I sample various aspects of recent research that bear on citizens' learning from news stories. I scrutinize the kind of political information that news media offer and note some of the obstacles that make it difficult for mass publics to benefit from news stories.

Important News Media Effects

De Tocqueville's account, of course, is a statement of the potential of the press, rather than an accurate description of the routine performance of the news media. It was based on a number of untested assumptions about what news media could and would cover and what citizens could and would learn from information presented by news media. Many of these assumptions have by now been tested and validated. Social scientists have convincingly demonstrated that people do, indeed, form their impressions about the political world from a succession of stories gleaned from news media (Graber 2001, Kahn & Kenney 2002, Patterson 2002, Zaller 2003). Scholars have also shown that learning is continuous and cumulative because people judge new information from the perspective of previously stored information and use new data to modify and refresh and, occasionally, alter their fund of stored information (Bartels 1993, 1996; Graber 1993; Neuman et al. 1992). These studies refute earlier research on media effects on voting that concluded, based on only a narrow realm of effects, that the media's impact was minimal (Graber 2002b).

News audiences are apt to adopt journalists' interpretations of the meanings and merits of the situations depicted in news stories whenever the information is
unfamiliar to them. That makes the media a powerful influence on public opinion (Jeffres 1997, Jensen 1995, Jones 1994, Norris 2000a). However, research has refuted early hypodermic theories about media effects that postulated that news consumers would internalize all news exactly as presented to them (Dalton et al. 1998, Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996, Erbring et al. 1980, Wanta 1997).

The meanings conveyed by news media vary depending on the receivers’ existing fund of political knowledge and the societal contexts in which they are situated. Recent research has probed how the various social influences that surround citizens impinge on their learning about politics. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague’s (1995) detailed study of how people in one community formed their views about the 1984 presidential campaign provides excellent illustrations. Paul Beck and colleagues (2002) extended that work to a national sample. The researchers concluded that newspaper editorial pages are more influential than print news and television, but interpersonal discussions outweigh mass media influence.

The “priming” phenomenon is an especially interesting media effect because it confirms that people do, indeed, absorb information from news stories and use it to guide subsequent thinking. It also confirms the well-documented human preference for “satisficing” rather than “optimizing.” To save time and effort, most people tend to make judgments based on limited subsets of the information available to them (Iyengar 1991, Krosnick & Brannon 1993). If schema that have been recently primed by news stories allow them to form opinions, they prefer to probe no further (Anderson 1983).

Iyengar & Kinder’s (1987) priming experiments showed that subjects exposed to broadcasts about U.S. military deficiencies, rampant inflation, or pollution of the environment ranked these issues highly among political problems facing the nation. Control groups exposed to broadcasts lacking such stories named other priorities. Similarly, Tewksbury and colleagues (2000) framed a story about large-scale hog farms in five different ways, each representing a particular interest group’s perspectives. Readers’ evaluations reflected these differences immediately after exposure as well as three weeks later. When news emphasis shifted to different issues, subjects’ rankings mirrored the shift (Iyengar 1991, Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Krosnick & McGraw 2002). Moreover, exposure to specific problems primed audiences to evaluate the president’s or other politicians’ performance in terms of these problems rather than less publicized issues. Evaluations of ordinary people are especially vulnerable to news story priming of stereotypes (Valentino et al. 2002). As one would expect from stimulus generalization theories, the valence assigned to prior problems or stereotypes is then reflected in the subsequent evaluations (Iyengar 1991, Iyengar & Kinder 1987, Krosnick & Brannon 1993).

Other studies show that priming effects differ depending on how well or how poorly informed news consumers are, how interested they are in the news and how amply exposed. Several studies indicate that knowledgeable audience members who have firm, well-grounded political opinions are less susceptible to priming than audience members who know little about issues that dominate the news (Fiske & Taylor 1991, Krosnick & Kinder 1990, Lodge & Stroh 1993, Price & Tewksbury
1997). Other contingencies may alter this. For example, normally prime-resistant news consumers may yield if they trust the media to provide accurate, unbiased information and infer from heavy coverage of an issue that it is, indeed, important and worthy of consideration in their political judgments (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, Miller & Krosnick 2000). Eveland & Shav (2003) investigated the antecedents of trust or distrust of media and identified individual political orientations and conversations within congenial interpersonal networks as important factors.

Many other cues besides priming are embedded in news stories (Barnhurst & Mutz 1997). For instance, the mere fact that a story has received prominent media attention signals that it is important and therefore potentially worthy of consideration when making political judgments. Similarly, audiences pay more heed to stories that appear on the front pages of newspapers, especially with large headlines, or in the opening portions of a newscast because they recognize story placement as a cue to significance.

The finding that many people equate news coverage with significance has led to the heavily researched “agenda-setting” hypothesis. In its starkest iteration, it says that the media rivet people’s attention on particular situations although they may fail to influence how people appraise these situations. When interviewers ask people which issues are most important to them or their neighbors, responses tend to reflect the issues featured most amply and prominently in the media they use (Iyengar & Kinder 1987, McCombs & Shaw 1972, Page & Shapiro 1992, Page et al. 1987, Wanta 1997). Numerous studies have tested and confirmed agenda-setting effects through a combination of audience surveys and content analyses of the media these audiences used (Iyengar & Simon 1993, Kerr & Moy 2002, Kim et al. 2002). Some studies have tested agenda-setting for particular issues like the 1990/1991 Persian Gulf crisis, famine in Ethiopia, or equipment failures in nuclear facilities rather than testing the influence of news stories on audiences’ overall perception of issue importance (Bosso 1989, Iyengar & Simon 1993, Rubin 1987).

Comparisons of media agendas with public opinion polls and reports about political and social conditions show that agenda setting is most potent for new issues that have not been widely discussed and for issues beyond the realm of personal experience (Weaver et al. 1981). Ader’s longitudinal study of agenda setting from 1970 to 1990 for stories discussing environmental pollution provides examples of the opinion-shaping potency of news stories about unfamiliar topics. People’s opinions reflected the world created by the news stories, rather than real-world conditions or politicians’ pronouncements (Ader 1995, Behr & Iyengar 1985).

While agenda-setting effects are robust, they are subject to the typical context-dependent variations. Personal experiences, conversations with trusted others, and independent reasoning all provide individual consumers with alternatives to media guidance. When these personal factors come into play, they often overpower decision criteria provided by news stories about the rank order of importance of particular issues and, more strongly, the merits of issues. Even front-page news
stories that conflict with firmly held audience beliefs lose their agenda-setting potency (Behr & Iyengar 1985, Erbring et al. 1980, Hill 1985). Diana Mutz further refined research on factors that impinge on agenda setting. She examined the “third-person effect” or “cognitive response model”—the impact of knowledge about the views of unknown others. She found that people without strong opinions on an issue do, indeed, find comfort in joining the opinion chorus of the majority (Mutz 1997, 1998). The reverse can happen as well. People who hold strong opinions may become alarmed when they discover that others are strongly opposed. That fear may strengthen their seemingly threatened beliefs (Boniger et al. 1995).

Turning briefly to the press as a tool for shared political socialization: It has indeed served that function in the past. But the process has become increasingly difficult because the U.S. population now represents a much broader array of ethnic and religious traditions and spans a much wider range of socioeconomic and educational experiences. The cultural melting pot has given way to multiculturalism. The many new media that have emerged in recent decades, thanks to advancing technologies, further jeopardize social cohesion. When the news is delivered by thousands of venues that focus on widely diverse issues, the bond of shared information that tied communities together in the past is weakened. Scholars have speculated about the consequences, but few have tested them (Gitlin 1998, Rahn & Rudolph 2001, Turow 1997). The fear is that people will find it increasingly difficult to agree on common political agendas and that norms of tolerance that are so crucial in democracies may weaken (Dahlgren 2001, Sunstein 2001). Rather than participating in nationwide dialog, people may abandon the previously shared public sphere and retreat into a multitude of communication ghettos (Bennett 1998, Entman & Herbst 2001, Swanson 1997). Public opinion polls show some increases in fragmentation of views in recent decades, though many shared perceptions and values remain intact (Dahlgren 2001, Pew 2000b, Sparks 2001).

Mismatches Between Theorists’ Expectations and Reality

There is a huge gap between democratic theorists’ expectation and the reality of how much political knowledge the media will transmit and what citizens can and will learn (Bartels 1993, Iyengar & Simon 2000). Journalists have never been motivated or even able to gather all potentially newsworthy information. Neither do they see political education of the public as their primary role (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996). Even top-level political leaders do not receive all information that matters to them, despite their superior access to published and unpublished news accounts and a bevy of employees trained to select and condense information. If political leaders did receive all essential information, they could not absorb all of it because human capacity for processing information is bounded (Graber 2003, Lupia & McCubbins 1998, Simon 1985).

The vast majority of average citizens, contrary to theorists’ hopes, survey political news haphazardly, spending less than an hour daily on it. Moreover, they practice “selective attention.” They develop choice criteria for following some
news stories and ignoring others (Atkin 1985; Chong 2000; Garamone 1985; McGuire 1984, 1999). Selectivity is often subconscious because subjects automatically process information that corresponds to their existing schemas (Barth 1997, Potter et al. 2002). The results of a summer 2000 Pew poll show that respondents ignored 38% of the news stories about their local community because they seemed neither "important" nor "interesting"; respondents eliminated 46% of the national news stories for these reasons, along with 63% of the stories covering international news (Pew 2000c, Price & Zaller 1993). When one combines these figures with Pew survey data about highly selective attention to a broad array of major news stories, such as accounts about social security and health care reform proposals, the 1990 Bush/Gorbachev summit, or global warming reports—news stories that were ignored by 70% or more of the public—it is obvious that the appetite for important political information is hardly voracious (Pew 2000d).

The record on de Tocqueville's final two points—the role of the press as mobilizer for public action, and the role of the press as watchdog—is similar to what has just been discussed (Cook 1998, Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999). Expectations outrun capacities and motivations. The press does a sporadic job in fostering political action by citizens and in monitoring the behavior of politicians. Its effectiveness is sharply limited because of its eclectic coverage of events, its focus on pleasing rather than educating the public, and the public's frequent unwillingness to pay attention to the news, to take it seriously, and to follow through with active involvement in politics.

**THE POLITICAL INFORMATION SUPPLY: QUANTITY, QUALITY, AND PERSUASIVENESS**

How rich is the diet of political news that mass media offer to nourish citizenship? Answers to that question come from various disciplinary approaches, many of them in areas of political theory. These range from historical accounts about various features of democracy to empirical and normative studies and formal models. My review covers only studies that assess the media in terms of their usefulness for citizens. I will also assess the practical realities that limit what journalists can provide.

To put into an appropriate perspective the political information supply offered to Americans requires considering the nature of U.S. news media. The large army of vociferous critics of media performance views the media through the rose-colored glasses of an ideal but quite impossible world. These critics expect news media to cover the political issues that the critics deem important, providing a wealth of factual data and contextual information to a presumably news-hungry public. They ignore the fact that most U.S. media are commercial enterprises that must be concerned with attracting the kinds of clienteles and advertisers that allow them to make substantial profits. Considering that audience data consistently show that substantial portions of most audiences flock to entertainment and avoid overly
complex news, it is reasonable to present much of the news as "infotainment" (Baum 2002). To mention just one sign of the public's disinterest in complex political accounts: Public television, which wins high praises from media critics, attracts only 2% of the nightly news audience.

The Quantity of News

Given sparse resources and manpower, U.S. media institutions regularly cover only a limited number of prominent institutions, or "beats." On the local level, that might be the mayor's office, the police department, and the schools. Beat coverage is supplemented haphazardly by covering a small number of events breaking elsewhere, and by occasional forays into major investigative reporting. Even if media wanted to cover "all the news that's fit to print," as the front page of the New York Times proclaims so deceptively, that is impossible because there simply is too much news to collect and report on a daily basis. In fact, there is not enough time now to report all the news that is currently collected. Audience members, however eager they may be for news and however much of their waking hours they devote to news consumption, cannot absorb most of the news that is readily available to them.

Content analyses show that, contrary to most critics' complaints, a substantial quantity of political news is available in an average week on television nightly newscasts. Viewers tuning in regularly to the half-hour early evening national newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC and to a 60-minute CNN newscast once a week can expect to find roughly 61% of the time devoted to news about politics and public policy issues. On average, 18% of that total will be news about foreign affairs, 13% will cover general domestic stories, and another 13% will deal with various social issues. News about the environment will account for approximately 10% of the coverage and 7% will be economic news (Graber 2001). A viewer who watches one half-hour network news broadcast six days a week and adds a CNN broadcast once a week will be exposed to serious political lessons averaging two hours and twenty-four minutes.

In fact, the supply of political information in the twenty-first century is more abundant than ever before when one considers the totality of all offerings available through new technologies, including the Internet. A comparison of news venue availability in 1960 and 2000, conducted by the Federal Communications Commission in ten geographic markets, showed that media outlets, including newspapers, broadcast and cable channels, and satellite television had tripled during that 40-year period (End the Ban on Cross-Ownership 2003, Federal Communications Commission 2002). While there is a great deal of overlap among all these news offerings, there is also a great deal of diversity.

Average citizens' opportunities to observe their government in action have mushroomed. C-SPAN, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, for instance, offers live, gavel-to-gavel coverage of Congress and other public forums featuring public policy discussions. Ordinary Americans can use the Internet for quick and
inexpensive exchanges of information with other citizens and with journalists and politicians. These new venues bring a much broader spectrum of political views to the fore and offer new opportunities for citizen participation in politics (Bucy & Gregson 2002, Dahlberg 2001).

As is typical for the dispersion of technical innovations, most people do not yet take full advantage of the rich feast (Bimber 2003). Although roughly two-thirds of all Americans now use the Internet, only one-third—primarily the well educated and economically secure—regularly use it to watch political news offerings (Bimber 2003, Margolis & Resnick 2000, Pew 2000a). This is why most analysts of the news supply discount this superb source of information, arguing that it is primarily a medium for elites. However, it is reasonable to expect demographic disparities to lessen, given the fact that this medium is readily available to average Americans and that by 2010 most Americans will have grown up with it and learned to use it in elementary school. Nonetheless, in line with historical patterns, elites can be expected to remain more interested in politics than mass publics.

The Quality of News

It is impossible to make summary judgments about the quality of the political information supply because there is no agreement among media scholars and no empirical evidence about what constitutes the best mixture of news topics and the degree of attention that should be given to particular topics at various times in the news cycle (Bennett 2002, Patterson 1993, Shoemaker & Reese 1996). The fact that news venues vary greatly in the breadth and depth of news coverage depending on their formats and audiences further mitigates against developing uniform standards. Should quality be judged by the appeal of the news for various demographic groups or should it be judged by standards developed by academics or practitioners? What would be the basis for standards when there is disagreement about what knowledge is essential for effective citizenship? Should economic and technological constraints be factored into evaluations? For example, time and space constraints often force journalists to skimp on useful contextual information for news stories. Such constraints are especially severe for television news that operates on the assumption that mass audiences' attention span to nightly news cannot be stretched beyond 30 minutes. News directors at large media organizations believe, albeit without systematic evidence, that their publics prefer multiple capsule news stories to fewer but lengthier and richer stories. Capsule news stories, which rarely exceed three minutes in length, are often bereft of background information. Journalists hope that key words used in the story will prime audiences to recall relevant information from memory. Although this happens regularly because people supplement news story information with information drawn from memory, should the story nonetheless be faulted for omitting the information (Graber 1993)?

Regardless of which criteria are used, content analyses show that news story quality varies widely among news venues, at different periods in history, and for different topics. Whether judgments about quality are positive or negative
depends on the critics’ appraisal criteria. For instance, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a group of experts on television news affiliated with the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, uses seven areas of performance to judge the quality of television news (Project for Excellence in Journalism 1997, 1999). The story’s focus, range of topics, and local relevance are deemed most crucial. Stories receive excellent ratings if they focus on significant, interesting situations that deal with issues affecting many people in major ways. The range of story topics has to be broad and diverse and salient for various segments of the local community. Other elements that contribute to excellent ratings relate to the authenticity of the story. Top-rated stories are originated by the station and cite many fair, impartial, and knowledgeable sources that represent diverse views. Based on these somewhat elastic criteria, news coverage by 34% of the television stations judged by the Project in 1999 were rated as poor, 34% were rated as fair, and 31% were deemed good or excellent. This shows that even by stringent professional standards, there is a lot of excellent television journalism along with a lot of mediocrity and a more-than-ample supply of horrors.

Besides dealing with the substance of information and the adequacy of documentation, many critics are also concerned with the breadth of orientation on a left-right political spectrum (Alger 1998, McChesney 2000, Schiller 1992). On the whole, the mainstream news media, which rely heavily on mainstream elites as news sources, present a limited centrist political spectrum. This deprives the audience of the opportunity to consider an array of political options that includes the extreme ends of the political spectrum. Whether or not these omissions account for the slim support that perspectives at the extreme ends of the political spectrum receive from the American public remains moot. Americans generally resist radical changes and instead cling to values learned in childhood and thereafter reinforced by their environment (Bartels 1993, Page & Shapiro 1992, Shanahan & Morgan 1999).

The Power to Persuade

Given people’s inherent resistance to change and the many personal and societal factors that hamper media agenda setting, it is clear that the news media’s power to persuade the public to follow the orientations reflected in news stories is limited (Bartels 1993, Page & Shapiro 1992, Schudson 1995). The quadrennial review of foreign policy opinions gathered by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations provides numerous illustrations of wide gaps between political elites’ well-publicized opinions and the mass public’s views (Rielly 1999).

Most news people favor more liberal social policies than favored by much of their audience. The reverse is true for economic policies (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996). News stories tend to reflect journalists’ orientation to varying degrees. Discrepancies in political orientations between journalists and mass publics may explain why almost half of the public expresses only limited confidence in the accuracy of the media and why 53% completely or mostly agree that “People who
decide what to put on TV news or in the newspapers are out of touch with people like me” (Pew 1998a, 2000c).

Under what circumstances are news stories persuasive? To find answers, John Zaller (2001) developed and tested a model of political persuasion known as RAS (receive, accept, sample information). He found that people do, indeed, resist arguments that clash with their political predispositions but only if they recognize the discrepancy. If they do, they rely on their own prior beliefs stored in memory or on other sources that are more believable than news media. Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins studied the conditions under which people are likely to be receptive to political persuasion. They identified trust as crucial. “Without trust there is no persuasion; without persuasion, people cannot learn from others; and without learning from others, it is very difficult for citizens to learn what they need to know” (Lupia 2000; Lupia & McCubbins 2000, p. 48; Popkin & Dimock 2000).

Credibility problems notwithstanding, most citizens think that news media serve their civic needs adequately. They routinely tell pollsters that television news—which is the most widely used medium—provides them with sufficient information to carry out their civic functions. In 2000, 80% of viewers said that they were very or fairly satisfied with television news programs (Pew 2000a). When viewers were asked in 1998, “How good of a job does the evening news do in summing up the events of the day?” 18% gave it an “Excellent” rating and 50% called it “Good,” while 21% said it was “Only Fair” and 4% labeled it “Poor.” Seven percent gave no ratings (Pew 1998a). The overall impression one receives from tracking the public’s appraisals of various aspects of media coverage over the last decade is that the modal response is “Good.” It remains an open question how one should merge these positive judgments into a single calculus that combines expressions of mistrust with mixtures of positive and negative appraisals of various media features.

THE USER-FRIENDLINESS OF POLITICAL NEWS

The mere fact that a story appears in a news venue does not assure that it will be noted. In fact, except for prominently displayed news, most stories are ignored. Researchers have discovered that story framing—the perspectives from which a story is told—must be user-friendly to attract audiences. Studies of patterns of attention and inattention show that elements embedded in headlines, initial sentences, and opening broadcast must resonate with people’s existing cognitions or emotions (Graber 1993, 2001; McGuire 1984, 1999).

Framing Problems

Frequently, after media significance cues have aroused attention, it flags quickly when audience members discover that their frames for processing this type of subject do not match the frames into which journalists have cast the story. Neuman et al. (1992) compared the frames used by journalists for five news topics with the frames used by audiences and found major disparities. The stories dealt with
South Africa’s apartheid problems, defense policy, the 1987 stock market crash, drug abuse, and the AIDS crisis. Journalists preferred conflict-related frames by far for these stories while audiences dwelled on human-interest frames.

Disjunctions between audience frames and news story frames are widespread despite journalists’ efforts to stay in tune with their audiences. Such disparities complicate people’s efforts to comprehend such stories by matching the information to past learning stored in memory (Graber 1993; Iyengar & Simon 2000; Lupia & McCubbins 1998, 2000). Even when audiences pay attention to stories framed in uncontentious ways, they are likely to forget them quickly because they find it too hard to reinterpret them to match their own mental schema (McGraw et al. 1991, Ottati & Wyer 1990). Mismatches in frames may also prevent people from developing sufficient interest in the story to pay close attention to it.

To be user-friendly, story frames must suggest a link between the thrust of the story and citizens’ welfare (Valkenburg et al. 1999). Boniger and colleagues (1995) and Modigliani & Gamson (1979) tried to ascertain which story frames make different types of stories most attractive. Boniger and colleagues tested frames appealing to self-interest, social identification with reference groups, or cherished values in various situations. Modigliani & Gamson tested similar types of frames in situations involving Vietnam, busing, and attitude toward presidential candidates. Nelson et al. (1997) tested how various news frames about a Ku Klux Klan rally affected the audience’s level of tolerance for the group. Audiences were more tolerant when the story was framed as a free speech issue than when it was framed as a potential disruption of public order. Such tests indicate that reactions to frames vary depending on the situation. The tests also show that it can be extraordinarily difficult to relate national political debates to the lives of average citizens.

Different frames, if accepted by audiences, lead them to internalize different impressions of the facts and meaning of stories (Brewer 2001). Studies of differential framing therefore support researchers’ contentions that news is a constructed product (Altheide 2002, Edelman 1988, Neuman et al. 1992, Wu 2000). Sociologist Philo Wasburn (2002) compared framing when reporters in different countries cover identical events. He noted substantial differences in the presentation of events like the 1982 Falkland war between Great Britain and Argentina, the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis and the 1996 U.S. presidential nomination conventions. Apparently, there are characteristic, culturally linked patterns of news framing — evidence that the pictures of political events presented to audiences hinge very much on the cultural orientation of the story’s narrator. Similarly, de Vreese (2002) compared how television newscasts in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands framed issues concerning European integration and then assessed the impact of these frames on public opinions in these countries, which varied widely.

Uses and Abuses of Emotional Appeals

Emotional appeals are another important factor in user-friendliness. As great storytellers throughout history have known, stories with which people can identify on
a human basis—about emotion-laden issues such as love and hate, greed and generosity, crime and punishment—are exceptionally appealing to audiences. Neuroscience studies show that it is easier to store and retain such stories in memory because emotional arousal releases stimulants into the bloodstream that sensitize perceptions and increases their impact (Damasio 1994, 1999; Gazzaniga 1992, 1998; Goleman 1995).

Nonetheless, many scholars condemn that approach, claiming that emotionally stirred people cannot weigh issues rationally. They point to numerous bad decisions and blame emotional arousal (Petty & Cacioppo 1986a,b). Recent research proves otherwise (Dolan & Holbrook 2001, MacKuen et al. 2001, Marcus & MacKuen 1993, Marcus et al. 2000, Rahn 2000). It shows that emotional arousal, coupled with cognitive resources, is an essential element in many well-reasoned decisions. One example is the likeability heuristic—so named because people are often able to appraise policies and individuals accurately by linking them to previously formed likes and dislikes. For instance, people who like consumer advocate Ralph Nader may carry that liking over to reforms he suggests (Damasio 1999, Johnston 2000, Lodge & Taber 2000, Planalp 1999, Sniderman 2000, Sniderman et al. 1991). Rational analysis would probably have led to the same conclusion.

Audience research indicates that stories with emotional angles capture larger audiences than stories that are bland irrespective of their intrinsic importance (Biocca 1991, Jamieson & Waldman 2003, McQuail 1997). For example, a look at the roster of news stories that captured the most public attention between 1986 and 2002 shows that half of them involved natural or manmade disasters, military events that endangered the lives of Americans, and important pocketbook issues like the price of gasoline. Average citizens can readily identify with these types of issues (Graber 2001, Pew 2003).

While emotion-arousing content can be a welcome incentive to pay attention to news, it can also have adverse consequences. Some audience members may consider it sensationalism and tabloidization, and may become alienated from the media and politics. Failure to vote in elections has been blamed on the negative emotions aroused by cynical news stories because trust in government dips when the public is plied with seemingly credible sensational negative news (Cappella & Jamieson 1997, Rahn & Rudolph 2001). When negative news pervades both print and broadcast media, alienating effects appear to be additive (Cappella & Jamieson 1997).

As is true for other media effects, multiple causes are usually at play. The public's feelings of trust may be driven primarily by political events and politicians' performance, as some scholars contend, rather than by an excessively hostile tone of media coverage of these events. The messenger should not be blamed for the impact of a message covering events beyond the messenger's control (Bishop 2002, Miller & Listhaug 1999, Nye et al. 1997, Pew 1998b). Such reasoning raises the question of whether the nature of events or the stories about them generate public attitudes. Of course, reactions to media stories inevitably reflect reactions to the facts reported in the story intertwined with reactions to the way reporters have
framed the story. When one adds reactions stored in a news consumer’s memory to the mix, assigning precise weights to each of these factors becomes well nigh impossible.

Research on the effects of cynical news stories illustrates several other typical complications that plague efforts to establish causality (Finkel & Geer 1998). Several studies indicate that the segments of the public who pay most attention to news stories and are most receptive to new information display the highest sense of political efficacy and trust in government (Bennett et al. 1999; Chanley 2002; Norris 2000a,b). That fact casts further doubts about the media’s contribution to political alienation. It could exonerate the media or it could indicate that elites are less persuadable than mass publics (McGuire 1999, Zaller 1992). Further doubts spring from evidence that the public continues to consume large amounts of national and international news regularly, despite expressing frustration with run-of-the-mill politics and political news (Key 1965, Kuklinski 2001, Kuklinski et al. 2001, Page & Shapiro 1992, Popkin 1994). Should one then take public expressions of cynicism at face value? They could be artifacts of questions about trust, rather than evidence of deep-seated political malaise. The framing of survey questions, or the mere fact of asking them, may suggest answers (Tourangeau & Smith 1996, Wanke et al. 1995, Zaller & Feldman 1992).

Matching News Presentations to Processing Skills

Many other factors that bear on user-friendliness of news in terms of human information-processing capabilities have received minimal attention from social scientists. The role played by visuals in attracting attention, conveying information, and making it more memorable is a glaring example (Berry & Brosius 1991, Graber 2001, Gregory 1997, Lyn et al. 1985, Messaris 1994). Disincentives for learning from news have attracted minimal research attention, despite their prevalence and profound consequences. For instance, news stories often overwhelm people with more facts and figures and even pictures than they can readily absorb. When journalists present alternative policies, like various health care plans or options for protecting the environment, they provide insufficient guidelines for evaluating these alternatives. Cappella & Jamieson (1997), who studied media coverage of the 1993–1994 healthcare reform debate, report that news stories never classified the 27 different reform proposals introduced in Congress into easily comprehensible categories. To compound the confusion, they labeled the proposals with more than 100 different names.

Complexity levels of print and broadcast statements are often beyond the capacity of audiences with limited education or language skills in the language used by the medium. Stories are routinely written or narrated at an eighth-grade, or even twelfth-grade, comprehension level that ignores the fact that most American adults do not function comfortably above a sixth-grade level. Many stories lack sufficient contextual information to allow average persons to assess their meaning within the larger context of happenings in the political world.
Even more troubling, too many stories are terribly boring, devoid of any dramatic unexpected events that motivate people to pursue the story (Baum 2002, 2003; Brants 1998). As Patterson (2002, p. 164) acknowledges, it is pointless to "increase the supply of useful information without increasing the demand for it. Citizens do not have a fixed amount of attention to give. The more engaging these moments are, the more attention they will pay." Polling data show that pleasurable feelings associated with following the news have declined steadily. In 1995, 54% of respondents in a nationwide polls said that they enjoyed keeping up with the news a lot. By 2000, that had dropped at a steady pace to 45%. Moreover, while younger age groups are pleased by the expansion of news sources, close to half (41%) of senior citizens and citizens with limited education feel overwhelmed by the multitude of choices (Pew 2000a). Often, stories are repetitive because journalists rehash them to cue in readers or viewers who have not yet heard the story. Attentive audiences dislike the repetition. Many stories fail to tell audiences what interests them most—the reasons for particular situations and the likely consequences. They slight the "why's" and "wherefore's" in favor of "who," "what," "where," and "when" questions (Baum 2002, 2003; Graber 1994).

From a neurophysiological perspective, the presentation of many news stories, especially audiovisual ones, suffers because elementary facts of information transmission are ignored. Words and pictures tumble out at a pace that is much too fast for human comprehension (Barry 1997, Gazzaniga 1992). Three-quarters of the television news pictures are on the screen for less than 20 seconds and often shift focus even within that brief time span. Picture and word messages are frequently uncoordinated and even contradictory, forcing audience members to wrestle with the often-impossible task of bringing them into alignment. Stopping points—the miniscule breaks of silence people need to absorb information to which they have just been exposed—are too brief or absent or, worst of all, filled with distracting advertising information. The sequencing of story elements and the jump cuts when the camera switches abruptly from one scene to another are frequently out of sync with human capacities to link disparate story elements together. To put them in sync requires knowing people's expectations about event sequences and telling stories accordingly (Barry 1997, Griffin 1992).

These and many other media shortcomings that have been mentioned here are linked to people's innate information-processing capacities. The human brain is a fantastic instrument for learning, appraising, and judging extraordinarily complex information, but it does have physiologically determined limitations. To make stories about complex political issues comprehensible, these must be respected. Moreover, people have to be motivated to engage in activities that are not inherently pleasurable for most of them—like politics or reading about politics. Social scientists and political practitioners who have routinely ignored these conditions in the past have therefore been unduly surprised by serious failures in political information transmission and political comprehension.
THE DEMAND-SUPPLY EQUATION: ARE CIVIC NEEDS MET?

To what extent does the current supply of political news satisfy the civic needs of average Americans? What and how much do they need to know to be good citizens in a modern democratic society? Answering such questions requires treading on treacherous, minimally researched intellectual terrain—determining the standards by which knowledge requirements for citizenship should be judged (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Graber 2001; Norris 2000a,b; Popkin 1994; Rahn et al. 1994). There is neither a uniform, widely accepted answer nor agreement about who ought to set the ground rules. In fact, there is no agreement about the scope of citizens’ roles or about the subject matter and breadth and depth of information that citizens need to master in order to perform citizenship tasks adequately.

The Controversy over Appraisal Criteria

Many theorists and pundits allege that the fully informed, participatory citizen is the ideal model and that the adequacy of media coverage and citizens’ knowledge should be assessed from that perspective. Using these standards, and framing survey questions accordingly, they have concluded that most citizens are woefully ignorant and poorly qualified for citizenship duties (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996, Kuklinski et al. 2000, McGraw & Pinney 1990). They often blame the news media for this state of affairs (Bennett 2003; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Kalb 2001; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Patterson 1993, 2000, 2002). As Thomas Patterson (2000, p. 2) puts it: “[S]oft news and critical journalism are weakening the foundations of democracy by diminishing the public’s information about public affairs and its interest in politics.” Critics also complain that media fail to discuss long-range political patterns and their likely consequences and that they feature and perpetuate overly dramatized stereotypes rather than offering nuanced comments (Patterson 1993). Postman (1985, p. 141) condemns television news for being “simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say information packaged as entertainment.”

More qualitative research tools like focus groups, depth interviews, and experiments yield contrary conclusions, casting doubts on the appropriateness of survey measures to gauge what people actually know and how well they can cope with civic obligations (Iyengar & Simon 2000). Why do these different methodologies yield such disparate results? The answer is that qualitative research probes what people know and allows respondents to discuss the areas of political knowledge with which they are familiar and to frame information in their own way. By contrast, surveys ask for knowledge about topics chosen and framed by researchers, often covering areas of little interest to respondents. Questions usually focus on knowledge of readily measurable details, such as the names and offices of political leaders, the ups and downs of current unemployment or violent crime rates, or procedural facts like the percentage of votes needed to overturn a presidential
veto or end a filibuster (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Obviously, answering such questions requires a command of long-forgotten schoolbook knowledge that may have eluded people entirely. The scores provide insights about political sophistication but fail to reveal how well average citizens are equipped to judge the political scene and deal with civic issues.

There are other serious methodological problems with using closed-ended survey questions to assess people’s learning from the news. Most researchers fail to ascertain, let alone content-analyze, the media information that, they assume, their subjects encountered. Graber’s (2002a) study of news coverage of environmental policies, unemployment rates, and changes in the nation’s deficit found that information that interviewers requested in national surveys was largely absent from television newscasts and only sparsely covered by most newspapers. When the information was covered, the framing usually differed substantially from the framing used in interviewers’ questions, making it tough for people to answer the questions as posed. Contextually appropriate questions could have yielded far better results.

A major assumption behind survey research—that people retain all information on which their opinions are based—ignores the “on-line processing” phenomenon. As various experimental and observational studies have demonstrated, people process news story information while encountering it but, for the most part, store only the results of the processing, rather than the underlying data (Graber 1993, Lodge et al. 1995). That explains why they often cannot cite the data that underlie their opinions (Graber 1993, Lodge & Stroh 1993). From a research perspective, this means that failure to remember content cannot be equated with snap judgments devoid of an information basis. It also means that the contents of information consumed by subjects must be retrieved from the stimulus messages, rather than the audience’s recall. Finally, it means that the key question for democratic citizenship is whether the media offer sufficient attractively packaged information about political issues so that news-hungry citizens can readily acquire a solid basis for their on-line evaluations of the political scene.

The Demands of Modern Citizenship

The crux of the counterargument to the claims of deficient media and ill-informed citizens is that the ideal informed citizen type that is at the center of this debate about media and citizen performance simply does not exist and cannot exist in most advanced industrialized societies, especially in large countries (Graber 2001, Lupia & McCubbins 1998, Neuman et al. 1992, Popkin & Dimock 1999). Sociologist Michael Schudson (1998) has pointed that out in his studies of the changing nature of citizenship. Schudson traced successive stages of citizenship moving from the ideal of the “deferential citizen” in the eighteenth century to the model of the “partisan citizen” prior to World War I and the ideal of the “informed citizen,” highly knowledgeable about the intricacies of politics, thereafter. That model held sway until the 1960s when it became increasingly difficult, even for the well educated, to keep abreast of public affairs. According to Schudson’s analysis,
the informed citizen model now has given way to the more realistic "monitorial citizen" model.

Unlike the fully informed citizens of the prior period, monitorial citizens need not stay fully informed about political developments at all times. They only need to survey the political scene carefully enough to detect major political threats to themselves or their communities. When threats appear, monitorial citizens should consult news stories, party and interest group pronouncements, and the views of trusted individuals (Page & Shapiro 1992, Schudson 1998). Reliance on information shortcuts yields acceptable results (Elkin & Soltan 1999; Mondak 1994; Norris 2000a, b; Popkin & Dimock 1999). For example, when California voters were faced in 1987 with five complex ballot initiatives, some wrestled with the details as required by the informed citizen model to determine which ballot initiative matched their interests best. Others simply ascertained who favored and who opposed each initiative and then sided with their presumed friends. Both sets of voters managed to match their vote to their own welfare with only a slight disadvantage for the group using heuristics (Lupia 1994).

Studies by Ottati & Wyer (1990), Bartels (1996), and Kuklinski & Hurley (1994), among others, also show that monitorial citizens can make sound decisions, although they are somewhat less likely to protect their self-interests. In a Chicago survey, Kuklinski & Hurley found that black citizens who used the race of the message source as a cue for supporting messages were more prone to make choices that conflicted with their stand on the thrust of the message than citizens who studied the actual positions of these sources. The study demonstrates, as do others, that heuristics can mislead—but so can other decision criteria. Precise error rates for various decision approaches do not yet exist, but the evidence suggests that errors made in heuristically guided decisions are random, rather than systematic (Mondak 1993, 1994). Some researchers have tried to estimate to what extent political outcomes might be different if all citizens were well informed. Bartels (1996), for example, argues that there would be fewer Democratic votes and fewer reelects of incumbents during national elections if all voters were well informed. Partisans are apt to disagree about whether that would be good or bad.

Can average Americans who use the readily available news media more or less regularly learn enough to fulfill the duties of monitorial citizens? The research-based answer is yes (Delli Carpini 2000, Lupia 2000, Page 1996, Zaller 2003). Focus group evidence shows that people from all walks of life are far more sophisticated about the political issues that seem important to them than survey-based civics tests indicate (Gamson 2001, Graber 2001). When ordinary people discuss major political issues using their own words and perspectives, even groups that generally score poorly on typical tests—African-Americans, Latinos, and poor people—display political insight and cognitive complexity in addressing major political issues that they regard as matters of concern (Gamson 1992, Tetlock 1993). While their performance is far from the ideal models of the past, it is reasonably adequate for fulfilling major citizen responsibilities such as discussing politics intelligently and voting for candidates and ballot propositions.
The monitorial citizen model stresses that the need for citizen alertness is cyclical—greater in times of crisis and less at other times. Citizen behavior conforms to such cycles. People who normally ignore much of the political news flock to the media in times of crisis. For example, during the six-week period following the 2000 Presidential election, when control of that vital office was at stake, public attention to news skyrocketed. Public opinion poll responses recorded that the public grasped the complex aspects of that situation and judged it intelligently. Similar trends were recorded in the months that followed the terrorist strikes on New York and Washington in 1991 and the events of the war against Iraq in 1993 (Graber 2003).

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The record thus far shows that news media are, indeed, important for supplying essential information that enables citizens to perform their civic duties. I have also argued that the quantity and quality of news that various media venues supply collectively is adequate for citizenship needs, especially since it is clear that citizens can perform their political obligations effectively on a low-information diet, supported by an array of well-developed decision shortcuts.

Following in Schudson’s (1998) footsteps, I have pleaded that monitorial citizenship is a realistic, politically sound concept. Most scholars in the decision sciences, psychology, economics, and even political science accept the idea that the human capacity for absorbing information is limited (Simon 1995). Many scholars also agree that it is not economically rational for ordinary citizens to invest much effort in collecting political information when expert views from trusted sources are readily available for consideration and adoption (Downs 1957). Consequently, most people are expected to conserve their mental energies most of the time, leaving it to experts to formulate policy options that average people can accept or reject, using simple decision rules.

I have pointed out that many complaints about media and citizen performance are based on assumptions that disregard the characteristics of commercial media systems, fail to acknowledge the transformation of the age of news scarcity into the age of news abundance, ignore the motivations and preferences of most citizens, and pay insufficient heed to the neurophysiological limitations of the human species. Although there is ample research support for all of these findings, they continue to be contested by pundits and scholars clinging to hallowed but outdated paradigms.

While average citizens play important political roles in democracies, the bulk of the burden for political action has always been born by elected and appointed public officials and by citizens with above-average interest in politics whom scholars call “the attentive public.” At best, that category comprises no more than 10% of the citizenry (Bennett 1995, Bimber 2001, Devine 1970). Media may play their most important role in supplying the news to the attentive segment of the public that,
in turn, routinely relays political information to less-interested fellow citizens. The media’s role in informing monitorial citizens may thus be a two-step process. Attentive publics are aroused first by news stories that provide adequate data. Their concerns and recommendations are then transmitted through print and broadcast news stories to less attentive citizens, making it easy for these citizens to form and express sound opinions.

Complex modern societies require intermediaries between citizens and elected and appointed public officials. Relatively small groups of attentive citizens have always served that role along with political parties and interest groups. These proxies relieve the majority of citizens of the burden of continuously monitoring public problems and pondering solutions. Political elites benefit immensely from the new information resources provided by modern technologies, especially the Internet. To the extent that they use this information to formulate better policy choices, and disseminate their views via mass media, the mass public benefits from this information treasure trove, albeit via a two-step transmission process (Bimber 2003). For aficionados of the informed citizen model it may seem heresy to argue that democracy is well served even when most citizens leave most civic tasks, including information collection and policy appraisal, to elites. They should be reminded that direct democracy has never been a constitutional pattern in the United States. Policies and laws have always been made and executed by elites, with most citizens limiting themselves to serving as periodic monitors through electoral mechanisms. The end has been a serviceable, if not ideal, democracy (Dahl 1989).

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