

Reconsidering 'virtuous circle' and 'media malaise' theories of the media: An 11-nation study

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Abstract

This study, based on a content analysis of television news and survey in eleven nations, explores the split between those who see the media as politically alienating and others who see the media as encouraging greater political involvement. Here, we suggest that both positions are partly right. On the one hand, television news, and in particular public service television news, can be very effective in imparting information about public affairs and promoting a culture of democracy in which news exposure, public affairs knowledge, sense of democratic competence and political interest feed off each other. On the other hand, the views represented in public affairs news are overwhelmingly those of men and elites, which can discourage identification with public life.

Keywords

Media system, news, media malaise, virtuous circle, political engagement

Introduction

There is a baffling contradiction at the heart of journalism research: some studies contend that the media are fostering political alienation, while others argue that, on the contrary, the media encourage greater political involvement.

Thus, Robinson (1975) claimed that American television's critical coverage of politics during the post-Watergate era lowered trust in the political system and fostered a sense of powerlessness amongst voters, especially those reliant on TV news. This general argument that the media induce political disaffection has since been presented in different ways. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) conclude that the relentless negativity

of political 'attack' advertising in the US is lowering turnout and 'shrinking' the electorate. Capella and Jamieson (1997), drawing on experimental research, argue that the US media's coverage of politics in terms of conflict and strategic calculation rather than in terms of political issues encourages distrust of the political process and gives rise to a spiral of cynicism. Similarly, De Vreese and Semetko (2002) find that the Danish media's tendency to frame politics in terms of contending strategies rather than political issues reduces political trust, while Pedersen (2012) concludes that it diminishes confidence in the ability to understand and the desire to participate in Danish politics. More generally, Putnam (2000: 228) claims in a celebrated book that 'more television watching [of entertainment] means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement'. In short, the media stand accused of diverting attention from, or turning people off, politics.

Yet, other studies argue the opposite. The media, it is maintained, nurture variously greater political interest, enhanced political knowledge, increased trust in the political system and higher electoral participation (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; Aarts et al., 2012; Avery, 2009; Boulianne, 2011; Curran et al., 2009, 2012; Holz-Bacha and Norris, 2001; Norris, 2000; Soroka et al., 2013; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2010). This perspective has won growing adherents in the US-dominated political communications tradition.

Two pioneering studies within this latter tradition are particularly worth noting because they advance seminal insights. Norris (2000: 309) hypothesises that there is a 'ratcheting process', 'a virtuous circle', in which the media function as a 'positive force in democracy'. This makes sense, she contends, of her key findings: namely that those more exposed to news media and party campaigns are more knowledgeable, more trusting towards the political system and more likely to participate in elections than those less exposed. However, the nature and dynamic of this putative virtuous circle warrants further investigation.

The second key study is Aarts and Semetko's (2003) award-winning essay which finds that, in the Netherlands, frequent exposure to public television has positive effects on cognition, efficacy and turnout, whereas regular commercial TV viewing has negative effects. They attribute this outcome to content differences between public and commercial TV. A follow-up study, based on six countries, concludes that sustained exposure to public TV fosters political engagement, whereas regular exposure to commercial TV has mixed (i.e. positive and negative) as well as weak effects (Aarts et al., 2012). In a similar vein, a major cross-national study found that exposure to news outlets with high levels of political content (such as public television news and broadsheet newspapers) contributes most to knowledge gains and turnout, whereas exposure to news media with less political content has limited or no positive effects (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006). This differential effect, first demonstrated by Aarts and Semetko (2003), is something that we will explore further.

But even if recent work has thrown up some useful leads, we are still left with the seemingly contradictory findings of past research. The sharp difference between what might be called 'media malaise' and 'virtuous circle' theories of the media remain unresolved (and often unacknowledged by either side). This essay attempts to resolve this split, drawing on new cross-national evidence.

Method of inquiry

We base our discussion on results from a combined, comparative survey and content-analytic project, carried out across 11 countries on 4 continents. The countries included are as follows: Australia, Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, South Korea, the UK and the US. While this choice of countries was influenced by pragmatic financial considerations,¹ it delivers a sample with varying media systems (notably strong and weak public service broadcasting) as well as different national contexts — old and new democracies, developed and developing economies, partisan and bipartisan political cultures and relatively egalitarian as well as inegalitarian social systems.

The first phase of our study took the form of a quantitative analysis of major news media during three pre-determined, non-sequential weeks (excluding weekends) in the period May–June 2010. The sampled media were television news in two leading TV channels (where available, one public and one commercial), two leading newspapers and one leading news website. The private channels sampled were Seven Network (Australia), CTV (Canada), RCN and Caracol (Colombia), Mega (Greece), DD (India), Sky (Italy), Asahi (Japan), TV 2 (Norway), ITV (UK), ABC and NBC (US). The public channels chosen were ABC (Australia), CBC (Canada), NET (Greece), CNN-IBN (India), RAI (Italy), NHK (Japan), KBS (South Korea), NRK (Norway) and BBC (UK). Sky Italia was selected for local reasons and is not the most popular commercial channel in Italy. No public channels were sampled in US and Colombia because these two countries do not have widely viewed public TV channels. Instead, a second commercial TV channel was chosen as follows: NBC in the US and Caracol in Colombia. In this overview essay, we will concentrate primarily on television news, in order to render manageable the presentation of our results. Television is still the principal source of news in nearly all of the countries investigated (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013).

News sources were content analysed by trained coders in each country. Using Huddle software, we set up a three-day ‘academy’ to train coders employed in the different countries in order to ensure sufficiently consistent coding. The classification scheme was composed of a common set of content categories prepared in advance and applied in all countries (coding details are supplied in the online appendix).

The second phase took the form of a survey administered to a sample of 1000 adults in each country, shortly after the period covered by the content analysis. The samples were fully representative, except in Colombia and India where the survey was confined to urban areas. 76% of the population in Colombia live in urban areas, while the majority of the population in India live in rural areas. The results for Colombia and, to an even greater degree, India should be viewed with this significant limitation in mind. The survey was conducted online, apart from in Greece and Colombia where interviews were conducted respectively by telephone and face-to-face. In the case of online surveys, a matching procedure was used which delivered the equivalent of a conventional probability sample on the basis of specified demographic attributes from pre-established panels (for a more technical discussion of sample matching, see Vavreck and Iyengar, 2011). The online surveys were carried out by YouGov-PMX, drawing on its panels and those maintained by Research Now in Norway, Japan and Australia. In South Korea, the surveys were carried out by Nielsen KoreanClick (with a panel of 10,000 internet users). A

time limit was imposed on responses to online surveys to prevent respondents looking up the answers to knowledge questions. The survey instrument captured citizens' awareness of current affairs, domestic and international, 'hard' and 'soft'. This instrument included a set of 10 common questions and 5 comparable, country-specific questions. Items were carefully selected in order to vary the level of difficulty of the questions (reflected in how often the topic had been reported in the preceding period and how extensively it was reported in different parts of the world).

The survey also included a range of attitudinal questions. Political efficacy was measured in terms of (internal) self-assessed knowledge and understanding of politics and current affairs and (external) perceived importance and effectiveness of voting. The models and data presented in this paper only rely on our measure of internal efficacy, as this was the most stable across cultures. Past research (Jung et al., 2011) has highlighted the key role that internal efficacy plays in promoting civic engagement. Future research could extend the model incorporating comparable and stable measures of external political efficacy. Interest in politics was gauged in terms of self-reported interest for local, national and international events and issues. Amongst other questions, we also included ones about self-reported media exposure and information about age, gender and socio-economic status to control for demographic factors in the analyses. (Information about question wording is also available in the online appendix.)

The discussion that follows thus has the benefit of being able to draw on a vast body of comparative data, both on media content, political attitudes and public knowledge. Our other recent work focuses on carefully grounded and relatively specialised investigations of these data. See Aalberg et al. (2013) for foreign news reporting and public knowledge; Curran et al. (2013) on media convergence; Hayashi et al. (2013) on gender gaps in public affairs knowledge; Papathanassopoulos et al. (2013) on changes in news consumption; Soroka et al. (2013) on the impact of public broadcasting on public affairs knowledge; Tiffen et al. (2013) on comparative patterns of news reporting; and Iyengar et al. (2013) on affective polarisation. Here, we want to develop a broader storyline that responds to data which appears to show two simultaneous and countervailing effects, namely, (a) media fostering political alienation and (b) media encouraging greater political involvement.

Media exposure and democratic values

We begin with one simple fact: our survey evidence makes clear that frequency of television news viewing is associated with positive 'democratic' attributes. As more people watch television news, they are more politically informed, interested and confident.

This begs the question about cause and effect, of course. It could be that those most drawn towards watching television news are citizens with a strong prior interest in politics, high levels of political knowledge and a strong sense of democratic competence. The association between viewing TV news and democratic benefits could thus be a selection effect rather than a consequence. Indeed, this possibility is enhanced by the fact that a range of societal factors strongly influence the distribution of political knowledge, political interest and sense of democratic self-efficacy — something that emerges from this study, as well as from previous investigations (e.g. Aalberg and Curran (2012)), and

Table 1. Correlations amongst TV viewership, hard news knowledge, political efficacy and political interest.

	Correlation with TV viewership
Hard News Knowledge	.13
Political Efficacy	.08
Political Interest	.13

Note: cells contains partial correlation coefficients, controlling for age, gender and education. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$; $df = 7985$.

about which more will be said in a moment. If citizens are more highly educated, they tend to be better politically informed. Men tend to be more interested in politics than women, so are the old compared with the young. Those higher up the socio-economic scale tend to have a greater sense of democratic consequence than those lower down. So, the statistical correlation between frequency of TV news viewing and 'virtuous' effects could be merely a reflection of who is most predisposed to watch TV news in the first place — the better educated, the better off and older people, whose greater knowledge and interest in politics and sense of political efficacy is a product of wider influences in society.

Dealing with this issue of self-selection, or endogeneity, in media effects research is not easy. Table 1 takes a cautious approach — one that cannot 'solve' the issue of endogeneity, but does at least (a) partly take into account the role of demographics in driving both knowledge and media selection and (b) not make strong causal claims in either direction. Table 1 explores simple partial correlations — controlling for the effects of education, age and gender — between the frequency of news viewership and three variables: political knowledge, political efficacy and political interest. For the purposes of Table 1, all substantive variables are included in their standardized form (as z -scores).

There are statistically significant and positive correlations between media exposure and individually knowledge, efficacy and interest. These findings come as no surprise. They are in line with Norris's (2000) study, which found that greater exposure to television news leads to gains in public affairs knowledge, as well as to an increased sense of being informed. Enhanced confidence fuels greater political interest, contributing in turn to increased exposure to news. The cycle has the potential to renew itself, she argues, with greater news exposure contributing to greater knowledge and so on.

However, studies conducted over the last two decades suggest that the directions of causality amongst these variables are even more complex than Norris (2000) outlined. Thus, prior political interest emerges as a strong predictor of political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Eveland and Scheufele, 2000), civic and political participation (Bennulf and Hedberg, 1999; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004; Oskarson, 2007; Verba et al., 1997) and, crucially, media exposure (Drew and Weaver, 2006; Lupia and Philpot, 2005; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2010). More generally, news media exposure is positively associated with public affairs knowledge (Chaffee and Frank, 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Eveland, 2002; Junn, 1991; McLeod et al., 1999) and sense of self-efficacy (Hoffman and Thomson, 2009). These in turn have been found to promote political

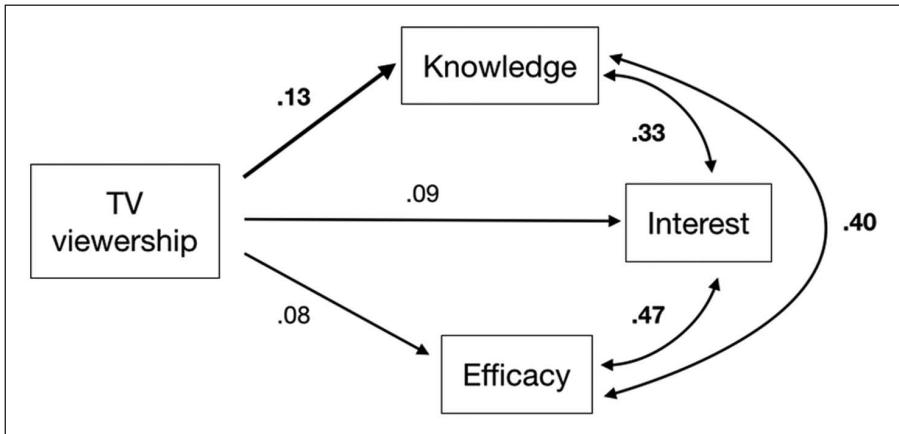


Figure 1. The 'virtuous circle': correlations between TV viewership and political interest. $p < .05$. Reported coefficients are standardized. Results based on SEM estimated using a maximum likelihood estimated with missing values, weighted survey results for all countries with public broadcasters and clustered standard errors (by country).

participation (Cohen et al., 2001; Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Valentino et al., 2009). It is difficult to ascertain which of these variables drives the others, but media exposure is clearly part of a matrix of mutually reinforcing influences that support a culture of democracy.

It is possible to capture this matrix more formally. We do so in Figure 1, using a somewhat simplified structural equation model (SEM) to estimate relationships amongst TV viewership, hard news knowledge, efficacy and political interest. Coefficients are shown in their standardized form; so, for instance, a one standard-deviation shift in TV viewing is associated with an average 0.13 standard-deviation shift in hard news knowledge, a one standard-deviation shift in efficacy is associated with an average 0.48 standard-deviation shift in interest and so on. (Details of the estimation procedure are included in Figure 1; coding of variables is included in the appendix.) We make no claims about causal directions between the latter three variables here; we use the SEM just to explore correlations between these variables. We allow TV viewership to have a uni-directional effect on hard news knowledge, efficacy and political interest. This approach means that we capture just one part of the self-reinforcing cycle in which exposure to media leads to increased levels of interest via increased levels of knowledge and sense of democratic competence. However, the simplified model has one important advantage: it allows us to capture the impact of TV viewership, controlling for demographics, in the section that follows. This model also identifies where exactly TV viewership makes (or does not make) contributions to the knowledge–efficacy–interest system.

Our data show strong connections between knowledge, efficacy and interest individually. (Significant coefficients are shown in bold, with thicker arrows.) TV viewership is related as well — not directly — to interest or efficacy, but quite clearly with knowledge. To the extent that TV viewership contributes to a cycle of civic reinforcement in this

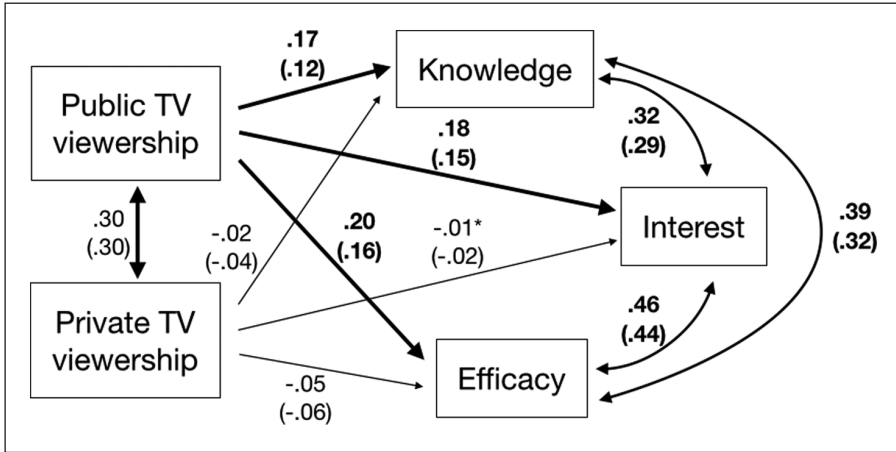


Figure 2. The 'virtuous circle': correlations between TV viewership, public and private, and political interest.

$p < .05$. Reported coefficients are standardized. Results based on SEM estimated using a maximum likelihood estimation with missing values, weighted survey results for all countries with public broadcasters and clustered standard errors (by country).

summary model, it appears to be mainly through its relationship to hard news knowledge.

Viewing different kinds of TV news

An extensive literature (reviewed and evaluated in Cushion (2012)) argues that a distinction should be made between public service broadcasting (PSB) and commercial TV channels when trying to understand the impact of news exposure on knowledge and civic engagement. This is because, compared with commercial channels, PSB channels tend to offer more hard and international news, are more inclined to depict politics in terms of issues and policies rather than of strategy, and tend to make newscasts available at more prominent times, reaching inadvertent viewers (Aalberg and Curran, 2012; Aalberg et al., 2010; Aalberg et al., 2013; Curran et al., 2009). Consequently, public service television fosters a higher level of public affairs knowledge (see Soroka et al. (2013), including a summary of recent work). As mentioned earlier, Strömbäck and Shehata (2010) also found that PSB news had a more positive effect than commercial television in enhancing interest in politics.

With this in mind, we re-estimate the model above by separating out viewership of public service and commercial television. Figure 2 shows the results. We show two coefficients for each connection. The first is based on an SEM including just the variables displayed in the figure. The second (shown in parentheses) is based on a model in which we add age, education and gender as exogenous drivers of knowledge, interest and efficacy. These second coefficients thus capture the influence of TV viewership (and the other correlations as well), controlling for the impact of demographics.

As past work has shown, demographics matter to knowledge, interest and efficacy. Even so, results from the model controlling for demographics are only marginally different than results from the simpler model. In both cases, there is a strong connection between public and private TV viewership (with a standardized coefficient of .30), but the two have quite different relationships with other variables. In fact, there are no statistically significant connections between private TV viewership and knowledge, efficacy and interest. In contrast, public TV viewership shows significant connections in every case.

This suggests that the virtuous circle of democratic reinforcement operates primarily in relation to public service television. As more people rely on PSB channels to gain information about the world, they are more knowledgeable and their sense of democratic competence is greater. Increased levels of knowledge and democratic self-efficacy in turn lead to increased levels of interest. In brief, and in line with a growing accumulation of evidence elsewhere, PSB supports more effectively public affairs knowledge and political involvement than commercial television. There is evidence of a 'virtuous circle' in our data, but its 'virtuosity' seems to depend in no small way on PSB.

Political disconnection

There are compelling reasons for thinking that TV news viewing in general, and public service television news viewing in particular, maintains and strengthens *some* citizens' sense of connection to the political process. Our study thus supports what is now almost a consensus within an 'effects' strand of political communication research.

Yet, when celebrating the positive effects of news exposure, this research tradition can seem insufficiently aware that there is widespread political disenchantment. Indeed, our comparative study confirms just how extensive (but also how geographically uneven) this disenchantment is. The countries with the highest proportion of people that said that voting made little or no difference were Japan and Italy; the lowest were Norway and urban India. Overall, 35% of respondents agree or agree strongly that 'no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens'. 54% agree that 'politics is so complicated a person doesn't understand what is happening', with the same percentage also saying that they feel themselves to be less informed than other people. Our survey also indicates a low level of political awareness. The average correct score in relation to both domestic and international questions in the 11 nations is just 51%.

This raises the question of whether the media may be contributing to this disaffection, while at the same time supporting the involvement of some people in the political process. In exploring this possibility further, it is perhaps worth registering two points. First, most of the relevant literature outside journalism studies ascribes political disconnection primarily to non-media influences. One set of overlapping explanations centres on social change: for example, the decline of social deference and weakening trust in public institutions (Dalton, Scarrow and Cain, 2004); the specific characteristics of the post-boomer generation (Franklin, 2005); increasing individualism giving rise to a cumulative erosion of social trust and commitment to collective action (Baumann, 2001) and greater social fragmentation, fostering the de-centring of society (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007). Another set of overlapping explanations focuses on political causes: for instance,

Table 2. Percentage of TV news items featuring women as sources of hard news across countries.

	AS	CA	CO	GR	IN	IT	JP	KR	UK	Tot
Women Quoted	47.4	39.2	25.6	32.8	28.9	19.3	41.7	17.0	34.3	30.2
Not	47.4	56.7	71.7	66.7	59.2	78.5	40.4	77.4	65.1	65.5
Unsure	5.1	4.1	2.7	0.5	12.0	2.2	17.9	5.7	0.6	4.3

the reduced representativeness of political systems due to the weakening of trade unions and labour parties linked to ‘peripheral groups’ (Gray and Caul, 2000); the way that politics tends to favour the rich (Solt, 2008); the debasement of politics as opportunist brand marketing (Hay, 2007); the reduced effectiveness of national governments in the age of deregulated global capitalism (Curran, 2002) or the unchanging reality that ordinary citizens have limited influence (Schudson, 1998).

The second point is that the critical journalism literature is inclined to see the media as an *autonomous* source of political disaffection. For example, one version argues that the increasing commercial pressure to entertain is causing the rise of soft news at the expense of hard news and is contributing to political ignorance (e.g. Curran et al. (2009)). Another version argues that the legitimacy rivalry between journalists and politicians encourages the game-framing of political news in a way that encourages public scepticism (e.g. Lloyd (2004)). While not desecrating these arguments, it is worth considering also whether the media are an extension of wider societal influences that are weakening political involvement.

An (elite) man’s world

We explore the possibility that the media may reflect and/or enhance broader social phenomena weakening political involvement by shifting our focus from who watches news to what newscasts are presenting. Our content analysis systematically investigates news sources, that is to say, who is interviewed, quoted or cited in television news in *nine* nations (US and Norway opted out of this part of the analysis). Citation in this context means, for example, a reporter declaring that ‘the prime minister believes that...’. To qualify as a source, journalists had to be reported or interviewed in a role going beyond that of reporter or presenter.

Table 2 illustrates the degree to which public affairs are represented by television to be largely a man’s world. Across all nine countries, women are cited or interviewed in just 30% of hard news stories. There is no difference between public and commercial television news in this respect. There are some differences across countries, to be sure – Italy, Columbia and South Korea appear to be particularly male-dominated in terms of news sourcing. But there is no country in which there is not a significant gap between the number of men and women used as sources in public affairs reporting.

This marginalisation of women reflects, and may well reinforce, a gender gap in political interest. Table 3 examines mean values for knowledge, interest, efficacy and news exposure across these nine countries. Women consume less television news than men. They are less interested in politics than men. They are less inclined to express a sense of

Table 3. Gender differences in knowledge, interest, democratic efficacy and media exposure.

	Male	Female	Total
Hard News Knowledge	.589	.457	.519
TV Exposure	4.157	3.970	4.060
Interest in Current Affairs	3.526	3.357	3.431
Democratic Efficacy	2.894	2.715	2.800

Note: a multivariate ANOVA 10 (country) \times 2 (gender) reveals reliable main effects for the two independent variables as well as a reliable interaction (all F s $>$ 7.17 (lowest F was the interaction)), all p -values $<$.001, all partial eta squared $>$ 006).

democratic competence or to believe that voting makes a difference than men. And in *all* nine countries, they have less knowledge of public affairs than men.

We cannot be sure of the direction of causality here. To varying degrees, men are in actual practice more prominent in public life than women. Whether the media accurately register this dominance — or, as Ross and Carter (2011) suggest, overstate it through a distorting, patriarchal filter — is not easy to determine. But whether the media are reflecting or distorting reality is, in one sense, beside the point. We know from other studies that male domination of politics discourages female interest and participation in the political process. For example, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) found on the basis of extensive comparative evidence that where there are fewer female members of parliament, women are less inclined to discuss and participate in politics. For general evidence of the way in which gender inequality weakens female engagement with politics, see in particular Burns, Schlozman and Verba (2001). Television news provides a reminder, every day, that public life is primarily a men's world. Whether true or overstated, this discourages female identification with this world.

Gender is one axis of news representation. Past work suggests that the reporting of public affairs news also tends to focus mainly on the views of state representatives and other elite groups (see e.g. Schudson (2003) and Curran (2011)). However, this research tends to be geographically confined. Table 4 shows that, across all nine nations, the state accounts for 50% of the sources of television hard news stories, while experts account for a further 10%. In short, the views reported in news of public affairs tend to be those of state and knowledge elites.

Differences in political systems give rise, of course, to important variations in news representation. The state looms especially large as a source in the television news of Japan, India and Italy; experts are especially prominent in the television news of Japan and South Korea; and the political opposition is highly visible in the polarised nations of Greece and Colombia.

Why do differences in sourcing matter? Our contention is that reporting public affairs mainly in terms of elite commentary may discourage identification with public life. We can examine this possibility directly here. We begin with a composite measure of 'democratic voices' in TV news. This is conceived not as representatives of civil society within a conventional, liberal-pluralist, theoretical framework (which typically would include business spokespersons and non-state experts like financial sector economists) but as people with whom members of the public might more readily be disposed to identify

Table 4. Sources cited in TV hard news across countries.

	AS	CA	CO	GR	IN	IT	JP	KR	NO	UK	Tot
State	43	46	55	50	62	64	56	43	49	47	50
Political	7	12	23	23	13	8	7	15	5	10	15
Opposition											
Civil Society/ Vox Pop	14	17	7	13	12	13	12	17	25	17	14
Business	7	8	2	7	4	3	8	6	11	5	6
Experts	14	13	7	5	6	9	14	17	7	15	10
Celeb/Arts/Ent	6	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	1
Other	9	3	5	2	3	1	2	1	3	5	3

with or feel represented by. ‘Democratic voices’ are, by our definition, the political opposition, public interest groups, trade unions, religious/ethnic/professional associations and individual citizens. Our composite measure is the total number of ‘democratic voices’ in each country’s media sample, divided by the number of stories in that sample. The measure thus captures the average number of ‘democratic voices’ in television hard news, by country.

We expect that efficacy to be lower in countries where media sourcing is less reflective of ‘democratic voices’. However, this may not be the case in aggregate. On the one hand, those who are typically represented in media content (elite men) might well be unaffected by more broadly representative media sources, while those who are typically under-represented (non-elite women) may be more strongly affected. On the other hand, a rising tide may raise all ships: more representative sourcing might increase efficacy regardless of gender and ‘elite’ status.

We test these alternative possibilities by merging the country-level ‘democratic voices’ measure into the individual-level survey dataset. We then estimate a simple multilevel model (Generalized Least Squares, random effects) regressing efficacy on gender, age, education and our measure of sourcing. Importantly, we allow for interactions between gender and sourcing and education and sourcing. Results speak to the possibility that men and women are differently affected by changes in sourcing and/or that different education groups (a proxy here for ‘elite’ status) respond differently to sourcing.

The full model is available upon request. Here, we report just the most important results, in the form of estimated levels of efficacy across genders (in Figure 3) and education groups (in Figure 4) and across low and high media representativeness (.4 and .9, the 10th and 90th percentiles in our data).

The results are relatively clear. Looking across our sample, both genders show higher levels of efficacy in countries where media sourcing is more broadly representative. In fact, men benefit more from more broadly representative sourcing than women do, though both genders benefit. Education is different: while greater media representativeness is associated with increases in efficacy for those with second and tertiary educations, the biggest difference is for those with a primary education only. This group expresses markedly lower levels of efficacy when media sourcing is less representative;

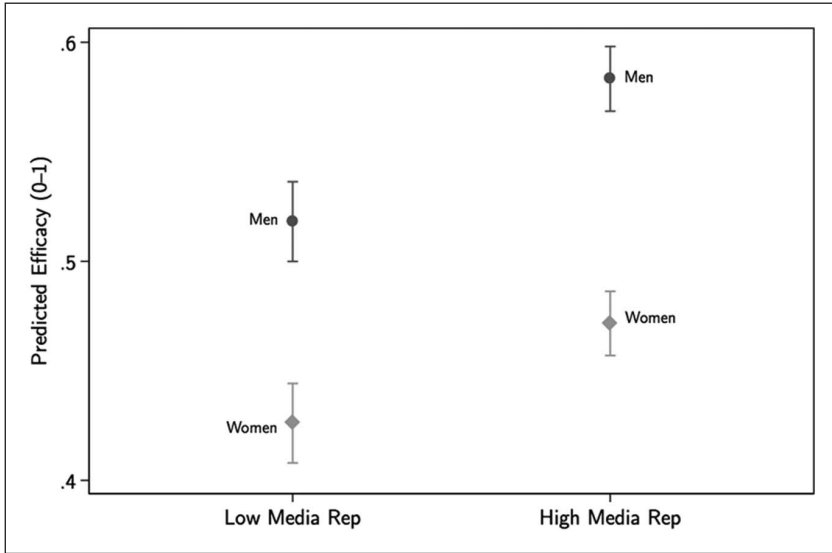


Figure 3. Efficacy across gender and media sourcing. Results are based on a multilevel model (GLS, random effects) regressing efficacy on gender, age, education and media representativeness. Media representativeness is the following measure of ‘democratic voices’ in media content, by country.

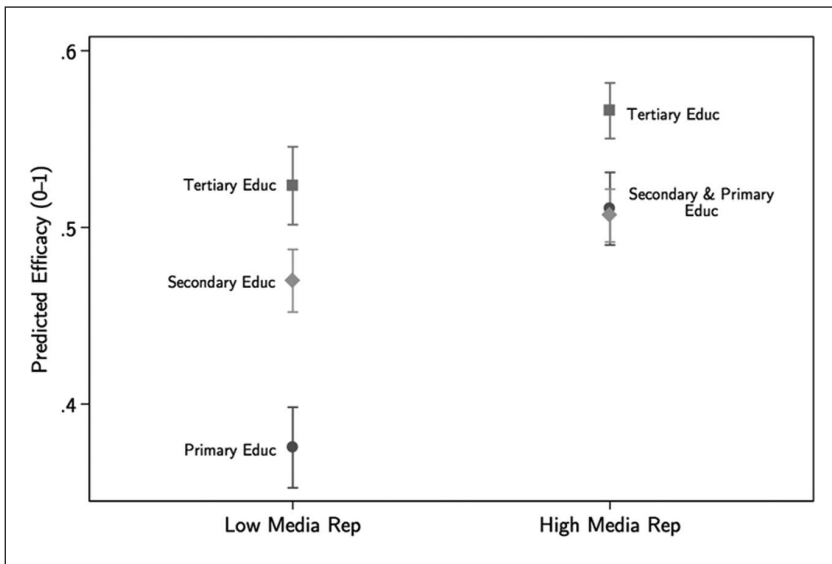


Figure 4. Efficacy across education groups and media sourcing. Results are based on a multilevel model (GLS, random effects) regressing efficacy on gender, age, education and media representativeness. Media representativeness is the following measure of ‘democratic voices’ in media content, by country.

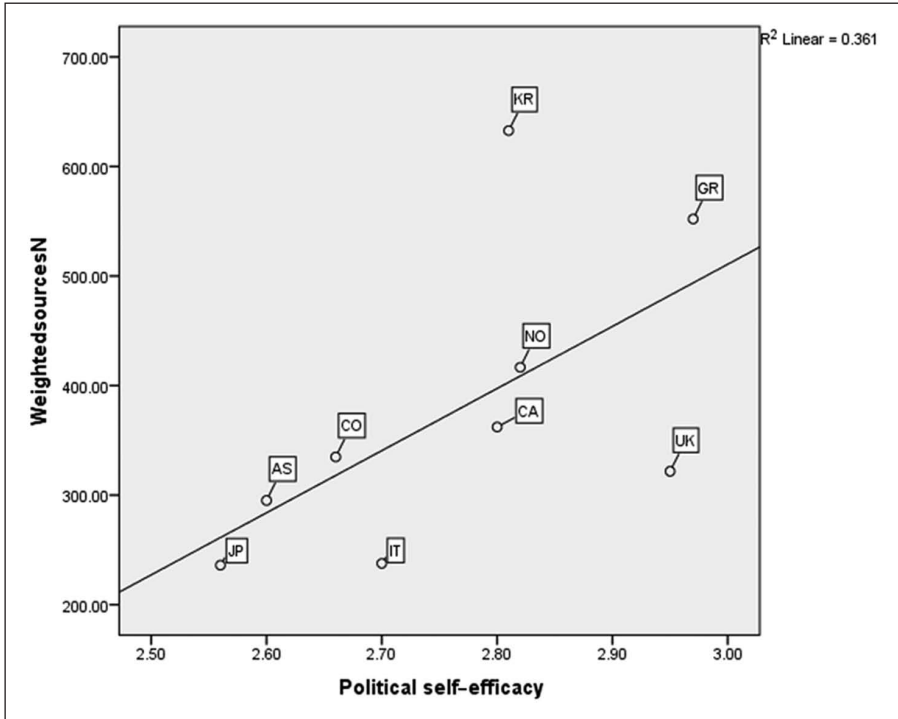


Figure 5. Relationship between the number of democratic voices in TV news and the sense of political efficacy across countries.

Note y-axis values are the number of 'democratic voices' weighted by the total number of items and the average length of a news item in each country. Rho (9) = .70, $p < .05$.

when media sourcing broadens, there is no longer any difference in levels of efficacy across the primary- and secondary-education groups.

Of course, we cannot be sure that media drive, rather than reflect, differences in efficacy across genders and education groups. It may be that a strong sense of democratic accountability in a national political culture influences the presentation of news. Or it may be that the prominence of democratic voices in TV news influences the political culture of a country, strengthening its sense of democratic agency. Alternatively both influences may be in play, supporting both a strong civic culture and progressive news reporting. Whatever is the relative flow of influence, greater levels of representativeness in media content correlate with higher levels of efficacy (see Figure 5).² Put simply, the prominent reporting of democratic voices in television news is associated with the view that ordinary citizens matter.

Conclusion

In the spirit of Manachi, researchers are typically encouraged to choose between ‘media malaise’ and ‘virtuous circle’ interpretations; that is, to side either with the view that the media radiate democratic influence in a nimbus of virtue or the opposing view that the media turn people off politics by distorting its true nature. In essence, we are asked to choose between perceiving the media as being an exclusively positive or negative force.

In opposition to this, we argue that both positions are partly right. On the one hand, our survey evidence confirms that regular exposure to TV news not only provides access to information about public affairs but is part of a process in which political interest, confidence, knowledge and engagement can feed off each other in cumulative ways. Watching television news helps to sustain political involvement amongst some citizens.

On the other hand, there are also strong grounds for thinking that television news can contribute to a sense of powerlessness and political disconnection. We demonstrate that the image of public affairs that television projects is, to varying degrees, profoundly rebarbative. It is a world where men do most of the talking and where women are marginalised. It is also a sphere where state and other elites dominate.

We are thus advocating a new approach in which both approaches — affirmative and critical — are brought together in a new synthesis. Both traditions, we also argue, need to evolve and change. The media malaise tradition usually sees the alienating aspects of media representation as stemming primarily from institutional and commercial pressures that distort media reporting. But the media can also be viewed as an extension of deep-seated processes in society and the political system that are contributing to political disenchantment. This is what has led us to identify two demotivating facets of media representation — the dominance of elite and gender sourcing — that tend not to feature in the media malaise tradition.

The ‘virtuous circle’ model first advanced by Norris (2000) is also open to revision. The flow of influence is more multidirectional than her outline model, rooted in a specific study, suggests. Greater account should also be taken of differences between television channels. Public service television, we have found in line with others, is more effective than commercial television in fostering a democratic culture.

However, our overriding argument is not so much that our understanding should be rendered more complex but that it should change. Rival ‘effects’ and ‘critical’ traditions of scholarship have generated a false dichotomy between a view of the media as a source of democratic enrichment or disaffection. It is time that we reject this binary simplicity, rooted in the division between research traditions rather than in the world which they seek to interpret.

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Notes

1. James Curran and Shanto Iyengar initiated this project on a co-funding model, which encouraged a choice of countries with accessible research funds.
2. The US has a high level of political efficacy, but did not participate in a source analysis. India, in our analysis has a high level too, while giving low visibility to popular sources. However, its efficacy score is probably distorted by its restricted, urban sample. India was therefore excluded from the analysis.

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