CHAPTER

15

Mediating Democratic Engagement: The Impact of Communications on Citizens' Involvement in Political and Civic Life

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[P]olitics is a drama taking place in an assumed and reported world that evokes threats and hopes, a world people do not directly observe or touch.

—Murray Edelman (1995)

[People] live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.

—John Dewey (1916)

Normative theories of modern representative democracies presume an information environment in which citizens are able to learn about pressing issues of the day, follow the actions of elected and government officials, and communicate their views to these officials. Theories of direct democracy assume a richer communications environment that helps provide citizens with the motivation, ability, and opportunity to participate in more ongoing, demanding, and varied ways. In turn, limitations in the communications environment are pinpointed as a primary reason why democratic practice falls short of normative expectations, whereas enhancements to this environment are held out as a way to improve this state of affairs (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989; Entman, 1989; Fishkin, 1991; Patterson, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Rosen, 1999).

Empirical research documenting the impact of communication in general and the mass media more specifically on the amount and quality of citizens' engagement in public life both supports and complicates this picture. As discussed here, numerous studies have found that media use is positively correlated with many core elements of democratic engagement such as political interest, knowledge, and participation. At the same time, there is evidence that media use can also foster

cynicism, apathy, ignorance, and disengagement. Understanding the impact of the media on the engagement of citizens requires careful consideration of the specific elements that make up both *engagement* and *media.*

Defining Democratic Engagement

What constitutes an engaged citizen? Although there is no simple answer to this question, most theory and research would include (1) adherence to democratic norms and values; (2) having a set of empirically grounded attitudes and beliefs about the nature of the political and social world; (3) holding stable, consistent, and informed opinions on major public issues of the day; and (4) engaging in behaviors designed to influence, directly or indirectly, the quality of public life for oneself and others. Underlying all of these elements is the assumption that citizens also have the skills and resources necessary to develop informed values, attitudes, and opinions, connect them together, and translate them into effective action.[1]

"Democratic norms and values" include internal and external efficacy, political and social trust, political interest, civic duty, and political tolerance. These orientations provide the emotional and cognitive underpinnings necessary for engagement in public life that balances conflict with consensus, self-interest with collective interests, and a healthy skepticism with faith in the institutions and processes of democratic governance.

"Attitudes and beliefs" refer to one's overarching views about the social and political world in which we live. Attitudes and beliefs are distinguished from opinions in that they are more likely to form early in one's life, are less issue specific, and are less amenable to short-term change. Politically relevant attitudes and beliefs can include one's ideological orientation, partisanship, views on the relative importance of equality versus freedom, a sense of whether the world is a safe place, relative commitment to individual versus collective rights, and general notions about race and diversity. Unlike democratic norms and values, there is no presumption that *specific* attitudes or beliefs are more or less beneficial to a democratic society. This does not mean that they are equally reasoned or reasonable, however. Rather, the hope is that attitudes and beliefs—although containing an affective or emotional component—are also based on an accurate assessment of the empirical world. For example, if a person has a deep-seated commitment to the Democratic party, one would expect that this commitment is based on some understanding of what this party stands for and how it relates to his or her other values, beliefs, and opinions.[2]

If values, norms, attitudes, and beliefs form the foundation on which engagement is based, "opinions" serve as the more proximate and concrete formulation of these orientations as they apply to specific issues, policies, candidates, officeholders, and the like. For example, if a person's deep-seated attitudes lead him or her to identify as a conservative and/or a Republican, one would expect, all things being equal,

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[1]Effective democratic citizenship also requires institutional and systemic structures and processes—democracy is not simply a matter of individual will and choice. Given the focus of this chapter, however, the emphasis is on individual requisites and attributes.

[2]The distinction among democratic values, general attitudes and beliefs, and opinions is somewhat arbitrary, and all such orientations are ultimately "essentially contestable" (Connolly, 1983; Gallie, 1955–1956). Indeed, part of the goal of a democratic society and the role of media in it is to provide an environment in which values, beliefs, and opinions can be regularly debated and, as appropriate, renewed or revised. Nonetheless, the distinction remains a valuable one, with each having a different theoretical and empirical relationship to the media.

that this would be reflected in his or her opinions regarding specific issues such as a potential tax increase, public financing of campaigns, or affirmative action.

The holding of opinions—especially opinions that are stable, consistent, and informed—is a crucial element of the democratic process and of democratic citizenship. Equally or more important, however, is the "behavioral expression" of these opinions. Opinions can be expressed directly or indirectly. Direct expression includes talking informally with others, participating in more formal deliberations and meetings, signing a petition, writing a letter to the editor, and contacting public officials. Indirect expression includes other forms of political or civic activity, from voting, to membership in an organization, to volunteering in the community.

Often a distinction is made between political and civic behavior. *Political* behavior is generally defined as activities intended directly or indirectly to affect the selection of elected representatives and/or the development, implementation, or enforcement of public policy through government (for example, voting, working for a political party, or contacting an elected official). *Civic* behavior refers to participation—as an individual or a member of a group—intended to address public concerns directly through methods that are outside of elections and government (for example, volunteering to work in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter or forming a neighborhood watch association to address the problem of crime). For the purposes of this chapter I include both civic and political engagement under the broader heading of *democratic engagement*.

Developing foundational values and attitudes, connecting these to specific opinions, and expressing these opinions through appropriate forms of political and civic behavior require a range of skills and resources. Included here are basic skills such as reasoning, argumentation, and oral and written communication, as well as resources such as knowledge or information about the substance, processes, and people of politics and public life.[3] Such skills and resources increase the likelihood not only that citizens will be engaged, but also that they will do so in effective ways that are connected to their self-interest and their sense of the public interest.

In sum, a democratically engaged citizen is one who participates in civic and political life, and who has the values, attitudes, opinions, skills, and resources to do so effectively.

Defining "Politically Relevant Media"

Democratic engagement includes a number of distinct but ultimately related elements. Politically relevant "media" or "communications" are no less complex concepts. At a minimum one must distinguish face-to-face versus mediated communication; one-to-one versus one-to-many versus many-to-one versus many-to-many communications; types of media (telephones, mail, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, movies, the Internet); and "genres" (news, talk shows, opinion pieces or editorials, documentaries, drama or humor). Each of these types of communication has the potential for affecting different aspects of democratic engagement (from foundational values and attitudes to specific civic and political behaviors), and different parts of the population (based on age, income, gender, race, and ethnicity), and to do so in different ways.

[3]For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the media and political information and knowledge, see Chapter 14.

Adding to this complexity is that individual citizens do not limit their media use to single types or genres but, rather, live within larger media, communications, or information environments. These environments are shaped in part by available technology, but also by factors such as one's social, cultural, and economic circumstances, as well as more personal preferences and choices. Finally, the media can serve simultaneously as the *channels* through which information is transmitted and received, as the *source* of particular kinds of information, and, increasingly, as the *public space* in which democratic engagement actually occurs.

MEDIA USE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND VALUES

Political Efficacy

Research on political participation has identified a number of deep-seated norms and values that are positively associated with the amount and quality of democratic engagement. One of the most central of these is political efficacy, or the sense that one's participation can actually make a difference (internal efficacy) and that the political system would be responsive to this participation (external efficacy). Efficacy is strongly correlated with political and civic participation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Finkel, 1985; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). There is also evidence that one's sense of political efficacy begins to develop early in life and is an important predictor of likely future engagement (Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement, 2002; Easton & Dennis, 1967; Hess & Torney, 1967; Jennings & Niemi, 1981).

Although political efficacy is affected by a number of demographic, contextual, and cultural factors, the media plays an important role in its formation and expression. In general, greater political efficacy appears to be positively associated with greater use of public affairs media, though the causal direction of this relationship (i.e., Are more efficacious people more likely to follow public affairs? or Does following public affairs lead to greater efficacy?) is somewhat unclear. There is some evidence that this relationship is the result of the intervening effects of political knowledge, with greater public affairs media use leading to greater knowledge, which in turn increases one's sense of efficacy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Closer examination of the relationship between media use and efficacy suggests a more complex picture, however, in which the impact of the media is tied in part to the tone and content of the information provided. For example, Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring (1979) found that attention to negative newspaper reports about politics significantly lowered levels of efficacy. And in his study of the impact of viewing a public television documentary critical of government, Robinson (1976) concluded that "reliance on public affairs television is, in fact, associated with lower scores on an efficacy index" (p. 425).

In a more recent study Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) examined television, newspaper, and newsmagazine coverage of five issues then in the news (South Africa, the Strategic Defense Initiative, the stock market crash, drug abuse, and the AIDS crisis), as well as the way people interpreted or "constructed" meaning from

this coverage. They found that on average a third of the coverage was presented within a "powerlessness" frame that emphasized a lack of control over the issues in question. In turn, the people they interviewed about their views on these issues tended to reflect this sense of powerlessness in many (22%) of their comments. And a study by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found evidence that the print and electronic news media's tendency to frame events (elections) and issues (health-care reform) in terms of strategy rather than substance increased citizens' political cynicism, an orientation connected conceptually and empirically to the more specific notion of efficacy.

A similar relationship between media exposure and efficacy has been found in studies of political campaign advertisements. Using both experimental and survey research, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) and Ansolobahere, Iyengar, and Simon (1999) conclude that viewing negative ads decreased citizens' sense of political efficacy. And a metanalysis of the impact of negative campaign advertising by Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt (1999) identified three additional studies (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Goldstein, 1997; Thornson, Ognianova, Coyle, & Denton, 1996) that found evidence of lowered political efficacy as a result of viewing such ads (see also Wanta, Lemert, & Lee, 1998).[4]

Although research suggests that exposure to negative or cynical portrayals of public affairs can reduce citizens' sense of efficacy, there is less known about the impact of positive coverage. There is a great deal of research documenting the shortcomings of the current news environment and theorizing about the *potential* of more civic-minded public affairs coverage to improve civic involvement (Patterson, 1993; Rosen, 1999; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001; West, 1997). Unfortunately, the actual impact of this kind of coverage on political efficacy remains largely untested. In one of the few studies to explore this relationship indirectly, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found only mixed evidence that issue (as opposed to strategic) coverage of health-care reform reduced public cynicism about politics.

There is also at least mixed evidence that the type of media attended to is related to political efficacy. Research on talk radio and television has found that heavy listeners, viewers, and callers score higher on some measures of efficacy, though the differences are often small (Davis & Owen, 1998; Hofstetter et al., 1994; Newhagen, 1994). Several studies have found suggestive evidence that political deliberation and discussion increase one's sense of political efficacy (Gamson, 1992; Gastil, 2000; Smith, 1999). And at least one study has found that Internet users have greater internal efficacy than the general public (Davis & Owen, 1998), though other research looking specifically at those who rely primarily on the Web for political information found no such relationship (Johnson & Kaye, 1998). Johnson and Kaye (1998) did find that those who rely primarily on either television or newspapers for political information are likely to be more efficacious than the general public. On the other hand, Hart (1994) makes a compelling case that television, by its very nature, is likely to have a distorting effect by exaggerating the political efficacy attributed to individuals and groups who are featured on this medium, discounting the efficacy of those who are ignored, and giving viewers an illusory sense of their own efficacy because of a misperceived sense of intimacy with the political world.

Despite its importance to democratic engagement, there are a number of gaps in our knowledge of the relationship between media use and political efficacy. In

[4]For a more in-depth discussion of the negative advertising, see Chapter 7.

particular, more research is needed on the impact of new media such as the Internet, as well as that of the entertainment media. In addition, little is known about the possible intervening effects of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and age, although variations in the amount and type of media use across these groups, coupled with differences in how they process and use media information (Graber, 2001a), suggest that such effects may exist. For example, Newhagen (1994) found that African Americans who viewed and/or called in to television talk shows featuring presidential candidates in 1992 scored higher in personal efficacy, a concept that is closely related to political efficacy.

Political Trust, Alienation, and Cynicism

A second set of foundational political orientations—political trust and its counterparts such as political alienation and cynicism—demonstrates an equally complicated and inconclusive relationship with the media. The predominant theory regarding this relationship is the "video" or "media malaise" thesis (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Robinson, 1975, 1976), which posits that exposure to media in general and television in particular leads to increased cynicism and alienation and decreased trust in government and politics. The hypothesized roots of this presumed relationship vary, from the increasingly negative and cynical coverage of politics in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Kerbel, 1995; Patterson, 1993; Robinson, 1975; Sabato, 1993), to the negative portrayal of government and politics that dominates the entertainment media (Lichter, Lichter, & Amundson, 1999; Lichter & Rothman, 1994), to the debilitating effects of television on political discourse and social connectedness (Hart, 1994; Postman, 1985; Putnam, 1995a, 2000).

Research on the impact of media use on political trust or cynicism has provided mixed support for the media malaise thesis, however. In the most systematic test of this thesis, Bennett et al. (1999), using data from the 1996 National Election Studies (NES), found that general exposure to entertainment television, local or national television news, and/or newspapers was unrelated to trust in government. They also found evidence that attention to media accounts of presidential and congressional campaigns was *positively* associated with trust and that following politics through talk radio decreased trust, though both of these relationships were statistically insignificant when controls for demographic and attitudinal variables were added to their model. Importantly, however, Bennett et al., did find that opinions about media fairness were associated with political trust, with those who mistrusted the media also more likely to mistrust government. They conclude that

> the time has come to take a more nuanced view of the relationship between the public's opinions about the media and political cynicism. General Social Science and Pew Center data show that confidence in government and confidence in the press are positively associated. The 1996 NES suggests that if people believe that the media do not fairly cover the political fray, they take a critical view of government's trustworthiness. Thus perceptions of the media and of the government may rise and fall together. This may reflect a broader trend: that support for institutions in general has changed. It may indicate the emergence of the media as another power broker and thereby an

> institutional power in the eyes of the public. Such a judgement by members of the public may lead them to view the media through the same lens that they view government. (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 17)

Although other studies (Norris, 1996, 1999) support Bennett's conclusion that media use does not automatically contribute to declining political trust, other research (Becker & Whitney, 1980; Chan, 1997; McLeod, Brown, Becker, & Ziemke, 1977; Putnam, 1995a, 2000) finds greater, if still mixed, evidence for the media malaise thesis. One difficulty in establishing a relationship is that aggregate levels of trust have declined precipitously over the last 30 years, whereas exposure to media of various kinds has increased over the same period. Although this general pattern could suggest some kind of cause-and-effect relationship, the ubiquitousness of the media, coupled with other societal changes occurring over the same time frame, has led one researcher to conclude that "the question of whether the mass media contributed to the growth of political malaise . . . will never be satisfactorily answered" (Zukin, 1981, p. 382).

Despite the lack of consistent support for a *general* impact of media use on political trust, studies that look more specifically at the tone of coverage find, much as with political efficacy, that negative or cynical coverage of government contributes to what Cappella and Jamieson call the "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979). Studies of the impact of negative campaign advertisements on political trust generally draw a similar conclusion (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Thornson et al., 1996; but see Martinez & Delegal, 1990).

As with other aspects of democratic engagement, the impact of the media on political trust may vary not only by the content and tone of coverage, but also by the type of media used. There is surprisingly little research on such differential impact, however, and the research that does exist draws different conclusions. For example, Davis and Owens (1998) found little evidence that talk radio listeners, television news magazine viewers, or Internet users differed in their levels of trust, either from each other or from the general public. Pinkleton and Austin (1998) also found that most forms of media use by Washington state voters during the 1996 presidential campaign had no effect on levels of cynicism, with the exception of newspaper use, which was associated with *lowered* cynicism. However, Johnson and Kaye (1998), using a nonrepresentative sample, found a negative association between political trust and reliance on the Web for political information and positive associations between trust and reliance on television or newspapers. And although levels of political trust are known to vary by education, race, age, and gender, the impact of media use on these differences is largely unexamined. One exception to this is Bennett (1997), who finds evidence that the generally negative coverage of politics in the media has contributed to younger Americans' political cynicism and negativism (see also Rahn & Hirschorn, 1995, on the impact of negative campaign ads on the "political mood" of children).

The dramatic increase in reported trust in government that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11,2001, raise interesting, but as yet unexamined questions regarding the relationship between political trust and the media. Given that the vast majority of Americans "experienced" these attacks and their aftermath exclusively or primarily through the media, it seems reasonable to assume that something about the events and the way they were represented combined to produce the rapid and widespread increases in trust. Understanding the dynamics of this process

could help in more fully understanding the media's role in the development and maintenance of political trust.

Social Capital and Trust

Though the term has earlier roots, the concept of "social capital" has become an important area of study in recent years, spurred largely by the work of Robert Putnam (1995a, 1995b, 2000). Social capital generally refers to

> those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit.... The community as a whole will benefit by cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his associations the advantages of the help, sympathy, and fellowship of his neighbors. (Hanifan, 1916, p. 130, as cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 19)

Although acknowledging that social capital can have its "dark side," Putnam (2000) persuasively argues and documents that the presence of social capital—broadly a connectedness of citizens to others in their community—results in a wide range of individual and collective benefits including better education, safer and more productive neighborhoods, economic prosperity, healthier, happier children and adults, and a more vibrant, participatory democracy (pp. 287–363).

The relationship between social capital and democratic engagement is twofold. On the one hand, the concept of social capital includes within it many forms civic and political engagement, including membership in civic organizations, attending public meetings, talking about political issues, volunteering, and participating in elections. On the other hand, high levels of general community involvement and social interaction (which are also components of social capital) are likely to increase more explicitly civic and political engagement and so strengthen the quality and effectiveness of democracy.

Putnam's argument and evidence regarding the positive benefits of social capital have been generally well received. More controversial, however, has been his research documenting the erosion of social capital over the past three decades and his theories regarding the sources of this decline. Of particular relevance to this chapter is his indictment of television (especially entertainment television) as a major source of decreasing social capital in general and democratic engagement in particular (Putnam, 1995a, 2000). Putnam's (2000) evidence on the decline in newspaper readership, the penetration of television into the American household, the growth in the number of hours of watching television and of having the television on even when not watching, and the dominance of television over other forms of more social leisure activity (pp. 216–228) is compelling and supported by other data and research (Bogart, 1989; Bowden & Offer, 1994; Comstock, 1989; Graber, 2001a; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; various surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center on the People and the Press; *The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2001).

His hypothesized relationship between the rise of television and the decline in social capital has been a matter of dispute, however (Norris, 1996, 1999). Putnam (2000) argues that this impact, which is especially prevalent among younger generations, results from a combination of television's usurpation of time that could (and in the past was) otherwise be used for more civic-minded activities, the

psychological effects of television that inhibit social participation, and the specific content of television that undermines civic motivations.

One key to understanding the link between media use and social capital is through the concept of *social trust*. Social trust (also known as *interpersonal trust*) is a dispositional orientation toward others in one's community. High social trust indicates feelings of connectedness to and faith in fellow citizens, or more simply, "a 'standing decision' to give most people—even those whom one does not know from direct experience—the benefit of the doubt" (Rahn & Transue, 1998, p. 545). People scoring high on measures of social trust are significantly more likely to interact with fellow citizens informally, as well as through belonging to community groups, working with them to solve a local problem, or volunteering (Borgida et al., 1997; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Rahn & Transue, 1998; Uslaner, 1995). In short, social trust is an individual-level, psychological measure of the more behavioral and collective concept of social capital.

Research indicates that the level of social trust in the United States has declined significantly over the past 30 years, paralleling other indicators of declining social capital (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 2000). This decline is especially noticeably among younger adults. Much as with arguments regarding the decline in overall social capital, television and, to a lesser extent, new media such as the Internet, have been singled out as a major cause of the decline in social trust. As noted by Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001), this argument is based in part on aggregate trends in increasing television and Internet use and declining newspaper readership, as well as "time displacement" and "mean world" theories of television:

> Time spent with television is thought to privatize leisure time at the expense of civic activities and to foster beliefs that the world is as threatening as the social reality of the "airwaves" (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980; Morgan and Shanahan, 1997). Likewise, epidemiological research has connected amount of television viewing with lower levels of physical and mental health (Sidney et al., 1998). These studies, albeit crude in their operationalization of media variables, lend support to the view that media use is related to changes in life contentment, social trust, and civic participation. (p. 143)

This argument has been extended to the Internet. Research by Nie and Erbring (2000) suggests that time spent "on-line" comes at the direct expense of more social activities, leading heavy Internet users to become physically and psychologically disconnected from their social environment. And Kraut et al. (1998) conclude from their research that "[l]ike watching television, using a home computer and the Internet generally implies physical inactivity and limited face-to-face social interaction" (p. 1019).

Research has not uniformly supported this view, however, as it applies to either television or the Internet. In one of the more comprehensive efforts to explore this relationship, Shah et al. (2001) distinguish among overall television use, the use of television for "hard news," overall newspaper use, the use of newspapers for "hard news," overall Internet use, and the use of the Internet for "social recreation," "product consumption," "financial management," and "information exchange." They find that when controlling for demographic characteristics, only using newspapers for hard news and using the Internet for information exchange (measured as "exploring an interest or hobby," "searching for school or educational purposes," or "sending an e-mail") had a significant effect on social trust for the general population, with

both *increasing* levels of trust. They also find differences by age, however. For the Civic Generation (pre-baby boomers), only using newspapers for hard news produced a significant (positive) effect on social trust. For baby boomers, only using the Internet for information exchange produced a significant (positive) effect. And for Generation Xers, use of the Internet for social recreation produced a significant *negative* effect on social trust, whereas using the Internet for information exchange produced a significant positive effect.

Experimental research on the impact of on-line deliberative discussions also finds a positive impact on participants' level of social trust (Price, Goldthwaite, & Cappella, 2002). The conclusions of this and other research in this vein (Norris, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001; Norris & Jones, 1998; Shah, 1998; Uslaner, 2000) suggest that arguments about the negative impact of television and the Internet are overly generalized and miss important differences in the content of different media, the types of people using these media, and the purposes for which they use them. A more specific conclusion emerging from this research is that "informational and communicative uses of the media may prove beneficial to the health of society, whereas recreational and entertainment uses may erode public involvement" (Shah et al., 2001, p. 144). This conclusion is for the most part consistent with that of Putnam (2000), who acknowledges that the negative impact of television and the Internet on social capital is most evident among those who use these media as their major source of entertainment (pp. 219–221, 231–233).

Political Interest, Duty, and Tolerance

Efficacy, political trust, and social trust are three of many norms and values that are important to the amount and quality of democratic engagement. Interest in politics and public affairs is also strongly related to civic and political participation (Bennett, 1986; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba et al., 1995). The relationship between political interest and media use has not been extensively studied, however. In general, interest is treated as a motivator for following politics and public affairs in the media, with the "roots" of political interest found "in socioeconomic factors—in having educated parents, a good education, and a high-level job, as well as organizational membership" (Verba et al., 1995, p. 494).

In one of the few studies to examine specifically the relationship between different types of media use and levels of political interest, Davis and Owen (1998) found that talk radio listeners, viewers of television newsmagazines, and Internet users were more likely to say that they follow government and public affairs "most of the time" than was the general public. Talk radio listeners and television newsmagazine viewers were also more likely to report being "very interested" in presidential campaigns, though no such relationship was found for Internet users. Johnson and Kaye (1998) found that reliance on the Web for political information was positively and significantly associated with interest in politics, whereas reliance on television was negatively associated with interest, though the latter relationship was not statistically significant (reliance on newspapers showed a modest and statistically insignificant positive relationship).[5] In general, although political interest has been found to be positively associated with the use of public affairs media, little is known regarding the extent to which this reflects the seeking-out of political information

[5]However, as they acknowledge, limits in their sample design make drawing conclusions to the general population difficult.

by already interested citizens, the socializing effects of media on interest, or some interaction between the two. Little is also known about the effects of non-public affairs media on political interest or how the tone of coverage affects interest, though in both cases the research on efficacy, political and social trust, and cynicism just discussed would suggest that there are likely both direct and indirect effects.

Civic duty, or the sense that one has a social obligation to participate in politics, is also related to democratic engagement (Almond & Verba, 1963; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Verba & Nie, 1972), though little is known about its connection to media use. However, given the close conceptual ties between civic duty and social capital, one might expect to find a similar set of relationships between media use and the former as for the latter. Similarly, civic duty is associated with other democratic norms and values, such as interest, efficacy, trust, and cynicism, and so should be directly and indirectly connected to media use through these norms and values.

Surprisingly, the impact of media use on political tolerance also has not been directly studied. Again, however, the relationship between tolerance and other variables such as psychological security, political interest, and political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995), coupled with what we know about the connection between these variables and the media, suggests that such a relationship should exist. One also strongly suspects that levels of intolerance and tolerance would be affected (or at least reinforced) differently by different media types (for example, television compared to newspapers), genres (for example, news compared to talk radio or a situation comedy), and, ultimately, content (for example, that of a general news Web site compared to that of an explicitly racist or homophobic "hate site").

Putnam (2000) argues that social capital is related to tolerance, though in complex and potentially conflictual ways. Specifically, high levels of social capital (especially capital that builds bridges across different groups) generally increase tolerance through the creation of a sense of collective civic community that transcends group differences and encourages equality. At the same time he acknowledges that "bonding" social capital in heterogeneous communities can, in certain circumstances, reinforce distinctions between "in-groups" and "out-groups" and, so, exacerbate intolerance. He further argues, however, that tolerance in the absence of social capital can devolve into a kind of individualistic relativism that is antithetical to democratic engagement, whereas *in*tolerance in the absence of social capital can lead to anarchy (pp. 350–363).

Finally, research suggests that communications (either face-to-face or mass mediated) that foster deliberation can, in certain circumstances, encourage consensus building and intergroup understanding and, thus, should lead to increases in political tolerance (Fishkin, 1991, 1995; Gastil, 2000; Guttmann & Thompson, 1996; Lindeman, 2002; Luskin & Fishkin, 1998; Mendelberg, 2002; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Price, Goldthwaite, & Cappella, 2002; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2002).

MEDIA USE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

In addition to holding norms and values such as those discussed above, democratically engaged citizens are also assumed to have a set of foundational attitudes and beliefs. These attitudes and beliefs are important in that they provide individuals with ways to think and act in a political world that is often overwhelmingly complex, with which they have only indirect contact, about which they have incomplete

information, and in which they often have only limited time and interest to engage (Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991).

Although attitudes and beliefs (and the network of relationships that develop among them) play an important function, there is no guarantee that they will enhance the amount or quality of civic engagement, as they can be more or less well connected to each other and to the empirical world they are meant to represent. In the best case, attitudes and beliefs can serve as effective heuristic devices, providing short-cuts to political decision making. In the worst case, however, they are based on misconceptions, stereotypes, and inaccuracies and, so, can lead to opinions and actions that are antithetical to one's self-interest, the interest of others, and the interest of the community as a whole (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kuklinski, Quirk, Schweider, & Rich, 1997; Peffley & Shields, 1996). Key to whether attitudes and beliefs enhance or limit effective democratic engagement is the role of both cognition and affect. In turn, what Americans know (or think they know) and feel about the political and social world, and how they use this information, is affected by the communications environment in which they live.[6]

The Formation of Political Beliefs and Attitudes

The study of political beliefs and attitudes shares several key concepts with psychology. Two central concepts are *cognition* and *affect*. Cognition (from the Latin, "to know") refers to the ways in which individuals process and use information. The study of cognition focuses on issues of "attention, perception, learning, and memory" (Eysenck, 1994, p. 64), as well as thought, language, reasoning, and problem solving (Wade & Tavris, 1993, pp. 275–309). Individual cognitions produce the *beliefs* one holds about any external stimulus, including "things, people, places, ideas, or situations, either singular or plural" (Oskamp, 1977, p. 8). A belief is "a person's subjective probability that an object has a particular characteristic" (Oskamp, 1977, p. 11) or "what a person holds to be true about the world" (Wade & Tavris, 1993).

Whereas cognitions refer to what people *believe* about some aspect of the world, affect (discussed in more detail subsequently) refers to how one *feels* about it. Thus, affect is necessarily evaluative and involves emotional responses to stimuli. For example, "Most politicians are corrupt" is a belief, whereas "I dislike politicians" is an affect.[7]

Another key concept in the study of mass political opinion is *attitude*. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of an attitude (Manstead, 1994, p. 30), the most comprehensive view remains that of Gordon Allport (1935):

> An attitude is a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related. (p. 810)

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[6]As noted earlier, although in this chapter I distinguish between "norms and values" and "beliefs and attitudes," this distinction is not a black-and-white one. Much of the discussion in this section concerning the formation and expression of attitudes and beliefs could also apply to norms and values.

[7]As discussed later, the distinction between cognitions/beliefs and affect/emotion has been questioned, with some arguing that feelings and unconscious information processing can be considered cognitions (Marcus et al., 1996).

The relationship among beliefs, affect, and attitudes is a matter of some disagreement in the psychological literature. Some view the former two constructs, along with *behavioral intention*, as components of attitudes (Krech, Crutchfield, & Ballackey, 1962; Triandis, 1971). Behavioral intention refers to the "predisposition to respond in a particular way to the attitude object" (Oskamp, 1977, p. 8). Others argue that the term attitude should be limited to affective/evaluative predispositions, thus separating the concept more clearly from beliefs and behaviors (Manstead, 1994; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1972; 1975; Oskamp, 1977). From this perspective, attitudes—defined as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 6)—and beliefs affect each other, and both in turn affect behavioral intentions.[8]

Whether one treats beliefs, affect, and behavioral intentions as components of attitudes or as separate constructs, what is clear is that they are deeply interrelated. One's expressed opinion and behavioral intention is the combination of what one feels about the "attitude object" and what one believes to be true about that object. Underlying this model of attitude development are two important assumptions. First, beliefs (what one *thinks* is true) are the mainspring of attitude formation, connecting values, and affect to produce attitudes and behavioral intentions. Second, beliefs can be based on more or less accurate information. For example, if I value equality, and (incorrectly) believe that Blacks and Whites have similar unemployment rates or incomes, then, all else being equal, I am likely to oppose programs that are designed to assist Blacks in these areas. If I (correctly) believe, however, that the Black unemployment rate is over twice that of Whites' or that Blacks earn significantly less than Whites, then, all else being equal, I should be more likely to support such programs.

Of course the process of attitude formation and expression is more complex than this simple example suggests—all other things are seldom equal. People hold numerous, often conflicting values that they draw on in different circumstances (Bennett, 1980; Connolly, 1983). Preexisting beliefs combine into more elaborate, often inconsistent cognitive structures or schema (Fiske & Taylor, 1984) through which new information is processed (Cohen, 1994; Kuklinski et al., 1997). These schema can affect what new information is attended to, how it is perceived or interpreted, how (and if) it is stored in long-term memory, and when and how it is recalled for later consideration (Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992; Price & Zaller, 1993; Sniderman et al., 1991). And in certain circumstances, new information can lead to changes in previously held beliefs, attitudes and schema (Luskin and Fishkin, 1998). Preexisting *feelings* regarding the object in question can also affect the way one attends to, perceives, interprets, stores, and uses information (Lodge, McGraw, & Stroh, 1989; Lodge & Taber, 1996). Finally, behaviors can lead to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and the desire to achieve cognitive consistency or balance

[8]There is also disagreement on the relationship of attitudes and beliefs to *opinions* and *values*. *Opinions* are sometimes equated with beliefs (Oskamp, 1977, p. 12), sometimes equated with attitudes (McGuire, 1969, p. 152), sometimes treated as the overt statement of an attitude (Childs, 1965), and sometimes treated as more specific, less stable, cognitive and/or affective predispositions to respond. Values are more clearly delineated and are defined as standards "towards which the individual has a strong positive attitude. . . . They are ends rather than means; they are the goals a person strives for and which help to determine many of his (her) other attitudes and beliefs" (Oskamp, 1977, p. 13). In this chapter I define opinions as the expression of attitudes.

(Heider, 1946), which in turn can lead to adjustments in what one thinks and feels about the political and social world.

Early Socialization to the Political and Social World

As one of several socializing agents, the media provide much of the "raw material" that make up social and political beliefs, attitudes, and schema. This mediated socialization process starts early in life and operates in both indirect and direct ways. Although research on the specific impact of mass media on children's political and social attitudes is sparse,[9] a number of factors point to a potentially powerful role. First, it is clear that from a very early age children begin to develop political and social beliefs about "authority, property, decision making and political symbols" (Graber, 2001a, p. 198). Research has found that as early as age 5 and increasingly through adolescence, children hold (initially inchoate but increasingly defined) orientations regarding the president and other political leaders, political institutions, political participation, political parties, social issues, community and nationality, efficacy, trust, tolerance, and ideology (Center for Information & Research on Civil Learning & Engagement, 2002; Cook & Scioli, 1972; Dawson, Prewitt, & Dawson, 1977; Dennis, 1973; Greenstein, 1965; Jennings & Niemi, 1974, 1981; Jennings & Stoker, 2001; Merelman, 1969; National Association of Secretaries of state, 1999; Renshon, 1977; Schwartz & Schwartz, 1975; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Stoker & Jennings, 1999).

Second, the fact that children and adolescents have little direct experience with politics, coupled with the fact that much of politics is experienced indirectly for adults as well, means that the development of political beliefs and attitudes is necessarily mediated. Although a good deal of this early learning occurs through interactions with parents, other family members, peers, and teachers, much of what is "taught" to children and adolescents through these interpersonal forms of communication originates from the media (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Graber, 2001a, p. 198).

Third, in addition to this indirect impact, from the very earliest ages children spend a great deal of time with the media. According to a recent study of the media use of children 18 and under, (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brody, 1999), those between age 2 and age 7 spend an average of over 3.5 hr a day using media (electronic and print), with the vast bulk of this time devoted to watching television. Significant percentages of this age group have a radio (42%), tape player (36%) television (32%), VCR (16%), CD player (14%), or video game player (13%) in their bedrooms. Sixty-two percent of 2 to 7 year olds have a computer at home, 40% have Internet access, and on an average day 26% of this age group uses a computer. Fifty-eight percent of children under the age of 8 live in households in which the television is on during meals, and 42% in households in which the television is on "most of the time."

The average amount of time that 8 to 18 year olds (compared to those under 8) spend using media nearly doubles to just under 7 hr a day, though the percentage of time spent with specific media tends to be more diversified than for younger children, with relatively less time (though still more in absolute amount) spent watching television and more time (in relative and absolute terms) with computers,

[9]Much of the work on childhood and adolescent political socialization was written in the late 1960s through late 1970s. Since then, research in this area has been a good deal less frequent.

radio, CDs, and other media (Roberts et al., 1999). This age group also has increasing access to various media in their homes. For example, in 1999 more than three in four had a radio or tape player in their bedroom, two thirds had a television or CD player, and one in five had a computer.

Summarizing the literature on young people's television use, Graber (2001a) notes that

> millions of babies watch television. In the winter, young children in the United States spend an average of thirty-one hours a week in front of the television set—more time than in school. Between the ages of twelve and seventeen, the weekly number of hours spent viewing television drops to twenty-four. Eighty percent of the programs children see are intended for adults and show incidents that differ substantially from those in the child's limited personal experiences. Children watch military combat, funerals, rocket launchings, courtships, seductions and childbirth. If they can understand the messages, the impact is likely to be great because, lacking experience, they are apt to take such presentations at face value. (pp. 198–199)

Although television continues to be the dominant communications medium in young people's lives, the Internet is growing in use and potential impact. According to Roberts et al. (1999) over half of children between 8 and 18 years of age use a computer on any given day, and overall this age group spends an average of 1 hr and 41 min a day on the computer. In a typical day those using a computer will spend about a third of their time on the Internet, e-mailing (9%), chatting (10%), or surfing/using the Web (15%). This same age group reports that they are slightly more likely to "learn interesting things most of the time" through the Internet (26%) than through television (20%). A more recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet and Public Life Project (2001) found that 73% of 12 to 17 year olds use the Internet. Of those who go on-line, 74% have used "instant messaging," 55% have participated in chat sessions, 38% have gone to a Web site to register an opinion, and 68% have used the Web to get news.

Although several studies have concluded that young people who use the Internet are also more likely to use other media (Pew Internet and Public Life Project, 2001; Roberts et al., 1999), there is also evidence of significant age and generational differences in the amount and type of public affairs media use. Several surveys and reports on adolescents' and young adults' (variously between 15 and 25 years of age) media use patterns conclude that younger Americans in general and post-baby boomers in particular are less likely to follow public affairs, with the decline especially noticeable in newspaper readership but also in both national and local news viewing (Pew Research Center on the People and the Press, 2000; Project Vote Smart, 1999; Zukin, 1997). At the same time, young people appear to be embracing the Internet as a source of news. For example, one recent survey found that 70% of 18 to 25 year olds believe that the Internet is a "useful" source of political and issue information (compared to 48% of those over 25), outstripping television news, newspapers, radio, magazines, personal conversations, and direct mail (Project Vote Smart, 1999).

Evidence of the early and ongoing development of beliefs and attitudes, the indirect experience of young people with much of the political and social world, and the large and increasing role of various media in young people's lives suggest that the media can be an important socializing agent. However, disentangling and

demonstrating the specific impact of media on young people's attitudes and beliefs have been difficult for a variety of reasons, including the ubiquitousness of the media, interactions with other types of experiences and communications, poor research design and measurement, and the fact that many studies were conducted prior to the more recent explosion in types and penetration of the media (Graber, 2001a, p. 199).

Nonetheless, several studies of young people have uncovered evidence of a relationship between media use and political attitudes and beliefs. Some of these studies have treated public affairs media use as an *indicator* of civic and political involvement. These studies have generally concluded that young people who have been socialized through their schools or parents to be more interested in politics are subsequently more likely to follow public affairs through the media (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1973; Jennings & Niemi, 1974, 1981; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961).

Other studies have explored the impact of media on young people's political and social attitudes more directly. For example, Pingree (1983) found that heavy media users were more likely to understand basic concepts such as free speech, fairness, and equality under the law and to support such values. Byrne (1969) found that viewing television news increased children's and adolescents' favorable views of government. Chaffee, Ward, and Tipton (1970) and Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo (1999) found that public affairs media use correlated positively with various measures of political knowledge. Rahn and Hirschorn (1995) found that viewing negative campaign ads increased children's anxiety and anger about politics. Gross and Morgan (1985) and Morgan and Rothschild (1983) found that heavy television viewing led adolescents to view the social world in similar ways to its often distorted presentation. And Conway, Wyckoff, and Ahern (1981) and Garramone and Atkin (1986) found that high school students self-identified television as the major influence on their attitudes regarding issues such as race, the economy, and war, far outstripping families, friends, teachers, or personal experience.

The Maintenance and Development of Beliefs and Attitudes in Adulthood

Although political and social beliefs appear to form early, this is not to say that they are impermeable to later influences (Abramson, 1983; Mutz, Sniderman, & Brody, 1996). Political socialization is a continuing process influenced by ongoing interactions with family and friends, the workplace, and significant personal and societal events, as well as through life cycle changes that affect one's contact with and relationship to the political and social world (Sigel, 1989). The media, as an ongoing source of information about the world, should thus remain an important factor in the maintenance of and/or change in beliefs and attitudes. In a typical day the average adult spends over 4 hr a day watching television, 2 hr listening to the radio, up to 45 min reading newspapers, and up to 30 min reading magazines (Graber, 2001a, p. 200). Over half the adult population uses the Internet (Pew Internet and Daily Life Project, 2001), with a third of adults using the Internet at least weekly for news and public affairs information (Pew Research Center, for the People & the Press, 2000).

Heavy exposure to the media "contributes to the lifelong process of political socialization and learning" Graber (2001a, p. 200), by "cultivating" particular orientations about how the world operates:

> [Mass media make up] the mainstream of the comon symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality. We live in terms of the stories we tell, stories about what things exist, stories about how things work, and stories about what to do. . . . Increasingly, media-cultivated facts and values become standards by which we judge. (Gerbner, Gross, Beeck, Fox, & Signorielli, 1978, pp. 178, 193)

Both entertainment and public affairs media use in adulthood appears to continue to shape one's perceptions of social reality including subjects such as sex, sexual orientation, age, class and racial stereotypes, religion, and crime and safety (Funkhauser & Shaw, 1990; Gerbner et al., 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Gross, 1984; Morgan, 1982). Media use is also associated with orientations toward political institutions, processes, and figures (Carlson, 1985; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1984; Gerbner et al., 1986; Reese & Miller, 1981), the relative importance of individual versus systemic causes for societal problems (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a; Iyengar, 1991), and political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). And research on both face-to-face and on-line deliberations has found at least limited evidence that this kind of interpersonal communication can lead to at least short-term changes in political and social beliefs (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Lindeman, 2002; Mendelberg, 2002; Price & Cappella, 2001, 2002).

Although these and other studies suggest that media use affects both children's and adults' political and social orientations, all told the evidence of impact is remarkably thin given the extent of the media's reach and its theorized import. As with other aspects of democratic engagement, noticeably absent are studies exploring the impact of different types of media (especially those other than television) and the impact of media on different segments of the population.

MEDIA USE AND THE FORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

Connecting Foundational Orientations to Specific Opinions: Heuristic Decision Making

One of the major criticisms of democratic theories that assume an active, informed citizenry is that they expect citizens "to yield an unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity, and effort" (Lippmann, 1925, p. 2), thus setting standards so high as to make democracy impossible (Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 134–136). A partial solution to this dilemma is the view that citizens, drawing on their foundational values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes, can come to reasonably effective judgements about issues of the day (Berent & Krosnick, 1992; Graber, 1988; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Lau & Sears, 1986; Peffley & Hurwitz, 1992; Popkin, 1991; Shapiro et al., 1991; Stroh, 1992). In this view citizens are seen as "cognitive misers" (Hewstone & Macrae, 1994) who attempt to make efficient, rational decisions in circumstances of limited ability to process information, limited incentives to become politically engaged, and limited information (Downs, 1957; Mondak, 1994; Popkin, 1991). Citizens achieve this low-information rationality through the use of information short-cuts or heuristics:

> Citizens frequently can compensate for their limited information about politics by taking advantage of judgmental heuristics. Heuristics are judgmental shortcuts, efficient ways to organize and simplify political choices, efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice. . . . Insofar as they can be brought into play, people can be knowledgeable in their reasoning about political choices without possessing a large body of knowledge about politics. (Sniderman et al., 1991, p. 19)

The notion of heuristic decision making is rooted in Anthony Downs's (1957) economic theory of democracy and research by psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1972, 1984; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Kahneman and Tversky identified four simplifying heuristics: representativeness, availability, adjustment and anchoring, and simulation. *Representativeness* is assigning an item to a particular class and then using what one believes about that class to form opinions about the item in question. For example, I know that President Bush is a Republican, so I use what I believe about Republicans to make judgements about him.

Availability refers to the ease with which an individual can retrieve relevant information from long-term memory. For example, in being asked my opinion about the job George Bush is doing as president, I might easily recall that he recently cut taxes, and so give him a favorable rating, as I am opposed to high taxes. *Anchoring and adjustment* is a simplifying process in which individuals form an initial response and then adjust that response by considering additional information related to that response. For example, I might give Bush a favorable rating based on his having cut taxes but then adjust my opinion in a more negative direction as I think of other ways in which he might have hurt the economy. Thus, my initial opinion anchors my subsequent reflections.

Finally, *simulation* "facilitates decision making when information is lacking . . . decision makers mentally play out [hypothetical] sequences of events relevant to the judgment under consideration" (Mondak, 1994, p. 123). For example, in deciding whether to vote for Al Gore or George Bush, I draw on easily accessible information and beliefs to "predict" how each candidate *might* address issues of importance to me.

Popkin (1991) uses both representativeness and availability in theorizing about how citizens are able to use heuristics in coming to political judgments, and Ottati and Wyer (1990) and Iyengar (1990) discuss an "accessibility" heuristic that is similar to "availability." Ottati and Wyer (1990) also discuss the use of "stereotypes" in a way that is similar to Kahneman and Tversky's representativeness heuristic. In addition, political scientists have hypothesized and tested other heuristics. For example, Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, and Brady (1986) and Sniderman et al. (1991) refer to a "desert heuristic" in which individuals make political judgments based on whether they believe that an individual or group is deserving of the action or policy in question. And Riggle (1992) and Riggle, Ottati, Wyer, Kuklinski, and Schwarz (1992) distinguish "procedural" heuristics (rules for how information should be processed) from "categorical" heuristics (rules for what kinds of information should be used in different circumstances).[10]

[10]For an excellent, comprehensive review of heuristic decision making and its use in political science, see Mondak (1994).

The role of the media in heuristic decision making is twofold. First, as discussed previously, the media play an important role in the formation of the foundational orientations that are drawn on in reaching specific opinions. Second, the media provides much of the new information that serves to "trigger" heuristic decision making (directly or indirectly). Citizens have a wide, often inconsistent range of norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes on which they can draw. By *framing* information in different foundational (for example, partisanship, ideology, equality, freedom, gender, race, patriotism) and/or substantive (for example, local, national, or international concerns, economic versus social issues, individual versus collective causes or impact) contexts, the media can *prime* citizens to attend to these particular aspects of the issue in question, activating different schema, and thus producing different opinions (Ansolabehere, Behr, & Iyengar, 1993; Huddy, 1994; Gilens, 1999; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Peffley, Shields, & Wiliams, 1996; Zaller, 1992).

The Role of Emotion in Opinion Formation

There is general agreement in the literature that citizens draw on foundational orientations in the formation of opinions and that the media can affect this process through the way they frame information. Less certain is the extent to which attitude and opinion formation is an active, conscious, and rational process. In one view, both general orientations and specific opinions are continuously being constructed and reconstructed through remembering, thinking, reasoning, and communicating. The media remain an important factor in this process, but their impact is less "automatic," with prior information, reflection, and deliberation mitigating more reflexive, unconscious responses (Connolly, 1983; Crigler, 1998; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1998; Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin, & Luskin, 1999; Gastil, 2000; Gamson, 1992, 2001; Lindeman, 2002; Luskin, & Fishkin, 1998; Mendelberg, 2002; Neuman et al., 1992; Wade & Tavris, 1993; Zaller & Feldman, 1992).

At the other extreme, both attitude and opinion formation is seen as being heavily driven by affective or emotional responses to information. Psychological research into affective information processing provides a strong basis for the importance of emotions in attitude and opinion formation. This research reminds us that "information" is much broader than facts, that "cognitions" are not limited to conscious thought, and that there are many "information-processing" systems in the human body. Drawing on this literature, Marcus et al. (Marcus, Neuman, MacKuen, & Sullivan, 1996; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) distinguish three interrelated information processing systems in humans: reflexive action, emotional responses, and deliberative thought. Deliberative thought is consistent with the more rational, constructivist approach already described. But Marcus et al., argue that emotional information processing has important, and under- or poorly studied, implications for political decision making as well.

Psychologists now believe that affective responses to information are processed through the "limbic system"—literally a group of brain areas (the hippocampus, amygdala, mammilary body, septal nuclei, septum, cingulate, cingulate gyrus, and fornix) involved in emotional reactions and motivated behavior (Wade & Tavris, 1993). A particularly useful theory of how the limbic system operates is J. A. Gray's (1981, 1985, 1987, 1990) model of emotions. According to Gray, the limbic system can be divided into three more specific systems. The *fight/flight* system regulates the emotions of rage and terror in response to "direct sensory input of punishment and

non-reward" (Marcus et al., 1996, p. 38). The *behavioral approach* system is associated with positive affect regarding the parts of our personal and social environment with which we are familiar. This system "provides people with an understanding, an emotional report card, on actions that are already in one's repertoire of habits and learned behaviors" (p. 43). The *behavioral inhibition* system, on the other hand, is associated with negative affect and "acts to scan the environment for novelty and intrusion of threat [and to] warn us that some things and some people are powerful and dangerous" (p. 43).

According to Marcus et al., the fight/flight system has limited (though potentially powerful) applications to politics. The behavioral approach and behavioral inhibition systems, however, are more likely to play regular roles in processing political information. In combination, these systems produce a two-dimensional model of affective responses, or moods (adapted by Marcus et al. from Watson and Tellegen's, 1985, circumplex model). The *positive affect* dimension (produced by the behavioral approach system) ranges from high positive affect (feeling active, elated, enthusiastic, excited) to low positive affect (feeling drowsy, dull, sleepy, sluggish). The *negative affect* dimension (produced by the behavioral inhibition system) ranges from high negative affect (nervousness, distress, fear, hostility) to low negative affect (calmness, placidity, relaxation). Other, nonorthogonal, moods can be viewed as combinations of high positive and negative affect (astonishment or surprise), high positive and low negative affect (contentment, happiness, kindness, pleasure), low negative and low positive affect (quiescence, stillness), and high negative and low positive affect (sadness, sorrow, unhappiness).

A key to the relationship between emotional and deliberative information processing in the formation of political attitudes and opinions is the speed with which different kinds of information are processed, and the extent to which they involve conscious thought. For example, reflexive responses to information (moving one's hand away from a hot stove) can take place before one has either a conscious awareness or a sensation of pain. Certain emotional responses to information, although not as quick as reflexive responses, are processed more quickly and less consciously than is rational thought (Lodge & Taber, 1996). For example, when I watch a campaign ad, listen to a presidential address, or read a newspaper article, I may be reacting to that information both emotionally and deliberatively, but my emotional reactions are happening more quickly and less consciously. Thus, at a minimum, emotional responses are likely to affect the extent to which factual information is attended to and the way it is perceived, stored, and recalled. And it is possible that emotional responses alone are enough for citizens to develop political attitudes, even in the absence of the conscious use of factual information or rational thought.

One well-developed approach to the interaction of emotions and factual information in attitude formation has been developed by Lodge et al. (1989; see also Anderson & Hubert, 1963; Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995; Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). According to this model of information processing (known alternately as the "impression-driven" or "on-line" model), individuals make political evaluations at the moment information is presented, storing their affective impressions in memory and then "'forgetting' the actual pieces of evidence that contributed to the evaluation" (Lodge et al., 1989, p. 401).[11] Affective judgments—rather than factual

[11]The theory is ambiguous on whether the factual information is actually forgotten or is simply stored but no longer relevant or easily accessible. The central point, however, is that the factual information itself is not consciously used in decision making.

information or rational thought—about particular individuals, groups, or issues are mentally stored in a running tally that is updated when new information is encountered. It is these emotional tallies that are retrieved into short-term memory when citizens encounter new information and/or make decisions about the person, group, or issue in question.

The on-line model differs from constructivist approaches to opinion formation in two important respects. First, it suggests that findings of generally low recognition and recall of political facts (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) tell us little about people's exposure to or use of political information. Citizens may have little memory of such facts, yet have used them to develop their attitudes. For example, I may be able to tell you that I disapprove of the job the president is doing, and have based that opinion on a wealth of factual information, but be unable to recall what those specific facts are. Second, it suggests that people's political decisions are driven by affective rather than cognitive schema—citizens come to political judgment about many issues through visceral emotions rather than deliberation and thought. In this model, political sophistication is defined as the speed and efficiency with which citizens can process factual information into affective tallies. At best, tests of factual knowledge are indicators of one's cognitive processing ability, rather than substantively important pieces of information that are called up for active use in forming and expressing political opinions.

Emotions have also been found to play a role in heuristic decision making. One example is the "likability heursistic" (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Sniderman et al., 1991). As the name implies, this model assumes that citizens use short-cuts in making political decisions. However, these short-cuts are driven by how one *feels* about the issue, person, or group in question. In the version of this model developed by Brady and (1985) and Sniderman et al. (1991), citizens infer stands to individuals and groups by attributing their own views to individuals and groups they likes and attributing opposing views to those they dislike. For example, if I am pro-gun control and I like George Bush, then I assume that he is pro-gun control as well. Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) also assume that affect (likability) drives decision making but argue that one's feelings toward the individual or group, coupled with beliefs about where they stand, cues citizens as to where they themselves stand on the issue in question. For example, if I like George Bush and I believe that he supports gun control, then I decide that I, too, must support gun control. Although the direction of causality is important, the point here is that both models see affect, rather than beliefs or knowledge, as the mainspring of attitude formation and change.

Recently, Lodge and Taber (1996) have further developed the on-line model, combining it with the concepts of *hot cognitions* and heuristic decision making to develop a theory of motivated political reasoning. According to this theory, *all* social information is affectively charged at the moment the information is encountered, and this "affective tag" is stored directly with the concept in long-term memory (p. 2). These hot cognitions (Abelson, 1963) are then updated and revised in the face of new information through the on-line process discussed earlier. Finally, when asked (implicitly or explicitly) to evaluate a political object, people will use the "how-do-I-feel" heuristic (Clore & Isbell, 1996) by moving the affective tally into working memory and using the resulting feelings to guide their response, with negative net tallies producing a negative judgment and positive net tallies producing a positive judgment.

Taken as a whole, this research clearly shows that emotions play important, multiple roles in political information processing. They can create moods that

affect one's motivation to attend to or avoid politics, thus affecting the likelihood of learning political facts (Marcus et al., 1996: 52). They can interact with knowledge and beliefs, affecting the way information is perceived, stored, and used (Carmines & Kuklinski, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 1996; Lodge et al., 1989). And they can substitute for factual information in the formation and expression of political attitudes (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Lodge & Taber, 1996; Marcus et al., 1996; Sniderman et al., 1991).

What is also clear is that the specific role played by emotions (and factual knowledge) is context dependent. Lodge et al. (1989; 1990) found that when experimental conditions encourage, forming *immediate* impressions (for example, when subjects are told, before being given information about candidates, that they will be asked to evaluate them) political "sophisticates" (significantly, defined as those scoring highest on a test of factual knowledge) are most likely to process new information "on-line." But when the experimental conditions are altered (for example, when subjects are not told that they will be asked to make an evaluation until after information is presented) or when the topic being evaluated is relatively complex (for example, a policy issue rather than a candidate), political sophisticates are the most likely to draw on information that is stored in memory. And Lodge and Taber (1996) suggest that the how-do-I-feel heuristic is most likely to be employed under certain conditions, including those where affective judgment is called for, where the consequences of being wrong are minor, where objective information is not readily available, where disconfirming evidence is not highlighted, and where one is distracted or under time pressure (p. 3).

Even if attitude and opinion formation is driven primarily through reflexive, emotional responses to information, the media remain important for the same two reasons discussed earlier. First, they are a primary source of the information on which the affective responses that shape foundational orientations are based. And second, the way the media implicitly and explicitly use affect to frame particular issues (for example, cynicism, trust, fear, anger, loyalty) can help determine what emotions are tapped and, thus, what opinions are expressed. Indeed, the nonverbal cues contained in visual and aural communication may make certain media (for example, television or movies) and certain genres (for example, entertainment or ads) more effective in shaping attitude formation and opinion expression through emotions than through reason (Graber, 1996, 2001b; Marcus et al., 2000).

Media Effects on Stability and Change in Political Opinions

Theory and research such as that described above paints a complex picture in which the media, interacting with previously held norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes (among other things), can affect individual opinion on particular issues in subtle and context-dependent ways. What does this mean for broader patterns of stability and change in public opinion and the impact of the media on these patterns? Several studies have explored this issue. Lang and Lang (1983) found that public opinion regarding Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal was at least partially influenced by media coverage of that event. Miller and Krosnick (1996) found evidence that media coverage of the Iran–Contra scandal and the Persian Gulf war, respectively, lowered President Ronald Reagan's and increased President George Bush's approval ratings. And several studies have found that negative political advertising decreased support for the targeted candidate, though these results have been inconsistent (Lau et al., 1999).

In an extensive analysis based on aggregate trends in public opinion regarding 32 foreign policy and 48 domestic policy issues over a 14-year period, Page and Shapiro (1989, 1992; see also Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987) found that print and broadcast comments by acknowledged experts on the issues in question, editorial opinions expressed directly by newspapers and broadcast news reporters, and statements by presidents (especially popular ones) had a measurable impact on shifting public opinion in the direction advocated. However, comments by spokespeople for interest groups (especially those viewed as being overly narrow, self-interested, or antisocial) either had no influence on public opinion or shifted opinion in the opposite direction intended by the groups.

Zaller (1992) combines theories of individual-level opinion formation with theories regarding the nature of the larger media environment to produce what is arguably the most comprehensive model and analysis of media effects to date. Simplifying his model somewhat, Zaller argues that two sets of characteristics are crucial to how citizens respond to media messages. The first is their level of "political sophistication," which includes political knowledge, interest, and intellectual engagement in politics. The second is their foundational orientations toward the political world, which can include their ideological or partisan leanings, hawkish or dovish views on war, underlying beliefs about race, and the like. The greater one's political sophistication, the more likely one is to attend to, comprehend, and retain information provided by the media on any particular issue. In turn, this information is likely to be filtered through one's predispositional attitudes, leading to specific opinions about the issue in question.

As summarized, Zaller's model is consistent with much of the theory and research discussed earlier in this chapter. But he takes his analysis a further step, arguing that media impact also depends on the content of the message. Because the vast majority of what the news media reports is based on elite discourse, the range of information and views presented by the mainstream press is circumscribed by this discourse. This produces a "Catch-22" of sorts, in which political sophisticates, who are the most likely to attend to media reports, are also the most susceptible to any bias contained in those reports.

Zaller uses this model to explore shifting opinion on a host of issues including the Vietnam war, job guarantees, school desegregation and busing, the admission of China into the UN, race and gender policy, defense spending, U.S. involvement in Central America, the state of the economy, a nuclear weapons freeze, and support for candidates. He finds that when the media environment is relatively homogeneous, public opinion shifts in the direction of this mainstream opinion, with the shift most noticeable for more sophisticated citizens. Significantly, although this shift is greater for those whose predispositions would incline them toward the view in question (for example, self-proclaimed "hawks" taking a pro-Vietnam war stance), the direction of the shift is the same even for those whose predispositions would lead one to expect the opposite (for example, self-proclaimed "doves" become more supportive of the war). If, however, the media environment presents "two sides" to an issue, the result is more polarized opinion, with those predisposed in different directions shifting in ways consistent with these predispositions (for example, hawks become more supportive of the war and doves become more opposed).[12]

[12]Whereas Zaller finds convincing evidence across numerous issue areas for his argument, more recently (Zaller, 1998, 2001) he has noted that for at least one issue (the Clinton sex scandal), public opinion appears to have been immune from the mainstreaming and polarizing effects of the media. See also Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) on this topic.

MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL AND CIVIC BEHAVIORS

Ultimately, democratically engaged citizens are citizens who *act*—through voting and other forms of electoral involvement, contacting public officials, membership in political and civic organizations, volunteering in their community, or even protesting and demonstrating. As with the other aspects of democratic engagement discussed in this chapter, the relationship between media use and civic and political behavior is complicated and only partly understood. Overall there appears to be a positive and consistent correlation between public affairs media use and participation—more active citizens are more likely to say that they follow politics, read newspapers, watch or listen to the news, and visit Internet news sites. (McLeod et al., 1996; Norris, 1996, 2001; Pew Research Center for the People and Press surveys; Putnam, 2000; Rhine, Bennett, & Flickinger, 1998).

The causal relationship between public affairs media use and participation is unclear, though the general assumption is that it is bidirectional—more participatory citizens are more likely to follow public affairs in the media, but exposure to public affairs media also increases participation. The positive impact of media use on participation is largely indirect, occurring through its effects on motivation (for example, political interest) and ability (most centrally, political knowledge). However, the media can also have a more direct impact on participation through the provision of "mobilizing information" such as specific calls to action and the identification of specific opportunities to act (Lemert, 1981, 1992; Merritt, 1998; Sirianni & Friedland, 2001).

Although the general impact of media use on participation and its prerequisites is positive, the content of the media mitigates and can even reverse the relationship. For example, there is at least some evidence that negative campaign ads can depress voter turnout, though the findings are mixed (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994; Ansolabehere et al., 1999; Bullock, 1994; Finkel & Geer, 1998; but see Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990; Geer & Lau, 1998; Kahn & Kenney, 1999). And the evidence, discussed earlier in this chapter, that cynical, strategy-oriented coverage of public affairs can lead to lower social trust and political efficacy suggests that such coverage has at least an indirect, negative impact on participation.

Although different types of public affairs media tend to be intercorrelated with each other (Pew Internet and Public Life Project, 2001), there is some evidence that different media are more or less likely to facilitate participation. In general, print media (newspapers and magazines) have the strongest relationship, with the relationship between participation and television news viewing less consistent and strong (Atkin, Galloway, & Nayman, 1976; Eveland & Scheufle, 2000; Patterson, 1980; Robinson, 1976; Robinson & Levy, 1986; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983; Van Dijk, 1988). This view has been disputed, however, with some arguing that television's audiovisual nature is actually superior in conveying certain kinds of information that can affect participation, such as "impressions of people and long-term memory for dramatic events" (Graber, 2001a, p. 197; see also Graber, 1996, 2001b). The attributes of television such as sound, motion, and color have also been found to "attract attention and stimulate psychological involvement and ultimately learning" (Neuman et al., 1992, p. 79; see also Graber, 1990). Neuman et al. (1992) conclude from their research that because people find television more entertaining and accessible, it "is particularly successful at breaking the attention barrier and getting people

interested" (p. 93). At the same time, "print media are particularly successful at providing in depth follow-up" (p. 93). In the end, both types of media appear to lead to increased political learning, which in turn is likely to lead to greater participation. Television may also be particularly effective at motivating and educating—and so increasing the participation—of less politically sophisticated citizens (Kwak, 1999; McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Miyo, 1983).

There is also evidence that television viewing and newspaper reading differ in their impact on different kinds of participation. For example, Eveland and Scheufle (2000) found that both television and newspaper use were positively correlated with voting, though the former relationship was smaller and statistically nonsignificant. However, only newspaper use was positively associated with other forms of campaign-related participation (displaying a campaign button, sign, or sticker, attending a meeting or rally, working for a party or candidate, or donating money to a candidate or party). This fact, in combination with the interaction between newspaper use and levels of formal education, led to an increased gap in overall campaign participation between more and less educated citizens, but not for voting.

Other forms of media have also been shown to be positively associated with civic and political participation. For example, Bennett (1998) found that listeners to talk radio were significantly more likely to participate in a variety of ways. However, although public affairs media appears to be positively associated (to varying degrees) with participation, entertainment media is another story. Putnam (2000, pp. 230–238) finds that although television *news* viewing is correlated with increased civic and political participation, there is a consistent negative relationship between the amount of time spent viewing *entertainment* television and a host of activities including attending a public meeting, writing a letter to a congressperson, attending a meeting or serving as an officer or committee member of a local organization, or volunteering in the community. And Brehm and Rahn (1997) conclude that watching a single hour less television each day would have the equivalent, positive effect on civic engagement as 5 or 6 more years of formal education.

As with the relationship between social trust and television viewing discussed earlier, entertainment television's impact on participation is presumed to result from a combination of competition for scarce time, psychological effects that inhibit social interaction and specific program content.

Although the "time scarcity" argument is compelling, arguments based on psychological impact and specific program content require greater refinement and specificity. For example, there is at least some argument to be made (and evidence to support it) that the content of entertainment media can, in certain circumstances, be more informative and better contextualized than that of the news (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a) and that citizens are willing and able to draw on entertainment media, often in positive, constructive ways in deliberations about important issues (Baum, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994b; Edelman, 1995; Fiske, 1996).

To date there is less evidence regarding the specific impact of the Internet on participation. Given its combination of print, audio, and video/images, it is arguable that the Internet combines characteristics of radio, television, and newspapers in ways that would make it particularly effective in increasing citizens' participation. However, Putnam (2000, p. 221) finds that people who depend primarily on the Internet for political information are *less* likely to participate in civic and political life than average. And Bimber's (2001) analysis of 1996 and 1998 NES data on participation suggests that the only demonstrable link is between Internet use and financial contributions to campaigns in 1998.

Despite the apparent lack of impact to date, the Internet's most distinctive qualities—the marriage of increased information, targeting by providers, filtering and active self-selection by consumers, and bidirectionality of communication—seem to offer truly new prospects for civic engagement. In particular, the Internet's ability to provide information to citizens and simultaneously permit them to act on that issue (for example, by communicating a reaction to friends, interest groups, or public officials, giving money, signing a petition, registering and voting, joining an organization, and agreeing to attend a meeting) is a radically new feature of the information environment (Delli Carpini, 2000; Sirianni & Friedland, 2000, pp. 232, 335; Uslaner, 2000). The Internet also has potential to increase participation in forums and deliberations about important public issues and, in doing so, increase the resources (for example, knowledge or reasoning and argumentation skills) and motivations (for example, interest and social connectedness) necessary to engage in other forms of participation (Price & Cappella, 2001, 2002).

Although the Internet's value for increasing civic engagement has only begun to be exploited, there is suggestive, if anecdotal, evidence of its potential. For example, it appears that the Internet was critical to organizers of the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization, the anti-land mine campaign, and the Free Tibet movement. Bimber (1998) provides two additional examples of mobilization via the Internet (a national campaign on home schooling and a local issue involving the homeless in Santa Monica, California). He describes this general phenomenon as "accelerated pluralism," arguing that the Internet will not change the basic logic of pluralism. Citizens will continue to participate in politics and be mobilized largely through groups to which they belong. At the same time, he argues that the Internet

> will lower the obstacles to grass-roots mobilization and organization by political entrepreneurs, activists, and others, and will speed the flow of politics. Lower costs of organizing collective action offered by the Net will be particularly beneficial for one type of group: those outside the boundaries of traditional private and public institutions, those not rooted in businesses, professional or occupational memberships or the constituencies of existing government agencies and programs. (Bimber, 2000, p. 53)

He speculates that this, in turn, will lead to an intensification of group-centered politics and a decreased "dependence on stable public and private institutions" (p. 53).

CONCLUSIONS: THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Over much of the last 40 years of quantitative research on media and politics, the consensus mantra has been that although the media does not influence what people think, it can influence what people think about. This view has long been questioned (most cogently by scholars writing from a "critical studies" perspective), but recent theory and research has reintroduced the notion that "the media matters" into the mainstream. The admittedly incomplete review presented in this chapter in large part confirms this view. Stepping back from the details of individual studies to take a broader view of the field, one can certainly conclude that the media

influence the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and actions that constitute democratic engagement. This impact begins early in life and continues throughout the life cycle. It is mitigated or enhanced by a number of factors, from the type and amount of media attended to, to the content of media messages, to characteristics of viewers, listeners, and readers. The effects of media are both direct and indirect and operate through both affective and rational pathways.

That said, there remains a sense that what we can conclude about the impact of media pales in comparison to more theoretical and even commonsensical expectations. In particular, four important questions emerge from existing theory and research that require answers if we are to understand more fully (and, hopefully, contribute to improving) the media's impact on democratic engagement.

If the Media Are So Important, Why Do Effects Seem So Small?

With few exceptions (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Zaller, 1992), the magnitude of most effects demonstrated through empirical research remain small, equivocal, and inconsistent or at least heavily context dependent, with most studies being limited in their findings and cautious in their conclusions:

> No empirical research has gone so far as to argue that the direct persuasive impact of mass communications is, in general, large. "Not so minimal" is perhaps the best characterization of the current consensus among quantitative researchers on the size of media effects. Words like *massive* are used only in a denial. (Zaller, 1996, p. 18)

Zaller goes on to challenge this view, suggesting that "at least in the domain of political communication, the true magnitude of the persuasive effect of mass communication is closer to "massive" than to "small to negligible" and that the frequency of such effects is "often" (p. 18). What explains this gap between the reasonable expectation that the media is a powerful influence on democratic engagement and the general inability to document large effects? Zaller argues that observing large media effects requires better measurement of key variables, variance in key independent variables (especially the content of media messages), and appropriate models for capturing crosscutting effects.

In the frequent cases in which media messages (across media and time) do not vary significantly, it may be difficult or impossible to detect a significant impact, even though this impact may in fact be quite large. In the not uncommon cases where media messages change or vary, however, it should be possible to detect their potentially sizable impact on public values, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. But to do this we must design research that simultaneously measures change in the content of media messages, the range of information provided in these messages, which citizens ultimately receive them, and the foundational orientations that citizens use to translate them into opinions and action. Too often such differential impact is lost because "impact" is defined as change in a single direction (i.e., citizens are expected to all be affected in the same way and amount). As a result, systematic but crosscutting change can be misinterpreted as no change at all. By acknowledging that the effects of the media environment can vary by content and context, and building models that can capture this dynamic, it should be possible

to document more fully the extent and direction of media effects on democratic engagement.

What Constitutes Politically Relevant Media?

Not surprisingly, most theory and research regarding the role of the media in democratic politics focuses on news and public affairs genres. It is in public affairs media in general and news media in particular that politics is assumed to reside, and it is to this part of the media that the public is assumed to turn when engaging the political world. As a former network television executive put it, in the civic education of the American public, entertainment programming is recess.

Despite the seeming "naturalness" of the distinction between news and entertainment media, it is remarkably difficult to identify the characteristics upon which this distinction is based. The opposite of "news" is not "entertainment," as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called "entertainment" is often neither. One might instead use the terms *public affairs* media and *popular* media, but these distinctions also collapse under the slightest scrutiny. Does the definition of public affairs media require that it be *un*popular? Does the broadcasting of a presidential address shift from public affairs to popular media because too many people watch it? And how does one classify the many magazine stories, novels, movies, television shows (in all their rapidly changing formats such as melodramas, docudramas, docusoaps, and talk shows), and Internet sites that address issues of public concern. Clearly the concept of popular media does not provide a counterpoint to public affairs. To the contrary, the *public* in public affairs indicates that the issues discussed are of importance to a substantial segment of the citizenry, and most of what is studied under this heading *is* popular by any reasonable definition of the term.

The difficulty in even *naming* the categories on which we base so fundamental a distinction is more than semantics. Rather it highlights the artificiality of this distinction. A possible way to salvage the news–entertainment distinction is to identify the key characteristics that are assumed to distinguish politically relevant from politically irrelevant media. But this does more to blur than clarify the traditional news/nonnews categories. Public affairs media address real-world issues of relevance to a significant percentage of the citizenry, but so, too, does much of what traditionally falls outside of this genre: One would be hard pressed to find *any* substantive topic covered in the news that has not also been the subject of ostensibly nonnews media. And public affairs media generally, and the news more specifically, regularly address issues of culture, celebrity, and personality.

Attempting to define public affairs media in broader strokes also does little to resolve this conceptual dilemma. No less a student of journalism than Walter Lippmann (1922) defined news as "the signalizing of an event." And yet "entertainment media" often play this role, drawing the public's attention to issues and events of social and political import (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994a; Fiske, 1996). In short, all of the usual characteristics we associate with news or public affairs media can be found in other media, and those we associate with popular or entertainment media can be found in the news. I do not conclude from this that *all* media are equally relevant to politics or useful to democratic discourse. Rather I am suggesting that our traditional categories fail as a way of making such distinctions, that

they are social constructions that tell us more about the distribution of political power than about the political relevance of different genres. Further, I would argue that these categories are rapidly losing what power they once had to privilege certain gatekeepers and genres in the process of constructing political reality.

To understand more fully the impact of media on democratic engagement, it seems clear that we must expand our theories and research to a much wider range of genres. One potentially fruitful approach, suggested in a different context by Bimber (1998, 2000), is to think less in terms of specific media, technologies, or genres and more in terms of *the transfer of information*. Politically relevant information can take many forms (from facts to opinions to audiovisual cues), emanate from many sources (from face-to-face exchanges to newspapers to television to the Internet), and have many different impacts (from the shaping of foundational norms and attitudes to the triggering of different emotions to the shaping of specific opinions and actions). Beginning with the questions, "What information matters?" and "Where do people get this information?" and letting the answers to these questions determine the particular media and genres we study, would, I believe, produce a more nuanced, integrated, and ultimately accurate picture of how media affects democratic engagement (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2003).

Is Media Use Good or Bad for Democratic Engagement?

One of the most intriguing patterns in the research summarized in this chapter is the general finding that public affairs media use is positively correlated with most forms of democratic engagement, coupled with evidence that the media's cynical, negative coverage of politics seems to contribute to declining trust, efficacy, and involvement. How is this possible? Although I do not pretend to have an answer to this question, on reflection these findings may be less paradoxical than they seem at first blush. In a large, modern democracy, the primary way in which citizens learn about public life is necessarily through the media. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more engaged citizens would be more likely to use public affairs media of various kinds. In addition, although the content of public affairs media may often fall short of what we might hope, taken as a whole, they certainly contain enough useful and usable information that citizens who regularly attend to them wind up learning things that enhance their civic and political engagement. Some (e.g., Edelman, 1988) argue that citizens are better off not attending to the elite-driven discourse that dominates mainstream media, but it is impossible to imagine how citizens could know anything about the political and social world without using the mass media as part of this learning process.

Acknowledging the benefits of media use does not discount its potential drawbacks, however. It is not surprising that exposure to negative ads, cynical and/or strategic news coverage, the barrage of crime and scandal stories, and so forth, would lead to doubts about the efficacy of one's involvement, hesitancy about trusting fellow citizens or elected officials, even confusion about the issues in question. Were these the *only* messages citizens received through the media, one might expect only such negative impacts on engagement. But clearly individual stories, particular media and genres, and the information environment, more generally, are not this homogeneous in tone or content.

Viewed in this light, the dual effects of media seem less surprising. At a minimum, it may be that different citizens are reacting differently, with some better able to

glean what is valuable from the media, whereas others succumb to their more insidious messages. More likely, I suspect, is that in many cases the *same* people are simultaneously educated and confused, motivated and alienated, empowered and politically weakened by their exposure to the media and its interaction with their more deeply held knowledge, values, and beliefs. I know that this is how I react, often in the course of watching or reading a single news story. Do I learn from the news? Yes. Am I also confused by it? Yes. Does the media inspire me to act, sometimes out of anger, sometimes out of a renewed sense of community? Yes. Do I sometimes wonder whether or not it is worth it? Yes. Did I feel more connected to fellow citizens while watching coverage in the aftermath of September 11, 2001? Yes. Did I also wonder about the darker side of human nature and what it means for how trusting I should be? Yes. Did I find myself more inclined to support military actions despite my more pacifist, skeptical attitudes and beliefs about such actions? Yes. Do I remain less supportive of such actions than people whose orientations are more "hawkish"? Yes. Although not wanting to make too much of what may say more about my own schizophrenic tendencies than the nature of media and democratic engagement, I suspect that I am not alone in my "relationship" to the media. Developing theories, models, and methods (along the lines suggested by Zaller, 1992, 1996) that can capture this complex, individual-level relationship, while also aggregating these individual-level responses in ways that can identify and explain larger trends, seems crucial if we are to assess systematically the role of media in democratic engagement.

I would extend this observation to include the impact of entertainment media. Although Putnam (1995, 2000) makes a compelling case for the negative impact of entertainment television (and, less fully, the Internet) on civic and political engagement, one need only cursorily consider the wide range of programs, Web sites, and content this includes to realize that, as with public affairs media, entertainment media is likely to have a much more varied and complex impact than this. Without question, spending excessive time "watching" or "reading" *anything* necessarily means less time for interacting with others and acting in the social and political world. Beyond this, however, there is no reason to think that certain kinds of entertainment media cannot be as effective as, or more effective than, public affairs media in educating or motivating citizens to act. Watching less television or spending less time on-line may in fact be part of the solution to declining democratic engagement, but equally important is *what* programs are watched or what Web sites are visited. If forced to choose, I think a strong case could be made that citizens would be better off watching *Politically Incorrect*, *The West Wing*, or *The Simpsons* than *Hardball*, *The Capital Gang*, or most nights of their local news broadcast. The key is not whether a show is produced by the news or entertainment division of a television station or network, but whether the content and form of the media message are likely to enhance or detract from the motivations, abilities, and opportunities necessary for democratic engagement (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2003).

How Can We Distinguish Between "What Is" and "What Is Possible"?

The ultimate value of theories and research on media and politics is in their ability not only to understand this relationship as it currently exists, but also to point the

way to how this relationship might be improved. Nowhere is this truer than for the issue of democratic engagement, which has at its roots the notion of agency. Although it is crucial that we maintain our objectivity and distance from the subjects we study, it is also crucial that we do not confuse findings that are dependent on the systemic and individual contexts in which they occur with broader, deterministic conclusions about the inherent value of certain mediums or genres.

Without question we need to know much more about the complex ways in which the media as it currently exists affect norms and values, beliefs and attitudes, opinions and actions. And it may well be that this undertaking will suggest that certain media or genres are superior to others. But before we reach such conclusions we also need to know much more about the democratic *potential* that may be locked within different media. Local television news as it currently exists may be a civic wasteland, but *if* it adopted the form and substance advocated by the civic journalism movement, might it not increase citizen engagement? Most entertainment media may do little more than take time away from more politically relevant activities, but might there not be ways (as in the past) to combine culture and politics to create a more relevant, engaging, and motivating public sphere? The Internet as currently used may be better at creating consumers than citizens, but might it not, in conjunction with more traditional forms of engagement, provide ways create a new, richer sense of connectedness and community?

A promising avenue for exploring this potential is the greater use of "natural experiments" in our research. Throughout the country there are numerous, ongoing efforts to harness and enhance the democratic potential of the media. Led by nonprofit organizations and largely funded by private foundations, these local, regional, and sometimes national efforts are often based implicitly or explicitly on existing theory and research. They include efforts to improve the quality of public affairs broadcasting and print media, news coverage of campaigns, political advertising, and political Web sites. They also include efforts to use a variety of media interventions to increase citizens' knowledge about and participation in civic and political life.

These natural experiments provide a tremendous opportunity to understand better both the current relationship between media and democratic engagement and the potential for improving this state of affairs. By combining many of the strengths of pure experimental design (for example, the ability to disentangle hypothesized effects through the isolation and manipulation of particular "treatments" and, in certain cases, the ability to assign people randomly to different treatment conditions) with those of survey and field studies (most notably, greater validity and generalizability), research based on such natural experiments could provide insights that would simultaneously enhance the theory and practice of democratic politics.[13]

Regardless of the particular merits and shortcomings of natural experiments, the larger point on which I would like to end this chapter remains—as a field we must, as the political theorist Benjamin Barber (1993, pp. 71–72) reminds us, see democracy as "an end to be sought" and use our research and data to understand where and why we fall short and how this might be improved.

[13]The use of natural experiments need not be limited to quantitative research and offers equal promise for more in-depth qualitative and/or anthropological approaches.

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