A Virtuous Circle

Is the process of political communications by the news media and by parties responsible for civic malaise? A Virtuous Circle sets out to challenge this conventional wisdom. Based on a comparison of the role of the news media and parties in postindustrial societies, focusing in particular on western Europe and the United States, this study argues that rather than mistakenly 'blaming the messenger', we need to understand and confront more deep-rooted flaws in representative democracy.

The book outlines appropriate standards for evaluating the performance of the news media and compares changes in the news media, including the rise of the Internet and the development of postmodern election campaigns. Norris shows that although negative news can erode public support for specific policy issues, in general there is a consistently positive relationship between attention to the news media and political knowledge, trust, and participation. The theory of a 'virtuous circle' is proposed to account for the main findings.

For more information on the book, please visit the author's website at www.pippanorris.com.

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COMMUNICATION, SOCIETY, AND POLITICS

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Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. Communication, Society, and Politics probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.
A Virtuous Circle

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS IN POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

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Preface

When I began writing this book I had an agnostic position towards popular theories of media malaise. The belief that political communications have contributed towards civic disengagement has become so prevalent among journalists and scholars, a mantra of pessimism repeated by media commentators, that the challenge for this book seemed to be to say anything new about this phenomenon. Whether the problem du jour was school shootings, world poverty, or cynicism about Congress, one branch or other of the media was, apparently, to blame. Journalists happily self-flagellated. Politicians contributed. After all, why not blame the media when, given a free press, we can do so little about it? A perfect do-nothing strategy. Yet as more and more evidence accumulated that proved contrary to prevailing expectations, I became increasingly skeptical and doubtful about the conventional wisdom. The literature, though plentiful in recent years, often slides too easily from discussing real changes in the news industry (which have occurred) to the assumed effects of these changes on public opinion (which have not). In searching for evidence to support or refute the thesis, several avenues that initially seemed promising eventually proved false leads. As with any study relying upon existing data, the available evidence was often limited. No single indicator presented in this book can be regarded as definitive. But by the end of the chase, the sheer weight of evidence that has accumulated over successive chapters, using a variety of surveys, in different years and in different countries, including the United States, has led to skepticism about the standard view of the impact of political communications on the public. It's just plain wrong.

Journalism is often venerated as a beacon of light that helps to sustain democracy, a force for freedom lying between venal government and
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the citizens, a protector of the innocent. Then we are shocked, shocked, to discover that in fact hacks and scribblers have to turn a penny by selling their wares. A more realistic view of the news industry, and more limited claims about the responsibility of journalism for all the sins of the world, would do us all good.

This book would not have been possible without the encouragement and stimulation provided by colleagues at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. In particular, Marvin Kalb, Director of the Shorenstein Center during the period of writing, deserves thanks for his continuous encouragement and support. Many colleagues helped by providing feedback and criticisms of earlier drafts. Lance Bennett, Stephen Earl Bennett, Jay Blumler, Derek Bok, Tami Buhr, Timothy Cook, Ivor Crewe, Wolfgang Donsbach, Mark Franklin, Doris Graber, Anna Greenberg, Christina Holtz-Bacha, Edie Holway, Marion Just, Anthony Mughan, Ken Newton, Nancy Palmer, Richard Parker, Tom Patterson, Susan Pharr, Robert Putnam, Fred Schauer, and Holli Semetko all deserve special mention in this regard, for listening to my thoughts and reading my arguments at different stages as the book progressed.

The ideas presented in this study were developed over many years in conjunction with a series of projects. Any book using large-scale data sets inevitably accumulates many heavy debts. I am most grateful to the DG X.A2 Public Opinion section at the European Commission, and in particular to Anna Melich and Agnes Hubert, for access to the content analysis in Monitoring Euromedia and for the invaluable series of Eurobarometer surveys. The Central Archive at the University of Köln, the ICPSR at the University of Michigan, and the Data Archive at Harvard University helped obtain the myriad data sets. Work on the 1994 Eurobarometer 41.1 was conducted in conjunction with Mark Franklin, Hermann Schmitt, Jacques Thomassen, Richard Katz, Bernhard Wessels, Michael Marsh, and others who formed part of the 1994 European Election Study. I am also indebted to Andy Kohut at the Pew Center for the People and the Press for access to surveys of online users in 1995, 1996, and 1998.

Some of the core ideas in this book originated from an earlier study of the role of the news media in the context of the 1997 British election, developed with John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell, and Holli Semetko. The 1997 British election campaign panel study (BES) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.
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More details about this project and related publications, classes, and data sets are all available on the Web at www.pippanorris.com.

Lastly, I would like to thank the reviewers for their excellent suggestions and Alex Holzman, Lew Bateman, Lance Bennett, and Robert Entman, the editors who have worked with me on this volume.

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