

## Understanding Political Communications

Although there is an abundance of heated rhetoric and conjecture, and everyone who watches television seems to have a view about the issue, it has been surprisingly difficult to find systematic evidence that proves the media malaise hypothesis. There is a broad consensus that the process of political communication has changed, but it remains questionable whether this has had a major impact on the contents of election news, still less influenced public attitudes and behavior. Unfortunately, discussions of the perceived problems of the news media often fail to distinguish between criticisms based on unsystematic observations and those based on more solid ground. Many recent books on the news media, in discussing phenomena such as trends towards 'soft' or 'infotainment' news, have simply assumed that the content of news coverage must influence the public, in a simple 'hypodermic-syringe model', with no prior evidence. But this model has been largely abandoned in communications research as we have come to realize that the public actively react to, deconstruct, and interpret what they watch and read, rather than simply absorbing messages like passive sponges.<sup>1</sup> The attempt to understand the political influence of the news media raises difficult theoretical and methodological challenges. Previous studies exploring whether political coverage in the news media contributes towards civic malaise have generally employed trend analysis, experimental designs, or cross-sectional surveys, and each of those methods has certain advantages and disadvantages.

### TREND ANALYSIS: DIFFUSE THEORIES OF MEDIA MALAISE

One approach has been to compare trends in the content of news coverage with trends in public opinion. Popular accounts often assume

a causal connection if negative news about government has grown in recent years along with public cynicism about political institutions. Content analysis provides a systematic description of the media landscape, and monthly polls monitor the pulse of public opinion.<sup>2</sup> The media are then believed to exert a diffuse, long-term, and cumulative influence on the political culture. It is the steady repetition of messages over and over again, not individual exposure, that is thought to entrench mainstream orientations in most viewers. Robinson and Sheehan first suggested the linkage between declining trust in American government institutions and the rise of television news.<sup>3</sup> As encapsulated by Austin Ranney: 'It is hard not to put two facts side by side: one is the fact that the age of television began in the 1950s and reached its present dominance by the mid-1960s; the other is the fact that the rise in public cynicism has been continuous through the same period. . . . These two facts do not prove that television portrayal of politics explains all the decline in confidence, but it is not unreasonable . . . to conclude that television has made a major contribution to that decline.'<sup>4</sup> Similar studies in Germany, Sweden, and Japan have shown that increased coverage of scandals and negative news has accompanied declining confidence in political leaders.<sup>5</sup>

That approach was exemplified in an influential study in which Thomas Patterson argued that there had been a shift in the culture and values of American television journalism in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era that had gradually infected the rest of the news media.<sup>6</sup> For evidence, that study examined the evaluative tone of coverage of American presidential elections in *Time* and *Newsweek* since the 1960s, and it found increasing negativity in election news: The proportion of 'bad news' in news magazines accounted for about one-quarter of campaign coverage in 1960. That grew to about 40% in presidential elections from 1964 to 1976, and then rose to about 50–60% in elections from 1980 to 1992. The data followed a pattern of stepped plateaus, rather than a steady linear rise. Although we lack direct evidence monitoring the culture of journalism in this period, Patterson argued that Vietnam and Watergate were seminal events that transformed American news, as the press turned against politicians.

While intuitively plausible, time-series analysis faces two main challenges before it can be accepted as fully convincing. First, can we assume that there has been a substantial change in the content of news over time, with the growth of 'negative news' or 'infotainment'? The evidence available from the United States is limited, and Patterson's data from

those sources may be unrepresentative of the broad range of news media.<sup>7</sup> Dalton, Beck, and Huckfeldt's analysis of campaign coverage in a nationwide sample from the U.S. press in the 1992 elections found that the contents were fairly neutral, with local papers presenting their readers with multiple messages about each party and candidate, or a diverse set of evaluative viewpoints, rather than predominantly negative coverage.<sup>8</sup> Systematic content analysis that could compare long-term trends in typical news coverage across many countries is lacking, and, as discussed in the next chapter, the existing evidence from Britain and Germany challenges the common assumption of growing tabloidization in these countries.<sup>9</sup> The declinism thesis may be falling into the trap of assuming a 'golden age' of journalism that in fact, proves mythical. 'Tabloidization' refers simultaneously, and thereby ambiguously, both to news formats and to subjects. As discussed in detail in the next two chapters, one possible interpretation of developments in recent decades is that perhaps the news may have diversified into both more popular and more serious formats, rather than simply having moved down-market in terms of the types of stories covered.

Even if we accept the presumed changes in the content of news, with the growth of tabloid or negative news in the United States and Europe, as a working assumption, we still face a large inferential leap before we can establish the impact of news coverage on public opinion. The evidence in the macro-level studies is open to many alternative interpretations.

Any parallel trends over time may in fact be independent. There may be no systematic linkage between the type of coverage and the public's response. Studies have found that even when political news on American networks has used a conflict frame, for example in covering the debate between the president and Congress over the issue of gays in the military, the public tended to discount such framing, instead interpreting the story in terms of the underlying events or the merits of particular policy proposals.<sup>10</sup> Even if news proves negative or conflictual, therefore, content analysis may provide a misleading picture of how the public respond and construct their understandings from the messages they see.

Or the association may prove spurious, as the result of other causal factors: An increase in the incidence of government corruption, for example, might logically produce both more negative media coverage and greater public cynicism about politicians. In the cultural account,

it is particularly important that the timing of events in Vietnam and Watergate should relate systematically to changes over time in political coverage; otherwise, many factors could be said to have driven trends in the news in recent decades.<sup>11</sup> The increased focus on strategy in American campaign news during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, might plausibly be explained by actual changes in electioneering, such as the rising importance of primaries, the lengthening of the campaign season, the declining salience of many of the hot-button issues of the 1960s and the accompanying generational and cultural conflict, and above all the growth of professional political marketing. Campaign news may have changed to reflect the fact that election strategy has become more important, and substantive policy issues have become less important, in determining election outcomes.

Equally plausibly, the direction of causality might be reversed: If political news seems more cynical, that might be the result rather than the cause of cynicism in the wider political culture. As Robinson and Sheehan note, television journalists are part of a broader set of norms and values in society:<sup>12</sup> ‘To some degree the entire process must be circular, with the networks affecting the public and the public affecting the networks in return.’ They argue that the media influences the public, because in several instances, such as civil rights, the networks have been ahead of the prevailing view.<sup>13</sup> But this argument fails to explain certain apparent major anomalies, situations in which the news media charged ahead like cavalry, but the poor bloody foot soldiers failed to follow. For example, media malaise theories need to account for how the endless onslaught of ‘scandal’ coverage in the news frenzy that afflicted the second term of the Clinton presidency failed to damage his long-term public popularity, and indeed probably boosted it. If this prolonged saturation coverage did not erode support for the president, then it seems implausible to expect that more transient ‘scandals’ would have major impacts on public opinion. As John Zaller suggests, we need to understand the conditionality of media effects, both when coverage of scandal matters for public opinion and when it does not.<sup>14</sup> As Lance Bennett concluded, after a lengthy critique of the time-series data presented by Putnam, a circular process may be at work: ‘The well documented political uses and abuses of television are as much a response to, as primary causes of, societal breakdown, individual isolation, and generalized discontent with politics.’<sup>15</sup>

Given these potential problems, the best that can be said about trend analysis is that it generates interesting hypotheses that deserve further

examination, but essentially the case remains unproven, more faith than fact.

### EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Another approach is through experiments that monitor the process of short-term individual-level opinion changes in response to specific media messages. Such experiments take the form of 'if X, then Y', and, in principle, if people are randomly allocated to groups, and the analysis compares differences between groups, the prior backgrounds, attitudes, and values of subjects should not influence the results.<sup>16</sup> The logic of such experiments is disarmingly simple: If some are shown negative news, for example news highlighting political scandals, government waste, or policy failures, while others watch clips featuring positive news, how do both groups react? This method potentially should provide some of the most convincing and rigorous evidence, evidence that might settle the media malaise debate.

Such experiments have long been used to examine the media malaise perspective. In the mid-1970s, Michael Robinson showed 212 subjects a single controversial documentary, *The Selling of the Pentagon*, and he found differences in internal political efficacy after exposure to the program.<sup>17</sup> Cappella and Jamieson conducted perhaps the most thorough experimental work on political cynicism. Their study argues that strategic coverage of policy debates has come to predominate; winning and losing become the central concerns; the language of wars, games, and competition predominates; there is discussion of performers, critics, and voters; there is much emphasis on the performances and styles of candidates; and great weight is given to polls and their latest rankings in evaluating candidates. Of course, there is little that is new in all this; after all, elections are primarily about who wins and forms the government, not simply a civics debate to educate the public. But their study argues that over the years this framing has come to predominate in campaign coverage.<sup>18</sup>

To test for the effects of such developments, Cappella and Jamieson conducted experiments involving 350 subjects in six media markets. One group was exposed to news in the print and broadcast media framed strategically, where winning or losing was the predominant way of characterizing the motivations of the candidates. Another group was shown substantive news about health care framed in terms of issues, where the stories concerned problems facing society and proposed solu-

tions. The study found that those who saw the strategic frame were more likely to have cynical responses, meaning that they saw self-interest as the primary motivation of politicians: 'A story can be framed in terms of the advantages and disadvantages for the candidate's chances of election or in terms of the advantages and disadvantages for the constituency. Mistrust of politicians and their campaigns arises when strategy framing dominates.'<sup>19</sup> The study concluded that American network news was guilty of sensationalizing and oversimplifying complex policy issues like health care, emphasizing the political game over substantive debate, contributing towards a 'spiral of cynicism' among the public.

Such experiments certainly come closer than many other methods to nailing down causal effects in a rigorous manner, but they face the common problem of how far one can generalize from experimental results to the real world. Experiments may involve a large number of participants who are allocated to stimulus and control groups wholly at random. Yet the findings can be strongly influenced by the particular methodology used, including the stimulus messages that are presented, the means used to measure political attitudes like 'cynicism', and other artifactual elements in the design. For example, in the Cappella and Jamieson study, nonstandard measures of political cynicism limited replicability with other research, and the operationalization of these items may also have been subject to problems of circularity.

The problem of excessive coverage of strategy represents one dimension of the media malaise case. Another important aspect concerns the impact of 'negative' news, which can be regarded as critical or damaging from the perspective of one particular actor. In an influential study, Ansolabehere and Iyengar demonstrated that watching negative or 'attack' television advertising discouraged voter turnout and decreased political efficacy in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Yet parallel studies in Britain came to a different conclusion. Experiments on the impact of negative and positive television news, conducted in the 1997 British general election campaign among 1,125 subjects, found that negative news failed to damage, while positive news served to boost, levels of party support.<sup>21</sup> As will be discussed further in the concluding chapter, that pattern proved significant even after the use of a wide range of controls. The contrasting findings from the experimental studies of the effects of negative television news in Britain, and Ansolabehere and Iyengar's study of negative TV ads in the United States, may be attributable to any of three reasons: variations in the specific conditions under which they

were conducted (such as their operationalization and measurements of negativity and party support); the repetitive 30-second TV ads and the longer TV news stories may have influenced viewers in different ways; people may have reacted differently in the U.S. and British media, electoral, and political contexts. Experimental studies may be able to provide precise findings that can address the issue of causality in media effects, but it can be difficult to generalize from the necessarily artificial conditions of an experiment to the real world.

#### SURVEYS: SPECIFIC THEORIES OF MEDIA MALAISE

Perhaps the most common approach has been to look for individual-level evidence from cross-sectional national surveys. Behavioral research has focused on understanding the conditions of media exposure believed to produce certain individual-level effects, including variations in source, content, channel, receiver, and destination. Several studies have compared the attitudes and behaviours of regular users of different types of media, such as newspapers and television news, or viewers of television debates and campaign ads.

This approach was exemplified by Michael Robinson, who used American NES survey data from the sixties to show that those who relied on television news had lower political efficacy, greater social distrust and cynicism, and weaker party loyalties than those who relied on newspapers, radio, and magazines for their political news.<sup>22</sup> Experimental data from 212 subjects were used to confirm the direction of causality. For Robinson, the media malaise story runs as follows: In the 1950s and 1960s television news developed a mass audience, reaching an 'inadvertent audience' who watched the news although they were otherwise inattentive to political information. The inadvertent audience is theorized to be particularly vulnerable to the messages in what they watch and prone to believe in the credibility of the networks. American television journalism is said to have certain characteristics, namely, a tendency to present interpretive, negativist, and anti-institutional news. The result is that viewers, particularly those of the inattentive audience who lack other forms of political information, respond to such content by growing more cynical, frustrated, and despairing about public affairs and more disenchanted with social and political institutions. The main evidence that Robinson presented, in addition to the experimental findings already mentioned, were simple cross-tabulations of the 1968 NES data on internal political efficacy scores, subdivided into those relying

solely on TV for information, those relying mainly on TV, and those relying on some other news medium. Robinson concluded that those who relied solely on TV had less confidence that they could have an effect in the political system: 'Those who rely upon television in following politics are more confused and more cynical than those who do not. And those who rely totally upon television are the most confused and cynical of all.'<sup>23</sup>

Robinson theorized that five factors are involved in the explanation of those relationships: the size of the television news audience; public perceptions of the credibility of the networks; the interpretive character of television news; the emphasis on conflict and violence; and the anti-institutional theme in network news. In later work, he suggested that network television news was strongly influenced by the prestige press, notably the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, with greater focus on 'inside-the-beltway' strategic analysis, rather than on the traditional coverage of politics by the regional press and wire services.<sup>24</sup> In the post-Watergate era, after the standard NES indicators of trust in American politicians experienced free-fall, the thesis that television news was responsible for civic malaise seemed plausible to many. Others broadened the critique: An early study by Miller and associates linked the content of newspapers, particularly critical political coverage, with feelings of political disaffection experienced by their readers.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Robert Putnam analyzed American survey data and reported that the heaviest users of television entertainment were least socially trusting and least willing to join community groups.<sup>26</sup> Putnam related the dramatic transformations in our leisure patterns associated with the rise of TV to broader trends in civic engagement: As television began to saturate American homes in the 1950s, that produced a post-civic generation. This could help to explain the new cohort patterns of political mobilization and why generational cohorts raised in this new cultural environment are less likely than their parents to trust others, to join voluntary associations, and to vote. It has been shown that social participation, such as belonging to clubs, attending church, or working on community projects, can be strongly and consistently predicted by TV use, and such participation is down among those who say that they habitually depend upon television as their primary form of entertainment. In short: 'More television-watching means virtually less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement.'<sup>27</sup> The reasons for that pattern are not entirely clear, though Putnam suggests



that time spent on television may displace other recreational activities and community involvement outside the home, and watching prime-time entertainment television may also foster passivity.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the reason, television entertainment (which does account for the vast bulk of TV watching) although not TV news, is thereby indicted for the dramatic erosion of civic engagement and social capital in America.

Analysts of cross-sectional surveys face four major challenges in interpreting the available evidence. The most important is that cross-sectional surveys carried out at only one point in time make it difficult to resolve the classic chicken-and-egg direction of causality. Is there a selection bias? Does political interest cause us to turn on *Meet the Press* or *Nightline*? Or is there a media effect? Does watching these programs make us more politically interested? In the same way, does watching television sitcoms and prime-time dramas produce less social trust and less community involvement? Or do people who don't trust others and are not engaged in their community simply prefer, as a matter of personal choice, to stay home and watch TV? We cannot tell from cross-sectional survey data. The uses-and-gratifications approach argues that we choose to watch programs that are most in tune with our prior predispositions and tastes.<sup>29</sup> In this view, our exposure to the new media may tend to reinforce our political views (which is still an important effect) rather than change our political attitudes.

Second, people often generalize about 'newspaper readers', 'television viewers', or even 'Internet users' as though we all had a single experience of these media. In practice, with the modern proliferation of television channels, my TV experience (*Nightline*, C-SPAN, and *ER*) probably is far removed from your TV experience (*Monday Night Football*, MTV, and *Oprah*). Ideally, we need to compare the effects of variance in the media messages so that we can see whether people who consistently use one distinctive source (such as crime-focused local TV news) differ from those who use others (such as right-wing talk radio). Unfortunately, in practice it is often difficult to disentangle news sources through survey research: Our measures of media habits are often diffuse and imprecise. (How many hours per day do I usually watch the news?) Often there is little variation in the content of mainstream sources like television news on different channels, so we cannot easily contrast the effects of watching ABC or NBC. We usually have multiple and overlapping uses of different media. For example, tabloid readers often are also fans of popular TV; broadsheet readers often listen to current-affairs programs; people who watch TV news often are newspaper

readers; and so on. One way to monitor media use is to ask the standard question long employed in American polls: Where do you get most of your news – from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking to people, or where? But that question is poorly designed, for it is akin to asking electors what influenced their votes, rather than analyzing this process indirectly. That question seeks a simple trade-off answer, but given our multiple uses, most of us are unable to provide a sensible answer. I get most of my news from Internet newspapers and online TV bulletins, from National Public Radio (NPR) and the BBC World Service, and, depending upon the topic, from occasional programs like *Nightline* and *Meet the Press*. What reply should I give? The alternative is to ask about habitual reliance on a series of different sources, such as how many days per week one usually listens to the radio, or watches the TV evening news, or reads a paper. Such self-reports of media exposure are also unsatisfactory, because they take no account of one's degree of attention, but they provide a more reliable indicator than a simple trade-off question. Our case can be strengthened if we can establish a significant and consistently positive relationship between this weak measure of media use and the indicators of civic engagement.

Moreover, there is no consensus in the literature, for other studies based on survey analysis have challenged the media malaise claims. Earlier studies strongly indicated that heavy use of television was associated with certain indicators of political apathy, as Putnam suggested, both in America and in other postindustrial societies.<sup>30</sup> But that was not a problem of television *news per se*: People who often watched TV news and current-affairs programs were among those most involved in a wide range of civic activities, such as voting, campaigning, and organizational membership.<sup>31</sup> Recently, Stephen Bennett has also challenged the theory of the pernicious effects of American TV news, concluding that media-exposure measures are not significant predictors of trust in government.<sup>32</sup> In series of studies involving several countries it has been found that regular viewers of television news and readers of broadsheet papers have higher-than-average levels of political information, interest, and engagement.<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, individual-level survey analysis is concerned with monitoring the specific influence of media malaise on particular groups of news media users. But that does not address the diffuse version of the media malaise thesis. If the whole country has been affected by similar trends, for example if American journalists are collectively overtaken by

Monica madness, then it becomes almost impossible to disentangle the effects of different media sources on the public. Like the air we breathe, if daily news about political scandals or government failures is all around us, from the *New York Times* to the *New York Post*, from the *Drudge Report* to *Larry King Live*, we cannot tell if the public is cynical because of this endless diet from the media or whether journalists are simply feeding the voracious public appetite for such headline news, or both. Only stringent comparative designs for studies across countries can allow us to explore cross-cultural differences.

### COMPARATIVE STUDIES

This leads to the conclusion that the impact of the news media ideally needs to be studied using a triangulated research design within a cross-national setting. As Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren argue, comparative research can allow us to overcome national and time-bound limitations on the generalizability of our theories, assumptions, and propositions.<sup>34</sup> At present, the bulk of the existing research has been conducted within the United States, and it remains unclear to what extent the patterns found in these studies are evident in other countries.<sup>35</sup> As discussed in Chapter 13, many features of the news environment in the United States may be products of 'American exceptionalism'. Despite the formidable problems facing comparative research, and the serious limitations of data, such a strategy is worthwhile because it can begin to counteract both 'naïve universalism' (assuming everywhere is the same as us) and 'unwitting parochialism' (assuming everywhere is different to us).<sup>36</sup>

### COMPARING POSTINDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES

The comparative framework adopted for this book focuses on post-industrial societies, defined as the twenty-nine member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. This comparison includes most of the major developed economies and established democracies in the world, including all G7 and European Union (EU) states. The advantage of this design is that it allows us to compare a wide range of advanced industrialized societies and democratic states that are reasonably similar in terms of their levels of economic, social, and political development. This follows the classic logic of the 'most-similar-system' design that assumes that the factors common to

relatively homogeneous societies are irrelevant to explaining their differences.<sup>37</sup> The common levels of literacy, education, and affluence in postindustrial societies mean that we can discount these factors in searching for explanations for civic participation. At the same time, there remain significant contrasts in the news environments, in the political systems, and in the dependent variables concerning levels of political knowledge, interest, and civic engagement among citizens in these states. At the broadest level, we are seeking to move from an analysis of nations towards an analysis of types of political communication systems. The analysis of newspaper-centric and 'television-centric' media systems presented in Chapter 4 is one example of this approach.<sup>38</sup>

The basic economic and social indicators for the countries in this comparison are summarized in Table 3.1. The OECD includes more than a billion people in large and small states, ranging from the United States, Japan, Mexico, and Germany at one end of the population spectrum down to Luxembourg and Iceland at the other. Many of the most affluent societies in the world, characterized by a GDP per capita of over \$30,000, are members of the OECD, such as Switzerland, Japan, the United States, and the Scandinavian states, although at the lower level of economic development the OECD has countries with GDP per capita below \$10,000, including member states in southern, central, and eastern Europe, as well as Mexico.<sup>39</sup> All these post-industrial economies are overwhelmingly based on the service sector, which accounts for two-thirds of civilian employment and roughly the same proportion of contribution to GDP. Just over one-quarter of jobs in the OECD states remain in manufacturing industries, and less than one-tenth are in agriculture. The only countries with more than one-fifth of the work force in agriculture are Greece, Mexico, Poland, and Turkey. The size of the public sector varies substantially between countries, whether measured by government expenditure as a percentage of GDP or by the size of public sector employment. The largest public sectors are found in the countries of Scandinavia and northern Europe, especially in small welfare states with a strong social-democratic tradition, such as Sweden and The Netherlands. In contrast, the levels of public sector spending are far lower in Japan and South Korea. Lastly, the indicators show that OECD societies are among the most literate and best educated in the world, with, on average, over one-fifth of their working-age populations attaining some higher education. Thus comparisons among OECD member states should allow us to detect any significant differences in their news environments, for example between countries with

Table 3.1. *Social and economic indicators, OECD countries, mid-1990s*

Country	Area (square miles)	Pop. (1000's) 1996	GDP per capita 1996 (\$)	Service Sector	Size of Public Sector		Educational Indicators	
				Contribution to GDP % Services 1996	General Government Expenditure % of GDP Mid-1990s	Government Employment % of Total Employment 1996	% Pop. with at Least Upper- Secondary Educ (25-64-year- olds) 1996	% Pop. with at Least Higher Educ (25-64- year-olds) 1996
Australia	7687	18,289	21,375	69.5	35.6	16.0	52.8	24.3
Austria	84	8,060	28,384	67.9	48.6	22.8	69.5	7.9
Belgium	31	10,127	25,409	70.2	51.7	19.0	53.5	24.6
Canada	9976	29,964	19,330	72.1	45.8	19.6	75.2	46.9
Czech Rep	79	10,316	5,445	58.4	40.5		83.4	
Denmark	43	5,262	33,230	72.1	59.6	30.7	62.0	20.4
Finland	338	5,125	24,420	64.9	55.9	25.2	65.4	20.5
France	549	58,380	26,323	71.7	51.6	24.9	68.4	18.6
Germany	357	81,877	28,738	68.4	46.6	15.4	83.7	22.6
Greece	132	10,465	11,684	67.9	52.1		42.5	17.4
Hungary	93	10,195						
Iceland	103	270	27,076	68.5	35.1	19.9		
Ireland	70	3,621	19,525	54.7	36.9	13.4	47.2	19.9
Italy	301	57,473	21,127	65.5	49.5	16.1	34.9	
Japan	378	125,864	36,509	60.0	28.5	6.0		
Korea, S.	98	45,545	10,644	50.9	15.7		59.8	
Luxembourg	3	418	40,791	74.9	45.0	12.0	29.3	
Mexico	1973	96,582	3,411	69.5				
Netherlands	41	15,494	25,511	69.8	50.0	11.9	61.2	
NZ	269	3,640	18,093	66.6		22.1	59.1	25.3
Norway	324	4,370	36,020	65.5	45.8	30.8	81.2	28.6
Poland	313	38,618					73.7	13.1
Portugal	92	9,935	10,425	62.9	42.5	15.3	20.1	11.0
Spain	505	39,270	14,894	64.8	41.2	15.7	28.0	16.1
Sweden	450	8,901	28,283	70.5	63.8	31.2	74.7	28.3
Switzerland	41	7,085	41,411	63.5	47.7	14.0	82.2	21.1
Turkey	781	62,695	2,894	52.5			23.0	
UK	245	58,782	19,621	70.8	42.3	14.1	75.9	21.5
US	9373	265,557	27,821	71.9	34.3	13.4	85.8	33.3

Source: OECD.

predominantly commercial or public sector television, or between those with high and low levels of newspaper circulation, controlling for reasonably common levels of social and economic development.

The basic features of the political systems are listed in Table 3.2. The OECD contains most of the world's major established democracies, as well as three newer democracies that have joined the organization more recently: Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The only exceptions to this generalization are Mexico and Turkey, which can best be classified as semi-democracies. In Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has held power at the federal level since 1929, although under increasing electoral challenge in recent years, and it has certain authoritarian characteristics. Turkey currently lacks important political rights and civil liberties and has had a mixed and unstable record of democratic development.<sup>40</sup> The Gastil index, provided by Freedom House every year since 1973, has monitored worldwide levels of political rights and civil liberties on two scales, ranging from 1 (most free) to 7 (least free). By the mid-1990s, most of the nations in our comparison fell into the 'free' column, with the exceptions of Mexico and Turkey, which were classified as 'partly free'.

As shown in Table 3.2, the countries compared in this book, though all democracies, feature a wide range of different types of political institutions. The electoral system is one of the most important aspects of any constitution, and the OECD countries range from proportional representation using national or regional party lists, as in The Netherlands and Sweden, through mixed systems, such as those in Germany and Italy, to plurality and majoritarian systems, like the first-past-the-post systems in the United Kingdom and the United States. Their party systems also vary substantially, and these are classified on the effective number of parliamentary parties elected to the lower house (ENPP) in the early and middle 1990s. This allows us to distinguish among predominantly one-party systems (characteristic of Mexico and Japan), two-party or two-and-a-half-party systems (found in Australia and the United States), the moderate multiparty pluralism (with between 2.5 and 4.5 ENPP) common in many European systems, and fragmented multiparty pluralism (with ENPP greater than 4.6).<sup>41</sup> The remaining columns in Table 3.2 indicate the opportunities for electoral participation within each system, including popular contests for the upper house in bicameral legislatures, direct votes for the presidency, and the frequency of national referendums. The comparison of OECD nations also reveals important differences in the news environments

Table 3.2. *Political systems, OECD countries, mid-1990s*

Country	Electoral System for Lower House 1996	Number of Members Lower House 1996	Number of Effective Parliamentary Parties 1991-95	Type of Party System 1991-95	Popular Election for Upper House 1996	Popular Election for President 1996	National Referendums N. 1945-95	Political Rights Index 1997	Civil Liberties Index 1997	Type of Democracy 1997
Australia	AV	148	2.42	Two party	Yes	No	23	1	1	Free
Austria	PR	183	3.40	Moderate pluralism	No	Majority-runoff	1	1	1	Free
Belgium	PR	150	7.95	Fragmented pluralism	Indirect	No	1	1	2	Free
Canada	Plurality	295	2.35	Two party	No	No	1	1	1	Free
Czech Rep	PR	200	4.85	Fragmented pluralism	Yes	No	1	1	2	Free
Denmark	PR	179	4.70	Fragmented pluralism	Unicameral	No	13	1	1	Free
Finland	PR	200	4.88	Fragmented pluralism	Unicameral	Majority-runoff	1	1	1	Free
France	Majority-runoff	577	2.96	Moderate pluralism	Indirect	Majority-runoff	12	1	2	Free
Germany	Mixed	656	2.78	Moderate pluralism	No	No	0	1	2	Free
Greece	PR	300	2.17	Two party	Unicameral	No	4	1	3	Free
Hungary	Mixed	386	2.89	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	No	5	1	2	Free
Iceland	PR									Free
Ireland	STV	166	3.48	Moderate pluralism	Mixed	AV	20	1	1	Free
Italy	Mixed	630	7.45	Fragmented pluralism	Yes	No	29	1	2	Free
Japan	Mixed	500	3.95	Moderate pluralism	Yes	No		1	2	Free
Korea, S.	Plurality	299	2.70	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	Plurality	6	2	2	Free
Luxembourg	PR									Free
Mexico	Mixed	500	2.28	One party predominant	Yes	Plurality	0	4	3	Partly free
Netherlands	PR	150	5.38	Fragmented pluralism	No	No		1	1	Free
NZ	Mixed	120	2.16	Two party	Unicameral	No	10	1	1	Free
Norway	PR	165	4.15	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	No	1	1	1	Free
Poland	PR	460	3.85	Moderate pluralism	Yes	Majority-runoff	5	1	2	Free
Portugal	PR	230	2.55	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	Majority-runoff		1	1	Free
Spain	PR	350	2.67	Moderate pluralism	Yes	No	4	1	2	Free
Sweden	PR	349	3.51	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	No	3	1	1	Free
Switzerland	PR	200	5.60	Polarized pluralism	Yes	No	275	1	1	Free
Turkey	PR	550	4.40	Moderate pluralism	Unicameral	No	4	4	5	Partly free
UK	Plurality	659	2.26	Two party	No	No	1	1	2	Free
US	Plurality	435	2.00	Two party	Yes	college/plurality	0	1	1	Free

Sources: Political rights, civil liberties, and type of democracy: *Freedom Review*, 'Index of Freedom', January 1998, 28(1). Electoral system: Lawrence LeDuc, Richard Niemi, and Pippa Norris. 1996. *Comparing Democracies*. London: Sage. Plurality systems, first past the post; AV, alternative vote; STV, single transferable vote; PR, party list; mixed, combination of plurality and party list systems. Number of effective parliamentary parties defined as those with at least 3% of seats in the lower house in the most recent election. Type of party system based on ENPP in the latest election available: 0-2.5, two party; 2.6-4.5, moderate pluralism; 4.6+, fragmented pluralism.

within this wide range of advanced postindustrialized economies and democratic states.

#### CONTENT ANALYSIS OF EU NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION

For aggregate trends, UNESCO is the most authoritative source for official statistics worldwide, such as data on the numbers of television sets and the circulation of newspapers. When we turn to content analysis of the news media, however, we focus on the available data from the fifteen member states of the European Union. The content analysis used in this book is derived from *Monitoring Euromedia*, a monthly report published by the European Commission from January 1995 to September 1997.<sup>42</sup> The company that carried out the research, Report International, used quantitative and qualitative methods to study coverage of the EU in newspapers in all 15 member states, and television in six member states, providing the most comprehensive cross-national content-analysis data set that is currently available. *Monitoring Euromedia* examined the contents of 189 newspapers every month, including all the national papers and the most important regional papers in all member states. The detailed list of sources is provided in the Technical Appendix at the end of the book. The survey included heavyweight broadsheets like *Le Monde*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, as well as large-circulation tabloids like *Der Bild* and the *Sun*. The weekly magazine press was also included, such as the *Economist* and *L'Express*, as well as dailies and Sunday papers. The average monthly report identified some 11,000–12,000 articles selected as containing information on the EU and its policies. The study then selected a random sample of 50% of the articles to be analyzed every month, or some 5,000–6,000 articles. Over the whole thirty-three-month period the study therefore analyzed the contents of just under 200,000 articles.

Each article was coded according to the source, country, date, and type of information contained (facts, opinions, or comment).

Articles were also assigned two or three different 'topic' codes, because most covered more than one subject. These categorized topics such as foreign policy, monetary policy, EU institutions, and enlargement of the EU.

A selection of stories was also coded on whether the topic was evaluated positively or negatively. This can be termed the 'directional' code



or tendency, which was scaled from 1 (very negative) through 2 (slightly negative), 3 (neutral), and 4 (slightly positive) to 5 (very positive). When the positive and negative evaluations balanced, stories were given a neutral code. Supervisors checked for inter-coder reliability and consistency of coding practices.

Most research on news balance has concentrated on the extent to which election news has been evenhanded in terms of partisanship or ideology, such as in the amount of coverage of different candidates or issues.<sup>43</sup> But elections are special cases: Practices in broadcasting often are strictly regulated by explicit fair-treatment regulations, as in allocating equal time to all sides in leadership debates and equal airtime for party broadcasts; in contrast, newspaper partisanship often increases during campaigns. While it is particularly important that campaign coverage be balanced, it is difficult to generalize from patterns found in this context to the daily editorial practices in newsrooms. Other comparative research has focused on how a particular dramatic event was reported in different countries, such as a positive or negative frame when reporting the Persian Gulf War or the downing of the Korean airliner over Russia. Only a couple of studies have attempted to compare typical daily news coverage across different countries.<sup>44</sup> This analysis of routine coverage of the EU over a thirty-three-month period provides a unique look at how the concept of directional balance operates in newspapers and television outside of election campaigns. By comparing the amount and balance of EU coverage in different member states over time, we can analyze whether or not the news media have provided an effective civic forum, as discussed in Chapter 2, encouraging public debate about the EU.

The monthly content analysis for television was based on daily news and current-affairs programs in six countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom). The study recorded the main news programs in each of those countries, with details as given in the Technical Appendix, analyzing 500–600 programs per month. During the course of the thirty-three-month period the study therefore analyzed some 16,000–20,000 programs in total. *Monitoring Euromedia* included the main news bulletins in each country, such as the 6 O'Clock News and 9 O'Clock News on BBC1 and *Newsnight* on BBC2 in Britain, the 6:30 A.M., 8:00 P.M., and midnight *Telegiornale* on RAI1 in Italy, and the *Desayunos de RN* and *Telediario* on TVE in Spain. The study examined the extent to which news stories in these programs contained information on the European Union and its policies, and

around 300 EU-related stories were coded every month, following the same process used for newspaper articles. *Monitoring Euromedia* also compared coverage of EU special events (notably the Turin Inter-Governmental Conference, IGC, and the Florence and Dublin councils) in all member states by 73 public and commercial television stations. These sources therefore allow us to compare the topics and directions of coverage of the EU by a wide range of newspaper and television outlets for each month. We can monitor how news coverage changed during these years in response to political developments, such as the 1996 Turin IGC, the process of moving towards Economic and Monetary Union, and events like the British beef crisis caused by 'mad-cow' disease. Using this data set, we can examine the amount and tone of the news about the EU, making comparisons between countries and over time. If coverage of EU policies and institutions became more negative in some member states than in others, for example with the European ban on British beef generating splash Euroskeptic headlines in the British tabloids, while generating more popular support for the EU in the French press, we can assess whether or not that led to changes in public opinion about the EU that differed across member states.

Inevitably, having to rely on secondary data limits our ability to examine certain important questions raised by theories of media malaise. Most importantly, we lack any direct evidence whether or not there has been a long-term change in the news culture since the 1970s, as some suggest, for example whether there has been an increase in negativity, or more frequent disdainful commentary by reporters, or a shift from a substantive to a strategic frame in news stories. Nor can we use this data set to examine many of the subtle nuances of news coverage of the EU, such as the extent to which the media present national political leaders, EU officials, and members of the European Parliament (MEPs) speaking at length, in context, rather than having journalists provide their interpretations of events, or the extent to which national frames, as one would expect, dominate stories about Europe. Such features of news stories may well play key roles in shaping the content of news coverage about Europe.

What we can do in this study, however, is examine certain long-term effects. If we assume that this typical content of news has changed over time and that this has contributed to public disenchantment with the political process, as media malaise theories hypothesize, then we should see changes in public opinion as monitored by the long-term series of surveys we examine. This study analyzes the American public using the

NES series from 1948 to 1998, and European public opinion using the Eurobarometer series from 1970 to 1999. Media malaise theories suggest two alternative hypotheses that we shall discuss in detail and test in subsequent chapters. One possibility is that if changes in news coverage have increasingly turned off all the public or a major segment of the public, then that should be evident in a shrinkage in the size of the news audience. In that scenario, many people disgusted with negative journalism would be expected to turn to other channels or to cease buying newspapers. Another possibility is that people may have continued to watch TV news and read newspapers, perhaps because of habitual leisure patterns, but over time those who have paid the most attention to the news have become increasingly cynical and disenchanted with government institutions and political leaders. If we assume that news did become more negative in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s, as many assert, and that this fuelled public disenchantment with politics, then we should see a changed relationship between attention to the American news media and a range of indicators of civic malaise.

A second potential problem is that coverage of European affairs, involving distant, complex, and low-salience issues, may differ in certain important respects from news about domestic politics. The latter may well provide more coverage of the drama, personalities, and salient issues more relevant and immediate to the lives of citizens. This is true, but in principle it can be argued that these conditions should maximize the potential impact of the news media's coverage. For domestic politics, the public has multiple sources of information. For example, people can evaluate the economic performance of the government on the basis of their own pocketbooks, the economic conditions of their friends, colleagues, and neighbours, and news reports of the trade gap, the rate of inflation, and the growth of jobs. Given all these sources, people may choose to discount some of the information provided by the news media. In contrast, in regard to European affairs, though some EU policies may have direct and visible impacts, most are conducted at such an abstract and technical level that citizens have to rely almost wholly on the news media for their information, along with cues from opinion-leaders and personal discussions. In this regard, coverage of the EU can be regarded as comparable to how public opinion is shaped towards other foreign-policy issues, such as conflict in Kosovo, trade with China, or the Gulf War. Plausibly, if we find few systematic effects

on public opinion from coverage of the EU, then we might expect to find even weaker effects from news coverage of domestic politics.

Lastly, the content analysis provides no direct evidence regarding coverage in the 'new' news, meaning television magazines, live discussion programs, and talk radio, let alone the flourishing sources of news on the Internet. This is a valid criticism, up to a point. The content analysis we use draws heavily on the mainstream evening news programs on television. But it does also include leading current-affairs magazines like the BBC's Sunday *Breakfast with Frost* and BBC2's *Newsnight*, as well as German ARD's *Europa-magazin* and *Presseclub* and France 2's Sunday *Revue de Presse*. These can be seen as roughly equivalent to American television magazine programs like *Meet the Press*, *Nightline*, *20/20*, and *Dateline*. If the 'new' news has infected traditional standards of mainstream journalism, as some suggest, then this should be picked up by our analysis. In addition, it remains unclear whether there is a distinct 'new' news sector in Europe. In Britain, for example, one of the oldest BBC radio programs, *Any Questions*, now forty years old, and the direct descendant of television's *Question Time*, has always involved live discussion of public questions and debate between political leaders. News magazines, in different formats, have been popular since the 1960s. Certainly there are some equivalents to the American 'new' news in Europe, such as the Spanish *tertulias*, twenty-four-hour radio talk channels, and Internet magazines, but their audience currently remains limited. The content analysis of television and newspapers used in this study, while less than ideal in terms of long-term time-series data, and while limited to the 15 European OECD countries, therefore does provide a suitable basis for a comparative study of typical news coverage of European affairs across the EU.

#### PUBLIC OPINION

Content analysis, no matter how comprehensive, remains silent about the effects of coverage. To understand the impact of attention to the news media on the public, we draw on two decades of Eurobarometer surveys ranging from the first European Community Study in 1970 to the most recently available survey in March–April 1999. Surveys were conducted two to five times per year, with about 1,000 face-to-face interviews in each member state, with reports published on a biannual basis for the European Commission. These studies have been supple-

mented since January 1996 by Euroinion surveys (European continuous-tracking surveys) that have sought to monitor public opinion about key issues and institutions via telephone interviews each week, with results released on a monthly basis. These rich data sets allow us to monitor whether people who are most attentive to newspapers, television and the Internet differ in any significant ways in their political attitudes, opinions, and behaviours towards the European Union, in terms of its institutions and its policies in the fifteen member states. When there are key events – such as the Maastricht agreement, the introduction of the euro, and the resignation of the Santer European Commission – these sources allow us to compare coverage in the news media with public opinion. Because EU policies often involve fairly complex and technical issues with which ordinary people have had no direct experience, this provides a strong test of the learning effects of the news media. It is difficult for European citizens to know much about these issues except via the news media, so if journalism fails in its informational role, then that may have important implications for European Union governance, raising widespread concern about a ‘democratic deficit’. Within this context we can explore the role of the news media system as a mobilizing agent and the effects of media use on political knowledge, interest, and activism in different European member states.

One potential criticism of using European data is the ‘American exceptionalism’ argument. Much of the media malaise literature originated in the United States, and many of the claims about changes in news journalism may relate to specific historical and cultural factors peculiar to America. As we shall see, the news environment in the United States is more television-centric (and with far more commercially oriented TV) than those in most European countries. The predominant liberal political culture in America may also be more mistrustful of government than is the more social-democratic tradition in the smaller European welfare states. To test whether or not patterns found in European public opinion were also evident in the United States, we drew on half a century of data from the American National Election Studies (NES) from 1948 to 1998. Obviously there are some important differences between the NES and the Eurobarometer, including the specific questions that monitor media use and civic engagement, as well as the electoral context of the NES. Nevertheless, by matching functionally equivalent, if not identical, measures, we can examine the impact of attention to the American news media on similar indicators of political knowledge, trust, and participation. As mentioned earlier,

the NES also has the advantage of allowing us to monitor trends from 1952, before the television age became established, until 1998, representing the early years of the Internet age.

The next chapter goes on to use official statistics from UNESCO and other international bodies to examine some of the most important structural trends in the news environment in postindustrial societies since the end of World War II,<sup>45</sup> including the following: *press diversity*, such as the number of national daily newspapers being published, changes in circulation and sales figures, and concentration of ownership; *television diversity*, including the structure of competition between public-service and commercial channels, regulation of broadcasting, and the availability and penetration of cable, satellite, and other new communications technologies; and *Internet usage*, a development that has proceeded far faster in some countries than in others. Given an understanding of those matters, we can then start to consider what impact these differences might have on the content of the news and its potential effects on the public.