

EXCERPTED FROM

Surprising News:
How the Media
Affect—and Do Not
Affect—Politics

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1

Surprising News

Few would argue with the claim that free news media should be a vital part of democracy, but many believe they undermine it instead. Some newspapers proudly proclaim their decisive influence over election results and their ability to make or break even powerful politicians. Research finds evidence of the agenda-setting power of the media and of the videomalaise, distrust, alienation, and political apathy they induce. Some eminent academics go so far as to state that the media use their monopoly of news and information to control what the population thinks and does. Politicians evidently believe them or, at least, are unwilling to risk ignoring them, so they spend huge amounts of time, energy, and money trying to control the news and keep media owners and editors on their side. There is widespread concern about the declining quantity and quality of news available in the mainstream media and how their influence has been supplanted by the divisive and corrosive effects of partisan television, biased journalism, fake news, foreign interference, and the hate-laden prejudices of a multitude of websites.

The importance of the media for democracy continues to produce a huge volume of comment on the subject. Opinions are often expressed with conviction, and yet (or perhaps because?) it is actually exceedingly difficult to pin down media power with any certainty. If the commercial media must produce what consumers are able and willing to buy, and if consumers are free to self-select what they want and are able and willing to pay for, then which is the chicken and which the egg?

Consequently, social science is divided. Some assert the power of the press, sometimes without evidence; some produce facts and figures that suggest strong, even massive, media effects; some find little more than modest consequences for public opinion and behavior; and some discover positive, others negative, media effects on democratic politics and government.

The result has been a hotly debated and unresolved issue ever since modern research took off some eight decades ago.

The difficulty of arriving at definitive and acceptable conclusions based on hard evidence has produced two divergent responses. One is to make plausible but speculative generalizations, though this has resulted in an assortment of contradictory claims that seem reasonable but are difficult to prove, or are sometimes disproved by subsequent developments. The other response, resulting from the pressures of modern academic life, is to engage in ever more specialized research on one particular set of circumstances in one country at one time, which is then summarized neatly in eight thousand words for publication in a journal. This sort of research, though it may be a valuable addition to knowledge, usually relates to a limited and specific time, place, and set of circumstances, so its relevance to higher level generalization about media effects in other times, places, and circumstances are obscure or unknown.

This volume takes a different approach. It is a slow book that marshals a great deal of empirical evidence drawn from a large and diverse range of studies, placing them in a broader picture and drawing out their common features and conclusions. As it turns out, diverse studies in different subfields reach some strikingly similar conclusions. In addition, trying to sketch out the bigger picture, the book ventures into fields of research directly relevant to media effects that are sometimes neglected by specialists in the field. This strategy reveals important gaps in media effects research and highlights the work that starts filling them in. Most important, perhaps, it sheds the harsh light of fact-based social science research on the influence of different kinds of media with different kinds of messages on different types of people in different sorts of circumstances. The results turn out to have a lot in common with the standard model of the behavioral sciences established by social psychology, political science, and sociology over two or three generations of research. The standard model is built upon a very large body of work that establishes such things as class, education, religion, income, occupation, age, and sex as the most important causal variables in most explanations of mass attitudes and behavior. In political science, the list also includes partisanship, party identification, and political interest. This book shows that the standard model, rather than the media, is generally the most powerful when it comes to explaining political attitudes and behavior.

In Chapter 2, the book lays down its foundations with a review of a large body of experimental psychology research on how and why individuals can preserve their beliefs, sometimes in the face of all evidence, logic, and argument to the contrary. The second part of the chapter shows that millions of people do the same in the real world outside the laboratories, whatever the media say. Disbelieving what the mainstream media tell us

and believing things that find little or no support in the mainstream media are common behaviors in modern society, although so also is accepting, absorbing, and acting upon media messages. This suggests that media effects are the product of interactions between audiences and media messages, and any attempt to understand these effects must take account of the relationship between media producers and consumers.

Chapter 3 considers political partisanship and party identification—that is, strong attachments to political ideas, values, and organizations. Experiments show that people are likely to engage in belief preservation where partisan opinions are concerned, and the same seems to be true of partisans in the outside world. Pre-existing political beliefs and values exercise a strong influence on what news individuals get and how they react to it, accepting it, rejecting it, or ignoring it according to their prior political attachments and attitudes.

Most people do not have strong partisan or political party attachments. Chapter 4 broadens the scope of the inquiry to examine how non-partisanship and non-party political beliefs and values can influence the ways the majority of individuals receive and process news reports and draw conclusions from them.

Building on evidence about personal values and beliefs, Chapter 5 examines the largely neglected role of everyday knowledge and experience as sources of political information and opinion that can reinforce or override the messages of the news media. It is widely assumed that citizens depend heavily on the news media for political information and opinion, but it seems that this is not always the case.

Chapter 6 continues with this line of inquiry by examining how one aspect of everyday life—political talk with friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues—can also be a source of political information and opinion that moderates the impact of the news media. Political talk can guide individuals to accept, ignore, or reject media messages.

Since trust is so important for the credibility of a news source, Chapter 7 discusses how it can limit or enhance media influence and how it interacts with individual characteristics to moderate media effects.

Chapter 8 explores the ways the media—especially the entertainment media—might influence political life indirectly with subtle messages that come in under the radar of conscious awareness. It covers an array of possible effects and compares those of newspapers and television, and news and entertainment television.

The first eight chapters deal mainly with the micro, demand side of the equation—the individual characteristics of media audiences—but there is also the macro, supply side of news media systems. Supply and demand are often analyzed separately, although understanding media effects requires examining the interaction between them. Besides, the contours of the producer

side have changed radically in recent decades, giving the media a new shape, possibly new powers. Therefore, Chapters 9 to 11 analyze three important aspects of the news media supply side and their consequences for political attitudes and behaviors.

Chapter 9 compares commercial and public service broadcasting, showing that they have different effects on political knowledge, trust, participation, and democratic support. Chapter 10 turns to the classic theory of news media pluralism as a cornerstone of modern democracy—one that requires news to be produced by a variety of sources, reflecting a diversity of political opinions. A pluralist news media maximizes the power of citizens to make up their own minds and minimizes the power of the press over public opinion. The chapter discusses how a new information-rich digital era has outflanked the growing concentration of ownership and control of the old media and the importance of internal pluralism within a single news organization. In brief, Chapter 9 estimates the extent to which the contemporary news media systems of Britain and the United States are pluralist in terms of their organization and news content.

A vital but largely unexplored aspect of both media pluralism and media effects concerns the news-gathering habits of citizens and the political diversity of their news diets. The importance of news diets has been raised by claims that the new media have a divisive, polarizing effect because they make it possible for individuals to self-select news sources that reflect their own opinions back to them. Chapter 11 presents evidence about the extent to which citizens use different news sources and whether they are trapped in echo chambers of their own making.

The first chapters of the book give insufficient attention to what are often called the “new media,” so Chapters 10 and 11 expand on this topic, explaining why the term *new media* is misleading and confusing. Avoiding the plausible speculation of many digital utopians and dystopians as much as possible, they explore what little we know about the political content and effects of digital news, social websites, cable news, and fake news.

Chapter 12 draws together the threads of previous chapters, summarizing the main findings of the book in brief and general terms.

The postscript argues that media power is not just of academic interest, but a practical issue that lies at the heart of democracy, involving how political leaders behave. Democratic government and politics could be greatly improved if politicians and the public better understood the real nature of media influence and power.

Each chapter reviews a set of empirical studies that deal with a subset of media effects research. The studies are chosen for their high quality and because they reveal a key aspect of the subject. The research strategy for exploring media effects is to take the best cases, not necessarily the most recent ones simply because they are contemporary. To take just

two examples: The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal resulted in what has been described as a “feeding frenzy of attack journalism.” Although the case is now twenty years old, it provides us with one of the clearest test cases in modern history of the news media’s ability to undermine, even destroy, elected leaders. As such, it has been subjected to close scrutiny by dozens of social scientists, with surprising results.

The second example comes from the other side of the Atlantic. The role of the tabloid paper, *The Sun*, in the British election of 1997 was highly controversial. *The Sun* was Britain’s biggest-selling paper, it was highly partisan, and, unusually for national dailies in the United Kingdom, it switched its party support for the 1997 election. If newspapers influence the voting patterns of their readers, this should show up with unusual clarity in a larger-than-average increase in Labour voting among *Sun* readers. Because Labour won an unprecedented landslide, and because it is widely believed that newspapers have a lot of influence over their readers’ voting choices, it is entirely plausible to speculate, as *The Sun* did, that “It was *The Sun* wot won it.” Because it is a key test case for gauging media influence, the 1997 election also attracted a great deal of careful research in the United Kingdom, also with surprising results.

The chapters that follow dwell on these and other significant case studies of media power that tell us a lot about the subject. Some of the case studies are old, some new, but in all cases the argument of the main research piece is augmented with evidence drawn from other sources, often more recent publications and especially up-to-date websites and survey evidence where it exists. One purpose of case studies is to lay down markers that can be checked against subsequent studies and new developments, so these chapters deal with, among other things, newspaper endorsements of Donald Trump, fake news, the content of the most popular news websites, the political effects of partisan cable news channels, and the politics of social media sites.

The research strategy of this book, therefore, involves comparing and contrasting a large number of studies of media effects on political attitudes and behavior in order to compare and contrast the conclusions they reach. The book does not merely triangulate in order to reach reliable conclusions, but it polyangulates, using many different studies written by sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, and economists who employ a variety of methods to investigate many possible media effects on politics. American and British research is used in the main, but single-country research on Russia, the Netherlands, Canada, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Belgium is included, as are comparative studies of European Union member states.

The book covers the work of more than 50 main authors in some detail and reinforces them with shorter accounts of other work and many references to related work. The methods used in these studies include laboratory

experiments, participant observation, questionnaire surveys, focus groups, single-country and comparative studies, and cross-sectional, time-series, and multilevel analysis.

The research strategy requires a comparison of different kinds of media—broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, print and TV news, commercial and public broadcasting, and news and entertainment content. It also requires a careful distinction between the means of delivering news (old media and new media) and their content, as well as examination of how the demand and supply sides of the media equation interact to produce media effects.

Because media effects may vary from one political matter to another, the case studies cover an assortment of issues, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, priming and agenda setting, how Russians use their TV news, judgments about the national economy, election campaigns and voting patterns, televised incivility, political knowledge, social and political trust, the mean world effect, democratic attitudes, political activity, political polarization, political cynicism, and alienation.

In short, this book is a meta-analysis and synthesis that marshals a large and diverse body of evidence and argument about the power and influence of the media on mass political attitudes and behavior. The results are often counterintuitive and contrary to received wisdom. In a word, they are surprising.