

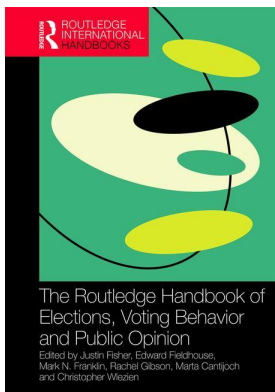
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25

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION AND VOTER BEHAVIOR

*Susan Banducci*¹

Introduction

A necessary condition for democracy to function properly is that information is available that allows citizens to make decisions and behave in a manner that maintains accountability and popular sovereignty (Key 1966). Most theories of democracy share a minimal condition that citizens are informed about the candidates or policy proposals presented to them (see, for example, Dryzek 2000; Schumpeter 1950). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 8) write that “Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship.” Despite competition from social media, the traditional mass media (television and newspapers) play a privileged role in informing citizens through their provision of news and current affairs programming. Contemporary developments in media and political structures, such as the expansion of commercial broadcasting and weakening of political parties and social ties, further elevate the supply of quality information as an indicator of the strength of electoral democracy. As the dominant source of political information for citizens, there seems to be little question that the media matter as providers of information in politics in general and in elections in particular. But another aspect to this relationship is whether media influence political attitudes and behavior, and here researchers have been hard pressed to build a conclusive body of evidence that demonstrates media effects.

For decades, researchers viewed the media as having a minimal effect on opinion and behavior (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960; Patterson and McClure 1976). The not so minimal effects of the media extolled by earlier researchers suggested that all information was distilled through a partisan lens and any new information simply served to reinforce existing predispositions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1968). Since then some have argued that expecting opinion to change or the media to persuade audiences to leave behind predispositions may be setting the bar too high for media effects. The suggestion was that the media could have a range of effects beyond opinion change such as reinforcing predispositions or crystalizing “fundamentals” (Sigelman and Buell 2004), priming issues to alter the basis on which political evaluations are made (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Stevens et al. 2011) and mobilization (Prior 2005). Furthermore, effects can extend beyond election campaigns (Prior 2007). Applying new methods and opening up the range of effects to extend beyond preference formation, these scholars have suggested that the

media can be influential and have begun to explore the conditions under which the media are more or less influential.

Since the breakthrough in agenda setting and priming research, there has not been a consensus on the role of the media in shaping opinion, with Bartels (1993: 267) referring to our state of knowledge as “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science.” More recently, there has been a debate as to whether we are seeing an “ushering in of a new era of minimal effects” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008) due to increased polarization amongst the electorate and changes in the media environment that allow for increased selectivity. Some have even suggested that the discipline of “media effects” research as a paradigm is in crisis (Lang 2013). Still others defend the state of research and accept that findings will be conditional (Holbert, Garrett and Gleason 2010). Given that political communications research crosses a number of disciplines from psychology, communications and political behavior it may not be surprising that there is no consensus on either the state of the discipline or the state of research findings.

After decades of research, the record of empirical research is still mixed. For example, in the area of the media and learning (i.e., political knowledge), some studies report positive effects for the mass media while others report null or even negative effects (Becker and Whitney 1980; Craig, Kane and Gainous 2005; Eveland 2004; Mondak 1995a; Robinson and Davis 1990). This mixed record of evidence extends into new areas of research. While initially thought to democratize access to information, there is conflicting evidence on how use of the internet influences public opinion (de Zúñiga, Copeland and Bimber 2014; Sudulich et al. 2014). Additionally, recent research has focused on how Web 2.0 technology, which allows users to interact with information in new ways – sharing, producing and selecting – and as with other lines of research the conclusions about the direction and size of effect varies (Bode 2016; de Zúñiga, Copeland and Bimber 2014).

While the record of empirical evidence is mixed, it is clear the media environment is changing as audiences are capable of selecting media sources and stories, and sharing these stories within their online networks. The transition to a Web 2.0 environment was preceded by other shifts in audience engagement with news and the structure of news media environments. Probably one of the most salient audience trends is the decline in newspaper readership. A range of studies have indicated a decline in newspaper readership, through reported news consumption habits that have been mirrored by declining circulation figures, in the US (Bogart 1989) and Europe (Curtice 1997). The decline in readership in Europe reflects a cohort effect with newer generations not developing a newspaper habit (Lauf 2001). Alongside the decline in newspaper readership, the privileged position of the news media as a trusted source of political information is on the decline in the US most markedly (Dautrich and Hartley 1999; Ladd 2011) but in other countries as well (Tsfati and Ariely 2014). Trust in media is important as it conditions the influence of media as well as reflecting general levels of trust in political institutions.

Given these changes, political communication has an outstanding need for new theories and methods able to capture the ongoing shift from mass media communication to *mass self-communication* (Castells 2007). These theories and methods should reflect a fundamental change in the media landscape, with increasing complexity in the flows of information (between social and traditional media, and within social media), new patterns of audience exposure (socially mediated and selective) and alternate modes of content production (e.g., user-generated content) (Valkenburg and Peter 2013). These new modes of exposure and content production have led to diversity of empirical findings and models. For example, the increased ability of political actors to target messages via data-driven techniques (Bennett and Manheim 2006) or the use of computer algorithms to direct users to specific content (Hindman 2009; Pariser 2011) means

that the model of information flows could be reduced to a “one-step flow” or to “filter bubbles.” On the other hand, the ability to share messages and content through social media platforms could reinforce the role of the opinion influencer in the two-step flow model (Messing and Westwood 2014).

Despite the lack of consensus over the direction and size of effects from traditional media sources and the introduction of new forms of communication, there have been advances in terms of conceptualizing the nature of media influence (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Iyengar and Simon 2000) and the methods used to study them. This chapter reviews work that addresses new approaches to studying media effects that move beyond reinforcement effects to focus on knowledge, learning as well as re-examining valence and priming effects. In terms of methodological advances, I focus on three areas of innovation in research designs. First, cross-national and comparative media effects studies have allowed researchers to investigate how media system characteristics, such as public funding, that structure the supply of information interact with individual news consumption habits. Second, using computer-aided content analysis and machine learning techniques, researchers are now able to analyze a much larger corpus of news information. Given the amount of information available online and the enormous amount of text, computer-aided content analyses has also opened up new sources of data and new possibilities for examining media effects. Third, experiments, the gold standard for examining media effects, have moved out of the lab and into the field and online. This has allowed researchers to make generalizations from research settings that are closer to the real world in which news exposure happens. I start by examining methodological challenges and then move to discuss new findings. I conclude with a discussion and recent empirical findings that attempt to account for media exposure in a dynamic, interconnected online media environment, where there are many sources of content, many channels by which content can be delivered, and where the user exercises unprecedented levels of choice in the media they consume.

Methodological challenges in studying media effects

There seems to be little question that the media matter in politics in general and in elections in particular. Despite what seems to be this accepted truism, researchers have been hard pressed to demonstrate without question that media influence political attitudes and behaviors. Of the situation, Mondak wrote:

what seems perfectly obvious at face value does not always lend itself to ready empirical confirmation. If media truly are a nearly all-pervasive force, then we are left with a variable that does not vary. Largely for precisely this reason, researchers have struggled to demonstrate the existence of media effects on political behaviour.

(Mondak 1995a: 15)

In media effects research the driving question is whether exposure to media content causes changes in behavior and/or attitudes. In its simplest formulation, as media effects researchers we want to know whether watching or reading a particular news story, viewing a particular campaign advertisement or being exposed to a string of media messages will alter how citizens perceive political candidates or leaders, their levels of political knowledge and understanding, the salience of issues in political choices or whether citizens are engaged in the campaign. The first step in determining media effects is to examine whether exposure to a message is accompanied by any observed change in behavior or attitudes. For example, we might expect that citizens more likely to report seeing advertisements for party A are more likely to vote for party A. If a

correlation or covariation is observed in our data, the underlying causal mechanism could be one of media effects – seeing the campaign advert has caused citizens to be more likely to support party A. However, the underlying causal mechanism can also be one of self-selection where partisan supporters are more likely to view and pay attention to ads from their own party or even spurious where a third factor, such as the viability of the party, is actually causing both the number of advertisements and the support for the party.

Within political communications research, the most appropriate technique to establish media effects, ruling out self-selection and a spurious relationship, is to employ experiments. In an experiment, manipulation of the media content and the intervention with the designated groups allows the researcher to control how and to what messages the experimental groups are exposed. Controlling for observable as well as unobservable factors is achieved through random assignment. Therefore, through controlling when and to what subjects are exposed, researchers can be fairly certain that observed changes in attitudes or reported behaviors can be attributed to the treatment or differences in exposure to media content. Experiments have been very successful in demonstrating consistent and strong media effects starting with the landmark studies (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982; McCombs and Shaw 1972). When experiments are not available, the conclusions about media effects are more tenuous and require careful design consideration. As many have noted, in survey-based research it is difficult to sort out cause and effect. Many measures that are used of exposure (such as days spent reading a newspaper) are highly correlated with the political variables of interest such as political interest and probability of voting or becoming engaged in the campaign. Furthermore, surveys, or observational work, measure reported exposure and cannot control what other messages respondents might be exposed to nor can they account for them in a model. Furthermore, most observational studies do not take into account the actual message to which respondents have been exposed.

Norris and co-authors ran a series of media effects experiments in Britain during the 1997 and 2001 general elections (Norris 1999; Norris and Sanders 2003; Sanders and Norris 2005). The general design of the experiments worked as such: subjects were exposed to a 30-minute compilation of television news items drawn from broadcasts aired on the main channels' major news programs in the months before the general election. There were several different treatments, including examinations of agenda setting, learning and valence – 10 minutes of stories about taxation, jobs, health, pensions, Europe or overseas aid in the middle of 20 minutes of neutral stories. The findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating a modest role for the media in influencing attitudes. For example, there were minimal effects on agenda setting where only of foreign affairs news, about the EU or overseas aid, altered perceptions of the importance of the issue (Norris 1999) and party election broadcasts showed no direct effects on attitudes (Sanders and Norris 2005).

In general, outside these experimental studies, studies can be grouped according to whether measures of media content are included. Some studies analyze reported media exposure while others provide an explicit link between exposure and the content to which respondents are exposed. Many studies on negative advertising and the effects of television on political attitudes and behavior fall into the first category of analyzing reported exposure (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Dilliplane 2011; Eveland Jr and Scheufele 2000; Zhao and Chaffee 1995). These studies measure consumption and then enter days viewing or reported exposure to advertising, for example, as independent variables but do not include measures of media content. This design is the one most often used in survey-based political communications research (Barabas and Jerit 2009). In addition to yielding conflicting results (for example, see debate on the mobilizing impact of negative advertising), relying on consumption measures alone is to base the demonstration of media effects on measures that are flawed in many respects (Bartels 1993; Dilliplane,

Goldman and Mutz 2013; Price and Zaller 1993; Prior 2009, 2013). In addition to lacking a measure of the actual content, because these consumption measures are highly correlated with the dependent variables of interest such as political interest, knowledge and engagement, it is difficult to sort out cause and effect in cross-sectional research.

There is a smaller category of studies linking media content to survey data (Curran et al. 2009; Jerit, Barabas and Bolsen 2006; Nicholson 2003; Price and Czilli 1996; Stevens et al. 2011). For example Jerit, Barabas and Bolsen (2006) link aggregate indicators of the saliency of an issue in the news to public opinion polls to estimate the impact of the information environment on political knowledge. The study is explicit in linking the media content but uses only an aggregate indicator allowing it to vary across surveys rather than by individual news consumption patterns in terms of both frequency and outlets. Therefore, the results indicate an effect of the general news environment on knowledge and as such do not approximate media effects as demonstrated in an experimental setting. In another study, Barabas and Jerit (2009) improve measurably on the design by comparing within subjects, demonstrating that a single individual exposed to different levels of information about two different topics will have different levels of information about the topics.

Building on this latter group of studies, there has been a growing recognition that, while experiments remain the gold standard for establishing media effects, they cannot reflect the multitude of sources of information and how individuals interact with these in the real world. Therefore, the type of design that incorporates various levels of exposure and variations in media content, either in a within subject design or a between subject design, increasingly becomes the norm for observational studies of media effects. Automated text analysis has made it less costly to analyze a large corpus of media content and this development encourages linking measures of media exposure to survey measures of content in order to better reflect media exposure in the real world. Cross-national studies, using both automated and human coding, of media effects are able to capture variations in media content across media systems which are important drivers of the supply of messages. Finally, there are a growing number of field experiments aiming to capture how public opinion can be influenced by media messages.

Advances in computer-aided text analysis

Given the importance of understanding the content of media messages in political communication, it is unsurprising that considerable effort has been made to understand the ways in which news coverage shapes elections. Large media content analyses have become fixtures in campaign and election studies in individual countries, such as Austria (Eberl et al. 2015), Britain (see, for example, Deacon and Wring 2016), Germany (Rattinger et al. 2015) and for Europe overall (Banducci et al. 2014). While these efforts have been instrumental in our understanding of the relationship between news media and elections, large content analyses come with an equally large cost. Thousands of hours of coding at an enormous cost are required to produce these data, presenting serious challenges for researchers interested in the relationship between media and political behavior. However, advances in machine learning can help human coders and researchers to understand media coverage and their effects across a vast body of material. The goal is not to replace human coders, but to focus attention on which tasks may be safely assigned to a computer and which tasks cannot.

Computer-aided coding of texts has been used successfully for over 10 years (Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003) and has aided advances in our theoretical and empirical understanding of phenomena from party policy positions (Benoit, Laver and Mikhaylov 2009) to open-ended survey responses (Roberts et al. 2014). However, the coding of media

texts does present some additional challenges. While texts are easily digitized for analysis, radio and television broadcasts must first be transcribed, and this is an expensive task. There are differences across media in the structure of a news story, reporting style and language, which need to be taken into account when applying any supervised or unsupervised classification. These considerations are particularly important when considering the reliability and validity of automated coding (Soroka 2014). That said, there has been great progress in automated coding that has allowed for new insights into the negativity of news (Soroka, Young and Balmas 2015) and news framing (Burscher et al. 2014). In turn, these content measures can then be linked to survey-based measures of exposure and political behavior to assess the impact of the media across the entire range of outlets.

Cross-national media effects studies

There is a growing body of cross-national media effects research that accounts for the mediating and conditioning role of media systems in political communication research (see, for example, Curran et al. 2009, 2014; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). These studies have suggested two mechanisms by which characteristics of media systems might influence the level of citizen political knowledge. First, factors such as greater investment in public service broadcasting may increase the amount of quality information available to citizens and produce a better informed citizenry (Curran et al. 2009). Second, the media landscape (i.e., alternatives for news information), influenced by commercialization or a partisan press, can alter the news consumption patterns of citizens and influence exposure and attention to news information. For example, in more commercialized markets, citizens have more entertainment options and are thus more inclined to opt out of news gathering, leading to a decrease in political knowledge (Prior 2005, 2007).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) give us a framework that identifies and codifies a set of dimensions by which media systems can be compared and allows us to develop media system indicators that potentially influence the amount and quality of news information. Prior's (2005, 2007) "conditional political learning" model demonstrates additional links between the media system and political knowledge by showing that acquisition of political information is dependent on the availability of choices (i.e., competition with news) combined with preferences for news versus entertainment. The advent of broadcast news in the 1950s and 1960s in America served to increase turnout (and knowledge), while the proliferation of choices via entertainment only channels in the 1980s and 1990s has had the opposite effect. Increasingly, these linkages, as specified by Hallin and Mancini, and Prior, are taken into account in cross-national media studies (Banducci, Giebler and Kritzing 2017; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Soroka et al. 2013). Not only can cross-national media studies capture variations in media systems but cross-national studies linking media content and survey data allow for variation in content.

One of the most fruitful areas of cross-national media effects research has been examining the effect of media on political engagement and knowledge. Aalberg, Van Aelst and Curran (2010) show public service media systems have greater levels of political information. However, the patterns are not consistent, with important variation across countries with similar media systems. Therefore, while aspects of the media system do seem to be related to the amount of electorally relevant information, the relationship is not consistent enough that spending can be used as a proxy for the amount of information in the environment, for example. To date, however, there is no large-scale cross-national study of the amount of political or electoral information available to voters, as measured with content analysis, and the decision to vote. Some studies show that viewing public broadcasting increases levels of political information and engagement (Aarts and

Semetko 2003; Norris 2000). A more recent study shows that public service television devotes more time to public affairs than commercial media systems and that in countries where the public service model is dominant there tends to be a smaller knowledge gap (Curran et al. 2009).

Using field experiments to examine media effects

Field experiments avoid the trade-offs between experiments (causal inference) and observational studies (generalizability) by random assignment to treatment in the field, or in natural settings (Gerber and Green 2012). In one experiment (Gerber, Karlan and Bergan 2009), non-newspaper subscribers are randomly assigned to the treatment (receive a copy of a Washington DC based newspaper) or control group. Those assigned to the *Washington Post*, a left-leaning paper, were significantly more likely to vote for the Democratic Party, but no effect was observed for the *Washington Times*, a right-leaning newspaper. Those who received a newspaper were also 2.8 percentage points more likely to vote than those who did not receive a newspaper subscription. However, this significant effect was for the next election rather than the most immediate election to the treatment. In other studies, localities holding mayoral elections were randomly assigned to receive get-out-the-vote radio spots which altered the competitiveness of the contests (Panagopoulos and Green 2008) and approximately \$2 million of television and radio advertising deployed experimentally in a gubernatorial campaign, which showed that televised ads have strong but short-lived effects on voting preferences (Gerber et al. 2011).

Naturally-occurring experiments or quasi-experiments – where comparable groups exist but only one receives a treatment and there is no random assignment to these groups – have also been used to examine media effects. One of the best known of these is Mondak's (1995b) study of the consequences of a newspaper strike in Pittsburgh that meant residents did not have a daily newspaper during most of the 1992 campaign period prior to a vote for president, the Senate and the House. He compared Pittsburgh voters to those in a similar city, Cleveland, which did not experience a strike. He found no difference in information-seeking behavior, but found that citizens of Pittsburgh based their decisions on different sorts of information and were not as knowledgeable about candidates down the ballot (House candidates). Another natural or quasi-experiment that has been exploited for studying the influence of the media is the switching of party endorsements in the UK's partisan press. In 1997, The *Sun* newspaper switched support from the Conservative Party and endorsed Tony Blair of the Labour Party. Then, in 2009–10, it switched support back again to the Conservatives. Studies examining this endorsement switch find that approximately 8.6 percent of voters altered their party identification in line with newspaper endorsements (Ladd and Lenz 2009) and that a switch in endorsements can significantly increase party support (Reeves, McKee and Stuckler 2016). Still others claim that the partisan press in Britain and their endorsements have little influence on electoral choices (Curtice 1997).

These experiments, whether field or lab based, are not free from challenges. Researchers are increasingly recognizing that even natural experiments have drawbacks (Sekhon and Titunik 2012). Experiments allow us to distinguish between causal and selection effects but do not allow for generalizations across contexts and may exaggerate the effects of information (Barabas and Jerit 2010). Furthermore, experimental settings tend not to accurately reflect how citizens encounter or engage with news media content in the real world. In the time since Bartels' criticism and Mondak's observation, researchers have developed methods for estimating media effects with cross-section data in order to take advantage of the strength of these data – capturing people as they naturally encounter political information. First, media effects researchers have employed sample matching (Barabas 2004; Ladd and Lenz 2009; Levendusky

2011) – a technique based on the logic of experimentation that allows the creation of two equivalent groups similar on characteristics except the “treatment” variable – for example, high media use vs. low media use (see, for example, Dehejia and Wahba 1999). Second, news media content that can be linked to survey data measuring exposure to specific sources is increasingly available to researchers and is advantageous in capturing variation in the information environment (see, for example, Barabas and Jerit 2010; Stevens et al. 2011; Stevens and Karp 2012).

Media effects studies and the changing information environment

The changing media landscape (declining newspaper readership and trust, increasing use of social media) begs the questions of where voters are obtaining their information. Social media has become a fundamental tool for voters gathering news stories (Bode 2016; Boulianne 2015) and for candidates connecting to audiences (Aldrich et al. 2015). The structural characteristics of the new media environment allow for information on demand, via internet and mobile devices, and are interactive, allowing feedback and creative participation (Castells 2007, 2009). Within this environment, public affairs/political news information constitutes a large amount of the content circulated in social media (Kwak et al. 2010). In the UK, tweets are increasingly used as sources by journalists with social media profiles, often driving the news agenda (Broersma and Graham 2013). These changes mean that the traditional media no longer play a gatekeeping function (Shoemaker, Vos and Reese 2009), and their influence on mass and elite political opinions and behavior has arguably weakened. Second, traditional models of flows of campaign communication, from elites to opinion leaders to the masses, may no longer be relevant in an age in which social media can provide a platform for opinion leaders (and the masses) to produce information. Political parties and leaders rely heavily on the internet and social media to communicate directly with their supporters and party activists (Lilleker and Jackson 2010). However, empirical evidence on the impact of online campaigning and new media on voters’ attitudes and behavior is far from conclusive, and scholars have been cautious in drawing causal inferences (Bimber and Davis 2003; Quintelier and Vissers 2008). Indeed, recent evidence points to the continued primary impact of traditional forms of campaign mobilization on turnout and no impact of e-campaigning (e.g., social media or e-mail) on political behavior (i.e., turnout) (Fisher et al. 2016).

The advent of Web 2.0 – the second generation of the world wide web that allows users to interact, collaborate, create and share information online, in virtual communities – has radically changed the media environment and the types of content the public is exposed to, as well as the exposure process itself. Individuals are faced with a wider range of options (from social and traditional media), new patterns of exposure (socially mediated and selective) and alternate modes of content production (e.g., user-generated content) (Valkenburg and Peter 2013). Networks shape how citizens receive and interpret information and, in turn, these networks are constructed by individuals (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1995; McClurg 2006). Within these networks, the influence of the media was conceptualized as uni-directional with information flowing from the source to the individual (Beck et al. 2002) and methodologically the issue had been devising a method to determine whether individuals construct networks of opinions similar to their own or whether the information received from the network influences individual opinion (Fowler et al. 2011). Yet analysis of embedded hyperlinks in blogs reveals the underlying social network architecture linking bloggers (Adamic and Glance 2005; Elgesem, Steskal and Diakopoulos 2015); bloggers tend to link their own posts to posts by other bloggers that they read.

Outside of the question of media exposure, research on media effects raises many potential avenues to explore but an equal number of challenges. Studies on social media and political behavior fall into three categories. First, there are studies examining how social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) alter political behavior and attitudes. A second group of studies uses social media data to estimate variables of interest (e.g., Google searches indicating salience of issues or public opinion). Third, a related group of studies focuses on political or media actors using social media to mobilize, persuade or inform supporters and/or citizens. Each of these types of studies poses interesting challenges that are linked to the data itself as well as in developing research designs that can capture the influence on public opinion. From the first group, one of the most convincing studies to date on social media effects demonstrates that social pressure can mobilize Facebook users to vote (Bond et al. 2012). With the help of the social media site, 611,000 users (1 percent) received an “informational message” at the top of their news feeds, which encouraged them to vote, provided a link to information on local polling places and included a clickable “I voted” button and a counter of Facebook users who had clicked it. A large group of 60 million users (98 percent) received a “social message,” which included the same elements but also showed the profile pictures of up to six randomly selected Facebook friends who had clicked the “I voted” button. The remaining 1 percent of users were assigned to a control group that received no message. Those who got the informational message voted at the same rate as those who saw no message at all. But those who saw the social message were 2 percent more likely to click the “I voted” button and 0.4 percent more likely to vote. Social pressure, therefore, can explain how social media works to mobilize users.

Conclusions

There is no question that news media are an important source of political information for citizens. The challenge has been understanding how and under what conditions this information will influence the behavior and attitudes of individuals. As a review of past research on this question, this chapter has addressed two related themes on developments in political communications. First, how have changes in the media environment shaped our understanding of the types and conditions of media effects? We understand that media effects may be small in real-world empirical studies but this likely reflects the reality that citizens receive political information from a range of sources, politics tends not to be held prominently in the day-to-day thoughts and activities of most people and media information seeking tends to reflect already established interests and predispositions. Second, while emerging technologies and social media have led us to reconsider media effects, the same technologies have led us to develop and apply innovative methodologies for studying media effects. These new methods have allowed researchers, for example, to analyze larger bodies of news text than previously imagined.

In terms of methodological approaches, laboratory and field experiments have been useful in illustrating the impact of the media with controlled treatments. Their strength is precisely in isolating the effect of a news media treatment from other rival explanations. On the one hand, despite having the shortcomings outlined in the above chapter, the greatest strength of observational media effects research is that it attempts to examine people in real-world settings and in the way in which they would usually encounter political information. When Bartels described the body of research on media effects as “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science” (Bartels 1993), he attributed this state of affairs primarily to a combination of measurement error and the absence of longitudinal research designs capable of detecting media effects. Increasingly, panel studies and repeated cross-sectional studies are being used to study media

effects. This development alongside the use of improved exposure measures as well as linking surveys to media content have yielded promising results about the nature of media effects.

These improvements in the research designs for studying media effects have also incorporated new technologies. These new technologies have allowed the study of large bodies of media text but also mean that citizens are being exposed to information in new ways. Indeed, a report from the OECD Global Science Forum attributes social scientists' inability to anticipate the political movements such as the Arab Spring to a failure to understand "the new ways in which humans communicate" (OECD 2013: 6–7). At the same time, the report calls for advances in tools that allow researchers to link online/open data to traditional data sources (such as surveys) to understand the human condition. These efforts are now being undertaken.

This chapter has focused mainly on understanding how media influence attitudes and behavior and the methods used to assess these influences. However, there is also a need to understand the drivers of news media coverage. Less well understood is how media systems and the polity shape the amount of politically relevant news. Given that television and newspapers produce the information, transitions evident in media systems, such as the move from public service to regulated commercial systems and the decline in newspaper readership, are likely to impact on the information available and may have consequences for the accountability function of electoral processes. Recent research has demonstrated both that the news alternatives available to voters influence political knowledge by altering news consumption patterns (Prior 2007) and that the rules and institutions governing news coverage affect political participation (Baek 2009). Both findings suggest an important role of media system characteristics in understanding the relationship between news and political attitudes and behavior. The comparative studies by Curran, Aalberg and others are an important step in this direction.

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