

System failure: It's not just the media — the whole political system has failed

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critique of attempts in the field of political communication to explain apparent voter apathy and declining electoral turnout. The response of many commentators is either to blame the media for the problem or to see the media as the solution to any problem that might exist. First, the paper examines the 'blame the media' school of thought — as exemplified by liberal commentators in the UK and the USA. Secondly, the paper focuses on the 'optimists' who argue that the spin/media nexus is either morally neutral or may actually be improving citizen involvement.

The paper argues that both approaches are flawed at the level of conceptualisation and of methodology. The narrow conceptualisation of the field means that even in the unusual cases where scholars look beyond the question of elections, the research agenda is still fixed at the level of media power and not on how the media fit into a wider system of power relations. Most obviously, the field tends to avoid the question of political and economic outcomes.

The paper ends by suggesting that the problem of disengagement from formal politics is a response to the crisis of legitimacy in the institutions of democracy in the USA and UK.

KEYWORDS: *spin, voter apathy, democracy, media, politics*

INTRODUCTION

There is a crisis of political participation in the UK. Since the record low turnouts of the 2001 general election, many questions have been raised about voter apathy and disengagement. In both public debate and academic research on political communication, the 'problem' of disengagement has been extensively debated. This debate draws on a long history of research and argument in political communication. But the bare fact that UK election turnout had dropped markedly in 2001 gave the debate an added urgency. One might imagine that such debate would range widely and raise questions about the health of the democratic system. The response of many commentators, however, is either to blame the media for the problem or to see the media as the solution to any problem that might exist. Both approaches are flawed at the level of conceptualisation and of methodology. They fail to approach the relationship between the media and political engagement in the context of the whole social system and how it has changed in the past two decades — specifically, the decline of democratic mechanisms. At the methodological level, the narrow conceptualisation of the field means that even in the unusual cases where scholars look

beyond the question of elections, the research agenda is still fixed at the level of media power and not on how the media fit into a wider system of power relations. Most obviously, the field tends to avoid the question of political and economic outcomes.

The two approaches outlined here include, first, the school of thought that blames the media for the problem, an approach often associated with liberal and some left-wing writers. Second is the school of thought which sees contemporary trends in media and political public relations as being either inevitable or as positively beneficial for democracy.

THE MEDIA AND SPIN AS THE PROBLEM: PLURALIST PESSIMISTS

The first approach to the question of disengagement is to blame the media for the decline in voter turnout, or to locate the problem as one of public apathy in which the media play a contributory role. So academic and commentator, Steven Barnett, writes:

We do not live in a corrupt country, we are not ruled by money-grabbing, power-hungry autocrats. And yet the notion that politicians are honest, honourable individuals doing their damndest to make their country a better place does seem faintly odd in today's media environment (Barnett 2002a; see also Barnett 2002b).

Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee writes:

Get the politicians, catch the government lying, denigrate, mock, kill. Never mind the substance of a policy — that's boring and time-consuming ... This is political decadence, games filling the vacancy in ideals and ideas. ... This approach is in danger of making the country nearly ungovernable (Toynbee 2003).

Some commentators also point to the 'excesses' of the culture of spin as a contributory factor. This appears to include many of the authors writing in the burgeoning field of political communication. The rise of the 'big

spin' in politics has been noted with some alarm (Bennett and Manheim 2001). Media analysts Blumler and Gurevitch have claimed that there is a 'crisis of public communication':

[The] publicity process is not exactly rich in vitamins for citizenship. Its fast food offerings tend to: narrow the debate; make negative campaigning more central; foster cynicism; and over-represent newsmaking as a field of power struggle rather than a source of issue clarification (Blumler and Gurevitch 1996: 129).

The notion of a crisis in public communications seems to be a dominant concern in the political communication literature. The question which might be raised about this argument is the extent to which the problem is seen as one of the media and political culture alone or whether it is seen as symptomatic of the system as a whole.

MEDIA AND SPIN AS THE SOLUTION: NEOLIBERAL OPTIMISTS

By way of contrast, there are those who see the media and the rise of spin as either a fact of life or as actually being beneficial to democracy. Whatever problems there are in the political system, they are not caused by the media or by spin. In fact, they say, a deregulated media and ever-increasing 'professionalisation' and 'modernisation' of communications and campaigns are the solution. At the sanguine end of the spectrum is Raymond Kuhn, who has concluded that the rise of spin is simply an 'integral' part of the rules of the game 'in the media age': '[I]t would be naive to expect government just to provide "neutral" information to be processed by professional journalists' (Kuhn 2000).

We are no more able to 'end' spin than we are to turn back history. Furthermore, writers such as John Street have argued that politics have 'moved on' and that this may not be a bad thing: 'the claim that "packaging politics" harms democracy must be analysed

not assumed. It may even improve democracy' (Street 2001: 211).

Commentators such as Pippa Norris in the USA have also claimed that there are systematic positive effects of the rise of spin. Norris is careful to note that there are many problems in the operation of democratic societies, but in the end she sees the media as forming a 'virtuous circle' which will 'ripple out' and improve political engagement. According to Norris: '... at the beginning of the twenty first century it appears that American democracy and the American news media are far healthier than many nay sayers would have us believe' (Norris 2000: 306).

Perhaps the most full-blooded defence of the system and the changes that have created it has come from Brian McNair, who argues:

Public relations is ... no more a 'bad thing' in itself than the cables, computers, digital editors and other communicative tools which allow political messages, and journalism about politics, to be disseminated with ever increasing speed and efficiency to the mass audience. From this perspective, indeed, public relations is a valuable element of the modern democratic process (McNair 2000: 138).

In this view, spin and the deregulation of the media are actually beneficial to democracy, extending its reach and holding politicians to account. These authors are united in their view that public opinion plays an important role in democratic politics and that the media play a key role in aiding and abetting the expansion of democracy by responding to popular pressure. This is all rather comforting, but neglects broader questions about the quality of democracy.

MEDIA, POWER AND DEMOCRACY: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Many approaches to political disengagement fail to approach the relationship between the media and political engagement in the context of the whole social system and how it has changed in the past two decades —

specifically in relation to the rise of Trans-National Corporations and the 'hollowing out' of democratic mechanisms. At the methodological level, the narrow conceptualisation of the field means that, even in the unusual cases where scholars look beyond the question of elections, the research agenda is still fixed at the level of media power and not on how the media fit into a wider system of power relations (see, for example, Bennett and Manheim 2001). As James Curran and Colin Leys have argued:

Some liberal accounts of the British media ... do not look behind media facades to check their wiring and plumbing, their complex articulation to power in British society. If they do, it is usually to check only the circuits that run between media and government. By contrast, there is a radical tradition which ... is more critical in tone [but] shares with the liberal approach a basic weakness. It offers a media-centred analysis which sheds light on media organisations, while leaving in shadow the wider processes of society (Curran and Leys 2000: 221).

We can add that both liberal and neoliberal accounts of the media also tend conveniently to ignore the interests at play and the outcomes of processes of interaction between the media and the political system (Philo and Miller 2001). It is not the development of spin techniques or multi-channel television in the abstract that are problematic, but rather what this signifies in terms of the decline of democratic process and the increasing dominance of business interests in politics. This is not, as neoliberal apologists like to claim, a question of 'aesthetic' judgment (McNair 2000). Rather, political communication needs to be seen in the context of wider circuits of communication and power (Philo and Miller 2002).

THE UK CASE

First of all, we should note that the political system in the UK has always found difficulty

in reflecting and responding to popular opinion. In the UK, public opinion has been consistently to the left of the three main parties since at least 1979. Contrary to the fashionable left-wing view in the 1980s, the British public were not won over by Thatcherism as suggested by analysts such as Stuart Hall (Hall and Jacques 1983, 1989). In fact, throughout the period of the Thatcher regime, public opinion opposed new right-wing policies (McKie 1990). The UK public opposed privatisation in the early 1980s, and since then its opposition to both privatisation and private finance initiatives (PFI)/public-private partnerships (PPP) has only grown (Newton 2001). Indeed, across the whole range of social and political issues, UK public opinion finds little expression in government decision making. The same is true of US public opinion in most areas of domestic policy (Lewis 2001).

It is arguable that this was less obviously the case in the period of post-1945 consensus, where there was agreement that some form of compromise between capital and labour was necessary. Since the rise of the New Right in British politics from the mid-1970s onwards, there has been a concerted attempt to attack sources of popular power, from the Trades Unions to the democratic process itself.

As even liberal critics of the state of democracy note, there are 'systemic defects in the democratic process' in the contemporary period. 'Cumulatively', writes David Beetham of *The Democratic Audit*, 'the democratic checks on prime ministerial power by the cabinet, by Parliament, by the prime minister's own and other parties and by the realistic threat of electoral defeat have been progressively weakened' (Beetham 2003; see also Beetham *et al.* 2002).

But we can go further and look at these issues in the light of international developments, such as the development of corporate-led globalisation. One of the key mechanisms for this has been the 'hollowing

out' of the national democratic process as important decisions are taken at the supranational level (the EC, the WTO) or by the transnational corporations themselves. The involvement of transnational capital in politics is an undeniable tendency which has progressively strengthened in relation to both the EU and the UK (Balanya *et al.* 2000). While there remains some dispute about whether this development points to the formation of a 'transnational capitalist class', the empirical evidence does show transnational business increasingly operating in 'national' and 'transnational' politics (Sklair 2001, 2002).

This, of course, has an impact on UK politics, in the sense that the UK government complies with such policies (indeed, is often at the forefront of their development). But the rise of direct corporate involvement in politics also has its own effects.

This involvement has increased in recent decades, as documented by Useem (1984) in his comparative study of UK and US business, and by a range of sociologists of power networks for the UK, USA and elsewhere (eg Scott 1990; Domhoff 2001). Such work has exposed the myriad financial and personal connections between political parties and governments and big business; these stretch all the way from bribes through the corporate funding of political campaigns and political donations to sponsorship deals, lobbying activities and membership of social clubs.

The 1980s and early 1990s saw the rise of business as a political actor in, and beneficiary of, politics. This was achieved, and continues to function, by means of what Neil Mitchell (1997) describes as the three pillars of business power: the media, the pro-business assumptions of policy makers and business political activity (including the funding of political parties and lobbying by corporations and corporate lobby groups). It is no secret that the public relations and lobbying industry have multiplied many times in the process of this neoliberal transformation (Miller and

Dinan 2000), nor that lobbyists have been implicated in many of the scandals associated with 'sleaze' under the Conservatives in the UK (Hollingsworth 1991; Leigh and Vulliamy 1997; Ridley and Doig 1995), and at the heart of those associated with the Blair government (Palast 2002) and its fellow traveller regime in Edinburgh, under, successively, Dewar, McLeish and McConnell (Miller 2002, 2003; Schlesinger *et al.* 2001).

The contribution of campaign finance has also become a much more significant issue in the UK (Osler 2002). This is not some abstract process of increasing corruption in politics, but is associated with the progressive narrowing of the differences between Labour and Tory, as both have become parties of business (Ramsay 2002; Osler 2002). The dominance of big business has been decisive in the institutional corruption of the political process (Monbiot 2000). This is shown most obviously by the Iraq war, but also by the neoliberal agenda on health, education, welfare and transport, all of which are being handed over to the banks via PFI and PPP. This has the result of locking in corporate control of democratic decision making rather than just providing public services with private cash (Shaoul 2003).

THE US EXAMPLE

A similar analysis of the US system can be made, although there has been less distance for the USA to travel, in the sense that social democracy never gained much of a toehold there. As Chomsky notes:

The techniques of manufacture of consent are most finely honed in the United States, a more advanced business-run society than its allies. . . . But the same concerns arise in Europe, as in the past, heightened by the fact that the European varieties of state capitalism have not yet progressed as far as the United States in eliminating labour unions and other impediments to rule by men (and occasionally women) of best

quality, thus restricting politics to factions of the business party (Chomsky 1991: 369).

One does not need to take Chomsky's word for it, as there are a myriad of investigative books that document the power of corporations in the USA, the influence of the 'cash nexus' on elections, lobbying and the corruption of the political process (Derber 1998; Drew 2000; Lewis *et al.* 1998; Lewis and Allison 2002; Palast 2002; Silverstein 1998; Trento 1992).

EXPLAINING VOTER DISENGAGEMENT

Contrary to the notion floated by the Labour Party — among others — that this is a general process across the Western world which has been happening for some time, the evidence shows that voter turnout in the UK has only declined markedly since 1997 (Forethought 2001). In the period from 1945 to 1997, there is some flux in the turnout rates, and on average a small decline. But there has only been a significantly larger decline since Labour came to power in 1997.¹ The problem is therefore only of comparatively recent origin, since the election of New Labour. Moreover, the problem is not a general problem across the West. There is a chronic and long-term problem in the USA. In Germany, by contrast, the turnout in the 1949 Bundestag election was 78.5 per cent. Since then, there has been some variation, but in 1998 and 2002 it was higher than in 1949 (1998: 82.2 per cent; 2002: 79.1 per cent).²

Although there has been a decline in voting in UK elections, there has also been a corresponding increase in political activity:

. . . between 1984 and 2000 . . . the proportion of people who said that they had boycotted products for ethical reasons rose from 4% to 31% . . . Although 44% of people had attended a political meeting in 1979, this had dropped to 25% by 2000, over the same period the propor-

tion who had gone on a demonstration increased from 20% to 33% (*The Guardian* 2003).

This was nowhere more clearly demonstrated than the biggest marches in Scottish and British history on 15th February 2003 in Glasgow and London against the attack on Iraq. The rise of the anti-war movement and the emergence of a global anti-capitalist movement gives the lie to the notion of political apathy.

The obvious conclusion, although not the one that most political communications scholars come to, is that political engagement is directly related to the extent that people feel that voting makes a difference. In this author's view, the answer is to be found in the progressive choking of democratic processes in the UK. It is no surprise to learn, then, that the seats with the lowest turnout in the 2001 UK election and the 2003 Scottish election were those with the highest levels of deprivation and poverty.

When the argument about voter disengagement is put in the context of the wider society, it is clear that the media do play a central role in disengagement, but one that is related to the more general decline in democracy. The key media trends, such as the declining coverage of international affairs, the decline of current affairs and documentaries, the rise in reality television, and the use of the media in spin and as propaganda tools (Miller 2003), are evidently a key part of the problem. But it would be wrong to see the media as pre-eminently to blame for disengagement. This is also the conclusion of Nick Sparrow (2001) of polling agency ICM, who concludes that 'low turnout in the 2001 election was a consequence of unfulfilled promises from Labour on the big issues they promised to tackle, coupled with a feeling that there was no alternative.' This is not very far from the conclusion of Michael Moore on the US experience:

Maybe the reason the majority of Americans

don't vote is that they are tired of having to choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledumber . . . Most citizens don't vote — not because they're not hungry to participate, but because they've shown up and there's nothing but crap on the menu (Moore 2002: 22).

SOLUTIONS

The dominant trend in political communication advocates various sophisticated and not-so-sophisticated solutions to the problem of disengagement. These include campaign and media reform. For example, Thomas Patterson suggests that US election campaigns should be shorter, start at a more convenient time, truncate the primary process, increase the amount of prime time coverage and make it easier to vote (Patterson 2002). In the land of the stolen election, where political parties are bought and sold by business interests, this is a solution destined to leave the naked power of the corporations untouched and will have precisely zero impact on the ability of the USA to act as a rogue state in defiance of international law.

By contrast, the 'solution' of the neoliberal apologists is more deregulation. According to McNair, we already have a 'popular public sphere in the best sense of the term, supporting a political culture which begins to hint at the democratic potential of advanced capitalism glimpsed by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. . . an information apparatus of real value to the democratic process' (McNair 2000: 176). Norris discusses deregulation as 'broadening the scope' of news leading to a 'gradual' process in which the media exert a 'positive impact' on democracy (Norris 2000: 311, 318). Similarly, Street claims that the decline of news and current affairs 'may have positive democratic consequences' (Street 2001). These suggestions are wrong, in the sense that they focus on the media at the expense of examining the functioning of the democratic system. They fail to note the decline in democratic processes, the massive gap between popular opinion and govern-

ment policies and that the shift to 'spin' has been accompanied by a neoliberal shift in politics and, moreover, fail to discuss the continuing shift towards the interests of transnational capital presided over by UK and US governments (not to mention the neoliberal agenda of the EU). Most importantly of all, they fail to notice that this means that the contemporary political choices open to the British people are extremely limited.

To sum up, it is possible to see the media as contributing to disengagement, in the sense that the media are a part of the power structure of the 'democratic' system. But it is the democratic system as a whole that is in crisis. This suggests that arguments about 'institutional corruption' are likely to have more purchase in understanding disengagement than those which diagnose the problem as a media or spin failure. Likewise, the solution is not to produce more engaging TV programmes, but a fundamental reform of the system. The deregulation of the media and the rise of spin and manipulation are key problems for democracy. But the media did not invent lobbying or institutional political corruption; in fact, if anything, they under-report it.

Spin and 'attack' journalism are merely features of a society in which private interests have almost entirely replaced public interests. The need for political spin arises from the need to sell policies which have no basis in popularity among the electorate. The post-war period of compromise between capital and labour (in the UK, France, Germany and elsewhere) was based on some concessions to the interests of the organised working class. There is now virtually no area where popular wishes find some expression in government policy. This is why there is a pressing need to spin and spin again.

The lack of democracy is a direct challenge to the neoliberals who want to replace popular control with consumerist market mechanisms. But it is also a direct challenge to liberal theorists who seem unable to recognise the

wider context of the problem. The crisis of communication does exist, but it is a consequence of a wider crisis of legitimacy. In short, the democratic system is failing. It is not just the media that is responsible for voter disengagement, it is the whole system.

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This paper was presented at the 'Can Vote, Won't Vote' conference under a different title.

NOTES

- (1) For the figures, see: 'Tutor2U low voter turnout, a threat to democracy?' (online at www.tutor2u.net/politics/content/topics/elections/voter_turnout.htm).
- (2) For further information on German election results, visit the website: http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahl2002/englisch/wahlvor98/btw2002/index_btw2002.htm

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