

Developing a Research Agenda on the Media and Education

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Most researchers who have investigated the relationship between the media and education have asserted that coverage of education has a negative impact on public perceptions of, and support for, public education. Much of this research relies on negative case examples and cross-sectional data to make this claim. This article calls into question the assumptions being made by these researchers. The article identifies a need for more systematic and longitudinal research on the topic. In identifying this need, the article suggests the development of a framework that recognizes the appropriate role of the media in a democratic society. In developing this framework, it is recommended that researchers focus on both media processes and media impacts in assessing the democratic nature of the coverage provided.

Research on the Negative Impact of the Media

The belief that the media have contributed to civic disengagement generally, and declining support for public education specifically, is so prevalent among researchers that it seems a certainty, an irrefutable fact. The articles in this special issue add to this rising chorus that holds the media, at least partially, responsible for growing public disengagement from

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governmental institutions and ignorance of public issues such as education. These articles make two primary assumptions: (a) that the processes used in media coverage of education have a significant impact upon public engagement with, and perceptions of, education issues and (b) that the impact of these processes is in the negative direction (Norris, 2000).

As the articles in this issue reveal, the rationales for this negative impact vary. Some researchers have focused on structural causes such as economic pressures on the news industry that have led to an erosion of standards and a reduction in public service orientation (see Killeen, 2007/this issue; Moses, 2007/this issue; Wallace, 2007/this issue). Other researchers have focused on cultural approaches that attribute the negative impact of the media on education to the growth of a more adversarial news culture (see Anderson, 2007/this issue; Haas, 2007/this issue). Others have focused the blame on changes in politics more generally as evidenced by the rise in spin, consultants, single-issue campaigns, and ideological polarization (see Haas, 2007/this issue; Killeen, 2007/this issue; Wallace 2007/this issue). Still other researchers have focused on the social impact of the mass media more generally, including television shows, popular music, advertisements, and the movie industry (see Tillman & Trier, 2007/this issue). What these varying approaches share is the belief that public disengagement and distrust of education are due, in part, to media coverage of education.

The researchers who have contributed to this special issue of the *Peabody Journal of Education* on the media and education are not alone in their belief that the media harm civic engagement with public issues. The first researchers to focus on what has become known as "media malaise" were Kurt and Gladys Lang (1966). Their work in the 1960s argued that the media promoted public cynicism by focusing on conflict at the expense of routine coverage of public issues. As they concluded, "The media, we contend, can stir up in individuals defensive reactions by their emphasis on crisis and conflict in lieu of clarifying normal decision-making processes" (p. 348). Michael J. Robinson (1975, 1976, 1977), popularizing the term video malaise, has argued that a combination of the themes television used to portray politics, and the type of person most likely to rely on television news, undermined trust in government. Robinson asserted that "the greater the dependency upon television, the greater the person's ... estrangement from government" (Robinson, 1975, p. 101).

Larry Sabato (1993), in more recent scholarship, characterized the typical journalist as being "far more interested in finding sleaze and achieving fame and fortune than in serving as an honest broker of information between citizens and government" (p. 2). Similarly, Thomas Patterson (1993) warned us that news coverage focuses excessively on horse race

aspects of elections, on conflicts and bad news, and on uncovering the insider angle behind most policy proposals. Joseph N. Capella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1997) argued that this style of political coverage stressing conflict and strategy contributes to a “spiral of cynicism.” James Fallows (1996) argued that the relentless pursuit of sensational, superficial, and populist reporting in an attempt to maintain ratings and readership has caused media coverage to go “down-market.” Such ratings-oriented reporting, Schudson (1995) argued, comes at the expense of detailed coverage of policy issues and “hard” news. The conclusion that emerges from all of this research, as well as from the articles in this special issue, is that “the media can be blamed for a host of political ills assumed to be plaguing America, such as widespread ignorance about government and public-policy issues, declining electoral turnout, and cynicism about government institutions” (Norris, 2000, p. 8).

Questioning Media Malaise

Although both the volume and the tone of research asserting a negative impact of the media on civic engagement appears overwhelming, the methods used for reaching these conclusions are less than convincing, relying primarily on negative case studies that may not be representative of the majority of media coverage and cross-sectional surveys showing a correlation between exposure to the news and negative views of government institutions. The research, to date, that attributes a negative impact on civic engagement to the media has three fundamental flaws: (a) The research is not systematic and reflects an ahistorical view of media impact that is heavily dependent on context, (b) the research attributes causation from misinterpreted correlations, and (c) the research rests on inappropriate assumptions about the role of the public as consumers of information.

A relationship between the media and public education specifically—and government institutions generally—has been shown on multiple measures. However, one of the fundamental flaws of the research that ascribes political cynicism to media coverage is that it does not account for the tendency of citizens’ views of government and education, and citizens’ views of the media, to covary. Confidence in government, in the press, and in education show positive correlations (see Table 1). Likewise the public’s trust in the media and government institutions do so as well ($r = .31$; American National Election Survey, 2004). However, the public’s confidence in the press, in government, and in education has moved downward together over time (see Figure 1).

Rather than showing that the media causes public distrust or lack of confidence in education and government institutions, trust in these

Table 1
Correlations for Confidence in Government Institutions and the Media From 1972–2005 General Social Survey Cumulative File

| <i>Government Institutions</i> | <i>Confidence in Press</i> | <i>Confidence in TV News</i> |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Confidence in public education | .21 | .22 |
| Confidence in executive branch | .16 | .15 |
| Confidence in the legislative branch | .27 | .23 |

institutions and trust in the media go hand in hand. The fortunes of the media are tied to those of education and government institutions and vice versa. This relationship could represent mutual destruction by government officials, education officials, and the media. As the media attack institutions such as public education and as public education officials (and researchers) attack the media, they simultaneously cause public disengagement and distrust of both themselves and the institutions. Just as likely an explanation, however, is that the relationship between lack of confidence in the media and lack of confidence in public education indicates a decline in more fundamental aspects of the public’s trust in society and reflects how the bar of public expectations for institutions and their leaders may have risen over time (Inglehart, 1997).

Another fundamental problem with existing research on the media’s impact on perceptions of government institutions and public education is the underlying assumption that the public responds passively to the coverage provided. The most recent analyses of the impact of media coverage on the public’s civic engagement indicate that those most actively engaged with the media are the most discerning of the coverage provided, and also happen to be the most engaged with public institutions. Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, and Bennett (1999) used measures of perceptions of types of

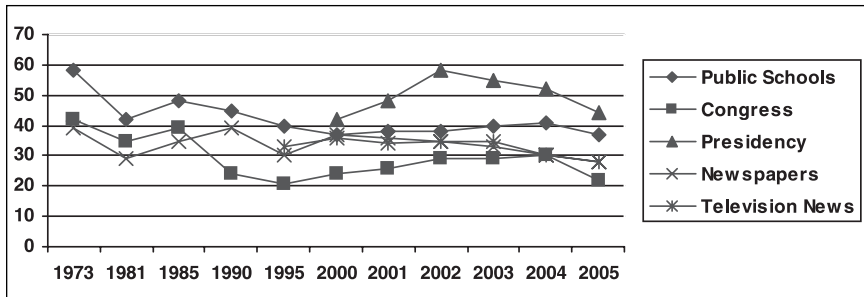


Figure 1. Longitudinal trends in public confidence in public schools, congress, the presidency, newspapers, and television news.

media, frequency of use of various types of media, importance of media exposure to respondent, media fairness, and demographic information including partisan identification to assess the impact of the media on a trust-in-government measure. Bennett and his colleagues expected that people who were exposed to more news would be more cynical and have less trust in government. This was not the case. Using three ordinary least squares regression models, the researchers found that none of their media-exposure variables were significant predictors of trust in government. At best, less than one fifth of the variance in the trust-in-government measure could be accounted for by the combined effects of trust in media fairness, perceptions of financial fortunes, opinion about government's impact on family fortunes, and general faith in people. Bennett and his colleagues concluded "it is important to note how little impact media exposure and attentiveness variables have on cynicism.... The time has come to take a more nuanced view of the relationship between the public's opinions about the media and political cynicism" (pp. 16–17).

Pippa Norris's (2000) work has taken this more nuanced view. In a far more extensive study of media impact on civic engagement and trust in government, she found that people who watch more television news, read more newspapers, surf the Internet, and pay attention to political campaigns are consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory. Norris used a combination of surveys, content analysis, and experiments to investigate the impact of various media sources and types of reporting on trust in government, knowledge of issues, and political participation. The study collected data over 5 years from Europe and the United States. Using a succession of models, Norris established that those most exposed to the news media and party campaigns consistently proved more knowledgeable, more trusting toward government and the political system, and more likely to participate in election campaigns. The findings were consistent across Europe and the United States, despite a battery of structural and attitudinal controls for factors that could have affected media use and civic engagement.

While Norris's (2000) findings counter the prevailing notions about the impact of the media on civic engagement and trust in government, her findings about those who are disengaged and cynical are even more telling. Norris showed that those who are least likely to be politically engaged are "naturally immunized" against the influences of the media in three ways. First, when those with less civic engagement encounter political news, they turn it off. As Norris explained, "The idea of a captive audience is as passé as the phonograph. Why listen to pundits and pollsters when there are so many alternative channels and programs?" (p. 317). Second, even if the disengaged continue to watch or read out of routine habit, they pay little

attention. Finally, the disengaged are less likely to regard news as credible, because disengagement is highly associated with mistrust. Thus, as the media do not cause civic disengagement and distrust, they also do not appear to reinforce existing disengagement and distrust.

Judging the Media

If the recent evidence on the impact of the media does not show that it negatively effects public engagement and trust in government institutions, including the public schools, why do researchers continue to focus on negative case examples that reinforce the opposite? I would assert that the pattern of research claiming a negative impact of the media on public education and government institutions continues because we have lacked a framework by which to judge the conduct of the media. And, because we lack a framework for making objective judgments about coverage, those who support public education (or support other existing government institutions) have assumed that the role of the media in a democracy should be to strengthen the public's goodwill and support for its institutions. This raises the question of whether the media's appropriate role in the reporting, for example, on the war in Iraq is to provide coverage that engenders more support for the conflict and leads more young men and women to volunteer for the armed forces. Or, similarly, is it the proper role of the media to cover education in such a way that leads citizens to unquestioningly approve school bond levies or accept without debate decisions made by school officials about what is taught to their children?

Although we lack a framework for judging the coverage of education provided by the media, there are accepted frameworks for judging democratic institutions more generally (see Beetham, 1994; Bollen, 1991; Gastil, 1991; Hadenius, 1992). The work of those who have developed frameworks for evaluating democratic institutions relies primarily on Schumpeter's (1952) conception of democracy. Under this framework, democratic institutions have only two elements: popular control and political equality (Beetham, 1994). This conception of democracy defines popular control as control over decision makers, rather than over decision making itself. Similarly, political equality is defined as equality of access to the political process rather than equality of participation. Thus, these researchers are concerned with whether the processes engaged in by the institutions are democratic. It is a procedural rather than experiential conception of democracy.

These two procedural elements of democracy are expanded into indices or dimensions by those concerned with evaluating the behavior of institutions. For example, Beetham (1994), in developing measures to assess democracy and the democratization of countries, expanded the element of popular control into four dimensions:

- Free and fair elections.
- Open and accountable government.
- Guaranteed civil and political rights.
- Civil society.

Political equity, in Beetham's (1994) framework, is assessed through these four dimensions of political control. For example, under free and fair elections, the Beetham indices assess the extent to which each vote is of equal value and the extent to which there is equality of opportunity to stand for public office, regardless of which section of society a person comes from. To assess political equality under the open and accountable government dimension, one evaluates whether any individuals or groups are systematically excluded from access to, or influence upon, government, or redress from it. For civil and political rights, political equality is assessed by whether these are effectively guaranteed to all sections of society. Under civil society, the degree of equal opportunity for self-organization, access to the media, and redress from powerful corporations are used to determine political equality.

Similarly, the Gastil (1991) index used by Freedom House to assess the degree of democratization in developing countries has expanded the two elements of procedural democracy into seven constructs:

- Fair electoral process.
- Political pluralism and participation.
- Accessible and accountable functioning of government.
- Freedom of expression and belief.
- Associational and organizational rights.
- Rule of law and procedures that support democracy.
- Personal autonomy and individual rights.

Again, the indices used in the Gastil index measure institutional processes rather than substantive performance or outcome.

In the study of media impact mentioned earlier, Pippa Norris (2000) too relied on the Schumpeterian framework of democracy to identify three functions of the media in a democratic society:

- As a *civic forum* for pluralistic debate.
- As a *watchdog* for civil and political liberties.
- As a *mobilizing agent* for public participation.

Like the frameworks developed for assessing the democratization of countries, Norris (2000) defined her media functions in terms of processes used rather than the products resulting from the coverage. For example, with regard to the function of mobilizing agent, Norris maintained that

the media succeeds if they *encourage* learning about politics and public affairs. She also assessed the media’s mobilizing agent function by whether they *stimulate* interest in politics as well as whether the media *encourage* participation through available channels for civic engagement (i.e., voting). Her framework then assesses the actions of the media themselves—what they do—rather than what the public does in response to their coverage.

Despite the seemingly incomplete assessment of the media provided by Norris’s (2000) framework, it does begin to provide a systematic way of assessing the actions of the media that is currently lacking in educational research and political science research more generally. Adopting a framework such as Norris’s for the emerging scholarship on media coverage of education would force researchers to be explicit about the assumptions they are making about the functions of the media. It would also allow for the development of agreed upon research lines within the study of the media and education. For example, the framework would provide a way of grouping and comparing studies of each democratic function. As an illustration in Table 2, I have grouped possible research questions for the study of media and education by the function they are assumed to play.

Table 2
Possible Grouping of Research Questions Emerging from Norris’s Framework for Assessing Education Coverage by the Media

| <i>Media Function</i> | <i>Possible Research Questions</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Civic forum | Is coverage of education issues widely and easily available to all sectors of society? Does the coverage of education reflect the political and cultural diversity within a society? Are diverse views on education given equal or proportional time in the media coverage? |
| Mobilizing agent | Do the media provide coverage that informs the public about education issues? Do the media provide practical knowledge about the probable consequences of educational action and inaction? Do the media provide coverage of opportunities for public engagement with educational processes? |
| Watchdog | Does the media coverage attempt to hold school officials accountable for their actions? Do the media provide critical coverage and analysis of educational events and plans? Do the media act as independent, fair, and impartial critics of all education interests? |

We then could, in politics of education scholarship, choose to develop a line of research on the media and education that relies upon a procedural view of democracy such as Norris (2000) offered. Such an approach would entail assuming that coverage of public education assessed as democratic will result in democratic impacts on public schools. This would, however, be limiting in a number of ways. First, the focus on democratic procedure is less than ideally effective in discriminating between democratic institutions in terms of their performance on key democratic dimensions. To provide a comparison that most educators have experienced with accreditation bodies, the efficacy of judging schools by the number and quality of books in their library or even the number and qualifications of teachers on their staff, rather than by the amount and quality of learning taking place, renders substantive comparisons between schools impossible. Thus, if we rely on a research framework for evaluating the media's coverage of education that focuses on what is provided, we inhibit comparisons between media sources, media coverage, and even coverage of different issues. A second disadvantage of relying on a procedural framework for analysis of media coverage is it focuses on currently identified procedures for coverage at the expense of emerging processes. Dunleavy (1990) claimed that the procedural, institutionally focused approach is implicitly system biased, fostering the growth of knowledge about issues that are salient within the status quo, rather than on the autonomous advancement of emerging developments, trends, and changes. Given these issues and the concern shown by the articles in this special issue for the negative impact of what may indeed be fair and democratic coverage by the media, we may want to pursue a line of research on the media that goes beyond assessing the procedural aspects of the coverage.

In contrast to the Schumpeterian theorists, polyarchical and deliberative democratic theorists including Dahl (1971), Benhabib (1996), Cohen (1996), and Young (1996) have all argued that we must not assume that fair and equitable democratic procedures will result in fair and equitable outcomes. For example Joshua Cohen stated

the deliberative conception of democracy captures the role of "undemocratic" as a term of criticism applying to results as well as processes: it provides common roots for the "by the people" and "for the people" aspects of the ideal of democracy. (p. 108)

And Young stated, "Most contemporary deliberative theorists believe that deliberative democracy is potentially more inclusive and egalitarian than an interest-based democracy" (p. 122). However, these theorists too have

failed to develop frameworks for assessing the impacts and outcomes of democratic institutions and have instead focused on outlining principles for improving the procedures and processes of the democracy. For example, Cohen outlined principles of deliberative democracy to include

- Deliberative inclusion—which requires more than that the interests of others be given equal consideration but that political actions are acceptable to others given a background of differences of conscientious conviction.
- Common good—that “begins by observing that citizens have good reason to reject a system of public policy that fails to advance their interests at all” (p. 105).
- Rights of participation—“including rights of voting, association, and political expression, with a strong presumption against restrictions on the content or viewpoint of expression ... and a more general requirement of equal opportunity for effective influence” (p. 106).

Benhabib (1996) too identified three principles assumed in a deliberative theory of democracy:

1. Value pluralism exists in all democratic institutions and communities—“disagreement about the highest goods of human existence and the proper conduct of a morally righteous life are a fundamental feature” (p. 73).
2. Conflicts of interest, in addition to conflicts of values, are also present in all democratic bodies—“social life necessitates both conflict of interests and cooperation” (p. 73).
3. Democratic institutions cannot be arranged in ways that result in interests and values being equally represented—“no modern society can organize its affairs along the fiction of a mass assembly carrying out its deliberations in public” (p. 73).

In outlining these principles, Benhabib (1996) and Cohen (1996) clearly assumed that the outcomes of the deliberation are as important as the processes used. Yet ultimately Benhabib claimed, “This deliberative model of democracy is proceduralist in that it emphasizes first and foremost certain institutional procedures and practices for attaining decisions on matters that would be binding on all” (p. 73).

The proceduralist orientation of both the Schumpeterian and the deliberative democratic theorists presents a real opportunity for educational researchers to develop measures, methods, and methodologies that capture how citizens are affected by the media’s coverage of education; by

their own consumption of that coverage; and by the knowledge, skills, adaptation mechanisms, or participatory actions that they consequently exhibit. In doing so, we must resist an approach that assesses the processes and performance of news media coverage of education that relies solely on one research paradigm and a few scales or measures. The study of the media, where both the detailed arguments used and the conclusions reached are likely to be contested, requires a multimethod approach. Because any set of performance measures and research processes will capture only a fraction of potentially relevant information, the production of multiple indicators and multiple methods would be a key step in developing this line of educational research.

If we are to develop a line of research that is not exclusively institutionally or procedurally biased, how the public experiences media coverage of education and the subsequent actions that result need to be studied, regardless of whether these experiences and actions translate directly into positive changes for schools. As Dahl (1996) argued, "The reason why we want foundations for democratic theory, then, is that they can improve our political judgments and choices" (p. 337). The reason we need to develop democratic frameworks that can assess both the process and products of the media's coverage of education is that they will improve our conclusions about this coverage and possibly even the coverage itself.

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