Chapter 10. Political Communications and Democratic Politics

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Previous chapters have demonstrated how professional spin-doctors, hired political consultants, advertising experts, and sophisticated party web pages have gradually displaced traditional forms of party campaigning, like local party volunteers, constituency rallies, and door-to-door canvassing. The professionalization of political communications is becoming evident in many established and newer democracies[1]. One common perspective has conceptualized these changes as representing the 'rise of political marketing', where the primary development involves the way candidates, parties, government, lobbyists and groups have borrowed communication techniques from the private sector in the attempt to achieve strategic objectives like gaining votes, driving public opinion or influencing legislation[2]. Yet this perspective remains limited, since political agents may be responding to changes in the news media, electorate or wider political system as much as initiating developments. The rise of the Internet, for example, or the loosening of party-voter bonds, provide problems and opportunities for politicians seeking to control the news agenda in a more complex, unpredictable and fragmented communication environment. Another alternative perspective has often regarded recent changes as the 'Americanization' of campaigning, if seen as originated in the United States. Yet rather than a specifically American development, with practices like negative advertising, personalized politics, or high campaign expenditures which are subsequently exported in a pre-packaged box to other countries, it seems more accurate to understand this process as an 'import-export' shopping model with campaigners borrowing whatever techniques are believed to work[3]. Developments in campaign communications can therefore best be understood as part of the modernization process rooted in technological, economic and political developments common to many societies. This process simultaneously transforms party organizations, the news media, and the electorate[4].

The key issue this chapter addresses is whether the modernization of political communications described throughout this book has proved detrimental to the quality of democracy, as so many fear. The first section briefly summarizes theories of media malaise, which suggest that changes in the news industry and in party campaigns have transformed

the *structure* and *contents* of political communications and that this, in turn, has contributed towards civic disengagement among the public. Theories of 'videomalaise' or 'media malaise', suggesting that exposure to political coverage contributed towards political alienation, first emerged in the early 1970s in Robinson's studies of American television news, and were expanded in Miller et al..'s analysis of newspaper readers.[5] In the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era theories of media malaise seemed to provide a plausible reason for growing public disillusionment with government. In the 1990s, following another wave of disenchantment, this perspective has launched a deluge of popular books. The core argument shared this perspective is that public faith in representative institutions and leaders has been eroded by developments in political communications, including tabloidization of the news media and the adoption of political marketing techniques by parties.

The chapter goes on to examine evidence for these claims, drawing on the 1964 and 1997 British Election Studies. Far from supporting this theory, the chapter demonstrates a consistent and positive relationship between attention to party and news messages and indicators of civic knowledge, political efficacy, and voting participation. This evidence lends further confirmation to patterns found throughout Western Europe and the United States[6]. The conclusion theorizes that this positive relationship is open to a number of interpretations but it can best be explained by the theory of a 'virtuous circle'. Attention to campaign communications function in this account as a two-way flow to activate the active, progressively strengthening and reinforcing political information, interest, and involvement. This is understood as a long-term process operating at diffuse level: it is the cumulative impact of regular and repeated exposure and attention to the news media and to party campaigns, the steady drip, drip, drip of political communications, that gradually influences the public. Through this process, those already most engaged acquire further information that facilitates practical political choices. In contrast, the disengaged are less affected since they are less disposed to pay attention to political coverage. The conclusion considers the implications of this theory for understanding the rise of post-modern campaigns and the future of British democracy.

Changes in the Structure and Organization of Party Campaigns

In understanding the modernization of campaign communications we need to make a clear analytical distinction between changes in the *structure* and organization of parties and the news industry, changes in the *contents* of political messages, and changes in the potential *effects* of these messages.

The impact of developments on changing the balance of power within party structures is most persuasive. P*re-modern* campaign organizations were based primarily upon direct forms of interpersonal communications between candidates and citizens at constituency level (see Figure 1). In these campaigns, local party volunteers selected the candidates, rang the doorbells, posted the pamphlets, targeted the wards, planned the resources, and generally provided all the grassroots machinery linking voters and candidates, supplemented by some professional party agents working in particular constituencies. Planning by the party leadership was largely short-term and ad-hoc and most activity like leadership speeches and rallies was essentially constituency-focused, although the rise of radio broadcasts and news reels started to change this pattern as early as the 1920s. In the news media, the partisan-leaning press acted as the core intermediary between politicians and the public. And the electorate was anchored to parties by strong loyalties.

[Figure 1 about here]

The era from the late 1950s until the late 1980s was characterized by the predominance of the *modern* campaign, defined as those with a party organization coordinated more closely at national level by politicians and press officers at central office, advised by part-time external professional media consultants, opinion pollsters and advertising gurus. Active planning and policy presentations lengthened well beyond the period of the official campaign. For the major parties the principal forum of campaign events moved to the battle to dominate news agenda on television and the national press. The daily campaign used morning press conferences, policy launches, leadership tours, party election broadcasts and key leadership speeches to influence a relatively small group of editors, producers and journalists who were the key gatekeepers in a limited range of national newspapers and TV studios. And the electorate became increasingly decoupled from party and group loyalties. At the heart of the campaign, for the major parties, a team of political leaders and party staff, supplemented by external advisors, handled the press, commissioned polls and advertisements, and scheduled the theme de jour, leadership tours, news conferences and photo opportunities in the attempt to frame the news.

The process continues to evolve and since the mid-1990s Britain has been experiencing the gradual emergence of *post-modern campaigns*. In these contests, parties have become more pro-active, coordinated and systematic in their news management and election targeting. The coterie of professional consultants expert in advertising, public opinion, marketing and strategic news management has become more co-equal actors with politicians, assuming a more influential role within government. Local activity has been coordinated

more tightly from national party headquarters by beepers, fax and Internet. A 'permanent' campaign has been developing, where the techniques of electioneering and governing become intertwined. The news media is becoming increasingly fragmenting into a more complex and incoherent environment of multiple channels, outlets, and levels, ending the days of the captive audience for the BBC and ITN evening news or the loyal and predictable readership on the right for the *Mail* or on the left for the *Mirror*. New information technologies, notably the explosion in Internet use, as well as the use of techniques like 'town-hall meetings', daily tracking polls, and focus groups, are gradually facilitating more interactive formats between the news media, parties, and the public. Newspaper-party linkages are weakening, as the press responds to a more autonomous 'media logic' of sales, rather than traditional political loyalties. And as Chapter X demonstrates, the electorate becomes further dealigned, or 'up for grabs', in their voting choices where social and political identities are constructed rather than given[7]. The characteristics of post-modern campaigns are continuing to evolve in Britain, along with political uses of the web. As shown in Figure 1, in many regards post-modern campaigns facilitate a return to some earlier forms of interactivity, placing these channels between the techniques that predominated in the pre-modern and modern era.

Previous chapters have demonstrated how this process has transformed party organizations: tipping the balance of power from elected representatives towards professional consultants (Chapter 5), and from constituency party activists towards Westminster HQs (Chapter 4). Increased professionalization has placed additional strains on party revenues: the Neill report[8] estimated that for the major parties the real costs of campaigning quadrupled from 1983-97 (see Chapter 3). There has also been a substantial increase in the costs of press offices during routine periods of government, with estimates of a staff of 60 employed for research, media and campaigning purposes in the news room in Conservative party central office, many paid by public funds for opposition parties, and over 70 special advisors employed in Whitehall by the Blair government[9].

These developments have affected Westminster politics but have they contributed towards public cynicism? Here there is much speculation that the rise of political marketing with its techniques of 'spin', selling and persuasion may have undermined the credibility of political leaders and institutions but the evidence is far less clear-cut.[10]. Bob Franklin provides one of the clearest statements of this thesis, decrying the 'packaging of politics', the manipulation of the public by official government advertising campaigns, and the rise of image over substance in Britain, which he believes may have contributed towards public cynicism[11]. Jay Blumler argues that the use of public relations techniques by Conservative

and Labour governments may have altered the tone of political news, producing a more adversarial journalistic-politician relationship, producing a 'crisis' in civic communication[12]. American research about the use of 'negative' or attack political advertising has raised worries that this practice may demobilize the electorate[13]. This literature suggests that if everything in politics is designed for popular appeal, with 'catch-all' parties adopting whatever slogan, message or image will resonate with today's focus groups, rather than authentic and deep-rooted ideological beliefs, then the public may have become more skeptical of party campaign messages.

Changes in the contents of political coverage

There is also much speculation, but little systematic evidence, that changes in the news coverage of government and public affairs have contributed towards political cynicism and disengagement. As discussed in earlier chapters, many believe that declining sales and intense headline-to-headline competition for readers have increased the 'tabloidization' of the press (see Chapter 7). 'Tabloidization' can refer to either the style or substance of news. The main worry is that this process has 'dumbed down' serious political coverage in the broadsheets as well as the popular end of the market, shrinking international news and parliamentary coverage, producing popular headlines focusing more on Blur than Blair.[14] At least until recently, British television has been insulated from down-market pressures, through regulated competition, but there are widespread anxieties that the dam is about to break producing a deluge of tabloid TV with the growing fragmentation of terrestrial, digital, satellite, cable and broadband television outlets (Chapter 5). The abolition of the flagship ITN *News at Ten* is regarded as indicative of these dangers. The emerging Internet Age has produced an even greater diversity of places to go and things to do, now that about a fifth of the British public is online[15].

It is feared that changes in the news industry mean that standards of British television are about to plunge headlong into a wasteland exemplified by imported sit coms, Schwartzenegger action movies, and Swedish soft porn. Many in Europe believe that growing competition from commercial channels in the 1980s has undermined the quality and diversity of public service television. The multiplication of media outlets, chasing the mass-market audience with low-cost, low-quality scheduling, is believed to have reduced the choice of program types[16]. For Peter Dahlgren, the displacement of public service television by commercial channels has impoverished the public sphere[17]. Many worry that Britain may be following down the path of America television, where concern about the quality of serious political coverage has produced a Greek chorus lamenting the modern state of

journalism. To mention just a few of the critics, for Entman, the free press in falls far short of its ideals, leaving too much of the public ignorant and disconnected from politics[18]. For Neil Postman the major networks, driven by their hemorrhage of viewers to cable, have substituted entertainment-oriented, crime, celebrity and consumer-obsessed, tabloid television for serious political coverage of national and world affairs '[19]. Neil Gabler echoes these claims, arguing that entertainment has come to be the predominant value on television news, with the result that the political process has been repackaged into show business[20]. For Roderick Hart, television creates illusions of political participation, while encouraging passivity, thereby seducing America[21]. Larry Sabato warns of the dangers of pack journalism, with all the press corp focusing obsessively on a few sensationalist stories producing a 'feeding frenzy'[22]. For Thomas Patterson, the press, in its role as election gatekeeper, has become a 'miscast' institution, out of order in the political system. Where America goes, in the multi-channel, mega-complex, entertainment-oriented, Disney Corp and Microsoft-dominated world, it is often feared that other countries will quickly follow.

Yet many of the more dire predictions seem exaggerated. Structural changes have radically transformed the news industry during the last half-century but rather than simply moving the news media down-market, as so many assume, instead this has produced a diversification of communication outlets, formats, levels and audiences, in Europe and the United States[23]. In Britain, real-audio BBC News online now coexists a click away from real-audio Amsterdam porn, the worthy 7pm Channel 4 news broadcasts along with Live TV's news bunny, MTV is available alongside the Parliamentary Channel, and *The Independent* sits on the same stands as the *Sunday Sport*. Television programmes commonly allow those who are interested to drill down for further information in related web sites. In post-industrial societies more political information is now available than ever before and the structure of the news industry in Europe is not necessarily following the commercially dominant and television-centric American model.

Moreover in Europe the news audience has not narrowed over time, as some fear, rather recent decades have seen the development of a wider and more socially diverse news audience. During the last fifty years on average across all post-industrial societies newspaper sales have not declined: the proportion of regular readers of European newspapers has doubled in the last three decades, and the social profile of readers has broadened[24]. The fall noted in earlier chapters in Britain, especially among Sunday papers, is not therefore an inevitable or universal secular trend. Three-quarters of all Europeans now watch TV news everyday, up from half three decades earlier. In post-industrial societies the amount of news

and current affairs broadcast on public service TV has tripled in the last thirty years, not shrunk. Use of the Internet has exploded so that by the end of the twentieth century a fifth of all Europeans are online, as are half of all Americans and Scandinavians. The new forms of campaigning provide a wide range of alternative channels for parties to connect with the public, from traditional house-to-house canvassing, national press conferences and party political broadcasts, to intranet and internet web pages, email lists and 'virtual' conferences. Even in the United States, where perhaps post-modern campaigns have developed furthest, newer forms of campaign communications complement, rather than replace, older ones. For example, the proportion of Americans contacted by the major parties during the campaign was higher in the mid-1990s than in the mid-1950s. Just as in warfare the poor bloody foot soldiers continue to be deployed alongside the Stealth bombers, so local volunteers contacting voters continue to work alongside sophisticated party web sites.

The Impact on Public Engagement

Therefore parties have adopted far more sophisticated techniques of political marketing, and the news media have diversified in channels and levels, but have these developments eroded citizen engagement with democracy, as many suggest? Many of the more exaggerated fears reflect a deeply conservative and nostalgic tendency to believe in a 'golden age' of face-to-face electioneering when, as in Lake Wobegon, all the politicians were articulate, all the voters were well-informed, and all the party activists were above average. In this mythical Briton, knowledgeable citizens enthusiastically debated Suez with parliamentary candidates at local campaign rallies, discussed the latest balance of payments crisis over tea and Spam sandwiches in the factory canteen, and read worthy parliamentary speeches on the Cuban crisis or the Rhodesian problem in the *Daily Mail* or *Daily Herald*. Campaigns, like Hovis and Marmite and Lipton's and Lucky Strikes, were widely believed to be good for you. Too often commentators slide far too easily, like a street gambler's slight of hand, from discussing changes in the news industry or in party campaigns (which have happened) to assumptions about their effects upon the public (which have not).

The number of skeptics questioning the evidence for all these claims has been growing in recent years. Earlier studies by the author found that, contrary to videomalaise, although TV watching was related to some signs of apathy, attention to the news media was associated with positive indicators of civic engagement, in the United States and Britain, as well as other countries[25]. Evidence from a battery of Eurobarometer surveys and the American National Election Surveys demonstrate that people who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns, are consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory[26]. Repeated tests confirm this

positive relationship, even after controlling for factors that characterize the news audience like their prior education and political interest. In a wide range of post-industrial societies, attention to the news media and party campaigns was found to be positively associated with political knowledge, trust and activism, rather that generating cynicism and disengagement, as many fear. Along similar lines, Kenneth Newton found that reading a broadsheet newspaper in Britain, or watching a lot of television news, was associated with high levels of political knowledge, interest and understanding of politics[27]. Christina Holtz-Bacha reported similar positive effects from attention to the news media in Germany[28]. The most recent examination of the American NES evidence, by Stephen Earl Bennett and his colleagues, found that trust in politics and trust in the news media went hand-in-hand, with no evidence that use of the news media caused political cynicism[29]. But so far these voices have been published as scattered scholarly studies, and thereby drowned out by the Greek chorus of popular lament for the state of modern journalism.

Civic Engagement and Campaign Communications in Britain

To extend this work further we can examine whether similar patterns are found in Britain. Unfortunately we lack consistent items that would allow us to analyze systematic trends over time in British general election campaigns but we can compare campaign communications in the 1964 BES, at the start of the series, with evidence for the most recent pattern in the 1997 BES.

The 1964 survey monitored three main categories of campaign messages. *Media* communications include coverage of the election in television news and current affairs, radio news, and newspapers. *Party-initiated* communications include campaign leaflets, canvassing by party workers, and local election meetings. Lastly, *personal* communications include talking about the campaign with family, friends, or colleagues. Table 1 shows that in the mid-1960s, the news media were the most popular source of information; 82% reported following the campaign on TV or radio news, while two-thirds followed events in newspapers. Reading party leaflets (64%), and talking to others during the campaign (60%), were also fairly common activities. In contrast only about a third (37%) reported contact with a party canvasser, while few (8%) said that they attended a political meeting during the campaign. Even in the mid-1960s, therefore, although television election coverage was a relatively recent innovation, the news media had quickly come to dominate the main channels of campaign communications.

[Table 1 about here]

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We can examine the association between exposure to campaign communication and three indicators of civic engagement included in the 1964 survey: reported voting turnout, campaign interest, and political efficacy. Table 1 presenting zero order correlations, without any social controls, shows that exposure to the news media and to personal discussions was consistently associated with civic engagement. The differences between groups were positive and significant on most of the indicators except for being canvassed, which was insignificantly related to civic engagement. In no case was use of the news media or party communications associated negatively with these indicators.

Are similar patterns evident today or has this positive association weakened over the years, due to changes in campaign communications? The British Election Study (BES) post-election cross-sectional survey in 1997 lets us compare exposure and attention to national and local television and newspapers, as well as whether the respondent was contacted at home or by telephone by party workers. We can also examine six indicators of 'civic engagement', broadly defined, including attitudes towards democracy, political trust, internal political efficacy, political knowledge, political interest, and voting turnout. The specific items are all outlined in the Appendix and scales were developed using principle components factor analysis (not reproduced here). Since the wording of these items are not identical to those used earlier the results of the analysis in 1964 and 1997 are not strictly comparable nevertheless we can compare the direction of the associations.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 presents the zero order correlations between these indicators and types of campaign communication without any control. The results show that attention to political news was strongly related to the propensity to vote, satisfaction with British democracy, political interest, and political knowledge. A similarly positive albeit weaker correlation was evident in terms of exposure to the news media. The only exceptions concerned political efficacy where, contrary to the other findings, regular viewers of local television news and regular readers of a national paper have a lower sense that they could influence the political process.

Of course it could be that these correlations are spurious if prior social background influences both use of the news media and civic engagement. Accordingly a series of regression models were run to examine the earlier associations controlling for age, gender, education and social class. These standard social variables have commonly been found to be strongly related to political participation, interest and knowledge, although to be more

weakly associated with political trust. The aim was not to develop comprehensive models explaining patterns of civic engagement, which would require many other factors to be considered, but rather to examine the standardized regression coefficients for the communication variables after entry of the social controls. To simplify the analysis, because of the intercorrelations between the media variables, the measures of exposure and attention were combined into a single scale for TV news and another for newspapers. The weakness of the party contact correlations meant that these were dropped from the analysis.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 demonstrates that even after entry of these social controls, the communication variables proved to be strong and positive predictors of political efficacy, interest, knowledge and turnout. The only dimension where these factors proved to be insignificant concerned political trust, which has often been found to be poorly related to social and news variables. Again in no case was there a significant negative relationship between civic engagement and exposure and attention to campaign communications.

Conclusions: A Virtuous Circle?

The evidence that we have analyzed in Britain lends further confirmation to the pattern found in other European countries and in the United States. That is, attention to the news media and party messages is positively associated with levels of political knowledge and participation. This account also strengthens the conclusions presented earlier in previous studies of the 1992 general election[30], and of the 1997 British general election campaign panel survey: "*Those most attentive to news on television and in the press, and regular viewers and readers,*" *On Message* concluded, "*were significantly more knowledgeable than the average citizen about party policies, civics and the parliamentary candidate standing in their constituency. They were also more likely to turn out.*"[31] Although there was minimal short-term attitudinal change during the 12-month run up to the 1997 general election, the persistent pattern suggests that in the long-term repeated attention to the news media functions as a socialization process similar to the effects of the family, class and community.

Of course this persistent pattern in cross-sectional surveys does not demonstrate the causal direction of this relationship. There are three possible interpretations of this association, which cannot be resolved using the available survey evidence. The pattern could be explained as a one-way flow from prior political attitudes towards media use. That is, it could that because I'm interested and involved in public affairs I regularly turn on the news or read a paper to follow the campaign. This explanation fits the 'uses and gratifications'

theory of use of the mass media. Or, alternatively, the pattern may be the result of a one-way flow from media use to political attitudes. In this case, because I usually catch the news, for whatever reason, I could gradually become more interested in, and informed about, politics. Both these interpretations cannot be ruled out based on the evidence presented in this chapter. Correlations, not matter how persistent, do not help us unravel complex issues of causality. Cross-sectional surveys provide limited insights into these familiar 'chicken-and-egg' issues.

But it does seem more plausible to interpret this consistent pattern as a diffuse process of two-way interactive flows, or a long-term virtuous circle. According to this theory, those who are interested and engaged in politics are most likely to pay attention to news and information about public affairs in newspapers, television, the Internet, and from party messages. And, in turn, those who frequently pay attention to these sources are most likely to acquire information that facilitates learning about public affairs, practical political choices, and therefore further engagement in the political process. In this regard, repeated exposure to campaign communications functions as a long-term socialization process, analogous to the influence of parents or friends. Cross-sectional surveys cannot prove that the persistent links between the party support of parents and siblings are the product of socialization processes but this seems like a likely inference.

Yet if the news media crystallizes and strengthens prior predispositions, why are the more cynical and disengaged are not similarly reinforced in their disengagement? The reason is that this group is naturally immunized from the positive or negative messages of the news media by a triple process. Given the diversification of media sources, the disengaged are less likely to catch the political news; if they do catch the news (perhaps out of habit) they probably pay less attention to political coverage; and if they catch the news *and* pay attention to politics they are less likely to trust the messages, since trust in the news media and in government commonly goes hand in hand. Even if the news and party messages have become more negative over the years, even if campaign communications focus increasingly on the horse race and less on issues of substance, even if tabloidization has reduced serious political coverage of serious issues, as critics suggest, the effect of exposure and attention to political messages still proves healthy for civic engagement.

Therefore the public is not simply passively responding to political communications being presented to them, in a naive 'stimulus-response' model, instead they are critically and actively sifting, discarding and interpreting the available information from politicians and journalists. According to the virtuous circle theory, the more educated and literate public in post-industrial societies are capable of using the more complex range of news sources and

party messages available in post-modern campaigns to find the information they need to make practical political choices. This suggests that there are many reasons to be skeptical about many of the stronger claims of media malaise. If the public is disenchanted with their leaders and institutions, if citizens are making greater demands on governments, as seems evident in many countries[32], then we should look more directly at the performance of representative democracy and less at the surface reflections.

Recent years have seen a revival in concern about civic engagement, notably low levels of turnout in the 1997 British general election (71.6%), the lowest level in the post-war period. The erosion of turnout evident in the June 1999 elections to the European Parliament has set widespread alarm bells ringing in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg as further evidence that the public is becoming disenchanted and disengaged with European politics. The level of voting participation across the EU fell from almost two-thirds (63%) of the electorate in the first direct elections in 1979 to just under half (49.2%) of European citizens in June 1999, its historical nadir. Britain also has the lowest turnout of any EU state; in June 1999 90% of Belgian citizens voted compared with only one quarter (23%) of the British electorate.

Yet before we can consider the pros and cons of alternative policy initiatives, like the introduction of leadership debates during the campaign, changes to the system of party political broadcasts, or other reforms to the news media, we need to demonstrate that it is political communications *per se* which is at the root of any 'problem'. It is true that turnout has declined in recent British elections but this can best be explained by a combination of political factors. As Heath and Taylor demonstrate[33], one of the main reasons why voting participation varies over the years is the changing electoral context, notably the closeness of the race in conjunction with large ideological differences between the major parties. If the outcome seems in doubt, then people tend to flock to the polls. If, as in 1997, all indicators predicted a safe Labour victory so that there were few doubts about the result, then this encouraged Labour voters to stay home, particularly in safe seats. Moreover many assume that most established democracies have experienced a general secular decline in voter participation but in fact in these countries levels of turnout have remained fairly stable during the last two decades; on average 71% of voting age population participated in elections in these states in the 1990s, down only 3% from the 1970s[34] British turnout in the last election was therefore about what we might expect for established democracies, rather than lower than average. The major systematic variations in turnout between countries can best be explained by institutional factors, such as the frequency of elections (producing British voter fatigue in the succession of elections and referendums from 1997 to 1999), the

type of electoral system, and compulsory voting. Certainly *institutional* reforms might help boost British turnout including changes to the facilities for registration and voting, the frequency, level and timing of elections, and the competitiveness of electoral politics[35]. Comparative studies of twenty-two democracies by Jackman and Miller,[36] research on the European elections by Franklin, van der Eijk and Oppenhuis[37], and Wolfinger and Rosenstone's work in the United States[38], all confirm that political institutions and electoral laws provided the most plausible explanation for variations in voter turnout. Devices like the introduction of online registration and voting facilities, supplementing not replacing conventional ballot boxes, seem like one of the most important steps towards boosting participation levels.

But any 'problems' of civic engagement in Britain should be addressed directly by institutional reforms that can serve to boost voter turnout at the polls, not by introducing major changes to the process of political communications. The system clearly isn't perfect. We all have our own list of things which, if we were God for a day, we might want to change. Of course tabloids should, in the best of all possible worlds, devote more attention to politics and less to porn. Check-book journalism and tacky scandal-driven 'exclusives' about the personal sex lives of politicians are, perhaps, unfortunate albeit entertaining. Party broadcasts should probably spend more time presenting positive policy options rather than negative critiques of the other side. Minor parties should have a more level financial playing field, and all parties should be more transparent in their financial dealings, a major problem that has already been addressed by the Neill committee. And dutiful citizens should, of course, pay more serious attention to the campaign and civic affairs, watching the Panorama specials and reading the election supplements, as well as turning out on wet and windy nights to cast their ballot. The new communication environment created by the digital and broadband convergence of technologies will pose major challenges to British campaign communications as we have known them since the war. Similar to the television revolution in the late-1950s, the Internet will transform e-politics, like e-commerce. But any potential policy reforms to political communications are probably worse than leaving things alone, given the problems of freedom of speech and publication inherent in regulating these matters, the need for the press to act as an unfettered watchdog for the abuse of power, and the unintended consequences which often accompany the best-meaning policy reforms. In the last analysis, caution seems preferable to meddling in the process of political communications, and in the old adage, if its not broken, we shouldn't attempt to fix it.

Table 1: Zero Order Correlations between Civic Engagement and Campaign Communications, 1964 British Gen

Types of Campaign Communication	% 'Yes'	Voting Turnout	Campaign Interest
News Media			
Regular TV/Radio news	82	.09**	.29**
Regular newspaper reader	64	.10**	.31**
Party Contact			
Canvassed by party worker	37	.02	.01
Read party leaflet	64	.07**	.28**
Attended party meeting	8	.04	.16**
Interpersonal communications			
Discussed politics with family and friends	59	.04	.30**

Note: Significant at the .01 (**) or the .05 (*) level. For all items and scales see Appendix.

Sources: 1964 BES.

Table 2: Zero-order correlations between Civic Engagement and Campaign Communications, 1997

Types of Campaign Communication	Satisfaction with democracy	Political Trust	Political Efficacy	Political Interest	
TELEVISION					
Regular viewer national TV news	.11**	.04*		.15**	
Regular viewer local TV news	.06**		-.06**	.03*	
High attention to political news on TV	.17**	.06**	.24**	.69**	
NEWSPAPERS					
Regular reader national morning paper	.07**		-.08**		
Regular reader local paper				.05*	
High attention to political news in paper	.16**		.27**	.67**	
PARTY CONTACT					
Canvassed by party at home or by phone		.04*			

Note: Only correlations significant at the .01 (**) or the .05 (*) level are reported. For all items and scales see Appendix.
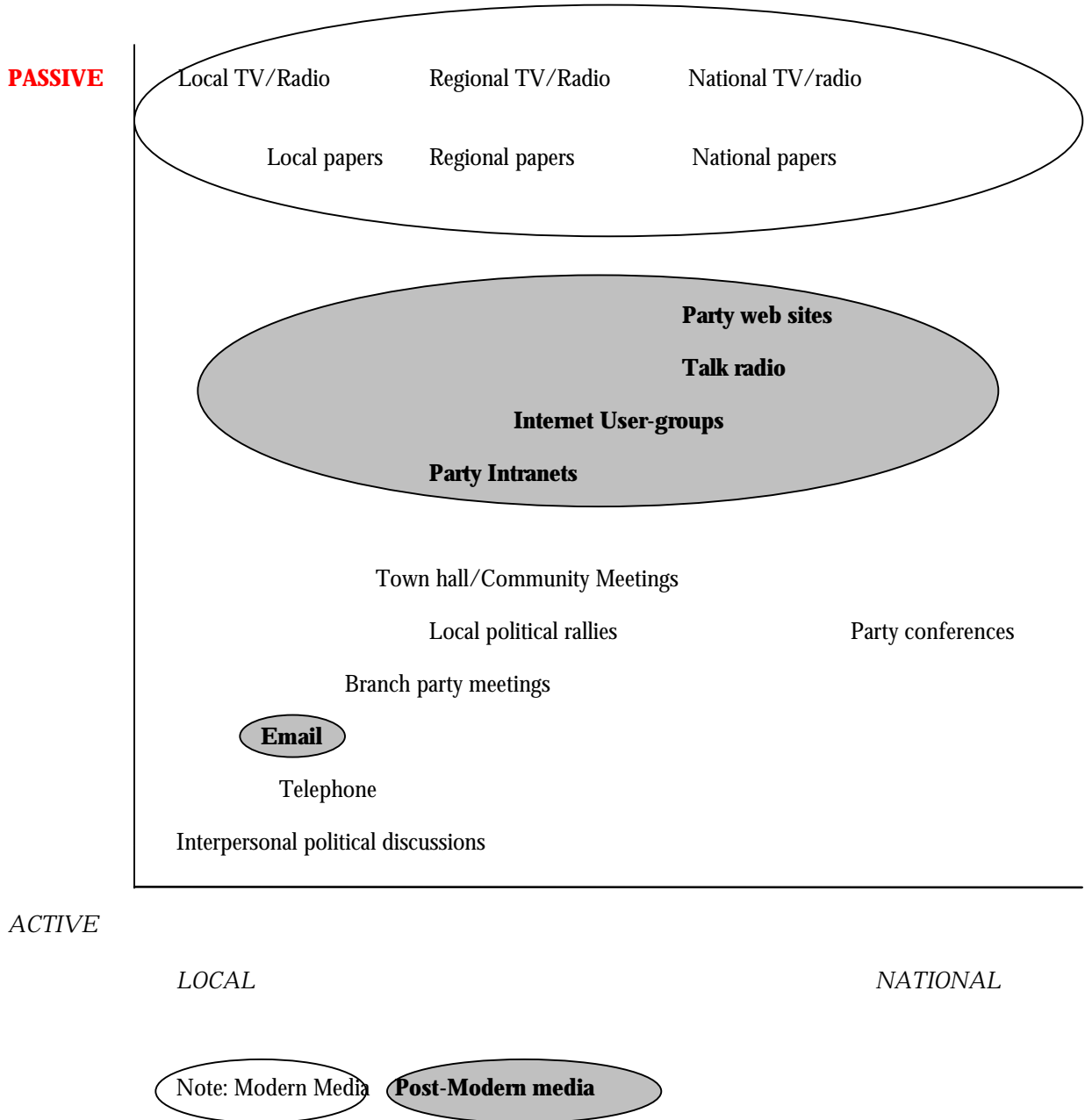
Source: BES 1997

Table 3: Association between Civic Engagement and Campaign Communications with Social Controls, 1997

Types of Campaign Communication	Satisfaction with democracy	Political Trust	Political Efficacy	Political Interest	
Social Background					
Gender (Male)	.11**	-.02	.01	.10**	
Age (Years)	.18**	.08*	-.13**	-.03	
Education (Highest qualification)	.07	.03	.19**	.08**	
Social Class (Non-Manual)	.04	-.01	.05*	.13**	
Campaign Communications					
Exposure and attention to TV News	.06*	-.01	.14**	.32**	
Exposure and attention to newspapers	.04	-.01	.10**	.37**	
Adjusted R²	.06	.01	.12	.44	

Note: The coefficients represent standardized beta coefficients in regression models controlling for age (years), gende
(manual/non-manual). Ordinary least squared regressions are used for the scales in columns 1-4. Logistic regressions are t
turnout in column 7. Only coefficients significant at the .01 (**) or the .05 (*) level are reported. For all items and scales se

Source: BES 1997

FIGURE 1: THE TYPOLOGY OF CAMPAIGN MEDIA

PASSIVE

Local TV/Radio   Regional TV/Radio   National TV/radio

Local papers   Regional papers   National papers

Party web sites

Talk radio

Internet User-groups

Party Intranets

Town hall/Community Meetings

Local political rallies   Party conferences

Branch party meetings

Email

Telephone

Interpersonal political discussions

ACTIVE

LOCAL   *NATIONAL*

Note: Modern Media   **Post-Modern media**

Appendix – Survey Items and Scales 1997 BES

Democratic Satisfaction – 9-point scale

"On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Britain. Are you… satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied?"

"In some countries, people believe their elections are conducted fairly. In other countries, people believe their elections are conducted unfairly. Thinking of the last general election in Britain, where would you place it on this scale? Last election was conducted fairly (1)… Last election was conducted unfairly (5)."

Political Trust – 8-point scale

"How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interest of their own political party." Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, almost never.

"How much do you trust politicians of any party in Britain to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner." Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, almost never.

Political Efficacy – 15-point scale:

"People like me have no say in what the government does."

"People are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions."

"It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same."

Agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.

Political Knowledge – 6-point scale

"Here is a quick quiz. For each thing I say, tell me if it is true or false. If you don't know, just say so and we will skip to the next one.

- The number of members of parliament is about 100? (F)
- The longest time allowed between general elections is four years? (F)
- Britain's electoral system is based on proportional representation? (F)
- MPs from different parties are on parliamentary committees? (T)
- Britain has separate elections for the European parliament and the British parliament? (T)
- No-one may stand for parliament unless they pay a deposit?" (T)

Newspaper Use and Attention

"About how often do you read [name of daily morning newspaper]? Everyday, 4 or 5 days a week, 2-3 days a week, 1 day a week or less." [PAPSCALE]

"People pay attention to different parts of newspapers. When you read [Name of Paper] how much attention do you pay to stories about politics? A great deal, quite a bit, some, a little, or none?" [PAPERATT]

"About how often, if at all, do you read a morning, evening or weekly local newspaper?" [LOCAL]

TV Use and Attention

"On average, how many days a week do you watch all, or part of any national news programme on any television channel?" 0-7. [TVSCALE]

"On average, how many days a week do you watch or listen to all or part of any local news programme on radio or television?" 0-7. [LOCALTV]

"People pay attention to different parts of the television news. When you watch the news on television, how much attention do you pay to stories about politics? A great deal, quite a bit, some, a little, or none?" [TVATT]

Party Contact

"Did a canvasser from any party call at your home to talk to you during the election campaign? Yes (1) No (0)." [CANV]

"Were you contacted by anyone on the telephone during the election campaign asking you how you might vote? Yes (1) No (0). [TELCANV]

Notes

[1] For accounts of campaigning in different nations see Frederick Fletcher. Ed. 1991. *Media, Elections and Democracy.* Toronto: Dundurn Press; David Butler and Austin Ranney. (Eds). 1992. *Electioneering* Oxford: Clarendon Press; Shaun Bowler and David M. Farrell. (Ed). 1992. *Electoral Strategies and Political Marketing.* New York: St. Martin's Press; Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan. 2000. *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective.* NY: Cambridge University Press.

[2] See, for example, Bruce I. Newman. Ed. 1999. *Handbook of Political Marketing.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[3] For the debate on 'Americanization' see Dennis Kavanagh. 1995. *Electioneering.* Oxford: Blackwell; Ralph Negrine and Stylianos Papathanassopoulos. 1996. 'The "Americanisation" of Political Communications: A Critique'. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1(2): 45-62; David Farrell. 1996. 'Campaign Strategies and Tactics.' In *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* edited by Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; David Swanson and Paolo Mancini. (Eds). 1996. *Politics, Media and Modern Democracy.* New York: Praeger; Margaret Scammell. 1997. 'The Wisdom of the War Room: U.S. Campaigning and Americanization.' *The Joan Shorenstein Center Research Paper* R-17. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University;; Ralph Negrine and Stylianos Papathanassoloulos. 1996. 'The "Americanization of Political Communication: A Critique.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics.* 1(2): 45-62. For the 'shopping' model see Fritz Plassner, Christian Scheucher and Christian Senft. 1999. "Is there a European Style of Political Marketing." In Bruce I. Newman. Ed. 1999. *Handbook of Political Marketing.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[4] For a fuller discussion see Pippa Norris. 1997. *Electoral Chance since 1945.* Oxford: Blackwells.

[5] Michael Robinson. 1976. 'Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of "the Selling of the President".' *American Political Science Review.* 70(3): 409-32; Arthur Miller, Edie H. Goldenberg, and Lutz Erbring. 1979. 'Type-Set Politics: The Impact of Newspapers on Public Confidence.' *American Political Science Review.* 73: 67-84.

[6] Pippa Norris. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[7] See also Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris. 1999. *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-term Perspective.* London: Sage.

[8] Note this is based on estimates of constant prices. 5th report of the Committee on Standard in Public Life chaired by Lord Neill. 1998. Table 3.11. Cm 4057. London: The Stationery Office.

[9] Jill Sherman. 1999. "Taxpayer funds Tory army of spin-doctors" *The Times* 23 September.

[10] See, for example, Nicholas Jones. 1995. *Soundbites and Spin Doctors.* London: Cassell; Martin Rosenbaum.1997. *From Soapbox to Soundbite: Party Political Campaigning since 1945.* London: Macmillan.

[11] Bob Franklin. 1994. *Packaging Politics.* London: Edward Arnold.

[12] Jay Blumler. 1997. 'Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship.' *Political Communication.* 14(4): 395-404.

[13] Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar. 1995. *Going Negative: How Political Advertisments Shrink and Polarize the Electorate.* New York: Free Press; Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha. 1995. *Political Advertising in Western Democracies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Kathleen H. Jamieson. 1992. *Dirty Politics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press; Kathleen H. Jamieson. 1984. *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Advertising.* New York: Oxford University Press; Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary A. Copeland. 1991. *Negative Political Advertising: Coming of Age.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

[14] See, for example, the discussion by Steven Barnett. 1998. 'Dumbing Down or Reaching Out.' In Jean Seaton. Ed. *Politics and the Media.* Oxford: Blackwell.

[15] Pippa Norris. 2000. 'The Internet in Europe: A New North-South Divide?' *The Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics.* 5(1):XX-XX.

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[24] Pippa Norris. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[25] Pippa Norris. 1996. 'Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam.' *P.S.: Political Science and Politics* XXIX(3); Pippa Norris. 1997. *Electoral Change since 1945*. Oxford: Blackwell; Pippa Norris. 2000. 'Television and Civic Malaise.' In *What's Troubling the Trilateral Democracies*, eds. Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage.

[26] Pippa Norris. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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[28] Christina Holtz-Bacha. 1990. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Media Exposure and Political Alienation in West Germany.' *European Journal of Communication*. 5: 73-85.

[29] See Stephen Earl Bennett, Staci L. Rhine, Richard S. Flickinger and Linda L.M. Bennett. 1999. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Reconsidering the relation between the public's view of the media and trust in government.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4(4): 8-23.

[30] Pippa Norris. *Electoral Change Since 1945.* Oxford: Blackwell.

[31] Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko. *On Message: Communicating the Campaign*. London: Sage.

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[33] Anthony Heath and Bridget Taylor. 1999. 'New Sources of Abstention.' In *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-term Perspective Ed.* Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris. London: Sage.

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