

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

News and the Construction of Political Meaning

Trying to keep the fragile peace from coming apart



W. Russell Neuman
Marion R. Just
Ann N. Crigler

Photo opportunities, ten-second sound bites, talking heads, and celebrity anchors: so the world is explained daily to millions of Americans. The result, according to the experts, is an ignorant public, helpless targets of a one-way flow of carefully filtered and orchestrated communication. *Common Knowledge* shatters this pervasive myth. Reporting on a ground-breaking study, the authors reveal that both our shared knowledge of the world and our political beliefs are determined largely by how we actively reinterpret the images, fragments, and signals we find in the mass media.

"How do we understand the political world—the 'world outside' as Lippmann put it? The authors have gone a long way towards answering that lingering question in *Common Knowledge*. Using survey research, content analysis, and in-depth interviews, they focus on what most people know about the world and how they know it. The result is a very valuable work for scholars, journalists, and all others who share an interest in the strange and wonderful world of press/politics."—Marvin Kalb, Director of the Barone Center for Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Harvard University

"*Common Knowledge* is an important work that makes major contributions to political communications, political psychology, as well as political science in general. The authors have undertaken a series of ingeniously designed and executed experiments to establish how various types of people process available information."

—Doris Graber, author of *Processing the News*

"*Common Knowledge* enriches our understanding of the complex ways in which people interact with the mass media as they try to make sense of a variety of social and political issues."

—William A. Gamson, author of *Talking Politics*

W. Russell Neuman is the Edward R. Murrow Professor of International Communications at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, and Research Fellow, MIT Media Laboratory. **Marion R. Just** is professor of political science at Wellesley College. **Ann N. Crigler** is assistant professor of political science at the University of Southern California.

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W. RUSSELL NEUMAN,
MARION R. JUST,
ANN N. CRIGLER

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W. RUSSELL NEUMAN is the Edward R. Murrow Professor of International Communications at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. MARIN R. JUST is professor of political science at Wellesley College. ANN N. CRIGLER is assistant professor of political science at the University of Southern California

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Preface

The researcher, who was sitting on a tree stump, leaned forward and asked the Turkish peasant he was interviewing a probing question: "What is the first thing you would do if you were the President of Turkey?" The interviewee was a young man about thirty years old, articulate but uneducated and currently unemployed. He was dumbfounded by the question. He explained to his intrigued inquisitor that he could not imagine himself in such a strange circumstance and proceeded to invoke God's help to prevent him from ever thinking such a thought again.

This interview fragment from research on communication media and political development in the Middle East turned out to provide an important and enduring contribution to the development of political communications theory. It stimulated Daniel Lerner, the principal investigator of that project, to formulate a theory of political empathy. Empathy is defined as the ability of citizens to relate to and understand events and issues outside their own immediate life space. All the peasant knew and understood in this case study was derived from the young man's immediate surroundings and the traditional culture of his village. He knew very little national or world politics. He had no means to know. There were no radios or newspapers available and only an occasional visitor from other villages. It was simply incomprehensible for this young fellow to understand or try to influence public institutions or policies outside of his immediate life space.

Lerner, writing in the optimistic climate of the 1950s, proposed a solution to the problem of political development in the Third World. Aspiring democracies should encourage literacy programs and the development of independent institutions of mass communications—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. The Third World should copy the successful model of the first. A rich information environment

will stimulate citizens to participate and hold leaders to account. Healthy mass media will lead to growing political empathy. Lerner's advice was enthusiastically received and soon became a central element of research and development efforts in this field.

In retrospect, these proposals and the implicit faith in the power of the media they reflect seem a bit naive. First of all, the development of democratic institutions and practices in the Third World turned out to be a much more complex and frustrating process. Second, and this is a central point we confront in this book, American social scientists need not travel to rural Turkey to confront people who feel out of touch with the critical social issues facing their country. They might do as well to sit down with their neighbors. It is the paradox of mass politics in the United States: despite a 200-year-old tradition of public participation, an intense and virtually uninterrupted barrage of video, audio, and print information on local, national, and world events, one finds a conspicuously large number of citizens with only marginal interest in and information about public affairs.

Political disengagement, of course, is not a universal characteristic of industrialized democracies. Some citizens, especially those with higher levels of education, demonstrate an awareness of and feeling of participation in world events. But in the depth interviews we have conducted in the American Northeast, we are struck by how closely the themes which arise resonate with those Lerner uncovered in the Middle East. People explain that they do not have the energy or interest to follow public affairs very closely. They are puzzled by why they should follow issues over which they have no control. Personal experiences and remembered fragments from the news and entertainment alternatively enlighten and obstruct the effort to make sense of national issues and events. Although none of our respondents invoked God's help to keep them from imagining political alternatives, there is a persistent belief in powerful others and a sense of inexplicable events which lie beyond the comprehension and influence of the average citizen. The attempt to relate the abstractions of national political debate to one's immediate life circumstances is a complex, delicate, subtle, and often frustrating process.

In this book we report on an extensive study of how citizens come to understand and learn about events of the world around them. Lerner's insight is sound as far as it goes. A rich and diverse media environment and a literate public are prerequisites to successful representative de-

mocracy. We pick up, in effect, where Lerner left off. In a media-rich environment, how do the media choose to report on and characterize the critical issues facing society? Are each of the media equally successful in communicating this information to the public at large? How do people filter, evaluate, and internalize this information as they attempt to make sense of the hubbub of conflicting comments, abstract statistics, and human interest anecdotes?

In the United States we confront one of the most technologically advanced communications infrastructures, a 100-billion-dollar industry of broadcasters and publishers. There are over 10,000 local newspapers, 10,000 national and local journals and magazines, 10,000 radio stations, 5,000 cable systems, and 1,000 television stations. The great majority of these institutions exercise their capacity to cover news and public affairs issues. Yet, somehow, the system of political communication in the United States appears to be falling far short of its potential.

Only half of those eligible bothered to vote in the 1988 presidential elections. This is part of a steady downward trend, the lowest turnout, in fact, since 1924. Participation in congressional and local elections is even lower. Well over half of the adult population assert that they have little interest in politics and agree with the proposition that "government is too difficult to understand."

The premise of this book is that something is missing in the nexus between the news media and the citizenry. Traditionally, when something is amiss, one of the first tasks is to establish culpability. We believe, however, that a scholarly mission of blame-seeking is ill-conceived and ill-advised. Instead we have begun working with a new theoretical perspective in political communications which we believe offers promise to both scholarship and professional practice. The perspective is associated with the term "constructionism." It will be defined in some detail in the pages ahead. Constructionism might briefly be described as a research perspective which focuses on the subtle interaction between what the mass media convey and how people come to understand the world beyond their immediate life space.

This book is an extension of our ongoing attempt to make sense of the puzzles of political communication and mass participation in modern industrial democracies. On different occasions we have had opportunity to pore over the accumulated election surveys of the last three decades, to conduct extended depth interviews about public affairs, to

conduct learning experiments, and systematically to analyze the political content of the mass media (Crigler, 1986, forthcoming; Just and Crigler, 1989; Just, Crigler, and Wallach, 1990; Neuman, 1976, 1982, 1986, 1991a; Neuman and Fryling, 1985). This study represents a special and most welcome opportunity to draw on all of the above techniques as part of a systematically integrated and (we hope) theoretically coherent exploration of what constitutes common knowledge in politics and public affairs.

The study was conducted with the generous support of the Spencer Foundation. We would like to express our appreciation to the foundation's President, the late Lawrence A. Cremin, Vice President Marion M. Faldet, and program staff Sunita A. Parikh. Professor Sidney Verba of Harvard University was most helpful in bringing the foundation's interests in this area to our attention. A special note of appreciation goes to Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool of MIT, who offered thoughtful suggestions early on and whose Research Program on Communications Policy provided the stimulating intellectual environment which brought us together.

We are indebted to a large number of graduate and undergraduate students at MIT, Wellesley, and the University of Southern California who helped with the execution of the study including the depth interviewing, the administration of the experimental series including the preparation of the video and print materials, the coding of the media materials, and the depth interview transcripts as well as data entry and data analysis. We would like to thank Loretta Anania, Deborah Campbell, Sarah Dickinson, Jolene Kiolbassa, Aaron MacPherson, Suzanne C. Neil, Jacqueline O'Connell, and Manoj Shahi, whose efforts in the conduct of the experiments, depth interviews, and content screening were especially helpful. Michelle Maxwell contributed to the media content analysis. Kim Foley and Sharad Shankardass lent their expertise to the preparation of the video materials. Diana Gagnon as a postdoctoral fellow in the Media Lab was especially helpful in the design and execution of the modality research. Shawn O'Donnell, Mark Reynolds, and Steven Schneider provided much appreciated skill and expertise in the data management and analysis stage. We are also grateful for the participation of Amy Epstein, Susan Holmberg, Gail Kosloff, and Lee McKnight. Bryan Reece and Paula Lackie helped with the parallel studies of the visual element in broadcast journalism. Deborah Campbell, Jolene Kiolbassa, and Jacqueline

O'Connell wrote master's theses in association with this project, and their special contributions will be acknowledged in the pages ahead.

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ONE

Knowledge in Common

In this book we examine how citizens in a democracy come to make sense of the political world around them. The study combines several research techniques, not ordinarily used together, to explore the fragile connection between public and private life that Walter Lippmann characterized as “the world outside and the pictures in our heads.”

Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, from which that phrase is drawn, was first published in 1922. The book is still widely read and cited, because the questions he raised about the role of public communication in mass democracy are so fundamental. Lippmann argued that the citizen’s political world is, by necessity, a pseudo-environment, created for the most part by the mass media who gather, organize, and filter the events of the day because

the real environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it. (Lippmann, 1965 [1922], p. 11)

Lippmann recognized that reconfiguring the political world into a manageable shape is not a deterministic one-way process of media information and persuasion. On the contrary, the creation of the pictures in our heads is an interaction between the extraordinarily diverse “habits, tastes, capacities, comforts and hopes” of each private citizen and the formal traditions of public and media discourse. This interaction between media messages and what the individual already knows and believes about the world is the focus of our study.

In the 1920s Lippmann’s attention centered on how the press and

the public confronted the First World War. He examined how the war was reported in the newspapers of the day and wondered what a typical American citizen could be expected to learn from those reports about the complex political, economic, and military events in Europe. Sharing Lippmann's concern for the role of communications in the democratic process, we turn in the 1990s to an expanded media environment and a fresh set of issues. We are concerned with what Americans think about the problems they confront in the last decades of the twentieth century—the threat of nuclear arms, race politics in South Africa, the impact of the stock exchange on the national economy, the scourge of drug addiction, or the epidemic of AIDS. Our study asks what people know about these critical policy debates and how well each of the media—television, newsmagazines, and newspapers—can help them to understand the political “world outside.”

We are challenged by a stream of research which finds that what people learn from the news media is so dismally disappointing that the United States has become a “nation at risk.” This research tradition follows a familiar pattern that we identify as the facts-and-figures fallacy. The analyst selects a few items routinely reported in the news media which have a certain self-evident importance and proceeds to demonstrate just how few survey respondents are actually familiar with the information. Recently, for example, the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate expressed concern about voter competence based in part on the inability of many survey respondents to volunteer the name of the Democratic vice-presidential nominee even in the midst of the campaign. The gloomy conclusion was that such findings signal “a widespread, glacial indifference, given the near-saturation media coverage of the Democratic convention” and “front-page attention” to the candidates (Markle Commission, 1989).

Other kinds of evidence about what people learn from their news encounters is sketchy and conflicting. We know, for example, that the average viewer of the evening news can recall without prompting only about one out of the nineteen news stories covered in a typical newscast, but when the viewer is presented with a list of topics, news recall rises to 50 percent (Neuman, 1976). Studies show that self-reported newspaper reading correlates about .35 with a variety of political information indices, while reported TV news viewing correlates only .08 on average, or in some data, negatively (Robinson and Davis, 1990). In a 1990 national survey, only 14 percent of a sample could

identify the democratic Czechoslovakian leader Vaclav Havel, but 70 percent knew how Nicolae Ceausescu died, and 82 percent knew where General Manuel Noriega took refuge during the American invasion of Panama (Times Mirror, 1990a). Clearly learning is not a simple function of exposure. Why Ceausescu and not Havel? In our view, the vagaries of name recognition, even of prominent politicians, is a poor measure of the health of a democracy or even the health of its system of political communication.

The Construction of Common Knowledge

Ours is a different concern. We take as our starting point, what people *do* know about public affairs—the *common knowledge* of mass politics. Much past research in political communication has focused on opinions: people's preferences and predilections about political candidates or controversial issues. Common knowledge, however, refers more broadly to what people think and how they structure their ideas, feelings, and beliefs about political issues.¹ Drawing upon a mixture of survey research, content analysis, in-depth interviews, and experiments on learning, we attempt to provide a methodologically integrated and theoretically coherent picture of what constitutes political common knowledge and how the mass media and the public interact to construct common understandings of "the world outside."

In exploring how citizens learn from the news, we start from the premise that the communication task of journalism is indeed a most difficult enterprise.² Political communication does not take place in a classroom. There are no study guides, no grades at the end of the term to motivate attention. People pay attention to whatever catches their interest and actively ignore, reorganize, and interpret the news that comes their way (Zukin and Snyder, 1984; Jensen, 1986; Robinson and Levy, 1986; Gunter, 1987; Swanson, 1987; Dahlgren, 1988; Petty, 1988; Bogart, 1989; Langer, 1989).

Just as the mass audience lacks the motivations and discipline of attentive students, news professionals lack the situational advantages of the classroom teacher. Journalists communicate with an audience they cannot see or hear. It is a one-way conversation. They operate in a professional world inhabited mainly by news sources, public-relations specialists, and other journalists. Their social world is also dominated by social and economic elites (Sigal, 1973; Hess, 1981). It is what

Gamson calls the world of "public discourse" (1992). Even a brief opportunity to talk with members of the mass audience who read and view their stories is predictably rare, a product of happenstance, because two-way conversations with the audience for news has not become a part of journalistic practice (Gans, 1979; Levy, Robinson, and Davis, 1986; Kiolbassa, 1989).

The majority of citizens operate in a world outside the rarefied realm of public discourse. It is a personal world, with an equally pressing set of career and family demands, economic and health problems, personal dreams and aspirations. For brief moments in a citizen's hurried day, there is an intersection of these two worlds. Stepping out of the shower in the morning one might hear an interview with a former hostage on the "Today Show," glance at the front page of the morning newspaper over coffee, hear the headlines on the car radio, or catch some of the evening news after dinner. The interconnection of public and private worlds is often unscheduled, incidental, and haphazard. The evolution of common knowledge is not a simple matter of transferring the content of the news, in whole or even in part, to the public.

Public Discourse and Common Knowledge

For the language of public discourse to be meaningfully interpreted in private life, it requires translation. Take, for example, this typical television news story on the harrowing epidemic of AIDS. CBS anchorman Dan Rather introduces the piece:

In as stern a message as any yet heard about AIDS, a scientific panel today called for a multi-billion dollar a year campaign against the killer disease. CBS News medical correspondent, Susan Spencer, explains why today's report from the U.S. National Academy of Sciences is bound to draw some unfriendly fire.

The correspondent explains that the panel is calling for a two billion dollar program of education and research over the next five years. She explains that there may be controversy over the proposal to distribute free sterile needles to prevent the spread of AIDS among drug users who share needles. She introduces soundbites from three medical experts; Dr. David Baltimore's from the National Academy of Sciences is typical: "We are quite honestly frightened about the future prospects here and we ask that there be strong leadership." She concludes:

The two billion dollars the Academy cites would cover only education and research, not treatment costs, which it has been estimated will be as high as sixteen billion dollars a year by 1990. The Academy today called that figure conservative. Susan Spencer, CBS News, Washington.

It is a classic news story in form and focus for any of the news media. It is driven by the day's events, official news as delivered by authoritative sources at press conferences (Cohen, 1963; McDougall, 1968; Epstein, 1973; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Gamson, 1984; Lewis, 1984; Manoff and Schudson, 1986; van Dijk, 1988). There is a passing reference to a policy dispute, the proposal about free needles which is "sure to cause an uproar." And there are references to two billion and sixteen billion dollars, figures difficult to comprehend other than that they are very large. The story does not make clear, however, where this vast amount of money is coming from or where it is going.

What would a typical viewer remember from such a news story? Not necessarily a great deal and probably not the names of the agencies or officials, or the dollar amounts cited. This news story represents only a fleeting connection between media discourse and evolving public knowledge of the tragic epidemic. The ephemeral nature of a given news encounter, however, does not mean that individuals are unable to think deeply about the problem of AIDS.

In the depth-interview component of our research, we asked our respondents to describe the main idea of a series of political issues including AIDS (see the Appendix for more detail). Their free-ranging responses offer a dramatic contrast between the media's public discourse and the private conceptions of the mass audience. Few of our respondents volunteered federal epidemiology statistics or projected medical research budgets. But most had a great deal to say, such as one seventy-three-year-old retired businessman. He described the AIDS epidemic in highly emotionally charged and moralistic language. For him, AIDS is intimately tied with issues of religion and public discipline. He associates AIDS with San Francisco, in his view a modern Sodom or Gomorrah. He understands the fundamental medical dynamics of the disease, but his thinking about appropriate policy responses to the crisis is structured by much more than just the medical issues:

Q: How would you explain the issue of AIDS to someone who didn't know anything about it?

A: Well, of course, it depends on who you're talking to. If you're talking just about the disease, I think you can only say that it's something that causes a breakdown within the body, that portion that manufactures whatever you need to resist disease . . . and makes you subject for almost any kind of disease . . . and it can be fatal because you don't have any resistance. So, I think that would perhaps explain fairly well for a laymen . . . But there is another aspect to this and that it's against the law of man. What brought this about, this homosexual lifestyle. That's against the law of man. It's against the law of God.

He goes on to describe the origins of AIDS in the lifestyles of the hippies and gays in "Frisco," which he and his wife had visited briefly on a vacation trip.

They were dirty. They had not just long hair, but dirty, dirty, straggly greasy looking hair and they didn't shave and the girls were just as bad as the guys and the guys were walking, hugging each other like lovers holding hands . . . I would never go back to Frisco after that . . . That's my feeling about it. I don't have that much sympathy for them [those afflicted with AIDS]."

He describes himself as not having any direct contact with drug users or gays or individuals with AIDS, but his conception of AIDS is clearly not dependent solely on media messages and information. He constructs a concept of AIDS from fragments of what he hears and what he already believes. His thinking is schematic, and richly so. He shows little sign of being a prisoner of mass media information, caught in the media's cuing and framing of public issues, even in domains where he has minimal direct experience. He draws heavily on personal experience, conversations with others, and non-news media and rails at the press for missing, as he sees it, the main point of the AIDS epidemic: the decline of American moral and religious life. This man's response shows us clearly that understanding how individuals frame issues in the news is critical to understanding both what will be recalled from the flow of news and how such information influences opinion about what ought to be done to respond to these public issues (Jensen, 1986; Graber, 1988; Gamson, 1992).

To study the dynamic interaction among individuals, with their personal interests, beliefs, and experiences, the issues with their varying

degrees of complexity, and the media with their different journalistic traditions, we must draw on a variety of investigative techniques. How much does political sense-making depend on the individual, or on the topic, and how much on the way the information is communicated? In the following chapters we will seek to answer those questions, as well as the broader question of how bits of information gleaned from the news fit into a person's larger framework of understanding important topics of public debate. We will focus on the resonances and disjunctures between public and private discourse about politics and introduce a typology of issue frames used in the media and by the mass citizenry. We will compare how different media—television, newsmagazines, and newspapers—present information to the public. We will concentrate on specific news stories and examine the information people pick out of the formal presentation of news to enrich their conceptualization of public issues.

Before we take up our study, however, we review three research traditions that have shaped the study of political communication: (1) the tradition of media-effects research, (2) the uninformed voter paradigm, which contrasts an ill-informed voter against an idealized model of rational choice, and (3) a recently evolving literature on political cognition in the mass public. Information from these studies can be arrayed according to the degree of audience passivity or activity and the concomitant media responsibility assumed by the researchers. Generally theories on media effects emphasize the persuasive and manipulative powers the media exercise over a relatively uninterested, unknowing, and gullible audience. Research on voter sophistication and knowledge has focused on the low level of knowledge among American voters, a level that results not necessarily from media manipulation as much as from public apathy and disinterest in politics. Research on public choice and political cognition has assumed a more active audience stance. These research approaches help us to move to a new conceptualization of political communication in which the audience is seen as constructing meaning from a rich media environment.

The Research Agenda in Political Communication

Much of the research in this area intimates dissatisfaction with the state of political interest, information, or sophistication of the electorate. The blame for the "nation at risk" divides along a continuum of

culpability, anchored by the media at one end and the people at the other. We explore various strands of the literature that focus on the negative impact of “media effects” and the disappointing performance of the uninformed voter. We show how concepts such as the “cost” of information and the “bounded rationality” in which real world political choices are made help us to avoid the endless debates over whether the glass is half-full or half-empty that characterize much of the research on big/little media effects and the oh so/not so uninformed voter. We lean heavily on the contributions of cognitive psychology in developing an approach to political communication that takes account of the construction of news and the citizen’s understanding of media messages.

Media Effects Theory

The traditional view of the way citizens gain information from the media is dominated by imagery of a vegetative audience, passively absorbing media influence. In one form or another, many analysts draw on the logic of Plato’s famous allegory of the cave.

Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground with an entrance open to the light and a long passage down into the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top . . . The prisoners, having seen nothing but shadows, cannot think their words refer to the objects carried past, behind their backs. For them, shadows are the only realities. (Plato, 1945, *The Republic*, book 7)

Plato’s allegory compellingly anticipates the mass citizenry dispersed in their private homes, huddled in front of flickering television screens and trying to make sense of the world at large around them. They are at the mercy of the television puppeteers. How could they possibly understand the full complexities of the political debates which are simplified and caricatured for them by professional journal-

ists? How could they know anything of the world except what they are shown? This is, in effect, the theory of media manipulation that has dominated the literature on media effects.

Media manipulation theories. This notion of a helpless audience is both the oldest and most broadly focused paradigm of political communication effects. It arose from the study of propaganda and mass society rooted in the historical period of authoritarian manipulation of public opinion in Europe beginning with the First World War (Kornhauser, 1959; De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1988; Davis, 1990; Neuman, 1991b). More recent research in a critical tradition characterizes the audience as powerless to resist the persistent, pervasive, and emotionally sophisticated persuasions of an interlocking media-political-economic establishment (Marcuse, 1964; Curran, Gurevitch, and Woollacott, 1977; Bagdikian, 1983; Gerbner, 1983; Bennett, 1988; Entman, 1989; Schiller, 1989). Research in this tradition identifies various mechanisms of media manipulation, including agenda-setting, salience cuing, priming effects, issue framing, mainstreaming, and ideological cultivation (Weiss, 1968; McGuire, 1969, 1986; Kraus and Davis, 1976; Comstock et al., 1978; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller, 1980; Roberts and Bachen, 1981; Zukin, 1981; Kinder and Sears, 1985; Davis and Robinson, 1989; Davis, 1990; Page and Shapiro, 1992).

The key problematic of this research tradition is somewhat awkwardly poised on a debate over minimal versus large media effects. The *bête noir* for many effects researchers is Joseph Klapper. His 1960 review of the literature concluded that media messages generally had minimal effects. His work became the jousting dummy for virtually a generation of communications researchers who felt obliged to prove, after all, that the media do indeed have significant effects on their audiences.

The basic methodology for demonstrating effects involves a statistical correlation between the issue agenda, preferences, perspectives, and assumptions of the audience and some corresponding measure of relative emphasis in the media (Clarke and Kline, 1974; Katz, 1980; McLeod and Reeves, 1980; Neuman, 1989; Nimmo and Swanson, 1990). For example, the cultivation analysis school found that those who watch a great deal of television tend to exhibit higher levels of mainstream and stereotypical thinking which could be derived from the simplifying caricature that dominates informational and entertainment television programming (Signorielli and Morgan, 1990).

Agenda-setting researchers found correlations between the amount of media coverage of public policy issues and the importance attached to those issues by survey respondents (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 1981; Weaver et al., 1981; MacKuen, 1984; Protess and McCombs, 1991). Experimentalists found that when the relative emphasis on various issues was subtly altered in television newscasts watched in a laboratory, such alterations affected the subjects' ratings of issue importance, their sense of responsibility for social problems, and their assessments of public figures (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1991).

The television hypothesis. Because so much of the growth of media coverage and public reliance has involved television in recent years, the new messenger has received more than its share of attention from researchers in the media manipulation tradition. The "television hypothesis" is well documented. Book-length studies of political communication focusing on television to the virtual exclusion of the print media are now commonplace (Meyrowitz, 1985; Robinson and Levy, 1986; Gunter, 1987; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Quester, 1990). Television, however, is only one of the most recent media to be scrutinized and held accountable for the deterioration of society (Wartella and Reeves, 1985). If possible, the tone of television-centered research is even more critical than the previous run of media manipulation studies. Patterson and McClure condemn television news coverage as "so fleeting and superficial that it is almost meaningless" (Patterson and McClure, 1976, p. 36).

Those who blame television for the deficiencies of public information often argue that twenty-two and a half minutes of nightly news cannot possibly provide an adequate knowledge base for the citizenry. One of the important pieces of evidence here is the survey research data which show that people who claim to rely on television as their primary news source are less informed about public issues than print users. Robinson and Davis, for example, in a recent review of research conclude that "there has been growing evidence that television may be less useful than newspapers or word of mouth at conveying information to the public" (Robinson and Davis, 1990, p. 108). The problem of causal inference is complex, however, and it is not yet clear whether there might be other prior factors that may explain both individuals' reliance on non-print news media and their low level of interest in and

knowledge about political life. Nevertheless, television serves as a convenient target of critical research; the growing dependency of the public on television news is being used to explain increasing political alienation, the drop in political participation, a declining role for political parties, and an overall evisceration of political debate (Barber, 1978, 1979; Robinson, 1975, 1976; Ranney, 1983; Arterton et al., 1984; Graber, 1984; Jamieson, 1988; Milburn and McGrail, 1990; Wattenberg, 1991).

The media dependency hypothesis. One component of the media effects tradition of research emphasizes not simply a reliance on television, but rather a dependence on media generally. Citizens have come to depend on the media because they have virtually nowhere else to turn for information about public affairs and for cues on how to frame and interpret that information (Becker and Whitney, 1980; Gerbner et al., 1980; McDonald, 1983; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990). Doris Graber develops the argument by example:

Just imagine what would happen if all mass media ceased to function and remained inactive for an entire year! No news about events at home and abroad. No explanations about shortages or failures of public services. No announcements of new programs and facilities. Presidents, governors, and mayors, and legislators at all levels would be slowed or immobilized by lack of information and interpretation. And you—how would you fare, relying solely on your own daily experiences and word-of-mouth? Indeed, media are vital for public and private life; the image of a modern world without them is eerie and frightening. (Graber, 1984, p. ix)

Becker and Whitney explain the historical roots of the perspective: “as the social system becomes more complex and the informal channels of communication become disrupted, members of society become more dependent on the mass media. The result is that members of modern urban-industrialized societies are becoming almost totally dependent on the media for even rudimentary pieces of information” (Becker and Whitney, 1980, p. 95).

The media, then, have the potential for significant influence because they are so central to the functioning of society and to the individual’s ability to acquire information about wider political and

economic aspects of society. The actual learning of information, however, may depend on the individual's motivations, uses, and anticipated rewards of using the media.

The media gratifications approach. Researchers in this evolving tradition argue that media effects depend on the "uses and gratifications" that the audience members use to orient their media experiences (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1973; Blumler and Katz, 1974; McLeod and Becker, 1981; Rosengren, Wenner, and Palmgreen, 1985; Perse, 1990). So, if one is puzzled by why the stock market crashed in October 1987 and finds more extensive background economic coverage in the newspaper and less, for example, on television, then that individual's needs will more appropriately be met by the newspaper coverage. Here audience members are seen not as simple, passive recipients of media messages, but as people who demand and expect the media to serve particular functions.

The media gratifications tradition has focused more on generalized motivations of media behavior (emphasizing, for example, entertainment versus information) and motivations for use of particular media (books versus television) rather than probing why people are attentive to certain messages and how they use that information (McLeod and Becker, 1981; Blumler, Gurevitch, and Katz, 1985).

The Uninformed Voter

While media effects researchers see the problem in terms of manipulative media facing relatively passive audiences, other researchers concentrate on the stubbornly ignorant and uninterested political audience—the uninformed voter. The key problematic here is the contrast between an idealized model of the citizen, drawn from economic theories of collective choice, and survey evidence of low political sophistication within the potential electorate. How can citizens exercise popular control over elected officials if they are hazy about where the candidates stand on the issues? For this paradigm, however, the problem lies not so much with the failings of the political and media establishment as with the voters themselves.³

This research tradition relies for the most part on the results of public opinion surveys. Interestingly, survey-based public opinion research has traditionally done better at measuring opinions than at measuring

knowledge. One reason is that survey interviewing techniques are premised on maintaining respondent rapport (Babbie, 1973). Researchers are reluctant to ask questions with generally accepted right or wrong answers which may prove potentially embarrassing. Another reason is that the traditional research paradigm focuses on explaining the correlates of policy preference and vote choice rather than the knowledge base from which such preferences may be derived. In fact, much of the received wisdom about the "uninformed public" is not derived from knowledge-oriented questions at all but is inferred from the modest correlations of voter policy or ideological preferences (as measured by one or another scale) and the individual's placement of candidates and parties on similar scales.

When surveys do focus on knowledge rather than opinion, they tend to be based primarily on rather narrowly conceived questions that one might associate with high school civics, such as the length of senators' terms or a definition of "Electoral College." Using textbookish tests of political knowledge, the classic survey-based voting studies of the 1940s and 1950s established a model of a partially informed voter heavily dependent on party labels and evaluations of candidates' personal qualities rather than issue positions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954; Campbell et al., 1960, 1966; Converse, 1964). Voters' policy attitudes were found to conform to a pattern of "self-interest in a primitive and short-sighted sense" rather than to any liberal-conservative ideology (Campbell et al., 1960). These studies, like the Klapper volume, became the target for younger researchers who wished to rescue the reputation of the lowly citizenry from the methodological inferences and elitist presumptions of their forebears (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1976; Judd and Milburn 1980; Natchez, 1985).

Like the debate over minimal versus large media effects, the brouhaha over unenlightened voters is awkwardly unresolved. And like the effects debate, there is enough ambiguity in the modest correlations between issue positions and vote choices to fuel endless debate.

The idealized model against which citizens have been invidiously compared derives from the study of public choice, which takes a mathematically oriented and game-theoretic approach to the puzzle of accumulating private preferences into public policy. Most analysts avoid the voter information problem by positing a model in which all voters have well-developed preferences and virtually complete information

on relevant candidates and parties. Much of the work in this tradition is non-empirical and purely theoretical, demonstrating, for example, how different voting procedures affect the weighted impact of different minority policy positions in multiparty elections (Elster, 1986). When empirical results are introduced, they draw on aggregate statistics at the macro and institutional levels of analysis, in which most of the micro-level random noise of individual "errors" and decisions based on limited knowledge cancel themselves out (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Shepsle, 1972; McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1984). Thus, a typical study concludes that "in principle, it is possible for voters to vote as if they were informed and for the electoral process to be responsive to voter preferences even in very sparse informational environments" (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1990, p. 311). In the past few years, research in this tradition has expanded empirical testing of the theory and even started to incorporate communications and information variables into public choice modeling (Ferejohn and Kuklinski, 1990).

Our own work picks up on this branch of the public choice model, focusing on the costs and benefits of information acquisition. In his seminal work, Anthony Downs argues that it may be completely rational not to vote at all, or not to collect the information necessary for an informed choice (Downs, 1957). Following that argument, Herbert Simon (1985) calls for an investigation of the information environment of "bounded rationality," real individuals coping with all of the demands of individual and collective life confronting a flood tide of political information. Our study attempts to respond to their invitation as we focus on the motives and behaviors of citizens as they develop ideas about critical issues in the public policy debate.

The Political Cognition Perspective

Our approach to public learning draws on the recent literature on political cognition. The key problematic here is the structure of political thought more than the effect of issue-opinions on the vote. Robert Lane's early work (1962) in this area employed extended depth-interviews with fifteen men of "Eastport" to examine the unique and common structuring of individuals' political ideologies. In a later article (1973), Lane explicitly contrasts his natural-language study of "political reasoning" to the survey-based conclusions of Converse and others on "issue constraint" and concludes that the cognitive approach

and its methods by their nature generate a very different picture of the "uninformed voter." More recent investigations in this tradition focus on individual strategies for processing political information in the face of constraints and distractions in other life areas (Graber, 1984). A central concept of political cognition is the notion of schema or simplifying maps of how political facts and figures can be organized into a meaningful whole (Graber, 1984). Lau and Sears (1986), for example, draw together a number of investigations which demonstrate how schematic outlines of candidates and issues are intertwined with the calculation of a vote decision. When individuals do not have enough time and energy fully to survey the political horizon, they may rationally employ some cognitive heuristic to make the task more manageable (Downs, 1957; Converse, 1964; Paivio, 1978; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; Perloff, Wartella, and Becker, 1982; Conover and Feldman, 1984; Simon, 1985; Lau and Sears, 1986; Bruner, 1990). The key problematic, then, focuses on whether the use of cognitive shortcuts, such as attribution techniques, distorts what would otherwise be a rational political preference.

The study of symbolic and sociotropic politics brings the perspective of political cognition into conflict with the underlying assumptions of rational behavior in the uninformed voter paradigm. There is considerable evidence that emotional responses to political symbols, often developed early in life and persisting through adulthood, influence political choices and the processing and conceptualization of new political information (Edelman, 1964; Lau, Brown, and Sears, 1978; Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979; Sears et al., 1980; Sears, 1990; Sears and Funk, 1990). Furthermore, while public choice theory is premised on the strategic expression of self-interest within the electorate, evidence of "pocketbook voting" is surprisingly scarce (Sniderman and Brody, 1977; Schlozman and Verba, 1979; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1981; Kiewiet, 1983; Sears and Lau, 1983; Kinder and Sears, 1985). Although retrospective voting on economic issues is plausible in the aggregate, a closer look at the individual level of how people make sense of the options put before them reveals a diversity of information, strategies, conceptualizations, values, and beliefs.

The Construction of Political Meaning

This review of the issues in the literature of political communication and behavior has been selective and purposeful. Our intent has not

been to chronicle research trends but to erect a theoretical platform from which to launch a fresh approach to enduring questions of mass political behavior. We have singled out three themes: media effects, the uninformed voter, and political cognition, critiquing the first two to build on the third.

The first thematic sets up an irresolvable contest between minimal and maximal media effects. Although such an artificial polarity may be a useful classroom technique, it does not admit a definitive answer. Most troubling is the notion of “media effects” itself which, in its less sophisticated formulations, posits a passive and unthinking audience “affected” by media messages of various sorts. We seek a more systematic understanding of the conditions under which some people learn from or are persuaded by messages and images in their media environment. This conditional focus moves away from the mechanistic and deterministic model of media effects.

The second thematic sets up an equally irresolvable tension between a model of the self-interested issue-focused rational citizen-voters and empirical evidence of distracted, half-attentive, and less-than-fully informed real human beings. Controversy surrounds the use of survey and experimental data that attempt to prove “once and for all” that voters are (or are not) fools. We agree with Converse, one of the founding fathers of this tradition, that it is time to leave that debate and turn to the study of underlying questions about how citizens interpret the political issues put before them by politicians and the media⁴ (Converse, 1980).

The third stream of research is loosely labeled the cognitive perspective. It starts not from a divisive polarity but a straightforward question—how do people think about politics? Drawing from and expanding the media gratifications tradition, it asks how people use the media to learn what they feel they need to know. In asking what kinds of media and what kinds of messages are likely to attract the citizen’s attention, it assumes neither a passive nor an active audience member. The central research question in the field of mass communications and politics need not be a debate over the amount of “effect” of the media on the populace but might well be a more balanced inquiry into the interaction of media, media messages, and public understanding—the study of how people construct meaning from the flow of political discourse around them.

Toward a Constructionist Model of Political Communication

Expanding on Gamson's (1988) early model of the new paradigm, we characterize constructionism as reflecting the following general principles of theory and methodology:

- Constructionism emphasizes the prospect of an active, interpreting, meaning-constructing audience. This is a long-standing impulse of researchers in the field (Kraus and Davis, 1976) but one that has proved frustratingly difficult to achieve in the practice of empirically grounded research (Rosengren, Wenner, and Palmgreen, 1985).
- Constructionism studies the "interaction" between the audience member and the media rather than a narrowly defined "effect" of media on the audience. Delia and O'Keefe (1979), for example, emphasize defining communication as the creation of meaning in interaction rather than in terms of influence. This model of communication as "conversation" provides a particularly attractive model for mass communications researchers.⁵ When an individual enters an ongoing conversation, there is an "implicit negotiation of the definition of the situation, an answer to the question, 'What is going on here?'" (Delia and O'Keefe, 1979, p. 179). The same dynamic, we argue, applies to an individual who turns on a television newscast or opens a newspaper.
- Constructionism emphasizes the importance of the varying character of the communications content. Different kinds of issues are interpreted by the media and by the public in different ways, and communications theory must be sensitive to these differences. In many traditional models of attitude change and persuasion, for example, the substance of the message (or issue, in our vocabulary) receives relatively little attention. In Hovland's work, topics were often selected because they were demonstrably unimportant or obscure, thus presumably leaving room for measurable attitude change (Neuman, 1989, p. 216). But the constructionist approach, in contrast, draws attention to the character of the issue, its salience to individuals, and their prior knowledge.
- Constructionism emphasizes the importance of the medium of communication, including the historical, struc-

tural, and technological character of media institutions. Thus the varying journalistic traditions of broadcast and print journalism, evolving public expectations of what each medium does best, and the physical modalities of textual versus audio and audio-video communication are drawn in as explicit variables for analysis (McLuhan, 1964; Worchel, Andreoli, and Eason, 1975; Cohen, 1976; Hirsch, 1977; Gans, 1979; Salomon, 1979; Robinson and Sheehan, 1983; Graber, 1988; Delli Carpini and Williams, 1990; Kosicki and McLeod, 1990).

- Constructionism focuses on “common knowledge” as opposed to “public opinion”: what people think and how they think about public issues rather than narrowly defined valence-oriented “opinions” concerning an issue or candidate. The use of “knowledge” rather than “opinion” emphasizes the need to organize information into meaningful structures. The phrase “common knowledge” emphasizes that the structuring and framing of information is not unique to each individual but aggregates into the cultural phenomenon of shared perspectives and issue frames.
- Constructionism is non-evaluative in character. The paradigms of media effects and the uninformed-voter each set up an idealized model of rational citizenship in a rich information environment. When measured against the Madisonian ideal, the voter (and in some cases the media) comes up short. Even when researchers in these traditions testify for the defense, asserting that voters are not fools, they do so within the original paradigm. Constructionist theory turns the original question on its head. One does not start with an idealized model of rational issue-voting and design studies to see if the voter measures up. It focuses on what motivates people to pay attention to some public issues rather than assuming that civic duty simply requires attention to all matters political. One asks, simply, how do people become informed about the political world around them, and how do they use the information they have acquired?⁶
- Constructionism is inherently comparative. This affects both theory and methodological strategy. The Latin derivation of the word *communication* emphasizes “that which is held in common.” Thus as analysts we compare how information about different types of issues is organized and

structured in the public discourse of different media and focus on how that information compares with public perceptions. This three-way interaction of individual, medium, and issue which characterizes constructionist research is summarized in figure 1.1.

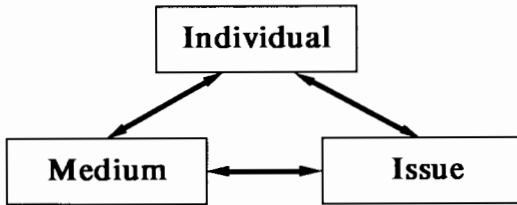


Figure 1.1 The Three-Element Model

- Finally, constructionism emphasizes the systematic integration of multiple methodologies ranging from narrowly focused experiments and content analyses to surveys and open-ended depth interviewing techniques to capture the range of meaning-constructing behavior. Rather than abandon the breadth and generalizability of traditional empirical social scientific methods for the depth, openness, and sensitivity of qualitative methods (or the other way around), a full range of methods is used in tandem (see fig. 1.2 below).

The Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 describes the research design we use as derived from the constructionist model. It is a relatively brief chapter, because many of the technical details concerning specific measurement instruments, sample sizes, and the like have been placed in a methodological appendix. The chapter is driven by a single theme, the importance of a multimethod approach to understand the process of constructing meaning. We systematically employ diverse and counterbalancing research techniques in order to triangulate and validate our findings as illustrated in figure 1.2.

We begin the study proper in Chapter 3 with an assessment of the issue environment. Drawing primarily on a series of content analyses, we review the flow of news in the United States for the period 1985 to 1987 and the relationship of our five selected issues to the broader po-

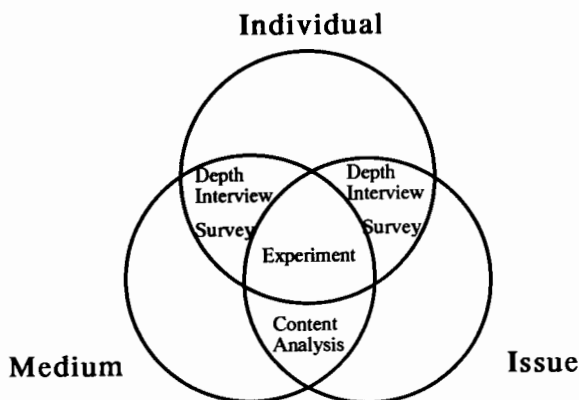


Figure 1.2 The Multimethod Strategy

litical context. We pay particular attention to contrasting the coverage patterns of three selected news media—television, newsmagazines, and newspapers. In that chapter we explore the presentational vocabulary, the structural syntax of news stories, and the use of visuals.

The parallel analysis of the conceptions of the five issues as held by the media and the mass public is the focus of Chapter 4. Here we contrast the journalist's imperative of objectivity with the affective style of popular discourse. We find from our transcribed depth interviews that the audience for news has little interest in the details of a particular conflict or news conference. They are concerned with the issue, broadly defined, as it impacts their own lives, their community, and nation. So we encounter a dynamic tension between the news media and their audience, as the individual viewer or reader struggles to make sense of a flurry of details, numbers, and quotations and to incorporate the significance of this new information into what they already know. News coverage tends to be dry and specific. The audience reaction, in contrast, tends to be affective and integrative. Many of the organizing issue frames of the media and individuals are similar, but they are used to different ends. We conclude that despite many parallels between the media coverage and the pictures in people's heads, there is little evidence that the media indoctrinate an inattentive or unthinking audience.

In chapters 5 and 6 we shift to our experimental and survey research instruments to look more closely at a set of thirty news stories spanning the five issues. Of our adult sample of respondents, we ask:

- What do they already know?
- What do they learn?
- How does learning vary by medium and by issue?
- How does learning vary by the cognitive skills and political interests of the individual?

Not surprisingly, what individuals might learn from a few news stories about an ongoing public issue represents a small proportion of what they already know. Although such findings are not new, they represent an important reminder of the interactive and accumulative nature of the political communication process. We turn next to evidence that directly contradicts the received wisdom about the innate inferiority of television as a news source. In this experimental context, television news proves to be more successful than newspapers in communicating substantive information to the audience. It is not, however, due to the audiovisual modality of the medium, as McLuhan and others have suggested. Indeed, the pattern is much more complex; the success of the medium as a source of political communication depends both on the nature of the public issue and the interests and backgrounds of the members of the audience.

In Chapter 6, we consider whether learning about the complex issues that confront the polity is more constrained by the ability of individuals to comprehend the material or by their interest in the topic. We find that merely paying attention to the news can compensate for the advantages of cognitive acuity. We also show that people learn some information at every level of cognitive ability, interest, and education, but that those with less acuity or prior knowledge depend significantly on the style and structure of news presentations. We show how differences in news presentation explain why television and magazine news is more accessible than newspaper news to people with average skills and interest in politics.

Chapter 7 pulls together these findings and attempts to draw out lessons for further systematic research, for democratic theory, and for journalistic practice. We conclude that the widely accepted image of an inattentive and ideologically innocent mass public drawn from three decades of survey research merits a closer look. Given the extraordinarily low likelihood that one's vote will tip an election outcome or that political authorities might actually call upon citizens to discuss their considered policy positions, political attentiveness represents a paradox. As Morris Fiorina puts it (quoted in Ferejohn, 1990, p. 13): "What is most puzzling about democratic politics is that the level of

public interest is as *high* as it is, not that ignorance is widespread.” Our learning experiments demonstrate that almost everybody learns at least something from a news encounter—and remembers it long enough that we can measure it. We resolve the apparent paradox of the mass public’s highly figurative understanding of political issues, but only modest success in recalling news facts, in the light of Graber’s admonition that “the ultimate purpose of most information gathering is the extraction of meaning” (1984, p. 151). Our study is devoted to showing how people learn and, ultimately, construct meaning about public issues, and how the print and broadcast news media can help them do it.