

Information and Democracy

Public Policy in the News

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Preface

Media are critical to representative democracy. This is well known and acknowledged throughout modern political history, from the founding of democratic republics to the present day. Information about government policy and performance is central to effective accountability and control. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how large-scale democracy would work without reasonably accurate media coverage of current affairs.

It is of some significance, then, that we are in the midst of both public and scholarly debate about the nature and quality of media coverage in the United States and elsewhere. The current academic debate is fueled by several factors. There is a growing body of work on journalists' misrepresentation – and the public's corresponding misunderstanding – of scientific issues such as global warming and vaccinations. There is a burgeoning literature on selective exposure and motivated reasoning suggesting that even were media coverage to portray issues accurately, exposure and interpretation of that information would be subject to a range of preexisting biases, and that this is enhanced in an increasing high-choice media environment. There also are concerns about an increasingly polarized electorate, which may enhance the likely impact of selective exposure and the systematically biased media coverage that may accompany it (bearing in mind that producers of the latter have an incentive to cater to the former).

Consternation over the accuracy of American media news reached a fevered pitch in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, the loose interpretation of facts by the Trump administration including contestation of the 2020 election results, and ongoing claims of and concerns about “fake news.” There have been few moments since the rise of modern media during which information about current affairs was so suspect, not just by the public but by media professionals and academics as well.

The current climate in the United States is in some ways relatively unique. The availability of inaccurate information is *not* one of those ways, however. There have of course been other periods of heightened concern about media accuracy, during the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, for instance. There are long-standing concerns about media accuracy on a broad range of policy issues as well, including climate change, health care, and taxes. There *always* has been variation in the quality and accuracy of media coverage across issues and media outlets and over time, and there has *always* been accurate and

inaccurate information about public policy. There is accordingly a rich body of work, with well-developed theories and models, that can help us examine instances in which media have facilitated or inhibited representative democracy.

This observation is the starting point for the work that follows. Our intention is partly to respond to very current concerns about the state of public affairs, especially the role that mass and social media currently play in connecting public preferences and policymaking in representative democracies. However, we also take seriously the possibility that while there are times that media content is inaccurate, there are times when it is accurate. Our aim is to leverage existing theories, and over forty years of data on public policy and media coverage across six policy domains in the United States, to better measure and understand both the successes and failures of mass media in modern representative democracy.

Ascertaining the quantity and quality of media content is a defining feature of the book, but we also want to know how well this content informs the public about the actions of government. For this, we need to assess whether the public actually receives (and accepts) that information, which leads us to public perceptions and preferences themselves. Indeed, this was the motivation for our research on media coverage of policy and it occupies a good deal of our attention in the pages that follow.

The book has roots dating back to our time at Nuffield College, Oxford, where we met in 2001 and began research on the dynamics of public opinion and policy, which led to a stream of articles and a book, *Degrees of Democracy*. Much of that work showed that spending policy in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada follows the ebb and flow of public opinion, and also that the public tends to respond, adjusting its preferences for more policy thermostatically in response to policy change. The mechanisms of public responsiveness to government policy actually were on our minds as we wrote *Degrees*, and the mass media were our primary suspects; indeed, they seemingly had to be a large part of the story. We nevertheless were not sure how to go about addressing this empirically, as we had little idea how to conceptualize coverage of government policy, let alone measure it. We were spurred on, however, by reactions to our work, perhaps most notably by Jason Barabas and Armen Hakhverdian, both of whom pushed us in reviews of our book to account for the mechanism(s) of public responsiveness. Others encouraged us more informally to undertake such research, including our current and former colleagues and coauthors Kevin Arceneaux, Peter Enns, and Patrick Fournier. We are thankful for this.

When we decided to move forward years later, we started not with policy but with something seemingly more tractable – the economy. Though it took some time, the methodology we developed with Dominik Stecula worked, neatly capturing the tone of mass media coverage of real economic ebbs and flows, first when applied in the United States and then in Canada and the United Kingdom. Having done this, we trained our sights on policy, beginning

with what struck us as the most self-contained domain and a highly salient one as well – US spending on defense. We produced two journal articles, one on measuring media coverage of policy change published in *Policy Studies Journal* and the other more comprehensive analysis of policy, coverage, and public opinion, with Fabian Neuner, for the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, both published in 2019. With the financial support of National Science Foundation (NSF) grants (SES-1728792 and SES-1728558), we were able to build on our proof of concept and undertake a comprehensive data collection in various spending and non-spending domains, involving millions of newspaper articles and television news broadcasts as well as (many) millions more Facebook posts and tweets. It led to a methodological paper with Lindsay Dun that assesses dictionary and supervised learning methods for measuring media coverage of government policy, which was published in *Political Communication*. The grants also funded the much more expanded data collection and analysis in this book.

We were fortunate to have had excellent research support along the way. Lauren Guggenheim of the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan helped with grant preparation, data management, and crowdsourced human coding. Sarah Fioroni helped with manuscript revisions. Stuart Tendler and Katie Beth Willis at the University of Texas provided management of the grant expenditure, particularly research assistance. There were a number of research assistants at the University of Michigan and University of Texas at Austin: Lindsay Dun, Connor Dye, Sydney Foy, Amanda Hampton, Daniel Hiaeshutter-Rice, Andrew Segal, and Dominic Valentino. We also relied on numerous undergraduate student coders in Austin: Alec Carden, Gabrielle Chavez, Hannah Cobb, Evita Escobedo, Rahul Gupta, Macy Jackson, Alex Montellano, Amanda Quintanilla, David Trevino, and Alfredo Valenzuela. Last but not at all least, the resources and support staff at the Texas Advanced Computing Center (TACC) literally were indispensable to the research, and we want to single out Charlie Dey and especially Anna Dabrowski.

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We benefited from the many other attendees at presentations of the research. Papers related to the book were presented at the University of Amsterdam, University of Antwerp, University of Arizona, Australian National University, Campus den Haag, Leiden University, UCLA, CIDE (Mexico City), University of Copenhagen, Hebrew University, Humboldt University, University of Leuven, University of Liverpool, University of Michigan, University of Sydney, University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, and the University of Vienna. We benefited from several opportunities to present ideas at the Political Communication Working Group at the University of Michigan. Papers also were presented to panels at conferences in Austin, Chicago, Houston, New Orleans, San Juan, San Francisco, Toronto, Tucson, and Washington, DC. Finally, we also thank our colleagues at the University of Michigan and the University of Texas at Austin for providing supportive research environments.

The book itself would not have happened without people at Cambridge University Press, beginning with Robert Dreesen for showing early interest in the work, and then Lance Bennett, Sara Doskow, Claire Sissen, and Jadyn Fauconier-Herry for carrying things forward and providing guidance and comments along the way.

Information and democracy : public policy in the news (Cambridge).

- 1 - Media in Representative Democracy
- 2 - Public Responsiveness to Media
- 3 - Measuring the “Media Signal”
- 4 - Alternative Measures of the Media Policy Signal
- 5 - The Accuracy of Media Coverage
- 6 - Policy, the Media, and the Public
- 7 - Diagnosing and Exploring Dynamics
- 8 - Policy and the Media