

The media can't be trusted and politics is irrelevant - It's what people say, but not always what they do

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Two recent lectures at Sciences Po give Europa United contributor Frances Cowell insights into the three-way relationship between politics, the media and the voting public.

The narrative is seductive: the media cannot be trusted because they are mouthpieces for megalomaniac media barons, sneaky politicians or both. The system is so rigged that politics has become irrelevant, and there is no longer any point in voting.

Can the media be trusted? Do they do what their owners instruct?

Is politics all a waste of time?

Can the media be trusted?

Surveys reveal that only about half of us think that traditional media (the French sometimes call them “merdia”) tell the truth. 56% of us say we trust radio the most, newspapers score 52% and television 48%. Journalists are one of the least admired or trusted of professions.

Yet more people get their news from the telly than from either radio or newspapers. And while only 25% say they trust the internet, they are more likely to get their news from it than from either radio or newspapers. Meanwhile, an increasing number of young adults choose a career in journalism.

Does this all say that trustworthiness isn't important - or perhaps that people trust the media more than they say they do?

Do the media say what their owners tell them to?

It often seems that way, but that could be because of a relatively small number of high-profile media barons such as Rupert Murdoch. But Murdoch et al stand out precisely because they are exceptions. The truth is much more boring: most media owners are passive or semi-passive funds such as pension funds, which exert famously-little influence or oversight over the firms they invest in.

Media firms, both “new” and “old”, earn their living from sales either of their publications or of advertising or both, so they present the material they think will earn them the biggest audience. To some, this means appealing to an audience that craves authentic, unbiased news and comment. But to many, it means telling people what they want to hear. And because television and social media must react instantly and continuously, their messages must be in short and accessible to attract attention in a crowded and noisy environment. Politics is a rich vein for snappy material, so the media are keen to maintain close links to get the best-

selling news. Which is often bad, so the audience gets sound-bites of mostly-bad news.

This instant news cycle is over-laid with a monthly one, as advertisers monitor audience statistics closely to get the best value for their budgets. This means that media bosses must too, and find themselves hostage to monthly audience survey reports.

Are the media influenced by political parties?

Politicians work to similar cycles. For one thing, they need to reapply for their jobs every couple of years, so any decision they take or words they utter must deliver a positive outcome in time for the next election. And of course they avoid taking decisions that may yield a negative result during their term, even at the cost of foregoing big benefits in the longer-term.

Between election cycles, politicians rely on monthly popularity surveys - and good media coverage to boost the numbers - which means they need good relations with key media organisations.

With both politicians and the media tied to their monthly report cards, and each needing the other to survive, the power relationship between them is a two-way embrace. If anyone is calling the shots, its media audiences and voters who power the surveys.

Politics? Irrelevant?

Research shows that about one person in ten is disengaged either permanently or temporarily from politics, or shows interest only occasionally. That means that nine people in ten still see value in voting, even if they don't always vote.

People may deride politics, but they are inherently interested in it and, surveys show, generally believe in democracy. The proportion of people professing interest or intense interest in current affairs is stable, since 1987 fluctuating within a range of 60%-80%, while disinterest fluctuates between 20% and 40%. 90% of French people rank democracy as the best way to run a country, although a worrying 17% think the army would do a better job!

Populists eagerly harness distrust and rumours of collusion; and a constant stream of bad-news sound bites may well turn people off voting and set off a vicious cycle of mis-information and political disenchantment.

Is lack of trust turning people off voting?

Perhaps, but it turns out that plenty of other things can and do stop people from voting:

A fine, for one thing: in Belgium and Luxembourg, where voting is mandatory or quasi-mandatory, turnout averages 90% and is consistently above 87%, as the graph shows for EU elections.

You are much less likely to vote if it is hard to do so. Most EU member states, except the Soviet blocs help by holding elections on weekends and see turnout of about 50%. Ireland, the Netherlands and Britain hold their elections on weekdays and average 44% turnout.

Inconvenience makes it a bit harder too. Many states designate a single polling place, typically near voters' home addresses, whether that is convenient for them or not. Of course voters can always pre-register for postal voting if they know they'll be away on voting day, but that requires forethought and organisation. More choice about where to cast your vote may make it more likely that voters will get to the polls.

You learn from your experiences and those around you. Perennially low turnout in Eastern European, ex-Soviet bloc states may be partly due to those people's experience of single-party elections and widespread election rigging under Soviet rule.

You're more likely to vote if you think that the election itself is important, as with a presidential election, or that your vote will actually make a difference to how things are run. This may explain relatively high turnout rates for municipal elections - and relatively low turnout for European elections.

So ... can the media be trusted, do they do what their owners instruct and is the EU an elitists plot and politics all a waste of time?

Many media organisations do indeed disseminate a lot of nonsense, but mostly this is to maximise their audience and hence their revenues, rather than manipulation by over-mighty media barons. Exceptions to this stand out precisely because they are exceptions.

The relationship between most media organisations and most political organisations is more akin to a fatal embrace than a smoke-filled back room. For the media, politics is a vital source of content, while politicians need the media to get their message to voters. Here is hard evidence that politics is far from irrelevant, for if it were, the media wouldn't bother reporting on it.

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