The health of a democracy rests on the vigilance of its citizens, and democracy works best when citizens pay attention to the governing process. Different models of democracy envision different roles for citizens to fulfill, but every theory of democracy agrees that the most basic role of the citizen is to hold leaders accountable for what they have done or intend to do.¹

Yet we know little about the conditions under which citizens are most likely to exercise such vigilance by going out and seeking political information. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that threats of various sorts can motivate people to gather information.² It would seem that citizen interest in politics should be most acute when the political stakes are perceived as high, or when the risk of future harm is great. For example, citizen knowledge of politics over the latter half of the twentieth century hit an all-time high in the 1960s, presumably because of the social turmoil occurring during that decade.³ Likewise, the American public receives higher scores on political knowledge tests given during presidential election campaigns than it does during midterm congressional elections, apparently because the highly visible presidential campaigns remind people how important it is to follow government affairs.⁴ If citizen engagement in politics goes up when the political environment generates reasons to be attentive, then democratic accountability might occur most efficiently during periods of social unrest or economic hardship, as the history of “critical realignments” in American elections suggests.⁵

Editors’ Note: Portions of the analysis of audience demand for network news broadcasts first appeared in Scott L. Althaus, “American News Consumption During Times of National Crisis,” *Ps: Political Science & Politics* 35, no. 3 (2002), and are used with permission from Cambridge University Press. Unless otherwise noted, all circulation and ratings data reported in this chapter were obtained from the 2004, 2005, and 2006 editions of the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s “State of the News Media” reports, available at www.journalism.org.
If vigilance follows times of trouble, then complacency should emerge in the wake of peace and prosperity. Although this prediction implies that political accountability might be harder to achieve when things are generally going well, it also suggests a reassuring explanation for one of the most vexing trends confronting American political communication scholars: the long-term decline in the size of audiences for traditional news coverage in the United States.

At the height of the Vietnam War in 1969, fully half of U.S. households tuned in to one of the three nightly news broadcasts. By 2000 the combined audience for network nightly news had dropped to less than a quarter of U.S. households. The same historical decline has affected newspaper readership. Daily newspaper circulation in the United States was approximately one newspaper per household in 1970. By 2000 weekday newspaper penetration had fallen to slightly more than one newspaper for every two households, a drop of nearly 50 percent in just thirty years.5

What happened between the 1960s and the turn of the twenty-first century that could explain these declines in the size of news audiences? One factor might be the end of the Vietnam War. The post-Vietnam period was a time not only of peace for Americans but also of rapidly growing prosperity. Between 1970 and 2000 per capita disposable income in the United States grew by 188 percent after controlling for inflation and changes in the price of personal commodities.7 If times of peace and prosperity are partly responsible for the apparent demobilization of news audiences, then the public's limited amount of attention to the news in 2000 compared to 1969 could be less ominous that it might seem. As long as Americans return to the news when times again become troubled, their waning interest during good times may be of no lasting consequence. Firefighters make for pleasant company, but showing up when the house is in flames is what really counts.

If popular vigilance is an essential ingredient to successful democratic governance, then we want to know whether diminishing levels of citizen attentiveness to politics is more like a free fall or a high dive. Leaving the safety of the airplane signals a point of no return for the parachutist. Pulling the rip cord can slow down but not reverse the jumper's fall. Once on the ground, the time and expense involved in reloading the chute and flying back to altitude makes the jumper unlikely to turn around and do it again. The same may be true of interest in the news. If people reach their "tipping point" and stop paying close attention to the daily doings of political leaders, then the declining size of newspaper and broadcast news audiences may signal a long-term demobilization that results in permanently smaller and more specialized sets of niche audiences for various types of political information.8

But news audiences may be more resilient than they appear. Plunging headfirst from an aerial platform without a parachute sounds catastrophic, but not when the platform is a diving board suspended above a deep pool of water. The diver speeds downward but eventually bobs back up. Climbing out and scaling the ladder for another leap is easily done, and the cycle continues until the interest fades. The size of the news audience might fall when times are good, but rise again when bad times return. In such a situation, an apparent long-term decline in the health of the body politic may rapidly change for the better once a pressing need arises for renewed citizen vigilance.9

The difficulty in sorting out free falls from high dives comes from the challenge of identifying the unique impact of numerous factors that simultaneously influence the changing composition of news audiences over time. Comparing news habits during the Vietnam War to those at the start of the twenty-first century tells us little about the reasons for decline, as more than peace and prosperity transpired in the intervening years. The growth of cable news channels and the advent of the Internet contributed to the fragmentation of audiences for traditional news formats, just as the rise of radio and broadcast television ate away at newspaper audiences in the decades before the 1960s. Today's audiences are also lured away from news coverage by a wider range of non-news media choices than were available in 1970, from video games and personal computers to home theaters and MTV.10 No simple comparison between the Vietnam era and today can control for the multiple influences of these other developments. To figure out not only whether the long-term contraction in the size of print and broadcast news audiences is temporary or permanent, but also how large the drop actually is, would require a census of audiences for all available news outlets. Given the complexity and scope of the contemporary media environment, such a survey may be impossible.

We have, however, a different way to approach the question that can help sort out the impact of these many competing influences. Sudden changes in the political environment following the onset of national crises provide opportunities to study the response of news audiences during times when technological advances and the state of the economy are more or less constant. This chapter considers patterns of surge and decline in news attention for three such cases: the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–1991, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Two of the three cases have clear and sudden starting points: the 9/11 attacks were completely unanticipated, as was Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait on August 2, 1990. Moreover, the Persian Gulf crisis occurred more than two years before the advent of the World Wide Web and during a time when CNN's tiny audience and lack of cable competitors...
made it a novel but relatively minor player on the media scene. The timing of these two crises allows for a comparison between the dynamics of audience response in the more concentrated television news system that existed in 1991, when the three network evening news broadcasts were the main source of news for American audiences, and the highly segmented multi-outlet system that was in place by 2001. The run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq was more gradual, but in all three cases it is possible to study the dynamics of news audience size long before and long after the start of each crisis. Comparing the percentage of adults attending to the news before and after each precipitating event should reveal how the crisis atmosphere stimulated changes in levels of popular attention to the news.

Free Fall or High Dive?

To understand whether the American public's appetite for political news is stimulated by the loss of peace or threats to prosperity, we must start by assessing the degree to which the public sees different sources of news as useful for keeping up with national and international events. National surveys conducted since 1991 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press provide detailed information about the media consumption habits of the U.S. public. Figure 8.1 shows that when people are asked where they were most likely to turn for news about national and international issues, television news has long been the most popular source of political information in the United States. In 2006, three out of four respondents named television as one of their main sources of news about national and international issues. In contrast, only about four in ten respondents mentioned newspapers as a major source of such information in 2006; one in four named the Internet; and two in ten relied on radio.

Because Pew allows respondents to mention up to two main sources of news about national and international issues, the numbers for each year can add up to far more than 100 percent. The best way to interpret these survey results is to note the trends over time and whether use of different media for surveillance changes in response to the onset of wars, major political events, or national crises. The relative importance of television, newspapers, and radio for keeping up with national and international issues has been relatively stable since 1990. Television's overwhelming popularity waned somewhat during the late 1990s, but revived after 9/11. Newspapers are the second-most popular source for following news of global and domestic importance, but reliance on newspapers for this purpose peaked in the mid-1990s and has been waning ever since. Radio used to be the third-most mentioned source of political news, and its use for this purpose has remained relatively steady since 1990. Of the four media considered here, the Internet was the least-turned-to news medium for national and international issues until after the invasion of Iraq. But public interest in using the Internet to follow news of the world has been building steadily since the late 1990s. Starting in July 2003 the Internet has been consistently mentioned by more people than radio as an important source of news about major events.

Yet when national crises erupt, these conventional patterns of self-reported media reliance can change quite dramatically. Figure 8.1 shows how reliance on television news spiked after the September 2001 attacks, the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina in September 2005. Short-term increases in reliance on television for news of national and international issues were accompanied by short-term declines in the use of radio and the Internet, as well as the dramatic abandonment of newspapers as a main source for political surveillance in the case of the two threats to national peace. Americans,
however, did not stop reading newspapers or listening to radio news during these national crises. Instead, these data tell us merely that the perceived usefulness of the four media changed abruptly when circumstances became dire, and that television is seen as the most important news source for national and international information during times of national crisis.

Claiming to rely on a medium for keeping up with a particular kind of news does not imply doing it often. It is important to place the trends in Figure 8.1 into perspective. Interest in national and international news topics is not widespread in the American public. For example, Pew data show that during most of 2005 and 2006 only four in ten Americans said they paid very close attention to news about the war in Iraq. For this reason, we need to examine what Americans do, not just what they say. Do sudden changes in national fortunes precipitate rapid growth in the size of news audiences for television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet? Addressing this question requires examining trends in ratings and circulation data for each medium in turn, beginning with national television news programming.

**Audience Demand for Broadcast Television News**

Nightly network news broadcasts hold the attention of a larger portion of Americans than any other single news product in the United States, including cable news. For example, CBS Evening News with Katie Couric was the lowest-rated network evening news program at the end of 2006. During the week of December 18, the average nightly audience for Couric’s broadcast was 7.4 million viewers, compared to 8.5 million for ABC’s World News Tonight and 9.5 million for NBC’s Nightly News. Yet Couric’s average nightly audience was more than two and a half times as large as the total audience for the top-rated programs on Fox, CNN, and MSNBC combined. For the week of December 18, the combined audience for Fox’s O’Reilly Factor, CNN’s Paula Zahn Now, and MSNBC’s Countdown with Keith Olbermann averaged just 2.8 million viewers per night. In contrast, the combined nightly audience for the three network news programs during the week of December 18 was nine times as large. Although network news audiences have been in decline for many decades, they still dwarf the nearest competitor on cable television.

To track short-term changes in the size of network news audiences over time, I combined weekly television ratings data collected by Nielsen Media Research for ABC’s World News Tonight, CBS’s Evening News, and NBC’s Nightly News. Translating these ratings data into the percentage of American adults tuning in to the nightly news corrects for population growth in the United States that occurred between 1990 and 2001.

One striking feature of these trends (see Figure 8.2) is that the evening news audience was only about half as large in 2001 as it was a decade before. During the 1990–1991 period, between 25 percent and 33 percent of American adults watched nightly network news broadcasts, depending on the time of year. Since January 2001 Nielsen data put the total size of nightly news audiences at between 11 percent and 16 percent of American adults (not counting the week of 9/11). Today’s total audience for all forms of public affairs content is probably smaller than it was a decade before, but the main reason for today’s smaller network television news audience is that the once-larger broadcast news audience of 1990–1991 is spread across a wider range of news products, with cable, the Internet, and local television news now attracting sizable portions of a national news audience that in 1990 was shared mainly by the three evening news programs.

Because news audiences have become fragmented, absolute differences in the percentage of adults watching network news during each crisis period are less
leading up to each precipitating event call into question whether either of these national crises fundamentally increased the size of the broadcast news audience. Network television news audiences swell during the winter months, when people spend more time indoors, and shrink in the summer months. Once we take into account these cyclical shifts in the size of television news audiences, the apparent changes prompted by each crisis become harder to distinguish from normal seasonal movement. It seems impressive at first glance that 32.7 percent of adults were following the evening news in a typical week during the critical month of January 1991, up from 23.2 percent for July 1990. But this number loses some of its luster when we recognize that the evening news audience was nearly as large—31.4 percent of adults—in the previous January. Because of the seasonal variation, a more appropriate way of measuring the impact of national crises is to calculate the size of the news audience after the precipitating event compared to its size from the same period in the previous year. This comparison paints a very different picture. During the Persian Gulf crisis an average of approximately 2.4 million more adults per day were watching evening news broadcasts in the first four months of 1991 compared to the first four months of 1990. The same comparison for the onset of the war on terrorism produces a mean difference of just less than 900,000 more audience members per day in 2002 than in 2001. Seasonal-adjusted growth in the news audience was nearly three times as large during the Persian Gulf crisis as during the current war on terrorism, but in both cases the magnitude of growth was rather small, amounting to 0.4 percent of adults in 2001–2002 and 1.3 percent in 1990–1991.16 Seen from this perspective, the clearest impact of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was the increase in the amount of weekly variance around the seasonal mean rather than a shift in the mean itself. Similarly, 9/11 appears to have accelerated the seasonal growth curve for the evening news audience during the fall of 2001 without producing a substantive shift in its average size.

This seasonal variation becomes easier to see when the points of comparison are closer together in time. Figure 8.3 shows twenty-four months of weekly ratings data for January 2001 through January 2003 and January 2002 through January 2004. Staggering these ratings trends by a year helps to distinguish event-induced spikes in the size of news audiences from normal seasonal movement. Because the 9/11 attacks occurred during the first period and the 2003 invasion of Iraq during the second, this comparison also helps to clarify how these events influenced the size of news audiences in the months that followed. Looking first at the impact of the 9/11 attacks compared to audience trends in the following year, we see that network news audiences grew by

telling than the relative changes in audience size within each trend. If we begin our analysis immediately before the onset of each crisis and follow the trends over the next several months, the two cases appear to reveal different patterns of audience response. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait produced an immediate four percentage point spike in the U.S. news audience. The nightly news audience then grew steadily during the fall as the U.S. military buildup in Saudi Arabia signaled a looming confrontation with Iraq. Nearly a third of U.S. adults were directly exposed to one of the three nightly news broadcasts during the weeks leading up to and immediately following the start of the air war on January 16, 1991. The news audience shrank somewhat in early February but jumped three percentage points during the week of ground combat, which began on February 23. A rapid victory over Iraqi ground forces was followed by an abrupt turn away from the news, and the nightly audience dropped nearly ten percentage points over the eight weeks following the close of the ground campaign.

A decade later, the tragedies of 9/11 had the immediate effect of doubling the size of the evening news audience, from 13 percent of U.S. adults in the week of September 3–9 to more than 26 percent in the week of September 10–16. Just as swiftly, however, the evening news audience contracted to 15 percent of adults in the week of September 17–23 and never rose more than 1.5 percentage points above that level in the following seven months. In contrast to frequent event-driven surges in news attention throughout the Persian Gulf crisis, network news attention in the post-9/11 United States held quite stable at about four percentage points above pre-9/11 levels for several months before declining steadily after the start of the new year in 2002. By the middle of April 2002, the size of the evening news audience had returned to the previous July’s level of just 13 percent of adults.

When interpreting these postcrisis trends using the immediate precrisis period as a benchmark, it appears that the Persian Gulf crisis produced a gradual mobilization of Americans into the television news audience, but that the onset of the war on terrorism generated a smaller shock to the size of news audiences that started decaying soon after it began. During the Persian Gulf crisis, the average size of the evening news audience grew by 13.8 million persons between the last week of July 1990 and the first week of January 1991. During the onset of the war on terrorism, the growth in the evening news audience between these same two weeks was only half as large, amounting to 7.4 million more audience members in January 2002 compared to the previous July.

This interpretation of postcrisis growth in the news audience, however, requires us to ignore the left-hand side of Figure 8.2. The longer-term trends
start of the Iraqi invasion saw a temporary 1 percent jump in audience levels over the previous week, but the size of the network news audience dropped precipitously over the following month as the invasion forces ground on toward Baghdad. The data in Figure 8.3 show that this decline in news attention followed the normal seasonal trend for March and April and did not seem to be influenced in any significant way by the progress of the war.

In short, the daily news audience for network news broadcasts is much larger than any other daily broadcast or cable news audience in the United States. But short-term changes in the size of the network news audience are typically influenced less by the current state of national security than by the current state of the weather.

**Audience Demand for Cable Television News**

The size of audiences for cable news channels is hard to pin down because of the format differences between traditional network broadcasts and cable channels. Audiences for nightly news broadcasts are concentrated into a single thirty-minute time period per day, but audiences for cable news channels come and go around the clock. Cable viewership can therefore be very small for any given program but fairly large when the number of unique viewers is considered over longer periods of time. Researchers use two methods to measure audience size for cable news channels; the average number of viewers in a typical minute of a day, and the cumulative number of unique viewers that have watched the channel at some point during an entire month.

The average number of people watching cable news channels at any given minute of the day is usually quite modest by network news standards. Figure 8.4 shows the combined average audience per minute for the top three cable news channels: CNN, Fox, and MSNBC. The impact of the 9/11 attacks on long-term trends in cable news viewership is unmistakable. From January 1998 to August 2001, the combined daytime audience for the three cable channels averaged just less than 0.4 percent of adults, or about 770,000 persons, while the combined primetime audience per minute averaged nearly 0.7 percent of adults, or about 1.4 million persons. From September 2001 to December 2005, the average daytime cable audience grew to nearly 0.9 percent of adults, or approximately 1.8 million people, while the average primetime audience expanded to 1.4 percent of adults per minute, or 2.9 million viewers. The increased national security threat following 9/11 effectively doubled the audience for cable news channels.

approximately 2 percent of the adult population beginning in the week following the terror attacks until roughly a month later. From mid-October 2001 until mid-January 2002, the network news audience was about 1 percent of the adult population larger than it would be a year later. After mid-January 2002 the size of the network news audience appears almost indistinguishable from the audience trend of the following year.

If the 9/11 attacks produced a small but temporary increase in the size of network news audiences, the March 2003 invasion of Iraq registered hardly at all. Figure 8.3 shows that the initial run-up to war produced little noticeable growth in the network news audience, beginning with the congressional vote on October 11, 2002, to authorize the use of military force against Iraq and continuing with the debate before the United Nations from late January through mid-February 2003. After the testimony of UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix and Secretary of State Colin Powell on whether Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, the size of the broadcast news audience dropped slightly until the beginning of the war against Iraq. The week including the
In addition to expanding the regular audience for cable news, national crises and high-visibility political events can have even stronger short-term effects on public attention to cable news programming. Figure 8.4 shows that as recounts were ordered in several states after the 2000 presidential election, the average cable news audience in November 2000 was three times the size of the average cable news audience when the campaign began in September. Likewise, comparing cable news attention in August and September 2004 shows that the start of the presidential campaign increased the size of the prime-time viewing audience by nearly a third for all three cable channels combined. Dramatic crises had a similar effect on the size of cable news audiences. The 9/11 attacks produced a fourfold increase in the size of the average cable news audience, from 1.6 million prime-time viewers in August 2001 to 4.6 million prime-time viewers in September. But the average cable news audience contracted swiftly in the months following the attacks. By January 2002 the combined per-minute audience for the three cable channels averaged 2.4 million prime-time viewers, just half the size of the peak audience in September 2001. More dramatic changes in the size of the average cable news audience followed the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in September 2005. The average minute of prime-time cable news programming during the intense ground combat in April 2003 drew 3.5 million more viewers than in February 2003, a month before the invasion. The flooding of the Gulf Coast after the hurricane temporarily expanded the average audience for prime-time cable news from 1.5 percent of adults in August 2005 to 2.7 percent in September, before just as swiftly snapping back to 1.4 percent in October.

Although Figure 8.4 shows that the average cable audience remains far smaller than the average broadcast news audience, the cumulative cable news audience—that is, the total number of unique viewers over a period of time—can include a fairly large proportion of American adults. For example, Hurricane Katrina drew an average prime-time cable news audience of 2.0 million per minute for CNN and 2.8 million per minute for Fox during September 2005. But the number of different people who watched at least six minutes of programming at some point during that same month was 101.1 million for CNN (or about 49 percent of American adults) and 87.2 million for Fox (or about 34 percent of American adults). Even if there is a large overlap in the individuals making up these two audiences, we can safely conclude that a majority of the American public sought out at least a few minutes of cable news programming as this natural disaster unfolded. Hurricane Katrina caused the cumulative cable news audience to increase by between 25 million and 37 million unique viewers per channel—representing between 12 percent and 18 percent of American adults each—during September 2005 relative to cumulative audiences for the previous month. But by November 2005 the size of cumulative cable news audiences had fallen back to pre-Katrina levels. At the time of this writing, trend data for cumulative ratings suggest that in any given month around a third of the U.S. adult population tunes in to six or more minutes of cable news programming.  

The cumulative number of unique cable news viewers per month may be more than twice as large as the average nightly audience for the three network newscasts, but comparable data for cumulative network news audiences are not publicly available. It is difficult therefore to tell whether cable news attracts more or fewer unique viewers per month than broadcast news. It is also important to consider that this measure of the cable audience includes persons who tune in for just six minutes per month, whereas network news viewers tend to be habitually attentive. Of the two available measures, the size of the regular audience for cable news is therefore better estimated by the smaller average
Audience Demand for Newspapers

Reading newspapers is relatively more habit-driven than watching television news. Eight out of ten regular newspapers readers are subscribers who have made a long-term financial commitment to a paper. For this reason, levels of newspaper reading tend to remain stable even during times of national crisis.

The 1990s marked the beginning of a steady, long-term decline in American newspaper readership that has continued undisturbed by wars and other catalyzing events. Figure 8.5 shows a steady pattern starting with 1964, the year that the Gulf of Tonkin incident propelled the United States into a large-scale military involvement in Vietnam, and continuing through 2006. The straight line in Figure 8.5 illustrates the predicted erosion of the newspaper audience over time, and, compared to the actual decline, shows how little impact wars and other dramatic events have had on newspaper readership over time. Daily newspaper readership during the Vietnam War started at 81 percent in 1964 but fell to 78 percent by 1970. The declining interest in newspapers continued through the 9/11 attacks and the war in Iraq.

By 2006 only 50 percent of U.S. adults were estimated to read a daily newspaper. Although this sounds like a sizable news audience, research shows that only half of those readers pay regular attention to national or international news items, about the same proportion that reads the sports pages. Instead, newspaper readers disproportionately specialize in local news. But because nearly nine in ten newspaper readers report paying attention to stories on the front page, it is likely that a fairly large proportion of Americans read prominent newspaper coverage of national or international news.

Figure 8.3 Combined national weekday readership for daily newspapers, 1964–2006

Source: Newspaper Association of America, compiled from various sources.

Audience Demand for Radio News

Like newspaper readers, the radio news audience consists mainly of habitual rather than occasional listeners. The highest levels of weekday radio news exposure occur during the morning and evening rush hours, mainly among motorists commuting between work and home. Because commutes occur without regard to the weather or major events of the day, radio listeners constitute one of the most loyal and stable of news audiences.

It is important to distinguish between commercial and public radio news audiences, because commercial news-talk formats combine shorter headline-style reports with call-in discussion and interview programs, while public radio news formats tend to combine longer stories on events of the day with in-depth analysis. Figure 8.6 reports quarterly estimates of the average quarter-hour radio audience for all commercial news and talk radio formats combined, excluding sports-only stations. Quarter-hour ratings provide the average number of different persons who are listening to a format for at least five minutes in any given fifteen-minute block of time. They are therefore directly comparable in magnitude to the average audience estimates for network television and cable news. The largest audience for news formats on commercial radio listens during the morning and afternoon weekday drive times, averaging around 2 percent of American adults. The second measure in Figure 8.6 includes weekends and the
audiences can be, the radio audience as a whole can sometimes surge in impressive ways. An Arbitron study of radio audiences before, during, and after the 9/11 attacks found that the combined national audience for all forms of radio programming on the day of the attacks was 5 million persons above normal listening levels, a surge of roughly 2 percent of American adults within a single day.24

It is harder to gauge the response of public radio news audiences to national crises, because public radio's lack of commercial advertising means that traditional ratings data were not collected for these audiences until recently. According to Arbitron ratings data for 2006, combining the listeners for National Public Radio, Public Radio International, Pacifica Radio, and American Public Media yields an average quarter-hour audience for news-based public radio formats of roughly 0.8 percent of adults during the morning drive time hours and 0.5 percent during the afternoon drive time.25 Averaging these estimates together and comparing that average to the drive-time audience for commercial news stations suggests that the news audience for public radio is less than half the size of the audience for commercial news radio. But as with cable news, the cumulative audience for radio news can be much larger than the average audience. In 2006 the weekly cumulative audience for news-based program formats on public radio stations averaged 22.2 million unique listeners for the four public radio networks combined, which translates to 10.8 percent of the adult population.26

It is less clear how much the size of this audience for public radio news has changed over time. Data provided by NPR suggest that its 2005 combined audience for news and music formats is 50 percent larger than in 2001 and 315 percent larger than its combined audience in 1985. Survey data from the Pew Center for the People and the Press, however, suggest a different trend. According to the Pew data, the percentage of adults saying they regularly listen to NPR nearly doubled between 1994 and 1995, from 9 percent to 15 percent, but grew more slowly from that point until 2006, when 17 percent called themselves regular NPR listeners.27 On this measure, most of the audience growth for public radio programming occurred well before the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war, suggesting again that the size of the radio news audience is relatively unaffected by current events.

Audience Demand for Online News

The online news audience is the hardest to measure, because we have no widely accepted methods for estimating the size of Internet audiences that can
of declining interest in traditional news outlets, but decisions to seek out online news seem to be driven less by habit than by the occurrence of newsworthy developments. Figure 8.1 showed that Americans report slightly less dependence on the Internet for news during periods of national crisis than during normal times, but other research suggests that breaking news events are associated with temporary surges in the size of audiences for Internet news sites. This research suggests that event-driven interest in Internet news sites surges and declines in a way similar to that of cable news audiences, in contrast to the more stable viewership for broadcast television news, radio news, and newspapers during periods of national crisis.29

Although online news sites are growing in popularity, less is known about which news sites are attracting audiences and what kinds of news those audiences are seeking online. Research on the Internet use habits of a random sample of the population found that the most popular online news sites corresponded closely to the most popular off-line news outlets: the top six national news sites, in descending order of page-hit popularity, belonged to CNN, CBS News, USA Today, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and ABC News. This pattern suggests that the news stories people read online are likely to be quite similar to the stories they follow in traditional mainstream news outlets. This conclusion is underscored by the finding that visitors to online news sites, like the readers of printed newspapers, tended to pay slightly more attention to sports news than to news of national and world events.30

The proliferation of news outlets on the Internet has, however, produced new modes of exposure that have the potential to disseminate public affairs information far beyond the ranks of those who seek it out intentionally. The widespread use of Web portals combined with imprecise methods for locating Web-based information has caused ever more people to accidentally expose themselves to news stories online. Figure 8.7 shows that the percentage of Americans who have come across news stories when going online for a purpose other than to search for news rose from 11 percent in 1996 to 51 percent in 2006.31 This number is especially impressive when we consider that only 67 percent of Americans reported ever going online at all as of 2006, which means that 76 percent of Internet users report being accidentally exposed to news stories. However, an early study on the types of people who report being accidentally exposed concluded that “those who tend to look for news online are the ones who tend to come across it by accident as well,” suggesting that incidental exposure may not substantially broaden the flow of public affairs information reaching the politically disinterested.32

compare to television and radio ratings or newspaper circulation figures. Estimates of audience size based on the observed behavior of a random sample of the population are the best gauges of audience demand, because the estimates are based on what individuals actually do. Ratings and circulation trends are behavioral data, and for that reason are highly regarded within the media industry. Estimates of the total size of online news audiences, however, are often based on what individuals say they do. Self-reported media exposure measures are notorious for overstating the degree to which people follow news coverage of public affairs.38 These self-reported survey estimates, however, remain the best gauge available for tracking changes in national online news audiences over time.

Popular access to the World Wide Web began with the advent of the Mosaic browser in 1993. National media use surveys conducted by the Pew Center show that online news audiences grew rapidly thereafter. Figure 8.7 shows that less than a quarter of a percent of adults reported visiting Internet news sites every day in 1994. That number grew to 11 percent by 1999 and 23 percent by 2006. Not only have online news sites become more popular during a period

Figure 8.7 Self-reported intentional, accidental, and back-channel exposure to news on the Internet, 1995–2006

Percentage of adults

Ever accidentally exposed to online news

Going online for news every day

Received an emailed news story in past week


Source: Pew Research Center for People and the Press.
How frequently these accidental exposures occur remains unclear, but Pew Center surveys shed light on the percentage of adults that receive unsolicited news stories by e-mail. In 1995 only 1 percent of Americans reported receiving a news story by e-mail from a friend or acquaintance within the past week, but by 2006 fully 17 percent of Americans said they had been e-mailed a news story within the past week. This finding suggests a sizable back-channel audience at the receiving end of e-mailed news stories. But little is yet known about the types of news stories that are passed around the Internet in this fashion.

The Future of Democratic Accountability

The short-term dynamics of news attention following sudden threats to national peace and prosperity offer a mix of sobering and encouraging trends. The proportion of Americans following network newscasts, newspapers, and radio news stations tended to be relatively stable before, during, and after times of national crisis. The main exception proves the rule when it comes to popular use of traditional news media: the network news audience doubled in size following the 9/11 attacks, but this surge lasted no longer than a week; radio saw a small but temporary bump in listeners for the fall 2001 quarter; and the steady slide of newspaper audiences continued uninterrupted. Although the audiences for traditional news products were largely unperturbed by sudden changes in national fortune, the average size of the cable news audience doubled after 9/11 and has held steady at the new level ever since. Moreover, the cable news audience surges when threats are imminent and recedes when the immediate outlook improves. Internet news audiences seem to follow a similar pattern.

Demand for news therefore seems sensitive to current events when it comes to cable and Internet audiences, but relatively inelastic when it comes to newspapers, radio, and broadcast television. Countering the long-term demobilization that might be occurring in the U.S. news audience is a short-term responsiveness when peace and prosperity are threatened that is heartening but difficult to evaluate. The proportion of Americans tuning in to Fox and CNN for anything more than a brief glimpse at the latest headlines remains unclear, but the growing popularity of Internet news outlets is another positive sign for the health of American democracy.

As encouraging as these findings may be, the long-term trends in news attentiveness give pause. Newspaper and network television news audiences keep draining steadily away, as they have for decades, while radio audiences remain stable but small. That the normally small cable news audience doubled in size after 9/11 and that the online news audience is growing over time suggests that the long-term loss of audience shares for traditional news products may partly represent changing preferences for newer news products. If so, then the shrinking audience for network broadcasts and newspapers might be driven more by changes in the technology of news delivery than by any long-term popular demobilization from the world of public affairs. If a direct transfer of audience shares from old media to new media is under way, then it is possible that today's news audience could be numerically as large in the aggregate as it was in the 1970s. But even if the number of attentive Americans has held steady over time, the size of the adult population in the United States nearly doubled over the second half of the twentieth century. This ensures that even numerical stability in the size of news audiences would translate into a proportional decline in news attentiveness as the number of American adults increases over time. This is the optimistic view.

The pessimistic view is that overall news consumption levels may be substantially lower today than they were in the 1970s. The steady loss of newspaper readers and network news viewers predates the advent of CNN and the World Wide Web. And given the flourishing array of entertainment media alternatives that have sprung up since the late 1960s to occupy the attention of ordinary citizens, it is unlikely that a direct transfer of audiences from old news to new news has been taking place. Instead, the new era of multimedia entertainment has almost certainly eroded the audience base for news products in the United States.3 The question is by how much. We know that news audiences today are spread out among a broader range of information sources, but our ability to accurately measure the size of audiences for cable and Internet news remains tentative and imprecise. We do not yet have a gauge that can tell us how much less attention the American public pays to political news today compared to the 1970s. A long-term free fall in news interest could therefore be under way, albeit more gradually than some might have expected given the rapid drop-off in attention to network news since the 1980s.

Although the seriousness of the free fall remains unclear, there is no question that audiences for broadcast television news and newspapers—the two most popular news media in the United States—are suffering a long-term and probably irreversible bleed-out. When it will stop and whether less traditional news products will inherit these audiences are questions of some importance to the future of popular governance in the United States. Regardless of what the future holds, one consequence of these long-term trends is already upon

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us. The loss of audience for any particular news medium undermines that medium's ability to supply the information needs of the audience it manages to hold on to, an unfortunate dynamic that has already taken hold in the newspaper and broadcast news industries.

For example, in March 2003 around six hundred reporters were embedded with American troops to cover the invasion of Iraq. Six months later only about one hundred remained, and by late 2006 the number may have declined to fewer than ten. Security concerns and the logistical difficulties of reporting from Iraq explain part of the decline, but the main reason undoubtedly stems from the lack of widespread audience demand for in-depth news coverage from Iraq. Although popular news interest in the invasion itself was high, no long-term expansion of the network or cable news audiences survived the fall of Baghdad, despite the quickening pace of an organized insurgency that was already apparent by late summer of 2003. Without a sizable audience for Iraq news to attract advertising money, none of the major U.S. news organizations could afford to keep a large number of reporters stationed there.

Gone are the early days of broadcasting when the evening news was a loss leader. Back then, the networks chose to burnish their reputations on the quality of their news programs but make their money on entertainment shows. In the United States, mainstream journalism has always been a commercial enterprise that needed to cover its own expenses like any other business, but today the fiscal discipline of the bottom line is more rigidly enforced than in the past. As much as journalists might like to provide in-depth reporting on national and international affairs, the costs involved must ultimately be passed on to their readers and viewers. And if quality reporting on important stories is unable to sustain the attention of a news outlet's target audience, that outlet must find other ways to deliver its target audience to advertisers.

This is why the May 18, 1998, covers of Time and Newsweek featured the death of singer Frank Sinatra instead of the other big event of that week: India's unanticipated and ominous detonation of five atomic weapons—the first nuclear tests that had been conducted anywhere in the world in nearly a quarter century—an event that immediately precipitated a nuclear arms race in South Asia. It had not escaped the attention of news magazine editors that newsstand sales dropped by as much as 25 percent whenever a foreign news subject was on the cover. The result was a form of journalism that gave profitable audiences the news they wanted. Their way.

In 1969, when nightly news broadcasts were watched by half of all the adults in America, six of ten nightly news stories dealt with national and international issues. Almost thirty years later, the nightly news devoted nearly two-thirds of its stories to topics other than government and foreign affairs. It is no coincidence that recent nightly newscasts have half the ratings as well as half the amount of political coverage compared to newscasts from the Vietnam era. In the 1980s and 1990s news executives began responding to a decades-long erosion of print and broadcast audiences by aggressively retooling news content to feature less-sophisticated and less-demanding political coverage. The emergence of USA Today in the early 1980s and the "You News" concept for NBC's Nightly News in the mid-1990s were important developments signaling change in the mainstream U.S. news industry. Compared to their respective national competitors, both outlets reduced the number of stories they reported, provided less coverage of politics and current events, and featured more coverage of "news you can use" about personal finances, health, and lifestyle issues.

The growing popularity of USA Today during the 1980s and the rapid success of the more audience-friendly NBC Nightly News in the 1990s began silencing scoffers who had initially dismissed the formats as "McNews" and "News Lite," respectively. The die was cast for a new style of market-driven news reporting for national audiences, and to this day they remain the most popular newspaper and network newscast in the United States.

Audience attrition has led many media outlets to undersupply in-depth reporting of domestic and foreign political news for at least three reasons. First, to the extent that dwindling ratings or circulation numbers are taken as a sign of dissatisfaction with the existing news product, news outlets will attempt to repackage their content to be more attractive to their target audiences. Newspapers and television news traditionally served a steady diet of current events coverage to readers and viewers. If audiences were turning away from the traditional formulas, the losses could perhaps be reversed or at least softened with a less-demanding mix of feature stories and dramatic coverage of crime, disaster, and scandal. When interest is high, news outlets supply. When interest is low, frivolity grows.

Second, although a large segment of the departing news audience leaves because the news is too political, another portion deserts traditional news outlets because they are not covering politics enough. Cable news channels and specialty Internet news outlets have emerged to cater to the tastes of political sophisticates. Because these specialty outlets are able to meet the information preferences of news junkies better than traditional mass-audience outlets, a gradual exodus from network newscasts and daily papers of people who prefer a timely diet of hard news leaves the audiences for traditional outlets relatively...
less interested in politics and public affairs. Separating the sheep from the goats in this way makes both groups happier, because the distinctive news preferences of each can be served by different types of news products. But an unintended consequence of increasing the diversity of news offerings is to concentrate ever more public affairs reporting into smaller and more specialized news outlets, thereby relieving traditional mass-market television news and newspaper products from the financial burden of having to provide more than a modicum of headline news about the nation and world.

Third, most of the news media's revenue comes from advertising, and the amount of revenue depends largely on audience size. Regardless of whether a share of its old audience is being divided among new competitors or exiting the news market altogether, the result to any given outlet is the same: less money that can be spent on gathering and reporting the news. What typically follows are reductions in the number of newsroom staff, cuts in the number of news bureaus, particularly expensive foreign bureaus; a greater reliance on wire service coverage, which is usually less costly to acquire than sending an outlet’s own reporters to cover the same story; and, because airtime can be filled more cheaply with talk than with action, an increased use of talking head and interview formats instead of traditional enterprise and investigative reporting. The inevitable result is greater homogeneity in the content and appearance of news stories reported by competing outlets, and reduced investment in the most essential functions performed by political journalism in democratic societies: gathering facts about important developments affecting the common welfare, reporting those facts in ways that help citizens make sense of the world beyond, and helping citizens hold the government accountable for the choices their leaders make.

Conclusion

In May 2006 a previously unknown singer named Taylor Hicks was propelled to national prominence when he won the hit television show American Idol. Two months later, a Zogby poll found that nearly a quarter of Americans could spontaneously name Hicks as the show’s most recent winner, but the same poll found that only half as many could identify Samuel Alito as the newest justice on the Supreme Court. On the night of the 9/11 attacks, Nielsen Media Research found that 79.5 million viewers—nearly four in ten American adults—were tuning into any of the eleven broadcast or cable net-

works that were showing news coverage of the attacks. As impressive as this level of attention seems, about the same number of viewers watched the January 2001 Super Bowl. Indeed, an audience of this size assembles just about every year to watch the Super Bowl.

The lesson to draw from these examples is not that the American public is stupid or intellectually lazy. Instead, these comparisons underscore how politically alert and responsive the American public could be if its interest in national and international news was as great as its interest in popular culture. It is unlikely that most Americans had even heard of the disease anthrax before late September 2001, when several letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to U.S. news organizations and government offices. Yet by early 2002 a national survey found that nine of ten adults not only knew something about the disease, but also could state correctly that the inhaled form was more deadly than the kind found on the skin. It is remarkable that this level of insight occurred at a time when only half of the U.S. public understood that antibiotics do not kill viruses. When the slumbering Leviathan awakes, its capacity for watchfulness can be astonishing.

Different theories of democracy envision different roles for citizens to play, with some limiting citizen involvement to participating in occasional elections and others expecting citizens to deliberate actively and frequently about important matters of public policy. Contrary to popular myth, few theories of democracy require anything like a highly informed citizenry as a precondition for popular rule. But the efficiency and quality of representation is likely to be enhanced under all theories of democracy as citizens become better informed about the actions of their elected representatives and the important public issues confronting the nation.

The more we learn about politics, the closer our political preferences should come to resemble our political interests, and the greater the chance that our votes and voices will properly reward our political leaders for what they have done well and punish them for what they did poorly or left undone. It is the quality of popular judgment underlying the system of rewards and punishments that is threatened by waning levels of interest in public affairs and the resulting undersupply of politically informative news coverage to the attentive audience that remains. The less attention the public routinely pays to the news, the greater the chance that voters will get it wrong on election day by rewarding irresponsible leadership and bestowing punishments on those whose sober and judicious views should have rightly carried the day.
15. Nielsen currently publishes ratings in terms of millions of audience members viewing a particular program. According to the 2000 Census, there are 205.05 million persons aged nineteen or older in the United States. Because household television penetration has been nearly universal since before 1980, simply dividing the former by the latter produces a reasonable estimate of the percentage of American adults watching nightly news programs. During the 1990–1991 period, Nielsen reported ratings information using its measure of rating points, in which each point represents 1 percent of American television households viewing a particular program. To create comparable trends for the Persian Gulf crisis, the combined rating points for all three network news broadcasts were multiplied by the mean number of persons aged nineteen or older per U.S. household (1.87, according to the 1990 Census) and then by the number of U.S. households (91.99 million in 1990). This joint product was then divided by the total number of persons aged nineteen or older (181.50 million) to estimate the percentage of adults watching nightly network news programs.

16. These percentages come from comparing the January through April averages for each case.


20. Daily newspaper readership data for the total U.S. population that are used in this section were compiled from various sources by the Newspaper Association of America and are available at www.naa.org/ReadershipPages/Research-and-Readership/readership_statistics.aspx.


25. Arbitron, “Public Radio Today,” Available at www.arbitron.com/downloads/PublicRadioToday06.pdf. These estimates come from multiplying the drive time average quarterly hour ratings for all public radio programming reported on page 8 of the report (approximately 1.0 percent of persons twelve and older during the morning drive time, and approximately 0.6 percent of persons twelve and older during the afternoon drive time) by the combined 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. shares reported for news/talk, news-classical, news-music, and news-jazz formats (summing to 81.7 percent, found on pages 20, 22, 31, and 37).
27. National Public Radio audience data were reported in Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2006." The Pew survey estimates of NPR’s audience were reported in the 2006 Pew Biennial Media Consumption survey. Ibid.
31. These percentages were obtained by multiplying the proportion of respondents saying yes to the question, "When you go online do you ever come across news when you may have been going online for a purpose other than to get the news?" with the proportion saying yes to the question: "Do you ever go online to access the Internet or to send and receive email?" 32. David Tewksbury, Andrew J. Weaver, and Brett D. Maddex, "Accidentally Informed: Incidental News Exposure on the World Wide Web," Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 78, no. 3 (2001): 542.
33. Prior, Post-Broadcast Democracy.