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Vox populi? Citizen alienation and the  
political and media elite

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# **Citizen alienation and the political and media elite**

by

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## *I Introduction*

“Who are you then?” Faust asks Mephistopheles in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s masterpiece. “I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good”, responds the diabolical Mephistopheles, offering Faust unlimited knowledge in exchange for his soul.

Public attitudes towards politicians and the press in Western democracies are just the opposite: decision-makers and mass media may will good, but they’re seen as eternally working evil. In the United States, for example, the 2012 Gallup poll on trust in the media, a record 60 percent of Americans said they had “little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly”. Last year, the figure was only slightly lower, at 55 percent. In Sweden, no public institution is trusted less than daily newspapers. And the 2014 Edelman trust survey, which polled the top-earning 25 percent of the population in 202 countries, governments claim the bottom spot, with only 44 percent trusting it, a further decline from the 2013 result of 48 percent. The media ranks second-worst, at 52 percent, while the NGOs and business claim the two top spots at 64 and 58 percent, respectively. In 2011, trust in government was a respectable 51 percent. By contrast, trust in business and NGOs has remained steady.<sup>1</sup>

And voters are not just cynical about politicians’ integrity: they are convinced that politicians don’t keep their promises. Elin Naurin, a political scientist at Gothenburg University currently working at McGill University, shows that 15 percent of Swedish voters believe that politicians even try to keep their promises. This figure contrasts dramatically with the actual share of promises kept 80 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Distrust in politicians and mass media is, I will argue, directly connected. While citizens have been wary of their elected leaders’ intentions for some time (the German word *Politikverdrossenheit* gained traction in the 1990s), they have seen the media as a mostly effective watchdog. After all, mass media are a democratic society’s fourth estate, and there was no efficient alternative to dissemination and consumption of news. Now, helped by the advent of social media, where every citizen can be a source or indeed talking head, their distrust in mass media that the novelist Stefan Zweig documented before the beginning of World War II<sup>3</sup> is growing as well. Stephen Coleman of Leeds University argues that average citizens see politicians and mass media as a class to which they have no chance of gaining access.<sup>4</sup>

While it is an informal elite, that is, one that comes with neither membership cards nor annual fees or electoral rolls, it is nonetheless a dangerous one. It is dangerous because the business of public decision-making and the dissemination of it to voters, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2014-edelman-trust-barometer/about-trust/executive-summary/>

<sup>2</sup> Naurin, Elin (2011): Elections, voter behaviour and party perceptions. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p 4

<sup>3</sup> Zweig, Stefan (1970): *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. Frankfurt: Fischer (40th edition)

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

the conveying of voter priorities back to the decision-makers takes the backseat as politicians and journalists' interactions focus more on personal vendettas and indeed personal favours. Reuters Institute Senior Fellow John Lloyd notes that the degree of closeness varies between different Western democracies – with from a personal media and political union in Italy under Silvio Berlusconi to relative distance countries like Scandinavia and Germany<sup>5</sup>, but it remains an elite -- one whose members may admire or hate each other but nonetheless one that outsiders, the average citizens, have great difficulty entering. A figurative Chipping Norton set, one may call it. Given the existence of one join elite, as Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page demonstrate in a US setting, makes matters less comforting still for the average citizen: he cannot even rely on competing elites to balance each other out.<sup>6</sup>

Mass media, of course, face existential questions due to the arrival of social media and declining news consumption. The need for mass media as a messenger has decreased as social media allow anybody to access the same public information. Though Pippa Norris shows that only a minority of citizens use online sources for news gathering<sup>7</sup>, doing so may increase their feeling of powerlessness, eager as they are to participate in public decision-making. A generation ago, citizen alienation towards the political and media elite may have posed a concern only to democracy purists or as a matter of public morality. But the information society with its connected citizens makes today's political and media malaise more dangerous, because citizens have access to not just to news but to public forums where they can express their anger. The passive majority may have little interest in analysing whether Osama bin Laden was really killed or whether the news of his death was simply a nefarious plot, but the activist minority sees its news-gathering and analysis – however ill-informed – empowered through the megaphone qualities the internet provides. Because the diversification of news dissemination allows those interested to choose the interpretation that suits them, such news activism, while in theory a healthy expression of democracy, instead threatens to destabilise it.

“Hang on a minute”, journalists and politicians will say: “do we not toil day in, day out to provide a service to the public?” Yes, many politicians work hard to provide a government for the people, but average citizens – alienated from their elected leaders by layers of staff and journalists – suspect these leaders of instead acting for their own benefit. Yes, many journalists work tirelessly to provide convey information, but is it the kind of service the public needs and wants (these, of course, being two different things)? One former Fleet Street political columnist, who asked not to be identified due

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<sup>5</sup> Lloyd, John (2004): What the media are doing to our politics. London: Constable & Robinson, p 56

<sup>6</sup> Gilens, Martin and Benjamin Page (2014): Testing theories of American politics: elites, interest groups and average citizens

<http://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Norris, Pippa (2000): A virtuous circle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 277

to stipulations in his contract, tells me that that he estimates only two percent of his red-top paper's readers perused his articles.<sup>8</sup>

Political journalists often approach politics as a personal game, not as an exercise in fulfilling their democratic duty. According to then-Neiman Fellowship curator and former New York Times Washington bureau chief Bill Kovach, "political reporters have become more concerned with how *other* political reporters view their work"<sup>9</sup>. And why not? They have an obligation towards their bosses and by extension their companies' shareholders, not to democracy. Politicians, for their part, try to use journalists as convenient messengers, not as truth-seeking diplomats in the service of democracy. Both benefit from the interaction, but the public knows it's missing out.

I will argue that the increase of information has, paradoxically, exacerbated this citizen cynicism. In Britain and the United States, the countries which will I examine most closely, a high percentage of citizens now declare themselves interested in politics, and for the past several decades, voter turnout has remained relatively high. In Britain's most recent parliamentary elections, 65.77 percent of those eligible cast their vote, compared to 72.55 percent in 1945, while Sweden saw a slight increase, from 82.74 percent in 1948 to 84.63 percent in 2010. No corresponding 1940s election figures are available for the United States, but while 1968 congressional elections – the high-water mark of US voter participation – saw 89.66 percent of Americans vote on the Congressional elections, a respectable 67.95 percent voted in 2012.<sup>10</sup> A far lower percentage, however, believe they have any chance of being heard.

This leads to warped election outcomes. The recent European Parliament elections that resulted in such impressive results for far-right parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Front National (FN) were, I will argue, not a vote against immigration or the EU but rather a vote against respective countries' prevailing elites. The same dynamic was at work when an unknown economics professor defeated United States House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in the Republican primary last month. Voters may risk descending into democratic apathy, but enough of the disaffected ones bother to make their voices heard, if only to make an anti-elite statement. As David Carr, the New York Times' media reporter, noted: "[Washington] Beltway blindness that put a focus on fund-raising, power-brokering and partisan back-and-forth created a reality distortion field that obscured the will of the people. But that affliction was not Mr. Cantor's alone; it is shared by the political press. [...] The big miss by much of the political news media demonstrates that news organizations are no less a prisoner of Washington's tunnel vision than the people who run for office."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2014

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in: Klein, Joe (2002): *The Natural*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, p 100

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=77>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/business/media/eric-cantors-defeat-exposed-a-beltway-journalism-blind-spot.html>

In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln established the definition of democracy that has been used ever since: government of the people, for the people, by the people. I will argue that today we have the former two but that government by the people is ailing. While they continue to exercise their right to give in relatively high numbers, the low trust they place in politicians and the media is evidence both that they feel left out of the decisions made between each election and that the media doesn't articulate their concerns in its privileged access to the country's powerful.

And it is a privileged access. I can testify from first-hand experience that interviewing a powerful politician or business leader one-on-one, having his or her full attention, makes one feel important. One wants to ask one's own smart questions, shape one's own story -- not articulate the concerns of the electorate. And yet most politicians, in my experience, are not out to deceive the public but have a sincere desire to serve the public good, though their priorities may be unpopular. But when the journalist, as the sole interlocutor, makes the choice of addressing only the issues articulated by him, his editors and his perhaps his fellow journalists, it leaves his increasingly well-informed recipients as passive recipients of the outcome.

I will argue that the existence of this elite – and the fact that average citizens are aware of it – puts media in a dangerous spot. Politikverdrossenheit has been joined by Medienverdrossenheit. Media could descend to becoming a trusted provider solely of entertainment and lifestyle news. Besides, with the public now able to access information as easily as journalists, the often generic day-to-day reporting that has been the bread and butter of media organisations is anyhow a questionable offering. The lack of trust in the media is all the more regrettable as the average citizen often lacks the ability to discern the trustworthiness of primary sources.

At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I will argue that it is also a danger to democracy. A society where voter cynicism has fossilised into permanent distrust of societal pillars risks becoming a society of mass voter withdrawal and thus a society where public decision-making carries little legitimacy. As seen in the European elections, it also risks becoming a society where voters make their choice to score a point against the elite, producing warped results.

The fourth estate has always operated independently: indeed, it could not operate otherwise. But the potential fixes to Politikverdrossenheit and Medienverdrossenheit, I believe, involve citizen participation in the communication between decision-makers and their voters, that is: the news business. I will examine several ways in which mass media can increase public trust through citizen involvement. Dare I say it: citizens may even provide good insights on politics.



## *II Media, a democratic stalwart*

Democratic theory, so neatly organised, assigns media the enviable role as messenger between citizens and those elected to lead the community. That's because in order to be able to productively participate in democratic decision-making, citizens need to be well-informed. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to his friend Edward Carrington in 1787: "The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro' the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people."<sup>12</sup>

Jefferson knew that honest and effective mass media was crucial to the United States' young democracy. That's because there is – in the absence of direct democracy – simply no alternative transmission belt between citizens and their elected leaders. As Geoffrey Craig notes, prior to modern media, public life was linked to a large group of people being collectively present in a common locale, with events becoming public the moment the gathered crowd experienced them. But "printing ushered in a fundamental reorientation of the nature of public life. No longer was 'publicness' linked to a common locale; rather, it was generated through the process of publication."<sup>13</sup>

Jefferson and his fellow founding fathers were wise not to place similar faith in interest groups: as Gilens and Page show, ones representing business interests exercise disproportionate influence over political decision-making, while citizen-based ones are as uninfluential as the citizens themselves.<sup>14</sup> Given the necessity of fund-raising in American politics, the influence of the business sector and the wealthy elite is higher there than in other Western democracies.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, given the existence of such *primus-inter-pares* democratic participants, the result is that citizens' priorities do not reach decision-makers or are diluted along the way.

That is, of course, mass media's *raison d'être*. "The media system, in democratic theory, was charged with providing information equally so that even poor citizens would have the capacity to be effective citizens", as Robert McChesney observes.<sup>16</sup> In this world of democratic purity, journalist toil for the public good, while the public rewards their hard work by buying their publication, thereby allowing them to stay in business. As Robert Putnam observes in *Bowling Alone*, his landmark study on civic participation: "newspaper reading and good citizenship go together."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendl\\_speechs8.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendl_speechs8.html)

<sup>13</sup> Craig, Geoffrey (2004): *The media, politics and public life*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, p 6

<sup>14</sup> Gilens and Page, p 3

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.idea.int/publications/funding\\_parties/upload/full.pdf](http://www.idea.int/publications/funding_parties/upload/full.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> McChesney, Robert W (2004): *The problem of the media*. New York: Monthly Review Press, p 22

<sup>17</sup> Putnam, Robert (2000): *Bowling alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p 218

So important is mass media in a democracy that it's habitually referred to as the fourth estate, a definition journalists themselves treasure. Though Dirk Baecker, Professor of Cultural Theory at Zeppelin University, recently asked whether it is accurate to describe a society that features messengers instead of the Greek polis's direct public participation as a democracy<sup>18</sup>, it has generally been accepted that in a world where the vote in the town square is no longer feasible, mass media is a crucial and healthy part of democracy.

The catch, of course, is that while most countries' constitutions clearly define the three other estates' functions, the fourth estate merely has a quasi-official role and, with a few notable exceptions, its members operate as commercial enterprises. That means they have almost complete freedom to operate as they wish within the confines of the law, but it also means that they have an obligation to their owners to generate profit, or at least not to lose money. As former BBC news executive Nick Davies has pointed out, "news is a way of making money, just as selling bread is a way of making money."<sup>19</sup>

Crucially, news organisations have no obligation to democracy. "Mass media have don't have a function for democracy, but for society", Baecker notes.<sup>20</sup> "Mass media disrupts democracy." Still, he adds, it is the best conduit between citizens and the elected leaders available to modern societies.<sup>21</sup> Yes, Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign successfully pioneered direct -- that is, internet-enabled -- contact between the candidate and potential voters, but such news distribution is by definition biased because the source and the conduit are the same. So it is that mass media remain a central if unofficial pillar of modern democracy. The question I seek to address in the following chapters is what happens if and when the average voter no longer perceives it as such.

### *III The connected, and disconnected, citizen*

And lo, I bring tidings of great joy: the citizen is more connected to the outside world than ever before. According to the most recent Nielsen Report, 80 percent of American households have internet-connected computers and 64 percent have smartphones.<sup>22</sup> Each month the average American spends nearly 134 hours watching live TV, more than

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[http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U\\_qJLQtwS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang\\_de%7Clang\\_en%7Clang\\_it%7Clang\\_sv](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U_qJLQtwS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang_de%7Clang_en%7Clang_it%7Clang_sv)

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in: Street, John (2011): *Mass media and politics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p 185

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author, 20 May 2014

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[http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U\\_qJLQtwS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang\\_de%7Clang\\_en%7Clang\\_it%7Clang\\_sv](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U_qJLQtwS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang_de%7Clang_en%7Clang_it%7Clang_sv)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2014%20Reports/the-digital-consumer-report-feb-2014.pdf>, p 5

34 hours browsing the internet on their smartphones and more than 27 hours browsing the internet on a computer. The average German, meanwhile, spends 205 minutes per day watching TV, 149 minutes listening to the radio, 107 minutes on the internet, 38 minutes playing video games, 33 minutes reading books and 19 reading a newspaper.<sup>23</sup> That's in addition to internet and media use at work.

Actually, I do not need to bring these tidings: homes with internet-enabled computers can find easily the report on their own. According to a 2013 Ofcom report on news consumption in Britain, 32 percent of adults say they use the internet as a source of news. 78 percent say they use TV, 40 percent use newspapers 35 percent use radio.<sup>24</sup> And with social media a ubiquitous part of citizens' lives – Nielsen reports that 64 percent of adult Americans engage with social media at least once a day – the information is (barring an embargo) available to the average citizen as quickly as it is available to the journalist. In reality, of course, the connected citizen does not always take advantage of the news sources available to him, and as Norris shows, instant information access has created a gap between the activist minority that constantly takes advantage of it and the passive minority that does not.<sup>25</sup> But even the member of the passive minority has access to them, which is of consequence when major news breaks. Russia's much-reported annexation of Crimea got a Leeds hairdresser Gemma Worrall's (@gemworrallx) attention and she tweeted: "If baracco barner is our president why is he getting involved with Russia, scary."<sup>26</sup>

The citizen, in other words, is a well-informed one, or at least one with more potential than his parents and grandparents to be well-informed. If he belongs to the activist-citizen part of this divide, he has learned of Osama bin Laden's death via Twitter long before a journalist has delivered the news to him. Keith Urbahn (@keithurbahn), former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's chief of staff, delivered the news of bin Laden's death, breaking a White House-requested embargo on news organisations. And as Elliot D Cohen and Bruce W Fraser point out, the thin case in favour of the United States invading Iraq in 2003 was exposed not by the mainstream media but by bloggers and foreign news outlets.<sup>27</sup> The verbal exchange of local news at the local grocery shop has gained a megaphone quality thanks to activist citizens' ability to spread the news not in a cumbersome one-by-one way, but by promptly posting whatever they consider newsworthy online.

But the well-connected activist citizen, who may have received the news of bin Laden's death via his brother's Facebook page or his favourite blogger's Twitter feed hours

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.sevenonemedia.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=2a6db46d-ed67-4961-a31f-722360028543&groupId=10143](https://www.sevenonemedia.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=2a6db46d-ed67-4961-a31f-722360028543&groupId=10143), p 7

<sup>24</sup> [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/tv-research/news/News\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/tv-research/news/News_Report_2013.pdf), p 6

<sup>25</sup> Norris, Pippa (2000): *A virtuous circle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 277

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2575436/Dumb-Britain-Beautician-laughs-Twitter-storm-mistakenly-spelling-Barack-Obama-Barraco-Barner-sparks-inevitable-parody-accounts.html>

<sup>27</sup> Cohen, Elliot D and Bruce W Fraser (2007): *The last days of democracy: how big media and power-hungry government are turning America into a dictatorship*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, p 18

before President Obama solemnly delivered the news in a televised speech to the nation, often lacks the expertise to judge his sources the way a journalist does. One has to wonder where Gemma Worrall got her information. There is no government agency or watchdog group that classifies – or would have the vast resources required to classify – each purported source according to its credibility and neutrality. Learning which sources are credible is part of a journalist’s job, but the average citizen has no such obligation to anybody. He may genuinely believe the Twitter account, or blogger, or Facebook page, that claims to have the real truth about climate change or bin Laden’s killing.

This trend, of course, goes hand in hand with the diversification of news media. It is no doubt a positive development when a range of news outlets offer the citizen their version of recent events. At the same time, however, it reinforces the notion that news is a matter of interpretation and that media can’t be trusted. Wikipedia, the ubiquitous encyclopaedia whose information is so often inaccurate that users are unable to rely on it, further emphasises this reality. The lack of sources perceived to be neutral and accurate also leads to political and social polarisation. As Stephen Engelberg, a former New York Times editor now serving as editor-in-chief of the non-profit investigative news website ProPublica, notes, “you need never trouble yourself with the opposing viewpoint”.<sup>28</sup>

This growing notion that news in news media is a matter of interpretation and relative truth reinforces suspicion when leading news organisations do not bring the news the citizen assumes they have: “Are they in league with the politicians?” “They are in cahoots with Exxon/McDonald’s/Morgan Stanley.” “They are paid by the CIA/Russia/China/Saudi Arabia.” “What are they hiding from me?” Every conceivable conspiracy permutation is possible. Bin Laden’s death, in fact, generated an astounding number of conspiracy theories. A Google search for “Bin Laden death hoax” yields 649,000 hits. A photo purporting to show the dead terrorist leader, which was first published by news outlets and subsequently withdrawn, further fanned the conspiracy flames. Today virtually every major piece of news is accompanied by such doubt and cynicism, partly due to declining faith in authorities but also because activist citizens can consult his own sources, regardless of whether or not they are accurate.

And the citizen’s use of alternative news sources does not mean that he trusts them more than established mass media, as Baecker points out in our interview: “The public notices that the politician doesn’t tell mass media everything and that they do not report everything, so it [the public] assumes a selective calculation on the part of both politicians and mass media. But the citizen is sceptical towards bloggers and tweets as well and jumps back and forth between different news sources. He is dependent on sources that he does not trust.”

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with the author, 29 May 2014

It is, of course, no great revelation to note that far from being nefarious, official and unofficial rules agreed on by news outlets and political bodies (and business and other pillars of society) are an established and straightforward part of media operations. For news outlets to keep a secret is not suspect by definition: like most other sectors of society, the sector of news dissemination needs certain procedures, or otherwise chaos will ensue and lives may even be put at risk. Imagine if the Navy SEALs who killed Bin Laden immediately turned around and sold the image to the New York Post or the Daily Mail. Indeed, it is fascinating mental exercise to imagine the clash between social media and the de facto media ban on President Franklin D Roosevelt's disability. If Roosevelt's driver, or even just a citizen passing by at a moment when Roosevelt got in or out of a wheelchair, had been able to spread the news nationwide, would it have changed Americans' attitude towards their president and by extension America's course of action during World War II?

A generation ago, the average citizen had no way of receiving news except news items from official channels, which in the case of politics usually meant stories subjected to these rules. But as one veteran of British political reporting who went on to a senior role at 10 Downing Street remarks, the average citizen four or five decades ago was also more inclined to trust official sources, simply because he had no alternative. "They accepted that others knew better than them", he adds.<sup>29</sup>

Today, by contrast, citizens have access to virtually the same news as journalists. That, however, doesn't mean that every citizen moonlights as a journalist. On the contrary, as Norris shows<sup>30</sup>, digital access may create a divide between activist, plugged-in citizens, who use this access to become even more active, and passive ones, whose voice will as a result fade even further. "The people [...] most likely to be motivated to communicate and organize via the Net are those who would be most engaged in traditional forms of political activism on parties, discussion groups, and lobbying activities", she notes<sup>31</sup>. The plugged-in society may, in other words, be creating yet another gap in public decision-making: between engaged citizens and unengaged ones.

There is, however, some encouraging evidence showing broad citizen interest in politics. According to the 2008 Communicating with Congress report, a record 44 percent of Americans contacted their congressman or senator within the past year. In 91 percent of cases the internet served as their primary source for information about Congress.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents a conundrum for the fourth estate. With the average citizen often having access to virtually the same information, what should news organisations report on? Making matters worse, when they report on a news item well-

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2014

<sup>30</sup> Norris (2000), p 277

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Congressional Management Foundation (2008): Communicating with Congress: [http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/cwc\\_citizenengagement.pdf](http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf), p vi

represented on social media, they invariably risk leaving the reader or viewer with the impression that their version is not the full truth, or that so-called mainstream media is teaming up with the political elite of their choice to shut him out. Article comments, often vitriolic and attacking the journalist's and media organisation's integrity, are evidence of this. I have, for example, been accused of being on the payroll of both the Mossad and the Muslim Brotherhood. The connected citizen's festering feeling of being disconnected from society's power centres is a consequence of the digital revolution that has not yet been scrutinised. But it is not just a paranoid impression. As Gilens and Page report, "the average citizen or the 'median voter' has little or no independent influence on public policy"<sup>33</sup>. That's the case even though Western democracies provide perfect provisions for citizen participation. In the following chapters I will argue that the average citizen's perception of being left by the wayside is nothing less than a danger to our democratic system.

#### *IV The forming of a political and media elite*

It is not forming at all, you may point out: politics and the publishing business have maintained a close bond ever since the invention of the printing press, and democracy has survived nicely. Indeed, the revolving door works as well for journalists as it does for anybody else going back and forth between the private and the public sector. After leaving office, no lesser a figure than Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of Germany became co-publisher of the highly respected weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, while at the same time remaining an *éminence grise*. And I daresay that no one would have objected if Carl Bernstein or Bob Woodward became President Gerald Ford's director of communications following Richard Nixon's resignation.

In fact, I daresay that nobody would object if John Humphrys, the BBC's star interviewer habitually referred to as its attack dog, were appointed Prime Minister David Cameron's communications director, because Humphrys is seen as having integrity. Still, he belongs to a clearly evident societal elite consisting of politicians (and their aides) and journalists. Like any other elite, it is not a homogenous one but instead one that is characterised by turf warfare and self-serving, often fleeting alliances much the same way as international diplomacy is characterised by leaders' affinity towards each other, or lack thereof. "The political and journalist class, especially in Britain, have become so merged together that they form a distinct class", notes Stephen Coleman, Professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds, in an interview with me. "They are educated in the same places and go back and forth between the two areas. The more you get of this, the more voter alienation you get." Coleman describes politicians and journalists as co-existing the same way a long-married couple does: though they hate

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<sup>33</sup> Gilens, Martin and Benjamin Page  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>, p 17

each other, they will not separate. Indeed, he notes, politicians and media court and detest each other in a way that is worthy of a soap opera.<sup>34</sup>

One can watch this sorry old couple arguing in public places – that is, in news media – not just in Britain but in virtually every other Western democracy as well. Germany offers an illustrative recent example of this. Last year, while investigating favours doled out by President Christian Wulff, media outlets led by the mighty tabloid Bild uncovered so many questionable actions by the president that he resigned. The media was, of course, doing its duty. But where does media’s investigative duty end and a vendetta, or prize game, against selected politicians begin? Following Wulff’s resignation, Heribert Prantl, national editor at the daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, wrote that media mustn’t view a politician’s resignation as their justly deserved reward for uncovering wrongdoing. Yet while German public opinion was split on whether Wulff should resign, media pursued its investigations until he did so. In his recently released memoirs, Wulff calls his resignation the wrong decision and blames journalists for forcing him to make it.<sup>35</sup> One might speculate what the outcome would have been if citizens had been asked to weigh in on Wulff’s potential resignation.

“Journalists are politicians’ natural counterparts, though not in their own right but as representatives of the public. The more the people gets the impression that journalists are not on their side but a party of their own, in a world with politicians that’s not the world of the people, the easier it will be for politicians to evade justified inquiries and get away with it”, writes the German media journalist Stefan Niggemeier.<sup>36</sup> Or as the political journalist-turned-Downing Street advisor puts it: “The media is powerful, but in its own interest, not that of the public. It is a mob mentality.”<sup>37</sup>

This distinction – acting as politicians’ counterpart on behalf of the people versus in one’s own interest – is a crucial one but one that is often blurred in the daily business of newsmaking. And yet it is crucial to public trust in journalism. “We [journalists] have gone from being conduits to opponents”, says the political journalist-turned-Downing Street advisor. “And there has been a huge increase in cynicism across the board. No voice of authority is to be believed anymore.”<sup>38</sup> He estimates that only two percent of his red-top paper’s audience read his columns.

In the United States, meanwhile, huge amounts of ink are again spent on Hillary Clinton’s presumed candidacy for president. At the heart of the discussion is why mass media are so fixated on Mrs Clinton and why she is so paranoid about journalists.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article128924925/Christian-Wulff-haelt-seinen-Ruecktritt-fuer-falsch.html>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-83588411.html>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2014

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Ken Auletta’s June 2014 article in the *New Yorker* [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/06/02/140602fa\\_fact\\_auletta](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/06/02/140602fa_fact_auletta)

Interestingly, the fixation and paranoia discussion rarely focuses on the average citizens, the people who will, or will not, give Mrs Clinton her desired job.

Crucially, the members of the political and media elite (or class, as Coleman prefers to call it) are not always antagonists; on the contrary. David Cameron's appointment of a communications director while he was still Leader of the Opposition is a well-known example of politicians and media's chumminess. The now-Prime Minister of Britain gave the job to Andy Coulson, the editor-in-chief of Rupert Murdoch's Sunday tabloid *News of the World*. The rival tabloid *Daily Mail* reported the following about the appointment: "[an individual intimately involved in Mr Coulson's recruitment said] 'Rebekah indicated the job should go to Andy. Cameron was told it should be someone acceptable to [Murdoch's firm] News International. The company was also desperate to find something for Andy after he took the rap when the phone hacking first became an issue. The approach was along the lines of, 'If you find something for Andy we will return the favour'." <sup>40</sup> Rebekah is Rebekah Brooks, President of News International in Britain and Coulson's superior. The *Daily Mail's* reporting has been substantiated by other news outlets. Brooks, an unelected and unaccountable individual, effectively dictated to the Leader of the Opposition whom to employ as his communications chief.

As it turns out, this salacious revelation by a rival newspaper was just the beginning of a major political scandal involving the relationship between Britain's politicians and media. For the past two years, the British public been treated to the arrests and trials of Brooks, Colson and several of their underlings. They have watched the televised proceedings of the Leveson inquiry, a spectacle that thoroughly and painfully illustrated the closeness between the political and media leaders to the detriment of ordinary citizens. They have heard about how both Tony Blair and David Cameron sent encouraging messages to Brooks. (In one text message, Cameron signed off with LOL, thinking it meant lots of love.) They have heard about the 10 Downing Street slumber party for influential women including Brooks organised by then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown's wife, Sarah. And they have heard of how then-Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt was judge and Rupert Murdoch supporter alike when Murdoch's takeover bid for TV channel BskyB was to be decided by the government.

Indeed, Britain's recent revelations of hacking, cover-ups and political backing of sinning media leaders offer the perhaps clearest illustration of the cosiness between the media elite and the political elite, or rather the selected partners therein. The list goes on. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism found, for example, that the Prime Minister's "specialist advisers were hosted by senior employees of News International on 26 occasions in the first seven months of [David Cameron's] government." <sup>41</sup> News International's boss, Rupert Murdoch, set himself three goals after helping Tony Blair win the 1997 general election: get personal access to Blair, to protect his media empire

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2015573/Rebekah-Brooks-vetoed-BBC-man-told-Cameron-No10-job-Andy-Coulson.html>

<sup>41</sup> Dean, Malcolm (2013): *Democracy under attack*. Bristol: The Policy Press, p 44



and to influence foreign policy. As McKnight notes, he achieved all of them.<sup>42</sup> And, reflecting on Blair's criticism of aggressive media during his tenure at 10 Downing Street, Steven Glover reflected in the Daily Mail: "For most of his 10 years as Prime Minister [Blair received] a more approving and docile press than any British leader in living memory."<sup>43</sup>

The political and media elite, then, features animosity and friendship alike, both at the expense of the public. Equally troublingly, it generates reporting that may simply not be of very high quality. The Watergate scandal was a tribute to reporters and executive editors doggedly following a story in spite of political pressure to abandon it. But Robert Entman, Professor of Media and Public Affairs at the George Washington University (located only several blocks from the infamous Watergate building), argues that media can no longer be trusted to seriously investigate political corruption.<sup>44</sup>

In the trenches of reporting, that means less aggressive digging. "Politicians know that journalists have to behave as if they are being aggressive and daring, so there is an unwritten rule that politicians can be criticised for their strategic blunders while tactical issues are not touched on", observes Entman. "Journalists should ask informed questions, but when a politician makes a statement in an interview, they do not have the knowledge to say, 'hang on a second; that is not correct'. And they do not want to lose access."<sup>45</sup> There is, in other words, a spectrum of closeness between politicians and the media: political leaders with a knowledge advantage being interviewed by journalists who are generalists (as I am); political leaders and journalists who have an informal agreement to arrange in aggressive-sounding exchanges while steering clear of tricky issues, and media leaders like Rebekah Brooks who maintain social relations with politicians.

Because he spends his time with other journalists and indeed with politicians and their aides, the journalist's perception of what interests the average citizen is also skewed. As a result, he may ask questions about issues that have little interest to his readers while leaving out issues that greatly interest them. The BBC news presenter Jon Snow goes even further than Entman in his criticism of journalists, saying that "journalists are lazy, they live in a goldfish bowl, they are not interested in breaking out and breaking [controversial stories] themselves."<sup>46</sup>

There are, of course, significant differences as well. Because of the government's role in regulating broadcasting licences, television companies maintain closer connections with politicians than do print media. In the United States, Fox News Channel's chairman, Roger Ailes, has amassed so much power that conservative politicians feel they have to

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<sup>42</sup> McKnight, David (2013): *Murdoch's politics*. London: PlutoPress, p 163

<sup>43</sup> Dean (2013), p 27

<sup>44</sup> Entman, Robert (2012): *Scandal and silence: media responses to presidential misconduct*. Cambridge: Polity

<sup>45</sup> Interview with the author, 5 May 2014

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Street (2011), p 185

court him. In a recent biography<sup>47</sup>, Ailes is quoted as saying during the 2012 presidential election campaign: "I want to elect the next president." And in his book *Bush at War*, Woodward reports how in the wake of the 9/11 attacks Ailes sent Bush advice on how to respond. But when the *New York Times* asked, Alex Jones, the director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, about this remarkable interaction, he noted that such links between a news executive and a president were neither unprecedented nor surprising "especially given how incestuous Washington is."<sup>48</sup>

As Rupert Murdoch has observed on the attractions of political power: "That's the fun of it, isn't it?"<sup>49</sup> Yes, of course. But there is power that comes from being close to the political elite – or a selected segment thereof-- and there is power that results from fearless digging, resulting in power-altering turns like Watergate, not personal vendettas. Murdoch and Ailes are elected by nobody. Neither, one might add, are internet-based media leaders like Julian Assange and Glenn Greenwald.

All these permutations of love or lack thereof in the marriage between politicians and mass media can, of course, be perfectly fine. In democratic systems, the media is a free agent. A TV boss's integrity doesn't have to be damaged by his socialising with objects of his reporters' work. A journalist can write extremely balanced articles about a politician even though he works for an editor or publication fundamentally hostile towards that person.

Following the Leveson inquiry, the major parties passed a royal charter demanding stricter press self-regulation, but the inquiry's task was not to examine the political and media elite and the charter does not address it. Yet if the average citizen has the impression that political and media representatives' closeness and personal likes and dislikes influence their actions, it harms the integrity of both. For that very reason, the famous investigative reporter I F Stone "refused to have any relationships with people in power; he knew that once he did so his ability to pursue controversial stories would be undermined"<sup>50</sup>

All this, argues Entman, has created a situation where citizens are spectators in much the same way they're at a football game. "This is a self-reinforcing situation", he says. "The elites are organised in a way they did not use to be." Despite decades of democratic and technological innovation, this state of affairs resembles the situation Walter Lippman observed in 1927: "The private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what is going

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<sup>47</sup> Sherman, Gabriel (2014): *The loudest voice in the room*. New York: Random House

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/19/politics/19ROGE.html>

<sup>49</sup> Shawcross, William (2005): *Rupert Murdoch: Ringmaster of the Information Circus*. London: Pan Books, p 550

<sup>50</sup> McChesney (2004), p 69

on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstance.”<sup>51</sup>

Gilens and Page support this analysis. Though their recent paper on elites examines the influence of the wealthiest Americans, not the media specifically, they too conclude that the average citizen has been relegated to a spectator seat where he – despite being in possession of the right to vote – has minimal influence on policy-making. “The preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy”<sup>52</sup>, they report, noting that “interest group alignments are almost totally unrelated to the preferences of average citizens. Moreover, there is no indication that officials’ anticipation of reactions from ‘potential groups’ brings policies in line with what citizens want.”<sup>53</sup> Britain, in turn, is already an elitist democracy, “characterised by almost universal mistrust in the professionalised political elite on which it relies, low levels of citizen interaction and media, and a sizeable proportion of the population not in the habit of using media that might provide more detailed information on public policy issues salient to them”, note Couldry, Livingstone and Markham.<sup>54</sup>

This reality does not cause average citizen undue suffering. On the contrary, if asked he may well have supported Murdoch’s BskyB takeover bid even though its handling by Hunt did not pass the impartiality test. Indeed, Gilens and Page conclude that with the average citizen’s priorities being roughly the same as those represented by the spectrum of special-interest groups, he is, despite his exclusion from the decision-making process, not adversely affected by its outcome. In fact, as Samuel Huntington suggested, citizen apathy may be necessary for a society to function effectively.<sup>55</sup> Though the concept of democracy is not a recent one, the general right to vote is, and as Huntington pointed out when writing his book in 1968, democratic societies were still struggling to adapt the expansion of participation to the urban working class and the peasantry.

To put it crudely, does the existence of an elite that makes decisions above the citizen’s head matter to the citizen if the outcome is the one he wanted anyway? I believe it does. The difference between 1968 (or even 1914) and 2014 is the citizen’s expectations. In 1968, he may have voiced his opinions at the local level or in a mass demonstration, but he did not have the expectation that his voice would be heard on a daily basis. 50

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<sup>51</sup> Lippman, Walter (1927): *The phantom public*. New York: Macmillan  
<http://www2.maxwell.syr.edu/plegal/history/lippmann.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Gilens and Page  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~mgilens/Gilens%20homepage%20materials/Gilens%20and%20Page/Gilens%20and%20Page%202014-Testing%20Theories%203-7-14.pdf>, p 21

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p 20

<sup>54</sup> Couldry, Nick and Sonia Livingstone, Tim Markham (2010): *Media consumption and public engagement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p 180

<sup>55</sup> Huntington, Samuel (1968): *Political order in changing societies*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p 88

percent of Britons now report being very or fairly interested in politics<sup>56</sup>, with a record 48 percent reporting to be at least fairly knowledgeable about Parliament. And in a 2009 survey, Ofcom reported that 75 percent of adult British citizens had engaged in civic participation at least once during the past year.<sup>57</sup> This is a public that wants to be heard, even if it does not wish for different political decisions from the ones already being taken.

The dilemma, then, is this: with journalists are so close to politicians that their relationship is incestuous, it sows distrust among voters. It does so even if that close relationship does not affect the actual reporting. As Couldry, Livingstone and Markham note, “citizens are well aware of the close interrelations between media and government, and are troubled by them. Media institutions cannot in the long run ignore the threats to *their* institutional legitimacy that these close interrelations generate.”<sup>58</sup> Or, to go back to Coleman’s soap opera: why would anyone watch it when there are better ones to be had on television? There is no reason. On the contrary, being a passive spectator causes frustration.

Entman sees a real entertainment connection as well, arguing that the most accurate information about the deterioration of mass media is now to be found in so-called entertainment shows such as the TV show *Scandal* and the film *In the Loop*. In Britain, political muckraking is conducted by the magazine *Private Eye* under the semi-cover of satire.<sup>59</sup> This, one may argue, is simply the continuation of the role played by the court jester during medieval times: the performer can state things under the guise of fiction that would otherwise be too uncomfortable to express.

Antagonistic or too chummy: either way, it is media and politicians in a world that – to borrow Niggemeier’s phrase -- is not the world of the people. Today’s people, to be sure, are not a Karl Marx-style Lumpenproletariat but simply a great throng of citizens lacking for nothing more than meaningful participation in public policy, which only about half of them desire anyway. But it stands to reason that Rupert Murdoch, Roger Ailes and other media leaders should mingle with their audience, just as politicians mingle with their constituents (though not enough), because it is their very loyalty that gives them the power to belong to the elite. Instead the elite mingles with other members of the elite. In Chapter VII I will discuss the implications of the potentially festering hostility between the public and the political-media elite.

## *V Citizen cynicism towards politics*

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<sup>56</sup> Hansard Society (2014): Audit of Public Engagement. <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-11-2014.pdf>, p 3

<sup>57</sup> Ofcom (2000): Citizens’ Digital Participation (<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/main.pdf>), p 2

<sup>58</sup> Couldry, Nick et al (2010), p 192

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.private-eye.co.uk/>

Virtually every time a politician speaks or gives an interview, the public's reaction is, "it is just a bunch of lies". Nobody illustrates this more clearly than Barack Obama. In 2008, the inexperienced senator famously rode to an astounding victory, a victory that was said to show the advent of a new kind of public servant, an unsullied politician fundamentally different from the jaded, self-serving legislators back in Washington and indeed in other capitals. When he took office in 2009, Obama had an approval rating of 65.4 percent. Today the figure has dropped to 43.6 percent.<sup>60</sup> Americans suspect him of everything from covering up the terrorist attack in Benghazi to not telling the truth about how Private Lowe Bergdahl was freed after five years in Taliban captivity. Democrats, for their part, worry that his low standing will hurt their re-election prospects. Not even Obama, it turns out, is immune to voter cynicism.

Voters, to be sure, have good reasons to be sceptical about politicians, and it is indeed healthy not to accept every political statement lock, stock and barrel. Germany's disgraced former President, Christian Wulff, made history this year by standing trial for corruption. Britain has not only endured the 2009 expenses scandal, where a large number of sitting parliamentarians were found to have used the public purse as their personal piggy bank, but continuing use of the same unethical practice even after Parliament vowed to clean up its act. In France, Budget Minister Jerome Cahuzac, in charge of the government's crackdown on tax evasion, recently resigned after a fraud inquiry discovered that he had a secret Swiss bank account. In Italy, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is famously subject to multiple legal proceedings, one of which has seen him convicted of using the services of an underage prostitute.

Given such news, especially in advanced democracies whose standards should be higher, it is no surprise that citizens maintain a cynical attitude towards politicians. In the most recent IPSOS/MORI survey covering Britain<sup>61</sup>, politicians again rank at the bottom, with journalists claiming the penultimate spot. Only 18 percent of Britons trust politicians to tell the truth, compared to 21 percent who trust journalists. Even real estate agents fare better at 24 percent. And at the height of the euro crisis, only 10 percent of Germans believed their country's politicians were telling them the truth about the crisis.<sup>62</sup>

The 2014 Edelman trust survey, which polled the top-earning 25 percent of the population in 202 countries, brings further bad news for governments: it ranks at the bottom, with only 44 percent trusting it, a further decline from the 2013 result of 48 percent. The media claims the penultimate spot, at 52 percent, while the NGOs and business claim the two top spots at 64 and 58 percent, respectively. In 2011, trust in government was a respectable 51 percent. The US and France have seen particularly dramatic drops in government trust: the former fell from a 53 percent public trust in the

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<sup>60</sup> [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president\\_obama\\_job\\_approval-1044.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_obama_job_approval-1044.html)

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/15/Trust-in-Professions.aspx?view=wide>

<sup>62</sup> <http://deutsche-wirtschafts-nachrichten.de/2013/08/14/umfrage-politiker-sagen-uns-nicht-die-wahrheit-ueber-die-euro-krise/>

government in 2013 to 37 percent in 2014; the latter fell from 49 to 32 percent. On a global scale, while trust in both governments and the media declined between 2013 and 2014, trust in business and NGOs remained steady, and in the case of NGOs even increased slightly.

Distrust in politicians and governments is nothing new. Stefan Zweig, the Austrian novelist, remarks in *The world of yesterday* that before World War I, the public believed politicians and the press, but that the war led to the demise of that trust.<sup>63</sup> And in the United States, suspicion of the federal government – and government in general – has a long and strong tradition that is alien to European democracies. But the current lack of trust, especially among a country's top-earning quartile, is evidence of a new and worrisome trend, coming as it does in the wake of unprecedented government interventions to save irresponsible major banks and thus their countries' economies. Governments, one would think, would be rewarded for such decisive actions by a bump in public confidence. Instead, trust is falling while trust in business is paradoxically increasing.

Since it is human nature to be wary of that which is alien, the public is bound to take a sceptical attitude towards politics simply because they themselves are not politicians. But if anything politics is more familiar to today's voters, not less. The British Social Attitudes Survey reports that political interest and engagement has increased over the past 30 years.<sup>64</sup> During the same period, party membership in Western Europe, with its long tradition of established parties with a wide popular base, has declined dramatically. As Ingrid Van Biezen shows, party membership in Western European democracies (and indeed Central and Eastern European ones) has halved in just one generation.<sup>65</sup> All these non-members will be more inclined to distrust politicians.

The good news is that citizens want to participate. According to the Hansard Society's most recent Political Engagement Report<sup>66</sup>, 50 percent of British voters consider themselves very or fairly interested in politics. The bad news, again, is that they feel left out. In the Hansard survey, only 14 percent believe they have at least some influence on national elections, and the British Social Attitudes survey reports that between 1987 and 2011 the share of citizens who feel that the government is not working for them rose from 64 percent to 75 percent.<sup>67</sup> According to the Communicating with Congress report<sup>68</sup>, even though a record number of Americans said they'd contacted a member of Congress, only 39 percent of those who received a response from their representative considered the information trustworthy, while 64 percent said the response did not

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<sup>63</sup> Zweig, Stefan (1970): *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*. Frankfurt: Fischer (40th edition)

<sup>64</sup> <http://bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/politics/conclusions.aspx>

<sup>65</sup> <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/06/decline-in-party-membership-europe-ingrid-van-biezen/>

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-11-2014.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> <http://bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/politics/introduction.aspx>

<sup>68</sup> Communicating with Congress [http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/cwc\\_citizenengagement.pdf](http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/cwc_citizenengagement.pdf), p vi

address their concerns. And the 2006 British Social Attitudes survey reports that 60 percent of voters feel that “people like me have no say in government”, while only 8 percent trust “any politician to tell the truth always or most of the time”<sup>69</sup>. Just as in the schoolyard, those who are feeling left out start resenting the in-crowd. In Germany, cynicism towards politicians has for the past generation had its own name: Politikverdrossenheit.

Yet politicians are not as dishonest as the public thinks. Election pledge research in Britain, Canada and -- a very unlikely candidate -- Greece shows that elected leaders there have during some periods kept 70-80 percent of their election pledges, while coalition governments in Ireland and the Netherlands and Ireland have kept a respectable 50-60 percent of theirs. In Sweden, thoroughly researched by Naurin, politicians keep an average 80 percent of their promises, even though only 15 percent of Swedes think that their elected representatives even try to do so.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, as soon as a politician speaks, the public assumes that he is massaging the truth or outright lying. In my work interviewing leading politicians, I witness this contradiction time and again. Not surprisingly, every politician tries to sweep uncomfortable facts under the carpet, and tries to steer an interview into areas that coincide with his current agenda, but I have found most politicians I have interviewed willing to answer unexpected questions and engage in a productive conversation. Still, as soon as the finished product reaches the average citizen, his reaction will be that this is just another lying politician speaking.

Without access to a politician’s internal records it is, of course, hard to measure lying, obfuscation and misleading statements. What is possible to quantify, however, is the extent to which elected leaders keep the promises outlined in their election manifestos: the 50-80 percent rate established by Naurin and her fellow scholars in the nascent election-pledge field. “There is such a pervasive public narrative about politicians’ promise-breaking that it does not matter what a politician says or does”, she reports. “In Sweden, the most-used criticism of political opponents is that they do not keep their promises.”<sup>71</sup> Politicians themselves, in other words, embrace the lying-politician narrative.

And, it should be noted, citizens do not fully embrace their democratic responsibilities, which include informing oneself about the matters at hand. “Because most do not read election manifestos, they are not really sure which promises politicians have been made”, notes Naurin. “They also anticipate election promises and use that as a measuring stick for politicians’ ability to keep promises. “Even if no party has pledged to end homelessness, for example, people assume that they have.”

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<sup>69</sup> Couldry et al (2010), p 180

<sup>70</sup> Naurin (2011), p 4

<sup>71</sup> Interview with the author, 16 May 2014

Politicians, in other words, are not solely to blame for the prevailing Politikverdrossenheit. According to Coleman, most politicians are “pretty good, not criminals”<sup>72</sup>. The problem, he argues, is that they’re surrounded by media advisers who are not very good: media advisers who could advise them to speak about, for example, election pledges they have kept. Another challenge facing politicians is the paradoxical one that they do not have as much power as voters think. While the US President has to negotiate with Congress (even when his own party makes up the majority), European governments are bound by EU decisions in most areas. “Politicians do not dare to take difficult decisions because the public would not believe their reasons for it”, says the political journalist-turned-Downing Street advisor.<sup>73</sup>

Granted, citizens have higher expectations of honesty and integrity on democratic institutions than on private corporations. But the fact that despite being largely honest, as measured by election pledge scholars and Transparency International, politicians and governments in Western democracies are rewarded with pitiful trust levels shows that their message is not effectively reaching their employer, the average citizen. Paradoxically, politicians’ efforts to directly reach voters may further grow citizen distrust, at least if their staffs use social media to do so. Engelberg cites the example of Obama’s 2012 campaign, when the President’s campaign staff sent unsolicited emails to Americans based on their Google profiles.<sup>74</sup>

In this new, vibrant-cum-messy outgrowth of democracy, citizens are holding politicians accountable not just by consuming mass media but by taking action through social media. “We have never had a moment were people were held more to account than now”, argues Engelberg. “If you make a mistake, the Twitter mob will come after you.”<sup>75</sup> It is not trust, but it is not complete apathy either. In the following chapter I will examine whether sceptical citizens are holding the media elite accountable in a similar fashion.

## *VI Citizen cynicism towards the media*

According to a survey by Claudia Mast at the University of Hohenheim, 42 percent of Germans think that journalists focus too much on “unimportant things and trivialities”<sup>76</sup>. That still means that the majority of Germans think journalists do their job well. Yet it reflects a substantial unease with the contents of mass media reports. According to a 2013 Pew poll, 55 percent of Americans have “little or no trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly”, only a slight decline from the 2012 record of 60 percent. In Germany, the public is now viewing mass media as

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

<sup>73</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2004

<sup>74</sup> Interview with the author, 29 May 2014

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.netzwerkrecherche.de/files/nr-jahreskonferenz-presetext-mast-20110702.pdf>, fig 2



more corrupt than parliament.<sup>77</sup> And in Sweden, 29 percent of citizens currently trust daily newspapers, compared to 41 percent in 2000.<sup>78</sup> Though their ratings have declined as well, the royal court, parliament, public service radio and television, and academia all score better than the print media. German media watchers are speaking of *Medienverdrossenheit*, wariness of the media, while Americans have coined the term *media malaise*.

How can there be such a disconnect between mass media and citizens' preferences? This distrust, after all, means that when, for example, a politician tries to reach voters through the fourth estate, the audience distrusts both the politician and the messenger. One explanation is that media is not a transparent institution. As Philip Bennett notes, "journalists have had an awkward relationship with transparency and disclosure."<sup>79</sup> Media is, of course, no institution at all but rather a collection of mostly for-profit companies with no obligation to let readers, viewers or anybody else examine the details of their work. Journalists may demand transparency from politicians, but since they themselves have no democratic responsibilities, they are in their full right to keep their methods secret. As the legendary American magazine publisher Henry Luce remarked in 1947, "by a kind of unwritten law the press ignores the errors and misrepresentations, the lies and scandals, of which their members are guilty".<sup>80</sup> That is, of course, their business. And lack of transparency is also a virtue of sorts: it would be a frightening situation indeed if the government were able to identify and examine a journalist's sources. Still, because of media's prominent role and because they themselves are in the business of examining the work of others, the lack of information about how they work and how they establish the truth sows distrust among the general public.

Media, despite being in the communications business, is also not a participatory institution. As Baecker notes, traditional mass media provide one-way communication. Even though readers and viewers can get in touch with the outlet not just via letters and phone calls but are now actively invited to do so on social media, it is primarily in a polling or entertainment capacity. Baecker cannot imagine mass media continuing to connect with average citizens solely as recipients.<sup>81</sup> Instead they need to be participants as well. Journalists, myself included, pay heed to the participatory creed through *vox pops*, call-ins and Twitter conversations, but even in that role, the citizen will primarily perceive his function as that of a cog in the wheel.

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<sup>77</sup> <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/korruptionsbericht-von-transparency-international-deutsche-verlieren-vertrauen-in-die-medien-1.1716739>

<sup>78</sup> [http://medieakademien.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014\\_MedieAkedemins\\_Fortroendebarmeter\\_140228.pdf](http://medieakademien.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014_MedieAkedemins_Fortroendebarmeter_140228.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> Bowles, Nigel and James T Hamilton, David A Levy, eds (2014): *Transparency in politics and media*. London: IB Tauris, p 104

<sup>80</sup> *Ibib*, p 105

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[http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U\\_qJLQtWS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang\\_de%7Clang\\_en%7Clang\\_it%7Clang\\_sv](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:U_qJLQtWS9gJ:www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/UDI3Z2.pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&lr=lang_de%7Clang_en%7Clang_it%7Clang_sv)

At the current state of affairs, the result of these efforts is often social media messages denouncing the reporter and the news outlet. And while the comment function below an article will in theory enable productive discussion about the topic at hand, it is in reality no more than a forum where readers can vent their frustrations. The most participatory option available is not the democratic equivalent of sunlight disinfectant but a tool that helps Medienverdrossenheit spread.

Imagine instead if a randomly selected and generally aware citizen instead were allowed to sit in on editorial meetings or major interviews (while vowing not to break the news): he, or she, is likely to come away a convert, having seen with his own eyes that newsmaking is far from a nefarious activity. In Chapter VII I will discuss this and other potential fixes to citizen alienation.

## *VII Implications for democracy, and what to do about it*

A society where the public trusts neither its elected leaders nor the messengers through which it receives news from and about those leaders is facing a democracy problem. Citizen alienation, if allowed to fester, is nothing less than a threat to the foundation of our democratic systems. Though Europeans and to a lesser extent Americans still vote in large numbers, if voters are convinced that their vote does not count, they will stop voting or start voting in a strange manner simply to attract attention. That gives elected leaders very limited legitimacy.

And yet citizen cynicism and withdrawal may be the best-case scenario. “I do not see a way out of the current situation unless there is a popular uprising”, says Entman. “It is interesting that there has been so little rebellion so far.”<sup>82</sup> Granted, the political and media elite in Western democracies causing an Arab Spring-style uprising seems a rather distant prospect, though the business elite got a dose of it through the Occupy protests. A more likely prospect, simply because it requires no action, is further citizen withdrawal. “Citizen alienation from politics gives citizens the power to say, ‘I am alienated; I do not have to do anything’”, notes Coleman. “Democratising politics is much harder.”<sup>83</sup>

There could, of course, be no negative outcome at all. For all its flaws, democracy has chugged along rather reliably for ever since its inception on the agora of ancient Greece. The average citizen may continue to give his vote to Eric Cantor-style legislators and his news attention to the likes of Rebekah Brooks.

Yet a clear expression of voter alienation made itself known in this year’s European Parliament elections, where anti-establishment parties such as the Front National (FN) and the United Kingdom Independence Party gained significant support at the expense

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with the author, 5 May 2014

<sup>83</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

of traditional parties. FN and UKIP are now the largest parties of France and Britain, respectively, in the European Parliament. In a similar fashion, Dave Brat, an unknown professor at tiny Ashland College in Virginia, this year defeated his well-funded Republican opponent, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, in the primary. So certain were political reporters and Cantor's Congressional colleagues of his victory that they had paid virtually no attention to the contest. Cantor himself spent Election Day morning not at polling stations in his district but meeting with lobbyists in Washington.<sup>84</sup>

Interestingly, these anti-elite parties are themselves run in a rather elitist fashion, with leaders given considerable power and publicity and internal dissent silenced. Even rebels form new elites. And with rebellion being a party's purpose, once the party gains power it faces the dilemma of how to govern. This, indeed, is the conundrum that the newly powerful FN and UKIP factions in the European Parliament will face. Like teenage rebellion, political rebellion loses credibility if it lasts too long.

Traditional parties are trying to respond to the protest parties' policies. Yet it is not their policies but their outsider identity that makes anti-establishment parties so attractive to voters. That outsider identity, of course, includes stepmother-like treatment by mass media that consistently point to the protest parties failings. "The EU vote has to do with projection on the part of the citizens", says Coleman. "They want someone who can cause a fuss in the establishment because they themselves can't do it. They cannot even get in. They're reacting against the system. I want to say, 'good on you, give them a good kicking', but that is dangerous."<sup>85</sup>

It is indeed. But disgust with the elite does not have to result in warped democratic decisions. The answer to Politikverdrossenheit and Medienverdrossenheit is certainly not only more citizen engagement, but it would go a long way. While conducting interviews with political leaders, I have often concluded that having a randomly selected reader – or indeed any citizen with a slight interest in the subject matter – accompany me and participate in the conversation would be a productive move. The citizen would bring his own questions and concerns, the politician would be able to respond to them, the citizen would be able to observe me, and by extension mass media, at work, and I would learn both from the citizen's questions and the politician's reaction to them. Readers would be able to read a more authentically democratic exchange, and the citizen-cum-interviewer would report to his friends and family, and perhaps his Facebook and Twitter community, that the process was honest and straightforward.

Imagine if every political interview was conducted the same way. Pretty soon there would be an army of average citizens who felt that they'd had meaningful input not just into public decisions but also into mass media. The political-journalist-turned-Downing

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<sup>84</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/eric-cantor-faces-tea-party-challenge-tuesday/2014/06/10/17da5d20-f092-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/eric-cantor-faces-tea-party-challenge-tuesday/2014/06/10/17da5d20-f092-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f_story.html)

<sup>85</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

Street-advisor, however, is certain it would be a failure. “Most journalists would think it ridiculous to have a member of the public tag along”, he argued. “Journalists are not very keen on oversight, not even from their superiors. And that member of the public would be seen as a stooge.”<sup>86</sup> Besides, he predicts, the appointed citizen would probably be too consumed by the trappings of power surrounding a political leader that he would not contribute with sharp questions anyway. I dare predict, however, that at least among the activist minority there will be plenty of citizens eager to practice citizen oversight who would not be intimidated in the corridors of power. In a further step, these interviews could be conducted in two parts: in the second one, conducted several months after the first one, the politician would have to show how he had followed up on his promises made in the first interview.

Inconvenient, yes, but oversight by members of the public may be more palatable than oversight by means of legislation. Several projects enable citizen oversight in an easier and more technical way. ProPublica has pioneered the concept of making as much information as possible available online, for example through the DocumentCloud application, where readers can click highlighted words to see the source of the information. And at MIT, a researcher is developing Truth Googles<sup>87</sup>, an application that automatically scans assertions in news stories against a database of verified facts. The stories should, of course, not be different simply because the public has access to the journalist’s working material, but this very access instils trust.

Users of these resources will, however, most likely be the activist minority. How, then, does one convince the passive majority? Saint Louis University political philosopher James Bohman argues regular interaction between citizens and media professionals is as important as regular interaction between citizens and politicians. That interaction should cover many aspects of media, he suggests, “both the ways in which the public is addressed and how opinion is represented as well as general questions of media ethics and media institutions”<sup>88</sup> Why should it, Bohman asks, not be normal for the average citizen to be able to attend such meetings in his home community “and communicate to media professionals their views about how media present public life? Why should it not be normal for media professionals to be seen to be accountable to such fora, and not just to their shareholders and advertisers? And why should it not be normal for politicians to take serious account of the implications of such discussions for how *they* conduct their relations with media and the electorate?”<sup>89</sup> A bit of that is already happening, with local news outlets, operating at the town or even neighbourhood level, are filling the gaps left by cashstrapped major news outlets.<sup>90</sup> A local news operation, by definition, has more face-to-face interaction with its audience and is able to give better attention to

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with the author, 6 June 2014

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.niemanlab.org/2012/07/are-you-sure-thats-true-truth-goggles-tackles-fishy-claims-at-the-moment-of-consumption>

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Couldry, Nick et al (2010), p 193

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p 194

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/10/small-digital-news-sites-young-lean-and-local/>

citizen input. And simply by being present at a local level, such news organisations make themselves more credible as representatives of the fourth estate: citizens can better observe their work.

Couldry, Livingstone and Markham suggest that journalists and others should ask the fundamental question of whether journalists practice their profession on behalf of democracy: “Are they independent servants of political truth and the public interest? Or are they the hired guns of particular political and commercial interests?”<sup>91</sup> Although practices vary around the world, it is rare to find systems in which journalists are licenced to practice and required to meet particular professional standards, maintained by a body of some kind. There is professional training, and there are regulatory bodies, but nothing that compares to the regimes that licence and regulate lawyers or doctors.”

A professional body that licences journalists and sets professional standards would go a long way towards addressing citizen cynicism. Journalists may still form an informal class with politicians, but if the public has independent verification of the truth and high standards of journalistic reporting, they will at least have some assurance that they are not being misled. The obvious danger with a government licensing system is that it becomes a censorship tool, and no modern Western democracy would even consider such a system. Licensing conducted by professional journalist association appears a superior solution. However, it, too, would have to solve the issue of how to treat journalists stricken from the list. Are they banned for life, and if not, how do they requalify? Of course, simply licensing journalists may do little to alleviate citizen cynicism apart from providing a general quality seal. And citizens can and will also continue to consult alternative news sources disseminated by non-professional journalists.

Coleman, in turn, suggests changing the recruitment into the political class to get lawmakers more connected to the public. Furthermore, he says, politicians have to learn to better tune into public opinion and in general be more modest.<sup>92</sup> The general challenge is, of course, that politics is complicated, but pointing it out further fans the citizen cynicism flames. A good exercise in explaining the essence of a political matter is straightforward conversations with voters. That may mean knocking on hundreds of potential voters’ doors, perhaps in the company of a journalist, instead of trying to reach them by means of an interview. Or, given that the 2010 prime ministerial debates in Britain generated unexpected enthusiasm for the election, politicians may agree to more frequent televised – and webcast – debates.<sup>93</sup> In any event, the politician will seem more authentic than he does through the prism of interactions with journalists.

Journalists, for their part, could reinvigorate both trust and interest in their news outlets by reporting not just about top politicians and other members of the

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<sup>91</sup> Couldry, Nick et al (2010), p 194

<sup>92</sup> Interview with the author, 5 June 2014

<sup>93</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/ckfinder/userfiles/files/1306-Politics-Performance-and-Rhetoric.pdf>

establishment but about local candidates as well. They may even be rewarded with a scoop the same way as Jim McConnell, a reporter for the local Richmond (Virginia) weekly *The Chesterfield Observer*. When national reporters focused only on Eric Cantor, McConnell accompanied Dave Brat.<sup>94</sup> When Brat won, McConnell was the man with the story.

Both journalists and politicians could take the citizen interaction one step further, inviting regular citizens to accompany them in the course of their daily work. It would certainly be an imposition, highly annoying even, but such a one-week “internship” would, if the journalist or politician is as honest as he claims, un-alienate not just one citizen but his social network as well. Indeed, willingness to accept such citizen oversight may be a way to test politicians’ commitment to accountability. If given to such internships, citizens could no longer complain about being alienated. There’s even Hollywood potential: a documentary of the politician and the citizen in their daily interaction would make for fascinating viewing.

Both politicians and citizens would help themselves and other citizens by being more transparent as well. Announcing a £800 million increase for a national healthcare budget, or a £100 million readership programme, breeds cynicism unless the politician explains how, exactly, it will benefit the individual citizen. And if the politician does not explain it, it is the journalist’s duty to report not just the announcement but, for example, how much go to each citizen/child/resident/patient each year, and for which purpose. Then it is not just a distant political action but, say, £8 per child per year for books.

There is also the occasionally brought up idea of none-of-the-above ballots. These ballots would contain the names of candidates as well as a none-of-the-above box. This option would be a very accurate reflection of voter disengagement and would be a much healthier option than protest voting, which distorts voter priorities and can lead to erroneous political decisions based on those voter results. In practical terms, that means that an establishment politician would then respond to, say, a 20 percent voter alienation rate rather than a 20 percent vote for a protest party.

Even if every single journalist receives a citizen companion as of tomorrow, even if every journalist union creates a licencing board, even if every journalist attends constituency meetings, and even if every politician engages directly with voters we will still have *Politikverdrossenheit* and *Medienverdrossenheit*. People will still cast protest votes or withdraw into their private sphere. But I dare predict that with more citizen involvement, and with the members of the political and media elite making a big and concerted effort to have meaningful exchanges with the average citizen, that elite will seem both less frightening and less suspect.

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<sup>94</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/business/media/eric-cantors-defeat-exposed-a-beltway-journalism-blind-spot.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/16/business/media/eric-cantors-defeat-exposed-a-beltway-journalism-blind-spot.html?_r=0)



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