TIME TO GET SERIOUS? PROCESS NEWS AND BRITISH POLITICS

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The proposition that the news media increasingly report about the 'process' of politics over the 'issues' has gathered general acceptance amongst the political class and academic observers. Thomas Patterson documented 'a quiet revolution' in American political journalism in the past 40 years, whereby there was a fundamental shift from issue-based stories to process-based ones.[1] Frank Esser et al. outline three stages of this development, which have also been witnessed in other Western democracies such as the UK.[2] In the period of *issue* orientation that prevailed until the early 1970s, the news was primarily concerned with the key issues each candidate/ party stood for and what their victory would mean for the average voter. Since then, in the *strategic* stage, focus shifted towards how parties/ candidates ran their campaign and how this might affect their electoral prospects. Since the early 1990s, political journalism has added a *meta* level to their coverage, where they examine how politicians and their handlers are utilising the media for their own ends, as well as reflect on the media's own involvement in the political process.

For the past four UK general elections, the Electoral Commission has commissioned a comprehensive content analysis of election news coverage where the main themes of news are classified, with process news being one such theme. These studies define process news as: 'campaigning strategies, opinion polls/ horse race news, passing references to the chosen daily topic agendas of political parties, political tensions and infighting within parties, party spin/ PR/ news management, and other themes'.[3] Most observers of campaign news and its critiques will be familiar with these terms, though various other concepts are included in this definition. For example, process news captures the tendency for the news media to focus on *political strategy* and its emphasis on winning and losing, campaign tactics and personal battles in the political arena.[4] Process news also encapsulates aspects of *metacoverage*, where journalists turn the spotlight inward and report on themselves, and the communication–related publicity efforts aimed at them, as integral parts of their stories.[5] Whilst its roots lie in

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[1] Patterson, *Out of Order.*
[2] Esser, Reinemann and Fan, 'Spin doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany'.
[3] Deacon et al., *Reporting the 2005 UK General Election.*
[4] Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism*; Jackson, 'Strategic Media, Cynical Public?'.
[5] See Esser and Spanier, 'News Management as News'

analyses of election news, elements of process news also apply to everyday politics outside of election periods.[6]

Evidence from the Electoral Commission studies shows how the amount of process news during UK elections now regularly accounts for around half of overall coverage,[7] with a peak of 70 percent recorded at the 2010 election leading Ivor Gaber to describe it as a 'policy-free environment'.[8] Longitudinal studies from UK elections are scarce, but content analyses of general elections dating back to the early 1970s suggest that process news was far less prominent, typically accounting for around 20-30 percent of election campaign news.[9]

The rise of process news therefore represents one of the most profound shifts in journalistic style in recent decades. With the intense scrutiny supplied by the concerns over political engagement in recent years, many have offered these changes in journalistic style as a causal explanation. In this chapter I will take up some of these normative questions. I will firstly document the driving forces behind process news, and then examine the democratic implications of its rise. Whilst there is no shortage of debate on aspects of process news, it is often polarised and not evidence based. I argue that there are many dimensions to debates on process news: whilst many critiques of process news underestimate its value in demystifying aspects of political reality that were once invisible, we should be concerned about the amount of process news and the tendency for it to be framed cynically. In the final section I explore what practical steps could be made to rectify some of the problems associated with process news, in order to create an environment in which citizenship might thrive.

The changing environment of political newsmaking and its consequences

There are many reasons for the striking rise in process news. Firstly, there are a number of well-documented cultural developments that have impacted on political journalism in particular.[10] In the United States, some scholars have identified the fall-out of Vietnam and Watergate as important milestones in the transformation of the culture of political journalism.[11] In Britain, even without the seismic moment of Watergate, the same changes in the 'media-politics nexus' took place.[12] These events had the effect of redefining deference

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[6] Esser, *Metacoverage of Mediated Wars*; Jackson, 'Strategic News Frames and Public Policy' Debates'; Skorkjaer Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 'Policy or Processes in Focus?'

[7] see Deacon et al., 'Press and Broadcasting: "Real Issues" and Real Coverage'; Deacon et al., 'Reporting the 2005 UK General Election'; Wring and Deacon, 'Patterns of Press Partisanship in the 2010 General Election; Wring, 'The Media and the Election'.

[8] Gaber, 'Election 2010: A Policy-free Environment'.

[9] See Harrop, 'Press'; Semetko et al., *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*; Seymour-Ure, 'The Press'; Seymour-Ure, 'Fleet Street'.

[10] See Swanson, 'Political Communication Research and the Mutations of Democracy'.

[11] Patterson, *Out of Order*; Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*.

[12] Schlesinger, 'Is There a Crisis in British Journalism?'

that journalists had towards politicians, as they came to realise that they had for too long been complicit in the government information agenda. Whilst the daily news agenda remained largely determined by the actions of politicians, the congeniality and fraternity between journalists and politicians was supplemented by greater hostility and distrust. Journalists felt emboldened to draw attention to the rivalries and backstage elements of politics, often with a cynical slant. In fact, Patterson believes that for many reporters, conflict and controversy are now actually seen as the real issues of politics, and so this explains their obsession with it:

> The press deals with charge and countercharge, rarely digging into the details of political positions or social conditions underlying policy problems. It is not simply that the press neglects issues in favor of the strategic game: issues, even when covered, are subordinated to the drama of conflict generated by the opposing sides.[13]

In the past 30 years we have witnessed the ongoing 'mediatization' of politics, whereby politics is increasingly carried out through the media, as that is where it is 'located'.[14] For politicians, mediatization is a thorny matter, as it gives them the opportunities to communicate with voters, but not always on their own terms, creating a tension with their own 'political logic'.[15] As a large body of literature has documented, party communications across the world have undergone a process of professionalization in order to control or at least manage the demands of the media.[16] This in turn has had major implications for the relationship between politicians and journalists. The relentless and at times aggressive promotion of political messages by party and government spin doctors places great strains on the autonomy of journalists.[17] Process news is one of the strategies they have developed to counter this, as it draws specific attention to attempts to influence the presentation of politics through news management. John Zaller draws upon the concept of professionalism to explain this process. He concludes that journalists would cease to be professionals if they were forced into the role of newsreaders or mere conduits for politicians.[18] So whilst politicians are still very successful at setting the news agenda, in order to retain a sense of professional self-esteem, reporters therefore want to add something to the news – to be a professional that not only reports but also selects, frames, comments upon, investigates, interprets and regulates the flow of political communication. In their view, 'what journalists add should be, in their ideal,

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[13] Patterson, 'The News Media: An Effective Political Actor?', p. 450.
[14] Mazzoleni and Schultz, `"Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy ? '.
[15] Brants and van Praag, 'Signs of media logic'; Stromback, 'Four Phases of Mediatization'.
[16] See Negrine and Lilleker, 'The Professionalization of Political Communication'.
[17] Blumler, 'Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship'.
[18] Zaller, *A Theory of Media Politics*.

as arresting and manifestly important as possible - if possible, the most important aspect of each news report, so as to call attention to journalists and the importance of their work'.[19]

Mediatization also – quite legitimately – gives the news media licence to report on itself, as it no longer solely looks upon politics from the outside, but is a political institution of considerable power.[20] Process news, or more specifically metacoverage, is a logical outgrowth of this, and describes the inclination of reporters to turn the spotlight inward and treat themselves as actors, even autonomous sources, in their own stories. Other times it might include 'self reverential' discussions of the media's own impact on an election campaign, or a politician's appearance on one medium (e.g. television) being the subject of a story on another (e.g. press).[21] Such reporting has been facilitated by the growth of specialist media pages in the press, themselves a reflection of the media's central role in contemporary culture and politics. Similarly, the Internet has facilitated metacoverage, as the mainstream news media pick up on trending topics on Twitter for example, or commission navel-gazing features on the impact of new media on politics.

Structural changes

In the last 20-30 years, the news media environment has changed dramatically. This has been driven by technological developments: satellite, cable and latterly digital signals have opened the door for new television channels to be launched without great costs, including 24 hour news channels; likewise in the newspaper sector, falling printing costs have been one reason for greater pagination and the launch of freesheets; technology also provided an entirely new platform for media expansion: the internet. Alongside technology, governments have allowed a liberalisation of media markets, thus ending the days of spectrum scarcity and enabling a more commercially-based media system. These developments transformed the information environment, seeing an explosion in the number of news outlets, and subsequent fragmentation of news audiences.[22]

The dramatic changes in the media environment have been mirrored by important cultural changes in their audience. In particular, the rise of a consumer culture which is based around consumption and individuality.[23] News media audiences are thus increasingly behaving like consumers in the media market, so given greater choice, they have responded by relinquishing their former loyalties, and increasingly obtaining their news from a wider

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[19] *Ibidem.*, p. 24.
[20] Esser, Reinemann and Fan , 'Spin doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany'.
[21] Johnson and Boudreau, 'Turning the Spotlight Inward'.
[22] Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*; Swanson, 'Political Communication Research and the Mutations of Democracy'.
[23] Bauman, *The Individualized Society*; Firat and Dholakia, *Consuming People*.

variety of sources.[24] Traditional news outlets such as evening television news broadcasts and newspapers have seen a decline in their audience figures, as more people migrate to alternative news sources offered by new media technologies.

One of the most important consequences of these forces has been the intensification of competition for audiences among news organisations. Journalism has traditionally been a competitive industry, typified by the kudos bequeathed to those who break an 'exclusive' story ahead of their rivals. What has accelerated in the last 20-30 years is the greater exposure of news *organisations* to commercial pressures. As news media output burgeons, so the finite advertising spend is spread more thinly, thus impacting upon overall profitability and as a consequence the budgets that can be allocated to newsgathering.[25] Within the newsroom, a major study by Justin Lewis et al. revealed a number of significant patterns underpinned by the political economy of contemporary news.[26] Firstly, as news organisations diversify into multimedia operations more news space is required to fill, but on the whole more journalists are *not* being hired to fill it. Instead, staff journalists are asked to be more productive, with their sample of journalists producing an average of 4.5 stories per day[27], and more than two-thirds of those surveyed (30 out of 42) believing that journalists were filing more stories each shift than they were a decade ago.

These pressures place even greater emphasis on news values, and hence for owners and editors concerned with the bottom-line, process news is cheap, quick, and in their view attracts larger audiences than news focused on the substance of policies and politics. For time-pressed journalists, it is easier to put a new twist on the day's news by focusing on the game of politics than by researching issues of policy.[28] Process news fits many news values that are important to the selection and presentation of the news, such as 'human interest', 'conflict' and 'controversy'.[29] It is also perpetually new: there will always be another twist, manoeuvre, or stumble in the game of politics.[30]

Timothy Cook has argued that many 'daily news stories are episodes of larger continuing sagas … Simply put, for news to be produced routinely, journalists must be able to visualize events as part of a larger, broader storyline and must move the plot along from one episode to the next'.[31] These sagas are often said to have a certain 'phase structure'[32], and so

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[24] See Dahlgren, 'Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture'; Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*.

[25] Gavin, *Press and Television in British Politics*.

[26] Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 'Four Rumours and an Explanation'.

[27] Although it should be noted that the press agency journalists contacted appeared to be producing approximately twice as many stories as their counterparts working on national newspapers.

[28] Patterson, 'The News Media'; Fallows, *Breaking the News;* Kuhn, 'The Media and Politics'.

[29] McManus, M., *Market Driven Journalism*; Price and Tewksbury, 'News Values and Public Opinion'; Stephens, *Broadcast News*.

[30] Patterson, *Out of Order*.

[31] Lawrence, 'Game Framing the Issues', p. 96.

[32] Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*.

the newsworthiness of events is determined by whether or not they move the saga to the 'next' step.[33] When it comes to elections, reporters often treat them as if they fit into a 'master narrative', whereby the election day is the finishing line, and everything that happens during an election campaign is significant only for its relevance towards a candidate's or party's chances of crossing that line.[34] Process news provides the perfect framework for journalists to interpret the election 'master narrative' of the 'race' for the line whereas policy coverage fits much less comfortably. The same can be said of non-election periods.[35] UN resolution votes, public inquiries, or even the saga of the splits in the UK coalition government all share a 'phase structure', whereby journalists can relate the day's news to its likely implications for the ongoing saga through process news.[36]

The 'problem' of process news

This takes us to some of the democratic implications of process news. The list of charges held up against process news (including its close relatives, self-coverage, metacoverage and strategic frames) is serious. Firstly, there is a complaint that process news is largely trivial, and its replacement of substantial and weighty news has stifled learning about political issues, and the ability of audiences to engage with political life is compromised. For Bennett the result of a media concerned with the spectacle of news is that it can disconnect its audience from the power to participate actively in political life.[37] They are 'passive receivers, no longer active participants, in the dialogue of democracy' and the ability to understand policy issues, generate opinions, and hold politicians to account is thus lost.[38]

This can then result in or aggravate a second problem: disenchantment and cynicism towards the political process. Many aspects of what constitutes process news are 'inherently cynical' according to Kerbel, Apee and Ross: politics is presented as a game played by ruthless, Machiavellian, power-hungry politicians.[39] As Fallows explains: 'By choosing to present public life as a contest between scheming political leaders, all of whom the public should view with suspicion, the mass media helps bring about that very result'.[40]

Such a sweeping critique is tempting to subscribe to, and regularly is by both media critics and politicians keen to move focus towards 'real issues'. But it is underpinned by a

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[33] Cook, *Making Laws and Making News,* pp. 47.
[34] Fallows, *Breaking the News, pp. 170-173.*
[35] See Jackson, 'Strategic News Frames and Public Policy Debates'.
[36] Fishman, *Manufacturing the News.*
[37] Bennett, *The Governing Crisis.*
[38] Franklin, *Packaging Politics,* p.14.
[39] Kerbel, Apee and Ross, 'PBS Ain't So Different'.
[40] Fallows, *Breaking the News,* p.7.

number of assumptions, some of which are sustainable and others that are flawed. These will be explored in the following section.

It is becoming harder to sustain the normative distinction between 'issues' and 'process'.

Dichotomies can be appealing and convenient, but sometimes mask a more complex truth. Whilst the rise in process news is quite clear and unambiguous, its status as a 'non-issue' is less so. Firstly, the UK represents a postmodern political culture where the distinction between 'political' and entertainment is increasingly blurred.[41] The private lives of politicians, their personality traits, looks, dress sense, personal rivalries and presentational performance have all become more important in our increasingly emotionalised public sphere.[42] In the context of the 2010 UK General election, Ipsos Mori found that voters ranked the image of the leaders as important as the policies in deciding how to vote.[43] This was the first time leaders were ranked as high as policies since they first asked this question in 1987. Of course, this cultural shift towards image and personality may be partly a *result* of media coverage, but it would seem unfair to dismiss all process news as trivial in this context.

Secondly, the extensive use of sophisticated communications methods by governments and political parties is an issue of democratic concern, and so worthy of reportage. Ten years ago, a UK government special advisor's internal announcement that 9/11 was 'a good day to bury bad news' seemed to encapsulate a government obsessed by 'spin', and accompanied a wider critique of a 'symbolic state' in which the *perception* of policy delivery was more important than actual delivery.[44] The subsequent 'demystification' of spin offered by journalists was both a rational response to a changing environment, and the raising of an issue of public interest which represents a progressive evolution in our political culture towards one of greater transparency and scrutiny.[45] Whilst coverage of news management and political PR is process news, it is not necessarily a 'non-issue'.

Who says you cannot learn from process news?

Alternative forms of journalism such as blogs, breakfast news, panel and debate shows, and even satirical news shows such as *The Daily Show* or *10 O'clock Live* are gaining increasing

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[41] Street, *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy.*
[42] Richards, *Emotional Governance*
[43] Ipsos MORI, *The Political Triangle 1987-2010'.*
[44] O'Shaughnessy, 'The Symbolic State'.
[45] McNair, *Cultural Chaos.*

acceptance as a legitimate part of the informational diet of citizens.[46] Whilst process news does not represent an alternative form of journalism, it can give citizens a more rounded picture of political reality than information on policies alone. McNair cautiously welcomes process news as 'the emergence of a demystificatory, potentially empowering commentary on the nature of the political process; an ongoing deconstruction of the relationship between journalism and the powerful which adds to, rather than detracts from, the stock of useful information available to the average citizen'.[47] Of course, this rests on the assumption that a) citizens are likely to be able to easily access coverage of policies as well as process and b) most process news is presented in an empowering way. These two issues will be taken up later.

The problematic role of politicians in process news

As mentioned earlier, as both campaigning and governing have become increasingly media-centred[48], so politicians must accommodate the 'media logic' and standards of newsworthiness,[49] which privilege the visual;[50] dramatic, conflict or scandal based;[51] human interest; and episodic (as opposed to thematic).[52] Thus whilst politicians may complain of the media obsession with process over issues (for e.g. see Tony Blair's final speech as Prime Minister, 2007), they have often been complicit in its rise to prominence. However, it is interesting to note that academic studies of process news invariably take a media-centric perspective, thus placing the blame for its deleterious consequences on the news media. There are serious limitations to this.

Conflict – including attack and counter attack – is a deeply embedded part of the UK's political culture and is theatrically performed weekly during Prime Minister's Questions. Politicians regularly accuse each other of spin and deception; and will emphasise the divisions in their opponents' ranks for their own political gain. The 'soap opera' of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's relationship during the last Labour government was an obsession of the media, but news was littered with quotes from opposition politicians who were keen to stoke the fire of a story that undermined their rivals.[53] Similarly, the news media are often castigated for employing the language of the 'horse race', war and games in their election

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[46] See Atton and Hamilton, *Alternative Journalism*; Jones, *Entertaining Politics*; Peters, 'Emotion Aside or Emotional Side?'
[47] McNair 2000, *Journalism and Democracy,* pp. 171-172.
[48] Esser and Spanier, 'News Management as News'
[49] Stromback, 'Four Phases of Mediatization'.
[50] Bucy and Grabe, 'Taking Television Seriously'.
[51] de Vreese, *Framing Europe*; Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy*; Stromback and Kaid, *The Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World*.
[52] Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*
[53] Jackson, 'Strategic News Frames and Public Policy Debates'.

coverage[54] but this is also the language that politicians use to both internal and external audiences. For example, in his 'State of the race – memo 4' to Labour party members during the 2010 General Election, Peter Mandelson said:

> We are the underdogs in this fight – always have been.
> But, with as much as a third of the electorate still undecided, this election remains wide open. The polls are so volatile because people remain in a state of genuine flux. So it is time to up the tempo and fight every inch of the way.[55]

Studies that have examined the agendas of political parties in elections reveal a sharp rise in the focus on political process. For the 1983 election, Semetko et al. found that parties placed a great deal of emphasis on 'substantive issues' (measured through press releases), with a minimum of 60 percent and a maximum of 80 percent of their press releases primarily focused on policies.[56] In 1997, an analysis of party PEBs and press releases found this figure to be 75 percent.[57] By 2005, Gaber reported that in their press releases the parties had made election strategy and tactics their single biggest issue, with Labour and the Conservatives devoting around 47 percent of their announcements to either attacking their opponents, or urging voters to get out and vote or not vote for their opponents, a trend that accelerated in the 2010 election.[58] By feeding the media stories of conflict, splits and spin, politicians can be seen as active agents in the rise of process news.

The 'negative' effects of process news can be questioned

Part of the critique of process news is rooted in the media malaise thesis that places the media at the centre of the process of voter disengagement and cynicism. This is hotly disputed in the political communication literature. Often based on large-scale survey evidence, a major finding of the 'media mobilisation' literature is the more a citizen consumes news media, the more likely they are to be politically knowledgeable and engaged, which in turn motivates them to seek out more political information, akin to a 'virtuous circle'.[59] Critics of process news would not dispute this, but instead contend that it still does not discount the possibility of a 'spiral of cynicism' for those who consume the least news, or certain types of news. Indeed, Norris' own data showed that those who consumed the least news on the European

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[54] See Jamieson, *Dirty Politics*
[55] Internal memo sent to Labour Party members, 25 April 2010.
[56] Semetko et al, *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*.
[57] Norris et al, *On Message: Communicating the Campaign.*
[58] Gaber, 'Dislocated and Distracted'.
[59] Norris, *A Virtuous Circle;* Newton, 'Politics and the News Media';

elections were less likely to believe they could trust Brussels bureaucrats and MEPs, and this pattern was likely to be self reinforcing – so people who know least about the EU and have minimal trust, will probably pay little attention to news about EU, on rational grounds.[60] The virtuous circle and spiral of cynicism theories are therefor arguably more compatible than many would believe. For those who are interested in politics, there is a mutually reinforcing cycle of news consumption and political engagement. But this can work the opposite way for the disengaged: because they lack interest and feel detached from politics, they are less likely to consume political news, which again reinforces their detachment from politics.

The spiral of cynicism thesis posits that strategically framed news (emphasising the tactics employed by politicians in pursuing policy/ electoral goals, as well as their performance, styles of campaigning, and personal battles in the political arena) can activate cynicism towards the politicians involved, as well as the wider political process.[61] Meanwhile, issue-based news has been found to potentially reverse the spiral of cynicism for young voters.[62] Empirical support for the thesis has been found in a number of contexts, though levels of political engagement and sophistication have been often been found to moderate the effects of such frames.[63] When metacoverage (news about the press' own role in political affairs, and attempts by politicians to gain publicity) is framed strategically, similar results have been found.[64] The effects of this news should be cause for concern, but whilst the link between strategic frames and voter cynicism is well established, the relationship between cynicism and political engagement is less so, meaning it is possible that under some circumstances, voters can be both 'cynical and engaged'.[65] Nevertheless, it would be misguided to dismiss the concerns raised by the effects of strategically framed process news given the balance of evidence garnered to date.

Perhaps citizens prefer process news to policy

It might be fair to assume that because strategically framed process news activates cynicism in some individuals, they will be less favourable to this type of news presentation. This is based on Cappella and Jamieson's evidence that the spiral of cynicism can spread from cynicism about those politicians portrayed as Machiavellian in news reports, to cynicism

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[60] Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*, p.250
[61] See Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism.*
[62] Adriaansen, van Praag and de Vreese, 'Substance Matters'.
[63] de Vreese, *Framing Europe*; Jackson, 'Strategic Media, Cynical Public'; Valentino, Beckmann and Buhr, 'A Spiral of Cynicism for Some?'.
[64] D'Angelo and Lombard, 'The Power of the Press'; de Vreese and Elenbaas, 'Media in the Game of Politics'.
[65] de Vreese and Semetko, 'Cynical and Engaged'.

towards the media as the messenger.[66] On the other hand, process news is partly a result of market pressures, which demand that news be presented in a format that has significant entertainment and interest value, even at the expense of civic or educational value.[67] The assumption here being that the uncertainty and suspense associated with the depiction of politicians as strategic players, plus the focus on personality-related stories, are more likely to catch and hold the audience's attention than more substantive aspects of the election or issue.

It seems previous research has provided evidence for both propositions. In the USA, public opinion surveys have shown that citizens are not happy about campaign formats that inject cynical views of the political process.[68] Calls for more 'substantive' reporting of politics by Patterson and Franklin contain the implicit assumption that the public would be happier if campaigns provided more and 'better' information (with a greater commitment to explaining issues as opposed to dramatising them).[69] This view was challenged by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, who found that while citizens indeed dislike campaigns, they do not necessarily desire more deliberation around the issues.[70] Instead, they want simple cues so they can size up candidates with minimal effort. If anything, election coverage should therefore be less demanding (i.e. substantive and issue-focused). Lipsitz et al. place themselves somewhere in between the 'deliberative' and 'undemanding' perspectives. They found attitudes to campaigns vary considerably based on various attitudinal and demographic factors. Most importantly, politically involved citizens desire more 'substantive' campaigns, whereas the less involved are more open to process news. [71]

As with the US studies, most evidence of audience evaluations of the news in the UK is based on a campaign context. Recent election opinion surveys asking the public to rate the media's performance have found them to be generally happy with the amount of news, but more critical of its content. In 2001 and 2005 for example, the majority thought coverage should be less leader focussed and more policy and local candidate focused.[72] Other evidence suggests that a substantial part of the population feel short of information during elections[73], though it does not explicitly say this is a result of a media focus on process over issues. Qualitative reports about young people and politics offer some more useful evidence towards this debate. White et al. for example, found them to view media coverage of politics as too often framed around party squabbles in Parliament, which reinforced their view of it as

[66] Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism*
[67] Hahn et al, ' Consumer Demand for Election News'

[68] Just, 'Talk is cheap'; Lichter, 'Was TV Election News Better This Time'
[69] Franklin, *Packaging Politics;* Patterson, *Out of Order*.
[70] Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy.*
[71] Lipsitz et al, 'What Voters Want from Political Campaign Communication'
[72] Ofcom, *Viewers and Voters;* Worcester and Mortimore, *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*
[73] E.g. Worcester and Mortimore, *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*

'boring'.[74] The young also appear to have picked up on media cynicism. Their message to the media was 'Make politics interesting and exciting for us – relate it to our lives but don't trivialise it with stories about politicians' private lives or political in-fighting – we're not interested'.[75] The handful of studies that have examined audience evaluations of strategically framed process news versus issue-based news have found (perhaps unsurprisingly) that citizens have both a greater sense of learning from issue-based news, as well as placing a higher value on its informational content.[76]

Despite some of the contradictions, all of this research supports the idea of an electorate who are critical of the media's current coverage of political affairs. This is set against a backdrop of declining levels of trust in news organisations, particularly newspapers.[77] Importantly, what the evidence does tell us is that we should challenge part of the logic behind why process news is so commonly used in everyday political journalism: the belief that it holds more news value and therefore appeals to audiences. Whilst there is unquestionably some audience demand for process news, including 'political junkies' (like your author) who want to know about both the substance of political issues and the 'politics' of them, the evidence does not support a demand for the amount of process news that we regularly see in UK news, especially in recent elections.

Coming to terms with process news

Whilst defending the importance of process news in a diet of news consumption, alongside its empowering and demystifying potential; and recognising the active role politicians play in the cycle of political gossip, speculation and tactical manoeuvrings; there are two main conditions this defence rests upon. The first is the balance of issue-based versus process news that the average citizen is likely to encounter. The second condition is the framing of process news in cynical or edifying terms. There is reason for concern about both of these.

It is the sheer amount of process news

Zaller rightly argues that many media critics expect an unrealistic standard of journalism, and questions whether most citizens would be willing or capable enough to fully process what he

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[74] White et al, *Young People's Politics.*
[75] Children and Young People's Unit, *Young People and Politics.*
[76] D'Angelo and Lombard, 'The Power of the Press'; Jackson, 'Framing Democratic Politics'; Pinkleton and Austin, 'Exploring Relationships'.
[77] See Hargreaves and Thomas, *New News, Old News,* and Schlesinger, 'Is There a Crisis in British Journalism?'.

calls the 'full news standard'.[78] But whilst accepting the case for 'multidimensional public spheres' to suit the needs of different sections of the public,[79] the weight of evidence from existing content analyses suggests that most citizens are likely to find it increasingly hard to learn about policy issues. During elections, when the focus on process news intensifies, typically between 50-80 percent of stories focus primarily on political process.[80]Whilst there are not the same number of campaign set-piece events or opinion polls to write about in-between elections – and therefore less process news – it is clear that it penetrates into the governing process as well.

But beyond the sheer amount of process news lie deeper concerns for the average citizen. In the context of EU news, Jackson found that process news is disproportionately prominent a) in the news media that is consumed by the most people: namely TV news and tabloid newspapers, and b) at the top of the news agenda, so that readers/ viewers would normally have to get beyond the main news stories before encountering issue-based news.[81] Studies have also found how the ebb and flow of news during non-election policy debates privileges process news over policy issues at key times. In the context of various debates in the US and UK, when the policy decision was being discussed and decided both behind closed doors and in the public sphere, the news more commonly offered strategic angles. Once the decision had been announced, the news placed greater emphasis on the policy issues.[82] It is arguably very reasonable for journalists to focus more on the political game when policy is being debated, and that when decided, attention might then turn to its implementation and possible consequences for ordinary citizens. But this phase structure can crowd-out or delay substantive coverage of those issues. For citizens, it means that at precisely the time when public opinion is most likely to be formulated, mobilised, and listened to by politicians, they are given news that encourages them to think about political strategies, party prospects and media management (often framed with a cynical slant); rather than empowering them to be part of the policy debate by explaining what impact the policy may have on their own life.

So whilst process news *can* give citizens a more rounded picture of political reality, there is evidence that it has cut so deeply into issue-based coverage that many citizens are unlikely to receive a sufficient basis for making informed choices of their own.

The question of cynicism

[78] Zaller, 'A New Standard of News Quality'
[79] Temple, 'Dumbing Down is Good for you'.
[80] See Benoit, Stein and Hansen, 'New York Times' Coverage of Presidential Campaigns'; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 'The Last Lap'; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 'The Debate Effect'; Patterson, *Out of Order*.
[81] Jackson, 'Strategic News Frames and Public Policy Debates'.
[82] *Ibidem*; Lawrence, 'Game Framing the Issues'.

Process news is not inherently cynical, and its focus on political motivations, political PR and presentation can be presented in an educational or empowering way. However, too often it is depicted in adversarial and cynical terms. Studies examining metacoverage (during elections) have found that such stories were mainly narrated with (cynical) strategy frames rather than (edifying) accountability frames.[83] Esser et al. highlight the term 'spin doctor' as an example of this.[84] Journalists could not serve their public task without the information provided by PR officials, and as long as this information is presented in a reliable and ethical way then there is nothing inherently undemocratic about the PR function itself. But many news outlets use the term 'spin doctor' to indiscriminately demonise any kind of professional PR.

> The journalistic use of the term spin doctor occurs in a one-sided and problematic sense whenever it serves to discredit the legitimate interest of politicians, parties, and governments in asserting themselves against the autonomous and powerful journalism that pursues an agenda of its own and whose mechanisms and motives are not always exclusively oriented toward the public welfare (Esser et al., 2001, pp39-40).

Findings from content analyses to date have therefore found that rather than presenting process news in a way that could empower 'a political public sphere in crisis', more often than not it takes the form of an adversarial battleground that does more to encourage public cynicism and distrust.

Retelling journalism. Retelling politics

In this chapter I have documented the rise of process news, explaining its appeal to journalists who find themselves in an increasingly fragmented and commercially exposed industry; and faced with a political class who put media strategy at the heart of their campaigning and governing activities. I have defended process news as a necessary element of political journalism due its empowering potential for citizens, and explored how politicians are complicit in its manifestation. However, as it stands, the sheer amount of process news and its cynical presentation mean that it often represents an obstacle to democratic empowerment and engagement. The challenges facing political journalism are many: the commercial climate, the pressure to produce more copy for multiple news outlets, the decreasing willingness for politicians to go 'off message', the obstacles to 'truth' in the shape of political spin doctors,

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[83] Esser, Reinemann and Fan , 'Spin doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany'; Esser and D'Angelo, 'Framing the Press and the Publicity Process'; Esser and D'Angelo. 'Framing the Press and Publicity Process in German, British, and U.S. General Elections'.
[84] Esser, Reinemann and Fan, 'Spin doctors in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany'.

plus the difficulty of explaining complex issues to an audience with limited knowledge and interest – all potentially stand in the way of redirecting journalism towards political news that feels less need to present politics as a game played by power-hungry schemers.

Why worry about these challenges? The news media plays a central role in the health of a democracy, and have a duty to exercise this power responsibly. The choices made by journalists when covering politics can have significant implications for how audiences perceive politics, politicians, and indeed the news itself. Given the wider concerns about falling trust in the political class, public disengagement from mainstream politics, not to mention falling trust in and readership of newspapers, the media must bear some of the responsibility, and this may mean considering different ways of covering politics.

What practical steps might be made to meet these challenges and improve the quality of news that citizens receive? Or, to take the theme of the book, how can political journalism be retold? Firstly, they are not straightforward to meet, and in some cases require reciprocal movements from politicians. Secondly, the suggestions offered do not claim to offer anything especially original, given the amount of attention the media and politics nexus has received in recent years. Still, they are worth elucidating as they can help raise the pressure for change, as well as elaborate the positive consequences that change may achieve.

Process news is a product of the culture of journalism, and supported by its adherence to news values. Kerbel (1998) has documented how political reporters are unaware that they are covering politics as a game and are unable to imagine how an election could be covered if not as a horse race. It is therefore important to recognise that *covering politics as a game is a choice, and there are other ways to characterise it, even during elections.* As Kerbel et al. explain, the strategy frame may be particularly appealing for TV journalists during an election campaign because it can be partly driven by an adherence to a norm of objectivity, or 'principled detachment'.[85] For TV journalists, objectivity is a thorny matter, and with a wide range of information available, reporters must make decisions about what subjects and perspectives constitute dispassionate coverage. Having mutually accepted standards for what comprises appropriate election news reduces the risk of appearing biased, and therefore covering elections from the strategic perspective serves this end.[86] Journalists will often therefore try to maintain a healthy distance from accusations of bias by highlighting the daily conflicts in Westminster, addressing how parties are doing in the horse race of opinion polls, and discussing the strategies employed to outmanoeuvre opponents. This is safer than engaging in substantive issues like the implications of a proposed policy, because there may not be equal amounts of evidence to support both sides.

A senior BBC political correspondent explains this mindset well:

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[85] Kerbel, Apee and Ross, 'PBS Ain't So Different'.
[86] *Ibidem.*

Here we have our 'Punch and Judy rows'. They are easy to cover because they fall into that 'British-wish-to-have-two-sides'. They are neat because they are told briefly, only need two bits of actuality, and require very little explanation, because people are familiar with the ideas, and you don't need to explain too much.[87]

In this sense, the focus on strategy is probably as well explained by journalistic professional norms as much as an in-built cynical perspective of political affairs. But this is still not without its problems, because if the aim is to increase public understanding of a complex issue, then simply offering conflicting perspectives can be counterproductive, because complex debates are simplified into polarised positions, potentially creating more heat than light.[88] Furthermore, the way these 'Punch and Judy' rows are framed is often not as principled stands, but as cynical manoeuvres in order to appeal to a voter segment or outflank opponents. The easiest decision for broadcasters is to continue to avoid engaging in the issues because of the potential accusations of bias associated with it. But reconnecting with their audience does not mean scrapping impartiality, but allowing more voices in.

The first suggestion is underpinned by a second, broader, one for journalists, which is *to place citizens rather than politicians at the centre of their coverage*. This point has been elaborated by Lewis, whose argument is that the majority of news coverage tends to address audiences as passive spectators rather than empowered citizens.[89] Even if the economics of news production are driving process news, through news values, then he argues these should be challenged. After all, once interrogated, many news values serve neither a commercial or public interest purpose:

Their operational presence is justified by a tautology: it is news simply because it meets our definition of what news is – what Peter Dahlgren (1992) calls "the aura of the self-evident". Or as David Althiede bluntly puts it: "news is whatever news people say it is" (1986, p. 17). Thus defined, it need serve no other purpose.[90]

Indeed, we may need to challenge part of the commercial news value basis on which process news is built. The idea that it is more appealing than issue-based news is only partially supported by the evidence to date, suggesting news organisations may be misunderstanding their audience somewhat. Instead, we might argue for a set of news values in which citizenship is foregrounded. In the case of elections for example, rather than conceiving the

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[87] de Vreese, *Framing Europe.*
[88] See Bond, *Insular by Default?*
[89] Lewis, 'News and the Empowerment of Citizens'.
[90] *Ibidem*, pp. 311.

'public interest' as no more than which candidate we find most likeable, and thus focusing on aspects of their media performance and electoral prospects, it might mean starting with the question of what difference it actually makes to people's lives if one candidate wins rather than another. Then, according to Lewis, a different type of contest might be encouraged in which what is at stake is less about the fortunes of one politician or another, and more about the way that we and others live.[91]

These suggestions do not mean journalists only engaging in worthy, dispassionate policy debates, but making the issues more relevant to people's lives. It also does not mean neglecting process news altogether, as its exposure of media management, personal rivalries, and the inside story of politics can have a public interest function. And it does not aim to create two kinds of news – one for the well informed, and one for the rest – but instead aims to re-conceive news by focusing on what it is useful for people to know.

If some of the suggestions for journalists are to be successful, then they must be at least mirrored by a reassessment of relations with the media adopted by politicians. If this is achieved, then it may go some way to *mending the relationship between journalists and politicians*, which is widely regarded as in need of repair, and one of the root causes of cynically framed process news. Indeed, Brants et al recently characterised this as the 'real spiral of cynicism'.[92] Some progress has been made as a result of the 2004 Phillis Report on UK government communications, such as making more press briefings open and on the record, and introducing new rules governing the conduct of special advisers within the civil service. But the problems run deeper than that.

> Many politicians believe that the national media "are only out to shaft us", that they
> use MPs to add colour to stories irrespective of the effect on the MP and that they will
> twist words to suit the story. Consequently, politicians become more defensive and
> adhere strictly to the party line, refusing to be drawn into debates (…) The result is
> that the audience are left as bystanders, spectators to an often ugly struggle.[93]

This has been described as a 'vicious' circle evolving at the heart of British politics, where the mutual distrust between politicians, their media handlers and the news media have created an environment where it is difficult for politicians of any side to make meaningful contributions to public debates.[94]

If we take the issue of Britain and the EU as an example, the media and politicians have consistently called for a proper debate on the subject in this country, but it is not likely

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[91] *Ibidem.*
[92] Brants et al., 'The Real Spiral of Cynicism?'
[93] Lilleker, Negrine and Stanyer, 'A Vicious Circle'.
[94] *Ibidem.*

to happen in the current climate of relations between the two. The media criticise politicians for not speaking their mind, and for stifling debate about the future of the EU. But when they do speak their mind, there are immediate stories of splits, conflicts and crises. The current stand-off between the two means that politicians talk less and less about Europe and simply follow the party line, while the media and political opponents pounce on any opportunity to claim a split. For slightly different reasons, a similar situation existed at the last general election, where the main political parties refused to seriously engage in the two most important issues for the public (public spending cuts and immigration).[95] In both cases, adopting the approach of staying strictly 'on message' whilst focusing on superficial points scoring may save politicians from engaging in complex and difficult discussions, but it does little to promote wider understanding of the issues facing the country, nor does it appear to inspire the public.

For their part, in order for their complaints about process news to hold weight, *politicians should give more consideration for how their statements may contribute to public understanding of an issue*, rather than their contribution to the political game. Upon becoming leaders of their respective parties, both David Cameron and Ed Milliband promised an end to 'Punch and Judy' style politics, and to pursue a more measured and constructive dialogue. This is a pledge they have failed to keep.[96] If politicians have more confidence that their policy statements will not be interrogated only for their contribution to the political game – such as evidence of splits or an appeal to a voter segment – then they in turn might feel less inclined to stick to the party line and speak in bland soundbites rather than answer straight questions, and rely less on news management techniques, which are some of journalists' main complaints.[97] The result may be the encouragement of a public discourse about politics that is more conducive to open and constructive dialogue, rather than distrust, hostility and cynicism.

Of course, we cannot force people to be interested or active citizens. But we can think about how to facilitate the conditions in which active citizenship may flourish. Reforming some aspects of how politics is conducted and reported may be one step towards this goal.

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[95] Gaber, 'Election 2010: a Policy-free Environment'.
[96] See Kirkup, 'Cameron Fails to End "Punch and Judy" Politics'.
[97] See Rudsbridger , 'Politicians, the Press and Political Language'.

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