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Conditions for Political Accountability in a High-Choice Media Environment

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Abstract and Keywords

Communication technology has increased availability of public affairs information, but many citizens ignore it. How do greater availability and less widespread consumption of news affect political accountability? Not all citizens have to follow the news for media coverage to improve accountability. Under some conditions, higher levels of news exposure and political knowledge in a relatively small subset of the population could strengthen accountability, even when other citizens follow the news less than in the past. For this to work, news junkies must effectively represent the interests of those who are tuning out. If news junkies have different interests than the rest of the population, their efforts to monitor officials and raise concerns may lead to less representative government and lower accountability. As a result of more media choice, the task of holding elected officials accountable rests increasingly on a small segment of the population.

Keywords: accountability, principal-agent model, latent preferences, media environment, political knowledge, news junkies, watchdog(s), news consumption, oversight monitor, monitoring, monitorial

COMMUNICATION technology has changed dramatically in recent decades, and with it the way people consume news. This chapter asks how changes in the media environment affect political accountability in a democratic system. The chapter's purpose is to sketch several conditions for accountability in a high-choice media environment and discuss their empirical plausibility.

The level of political knowledge among ordinary citizens is an important factor in determining how, and how well, elected officials are held accountable. Representatives typically have more information about conditions and policies than the people who choose them, so "the main difficulty both in instructing governments what to do and in judging what they have done is that we, citizens, just do not know enough" (Manin et al., 1999, 23). But even though governments and representatives have an inherent informational advantage, a more-informed electorate may produce greater political accountability than a less-informed one.

For a citizenry to be informed, information about government and elected officials must be available. Two critical sources of such information are news media and election campaigns. Studies suggest that politicians covered more heavily by the news media are more accountable to their constituents (e.g., Cohen et al., 2004; Snyder and Strömberg, 2010). Elections are more likely to vote out of office those who ignore the preferences of the people they represent (e.g., Canes-Wrone et al., 2002). How much information is being produced by media and campaigns—and whether new technologies have systematically altered production—are very difficult to quantify. On one hand, cable channels, Web-based news providers, online databases (Schudson, 2010), and amateur journalists (Bentley, 2008) have added new sources of information about public affairs. On the other (p. 898) hand, these additions may not compensate for the loss of traditional media coverage due to intensified competition and declining advertising revenue. Hard news is under attack from entertainment-heavy soft news, especially on television, and news organizations are closing foreign bureaus. Some areas of journalism, including local public affairs coverage (Starr, 2009), have suffered stark losses in resources and personnel.

Undeniably, however, more public affairs information is available to individual media users than before the rise of digital media. Many traditional media outlets that used to be available only in some parts of the country or the world now have websites, and news aggregators organize this content conveniently. Information collected by governments or interest groups that used to be difficult to access—including public opinion data, roll call votes, and government expenditures—is now a mouse click away for anyone with an Internet connection.

Greater availability of information has not translated into greater use of information across the board, however. Starting in the 1970s, cable television slowly offered television viewers more programming choices. Some viewers—people who prefer entertainment to news programming—began to abandon the nightly newscasts in favor of more entertaining programs. In the low-choice environment before cable TV, they encountered politics at least occasionally, because they liked watching television—even television news—more than most other leisure activities. With access to numerous entertainment-oriented cable channels and Internet websites, entertainment fans learn less about politics than they used to and vote less often. The transition from the low-option environment to the high-choice world of cable and Internet had the opposite effect on people who prefer news to entertainment. These news junkies take advantage of more information to become more knowledgeable and more likely to vote than in the past. Hence, the growth of new media has increased inequality in the distribution of political knowledge and concentrates knowledge among those who like the news (Prior, 2005, 2007).

New Media and Political Accountability

The combination of greater availability of information and mounting inequality of its use might seem like a quintessential case of good news/bad news. If political accountability is roughly proportional to total consumption of political information by all members of an electorate, then an accounting of changing news audiences can determine if the bad news outweighs the good news. I illustrate such an accounting below.

But it is critical to realize that not all citizens have to follow the news in order for detailed media coverage to strengthen accountability, because an evenly well-informed electorate is not a necessary condition for political

accountability. Accountability requires only that wrongdoing, incompetence, and shirking by representatives will be (p. 899) revealed and sanctioned at least some of the time (e.g., Ferejohn, 1986; Key, 1961). It does not require that every such instance is known to all citizens. Instead, elected officials, aware that their behavior is being monitored or may be subject to an “audit” (Arnold, 1990), anticipate sanctions for abusing their power, acting incompetently, or ignoring constituents’ preferences. When evidence for any of these behaviors is revealed, the representative risks losing her job. Ferejohn (1999) shows that competition between agents (candidates for office) can lead to more effective monitoring because principals (voters) tend to prefer agents who commit to making their actions transparent. And as long as the representative believes that she may be monitored, she will not take (full) advantage of the information asymmetries in her favor.

A representative seeking reelection thus has an incentive to act according to her constituents’ preferences, even if constituents do not have full information about her actions. When selecting an action, reelection-seeking representatives must gauge “latent opinion” (Key, 1961), that is, the state of public opinion that might develop if their actions or the consequences of their actions are revealed by election time. Actions and consequences may remain private, so latent opinion may never become actual opinion, in which case representatives will not be judged against latent opinion at all. Yet, the mere possibility that actual opinion might catch up with representatives’ behavior can be a powerful incentive for them to keep their constituents’ best interests in mind—even when constituents have uninformed, vague, or no opinions on the subject (Arnold, 1990; Canes-Wrone et al., 2001; Zaller, 2003a).

For this incentive structure to work, it is not necessary that all or even a majority of citizens monitor representatives’ behavior. Writing about accountability of congressional representatives, Arnold (2004, 13) emphasizes that

[n]ot every citizen needs to be a front-line sentry to keep representatives on their toes. As long as a cadre of individuals and organizations monitor what representatives are doing in office and stand ready to inform other citizens when they see something out of line, representatives know that they are being watched. Much more important is that information regularly flows to those who act as watchdogs, that these watchdogs reflect the diversity of interests in a constituency, and that they have easy ways to communicate with other citizens when they discover representatives doing disagreeable things.

This mechanism does not require that all citizens are well informed and does not provide a hard lower bound for the number of well informed. If the presence of well-informed “watchdogs” is a crucial requirement for accountability, then higher levels of news exposure and political knowledge in a relatively small subset of the population might improve overall accountability of a democratic system, even when the population as a whole does not consume more news and some citizens consume noticeably less than they used to. If the level of information among the politically most involved citizens is a critical condition for political accountability, then new media may in fact strengthen accountability because news junkies are more informed than in the past. And increasing (p. 900) the share of ill-informed citizens will not necessarily reduce the effectiveness of the accountability mechanism. To be sure, Arnold’s prescription for accountability involves more than well-informed watchdogs. For a relatively small number of news junkies to serve as watchdogs and strengthen accountability, they must hold similar political attitudes as other citizens and be able to alert them.

With a basic understanding of the principal (citizen)–agent (representative) relationship in place, the conditions under which recent changes in the media environment strengthen or weaken accountability become more nuanced. The

remainder of this chapter offers some crude empirical assessments of these conditions.

Total News Consumption and Political Accountability

One way to assess changes in accountability is to consider if a given news story or piece of information is as likely to be seen, read, or heard as it was in the past. The question here is *not* if as many people as in the past follow the news. Rather, the critical condition is that information about abuse of power or incompetence by elected officials finds its way to some members of the public, who can then help spread it to inattentive publics through interpersonal channels or by organizing amplifying protest activities. The extent to which Americans collectively attend to information produced by the news media becomes a rough gauge of accountability. This would make overall consumption of news and political information the relevant indicator to trace.

Conceptually, Total News Consumption is simple to define. It is the total amount of news consumed in a given interval by a group of people, in this case the American public. Practically, measuring Total News Consumption poses considerable challenges, made more daunting by the diversification of news options. Signs of audience fragmentation are taken prematurely as indication of declining news consumption. Traditional indicators of news media use—network news ratings and daily newspaper circulation—have indeed declined. But news options that were not available in the past or have expanded in scope have gained audiences. Cable television, all-news radio, news Websites, and the online editions of newspapers all add to the overall news audience. Individually, these new audiences may seem rather small, but together they make up a large share of news media use.

Unfortunately, measuring Total News Consumption across all these platforms by simply asking a representative group of survey respondents is bound to yield misleading results because people are not adept at estimating the amount of time they spend doing things, including watching, reading, or listening to news (Price and Zaller, 1993; Prior, 2009, 2013a, 2013b). As a result, audience research firms monitor television viewing to provide consumption estimates that do not depend on self-assessment. A similar measurement approach has become common for online news consumption, but it is not obvious how either can be compared to consumption of offline print media, which is most validly assessed by the number of copies in circulation.

In *Post-Broadcast Democracy* (Prior, 2007), I offered a very rough accounting of trends in Total News Consumption. Even though many people consume less news than (p. 901) they used to, the total amount of news consumed has probably not declined. New media generate so much more news media use that the American public likely consumes more news than in the past.

Today, by far the greatest contributor to overall television news exposure is cable news. Even though each half-hour nightly broadcast network news program still draws about twice the audience as the highest-rated cable news shows, the accumulation of small cable news audiences over a 24-hour day exceeds the combined network news audience. In 1980, the nightly network news enjoyed its highest-ever combined yearly average with a rating of 38. That is, 38 percent of all US households watched one of the three evening network newscasts—30 minutes of news (including commercial breaks). For the average household, this amounted to 11.4 minutes (30 minutes \times .38) of news per weekday. By 2004, the combined rating had dropped to 18.5. In that year, the three major cable networks (CNN, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC) had a combined average rating of 1.4. But since this is a rating over a 24-hour period, it adds up to more news consumption than network news at its peak. A 1.4 rating for the three cable networks means that

1.4 percent of all US households watched one of the three cable networks *during the average minute of the day*. For the average household, this amounts to 20.2 minutes (60 minutes \times 24 hours \times .014) of news per day.

Other significant contributions to news consumption on broadcast networks come from prime-time news magazines, Sunday morning talk shows, and morning news. In the early 1980s, the most popular news magazine, *60 Minutes*, contributed about the same amount to Total News Consumption in its one weekly hour as CNN, then the only cable news network, did with its 24/7 schedule. Although other broadcast programs tried to copy the success of *60 Minutes*, their ratings were lower at the outset, and all news magazines have suffered large audience losses since. The networks' Sunday morning interview shows draw small audiences and add relatively little to overall news consumption. Yet the extension of *Meet the Press* to one hour in 1992 and the addition of *Fox News Sunday* in 1996 increased average news consumption of the Sunday morning shows temporarily. Audiences for weekday morning news on ABC, CBS, and NBC have been fairly stable over the last two decades. Local newscasts tend to draw somewhat larger audiences than national broadcast news. Over recent decades, their ratings have declined at similar rates as nightly network news (see Prior, 2007, ch. 3; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011b).

Adding up the time the American public spends watching cable and broadcast news reveals remarkably stable television news consumption between the early 1980s, when CNN appeared on the scene, and the end of the 1990s, when broadcast news had lost a considerable share of its audience and cable access had reached two-thirds of all American households. Driven by increased cable news viewing, Total Television News Consumption increased by about 50 percent in 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11. Sustained, at least in part, by the war in Iraq and perhaps by the addition of the successful Fox News Channel, it stayed at this level and reached an even higher mark during the 2008 presidential campaign.

Between 2005 and 2010, nightly network news programs lost another 19 percent of their audience, while cable news grew by about 15 percent, even though ratings dropped (p. 902) considerably after the first months of the Obama administration (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011b). Since cable news provided three to four times the news consumption as network news midway through the decade, this implies that Total Television News Consumption continues to exceed the levels of the 1980s and 90s.

Nor is there clear evidence that the overall amount of newspaper reading has declined. Although it is difficult to compare circulation data with metrics for use of newspaper websites, declining print circulation may well be offset by increased online reading. Between 1995 and 2010, daily newspaper circulation dropped by about 15 million, declining from 58.2 million to 43.4 million, according to *Editor & Publisher*. In a given month, US newspaper websites currently draw about 100 million unique visitors (from within the United States), according to comScore data published by the Newspaper Association of America. Although this number has doubled since 2005, it inflates the online newspaper audiences. By tracking cookies comScore counts the same users multiple times if they use different browsers or delete cookies (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011b).

The great majority of "unique visitors" spend very little time on newspaper websites each month. The average monthly time spent per visitor is just over 30 minutes (down about 10 percent from 2005.) An analysis of online news consumption by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2011a) found that about two-thirds of visitors to the top twenty-five news websites do not return to the site in the same month and fewer than 10 percent spend more than an hour per month on the site. But these estimates are website-specific and do not reveal how many people follow news

on any combination of websites for more than an hour per month (or week). Clearly, only a small fraction of the 100 million unique monthly visitors estimated by comScore actually read articles on a more or less daily basis. Yet, even though it is difficult to determine the share of serious online readers, 30 minutes of news consumption per month by 100 million visitors—plus traffic to other news sites—probably go a long way toward compensating for the decline in print circulation.

Radio news consumption, too, appears to be relatively stable, with National Public Radio increasing its audience over the last decade and political talk radio fairly stable (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011b).

If political accountability is indeed proportional to overall consumption of political information, there is little reason to conclude that it has been weakened by new technologies and greater media choice.

News Junkies as Monitors

The argument that political accountability is proportional to overall news consumption ignores some of the insights generated by principal-agent models. The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms depends in part on who monitors representatives. An arrangement where all or most citizens do the monitoring is not necessarily more effective than monitoring by a smaller set of people and organizations, especially when (p. 903) these people and organizations are attentive and knowledgeable. Instead of using overall news consumption as an indicator of accountability, it may be more relevant to focus on how a changing media environment affects the distribution of news consumption and thereby modifies the monitoring capacity of the attentive public.

Writing about the capacity of Congress to hold the executive branch accountable, McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) famously contrasted two approaches to oversight. Members of Congress could collect and review detailed information on all aspects of executive behavior. Or they could devise mechanisms that flag problematic behavior. McCubbins and Schwartz referred to the former as “police patrols” and the latter as “fire alarms.” Fire alarms are more efficient than police patrols. When the system produces so much information that police-patrol oversight cannot process all of it, they are also more effective because police-patrol oversight will miss evidence of shirking or incompetence in the ocean of irrelevant or benign information.

Fire-alarm oversight draws its effectiveness from the threat that shirking may be caught by monitors. This threat is only credible if there is in fact a good chance that someone will notice shirking and sound an alarm. In McCubbins and Schwartz’s (1984) fire-alarm model, various watchdogs, including interest groups and ordinary citizens, monitor executive branch behavior and alert Congress or the courts when legislative goals are violated.

Both Zaller (2003b) and Arnold (2004) subsequently drew on fire-alarm oversight to specify what role news media should play in fostering political accountability. Arnold (2004, 13–16) describes different types of watchdogs using different information to monitor the actions of elected officials. “Professional watchdogs,” such as opposition politicians and interest groups, have the resources to engage in their own police-patrol oversight. “Amateur watchdogs” are interested ordinary citizens—roughly what I call news junkies—who do not have such resources and must therefore rely on news coverage for their monitoring. News media are needed to perform police-patrol oversight as well because none of the other watchdogs are prone to unearth the information that journalists produce.

According to Zaller, most media should be evaluated based on how well they alert citizens to danger, not based on how well they inform them on mundane political matters. Noting that many citizens lack interest in providing police-patrol oversight, Zaller's (2003b) "burglar alarm" news standard charges news media with more of the monitoring. Zaller believes that "it is the job of reporters ... to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public." Citizens "should be alerted to problems requiring attention and otherwise left to private concerns" (121).

Even though Zaller (2003b) draws heavily on Schudson's (1998) idea of ordinary people as "monitorial citizens," he does not entrust citizens with the same responsibility to hold officials accountable as Schudson does. In Schudson's view, the ideal of an informed citizen who carefully studies policy issues and candidate platforms before casting a vote was always an ideal against which most citizens looked ill informed and ineffective. Although Schudson does not deny the benefits of an informed citizenry, it is neither realistic nor necessary, in his view, to expect citizens to be well informed about every (p. 904) aspect of their increasingly complex role in society. Rather than being widely knowledgeable about politics, citizens merely need to "be informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good" (Schudson, 2000, 22). In order to fulfill this "monitoring obligation," citizens "engage in environmental surveillance rather than information-gathering"—they "scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends" (1998, 310–311). Media provide much of the input for monitoring, but citizens do more than respond to journalists' alarms.

An average citizen may well be closer to Zaller's pessimistic diagnosis than to Schudson's ideal. But from an agency perspective on accountability, that is not the relevant question. The more attentive and knowledgeable citizens, not the average Joe, contribute to accountability. Today's news junkies certainly look like excellent monitors. The current high-choice media environment provides them with unprecedented resources to perform as monitorial citizens, so the expansion of media choice may make it easier to spot the dangers. They consume a lot of information—and a lot more than before the days of cable and online news (Prior, 2007). They also take advantage of new media technologies to share and debate the results of their monitoring (e.g., Adamic and Glance, 2005; Lawrence et al., 2010). Most importantly, news junkies do not mind the monitoring obligation. They enjoy following the news. Hence, new media may strengthen accountability because some citizens, news junkies, and "amateur watchdogs," become more knowledgeable and can more effectively monitor elected officials.

Representative News Junkies or Biased Fire Alarms?

For "monitorial news junkies" to maintain or even improve accountability in a high-choice media environment, their increased monitoring capacity must compensate for those who lack the interest to monitor their representatives. Entertainment fans, who actively try to avoid exposure to news, can hardly be effective monitors. Their news exposure and political knowledge dropped as they obtained access to cable television and the Internet. For new media to strengthen accountability, it is not sufficient that one segment of the population, news junkies, becomes more knowledgeable as a result of new and easily accessible sources of information. The news junkies also need to be representative of the population as a whole. If monitoring by a subset of citizens were to foster overall accountability in a political system, it must be clear that citizens who monitor and citizens who do not monitor *would* sound the alarm under the same circumstances (or amplify an alarm sounded by the media or interest groups).

This added requirement may be of little importance for the punishing abuse of power and major incompetence. The representativeness condition is met to the extent that there is wide agreement regarding the standards to which elected officials ought to be held and the criteria by which these standards can be assessed. Impeachable offenses, ethics violations, and perhaps even dramatically incompetent or ineffective (p. 905) performance in office could be detected and sanctioned by monitorial news junkies as stand-ins for those who would rather enjoy entertainment fare.

But the definition of political accountability offered by Manin et al. (1999, 10) goes far beyond alarms that everybody can agree on. Instead, “governments are ‘accountable’ if citizens can discern representative from unrepresentative governments and can sanction them appropriately.” Government is “representative” if it acts in the collective interest of the citizens or, when interests collide, “pursues the best interest of a majority” (7). Unless one wants to rely on altruism and magnanimity of news junkies, this leads to Arnold’s requirement that “these watchdogs reflect the diversity of interests in a constituency.” The demographic background and political attitudes of the monitors are critical, if political accountability includes electoral sanctions for failing to serve one’s constituents on inherently contestable issues.

It may still not be necessary for all citizens to engage in monitoring, because some citizens can in fact fill in as monitors for others. But those who sound or amplify alarms must effectively represent the interests of those who are tuning out. Political accountability could be strengthened if more effective monitoring by news junkies can help detect unrepresentative government and trigger sanctions. But if news junkies have different interests than the rest of the population, their monitoring may actually lead to less representative government and thus lower accountability by Manin et al.’s definition. It becomes a matter of empirical analysis to determine if monitorial news junkies sound, or react to, the same alarms as non-monitoring entertainment fans.

One way this could happen is if monitoring news junkies resembled the population except for their greater preference for news consumption and interest in politics. I measured people’s preference for news over entertainment—their Relative Entertainment Preference (REP)—in two different ways. The first REP measure asked respondents to rank how much they liked news compared to other programming genres. Out of ten genres, news ranked first for 5 percent of the respondents and was among the three most-liked genres for 30 percent. In the second survey item measuring REP, respondents were asked which of four cable premium channels they would order, assuming that they would not have to pay a monthly charge. The four alternatives were a music channel, a news channel, a “movie and entertainment channel,” and a sports channel. Instead of making respondents pick one channel, the question allowed them to assign a “percent chance” to each of the four channels (following a design developed by Charles Manski). Respondents could thus express their preference structure more precisely. The movie channel was most popular with an average percent chance of 50, and the news channel was next with an average percent chance of 23. (For more details on these measures, see Prior, 2007, ch. 4.) Separately or as a combined two-item measure, REP is a powerful determinant of news exposure, political knowledge, and turnout among people with access to cable television or the Internet. Among people without new media access, REP is unrelated to those indicators of political involvement.

Who are the news junkies that take advantage of new media to become more knowledgeable about politics? Demographically, it turns out, they are very similar to the rest of the population. On a variety of variables, including race, marital status, education, (p. 906) income, employment status, and media access, few differences emerge. Although college-educated people, men, the wealthy, and the unemployed are significantly fonder of news, these

differences are substantively small (less than a fifth of one standard deviation of REP). The only sizable predictor of REP is age. Young people enjoy entertainment more than news and political information, while people over 64 prefer news quite strongly. Without age in the model, demographic variables explain only 7 percent of the variance in REP. Even with age included as a set of four categories, the R^2 is only .13.

Descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967) does not appear to suffer much as entertainment fans tune out, leaving news junkies in charge of monitoring elected officials and sounding alarms. As far as demographics are concerned, news junkies look like potential stand-ins for the political dropouts of the high-choice media environment. Importantly, a preference for entertainment is not a proxy for education or socioeconomic status. The chances that a wealthy, well-educated American and a poor American without a high-school diploma prefer entertainment to news are essentially the same. As a result, the chances are essentially the same that either one of them will abandon the news in the high-choice media environment.

Yet, demographic similarity between news and entertainment fans is not a sufficient condition for effective representation. It does not imply shared political values or issue preferences. Demographic similarity cannot assure us that news junkies are ready to sanction elected officials who hurt the interests of inattentive entertainment fans. But the similarities between these groups go beyond demographics. Collectively, news junkies do not have a fundamentally different view of politics than entertainment fans. Party identification and ideology are not related to REP. News junkies are not systematically more liberal, more conservative, more Republican, or more Democratic than entertainment fans.

In one respect, however, news fans differ substantially from entertainment fans: They are far more partisan. At one extreme, almost 40 percent of the people who decidedly prefer news (bottom eighth of REP) identify strongly with a party, and an additional 26 percent identify weakly. Respondents at the other extreme—those who most clearly prefer entertainment—are the least partisan of all. Only 25 percent of them identify strongly with a party. Forty percent are either independent or completely apolitical, not reporting any party preference. As we move from low to high REP, the share of strong partisans drops by about a third, while the share of apoliticals and independents doubles (Prior, 2007, ch. 7).

Since news junkies are about evenly split into Democrats and Republicans, they might still effectively alert others when government threatens to pass laws that do not represent the interests of a majority. Even though they do not include many monitors with centrist views, they will sound the alarm about non-centrist policy proposals—the ones that are inconsistent with their own partisan leanings.

But news junkies may also raise their voices and drum up opposition to centrist policies or candidates. In fact, liberal and conservative news junkies might both sound alarms about centrist proposals. The disproportionate and growing political involvement of relatively partisan Americans may further encourage candidates to take more (p. 907) extreme political positions, especially in primaries (Aldrich, 1995; Fiorina, 1999). So the only manifest difference between news junkies and the rest of the population—the intensity of partisan feelings—reduces the likelihood that monitors would advocate, or at least not punish, the moderate policy positions that entertainment fans seem to favor.

Conclusion

As a result of more media choice, the task of holding elected officials accountable rests increasingly on a relatively narrow segment of the population—the news junkies. Many others have simply withdrawn into the inattentive public that is roused only if enough news junkies make noise. But the changing media environment has equipped news junkies with newly abundant political information that may well make them more effective “monitorial citizens.” News junkies consume so much news that Total News Consumption has probably remained fairly constant, even though many entertainment fans abandoned the news audience once cable television and the entertainment offered them more attractive programming at all times of the day.

These developments give power to news junkies—and raise the question of how likely these news monitors are to use their power responsibly. As news junkies resemble the rest of the population in many demographic and even political characteristics, they may often just have to follow their own interests and preferences to effectively represent entertainment fans. In cases of politically unambiguous abuse of power or dramatic incompetence, news junkies will probably be good proxies for others and alert the wider public. But since they are on the whole considerably more partisan, news junkies will not always guard or facilitate the centrist policies that the rest of the population would prefer. In those instances, news junkies could strengthen political accountability only if they consider the collective interest of the citizenry, rather than their own self-interest, while performing their monitoring tasks.

If rising inequality in political involvement does reduce responsiveness of elected officials to the interests of citizens who prefer entertainment to news, these entertainment fans will have mostly themselves to blame. Unlike most other forms of inequality, this one is a second-order consequence of *voluntary* consumption decisions, not differences in abilities or resources. Entertainment fans abandon politics not because it has become harder for them to be involved—many people would argue the contrary—but because they decide to devote their time to media that promise greater gratification than the news. Whether the harm from lack of representation outweighs the added consumption value of more entertainment is a difficult question to answer for researchers and entertainment fans alike.

In this chapter, I have argued that a clearer understanding of accountability mechanisms can bring political communication research one step closer to an answer. This chapter raises many questions that require further theoretical development and focused empirical examination. Two areas of research seem particularly critical. The (p. 908) first concerns journalism. To judge the effectiveness of monitoring by news junkies, it is important to understand what news junkies can learn. How much relevant public affairs information do news media, governments, and interest groups produce? Arnold's (2004) detailed study of newspaper coverage of Congress is an excellent model, but the current media environment requires content analysis across platforms and types of information providers. The ongoing data collection by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (<http://www.journalism.org>) provides content data for an unprecedented number of different media outlets. But it is not deliberately designed to evaluate accountability journalism. Better data would allow us to adjudicate between Zaller (2003b), Bennett (2003), and Arnold (2004), who offer widely different assessments of the capacity of news organizations to sound appropriate alarms.

With more detailed content data, it would become easier to assess viable business models for accountability journalism. Millions of former newspaper readers who used to pay for their paper and serve as targets for mass

advertisements have either abandoned news or turned into online users who access news free of charge and do not respond to ads as frequently as advertisers have hoped. It is too early for obituaries of market-provided accountability journalism. But in some areas, market mechanisms have failed in the past (Hamilton, 2004) and will only become less effective as bundling declines. Ironically, the corollary of more efficient fire-alarm oversight by a small group of news junkies is a reduced customer base for commercial news providers. And we should think twice before charging avid news consumers more steeply—they are, after all, doing the important monitoring for everyone else.

A second critical research area involves the diffusion of alarms. How and how effectively do various watchdogs, including news junkies, spread fire alarms to inattentive citizens? If elected officials do not expect that the problems uncovered by fire-alarm oversight will ultimately trickle down to large segments of the voting public, they will be able to ignore the alarms. The growing sophistication of online communication and the popularity of social media offer some prospect that news junkies may manage to alert the rest of the citizenry. But the abundance of distractions and obfuscations creates a formidable wall of noise that news junkies' voices must penetrate. Assessments of their success will likely benefit from a growing academic interest in network analysis and closer attention to existing theories of democratic accountability but will also need to understand “new” and “old” kinds of news production.

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