

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

The fourth estate: can the media change our feelings about democracy?

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The media plays a major role in influencing public opinion. This can lead to greater polarisation, but can media coverage also have a unifying effect? New research by **Omar Hammoud-Gallego** explores the relationship between what is printed in the press and how we feel about democracy.

A vibrant media sector and a healthy democracy have always been strongly linked. Indeed, it is often said that one cannot exist without the other. However, how much can what is reported in the press change our feelings towards democracy?

In a new study, “Breaking the News: how the pandemic short-circuited media-polarisation”, Dr Omar Hammoud-Gallego, School of Public Policy at LSE, with Dr Roberto Foa and Dr Xavier Romero of Cambridge University, explores how what is reported in the media can exacerbate or ease divisions in society. An important question at a time when we are seeing an increasingly fragmented society and a rise in culture wars.

To conduct the study, Dr Hammoud-Gallego and colleagues analysed the relationship between satisfaction with democracy and news exposure in the UK over a two-year period during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers used data from the YouGov tracker of satisfaction with democracy, where a cross-sectional representative sample of respondents is surveyed about three times every week about their feelings towards democracy and their newspaper consumption.

The researchers then scraped 1.5 million newspaper tweets from the internet and identified the topic and sentiment of each tweet from specific news outlets in the days before each respondent’s interview.

They found a decline in polarising media coverage in the UK during the pandemic as news content shifted from partisan political issues to more neutral areas such as lifestyle, sports or entertainment. This was particularly the case among newspapers ordinarily critical of the governing party. The researchers found an association between this shift in coverage and increased levels of satisfaction with democracy.



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“Rally-round-the-flag” effect

Although there are many studies documenting this improvement in trust and political satisfaction during the pandemic, there has been a lack of research examining why this happened, with some suggesting a “rally-round-the-flag” effect, where public opinion tends to become more favourable towards political leaders in times of crisis. However, as Dr Hammoud-Gallego notes, this theory does not explain how this effect is produced. This new study suggests it was the move away from more partisan news coverage during the pandemic that contributed to a restoration of trust in democratic institutions.

Dr Hammoud-Gallego explains: “We found that when newspapers report more negative news, specifically political news, then people tend to be less satisfied with democracy. It’s not causal. It doesn’t mean you read an article then you are instantly less satisfied with democracy, but there is a strong correlation, and it probably works.

“The main take away message is that the media can polarise individuals. However, our main contribution is to show that it can also depolarise people if it focuses less on negative rhetoric and political news and more on other types of news that can unite society.”

Although, as the pandemic continued, news coverage became more partisan once again, particularly in relation to how national lockdowns were being handled and on issues such as the supply of PPE, Dr Hammoud-Gallego believes the initial unbiased coverage was partially down to the large role played in the media by non-partisan health officials. This is in strong contrast with coverage at the start of the pandemic in other countries, such as the US, where health officials were very politicised.

“The political atmosphere was depolarised during the time of the pandemic in the UK, and I think a large part of that was due to the central role played in the messaging by officials such as Chief Medical Officer for England, Sir Chris Whitty,” he explains.



Regulating the media is always a very tricky issue, because ... in many countries [regulation] is often used as an excuse to conduct what is effectively a form for censorship. ”

With power comes responsibility

Given that the media has this power to polarise and unite people and the huge impact this can have, does Dr Hammoud-Gallego believe there should be more responsibility on the press and what they publish? Should they focus on less political content?

“That’s a tough question,” he muses, “in the sense that regulating the media is always a very tricky issue, because, of course, in many countries regulating the media is often used as an excuse to conduct what is effectively a form for censorship.”

“In this country, we have Ofcom which ensures some sort of balance. I think the best remedy is to make sure a wide variety of opinion exists in the media. The more diversity we have, the better. I wouldn’t argue for more regulation, but rather awareness from the media to be as professional as possible and not become the pawn of political interests.”

In the paper, the authors go on to note that “while news consumption may play an important role in raising access to political information and overall citizen engagement with politics, in a partisan media landscape, continuous exposure could possibly undermine perceptions of democratic legitimacy.”

In a world where we are seeing increased division and polarisation of public opinion, it is important to better understand what contributes to this fragmentation and how we can also foster more unity and bring people together. ■

Dr Omar Hammoud-Gallego was speaking to Charlotte Kelloway, Media Relations Manager at LSE.

Breaking the News: how the pandemic short-circuited media-polarisation is by Dr Omar Hammoud-Gallego, Roberto Foa and Xavier Romero.

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