Media scepticism, media diets and media landscapes: A consideration of US versus Australian political information environments

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Throughout her librarianship studies and work as an academic librarian (QUT), Kim developed an interest in the social justice aspects of information access. Her previous research explored the potential of contemporary library practices to result in inadvertent censorship of collections. The paper presented here includes findings from Kim's current PhD research, titled Media Scepticism, Audience Gratifications and Information Seeking About Politics: An Australian Perspective, which is due for completion in July 2010. Kim currently teaches in the Masters of Information Management and the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, Brisbane. A current list of Kim's publications may be found at http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Moody_Kim.html

Abstract

The range of political information sources available to modern Australians is greater and more varied today than at any point in the nation’s history, incorporating print, broadcast, Internet, mainstream and non-mainstream media. In such a competitive media environment, the factors which influence the selection of some information sources above others are of interest to political agents, media institutions and communications researchers alike.

A key factor in information source selection is credibility. At the same time that the range of political information sources is increasing rapidly, due to the development of new information and communication technologies, audience research suggests that trust in mainstream media organisations in many countries is declining. So if people distrust the mainstream media, but have a vast array of alternative political information sources available to them, what do their personal media consumption patterns look like? How can we analyse such media consumption patterns in a meaningful way?

In this paper I will briefly map the development of media credibility research in the US and Australia, leading to a discussion of one of the most recent media credibility constructs to be shown to influence political information consumption, media scepticism. Looking at the consequences of media scepticism, I will then consider the associated media consumption construct, media diet, and evaluate its usefulness in an Australian, as opposed to US, context. Finally, I will suggest alternative conceptualisations of media diets which may be more suited to Australian political communications research.
Introduction

An informed citizenry is believed to be essential to the effective functioning of democracy (Lippmann 1913, as cited in Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Kuklinski, 1990), making the issue of where citizens obtain their political information a core factor in the health of a democratic state (Jones, 2004; Vincent & Basil, 1997). In most modern liberal democracies, the task of informing the population about political issues and events has been traditionally conducted by the media (Chadwick, 1998; Jones, 2005; B. Pinkleton & Austin, 2002; Ward, 2006). However, the range of political information sources available to modern Australians is greater and more varied today than at any point in the nation’s history, incorporating both traditional media sources and new information technologies, which open up political communications to a wider array of contributors than simply the traditional political agents and professional journalists. In such a varied political information environment, the factors which influence the selection of some information sources above others are of interest to all parties involved in political communication.

A key factor in political information source selection is credibility. At the same time that the range of media outlets is increasing rapidly, due to the development of new information and communication technologies, audience research suggests that trust in mainstream media organisations in many countries is declining (English, 2007; European Commission, 2008; Gronke & Cook, 2007; Roy Morgan International, 2006). So if people distrust the mainstream media, but have a vast array of alternative political information sources available to them, what do their personal media consumption patterns look like? How can we analyse such media consumption patterns in a meaningful way?

In this paper I will briefly map the development of media credibility research in the US and Australia over the past fifty to eighty years, leading to a discussion of one of the most recent media credibility constructs to be shown to influence political information source selection, media scepticism. Looking at the consequences of media scepticism, I will then consider the associated media consumption construct, media diet, and evaluate its usefulness in an Australian, as opposed to US, context. Finally, I will suggest alternative conceptualisations of media diets which may be more suited to Australian political communications research.

The conceptions of media diet outlined in this paper draw strongly on the political economy theories commonly exhibited in the European media and communication studies traditions (Sinclair, 2002). This is complimented by the behavioural, psychological and quantitative research methods which are also examined and which are more commonly applied in the US
mass communications field (Sinclair, 2002). In developing a hybrid of these two approaches, this paper, follows in the tradition of Australian media and communication studies discussed by Sinclair (2002, p.34) “fuses (‘European’) critical theory with (‘US’) attention to empirical detail, [and] is premised on an understanding of industry structure and functioning and, perhaps also maintains an eye on policy implications” and the larger doctoral research project from which it is drawn.

**US media credibility research**

Trustworthiness is known to be an important factor when selecting an information source (Chen & Hernon, 1982), and the issue of public trust in the media has long been researched in the American media communications tradition. Prior to the 1960s, credibility was viewed by researchers as a static characteristic of media sources (Tsfati, 2002). From the 1960s onwards, however, credibility began to be seen as a characteristic applied by the audience to the media source, rather than a characteristic of the media source itself. As such, concepts including perceived credibility (for example, B. Pinkleton & Austin, 1998), trust in the media (for example, Bennett, 1999; Jones, 2004; Ladd, 2006) and media cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; B. Pinkleton & Austin, 1998) began to be explored, with a consistent focus on the *causes* of media distrust (Tsfati, 2002). More recently there has been a move away from assessing the *causes* of distrust, and towards a consideration of the *consequences* of media distrust, which is of particular significance in the realm of political communication. With this development has emerged the new construct, *media scepticism*, which is defined as “a subjective feeling of alienation and mistrust toward the mainstream news media” (Tsfati, 2002, p35).

The media scepticism construct differs from prior concepts of media credibility by incorporating affective dimensions. It relates to the subjective opinion the audience member holds with regard to the mainstream media as a whole, rather than to any particular media source (Tsfati, 2003b; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). It taps into feelings that journalists are not fair or objective, news reports are often incomplete and media corporations are more interested in profits than accuracy. The media scepticism construct is based on the assumption that “people have some mental schema for what ‘the media’ are”, and that people will have attitudes towards ‘the media’ in general (Tsfati, 2002, p38).

Public opinion polling as we would recognise it today began in the US in the 1930s (Ladd, 2006). While it is difficult to directly compare the wide range of methods used to measure public attitudes throughout the subsequent eight decades, it does appear that overall, trust in
the media has declined. For example, a 1939 poll revealed that only 21% of respondents believed that the press had ‘abused its freedom in any way’ (Ladd, 2006, p19). By 1973 however, confidence in the press was down to an average score of less than 0.6 on a scale of 0 to 1 (where 1 is ‘a great deal of confidence’), and by 2002 this had almost halved to roughly 0.3 on the same scale (Ladd, 2006, pp34-36).

**Australian media credibility research**

A flurry of Australian research from the 1950s to the 1970s concerned itself with audience evaluations of different media formats and institutions. For example, Mayer reports on attitudes from the 1940s and 1950s towards newspapers, including such dimensions as reliability and bias (1964). Aitkin uses 1967 and 1969 data to explore audience perceptions of political bias in newspapers, radio and television (1972); while Western & Hughes (1983), reporting on data from 1966 and 1979, provide a thorough analysis of audience media use, including audience perceptions of radio, television and newspapers with regard to political bias, political coverage and quality of reporting.

In more recent years, while surveys conducted by professional opinion polling firms have sought public opinions of the media, scholars have instead focussed on professional critiques of media content and conduct. Public intellectuals have found much to criticise in the Australian media landscape, particularly pertaining to representations of political news, including issues of deliberate censorship by interventionist media moguls (Manne, 2005; Tiffen, 2006; Ward, 2006); political bias; inaccurate, incomplete or misleading information; misleading framing of news items; and homogenous cultural and political representations which do not reflect the diverse, multicultural and pluralist nature of modern Australian society (see for example Beecher, 2005; C. Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Manne, 2005; Rundle, 2005; Ward, 2006). Concerns have also been raised regarding the deliberate censorship of the mainstream media by the former Howard Federal Government (Ester, 2007; C. Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Ward, 2006), as well as the more subtle effect of corporate agendas on media content diversity (Beecher, 2007; Chadwick, 1998; Lewis, 2001). Such discussions about media bias, when conducted in the public arena, have been found to decrease public trust in the media (Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999).

Certainly in Australia such trust is thin on the ground and is apparently decreasing over time, with a 2006 Morgan Poll revealing 74% (up 3% in 12 months) of Australians believe the media are more concerned with profits than with informing society, 71% (up 4%) believing the media is not sufficiently objective and 59% not trusting journalists to tell the truth (Roy
Morgan International, 2006). Such polls appear to be tapping into the same ‘mental schema’ for ‘the media’ as Tsfati’s media scepticism construct. That is, respondents appear to be providing answers not about any particular media outlet, but rather about ‘the media’ as an entity.

To demonstrate, the same Morgan poll found that 49% of respondents (down 1% in 12 months) agreed with the statement “I trust more small media organisations or bloggers than big media organisations” (Roy Morgan International, 2006). It is clear from this that people have an opinion on ‘the media’ as an entity, but may have differing opinions on particular media when specifically asked. Similarly, focus group research commissioned by the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) revealed different attitudes towards the public broadcasters (ABC and SBS) than towards the commercial media outlets, with the public broadcasters “highly praised… for their continuing commitment to news and information that empowers audiences and citizens” (Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006, p63).

**The consequences of media distrust – media diets**

In his research, Tsfati explored the impact media scepticism has on *media diets* – the ratio of mainstream to non-mainstream media sources used by a news consumer. He found that media sceptics’ media diets incorporated fewer mainstream news sources and more non-mainstream news sources than non-sceptics (Tsfati, 2002; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). While this is an interesting finding, Tsfati’s mainstream/non-mainstream media distinction deserves some consideration.

By way of definition, Tsfati makes a number of statements describing non-mainstream media, most of which concern the content, rather than the format, of media messages. For him, non-mainstream media:

1. present themselves as alternatives to mainstream media institutions;
2. are sometimes easier for the average person to participate in;
3. attempt to present alternative information and a different point of view from the mainstream media; and
4. are very cynical about mainstream media (Tsfati, 2002, p311).

While content appears to be the main focus of each of these points, Tsfati also introduces, in point two, the notion of interactivity between the audience and media producer. I will return to these points later in the paper.
In the research literature, the term ‘non-mainstream media’ appears to be less commonly employed than the term ‘alternative media’. Atton notes that there is some confusion between the two terms (Atton, 2002), although to the current author, there does appear to be significant overlap in their definitions. Hamilton notes that from a mass culture perspective, alternative media’s role is to unmask the “dominant ideology” (J. Hamilton, 2000), reflecting point 3 above. Downing similarly notes that alternative media “focus on challenging the structures of power”, as opposed to mainstream media which “focus on hegemonic integration” (Downing, 2003, p626), reflecting the above points 1, 3 and to some extent 4. Similarly, for Couldry & Curran, alternative media is “media production which challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power” (Couldry & Curran, 2003). The emphasis in these definitions on the distribution of power within the media sector reflects the political economy tradition of media studies. Other authors also stress the involvement of citizens in the production of the media (O'Sullivan et al 1994 & Traber 1985, as cited in Atton, 2002), reflecting point 2 above. Vercellotti & Brewer (2006) however, extend the role of alternative media far beyond Tsfati’s ‘non-mainstream’ definition, seeing it additionally as an antidote to the mainstream media and an advocate for minority groups.

For some, alternative media can range from performance art and graffiti, to websites and underground political papers (Downing, 2003), however Tsfati’s scope for non-mainstream media is far narrower. Tsfati selects only political talk radio (PTR) and Internet sources as non-mainstream, while daily newspapers and television news are considered mainstream. This fairly broad distinction is due in part to his reliance on a secondary analysis of existing datasets. There is, however, something of a mismatch between Tsfati’s definition of non-mainstream and his application of the concept. As stated previously, Tsfati’s definition of non-mainstream sources focussed primarily on the content of media messages, whereas his application is based primarily on media format, not content. His rationale for this approach highlights some interesting differences between the US and Australian media contexts.

Tsfati explains that he considers PTR non-mainstream, because American PTR is frequently critical of public institutions, including the media itself; and because it is more accessible to the “average person” through the call-in nature of the program format (Tsfati, 2002, p311). Internet sources are considered non-mainstream because of a perceived independence (due to minimal barriers to entry – it is not restricted to only the large media corporations) which enables them to critique the media and other institutions. Internet sources are further considered non-mainstream due to their often interactive nature, which allows audience members to contribute to the information source (eg. through comments fields), and potentially provide alternative content and viewpoints. Tsfati is careful to note that both
mainstream and non-mainstream content may occur within either set of media, but maintains that on balance, his distinction is reasonable.

In order to consider the appropriateness of such a distinction to the Australian media landscape, I will now address each of these media types in turn, from an Australian perspective.

**Political talk radio / Talkback radio**

Talkback radio, the Australian equivalent of PTR, has a significantly different reputation to its American counterpart. If American PTR has a reputation for critiquing public institutions, Australian talkback radio is in contrast seen as “a crucial part of the structure through which contemporary party politics is prosecuted” (Turner, 2007, p78). This is due in large part to talkback radio’s reputation for allowing politicians to speak directly to the public, thereby bypassing professional journalistic critique and scrutiny. Former Prime Minister John Howard particularly embraced talkback radio, using it as his preferred means of disseminating information to the public (Ester, 2007). Far from criticising public institutions then, talkback radio in Australia has in fact become a central cog within the public institution of government.

Tsfati’s second rationale, that talkback radio may be easier for the average person to participate in, is countered by the tight screening processes which are conducted prior to a caller being allowed to participate in any such show. The degree to which participation by ‘average people’ is enabled, is strictly determined by the show producers, who pre-screen callers to ensure they fit the show’s tenor (Gillman, 2007; Salter, 2006). ‘Alternative’ viewpoints are ironically thus only likely to be represented in the show if they suit the agenda of the show’s producers and sponsors. However, regardless of how slim the odds are on any given caller making it to air, talkback radio still appears to present an opportunity for instant, two-way communication between the audience and the media producer. This type of interactivity is not a possibility in print media, and is rarely incorporated into television shows. The Internet presents another opportunity for interactive communication, and it is to this I turn now.

**Internet**

It must be noted that the landscape of the Internet has changed significantly in the seven years since Tsfati’s thesis was completed. A vast array of news and political information sources now abounds on the Internet, including online versions of traditional corporate news outlets
(eg. NineMSN.com, news.com.au); independent, non-corporate, organised news collectives (eg. Independent Media Centre (indymedia.org)); independent but commercial political information services (eg. Crikey, NewMatilda); professional non-profit political blogs (eg. Larvatus Prodeo); and personal blogs. While it is true that some of these sites present themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media and that some present non-mainstream viewpoints, a great many do not. To group the entire Internet together as a ‘non-mainstream’ media outlet on the basis of alternative content, therefore seems inaccurate at the present time. Interactivity does remain a key feature of the Internet, although again, the level of interactivity enabled differs widely across websites, so again, a blanket categorisation of the Internet as non-mainstream is difficult to justify.

A different approach to the mainstream/non-mainstream distinction

It is this author’s contention that in the increasingly complex modern political information environment, attempting to make mainstream/non-mainstream distinctions at the format level (eg. Internet vs newspaper) is simplistic and inaccurate. Although undeniably more complicated and time consuming, a nevertheless more useful approach may be to consider the source originator’s stated commitment to mainstream or alternative information provision. Such an approach may lead us to a more effective application of Tsfati’s original, content-focused definition of non-mainstream media, and thus provide us with an indication of the type of information people are actually exposed to.

Applying Tsfati’s basic definition of non-mainstream media as those that “present themselves as alternatives to the mainstream media institutions” (Tsfati, 2002, p. 311; 2003a), we can refer to mission statements, slogans or similar, to distinguish the mainstream from the non-mainstream. So for example, information generated by the Channel 9 News Network will be considered mainstream regardless of the delivery platform (eg. TV, Internet or podcast), on the basis that their corporate documents and promotional materials make no reference to alternative viewpoints (in fact, they make no reference to being an information provider, or to information standards at all). On the other hand, Brisbane radio station 4ZZZ’s website makes explicit the station’s self-identified role of “presenting news and opinions not found in mainstream media” (4ZZZ Brisbane, n.d.), so would be considered non-mainstream despite its quite traditional delivery platform (radio).

Such an approach would enable a much finer level of granularity in any consideration of media diets and the impact of media scepticism. However, the Australian media landscape
lends itself to other conceptualisations of media diets, as is discussed in the remainder of this paper.

**Alternative conceptualisations of the media landscape: Public vs private**

Regardless of how it is operationalised, the mainstream/non-mainstream or mainstream/alternative media distinction may be less useful in the Australian media context than it is in the US context. Australia has one of the highest media ownership concentrations the world (Rahkonen, 2007). For example, 68 percent of national and capital city newspaper circulation is controlled by a single corporation (Gardiner-Garden & Chowns, 2006). In such an environment, the volume of, degree of access to, and usage of non-mainstream media sources, relative to mainstream sources, may be so insignificant as to make meaningful comparisons difficult. How then should researchers conceptualise the media diets of Australians?

Another option, still within the political economy tradition, could be to consider the consumption of publicly owned versus commercial media. Looking at the dominant news source in Australia, television, Pay TV uptake in Australia remains at reasonably low levels (24% penetration in 2007) (Paul Buddle Communication, 2008), with the five national free-to-air stations still dominating the market. Of these, two are publicly funded broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), with each creating products not only in television but also in radio and online formats. The roles, scope and funding of both public broadcasters are defined and protected by Federal Government legislation. Significantly, in light of the earlier discussion regarding stated missions and goals, both public broadcasters differ from the commercial networks in having a stated commitment to the provision of quality information (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2006; Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), 2002). It perhaps follows that both also have a reputation for higher quality journalism than that offered by their commercial competitors (Ang et al., 2006; Bean, 2004).

It is already known that significant demographic differences exist between the audiences of these public broadcasters and those of the commercial networks (Bean, 2004). Given the differing reputations of journalistic quality demonstrated by public versus private media outlets, this type of distinction may also prove useful in analysing the consequences of media scepticism in the Australian context. For example, such an approach could explore whether people sceptical of the mainstream media rely more on public media outlets, in their quest for higher quality information.
Alternative conceptualisations of the media landscape: Tabloid vs traditional journalism

Another distinction familiar in the Australian context is between tabloid and broadsheet journalism. Tabloid journalism blurs the lines between information provision and entertainment, specifically tending to focus on the private lives of individuals, especially in the spheres of “scandal, sports and entertainment” (Deuze, 2005). Tabloid journalism is generally considered to be of low journalistic quality, not adhering to the stated standards and ethics of traditional journalism. It is characterised by shallow, limited or superficial coverage of the topic at hand, and frequently incorporates such dubious practices such as ‘foot-in-the-door’ interrogating and ‘dog whistle journalism’ (Poynting & Noble, 2003). Examples of tabloid journalism in Australia can be seen in a variety of formats, from ‘trashy’ magazines such as *Who Weekly*, to television ‘current affairs’ programs such as *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*. These contrast strongly, for example, with the more respected journalism of media products such as the ABC’s *7.30 Report*.

As with the public/private conceptualisation of media diets, this approach could be used to explore whether media sceptics seek out what they perceive as higher quality journalism. The differing reputations of tabloid versus traditional journalism may make this an interesting lens through which to analyse the impact of media scepticism on Australian media diets.

Alternative conceptualisations of the media landscape: One-way vs two-way (interactive) media

Yet another approach would be to address the degree of interactivity offered by different media. Print media offer the least amount of interactivity, for example with books essentially representing a one-way information flow, whilst newspapers provide the very minimal feedback option of letters to the editor. Television shows may offer varying degrees of interactivity and audience feedback, such as through phone polls, phone-ins and the reading out of emails on air, all of which typically represent fairly minimal proportions of air-time; through to on-air debates which form the basis of shows such as ABC’s *Difference of Opinion* and SBS’s *Insight*. Talkback radio relies entirely on audience interaction, although, as with the television shows described previously, audience contributions are constrained through careful screening processes. Internet technologies provide the greatest opportunities for interactivity (at least amongst technologically literate audience members), although individual websites differ in the degree to which such interactions are enabled. It may be interesting to...
use such an approach to explore whether individuals who do not trust the mainstream media prefer to use media to which they can contribute and in some way shape debate.

**Conclusion**

Audience attitudes towards the media influence political information consumption patterns. In order to meaningfully analyse differences in these patterns, researchers must conceptualise the resulting media diets in ways which make sense within the political information landscape in which they operate. Conceptions of media diets originating in the US may not be suitable for application in an Australian context, due to differing media landscapes. Specifically, US definitions of ‘mainstream’ and non-mainstream’ media types may not have relevance outside the USA. Alternative conceptualisations may be more appropriate within the Australian context, for example, publicly owned versus private media, tabloid versus traditional journalism, or interactive versus one-way media. This paper has merely scratched the surface of this discussion. However, it is recommended that Australian media and communication researchers take a variety of approaches to the analysis of media diets, and consider the appropriateness of each to the Australian information environment, rather than adopting wholesale measurement techniques originating in other media landscapes.

**References**


