

New study identifies 'disconnect' between media and public

February 9 2017, by Nathan Hurst

Recently, mainstream media have faced heavy criticism from all sides of the political spectrum regarding coverage of the presidential election and other political issues. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri School of Journalism have found that many national journalists have views of democracy that are different than many Americans. The researchers believe this difference in philosophy might be contributing to a disconnect between Americans and the media.

Tim Vos, an associate professor of journalism studies at MU, along with David Wolfgang, a former doctoral student at MU, performed in-depth interviews with political [journalists](#), many of whom work for national news outlets. They found that most political journalists had an "elitist" view of democracy, meaning they believe that American citizens should elect political candidates every four years and then allow those office holders to perform their jobs with little input from the public. Furthermore, journalists believe their role is to update the public on the actions of elected officials so the public will be well-informed during the next election cycle, the study found.

Vos says this philosophy, also called "administrative democracy," is at odds with a more populist view of democracy many Americans hold, which is that the public should have influence over elected officials' decisions on a more regular basis.

"This disconnect has shown itself many times in recent months, as a large portion of the American public has expected [political news](#) to be

covered in one way while reporters are covering political news in a different way," Vos said. "This not only has led to many readers being upset about the style, tone and content of the news coverage, but also journalists appearing out-of-touch with their audience. While neither of these views about [democracy](#) are wrong, journalists need to do a better job of understanding their audiences so they can cover political issues better."

The study also identified a lack of diversity among journalists' sources as another potential cause for the disconnect between journalists and the [public](#). A primary tenet of good journalism is portraying diverse points of view and covering all sides of an issue. However, Vos found that a lack of newsroom resources often prevents reporters from covering issues as holistically as they wish.

"The lack of staffing and the emphasis on fast reporting has hurt journalists' abilities to speak with a wide range of sources when covering stories," Vos said. "Many journalists said the pressure of being first to break a story, as well as less support staff to help with reporting, has led them to reuse the same sources many times. If a reporter needs a quote from a member of each political party, they are much more likely to call the person who they know will respond quickly, rather than take time to hunt down different people who might have more diverse viewpoints."

Vos says increasing the resources for journalists would greatly improve this lack of source diversity. The study, "Journalists' normative constructions of political viewpoint diversity," was published in *Journalism Studies*.

More information: Tim P. Vos et al. Journalists' Normative Constructions of Political Viewpoint Diversity, *Journalism Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2016.1240015](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1240015)

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