



# Crime, foreigners and hard news: A cross-national comparison of reporting and public perception

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## Abstract

The Finnish media devote more attention to hard news than the British media, yet Finns are less interested in politics than the British. The principal reason for this difference in news values is that Finnish TV is more subject to public service influence than British TV, and the Finnish press is more strongly influenced by a professional journalistic culture than its British counterpart. While a number of national differences contribute to different levels of public knowledge, the Finns are better informed about hard news topics partly because they are better briefed in these areas by their media.

## Keywords

british journalism, comparing media, Finnish journalism, hard news, public knowledge

## Introduction

Comparative analysis can provide a way of investigating the wider influences that shape media content that is not always apparent in nation-bound studies. It can also throw up larger questions about the consequences of organizing the media in different

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ways. This is at least the hope of this comparative study, based on a comparison of the media in the United Kingdom (UK) and Finland.

Comparative studies tend to select countries that are similar and/or different (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). However, some studies select countries that both converge and diverge (Collier and Mahoney, 1996; Gerring, 2004) – the strategy we have followed here since we are seeking to break free from the rigidities of ideal typification. The UK and Finland are similar in that they are well-established democracies and members of the European Union. They both have advanced economies, high incomes and high levels of investment in education. They have strong public service broadcasting organizations and market-based newspapers (though closer examination will reveal that their media systems are in important respects significantly different). However, the UK is different in having a liberal pluralist structure of political power in contrast to Finland's corporatist system. The UK's population is over 11 times the size of Finland's, is more ethnically diverse and less egalitarian in terms of income distribution. The UK is also a former imperial power, whereas Finland was once a colony.

## **News differences**

A systematic examination of the main news programmes on the two principal television channels and of the news published in a representative sample of newspapers in Finland and the UK was conducted during four non-sequential weeks in March–April 2007.<sup>1</sup> In addition to quantifying the topic and geographical location of each news item, a distinction was made between hard and soft news. This was based on defining some topics such as politics, public administration, the economy, science and technology as hard, and other topics such as celebrity, human interest, sports and entertainment stories as soft. In the particular case of crime, however, predetermining news stories as either soft or hard was judged to be misleading, prompting us to distinguish between different types of articles. If a crime story was reported in a way that was contextualized and related to the public good – for example, if the report referred to penal policy, or related to the general causes or consequences of crime – it was judged to be a hard news story assimilated to public affairs. If, however, the main focus of the report was the crime itself, with details concerning the perpetrators, violence and victims, but with no reference to the larger context or implications for public policies, the news item was judged to be soft.<sup>2</sup>

Comparative analysis shows that Finland's main TV news programmes devote much less time to soft news (17%) than do those in Britain (40%) (Table 1). Even Finland's main commercial television channel, MTV3, transmits considerably less soft news (19%) than Britain's premier public channel, BBC 1 (37%).

This divergence arises partly from the fact that Finnish TV news devotes more time to reporting politics (53%) than its counterpart in Britain (44%) (Table 2). Finnish TV news also devotes, proportionately, twice as much time to business and the economy; and three times as much to science, technology and related issues. It thus combines a strong orientation towards politics with a general 'public affairs' news agenda.

While foreign news gets the same amount of attention on both Finnish and British television news, there are big differences in terms of which parts of the globe are covered. Finnish television divides its attention, in roughly comparable proportions, between three spheres: the European Union; Finland's geopolitical zone outside the European Union

**Table 1** Distribution of news in Finnish and British television by type

	Hard <sup>1</sup>	Soft <sup>2</sup>	Domestic	Foreign
UK	60%	40%	71%	29%
Finland	83%	17%	71%	29%

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Includes politics, business, science & technology and crime news with clear reference to wider justice/public policy issues; <sup>2</sup> Includes sports, entertainment, culture, arts, religion and lifestyle reporting and crime news presented in a personalized/decontextualized way.

Source: 810 TV news items for the UK, 697 for Finland.

**Table 2** Distribution of news in Finnish and British television by topic

	Politics	Business	Science/ Technology <sup>1</sup>	Crime	Sport	Culture <sup>2</sup>	Entertainment <sup>3</sup>	Lifestyle/ Family
UK	44%	7%	5%	15%	16%	3%	11%	2%
Finland	53%	14%	16%	11%	1%	9%	2%	3%

Notes: <sup>1</sup> Includes science, technology, history; <sup>2</sup> Includes arts, culture and religion; <sup>3</sup> Includes entertainment, celebrities, gossip and human interest stories.

Source: 810 TV news items for the UK, 697 for Finland.

(the USA and Russia); and the rest of the world. By contrast, British television allocates only 7 per cent of its news time to Europe, less than a fifth of the coverage provided by Finnish television. British television also gives short shrift to countries with which it has little connection: for example, paying significantly less attention to China and Japan than Finnish TV. British TV's gaze is focused primarily on the UK's geopolitical sphere outside Europe – the USA, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Commonwealth countries (71%). A substantial proportion of this (39% of all foreign news) was devoted, in our data collection period, to the two countries where Britain's troops were engaged in regular military action (see Table 3).

The foreign coverage of the British and Finnish press differs in some respects from that of television. But the newspapers of the two countries reproduce the same rank order of precedence between different spheres of the world – between Europe, their national geopolitical zone outside Europe, and the rest of the world – as their respective TV news services.

**Table 3** Distribution of foreign news in British and Finnish media

Sections of the world	TV		Press	
	UK	Finland	UK	Finland
Europe	7%	38%	24%	40%
Geopolitical zone outside Europe <sup>1</sup>	71%	27%	49%	25%
Rest of the world	22%	34%	26%	35%

Note: <sup>1</sup> USA and Russia in the case of Finland; Iraq, Afghanistan, USA, and Commonwealth countries in the case of the UK.

Sources: 235 and 204 international TV news items in UK and Finland respectively, and 1283 and 1777 international press articles in UK and Finland respectively.

**Table 4** Distribution of news in the Finnish and British press by type

	Hard	Soft	Domestic	Foreign
UK	40%	60%	83%	17%
Finland	54%	46%	62%	38%

Note: Types of news are defined as in Table 1.

Source: 7751 newspaper articles for the UK, 4644 for Finland.

**Table 5** Distribution of news in the Finnish and British press by topic

	Politics	Business	Science/ Technology	Crime	Sport	Culture	Entertainment	Lifestyle/ Family
UK	24%	12%	6%	13%	25%	5%	11%	5%
Finland	35%	6%	6%	19%	12%	10%	9%	3%

Note: Topics of news are defined as in Table 2.

Source: 7751 newspaper articles for the UK, 4644 for Finland.

Finnish newspapers devote more attention to politics and hard news, and very much more to foreign news, than the British press (Tables 4 and 5). However, the contrast between the newspaper press of the two countries is much less than that between television news. While the British press allocates 54 per cent of its editorial content to crime, sport, entertainment and lifestyle news, the Finnish press allocates 43 per cent of its editorial space to these topics.

In brief, Finnish television news is more oriented towards public affairs than its British counterpart. This difference, though still present, is less marked in the case of the press of the two countries. The media systems of both nations tend to spotlight different parts of the globe.

## Explaining difference

Why, then, do Finnish and British media – and in particular television – have different news values and priorities? A seemingly plausible explanation is that serious-minded Finns are more interested in politics than hedonistic Britons, and as a consequence Finnish media pay more attention to politics and public affairs. The media of the two countries merely reflect, it can be hypothesized, the divergent consumer preferences of the two countries, reflecting differences in their national cultures.

However, this explanation is not supported by the evidence. The populations of both countries have, in fact, a rather limited appetite for politics. Our survey (about which more later) showed that, on a scale of 1–4, the average score for ‘interest in politics’ in Finland (2.16) was below that in Britain (2.49). This is consistent with the 2001 World Values Survey, which reports that only 20 per cent in Finland said that politics is rather or very important in their lives compared with 34 per cent in Britain (European and World Values Surveys, 2006). If anything, the British emerge as being more interested in politics than the Finns.

A more convincing explanation of difference is that Finland and Britain have divergent political systems of power. Thus, Finland is a liberal corporatist society which has highly organized social interests (including a continuing high level of trade union membership), linked to political parties and corporate bodies. Finland has also a strong welfare state, operating within a political culture that is collectivist and consensual, accords a high degree of legitimacy to public institutions, and affirms the need for public accountability and civic duty. The state plays a key role in mediating agreement between organized social and political groups, while Finland's proportional electoral system, and ensuing coalition governments, encourages the pragmatic pursuit of consensus within a small, social cohesive society (Kautto, 2001; Konsonen, 1993; Moring, 2008).

Finland's television is the product of this political system. Its principal channels, both public and private, are required by law to further the public interest. This is interpreted to mean that they have an obligation to inform the public so that citizens can make informed choices at election time, hold power to account, and be aware of the concerns and interests of other groups in society. This emphasis on the public purpose of Finnish television, underpinned by a regime of public ownership and regulation, thus derives from a political culture and way of doing politics that stresses the legitimacy of an active state, the importance of public deliberation, and a collective route to securing public well-being (Salokangas, 1996; Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Sauri, 2007; Ylönen et al., 2004).

Something very similar was once true of Britain, which had a liberal corporatist political system during the period 1940–1979. This gave rise to an extensively regulated television system, underwritten by a statist tradition of public service, the value placed on democratizing access to politics and 'culture', and a stress on one-nation social inclusion (Curran, 2002). However, the underlying structure of power that supported this regulatory regime was undermined during the 1980s and 1990s. Organized labour weakened; corporatist structures of consensus-building were abolished; social interests became more fragmented and individualized; and market forces gained greater primacy (Gamble, 1994, 2003; Hay, 1999; Kavanagh, 1990; Moran, 2005). This shift was accompanied by a marked fall of electoral turnout and increased disconnection from Westminster politics during the later 1990s and 2000s (Couldry et al., 2007). While popular support for welfare provision persisted, the neo-liberalism of both Conservative and New Labour governments led to the increasing marketization of public institutions (Leys, 2001).

This marketization weakened the public service regime of British broadcasting. During the 1990s, a new light touch regulator of commercial television was established; control over the principal commercial television channel (ITV) was auctioned to the highest bidders; and largely deregulated private channels on satellite and cable TV mushroomed (Goodwin, 1998). This led to an increased orientation towards entertainment at the expense of public affairs journalism on the main commercial television channel, ITV, during the period 1988–1998 (Barnett and Seymour, 1999). This had a knock-on effect on the BBC, which was exposed to increased ratings pressure. Like ITV, BBC news softened, with coverage of crime increasing at the expense of 'political' reporting (Winston, 2002). Both the BBC and ITV also demoted, in 1999, their main evening news programmes to later time slots (though ITV reversed this, for four days a week, nine years later).

In short, the different orientations of Finnish and British TV news can be traced, in part, to their different forms of regulation. Both public and commercial television in Finland

remained subject to a public service regime, and continued to give a high priority to 'hard' news (and also to the peak scheduling of news). By contrast, commercial television in Britain was partly deregulated, and the BBC became more ratings oriented, leading to the growth of soft news, and the less prominent scheduling of news programmes. Underlying this difference was the divergent political paths taken after 1979 by the two countries, in which Britain embraced a form of neo-liberal politics, while Finland remained a corporatist society.

As we have seen, there is a greater degree of similarity between Finnish and British newspapers than there is in the television news of the two countries. One clue to why this should be the case is that both the Finnish and British press are exposed to market pressure in societies where consumer interest in politics is limited.

Thus, Britain has a dominant national press, which sustains 10 competing national dailies (and also 10 national Sunday papers). This fuels intense rivalry, and a strong consumer orientation. Market research commissioned by publishers has long revealed that politics is a minority interest, concentrated among male and older readers. This has led to a cumulative, relative reduction of public affairs coverage in favour of entertainment content in the popular national press (Curran and Seaton, 2009; Rooney, 2000). Market values also strengthened in the national prestige press during the 1990s, leading to its increased popularization (McLachlan and Golding, 2000), and contributing to the erosion of election coverage in local papers (Franklin and Richardson, 2002). Attitudinal data collected over half a century confirm that public involvement in politics has long been a minority concern, with only minor fluctuations (Jefferys, 2007).

Finland seemingly differs from this picture of commercial dominance in that it has a number of politically aligned papers committed to advancing a political cause. But while the party press was dominant in the 1950s, its circulation dwindled in the subsequent period. Increasingly, newspapers competed across political boundaries, closures led to regional monopolies, and newspaper political affiliations weakened especially during the 1980s (Salokangas, 1999). Today more than 95 per cent of Finnish newspapers declare that they are politically unaffiliated. Remaining party papers have limited circulations, appear less frequently than they used to, and have fewer pages than standard newspapers (Jyrkiäinen, 2004; Salovaara-Moring, 2004).

In contrast to Britain, a newspaper subsidy system was also introduced in Finland in the 1960s. While this system supported press diversity, it was funnelled primarily towards the party press and so-called 'second' newspapers (regional or national). From 2008 onwards, the support to second newspapers was cut dramatically, while subsidies for the party press (distributed in proportion to the parliamentary representation of the parties) increased substantially (Moring, 2008; Salovaara-Moring, 2009). Press subsidies do not therefore cushion dominant newspapers from market pressure in a consumer context where interest in politics is relatively low. In addition, Finland has one of the highest circulations per capita in the world, significantly higher than in the UK (World Association of Newspapers, 2006), which exposes the Finnish press to strong popular influence.

Thus, both the Finnish and British press are subject to strong economic pressures that encourage a common convergence towards a popular editorial agenda. However, the British press is even more oriented towards human interest, sport and entertainment than the Finnish press, principally because British journalists are less influenced by a

professional culture, emphasizing the duty to inform, than Finnish journalists. Thus, British newspapers are more hostile to university-based journalism education than Finnish newspapers; the main British journalists' union is less professionally oriented than its Finnish counterpart; and journalists in Britain tend to view voluntary self-regulation as unnecessary and undesirable in contrast to Finland (Bingham, 2007; Heinonen, 1998; O'Malley and Soley, 2000). This partly reflects wider cultural differences between corporatist Finland and neo-liberal Britain. But it also arises from a different press structure. The dominance of the national press in Britain sustains more directly competing titles, and a greater intensity of competition, than the more regionally and locally centred Finnish press. Indeed, it is where competition is most intense in the British press – among mass circulation tabloids – that Britain's journalism culture is most strongly penetrated by market values stressing entertainment and commercial success (Curran et al., 2005).

But if differences of regulation, market structure, journalistic culture, and political systems of power explain broad differences of editorial topic allocation in both television and press news, they seem inadequate to account for differences of foreign news coverage. Here, other influences – most notably geopolitical location and cultural geography – are also in play. Thus, British TV gave more attention to Iraq and Afghanistan than Finnish TV because Britain had troops fighting there, unlike Finland. Similarly, British television gave more attention to Zimbabwe than Finnish television because it is a former British colony and occupies a place in the collective memory of British society. Likewise, Russia was reported more fully on Finnish TV because it is Finland's neighbour, important trading partner and former ruler.

However, the different amount of attention given to Europe in the television news of the two countries seems more perplexing since both Britain and Finland are located in Europe, and are members of the European Union. Perhaps part of this difference can be attributed to the news diversion afforded by British military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, which may have squeezed the time that British TV would otherwise have allocated to Europe. But its neglect of Europe in fact predates these conflicts (Norris, 2000). The more important explanation is that Britain and Finland relate to the European Union in divergent ways.

Britain was a late, reluctant entrant to the European community, joining in 1975. Even after accession, Britain remained a semi-detached member. Britain's political class has strong Atlanticist leanings, influenced by the belief that Britain can 'punch above its weight', and compensate for loss of power, by cultivating its 'special relationship' with the USA. Strong personal and cultural ties to a country with a shared language also encourage public affiliation to America. Thus in a 2008 ICM poll, 64 per cent of adults said that the country with the 'warmest relations with Britain' was America, while only 29 per cent nominated Europe (Glover, 2008: 6). An influential 'Eurosceptic' tradition, fuelled by a fusion of nationalism and neo-liberalism, but also drawing support from other sources, equates increased European political integration with loss of national democratic control and identity. For all these different reasons, British identification with Europe has long been relatively weak. And British television has long reflected this, giving less coverage for example to the first European parliamentary election in 1979 than other European countries, contributing to the UK's especially low turnout (Blumler, 1983).

Finland was also a reluctant entrant to the EU, joining only in 1995. However, the end of the Cold War encouraged Finland to adopt a very positive orientation towards the EU. It no longer felt the need, for strategic reasons, to remain neutral between the western and Communist blocs. As a former colony, Finland also did not harbour hubristic reservations about accepting the position of an ordinary member state of the European Union. Many educated Finns are linguistically skilled, and consequently find the inability of most Europeans to speak their language fluently less problematic than do the mainly monoglot British. Much of Finland's political class are now less hostile to greater European integration than their counterparts in Britain. All told, these influences encouraged Finnish television to report European politics, and Europe in general, more fully than British television.

## **Reporting and public knowledge**

Does the fact that Finnish media devote more attention to public affairs than British media have any consequences in terms of what their audiences know? As a way of gauging levels of knowledge in the two countries, we conducted an online survey based on nationally representative samples of 1000 adults.<sup>3</sup> Questions were asked in relation to hard and soft news areas reported by the media of the two countries during the period of our content analysis. In particular, 14 common questions were asked in relation to international news, two common questions in relation to domestic crime, and 14 separate questions about the domestic news of each country. We balanced easy and difficult questions, with the degree of 'easiness' being established on the basis of the number of reports registered in the Lexis-nexis and Finnish equivalent data sets in a sub sample of newspapers during one month and six months prior to the survey. Questions designed to measure recognition of specific individuals were administered in two different versions. Using random assignment, one half of the national samples was presented with the individual's name, and the other half with a photograph of the target person. In 28 instances, respondents were presented with five possible answers to multiple choice questions, one of which was correct. A time limit was imposed, through computer software, to prevent respondents from looking up the right answer.

In line with Finnish television's more extensive coverage of domestic hard news, the average percentage of correct answers to domestic hard news questions in Finland (78%) was significantly higher than in Britain (67%). For example, 82 per cent of Finns correctly identified Tarja Cronberg as the Minister of Labour, compared to 68 per cent of British respondents correctly recognizing Menzies Campbell as the then Leader of the Liberal Party.

The Finnish advantage was smaller in relation to international hard news. However, Finns shone in relation to European hard news – a region much more extensively reported, as noted earlier, on Finnish than on British television news. Thus, 73 per cent of Finns correctly identified Nicolas Sarkozy as the French President, compared with 58 per cent of UK citizens. Similarly, 72 per cent of Finns got right the identity of the former Serbian ruler Slobodan Milosevic, a significantly higher level than in Britain (58%).

In general, Finns emerged as better informed than British citizens (see Table 6). Finns' lead was greatest in domestic hard news, an area where the Finnish media excel. By contrast, Finns knew less about international soft news than Britons, which British TV reports more fully than Finnish TV.

**Table 6** Knowledge of news in Finland and the United Kingdom

	Domestic		International	
	Hard%	Soft%	Hard%	Soft%
Finland	78	91	62	70
UK	67	82	59	79
Average	72	87	61	74

Note: A Mixed Measures ANOVA 2 (Domestic vs. International)  $\times$  2 (Hard vs. Soft)  $\times$  2 (UK vs. Finland), with repeated measures in the first two factors, revealed reliable main effects of the three factors (all  $F_s > 21.12$ , all  $p_s < .001$ ), qualified by reliable two-way interactions between country and the two within-participants factors (both  $F_s > 68.63$ , both  $p_s < .001$ ) and a reliable three-way interaction,  $F(1, 2133) = 66.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\text{Partial } \eta^2 = 0.03$  Weighted  $N = 2134$

**Table 7** Perception of crime in Finland and the United Kingdom

%	Finland	UK
Number of murders underestimations	22	39
Number of murders correct	27	23
Number of murders overestimations	51	38
Murder rate underestimations	2	1
Murder rate correct	21	20
Murder rate overestimations	77	79

Note: Data on actual crime rates for the UK sample were based on the Home Office statistical bulletin made available on 26 April 2007, quarterly update to December 2006. UK  $N = 999$ ; Finland  $N = 999$

A different type of question was asked in relation to crime, a topic which is extensively covered in both British and Finnish media. Indeed, news about domestic violence, violent crime and political violence has increased as a proportion of Finnish media content (Saloniemi and Suikkanen, 2007: 70–1). This helps to explain why there is actually more crime reporting in Finnish newspapers than in British newspapers, though this is reversed in the case of television news. Both Finnish and British media are also similar in that they tend to focus attention on untypical but newsworthy crimes: in Britain's case, those involving violence, sex or children (Jewkes, 2004).

Respondents were invited to estimate to what extent the crime rate had increased, decreased or remained the same, and also to estimate the number of murders committed in the previous year, by picking one of four alternatives. Over half the Finnish respondents, and over a third of British respondents, overestimated the number of crimes in their countries (with the less inaccurate British response perhaps being influenced by a well-publicized government campaign, starting a month before the survey, which emphasized that the crime rate was falling). Misperceptions were even more widespread in relation to murder, a prominent element of sensational crime reporting. In Finland and the UK (both countries with a low murder rate), the number of murders had decreased over the previous year. Yet, no fewer than 77 per cent of Finns and 79 per cent of British citizens believed that they had increased or remained stable (see Table 7).

There seems to be a broad connection between what was reported and what was 'known' in both countries. For example Faye Turney – a British sailor arrested with others for entering Iranian waters, and paraded on Iranian television as a captive wearing an 'Islamic' scarf – was widely reported in the British media shortly before our survey. This is why 63 per cent of British respondents were able to identify who she was. Without this media attention, she would have remained an unknown naval rating. Similarly, it is perhaps not surprising that more Finns than Britons were able to identify who Nicolas Sarkozy was. In a sample of newspapers, during the four weeks before our survey, Sarkozy was reported 98 times in Finland but only twice in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

## Dynamics of public knowledge

Of course, the acquisition of knowledge about public issues is a lifelong activity that is strongly influenced by diverse social, economic and cultural influences. Education, gender, income and prior interest in politics all significantly affect the distribution of civic knowledge within societies (Bennett, 1988; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lambert et al., 1988; Luskin, 1990; Milner, 2002; Neuman, 1986; Smith, 1989). Extrapolating from these studies, it would seem also that national differences in the degree of equality, sense of civic duty, perception of being represented by the political system, and sense of personal efficacy can affect levels of public affairs knowledge. Data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems relating to Finland (2003) and Great Britain (2005) suggest that the Finnish public are in fact more inclined than the British public to think that government can make a difference, that the public's vote can have an impact on the future of the nation, and that voters' views are represented in elections. The greater sense of public connection with the political process in Finland compared with Britain may have contributed to a higher level of attentiveness to public affairs news among Finnish audiences.

But if the demand for news is one significant variable affecting levels of public knowledge, so is the supply of news. There is also extensive evidence showing that sustained exposure to media information about public affairs promotes gains in public knowledge (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; Curran et al., 2009; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000). This is corroborated by a regres-

**Table 8** Summary table reporting hard and soft news knowledge in Finland and the United Kingdom

	Finland	Gender	Education	Media	Interest	R <sup>2</sup>	F(5,1984)
National hard	0.31**	0.09**	0.10**	0.19**	0.40**	0.36	224.33**
National soft	0.27**	-0.08**	-0.00	0.18**	0.15**	0.13	58.85**
International hard	0.13**	0.22**	0.14**	0.07**	0.42**	0.35	210.27**
International soft	-0.22**	0.12**	0.15**	0.02	0.13**	0.37	61.35**

Notes: Linear Regression Model keeping UK as a baseline and adding Finland (coded as dummy variable 1-0) and moderator variables (gender was coded as a dummy variable 0 = man, 1 = woman; education was coded on three levels: -1 high school, 0 some university, 1 university or higher; media attentiveness and interest were evaluated on 4 point Likert scales) as predictors of knowledge of hard and soft issues in national and international contexts. Weighted  $N = 1990$ . \*\* $p < .001$

sion analysis, based on our survey data, which shows that frequency of media exposure is a significant predictor of hard news knowledge in both Finland and Britain (see Table 8).

In other words, what the media report matters. One reason why Finns are better informed about hard news and European news is because they are better briefed by their media in these areas than British citizens.

## Knowledge gaps

A further reason why the level of public knowledge is higher in Finland is that the low income group in Finland is significantly better informed than its equivalent in Britain. There is a 13 percentage point difference between the hard news scores of high and low income groups in the UK, whereas this difference is actually inverted in Finland.

This difference in the width of the knowledge gap is probably mainly the product of differences in the social structure and political culture of the two countries. But a contributory factor is that Finnish television schedules its news output in a way that is deliberately designed to maximize civic knowledge in a socially inclusive way. Finland's three main television channels transmit news programmes at 6.30p.m., 7p.m., 8.30p.m. and 10p.m. (and, on one of these channels, a daily current affairs programme at 9.30p.m.). In other words, they maintain a steady drip-feed of public information so that it requires an effort of will for a Finnish television viewer of a popular channel to avoid the news. By contrast, Britain's three main television channels offered their news programmes in 2007 at 6p.m., 6.30p.m. and 7p.m. and at 10p.m. and 10.30p.m., with peak primetime viewing cleared primarily for entertainment.

Thus, in one system, the dominant channels make a strong commitment to informing democracy by seeking to expose the inadvertent viewer to news programmes; in the other, the major channels strive to maintain good audience ratings by giving their news programmes less prominence. This difference contributes to a situation where 62 per cent of those on low incomes regularly view the news in Finland, compared to 49 per cent in Britain.

**Table 9** Hard news knowledge distribution between income groups in Finland and the United Kingdom

Income	Total hard		National hard		International hard	
	Finland	UK	Finland	UK	Finland	UK
Low	79	55	87	61	72	50
Medium	76	66	84	70	68	63
High	67	68	74	71	59	65
GAP	+12	-13	+13	-10	+13	-15

Note: We grouped the income answers in three macro categories: low (UK: income below £19,999; Finland: income below €35,000); medium (UK: £20,000–29,999; Finland: €35,001–65,000) and high (incomes higher than the medium bracket in the two countries). A series of Univariate 3 (income: high, medium and low) × 2 (country: UK vs. Finland) ANOVAs showed significant main effects of both independent variables on the three knowledge scores. Also, the two independent variables interacted significantly in affecting knowledge scores (all  $F_s > 4.1$ , all  $ps < .01$ ). Weighted  $N = 886$  UK, 1084 Finland.

## Wider implications

Thus far, we have made no reference to perhaps the best known comparative media study to have been published in the last two decades (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Hallin and Mancini present three media models, said to be located in different parts of the North American–European hemisphere. In terms of their cartography, Britain has a ‘liberal’ media system, whereas Finland has a ‘democratic corporatist’ one. The liberal model (Britain), they argue, fosters neutral, information-oriented journalism, and sustains a neo-liberal, pluralistic political system. By contrast, the democratic corporatist model (Finland) offers balanced but more interpretive journalism, which facilitates the management of inter-group relations and the maintenance of a corporatist consensus.

Their analysis offers commanding insights, even if it simplifies. However, it also has two major limitations. The first of these is that Hallin and Mancini do not investigate whether different media models tend to privilege some topics of news over others. They are concerned with news reporting primarily in terms of political orientation and journalistic convention. Their favoured approach is to quote short extracts from news reports which exemplify, in their view, distinctive styles of news reporting in different media models. But this leaves unclear whether these models differ in terms of *what* they report (as distinct from *how* they report).

This is related to the second central omission in their analysis. They examine divergent media models primarily in terms of their links to different political systems. But while this illuminates how different media models emerge from, and support, different modes of power, it leaves unaddressed the larger issue of which media model best supports the functioning of democracy.

These two omissions are addressed in this study. We have found that the ‘democratic corporatist’ media model of Finland gives more attention to hard news, both domestic and international, than the ‘liberal’ media model of Britain. This is primarily because Finnish television is more subject to a public service regime of regulation, and the Finnish press is more influenced by professional journalistic norms, than the more market-driven media system in Britain. In line with their greater exposure to hard news, Finns are more informed in this area than the British population.

The implication of this study is that media systems sustained by public service regulation and a professional culture brief their electorates better, and sustain a higher level of public affairs knowledge, than media systems more strongly influenced by market values. In this sense, they better serve the public good.

This inference runs contrary to two currents of thought, one well represented in cultural studies and the other in ‘new media’ studies. The first of these argues that soft news and entertainment, more generally, serve democracies in diverse ways: for example, by assisting collective evaluation and revision of public norms, facilitating the exploration of social identity and discussion of social values (both central to contemporary politics), and providing a forum for debating public issues and a means of making sense of the world (Curran, 2007). But this does not undermine the key point that citizens need also to have substantive information about public affairs if they are to hold power to account, make informed choices at election time, and be an effective presence within the political system.<sup>6</sup>

The second objection is that the rise of the internet ‘changes everything’. It does not much matter, it can be argued, that British television and newspapers report less hard and international news than their counterparts in Finland since this information is readily accessible on the web. However, this fails to take account of how the media are currently used in Britain. While there has been a meteoric rise of home internet use in Britain since 1999, the internet has made more impact in the consumption of entertainment than of news. The internet was the main source of information for only 3 per cent in the 2005 UK general election (Lusoli and Ward, 2005). In 2006, the internet was identified as the main source of news by just 6 per cent of the adult population, an increase of 4 percentage points on 2002 (Ofcom, 2007a). In other words, how adequately ‘traditional’ media report public affairs still matters.

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### Notes

- 1 The sample consisted of the main evening news programmes of the two principal television channels in each country (BBC1 and ITV in the UK, YLE1 and MTV3 in Finland); news reports (excluding features) in the main or general sections of the Finnish national broadsheet *Helsingin Sanomat*, a big regional daily *Aamulehti*, the national tabloid *Ilta-Sanomat* and a national free sheet, *Metro*, and of the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Sun* (respectively, the circulation leader of the upscale, mid-scale and downscale sectors of the British national daily press), and one local daily (*Manchester Metro*). In order to check for potential biases due to the conservative political orientation of British national papers in our sample, we also collected and analysed data from the left-of-centre *Guardian* as a control news source. As we found little difference between the *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph* in terms of the main topics addressed, we dropped the first, smaller circulation title and retained the latter. Each news source was monitored for a period of four (non-sequential) weeks in March–April, 2007. The news sources were classified by trained student or research assistant coders in each country. The overall inter-coder reliability test yielded 88 per cent agreement in Finland, and 84 per cent in the United Kingdom.
- 2 Our estimation of soft and hard news in British television differs from that of Ofcom (2007a). This is because Ofcom’s definition of soft news was ‘predominantly entertainment or celebrity based’ (Ofcom, 2007b: 96), and did not include human interest-centred crime stories, indeed any crime or sports reports (private communication from John Glover, Ofcom, to James Curran, 29 November 2007).
- 3 The survey was conducted in the 8-day period between 28 May and 4 June 2007. It was carried out by YouGov in the UK, and Zapera in Finland, coordinated by Polimetrix (PMX). Our survey design minimizes sampling bias through the use of sample matching, a methodology that features dual samples – one that is strictly probabilistic and based on an offline population, and a second that is non-probabilistic and based on a large panel of online respondents. The key is that each of the online respondents was selected to provide a mirror image of the corresponding respondent selected by conventional RDD methods. In essence, sample matching delivers a sample that is equivalent to a conventional probability sample on relevant demographic

attributes (for a more technical discussion of sample matching, see Rivers, 2005). From each online panel, a sample of 1000 was selected. The sample consisted of citizens over the age of 18, matched to national samples on education, gender and age.

- 4 The sample in the UK was the *Daily Mail*, *Sun*, *Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*; and in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Aamulehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*. The sampled period was 7 May to 7 June 2007.
- 5 Published in 2004, it has been cited 1396 times, according to Google Scholar (accessed 30 February 2009). This is a very large number of citations over a relatively short period. The book has also been published in Italian and Polish. For a recent critique, see Hardy (2008).
- 6 This contention is perhaps best illustrated by the example of American society where levels of factual knowledge about public affairs can be so low as to weaken the functioning of its democracy. Thus, even as late as July 2006, 50 per cent of Americans said that ‘Iraq had weapons of mass destruction when the US invaded’ (Harris Poll cited in PIPA, 2006b); and in March 2006, 49 per cent said either that Iraq was ‘directly involved in carrying out the September 11 attacks’ or that ‘Iraq gave substantial support to al-Qaeda’ (PIPA, 2006a).

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