

## Transformations of the Public Sphere

Media Systems, News Delivery and Citizens' Knowledge of Current Affairs

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While public sphere theory has provided a useful perch from which to critically evaluate media and public life and has led to useful distinctions between deliberative, agonistic, and other conceptions of democracy, it does need to connect at some point to actual changes that are taking place in society. This essay focuses on one such change: the increasing “marketization” of the broadcast news media and the possible consequences for informed citizenship.

Television has become more commercialized in many countries in response to three changes: the creation of more channels generating greater competition, the deregulation of commercial television networks, and the decline of public television. [1] The end result is that television (still the principal news medium in most countries) has tended to become more oriented towards the needs of the consumer than of the citizen, although there are still significant variations between countries. Research into the question of how well ordinary citizens measure up to the standard of democratic theory has focused almost exclusively on individual-level explanations. Typically, differences between the more and less informed are attributed to differences in the motivation to keep abreast of current events, that is, to varying demand for news. [2]

There is an alternative theory of civic engagement, however, one that incorporates not only demand for information, but also the supply side. There are systematic national variations in the supply of news. When broadcast media are relatively insulated from market pressures and government regulation favors more frequent delivery of news with substantive content – as contrasted with settings in which the media are subject to intense commercial pressure and governments provide little incentive to deliver such content – more voters are likely to encounter meaningful information. Thus, informed opinion depends on the interplay between attentiveness to news on the one hand, and the supply of news on the other.

Media Systems: Their Relevance to Informed Opinion

In modern democracies, it is the news media that are entrusted with the responsibility of providing citizens with costless access to information. But fundamental transformations in the business model for news organizations accompanied by significant reductions in the scope of government regulation have called into question the media’s ability to make good on their civic responsibility.

The consequences of these shifts for the possibility of informed public opinion are ominous. It is well established (at least in the United States where most of the research has occurred) that mass opinion is typically poorly informed and, at times, badly misinformed. [3] Information is especially lacking in the area of foreign affairs. Despite massive increases in public education, widespread exposure to the news media and the globalization of the US economy, Americans’ knowledge of foreign affairs remains scant. [4] Most recently, in the period immediately following the US invasion of Iraq, some one quarter of the American public continued to believe that the US had found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein was implicated in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. [5]

Compared with Americans, citizens in other democracies appear more informed about world events, a pattern that suggests the variations in the delivery of international news. A 1994 Pew study found that Americans lagged behind the English, Germans, Spanish and Mexicans in the percentage able to recognize the Secretary General of the UN and other world figures. [6] Based on these data, Popkin and Dimock proposed the hypothesis that the European advantage in the distribution of information was attributable to “substantial differences between countries in the communication of knowledge.” [7] More specifically, Europeans might be more informed because they consume significant amounts of broadcast news programming

delivered by a state subsidized public broadcaster, while most Americans are dependent on commercial broadcasters. The distinction between public and commercial broadcasting is relevant because the former are insulated, to some degree, from market pressures and can afford to produce more substantive or informative news programming. In the United States, which is the only industrialized democracy to have almost no significant (in terms of audience share) public broadcasting system, it is well known that news programming has been curtailed both in quantity and quality [8] and international news content has fallen dramatically since the end of the Cold War. [9] Thus the hypothesis put forth by Dimock and Popkin appears entirely plausible; Europeans may be more politically informed than Americans simply because they are more exposed to public affairs news programming.

The reach of public broadcasting is only one variable that can influence the delivery of news. Another is the nature of public service regulation to which commercial broadcasters are subject, with many European (but not American) private broadcasters being required to inform the public. The general trend has been towards partial deregulation in Western Europe [10], accompanied by falling levels of international coverage. In the United Kingdom, foreign coverage in the main commercial broadcast channel's (ITV) current affairs programs was cut in half. [11] Nonetheless, most societies other than the US (whose commercial broadcasters are now entirely deregulated) retain some minimum level of public affairs programming requirements that commercial broadcasters must comply with.

We recently examined the impact of public service requirements on the delivery of news and citizens' knowledge of current affairs in a four-nation study. We coupled a systematic content analysis of print and broadcast news outlets in the US, UK, Denmark and Finland with a national sample survey that included several questions measuring both hard and soft news knowledge. [12] Our content analysis results demonstrated relatively modest differences in the level of hard news programming with the US lagging slightly behind the European nations. More in keeping with expectations, we found significantly lower levels of international content in US news programming. American media are overwhelmingly preoccupied with domestic news. American network news allocated only 20% of their time to foreign news (of which nearly half concerned Iraq). Several areas of the world are generally invisible in American news. In contrast, the European public service television channels represented in our study devoted significantly more attention to international news. As a proportion of news programming time, foreign news coverage on the main news channels in Britain and Finland was nearly half again the level in the United States.

These differences in the content of news programming converged with differences in public awareness of international issues; in the US and Britain, where soft news was more predominant, citizens were generally less informed about hard news events than their counterparts living in Denmark and Finland, who were exposed to programming with higher levels of both international and hard news content.

One way of documenting these cross-national differences in information is to compute the "difficulty level" of particular questions. In general, the difficulty level of any given question is based both on the overall distribution of "passing" responses as well as the relationship between a passing response on any particular question and the full set of questions. An especially difficult question is one that few people pass including those who pass most other questions. [13]

In our four-nation study, Americans found the hard news items more difficult than the soft news items. In contrast, the hard-soft discrepancy in difficulty was smaller for Finnish and Danish respondents. Among Danish respondents, in fact, the soft news items, on average, proved slightly more difficult than the hard news items. Four of the five easiest items in Denmark were hard news items. In the UK and US, on the other hand, the easiest items were exclusively soft. The close similarity of the UK to the US in the difficulty of hard news may be attributed to both the increasing commercialization of the British broadcast media and the dominance of the tabloid press in the U.K.

The US-UK-Denmark-Finland study not only documented parallel differences in the delivery of news content and levels of public knowledge, but also showed that in countries with relatively strong public service broadcasters and regulated commercial broadcasters (i.e. Denmark and Finland) there was a more equitable distribution of knowledge in the sense that the most and least educated groups (or the most and least affluent) were equally informed. By contrast, in the US, the

knowledge gap between less and more educated respondents was substantial; on average the former group scored 40 percent lower than the latter. [14] The less educated American respondents proved most disadvantaged when the comparisons concerned hard news and international news, areas in which the likelihood of chance encounters with news reports are especially low. By contrast, in the case of soft and domestic news, which are encountered on a regular basis, the knowledge gap between the most and the least educated Americans was relatively modest. In short, the pattern of cross-national differences in the size of the knowledge gap and the increased width of the knowledge gap in the US suggests that a more reliable supply of news can, to a certain degree, compensate for differences in individuals' motivation and attentiveness. [15]

In summary, cross-national differences in political knowledge can be attributed, not only to longstanding differences in national political culture which contribute, in turn, to differences in individuals' interest in politics and motivation to stay informed. They can also be attributed to differences in the supply of meaningful political information. In purely market-based regimes with little to no regulation of commercial media, soft news predominates and except for the most highly motivated of citizens, there is limited exposure to information about current events and policies. In public service regimes, on the other hand, not only is there a more regular supply of substantive news, news programs air more frequently during times of peak television viewing thus assuring that even less motivated citizens encounter the news.

#### Conclusion

Although the importance of media attentiveness and interest in politics as key antecedents of information cannot be underestimated, our research suggests that differences in the supply of news can in fact weaken the standard knowledge gap. In those societies where the media provide ample coverage of hard news and where the schedule of news programming is adjusted so as to capture the attention of even relatively inattentive citizens, easy access to information can compensate for inadequate motivation. In the Scandinavian countries of Denmark and Finland, for instance, where news bulletins air regularly during the peak television viewing periods (such as just before a nationally televised sporting event), a sufficient number of citizens who are not especially interested in politics nonetheless find themselves in the path of news reports thus allowing them to acquire information. Thus, in countries where news programming is more substantive and the delivery of news is scheduled to capture a substantial "inadvertent" audience, we observe a significant narrowing of the traditional knowledge gap. It is in this sense that the supply of news can contribute to civic competence.

[This essay is based on a talk delivered at the mini-plenary "[Keywords: The Public Sphere, Public Culture and Reasoned Public Choice](#)" of the 59th Annual ICA Conference in Chicago, May 22, 2009.---ed.]

#### FOOTNOTES

1. K. Chadha and A. Kavoori, "Globalization and National Media Systems: Mapping Interactions in Policies, Markets and Formats," *Mass Media and Society*, J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, eds. (London: Hodder, 2005).↑
2. For recent reviews, J. Jerit, J. Barabas and T. Bolsen, "Citizens, Knowledge, and the Information Environment," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 266-82; R. L. Luskin and J. Bullock, "'Don't Know' Means 'Don't Know,'" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The Midwest Political Science Association (2005).↑
3. V. Price and J. Zaller, "Who Gets the News? Alternative Measures of News Reception and Their Implications for Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1993): 133-64; M. X. Delli Carpini and S. Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).↑
4. Pew Research Center, "Public Knowledge of Current Affairs Little Changed by News and Information Revolutions: What Americans Know 1989-2007" (2007), <http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?PageID=1137>. (Accessed on 21/09/2007).↑
5. S. Kull, C. Ramsay and E. Lewis, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 118 (2004): 569-598.↑
6. A. Kohut, R. Toth and C. Bowman, *Mixed Messages about Press Freedom on Both Sides of the Atlantic* (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1994).↑
7. M. Dimock and S. Popkin, "Political Knowledge in Comparative Perspective," *Do The Media Govern?*, S. Iyengar and R. Reeves, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 217-224.↑
8. T. E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993); J. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).↑
9. P. Norris, "The Restless Searchlight: Network News Framing of the Post Cold-War World," *Political Communication*, 12 (1996): 357-370; D. Shanor, *News From Abroad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).↑
10. M. Kelly, G. Mazzoleni and D. McQuail, eds., *The Media in Europe*, 4th edition (London: Sage, 2004); J. Wieten, G.

Murdock and P. Dahlgren, *Television Across Europe* (London: Sage, 2000).↑

11. E. Seymour and S. Barnett, "Factual International Programming on UK Public Service TV, 2005" (London: Communication and Research Unit, University of Westminster, 2006).↑

12. For methodological details, see J. Curran, S. Iyengar, A. Brink Lund and I. Salovaara-Moring, "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study," *European Journal of Communication* 24 (2009): 5-26.↑

13. For a more technical description of the difficulty parameter, see J. Curran, S. Iyengar, K. Hahn, A. Lund and I. Salovaara-Moring, "Cross-National Versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information: A Media Systems Perspective," (Unpublished paper, Stanford University, 2009).↑

14. See J. Curran, S. Iyengar, A. Brink Lund and I. Salovaara-Moring, "Media System, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study," *European Journal of Communication* vol. 24 (2009): 5-26.↑

15. We add that a follow-up study — involving six countries — has yielded essentially identical results concerning the differential scope of the knowledge gap in the US and Europe.↑

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