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# SOURCES IN THE NEWS

## A comparative study

**Rodney Tiffen, Paul K. Jones, David Rowe, Toril Aalberg, Sharon Coen, James Curran, Kaori Hayashi, Shanto Iyengar, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Hernando Rojas, and Stuart Soroka**

*In analysing the news media's role in serving the functions associated with democratic citizenship, the number, diversity and range of news sources are central. Research conducted on sources has overwhelmingly focused on individual national systems. However, studying variations in news source patterns across national environments enhances understanding of the media's role. This article is based on a larger project, "Media System, Political Context and Informed Citizenship: A Comparative Study", involving 11 countries. It seeks, first, to identify differences between countries in the sources quoted in the news; second, to establish whether there are consistent differences across countries between types of media in their sourcing patterns; and, third, to trace any emergent consistent patterns of variation between different types of organization across different countries. A range of findings related to news media source practices is discussed that highlights variations and patterns across different media and countries, thereby questioning common generalizations about the use of sources by newspapers and public service broadcasters. Finally, a case is made for comparative media research that helps enhance the news media's key role as a social institution dedicated to informed citizenship.*

**KEYWORDS** comparative research; content analysis; informed citizenship; news; public service broadcasters (PSBs); sources

### **Introduction: Sources and News Power**

News is produced through a series of interactions between news organizations and their socio-cultural environments. These connections are not random or arbitrary—news organizations can only be viable and meet their necessary goals of frequent and reliable production if they establish regular channels of news gathering. "News mediates the wider socio-political environment to its audience, but in turn its content has been mediated by its reliance on how other institutions make information available" (Tiffen 1989, 32). Thus, according to Fishman (1980, 51–52):

It is useful then to think of the news as the outcome of two systems which produce accounts: a system of journalistic accounts and, underlying this, a system of bureaucratic accounts... This can be termed the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy.

News is, then, a parasitic institution; its product is the deeds and words of others, and its quality depends at least partly on the quality of the information environment in which it is operating. News content, therefore, always needs to be understood not only in the

context of what information is considered newsworthy, but of what information becomes available to the news media, and how. For Sigal (1986), “Sources make the news”, although obviously they do not necessarily generate the news that they seek.

Many analysts have examined the implications of this key relationship, and of how differential access to the news can help the powerful. Hall (1974) and Hall et al. (1978) argued that elite sources’ capacity to over-access news media meant that their definitions of a situation were “primary” in that they defined the semiotic field of public debate. Notably, for Hall and colleagues, the police’s role in crime reportage is that of “primary definers”, standing at the top of a “pyramid of access” to news media. They argued that professional journalistic practices designed to prevent bias—notably authoritative sourcing and verification to ensure balance—were the very means by which primary definition was secured. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) similarly criticized the “media-centrism” of much existing media research. However, they advocated—and practised empirically—a source-centred corrective to Hall that revealed the key role of a more contested definitional struggle through which source strategies were deployed to secure the desired type of news coverage.

McNair (1995, 137–143) and others have explored such definitional struggles in overtly political stories. The key source actors that McNair considers are political parties—in and out of government—and social movements. Gandy (1982) saw the most powerful sources as enjoying “information subsidies” where their advantages in generating news coverage strengthened their political influence, while Bennett (2007) has posited a theory of “indexing”, whereby news coverage reflects the degree of contention among policy makers. Where there is a powerful consensus, as in Washington in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, news coverage tends to be much less probing (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007). Commentators have used a range of imagery to capture the relationship between sources and journalists. Gans saw it as a “dance”, but one where most often sources do the leading (Gans 1979, 116). Less romantically, *Guardian* journalist Simon Hoggart envisaged a shared “snake pit” in which journalists and sources “slither all over each other, hissing with hatred but hopelessly knotted together” (Savage and Tiffen 2007, 79). Here, the power relationship is pivotal—and the news that results highly pertinent to the larger exercise of political power. But, as Phillips (2010, 88) identified in a recent study of online news sources, there has been a tendency in the sources literature to move away from the either–or, “binary power relationship between sources and journalists”. Equally, the study of source structures, relationships and activities—in all their complexity—remains central to understanding news content.

As Schlesinger, Tumber, and Murdock (1991) also pointed out, Hall’s argument was part of a contemporary struggle between Marxian and liberal-pluralist accounts of newsmaking, primarily within, we might add, the United States and United Kingdom. One of the many ensuing shifts in the literature has seen the waning of that binary and its replacement by a tussle between orthodox liberal and critical deliberative approaches—or “liberal” and “radical democratic”, as Curran (1991) (still drawing on elements of Marxian political economy) has described them. Phillips’s (2010) aforementioned reading of the sources literature, for example, places emphasis on the characterization of the role of the journalist in appealing to something like a fourth estate ideal. Thus, whether there is a diversity of sources in the news is a very pertinent research question. A second question is a variant of the first: is there a balance of sources in the news, or do some source types dominate? A third question has become even more pertinent in response to the rapidly

changing political economy of the news media. As news corporations have become ever more profit conscious, the pressure to increase journalistic productivity—in the sense of producing more usable copy every day—has substantially intensified (Davis 2002). But the danger of this generation of more stories more quickly is that the news media may act simply as passive conveyors of dominant sources' views. This line of criticism has been argued forcefully by Davies (2008) in his critique of “churnalism”, where pressures on journalists to accelerate and increase their production of news leads to less balancing and cross-checking of different views. Primary defining thereby resurfaces in a different guise.

*Comparative* sources research has seen only a gradual development. Considerable research of this kind has been undertaken on sources and news within particular countries or regions (e.g. Falkheimer 2005), including research assessing differences according to media platform (Carlson 2010), gender (Lachover 2005) and ethnicity (Zeldes and Fico 2005). To this extent the earlier Anglo-American research focus discussed above has been de-centred (cf. Franklin and Carlson 2011). However, there has been much less work comparing news sources and news coverage across a range of nation-states. Berkowitz's (2009, 107) recent overview of the sources literature concluded that there was little such research, noting “We are . . . left floundering for precise answers once leaving the comfort of a single home base for study”. At this point the sociology of sources confronts some of the classic dilemmas within comparative political communication regarding the appropriate selection of contexts and variables (Esser and Pfetsch 2004). Berkowitz (2009, 108–109), for example, resorts to testing a homogenizing version of globalization in which reporter–source relations are treated as “portable” across nations.

In terms of the media's role in serving the functions associated with democratic citizenship, then, several aspects of sources in the news are pertinent. If, for instance, the number, diversity and range of sources are regarded as a proxy for news media quality, then empirical evidence of variations across national environments can enable analytical conclusions to be drawn about the differential role of the media in informing the citizenry in different parts of the world within varying media and political systems. The data in the study reported here allow us, therefore, to compare in these respects different countries and different types of media and organization—and different types of state.

### **“Media System, Political Context and Informed Citizenship: A Comparative Study”: Research Design and Sample**

The research forming the basis of this article is part of a larger project, “Media System, Political Context and Informed Citizenship: A Comparative Study”, involving 11 countries: Australia, Canada, Colombia, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, South Korea, United Kingdom and United States (and which builds on an earlier six-country study on media and democracy—see Curran and Aalberg 2012). Its main focus, in the light of widespread, rapid change in media systems arising from digitization, deregulation, the remorseless advance of the internet, television channel proliferation and market development, is on assessing the persistence of national variations, especially given resilient public service broadcaster (PSB) sectors in some countries. The investigation addressed national differences in news diets and media use, and wider societal influences on news consumption in comparable countries. Thus, the participating countries have democratic political structures in common but also offer a range of key variations,

including those between partisan and consensual political cultures; collectivist and individualistic values; inegalitarian and more egalitarian social systems; majoritarian and proportional electoral systems; and advanced or developing economies. In taking account of national differences in the supply of, and demand for, news, the research sought to establish the influence of national political and media systems on citizen knowledge of public affairs. Thus, by extension, the project analysed the degree to which the organization of the media, and the societies in which they are embedded, affect the quality of political citizenship in a diverse range of national contexts, thereby allowing comparative conclusions to be drawn (see Curran et al. 2013a).

The research had two principal components—a content analysis and a survey of citizen knowledge and attitudes. The quantitative content analysis of major news media (broadcast, print and Web) was conducted in most countries during five consecutive weekdays in three non-sequential weeks in the period May to June 2010, followed quickly by a survey involving a representative population sample (a minimum of 1000 adults). The design involved each country conducting an analysis of two (evening peak-hour) television news programmes, one PSB channel (in Colombia and the United States there is no PSB TV of major consequence, so two commercial channels were analysed), and the leading commercial channel. In addition, two newspapers—a prestigious quality newspaper and, where applicable, a large-circulation popular newspaper (although in several countries it was more appropriate to study two quality newspapers)—were analysed, as well as the leading news website in each country. Curran et al. (2013a) provide greater methodological detail on the research design across the whole project.

The practical constraints confronting a research project on the news media involving so many countries are considerable. While the survey was conducted in all 11 countries, some only had sufficient resources to complete part of the content analysis—undertaking two weeks of coding rather than three, or only coding TV, or TV and website. There was insufficient data on sources from Norway and the United States to include in this article. Hence, only nine countries are represented in Table 1. Furthermore, the need to co-ordinate common timing of the sampling inevitably entailed intensive coverage of only a limited time period, meaning that the results could be skewed by whatever stories were dominating the news at that time. But sourcing patterns—and other aspects of journalistic practice and

**TABLE 1**  
Total news stories

Country	Total	TV total	TV composition	Newspaper total	Newspaper composition	News website
Australia	3121	322	PSB + Comml	2670	1 Qual + 1 Pop	129
Canada	494	494	PSB + Comml	0	–	0
Colombia	1294	639	2 Comml	0	–	655
Greece	3644	552	PSB + 2 Comml	2497	2 Qual	483
India	2972	336	PSB + Comml	2306	1 Qual + 1 Pop	324
Italy	3479	612	PSB + Comml	2462	2 Qual	405
Japan	4493	356	PSB + Comml	3952	2 Qual	185
South Korea	5222	814	PSB + Comml	3355	2 Qual	1053
United Kingdom	5090	354	PSB + Comml	4075	1 Qual + 1 Pop	658
Total	29,809	4683		21,224		3892

PSB, public service broadcaster; Comml, commercial; Qual, quality; Pop, popular.

news presentation—tend to be recurring, and so less affected by the vagaries of the news focus of the moment. Such methodological variations inevitably impose limits on the conclusions that can be drawn from the content analysis findings. However, these flaws and limits are outweighed by the advantages of creating a comparative dataset of reasonable robustness, and in the context of a rare opportunity for geographically dispersed media researchers to collaborate on a common project seeking to advance crucial knowledge of the relationship between media systems and the quality of contemporary citizenship.

Even in the unlikely event that such a large, ambitious project could be executed flawlessly, the limits of content analysis methodology need to be acknowledged. Content analysis certainly cannot probe directly many significant issues of news quality—for example, how accurately or fairly sources are reported, nor whether confidences are honoured, nor interrogate media texts and textual relations in a manner that attends fully to their depth and complexity. Content analysis can only, therefore, as noted above, provide proxy indicators of news quality. This article uses only the content analysis data from the study to examine the media's use of sources in the countries sampled. It has three central research concerns in, first, seeking to identify differences between countries in the sources that are quoted in the news; second, to establish whether there are consistent differences between types of media in different countries in their sourcing patterns; and, third, to trace any emergent consistent patterns of difference between different types of organization (e.g. PSB compared with commercial television channels) across different countries. Measures of source complexity, balance and inclusion were constructed, because examining sources can (at least partially) illuminate levels of active news gathering, the structural balance of news presentations, inclusiveness in the range of sources used, and so on.

Table 1 outlines the sample on which the results in this article are based. One factor that should be noted is that newspapers have a far greater number of stories than other media, and so tend to overwhelm television and websites in terms of total stories, thereby making some country comparisons problematic when there is a sharp contrast between media. All these *caveats* demonstrate that continuing caution in extrapolating results from the sample content analysis must be exercised.

### *Number of Sources*

The simplest but a nonetheless revealing measure of sources in the news is the number cited in a news story. Often, a story based on a single source allows that source's view of events to be carried unchallenged, and reflects a passive orientation whereby news acts as a conveyor belt rather than a testing ground for what powerful figures are saying. On the other hand, using multiple sources sometimes means that the media are providing checks on what is said, bringing more variety and balance to the views presented. Multiple sources also often indicate a more active news media orientation as they seek out information themselves rather than relying on limited, privileged sources or reproducing media releases. Increasing pressures on journalistic "productivity", according to Davis (2002), are leading journalists to produce far more words per day than in the past, but with the risk that there is less rigorous verification and cross-checking.

The first three columns of Table 2 report the mean number of sources for each medium in each country, ranked according to the number in TV news. As can be seen, the average number of sources per story is somewhat higher for TV than for newspapers. This

**TABLE 2**  
Mean number of sources per story

Country	All items			"Normal" items only		
	TV	Newspaper	Web	TV	Newspaper	Web
Greece	4.03	1.89	1.89	4.03	2.23	2.03
Japan	3.46	1.62	1.84	3.73	1.65	1.84
United Kingdom	2.76	1.69	3.70	3.30	1.97	4.57
Canada	2.47	–	–	3.24	–	–
Australia	2.46	1.47	2.06	2.58	1.64	2.10
South Korea	1.72	1.49	1.32	1.80	1.65	1.41
Italy	1.46	2.19	0.63	1.62	2.45	0.75
India	1.29	1.19	0.99	1.42	1.28	1.03
Colombia	1.06	–	1.58	1.26	–	1.63
Total	2.28	1.65	1.80	2.56	1.81	1.95

Ordered according to mean for "all TV items".

tendency holds in the data for all countries except Italy. There are many types of item in the news, such as topical cartoons or photographs, as well as news briefs, which tend to be found more in newspapers than on TV, and which by their nature usually have no or only a single source. The last three columns eliminate such items, and so raise the mean number of sources per story, but their removal does not diminish the differences between the media.

The range between countries is considerable. Concentrating on television (although the rankings for the other media are similar), Colombia and India have only a small number of sources per story. Greece is by a long distance at the top, but three other countries (Japan, United Kingdom and Canada) average more than three sources per "normal" story in TV news. No consistent difference was found between the PSB and commercial TV news services in most countries. The most substantial difference is in the United Kingdom, where the BBC has more complex sourcing than ITV (3.0: 2.2), with a tendency in the same direction in Australia for the ABC and Channel Seven (2.6: 2.3). Those countries also show a similar difference in the sourcing patterns of qualities and tabloids (2.0: 1.3 sources per story in Australia; and 1.8: 1.2 in the United Kingdom). In most other countries, the two newspapers are competing quality newspapers, and show no difference in patterns of sourcing.

### *Conflict and Balance Between Sources*

While number of sources is the starting point for balanced and diverse views in the news, the next step is examining whether and how conflicting views are presented. In stories presented as involving no conflict between sources, the subject matter and claims pertaining to them are treated as unproblematic, sometimes meaning that only one side, or a partial viewpoint, is given. Table 3 ranks the sample countries on whether there is any conflict between sources, and can be seen to fall into several clusters. Greece, Australia and Canada most often present some conflict between sources, while South Korea and Colombia are at the other extreme, with conflict among sources present in few stories (India is almost in this group, except that its commercial TV news is unlike the other media organizations in that country, which tempers its national result). The middle group—Italy,

**TABLE 3**  
Stories with no conflict between sources (%)

Country	Total	PSB TV	Commercial TV	Quality paper	Second paper	Web page
Greece	50	28	33	63	46	68
Australia	55	38	45	54	61	57
Canada	57	57	57	—	—	—
Italy	67	82	77	62	68	50
Japan	72	61	60	74	73	75
United Kingdom	72	38	54	69	84	62
India	75	83	38	74	84	65
Colombia	87	95	88	—	—	84
South Korea	95	96	97	92	96	96
Total	71	67	65	70	73	73

Japan and the United Kingdom—have approximately 7 in 10 stories not featuring conflict. Across media within nations, however, there are variations, with commercial TV more likely not to present conflict between sources than the public broadcaster in the United Kingdom, Greece and Australia, while the British and Indian tabloids are particularly likely to present sources' views without apparent conflict.

Tables 4 and 5 were constructed by selecting only those stories involving conflict between sources. It can be seen from Table 4 that India broadly conforms to the conflict-free style of South Korean and Colombian news presentations in that, in almost 9 out of 10 stories, only one side of the conflict is presented. However, the ordering across the three columns is not consistent, with Australia heading the group in presenting two or more sides roughly equally, while also having one of the highest proportions presenting only one side, because few stories figure in the middle column (that is, more than one side is represented, but one side predominating). The other countries have more stories in this middle column where both sides are mentioned, but there is a considerable range here, from approximately half of the stories in Canada to less than a quarter in Japan.

Table 5 again shows that the United Kingdom and Australia have a similar pattern with regard to sources: both commercial TV and tabloid newspapers are more likely than their public and quality counterparts to give only one side of a conflict. Here the difference between PSBs and commercial broadcasters is marked. This distribution also applies to Indian TV, but it is the reverse for its newspapers. In most other countries' television there is no difference, but in Italy both PSB television and quality newspapers are more likely, in

**TABLE 4**  
Balance between sources in stories involving conflict

Country	Quoted equally	Mainly one side	Only one quoted
Australia	49	11	40
Canada	43	52	5
Japan	43	24	33
Italy	42	27	31
Greece	39	31	30
United Kingdom	27	48	25
India	8	5	87

Figures are for all media. South Korea and Colombia are excluded because of small numbers. Rows sum to 100.



**TABLE 5**

Balance in stories involving conflict: percentage reporting only one side in stories involving conflict

Country	Total	PSB TV	Commercial TV	Quality paper	Second paper	Web page
Canada	5	5	5	—	—	—
United Kingdom	25	19	33	20	33	23
Greece	30	3	2	10	60	18
Italy	31	50	16	31	22	59
Japan	33	21	23	33	37	38
Australia	40	36	47	36	45	50
India	87	61	81	96	69	95

South Korea and Colombia are excluded because of small numbers.

a conflictual story, to cover only one side when compared with commercial television and tabloid newspapers.

### *Types of Source 1—Political and Institutional Sources*

Apart from examining the number and balance of sources in the news, other issues revolve around whose voices are heard. Are the main currents of opinion present, and are major political constituencies represented? Because news is generally dominated by institutional sources (Schudson 1995, 2011), it is important to investigate whether media institutions simply reflect the views of institutions of government to the general populace—the core of the “primary definers” thesis discussed earlier.

In addressing the news media’s relationships with institutions as sources within the political process, Table 6A examines political and institutional sources in the news (in this, and the following tables, only domestic sources are included). The first column reports the proportion of domestic sources that are political, including both national and sub-national levels of government, and encompassing government and opposition politicians. The second column examines the proportion of bureaucratic sources, ranging from Treasury to the military, as well as government agencies, while the third concerns judicial sources (going beyond strictly institutional sources in incorporating people involved in the judicial process, such as victims, the accused and witnesses in court proceedings). It is apparent that differences in sources in this table partly reflect those in story topics: for example, the low ranking of Australia in political sources reflects the lower proportion devoted to

**TABLE 6A**

Official sources in the news: percentage of all domestic sources cited in all stories

Country	Political	Public service	Judicial
Greece	39	4	8
Italy	37	4	13
Colombia	34	7	23
South Korea	32	13	8
Japan	31	9	15
India	30	12	14
Canada	27	6	13
United Kingdom	27	6	21
Australia	21	8	16

politics in its news. Similarly, the high proportion of judicial sources in Colombia and the United Kingdom reflect correspondingly high levels of crime news in those countries. Therefore, a second, more precise set of comparisons seeks to control for this variable by appraising patterns of sourcing when the media are covering similar topics. For this reason, [Table 6B](#) includes only stories that involve politics and public policy, and gives the proportions of all domestic sources of these three source sets for these stories.

Unsurprisingly, the proportion of judicial sources drops sharply, meaning that only in Colombia do they exceed 5 per cent. Notably, however, public service sources do not increase substantially, thereby reflecting their presence in other areas of news. Given the importance of public bureaucracy to the political process, and the amount of policy, operational and communicative expertise that it possesses, these proportions seem surprisingly low. Interestingly, Japan and South Korea, perhaps the two countries where public respect is most accorded to state bureaucracy, have the highest proportion of public service sources. Political sources, undifferentiated, dominate in all countries, with the proportions relatively tightly grouped between 50 and 60 per cent, except for Australia.

One way of approaching the analysis of political balance and debate, and the degree of government domination, is to examine the relative presence of politicians from the governing party compared with those from the opposition. [Table 7](#) shows that, at national level, in all countries government sources outnumber opposition sources, and by a broad average of two to one. Because governments make policies, take actions that affect the wider society, and make many announcements that are not seen as controversial, such a disparity might be regarded as “normal” in a democratic society.

However, there is still a considerable range, with India and Japan in particular having a four-to-one ratio of government to opposition sources. This is an area where there is also considerable variation within countries, although the direction of difference is not constant. In Australia, for example, the commercial TV news is the only one where (conservative) opposition sources form a majority, while the PSB channel and the two newspapers come close to the two-thirds government average across the sample countries. In Greece, the two TV channels and one newspaper all have a proportion of government sources at just below 60 per cent, while the other newspaper (77 per cent) and the Web page (71 per cent) rank considerably higher. In South Korea, although the other four media have just below 70 per cent devoted to government sources on average, the website devotes a very high 88 per cent to them. Italy has the single most dramatic

**TABLE 6B**

Official sources in political and policy news: percentage of all domestic sources cited where the topic is politically and policy-related

Country	Political	Public service	Judicial
Colombia	60	6	10
Italy	59	4	3
South Korea	57	11	4
United Kingdom	56	4	2
Japan	55	11	2
Canada	52	5	5
Greece	50	3	2
India	50	8	4
Australia	37	9	2

**TABLE 7**  
Source balance at national level: government–opposition

Country	%
India	82–18
Japan	80–20
Italy	76–23
United Kingdom	72–27
South Korea	70–30
Australia	68–32
Greece	64–36
Canada	62–38
Colombia	61–39

result. While government sources enjoy a considerable majority in all Italian media (averaging around 75 per cent), on commercial TV they form 98 per cent of sources cited, leaving the opposition just 2 per cent. The country-specific factor of having the dominant media proprietor, Silvio Berlusconi, as Prime Minister at the time of the content analysis, is an obvious explanation for this finding, although the characteristics of its political and media systems suggest that governing party domination is of longer standing (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

When the focus shifts, though, from examining the balance at national to a sub-national level, for regional and local government—a much smaller number of stories—the ratios are quite different. As Table 8 shows, opposition voices are much less present in this domain, with seven of the nine countries having 88 per cent and above government source citation. In South Korea especially, and also in India, these ratios are much smaller, but elsewhere there is a general sharp movement towards greater government dominance at sub-national level.

### *Types of Source 2—Civil Society*

Two questions relevant to the quality of policy debate concern the extent to which government sources dominate news coverage, and whether political parties are central to framing it. Conversely, is there a wider range of expertise, perspectives and interests that is drawn upon by the news media? Is politics a game for formal political parties and the preserve of political institutions, or does political reporting also incorporate concerns that emanate from the wider society? Although, of course, these concerns may come from

**TABLE 8**  
Source balance at sub-national level: government–opposition

Country	%
Colombia	99–1
Japan	96–4
United Kingdom	93–7
Greece	92–8
Italy	91–9
Australia	88–12
Canada	88–12
India	76–24
South Korea	54–46

vested interests, they may nonetheless reflect strong social constituencies and currents of opinion that should be given voice in the media in a democracy. In pursuing such wider representation, [Tables 9A](#) and [9B](#) put all such groups together under the heading civil society in the first column, with the other four columns providing its constituent parts. The first embraces interest groups and social movements; the second comprises business sources; and the third external experts—a very broadly defined group outside government that ranges from scientists to opinion pollsters and economic commentators (the latter often directly linked to large financial private organizations). Finally, there is a residual category listing all other sources. Overwhelmingly, this column consists of two main groups—*vox populi*-type sources from the public and celebrities, which may be associated with what [Turner \(2010\)](#) has called the “demotic turn” away from the usual formal political authorities in favour of “ordinary people” and celebrities.

As in [Table 6A](#), the differences in sourcing in [Table 9A](#) reflect to some degree the subject of what is reported, while in [Table 9B](#), the way in which politics and policy is reported is the focus. In both cases, civil society sources are rarest in Colombia, where only in the use of external experts does the score approach other countries. The sample countries fall into two broad groups regarding the extent to which interest groups are represented in political reporting. Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and Italy are all in double figures with respect to interest group sources, while the other countries are in single figures. Japan and South Korea—the countries noted earlier with a high figure for bureaucratic sources—are very low in the use of interest group sources in the media, as they are (like nearly all sampled countries) in reporting business sources. All countries are more likely to make some use of external experts, with Australia and Greece leading the way in this area (the latter figure perhaps attributable to its current acute economic crisis). As noted above, no other media outlet comes close to Italian commercial TV in allowing government sources to dominate. In comprising fully 84 per cent of all sources, government voices not only squeeze out the opposition (1 per cent), but also wider civil society and the bureaucracy. Non-government sources combined constituted just 16 per cent of the total compared with an average of over 50 per cent for the other Italian media, and for most other countries.

In exploring the presence of civil society among news sources further, [Tables 10A–10D](#) show the relative presence of the corresponding types of voice in political/policy news coverage for each country regarding their different media. The general observed

**TABLE 9A**

Civil society sources in the news: percentage of all domestic sources cited in all stories

Country	Total	Interest groups	Business	External experts	All other
Australia	55	9	15	19	12
Canada	54	10	8	15	21
Greece	49	8	4	23	14
South Korea	47	4	8	23	8
Italy	46	10	8	13	15
United Kingdom	46	10	8	15	12
India	45	6	13	14	13
Japan	45	5	12	17	12
Colombia	36	6	5	14	12

Columns 2–5 sum to equal column 1.

**TABLE 9B**

Civil society sources in political and policy news: percentage of all domestic sources cited in political and policy stories

Country	Total	Interest groups	Business	External experts	All other
Australia	52	14	9	19	10
Greece	45	9	3	21	12
United Kingdom	39	11	3	16	8
Canada	38	12	2	12	12
India	38	7	4	13	12
Italy	34	11	3	12	8
Japan	33	4	3	15	11
South Korea	27	5	3	12	8
Colombia	24	5	3	12	5

Columns 2–5 sum to equal column 1.

tendency—although there are many exceptions—is that these types of source, which do not necessarily generate desirable news visibility and are not always supported by strong public relations machines, are covered more in newspapers than in television news. This finding holds in all countries with respect to the public service, interest groups and external experts, although it is much more marked in some than in others.

While news websites vary greatly between countries regarding the independent news-gathering capacity that they possess, overall they display the greatest use of independent experts as sources. This finding may be attributable to the attractiveness of using media releases and interviews with independent experts as an easy way of gathering material where there are small numbers of employed journalists. In contrast, the mainstream media, especially newspapers, tend to have a much larger journalistic work force (although one that has been shrinking rapidly in Western countries over the last decade; Rowe 2011). In several countries, websites are the highest in using external experts, including the United Kingdom (21 per cent compared with an average of 15 per cent for the other four organizations); Greece (38 per cent compared with TV 5 per cent and the newspapers 27 per cent); Australia (on a small sample, 44 per cent compared with around 16 per cent for the other four); and Colombia (16 per cent compared with the TV channels' 7 per cent). The use of these sources also tends to be more prevalent among PSBs than commercial broadcasters, although the pattern is far from uniform. This is the only case among the variables examined displaying clear differences between the two Canadian TV channels, while the trend is also strong in the United Kingdom and Australia, but not in the other countries. Overall, then, the use of civil society and bureaucratic sources in political/policy news stories shows more variation between media within countries than the earlier measures of source patterning.

For Tables 10A–10D, the first TV channel is a PSB with the exception of Colombia, where both channels are commercial.

Apart from the civil society categories above, a key issue in analysing news coverage is the inclusiveness of the sources in the news and whether different groups' perspectives and concerns are reflected. The extent of this inclusiveness is often hard to assess—the class and ethnic backgrounds of sources are not usually explicitly mentioned. It is usually (though not infallibly) easier to know the sex/gender of the sources being cited. Table 11 reports on the percentage of stories citing at least one female source, having eliminated

**TABLE 10A**  
Public service sources in political/policy news (%)

Country	First TV channel	Commercial TV	First newspaper	Second newspaper	Website
South Korea	10.6	3.1	16.0	8.1	17.6
Australia	8.3	4.7	9.3	11.0	5.9
Canada	5.4	3.4	–	–	–
India	5.1	9.3	10.5	5.2	6.5
Japan	3.1	5.0	11.9	12.5	4.5
Colombia	2.9	7.6			7.2
United Kingdom	2.5	0	4.6	2.7	5.6
Greece	1.1	1.3	3.9	2.7	5.6
Italy	0	2.0	6.8	3.6	1.5

**TABLE 10B**  
Interest group and social movement sources in political/policy news (%)

Country	First TV channel	Commercial TV	First newspaper	Second newspaper	Website
Canada	14.4	6.9	–	–	–
Greece	14.1	18.8	9.5	4.1	8.8
Australia	10.7	6.3	17.5	11.3	11.8
Italy	9.6	6.9	10.8	12.2	9.0
United Kingdom	8.4	4.3	12.9	6.8	13.2
India	5.1	7.0	8.4	4.6	6.5
Colombia	3.7	2.1	–	–	6.9
Japan	2.0	2.5	5.2	4.8	0
South Korea	1.8	8.0	4.7	5.1	4.6

**TABLE 10C**  
Business sources in political/policy news (%)

Country	First TV channel	Commercial TV	First newspaper	Second newspaper	Website
Australia	11.9	4.7	7.8	10.1	8.8
India	3.4	2.3	3.2	13.7	3.9
Japan	3.1	3.3	2.9	4.2	0
South Korea	2.7	2.5	4.8	2.1	7.2
Canada	2.7	1.7	–	–	–
Greece	2.2	3.2	1.3	3.0	4.2
Colombia	2.2	0.7	–	–	4.7
Italy	0.7	0	3.6	4.1	1.5
United Kingdom	0	2.9	3.1	5.1	3.6

those sources where gender could not be reliably assigned from cues given in the story. It should be noted that the percentage of women sources is lower than these figures, because many of these stories also quoted a male source. One striking finding from [Table 11](#) is that television cites females substantially more than newspapers or the internet. This pattern holds for every country except Italy, where the percentages are reversed. In some countries the lesser coverage of female sources in newspapers is quite

**TABLE 10D**

External experts as sources in political/policy news (%)

Country	First TV channel	Commercial TV	First newspaper	Second newspaper	Website
Italy	16.3	2.0	10.8	15.5	7.5
United Kingdom	16.0	12.9	16.0	13.7	21.2
Australia	15.5	14.1	20.0	15.0	44.1
Canada	14.4	8.6	—	—	—
South Korea	9.7	6.1	14.5	11.6	9.8
Colombia	7.4	6.2	—	—	16.2
Japan	6.1	13.3	17.3	14.3	6.8
Greece	5.9	4.5	29.5	25.1	37.7
India	1.7	9.3	12.7	19.6	5.2

**TABLE 11**

Gender: percentage of stories where a woman is quoted or cited

Country	All	TV	Newspaper	Web
Japan	31	50	27	42
Australia	32	49	29	30
Canada	47	47	—	—
United Kingdom	28	37	25	30
Greece	26	33	21	19
India	15	33	12	16
Colombia	24	28	—	21
Italy	30	21	34	29
South Korea	15	17	13	21
Total	26	32	23	23

pronounced, particularly in Japan and Australia, where the difference is a full 20 percentage points or more. Within each medium, the differences between organizations in each country are negligible.

### Conclusion: Lessons from Comparative Research on News Sources

The data in this article highlight the persistence of local/national differences in news media despite the claimed effects of advancing globalization, networking and convergence (Castells 2009). Thus, the first lesson that can be drawn is that news practices—and hence, in important ways, news content—are far from uniform in the sampled democracies. These research findings constitute another warning against unthinking generalization, and the idea that social scientists, including media researchers, can extrapolate simply from Anglo-American democracies as if they are a global norm. Curran and Park (2000) have called for a “de-Westernising” of media studies, and this comparative research supports that position, as well as a broader one that demands close empirical attention to highly variable media and political environments in the task of eliciting their complexities and, not uncommonly, their inconsistencies and apparent contradictions.

In going further than discerning national differences regarding news media sources, we have also attempted to establish whether there are consistent differences regarding

sources between types of media and media organization in different countries. In each of the media, there are important differences. For example, the websites vary in their roles and capacities in these countries in ways that are not evident simply from content analysis; while some are essentially derivative, others have developed considerable independent news-gathering capacities (for further discussion of news source engagement with online media, see Curran et al. 2013b). The conventional wisdom is that newspapers exhibit superior depth. For example, the Pew (2006) *State of the News Media* report in the United States concluded that “newspaper readers on balance learn about the widest range of topics and get the deepest sourcing and the most angles on the news”. Our study did not find such a consistent pattern. Indeed, especially in the tabloid press in Australia and the United Kingdom, fewer sources were cited and fewer balancing perspectives offered than was the case with television. On the other hand, bureaucratic and civil society sources tend to be more prevalent in newspapers, and these often provide more context, information and expertise. This is a question of the quality and type of source, not just the quantity, a finding that highlights the limitations of simply using the number of sources accessed by the media as a proxy for news story quality.

In relation to types of media organization and news source patterns, the findings also offer a warning against certain Eurocentric assumptions concerning public PSBs (Jones 2000). Not all have enjoyed a BBC-like hegemony nor, indeed, are public–commercial hybrids necessarily a product of successful public service-based regulation. Especially after several decades of deregulation, the role of PSBs varies considerably across countries, with commercial and public service broadcasters closer to each other in some countries, while in others PSB priorities are more distinctive. Although stark contrasts in our data are not common, a rough correlation between the number, type and use of sources and the relative strength of PSB in each country can be proposed. In a parallel analysis within our 11-nation project by Soroka et al. (2012) that focused on the relationship between PSBs and public knowledge, the combination of nation and strength of the PSB system was found to be strong. In that study the “PSB effect” was markedly greater

in countries where the public broadcasters are funded mainly if not exclusively by public funds, and where they also have *de jure* independence from government. Essentially, freedom from interference by market forces and government seems to lead to a form of public broadcasting that is markedly “better” than its commercial rivals. (Soroka et al. 2012, 19)

A similar patterning began to emerge in our research in Table 5’s findings regarding the prevalence of single-sourced stories involving conflict in commercial when compared to PSB television. The United Kingdom (and Australia and India) had the strongest contrast, with their PSBs leading the commercials in source diversity; Canada and Japan (and Greece) had negligible differences, while in Italy the PSBs were far more single source-dependent than the commercial sector. This distribution broadly corresponds to the typology of Soroka et al. A further factor may be the strong charter requirements of such PSBs to ensure balanced reporting, as compared to the level of content regulation of commercial broadcasters.

Our analysis contributes to the still-sparse comparative knowledge of the news media in their national environments, and illuminates the variable role of the news media in different countries in giving voice to various groups in both state and civil society. The over-representation of certain source types, especially governmental, in some countries



(the most striking case here being Italy) illuminates state–civil society structures of power. In this way, it is hoped that this comparative research can contribute to the broader task of improvement of news media practices within and across national media systems for the benefit of their citizenries. At the same time, in advancing understanding of the relations between news media, politics and socio-cultural systems (as was shown in relation to PSBs), studies of this kind can highlight the news media’s key role as a social institution dedicated to informed citizenship.

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