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After All This Time? The Impact of Media and Political History on Political News Coverage in Twelve Western Countries

Sjifra E. de Leeuw, Rachid Azrout, Roderik Rekker & Joost van Spanje

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Abstract

Historical classifications of journalistic traditions are the backbone of comparative explanations for news coverage. This study assesses the validity of the dominant media systems framework and proposes and tests a novel framework, which states that a history of authoritarianism also affects today’s coverage. To facilitate a clean cross-national comparison, we focus on the same person and measurement in twelve Western countries, i.e. the use of the pejorative terms ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents to describe Donald Trump. Our automated – and manually validated – content analysis (2016–2018; \(N = 27,631\)) shows that content varies along with countries’ media and political history: pejoration is more common in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism and in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere. Newspapers’ ideology does not matter, regardless of countries’ level of political parallelism or experiences with authoritarianism. Combined, we provide new methodological and theoretical handles to further research on legacy effects.

Keywords: models of journalism; media systems; authoritarian legacies; comparative research; systematic content analysis.

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Introduction

Why does news appear in different forms in different countries? In *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm proposed that what we read in the paper today is the product of a historic interplay between press, government and society. This work would later inspire Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s (2004) *Comparing Media Systems*, which among other things argued that countries’ media history shapes content features of news coverage. However, discouraged by the lack of standardized measurements of news content (Norris, 2009) and growing concerns over its relevance in today’s context of globalization (Blumler & Gurevich, 2011; Hallin & Mancini, 2012), little theoretical progress has been made in this area of research since then. To date, countries’ media history is the most prominent and virtually uncontested comparative framework (e.g., Benson, 2004; Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008) while various other important historical differences between countries have remained largely unexplored. In this study, we propose and demonstrate empirically that countries’ political history is an equally viable explanation for what we read in the papers today. In particular, we contend that historical experiences with authoritarianism leave such deep-seated national traumas that they serve as recurring frames of interpretation in contemporary news coverage.

The purpose of the present study is therefore to assess the impact of countries’ media and political history on the content of political news coverage. To this end, we develop a highly standardized design, which holds both the object of coverage and the measurement constant across all countries under investigation. We do so by focusing on a very specific feature of news content, namely the use of pejorative terms that are known to provoke a sense of disgust in all established democracies, namely ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents in news coverage of one single person. Inspired by Shoemaker and Reese’s (1991) Hierarchy of Influences Model, we lay out two explanations for how these historical legacies shape the use of pejoration in news content. Following Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) work, we argue that in countries where journalistic standards promote a detached style of writing, journalists are more likely to avoid these terms than elsewhere. Furthermore, based on insights from literature on authoritarian legacies (e.g., Art, 2005; Costa Pinto, 2010;
Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2017), we contend that pejoration is more common in former authoritarian countries, where journalists are more likely to associate the object of coverage with historical examples of authoritarianism.

Given its comparative angle, this study speaks to several longstanding debates in communication science, theoretically, empirically and methodologically. Theoretically, our study adds by developing a novel comparative historical framework. More importantly, by doing so, we demonstrate that the Hierarchy of Influences Model permits the translation of insights from other disciplines to new falsifiable comparative frameworks in the field of communication science. This is especially important, given the limited number of theoretical contributions in this area (Norris, 2009). Empirically, this study provides a more comprehensive validation of Hallin and Mancini’s classification than earlier efforts, which have been confined to comparisons of coverage of a limited number (six at most) of prototypical examples of each media system (e.g., Esser & Umbricht, 2013; Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008). Expanding the geographic scope to twelve countries enables us to assess the viability of this classification in less prototypical cases.

Methodologically, we address two problems that these earlier efforts to validate the classification of Hallin and Mancini as well as any other existing comparative analysis of news coverage have faced, which in survey research are often qualified as problems of sample inequivalence – or the incomparability of the units of analysis – and measurement inequivalence. We show that high levels of sample and measurement equivalence can be achieved by focusing on coverage of a single person who (1) has attracted an extensive amount of attention in news media in various countries and (2) has been frequently labelled with terms that have the same connotation in all countries. United States President Donald Trump is arguably one of the very few – if not the only – cases that satisfies these criteria. We use the frequent use of the pejorative terms ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents to describe Trump to our advantage to conduct a systematic automated – and manually validated – content analysis of 27,631 articles in 35 newspapers in twelve Western countries (2016–2018).
Theory and Hypotheses

Explaining Cross-National Differences in Coverage: The Hierarchy of Influences Model

In their book Mediating the Message Shoemaker and Reese (1991) lay out the idea of a ‘Hierarchy of Influences’. News content, they argue, is the product of five ‘levels’ of influences, i.e.: characteristics of individual journalists, media routines, organizational characteristics, extra-media influences and contextual influences. Historical comparative explanations can be characterized as contextual influences. Such explanations build upon the assertion that historical experiences affect countries’ prevailing cultural paradigm, or a societal agreement on what is acceptable (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). As a result of such experiences, media and non-media actors within the same country may maintain similar norms (Cook, 1998).

Among other things, these norms may dictate to what degree and under what circumstances it is acceptable to use pejorative terms that are known to provoke a sense of disgust among the reader, such as ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents. Even when justified, such words are deeply discrediting and imply that an actor’s behavior is beyond the pale. Given these connotations, in most cases the use of these terms arguably requires a conscious decision on the part of the journalist. In this section, we develop to historical explanations for the use of pejorative terms in news content.

Media history. The prevailing comparative explanation of media coverage is discussed in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) book Comparing Media Systems. These scholars argue that journalistic practices and output should be viewed as an outcome of countries’ media history. One such outcome is the promotion of a detached style of writing, which includes avoiding pejorative terms. While not covering the full extent of countries’ media history, in this study we focus on the two most frequently recalled historical developments arguably contributing to the prevalence of this journalistic style, namely journalistic professionalism and political parallelism.
First, the origin of this style of writing can be traced back to the professional development of journalism. In Anglo-Saxon and to a lesser degree continental Western European countries, press historically operated in favorable market conditions. This facilitated the rise of ‘journalistic professionalism’, i.e. a professional network with its own educational, organizational and normative framework, all emphasizing the distinction between news and opinion (Schiller, 1981). By contrast, news media in Southern Europe catered to a small elite public and strongly relied on contributions of skilled writers and politicians. According to various accounts, this resulted in an opinion-oriented style of journalism (Chalaby, 1996; Mancini, 2000, 2007) with “a substantial emphasis to commentary and distinct political tendencies” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.98).

It is plausible that journalistic professionalism discourages the use of pejorative terms at several levels of the Hierarchy of Influences Model. Professionalism first and foremost reduces the extra-media influence of an important source of partiality, namely politics. It is also linked to the implementation of a code of ethics, which often prescribes a detached style of writing. This code is subsequently embedded in media routines, in which pejorative terms are likely to be edited out. On the individual level, professionalism promotes journalists’ self-conceptions as detached observers (Kepplinger & Köcher, 1990), which encourages avoiding pejorative terms.

Various studies show that role conceptions of journalists as detached observers are most common in countries with high levels of professionalism (Köcher, 1986; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Van Dalen, Albæk & De Vreese, 2011). Studies drawing on comparisons of news coverage furthermore demonstrate that professionalism affects the prevailing style of journalism. These studies show that opinionated reporting styles (Esser & Umbricht, 2013) and critical news content (Benson, 2010; Benson & Hallin, 2007) are least common in prototypical examples of countries with high levels of professionalism. Tied back to pejoration, we can expect that:

**H1a**: The lower countries’ level of journalistic professionalism, the higher the prevalence of pejoration in political news coverage.
Media systems also differ in their ties between parties and press. The concept ‘party-press parallelism’ was first coined by Seymour-Ure (1974) to describe the close alignment of parties and press in Britain. Hallin and Mancini (2004) later use the concept ‘political parallelism’ to describe the general bonds between press and ideologies. Parallelism is strongest when newspapers defend only one political-ideological current and weakest when they remain fully impartial. Strong parallelism is typically found in Southern Europe, medium levels in continental Western Europe and weak parallelism in most Anglo-Saxon countries.

Parallelism may influence the use of pejoration, because it affects how newspapers respond to ideas and persons that do not share their own ideological convictions. When parallelism is weak, newspapers typically aim to provide balanced access to different ideological voices, which is characterized as a situation of ‘internal pluralism’. When parallelism is strong, newspapers only present their own ideology. Pluralism can only be achieved externally, with different newspapers presenting different ideologies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). It is therefore plausible that newspapers’ ideology matters more in countries with high levels of parallelism than elsewhere.

Parallelism may affect decisions to use pejorative terms at all levels of the Hierarchy of Influences Model. Strong parallelism implies a strong hold of parties on news media, which encourages the production of partisan content. This hold is also sustained on an organizational level, where poorly paid jobs in journalism serve as a springboard to a career in politics (Ortiz, 1995). Within media routines, pejoration of actors with other ideological beliefs is less likely to be edited out. Finally, parallelism promotes journalists’ self-conceptions as political advocates, justifying the delegitimization of other ideological views (Hallin, 1986).

Although scholarship agrees that countries’ media system affects role conceptions of journalists as political advocates (e.g., Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Van Dalen et al., 2012), evidence that these conceptions influence the content journalists produce is mixed (see Van Dalen et al., 2012; Tandoc et al, 2013). In a comparative analysis of news coverage, on the
other hand, Benson and Hallin (2007) show that partisan content is more common in France, a country with high levels of parallelism, than in the United States, a country with low levels. In spite of this mixed evidence, it is likely that the higher the level of parallelism, the more newspapers’ ideological alignment matters. This should mean that, for example, the difference in the prevalence of pejorative coverage between the Toronto Star (left) and the National Post (right) – both published in Canada, a country with low levels of parallelism – is less pronounced than that between the French papers Le Monde (left) and Le Figaro (right). We therefore expect that:

**H1b:** The higher countries’ level of political parallelism, the more pronounced the difference in pejoration between left- and right-leaning newspapers.

Political history. Countries’ political history may also contribute to what degree it is deemed acceptable to use pejorative terms. Of particular importance in the context of Western democracies are historical experiences with right-authoritarianism. In the interwar period, fascism was the leading ideology in Austria, Germany and Italy. Later in the century, right-authoritarianism regained its significance in the establishment of military dictatorships in Spain, Portugal and Greece. These regimes were notorious for the intensity of their well-publicized physical repression, surveillance and propaganda (Dinas & Northmore-Ball, 2017).

It is commonly acknowledged that the deep-seated traumas these regimes have left, resulted in strong pressures to create a rupture with the past. Institutional pressures include legal constitutional provisions permitting the criminalization and prosecution of parties and leaders of the past regime (Bourne, 2018; Costa Pinto, 2010; Morlino, 2010). Societal pressures are even further reaching and extend to anyone who might be associated with the past regime. That is, even the slightest similarity with the authoritarian predecessor may be used as an excuse to recall the traumatizing records of the past. As a result, the past is frequently used in elite and public debate to discredit opinions, persons and parties (Encarnación, 2004; Morlino, 2010).
Tied back to the Hierarchy of Influences Model, it is plausible that the frame of interpretation created by the authoritarian past also influences news content. Good examples of institutional extra-media pressures are the Italian and Portuguese constitutional charters, which were designed to counter any remnants of the past regime (Costa Pinto, 2010; Morlino, 2010). Evidence for societal pressures can be found in Spain, where for years the mainstream right was deeply mistrusted due to its perceived association with the Franco regime (Encarnación, 2004; Morlino, 2010). The repeated attempts of the Portuguese center right parties Centro Democrático Social and Partido Popular Democrático (jointly appearing as CDS-PP) to accuse the left of authoritarian politics furthermore shows that even those without an ideological tie to the past can be targeted by such frames (Santana-Pereira, Raimundo & Costa Pinto, 2016). Given the inclination to produce resonating content (Snow & Benford, 1988), news organizations may experience these pressures too. On the individual level, authoritarian legacies may foster journalists self-conception as watchdogs of democracy, thereby justifying the pejoration of possible threats to democracy.

Our argument can be loosely substantiated by arguments made in other studies in the field of communication science. First, some studies have argued that past experiences with authoritarianism have resulted in an emphasis on the promotion and defense of democratic values in news media (Gunther, Montero & Wert, 2000; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Van Dalen et al., 2012). In keeping with this argument, Köcher (1986) shows that journalists in former authoritarian Germany are almost twice as likely to agree that it is their task to oppose antidemocratic parties as their British counterparts. We therefore expect that:

**H2a**: Pejoration is more common in political news coverage in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere.

Authoritarian legacies may also mitigate the impact of newspapers’ ideology. From literature on party politics, we know that the institutional and societal pressures discussed before are especially strong for parties with a greater risk of being associated with the past (Art, 2005; Van Spanje, 2018). If the same applies to newspapers, it can be argued that the ideology of
newspapers matters less in former authoritarian countries, because both left- and right-leaning newspapers have an interest in avoiding any association with the authoritarian past.

In terms of the Hierarchy of Influences Model, this means that the authoritarian past creates additional pressures for newspapers to provide negative coverage, even if they have an ideological motivation to provide positive coverage. In media routines this takes on the form of a general awareness of the negative impact non-pejorative content may have on the public image of a newspaper. Even at a subconscious level, journalists may feel inclined to discredit controversial figures, because they grew up in a context where it was common to do so as well.

Although not related to news media, literature on party politics and transitional justice demonstrates that discrediting the authoritarian past transcends the division between left and right. The German center-right party Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU), for example, has made considerable efforts to disassociate itself from the Nazi past (Art, 2005; Van Spanje, 2018). Likewise, the Portuguese CDS-PP still excludes anyone who is associated with the Estado Novo regime (Costa Pinto, 2010).

Applying these insights to newspapers, it is plausible that ideology matters less in former authoritarian countries, because both right- and left-leaning newspapers have an interest in discrediting anyone associated with the past regime. This should mean that, for instance, the difference in the prevalence of pejorative coverage between Tageszeitung (left) and Welt (right) in former authoritarian Germany is less pronounced than that between Volkskrant (left) and Algemeen Dagblad (right) in the Netherlands. In short, we expect that:

**H2b:** The difference in the prevalence of pejorative coverage between left- and right-leaning newspapers is less pronounced in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere.
Data and Methods

Case Selection: Donald Trump

Our case selection is based on two criteria, both aimed at enhancing the cross-national comparability of our design. First, we take into consideration the sample equivalence of our data, or the comparability of the units of analysis across countries. We do so by focusing on a single person, as to hold the characteristics of the object of coverage constant. Second, although uncommon in analysis of text data, we also take the question of measurement equivalence seriously and employ a measurement that is understood in the same way in all countries under investigation. Focusing on coverage of a person who (1) has received an extensive amount of attention in media in various countries and (2) has been frequently labelled with pejorative terms that universally provoke a sense of disgust – i.e. ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents – will enable us to factor out various case-specific, contextual, linguistic and semantic differences between countries and languages. For these reasons, we focus on news coverage of United States President Donald Trump.

Data

Several criteria guided the data collection. First, the selection was constrained by the online availability of news sources in the databases Nexis Uni and Go Press Academic. We selected countries in such a way to facilitate considerable variation in countries’ media and political history. Within these countries, we selected all available national quality newspapers, as to ensure that we compare the same type of newspapers in all countries. We then retrieved all available coverage mentioning Trump in the headline or text body. Finally, we ensured that we study a time-frame in which news coverage was available in all countries, by narrowing down our selection to articles published after the date of the

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3 Including tabloids would mean that a cross-national comparison is off, since we would be comparing only quality outlets in Southern Europe and quality and tabloid outlets elsewhere. Assuming pejoration is more common in tabloids it should be noted that our estimations of pejorative news coverage as a percentage of total coverage in Northwestern European countries and Canada presented in Figure 1 are conservative.
announcement of Trump’s candidacy, i.e. June 16 2016. This resulted in 27,631 articles in 35 newspapers in twelve countries.

**Dependent Variable: Pejoration**

The dependent variable of this study is the use of pejorative language, such as ‘sexist’, ‘racist’, ‘populist’, ‘dictator’ and equivalents, to describe Trump. To detect the use of pejoration, we first conducted a systematic automated content analysis, based on an extensive dictionary of pejorative terms. This dictionary was translated by native speakers to seven languages, covering the twelve countries under investigation. Words were considered pejorative if they implied a comparison or association with political currents generally considered beyond the pale. This broadly includes (1) antidemocratic currents (e.g., ‘authoritarian’ and ‘dictator’), (2) populism or political actors labelled as populist (such as the French Rassemblement National), (3) illiberal beliefs that deny the equality between citizen (e.g., ‘sexist’ and ‘racist’), (4) historical examples of authoritarian regimes (e.g., ‘fascism and ‘Benito Mussolini’), and (5) contemporary examples (e.g., ‘Neo-Nazism’ and ‘Vladimir Putin’).

The automated content analysis returned 16,991 hits spread across the 27,631 articles in our dataset. To redress the chances of articles being incorrectly coded as positive, we asked our coders to validate each separate hit. We did so by presenting them with short text fragments (snippets) in which the captured term and Trump’s name were capitalized. Our coders were asked to evaluate whether the capitalized term was indeed pejorative, as to identify incorrectly captured words. In Italian articles, for example, the search string ‘Nazi’ would incorrectly return the word ‘nazionale’ (national). We then asked whether the term was linked to Trump by means of a label, a comparison or a general association. In this phase, texts, such as “Trump meets with authoritarian leader Kim Jong Un”, were recoded as negative. Finally, we asked all coders to code the same subset of English snippets (N = 200), which confirmed that coders worked according to the same criteria (Krippendorff’s
Ultimately, these endeavors resulted in a dependent variable where ‘1’ indicated that an article contained pejorative language to describe Donald Trump and ‘0’ that it was not.

**Independent variables**

Drawing on the classification proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), we distinguish between countries with (1) low, (2) medium and (3) high levels of journalistic professionalism. The same levels were used to operationalize political parallelism. To investigate the influence of countries’ political history, we distinguish between countries with and without prior experiences with authoritarianism. On the level of the news outlet, we classified newspapers into (1) left-leaning, (2) centrist and (3) right-leaning. Finally, we control for the length of the article, because pejorative coverage is more likely to occur in longer articles and because the average length of an article may vary between countries. All country and newspaper data is summarized in Table 1.

**Analysis Strategy: Bayesian Multilevel Logistic Regression**

One of the prime statistical challenges in this study is the focus on cross-national differences with a small number of countries (N=12) spread across two or three groups. Using frequentist multilevel approaches would be problematic because when the number of countries is small, the estimation of variance components, point estimates and confidence intervals tend to be biased with up to as much as twenty percent (Stegmueller, 2013). Overall, these techniques would substantially increase the chances of making a Type I error. In such cases, various studies have recommended the use of Bayesian analysis techniques (Baldwin & Fellingham, 2013; Stegmueller, 2013), which have shown to produce unbiased

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4 Approximately half of this dataset consisted of snippets that the authors of this paper considered false positives. Since non-English coders do not have a perfect command of the English language, Krippendorff’s Alpha may be underestimated. We also used this dataset to assess the direction of a possible bias introduced by the coders. A post-hoc test based on a generalized ANOVA revealed that the differences in the propensity to identify false positives between all coders were insignificant, apart from the Spanish and German coders. The Spanish and German coders were 3 percentage points less likely to identify false positives. This means that the main effect of professionalism (Model 1a, Table 2) might be slightly overestimated, while the main effect of countries’ authoritarian legacy (Model 2a, Table 2) might be slightly underestimated.
estimates with as little as three clusters. They do so by estimating a series of parameters and creating a density distribution (or ‘posterior distribution’) of all credible parameter values.\(^5\)

Table 1. Country and Newspaper Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Parallelism</th>
<th>Legacy</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Leaning</th>
<th>(N_{\text{articles}})</th>
</tr>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Der Standard</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Die Presse</td>
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<td>336</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>De Morgen</td>
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<td>754</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Le Temps</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Algemeen Dagblad</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>De Volkskrant</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NRC Handelsblad</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>1,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Telegraaf</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trouw</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>734</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Independent</td>
<td>Center</td>
<td>2,610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>2,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>591</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) Bayesian models produce estimates by estimating a series of possible parameters. For each ‘iteration’ it evaluates the credibility of the estimate given the data. These estimations are then combined in a posterior distribution, which is an approximately normal density distribution \(N\) of all estimated values of an unknown parameter \(\beta\), with a measure of variance \(\sigma^2\): \(P(Y) \sim N (\beta^T X, \sigma^2I)\) in which \(T\) denotes a transposed matrix and \(I\) an inverted matrix.
In addition to avoiding crude measures such as significance tests, Bayesian hypothesis testing allows for an intuitive interpretation and is merely a way of expressing the probability that a hypothesis is true, given the data. This is calculated as the share of the posterior distribution that supports the hypothesis. For instance, if a hypothesis predicts that a particular effect is negative, the empirical support for this hypothesis equals the percentage of the density distribution that falls below the value zero on the x-axis. To allow for a substantive reading of the results, we report a ‘credible interval’ containing the 95 percent parameter estimates that are best supported by the data. We employ multilevel analysis techniques, with articles (level 1) nested in newspapers (level 2) and newspapers cross-classified with countries and years (both at level 3). These techniques take into account the 16.61 percent variance explained by the similarities within these clusters. In addition to the robust estimation of country-level effects, these techniques are commendable for their ability to estimate interactions between different levels of clustering or ‘cross-level interactions’. We take advantage of this flexibility to test whether the strength of the effect of newspapers’ ideological leaning varies across groups of countries. We do so by estimating random slope models, in which the effect of newspapers’ ideology is allowed to vary between countries. Given that centrist newspapers were not available in all groups under investigation, we did not include centrist newspapers in analyses estimating these interactions.

Results

Mapping Cross-National Differences

Figure 1 shows the amount of pejorative coverage as a percentage of the total coverage of Trump in a country, with darker colors indicating a higher percentage. This figure shows that pejorative coverage is common, ranging between 18.26% of total coverage in the Netherlands to 47.01% in Spain. Cross-national differences seem to reflect a clear geographic divide, with pejoration being more common in Southern Europe than elsewhere. However, this distinction does not capture all variation. For instance, in spite of the
geographic proximity of the Netherlands and Germany only 18.26% of Dutch news coverage contains pejoration, while in Germany this equals 34.12%.

**Figure 1.** Comparing Pejorative Coverage in News Media

![Map showing percentage of pejorative coverage across European countries](image)

**Explaining Cross-National Differences**

**Media history.** The first explanation for these cross-national differences held that lower levels of journalistic professionalism would result in a higher prevalence of pejoration (Hypothesis 1a). The main effect of journalistic professionalism (Table 2, Model 1a) evaluates whether this is the case. Indeed, the negative value of the coefficient for medium levels of professionalism ($\beta = -0.165$) tells us that pejoration is less common in countries with medium levels of professionalism than in countries with low levels. Expressed as a percentage, this coefficient indicates that this difference equals 4.07 percentage points.\(^4\) Likewise, the coefficient linked to high levels of professionalism ($\beta = -0.176$) suggests that pejoration is 4.39 percentage points less common in countries with high levels than in countries with low levels.
Table 2. Explaining Pejoration Using Countries’ Media and Political History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1a</th>
<th>Model 1b</th>
<th>Model 2a</th>
<th>Model 2b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>90% CI</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>90% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof.: Medium</td>
<td>-0.165(0.052)</td>
<td>[-0.232;-0.098]</td>
<td>-0.178(0.057)</td>
<td>[-0.251;-0.105]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>-0.165(0.052)</td>
<td>[-0.232;-0.098]</td>
<td>-0.178(0.057)</td>
<td>[-0.251;-0.105]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par.: Medium</td>
<td>-0.015(0.088)</td>
<td>[-0.128;0.098]</td>
<td>0.124(0.090)</td>
<td>[0.009;0.239]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.124(0.090)</td>
<td>[0.009;0.239]</td>
<td>0.124(0.090)</td>
<td>[0.009;0.239]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par. × LR: Medium</td>
<td>0.041(0.079)</td>
<td>[-0.060;0.142]</td>
<td>0.023(0.078)</td>
<td>[-0.077;0.123]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.023(0.078)</td>
<td>[-0.077;0.123]</td>
<td>0.023(0.078)</td>
<td>[-0.077;0.123]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy: Yes</td>
<td>0.106(0.059)</td>
<td>[0.030;0.182]</td>
<td>0.107(0.056)</td>
<td>[0.035;0.179]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy × LR: Right</td>
<td>-0.020(0.042)</td>
<td>[-0.074;0.034]</td>
<td>-0.020(0.042)</td>
<td>[-0.074;0.034]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR: Center</td>
<td>-0.017(0.027)</td>
<td>[-0.052;0.018]</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>0.000(0.016)</td>
<td>[-0.020;0.020]</td>
<td>-0.026(0.070)</td>
<td>[-0.116;0.064]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>1.859(0.048)</td>
<td>[1.798;1.920]</td>
<td>1.927(0.056)</td>
<td>[1.855;1.999]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.307(0.042)</td>
<td>[0.253;0.361]</td>
<td>0.145(0.082)</td>
<td>[0.040;0.250]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²: All (Key Terms)</td>
<td>8.989% (3.704%)</td>
<td>9.404% (0.014%)</td>
<td>8.996% (3.703%)</td>
<td>9.390% (0.091%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOO-CV</td>
<td>38856.6</td>
<td>30291.5</td>
<td>38856.0</td>
<td>30291.1</td>
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</table>

Notes. The dependent variable is pejoration. Entries are the result of Bayesian multilevel logistic regression analyses, with a Hamiltonian Monte Carlo Sampling Algorithm. Models are based on 2 chains with 5000 Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) iterations, using two cores and weakly informative normally distributed priors (seed = 934), with a 0.990 Target Average Acceptance Probability. Articles are nested in newspapers (level 2) and countries (level 3). Convergence was confirmed based on the Gelman-Rubin Convergence-Diagnostic. Models were estimated using the Bayesian Applied Regression Modeling via Stan (rstanarm). The key terms of each model to which the partial R-Squared applies, are displayed in bold.
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To assess the credibility of this hypothesis, we conduct three tests on the posterior distributions of the coefficients for countries’ level of professionalism (Figure 2a). To test whether pejoration is less common in countries with medium and high levels of professionalism than in countries with low levels, we calculate the share of the two distributions falling below zero. This reveals 99% support for the expectation that pejoration is less common in countries with medium levels and 99% support for the expectation that pejoration is less common in countries with high levels.

**Figure 2.** Posterior Distributions

Notes. The grey area surrounding the y-axis depicts the area of negligible change, as suggested by Kruschke (2018). Figure 2a is based on Model 1a, Figure 2b on Model 1b, Figure 2c on Model 2a and Figure 2d on Model 2b (Table 2).
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A final test calculates the credibility of the expectation that pejoration is less common in countries with high than in countries with medium levels of professionalism. This equals the share of the distribution for the coefficient linked to high levels that falls below the distribution of the coefficient linked to medium levels. This test provides only 60% empirical support for this expectation. Thus, we find considerable (but not full) support for Hypothesis 1a.

A second expectation was that higher levels of political parallelism would result in more pronounced differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers (Hypothesis 1b). We test this by estimating an interaction between countries’ level of parallelism and newspapers’ ideology (Model 1b, Table 2). The negative value of the main effect of ideology ($\beta = -0.026$) predicts that pejoration is 0.64 percentage points less common in right- than in left-leaning newspapers in countries with low levels of parallelism. However, the low value of the interaction term for medium levels of parallelism ($\beta = 0.041$) and the near-zero value of that for interaction term for high levels ($\beta = 0.023$) show that there is little reason to believe that this ideological difference is more pronounced in countries with higher levels of parallelism.

Hypothesis tests based on the posterior distribution of the interaction terms (Figure 2b) confirm this preliminary conclusion. These tests reveal 70% support for the expectation that newspapers’ ideology matters less in countries with low levels of parallelism than in countries with medium levels and 62% support for the expectation that it matters less than in countries with high levels. In addition, there is very little support (36%) for the expectation that these ideological differences are more pronounced in countries with medium than in countries with high levels of professionalism. The data therefore provide little to no support for Hypothesis 1b.

Altogether, these findings suggest that differences in news content can to some extent be attributed to countries’ media history. The determination coefficient for Model 1a reveals that this model explains 8.99% of the variance in our data, of which approximately 3.70% is accounted for by countries’ level of professionalism. At the same time, the near zero value
of the partial determination coefficient for the interaction term between newspapers’ ideology and countries’ level of political parallelism (Model 1b) shows that countries’ media history cannot account for differences in content between newspapers of different ideological leanings.

Political history. We furthermore argued that pejorative coverage would be more prevalent in former authoritarian countries (Hypothesis 2a). We test this by estimating a model with a dummy variable for countries’ political history (Model 2a, Table 2). In keeping with Hypothesis 2a, the positive coefficient for countries’ authoritarian legacy ($\beta = 0.106$) shows that pejoration is around 2.62% more common in former authoritarian countries. A test based on the posterior distribution of this coefficient (Figure 2c) reveals that there is considerable support for Hypothesis 2a (95%).

Our final hypothesis was that past experiences with authoritarianism would mitigate the impact of newspapers’ ideological leaning (Hypothesis 2b). We test this by estimating an interaction between newspapers’ ideology and countries’ political history (Table 2, Model 2b). The near-zero value of the main effect of newspapers’ ideology ($\beta = 0.007$) shows that in countries without a legacy of authoritarianism pejoration is almost equally common in right- and in left-leaning newspapers (the difference being less than 1 percentage point). Countering our hypothesis, the near-zero value of the interaction term between newspapers’ ideology and countries’ authoritarian legacy ($\beta = 0.020$) suggests that it is unlikely that this difference is more pronounced in former authoritarian countries. A hypothesis test based on the posterior distribution of this analysis (Figure 2d) confirms that there is indeed little empirical support for Hypothesis 2b (68%).

Combined, these analyses show that classifying countries in accordance with their authoritarian past also explains a substantial share of cross-national variation in news coverage. The determination coefficient of Model 2a shows that this classification explains 8.99% of the variance in the data, of which 3.70% is accounted for by countries’ authoritarian legacy. In other words, this novel classification performs equally well as Hallin and Mancini’s classification of media systems – of which the partial R-squared was 3.71%.
MEDIA HISTORY, POLITICAL HISTORY AND POLITICAL NEWS COVERAGE – in spite of being considerably more parsimonious. At the same time, this explanation is equally incapable of accounting for differences between newspapers of different ideologies.

Robustness test. Although our design already enables a high level of cross-national comparability, the use of different dictionaries in different countries may be a source of instrument inequivalence – or bias resulting from the use of different instruments for different measurements. This is because there may be differences caused by cultural, linguistic and semantic differences across languages and coders. For instance, the number and type of adjectives used may very well be culturally determined. Likewise, some languages have a much richer vocabulary than others, resulting in variation in terms of the length of our dictionaries. Finally, in terms of semantics, it can be debated whether words such as ‘authoritarian’ or ‘bigot’ are equally pejorative in all languages.

Figure 3. Robustness Test Linguistic and Semantic Differences.

Notes. The vertical whiskers indicate a 95% credible interval around the predicted percentage.

To ensure that our findings for countries’ level of professionalism and authoritarian history cannot be attributed to this possible lack of instrument equivalence, we conduct a test that
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focuses on two sub-types of pejoration, namely comparisons with historical and contemporary examples of authoritarianism. These types of pejoration are less sensitive to cultural, linguistic and semantic influences because (1) there is virtually no cross-national variation in the number of synonyms for names such as ‘Hitler’, or ‘Putin’ and words such as ‘Nazism’ and ‘fascism’, and (2) they leave substantially less room for interpretation than other forms of pejorative coverage. Figure 3 visualizes the results of this robustness test.

The left panel of Figure 3 shows that our findings for historical pejoration mirror the patterns of earlier findings, with pejoration being more common in countries with low levels of professionalism than elsewhere, while we find little to no difference between countries with medium and countries with high levels. By contrast, our findings do not hold when focusing on contemporary pejoration, which is equally common in countries with low levels of professionalism as in countries with high levels. The right panel of Figure 3 shows that our findings for countries’ authoritarian history do hold. Pejoration is systematically more common in countries with a legacy of authoritarianism than elsewhere, regardless of whether it concerns contemporary or historical pejoration. In short, Hypothesis 2a is robust to this particular test, while this is less so for Hypothesis 1a.

Discussion

In *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) Siebert and colleagues first asked why news content appears in different forms in different countries. A few decades later, the landmark study of Hallin and Mancini (2004) would attempt to formulate an answer to this question, arguing that cross-national differences should be attributed to the historical development of countries’ media system. Ever since, the field of comparative communication science has largely stagnated. One of the reasons for this is a lack of standardized measurements of news coverage, which has made the validation of this existing framework difficult and has discouraged the development of novel comparative frameworks. In this study, we proposed and demonstrated empirically that aside from countries’ media history, historical experiences with authoritarianism also influence what we read in the paper today. We did so by focusing on the pejoration of Donald Trump in news media in twelve Western
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countries, as to facilitate a clean cross-national comparison. Our systematic content analysis showed that countries’ media and authoritarian history still affect news content. We found that pejorative coverage is more common in countries with low levels of journalistic professionalism and in former authoritarian countries than elsewhere. At the same time, we found little evidence that newspapers’ ideological leaning matters: pejoration appeared to be equally common in left- and right-leaning newspapers, regardless of countries’ level of political parallelism or past experiences with authoritarianism.

The findings of this study play well to at least three longstanding debates in communication science. Theoretically, we showed that the Hierarchy of Influences Model permits the formulation of new falsifiable comparative frameworks. Thus far, countries’ media history has been the most prominent and virtually uncontested historical explanation for cross-national differences in coverage. By outlining an alternative framework based on countries’ authoritarian history, we demonstrated that it is possible to extend the scope of theoretical work on macro-level influences on news coverage, especially legacy effects, to novel frameworks.

Empirically, our systematic comparison tells us that historical classifications to some degree still account for cross-national variation in news coverage. This counters two recurring criticisms fielded against Hallin and Mancini (2004), namely their inability to empirically validate their conceptualizations (see e.g., Norris, 2009, 2011; Esser & Umbricht, 2013) and their appropriateness in times of global convergence (Blumler & Gurevich, 2001; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). Indeed, the finding that pejoration is equally common in countries with medium levels of professionalism and in countries with high levels, is consistent with the argument that some media landscapes are converging toward the ‘liberal model’ (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012). However, the sharp contrast we observed between these two groups of countries on the one hand and countries with low levels of professionalism on the other hand are in line with Hallin and Mancini’s typology, thereby providing validation for (parts of) their classification. We also showed that countries’ authoritarian history, a framework based on insights from political science, may provide a more robust explanation
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than this landmark classification. Even more so, this classification performs equally well in terms of explanatory power, in spite of being considerably more parsimonious.

Methodologically, this study addressed several recurring challenges resulting from a limited comparability of media data (Norris, 2009). Prior research has already taken significant steps forward by focusing on news coverage of comparable objects to increase the comparability of the data (see for instance Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1994) and using random sampling techniques to improve its representativeness (most notably Esser & Umbricht, 2013). Our study shows that a careful case selection may even further improve the comparability of analysis of news content. First, we improved the sample equivalence by focusing on a very narrow topic, rather than a theme, as to hold the object of coverage constant across countries. Second, our focus on a limited set of words with similar connotation in all countries has enabled us to reach a higher level of measurement equivalence. Finally, acknowledging a possible bias introduced by a lack of instrument equivalence, we conducted robustness tests focusing on forms of pejoration that are virtually insensitive to cultural, linguistic and semantic differences. Our efforts to take these considerations into account meets the growing demand for a methodological toolkit to permit replicable comparative analyses in communication science (Norris, 2009; Wirth & Kolb, 2004). Even more so, the dataset and content analyses produced for the purpose of this study can very well be utilized by future scholarship interested in macro-level effects on news coverage.

Notwithstanding these contributions, several limitations and avenues for future research have to be considered. First, our theoretical focus is confined to legacy effects of countries’ media and political history. Comparative research could benefit from the development of legacy frameworks in other subdisciplines of communication science, e.g., the impact of historical (corporate vs. public) ownership of media organizations. A second shortcoming has to do with our empirical focus on the influence of country characteristics on news coverage. The Hierarchy of Influences Model predicts that this influence is partially if not fully mediated by factors situated at the intermediate levels. Studying the full extent of this model does not only require more diverse data (data on parties’ behavior, editors’ motivations and decision making processes), but also calls for new falsifiable frameworks to test the influence
of e.g., organizational and extra-media pressures. Interviews with media and non-media actors and the use of process-tracing methods may help further research in this area. Finally, our data and measurements also suffers from several limitations. For instance, we focus on the use of pejorative terms that are typically reserved for right-wing politicians. It is therefore uncertain whether this standardized measurement can be used to analyze coverage of left-wing politicians. It is also questionable whether our data – with its focus on a foreign politician – is sufficiently well suited to permit the analysis of ideological differences between newspapers. If not, this may explain the limited disparity we found between newspapers of different ideologies. Perhaps the most pressing limitation resulting from our data, is our inability to study the interaction between countries’ media and political history. Yet, several studies (e.g., Gunther et al., 2000; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) underline that political history has influenced the development of media systems in countries such as Spain and Portugal, but not so much in Germany. Further expanding our database to more countries, more topics and more diverse standardized measurements may resolve these limitations.

In spite of these shortcomings, our study provides reassurance that countries’ history still matters and that historical comparative classifications perform well in explaining news coverage. Not only does this finding counter the most prominent criticisms of comparative scholarship exploring legacy effects on media content, it also serves as an encouragement to expand the scope of theoretical work in this field. In this respect, the theoretical and methodological novelties presented in this study may provide a useful handle to guide these future endeavors.
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References


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