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Conclusion

Assessing news performance

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Introduction

At the outset, we asked if there is any good news about the news and, if so, where the good news is. In academic research and public discussions about news and democracy, one finds different interpretations of the state of current news provision. A tendency towards pessimism about current news performance is commonplace. Although there is an overall proliferation of both traditional and newer forms of online news availability and supply (Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012), many suggest that the *performance* of news providers is getting worse. In more or less explicit terms, the decreasing quality of news is seen as having a negative impact on the quality of political life and democracy. Set against the pessimism and caution in the public debate and literature on news quality and the performance of political journalism, we were not optimistic that we would find good-quality news or that we would be able to offer some good news as a positive antidote, so to speak, to the pervasive pessimism in the literature.

Using six key concepts – strategy and game framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization, and hard versus soft news – as indicators of news performance, we systematically assessed news in 16 Western democracies. The starting point for our work was that ‘news performance’ implies that media have different functions (see Chapter 1). At a basic level, most agree that the news media should provide information, context and analysis, a platform for public debate, and scrutiny of power holders (McQuail 1992). News performance refers to the reality of news practices and how they manifest themselves in media outcomes across types of media systems, news organizations, and journalistic communities. Thus, we measure the quality of news performance by the use of strategy and game framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization, and hard and soft news.

What did we find? We first summarize our key findings per concept, then look across the different concepts, and propose the conditions under which we are most likely to find good news. In terms of covering politics as a *strategic game*, we find

that most political news in most countries during regular time periods is largely *not* framed as a strategic game. Some issues, typically related to party politics, are more often framed as a strategic game, but the use of strategy and game frames are not necessarily, as previously assumed, higher in tabloid newspapers and commercial broadcasters compared to elite newspapers and public broadcasters. Looking at *interpretive journalism*, we find that it is common across countries, although it differs significantly with respect to its prevalence, its various forms, and the type of media where it is most often found.

Looking at *negativity*, we find large country differences. Country-specific events were better able to explain overall negativity than differences in political systems, journalistic cultures, or political communication cultures. Negativity is highest in media systems with high levels of commercialism and competition and in media organizations that are geared towards commercial goals (as opposed to public service obligations). The tendency to cover politics in negative terms is stronger in the offline than online editions of media outlets and is strongest in stories that deal with negatively connoted issues, such as scandals, crises, or conflicts. Moving on to *political balance*, we find that the visibility of political actors across countries is fairly balanced. The analysis shows that by far most appearances of politicians are either neutral or balanced, rarely colored in a positive or negative light.

In terms of *personalization*, we looked at whether individual politicians or political institutions are the main actors in news stories and whether the media focus on a broad range of politicians or only on a limited number of leaders. We find that individual politicians are more prominent in the news compared to political institutions. The degree of personalized political coverage, however, varies strongly across countries. The greater the number of television channels (which represents the competitiveness of the media market) and the greater the degree of federalism (which represents the concentration of power within the political system), the more personalization in the news. Looking at *hard and soft news*, we find that the prevalence of harder and softer news strongly differs between countries. Multivariate analyses show that the medium type, a country's political and economic situation, and the state of the media market significantly predict the hard or soft character of individual news items.

Finally, analyzing across the different concepts (in Chapter 10), we find that game- or strategy-framed news tends to be more interpretive and negative, rather unbalanced, and softer. In the same vein, interpretive news tends to be more negative and strategically framed, be less balanced, and carry less hard political information. Negativity and balance are negatively correlated; we would expect a clear, unambiguous, negative portrayal of actors to be reflected in a story's overall negative tone. And finally, personalization is negatively correlated to hard news, such that personalized news tends to have less political substance, whereas news items with more political substance tend to have more institutional actors. Looking cross-nationally, we observed that Spain, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom have the most issue-focused coverage, whereas Austria, Portugal, Greece, and Sweden have the least. News in France, Greece,

the United States, Israel, and Italy is the most focused on framing politics as a strategic game. We will return to these dimensions, the ranking of countries, and the antecedents of news performance. But it is important to note that using the six key concepts as indicators of news performance, we do *not* find a pervasive and uniform pattern of ‘bad news’ with little political substance. In several instances, we even find indications of quality news.

Key dimensions of political news

Often when analyzing news, the focus is on one or two key features, such as the amount of strategy coverage versus substantive news coverage or how intensely the news is actor focused versus issue focused. Scholars rarely take the opportunity to explore news across several dimensions, even though such an approach makes sense, not only because the conceptual demarcation between different elements of interest is less clear than is often assumed, but also because (and in part as a function of this blurring of borders between the concepts) different elements co-occur, of which research has found clear traces.

We propose four clusters of news coverage based on our empirical findings (see Chapter 10). Cluster 1 is dubbed *issue-focused hard news coverage*. News stories in this cluster are more hard news-oriented and more balanced than the average news item but have less strategic framing, less interpretation, and less negativity. News items are regular, fact-oriented news stories covering a wide range of issues with an above-average share of hard topics such as macroeconomics. As shown in Figure 11.1, this type of news is largely found in Spain, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. But Israel, Sweden, Greece, and the United States have the least of this type of news.

Cluster 2 is labeled *actor-focused news coverage*. It is similar to Cluster 1 with respect to strategic framing, interpretation, negativity, and balance. It, too, features regular, fact-oriented news stories, but they are much more personalized and include fewer indicators of political substance. As shown in Figure 11.2, this type

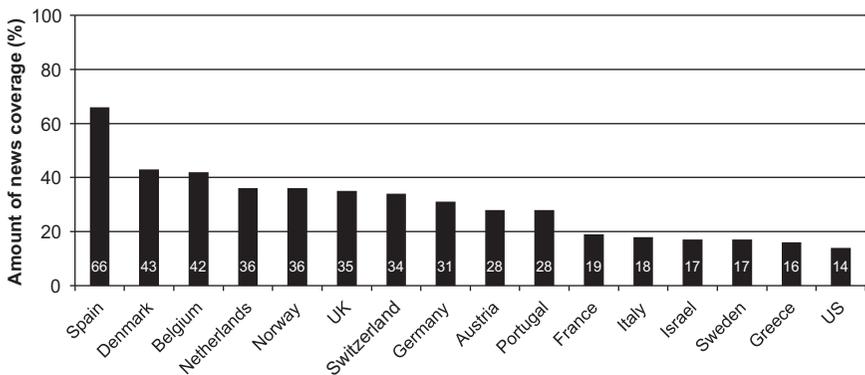


Figure 11.1 Amount of issue-focused hard news coverage per country (percentages).

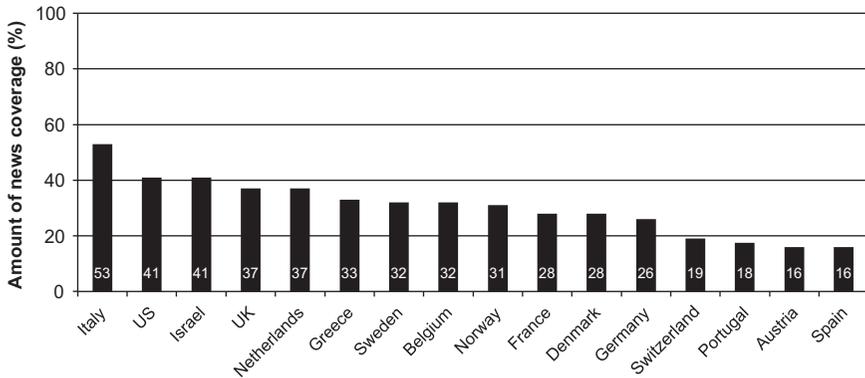


Figure 11.2 Amount of actor-focused news coverage (percentages).

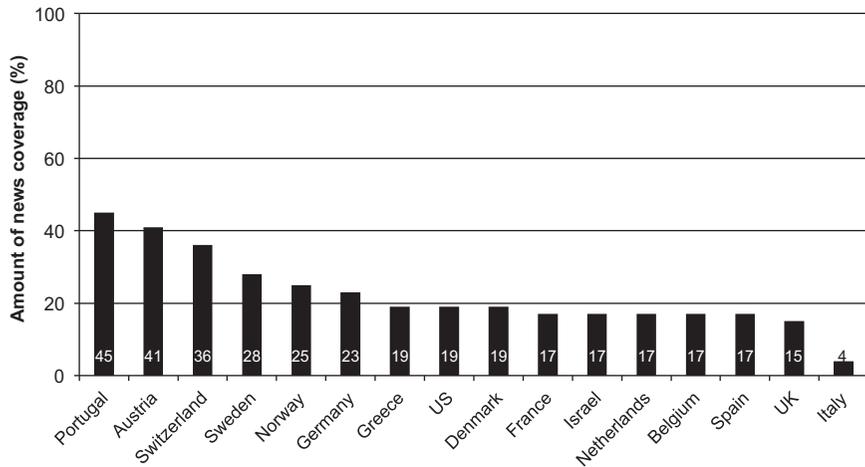


Figure 11.3 Amount of issue-focused interpretive coverage (percentages).

of news is mostly found in Italy, the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom and less so in Switzerland, Portugal, Austria, and Spain.

Cluster 3 is called *issue-focused interpretive coverage*. It is characterized by an above-average amount of strategy framing, interpretation, and negativity. At the same time, these news reports contain a good deal of political substance (i.e., hard news indicators). As shown in Figure 11.3, issue-focused interpretive news is found most in Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, and Sweden and least in Belgium, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

Finally, Cluster 4 is named *strategy-focused interpretive coverage*. Here, we find negative, interpretive, personalized news, and the most strategic framing. This category includes not only news but also editorials and commentaries, reportage and background reports. This type of news has the highest share of

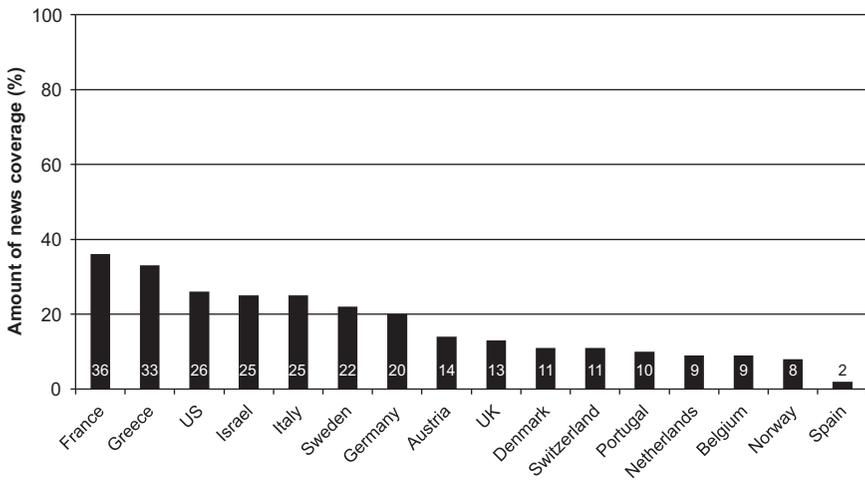


Figure 11.4 Amount of strategy-focused interpretive coverage (percentages).

party politics, elections, and stories dealing with the functioning of democracy. As shown in Figure 11.4, this type of news is especially prevalent in France, Greece, the United States, Israel, and Italy and is least prevalent in the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Spain.

Figure 11.5 illustrates the different dimensions as a radar chart. It becomes clear that news in France, Greece, the United States, and Israel (and in part Italy) stands out as scoring relatively *high* on the actor-focused and strategy-focused interpretive news coverage dimensions and relatively *low* on the issue-focused hard news, with a more mixed picture regarding issue-focused interpretive news. Conversely, news in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway – *ceteris paribus* – score higher on issue-focused hard news and lower on strategy-focused interpretive news.

As an illustration of the relationship between the different dimensions, on the one hand, and the differences in between countries, on the other hand, we briefly zoom in on the news in the United States (Figure 11.6), Germany (Figure 11.7), and Norway (Figure 11.8). News in the United States (Figure 11.6) is characterized by a (relatively speaking) high share of strategy coverage, high share of actor-based news, moderate share of issue-focused interpretive news, and low share of issue-focused hard news. News in Germany (Figure 11.7) is characterized by a somewhat moderate score on all four dimensions. News in Norway (Figure 11.8) scores very low on the strategy-interpretive dimension, relatively high on the issue hard news, and moderate on the remaining two dimensions.

In sum, the cross-national comparisons suggest that, in particular, news in France, Greece, the United States, Israel, and, in part, Italy stands out for being more strategic, interpretive, and actor based than news elsewhere. Danish, Belgian, Dutch, and Norwegian news scores higher on the hard issue dimension and

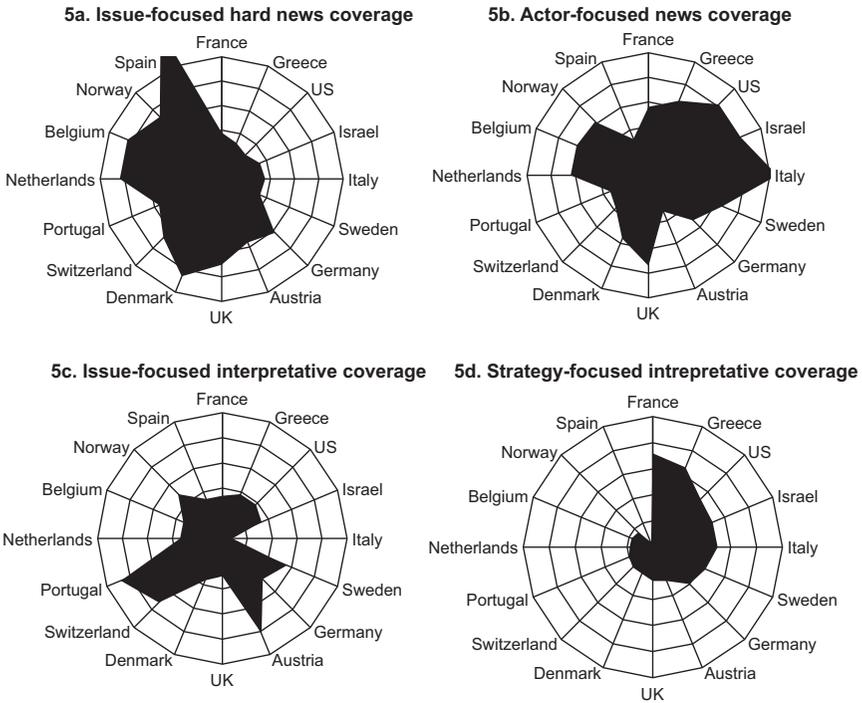


Figure 11.5 Dimensions of news. Each of the four fields represents a percentage of coverage per country by either issue-focused hard news (5a), actor-focused news (5b), issue-focused interpretative news (5c), or strategy-focused interpretative news (5d). Each ring represents an additional 10%, which results in a maximum of 50% for the outer ring. Spain, with a 66% share in issue-focused hard news coverage out of its total coverage, therefore extends beyond the outer ring.

lower on the strategy dimension. The empirical findings do not provide a clear-cut picture that translates into a one-dimensional categorization of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ news provision or ‘excellent’ versus ‘appalling’ news performance. However, we find traces of a north–south divide; southern Europe, Israel, and the United States share patterns in news provision in contrast to northwestern Europe, represented by parts of Scandinavia, Germany, and the Belgium–Netherlands nexus. Overall, however – confirming our research group’s earlier findings (Esser, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012) – more deeply rooted dimensions are relevant for understanding and classifying news patterns in contemporary media systems. One dimension that stands out is political economy; both in our previous study and in the study at hand, explanatory factors such as strong competition, private broadcast ownership, and heavy dependence on commercial logics turned out to be disadvantageous for news performance quality. Another aspect that stands out is the United States case, which may no longer be as exceptional as it was long made out to be in the literature (e.g., Patterson 2000).

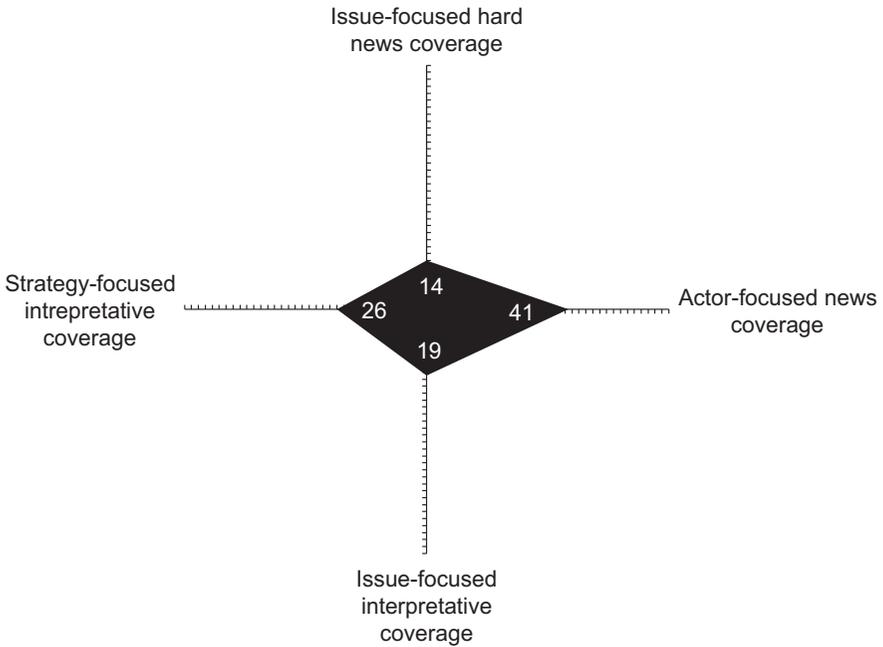


Figure 11.6 Dimensions of news coverage per dimension in the United States (percentages).

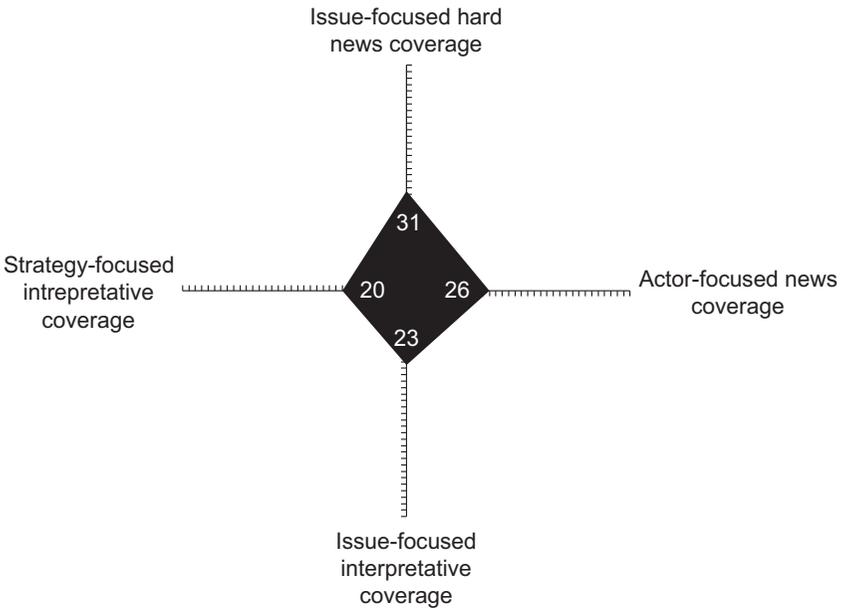


Figure 11.7 Dimensions of news coverage per dimension in Germany (percentages).

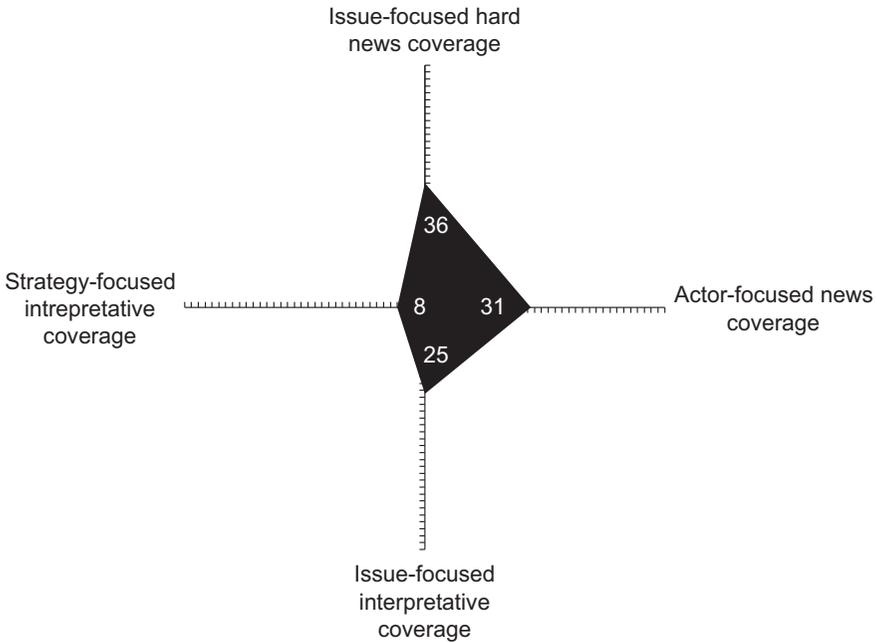


Figure 11.8 Dimensions of news coverage per dimension in Norway (percentages).

Everyday democracy

Our analysis focuses, deliberately, on routine news. We do not include election periods or news focused around large and important events. Obviously, in so doing, we do not argue that political news during elections is unimportant. On the contrary, these few weeks of heightened political interest and activity are the cornerstone of democracy and the epitome of aligning citizens' preferences and elected representatives. However, elections are not the only time at which representative democracy is at play. The provision of news about politics in the interim period – that is, the 95 percent of the time when an election is not taking place – is crucial for the linkage between citizens and politics. This notion is also gaining momentum in the political science literature, and the term 'between-election democracy' eloquently captures the idea that representative democracy necessitates responsive political representatives also in the long periods between elections (Esaiaasson and Narud 2013). The bulk of political communication research focuses on election periods, and many of the observations about the quality of news and the performance of news media pertain to elections. Patterson's (1993) *Out of Order* made a clear argument why the news content during elections is suboptimal and damaging to democracy. He is especially critical of the growing attention that is paid to polls and horse race news. His analysis focuses on election periods in particular, and his conclusion is that the news

media are charged with a task that they are not equipped to fulfill; they therefore fall short of our expectations. The system is dysfunctional, out of order. We ask in this book if the same kind of conclusion pertains to nonelection news. It goes without saying that an assessment of news performance should also consider the bigger part of the electoral cycle, when elections are absent. Again, based on our analysis, we do *not* find support for a sweeping conclusion about ‘system failure.’ Although one can be critical of contemporary news for many reasons, the picture that emerges is one where the overall supply of political news is rich in both amount and content.

Antecedents of good news?

We have identified different clusters of news reporting and scored the countries on each cluster as well as across the cluster dimensions. We now turn to the antecedents of different news performance. In Chapter 3, we outlined our conceptual approach and made a distinction between factors shaping political news at the (1) event level, (2) media organization level, (3) media system level, and (4) political system level. In each chapter, we discussed the different explanations. In general, there are certain news styles that have a higher degree of event dependency. For example, strategy game news is inherent to elections, though not absent outside elections, and negative news prevails mostly in relation to certain topics. At the level of media organizations, the distinction between public and commercial broadcasters is clearly still relevant to understanding news content and performance differences. Commercial broadcasters provide more interpretive, more negative, more personalized, and more soft news than their public service counterparts. For mass-market versus upmarket newspapers, the picture is more diverse, with upmarket newspapers, for example, scoring higher on hard news but also on strategy game coverage and negativity – perhaps, in part, as a function of longer pieces and more attention to the behind-the-scenes aspects of politics. At the level of media systems, we find that the degree of competition in a media system is a positive predictor of, for example, personalization and negativity. At the political systems level, the degree of federalism has a strong negative impact on personalization, whereas the number of parties in government has a positive impact on the degree of game strategy news framing. Our study also included both online and offline news. Here, we found very little that was substantively meaningful and minimal systematic variation when controlling for other factors, suggesting a rather high degree of resemblance between the online and offline news supply and that the same kind of ‘media logic’ is prevalent in both offline and online news (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Looking across the different explanatory levels, we find that the *media organizational level* – in particular, the distinctions commercial/public service and mass market/upmarket – is highly relevant for understanding variation in news content. Table 11.1 summarizes a selection of our hypothesized effects and the empirical findings.

Table 11.1 Multilevel framework of factors that shape political news

<i>Levels of influence</i>	<i>Hypothesized effects on news performance (selected examples)</i>	<i>Empirical relationships found</i>
<i>Event level</i>		
Bad economic situation	More hard news	Not supported
Proximity to elections	More game/strategy news	Supported
<i>Issue context:</i>		
e.g., crime and corruption	More negative news	Supported
e.g., intra party conflict	More game/strategy news	Supported
<i>Media organizational level</i>		
Mass-market oriented editorial mission (e.g., in commercial TV or popular press)	More personalized news	Partly supported
	More soft news	Supported
	More strategic news	Partly supported
	More interpretive news	Supported
Public service mission	More balanced news	Partly supported
Online channel	More negative news	Not supported
<i>Media system level</i>		
High market competition	More personalized news	Partly supported
	More negative news	Partly supported
	More interpretive news	Partly supported
High market commercialization	More negative news	Not supported
	More interpretive news	Not supported
	More soft news	Supported
Low competition and commercialization	More hard news	Partly supported
High journalistic professionalism and independence (i.e., distance to politics)	More negative news	Not supported
	More strategic news	Not supported
	More interpretive news	Not supported
<i>Political system level</i>		
Small number of competing parties	More strategic news	Supported
	More negative news	Not supported
High number of parties (i.e., need for negotiations and coalitions)	More hard news	Not supported
Majoritarian electoral system	More personalized news	Not supported
Low federalism, high power concentration	More personalized news	Supported
	More negative news	Not supported
Stronger party standing in preceding election or current poll standing	More visibility	Supported

News performance and democratic quality

Answering the question of where the *best* news performance is to be found is obviously a task with normative implications. The answer will depend on the standards that are applied to the media and on the perceived role that they play in a democracy. As summarized by Strömbäck (2005), when the procedural and competitive models of democracy are combined, the demands for political journalism are to (1) provide reliable information that can be acted upon, if necessary, (2) provide an overview of political events, (3) monitor and watch political elites and power holders, and (4) offer alternatives in political discussions. How do we interpret our findings in that light?

First, we contend that *none* of the included countries have news that is void of substance or focused solely on strategy. Neither is it heavily negative or grossly biased. So the first observation must necessarily be that things are not pervasively bad.

Second, some differences are striking. We see a pattern emerge where news in countries like France, Greece, Israel, the United States, and Italy is less focused on substance and more on strategy; it is more negative, more actor biased, and more interpretive. The opposite is the case in Scandinavian countries and the central west of the European continent (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands). Here, the news is more varied and overall more substantive and hard-news focused.

Third, media organizations matter. Public service broadcasting is good for news performance, provided that the public broadcaster has the necessary financial and political autonomy from power holders.

In all cases, however, news provides an overview of current events, balanced information, and a diverse range of topics and approaches. Perhaps the real question is therefore by what bar should one judge political news performance? Other scholars have suggested that the bar for the average citizen and ‘average’ news medium should not be placed too high. John Zaller (2003) has argued that most citizens are only marginally interested in politics and that the news media should – as a minimum – function as a ‘burglar alarm,’ such that even the inattentive and politically uninterested citizen will be exposed to major political issues. Zaller (2003) posits that this minimum is perhaps both sufficient and rational since diving into deep and contextualized knowledge about politics does little for citizens’ political empowerment or decision-making impact.

We find Zaller’s model too minimalistic and believe that we should demand more – both of citizens and of the political news media. According to Bennett (2009), problems occur if the alarm rings too frequently or if it does not ring at all. Our findings suggest that the news media deliver more than just burglar alarm coverage. In line with Albæk, van Dalen, Jebril, and de Vreese (2014), we suggest that “political journalism should not be treated complacently.” Although we find no reason to ‘ring the alarm bell’ or activate the burglar alarm on the part of the media, our findings clearly show that strong public service organizations and journalists that are not tightly bound by commercial or political pressures are where the news performance is best.

Approach and shortcomings

In this book, we took an explicit comparative approach to our study of political news. The study is part of a larger endeavor in which we hope to promote not only comparative research but also a *systematic* approach, which calls for standardized ways of operationalizing key concepts and for particular attention to theory-driven, systematically tested explanations (Esser et al. 2012). As we have expressed elsewhere (e.g., Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012), we share earlier observations about the virtue of comparative research (e.g., Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren 1992; Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004), but we also acknowledge that political communication scholars still have a long way to go to further develop the conceptual consistency and the infrastructure for comparative research. In pursuing this, we believe that a combination of large-scale comparative studies and small-scale, in-depth case studies should complement each other.

Our own study is obviously not without limitations. First of all, we would like to highlight that the project was completed without the backing of a large-scale grant. Systematic comparative research is cumbersome and requires resources. However, with this project, we have shown that pooling modest resources and agreeing to an approach, a design, and a measurement can yield insightful comparative research. This lesson is an important one.

When resources are pooled, comparative research can be carried out on a shoestring. That said, in the long run, comparative research needs to develop infrastructure, which requires larger endeavors and greater resources.

Looking at the project in more detail, we believe that our research could be improved by expanding the scope of the design. We have focused, purposely, on an ‘in-between’ period of democracy. Obviously, a design that would allow a comparison between our routine period and election times would yield very interesting observations and offer comparative conclusions about these different aspects of democratic processes (see also Van Aelst and de Swert 2009; Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009; Falasca 2014). Second, the scope of the media sample could be expanded. We include television, newspapers, and online news, but in terms of both the sampling period and media outlets, it would be beneficial to span out more to assess temporal and outlet differences and similarities in greater detail. In particular, the sampling of online news is limited by looking only at the online counterparts of offline news providers. Even so, we believe that our choice made sense for reasons of comparability between online and offline news and of the sites’ popularity and wide use.

Third, our analysis neglects the role of visuals. The importance of visuals in news provision has been reiterated time and again (Graber 2003; Grabe and Bucy 2009; Nagel, Maurer, and Reinemann 2012), but too often, as in our case, they have been neglected and have not been integrated into the actual coding scheme. We echo the long list of scholars pleading to pay more attention to the role of visuals, also in comparative political communication research. Finally, we are aware that any attempt to standardize comes at the cost of losing details. Already, when

developing the conceptual framework for this study (Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012), we acknowledged that the measures proposed for each of the six key concepts were not exhaustive. The empirical application of these measures led to further confinement and simplification, and thereby a de facto loss of detail and information. At the same time, the challenge of cross-national comparative content analysis also yielded inter-coder reliability scores for some of the new items that merit further conceptual attention and that need to be improved in future research.

In addition to these explicit shortcomings, our comparative endeavor yielded interesting discussions about the levels and units of analysis in comparative research. Descriptions and analyses can be conducted at the individual news story level, the aggregated media outlet level, or the country level. In many descriptive analyses, we refer to the sum of individual news stories, whereas most explanatory analyses are conducted at the media outlet level. A second issue is one of comparability. As noted earlier, media type is an important explanation, but a mass newspaper in one country is not exactly the same in another. Undoubtedly, those who know both *The Sun* (United Kingdom) and *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands) would agree that these are not identical newspapers, just like a 15-minute public service news broadcast in Germany is not identical to a 60-minute public broadcasting news show in Spain. These examples point to a broader issue of comparability and functional equivalence of the units being compared. Our study has not solved these challenges but merely adds to the cautionary warnings that should be issued when making conclusions about types of units.

A final reflection concerns explanations that failed to fall into their expected place. In recent years, much work has been done at the level of systems (see also Chapter 3). In our analyses of variation in news content, this level did not yield strong explanations, and our empirical findings did not reproduce the systematic pattern that could be expected based on, for example, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of countries. We take this outcome not so much as a disqualification of existing work at the systems level but rather as an indicator that explanations of news content features require other crucial factors to be included (see also Boomgaarden et al. 2013). System-level classifications have perhaps greater value as heuristics for systems differences and similarities than as specific explanatory factors.

The future of news: sobering appraisals of new challenges

Our book focuses on political news as it is understood in a relatively conventional and contemporary sense – that is, on news that is provided by key national news organizations via television, newspapers, and online. It is a truism that the news landscape is rapidly changing. News is no longer accessible merely in prescheduled television shows or in papers printed at night. New digital and networked technologies have emerged while many traditional political journalism outlets with clear-cut schedules have declined (Kuhn and Kleis-Nielsen 2014). The news

business is now a 24/7 affair, and in recent years, new players have entered the field offering niche news, specialized news, citizen-based news, and the widespread sharing and liking of news on social media. This change poses the question of how our own study relates to these new realities of news supply and use. Scholarship has long clung to a “mass public model of political communication research,” which is now changing towards a “more fragmented model of political communication” (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012), dubbed by others a “hybrid communication system” (Chadwick 2013). We are fully aware of this shift, but the question remains what conclusions should be drawn from it.

The old mass public model understands political communication basically as a top-down process where elites in the media and political sphere control information. The public occupies a much weaker position, unable to do other than receive or ignore these elite-centered messages. In the new evolving system, however, traditional media are losing influence, whereas the audience is gaining importance. New possibilities are opening up for people to become more selective and active, and these shifts in consumption patterns and in mass self-communication have implications. Although the changes appear to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, people increasingly have the option of becoming involved in the creation and distribution of political information, observable in multiple forms of citizen journalism and user-generated content. Greater involvement leads to a potentially greater dispersion of providers, platforms, practices, and subpublics and thereby to a “more fragmented model” of political communication (see Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2012). Some commentators are already declaring the death of traditional journalism (Charles 2014; McChesney and Pickard 2011), while others are celebrating the rise of digital networks and crowd-sourced intelligence (Bennett 2015). Future scholarship will show to what extent these predictions are right.

We readily concede that our study is more concerned with the realities of today. But although our study focuses mainly on established news providers, we found them in the middle of a transitional process, making changes to adapt to new demands and requirements. Many of these organizations are trying to turn themselves into more agile operators as they embrace new processes and approaches to news. One manifestation of this development is that they are all employing different platforms to engage with the public, and for that reason, we decided to study both their offline and online news supply. And we focused specifically on those news organizations that still hold the largest audiences and the greatest agenda-setting power in their respective countries. We do realize that many functions of journalism will no longer be provided solely by the closed ecosystem of ‘traditional’ media organizations but by a more open, fluid, hybrid system that accommodates a wider range of sources, including blogs and social media. It is very likely, however, that a fair number of large general news providers – today’s print, broadcast, and digital leaders – will also dominate the provision of political information in the future (Picard 2014). We have taken great efforts to identify those leaders and include them in our sample. After all, most people continue to use well-established sources such as the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*,

or CNN when consuming online news (Newman and Levy 2014; Shehata and Strömbäck 2014). Moreover, many of the news items that people share on social media platforms tend to originate from these well-established sources or relate to traditional media formats (Curran, Fenton, and Freedman 2012).

The six features of news performance that we have studied (strategy and game framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization, and hard and soft news) are part of a ‘news logic’ that has developed over a long period in the transorganizational field of legacy media. This incremental process was based on common professional beliefs, norms, relationships, and routines and was a typical course to follow for news media to emerge “as institutions” (Esser 2013; Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Whether these institutionalized elements of news logic and news performance will stay the same or change under the influence of an increasing ‘social media logic’ remains to be seen. Our expectation is that certain forms of journalism – whether practiced inside or outside the brick walls of news organizations – will stay the same.

The greatest differences between mass media logic and network media logic concern the production, distribution, and consumption of messages, as Klinger and Svensson (2014) have pointed out.¹ But they also emphasize that the elements of news logic and news performance that we have studied remain significant because “the majority of relevant information still comes from journalistic content production, is distributed via established mass media and is used by individuals with routinized media menus” (Klinger and Svensson 2014, p. 11). New players such as BuzzFeed, Facebook, Google News, or Twitter are good examples since they remain reliant on external sources and repackage information derived from traditional news providers. Further, their output is limited in democratic value due to self-imposed reductions (such as maximum message length on Twitter or the conversion of everything to headline-grabbing lists at BuzzFeed).

Nevertheless, we fully agree that the “political information cycle” (Chadwick 2011) in Western democracies will be increasingly shaped by the *combined* forces of conventional and network media, which act in tandem to shape the news agenda. And we also agree with Cushion (2015), who argues that “amidst much of the hype and excitement about the latest technologies reshaping the new media landscape, it is important not to lose sight of old media which continue to exert their influence on most political information environments” (p. 162). The “political information environments” that Cushion refers to were defined by us in an earlier publication as mediated public spaces through which political information flows via different channels (Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012). The idea of ‘environment’ emphasizes, in particular, the supply and performance of news to which citizens are exposed.

Changes in the supply side of the news environment lead to the final question: what will and what should be the future added value of political journalism. Thomas Patterson (2014), in his recent book, argues that the news media need to provide a new kind of added value, which he dubs “knowledge-based journalism,” which he characterizes as

a conceptual reorientation of the way media members frame issues and conduct the information-gathering process. . . . This is not a call for dry policy stories, but a shift in the way the press should contextualize partisan claims and ground anecdotes in wider intellectual frameworks and research findings.

In the light of our news classification, Patterson's recommendations might be a call for political journalism to be not only issue based but also interpretive. However, even if political journalism adjusts continuously to cater for citizens as critical consumers in media markets, an audience is not guaranteed. Current research is divided on what proliferation in choice does for news consumption (see Prior 2013 for an overview): are some citizens increasingly tuning in while others tune out? Or do they become selective (along the lines of political preferences)? Or do citizens still get 'trapped' by the news as inadvertent audience members in a high-choice era? Only future, systematic, comparative research can answer such questions. For now, we can only conclude that, as regards the supply side, good news is out there. As we continue to discuss and study the changing role of political journalism in a global world, this conclusion is an important one to add to the literature and to the public and political debate about news performance.

Note

- 1 Klinger and Svensson (2014) argue that the 'production' of messages in *mass media logic* refers to content that is generated and selected extensively by professional journalists according to news values, whereas in *network media logic* this is done by (lay) users according to their individual preferences and anticipated attention gain. 'Distribution' of messages in *mass media logic* means content selected by expert/professional gatekeepers – based on established news values – and distributed to a fixed audience of subscribers, whereas in *network media logic*, it means that users distribute popular content as intermediaries – almost like chain letters – through networks of like-minded others. Media 'consumption' in *mass media logic* refers to a location-bound mass audience that uses professionally preselected messages rather passively, whereas in *network media logic* the process occurs within like-minded peer networks, based on selective exposure driven by own interests and oriented towards interaction through practices of constant updating.