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Erik Albæk, Arjen Van Dalen, Nael Jebril and Claes H. De Vreese

Excerpt

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## I

**Introduction**

Political journalists play a crucial role in a democracy. Democracy and journalism develop side by side, and a healthy democracy is characterized by free media and well-functioning journalists. Norris (2000, xv) writes that “journalism is often venerated as a beacon of light that helps to sustain democracy, a force for freedom lying between venal government and the citizens, a protector of the innocent.” The crucial word here is “often.” The role of journalism is not carved in stone, neither in terms of location nor time. The relationship between politics and journalism is evolving, and the news that journalists produce is under constant public and scientific scrutiny. Changes in society, journalism, and politics over the past decades have affected the nature of political communication systems. As argued by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) more than a decade ago, power relationships among key message providers are shifting, the culture of political journalism is undergoing transformation, and conventional meanings of “democracy” and “citizenship” are being questioned and rethought. These changes raise questions about the nature of political journalism: Are political journalists and journalism similar across countries, or are they different? Does political journalism inform citizens? Does it help or hinder their engagement in politics? And what are the conditions under which political journalism functions optimally?

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In the scholarly literature and public debate, some point to a positive impact of the news media on citizens' knowledge and engagement in politics (e.g., Norris, 2000, Aarts & Semetko 2003). However, mostly negative views of news content dominate. Many believe in a current demise of news journalism, and most studies highlight the detrimental effects of that demise on citizens and democracy. Concerns are voiced about dominance in ownership structures, poor content, lack of good journalism, reliance on and misinterpretation of opinion polls, and ill-informed citizens who are losing interest in politics (e.g., Barnett & Gaber, 2001; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston, 2007; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; McChesney, 1999; McNair, 2000a; Patterson, 1993, 2005).

Is this pervasive pessimism justified? We doubt it. We believe the conclusions reported here to be too sweeping and too general. Moreover, many arguments are based on single-country studies with limited empirical observations about both news content and journalism's effects. Our book offers the first systematic, internationally comparative assessment of political journalism – its production, content, and the effects that it produces. Our fundamental claim is that when conditions are right, political journalism makes an important and positive contribution to democratic processes. We show that different conditions create different kinds of political journalism that affect citizens in a variety of ways. The book analyses and compares political journalism cross-nationally, and it tests, re-assesses, and further develops a set of key propositions on the influences of news media on the general public.

What are the right conditions? Central to this book is the thesis that when political actors and journalists view each other with a minimum of suspicion, when journalists perceive that they have autonomy, and when political journalism serves both an informing *and* entertaining role, citizens are more knowledgeable, more satisfied with the media, and less cynical. Specifically, we identify a high degree of professionalization in journalism, a low degree of political parallelism, a strong public broadcasting system, and moderate degrees of commercialization and competition

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as the *right mix*. This specification of the conditions is important because it straightforwardly defines what is needed. But it is the *combination* of conditions that is required. The presence of one of the elements is in most cases not sufficient. For example, American journalists may feel that they have a high degree of freedom (i.e., score high on the professionalization dimension and low on the political parallelism dimension), but this by itself does not lead to higher news quality. It is the combination, the mix, that is required. As will become clear in the book, the one-million dollar question is: what is the right mix of conditions? Ultimately, the book strikes an optimistic note about the nature of political journalism and its societal role.

## CHANGES IN POLITICAL JOURNALISM

An ever-growing body of research in political communication shows how political coverage can have an impact on democratic processes through its effects at the individual, societal, and institutional levels. Developments in political journalism go hand in hand with larger societal and democratic developments. The relationship between the media, politics, and the public is complex and dynamic, and the literature suggests that the current phase of political communication is marked by several major developments.

First, politics is changing. Campaigning has gone from short and decentralized political campaigns to a state of permanent campaigning in which campaign professionals such as pollsters, marketing consultants, and spin doctors play key roles (de Vreese, 2009). These recruits are familiar with the different news outlets and their audiences, and they are able to plan campaigns in elaborate detail and organize prompt responses to daily events and opinion trends (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). The professionalization of politics has meant increased use of communication technologies, more sophisticated targeting of key voters, and increased expenditure on publicity (see also Norris, 2000). These developments have affected the mutual perceptions of journalists and of politicians and their staffs, with journalists

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allegedly increasingly making the strategies and behavior of political actors the object of their reporting.

Second, the media landscape is changing, and has become a commercial industry. Commercialization here refers to the decline of party press and the emergence of a catch-all media that is committed to an informational and commercial model of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b). The process features increased liberalization and competition, which have led to the multiplication of news outlets and to an upsurge of specialist journalism forms (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Scholars argue that commercialization has undercut the public broadcasting system with its cultural, pedagogic remit of giving the public what it needs (Brants & van Praag, 2006). They perceive the process to be threatening since the news content tends to be produced and marketed as a commodity (McQuail, 2005). This development potentially affects the role conceptions of political journalists and the content they produce.

Third, politics and media have become more intensely intertwined, a process often referred to as “mediatization” of politics. This process refers to the shift from political logic to media logic. In the former case, the needs of the political system and of political institutions take center stage and shape the way political communication is played out, covered, and understood. In the latter case, the requirements of the media take center stage, and they ultimately determine how political actors, the media, and citizens use and understand political communication (Strömback, 2008, p. 7). Thus the content of news reporting must fit the frame of reference that the media uses to socially construct reality and to frame issues and people. Political actors adapt their performance to the media’s needs regarding time, place, and format (Brants & van Praag, 2006, p. 30). The mediatization of politics, it is argued, undergoes four successive stages. The first stage is whenever the mass media in a particular setting constitute the most important source of information and communication between the citizenry and political actors. In the second and third stages, the media gain greater independence from the government and political bodies, which forces political and social actors to

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adapt to the media. The final stage is reached when these actors allow media logic and standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes (Strömback, 2008, 9–13). These developments raise questions about both the content of political journalism and its effects on citizens' perceptions of politics, satisfaction with the media, and gains in knowledge.

Lastly, wide-reaching changes within society include personalized consumer behavior, a focus on individual ambitions, and decreasing conformity to traditional societal pillars, such as religion, group-based working conditions, and standard family compositions (see also Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Citizens are increasingly viewed as individual consumers of political products rather than as an electorate or a mass. This view affects politicians' behavior (together with the media, they focus more on their own personae) and is also reflected in news reporting, where typically an individual's fate takes center stage (for example, a story about a policy's impact on a particular person). Finally, individualization is also seen in media use patterns: citizens in the post-Second World War period were captive audiences who had a hard time escaping the evening news (Prior, 2007; Schönbach & Lauf, 2002). Today, it is much easier to create a personal media diet that may consist of either plenty of or virtually no political information.

As an antidote to such general accounts, we note that, as with all typologies and overviews of developments, great injustice is done to differences in the speed and scope of changes. It is indeed noteworthy that although most research speaks of developments as universally applicable, they are not necessarily uniform, and may well create different conditions for the functioning of political journalism in different countries.

The characteristics of current political communication have significant consequences for the relationship between journalists and politicians and the nature of political news reporting. While campaigns and elections in the past were considered newsworthy per se (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995), politics must now fight for its place in reporting and scheduling on the basis of its news value or likely audience appeal (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, 218).

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In other words, the “sacerdotal” approach toward politics has been replaced by a pragmatic one (Blumler & Kavanagh, 2001; de Vreese, 2009). It appears that political journalism has shifted from descriptive to interpretative styles of reporting, which manifest themselves in less substantive and more negatively focused news (Brants & van Praag, 2006). Journalists tend to increasingly cover elections with a focus on candidates’ strategies – somewhat in the spirit of horse racing (Patterson, 1993; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) – and they uncover politicians’ publicity efforts, emphasizing the role of the media in the campaign (Esser & d’Angelo, 2003; Kerbel et al., 2000). Further, the presentation of politics has become more dramatized (Bennett, 2001) and people-oriented, often resorting to “infotainment” styles (Adam & Maier, 2010). This is reflected in the breakdown of the public/private divide when covering politicians, the greater receptivity of quality media to stories initiated by tabloids, and the significant growth in scandals coverage (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999).

Coverage and framing of national politics can, for instance, influence an individual’s knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Schönbach & Lauf, 2002; Iyengar et al., 2010), political cynicism, participation, and interest (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Norris, 2000; De Vreese, 2005; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010), or the turnout in elections (Banducci & de Vreese, 2011; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Jackson & Carsey, 2007). At the level of institutional politics, media attention to different issues and politicians can have an effect on the political agenda (Robinson, 1999; Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006; Blach-Ørsten & Bro, 2009), the careers of politicians (van Aelst et al., 2010; Sheaffer, 2008), or the tone in political debates (Kepplinger, 2000). At the societal level, the range of voices and viewpoints expressed in the media has, for example, been related to political polarization (Prior, 2007; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009) and the composition of public agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009).

The way political journalists work results in the political news coverage that causes these effects. Political news presents a

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mediated version of reality, “an account of the existing, real world as appropriated by the journalist and processed in accordance with the particular requirements of the journalistic medium” (McNair, 1999, p. 9). To better understand *why* political news looks the way it does, and why the media produces the effects it does, we need to go back a step to study how news is produced. In the words of Shoemaker and Reese (1996, p. 258), “We cannot fully understand the effects of that version of social reality if we do not understand the forces that shape it.”

Media sociology and journalism studies have developed theories and models to help us understand the antecedents of news. Examples include the hierarchy-of-influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), the concept of news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), and theories of socialization and social interaction in the newsroom (Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979). However, media sociology (studying news production) and political communication (studying news content and its effects) still largely stand apart from each other. Benson (2004, p. 275) summarizes this divide by noting that while journalism research has often been too “media-centric” (Schlesinger, 1990), political communication research seems to suffer from “media phobism.”

Our book bridges this divide by taking a look at the mediating role of political journalists in the production of political news. We study their role conceptions and their relationships with sources, and the influence of these two features on political coverage. We also study the effects of different kinds of political journalism. Studying the antecedents, characteristics, and consequences of political news in countries with different media systems has three concrete goals: (1) to investigate journalists’ backgrounds and their attitudes toward reporting on politics, (2) to identify, analyze, and define different types of political news reporting, and (3) to investigate the effects of different types of political reporting on the public’s political perceptions. Each component is part of the central ambition to specify the mix of conditions that ensure that political journalism can make a positive contribution.

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[More information](#)EXPLAINING CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN  
POLITICAL JOURNALISM

In our quest to specify the right mix of conditions, we take a cross-nationally comparative perspective. We first look at the variation in political journalism across countries. Media-sociological theories and models of forces that shape (political) news distinguish between influences on different levels, including the micro-level of individual journalists, the meso-level of news organization, and the macro-level of the system in which journalists work (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; McQuail, 2005; Dimmick & Coit, 1982). Based on the observation that political news content varies from country to country, several scholars have called for more attention to be paid to the macro-level influences (for example, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004). Ignoring macro-level characteristics in the study of news production can lead to the assumption that findings in one context automatically apply to other contexts, putting research at risk of “naïve universalism” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, 75). Heeding macro-level characteristics in the study of news production will expand our understanding of the antecedents of political news.

By comparing the way journalists in different systems work, we can determine the generalizability of theories that are developed in particular contexts, and even adapt these theories to become more widely applicable. Studying journalists working in other systems makes researchers view familiar systems afresh and “renders the invisible visible” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, p. 76). Comparative research can shed light on the question of how macro-level forces – such as the structural arrangements of the media and political systems, or journalistic and political communication cultures – affect the way political journalists work (see also Chapter 2).

Although the notion that *context* affects political journalism is widely acknowledged (see, for example, Benson, 2004), our knowledge of the influence of macro-structures on political journalists is still limited (Norris, 2009; Benson & Hallin, 2007). Benson and Hallin (2007) identify two main reasons for this



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paucity of knowledge. First, the production of political news is generally studied in single-country studies, making it impossible to test the way system-level variation influences news production. Second, when political news is studied cross-nationally, this mostly entails descriptive accounts rather than systematic tests of predefined hypotheses. We can add yet a third explanation for our limited understanding of the influence of macro-structures on political journalism. While both production processes and news content have been studied cross-nationally (by means of surveys and observations and by content analysis, respectively), the two branches of research have so far been largely separate and distinct (Esser, 2008, 425).

In this book, *nations* are chosen as the unit of analysis. Although media markets have become transnationally connected (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b), media systems in Western Europe are still largely nationally organized (Livingstone, 2003, p. 480). Press laws and media subsidies are developed on a national level. International media, such as the *International Herald Tribune*, *Financial Times*, or *Euronews*, reach a fraction of the population compared with national newspapers or television channels. Public service broadcasters and commercial television stations aimed at national audiences reach a large proportion of the population. Finally, journalistic practice is heavily influenced by the historical development of the press, which is often nationally determined (Curran & Park, 2000, pp. 11–12).

## DIFFERENT JOURNALISM, DIFFERENT EFFECTS?

Since national traditions and systems condition the functioning of political journalism, one would not expect the content of political journalism to be universal. This concept again is important to take as a starting point when identifying the right mix of conditions. Indeed, comparative studies have confirmed observations that the availability of political information in different European countries varies over time and by country (Aalberg et al., 2010; Esser et al., 2011). These variations in supply result in a variety of conditions and parameters, which help fashion

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citizens' political awareness and knowledge (Curran et al., 2009; Iyengar et al., 2010). Overview books, such as Kaid and Strömback's (2008) *Election News Coverage across the World*, certainly show that some content features are shared cross-nationally, but their effects vary in intensity. For example, the shift toward more episodic, sensational, and critical reporting styles has spawned important questions in relation to the media's function in a democracy, but these questions are not universally pertinent. Scholars fear that infotainment and cynical and negative approaches toward politics may have negative effects on the public. But the evidence for such effects is both fragmented and mixed (see e.g., Baum, 2003 versus Prior, 2003b). Indeed, it is not uncommon for the effects of news media on the public to be assumed rather than tested empirically.

If we scan the field of media-effects research historically, we can observe that it has passed through several more or less successive phases. The first phase began at the turn of the twentieth century and lasted until the 1930s, when the media was perceived as having considerable power to shape opinion and belief (McQuail, 2005, p. 458). In the second phase, the theory of powerful media effects was put to empirical analysis. Scholars did not find a one-to-one link between media stimulus and audience response (McQuail, 2005, 459), and a limited-effects model for mass communication emerged from these empirical studies (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002). The third phase took hold in the 1960s with the arrival of television, and witnessed a shift away from the minimal consequences of media (Chaffee, 2001): scholars found much evidence that the media plays a key role in constructing our picture of reality (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and that the media could indeed have important social effects and be an instrument for exercising social and political power (McQuail 2005, p. 460).

Today, research on the effects of political communication has come to include an increased array of effects models, augmented conceptions of media messages, and greater emphasis on diverse types of effects and their conditional nature. The complexity of