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*Does Public Media
Enhance Citizen
Knowledge? Sifting
Through the
Evidence*

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Does Public Media Enhance Citizen Knowledge? Sifting Through the Evidence

'Political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship' (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, p8)

Introduction

Although there are disagreements about how politically knowledgeable citizens should be for democracy to function well, few argue against the notion that an informed citizenry is good for democracy. As most citizens get their information about politics and current affairs from the media, a key concern for political communication scholars has been to investigate the links between media funding and organization, and the supply of political information and public knowledge.

To understand these mechanisms is perhaps more important now than ever before, as the media landscape is radically expanding and the number of commercial media channels multiplying. The challenge to existing media brought by this expansion is assumed to be a positive development, as citizen choices are enhanced. Such positive expectations about the emerging commercial media are mirrored by a rise in questions about the relevance of publicly-funded journalism. In many countries, there is now a heated debate on whether public media is distortive and stifles growth, innovation and plurality in the sector. However, as argued here, more commercial media does not automatically mean a more informed public. In fact, paradoxically, a higher number of information providers may result in a less informed democracy.

The purpose of this text is not to review these national political disputes. Rather its aim is to provide a short and accessible assessment of current research on the supply and quality of hard news reporting in public and more commercially driven news media, and to discuss how this may influence political knowledge and public awareness.

Public Versus Commercial Media in the Supply of News and Current Affairs.

Recent comparative studies have shown that the status of public service media and their market impact vary considerably between nations (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Benson and Powers, 2011; Rövekamp, 2014). In some countries, the media system is highly fragmented and mostly commercial, like the American and the Australian media sectors. In most other Western democratic states however, there is a more balanced mix of public and private media. In many cases, public broadcasters are also the dominant media outlet, both in terms of audience size and in terms of quality and independence. In Western and Northern regions of Europe, public service broadcasters have received large governmental support. In contrast, audiences for public service channels in Australia, the US, Canada and many countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, tend to be significantly smaller.

Many public service broadcasters have experienced a severe funding crisis in recent years, as politicians and publics become more skeptical about the role public media can (and should) play in the future. To remain relevant in a 21st century media landscape, public service *broadcasters* have begun supplying online and social media platforms and, in the process, become known as public service *media* (Donders et al. 2012). Nevertheless, they have continued to operate to a remit that promotes the 'public good' and serves the needs of all citizens (Cushion, 2012; Hendy, 2012). Typically, it is thus argued that public media should

be distinctive from commercial competitors, and pursue normative values such as producing appealing content to all citizens – including minority groups – and pursuing an editorially diverse and independent agenda (Tracy 1998). Public media are also justified on the basis of their ability to better inform citizens as commercial media chase audiences and advertisers to survive. It is argued that market incentives will therefore lead to an overproduction of content that is popular to the detriment of that which informs and empower citizens about public affairs. Side-stepping entrenched political positions, what does the empirical research contribute to this debate?

The research evidence is somewhat mixed, but a majority of studies tend to support the assessment that there are significant differences between public and private media content. For instance, the general conclusion from schedule analyses, presented by Aalberg et al. (2010) and Esser et al. (2012), show that public service media offer better political information opportunities than commercial media. Comparing the top two public service and commercial broadcasters in each country, in periods when many media markets were deregulated and commercialized, a common finding was that market-driven channels gradually enhanced the availability of news. This challenged the belief that commercialization has diminished the supply of news altogether.

However, both studies also stressed that the presence of public service broadcasting within a national media ecology appeared to ensure that news continued to be scheduled at peak time. In other words ‘countries where public television has a stronger standing, the public are offered more prime-time news and current affairs, not only by PBS channels but also by commercial ones’ (Aalberg et al 2010, p 266). In contrast, in the market-driven media environment of the US, there was a distinct lack of news programming and current affairs, less at peak times and less on the most popular channels. These studies also demonstrate that established public service channels generally deliver more news than their commercial counterparts. This finding is supported by van Santen and Vliengenhart’s (2013) study of Dutch TV programming over a 50 year period. This recorded that commercial broadcasters spent less time on information but more time on ‘infotainment’ and entertainment than the Dutch public service channels.

An important limitation to studying broadcasting schedules however is that they cannot provide evidence on the quality of information provided. Accordingly, Esser et al., (2012) speculate about whether or not the positive effect of the growing amount of information is at least partly wiped out by rising levels of soft news with less relevance to the democratic process. One approach to evaluate the quality of news is to distinguish between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news, or pure information and infotainment. Reinemann et al (2012, p 234) define hard news as media content that is politically relevant for society as a whole, and based on impersonal and unemotional reporting. Soft news, on the other hand, is viewed as less political and more focused on individuals, personal and emotional reporting.

Research evidence about longitudinal changes in the supply of hard versus soft news is mixed (Reinemann et al. 2012). While some studies suggest that news has not become ‘softer’ over recent decades (Scott and Gobetz, 1992; Waldahl et al., 2009) others have found evidence to suggest the opposite (Patterson, 2000; Donsbach and Büttner, 2005; Sinardet et al., 2004). It is also important to note that public service broadcasters with large audiences do not automatically foster hard news environments. For instance, while widely watched, the Italian public service broadcaster does not seem to generate a lot of hard news (Aalberg et al 2013; Reinemann et al 2016).

However, several recent studies have identified clear differences in terms of hard and soft news content in public service and commercial media. Maier et al.'s (2009) study, of seven different German television newscasts between 1992 and 2007, found a significant difference. While there is a linear increase of non-political content in commercial channels, this is not the case in newscasts provided by the public service channels. Aalberg et al (2013) found that public service providers across nine different countries supplied more hard news on foreign affairs than commercial broadcasters, who pursued more of an international soft news agenda. As it is costly to assemble hard, thematic news, especially in foreign countries, the authors suggest that this may be a response to corporate commercial considerations. Reinemann et al.'s (2016) comprehensive study of 16 western democracies, demonstrated that public service broadcasters in general provided more hard news than commercial television networks, even after controlling for how commercialized the media system was.

Hence, one of the main conclusions of much of this literature, is that the 'ecological effects' of strong public service television is that it contributes to a general climate in which media are more likely to report about politics in more substantial ways.

Media Systems and Public Knowledge

Publicly supported media systems tend to provide greater opportunities for citizens to encounter informative news, and many comparative studies therefore argue that citizens also are more likely to learn from it (Aalberg and Curran 2012, Curran et al 2009; Iyengar et al 2010; Soroka et al 2013). Put simply, countries that support and help fund public journalism, and who therefore offer a larger share of substantive news-content to large audiences, produce a better learning environment than market-driven media systems, where quality news is less easily available.

These favorable opportunity structures are determined not only by the sheer volume of news and information, but also by their extensive distribution to a large and heterogenic audience. For instance, the placement of news and current affairs between popular shows and in attractive timeslots is seen to engage "inadvertent" audiences; i.e., those viewers who had not planned to watch the news but came across it accidentally. Blumler (1970) first recognized the democratic value of reaching such audiences through these smart 'traps'.

Several recent empirical studies have supported this thesis (Curran et al 2009; Iyengar et al 2009) with reference to the public service versus commercial media debate. Aalberg and Curran (2012) demonstrate, for instance, that the knowledge gap between the interested and the uninterested is relatively small in many of European countries, while this gap is quite dramatic in the US. Citizens who were very interested in politics, and who declared that they follow domestic politics closely, were indeed very well informed across all countries and media systems, including the commercial US system. But, while uninterested citizens in Europe still managed to be relatively well informed, this was not the case in the US, where a substantial minority had minimal news media exposure and remained politically uninformed. Insights from these studies suggest that the larger and increased knowledge gap in the more market-oriented US media-system indicates that learning about politics is a more *active* process than in many European countries. US citizens are now required to work harder in actively seeking out the news (Prior, 2007).

The more extensive information environments offered by media systems with stronger public service providers, by contrast, stimulate more *passive learning*. Shehata's (2013) study, using Swedish panel data, found that exposure to news at election time had stronger effects on current affairs learning among citizens with lower levels of general political knowledge. This happened despite the fact that these programs are watched less extensively by this group of citizens, simply because they learn more from news exposure than high-information groups (2013). Shehata thus concluded that 'the smaller current affairs knowledge gaps found in public service-oriented countries are, at least partly, the result of passive learning from television's inadvertent audiences who are captured by the extensive political information opportunities provided by the major television channels' (2013, p 217). The new tendency of watching television content online, rather than live, may however reduce this inadvertent audience effect (Prior, 2007).

Shehata (2013) did not control for the different effects of exposure to public service versus commercial media. But, as in other studies, his data suggested that the most knowledgeable citizens tended to prefer public service channels, while the less informed, to a larger extent, watch commercial news. Strömbäck's Swedish study (2015) however, did find that exposure to public service news lead to positive knowledge effects whereas exposure to commercial news had negative knowledge effects. These results hold even after stringent controls, including general prior political knowledge.

An important innovation in media effects research is to control for self-selection tendencies within particular audiences (Soroka et al., 2013; Fraile and Iyengar, 2014). Soroka and his colleagues found that, compared to commercial news, public service broadcasters had a positive influence on news knowledge. However, not all public service providers were equally effective in this way (the effect of exposure to the Italian public broadcaster was actually negative). In the UK there was a clear positive effect of exposure to news from public service broadcasters and a clear negative effect of exposure to commercial news. Also controlling for self-selection of news, Fraile and Iyengar (2014) found that public broadcasters had more informative effects than commercial broadcasters on unmotivated citizens, but exposure to broadsheets newspapers generally overshadow the positive effect of public service news exposure.

The empirical evidence also suggests that differences in national news supply not only influence how much citizens know about politics, but also the type of knowledge learnt. One of the patterns found in many studies is that Americans are less informed about international news compared to people in less market-driven media systems (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2013). Another, and perhaps more important type of current affairs knowledge, is citizens' ability to describe the issue positions of the main political parties. A surprisingly large number of citizens however, find it impossible to do this (Jenssen et al., 2012, p 144). Among citizens with low hard current affairs knowledge more than half of the respondents were unable to describe the parties issue position. Jenssen et al (2012) investigated if the media was able to help lift people out of this political ignorance and found that exposure to public service news had the most positive effect, while exposure to news from commercial broadcasters was less important. Similarly, Banducci et al (2015) using the European Election Study from 2009, showed that citizens who obtain information via quality news outlets (including public service broadcasters) had a better understanding of parties' policy positions than voters who received their information through low quality outlets (including commercial broadcasters).

Conclusion

This review suggests that citizens are more likely to be exposed to hard news and be more knowledgeable about current affairs if they watch public service news, or news in public service dominated media systems, compared to more market-driven news environments. Although there is some mixed evidence, the overall picture indicates that the media economy and public knowledge is related. The quality of the information environment and the positive effect of public service providers are based on institutional independence. Commercial broadcasters clearly provide the citizens with more news opportunities if they need to comply with certain regulations and compete with a relatively strong public broadcaster. Despite the amount of news steadily increasing over recent decades, with more commercial choice and competition, the review suggests public service media remain distinctly different from market-driven news, and that they clearly are more effective in engendering informed citizenship.

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