ROUTLEDGE NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY RESEARCH

How Media Inform Democracy

A Comparative Approach

Edited by
Toril Aalberg
and James Curran

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Central Debates

Toril Aalberg and James Curran

Public opinion constitutes one of the cornerstones of democracy. Citizens are assumed to hold preferences for particular polices, know where parties and candidates for office are located on the relevant policy dimensions, and cast their votes accordingly. In other words, democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed. Access to information is essential to the health of democracy for at least two reasons. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than act out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves a "checking function" by ensuring that representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out, broadly, the wishes of those who elected them.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) have demonstrated that informed citizens are better citizens as judged by the standards of democratic theory. They are more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, and more likely to choose political candidates who represent their views. But in order to express political views and identify their self-interests, citizens need relevant and up-to-date information about current affairs.

Politically relevant information is now more widely available than at any time in the past. But never before has it been so easy to avoid news and current affairs in the media (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007). The rise of cable TV and the Internet have given people greater control over what media they consume. In the US, this has enabled people with a strong preference for entertainment to limit their exposure to public affairs information, and the world of politics more generally (Prior 2007).

Some researchers also criticize the quality of information provided by news media. Increased market influence and changing news values are said to have depleted the information environment, even for those who seek out the news (Entman 1989; Postman 1985; Patterson 1993; 2000a). One of the main problems, it is argued, is that increasing competition in the news market has encouraged journalists to sensationalize the news (Vettehen et al. 2006; Örnebring 2003; Slattery et al. 2001), and to present politics as a game or a soap opera in order to make it more interesting (Witelbols 2004). It is also argued that television news is becoming softer and

more de-contextualized, and that many newspapers have adjusted to TV competition by shifting to more entertainment-oriented and less fact-based reporting.

The overall aim of this book is *to study the information given by the news media to the public cross-nationally and to investigate how this information influences the public's knowledge, awareness, and perceptions of current affairs*. The book will add, it is hoped, to knowledge in two main areas: first, the comparative study of media systems and second, the role of political communication and media influence.

MEDIA SYSTEMS AND THE STRUCTURAL BIAS OF NEWS COVERAGE

Although empirical political communication research can be traced as far back as the 1930s, it has never developed a strong comparative tradition. Most political communication research is based on studies of individual countries, and the vast majority of this research is concerned only with the US. This single-country approach has encouraged researchers to ignore the influence of different media structures on news coverage, and on what people know. Yet, how broadcasting is organized within a country, or the relative importance of newspapers in relation to television, are factors that can influence the information provided by the news media, and thus its potential effect on the political knowledge and culture of society.

The dearth of comparative research can also give rise to misleading generalization. There is a tendency for scholars to assume that research findings from their country are valid everywhere—what Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 75) refer to as "naïve universalism". It is also a problem that most previous research has been based on evidence from the US since there are good grounds for thinking that the US is significantly different from other western democracies in terms of its media environment, political system, history, and culture (Lipset 1996; Wilson 1998). Against this background, it is important to study cross-nationally the relationship between media systems, the supply of information, and public knowledge and perceptions.

In their influential work on comparing media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest that an important media system characteristic is the structure of media markets, and in particular, the relative strength of the mass circulation press. What is especially significant, they argue, is whether or not newspapers are read mainly by the political class or whether they reach a wider public. They also contend that the presence or absence of a mass circulation press is accompanied by differences in the respective roles of print and electronic media (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 24). In countries where per capita newspaper circulation is low, the mass public relies more heavily on electronic media for information. Press differences are linked to geography. Scandinavian and other North European countries tend to have

high rates of newspaper circulation while Southern Europe has low rates; North Atlantic countries tend to fall between two rates.

Some also argue that the relative popularity of the newspaper press matters because newspapers convey more information than general TV. The format of newspapers allows them to offer *more* news, and potentially more issue-specific and contextualized news than TV (Esaiasson and Håkansson 2002; Iyengar 1991). By contrast, the time available for a TV newscast allows for fewer words or stories than a newspaper. This is one reason, it is claimed, why television generally offers less coverage and less informative reporting (Druckman 2005; Just et al. 1996; Mondak 1995; Neuman et al. 1992; Robinson and Davis 1990).

In addition, television viewers usually have no control over the pace at which they receive information, unlike newspaper readers. The visual aspects and conventions of television can also lead to an emphasis on personality rather than policy, and on episodic rather than thematic news (Bennett 2003; Druckman 2005; Eveland and Scheufele 2000; Graber 1993; Iyengar 1991; Keeter 1987; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Some even claim that modern television must, by its very nature, be entertaining rather than educational (Postman 1985). However, these technology-centered generalizations tend to ignore the fact that newspapers vary greatly between countries. There is a striking contrast, for example, between the relatively devolved, public affairs-oriented Finnish press, and the more nationally centralized, entertainment-centered British press (Curran, Salovaara-Moring, Coen, and Iyengar 2010).

Another important media system characteristic, in Hallin and Mancini's schema (2004: 41), is the role of the state in funding broadcasting. In some countries, public television remains both well-resourced and important, while in others it is impoverished and marginalized. In general, public funding of television is much higher in Europe than in North America. However, PBS dependence on commercial revenue varies considerably within Europe.

It is also argued that America's commercial media system gives relatively little attention to public and foreign affairs. "Soft news" has grown at the expense of "hard news" on American network television during the last two decades (Hamilton 2004: 184). According to one estimate, the time devoted to entertainment, disasters, and accidents more then doubled in network television newscasts between 1990 and 1998 at the expense of public affairs coverage (Bennett 2003: 14). The US media coverage of foreign affairs also declined during the post-Cold War period of 1988–1996 (Schudson and Tifft 2005: 35), as did its investment in foreign news-gathering (Shanor 2003).

Although researchers have pointed to the increasing commercialization of European media systems, "information programs" still account for a substantial proportion of both total and prime-time output in much of West-European television (Curran 2002: 192). However, within the