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# Media Systems and the Political Information Environment: A Cross-National Comparison

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## Abstract

To express attitudes and act according to their self-interest, citizens need relevant, up-to-date information about current affairs. But has the increased commercialization in the media market increased or decreased the flow of political information? Hallin and Mancini stress that the existing empirical evidence is fragmented and that this question therefore has been difficult to answer. In this article the authors present new data that allow them to systematically examine how the flow of political information on TV occurs across six Western countries during a thirty-year period. The authors find that the flow of political information through TV varies according to the degree of commercialization. The flow of news and current affairs is lowest in the most commercially oriented television system and among the commercial TV channels. There is however important cross-national variation even within similar media systems. The authors' data do not suggest a convergence toward the liberal system when it comes to the political information environment on TV. Rather, what strikes them is how strongly resistant some European countries have been to subordinating the needs of democracy to profit making.

## Keywords

citizens, comparative research, democracy, television, United States, Western Europe

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One of the most important and dominant questions in the study of political communication is how the media aid citizens to become informed voters (Holbert 2005: 511). The media are expected to provide sufficient and relevant political information so that citizens can hold their representatives to account and make informed choices (Carpini and Keeter 1996). Yet there is considerable uncertainty about whether recent changes in the media environment are supporting or impeding increased public affairs knowledge. This uncertainty is reflected in Hallin and Mancini's (2004: 279) landmark survey of western media systems. "One of the most difficult questions to sort out," they maintain, "is whether commercialization has increased or decreased the flow of political information and discussion." "The existing empirical evidence," they continue, "is fragmentary and not entirely consistent" and is complicated by the play of other influences. But if the consequences of commercialization are uncertain, at least one trend is, in their view, beyond doubt. Commercialization "has encouraged the development of a globalised media culture that substantially diminishes national differences" (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 282).<sup>1</sup>

Hallin and Mancini's baffled response to contradictory and insufficient evidence, in this area, is something with which we empathize. That said, we endeavor to reach a more finite conclusion on the basis of new data, gathered for the period 1987 to 2007, in relation to the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway. These are six countries that Hallin and Mancini portray as, respectively, examples of liberal (United States, United Kingdom) and democratic corporatist models. The focus is on television as the principal supplier of political information to a broader public. By offering a systematic examination of the supply and demand of news and current affairs broadcast by the four principal television channels in these countries, we reveal *whether the flow of political information varies according to media systems*. We also investigate *whether there is evidence of a convergence in the political information environment, as more media systems become increasingly commercialized*.

These research questions are elaborated in more detail later. First, let us take a closer look at why the political information environment is important and how these environments may vary according to different media systems.

## Democracy, Media Systems, and the Informed Citizen

Democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed. As Carpini and Keeter (1996) demonstrated, informed citizens are better citizens 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 interest with their attitudes, and more likely to choose political representatives who are consistent with their own attitudes. Thus, for normative as well as empirically supported reasons, it is desirable that the media adequately inform the electorate about public affairs.<sup>2</sup> News and commentary enable citizens to make informed and effective choices about the exercise of state power.

In many respects, politically relevant information is more *widely available* now than at any time in history. There has been an increase in the number of TV channels, and the rise of Internet during the late 1990s and 2000s should be viewed as being as significant as the rise of television during the 1950s. This does not mean, however, that the *flow* of political information is better than ever before. Although online newspapers are growing and their print versions are declining, the Internet is predominantly used for entertainment purposes and not for seeking news and current affairs information. When people surf the Web, they are more likely to seek information about their special interests rather than visit mass media sites (Hilt and Lipschultz 2004). There is not much evidence suggesting that the Internet has been established as a primary source of news, either in Europe or in the United States, save for a minority (Castells 2009: 231).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Prior (2007) argues that the greater choice introduced by Internet and cable TV actually encourages more people to diminish their exposure to political information. In essence, changes in the US media environment have made it easier both to find and also to avoid news and current affairs. "Political information in the current media environment," Prior (2007: 26) writes, "comes mostly to those who want it." Thus, two changes are taking place, which are linked but not identical. Both the *multiplication* of channels and increasing *commercialization* have the potential to influence the flow of political information and distribution of public affairs knowledge.

If this is judged to matter or not depends on both the normative standard one requires of a good citizen as well as the empirical evidence. Patterson (2000) and Bennet (2003) are among those who take a pessimistic view and claim that the evidence suggests that fragmented news weakens the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public's information about public affairs. Zaller (2003) is more optimistic when he argues, in line with Schudson (1998), that normative democratic theory places unnecessary and unrealistically heavy demands on "the good citizen" and that the ideal rather should be that of the "monitorial citizen." Zaller argues that, because of heuristics and cognitive shortcuts, citizens can get the information they need by "scanning the environment for events that require response." In what he calls the "burglar alarm standard," he suggests that intense, dramatic, and entertaining coverage will lead more citizens to get more information because it is more tailored to the needs of the low-information citizens. Therefore, they argue that it is entirely appropriate that some media should provide only a basic news service that the "monitorial citizen" will scan, while other media offer fuller news coverage and commentary to satisfy the demands of the news junkie (Zaller 2003).

Zaller's argument is that even a thin diet of news consumed by the majority is sufficient to sustain a healthy democracy. We believe that there is reason to question this assumption, as a heavy diet of entertainment and a low level of public engagement left large numbers of Americans woefully ignorant about the cause of the second Iraq War (2003) fought in their name. In the aftermath of the invasion, one-quarter of the American public continued to believe that the United States had found weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein was implicated in the 9/11 terrorist attacks

(Kull et al. 2004). In the ensuing period, 2004–6, these proportions actually increased despite the way in which information that clearly demonstrated the falsity of these perceptions became publicly available (Castells 2009).

Some studies have already suggested that the American media system gives relatively little attention to public and foreign affairs. For instance “soft news” has grown at the expense of “hard news” on American network television during the past two decades (Hamilton 2004: 184). According to one estimate, the time devoted to entertainment, disasters, and accidents more than doubled in network television newscasts between 1990 and 1998 at the expense of public affairs coverage (Bennet 2003, 14). U.S. media coverage of foreign affairs was also significantly reduced during the post-cold war period of 1988–96 (Schudson and Tiftt 2005: 35), as was U.S. investment in foreign news gathering (Shanor 2003). Previous analysis has also suggested that commercial news tends to be broadcasted at an early fringe time, whereas public broadcasting systems have traditionally broadcast the news in the heart of prime time (Semetko 2000; Hallin and Mancini 2004: 280).

From this it can be inferred that different media systems create a structural bias in favor of different political information environments. This can produce, in turn, significant cross-national differences in the levels of political knowledge and misperceptions. Some studies already suggest such a pattern. Dimock and Popkin (1997: 223) showed that Europeans were very much better informed about world events than were Americans and suggested that this was because of “substantial differences between countries in the communication of knowledge by TV.” Iyengar et al. (2009) and Curran et al. (2009, 2010) also argue that the liberal media models have a soft news focus, which makes U.S. and British citizens less informed about politics and current affairs than citizens in countries with strong public service broadcasting regimes.

Although some scholars have pointed to the growing Americanization of European media systems, “information programs” still account for a substantial proportion of both total and prime-time output in much of Western European television (Curran 2002: 192). However, within the European context there are significant differences among the traditional public service channels, the “hybrid” commercial public service channels, and relatively unregulated commercial satellite or cable channels. Syvertsen (2002: 42) and Carlson and Harrie (2001: 121-25) demonstrate how news and information constitute a larger share of the programs in the traditional public service channels compared to the commercial public service channels where the focus is more oriented toward drama, entertainment, and sports. Therefore, one central hypothesis of this study is that commercial media have a structural bias in disfavoring news and current affairs. We anticipate that media systems dominated by commercial television, low levels of media regulation, and a strong consumer orientation will tend not to supply significant quantities of news and current affairs in prime time when most people actually watch television. By contrast, countries with more public television, higher levels of media regulation, and a stronger orientation toward serving democracy are expected to offer a substantial share of news and current affairs in prime time.

Moreover, if it is true that we are experiencing a homogenization of media systems, where the liberal commercialized media model is expanding at the expense of other models, we would expect to see a convergence of political information environments. If this is the case, we will find that prime-time news and current affairs are declining and that the democratic corporatist television systems that dominate most of north-western Europe are becoming more like their liberal commercial counterparts in the United States.

## Data

This study is based on data from six countries. They are Belgium,<sup>4</sup> the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In all countries we have included information about news and current affairs programs broadcasted by four major broadcasters in 1987, 1997, and 2007. Data on news and current affairs programs have been collected from the TV guides of the two main PBS and two main commercial TV stations where applicable.<sup>5</sup> In the four “democratic corporatist” countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), commercial stations had not yet been established in 1987, but by 1997 all four had up to one or two commercial channels that competed with the public service channels. In the liberal countries (the United States and the United Kingdom), commercial channels were well established by 1987. For an overview of individual channels included in this study, see Table A1 in the appendix.

The TV guides for these channels were coded the second week in every month for all three years.<sup>6</sup> Coders were asked to include the following two categories in the data set:

1. *News*: This includes all news reports that are broadcast, save for sport and weather forecasts. Coders were asked to deduct approximately 20 percent if the latter was included in the newscast. Both national and local news was coded and is included in this study, as is news directed toward children, the deaf, and various linguistic minority groups. Specialized news programs on business, culture, or entertainment were not included.
2. *Current affairs*: This includes all programs that give more background information concerning recent social or political events. It also includes political talk shows, political debates, and documentaries that focus on recent political events. More popular talk shows that occasionally invite a politician are not included. Popular factual entertainment programs that have a main focus on human interest or crime are not included. In the case of “breakfast television” shows, it was estimated that approximately 10 percent of its content was allocated to news and 10 percent to current affairs.

The unit of analysis is the individual program, which was measured in minutes. The programs were also identified by date, time, TV channel, type of program, and whether

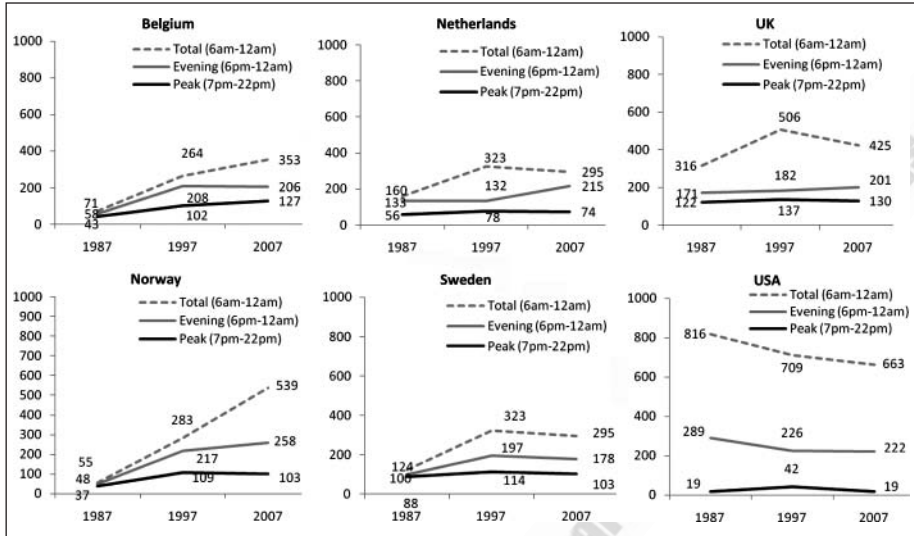
or not this was a rerun. For commercial channels 10 percent of the time was deducted to exclude time spent on advertisements. Advertising time is generally higher in the United States and has increased over the years. Hence, in the U.S. case we deducted 20 percent of program time in 1997 and 30 percent in 2007. These and other decisions on the actual program time are obviously rough estimations but were taken after careful consideration and discussion with country experts.

The flow of political information is not only a question of supply. Equally important is demand, registered in the share of people who spend time consuming the news and current affairs programs offered to them. In 1987 a single accepted method of measuring audience size was not yet established in five out of the six countries included in this study. Therefore, we have only included audience figures from 1997 to 2007. In the four democratic corporatist countries, the various broadcasters have provided us with their average audience ratings and market share for their main news program.<sup>7</sup> For the United Kingdom and the United States audience ratings were collected from publicly available resources (United Kingdom: Barb data; United States: Nielsen ratings provided by Project for Excellence in Journalism). The audience figures should be interpreted with caution as measurement procedures tend to vary both across countries and also across time.

## The Flow of Political Information

In all countries, except the United States, there has been a substantial growth in the total volume of news and current affairs programs *on leading television channels* during the period 1987–97 (see Figure 1). This growth was partly a consequence of the expansion of daytime provision of news and current affairs content, but it also arose from the ending of television monopolies and the rise of new general channels, offering news and current affairs programs that built large audiences.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this growth of journalism provision in the core TV sector, the total number of television channels also proliferated, including twenty-four-hour news channels such as Sky News (1989) and BBC 24 (1997) in the United Kingdom and TV2 Nyhetskanalen (2007) and SVT24 (1999) in the Scandinavian case.<sup>9</sup> In four of our six countries, this increase was slightly reversed between 1997 and 2007. This drop was most pronounced in the United Kingdom, where the British audience on average was offered approximately one and a half hours more news and current affairs in 1997 than in 2007.

Only Norway and Belgium experienced a growth of leading channel news and current affairs in this last decade. In Norway this was caused by the public broadcaster NRK changing its profile for its number 2 channel. Until then NRK2 had mainly focused on cultural and special interest programs, but when NRK launched its third channel (NRK3) in September 2007, the public broadcaster decided to refocus the NRK2 programming on news and documentaries. In Belgium, the total growth of news and current affairs is mainly caused by a further increase in length of the main news broadcast on both the commercial and public broadcaster channel.

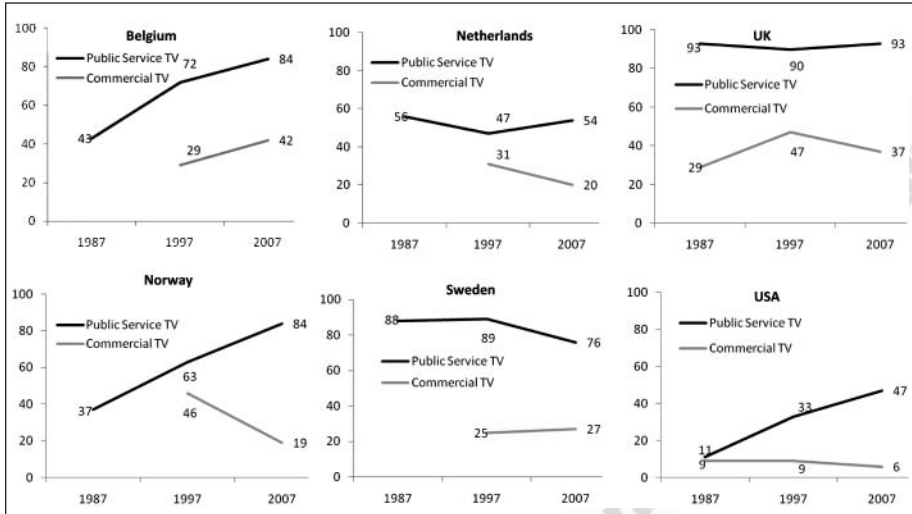


**Figure 1.** Supply of news and current affairs according to time of broadcast, 1987–2007: Average minutes per day  
Note: News and current affairs programs broadcast between 12 A.M. (midnight) and 6 A.M. are not included.

The evolution of the news flow of the United States has been quite different from those of the other countries, with the total volume of its news decreasing over time. Still this total amount of news remains higher compared to that in the European countries. It is important to keep in mind that much of this news is local news and that this share has increased significantly over the years. In 1987 about one-third of its news consisted of local news, compared with over half in 2007, which differs strongly from the European sample.<sup>10</sup> Although local news includes politically relevant information, it tends to include more information about crime, accidents, and sport. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

Nevertheless, the ending of television monopolies and the rise of new general channels have obviously given the audience a larger supply of news and current affairs. In short, citizens in these six countries had ready access to an enormous increase in the volume of news and current affairs commentary. Never before in the history of democracy have electorates been supplied with so much information about public affairs on TV as they are today. However, the vast majority of this increase took place outside prime time. The fact that the volume of public affairs information increased between 1987 and 2007 does not demonstrate therefore that more attention was paid to it. We now have a situation in which a larger volume of news and current affairs is offered to the public at times *when few people* traditionally watch television. Since daytime TV does not attract significant audiences, the growth in total volume is not proof of increased consumption.





**Figure 2.** Supply of news and current affairs during peak hours among Public Service TV and Commercial TV, 1987–2007: Average minutes per day

Let us therefore turn to the time of day when audience ratings are highest. The black lines in Figure 1 give us the average number of minutes of news and current affairs during peak hours (7 P.M. to 10 P.M.). Here, the dominant pattern is one of stability. In four of our six countries the change from 1987 to 2007 must be considered small and insignificant. Again only Norway and Belgium have experienced a significant increase in peak-time news and current affairs between 1987 and 1997 that was not been reversed later. In other words, despite a higher number of TV channels offering news and current affairs in 2007 compared to 1987, the amount of news and current affairs offered at peak times to the public remains remarkably stable. We also see that the lowest share of prime-time news and current affairs, hardly twenty minutes a day, is provided by the four U.S. channels. It is also worth mentioning that the broadcasters in the United Kingdom, also categorized by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a liberal media system, provide a very similar amount of prime-time news as the four democratic corporatist countries. We believe this is caused by the relative importance of public service television as a central player in the United Kingdom compared to the commercially driven media landscape of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed a central assumption in this study is that commercial media organizations will be less focused on news and current affairs and that this will be especially apparent in prime time. Figure 2 confirms that this is clearly the case: in all six countries commercial channels devoted on average significantly less time to news and current affairs during peak hours compared to public channels. Although a clear pattern over time in the different countries is absent, there is little indication that PBS and commercial

television have grown toward each other. In the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway, and the United States, the difference has even increased.

What can explain the rather large country differences, particularly between the United States on one side and the European countries on the other? There are at least two obvious explanations, both relating to the way TV is organized. In the United States public television is weak and underresourced, whereas in Northern Europe public television is relatively well financed and still important. No less important, commercial television in the United States is subject to minimal regulation. In Northern Europe, however, commercial television is incorporated into the regime of public service (with the partial exception of Britain). This gives rise to a different division of labor. In the United States, its very weak public TV shoulders nearly all the burden of informing the public in prime time. By contrast, the leading commercial TV channels in Europe still offer substantial peak-time news and current affairs. In the European context even a commercial channel that aims at a broad audience seems to need a prominent news service for its overall credibility.<sup>12</sup>

Underlying these differences is a divergence of institutional goals. American television is directed toward maximizing revenue and is oriented toward serving the American consumer. By contrast, European television gives greater relative priority to serving the needs of democracy. This gives rise to one very concrete and important difference. The principal American television channels transmit news and current affairs programs at the fringe of popular viewing times. By contrast, the principal channels in our sample of European countries (with the partial exception of Britain) transmit news and current affairs during peak times. In the United States the three largest channels (all commercial) provide their main evening news shows at 6:30 P.M.<sup>13</sup> The largest TV channels in the democratic corporatist countries, however, provide their main evening news show at the heart of prime time. This holds even for most commercial channels included in our sample. Thus, while the American television system makes it difficult for viewers to encounter news and comment about public affairs by scheduling these outside peak viewing times, the European system makes access to news and current affairs easier by doing the opposite. Table 1 provides an overview of the scheduling of the two main evening news programs in the six countries.

The time when news programs are broadcast influences the size of their audiences and the number of citizens who follow the news.<sup>14</sup> Table 2 presents the number of viewers of the two main channels evening news show as a percentage of the country's population. Generally, the news broadcast provided by the public service channel attracts more viewers than the commercial news shows across all the European countries, though with two exceptions in 1997. In Belgium the commercial news program *Het Nieuws* was watched by more people than the public competitor called *Het Journaal*. This can be seen as a reflection of the instant success of the introduction of commercial television in 1989, which shrunk the market share of the PBS channel, then viewed as bureaucratic and politicized. After a cumulative process of modernization and "depolarization," *Het Journaal* regained its position as the leading news program and was in 2007 watched by approximately 12 percent of the population in Belgium (Flanders).

**Table 1.** Overview of the Two Biggest TV Channels' Main Evening News Programs in 2007 by Country, Type of Channel, and Transmission Time

	Belgium	Netherlands	Norway	Sweden	United Kingdom	United States <sup>a</sup>
Biggest, channel	VRT (PBS), <i>Het Journaal</i> , start at 7 P.M.	Ned1 (PBS), <i>NOS 8 uur</i> <i>journaal</i> , start at 8 P.M.	NRK1 (PBS), <i>Dagsrevyen</i> , start at 7 P.M.	SVT1 (PBS), <i>Rapport</i> , start at 7:30 P.M.	BBC1 (PBS), <i>BBC News</i> , start at 10 P.M.	NBC (Com), <i>Nightly News</i> , start at 6:30 P.M.
Second biggest channel	VTM (Com), <i>Het Nieuws</i> , start at 7 P.M.	RTL4 (Com), <i>RTL4 Journaal</i> , start at 7:30 P.M.	TV2 (Com), <i>Nyhetene</i> , start at 9 P.M.	TV4 (Com), <i>Nyheterna</i> , start at 7 P.M.	ITV (Com), <i>News at Ten</i> , start at 10 P.M.	ABC (Com), <i>World News</i> , start at 6:30 P.M.

a. Network evening news in the United States may be broadcasted at different times in different local markets. The transmission time may therefore start at 6 P.M. or even 5:30 P.M.

We also see that ITV's news at 10 in the United Kingdom attracted somewhat more viewers than BBC in 1997. ITV, the leading commercial channel, had broadcast its main evening news show at 10 P.M. since 1967. In 1999 however, it was moved to 11 P.M. to create an uninterrupted space for high-ratings entertainment. The BBC, exposed to increased competitive pressure, shifted its main news program from 9 to 10 P.M. in 2000. It was only when public pressure increased that ITV returned its news program to its original slot at 10 P.M., for four nights in 2008 and five nights in 2009. But by then ITV news had lost a significant part of its audience that it never regained.

Viewing statistics demonstrate that there also are significant differences in TV news consumption among the various countries. Generally, audience figures are higher in the democratic corporatist countries compared to the liberal countries, but with the United Kingdom being much closer to the other European countries than to the United States. *Dagsrevyen*, the most popular evening news show in Norway, was watched by approximately 15 percent of the Norwegian population on average in 2007. By comparison, the most popular news program in the United States, *NBC Nightly News*, was watched by less than 3 percent of the American population. Translated into market shares, this means that 66 percent of Norwegians watching television at that time of day were tuned into the public service news. In the United States, however, only 12 percent of those who watched television at that time were tuned into NBC's evening newscast. This dramatic difference in people watching the news can be seen as a consequence of differences in political culture, geography, and the way in which television is organized.

There has been a general decline in TV news consumption, mostly both for public as well as for commercial TV stations. This is the case in the United States,

**Table 2.** Evening News Viewership: Percentage of Viewers Relative to Country's Population Size

	1997	2007
Belgium		
Main public service evening news	8.6	12.0
Main commercial evening news	13.6	10.0
Netherlands		
Main public service evening news	9.4 <sup>a</sup>	9.8
Main commercial evening news	5.8 <sup>a</sup>	6.1
Norway		
Main public service evening news	20.4	15.4
Main commercial evening news	12.7	10.7
Sweden		
Main public service evening news	16.8	11.2
Main commercial evening news	5.2	5.4
United Kingdom		
Main public service evening news	8.9	7.9
Main commercial evening news	9.9	6.1
United States		
Main NBC evening news	3.9	2.7
Main ABC evening news	3.7	2.7

Note: Entries are based on average viewing statistics provided by broadcasters. These figures are calculated and presented in the table as percentages of the total population. For simplicity, the population figures are kept constant across the ten-year period. Population figures are Norway 4.6 million, Belgium (Flanders) 6.3 million, Sweden 9.1 million, the Netherlands 16.6 million, the United Kingdom 61.1 million, and the United States 307.2 million. The following programs are included in our measurement. Norway: *Dagsrevyen* 1900, *Nyhete* 2100; Sweden: *Rapport* 1930, *Nyheter* 1830/1900; Belgium (Flanders): *Het Nieuws* 1900, *Het Journaal* 1900; Netherlands, *Het Nieuws* 1930, *Het Journaal* 2000; United Kingdom: BBC *Ten O'Clock News* (*Nine O'Clock News* until October 2000), *ITV News at Ten/ITV Evening News* (yearly averages are derived from Barb data at the British Film Institute); United States: NBC and ABC news broadcast at 6:30 P.M. For the United States, average viewership is for November based on Nielsen Media Research figures (reported by Project for Excellence in Journalism in 2007 and 2008 annual reports on the State of the News Media (<http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2009/previous.php>)). Norwegian measurement procedures were significantly changed in 2000. Swedish figures are based on average ratings for the first and third quarters of the year.  
a. Figures from Netherlands are from 2001.

United Kingdom, Sweden, and Norway. In Belgium and the Netherlands the number of viewers and also market shares remained remarkably stable. However, this different evolution has not increased the variation within the four democratic corporatist countries but rather has made them more similar in terms of their TV news viewing.

## Conclusion

In our study of the political information environment, we used two central arguments of Hallin and Mancini (2004) on media systems as a starting point. The first is that different systems of organizing political power are associated with different ways of

organizing the media and of doing journalism, leading to their tripartite zoning of media systems. Their second central argument is that these differences are diminishing, mainly as a consequence of the growing influence of the market. We argue, based on the empirical evidence presented here, that both arguments are problematic, or at least need more nuance. We discuss the “commercialization” argument first and examine country differences second.

Hallin and Mancini (2004: 279) declared that it is very difficult to sort out whether commercialization has increased or decreased the flow of political information. Studying the information provided by the four biggest terrestrial TV channels (still the dominant news media) in six Western countries, we find that peak-time supply of political information varies according to media system, or rather the degree of commercialization. It is lowest in the most commercialized of these countries, the United States. The time the three largest TV channels, NBC, ABC, and CBS, allocate to news and current affairs in prime time is in a comparative perspective exceptionally low. Partly as a consequence, their main newscasts also attract a relatively small share of viewers. In 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. Viewer statistics also demonstrate that a larger share of the population in these countries actually does consume the television news offered to them. The public versus commercial logic is also evident if we compare broadcasters within countries. Commercial TV channels offer less prime-time news compared to the national PBS channels, and their newscasts generally attract fewer viewers.

However, the term *commercialization* implies not only differences between public and commercial organizations but also a shift over time. Do we see evidence of convergence in the political information environment as a consequence of increasing market influence on television? There are traces of convergence, most notably because the number of terrestrial channels increased as television monopolies ended in the democratic corporatist countries. This caused a growth particularly in daytime provision of news and current affairs programs, which prior to 1997 were extensive only in the liberal systems. Thus, by 2007 all six countries included in this study had substantial daytime TV news. Within the democratic corporatist countries we found some evidence of convergence between public and commercial TV channels in terms of *when* they broadcast news and current affairs.

Political information convergence in the TV sector has, however, *not* occurred if we focus on prime-time programming or the number of citizens following the main evening news, which after all are the two most important factors when considering the flow of information. Our data do not suggest that the supply of prime-time news and current affairs has become more similar across the different media systems during the twenty-year period included in this study. If anything, differences between the democratic corporatist countries and the United States have increased in this respect. Similarly, even if several countries have experienced a decrease in news audiences, this has not fundamentally changed the major differences that persist between the United States and the Northern European countries in terms of TV news consumption. Our conclusion therefore is that when it comes to the political information environment provided by the

major TV channels, general trends of commercialization and a more globalized media culture have not diminished important national differences. If what impresses Hallin and Mancini (2004) is a worldwide convergence toward a commercial market model, what strikes us is how strongly resistant some countries have been to subordinating the needs of democracy to profit making.

Both British and American media are bracketed together by Hallin and Mancini as part of the “liberal” camp and the media of the remaining countries in our sample as belonging to the democratic corporatist bloc. However, our analysis based on the provision, scheduling, and consumption of news places U.S. television out on a limb and British television as having greater affinities with the television systems of other European countries. Thus, the peak-time and evening news provision of news and current affairs on leading channels is 6 times higher in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Overall, the news provision of British television is comparable to that in the four other European countries. Viewing of the news in the United Kingdom is also much higher than in the United States.

Thus, it would seem that British TV has more in common with its European neighbors than with its liberal “partner” country, the United States. Within the democratic corporatist bloc, there is some degree of internal differentiation for which multiple country-specific reasons can be identified. In particular, the divergent strategies of public broadcasters in the different countries seem to be crucial. For Norwegian PBS, an important goal is to be the “*biggest broadcaster in the country.*” By contrast, the primary aim of Swedish PBS is to be among the “*best PBS organizations in the world*” (Larsen 2008: 333).

This indicates that perhaps the content and the quality of the news might vary substantially even between different European PBS channels. Previous findings do suggest that a considerable share of news programs, even in democratic corporatist systems, is devoted to soft news (Curran et al. 2009, 2010). The daily news show of the private Dutch broadcaster SBS6 called “The Heart of the Netherlands” was even excluded from this analysis because it *never* focused on political affairs. The growth of soft news is probably a response to increased competition and the fragmenting, and sometimes eroding, TV audience for news and current affairs. Because soft news is perceived to be more entertaining, it is included as a bait to attract a larger audience. Thus, the challenge facing TV news providers in most countries is how to reach *a lot* of people but at the same time provide *quality* news on public affairs. Perhaps commercialization has its strongest impact not on the amount of news and current affairs knowledge but on its character, reflected in a shift toward soft news and away from public affairs.

Zaller (2003) argues that it is entirely appropriate that some media should provide only a basic news service that the “monitorial citizen” can merely scan and that a modicum of news consumed by the majority is sufficient to sustain a healthy democracy. We believe, however, that a fuller diet of news and current affairs is to be preferred over a sparse one, if democracy is not to become anorexic. The major problem with a thin diet (or an average of six minutes of prime-time news offered by the three biggest channels as in the U.S. case) is that citizens *have to make an active effort to seek out substantive news programs*. When more time is devoted to news and current

affairs in prime time, as in the European case, more people inadvertently watch the news because these are broadcast on the biggest TV channels at a time when most people actually watch television. Differences in quantity and quality as well as in when news is offered contribute to the higher level of public affairs knowledge among European citizens compared to their American counterparts documented in previous research (Dimock and Popkin 1997; Curran et al. 2009, 2010; Iyengar et al. 2009). Public service scheduling of news at peak times designed to foster inadvertent viewing, especially among those not particularly interested in politics, also helps to reduce gaps in current affairs knowledge between the advantaged and disadvantaged (Curran et al. 2009) and thus create better democracies. The fact that there is a continuing divergence between television systems matters.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Overview of Channels Included in the Study

	1987	1997	2007
Belgium			
PBS 1	BRT1	TV1	Eén
PBS 2	BRT2	TV2/Canvas	Canvas
Private 1		VTM	VTM
Private 2			
Netherlands			
PBS 1	Ned1	Ned1	Ned1
PBS 2	Ned2	Ned2	Ned2
Private 1		RTL4	RTL4
Private 2		SBS6	SBS6
Norway			
PBS 1	NRK	NRK1	NRK1
PBS 2		NRK2	NRK2
Private 1		TV2	TV2
Private 2		TVNorge	TVNorge
Sweden			
PBS 1	SVT1	SVT1	SVT1
PBS 2	SVT2	SVT2	SVT2
Private 1		TV4	TV4
Private 2	— <sup>a</sup>	TV3	— <sup>a</sup>
United Kingdom			
PBS 1	BBC1	BBC1	BBC1
PBS 2	Channel 4	Channel 4	Channel 4
Private 1	ITV	ITV	ITV
Private 2		Channel 5	Channel 5
United States			
PBS 1	PBS	PBS	PBS
Private 1	NBC	NBC	NBC
Private 2	ABC	ABC	ABC
Private 3	CBS	CBS	CBS

a. TV3 was launched on December 31, 1987, but did not broadcast any news in 2007.

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## Notes

1. Hallin (2009) has, in a brief recent article, rowed back a little from the media convergence thesis.
2. While this remains the standard position, it is contested by “elite democracy” theorists and advocates of low information rationality who argue that it is unrealistic to expect most citizens to be highly informed about public affairs and that democracy functions just as well or even better when citizens are apathetic (see Clawson and Oxley 2008: 183).
3. A recent study based on European Social Survey (ESS) data from thirty European countries also indicates that people use the Internet as a *supplement* rather than an alternative to traditional news media use (Blekesaune et al. 2009).
4. When we talk about Belgium in this study we actually mean Flanders, the Dutch-speaking north of Belgium, containing about 60 percent of the Belgian population.
5. Data from the United States include three commercial and only one PBS station. In Belgium we included only one commercial channel as there is only one commercial channel that offers news and current affairs. In Sweden, there was only one commercial channel that offered news in 2007, and there was only one main commercial channel that provided news in the United Kingdom in 1987.
6. Weeks when national election campaigns took place are not included in this study. Hence, we only include eleven weeks for Belgium in 1987 and ten weeks in 2007. In Norway only eleven weeks are included in 1997.
7. Iacob Christian Prebensen at NRK, Birgit Eie at TV2, and Bengt Nordström at SVT helped us with the Norwegian and Swedish audience ratings. Dutch data were supplied by Stichting Kijkersonderzoek (SKO) Netherlands, and Belgian data were supplied by VRT (public broadcaster for Flanders; data source is CIM/GfK-Audimetrie).
8. This is reflected in an increase in the number of channels in our sample. This grew from fourteen channels in 1987 to twenty-three in 1997, the same number as in 2007.



9. These twenty-four-hour news channels are not included in our sample.
10. In 2007, the share of local news was 15 percent in Norway and 9 percent in the United Kingdom.
11. Hallin and Mancini (2004) also cite the strength of public service broadcasting as the main feature the United Kingdom shares with the democratic corporatist system.
12. This may well change. Commercial channels that are not forced by regulation to maintain a news service may consider it unnecessary to compete with PBS channels on news and current affairs. In Norway, the commercial channel TVNorge closed down its entire news department in October 2009. They declared that they would rather spend their resources on entertainment and concentrate on a young audience that would yield greater advertising. By contrast, the largest Norwegian PBS channel expanded its main evening news program from thirty to forty-five minutes in January 2010.
13. Note however that there may be variations between the different local media markets in the United States in terms of when network evening news is broadcast. Sometimes it is also broadcast at 6:00 P.M. or even 5:30 P.M.
14. The number of competing channels offering news is of course another important factor influencing audience ratings.

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