Chapter 3

The explanatory logic. Factors that shape political news

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Introduction

Insights gained depend on the questions asked. This chapter describes the why and the how of our study's approach. After outlining some principal research interests of comparative news analyses, we introduce a theoretical hierarchy of influences that needs to be observed in order to understand the construction of media content. In fitting this model to the specific requirements of our study, we emphasize, in particular, the importance of integrating event-centered and media-centered considerations, of incorporating an explicit comparative perspective, and of applying appropriate strategies of data analysis. The main part of the chapter introduces the explanatory factors that are used in this study to elucidate cross-national and cross-organizational differences in journalists' use of the six core concepts of political news. The explanatory factors are systematized according to their level of analysis, and we provide a great many examples to illustrate their use in this study, together with concrete operationalizations. We conclude by situating our own approach in the recent development of explanation-oriented comparative news research.

Research interests

Comparative cross-national news analyses pursue essentially two research questions (Esser and Strömbäck 2012b, p. 314). The first explores the apparent simultaneousness of convergence and divergence in news performance across countries. The second links actual news performance to democratic expectations and explores normative aspects of news coverage. Both perspectives are relevant for this study.

In the first line of research (exploring convergence and divergence in news reporting), convergence is usually explained by concepts of diffusion, integration, and cooperation. Diffusion takes place through the border-transgressing distribution and imitation of news practices that have been successful in the United States (Americanization), integration effects refer to growing 'policy transfer' within the European Union (Europeanization), and mutual co-orientation between national communities of media professionals and transnationally operating media companies has become the hallmark of globalized network societies (globalization). The present study's sample was constructed to account for Americanization and Europeanization tendencies, although our cross-sectional design does not allow for testing long-term processes.

Divergence in reporting patterns is usually explained by major, persistent, and relatively stable differences in the structure of media systems and political systems and in the organizational and professional cultures of distinct types of media. These differences exist despite (and in parallel to) the influences mentioned earlier. Here, the modernization paradigm is an important explanatory concept

(Esser and Strömbäck 2012b, p. 314). It acknowledges over-time changes due to external influences but expects these changes to proceed in a path-dependent manner determined by the specific conditions of the institutional and cultural environment in which journalists work. These contextual constellations are said to differ at the national, organizational, and situational levels. The challenge for researchers is to disentangle these factors' effects – located at different levels – in order to explain elements of convergence (such as the emergence of a transnational news logic) and differentiate them from identity-forming elements of divergence (such as the continued significance of distinct national and organizational news cultures). Studying differences in broadly similar systems requires a "most similar systems-different outcome design" (see Esser and Hanitzsch 2012, p. 13), which is precisely what we intend with our own approach.

The second line of research motivating scholars to compare international characteristics of news performance is related to democratic norms. How does the news media fulfill their political role in distinct national settings? Regardless of institutional peculiarities, democratic theory expects the media to provide information that is substantial and reliable, inclusive and diverse, analytical and enlightening, and that serves the public interest, fulfilling the 'watchdog' ideal (see Chapter 1). Against this background, news features such as negativity, bias, personalization, soft news, strategic framing, and interpretive news have raised particular interest. Scholars wish to understand which contextual conditions affect news performance and in what ways, as this understanding could provide the basis, where appropriate, for recommending targeted interventions. But scholars are confronted with the same challenge that was mentioned earlier – namely, to disentangle the effects of relevant factors located at different levels of analysis.

Multilevel framework

Several models have been proposed that conceptualize layers of influence – usually hierarchically arranged from macro to micro – for explaining cross-national differences in news (see Donsbach 2010; Preston 2009; Shoemaker and Reese 1991, 2014). Although differing in detail, they regularly include characteristics of political systems and media systems as a whole, the respective media sectors and organizational types that journalists work for, and the journalists' routines and practices when interacting with news events. (This interaction is also guided by influences from the organizational and national spheres.) The multilevel framework by Shoemaker and Reese (1991, 2014) is probably the best known and most refined. It takes a variable-analytic approach to explaining news content in causal terms (see also Reese 2007). It treats content features such as negativity, balance, personalization, game framing, and infotainment as *dependent variables,* with which a number of *independent variables* – located at the 'individual,' 'routine,' 'organizational,' 'institutional,' and 'systemic' levels – are systematically related.

The metaphor of 'peeling an onion' is useful for understanding the concentric layers of influence that surround individual news workers (McCombs and Reynolds 2002, p. 12).
• The *individual sphere*, which lies at the core of the theoretical onion, encompasses the psychological factors that impinge on an individual's work: professional values, personal views, and political attitudes. However, whether journalists allow their attitudes and values to influence their stories depends on the environmental conditions.
• The *routine level* refers to news-making practices. They allow everyday occurrences to be recognized as news events and to be reconstituted as news stories. This level relates to journalistic initiative versus spoon-feeding by sources, news-gathering practices, criteria of newsworthiness, and the logic of news story construction.
• The *organizational level* covers factors such as internal structure, ownership type, economic and professional goals, editorial policy, news philosophy, and the journalistic culture of news organizations.
• The *institutional level* includes influencing factors outside the newsroom: the regulatory media policy environment; the market environment (with advertisers and audiences as revenue sources and other media as competitors); special interest groups and public relations as sources; and also

relationships with the market environment, the political environment, and technological development.

• The *systemic level* refers to links between the media system and the prevailing social order of the nation-state. News is filtered through national prisms and cultures and is influenced by broader ideologies that reflect the values inherent in domestic political and economic systems. Only comparative research can help assess the importance of these nation-level differences to news production.

A levels-of-analysis approach requires scholars to be especially clear about the elements that they want to compare and whether they mean the same thing in different contexts. This approach takes the entire context of media production into account when explaining news content (Reese 2007; Shoemaker and Reese 2014). Shifting to such a variable- and causality-oriented perspective in news research has been a real leap forward for conceptual clarification and for the understanding of hypothesized relationships – the hallmarks of explanatory research. The underlying logic is also in line with prominent paradigms underlying social scientific explanations, such as Karl R. Popper's (1963/1994) 'institutional individualism,' James S. Coleman's (1990) 'structural individualism,' and Gidden's (1984) 'structuration' concept. They all focus on explaining the actions of individuals who work within social structures. In contemporary newsrooms, even the most creative journalistic activities are processed through structured rules.

Analytical approaches

News decisions are made based on the available events and sources and their suitability for constructing compelling stories. The event environment (i.e., routines and practices) forms part of our model's routine level, which surrounds the individual sphere (the onion's core). The event environment is relevant insofar as journalists regularly attribute 'news factors' to various aspects of political reality. Nonetheless, the criteria journalists use for considering events as newsworthy (by giving them high 'news value') may differ and are often dependent on factors at the organizational and systemic levels. For example, the news factor 'prominence' is typically attributed a higher news value by tabloids than by broadsheets, and the news value and framing of military events in Iraq depend on how the media outlet's home country is involved in the conflict. It is thus important to integrate event-centered and media-centered considerations when explaining news making (Reinemann and Baugut 2014). Our own study follows this principle.

Over the years, news research has shown that the impact of individual-level factors is constrained by successive factors of influence: in particular, organizational-and systemic-level effects can significantly limit the impact of journalists' personal characteristics (Reinemann and Baugut 2014). Shoemakers and Reese's book, *Mediating the Message*, mirrors our adjustments to the many influences. The first edition, published in 1991, prioritizes the individual level of analysis by discussing it before all other levels, whereas the third edition, published in 2014, moves from an individual-centered to a context-sensitive understanding. It reverses the order of the chapters, beginning with systemic influences and dealing with individual influences only in the last chapter. That said, we agree with Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) position that any argument about the supremacy of one level over another should not be based on any kind of theoretical determinism but on careful empirical analysis. An appropriate way of testing the relative superiority of one set of factors over another is multiple regression analysis. This procedure allows for testing a factor's effect while holding the influence of other factors constant (i.e., controlling for them statistically). Usually, factors are entered as 'blocks' in accordance with the distinct layer of influence to which they belong. We will apply the same strategy of data analysis in our own study.

Although we will not use formal multilevel modeling in our statistical analyses, we will estimate our multiple regressions with robust standard errors to account for the nested character of our data (see Chapter 2 on method).

Working with a multilevel framework of news determinants has the advantage of sensitizing readers to the role of context in understanding the news-making process. Such a framework (see Table 3.1)

imposes order onto a multitude of potential factors operating simultaneously. In particular, its context-sensitive and layer-sensitive perspective allows a *comparative* analysis of how, for instance, different organizational or national contexts affect news content. Generally speaking, comparative analysis guides our attention to the explanatory relevance of the contextual environment for media outcomes. It aims to understand how the macro- and meso-level context shapes news practices at the micro-level (see Esser and Hanitzsch 2012). The research is based on the assumption that different parameters of the event and of organizational and systemic environments either promote or constrain the news organizations' and news workers' behaviors, both being embedded in those structures. Recognizing the causal significance of contextual conditions is what makes comparative research exceptionally valuable. In the words of Mancini and Hallin (2012, p. 515), "theorizing the role of context is precisely what comparative analysis is about." Clearly, explanatory logic can be distinguished from mere descriptive comparison, which is considered less mature (Gurevitch and Blumler 2004). Our own study follows the rationale of explanatory comparative analysis by employing one comprehensive comparative design that allows us to vary the influence of assumed independent variables; we study the effect of their presence or absence in 16 contextual settings on the same 6 dependent variables.

Factors of influence: the independent variables used in this study

We consider factors of influence at the four analytical levels that are summarized in Table 3.1 and explained in detail in the following section. The independent variables that are presented in the following chapters are each theoretically grounded and specifically developed for their use. Thus, not all independent variables listed in Table 3.1 are used in each chapter; rather, only those that have a theoretically meaningful link to the news concept in question.

The event level

Our comparative analyses first take the event environment into account. After all, any journalistic behavior occurs in a 'situation,' and journalists' own definitions of news situations are dependent on the 'external' framing conditions set by the event environment.1 For instance, our analysis of hard and soft news (Chapter 9) takes into account a country's economic situation as an important real-world condition and predicts greater macro-economic problems to correspond with higher levels of hard news. The relevant indicator that we use to operationalize the economic situation is the country's harmonized unemployment rate (seasonally adjusted) as reported by Eurostat in May 2012, the time period at which we content-analyzed the news media.2

Another event environment factor is the proximity to national elections. The phases immediately before and after polling days are different in nature from routine periods because both the campaign mode before and the honeymoon period after create a climate that causes political actors and media actors to behave in peculiar ways (de Vreese, Lauf, and Peter 2007; Van Aelst and de Swert 2009). The proximity or distance to elections should be relevant for the amount of strategic news (Chapter 4) and hard news (Chapter 9). We operationalize this indicator by using two variables that express the time period (in months) from code start to the last election and from code start to the next election, respectively.

A final indicator of the event environment is the issue context. It is well known from comparative studies that the topical nature of events influences their treatment in the news (see de Swert et al. 2013). In our own study, for example, we expect higher levels of negativity in news reports that deal with negatively connoted events, such as crime or corruption (see Chapter 6). Similarly, our analysis of strategy and game framing predicts a greater use of such frames in issue contexts that are related to elections and internal party politics (see Chapter 4). We operationalize this indicator with an 18-item list of topic areas that coders used during the content analysis to determine each story's main issue as apparent from the headline and lead paragraph (see Chapter 2 on method).

Given the growing realization in comparative news research that individual journalists matter less than the contextual conditions that guide their practices in characteristic ways, we focus our own

analyses on organizational- and national-level factors. In their broad-scope study, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) discovered an unexpectedly weak and at times negative relationship between journalists' individual views on news values and their actual produced content. Consequently, Weaver and Loeffelholz (2008, p. 8) point to "the importance of studying influences on news content not only at the individual level, but also at the organizational and . . . societal level, as Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have advocated." Contextual conditions and organizational- and national-level factors strongly influence journalists' perceptions of adequate and appropriate behavior in a given news situation. In this regard, the structural constraints within news organizations and home societies and their influence on journalists' socialization processes – including the effects of institutional rules and conditions on the internalization of norms and worldviews – have been particularly emphasized in contributions to so-called multilevel analyses in mass communication research (see Pan and McLeod 1991). That emphasis in the research has shaped our own approach. We follow Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) media-*sociological* perspective (as opposed to an individual-centered, media-psychological perspective) and therefore focus more on the structural *context* than communicators' personal traits.

The media organizational level

Among the factors at the organizational level are distinctions between ownership structures (public versus private), editorial missions (upmarket/elite versus mass market/popular), editorial policy (left leaning versus right leaning), channel type (print, broadcasting, web), and platform (offline versus online). These distinctions refer to a multitude of technological, economic, political, and professional goals of news organizations, all of which have potential implications for media content production. Our analysis of political balance in Chapter 7, for instance, expects public broadcasters to be less biased than newspapers, given newspapers' partisan history in Europe. Similarly, our analyses of personalization, soft news, interpretive journalism, and game framing (see Chapters 4, 5, 8, and 9) expect mass-market oriented outlets, such as commercial television and tabloid newspapers, to exhibit these content features in much more pronounced ways than high-brow media (public broadcasters and broadsheet newspapers). A final example refers to Chapter 6, which expects online editions to carry greater amounts of negativity in the news than their offline counterparts. We incorporated the influence of different organizational types mainly through a targeted selection of media outlets. The stratified media sample, as described in Chapter 2 on methods, was constructed according to the differentiations in organizational types mentioned earlier.

The media system level

The extent of competition and commercialization has received much attention in the recent literature on media systems (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012; Plasser 2005). Both factors are assumed to shift news criteria from professional and social responsibility–oriented concerns to audience- and profit-maximizing concerns. The literature explicating this connection is extensive (Croteau and Hoynes 2006; Hamilton 2004; McManus 2009; Picard 2004) and features prominently in the chapters that follow. We operationalize competition by the number of television channels available nationwide and by the number of paid-for, nationally available daily newspapers in a media market. The data for the first variable comes from the European Audiovisual Observatory (2011), and for the second variable, from a statistical reference guide of Nordicom (Leckner and Facht 2010). We expect that a higher number of competing TV channels and newspapers will lead to higher levels of negativity (Chapter 6) and personalization (Chapter 8) in political news due to their audience-pleasing and attention-grabbing qualities.

Commercialization, on the other hand, is operationalized by two indicators: the public service channels' small cumulative market share and news providers' high dependency on advertising revenue, measured as percentage of total adspend of the gross domestic product. The data for both variables is again taken from the latest available report of the European Audiovisual Observatory (2011). Theoretically speaking, high competition and higher commercialization indicate a

predominance of the 'market model' of news production over the 'public sphere model' – a conflict in logics that Croteau and Hoynes (2006) describe as 'the' major divide in characterizing media systems (see also Aalberg and Curran 2012; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring. 2009). Against this background, we expect high commercial pressures in a media system to lead to high levels of interpretive journalism and negativity (see Chapters 5 and 6). Conversely, we expect that a high market share of public service broadcasters (PSB) and a high number of paid-for national dailies will correspond with high levels of hard news (Chapter 9).

A related factor is the degree of journalistic professionalism. It constitutes a key dimension for comparing media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and is measured in our study by an index constructed from two variables. The first variable measures the extent to which "journalists [in a country] agree on the criteria for judging excellence in their profession, regardless of their political orientation." The second variable measures the extent to which "journalists have sufficient training to ensure that basic professional norms like accuracy, relevance, completeness, balance, timeliness, double-checking, and source confidentiality are respected in news-making practices." These two items – measured with 11-point rating scales from 'untrue' to 'true' – are from the *European Media Systems Survey* by Marina Popescu, and we use this Professionalization Index exactly as constructed by Popescu (2011). Her survey is based on 838 interviews with experts working in communication research, journalism training, and media consultancy from 34 countries. Unfortunately, three of the countries in our study were not represented in this survey – namely, Israel, Switzerland, and the United States. We therefore asked local experts in those three countries for the missing assessments and are grateful for their spontaneous willingness to help.3

The emergence of a distinct set of professional norms that guide journalists' daily practices is not so much an indicator of high quality as an indicator of independence from undue political interference as well as a sense of autonomy. News work that is guided strictly by news values as opposed to political values (indicating high professionalism) will likely be more inclined to portray politics in game-and strategy-oriented scenarios (see Chapter 4); it will also be more interpretive (Chapter 5) and negative in nature (Chapter 6). The reason is that these content features meet journalists' professional needs to produce a news product that is rich in strategic interpretation and critical analysis and that signals distance, if not skepticism, from the world of politics (Zaller 1999). For predicting high levels of interpretive journalism, we also use the related concept of journalistic independence (see Popescu 2011 for details on this 5-item index) as an explanatory variable.

A final item from Popescu's (2011) *European Media Systems Survey* is the cost of producing hard news. In countries where experts strongly agree with the statement that "the production costs for hard news content are so high that most news media cannot afford to present carefully researched facts and analyses," we expect to find more negative news (see Chapter 6) and more soft news (see Chapter 9). Both content features represent strategies to maximize audience appeal with minimal newsroom expenses, a behavior perfectly rational within the 'market model' of news production.

The political system level
Political news is the joint product of media–politics exchanges. Therefore Cook (1998, p. 3) considers news to be a 'coproduct' of media and political influences, and Blumler and Gurevitch (1995, p. 26) go so far as to say that media traces and political traces in news messages are "inextricably intertwined." Consequently, the selection, presentation, and discursive framing of political news reflects as much the internal operating logics of the media system as the external framing conditions set by the political system (for a heuristic model of this relationship, see Esser and Strömbäck 2012b, p. 317). In this study, these external framing conditions refer to three key dimensions for comparing Western democracies: electoral system, government system, and party system.

The basic distinction in 'electoral systems' refers to the contrast between majoritarian and proportional visions of democracy. Whereas the majoritarian vision values the concentration of power in the hands of the government party, allowing it to carry out its promises and clarify its responsibilities for the consequences, the proportional vision emphasizes the pluralist principle of minority influences

according to their representation in parliament. A key feature of the 'government system' is concentration of power and the sharing of power in different ways – either between actors within the central executive or between different institutions – thereby referring to the basic distinction between centralization and federalism. Both distinctions (majoritarianism vs. proportionality; centralization vs. federalism) feature prominently in Lijphart's (1999) comparative study, *Patterns of Democracy*.

Differentiations within 'electoral systems' are operationalized by a variable that distinguishes between list proportional representation (value 0) and majority or mixed systems (value 1). Drawing on earlier studies, beginning with Swanson and Mancini (1996), one of our expectations is the presence of more personalized political news coverage in majoritarian and mixed electoral systems.

Differentiations within 'government systems' regarding the concentration of power are measured by Lijphart's (1999) Federalism Index, a fivefold classification ranging from a low (value 1) to high degree of federalism (value 5). We expect that political systems that are more centralized and less federalized will be characterized by higher degrees of personalized news coverage, reflecting a concentration on prominent power-holding elites (Chapter 8). Furthermore, because centralized systems have less need to negotiate compromises and balance interests, we also expect a greater likelihood of conflict and critique – and thus of negativity – in the news (see Chapter 6).

A third distinction featuring prominently in Lijphart (1999) is between few party and multiparty systems – an important measure of pluralism in a political system. We operationalize differentiations within 'party systems' by a variable expressing the de facto relevant number of parties in parliament. We expect that systems with small numbers of parties will be characterized by fierce political competition and limited willingness to compromise, fostering a news culture that is more game centered (Chapter 4), more negative (Chapter 6), and more personalized (Chapter 8). A higher number of parties, however, will lead to more hard news coverage (Chapter 9).

Finally, the close connection between political influences and media influences for explaining news content is nicely demonstrated by our analysis of political balance (Chapter 7). It asks whether differences in the visibility of parties can be better explained by a political systems approach (focusing on the parties' preceding electoral vote shares) or a media systems approach (focusing on the parties' current standing in media-sponsored opinion polls). We gathered the data for both these approaches by researching the vote shares of all parties in the national elections preceding our content analysis and by researching the parties' standing in polls around the time of coding.

Conclusion

The still young history of comparative cross-national news research has proceeded through various stages, from initially pursuing solely descriptive goals to developing increasingly explanatory ambitions (de Vreese and Vliegenthart 2012; Esser and Hanitzsch 2012). These kinds of explanatory studies, which are usually based on multivariate regression analyses, are still rare, and their quality is often compromised by low numbers of cases in their country samples. There are a few exceptions, and when designing the present study, we drew inspiration from these exceptional studies. They include, for instance, the study by Schuck and colleagues (2016), which investigated factors explaining the variation in the campaign coverage of the 2009 European parliamentary elections in all 27 European Union (EU) member states. It found that the level of conflict framing in election news was contingent upon the type of medium and the type of electoral system as well as public aversion to the EU. Another noteworthy role model study is by Boomgaarden and colleagues (2013), which investigated predictors for over-time variation in the news media coverage of EU affairs between 1999 and 2009. It found, for example, that the more the national parties were divided about the EU, the greater the increases in EU news media coverage. Our own study follows this same tradition.

The main goal of our 16-country investigation is to explain cross-national variation in news performance (measured using six news concepts) by way of multiple regressions with a total of 20 predictors located at several levels of analysis (see Table 3.1). We are not aware of any other study that has been dedicated to explaining news performance in such a comprehensive manner. It should be noted that not all of the 20 explanatory factors are considered in all the chapters that follow but

only those that are theoretically relevant to the concept at hand. Chapters 4 to 9 will separately examine strategic game framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, balance, personalization, and hard and soft news before Chapter 10 explores the cross-connections between them.

Notes

Table 1: Multi-Level Framework of Factors that Shape Political News

Levels of Influence	Hypothesized Effects on News Performance (selected examples)
Event level	
• Bad economic situation	→ More hard news
• Proximity to elections	→ More game/strategy news
• Issue context,	
e.g., crime and corruption	→ More negative news
e.g., inner party conflict	→ More game/strategy news
Media organizational level	
• Mass-market oriented editorial mission (e.g., in commercial TV or popular press)	→ More personalized, soft, strategic, interpretive news
• Public service mission	→ More balanced news
• Online channel	→ More negative news
Media system level	
• High market competition	→ More personalized, negative, interpretive news
• High market commercialization	→ More negative, interpretive, soft news
• Low competition and commercialization	→ More hard news
• High journalistic professionalism and independence (i.e., distance to politics)	→ More negative, strategic, interpretive news
Political system level	
• Small number of competing parties	→ More personalized, strategic, negative news
• High number of parties (i.e., need for negotiations and coalitions)	→ More hard news
• Majoritarian electoral system	→ More personalized news
• Low federalism, high power concentration	→ More personalized, negative news
• Strong party standing in preceding election or current poll standing	→ More imbalanced party news