Chapter 1

Our goal. Comparing news performance

Claes de Vreese, Frank Esser, and David Nicolas Hopmann with Toril Aalberg, Peter Van Aelst, Rosa Berganza, Nicolas Hubé, Guido Legnante, Jörg Matthes, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Carsten Reinemann, Susana Salgado, Tamir Sheafer, James Stanyer, and Jesper Strömbäck

The problem: where is the good news?

Democracy theory expects the news media to serve several roles: informing citizens about political actors and their ideas, interpreting the actions of both politicians and their opponents, scrutinizing those in power, and engaging citizens politically. The extent to which the news media fulfill these functions can be judged by their coverage of politics and society. Whether explicitly or implicitly, most discussions about the media's performance and their democratic role thus focus on political news and political journalism (Benson 2008; Graber 2003; Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Norris 2000; Strömbäck 2005).

Research on political news and political journalism has grown in the last decade. Both single-country and comparative studies have increased, and the rising prominence of comparative journalism research is especially noteworthy (Albæk, van Dalen, Jebril, and de Vreese 2014; Esser 2008; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Plasser, Pallaver, and Lengauer 2009; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Van Aelst et al. 2008; Van Dalen, Albæk, and de Vreese 2011). Single-country and comparative research has generated many important insights into patterns of political news coverage and longitudinal and cross-national differences and similarities. Much of extant research suggests that, although news availability and supply are proliferative (Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012), the *performance* of news providers is getting worse. In more or less explicit terms, decreasing news quality is seen as having a negative impact on the quality of political life. For example, concerns are voiced about overemphasis on strategy news causing political cynicism and apathy (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), about the media providing too little hard news (Patterson 2003), and about commercialization leading to too much interpretive journalism (Fallows 1996). As Albæk and colleagues observe (2014, p. 5), pessimism pertains to the "dominance in ownership structures, poor content, lack of good journalism, reliance on and misinterpretation of opinionpolls, and ill-informed citizens who are losing interest in politics." Judging by much of the current research, we have little reason to be optimistic about today's news media performance, let alone tomorrow's. However, are things really that bad? Is good news, so to speak, really absent from all media environments? By 'good,' we mean in the sense of both news content and positive nodes in the literature. As scholars, we should not accept the pessimistic orthodoxy uncritically. Democratic news media performance is surely not all bad; good news is out there, but it needs to be identified and documented. The fundamental challenge facing scholars, therefore, is finding some good news and not just assuming that things are getting worse.

To address this challenge, solid and comparable evidence is needed. Any optimism needs to be supported by solid empirical evidence. Despite all the progress in recent research on political news, we have only just begun to grapple with some serious challenges that are related to a lack of conceptual clarity, poor comparability across studies, and insufficient cumulativity of findings (Esser, Strömbäck, and de Vreese 2012). These inadequacies hold particularly true for research that focuses on the content of political news. While many scholars use similar theoretical concepts, the conceptualizations and, in particular, the operationalizations often differ. These differences often make it hard to take stock of our current knowledge and to assess whether country differences

and over-time developments are real or whether they are a function of differences in conceptualizations and operationalizations.

For example, where is news most focused on politics as a game? And where is it most substantive? Where is news more interpretive, and where less interpretive? And is news in all places equally prone to emphasizing negativity? Or do politicians in some countries receive more balanced treatment than in others? Given the differences in extant research, these questions are tough to answer. We know very little about some concepts, whereas a wealth of (national) information is available about others. But this research is often not comparable. The devil is in the detail! In addition, differences in research make it difficult to build solid theories explaining patterns of political news coverage across time and space. If the goal of social scientific research is to build and test theories, then this problem is a serious one.

In news research, references to 'hard' and 'soft' news are increasing, but they often carry different implications (Baum 2003). In a similar vein, although many scholars in different countries are doing research on the extent to which news journalism frames politics as a strategic game (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; de Vreese 2003; Lawrence 2000a; Patterson 1993; Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2010) and although they largely share the same terminology, there is no agreement on how this framing of politics should be conceptualized and measured. Scholars use various measures, which inhibits the cumulativity of findings. Equally, a mixture of methods hampers efforts to build theories explaining the differences and similarities in how different media, in different countries, at different times, cover politics (Esser, de Vreese et al. 2012). A similar situation holds true for most, if not all, key concepts in research on patterns in political news coverage.

We believe this situation to be highly unfortunate and that researchers investigating news content have a lot to learn from fields where standardization of key variables has progressed further. The best example might be survey research, where a number of standardized core variables are used to investigate political interest and party identification, for example. These variables are standard components of surveys and election studies across the globe, and the academic community has engaged in a long tradition of collaboration to make this standardization possible. National election studies, the European Social Survey, the World Value Survey, and the Eurobarometer are all hallmark examples. Collectively, such surveys provide social scientists with a lens through which to understand public opinion and human behavior. Admittedly, no single variable or set of variables is ideal for all people and all purposes at all times. Undoubtedly, political scientists have wished to change the wording and focus of specific items in various studies – for example, the American national election studies – but the what-ifs are outweighed by the benefits of comparisons and over-time insights. At the end of the day, by standardizing core variables, survey research has made great progress in opening up comparisons across time and space, which has significantly increased our understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

The advantage of standardization is why we – the authors of this book – took the initiative to organize a journal special issue reviewing six key concepts in research on political news journalism. These concepts were *strategy framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization,* and *soft versus hard news.* The special issue was published in *Journalism* in 2012. The purpose of this special issue was twofold. The first purpose was to review the research and to offer an assessment of the state of affairs vis-à-vis key concepts in research on political news journalism. In so doing, we aimed to provide the scholarly community with points of reference related to each of the selected concepts, on which future research can build. The second purpose was to suggest how each of the selected key concepts should be conceptualized, operationalized, and investigated empirically in order to contribute to their standardization.

In this book, we put theory to practice. We designed a systematic, cross-national content analysis of newspapers, television news, and news websites in 16 Western countries. We investigated each of the key concepts to arrive at conclusions about the nature of political news and the forces driving these patterns.

Six dimensions of news performance

Underlying the quest to understand the nature of political news and the driving forces behind news features is the notion of news quality. Quality, however, is of little practical relevance analytically since it can be meaningfully understood from very different perspectives, ranging from consumers, citizens, and media companies to society as a whole. It makes more sense to consider news performance (McQuail 1992) a guiding concept. News performance is grounded in the notion that media have different functions, which stem from different normative theories. Ceteris

paribus, most scholars suggest that news media should provide information, context and analysis, and a platform for – and scrutiny of – power holders (McQuail 1992).

The six concepts that were selected for the special issue and that are examined in this book were chosen because they are all widely used in content analyses of political news, have no standardized operationalizations, and are relevant to democratic news discourse and theories of news production. There are obviously other very important, ongoing discussions about changes in journalism at large and political journalism in particular that are also important and have a bearing on the six concepts. One may think of issues such as political parallelism (which relates to our discussion of political balance) but also of system-level concepts such as journalistic practice and culture and media ownership, which come up in our discussion of explaining why news takes the form it does. At the core of the six concepts is an interest in the role of the media in democracies. As noted, among other things, the media in democracies are expected to inform people, interpret processes with societal and political relevance, scrutinize those in power, and mobilize people politically. Content analyses of political news coverage can make important information explicit about how the mass media fulfill these political roles in divergent national settings.

With respect to their informative role, some national communication systems, compared to others, offer more favorable opportunity structures for relaying political messages comprehensively and neutrally to the public. Some national settings foster a more partisan, depoliticized, or personalized political and reporting culture. With respect to their interpretive role, many democratic news systems have experienced a cultural shift from the media as passive informants to active shapers of public opinion. Some news organizations have pursued an interventionist role, posing as the 'better' public representative compared to elected politicians. While interpretation and analysis can provide an important background for audiences and facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues, an overly interventionist role can become a source of conflict between political actors and media actors, especially if politics is mainly presented as a strategic game. The extent and consequences of interpretive journalism lead us to another political role that is frequently discussed in democratic theory – namely, the media's watchdog function. Here, the media are supposed to guard citizens against undue infringements of their rights by the apparatus of the state and to uncover abuse of power and unfitness for public office. Yet, the media's abuse of the watchdog function may encourage an ideology of negativity and voter alienation.

The discussion surrounding democratic news performance has highlighted several features of political news journalism that have raised particular interest among scholars – notably, the framing of politics as a strategic game, the interpretive journalistic style, media negativity, balance in the news, media personalization, and depoliticization via a focus on soft news over hard news. Collectively, these six dimensions allow us to assess how well news is performing cross-nationally.

News performance refers to the reality of news practices and how they manifest themselves in media outcomes. Of particular interest are the reasons for the differences in news performance that can be observed across types of media systems, news organizations, and journalistic communities. We measure the quality of news performance using six content features – namely, strategy and game framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization, and hard and soft news. They are related to normative expectations of the news media in contemporary Western democracy (as shown earlier) and have the additional advantage of being closer to the daily routines of news workers than abstract principles such as truth, freedom, solidarity, or order and cohesion. They are also easier to operationalize and are often critically discussed as features of a proliferating yet problematic Western news ideology.

The factors affecting news journalism's conduct and performance are located at the levels of media and political systems, news organizations, and individual journalists interacting with their event environments. Consequently, we consider 'political news coverage' the outcome of three broad and interdependent sources of influence. The first source are the journalists, who engage with political events, actors, and processes according to their professional norms and goals. The second are the news organizations' influences, constraints, and goals (e.g., whether an outlet pursues a public service–oriented or a mass audience–oriented editorial mission). And the third source are the structural influences at the level of the media system (e.g., market competition, market commercialization, and journalistic professionalization) and the political system (e.g., type of party, electoral and government systems) that constitute the contextual environment for the news organizations and the journalists who are employed by them. In combination, these factors affect the editorial processes and actual news outcomes that determine the use of our six news performance indicators. Figure 1.1 offers a simplified visual representation of these relationships.

A more elaborate specification of our theoretical framework is presented in Chapter 3, where we also derive research questions and concrete hypotheses. Chapters 4 to 9 come next, with in-depth analyses of the six

concepts of news performance, following a common structure to ensure readability and coherence. Each of these chapters outlines why the concept is relevant and why a systematic study is needed. The chapters proceed by reviewing the most important theoretical and conceptual foundations, including how the concept has been defined in previous research, and, if appropriate, they discuss different dimensions of the concept. They then outline how the concept fares in news across different countries and the key explanations for the discovered patterns.

Our approach

More than 20 years ago, Blumler, McLeod, and Rosengren (1992) stated that, before comparative communication research can establish itself as a recognized subdiscipline, it must achieve greater cumulativity in findings and interpretation. By explicating concepts in this book, our goal is to contribute an empirically grounded, systematic, and comparative assessment of political news.

At this volume's core are comparative analyses of political news coverage in 16 Western countries with regard to strategy framing, interpretive journalism, negativity, political balance, personalization, and soft versus hard news. Each chapter focuses on one of these concepts (measured collaboratively by an international research network) and compares all countries in relation to common research questions. We also strive to understand what drives the presence of these concepts in the news. In each chapter, we develop research questions and hypotheses about how news content is affected by variables at the (1) event environment, (2) media organization, (3) media system, and (4) political system levels.

The book is based on a unique content analysis of more than 7,500 news stories from newspapers, television news bulletins, and news websites. We examined three newspapers, two television news bulletins, and five news websites from each country over a constructed routine period. Our book speaks to an international literature on news and politics. Only a few publications have addressed this topic in such a systematic manner, but they tend to focus on just one concept (balance, objectivity, bias, domestication, etc.) or explore only a small number of countries (two to five). Some recent projects are more inclusive (e.g., Albæk et al. 2014; Umbricht and Esser 2014, 2015), and some journal articles cover more than 20 countries in a systematic content analysis (see, e.g., Boomgaarden et al. 2013; de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, and Boomgaarden 2006). But book-length analyses of diverse concepts using large samples of countries are rare exceptions; Pam Shoemaker and Akiba Cohen's *News around the World* (2006) and *Foreign News on Television – Where in the World Is the Global Village* (2013) are perhaps the prime examples. Their focus, however, is very different to ours, and none of the key concepts that we pursue in this book are included in their work. We have also attempted to generate a sample of routine news and to systematize our inclusion of explanatory variables and are, therefore, well poised to make observations that are general in nature and not confined to specific particularities or to incompatibilities in our design.

We believe that the book is unique because it (1) systematizes national and international research on 6 key concepts in political news, (2) builds on recently developed empirical tools for analyzing these concepts, (3) tests the 6 concepts in a systematic, cross-nationally comparative analysis in 16 countries, (4) develops and tests hypotheses for understanding similarities and differences in the coverage of politics, and (5) brings together a strong team of political communication scholars from different countries. The book is thus not only about investigating the key features of news cross-nationally but also about *explaining* them.

Outline of the book

We outline our methodology and approach in the next chapter. It reviews the choice of countries, media, and periods and details the coding procedures, inter-coder reliability, data preparation, analytical strategy, and so on. We opt to keep the methodological information in one chapter so that subsequent chapters merely have to introduce the specific variables of interest (while cross-referencing Chapter 2). In Chapter 3, we explicate our philosophy of trying to move beyond national descriptions and to focus on explanations for the variation in the news coverage. We discuss key works in this tradition, such as those by Shoemaker and Reese (2014), and we identify the most important explanatory concepts for our endeavor. We include macro-, meso-, and micro-level variables, and the chapter outlines the most frequently used explanatory variables, thereby serving as a reference chapter for the empirical concept chapters (Chapters 4 to 9).

In Chapter 4, we take on a key concept in political communication research – game and strategy news framing. Based on the instrument developed by Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese (2012), the chapter compares the extent to which political news journalism across 16 countries is dominated by game and strategy frames, and equally importantly, it investigates what drives this type of political news coverage. It finds that during regular periods, most political news throughout Europe is not framed as a strategic game (although some issues,

typically related to party politics, are more likely to be framed in this way). The use of strategy and game frames is not, as previously assumed, higher in mass-market newspapers and commercial broadcasters compared to upmarket newspapers and public broadcasters. Nevertheless, some of the relatively small cross-national differences may be explained by the market share of public service channels and the number of political parties.

In Chapter 5, we examine interpretive journalism. Based on Salgado and Strömbäck (2012), we examine the operationalization of interpretive journalism and the extent to which political news across 16 countries provides journalistic interpretations. The chapter shows that about a third of public affairs coverage in European and U.S. news media contains interpretive journalism, although there are meaningful differences across countries with respect to its prevalence and the factors that promote it. To give just one example, commercial television news, particularly if integrated in a highly competitive market, provides a highly fertile ground for interpretive reporting.

In Chapter 6, we look at negativity in the news. Although there is an abundance of research on the journalistic tendency to focus disproportionally on negative information, we lack studies that systematically compare theoretically derived indicators of negativity across countries. This chapter draws on a standardized measure of negativity developed by Esser and colleagues (2012), consisting of four highly related dimensions: negative tonality, focus on conflict, focus on incapability, and negative tone towards political actors. The findings show that negativity is highest in media systems with high levels of commercialism and competition and in media organizations that are geared towards commercial goals (as opposed to public service obligations). The tendency to cover politics in negative terms is stronger in the offline than online editions of media outlets and strongest in stories that deal with negatively connoted issues, such as scandals, crises, or conflicts.

In Chapter 7, the focus shifts to political balance. The chapter examines the visibility of politicians and political parties in the news and the neutrality with which they are presented. It follows the article by Hopmann and colleagues (2012) and analyzes to what extent news coverage is politically balanced at the party level. The results show that the visibility of political actors across countries is fairly balanced. Moreover, most appearances of politicians are by far either neutral or balanced, rarely colored in a positive or negative light.

In Chapter 8, we turn to personalization, examining the general belief that the focus of news coverage has shifted from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders. Based on the indicators developed by Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer (2012), the chapter shows that, in general, individual politicians are more prominent in the news compared to political institutions. The degree of personalized political coverage, however, varies strongly across countries. Two country characteristics are especially important for understanding the variation: the number of TV channels (which represents the competitiveness of the media market) and the degree of federalism (which represents the concentration of power within the political system).

In Chapter 9, we focus on 'hard' and 'soft' news, terms that have become widely used for capturing particular changes in the news. This chapter draws on the recent multidimensional approach to distinguishing harder and softer news developed by Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2012). Findings show that the prevalence of hard and soft news differs strongly between countries. Analysis reveals that the type of medium, a country's political and economic situation, and the state of the media market significantly predict the hard or soft character of individual news items.

In Chapter 10, we survey the different key concepts. The chapter identifies the patterns across the different concepts and countries and offers more general observations about the nature of political news. First of all, we conclude that game or strategy framed news tends to be more interpretive and negative and rather unbalanced and softer. In the same vein, interpretive news tends to be more negative and strategically framed, be less balanced, and carry less hard political information. Negativity and balance are negatively correlated, which makes sense since we would expect a clear and unambiguous negative portrayal of actors to also be reflected in the overall negative tone of a story. And finally, personalization is negatively correlated to hard news such that personalized news tends to have less political substance, whereas news items with more political substance tend to have more institutional actors involved. Second, the chapter identifies two 'meta-dimensions' that summarize and combine the different indicators. One dimension represents the degree of evaluation and interpretation, and the other represents the amount of political substance. Looking cross-nationally, we observe that Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom have the most issue-focused coverage, whereas Austria, Greece, Portugal, and Sweden have the least. News in France, Greece, Israel, Italy, and the United States is the most focused on strategy game coverage.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 11), we summarize the book's main findings and outline an agenda for future comparative research on political news and political communication. We hold the empirical outcomes against the assumptions about news performance that are embedded in the six key concepts. We also specifically revisit some of the expectations that we had a priori and which turned out to be wrong – or at least, were not supported by the study. We offer a methodological reflection on comparative news analyses and

observations on where news is most substantive. At the very end, we identify some key factors that help locate the 'good news' – that is, news that offers citizens a range of choices and provides them with a substantive, rich, and varied information environment.
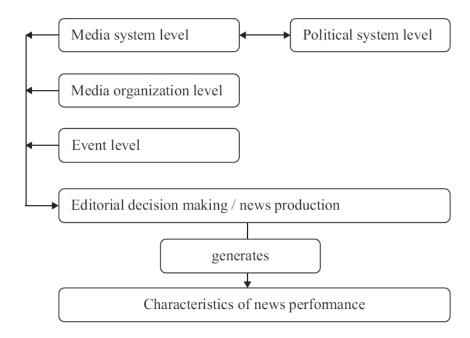
```
   ┌─────◄── Media system level ◄──────► Political system level
   │
   ├─────◄── Media organization level
   │
   ├─────◄── Event level
   │
   └─────►── Editorial decision making / news production
                              │
                              ▼
                          generates
                              │
                              ▼
              Characteristics of news performance
```

Figure 1.1 News performance in context