

Workshop 16. Political information, public knowledge and perceptions of reality

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Abstract

Informed citizens are better citizens judged by the standards of democratic theory. They are more likely to participate in politics, to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, to link their interest with their attitudes and to choose political representatives who are consistent with their own attitudes. In order to express attitudes and act according to their self-interest, citizens need relevant and up to date information about current affairs. However, several scholars have questioned the quality and the form of information provided by the news media. Market mechanisms and news criteria are said to provide a poor information environment. The claim is that there is a rise of tabloid, soft news in television and a tendency for many newspapers to compete with television by shifting to shorter more entertaining and less fact-orienting stories. This workshop will focus on the political information given by the news media to the public, and how this information influences the public's knowledge and perception of political reality. The aim of the workshop is to contribute to the research agenda in two areas: (i) Do the information given by the news media vary across different media systems and types of media within these systems? (ii) Do between and/or within system variations in news content influence political knowledge and public perception of political reality? The workshop will offer an arena for sharing and discussing the results of diverse empirical research on these topics. Contributions are invited from comparativists and country specialists, and we particularly welcome papers which combine theoretical and empirical approaches.

Workshop description

Outline of the topic

Public opinion constitutes one of the cornerstones of democracy. Citizens are assumed to hold preferences for particular policies, know where parties and candidates for office are located on the relevant policy dimensions, and cast their votes accordingly. In order to express attitudes and act according to their self-interest, citizens need relevant and up to date information about current affairs. This holds, regardless of whether one considers the political competence of individual citizens or the competence of the public as an aggregate (Converse 1964, Lodge et al 1986, 1989, Lupia 1994, Sniderman et al 1991, Stimson 1991, Zaller 1992). In many respects, political relevant information is more widely available now than at any time in history. However, several scholars have questioned the quality and the form of information provided by the news media. Market mechanisms and news criteria are said to provide a poor information environment (Postman 1985, Entman 1989, Patterson 1993, 2000). The claim is

that there is a rise of tabloid journalism, soft news in television and a tendency for many newspapers to compete with television by shifting to shorter more entertaining and less fact-orienting stories (Vettehen et al. 2006, Slattery et al. 2001, Örnebring 2003).

Although empirical political communication research has a long history and can be traced back to World War II, there is still an apparent lack of comparative research. Most political communication research is based on studies of individual countries, and a vast majority of this research is based on studies conducted in the United States. These single country approaches have made most researchers ignore the question of how structural system differences may influence the information provided to the public and, and how qualitative differences in the content of news in different systems may affect public opinion. How commercial and public broadcasting is organised within a country, or the relative importance of newspapers to television, are all factors that may influence the information provided by the news media, and thus the potential effect on the public (Hallin & Mancini 2004). The same holds for political system characteristics (Lijphart 1984). An important theoretical and empirical question is whether the characteristics of different media and political systems influence the information provided to the public.

We therefore wish to attract papers that *study the information given by the news media to the public in different countries and how this information influences public's knowledge and perception of political reality*. How does the information given by the news media vary between different systems and types of media within these systems? Does news content vary between media systems in that the amount of political information, the focus of information and the use of news frames varies significantly, or is there no significant difference in the information provided? Does between and/or within system variations in political information influence public knowledge and perception of reality?

Relation to existing research

The workshop theme relates to several different sets of literature on political communication and public opinion. The origins of political information typically study media content and the information environment. Recent publications can for instance be found in *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol 30 and 31. Where nr 3 in vol 30 was a special issue dedicated to the "The Origins, Dynamics and Effects of Political Information". The origins of political information have also been discussed in journals such as *Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics* and *Political Communication*. Case studies of the effects and consequences of political information can be found in most European countries, and are typically based on

opinion surveys or experiments. Sometimes these are combined with content analysis of news output. Some of these studies have previously been published in *European Journal of Political Research*, *Journal of Politics* and *Communication Research*. Genuine comparative studies are scarcer, but can be found e.g in *British Journal of Political Science*, *European Union Politics*, and *American Behavioral Scientist*. Two articles addressing media output and public knowledge from a comparative perspective are currently under review at *European Journal of Communication* and *Communication Research*.

Both Toril Aalberg and Shanto Iyengar are involved in different international projects who study the political information environment and the effect on public opinion. In these projects participants from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, UK and USA are involved.

Participants

The workshop intends to combine the insight, experience and research of political scientists from all spectres of political communication, public opinion and behaviour, and is therefore initially open to everyone. Yet, we wish to give priority to the topic described above.

Type of paper

The overall aim of the workshop is to contribute to an increased understanding of how media and political system characteristics influence the information environment and the effect on the public. We therefore particularly welcome comparative papers, although we also accept case studies, and especially papers from Southern and Eastern European countries. Key issues may concern various characteristics of the information output, levels of knowledge among the public and perceptions of central issues and party/candidate platforms. Papers may also discuss potential consequences such as political participation.

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