Political Journalism 🔓

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Summary

Political journalism constitutes one of the most prominent domains of journalism, and is essential for the functioning of democracy. Ideally, political journalism should function as an information provider, watchdog, and forum for political discussions, thereby helping citizens understand political matters and help prevent abuses of power. The extent to which it does is, however, debated. Apart from normative ideals, political journalism is shaped by factors at several levels of analysis, including the system level, the media organizational level, and the individual level. Not least important for political journalism is the close, interdependent, and contentious relationship with political actors, shaping both the processes and the content of political journalism.

In terms of content, four key concepts in research on political journalism in Western democratic systems are the framing of politics as a strategic game, interpretive versus straight news, conflict framing and media negativity, and political or partisan bias. A review of research related to these four concepts suggests that political journalism has a strong tendency to frame politics as a strategic game rather than as issues, particularly during election campaigns; that interpretive journalism has become more common; that political journalism has a penchant for conflict framing and media negativity; and that there is only limited evidence that political journalism is influenced by political or partisan bias. Significantly more important than political or partisan bias are different structural and situational biases. In all these and other respects, there are important differences across countries and media systems, which follows from the notion that political journalism is always influenced by the media systems in which it is produced and consumed.

Keywords: political journalism, normative perspectives, factors shaping political news, strategic game framing, interpretive journalism, conflict framing, media negativity, media bias, journalism studies

Political Journalism: The Most Sacred Part of Journalism

Political journalism constitutes one of the most prominent domains of journalism and has been called the most "sacred" part of journalism (Neveu, 2002, p. 23). There are several reasons for this. First, political journalism is inextricably linked to politics and democracy, working close to centers of political power, and functioning as a key mediator between political actors and institutions on the one hand and the citizenry on the other (van Dalen, 2016). Second and consequently, political journalism is important and closely related to normative conceptions of media and democracy and the role of journalism in democracies (Strömbäck, 2005). Third, political journalism influences how citizens understand the world and, by extension, their political attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (McCombs, 2014). Fourth, political journalism serves as both an arena and an actor in political processes, influencing how political institutions, actors, and processes work (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). In essence, political journalism is deeply embedded in and potentially influences all political processes in democratic regimes. The news media, including their political journalism, have therefore been conceptualized as a political institution in their own right (Cook, 2005; Sparrow, 1999).

Despite the importance of political journalism, there are no clear boundaries that separate political journalism from other kinds of journalism. This follows from the ambiguity of what constitutes politics. In research, political journalism is mostly defined as news journalism explicitly dealing with political institutions and actors, such as parliaments, governments, political representatives, or candidates for office. Most research focuses on political journalism at the national level, and in particular on election campaigns, with less research dealing with political journalism at the supranational, regional, or local levels. The main exception is research on European parliamentary elections (Boomgaarden et al., 2013). While single-country studies historically have dominated the field, comparative research has become increasingly common in the 21st century (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2017). This comparative turn has had an important impact on the scholarly understanding of differences and similarities across countries and of system-level factors influencing political journalism and its content. Although comparative research on political journalism has become more common, most of this research focuses on Western democratic systems. For that reason and to delimit the scope of this review, this article will focus on political journalism in Western democratic systems.

Normative Perspectives on Political Journalism

From a democratic and normative perspective, journalism is commonly assigned three key functions. The first is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing, the second is to scrutinize those in power and act as a watchdog, and the third is to function as a public space and a forum for political discussions and deliberations (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; McQuail, 1992). By fulfilling these functions, journalism is supposed to help citizens become informed about politics and understand the issues at stake, check those in power, help prevent corruption and power abuse, help citizens hold those in power accountable, and aid public deliberations about political matters. While these functions are generally ascribed to journalism in general, they are particularly important for political journalism.

While in Western democratic systems there is broad consensus that journalism should function as an information provider, watchdog, and forum for public discussions, there is less consensus on how much and what kind of information people need and that political journalism should provide. Partly this follows from the fact that there are several normative models of democracy, each with different normative expectations of citizens, politicians, and journalism (Strömbäck, 2005). For those who espouse more elitist models of democracy, for example, citizens are not expected to be politically active between elections. Instead, their most important role is to choose among competing elites at election time (Schumpeter, 1975). For those who espouse more participatory models, the quality of democracy hinges on citizen participation in political processes both between and during election campaigns (Pateman, 1970). Depending on what normative model of democracy is espoused, the normative expectations of citizens differ, and so do conceptions of how much and what information political journalism should provide in order to help people act in their role as democratic citizens.

There are also different perspectives on how realistic the normative demands placed upon political journalism should be, given that citizens have many things other than politics to care about while most political journalism is produced and diffused by news media that are commercial businesses. Hence, these news media have a constant need to keep down production costs and cater to audience demands (Hamilton, 2004). Zaller (2003, p. 110), for example, has argued that the traditional standard for what news journalism should do "makes unrealistically heavy demands," primarily on citizens with many other things on their minds. Hence, he espouses that news journalism should function as attention-catching "burglar alarms," mainly focusing on acute problems in ways that increase the chance that everybody takes notice. Others disagree, holding news journalism to higher standards, and emphasizing the need for journalism to provide comprehensive, proportional, and verified hard news aimed at people in their role as citizens rather than as consumers (Bennett, 2003; Patterson, 2014).

In most research on political journalism, the normative standards applied are, however, not explicated but rather implicit. A common assumption is that political journalism fulfills an important function and should provide information that helps citizens make informed decisions, but what that entails often remains unspecified and elusive.

Factors Shaping Political Journalism: Mutual Interdependencies

As with all kinds of journalism, political journalism is shaped by numerous factors on several levels of analysis (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Some factors are more important or even unique for political journalism, as a key part of the political communication system in the country in which it operates. The idea of political communication systems was originally developed in a comparative study by Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, and Weaver, in which they compared the news coverage of the 1984 U.S. presidential election and the 1983 British general election. In this study, they described the news coverage of elections as "the joint product of an interactive process involving political communicators and media professionals" (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991, p. 3), and the same logic applies to political journalism generally. More than other forms of journalism, political journalism is shaped by continuous interactions and mutual interdependencies between political actors and journalists.

Key to understanding the relationship between political actors and journalists is that the relationship often is close, that both parties are highly dependent on each other in the sense that both control important resources that the other party wants and needs, while journalists and political actors ultimately have different interests (Cook, 2005; Gans, 1980; Van Aelst, Shehata, & van Dalen, 2010). The closeness follows from the fact that many political journalists are beat reporters who cover politics and the same political actors for years, and that both parties seek to cultivate the relationship with the other. Continuous interactions naturally lead to a certain closeness. The mutual dependencies follow from the fact that both parties control resources that the other party wants or needs. While journalists have ultimate control over what actors, events, or issues their media cover and how they frame the actors, events, and issues involved, political actors have access to the raw material that journalists need: information and quotes that can be turned into news. Thus, journalists need political actors for newsworthy information and quotes, while political actors need journalists to get visibility in the news for themselves and the issues and frames they are advocating. At the same time, political actors might not want to provide the kind of information and quotes that journalists want, while journalists might not want to cover the issues and events that political actors want them to. Thus, both parties try to get from the other what they want and need, without allowing the other party to control the relationship. In particular, political journalists strive to protect their independence and avoid being reduced to becoming simple messengers for political actors. Thus, both cooperation and conflict is built into the relationship between political actors and journalists.

This situation leads to what Cook (2005) has labeled *negotiations of newsworthiness*, simultaneously occurring at several levels. One level concerns the "explicit battle over the forums in which interactions will occur," as political actors and journalists "seek to specify the conditions and circumstances under which they will meet." A second level concerns the interactions within those forums, for example when journalists try to get political actors to answer their questions while political actors try to avoid uncomfortable questions and instead get their preferred message across. Finally, "an indirect and implicit negotiation goes on when each party to the negotiation is out of sight of the other," when political actors try to anticipate what will make news and journalists "go back to their home organizations with the raw material and reshape it into a coherent news story" (Cook, 2005, p. 102).

Important to note is that the power balance in these negotiations is variable and varies depending on who the political actors and journalists involved in the negotiations are. On a general level, the more powerful a political actor is, and the more newsworthy and exclusive information she has access to, the stronger her position is in these negotiations of newsworthiness—and vice versa. And the more influential the media for which journalists work, the stronger their position is in these negotiations. Thus, political journalists working for national agenda-setting news media have a stronger position than journalists working for less influential news media.

Also important is what alternative means political actors have to reach the public or specific target groups with the information and messages they want to get across. Ultimately, the power of the news media and political journalism in relation to political actors resides in their control over public visibility and the perceived need of political actors to communicate through news media (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). The more political actors perceive themselves as dependent on news media and political journalism to get their messages across, the stronger the position of journalists in the negotiations of newsworthiness. At the same

time, the need of political actors to communicate through news media creates incentives for them to develop and professionalize their news management strategies, tactics, and skills (Lieber & Golan, 2011; Strömbäck & Esser, 2017; Zoch & Molleda, 2006), which in turn creates incentives for political journalists to guard their independence and develop their strategies and tactics to avoid being used (Zaller, 2001). Thus, the relationship between political journalism and political actors is always dynamic and in flux.

Factors Shaping Political Journalism: The System Level

While the observation that political journalism is shaped by mutual dependencies between political actors and journalism is generally applicable, there might be significant variations across countries depending on different structural and system-level factors within countries. Although it is notoriously difficult to empirically establish exactly how and to what degree different structural and system-level factors shape political news coverage, there is broad consensus that political systems as well as media systems matter (Albaek, van Dalen, Jebril, & de Vreese, 2014; Esser & Strömbäck, 2012; Esser et al., 2017; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008).

While most research on political journalism is still single-country studies, comparative research—a necessity to investigate the importance of system-level factors—has taken a leap forward since the early 21st century (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). An important catalyst for this comparative turn was the publication of *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics* by Hallin and Mancini in 2004. In this book, they identified three types of media-political systems within the family of Western democracies: the *polarized pluralist* or Mediterranean model, the *liberal* or North Atlantic model, and the *democratic-corporatist* or Northern European model. Briefly, they summarize these as follows (2004, p. 11):

The Liberal Model is characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media; the Democratic Corporatist Model by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state; and the Polarized Pluralist Model by integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state.

These differences across media-political systems are expected to influence both the processes and the content of political journalism. In polarized pluralist systems, news media are more embedded within and form part of politics. Political journalism is characterized by being less independent from politics, less professionalized, and more instrumentalized for political purposes. In liberal systems, the news media are in contrast highly independent from both political parties and the state, but more dependent on the market. Political journalism is highly professionalized, but also permeated by commercial considerations. In democratic corporatist systems, news media and political journalism are also highly professionalized and independent of party politics, while the state takes a more active role through, for example, public service broadcasting and press subsidies. Compared to those in liberal systems, the news media tend to be less commercialized. Differences such as these can be linked to the mediatization of politics, a concept focusing on the influence and importance of news media in political processes (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Overall, differences in the relationship between media systems and political systems across countries might lead to

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different degrees of mediatization of political journalism, where one dimension is concerned with the extent to which political journalism is shaped by news media logic as opposed to some kind of political logic (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Landerer, 2013).

While Hallin and Mancini's typology builds on historical and qualitative analysis, more recent research has sought to test it using quantitative data. This has resulted in a somewhat different classification of media systems and what countries belong to them. The most important example is by Brüggemann and colleagues (2014). Within the family of Western democratic systems, they identified four empirical types of media systems based on the same dimensions used by Hallin and Mancini in their analysis; a Northern, a Central, a Western, and a Southern type.

What can be concluded is that there are different types of media systems and political systems, with different relations to each other, and that this influences the processes of producing political journalism as well as the content of political journalism. Although it is difficult to empirically establish exactly how and to what extent different system-level factors influence political journalism, the framework provided by Hallin and Mancini has been widely used in comparative research on political journalism, not least as a heuristic and rationale when selecting countries to include in comparative studies (Albaek et al., 2014; Esser & Umbricht, 2014; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2006).

Factors Shaping Political Journalism: The Organizational Level

Political journalism is also influenced by several factors at the media organizational level. This includes what type of news media it is, ownership type, editorial policies, internal structures of newsrooms, journalistic work routines, economic resources, what audiences the news media are catering to, and the journalistic culture of newsrooms (Baker, 2002; Esser, 1998; Esser et al., 2017; Gans, 1980; Hamilton, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Tuchman, 1978). Type of news media might refer to differences between platforms, for example radio, television, print, and online-only news organizations. It might also refer to differences between types of newspapers or television news, for example broadsheets and tabloids or commercial and public service news. Ownership type might refer to whether a news media outlet is private or publicly traded and whether it belongs to a chain or a larger conglomerate. Another highly important factor is the degree of commercialization, which is influenced by, among other things, ownership type, editorial policies, how the news media are funded, what audiences they are catering to, and how competitive the media market is (Baker, 2002; Doyle, 2002; Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994).

While there is broad scholarly consensus that factors at the media organizational level influence the amount of the news hole devoted to political journalism as well as the content of political journalism, overall there are only a limited number of studies empirically linking specific media organizational factors to the content of political journalism. The main exception is related to differences between media types. Overall, research suggests that media types matter in the sense that broadsheets or quality newspapers compared to tabloids devote more resources and space for political journalism; that their coverage is more serious, in-depth, issue-oriented, and focused on hard political news; and that they devote more attention to international affairs (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2017; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2010). Similar differences have been found in studies comparing commercial and public service

television, with public service channels and their news programs generally providing better opportunity structures for political news and more hard and issue-oriented political news than commercial channels and their news programs (Aalberg & Curran, 2011; Cushion, 2012; Esser et al., 2012; de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2017). To a significant degree, such patterns of findings can be explained by the degree of commercialism, where higher degrees of media commercialism tend to correspond to less political news overall and to cheaper-to-produce, more sensational, and more soft news–oriented political journalism (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994). Similar findings have been found when comparing the quality of campaign news coverage in publicly traded and privately owned newspapers (Dunaway, 2008). In essence, some news media and their owners and managers are more market-driven whereas others are more driven by journalistic values and priorities, and this has profound implications for political journalism.

Factors Shaping Political Journalism: The Individual Level

In the production of political news, the journalists covering politics are often assigned a key role. This is evident not least in discussions about media bias, where those who criticize the news media for liberal or left-wing bias often claim that journalists are more liberal or left-wing in their political orientations than citizens at large. Surveys also show that journalists in Western Europe and the United States generally place themselves slightly to the left of the political center (van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2012; Strömbäck, Nord, & Shehata, 2012). This is not the only respect in which journalists are not representative. Generally speaking, journalists tend to be predominantly male, have a middle- or upper-class background, be well-educated, and belong to the ethnic majority in their country (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). In that sense, journalists tend to resemble the political elites they are covering rather than citizens at large, which might have implications for what they cover and how they cover it (Van Dalen, 2016). There are also some quasi-experimental studies suggesting that the individual traits and backgrounds of journalists might influence their reporting (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004, but see Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016).

Most research nevertheless suggests that the individual traits and backgrounds of journalists have only a limited influence on what they cover and how they cover it, and that other factors have a greater influence. Among those factors are professional role conceptions, newsroom socialization, organizational control, news values, and the circumstances of news production (Schudson, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). For journalists and news media in countries adhering to the norm of objective, neutral, or impartial journalism, it would, for example, be perceived as unprofessional to let their personal political views influence their coverage. Similarly, and regardless of political views or other individual traits, most journalists working within traditional news media within countries adhere to largely the same news values and news media logic. Research also suggests that traditional news media largely function as an institution and that different media largely follow the same news media logic and apply the same news values (Cook, 2005; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Sparrow, 1999). Content analyses hence tend to show that political news coverage is highly similar across news media belonging to the same type of news media, although there might be differences across media types such as broadsheets and tabloids. All this suggests that the traits and backgrounds of individual journalists have a limited impact on the content of political journalism, and that professional role conceptions and journalistic skills at the individual level have a greater impact than other

personal traits. In essence, it is not by going against the norms of the profession that political journalists get successful, but by being perceived by peers and editors as being professional and adhering to the norms and "logic of appropriateness" (March & Olsen, 2004) within news media.

Patterns in Political Journalism

A key question in research on political journalism is what characterizes its content and how that may vary across media outlets, countries, and time. Broadly, research in this area can be divided into three categories: cases studies of the news media coverage of particular political events, studies of political news coverage during election campaigns, and studies of routine political news coverage. Out of these, studies of political news coverage during election campaigns is probably the most common type. The preferred methodologies are qualitative and, in particular, quantitative content analysis, with automated and computer-assisted content analyses becoming more common. As there are thousands of studies dealing with the content of political news (depending on how political journalism is delineated from news journalism in general), focusing on different aspects and employing different concepts, it is impossible to summarize all research on the content of political journalism. To delimit the scope, here we will therefore focus on research related to four key concepts central in research on political journalism: the framing of politics as a strategic game, interpretive political news, conflict framing and media negativity, and political bias.

The Framing of Politics as a Strategic Game

One of the most prominent concepts in research on political journalism is the framing of politics as a strategic game. For decades, scholars have lamented that journalists focus too much on the political game and who's winning and who's losing, the strategic maneuvering of political actors, and the performances of political actors (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Sometimes referred to as "the game schema," other times as "strategic game framing," "strategy framing," or "game framing," the essence of this journalistic framing is a focus on winners and losers, politicians' and parties' performances, and campaign strategies and tactics. Whether it makes most sense to conceptualize it as one *strategic game frame*, or whether the *game frame* and *strategy frame* rather should be conceptualized as two separate frames is a matter of discussion (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012), but in most cases, this kind of framing is conceptualized in opposition to issue framing or substance framing. When political journalism employs an issue or substance frame, the focus is on the substance of politics and political issues, on real-world problems, and on proposals to address different societal problems.

Most research on strategic game framing and related concepts has focused on political journalism during national election campaigns. In that context, there is strong evidence that this kind of framing is very prominent, at times constituting a majority of all election news stories (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012; Patterson, 2017; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008). To the extent that there is longitudinal research, there is also evidence that this particular kind of framing has become more common (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Patterson, 1993). There is less research on the prevalence of strategic game framing during routine periods, but

what research there is shows that it is prominent also between elections and when covering issues (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2017; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Falasca, 2014; Lawrence, 2000; Schmuck, Heiss, Matthes, Engesser, & Esser, 2017). Thus, the overall conclusion is that strategic game framing is very common during election campaigns and common but less so between election campaigns.

The prevalence of strategic game framing varies across both countries and media types, however. The most comprehensive cross-national comparative study, focusing on routine periods and including 16 countries, found that the share of news stories that was dominated by the strategic game frame on average was 23%, although there were wide variations across countries (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2017). In terms of explaining the prevalence of strategic game framing, scholars have suggested that one key factor is degree of commercialization. Some research also suggests that this framing is more common in commercial than in public service news and in tabloids than in broadsheets, while other studies suggest otherwise (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2017; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2010; Schmuck et al., 2017). There is also research suggesting that strategic game framing is more common in newspapers owned by large diffuse chains than in locally owned newspapers, suggesting that ownership matters (Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015). Another factor might be how professionalized political actors are in their communication, as increasing professionalization may create stronger incentives for political journalism to focus on the political game in order both to uncover the strategies of political actors and as a defense mechanism to avoid being spun (Zaller, 2001). The framing of politics as a strategic game may thus be a means by which journalists attempt to achieve control over the news. More research is, however, needed to disentangle the antecedents of strategic game framing.

In terms of the effects, scholars have worried that the framing of politics as a strategic game will crowd out more substantive coverage of the issues at stake and how political actors seek to address societal problems, hence leaving citizens less informed about the substance of politics. There is also evidence that the framing of politics as a strategic game contributes to increasing political cynicism and less trust in political institutions and politicians, and some evidence that it contributes to less political interest and less trust in the news media (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015; de Vreese, 2004; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Shehata, 2014). From this perspective, many scholars consider the framing of politics as a strategic game problematic.

Interpretive Versus Straight News

Another area that has received extensive attention in research on political journalism is related to the concept of interpretive journalism. According to the traditional hard news paradigm, news journalism should strive for objectivity and neutrality, and to provide an answer to the five *W*s: who (was involved), what (happened), where (did it happen), when (did it happen), and why (did it happen), with an emphasis on the first four. From this follows that political news should be characterized by the "inverted pyramid writing, balanced reporting, emphasis on verifiable facts and attributed sources, a detached point of view, and the separation of the news and the editorial function of the news organization" (Esser & Umbricht, 2014).

Over time, research from different countries suggests, however, that political news journalism has become increasingly interpretive (Barnhurst, 2014; Patterson, 1993; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2008, p. 209), for example, characterize the rise of interpretive journalism as "the most significant change in political journalism," while Patterson (1993, p. 67) claims that nowadays, "facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in election reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illustrate it." Instead of focusing on the five *W*s, political journalism increasingly seeks to analyze, contextualize, explain, and help audiences understand the causes and consequences of different political and societal events. This may happen through so-called news analyses, articles with vignettes signaling an analytical approach or broadcast stories where journalists are being interviewed in the role of news analysts, or through analyses embedded within and permeating what at first might look at straight news stories. It may also happen through fact checks, where journalists fact-check statements by political actors (Graves, 2016). Conceptually, interpretive journalism has been defined as "opposed to or going beyond descriptive, fact-focused and source-driven journalism" and being characterized "by a dominant journalistic voice; and by journalistic explanations, evaluations, contextualizations, and speculations going beyond verifiable facts or statement by sources" (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012, p. 154). Both theoretically and empirically, interpretive journalism has been linked to the framing of politics as a strategic game, media negativity, and less balanced reporting (Patterson, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017). On the other hand, it can also be argued that interpretive journalism helps political journalists maintain their independence from political actors and audiences better understand the background to and meaning of news. Fact-checking journalism might be a good example of this type of interpretive journalism (Graves, 2016).

While there is evidence that interpretive journalism in some countries has become more common (Barnhurst, 2014; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2008; Patterson, 1993), the pattern is not necessarily universal. There are two reasons. Most important, the journalistic cultures and paradigms differ between countries, both historically and today (Benson & Hallin, 2007; Chalaby, 1996; Esser & Umbricht, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The traditional hard news paradigm has been described as an Anglo-American invention (Chalaby, 1996), while a more literary, advocacy-oriented, and interpretive style traditionally has been more prominent in other countries. This holds particularly for political journalism in countries belonging to the polarized pluralist model. Second, in most countries there is a paucity of longitudinal research investigating trends in the amount of interpretive journalism. Nevertheless, cross-national studies show that the amount of interpretive journalism differs significantly across countries. For example, one study, comparing 16 countries, found that the share of interpretive news stories varied between 6% in Belgium and 35% in Sweden (Salgado, Strömbäck, Aalberg, & Esser, 2017), while another study, comparing five countries, found that the share of news stories that could be classified as interpretive varied between 31% in the United Kingdom and 60% in Italy (Esser & Umbricht, 2014). While differences between studies with respect to what news media were investigated and how interpretive journalism was operationalized warn against comparisons of the results, there is clear evidence that the amount of interpretive journalism differs across countries. In terms of changes across time, evidence suggests that interpretive journalism has become more common in countries that traditionally subscribed to the hard news paradigm and its emphasis on the five *W*s, but not necessarily in countries

belonging to the polarized pluralist model and with a different journalistic culture and tradition (Esser & Umbricht, 2013, 2014). Media systems and historical trajectories thus matter.

Conflict Framing and Media Negativity

One of the most frequently noted characteristics of political news journalism is a bias toward negativity and conflicts (Schudson, 2003; Patterson, 1993). In general, the news media's tendency to focus on bad rather than good news and to emphasize conflict over consensus is grounded in widely shared journalistic notions of what is "news" and what is a "good story." As noted by Schudson (2003), "when things are going well, there seems to be less reason for a news story. The news 'instinct' is triggered by things going badly" (p. 50). At the same time, the focus on negative news in the media reflects a basic human instinct to pay closer attention to negative and deviant information than to positive information—following an intrinsic human motivation to monitor the surrounding environment for potential risks and threats (Shoemaker, 1996). Along these lines, recent studies on "negativity bias" indicate that news consumers "react more strongly to negative than to positive news content" (Soroka & McAdams, 2015, p. 13), which may have important implications for a variety of media effects on public opinion formation.

Even though extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to investigating the prevalence of negativity and conflict in political news, different conceptualizations and operationalizations across studies have made comparison of results from various contexts difficult (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). To begin with, although the prevalence of negativity and conflict in the news is often discussed within the same overarching framework, these are partly distinct concepts. While studies of negativity sometimes subsume conflict as a dimension of negativity, there are also studies focusing primarily on what has been defined as "conflict framing," distinct from negativity (De Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2016). Conceptually, the conflict frame "emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions a means of capturing audience interest" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 92). As such, political journalism tends to focus attention on matters of disagreement among political actors, both as an effective story-telling technique and as a manifestation of the professional norms of impartiality and objectivity—according to which hearing "both sides" of a story has become a standard journalistic practice.

In other studies, the focus on conflicts is conceptualized as one of several dimensions of media negativity. In one of the most comprehensive overviews of research on negativity, Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza (2012) conceptually distinguish between five components of negativity in the news: (1) *overall negative tone toward politics*, (2) *conflict-centeredness*, (3) *allegation of misconduct*, (4) *actor-related negativity*, and (5) *pessimistic outlook*. In their review of previous research, they found that overall negative news outweighs positive news—although a substantial part of news coverage is neutral in tone; that a pessimistic outlook is significantly more common than an optimistic outlook; that news with a conflict focus is substantially more prevalent than consensus news; that the tendency to focus on political incapability and

misconduct outweighs news reporting on political solutions and capability; and that negative portrayals of specific political actors and parties have become more common than positive portrayals (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012).

Apart from reflecting basic human psychology, the news media's penchant for negativity and conflict framing is typically explained by factors such as journalistic news values and professional role perceptions, changing relations between journalists and political actors, and commercial logic and increasing market pressures (Soroka, Daku, Hiaeshutter-Rice, Guggenheum, & Pasek, 2017; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011; Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2012). A cross-national comparative study of 16 Western countries, aiming at explaining variations in negativity, highlighted factors at different levels of analysis—including the news story level, the organizational level, and the country level (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, & Berganza, 2017). Apart from documenting significant differences between countries with respect to the amount of negativity in the news, some factors were more strongly related to negativity than others. Taken together, the findings suggest that negative news is more prominent (1) in coverage focusing on certain topics and events that are inherently negative, (2) in privately owned media generally, compared to public broadcasting media, and (3) in media systems characterized by higher levels of commercialization. There were, however, no important differences between quality and more popular newspapers (Esser, Engesser, et al., 2017). The overall conclusion that can be drawn is that while political journalism in general has a penchant for negativity, the amount of negative news varies across countries and contexts, and to explain the degree of negativity, it is necessary to take factors at several levels of analysis into account. These include, but are not restricted to, factors at the news story, news organizational, and system levels of analysis.

Political or Partisan Bias

Of all features of political journalism, there is none eliciting as much opinion and debate as whether political news journalism is characterized by political or partisan bias. Across countries, many seem to believe that the news media are not covering politics fairly (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, & Silver, 2018). While accusations of media bias might come from the right as well as the left, in Western democracies, charges of liberal or left-wing media bias are particularly pronounced. In the United States, for example, accusations of liberal media bias are commonplace, with more people thinking that the news media favor the Democrats than the Republicans (Gallup, 2017; Watts, Domke, Shah, & Fan, 1999). At the same time, research on the hostile media phenomena shows that people have a tendency to perceive the media as biased against their own views (Vallone, Ross, & Leeper, 1985; Perloff, 2015), suggesting that media bias is often in the eye of the beholder.

Moving beyond perceptions, there is quite extensive research on whether political news coverage is characterized by political or partisan bias, generally defined as politically motivated coverage favoring one political perspective at the expense of another. Most of this research focuses on election news, with fewer studies focusing on routine news. Assessing and interpreting whether news coverage is characterized by political or partisan bias is, however, not straightforward (Hopmann, Van Aelst, & Legnante, 2012; Lichter, 2017). First, it requires some kind of baseline to compare with. In countries with two parties, a typical approach is to assume that any deviation from an equal coverage is an indicator of bias, but in

countries with multiparty systems, it gets more complicated. In essence, it is not necessarily the case that reality is balanced. An unbalanced news coverage is therefore not necessarily an indicator of political or partisan bias. Second, bias might be manifested through visibility in the news coverage, the tonality of the news coverage, or through how the news coverage links political actors with different political issues. This means that a political actor might be favored in terms of visibility but not in terms of tonality or vice versa. Third, some political actors might be more newsworthy than others, for example by being in power and thereby having more political influence. Results showing that they get more visibility is therefore not necessarily an indicator of political or partisan bias (Hopmann, Van Aelst, Salgado, & Legnante, 2017; see also Gunter, 1997; Hofstetter, 1976; Niven, 2002).

These difficulties notwithstanding, most research focusing on Western democratic systems has found little evidence of news media being politically biased in the sense that they systematically favor one party or candidate at the expense of other parties or candidates (Albaek, Hopmann, & de Vreese, 2010; Asp & Bjerling, 2014; D'Alessio, 2012; D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Hopmann, Van Aelst, & Legnante, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2017; Hofstetter, 1976; Niven, 2002; Watts et al., 1999). A key word in this context is *systematically*. While research often finds imbalances that might favor one political actor over the other in the coverage of a specific campaign or event, the overall pattern is that imbalances in political news favor and disfavor different political actors at different points in time—and that different news media tend to be quite similar in their coverage of particular campaigns or events. That suggests that imbalances should not be equaled with political or partisan bias.

A key distinction in this context is between partisan or political bias on the one hand, and structural or situational bias on the other (Gulati, Just, & Crigler, 2004; Lichter, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2007). Coined by Hofstetter (1976), structural or situational bias refers to imbalances that are due to such things as the circumstances of news production, the actual events taking place, the newsworthiness and relevance of different political actors or events, and news media logic. For example, incumbents often receive higher visibility than opposition parties, not because the news media for political reasons are in favor of incumbents but because incumbents have more power and are considered more newsworthy. Another example of structural bias might be the news media's tendency to favor negative news, regardless of what actors are involved. As factors associated with structural or situational bias vary across time, so will imbalances. As summarized by Graber (2006, p. 236): "Political bias reflects ideological judgments, whereas structural bias reflects the circumstances of news production."

To conclude that research overall has found little evidence of political or partisan bias is therefore not to say that that political journalism is balanced or neutral in its consequences. The conclusion is rather that imbalances are much better explained by different structural and situational biases than by political or partisan bias.

Research on Political Journalism Looking Forward

From a democratic perspective—and save from the fact that there are several models of democracy and disagreement on how realistic the normative demands placed upon political journalism should be—there is broad consensus that that political journalism should function as an information provider, watchdog, and forum for public political discussions. The extent to which political journalism lives up to democratic and normative ideals is, however, debated. Importantly, empirical research repeatedly suggests that political journalism falls short of the democratic and normative ideals, for example by an excessive focus on framing politics as a strategic game rather than as issues, by focusing too much on conflicts and negative news, and by blurring the line between straight, descriptive news and interpretive news. These and other patterns in the news media coverage of politics might be conceptualized as structural and situational biases, shaped by the close, interdependent, and contentious relationship between political journalism and political actors and by factors located at different levels of analysis: the system level, the media organizational level, and the individual level.

While there is extensive research on political journalism and its antecedents and effects, there are still many unresolved questions and research problems. There are at least four reasons for this. First, while significant improvement has been made in recent years, there is still a lack of cross-national and longitudinal research on political journalism. This limits not only our knowledge of variations across time and space, but also our understanding of factors shaping political journalism. It also increases the risk that scholars fall prey to naive universalism, or the tendency to assume that findings from one setting are applicable and valid everywhere (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995), or to assuming trends or changes across time where there might be none or where changes across time look differently than are assumed. Thus, there is a need for more comparative as well as more longitudinal research on political journalism. In that context, the need for longitudinal and comparative research that includes countries beyond the family of Western democratic systems should also be emphasized. Second, while there is extensive research on the content of political journalism, there is less research focused on identifying the antecedents of the news media's coverage of political issues, events, and processes. There is even less research simultaneously investigating the impact of factors at different levels of analysis and linking factors at the macro level, the meso level, and the individual level of analysis. Thus, there is a need for more research on the antecedents of political journalism, and for research designs linking factors at different levels of analysis to the supply or content of political journalism. Third, while scholars often use similar theoretical concepts, the conceptualizations and—in particular—operationalizations of key concepts often differ. This severely hampers efforts at taking stock of current knowledge and comparing findings across studies, which, in turn, hampers efforts at building theories that might explain patterns of political news across time and space. To increase cumulativity and comparability of findings, there is thus a need for more standardization of how key theoretical concepts are conceptualized and operationalized (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012).

Fourth, most of our knowledge of political journalism is related to political journalism in traditional news media, and there is still limited research taking the impact of digital and social media on political journalism into full account. At the same time, the profound media technological advancements and developments of the last couple of decades have had a major influence on the conditions under which political journalism is produced, disseminated, and

consumed (Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Prior, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Not only have media environments changed significantly, with a growing number of media actors competing in the marketplace of audience attention, but the Internet and the increasing accessibility of political information and communication networks through mobile devices and social media have changed media market structures, journalistic practices, and news consumption patterns. Presumably, these developments have also influenced the content of political journalism, although it is less clear how and to what extent. To take just a couple of examples, as of yet there is no consensus on how digital media have influenced political journalism in traditional news media and limited knowledge of the extent to which political journalism on digital media differs from political journalism in traditional news media (but see Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). And while there is overwhelming consensus that the traditional *gatekeeping* function of traditional news media has changed and that traditional news media have lost their exclusive role as gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), it is less clear how and to what extent this change has influenced political news journalism (see, e.g., Bennett, 2017; Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2016). Hence, there is a need for more research on the impact of media environmental changes on political journalism as both process and content, and on similarities and differences in political journalism in offline and online news media.

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