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Introduction

The democratic value of news is increasingly contested in today’s crowded media culture. This is not because news is hard to reach or find. Far from it, since news is more readily available than ever before and, whether watching breaking news unfold on television, listening to live radio commentary or receiving a tweet, text or email, information has never been more instant or up to date, there at the flick of a switch. Viewed in this context, there has been an “information explosion” in journalism (Fuller 2010), with citizen-led media reshaping conventional journalistic practice (Allan and Thorsen 2009), leading to a richer and more globally diverse public sphere (McNair 2006). It has been argued that new media conduits have challenged the hegemony of top-down monolithic broadcasting structures, promoting cultural differences and identities, and advancing digital literacy as print once did centuries before (Hartley and Cunningham 2010).

After many Western countries began deregulating their media industries in the 1980s and 1990s, the monopoly once held by state broadcasters has diminished. This has cultivated, in most advanced democracies, a highly competitive media market-place allowing citizens to access an increasing array of television channels and radio stations, a range of newspapers and magazines, and a world of choice online, delivered on computers, laptops and mobile phones. With so much information at their fingertips, the post-1980s and 1990s media environment could be interpreted as a great victory in media pluralism.

But while this information blitz in recent decades might appear to have radically enhanced media pluralism, the quality of information supplied by contemporary journalists has not necessarily enhanced the value of news (Franklin 2004; Patterson 2000) or cultivated a healthy democratic culture (Prior 2007). In recent years, scholars have suggested that journalism has advanced to a stage of “hypercommercialism” (Cooper 2004). The commercial drive to generate more income from journalism has reshaped conventional values associated with the fourth estate (McChesney 2000). Spoon-feeding newsrooms prepackaged stories, PR-shaped reports are increasingly dressed up as “news” since journalists have neither the time nor the resources to investigate further (Lewis et al. 2008). Contemporary news culture has drawn parallels with the fast-food industry: both are quickly produced, relatively cheap to purchase and can be delivered instantaneously.
We are witnessing, in this sense, a “McDonaldization” of news values (Franklin 2005).

News audiences, from this perspective, are treated as consumers rather than citizens. If news is seen by journalists and scholars as “the hard-wiring of our democracy” (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002: 4), equipping citizens with the information to understand politics and public affairs, the lurch towards consumerism is seen to diminish the prospects of informed citizenship. Operating within a neo-liberal framework, it has been argued that global news media networks work towards enhancing market economies, as opposed to fourth estate principles that foster democratic interests or engender citizen engagement (McChesney 2004). Although a voluminous literature has grown around the marketization of news in recent decades or the neo-liberal spell under which journalism operates (Fenton 2011a; McManus 2009), underlying many of these critiques is the assumption that another system of ownership – a publicly rather than privately funded news service – could better serve the democratic needs of citizens. And yet, while many studies have drawn distinctions between these media systems, there is little systematic evidence bringing together internationally comparative empirical studies of public and market-driven news programming (with notable exceptions, of course: see Aalberg and Curran 2011).

In the context of a widely perceived decline in the concept of public service broadcasting (Hoynes 1994, 2003; Jacka 2003; Tracey 1998; Tambini and Cowling 2004), this book will explore an important facet of its mission – asking whether public service journalism is distinctive from market-driven news. The aim will be to interpret the democratic value of a news service citizens help fund compared to market-driven systems. After all, why should citizens pay for news provision that the market has made more widely available than at any other point in history? Of course, news of democratic value can be difficult to interpret and classify. Chapter 2 discusses how scholars have typically evaluated the quality of news and subsequent chapters will define how the democratic value of news is interpreted more specifically to the topic under examination. But, broadly speaking, throughout this book the democratic value of news will refer to news that, above all, has informative quality, enhancing people’s understanding of the world on issues likely to empower them as citizens in a democracy.

Before introducing the methodological framework this book employs to develop a cross-national comparative analysis of news media operating under different funding models, a wider context into recent inquiries about the role of public service media is necessary to establish how this study will offer a new perspective about a system of ownership increasingly threatened by market forces in recent decades.
Crisis in public service media? The commercialization of the media industries

According to many scholarly accounts, public service broadcasting has experienced varying levels of crisis over recent decades (Lowe and Bardoel 2008; Lowe and Jauert 2005; Iosifidis 2010; Tracey 1998). There are, of course, many conflicting reasons why publicly funded media appears precariously placed within the media industry, but most studies have tended to focus on the increased threat of commercial values and market-led direction of media policy-making. While a tension between, on the one hand, state ownership and intervention and, on the other hand, market freedom and liberalization, has plagued the history of media policy-making over many decades, for many countries around the world in the 1980s the pendulum swung decidedly in favour of the market. Advancements in new technologies permanently changed the broadcasting infrastructure. Where once “spectrum scarcity” limited how many broadcasters could fill the airwaves, new cable, satellite and digital technologies made a multi-channel media environment possible. A lucrative commercial market soon opened up and many governments began relinquishing control of the media industries, deregulating them to encourage growth and investment independent of the state. This deregulation of the broadcasting industry needs to be interpreted as part of wider political and economic changes in many countries, since a wide range of industries, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, were denationalized and free-market principles of globalization embraced.

However, the commercialization of media industries has not followed a globally uniform pattern. The balance between state, public and market-driven media models varies considerably in different regions around the world. Nor have governments carried out a wholesale retreat from state ownership or regulation, since there remains a strong public service presence in many countries and robust regulatory structures. But, as Chapter 1 explores, there has been a broad trend in which the market gradually challenged the state monopolization of the media industries in the 1980s and 1990s.

Even in countries where the media is censored by national governments, the state’s firm grip on broadcasting has been challenged by transnational news channels or the World Wide Web (WWW). When the Middle Eastern/North African anti-government protests emerged in January and February 2011, many political leaders chose state television to broadcast their message but found it hard to shut down foreign news channels, websites, Twitter, Facebook and SMS phone messaging. In other words, in countries diametrically opposed to relinquishing state control of the media industries and embracing commercial choice, market forces have proved almost unstoppable, impacting on national broadcasting cultures and political events.
The liberalization of broadcasting in countries once tightly controlled by state forces has generally been interpreted as a powerful antidote to governments operating under autocratic rule or, worse still, outright dictatorship. Days after the Egyptian president resigned in February 2011, attention turned to how state media had been complicit with the outgoing government’s failure to secure human rights. A journalism professor, Nailah Hamdy (2011), suggested:

We’re going to see major political alterations in the coming months, and that means altering the media landscape as well. In a democracy I can’t imagine that there will be any role to play for state TV channels or official newspapers which take diktats from a Ministry of Information; they will have to look to other models, such as BBC-style public broadcasting, to survive. (cited in Shenker 2011)

But while some countries rebuilding democracies have turned to the market or long-standing public service broadcasters like the BBC as models when considering how to establish editorially independent media systems, in more developed nations publicly funded media have had to justify their role in increasingly market-driven economies. The role of publicly funded journalism and the purpose of state regulation have come under a great deal of scrutiny as commercial media markets have expanded. So, for example, Syvertsen (2003: 155) has observed that the “question of whether public broadcasting should be sustained and protected is at the heart of current media policy debates in Europe”. As commercialization has intensified in the digital era, scholars have begun to explore how public service broadcasters negotiate the role they should play in an increasingly multimedia, multi-channel environment (Lowe and Bardoel 2008; Lowe and Jauert, 2005; Iosifidis, 2010). In doing so, public service broadcasting has been redefined as public service media (Iosifidis 2010: 1) or public service communication (Lowe 2010), since broadcasting only encompasses television and radio services. Where once broadcasters were exclusively focused on national audiences and faced minimal competition, the media market has since internationalized and rapidly expanded, fragmenting audiences and reducing the reach and influence of public service media. In this context, scholars have suggested a new era of “minimal effects” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008) is diminishing the impact individual broadcasters can have in society. In the context of these debates, this book explores how public service broadcasters have adapted to the multimedia environment, developing online and digital strategies, asking how they can justify and legitimize continued public subsidy and remain distinctive in the face of increasing competition from commercial media.

To accurately reflect the contemporary multimedia environment in which broadcasters operate, this book will primarily refer to them as public service media
rather than public service broadcasters. While countries with a long history of public service broadcasting might be familiar with what this system of ownership represents in a digital, online age, elsewhere (such as in the US), it holds less resonance. But since debates about the history and philosophy of public service media have largely been understood in a broadcasting culture, the terms “media” and “broadcasting” will sometimes be used interchangeably throughout the book, most notably in the opening chapters to introduce the conceptual principles of this media system. Either way, each refers to a publicly funded system of media ownership.

While the principle of public service media remains championed in many countries, in practice talk of a continued “crisis” is ongoing. So, for example, in the UK, home to arguably the most well-known public service broadcaster, the BBC, the opening words of a 2009 House of Lords Committee review began with: “This report responds to the current crisis in public service broadcasting” (Communications Committee 2009: 1). Within academic scholarship, according to Enli (2008: 106), a “crisis discourse” pervades “current recent literature on public service broadcasting” as “a result of deregulation and competition”. Likewise, Jacka (2003: 178) has stated unequivocally that “there is no doubt that PSB [public service broadcasting] is under threat around the world”. Padovani and Tracey (2003), by contrast, have suggested that the crisis of public service broadcasters has subsided in recent years. They point to the growth of public service media, such as in children’s programming, the emergence of a digital infrastructure and the healthy audience ratings maintained by many public broadcasters. While they conceded that an “inherent contradiction between the public service mission and commercial imperatives” exists, in their view these new developments “point toward a positive future” (Padovani and Tracey 2003: 140). In many countries public opinion polls have shown high levels of support for public service media (Cushion 2009), with governments reluctant to be seen attacking well-regarded public institutions. But while many public service broadcasters may appear on relatively safe ground, new licence fee contracts or budget negotiations are always on the horizon and threaten future programming arrangements. The financial crisis that began in late 2007, for example, has led many Western national governments to seek ways to radically reduce levels of public expenditure and public service broadcasters have had their share of budget cuts.

Although many public broadcasters have suffered budget reductions, in the late 1990s and 2000s it is possible to detect a scholarly renaissance in the role of public service broadcasters and a wider recognition of the value public service media brings to societies. The increasingly commercialized media and digitalized environment has prompted many inquiries from a variety of cultural, economic and legal perspectives into the general impact on public service structures and their wider values. Having to justify state subsidies, many national and international regulators have sought to develop public
service value tests where the cost, quality of media content and audience impact are measured against scales that vary from one country to the next (Donders and Pauwels 2010; Moe 2010).

The titles of anthologies about the contemporary state of public service broadcasting have tended to be broad in scope, largely examining media generally such as Public Service Broadcasting in the Age of Globalization (Banerjee and Seneviratne 2006), Public Service Broadcasting in Transition: A Documentary Reader (Price and Raboy 2003), Cultural Dilemmas in Public Service Broadcasting (Lowe and Jauert 2005), The Public in Public Service Media (Lowe 2010), From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Communications (Tambini and Cowling 2004), Public Service Broadcasting: Change and Continuity (Ward 2004), From Public Service Broadcasting to Public Service Media (Lowe and Bardoel 2008), Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest (McCauley et al. 2003) and Making a Difference: Public Service Broadcasting in the European Media Landscape (Nissen 2006). Special editions on public service broadcasting have been published in academic journals, such as Television and New Media (2003), Convergence (2008) and Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture (2010). Many of the book titles, chapters and articles in academic journals feature (sub)titles implying change and recovery such as Petros Iosifidis’s (2010) edited book, Reinventing Public Service Communication or Mary Debrett’s (2010) Reinventing Public Service Television for the Digital Future. All of which, in short, demonstrates the fact that public service broadcasting remains an enduring presence in academic scholarship.

However, while much academic literature has debated at length the contributions public service media make to culture and democracy, many of these collections review programming, management structures, funding mechanisms and market impact more generally (e.g. Iosifidis 2010; Lowe 2010). In addition, key texts in public service media have tended to discuss their political history, contemporary performance or immediate future within the context of what Moe and Syvertsen refer to as “policy studies” (2009: 400–1) without meaningful engagement with the content produced. There have, in other words, been edited viewpoints on the legalistic or policy-related condition of state or public service media either in a particular nation or on a comparative basis of two or three countries. The intention in this book is to comprehensively examine a particular aspect of public service media – the supply of news – and to compare the quality of publicly funded journalism with market-driven news media.

It is also important to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of contemporary public service media cross-nationally since different broadcast models and regulatory environments shape the delivery of news. But the focus in the book, throughout, is on how changing media ecologies and shifting regulatory frameworks impact on the production of news.
Understanding media systems and internationally comparative research: towards a comprehensive review of empirical news studies

To explore journalism operating under different ownership structures, regulatory systems and wider media cultures, it is necessary to develop an internationally comparative framework of analysis. Cross-national research into media systems has, in the previous decade or so, grown more prominent within the disciplines of journalism, communication, media and cultural studies (Livingstone 2003). While there have been pockets of comparative research in recent decades, studies spanning many countries that have been informed by robust data sets are thin on the ground. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 73) pointed out well over a decade ago in *The Crisis of Public Communication* that comparative research is the “extending frontier” in understanding the future of political communications studies. As the forces of globalization have impacted on journalism scholarship (Löffelholz and Weaver 2008), cross-national research within relevant disciplines has begun to appear more regularly in a range of international academic journals and, to a lesser extent, book-length endeavours, with publishers eager to capture the lucrative global market. Consequently, much theoretical understanding of media systems is driven by American, European and Australian empirical observations or analysis. Or, to put it another way, Western trends have tended to dominate the interpretation of media systems within the broader academic literature.

It is in this context that Curran and Park (2000) argued that media studies should be “de-Westernized”. Their book, *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, was intended, in their words, to counter “the self-absorption and parochialism of much Western theory” (Curran and Park 2000: 1). Of course, since there are close to 200 countries worldwide, developing a truly global comparative study is, in most cases, practically impossible, not just for logistical reasons but due to financial constraints. Very early attempts to characterize the global characteristics of media systems appear almost farcical when even a flicker of empirical light is shed on the sample used to represent the global population. So, for example, in *Four Theories of the Press*, Siebert et al. (1956) set out to demonstrate that media systems tended to reflect their political identity. Primarily dealing with the US, Russia and England, they argued that four theoretical models – authoritarian, libertarian, Soviet and social responsibility – characterized the media systems of regions around the world. While their book is much cited and intended as a normative rather than empirical mapping of world media, it has largely been dismissed within the literature for not capturing the character and complexity of global communications (Curran and Park 2000; McQuail 1987). McQuail (1987) has since extended the four models to six – adding development and democratic-participant models – to recognize third world countries and the democratization of many countries since the 1950s. But, in more recent years, scholars have largely moved on and developed new comparative frameworks of cross-national research into media systems.
Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) _Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics_ developed a more systematic approach to understanding international patterns of journalism in different Western European/North American contexts. Their aim was not to offer any new empirical material but to draw on “existing published sources” in order to “propose a theoretical synthesis and a framework for comparative research on the media and political systems” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 16). Examining journalism in 18 countries, they identified three models – liberal, democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist – that characterized the political and news media structures in these regions. The liberal model, evident in Britain, Ireland and the US, was “characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media”; the democratic corporatist model, representing Northern Europe, “by a historical co-existence 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, finally, the polarized pluralist model was interpreted as reflecting the character of Southern European countries by “the integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media and a strong role of the state” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 11). They arrived at these categories by examining in each country:

1. the type of media markets, most notably the strength of the press readership;
2. the relationship between media systems and political parties;
3. journalistic professionalism; and
4. the extent to which the state intervenes in media regulation. (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 21)

Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) study has since sparked further engagement with international comparative research into media systems (Aalberg and Curran 2011; Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010). In particular, their attempt to pattern news media structures according to relevant historical and political dimensions, and to develop interpretive frameworks to compare media systems is often used by scholars to explore whether certain countries conform to or deviate from the three models (see Curran 2011 for critique). This point was taken up by Hallin and Mancini in a foreword to Dobek-Ostrowska’s (2010) edited volume, _Comparative Media Systems: European and Global Perspectives_. They stated that:

Our models [in _Comparing Media Systems_] are not intended as universal patterns that are somehow inherent in the nature of media and politics. We conceive them as concrete, historical patterns that can be observed in the groups of countries we studied. We have always hoped that people studying other regions would not try to apply them unmodified, but instead would follow our approach, in the sense of developing models of their own ... the main goal of our research was to propose an interpretive
framework for comparing systems of the relationship between the mass media and politics, not to label particular systems in different parts of the world. (Hallin and Mancini 2010: xi–xiv)

It is in the latter sense that this book attempts to develop a greater understanding of media systems cross-nationally. While Hallin and Mancini explored media systems generally, “with particular emphasis on strong or weak development of a mass circulation press” (2010: 21), the focus in this book is on a comparative assessment of public service and market-driven broadcasters (and online platforms) and the wider regulatory frameworks within which they operate.

Of course, as Chapter 1 explores in depth, public and private broadcasting cannot be crudely made into a dichotomy since broadcast ecologies have in recent years evolved into complicated multi-platforms with hybrid funding models operating in changing regulatory environments. Complex cross-national variations in the ownership and culture of news production thus bring inherent tensions and challenges for researchers when attempting to understand and identify the broad characteristics of news in different regions around the world. As Livingstone (2003: 480) has observed, in “cross-national comparative research … . Folk wisdom cautions against comparing apples and oranges. Anyone who has conducted comparative research will have been berated for attempting to compare unlike objects or categories.” But in acknowledging the complexity of different media systems and accepting that comparative international research inevitably brings many sampling headaches, this should not invalidate or discourage ways and means of comparing communications beyond the safer confines of national boundaries. The aim of the cross-national comparative exercise in this book is to broadly map the type and nature of journalism produced by different media systems and to weigh up the relative merits of news coverage on a range of subject matter vital for citizens in a democracy.

Since news can mean reporting potentially anything going on in the world, a degree of semblance is necessary to ensure journalism is consistently analyzed on a comparative cross-national basis. Thus, whatever topics are explored need to be internationally relevant for points of comparison as well as broad areas already sufficiently researched so that existing publications can be pulled together and compared cross-nationally. Perhaps most importantly, however, the framework of analysis needs to revolve around topics where the democratic value of news is most evident. After all, a global case study of sports or celebrity-driven news would not, as Chapter 2 discusses, typically inform democratic choices about what is happening in the world or, to put it more grandly, empower citizens in the public sphere.

To address internationally relevant topics that can be compared cross-nationally, four broad areas of journalism will be explored. First, relatively routine periods of news media coverage will be examined, at a time when no
major events, accidents, disasters or conflicts occurred (Chapter 3). The aim will be to generally assess public and market-driven news, examining what stories typically feature, how local, national and international news agendas are balanced, which actors regularly appear, and, in the context of the rise in “citizen journalism”, the role citizens themselves play in making and shaping news. To interpret the performance of news media at a more critical juncture, the second area of journalism explored will be election news over the campaign period (Chapter 4). Since elections are considered to be key democratic moments, it will explore their prominence in the news agenda over the campaign period, the approach taken towards covering politics and the type of reporting pursued. The third topic includes another critical time for journalism – during moments of war and conflict, when news “on the ground” is difficult to establish and when concerns about objectivity or independence are raised as propaganda distorts the informational climate (Chapter 5). The fourth and final area of journalism that will be examined is the rise of 24-hour journalism or, more specifically, the editorial agendas of dedicated news channels on public and commercial stations (Chapter 6). The aim will be to explore the type of information conveyed in a fast-moving format and whether journalistic ideals about objectivity, accuracy and analysis can be sustained in a 24/7 environment. At a time when journalism is increasingly shaped by the speed of its delivery, the chapter will seek to evaluate whether accuracy or analysis have been compromised to break news first.

Like Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) study, the book does not deliver new empirical pearls of wisdom but draws extensively on existing empirical research into news coverage that distinguishes between public and market-driven journalism. This will bring together evidence cross-nationally to paint a “big picture” analysis of the prevailing patterns and longitudinal trends across broadcast and online journalism. Since journalism studies has rapidly expanded over the previous decade, with more publishers interested in book-length endeavours, more dedicated journalism journals arriving on the scene, more established scholarly networks emerging (see Cushion 2012), the intention of this book is to draw extensively on the rich tapestry of research from around the world to develop a globally relevant case study about whether news ownership matters.

While the broad purpose of this book is to explore whether public or market-driven media produce distinctive news of democratic value, the wide-ranging nature of the inquiry examines different aspects of journalism that require more specific questions. In doing so, making nuanced distinctions between media systems cross-nationally and establishing the democratic value of news does not lend itself to a quantitative conclusion whereby the sum of all empirical news studies can be aggregated to answer a specific question. Instead, the book will qualitatively interpret the prevailing trends of journalism, mapping the characteristics of coverage and identifying where public and market-driven news is distinctive. While Chapters 1 and 2 provide
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