

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ONLINE

# SHAPING ONLINE NEWS PERFORMANCE

POLITICAL NEWS IN SIX WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

EDDA HUMPRECHT



## *Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century*

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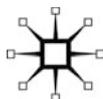
# Shaping Online News Performance

**Political News in Six Western Democracies**

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# 1

## Introduction: News Performance in the Online Age

When in 2010 the web-based news outlet *Médiapart* revealed one of the biggest political scandals in France – the so-called Bettencourt affair – it turned traditional French political journalism upside down. The news outlet reported that millionaire and *L'Oréal* heiress Liliane Bettencourt had made illegal payments to members of the UMP, the French conservative party, including to former president Nicolas Sarkozy and the budget minister at the time, Eric Woerth. In addition, the case also showed that new web-based media outlets could serve as journalistic watchdogs and deserved at least as much public confidence as well-established media brands. The whistle-blower who initially revealed the case self-consciously decided to give the precious information to a relatively new journalistic start-up, rather than an established major newspaper – a first in French journalism.

This example shows the important role of new journalistic websites in France. Those websites have become an integral part of online journalism over the last decade, although they remain niche products (Kuhn, 2013). This development is common to many other countries around the world in which new journalistic outlets enrich national media markets and challenge traditional forms of news consumption. However, despite some positive examples of successful investigative projects, online news media in general have been roundly criticized for the low quality of their news output. Critics claim that speed is the most important currency to online media. The Tow Center for Digital Journalism published a report on the practices of online news media outlets and concluded that journalists squander much of the value of rumor and emerging news by moving too quickly and thoughtlessly to propagation. Furthermore, the report finds that news websites dedicate far more time and resources to

propagating questionable and often false claims than to verifying viral content and online rumors (Silverman, 2015).

This pessimistic evaluation of online news practices clashes with the increased use of online news media by many people in contemporary democracies. According to the World Internet Project, most Western countries have an Internet penetration rate of more than 80 percent; moreover, 51 percent of American users go online at least daily to look for news (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Zhou, & Reyes-Sepulveda, 2013). Against this background, scholars have expressed concerns about informed citizenships in democracies and about the performance of future journalism. Downie and Schudson (2009) argue that newspapers have lost ground and that online media outlets are expanding, although they question whether the 'new media' can supplant newspapers. This critical assessment of the current situation is shared by other scholars who more fundamentally question the extent of the empowering nature of the Internet by arguing that the Internet is constrained by state, corporate and elite influences (McChesney, 2013; Morozov, 2012, 2013). Still other authors agree with this assessment of the news media's current state and question whether journalism in Western countries is at a watershed moment, prefiguring a new era of news making (Curran, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

When online news media initially emerged in Western democracies, it triggered euphoria among many individuals who hoped that the 'new media' would revolutionize media consumption and make endless information available to anyone by increasing accessibility (Curran et al., 2013). Consequently, one of the most frequently mentioned strengths of online news media is its global reach (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2005; Singer, 2001). Internet pioneers hoped that online news media would break down boundaries of national media markets and democratize political knowledge.

However, such hopes were only partly realized. Although new players have emerged in the online media landscape, Internet users in many countries prefer to use well-known national brands. One reason for that loyalty is that new online outlets have traditionally lacked credibility. Because the online media's sources and information supply were often not transparent, there was little incentive for mass audiences to switch to new, online-only players (Franklin & Carlson, 2010). Simultaneously, traditional, well-known media brands established themselves online, which helped orient audiences within the growing amount of information available on the Internet. Online-only outlets were able to emerge and occupy niches only in those environments in which the mainstream

media could not fulfill their users' expectations (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013).

Some authors see the industry's financial problems as the reason for this development. Freedman (2010) argues that 'the Internet has the potential to expand the diversity of news sources, to improve the quality and breadth of news coverage, and to deepen the interaction between news providers and their audiences.' However, he also states that 'given today's harsh economic circumstances, the Internet has instead contributed to a possibility that the news of the future will be sustained by a declining number of specialist news organizations, a growing band of generalist news and information businesses, and a handful of parasitical aggregators supplemented by an army of contributors working for free' (Freedman, 2010, p. 50).

It has been argued that, when media companies struggle with financial problems they are less likely to provide audiences with comprehensive information (Zaller, 1999). Although small resources and public values are not necessarily contradictions, skepticism appears to remain. A tension arises: journalism is a private good with the public function of informing democracy (McQuail, 2013b). When the business and public interest sides of journalism become unbalanced, profit considerations might dominate editorial decisions. The case of the Swiss fashion magazine *Annabelle* exemplifies this tension between conflicting interests: in 2013, *Annabelle* was banned by *Tamedia* (its owner and Switzerland's biggest media organization) from reporting on controversial political topics, such as emancipation (Lüthi, 2013). Ironically, the magazine had a long history of supporting feminist issues and political engagement. However, CEO Pietro Supino stated in a press release that the promotion of political opinions was not (longer) a component of his enterprise's understanding of journalism (Supino & Feldmann, 2013). Critics interpreted that statement as an attempt to make the magazine more attractive to a mass audience without repelling people because of the magazine's political views. Furthermore, the agreement of the editor-in-chief, who had previously initiated most of the magazine's political engagement, was observed as the capitulation of an employee under pressure (Lüthi, 2013). This case shows that even within media markets that show relatively few signs of crisis, increasing commercialization can lead to serious editorial cuts. It can thus be assumed that the consequences of this development are even more dramatic in other structural and organizational environments. In addition, because online news media outlets face particular challenges with respect to financial instability, there are questions regarding just how well they can inform

societies, and whether they can fulfill important functions in the functioning of democracy.

Finally, comparative research has found that, although the challenges for online news media are similar in most Western countries, their news performance differs significantly (Benson, Blach-Ørsten, Powers, Willig, & Zambrano, 2012). Moreover, commercial influences are reflected to varying degrees in the news content produced by different types of media organizations (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). News organizations seem to be embedded in wider political and economic parameters which shape the way news is produced (Curran et al., 2013). It is thus crucial to understand the decisive factors that foster high levels of news performance.

## 1.1 Understanding the parameters of news performance

The purpose of this book is to contribute to the research on news performance of online news media by addressing three important aspects disregarded in the previous research. *First*, this book develops a comprehensive conceptual framework for the understanding and explanation of news performance. What exactly is news performance and which of news media's democratic roles undergird it? Based on a discussion of normative theories, four main theoretical functions of mass media in democracies can be identified: information, accountability, legitimation and integration. These roles are reflected in media content by indicators such as hard news, analytical depth, critical distance, and diversity. Moreover, the book shows that different theoretical strands and journalistic traditions stress different roles for the news media in a democracy. Therefore, I argue that these different aspects of news performance are important when comparing news content cross-nationally.

*Second*, a multi-level model is offered to explain variations in news performance among different news outlets. This model integrates systemic and organizational conditions that play a major role in studying news content. On the macro level, it refers to those characteristics of media systems as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004): namely, the media market, the role of the state, political parallelism, and journalistic professionalism. The corresponding media systems typology has been used widely in comparative research for the sampling of different countries and accordingly to explain variations in news content among them (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). However, indirect use of system dimensions limits their explanatory power because it remains unclear which

dimensions are pivotal. Thus, this study extends a step further and suggests an operationalization of the four media system dimensions. This allows to show the degree to which the degree of political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state or the media market account for the news performance of single news outlets. Furthermore, previous research has shown that media organizations belonging to different ownership types vary in their news performance and in the manner in which they report political and public affairs. Those results have been linked to differences among ownership types with respect to profit and editorial orientation. To understand how media system and ownership types affect news performance, I argue that it is necessary to study news content from outlets which systematically vary in systemic and organizational terms. Two main questions guide the research presented in this book:

*To what extent do different online news outlets offer high-level news performance?*

*Under what constellations of conditions are online news media most capable of providing high-level news performance?*

*Third*, these questions are answered by means of an empirical investigation of combinations of conditions that foster high-level news performance. The analysis combines explanatory conditions on the macro- and meso-levels and tests the effects of different combinations of conditions on news performance in news content. This analysis is performed using fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is a set-theoretic method that identifies equifinal solutions and provides a middle path between case-oriented qualitative research and variable-oriented quantitative approaches, and is thus highly appropriate for the research goal and database of this study.<sup>2</sup>

The overall aim of this book is to study the performance of online news outlets cross-nationally and to investigate how certain combinations of meso- and macro-conditions can explain different levels of news performance. I hope that this book will contribute to the understanding of the concept of news performance, the comparative study of media systems, and the role of organizational characteristics in news production. Understanding the nature of high-level news performance and the conditions under which online news outlets are most likely to provide high-level news performance will inform future research on news performance in online media.

## 1.2 Chapter-by-chapter outline

Chapter 2 begins by introducing the main normative principles that apply to the functions of the news media and to their adherence to widely accepted standards. These principles include the conceptual framework of news performance, the particular roles that various online news media play in this context, and the challenges faced by such media in a changing environment. The tradition of research examining news performance has been based on public-interest (or societal-good) concepts that provide a point of reference in empirical research and allow the deduction of relevant content indicators. By contrast, the concept of news performance has been investigated implicitly using a growing body of research, but there has been little evidence of explanatory factors for *high-level news performance*. To fill this research gap, I suggest a range of macro- and meso-conditions that, the literature has shown, influence news performance. I argue that these conditions are inherent in media systems and ownership types and then discuss different characteristics that can be operationalized and measured empirically. The final component of this chapter discusses systematic and organizational influences on news content, which is necessary to put the subsequent analyses into perspective.

Against this background the following questions arise: How do these characteristics influence the news performance of online news? How can these influences be measured? To answer the first question, Chapter 3 suggests a conceptual framework for the multi-level analysis of news performance. It then specifies the causal relationships between explanatory conditions and the outcome of high-level news performance and presents theoretical assumptions for the empirical analysis. In Chapter 3 I emphasize that news coverage differences in previous research have primarily been attributed to the sampling of outlets from different countries or media types. However, the underlying characteristics have not been measured individually and those explanations thus remain unspecified. I argue that we must include macro- and meso- level characteristics to understand the contexts that foster high-level news performance at the outlet level. Because the concept of news performance has a normative background and refers to the news media's contribution to the public interest, this study's empirical research focuses on media coverage of *politics*. I discuss the sampling strategies of media systems and organizations that are assumed to vary according to their characteristics and will be measured and linked to the degree of news performance. This study's primary interest does not lie in country or

organization type differences but in explaining different levels of news performance across news outlets. Thus, comparisons among countries and ownership types are used only as controls.

Chapter 4 is devoted to this study's measures and methods, the operationalization of its concepts, and data collection. In this study, a content analysis of online news is conducted and the data are analyzed using QCA. Based on the previously established criteria, Chapter 4 addresses the content analysis of online news, including selection criteria and coding units, sampling period, and coding procedure. To assess online news outlets' news coverage, I analyze the four main indicators of news performance: analytical depth, hard news, critical distance, and content diversity. These indicators are divided into several categories that are measured separately and then aggregated into indices for each indicator of news performance for the analysis.

Furthermore, 48 news outlets from six countries representing six different ownership types and three different media systems are analyzed. The inclusion of media system, as well as ownership characteristics, enables testing of the theoretical assumptions that are revealed and leaves sufficient space for new insights into this partly uncharted territory. In the final section, the main method of analysis, QCA,<sup>3</sup> is explained. This analysis includes the two-step approach, a variant of QCA which is used to address this study's multi-level design and its application to the study of news performance.

The subsequent chapter attempts to shed empirical light on the news performance of online outlets in different contexts. Chapter 5 examines the degree of analytical depth, hard news, critical distance and news diversity in political reporting and compares these measures across media systems and ownership types. Furthermore, it draws on external data and compares the dimensions of the media market, the role of the state, political parallelism, and journalistic professionalism at the systemic level. Next, at the organizational level, the editorial mission, profit orientation, and the thematic orientation of different news outlets are compared. Contemporary trends are then explored, and different dimensions of news performance are compared and contrasted to assess whether political news coverage can routinely distinguish ownership and media system patterns.

To assess how online news media cover political affairs, four indices are constructed to investigate news performance, each representing a separator indicator of news performance. These results are summarized and compared by group to contextualize the subsequent analysis of the conditions of the context that foster news performance. However, this

study's primary interest is to investigate how individual media outlets differ in their news performance, and which constellations of conditions are contributive. Thus, it focuses on the fuzzy set values used in the analysis by investigating favorable opportunity structures for single dimensions of high-level news performance. To overcome the limitations of country and ownership comparisons, I discuss the results for single outlets, sum up the main results for ownership types in each country and relate these results to the respective context of each media system type. In this manner, I aim to redefine the characteristics of media systems and ownership with respect to online news outlets.

Returning to the initial research question, Chapter 6 summarizes and discusses the main results of this study. More importantly, the empirical results are discussed with the goal of deriving a better understanding of the conditions of the contexts that foster high-level news performance. What conditions must be created to ensure high-level news performance? Whereas this study's empirical focus is on the news performance of online news media in six Western countries, its conceptual scope aims to derive broader implications for future research. Therefore, the final component of this study is devoted to open questions in the area of media systems, media organizations, and news performance.

In short, the questions guiding this book address *whether* online news outlets produce high-performance news and *which* combinations of causal conditions foster high-level news performance. The chapters that follow aim to provide a more complete account of how and why news is produced and what might improve it.

## **Part I**

# **News Performance: Concepts, Context and Measurement**

# 2

## News Performance in Market-Oriented Environments

It has often been claimed that the news media play a key role in democracy: they are assumed to enable communication between power-holders and citizens, serve as a check on political decisions and facilitate deliberation (McQuail, 2010). News journalism is therefore expected to provide relevant information, comprehensive analysis, and critical reflection. The evolution of online media has increased the amount of politically relevant information that is available to mass audiences. However, there is a discrepancy between what news journalism should do and contemporary journalistic practice (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Gerhards & Schafer, 2010). In addition to technological development and changed usage habits, profit-oriented media companies have been argued to contradict the ideal of news media informing democracy (McChesney, 2013). Normative societal expectations are challenged by the fact that most news outlets are private companies operating in competitive markets. This double role of public good and commercial product implicates the conflicting interests of markets and society. Some news organizations prefer to produce 'all the news that's fit to sell' (Hamilton, 2004), particularly in times of recession when revenues stagnate or decline. However, audiences depend on diverse and comprehensive information to form their own opinions about political decision-making. McManus (1994) argues that journalistic quality is inversely related to a media outlet's level of profit maximization effort. Today, news outlets encounter many economic pressures, which presumably affect their news content.

In this chapter, two central questions are discussed: First, what role are the news media, and particularly the online news media, expected to play in modern democracies? Second, how does the surrounding

environment (system and organizational conditions) shape news performance outcomes?

The chapter initially discusses the notion of news performance and its relevance to the study of news media against a background of normative theories in communication and media research. According to McQuail (2010), 'normative theories refer to the ideas of right and responsibility that underlie the expectations of benefit from the media to individuals and society' (p. 162). To understand how the media are expected to behave in the public interest, the central functions of mass media identified in previous research, along with the concepts of and potential differences among types of media, are discussed and analyzed. Online news media encounter particular challenges due to technological and economic developments, and I discuss these challenges relative to their influences on news performance.

The subsequent section of this chapter focuses on the environment in which news production occurs (Section 2.2). First, system-related conditions are discussed and evaluated from the perspective of news performance (macro-level). Second, the characteristics of media ownership are analyzed, and I note potential antagonisms, all of which are inherent objectives of news production (meso-level). Third, I explain how the previously mentioned conditions shape newsroom decision-making and why newsroom decisions are reflected in news content. Section 2.3 summarizes the assumed influences on news content at the system (macro) and organizational (meso) levels. In the final Section (2.4), the main results of the literature review are summarized and conclusions are drawn for this study's research design.

## **2.1 Why study news performance?**

### **2.1.1 Normative perspectives in comparative research**

News media are crucial for creating a public sphere, which is the foundation of the functioning of democracy (McQuail, 1992). With his ideal of the 'public sphere', Habermas (1989) addresses the question of democracy quality (namely, critical debate) and democracy quantity (namely, pluralism and wide participation) as central features of journalistic discourses. His main idea is that mass media should create a platform for consensus-building within societies. Arguments can be exchanged on that platform, with the best argument eventually becoming victorious. However, for this scenario to occur, transparency concerning different actors' particular interests is necessary. Thus, other authors have argued