UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Political communication in a high-choice media environment: a challenge for democracy?

Van Aelst, P.; Strömbäck, J.; Aalberg, T.; Esser, F.; de Vreese, C.; Matthes, J.; Hopmann, D.; Salgado, S.; Hubé, N.; Stępińska, A.; Papathanassopoulos, S.; Berganza, R.; Legnante, G.; Reinemann, C.; Sheafer, T.; Stanyer, J.

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

COMMUNICATION INSIGHT

Check for updates

Political communication in a high-choice media environment: a challenge for democracy?

Peter Van Aelst[a], Jesper Strömbäck[b], Toril Aalberg[c], Frank Esser[d], Claes de Vreese[e], Jörg Matthes[f], David Hopmann[g], Susana Salgado[h], Nicolas Hubé[i], Agnieszka Stępińska[j], Stylianos Papathanassopoulos[k], Rosa Berganza[l], Guido Legnante[m], Carsten Reinemann[n], Tamir Sheafer[o] and James Stanyer[p]

[a]Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium; [b]Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; [c]Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway; [d]International and Comparative Media Research, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; [e]Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands; [f]Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria; [g]Centre for Journalism, University of Southern Denmark, Odense M, Denmark; [h]Department of Political Communication and Media and Politics, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, Lisboa, Portugal; [i]Department of Political Science, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France; [j]Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poznań, Poland; [k]Department of Media Organisation and Policy, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece; [l]Department of Communication Sciences, University of Rey Juan Carlos (URJC), Madrid, Spain; [m]Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Pavia, Pavia, Italy; [n]Department of Political Communication, Ludwig- Maximilians-University Munich, Munich, Germany; [o]Departments of Political Science and Communication, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel; [p]Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

ABSTRACT
During the last decennia media environments and political communication systems have changed fundamentally. These changes have major ramifications for the political information environments and the extent to which they aid people in becoming informed citizens. Against this background, the purpose of this article is to review research on key changes and trends in political information environments and assess their democratic implications. We will focus on advanced postindustrial democracies and six concerns that are all closely linked to the dissemination and acquisition of political knowledge: (1) declining supply of political information, (2) declining quality of news, (3) increasing media concentration and declining diversity of news, (4) increasing fragmentation and polarization, (5) increasing relativism and (6) increasing inequality in political knowledge.

Introduction

In an oft-cited analysis at the turn of the millennium, Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) asked whether changes in political communication and the growing influence of the mass media presented a challenge to democracy. While their review of the evidence suggested that the most dystrophic assessments were unwarranted, they still concluded 'political systems in most liberal democracies are facing momentous changes on the communication front that raise serious challenges to the old order' (p. 259).

CONTACT Peter Van Aelst ✉ peter.vanaelst@uantwerpen.be Department of Political Communication, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

Since then, media environments and political communication systems have changed fundamentally with the increasing proliferation of digital, social and mobile media (Vowe & Henn, 2016), the blurring of boundaries between media and their genres (Chadwick, 2013), the decline of traditional news media with respect to their business models and hegemony over media consumption (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016), and citizenries less attached to institutional politics and news media than ever (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). If political communication systems at the turn of the millennia were facing 'momentous changes', the development since have only accelerated and amplified changes in media environments and political communication (Blumler, 2016, p. 27).

Not least important is the transition from low to high-choice media environments. This change has major ramifications for the *political information environments* and, hence, processes of knowledge dissemination and acquisition in postindustrial democracies. While previous studies have mainly operationalized the political information environment in terms of amount and types of news available to citizens, we argue that a full understanding of political information environments needs to take not only the supply side but also the demand side into account. The rationale is that in any market-based situation, supply and demand are inextricable linked. Building on but going beyond previous conceptualizations, we therefore define a political information environment as the supply and demand of political news and political information within a certain society. The supply side encompasses the quantity and quality as well as the structure of political news and information available through various old and new media. The demand side encompasses how various segments within a society make use of political news and information and the quality of that information.

From a democratic perspective, a fundamental question is how changes in political information environments influence the character and quality of our democracies. On the one hand, many concerns have been raised. Prior (2007, p. 270), for example, warns that 'Greater media choice exacerbates tensions between citizens' immediate gratifications and the health of the political system in which they live', Pariser (2011, p. 82) that we increasingly live in algorithm-shaped filter bubbles that 'invisibly transforms the world we experience by controlling what we see and don't see', and Davis (2014, p. 112) that political journalism is becoming 'more superficial and sensationalist, less informed and less investigative, more desk-bound, more cannibalistic, and generally prone to taking newsgathering short-cuts in its practice'. On the other hand, changes in media technologies have also extended freedom of choice, opened up for increasing interactivity, and expanded the opportunities for citizen and civil society participation in the public sphere (Blumler, 2016, p. 29; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2015). In these and other respects, ordinary citizens have been empowered by the very same changes that in other respects might undermine one fundamental element of political information environments in democracies: the extent to which they aid citizens in becoming informed about politics and current affairs.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to review research on key changes and trends in political information environments and assess their democratic implications. To delimit the scope of this review, we will focus on advanced postindustrial democracies and six concerns that are all closely linked to processes of the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge about politics and current affairs: (1) declining supply of political information, (2) declining quality of news, (3) increasing media concentration and declining diversity of news, (4) increasing fragmentation and polarization, (5) increasing relativism and (6) increasing inequality in political knowledge.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section we will expand the discussion of the concept of political information environment. In the subsequent six sections, we will focus on the different concerns and assess the empirical support for them. In light of the findings presented, we will elaborate on the democratic implications in the conclusion, and offer some suggestions for future political communication research. Although we often talk about political information in general, we will focus particularly on political news, broadly defined as news related to political issues, actors and institutions, which are produced by journalists and aimed at a larger public. This is of course not the only form of political information that is relevant and that people might learn from, but it still constitutes the core and most important form of widely available and used political information.

The importance of the political information environment

For a democracy to be well functioning, citizens need information about politics. Only when people have knowledge about the actors, the state of various societal affairs, and the rules of the political game can they hold informed opinions and act meaningfully as citizens. Exactly how informed people need to be for democracy to function is a matter of contention (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Patterson, 2013; Zaller, 2003), and dependent of what normative model of democracy is espoused (Strömbäck, 2005), but there is little doubt that well-informed citizens are better able to link their interest with their attitudes, choose political representatives who are consistent with their own attitudes, and participate in politics (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Milner, 2002; Prior, 2007).

Until quite recently, the mass media were considered as *the* key actor in providing 'the kind of information people need to be free and self-governing' (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 12), and there are numerous studies showing that mass media still constitute the most important source of information about politics and current affairs (Mitchell et al., 2016; Newman, Fletcher, Levy, & Nielsen, 2016). At the same time, across Western democracies news consumption patterns are shifting and traditional news media – not least newspapers – are losing ground. The world of politics and communication has never been very stable, as noted by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), but the rise of Internet and social media have accelerated and exacerbated many developments.

One key concept to assess the implications of changes in the relationship between media, politics and citizens is the *political information environment*. Sometimes labelled information environment or media environment (Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), the concept usually refers to the aggregate supply of news or political information that is 'out there'. Esser, de Vreese et al. (2012, p. 250), for example, define the political information environment as 'the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources', and link it to the opportunity structures for accessing and learning from the news. Several studies suggest that the political information environment has a significant impact on people's media use and knowledge of politics and current affairs (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Althaus, Cizmar, & Gimpel, 2009; Prior, 2007). Jerit et al. (2006), for example, show that US citizens learn more about political issues in information-rich environments compared to information-poor environments. This finding stresses the importance of going beyond individual factors, such as education, to explain political knowledge. Studies also suggest that differences in political knowledge across countries partly can be attributed to variations in political information environments (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Banducci, Giebler, & Kritzinger, 2016; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009).

In sum, there seems to be broad consensus that the supply side of political information environments matters. The underlying mechanism is that the more political information that is *widely* available, the higher the likelihood that people will be exposed to, and subsequently learn from, political information.

Supply thus sets a boundary condition for *demand*. For several reasons, however, this mechanism is under pressure. First, in a high-choice media environment people can much more easily opt out of news and only consume the non-political content they prefer (Prior, 2007). Increasing media choice might thus result in an increasing share of 'news-avoiders' (Blekesaune, Elvestad, & Aalberg, 2012; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013) and, hence, weaker 'trapping effects' (Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002) where people are incidentally exposed to news and other political information. This holds particularly true for news in traditional news media, while the extent to which people are incidentally exposed to and learn from news and other political information via digital and social media is still largely an open question (Hindman, 2009; Kim, Wang, Gotlieb, Gabay, & Edgerly, 2013). Second, increasing choice implies a growing interconnectedness between demand and supply, as it compels news media and other information providers to provide the kind of content that their target groups demand in order to remain competitive (Hamilton, 2004). As digital technologies have improved the

ability to track audience behavior and adjust media content accordingly, the interconnectedness between supply and demand has become even stronger. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013), for example, show that across media systems, news consumers are pushing media outlets to offer more soft news at the expense of hard news. Growing competition for audience attention only strengthens this tendency for media to cater to audience demands, for example by providing 'click-bait' (Blom & Hansen, 2015).

Thus, a comprehensive analysis of the political information environment in any particular society should look at *both* the supply *and* the demand of political information. The supply side encompasses the amount and quality of political news and other political information pro- vided by the media in a specific political information environment, as well as the opportunity structure to access and learn from political information. In addition, the supply side is also deter- mined by the behavior of political actors, as key producers of political information. The demand side encompasses the amount and quality of information that people are interested in consuming and the skills they require to comprehend and retain this information. As we will discuss in more detail below, supply and demand factors determine themselves mutually in any given political information environment. The political information environment is thus shaped by the behavior of political actors as well as media actors and ordinary citizens, with reciprocal influences on all sets of actors.

Against this background, we will now turn to some fundamental concerns that have been raised with respect to changes in political information environments. We will discuss six of them in detail.

Concern 1: Declining amount of political news

To list 'declining amount of political news' as a concern might appear odd in a time when there seems to be political news everywhere. There are however several reasons for why a declining amount of political news still is a concern. First, more political news in the overall media environment does not equal more political news in the most widely used media sources such as general interest tele- vision channels or websites. Second, an increase in the *absolute amount* of political news does not equal an increase in the *relative amount* of political news as a share of the overall media supply. Third, and related to the demand side, there is a concern that people's motivation to consume pol- itical news is declining.

Beginning with the absolute amount of political news, in contrast to worries during the 1990s (Pat- terson, 2002), there is little doubt that it has increased during the last decades. With respect to tele- vision, several comparative studies show that the amount of news and public affairs programming has risen significantly since the 1970s (Aalberg et al., 2010; Esser et al., 2012). Studies also suggest that the introduction of commercial broadcasters resulted in more rather than less news, as some of them present news and public affairs in lengthy and prominent time slots. At the same time, public broadcasters have broadened their range of news programming (Aalberg et al., 2010), and general television channels are in many countries complemented by channels that broadcast news 24/7. Thus, both in major and specialized channels there is more political news to be found than there used to be.

Another significant trend is that virtually all newspapers in established democracies today are online, and that in many countries, new web-only news providers have established themselves. While the content of online versions of print media in the early phase of the Internet often was described as 'shovelware', since then online news have developed and major news websites now offer a rich spectrum of political and current events reporting. Equally important is that citizens are no longer restricted to newspapers in the area in which they live, but can access online news from virtually everywhere, virtually anytime, and through their preferred media platform. In addition, there are a plethora of blogs, independent news sites and citizen journalism outlets that in principle can be accessed by anyone. All these changes suggest a major improvement from the time when

people were restricted to their local and national print newspapers and a limited number of broadcast news programmes.

There are obviously significant variations across countries, not least in terms of the opportunity structures for news and public affairs on television. In some countries news and public affairs programmes are broadcast on prime time and dispersed throughout the evening, in other countries they are scheduled outside of prime time or concentrated around a particular time. Such scheduling strategies have major implications for the ease to which people find news on the most important and most widely watched channels. The strength of public service broadcasting also varies across countries (Tambini, 2015), which several comparative studies show has implications for the supply and the use of news and public affairs as well as for political knowledge (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Cushion, 2012; Fraile & Iyengar, 2014; Shehata, Hopmann, Nord, & Höijer, 2015; Soroka et al., 2013). Important to note is also that there is limited research on how the amount of political news has developed *in individual media*. With more market-driven news media and successive cuts to newsroom budgets, there are serious concerns that political and other hard news will be covered less (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994). This might hold particularly true for local news, where there are also less alternative news providers than with respect to national news.

Second, an increase in the *absolute amount* of political news does not equal an increase in the *relative amount* of political news. Even if there is more political information out there than ever, most evidence suggests that the major increase in the total media supply is related to non-political content such as sports or entertainment, and that news and other political information constitute a small and declining share of the total media supply (cf. Hindman, 2009; Prior, 2007). Most newer television channels focus on entertainment and sports, most websites on other areas than politics and most of what is being discussed on social media does not involve politics. This has implications for a key performance indicator of political information environments – the capacity to inform by providing a multiplicity of opportunities to encounter news even if not searched for. Important to note is that the decreasing *share* of the media supply that constitute political information means that it has become easier to consume media while avoiding political news (Prior, 2007).

Third and turning to the demand side of political information environments, there is a concern that the demand for – or use of – political news is declining (Aalberg, Blekesaune, & Elvestad, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2016). The general pattern is decreasing use of most kind of traditional news media such as television news and, in particular, newspapers. To take one example, according to the 2016 Reuters Institute *Digital News Report*, among people younger than 44 years old, online media are now considered the most important source of news. The report covers 26 countries from around the world and in 24 of them digital news consumption has become more important than traditional news use (Newman et al., 2016, p. 53).

Does the increasing use of digital and social media compensate for the trend towards decreasing consumption of traditional news sources? To some extent the answer is yes, but instructive is Hindman's study (2009) using traffic data from 2007 showing that most web traffic goes to adult websites, followed by web-mail services and search engines. Less than 3% of all web traffic goes to news and media sites, while the share of web traffic going to political web sites is below 1% (pp. 60–61). This is a stark reminder that news and political information constitute only a small fraction of what people are doing online, despite the availability of a plethora of news and political sites.

The greater the media choice, the more selective people have to be, and the more selective people have to be, the more important their preferences become. As a consequence, several studies have found growing gaps between heavy users and low/nonusers which are attributable largely to different sets of motivations and gratifications sought by people (Aalberg et al., 2013; Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Strömbäck et al., 2013). It is also likely the case that differences in the demand for *political news* would vary even more than differences in demand for news in general.

Summing up, there is convincing evidence that the absolute amount of political information has increased, but also that the relative amount of political news has declined and that public demand for

political news is limited. It is less clear how the demand for political news has changed, but increasing media choice has made individuals' preferences more important. The implication is that the linkage between people's demand for different kinds of content and the content they consume has become stronger. Therefore, our overall conclusion is that there are reasons to be concerned about the *relative* amount of political news and what this means for the opportunity structures for accessing political news in contrast to other forms of media content. How this will influence the demand for political news both on the aggregate level and among those more and less politically interested users, is one of the most burning questions for future political communication research (see also concern 6).

Concern 2: Towards declining quality of news

The second major concern is that economic constraints and incentives and the increasing competition for audience attention will harm the quality of political news in the media. To maintain or increase audience shares, in an era of stiffening market competition and decreasing editorial budgets, media have been accused of choosing more popular and less expensive content over more important and expensive-to-produce news (Davis, 2014). While not new, concerns about declining quality of the news are widespread both within and outside academia – encapsulated in terms such as dumbing-down, tabloidization, infotainment and softening of news (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). This concern rests on the broadly shared assumption that high-quality political news is crucial for public knowledge and a prerequisite for a healthy democracy.

There is however much less consensus on what 'high quality' means or how it should be operationalized. Several scholars stress that it depends on the preferred normative model of democracy and the role of the media within that model. Deliberative or participatory models of democracy, for instance, require different quality benchmarks than the competitive model of democracy (Albaek, Van Dalen, Jebril, & de Vreese, 2014; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2001; Strömbäck, 2005; Zaller, 2003). Nevertheless, as a baseline, the concept of political information environment suggests that media coverage should help people to make informed choices and hold politicians accountable, in essence providing people with the information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). At a minimum, this implies that political news should be *substantial*, *factual* and *diverse* (Jandura & Friedrich, 2014).

Substantial news means that it deals with issues and topics that are relevant for people in their role as citizens rather than just addressing people in the role of consumer with various kinds of soft news. At the heart of substantial political news thus lies 'factual information': information that is 'true' in the sense that it is verified, accurate and complete (see also concern 5). In addition, qualitative journalism needs to be diverse in the sense that it presents citizens with a wide variety of actors, issues and viewpoints (see also concern 3).

Unfortunately there is little empirical research on changes in the quality of news across different dimensions of the concept. Several 'threats' against substantial political news have received extensive attention in many democracies. For instance, the framing of politics as a strategic game or a horse race at the expense of the more substantial issue framing is often seen as a threat to the quality of political news as it draws attention to the more entertaining and competitive aspect of politics at the expense of important political issues and policies, while also contributing to political distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013). Although most research has focused on election periods, studies show that this kind of framing is quite prevalent also between election periods (Aalberg, de Vreese, & Strömbäck, 2016; Lawrence, 2000).

A more broadly studied threat towards news quality is soft news. The concept relates mainly to the topic cluster of a story (for instance, public affairs) and its style or presentational mode (for instance, more personalized) (Reinemann, Stanyer, & Scherr, 2016). The term is often associated with concepts such as tabloidization and popularization, which suggest a trend over time. According to Boczkowski and Peer (2011, p. 857), however only citing US scholars, there is a 'growing agreement among media scholars about a trend towards the softening of the news'. For instance, Patterson (2000) showed that

the news in the mass media 'without a public policy component' increased during the period 1980–1999. More recently, some scholars argue that late night comedians even have become the most important newscasters in the US (Baym, 2010). Based on an extensive review of empirical studies on hard and soft news (including those on tabloidization and infotainment), Reinemann et al. (2012) conclude however that the evidence is mixed. Contrary to popular claims, there is no overwhelming evidence of a trend of declining hard news across developed democracies. Rather, studies in different countries have found mixed evidence and fluctuations over time rather than a general trend (Hubé, 2014; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Rowe, 2011; Uribe & Gunter, 2004; Winston, 2002).

At the same time, the lack of conceptual clarity and different operationalizations of hard and soft news makes it difficult to compare studies across time and space, and there is a severe deficit of comparative studies on soft news. One exception is a six-country study by Umbricht and Esser (2016), covering the time period from the 1960s to 2010s. Looking at different indicators of popularization of political news, such as scandalization, emotionalization and privatization, they found an increase over time, mainly in the US and UK media. However, there was no convergence in 'popularization-related reporting styles' across countries. Other recent comparative studies also show that the amount of soft news varies significantly across countries (Reinemann et al., 2016).

This brings us to the demand side, where there is quite some disagreement among scholars whether people prefer hard news above soft news. Mainly based on market shares and survey data, Patterson (2003) and Prior (2003) claim that the audience for soft news in the US remains relatively small compared to hard news, and that it might even be shrinking (see also Nguyen, 2012). Other scholars suggest that the soft news audience is growing without necessarily leading to a declining audience for hard news (Baum, 2003). The question is what the public would prefer if they could choose without constraints. With respect to the US, Graber (1988) and Zaller (1999) have argued that the appetite for hard political news among the general public is limited. Support for this can be found in research showing that in terms of political news, in an experimental setting most people prefer horse race-coverage and find strategy or game-related campaign coverage more appealing than issue coverage (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004). More recently, a study by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013), based on patterns of news item selection, suggest that the tendency towards more soft news is driven by audience preferences. Based on an analysis of news websites in a wide variety of countries, there seems to be a systematic gap in public affairs information between the news stories that journalists and editors put up front and the ones that people consume the most (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). At the same time, Baum (2003) argues that people who would otherwise not watch any news at all might demand and pay attention to soft news and entertainment which may include political content.

Of course, these results refer to the average preferences and might hide large variation between publics. Hamilton (2004) notes that commercial media outlets will mainly take into account the preferences of those audience segments that are most valued by advertisers. In the US, that segment consists of younger (18–35) females. Since this group tends to favor entertaining and soft news more than the average news consumer, this demand might push commercial news media to further sideline substantial issue news (see also Nguyen, 2012).

In short, there is no compelling evidence of a universal downward trend towards declining quality in terms of more soft or game-framed news. What research rather shows is variation across time and countries as well as across media types within countries (Aalberg et al., 2016; De Swert et al., 2013; Reinemann et al., 2016). While there are exceptions, and a lack of longitudinal and cross-national comparative studies, most major news media still seem to seek to provide a mixture of hard political information and more entertaining soft news coverage. At the same time, media organizations are increasingly monitoring what people click on and share. Together with further newsroom-cuts and competition for audiences, there might be stronger incentives ahead for news media to cut corners in terms of journalistic quality and focus on audience-appealing content at the expense of more substantial reporting. How strong such incentives are will vary across types of media. Our overall conclusion is thus that there is less reason to be concerned about a universal trend

towards soft, entertaining and game-framed news, more reason to be concerned about decreasing resources for journalism and increasing quality differences between media, and more reason to be concerned about the actual demand for high-quality news. There is also more reason to be concerned about how this will influence gaps in political knowledge between those who consume low- and high-quality journalism respectively (see also concern 6).

Concern 3: Towards increasing power concentration and decreasing diversity?

The third major concern focuses on increasing power concentration within the media business and how it influences content diversity. In recent decades, many news companies have witnessed a deterioration of business conditions and suffered a decline in revenues from sales and advertising. It has led to numerous cost-cutting exercises where newsroom budgets, staff sizes, product offerings and correspondent bureaus have been reduced. To stay profitable in a time of relentless pressure to invest in new technologies, the number of media mergers has increased in many countries and caused their markets to become more concentrated (Almiron, 2010; Fenton, 2011; Papathanasopoulos & Negrine, 2011). This is frequently seen as a problem for society as it affects the diversity of actors and viewpoints represented in public debates (Cook, 1998; Schudson, 2003; Thompson, 1995). The key concern is that increased ownership concentration in a given political communication environment may lead to a more 'narrow ideological debate' in the media (Benson, 2004; Curran, 2006).

A review of the relevant literature reveals that research on content diversity is still quite limited. Even if political economy studies have been addressing these concerns for decades, this line of scholarship has been criticized for its lack of systematic empirical research (Mosco, 2010). For instance, the claim that media ownership affects the editorial line is expressed frequently, but there is hardly any systematic, empirical evidence to support it (Wagner & Collins, 2014, p. 3). According to Hanretty (2014, p. 29), this is not because of a lack of scholarly interest but rather because of the difficulties of 'collecting sufficient, and sufficiently varied, data on both influence and ownership structure'. Furthermore, influence of owners might be hard to establish as journalists might use self-censorship in reporting news relating to the business interests of the media conglomerate.

Most studies on the impact of concentration on media content focus on case studies, and the cases often seem chosen with the knowledge that they will confirm the hypothesis. Undoubtedly most attention has been given to media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp, including leading media outlets in Australia, the USA and the UK. Deacon and Wring (2015), for example, describe how Murdoch 'used' his tabloid the *Sun* to campaign for the Conservatives and against Labor. Although the *Sun* has a reputation of being an outspoken partisan paper, the active and sometimes vicious coverage of the Labor leader could be related to Labor's plans for stricter regulation on media ownership. Other studies have established that Murdoch takes direct influence on the outlets he owns (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Benson, 2012; McKnight, 2010; Wagner & Collins, 2014).

Although the Murdoch case is a quite convincing example of the influence of media owners, it is also rather exceptional. As argued by McKnight (2010, p. 304), News Corp is a rather atypical case because it 'has been a media group in which the propagation of a political world view has been a powerful and quite separate goal, which at key points overrides the normal corporate goal of financial success'. The same holds for the influence attributed to Silvio Berlusconi, media mogul and former prime minister of Italy (Durante & Knight, 2012). The Italian case has also been studied through the lenses of Berlusconi's media laws and their unilateral coverage (Hibberd, 2007; Padovani, 2012).

Research that goes beyond the influence of a famous media owner are scarce and the findings somewhat contradictory. Only a handful of studies have addressed the impact of media concentration and types of ownership on the actual news content. Some of these have addressed the issue of content diversity (Entman, 2006; Voakes, Kapfer, Kurpius, & Chern, 1996), but have not been able to establish any causal interference. While some studies show a reduction in media coverage diversity in the wake of mergers or acquisitions (Landry, 2011), other studies find stability,

convergence and divergence in editorial content over time (Ho & Quinn, 2009). This indicates that effects of ownership concentration on content diversity can go in different directions.

Ownership can also affect the way the news is presented or what is omitted from the news. For instance, in many Latin American countries, processes of privatization in the media strengthened close relationships between media owners and the political system (Fox & Waisbord, 2002), and Porto (2012) shows how the largest media conglomerate in Brazil, *TV Globo*, in some periods hindered democratization by ignoring some events and silencing alternative political views. Research also suggests that certain types of news might be more influenced than others. Several studies show that, compared to smaller and independent media companies, large group owners tend to focus on preferred policies (Duval, 2005) and devote less attention to local politics and community level stories (Hamilton, 2004; Nielsen, 2015; Yanich, 2010). Other studies suggest however that corporate media owners have a smaller influence on news content than media companies in the hand of individuals or families (Hanretty, 2014). From a supply side perspective, it is nevertheless evident that diversified ownership provides stronger guarantees for editorial and journalistic freedom.

Any discussion on media diversity also has to take the growing number of online news outlets into account. Despite expectations to the contrary, many studies suggest increasing concentration online, both in terms of content and traffic to the websites (Curran, Coen, Aalberg, & Iyengar, 2012). Hindman (2009), for example, shows that concentration in terms of audience share is higher with respect to online news and media websites compared to print newspaper and magazine circulation, and that those media that benefit the most online are those that have strong brands offline. He also found that blog use is characterized by a high degree of audience concentration (see also Davis, 2009). In terms of content, Boczkowski (2010, p. 6) demonstrates that journalists' imitation practices intensify in a news environment characterized by Internet abundance: 'In an age of information plenty, what most consumers get is more of the same'. This suggests a continuation of the *diversity paradox* observed almost 20 years ago, where more outlet diversity coincides with less content diversity (Van Cuilenburg, 1998, p. 44). This seems to hold cross-nationally. In a comparative study of seven democracies covering four continents, Tiffen et al. (2014) find that the source balance generally was lower for online new sites than for quality papers or public service news. Online news and commercial broadcasters were also more likely to only present one side of stories involving conflict. At the same time it should be noted that in less-democratic contexts, where traditional news media are state-owned or controlled, online news can add considerably to both content and source diversity and to overall plurality in these societies (Salgado, 2014).

Turning to the demand for diversity in the news, for a long time the assumption was that if the media only offer diverse content, then citizens will obtain a more varied media diet and a richer understanding of the world. This notion rested on the presumption that there is a demand for diverse news content. Newer research casts serious doubts on such presumptions. Coined 'exposure diversity' or 'diversity as received' (van der Wurff, 2011), recent empirical studies deal with how and to what extent audiences consume different viewpoints provided to them (Napoli, 2011; Webster, 2007). This is done by empirically tracking individuals' news consumption (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012), or by studying if a fragmented media market results in people actively selecting diverse content (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). In contrast to previous presumptions, altogether findings suggest that more media outlets have resulted in people taking part of news from *fewer* rather than more media outlets (Webster, 2007). As noted by Hindman (2009, pp. 133–134), 'the audience for online news outlets and political web sites is shaped by two powerful and countervailing trends: continued or accelerated concentration among the most popular outlets, combined with fragmentation among the least-read-ones'.

Summing up, while there are reasons to be concerned that media concentration has a negative influence on outlet and content diversity, empirical evidence is mixed. Thus far the overall political information environment does not seem to have been impoverished by media concentration. However, certain markets, like the one for local political news, might be more vulnerable than

others, as might certain countries. In several Central and East European countries, for example, successful local businessmen are buying media companies to advance both their business and political interests (Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2016; Stetka, 2015). More in general, research shows that increasing media choice might lead to less rather than more diversity, both with respect to outlet and content diversity, suggesting that demand for more diverse content is limited. This indicates that it is equally important to be concerned by increasing media concentration and decreasing diversity from below, shaped by audience demand, as from above, shaped by the economics of media industries or the grand plans of media moguls.

Concern 4: Towards increasing polarization and fragmentation

The fourth concern focuses on increasing fragmentation and polarization of media content and media use in the wake of the transformation into high-choice media environments. The core argument is that societies are facing increasing political divides with respect to both media content and public beliefs. This divide is, according to the literature, in large parts caused by developments in politics and changes in the media environment.[1] To some extent polarization may also be related to what is known as political parallelism, or the link between political actors and the media, that characterize many media systems in Southern and Eastern Europe and South America (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2011; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002).

Beginning with the supply, the polarization argument states that the increase in the number of available media channels, in broadcasting but even more so online, has created a greater supply of niche or partisan media. This greater supply, in turn, is thought to lead to a more fragmented audience, either because the supply matches a demand for niche or partisan media or because the supply creates a greater demand for media tailored to people's political beliefs. In either case, this might lead to a further polarization of political views, 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011) or a 'balkanization' (Sunstein, 2007) of the public sphere. In short, changes in the political information environment have created opportunity structures for selective exposure based on political attitudes and beliefs (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Skovsgaard, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2016; Stroud, 2011). The main concern is that such a development will erode a common core of the public sphere and cause conflicts in society. A continuous process of polarization might lead to less shared facts, extremism and disrespect for citizens with other points of view, thereby weakening social cohesion and challenging fundamental democratic institutions and practices (Sunstein, 2007).

Polarization can manifest itself in media content (supply) as well as in audience behavior (demand). With respect to news media, most studies on the supply of polarized news originate from the United States, albeit with some exceptions (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, & Yıldırım, 2014; Hahn, Ryu, & Park, 2015; de Nooy & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013). It is however striking that none of these studies is based on a longitudinal design. It is therefore problematic to make inferences about polarization, which implies a development over time. In fact, a review of the literature presents no unambiguous proof for a *trend* towards increased partisan polarization of news media content, although most would agree that there is a greater supply of partisan biased information online than ever. The success of partisan news broadcasters, such as Fox News and MSNBC, and online platforms such as Breitbart and The Huffington Post, in the USA, also contributes to the view that there is a trend towards increasing polarization of media content.

Even if existing studies do not allow conclusions with respect to changes in polarized news content across time, some patterns found are interesting. One study shows, for example, that polarized groups (very conservative or very liberal) receive more prominent attention in the news compared to the moderate groups, and that they are not portrayed more negatively than moderate groups (McCluskey & Kim, 2012). This suggests that contemporary news values favor polarization, due to the potential for conflict and its entertaining value. This might also explain the extensive media attention paid in many countries to populist political parties positioned on the far left or right side of politics (Esser et al., 2016). The tendency to prioritize extreme over moderate views

may also be caused by the journalistic doctrine to present 'two sides of a story;' it may open the news gates for radical counter-positions.

With respect to digital media, Hahn et al. (2015) point to another mechanism that may cause polarization. They argue that Twitter is likely to increase polarization as it reduces the likelihood of chance encounters with disagreeable views. Other studies find that even if citizens are more likely to read tweets offered by like-minded others, they are also engaged with those with whom they disagree (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Such findings show that a preference for attitude-consistent information does not equal active avoidance of attitude-discrepant information (Garrett, 2009).

When it comes to the demand for polarized news, two key questions are at stake. One is the *degree of selective exposure* based on political preferences. The other is whether exposure to partisan media increases polarization, that is, *the effects of polarized news*. Here studies show that people have a tendency to prefer information sources consistent with their political beliefs (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011) and that there is a relationship between frequent use of pro-attitudinal information and more polarized or extreme attitudes (Hollander, 2008; Tewksbury & Riles, 2015; Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2014). Gvirsman (2014), for example, demonstrate that proponents of a strong political ideology report significantly more reliance on partisan media as a news source. Another study finds mixed support for the hypothesis that increased media choice increases polarization, as the effect was present only among those high in political interest (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). The authors therefore conclude that 'the increased availability of partisan news via expanding media choice may not translate into mass effects beyond those highly interested in politics' (p. 292). Similar conclusions follow from studies simultaneously investigating selective exposure based on political interest and political beliefs: while there is evidence of political selective exposure, selective exposure based on political interest exerts a stronger effect (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Skovsgaard et al., 2016).

This discussion leads us to studies related to the demand for and *the effects of polarized news*. Most research in this area is based on experiments, and the overall finding is that the effect of media exposure depends on the characteristics of both the content and the audience. This implies that if citizens show patterns of selective exposure, it does not necessarily polarize their attitudes. Even if news selection often is understood as an antecedent of audience polarization, there is strong evidence that attitude importance outweighs the information environment when explaining polarization (Leeper, 2014). All findings available to date suggest that, by and large, citizens with extreme views are more likely to show polarization after exposure to media messages compared to citizens with less extreme views. Exposure to, or demand for, partisan media may therefore increase polarization, but typically only for certain groups of people. Some studies also suggest that political discussion with like-minded others leads to polarization, and that the politically extreme may become more polarized when confronted with discussion content that runs counter to their prior opinions (Wojcieszak, 2011). The robustness of such findings, across time and in different political and media environmental contexts, is however open for further probing.

When summarising the findings, two important caveats should be noted. First, most studies on political selectivity in media use is based on the US case, that has a political climate and media environment that are conducive to politically driven selective exposure. Hence, the validity of findings in political information environments where the opportunity structures for political selective exposure are different is an open question. Therefore, we would encourage more studies from other contexts, like Conroy-Krutz and Moehler's (2015) study based on a new democracy in Africa. Second, most studies focus on traditional media, and to some extent Twitter, while there is limited research on the supply and demand of other politically biased online information sources out there, ranging from sites espousing one political party or extremist views to fake news stories that are easily distributed via social media platforms such as Facebook.

Summing up, while there are strong theoretical arguments for the concern that changes in political information environments might lead to increasing fragmentation and polarization with respect to both the supply and demand for politically biased information, the empirical evidence does not

support more far-reaching claims about a balkanization of the public sphere or more people living encapsulated in their own filter bubbles. Although the supply of biased information has increased, particularly online, news media with an ambition to cover politics in a balanced and neutral way still constitute the main source of political information for most people, and selectivity based on political interest seems to be more widespread than selectivity based on political beliefs. Our overall conclusion is therefore that there are reasons to be concerned about increasing fragmentation and polarization, but that this concern needs to be tempered by empirical findings which shows that neither the supply nor the demand for biased information is as widespread as is sometimes claimed.

Concern 5: Towards increasing relativism

The fifth major concern is that we are witnessing a development towards increasing relativism towards facts, evidence and empirical knowledge; a development in which factual information more and more comes to be seen as a matter of opinion, in which evidence is neglected, and in which misinformation, rumors and conspiracy theories increasingly permeate public discourse and public opinion (Mohammad, 2012; Mooney & Kirshenbaum, 2009). Increasing relativism might result in situations in which different political camps cannot even agree upon very basic facts and evidence, or in discourses in which mere opinions not backed by evidence are traded as facts. It concerns the rise of what is sometimes called 'truthiness', a term introduced by comedian Stephen Colbert to refer to when someone believes something is true because it 'feels right', without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination or facts (Manjoo, 2008, pp. 188–189).

Relativism is problematic insofar as democracies depend on both citizens and political actors relying on factual information to generate empirical beliefs or knowledge that can guide their decision-making (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). Facts are, as Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, p. 8, 11) put it, 'the currency of citizenship' that 'prevent debates from becoming disconnected from the material conditions they attempt to address'. Among other things, politicians need factual information to be able to judge how severe a problem is and when pondering various measures that could be taken to solve a problem. Citizens similarly need to know what a party platform or candidate actually says, and whether, for example, the economy or crime situation is improving or deteriorating.[2]

Though 'truth' is a portentous term, from a more practical point of view, what matters most is that there are claims that intersubjectively can be categorized as 'false' or 'correct'. For example, we can decide whether there are certain elements in a health care plan (Pasek, Sood, & Krosnick, 2015); whether the US and UK governments had information about WMDs before it attacked Iraq (Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005; Herring & Robinson, 2014); or whether there is scientific evidence on vaccines causing autism (Dixon & Clarke, 2013; Kata, 2010). We can also decide whether former President Obama is a Muslim or a foreigner (Crawford & Bhatia, 2012; Hollander, 2010) or whether Donald Trump sued former customers of Trump University who wanted to get their money back.

Issues such as these are not a matter of opinion: it is a matter of true and false. Yet, at the core of the concern of 'post-factual' relativism is that the epistemic status of information and knowledge has increasingly become an issue of public debate up to the point where factual information is often downgraded to mere opinion. This means that those engaged in public discourse increasingly challenge facts as mere opinions, even if the overwhelming majority of scientists or publicly available evidence back the facts. If this were to be the case on a larger scale, it would endanger the very heart of democratic decision-making. If political parties cannot agree upon the basic facts they base their decisions on, political discourse becomes virtually impossible. As Arendt (1967) once noted, 'What is at stake here is (…) common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order'.

Whether concerns about increasing relativism are warranted is hence an important question. Beginning with the supply side, one key reason for the concern about increasing relativism is the weakening of traditional, journalistic media and that 'the internet may provide a social context

facilitating' not only the dissemination, but also the endorsement of misinformation (Klein, Van der Linden, Pantazi, & Kissine, 2015, p. 163). Thanks to online media, it has become easier than ever for those inclined to spread false or misleading information to gain an advantage in political conflicts. The result is a 'crisis of verification', made worse by the mingling of half-truths and false claims into 'factitious informational blends' (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016) and algorithms that do not effectively discriminate between true and false information when people search for information or use social media.

Adding to this, the way in which think tanks produce facts and knowledge also needs to be recognized. Originally, think tanks typically consisted of 'academic experts' who would come up with ways to solve specific problems in society, but today they rather seem intent on promoting their ideological agendas (Abelson, 2009). One major strategy used by these is to produce research evidence that is politically biased (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Research also suggest that the supply of biased facts is often picked up news media that might not have time to check on the veracity of the information. McKewon (2012) even claims that advocacy think thanks are the most influential news sources in the USA and Australia, and studies suggest that they are also quite prominent in some European countries (Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen, 2016). For these, and for all others who have an interest in disseminating their version of reality, it has become much easier to directly reach their target groups and bypass the news media gates.

In the case of the news media, there has been a long debate on the question whether it is possible to obtain true and objective information (Lippmann, 1922). While Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) note that journalists' search for the truth is a process fraught with problems, they compare the news making process to a conversation with the public in which journalists should flag any misinformation, disinformation or self-promoting information. Most scholars also agree that journalists have a responsibility to make a clear distinction between facts and opinions (Goldstein, 2007; Patterson, 2013), although some stress that the responsibility lies with political actors (Herring & Robinson, 2014; Maurer & Reinemann, 2006). Many news media are however aware of the problem, reacting to the perceived increase in false or misleading information floating around by introducing various fact-checking formats and websites. Some scholars even refer to this fact-checking as a movement (Graves, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2016; Spivak, 2011), a new style of journalistic reporting that is concerned with assessing the truth of substantive claims made by politicians.

Turning to the demand side, we do not know much about the demand for false 'facts' that support rather than challenge people's beliefs. Similarly, few studies provide insight into the demand for fact checkers or scientists disseminating scientific knowledge in the public sphere. At least in the USA there is however evidence that trust in science has decreased among certain groups of citizens and that there is a process of increased politicization of science. Gauchat (2012) for instance, demonstrates that conservatives in the United States have become increasingly distrustful of scientific knowledge. While they were the most trustful group in the 1970s, compared to liberals and moderates, they have become the least trustful by 2010. Among liberals and moderates, the level of trust in science has been very stable. Hmielowski and colleagues link these different levels of trust to media use. They demonstrate that use of conservative media decreases trust in science whereas mainstream and non-conservative media use increases trust in science, and explain why some citizens for instance choose to ignore the scientific consensus that exist regarding the causes and consequences of global warming (Hmielowski, Feldman, Myers, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2014).

More broadly, we also see that many scholars have shifted their focus from lack of political knowledge to the phenomenon of confidently held false beliefs and misinformation that also may have grave consequences on political preferences (Fowler & Margolis, 2013; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, & Rich, 2000). Here numerous studies have shown that there seems to be a partisan bias in political knowledge, with voters holding false or biased beliefs about factual political or scientific matters that are in line with their general political worldviews (Bartels, 2002; Crawford & Bhatia, 2012; Kraft, Lodge, & Taber, 2015; Pasek, Stark, Krosnick, & Tompson, 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2013). Thus, there seems to be a public demand for biased information. To explain this, confirmation biases and

motivated reasoning have been mentioned as key causes for the effect of pre-existing attitudes on factual beliefs (Prior, Sood, & Khanna, 2015). The use of offline or online partisan media, the interaction of news coverage and online search behavior, and how information is spread through social networks online, has also been investigated as potential factors explaining biased knowledge. In terms of how misperceptions may be corrected, evidence to date is inconclusive. While some experimental studies suggest that fact checkers have an effect on people's beliefs (Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015), others find that false information shapes attitudes even after the information has been effectively discredited (Thorson, 2016).

One reason for increasing relativism might be that governments, political institutions and news media have lost their exclusive status of reality construction, while another might be a longer-term development towards secularization and post-modernism (Mooney & Kirshenbaum, 2009). It should also be noted that some political actors seem to take allegations of spreading misinformation much less seriously than established political actors traditionally used to do. For instance, Mooney (2005) stated that the rejection of neutral scientific knowledge in the USA began with the emergence of 'the new right'– a group skeptical of organized science and the intellectual establishment. Mooney argues that these groups have gradually contributed to a situation where many people believe what they want to believe, even if it goes against scientific or other facts, and where many turn to false news and media that support their beliefs while mistrusting what is known as mainstream media or scientific consensus. This trend might explain why the large amount of false statements by Donald Trump during the 2016 election campaign did not seem to reduce his electoral support.[3] In other words, the incentives for political actors and others to stick to the truth seem to have weakened, further contributing to increasing relativism.

Summing up, although there is a lack of longitudinal and comparative research, there does appear to be an increase in the supply of misinformation or 'factitious informational blends' (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016) circulating in political information environments. Many studies also show that people have a tendency to dismiss facts that challenge their already held beliefs. Based on the demand for polarized news, it also appears as if public demand for 'facts' that align with their political beliefs either is increasing or that it has become easier for people to match their demand with the supply of biased information. In either case, the result is that there is a risk that people will increasingly hold, and hold on to, false beliefs. Our overall conclusion therefore is that there are strong reasons to be concerned about increasing relativism of facts and how that might influence public discourse and jeopardize building consensus in ideologically polarized environments.

Concern 6: Towards increasing inequalities

The sixth and final concern focuses on the use of various information sources and how that influences public knowledge. The core of the concern is that increasing media choice will lead to increasing inequalities in the extent to which people make use of the news media, and that this will result in increasing inequalities in knowledge about politics and current affairs among different groups in society (Aalberg et al., 2013; Blekesaune et al., 2012; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Gaziano, 2010; Hwang & Jeong, 2009; Ksiazek et al., 2010; Strömbäck et al., 2013; Wei & Hindman, 2011). Thus, the concern is rooted in how changes in the supply of news and other political information influence the demand and, subsequently, learning about politics and current affairs.

Despite this widespread concern there are few studies with a longitudinal approach that connect news media use with political knowledge or other outcome variables. There is thus a mismatch between the concern, requiring longitudinal data, and empirical evidence, typically focusing on shorter time periods. There are some exceptions, though. Prior (2007), for example, demonstrates empirically how the media environment influences the effects of individual characteristics, such as the ability and motivation to follow the news and learn about politics. In the past, few media options were available, and citizens who were not very interested in news still encountered and learned political information because the few available media options regularly featured newscasts

and current affairs. Nowadays, Prior argues, more media choice and increased availability of entertainment programming allows for easier avoidance of political information among those who are not interested, leading to less accidental exposure to news, less political knowledge and, as a consequence, an exclusion of the un-motivated from democratic politics (see also Hollander, 2008; Wei & Hindman, 2011).

Several other studies also show that political learning is dependent on the supply offered by the aggregate information environment. In a longitudinal study, Jerit and colleagues show that higher levels of information in the environment elevate knowledge for everyone, but also that the educated learn disproportionately more from newspaper coverage (see also Fraile, 2011; Slater, Hayes, Reineke, Long, & Bettinghaus, 2009). Increases in television coverage, by contrast, benefit the least educated almost as much as the most educated. The information environment thus has a nuanced effect: certain news formats reinforce differences in political knowledge; others diminish those differences. One important conclusion is thus that the increased level of information available in society will reinforce the knowledge gap that exists between people with high and low levels of education – and with and without interest in politics and news – although more easily digestible formats such as quick-and-easy TV news, satirical news or infotainment may perhaps function as a leveller (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; Gil de Zuniga, Nakwon, & Valenzuela, 2012; Young, 2016).

Turning to the demand perspective, some longitudinal studies have chosen to treat media use as the dependent variable, and focus on how increased gaps in media use are linked to related measures such as political interest and trust. One Swedish study, for example, shows both that news consumption has become more polarized between news-seekers and news-avoiders since the 1980s and that political interest has become a more important determinant of news consumption (Strömbäck et al., 2013; see also Bonfadelli, 2002; Ksiazek et al., 2010). Other studies confirm that political interest and informational TV use have increased their importance in widening the knowledge gap (Hopmann, Wonneberger, Shehata, & Jonas, 2016). Beam and Kosicki (2014) also show that the personalization of news portals is a further instrument for news-seekers to get more news, and that the use of these may thereby increase inequalities.

Along similar lines, Blekesaune et al. (2012) show that the group of news-avoiders increased across Europe between 2002 and 2008, and that the probability of tuning out is a function both of individual traits of the citizen and the supply of news in particular media systems. More specifically, they find that it is mainly citizens with low levels of social capital that avoid the news. In another study, Aalberg et al. (2013) investigate how the public's consumption of news versus entertainment developed between 2002 and 2010 in different European media systems. Among other things, the authors show that the demand, or the time citizens spend watching news and programmes about politics and current affairs, has declined.

Aside from longitudinal studies, several comparative studies argue that the impact of choice and the commercialization of media on news media use and knowledge can be studied by investigating countries with different types of media system and political information environments, and thereby how levels of commercialization influence knowledge gaps (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Banducci et al., 2016; Curran et al., 2009; Fraile & Iyengar, 2014; Soroka et al., 2013). In addition, several studies investigate how exposure to commercial versus public service news may influence learning and knowledge gaps (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Shehata et al., 2015; Strömbäck, 2016). These studies generally find that inequalities in media use and knowledge gaps are greater in more commercially oriented media systems.

Relatedly, some studies use a cross-sectional comparative approach to explore how media environmental characteristics have effects on gaps in the demand for news, beyond the effects of individual-level characteristics. For instance, Norris (2001) study of inequalities related to Internet use across and within countries shows that information-rich citizens have a tendency to get richer, and in that way increase existing information gaps and the digital divide. Shehata and Strömbäck (2011) also show how media environments moderate the impact of education and interest, as media systems characterized by higher levels of newspaper-centrism are related to smaller gaps in

newspaper reading between those with high and low levels of education and political interest. Slater et al. (2009) similarly show that differences in the amount of news coverage of a topic influences knowledge differences across groups. Simply put, the more extensive the coverage, the less sizable the knowledge differences are between groups.

There are also studies looking into questions of causality and effect, trying to explore which groups may be influenced the most by what type of content or medium they demand. The evidence with respect to learning effects among different groups from following different types of media (TV, newspapers, online) is not conclusive, however. There is limited evidence suggesting that viewers learn from soft news and entertainment (Hahn, Iyengar, van Aelst, & Curran, 2012; Kim & Vishak, 2008), though some studies suggest that exposure to conflict and human interest frames, often associated with soft news, may increase learning among groups less interested in politics (Albaek et al., 2014). Several studies also show that public service news has stronger knowledge effects than commercial TV news (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Fraile & Iyengar, 2014; Liu & Eveland, 2005; Shehata et al., 2015; Soroka et al., 2013; Strömbäck, 2016; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001).

One key question related to how changes in media environments influence knowledge acquisition and inequalities is the likelihood of accidental exposure and learning from Internet use compared to the use of traditional media. While some studies argue 'passing the threshold to get news overviews at all seems to be easier online' (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013, p. 45) and that use of social media might have levelling effects (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Kobayashi & Inamasu, 2015), other studies suggest that motivation to find and learn from the news have a greater impact with respect to online compared to offline media (Haight, Quan-Haase, & Corbett, 2014; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Wei & Hindman, 2011). As social media become an increasingly important source of information, investigating the extent to which people incidentally learn about politics from using social media, and whether using social media compensates for not using traditional news media in terms of political learning, should be a priority.

Summing up, there is compelling evidence of increasing gaps in news media use – online and offline – between different groups and that personal preferences are more decisive today than in the earlier age of low-choice media environments. Put differently, the increasing supply has made for a better match with the demand for political information among the most politically interested and the demand for non-political information among those not interested in politics. Several studies convincingly suggest that this might lead to increasing knowledge gaps, although the lack of longitudinal studies prohibits firm conclusions. Research is also not conclusive with respect to learning effects from following different media types, or the likelihood for accidental learning while using digital and social media. As media use increasingly moves online, and as studies suggest that motivation is more decisive for learning from online compared to offline media, there is a risk that growing differences in media use will lead to wider knowledge gaps. Our overall conclusion is therefore that there are strong reasons to be concerned about increasing inequalities in media use and knowledge about politics and public affairs.

Conclusion and discussion

Imagine a democracy where the supply of news and political information constitute just a miniscule share of the total media supply, where just a small minority regularly follows news about politics and current affairs, where the quality of news and political information is so poor that it does not matter for levels of knowledge whether people absorb it or not, where diversity is reduced to such an extent that people no longer hear the other side of the story, where people are only willing to expose themselves to attitude-consistent information, where people systematically dismiss any information that goes against their views no matter what hard facts show, where everybody is entitled not only to their own opinions but also their own facts, and where differences in media use produce a small group of highly informed and a larger group of misinformed citizens who hold diametrically opposed views on the state of the nation or how the country should be run.

Clearly, such as scenario would pose a serious challenge for democracy or even threaten its survival. As shown by this review on trends in political information environments, fortunately the state of affairs is not that bad. While a lack of longitudinal and cross-national research in many cases prohibits firm conclusions, rather than showing a wholesale deterioration, the evidence shows a more mixed picture. Thus, on the one hand, the amount of political news and information is increasing; on the other, the share of the total media supply constituting political news and information is decreasing. While in some countries soft and game-framed news is on the rise, in others it is not and there is no evidence of a convergence towards a popularization-related reporting style. While there on the one hand is increasing concentration in the media sector, on the other hand there is no compelling evidence of decreasing diversity. Media environments are becoming more fragmented and polarized, and people tend to prefer attitude-consistent information, but most people at the same time still turn to major news providers and also consume attitude-discrepant information. While there is a growing supply of partisan biased and fake information, there is little evidence of a strongly increasing demand for such information. And while the opportunity structures for finding non-political information have improved, it has also become easier for news junkies to find high-quality news and political information.

Based on this, one important conclusion coming out of this review is that the direst warnings are not warranted. All news is not bad. Equally important, however, is that all news is not good either and that many of the concerns have a material foundation. There clearly are some trends with respect to political information environments that do represent a serious challenge for democracy.

Important in this context is that democracy, to function well, requires more than a formal framework guaranteeing that the law protects every citizen's equal democratic rights and that those in power are elected in free, fair and recurring elections. Democracy is not just a set of institutions. Democracy is also about *processes* seeking to make sure that all citizens have opportunities to participate in politics, to voice their opinions and influence political decision-making, and to ensure that all citizens and their interests are represented. Democracy requires not only formal rights. Democracy also requires, among other things, *inclusiveness*, *enlightened understanding* and *effective participation* (Dahl, 1989).

In light of this, several of the trends reviewed here pose challenges for democracy not only because there is evidence suggesting that the concerns are at least partly warranted, but also because they are closely linked to the degree of inclusiveness, enlightened understanding and effective participation. Increasing inequalities in political knowledge, for example, will not only inhibit the opportunities for enlightened understanding in society at large. It will also have a negative impact on effective participation and inclusiveness, as those who are better informed are better equipped to participate and exert influence on political outcomes. Increasing relativism might similarly undermine the degree of enlightened understanding, directly when it contributes to widely held misperceptions and indirectly when it aggravates reason-based policy discussions. Increasing fragmentation and polarization might not only contribute to increasing relativism and increasing inequalities in political knowledge: it might also undermine the degree of inclusiveness and social cohesion by contributing to more conflict, intolerance and anti-pluralism.

Although the direst warnings about where democracies are heading due to changes in political information environments are not warranted, our overall conclusion is therefore that several political communication trends in high-choice media environments do represent a challenge for democracy. Based on the empirical evidence thus far, the most important seems to be increasing fragmentation and polarization, epistemic relativism and growing inequalities in political knowledge.

Having said this, our review also shows that not all trends are global trends, nor do they affect all countries to the same extent. Some concerns may furthermore be more justified for some types of news and not for others. For instance, in many democracies the amount of local political news is a problem, despite an increasing absolute amount of political news at the national level. Many countries are also witnessing a declining attention for local elections and local politics in general that might negatively affect citizen participation at the local level (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Nielsen, 2015). It should also be kept in mind that the evidence in many cases is inconclusive or mixed.

That holds for the prevalence of the alleged trends as well as for their causes and consequences, how they are contingent on factors on the macro- and meso-levels of analysis, and hence the mechanisms and causal factors at work.

These observations lead us to five suggestions for future research. First, there is great need for more comparative research across both time and space. Although cross-national comparative political communication research has become more common (Esser & Hanitszch, 2012) it is still rather exceptional. Most studies are still single-country studies, and in most studies the case under study is the – quite exceptional – case of the United States. To understand what factors shape different aspects of political information environments, cross-national comparative research is absolutely essential.

Second, considering how often trends are discussed or concepts implying a trend are used, it is striking that longitudinal studies in political communication are so rare. On some concerns discussed here, we were not able to find any study covering a longer period of time, allowing a firm assessment of whether there is a trend or not. More longitudinal research is hence needed.

Third, there is a great need to expand research to other continents across the world than North America and Europe. Even if we here have focused on advanced postindustrial democracies, it remains a fact that there is a paucity of political communication research both in general and with respect to the concerns analysed here pertaining to democracies in continents such as South America, Africa and Asia. This seriously hampers our understanding of the global situation as well as of the antecedents and consequences of various political communication phenomena.

Fourth, we also think there is a need for more descriptive research. In particular, in the international communication literature it is often hard to find descriptive data of developments over time. Most journals give premium to methodologically and theoretically sophisticated articles, and when space is scarce, many scholars do not include the descriptive data that their analyses are based on. While there are strong arguments for this, to assess whether the prevalence of phenomena vary across time or space, descriptive data are indispensable. In that respect, there are some useful examples in political science. For instance, the Political Data Yearbook documents election results, national referenda and institutional reforms in most Western democracies. We would also advise scholars to make greater use of the interactive features of publications such as online appendices to provide descriptive information.

Fifth, there is a great need for conceptual clarity and consistency in terms of how key concepts are conceptualized and operationalized (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). While many scholars use similar concepts, the conceptualizations are often vague, and both the conceptualizations and the operationalizations often differ. This makes it hard to take stock of current knowledge and assess whether differences in findings across studies are real or a function of differences in conceptualizations or operationalizations. This shortcoming, in turn, hampers all attempts to build theories helping us to understand and explain variations across time or space.

These suggestions may not revolutionize research in political communication, but if adhered to, they would make it significantly easier to assess trends in political communication and whether they constitute a challenge for democracy. Considering how much might be at stake, that is no small achievement.

Notes

1. Here we focus on the media as a potential cause of polarization. For a broader overview of potential causes and consequences of polarization, see Barber and McCarty (2013).
2. We are aware that the amount of knowledge necessary is an issue of debate and that at least some researchers hold the view that citizens can arrive at rather sensible decisions by using various kinds of heuristics (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). However, we would argue that public discourse and decisions need to have at least some foundation in facts to not become completely erratic and that even the best heuristics will be misleading if they are triggered by false information (see Kuklinski et al., 2000).
3. According to PolitiFact about 7 out of 10 statements made by Donald Trump during the campaign turned out to be (partly) false.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Aalberg, T., Blekesaune, A., & Elvestad, E. (2013). Media choice and informed democracy: Toward increasing news consumption gaps in Europe? *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18, 281–303. doi:10.1177/1940161213485990

Aalberg, T., & Curran, J. (2012). *How media inform democracy. A comparative approach*. London: Routlege.

Aalberg, T., Van Aelst, P., & Curran, J. (2010). Media systems and the political information environment: A cross-national comparison. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 5, 255–271. doi:10.1177/1940161210367422

Aalberg, T., de Vreese, C., & Strömbäck, J. (2016). Strategy and game framing. In C. de Vreese, F. Esser, & D. N. Hopmann (Eds.), *Comparing political communication* (pp. 33–49). New York, NY: Routledge.

Aarts, K., & Semetko, H. A. (2003). The divided electorate: Media use and political involvement. *Journal of Politics*, 65(3), 759–784. doi:10.1111/1468-2508.00211

Abelson, D. E. (2009). *Do think tanks matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.

Albaek, E., Van Dalen, A., Jebril, N., & de Vreese, C. H. (2014). *Political journalism in comparative perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Almiron, N. (2010). *Journalism in crisis. Corporate Media and Financialization*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.

Althaus, S. L., Cizmar, A. M., & Gimpel, J. G. (2009). Media supply, audience demand, and the geography of news consumption in the United States. *Political Communication*, 26, 249–277. doi:10.1080/10584600903053361

Arceneaux, K., & Johnson, M. (2013). *Changing minds or changing channels?: Partisan news in an age of choice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (1967, February 25). Truth and politics. *The New Yorker*, p. 49.

Arsenault, A., & Castells, M. (2008). Switching power: Rupert Murdoch and the global business of media politics. *International Sociology*, 23, 488–513. doi:10.1177/0268580908090725

Banducci, S., Giebler, H., & Kritzinger, S. (2016). Knowing more from less: How the information environment increases knowledge of party positions. *British Journal of Political Science*. doi:10.1017/S0007123415000204

Barber, M., & McCarty, N. (2013). Causes and consequences of polarization. In J. Mansbridge & C. Jo Martin (Eds.), *Negotiating agreement in politics* (pp. 37–90). Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.

Bartels, L. M. (2002). Beyond the running tally: Partisan bias in political perceptions. *Political Behavior*, 24(2), 117–150. doi:10.2307/1558352

Baum, M. A. (2003). Soft news and political knowledge: Evidence of absence or absence of evidence? *Political Communication*, 20(2), 173–190. doi:10.1080/10584600390211181

Baym, G. (2010). *From Cronkite to Colbert. The evolution of broadcast news*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Beam, M., & Kosicki, G. (2014). Personalized news portals: Filtering systems and increased news exposure. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 91(1), 59–77.

Bennett, W. L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? The changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, 58, 707–731. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00410.x

Benson, R. (2004). Bringing the sociology of media back in. *Political Communication*, 21, 275–292. doi:10.1080/10584600490481299

Benson, R. (2012). Murdoch in the United States: Kingmaker or ringmaster? *Global Media and Communication*, 8(1), 4–7. doi:10.1177/1742766511434730

Berelson, B. R., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & McPhee, W. N. (1954). *Voting*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Blach-Ørsten, M., & Kristensen, N. N. (2016). Think tanks in Denmark–Media visibility and network relations. *Politik*, 19(1).

Blekesaune, A., Elvestad, E., & Aalberg, T. (2012). Tuning out the world of news and current affairs. An empirical study of Europe's disconnected citizens. *European Sociological Review*, 28, 110–126. doi:10.1093/esr/jcq05

Blom, J. N., & Hansen, K. R. (2015). Click bait: Forward-reference as lure in online news headlines. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 76, 87–100. doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2014.11.010

Blumler, J. G. (2016). The fourth age of political communication. *Politiques de communication*, 1, 19–30.

Blumler, J. G., & Kavanagh, D. (1999). The third age of political communication: Influences and Features. *Political Communication*, 16, 209–230. doi:10.1080/105846099198596

Boczkowski, P. J. (2010). *News at work: Imitation in an age of information abundance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boczkowski, P. J., & Mitchelstein, E. (2013). *The news gap: When the information preferences of the media and the public diverge*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Boczkowski, P. J., & Peer, L. (2011). The choice gap: The divergent online news preferences of journalists and consumers. *Journal of Communication*, 61, 857–876. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01582.x

Bonfadelli, H. (2002). The internet and knowledge gaps. A theoretical and empirical investigation. *European Journal of Communication*, 17(1), 65–84.

Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of cynicism: the press and the public good*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Çarkoğlu, A., Baruh, L., & Yıldırım, K. (2014). Press-party parallelism and polarization of news media during an election campaign: The case of the 2011 Turkish elections. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *19*(3), 295–317. doi:10.1177/1940161214528994

Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Conroy-Krutz, J., & Moehler, D. (2015). Moderation from bias: A field experiment on partisan media in a new democracy. *The Journal of Politics*, *77*(2), 575–587. doi:10.1086/680187

Cook, T. (1998). *Governing with the news*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Crawford, J. T., & Bhatia, A. (2012). Birther nation: Political conservatism is associated with explicit and implicit beliefs that President Barack Obama is foreign. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, *12*(1), 364–376. doi:10.1111/j.1530-2415.2011.01279.x

Curran, J. (2006). *Media and power*. London: Routledge.

Curran, J., Coen, S., Aalberg, T., & Iyengar, S. (2012). News content, media consumption, and current affairs knowledge. In T. Aalberg & J. Curran (Eds.), *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach* (pp. 81–97). New York, NY: Routledge.

Curran, J., Iyengar, S., Lund, A. B., & Salovaara-Moring, I. (2009). Media system, public knowledge and democracy: A comparative study. *European Journal of Communication*, *24*, 5–26. doi:10.1177/0267323108098943

Cushion, S. (2012). *The democratic value of news: Why public service media matter*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Davis, A. (2014). The impact of market forces, new technologies, and political PR on UK journalism. In R. Kuhn, & R. K. Nielsen (Eds.), *Political journalism in transition. Western Europe in a comparative perspective* (pp. 111–128). London: I.B. Tauris.

Davis, N. T., & Dunaway, J. L. (2016). Party polarization, media choice, and mass partisan-ideological sorting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *80*, 272–297. doi:10.1093/poq/nfw002

Davis, R. (2009). *Typing politics. The role of blogs in American politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Swert, K., Belo, A., Kamhawi, R., Lo, V.-H., Mujica, C., & Porath, W. (2013). Topic in foreign and domestic television news. In A. A. Cohen (Ed.), *Foreign news on television. Where in the world is the global village?* (pp. 41–62). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Deacon, D., & Wring, D. (2015). Still live in the old attack dogs: The press. In P. Cowley, & D. Kavanagh (Eds.), *The British general election of 2015* (pp. 302–335). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

De Vreese, C., & Boomgaarden, H. (2006). News, political knowledge and participation: The differential effects of news media exposure on political knowledge and participation. *Acta Politica*, *41*, 317–341. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500164

Dixon, G., & Clarke, C. (2013). The effect of falsely balanced reporting of the autism–vaccine controversy on vaccine safety perceptions and behavioral intentions. *Health Education Research*, *28*(2), 352–359. doi:10.1093/her/cys110

Durante, R., & Knight, B. (2012). Partisan control, media bias, and viewer responses: Evidence from Berlusconi's Italy. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *10*, 451–481. doi:10.1111/j.1542-4774.2011.01060.x

Duval, J. (2005). Economic journalism in France. In R. Benson, & E. Neveu (Eds.), *Bourdieu and the journalistic field* (pp. 133–155). Cambridge: Polity.

Entman, R. M. (2006). Punctuating the homogeneity of institutionalized news: Abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib Versus killing civilians at Fallujah. *Political Communication*, *23*, 213–224.

Esser, F., & Hanitzsch, T. (2012). *Handbook of comparative communication research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Esser, F., Stępińska, A., & Hopmann, D. (2016). Populism and the media: Cross-national findings and perspectives. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, & C. H. De Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 365–380). New York, NY: Routledge.

Esser, F., Strömbäck, J., & de Vreese, C. H. (2012). Reviewing key concepts in research on political news journalism: Conceptualizations, operationalizations, and propositions for future research. *Journalism*, *13*(2), 139–143. doi:10.1177/1464884911427795

Esser, F., de Vreese, C. H., Strömbäck, J., Van Aelst, P., Aalberg, T., Stanyer J., … Reinemann, C. (2012). Political information opportunities in Europe: A longitudinal study of thirteen television systems. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *17*, 247–274. doi:10.1177/1940161212442956

Eveland, W. P., & Scheufele, D. A. (2000). Connecting news media use with gaps in knowledge and participation. *Political Communication*, *17*(3), 215–237.

Fenton, N. (2011). *New media, old news*. London: Sage.

Ferree, M. M., Gamson, W. A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2001). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and Society*, *31*, 289–324. doi:10.1023/A:1016284431021

Fox, E., & Waisbord, S. (2002). *Latin politics, global media*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Fowler, A., & Margolis, M. (2013). The political consequences of uninformed voters. *Electoral Studies*, *30*, 1–11. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2013.09.009

Fraile, M. (2011). Widening or reducing the knowledge gap? Testing the media effects on political knowledge in Spain (2004-2006). *International Journal of Press Politics*, *16*(2), 163–184.

Fraile, M., & Iyengar, S. (2014). Not all news sources are equally informative. A cross-national analysis of political knowledge in Europe. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *19*, 275–294. doi:10.1177/1940161214528993

Fridkin, K., Kenney, P. J., & Wintersieck, A. (2015). Liar, liar, pants on fire: How fact-checking influences citizens' reactions to negative advertising. *Political Communication*, *32*, 127–151. doi:10.1080.10584609.2014.914613

Gauchat, G. (2012). Politicization of science in the public sphere: A study of public trust in the United States, 1974 to 2010. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(2), 167–187. doi:10.1177/0003122412438225

Garrett, R. K. (2009). Echo chambers online? Politically motivated selective exposure among Internet users. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *14*, 265–285.

Gaziano, C. (2010). Notes on 'revisiting the knowledge gap hypothesis: A meta-analysis of thirty-five years of research. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *87*(3–4), 615–632.

Gershkoff, A., & Kushner, S. (2005). Shaping public opinion: The 9/11-Iraq connection in the Bush administration's rhetoric. *Perspectives on Politics*, *3*(3), 525–537. doi:10.1017/S1537592705050334.

Gil de Zuniga, H., Nakwon, J., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *17*, 319–336.

Goldstein, T. (2007). *Journalism and truth. Strange bedfellows*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Graber, D. (1988). *Processing the news: How people tame the information tide*. New York, NY: Longman.

Graves, L., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2016). Understanding innovations in journalistic practice: A field experiment examining motivations for fact-checking. *Journal of Communication*, *66*(1), 102–138. doi:10.1111/jcom.12198

Gvirsman, S. D. (2014). It's not that we don't know, it's that we don't care: Explaining why selective exposure polarizes attitudes. *Mass Communication & Society*, *17*(1), 74–97. doi:10.1080/15205436.2013.816738

Hahn, K. S., Iyengar, S., van Aelst, P., & Curran, J. (2012). Does knowledge of hard news go with knowledge of soft news? A cross-national analysis of the structure of public affairs knowledge. In T. Aalberg, & J. Curran (Eds.), *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach* (pp. 119–137). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hahn, K. S., Ryu, S., & Park, S. (2015). Fragmentation in the Twitter following of news outlets: The representation of South Korean users' ideological and generational cleavage. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *92*(1), 56–76. doi:10.1177/1077699014559499

Haight, M., Quan-Haase, A., & Corbett, B. (2014). Revisiting the digital divide in Canada: The impact of demographic factors on access to the internet, level of online activity, and social networking site usage. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*(4), 503–519.

Hallin, D., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political Clientelism and the media: Southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media, Culture and Society*, *24*, 175–195. doi:10.1177/016344370202400202

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems. Three models of media and politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2011). *Comparing media systems beyond the Western World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hamilton, J. T. (2004). *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hanretty, C. (2014). Media outlets and their moguls: Why concentrated individual or family ownership is bad for editorial independence. *European Journal of Communication*, *29*(3), 335–350. doi:10.1177/0267323114523150

Hayes, D., & Lawless, J. L. (2015). As local news goes, so goes citizen engagement: Media, knowledge, and participation in US House Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, *77*(2), 447–462. doi:10.1086/679749

Herring, E., & Robinson, P. (2014). Report X marks the spot: The British government's deceptive Dossier on Iraq and WMD. *Political Science Quarterly*, *129*, 551–584. doi:10.1002/polq.12252

Hibberd, M. (2007). Conflicts of interest and media pluralism in Italian broadcasting. *West European Politics*, *30*, 881–902. doi:10.1080/01402380701500363

Hindman, M. (2009). *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hmielowski, J. D., Feldman, L., Myers, T. A., Leiserowitz, A., & Maibach, E. (2014). An attack on science? Media use, trust in scientists, and perceptions of global warming. *Public Understanding of Science*, *23*(7), 866–883. doi:10.1177/0963662513480091

Ho, D. E., & Quinn, K. M. (2009). Viewpoint diversity and media consolidation: An empirical study. *Stanford Law Review*, *61*, 781–868.

Hollander, B. A. (2008). Tuning out or tuning elsewhere? Partisanship, polarization, and media migration from 1998 to 2006. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *85*(1), 23–40. doi:10.1177/107769900808500103

Hollander, B. A. (2010). Persistence in the perception of Barack Obama as a Muslim in the 2008 presidential campaign. *Journal of Media and Religion*, *9*(2), 55–66. doi:10.1080/15348421003738769

Hopmann, D. N., Wonneberger, A., Shehata, A., & Jonas, H. (2016). Selective media exposure and increasing knowledge gaps in Swiss referendum campaigns. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *28*(1), 73–95. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edv002

Holt, K., Shehata, A., Strömbäck, J., & Ljungberg, E. (2013). Age and the effects of news media attention and social media use on political interest and participation: Do social media function as Leveller? *European Journal of Communication*, *28*, 19–34. doi:10.1177/0267323112465369

Hubé, N. (2014). "Design is content". On tabloidization of the French quality newspaper journalism. In C. Peters, & M. Broersma (Eds.), *Retelling journalism: Conveying stories in a digital age* (pp. 107–127). Leuven: Peeters.

Hwang, Y., & Jeong, S.-H. (2009). Revisiting the knowledge gap hypothesis: A meta-analysis of thirty-five years of research. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *86*(3), 513–532. doi:10.1177/107769900908600304

Iyengar, S., & Hahn, K. S. (2009). Red media, blue media: evidence of ideological selectivity in media use. *Journal of Communication*, *59*, 19–39. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x

Iyengar, S., Norpoth, H., & Hahn, K. S. (2004). Consumer demand for election news: The horserace sells. *Journal of Politics*, *66*, 157–175. doi:10.1046/j.1468-2508.2004.00146.x

Jandura, O., & Friedrich, K. (2014). The quality of political media coverage. In C. Reinemann (Ed.), *Political communication* (pp. 351–373). Berlin: de Gruyter.

Jerit, J., Barabas, J., & Bolsen, T. (2006). Citizens, knowledge, and the information environment. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*, 266–82. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00183.x

Kata, A. (2010). A postmodern Pandora's Box: Anti-vaccination misinformation on the Internet. *Vaccine*, *28*(7), 1709–1716. doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2009.12.022

Kim, Y. M., & Vishak, J. (2008). Just laugh! You don't need to remember: The effects of entertainment media on political information acquisition and information processing in political judgment. *Journal of Communication*, *58*(2), 338–360.

Kim, Y. M., Wang, M., Gotlieb, M. R., Gabay, I., & Edgerly, S. (2013). Ambivalence reduction and polarization in the campaign information environment: The interaction between individual-and contextual-level influences. *Communication Research*, *40*, 388–416. doi:10.1177/0093650211431884

Klein, O., Van der Linden, N., Pantazi, M., & Kissine, M. (2015). Behind the screen conspirators: Paranoid social cognition in an online age. In M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka, & W. Soral (Eds.), *The psychology of conspiracy* (pp. 162–182). Hove: Taylor and Francis.

Kobayashi, T., & Inamasu, K. (2015). The knowledge leveling effect of portal sites. *Communication Research*, *42*(4), 482–502.

Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2007). *The elements of journalism: What news people should know and the public should expect*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Kraft, P. W., Lodge, M., & Taber, C. S. (2015). Why people "don't trust the evidence": Motivated reasoning and scientific beliefs. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *658*, 121–133.

Ksiazek, T., Malthouse, E., & Webster, J. (2010). News-seekers and avoiders: Exploring patterns of total news consumption across media and the relationship to civic participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *54*, 551–568. doi:10.1080/08838151.2010.519808

Kuklinski, J. H., Quirk, P. J., Jerit, J., Schwieder, D., & Rich, R. F. (2000). Misinformation and the currency of democratic citizenship. *Journal of Politics*, *62*(3), 790–816. doi:10.1111/0022-3816.00033

Landry, O. (2011). Concentration de la propriété des médias et diversité des contenus dans les quotidiens du groupe Gesca. *Recherches sociographiques*, *52*(2), 233–254.

Lawrence, R. G. (2000). Game-framing the issues: Tracking the strategy frame in public policy news. *Political Communication*, *17*, 93–114. doi:10.1080/105846000198422

Leeper, T. J. (2014). The informational basis for mass polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *78*, 27–46. doi:10.1093/poq/nft045

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt.

Liu, Y.-I., & Eveland, W. P. (2005). Education, need for cognition, and campaign interest as moderators of news effects on political knowledge: An analysis of the knowledge gap. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *82*(4), 910–929.

Lupia, A., & McCubbins, M. D. (1998). *The democratic dilemma: Can citizens learn what they need to know?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Manjoo, F. (2008). *True enough. Learning to live in a post-fact society*. Hoboken: Wiley.

Maurer, M., & Reinemann, C. (2006). Learning vs. knowing. Effects of misinformation in televised debates. *Communication Research*, *33*, 489–506.

Mazzoleni, G., & Schulz, W. (1999). "Mediatization" of politics: A challenge for democracy? *Political Communication*, *16*, 247–261. doi:10.1080/105846099198613

McCluskey, M., & Kim, Y. M. (2012). Moderatism or polarization? Representation of advocacy groups' ideology in newspapers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *89*(4), 565–584. doi:10.1177/1077699012455385

McKewon, E. (2012). Talking Points Ammo. The use of neoliberal think tank fantasy themes to delegitimise scientific knowledge of climate change in Australian newspapers. *Journalism Studies*, *13*, 277–297. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2011.646403

McKnight, D. (2010). A change in the climate? The journalism of opinion at News Corporation. *Journalism*, *11*, 693–706. doi:10.1177/1464884910379704

McLachlan, S., & Golding, P. (2000). Tabloidization in the British Press: A quantitative investigation into changes in British Newspapers, 1952-1997. In C. Sparks, & J. Tulloch (Eds.), *Tabloid tales: Global debates over media standards* (pp. 76–90). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

McManus, M. (1994). *Market Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Milner, H. (2002). *Civic literacy. How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Barthel, M., & Shearer, E. (2016). *The modern news consumer*. New York, NY: Pew Research Center.

Mohammad, S. N. (2012). *The (dis)information age. The persistence of ignorance*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Mooney, C. (2005). *The republican war on science*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Mooney, C., & Kirshenbaum, S. (2009). *Unscientific America. How scientific illiteracy threatens our future*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Mosco, V. (2010). *The political economy of communication*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Napoli, P. M. (2011). Exposure diversity reconsidered. *Journal of Information Policy*, 1, 246–259. doi:10.5325/jinfopoli.1.2011.0246

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Levy, D. A. L., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). *Reuters institute digital news report 2016*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Nguyen, A. (2012). The Effect of Soft News on Public Attachment to the News. *Journalism Studies*, 13, 706–717. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2012.664318

Nielsen, R. K. (2015). *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media*. London: IB Tauris.

de Nooy, W., & Kleinnijenhuis, J. (2013). Polarization in the media during an election campaign: A dynamic network model predicting support and attack among political actors. *Political Communication*, 30(1), 117–138.

Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide? Civic engagement, information poverty and the Internet worldwide*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2010). *Merchants of Doubt. How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from Tobacco Smoking to Global Warming*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Padovani, C. (2012). Berlusconi on Berlusconi? An analysis of digital terrestrial television coverage on commercial broadcast news in Italy. *Discourse & Communication*, 6(4), 423–447.

Papathanasopoulos, S., & Negrine, R. (2011). *European media structures, policies and identities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin Press.

Pasek, J., Sood, G., & Krosnick, J. A. (2015). Misinformed about the affordable care act? Leveraging certainty to assess the prevalence of misperceptions. *Journal of Communication*, 65, 660–673.

Pasek, J., Stark, T. H., Krosnick, J. A., & Tompson, T. (2014). What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-black attitudes. *Electoral Studies*, 40, 482–489. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2014.09.009

Patterson, T. (2002). *The vanishing voter*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Patterson, T. E. (2000). *Doing well and doing good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the news audience and weakening democracy– and what news outlets can do about it*. Retrieved from http://www.uky.edu/AS/PoliSci/Peffley/pdf/475PattersonSoftnews(1-11-01).pdf

Patterson, T. E. (2003). The search for a standard: Markets and media. *Political Communication*, 20(2), 139–143. doi:10.1080/10584600390211154

Patterson, T. E. (2013). *Informing the news*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Porto, M. (2012). *Media power and democratization in Brazil. TV Globo and the dilemmas of political accountability*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Prior, M. (2003). Any good news in soft news? The impact of soft news preference on political knowledge. *Political Communication*, 20(2), 149–71. doi:10.1080/10584600390211172

Prior, M. (2007). *Post-broadcast democracy. How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Prior, M., Sood, G., & Khanna, K. (2015). You cannot be serious: The impact of accuracy incentives on partisan bias in reports of economic perceptions. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 10(4), 489–518. doi:10.1561/100.00014127

Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., & Scherr, S. (2016). Hard and soft news. In C. de Vreese, F. Esser, & D. N. Hopmann (Eds.), *Comparing political communication* (pp. 131–149). New York, NY: Routledge.

Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., Scherr, S., & Legnante, G. (2012). Hard and soft news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13, 221–239. doi:10.1177/1464884911427803

Rojecki, A., & Meraz, S. (2016). Rumors and factitious informational blends: The role of the web in speculative politics. *New Media & Society*, 18, 1–19. doi:10.1177/1461444814535724

Rowe, D. (2011). Obituary for the newspaper? Tracking the tabloid. *Journalism*, 12, 449–466. doi:10.1177/1464884910388232

Salgado, S. (2014). *The internet and democracy building in Lusophone African countries*. London: Routledge.

Schoenbach, K., & Lauf, E. (2002). The "trap" effect of television and its competitors. *Communication Research*, 29, 564–583. doi:10.1177/009365002236195

Schuck, A. R. T., Boomgaarden, H. G., & de Vreese, C. H. (2013). Cynics all around? The impact of election news on political cynicism in comparative perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 63, 287–311. doi:10.1111/jcom.12023

Schudson, M. (2003). *The sociology of news*. New-York, NY: Norton.

Shehata, A., Hopmann, D. N., Nord, L., & Höijer, J. (2015). Television channel content profiles and differential knowledge growth: A test of the inadvertent learning hypothesis using panel data. *Political Communication*, 32, 377–395. doi:10.1080/10584609.2014.955223

Shehata, A., & Strömbäck, J. (2011). A matter of context. A comparative study of media environments and news consumption gaps in Europe. *Political Communication*, 28, 110–134. doi:10.1080/10584609.2010.543006

Skoric, M. M., Zhu, Q., Goh, D., & Pang, N. (2015). Social media and citizen engagement: A meta-analytic review. *New Media & Society*, 18, 1817–1839. doi:10.1177/1461444815616221

Skovsgaard, M., Shehata, A., & Strömbäck, J. (2016). Opportunity structures for selective exposure: Investigating selective exposure and learning in Swedish election campaigns using panel survey data. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 21, 527–546. doi:10.1177/1940161216658157

Slater, M. D., Hayes, A. F., Reineke, J. B., Long, M., & Bettinghaus, E. P. (2009). Newspaper coverage of cancer prevention: Multilevel evidence for knowledge gap effects. *Journal of Communication*, 59, 514–533.

Soroka, S., Andrew, B., Aalberg, T., Iyengar, S., Curran, J., Coen, S., … Tiffen, R. (2013). Auntie knows best? Public broadcasters and current affairs knowledge. *British Journal of Political Science*, 43, 719–739. doi:10.1017/S0007123412000555

Spivak, C. (2011). The fact-checking explosion. *American Journalism Review*, 32, 38–43.

Stetka, V. (2015). The rise of oligarchs as media owners. In J. Zielonka (Ed.), *Media and politics in new democracies. Europe in a comparative perspective* (pp. 85–98). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strömbäck, J. (2005). In search of a standard: Four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 6, 331–345. doi:10.1080/14616700500131950

Strömbäck, J. (2016). Does public service TV and the intensity of the political information environment matter? *Journalism Studies*, 1–18. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2015.1133253

Strömbäck, J., Djerf-Pierre, M., & Shehata, A. (2013). The dynamics of political interest and news media consumption: A longitudinal perspective. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 25(4), 414–435. doi:10.1093/ijpor/eds018

Stroud, N. J. (2011). *Niche news: The politics of news choice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Sunstein, C. R. (2007). *Republic. com 2.0*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 755–769. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x

Tambini, D. (2015). Public service media| Five theses on public media and digitization: From a 56-country study. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(25), 1400–1424.

Tewksbury, D., & Riles, J. M. (2015). Polarization as a function of citizen predispositions and exposure to news on the internet. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59, 381–398. doi:10.1080/08838151.2015.1054996

Tewksbury, D., Weaver, A. J., & Maddex, B. D. (2001). Accidentally informed: Incidental news exposure on the World Wide Web. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 78(3), 533–554. doi:10.1177/107769900107800309

Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Thorson, E. (2016). Belief echoes: The persistent effects of corrected misinformation. *Political Communication*, 33, 460–480. doi:10.1080/10584609.2015.1102187

Tiffen, R., Jones, P. K., Rowe, D., Aalberg, T., Coen, S., Curran, J., … Soroka, S. (2014). Sources in the news: A comparative study. *Journalism Studies*, 15, 374–391. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2013.831239

Trilling, D., & Schoenbach, K. (2013). Skipping current affairs: The non-users of online and offline news. *European Journal of Communication*, 28(1), 35–51. doi:10.1177/0267323112453671

Tsfati, Y., Stroud, N. J., & Chotiner, A. (2014). Exposure to ideological news and perceived opinion climate: Testing the media effects component of spiral-of-silence in a fragmented media landscape. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19, 3–23. doi:10.1177/1940161213508206

Umbricht, A., & Esser, F. (2016). The push to popularize politics, understanding the audience-friendly packaging of political news in six media systems since the 1960s. *Journalism Studies*, 17, 100–121. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2014.963369

Uribe, R., & Gunter, B. (2004). Research note: The tabloidization of British tabloids. *European Journal of Communication*, 19, 387–402. doi:10.1177/0267323104045265

Van Cuilenburg, J. (1998). Diversity revisited: Towards a critical rational model of media diversity. In K. Brants, J. Hermes, & L. van Zoonen (Eds.), *The media in question: Popular cultures and public interests* (pp. 38–49). London: Thousand Oaks.

Van Dijk, J., & Hacker, K. (2003). The digital divide as a complex and dynamic phenomenon. *The Information Society*, 19(4), 315–326.

Voakes, P. S., Kapfer, J., Kurpius, D., & Chern, D. S.-Y. (1996). Diversity in the news: A conceptual and methodological framework. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73(3), 582–593. doi:10.1177/107769909607300306

Vowe, G., & Henn, P. (2016). *Political communication in the online world. Theoretical approaches and research designs*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Wagner, M. W., & Collins, T. P. (2014). Does ownership matter? The case of Rupert Murdoch's purchase of the Wall Street Journal. *Journalism Practice*, 8, 758–771. doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.882063

Webster, J. G. (2007). Diversity of exposure. In P. M. Napoli (Ed.), *Media diversity and localism: Meaning and metrics* (pp. 309–326). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Webster, J. G., & Ksiazek, T. B. (2012). The dynamics of audience fragmentation: Public attention in an age of digital media. *Journal of Communication*, 62(1), 39–56. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01616.x

Wei, L., & Hindman, D. B. (2011). Does the digital divide matter more? Comparing the effects of new media and old media use on the education-based knowledge gap. *Mass Communication and Society*, 14, 216–235. doi:10.1080/15205431003642707

Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2011). *After broadcast news: Media regimes, democracy, and the new information environment*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Winston, B. (2002). Towards tabloidization? Glasgow revisited, 1975-2001. *Journalism Studies*, *3*, 5–20. doi:10.1080/14616700120107301

Wojcieszak, M. (2011). Deliberation and attitude polarization. *Journal of Communication*, *61*, 596–617. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01568.x

van der Wurff, R. (2011). Do audiences receive diverse ideas from news media? Exposure to a variety of news media and personal characteristics as determinants of diversity as received. *European Journal of Communication*, *26*(4), 328–342. doi:10.1177/0267323111423377

Yanich, D. (2010). Does ownership matter? Localism, content, and the federal communications commission. *Journal of Media Economics*, *23*(2), 51–67.

Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010). Dynamic debates: An analysis of group polarization over time on Twitter. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*(5), 316–327. doi:10.1177/0270467610380011

Young, D. G. (2016). Humor and satire, political. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, 1–7. doi:10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc100

Zaller, J. (1999). *Market Competition and News Quality*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association Atlanta, GA.

Zaller, J. (2003). A new standard of news quality: Burglar alarms for the monitorial citizen. *Political Communication*, *20*, 109–130. doi:10.1080/10584600390211136