The push to popularize politics
Understanding the audience-friendly packaging of political news in six media systems since the 1960s

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This study offers a five-item based measurement of popularization of news (combining sensationalism, scandalization, emotionalization, ordinary citizen approach and privatization of public figures) to examine a core assumption in the comparative literature, namely the convergence in Western journalism toward the Liberal Model. A content analysis of more than 6000 stories from 18 news outlets (regional, national and weekly papers) in six press systems (United States, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy) stretching five decades (1960s to 2010s) finds an increase but no convergence in the popularization of political news. Factors located at the national and the organizational levels correspond in characteristic ways with differences in the use of popularization-related strategies. With the growing need to offer additional attractions to oversaturated consumers, further increases in popularized political news are to be expected in the future but only according to specific conditions.

KEYWORDS comparative media research; content analysis; convergence; emotionalization; political news; popularization index; scandalization; sensationalism

The Push to Popularize News

One of the core assumptions in comparative journalism research states that commercialization has “encouraged the development of a globalized media culture that substantially diminishes national differences” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 282). It is argued that the market-driven “forces of homogenization” are strong, and “that considerable convergence has taken place” across western press systems, “primarily in the direction of the Liberal Model” (ibid.). Recent studies have shown that this shift toward the liberal journalism model – meaning the reporting style of U.S. and British news media – push political affairs coverage toward a softer, more entertainment-centered and audience-friendly approach (Aalberg and Curran 2012). This move has been linked to further-reaching developments like the growing concentration, conglomeration and competition of media companies (Croteau and Hoynes 2006), a shift from a traditional party democracy to an image-focused audience democracy (Manin 1997) and a change toward consumer-oriented lifestyles that emphasize presentation, style, and aesthetics (Brants 2007) – all of which pressurize even long-established media to sell their news in more accessible ways.
In their influential book *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) are fairly specific about the implications that a greater audience orientation has on Western journalism. It would streamline news content toward (1) more sensationalized and (2) more emotionalized information that can be consumed more readily; (3) more personalized portrayals of politicians that humanize them as leaders with an easy-to-relate private side; (4) a stronger focus on the experience and perspective of ordinary people and how they are affected by public issues; and (5) a more self-confident reporting style that emphasizes the power of the press by focusing on stories about political scandals, rivalries and self-interests (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 277–279).

One of the reasons why these trends (see also Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Thompson 2000) spread across borders is that newspapers feel tempted to imitate profitable reporting techniques seen in other countries, in particular if papers are faced with similar challenges like declining circulation and growing competition from new communication channels. Growing co-orientation within the global news arena is thus assumed to contribute to a further homogenization of news practices (Reese 2008). Other transnational processes like economic liberalization and political deregulation push newspapers in the same direction. These trends toward convergence are supported by pressures to increase efficiencies and to lower costs which promote structural convergence (reorganizing newsrooms) and journalistic convergence (redefining professional roles and skills; see Quinn 2004). They have been connected to results of content analyses showing that European newspapers increasingly pursue “a more popular editorial profile” – albeit with important “differences between individual countries” (Weibull and Nilsson 2010, 65). Despite all the plausibility of a converging trend towards market-driven journalism, there is in fact very little conclusive and reliable evidence available in support of it. This is, as Brants (2007, 108) explains after reviewing the relevant literature, mainly due to a lack of a “systematic, comparative and longitudinal analysis that could substantiate a development over time.” Two newer studies on the topic are comparative (Curran et al. 2010; Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, and Aalberg 2012) but use only a very crude measure of soft news, do still lack a longitudinal design and take only one explanatory factor – commercialization – into account.

**The Means to Popularize News**

Our own study advances the existing literature by combining a cross-national with a long-term cross-temporal design to allow for context-sensitive conclusions about the process-related implications of the convergence thesis. Also it operationalizes popularization as a multi-faceted concept with a set of different indicators, and takes a broader range of explanatory factors into account along which Western press systems differ. We will examine five indicators that are derived directly from Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) understanding of audience-oriented news. They include

- sensationalization,
- scandalization,
- emotionalization,
- common people narrative, and
- privatization of public figures.

They represent five strategies to popularize politics. Our theoretical framing of popularization follows the specific purposes of a comparative research design. We will first define these five strategies by drawing on relevant concepts developed in previous scholarship before we define contextual conditions relevant for predicting differences in intensity and shape across news organizations and media systems.

The aforementioned strategies serve as key dependent variables in our study and are measured as framing devices at the story level (see below). *Sensationalist stories emphasize*
uncommon, extreme or animating elements of attention-grabbing character and deviate from a rational, matter-of-fact writing style (Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett 2001; Kleemans and Hendriks Vettehen 2009). Scandalous stories refer to intense public communication about a real or imagined defect or misbehavior that provokes widespread indignation or outrage (Thompson 2000). Emotionalized stories add a human-interest component to the presentation of an event by giving it a face, using engaging images or expressions, or displaying and amplifying emotions (Pantti 2010; Reinemann et al. 2012). Stories with a common people narrative introduce political issues into the lives of otherwise non-included citizens by likening them to their reality of life, privileging the viewpoints of ordinary people (Ferree et al. 2002; Benson 2010). Finally, privatization describes an emphasis on the private life and personal, non-politics-related traits of a politician to make political coverage more appealing (often in the context of identity politics and celebrity culture; see Langer 2010).

**Predicting Differences in the Popularization of News**

We expect that the use of these reporting techniques depends on facilitating or inhibiting contextual conditions. Drawing on previous theorizing about the relevance of contextual conditions for news work (Esser and Strömbäck, 2012, 315–317), we identified the following factors as most relevant for differences in popularized news among Western press systems:

- commercialism,
- tabloid tradition,
- communication culture,
- professional autonomy, and
- type of medium.

**Commercialism.** Other than Hallin and Mancini (2004), we expect commercialism to be just one of several drivers promoting audience-oriented news. Commercialism is defined to be high when the relationship between media outlets is organized according to a competitive market with very little intervention by the state which aims to regulate the economic behavior of companies or the professional behavior of journalists (e.g., through privacy or concentration laws). This light-touch approach is characteristic of the U.S. and British system. A contrasting picture is found in southern European countries such as France or Italy where the state has a history of supporting a chronically weak commercial press through indirect and direct subsidies. Further measures of commercialism are advertising spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product and the revenue share from advertising for newspapers. On both measures, the United States and Britain score high whereas France and Italy score low (Benson 2013; De Bens 2007; Levy and Nielsen 2010). A medium position on these scales is occupied by countries like Germany and Switzerland which are typical representatives of democratic-corporatist media systems (see Hallin and Mancini 2004). What distinguishes Germany and Switzerland from the other four countries is that they are newspaper-centric systems where the press competes less with television (for audiences and advertising) and where newspapers can rely on high subscription and home-delivery rates (and are thus less dependent on winning readers at newsstands; see Esser 1999; Levy and Nielsen 2010).

**Tabloid tradition.** It is argued that tabloid news values have the greatest impact on U.S. and British media – not only because the popular news sector is larger but because it is also more competitive than in France, Italy or Germany (Stanyer 2012). The more relevant the flow of soft news across multiple channels and platforms is, the more likely it is that tabloid values spill over to other sectors and eventually impact the entire system. A longer history of unrestrained freedom of expression, an acknowledged appreciation of popular culture, a higher dependency on advertising and sales, and a hard-boiled professional culture that will publish almost “anything that is going to sell newspapers” (Stanyer 2013, 86) may help
explain this. As a result, journalists from Great Britain and the U.S. report much more often that their stories are “changed by another person in the newsroom for the purpose of increasing audience interest” than in Italy or Germany (Donsbach 1995, 27). The longer history of mass market newspapers and commercial television in the Anglo-American systems also indicates that their audiences have come to be more receptive of tabloid news values (Esser 1999). The other extreme is again in the Mediterranean region where we observe a distinct lack of mass-circulation newspapers with tabloid journalistic values that serve as agenda setters for a significant nationwide audience (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Kuhn 2014). Germany and Switzerland can be assigned a middle position again: both have one national tabloid with agenda-setting power but appear in broadsheet format and enjoy monopoly positions.

Communication culture. It can be argued further that journalism reflects typical patterns of interpersonal communication and is hence culturally coded. In this regard, the literature distinguishes low context cultures from high context cultures. Low context media cultures are found in the Anglo-American and Germanic countries and are characterized by a more direct, explicit, factual, rational and condensed news style; high context media cultures are located more often in the Mediterranean countries of Southern Europe and tend to use a more aesthetics-driven, expressive, associative and sometimes spectacular style (Hahn et al. 2007; Hall and Hall 1990). These opposing communication cultures have variably been termed “goal-oriented” versus “affective” (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988, 112) or “exacting” versus “elaborate” (De Mooij 2010, 166). The production cultures of the media have adjusted to their respective reception cultures. A more direct, goal-oriented and exact journalistic style has proven more effective for committed and conscious information-seekers in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic countries (high news use) whereas a more affective and elaborate approach proved better suited to attract the less interested newspaper readers of the South European press systems (low news use; see Hahn et al. 2012; Grieves 2012; Weibull and Nilsson 2010). In fact, the positive effects of infotainment for those less interested in political news have been shown in many countries and have meanwhile presumably affected news cultures beyond the Mediterranean (Jebril, Albaek, and De Vreese 2013). Nonetheless, the different historical pathways lead us to expect a stronger tendency toward sensational and emotional reporting in the South than in the North.

Professional autonomy. Professionalism means growing autonomy from outside influences and outside control over one’s work. In Anglo-American and democratic-corporatist media systems, journalism has achieved autonomy at a faster rate and to a greater extent than in the Mediterranean press systems. Journalistic norms that signal clear distance to the state and political parties (like the watchdog role) gained broad acceptance first in Anglo-American systems, from where they diffused to democratic-corporatist systems like Germany or Switzerland (but often more as an ideal than in practice). In the Mediterranean countries, it was only after the judiciary had gained autonomy from political ties that political wrongdoings were exposed and released to the press. Until the 1980s, a culture of secrecy surrounded the powerful in France and Italy, and investigative journalism basically meant to follow the prosecutors (Van den Blink and Kruk 2005; Poletti and Brants 2010). Therefore, it has been argued that in these two countries, scandalous revelations are less based on journalists’ investigations but on criminal investigations – of which there have been many (Marchetti 2009; Landman 2005). In both countries, like in many other Western press systems, there is a great appetite for covering scandals or “affairs.” But, as Hallin and Mancini (2004, 279) point out, the coverage of scandals is driven by three forces: critical professional autonomy (the desire of journalists to build professional prestige and assert their independence vis-à-vis political actors), commercialism (the desire of media organizations to compete for audiences) and the judiciary (which recently has become also more independent and assertive in Southern Europe). From a cross-national perspective it is often not easy to
disentangle these influences. Given the differences in professional autonomy, we expect to find the largest amount of scandal coverage in the Anglo-American and the lowest amount in the Mediterranean systems.

**Type of medium.** In addition to cross-national differences, we are also interested in cross-media differences. Previous comparative studies found *regional* newspapers to be more prone to infusing soft-news elements into their political affairs coverage than prestigious *national* titles (Aalberg and Curran 2012) because they face much tougher choices given their smaller budgets and mid-market positions (Udris and Lucht 2014). An additional segment that has often been overlooked is the *weekly* press. A prominent exception is Patterson’s (1993) influential study *Out of Order* which examined the style of election news coverage in *Time* and *Newsweek* since the 1960s. Weekly news magazines and Sunday papers have long been important because of their nation-wide distribution, their influential readership and their status as opinion-makers and intermedia agenda setters. To differentiate themselves from daily papers and get an edge over television, news weeklies rely on more colorful writing and vivid presentation. Landers (2004) argues that their publication schedule allows them to develop very effective storylines that focus on the significance and impact of news events, and that they also add more perspectives, interpretation and speculation about the direction of issues. A recent strategy to retain their significance has been to add elements of popular culture and take a broader, lighter, less hard-news oriented approach (Baughman 1998; Project for Excellence 2005). For all these reasons we expect the largest amount of market-oriented journalism in weeklies and the lowest in national dailies.

**Hypotheses**

Our research design assumes that five explanatory conditions are responsible for characteristic variation in an otherwise increasingly unified approach toward popularizing political news. These are, on the one hand, the cultural-institutional “contexts” of the press systems (cross-national perspective) and, on the other hand, the development over “time” and the related transformation and diffusion processes (cross-temporal perspective). We add a third layer by assuming that some press sectors are more prone to popularizing their political news coverage than others (cross-organizational perspective). Consequently, we will organize the formulation of our hypotheses according to these three perspectives. Our analysis will investigate how context, time and media type influence, in symptomatic ways, the popularization of political news in Western democracies. Popularization is measured by the use of five news practices and their resulting content features: sensationalization, emotionalization, scandalization, orientation to common citizens, and privatization of public figures. The study is further guided by recent findings in comparative media-systems research that processes of convergence and divergence can occur simultaneously, albeit at different levels and caused by different combinations of influences (Nielsen 2013).

- **Cross-national Hypothesis H1:** The use of practices related to the popularization of political news is highest in the Anglophone systems, followed by the Polarized Mediterranean systems, and lowest in the Corporatist Germanic systems.

The rationale behind this hypothesis is that British and U.S. press markets are least regulated and most market- and advertising-dependent, that they have a long history of tabloid journalism and competition with television, and an autonomous professional culture. The French and Italian press lacks many of these aspects but lately has shown noticeable catch-up effects in terms of journalistic autonomy and the competition between television and the press. More important is a strong inclination in the French and Italian press toward commentary-journalism which, in combination with an expressive communication culture, favors an aesthetics-driven and sometimes spectacular style. German and Swiss journalism, in
contrast, embodies the essence of a distanced, formal, rational reporting style (Grieves 2012; Luginbühl 2009) which, as we expect, will overlay or neutralize other influences.

- **Cross-temporal Hypothesis H2a:** The use of practices related to the popularization of political news has increased throughout Western press systems over time.
- **Cross-temporal Hypothesis H2b:** News outlets in Western press systems have converged in their use of practices related to the popularization of news.

The rationale behind these two hypotheses is that long-term processes like cross-border diffusion, cross-organizational co-orientation as well as growing commercialization and professional autonomy find their expression in an overall increase and convergence of popularization trends.

- **Cross-organizational Hypothesis H3:** The use of practices related to the popularization of political news is most frequent in the weekly press, followed by the regional press, and it is least frequent in the national press.

The rationale behind this hypothesis is that the more colorful, interpretative, feature-like style of weeklies promotes a more popularizing style and that the more serious-minded, high-brow approach of the national dailies will curb it.

Following a call by Hallin and Mancini (2012) to combine quantitative and qualitative aspects in comparative communication research, particularly when incorporating a historical component, we will also draw on qualitative research to relate findings to their assumed causes.

**Method**

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of eighteen newspapers from six press systems over a time span of almost five decades. Germany, Switzerland, USA, Great Britain, France, and Italy are selected to ensure sufficient variation of the five factors identified as presumed drivers of highs and lows in popularized news styles, and to ensure inclusion of prototypical representatives of three common types of Western news systems. For each system, we examine newspapers from three different press sectors – national, regional and weekly – in which these outlets have a high circulation and a reputation for being typical. For the U.S. we selected the *New York Times* (national newspaper of record), the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (large independent regional newspaper founded by Joseph Pulitzer) and *Time* magazine (the largest news weekly in U.S. history). In Britain we analyzed *The Times*, *Birmingham Mail* and *The Observer*; in Germany the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Rheinische Post* and *Spiegel*; in Switzerland the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Berner Zeitung* and *Weltwoche*; in France *Le Monde*, *Ouest France* and *L’Express*; and in Italy *Corriere della Sera*, *Resto del Carlino* and *Espresso*.

We included regional instead of tabloid newspapers because they have been more formative for the development of Western press markets with the exception of Britain. Another theoretical reason for not including tabloids was that we are not interested in tracing popularization in the popular press – which seems of little added value – but in the more relevant *spill-over effect* of popular news values in the high-brow press (see also Esser 1999).

Our study focuses on routine phases of political affairs coverage that are not bound to specific events or periods that would eventually bias the results. We selected issues from the 1960s, 1970s, 1990s and 2000s in an effort to capture a longitudinal perspective. For each decade, we analyzed two years, namely 1960–61, 1972–73, 1994–95 and 2006/07. In every second month of these four two-year periods, one random issue of each news outlet was sampled. We included all articles that discussed at least one regional, national or international political actor or institution and its actions – irrespective of whether they offered news, analysis or commentary – that started on the front page (including those continued on the inside pages) or those political stories whose headline was mentioned on the front page but
The push to popularize politics where the story was published on inside pages. This is consistent with common practice in comparative international news research (see, e.g., Benson 2010; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006) and ensures that political articles are analyzed that the newsroom considers most important and that readers are most likely to notice. For news magazines, in addition to all stories mentioned on the cover, we also included those stories prominently highlighted in the table of contents, usually with bold letters or a picture. This sampling strategy yielded 869 stories from U.S. newspapers, 931 from British newspapers, 1360 from German newspapers, 845 from Swiss newspapers, 962 from French newspapers, and 1170 from Italian newspapers.

Our five indicators were measured with three-point scales but have been recoded for this analysis into binary variables (0, 1) that indicate the absence or presence in a given story. Not the underlying topics or the events are decisive for their coding but the way they are packaged to make coverage more appealing. More than one of the five indicators can be coded per story as they are not mutually exclusive. We use the code “sensationalism frame” when a story attempts to attract attention by using exaggerations, dynamic verbs and vivid metaphors or by emphasizing dramatic, unusual and seemingly spectacular aspects of a political event; and we use “emotion frame” when a story describes and emphasizes expressions of feelings, irrespective of whether they are pleasant (e.g., joy, pride) or unpleasant (e.g., rage, grief, anger, pity, disappointment); the frame is also coded when the unique fate of specific persons is expressed in affective language and with strong adjectives. We code “scandal frame” when a story expresses public anger, uses language of escalation, or denounces or condemns a behavior. Typical catchwords are: abuse, misconduct, private and professional affair, mores, corruption or cover-up that can all lead to demands to resign from office. We use the code “common people narrative” when a story is structured around everyday citizens and the way they are involved in an event or affected by a decision, using this humanness to connect political stories closer with the reality of life of ordinary readers. We apply the code “privatization” when a story emphasizes private elements of politicians outside their official duties, for instance those related to their family or hobbies.

Bilingual coders were trained intensively for several weeks. All coders employed in the project have detailed knowledge of the country whose news stories they analyzed and they are fluent in the respective languages. For testing inter-coder reliability, we used Cohen’s kappa as a rather conservative measure that gives credit only to agreement beyond chance. The average (Cohen’s kappa) coefficients were calculated separately for all language groups (English, French, German, and Italian) and separately for format-based story elements (e.g., placement, story genre) and content-based elements (e.g., style elements, frames). Landis and Koch (1977) characterize values between .61 and .80 as substantial and between .81 and 1.0 as almost perfect agreement. For all format-based variables, the average level of agreement was in the “almost perfect” range (.83 – .91) and for the content-based variables in the “substantial” range (.62 – .70) in the four language groups. These values are in line with kappa-tests reported in other cross-national comparative content analyses (see for instance Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2012).

Findings

To answer Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, we will concentrate on the national analysis level, before we include the organizational analysis level to answer Hypothesis 3.

Cross-national Hypothesis 1

Figures 1 to 5 illustrate how the use of the five popularization techniques in the various press systems has developed over time. As can be seen from the values of the Y-axis in the five Figures, sensationalism occurs everywhere most frequently, followed by
scandalization, emotionalization, and ordinary citizen narrative whereas privatization is used least frequently. The intensity of the use of these five indicators can vary between 0 and 1, meaning that a newspaper may not use a content feature at all (=0), or may use it in every political story (=1).

A closer look at Figure 1 reveals that over the entire study period (1960–2007), sensationalism is used most frequently in Italian and French newspapers whereas it is least frequently used in German and Swiss newspapers (national, regional and weeklies combined). The study of British and American newspapers reveals that they occupy “only” a medium position with regard to the sensationalist presentation of their political news.

A closer look at Figures 2 and 3 shows that with regard to scandalization and emotionalization techniques, a high tendency exists also in French and Italian newspapers to make their political reporting more “lively.” However, British as well as American newspapers have reached the same tendency since the 1970s and now display the highest proportion of scandalized and emotionalized elements (see Figures 2 and 3).

A closer look at Figures 4 and 5 confirms the leading position of Anglophone newspapers with regard to popularized reporting techniques: the tendency to show the private side of politicians (privatization) and to portray political news from the perspective of the people affected by it (ordinary citizen approach) is especially prevalent in British and American newspapers. It is however also very obvious that French newspapers in particular have been following this trend strongly since the 1990s.

All five popularization techniques (sensationalization, scandalization, emotionalization, ordinary citizen narrative and privatization) are closely linked theoretically. This correlation is also evident empirically. When the five techniques were subjected to a Principal Component Analysis, it could only extract a single factor with an Eigenvalue of $\lambda = 1.75$ that accounted for 35 percent of total variance. We thus aggregated all five indicators into one joint average index. With this “Popularization Index” we run ANOVA-based mean comparisons for country and time differences that are shown in Table 1. The results in the upper part of Table 1, combined with those presented in Figures 1 to 5, allow us to answer our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the popularization techniques would be exhibited most frequently in newspapers of the Anglophone countries and least frequently in Germanic-corporatist countries. However, this proved to be only partially true. As predicted, the overall use of popularization techniques tends to be lowest in Germany and Switzerland, and the gap to the other countries has even widened recently (see the statistically significant differences in country means for 2006/07 in the upper part of Table 1). The frequency of use of popularization techniques in newspapers of the Anglo-American and Mediterranean-polarized systems is, according to the data presented in Table 1, very similar. Only a look at Figures 1 and 5 presents a more differentiated view. At closer inspection, it becomes evident that the use of emotionalization, ordinary citizen narrative and privatization over the entire time period is used most often by British and American newspapers, and that sensationalization and scandalization are used most often by French and Italian newspapers. Overall, this differentiated observation – as well as the results pertaining to Germany and Switzerland – lead us to partially accept Hypothesis 1, but only with regard to three of the five popularization techniques.

Cross-temporal Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2a predicted a general increase in the use of the five popularization techniques over time. The values in the upper part of Table 1 show that this applies to five of
the six press systems that were examined, and the increases in the row “Average” from .12 (1960/61) to .20 (2006/07) confirm the transnational growth. A significant decrease in the use of popularization techniques in recent times could only be observed in Germany. In the newspapers of all other countries, they are becoming more and more common, whereby the most significant increases took place during the 1960s and 1970s (see top of Table 1) – parallel to the spread of television! In general, our findings clearly support Hypothesis 2a.

Hypothesis 2b predicts also a convergence in the use of popularization strategies across press systems and time. We use the concept of sigma convergence that is also used by the European Commission to measure economic convergence among EU member states (Vojinovic, Acharya, and Prochniak 2009). The most frequently used measures of sigma convergence are the Standard Deviation and Coefficient of Variation. First, the Standard Deviations reported in the upper part of Table 1 are not shrinking over time but slightly growing, from .04 in 1960/61 to .06 in 2006/07, indicating increasing divergence. Second, the Coefficients of Variation, calculated by dividing the standard deviation by the mean for each decade, stay largely unchanged from .33 in 1960/61 to .31 in 2006/07. Finally we looked at the Adjusted $\text{R}^2$ whose rising values (from .029 in 1960/61 to .061 in 2006/07) express an expanding share of variance explained by country differences, indicating again increasing divergence (see top of Table 1). In summary, none of the three measures provides evidence in support of Hypothesis 2b. Rather, the use of popularization techniques depends on diverging context factors which prevent a transnational homogenization with regard to packaging the political news.

Cross-organizational Hypothesis 3

These context factors are located at the national and organizational level. Hypothesis 3 addresses specifically the organizational level and expects a greater use of popularization-related practices in the weekly press – mainly because their publication schedule demands and allows for a more forceful, more colorful, more interpretative and impact-oriented style. For a systematic examination, we look at the lower part of Table 1. These univariate analyses of variance, run separate for the three media sectors, show clearly that weekly newspapers use popularization techniques to a significantly greater degree than daily newspapers. The second most frequent use of popularization techniques occurs in regional and the least frequent use in national dailies. This clearly confirms Hypothesis 3. Interestingly, the differences between regional and national dailies from the 1970s to the 1990s were almost non-existent, but they have widened since then to a significant degree.

These findings lead us to the further-reaching question whether or not the differing popularization levels in political coverage can be explained mainly by country-specific or newspaper-type-specific factors. To answer this question, we have run two-factorial ANOVA tests (not presented here for reasons of space) which use press systems and organizational types as independent variables and the various popularization strategies as dependent variables. The effect sizes (partial eta squares) are consistently and significantly higher for press systems (country level) than for newspaper type (organizational level) as long as only daily newspapers are included in the analysis. Once weeklies are added, the interaction effects between press system and newspaper types receive oftentimes the largest explanatory power.(3) We conclude from these results that national borders still play a significant role, but not equally so for all media types. While national and regional newspapers continue to represent mainly country-specific news cultures, weeklies increasingly use their own style. Over decades, this style has become less national and is increasingly shaped by the genre-specific requirements of a magazine-type journalism.

Explanations
With regard to national context factors, the previous theory tends to see popularization trends in political coverage influenced mainly by four factors: increased commercialization, increased autonomy, tabloid tradition, and communication culture. While the first two are dynamic factors that can therefore more likely explain increases of popularization indicators, the last two are historical constants that can therefore more likely explain stable trends.

Unfortunately, these four context factors can hardly be quantified in a meaningful way, at least not over time. As an alternative, comparative research suggests case-specific analytic narratives (George and Bennett 2005). Using this qualitative approach, we will try to illuminate the characteristic relationship between our assumed causal factors and features of media content.

**Relating Sensationalism, Scandalism and Emotionalism to Contextual Conditions**

The increase in the use of the five popularization techniques in the British and American press can be easily related to the growing commercialization and professional autonomy; these two countries are also increasingly susceptible to a growing spill-over of news values from popular culture to the mainstream press. Scandalization is increasing more strongly in the papers from Great Britain and the United States than in the other countries (Figure 2), and this trend is accompanied by much more emotional reporting, the personalization of news protagonists as well as a strong human-interest focus on the private life of politicians (Figures 3, 4 and 5). Peak values in the examined indicators are reached by Anglophone newspapers at the end of our study period (2006/07).

Based on these findings, we can confirm many problematic characterizations in the research literature according to which British and American media have since the 1980s entered a “third age of political communication,” in which an infotainment approach to politics is prevalent (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 220). However, popularization does not only have negative sides. It can also make political information more accessible – meaning more interesting and entertaining – for politically inattentive people. Put differently, it potentially allows newspapers to “piggyback” substantive information which may eventually lead to incidental learning and a more informed citizenry (Baum and Jamison 2011).

Particularly the Italian and French newspapers with low circulation find themselves under pressure to win over the masses, who are hardly interested in printed news, through attractive packaging. They are helped in this endeavor by the high context culture in the Mediterranean regions, which invites a more aesthetics-driven, expressive, associative and sometimes spectacular reporting style. It explains the relative high degrees for a “sensationalistic” packaging of political news in newspapers from Italy and France (particularly in the regional and weekly press). The newspapers of the other countries – maybe with the exception of Great Britain – do not rely as much on it (see Figure 1). And the tendency toward “scandalization” has stayed equally high in the Italian and French press from the 1960s to the 2000s. Because this – as is the case with sensationalism – constitutes a more or less unchanged constant over time (see Figure 2), communication culture suggests itself as explanatory factor.

Italy stands out through the highest sensationalism levels for the topics of ethnic minorities, crime, environment, political parties, politicians, trade unions, media, churches and judiciary (in all newspaper types). It shares equally high sensationalism values for terrorism and social movements with France. All these topics are reported in a bit more detached and unagitated tone in the other countries, which seems to confirm the role of a “more rational” (low context) communication culture – but also of a less polarized political culture – in the Anglo-American and Germanic-corporatist systems.
At first sight, there is no difference with regard to the question about which topics are most frequently scandalized. In all six countries, most frequently scandalized are political corruption, crime and social problems. At second sight, it emerges that in Italy and France (but also in Great Britain), often the media themselves are the focus of scandalized reports. This indicates a more controversial “political” role of the media of these three countries.

The sharp increase of scandal coverage in Great Britain can be traced to a broadening of the thematic spectrum: especially in the sectors political parties/politicians, financial/economic matters as well as society/crime, the British journalists have over time increasingly sought and found more scandalized news (which by the way is similar to what U.S. journalists did). This confirms our suspicion that growing commercialization and professional autonomy – in interaction with a tabloid tradition – are driving factors behind the broadening of the event horizon that is scandalized. As far as scandal coverage in France is concerned, scholars have previously assumed that investigative journalism arrived considerably late there (Chalaby 2004). Based on our data, this is true for *Le Monde* and *Quest France* but not for the weekly *L’Express* which has always had scandal coverage.\(^{(5)}\)

Furthermore, our data supports the findings of Benson and Hallin (2007) which have also detected a surprisingly high number of politics-critical articles in the French press. Additional assumptions according to which scandal coverage in France– different from the Anglo-American sphere – tends to “bark” but “rarely actually bites” (Benson 2010, 16) or gives the impression of an investigation only through the way it is packaged (Marchetti 2009, 379) but is actually not initiated by journalists but the judiciary cannot be confirmed through our data. We were also not able to examine the assessment that scandal coverage in Italy is often guided by political parallelism and intends, through biased reporting, primarily to damage the opposite political side (Poletti and Brants 2010, 334), but it seems plausible.

In the German and Swiss press, except for a few unsystematic blips,\(^{(6)}\) reporting is, as expected, less sensationalistic and scandalized, due to the lesser importance of commercialization, tabloidization and high context culture. The stronger presence of a consensus culture (including power sharing, separation of power between legislative and executive, proportional representation, and compromise or cooperation between opposing forces; see Lijphart 1999) seems to have a diminishing effect.

**Relating a Focus on Common People and Politicians’ Private Lives to Contextual Conditions**

The readiness for emotionalization as seen in Figure 3 is often apparent through journalists giving their stories a human face (see Figure 4). The “human narrative becomes the way to connect with the reader,” is a quote attributed to a *New York Times* journalist by Benson (2010, 8). Conceptually linked to human interest coverage, the common people narrative in Anglophone spheres is deemed an important “form of serious (or light) entertainment” which is used “to attract the largest possible audiences” (Benson 2010, 16–17). The growing use of common people narratives in the American and British press lets us trace it back in these two countries to the commercialization factor. But it has also been used increasingly in the French press – apparently based on the similar motive to make political news more attractive for those less interested. (It can hardly be traced back to the communication culture; for that, the increase is too sharp and the Italian press affected too little.) But it is certainly not a transnationally uniform strategy. On the contrary – and such is at least the argument made by Benson (2010, 8) – the German press instead prefers “reasoned debates among elites” and the Italian press “the presentation of opposing party viewpoints.”

While one can see the focus on common people as one side of the personalization coin, it is clear that the other side is the presentation of public figures as private persons. Here it is also the British, American and French press that have recently followed this trend most
strongly (see Figure 5). The so-called privatization is also deemed a strategy “to make political coverage more appealing,” and it is seen as an instrument of infotainment traced back mainly to commercial motives of the media (Langer 2010; Jebril Albaek, and De Vreese 2013). Our findings confirm almost perfectly the results of a content analysis by Stanyer (2013) which, for the time period from 1995 to 2009, also came to the conclusion that the level of publicity that politicians’ private lives receive is highest in Great Britain and the United States, followed by France, then Italy and finally Germany (see Stanyer 2013, 56, 153). Our findings furthermore confirm the findings of Langer (2010) and Kuhn (2014) according to which this type of coverage in the British and French press has increased recently. Along with these authors, we also come to the conclusion that the tendency to humanize leaders is fostered by a few politicians as part of their image management, but that it is carried out by the media especially for commercial reasons. Tabloid tradition and a culture that perceives politics as a spectacle or emotional drama can certainly be counted as supportive reasons.

Conclusion

The international comparative literature certainly harbors fears of market-driven forces of homogenization and convergence toward the Liberal Model of journalism. This should, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004, 277–279), become evident through growing sensationalism, scandalization, emotionalization, ordinary citizen perspective, and privatization of public figures. Their assumption regarding changes in Western journalism along these five trends represents the theoretical foundation for exploring these indicators individually (Figures 1 – 5) as well as combined (Table 1).

Although we find a general increase in the use of popularization techniques (Hypothesis 2a confirmed), we do not find systematic evidence for a convergence of popularization-related reporting styles in the press systems under study (Hypothesis 2b rejected). The tendency to popularize public affairs coverage is thus more widespread today than it was in the past but has developed differently across systems and time periods. This is to say that popularization strategies are neither traveling unidirectional across borders (Americanization) nor are they adopted in identical ways (convergence), but they are used in differing shapes and intensities according to contextual conditions such as level of commercialism, length of tabloid tradition, kind of communication cultures, degree of professional autonomy, or type of medium. We can hence confirm and clarify the skepticism toward the convergence thesis as expressed in some earlier studies (Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, and Aalberg 2012; Nielsen 2013; Weibull and Nilsson 2010).

The differing context conditions became relevant for the interpretation of the findings regarding the first hypothesis which was only partially confirmed. While we were able to relate the intensive use of some of the five popularization techniques in the Anglophone markets with social acceptance for popular culture (tabloid tradition), a high degree of journalistic autonomy (oriented toward news values instead of political values) and commercialism (oriented toward audiences instead of elites), the intensive use of some other of the five popularization techniques corresponded to the social acceptance for sensory stimulation and spectacularization in media discourse (communication culture), antagonistic political discourse (polarization) and accusations of nepotism (clientelism) in polarized-pluralist systems media systems. The lesser importance of many of the before-mentioned factors has contributed in Germany and Switzerland to a generally diminished cultural appreciation and economic prospect of success for the “tabloid form” (Esser 1999; Udris and Lucht 2014). Particularly aspects of commercialism play a versatile role. The fact that, for instance, readers in France, Britain and Italy buy their papers at news stands (instead of
having long-term subscriptions as in Germany) means that the economic need to popularize news is not distributed evenly (see Newman and Levy 2013, 42).

Finally, the clear confirmation of the third hypothesis indicates that the internal homogeneity of media outlets located in the same country must not be overestimated. The growing differences between media types within each of the countries oblige comparativists to apply an ever greater care to the design of national-representative media samples. We were able to show (as expected by Hypothesis 3) that the specific requirements of weekly newspapers journalism are in particular susceptible to blending political news with popularizing elements. From this we can expect an increase in popularization strategies in the Online Age where image and aesthetics driven delivery modes mix with competitive pressures to offer “additional attractions” to politically less interested consumers. For comparative communication research one may conclude that daily newspaper journalism still seems to continue to reflect in a relatively reliable way the specific news culture of a given country (despite the recently growing divergence between national and regional papers).

A central goal of this study has been to introduce a new five-item-based measurement of popularization in the news. It has been integrated in a research design that combines cross-temporal, cross-national and cross-organizational comparisons in an effort to provide a more nuanced picture of long-term transformations of news and their characteristic correspondence to contextual conditions. To examine causality we used case-specific analytic narratives to uncover characteristic relationships between relevant variables. Our explanatory section was thus not guided by the question, Can it be statistically tested? (it could not for lack of data) but Is it useful? (for understanding relevant patterns and developing further a research program on the basis of heuristic power). We sincerely believe that our index-based study provides relevant insights and stimulating impulses for comparative research in political news and media systems.

Of course, we would have wished for bigger media samples (including television) in the six countries to be able to further differentiate and generalize the results. This was not possible due to various constraints. We have made an effort to point out path-dependent developments that news cultures have taken in the past and which future studies might find helpful to take as starting points for investigating further some of the issues raised here by using more diverse media samples to account for increasingly fragmented news environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

1. The item with the lowest factor loading is privatization (0.27) which occurs least often while all others range between 0.55 and 0.77. Cronbach’s alpha for the five-item index is 0.53. A hypothetical second component would have an Eigenvalue of $\lambda = 0.9$ explaining only a fifth (20%) of the variance. Please note that for PCA, Cronbach’s alpha and the ANOVAs in Table 1 we included also stories on foreign scandals in order to consider the widest possible number of cases whereas Figure 2 is based on domestic scandals only.

2. We created an aggregate popularization index for each story that sums up the five dichotomous variables and ranges (based on a standardized formula) from 0 to 1. The following formula was applied: $(x_i - \text{min}[\text{th}]) / (\text{max}[\text{th}] - \text{min}[\text{th}])$; $x_i$ refers to the empirical value of the aggregate popularization index $x$, $\text{min}[\text{th}]$ to the minimal
theoretical value of the aggregate index (here 0), and max[th] to the maximal theoretical value (here 5).

3. Two-way ANOVAs with only daily newspapers (regional and national) yielded in 21 out of 24 measurements stronger *country* effects than *interaction* effects (country X newspaper type). When weeklies are added, *country* effects are strongest in 11 and *interaction* effects are strongest in 13 out of the 24 measurements (as expressed by partial eta squares). We came to 24 measurements because we ran in each of the four decades ANOVAs for the five popularization techniques as well as the composite popularization index (4 times 6 equals 24).

4. The exceptionally high level of sensationalist news in the German press in 1994/95 was triggered by an unusual concentration of regional elections (“super election year” of 1994) and the atrocities of the Bosnian war reported in that period.

5. According to Marchetti (2009) and Van den Blink and Kruk (2005), in France only *L'Express* and to some extent *Le Monde* (and of course *Le Canard Enchaine*) are interested in true investigative reporting. The fact that *L'Express* and *Le Monde* are both in our sample explains the increased scandalization values for France.

6. The exceptionally high level of emotional news in the Swiss press in 1994/95 was triggered by an unusually high number of Asylum seekers from Bosnia and other war regions (related topics: “social problems”, “war”, “ethnic groupings”, “politicians”).
REFERENCES


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Frank Esser (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research, University of Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: frank.esser@uzh.ch
FIGURE 1
Sensationalization in News Stories per Press System

N=6129 stories from three news outlets per country; intensity of using sensationalism can vary between 0 (not used in a newspaper’s average story at all) to 1 (used in every political story of newspaper).
FIGURE 2
Scandalization in Domestic News Stories per Press System

N=3776 stories from three news outlets per country; intensity of scandalizing domestic events can vary between 0 (not used in a newspaper’s average story at all) to 1 (used in every political story of newspaper). Stories reporting foreign scandals are excluded here.
Figure 3

Emotionalization in News Stories per Press System

N=6128 stories from three news outlets per country; intensity of using emotionalization can vary between 0 (not used in a newspaper’s average story at all) to 1 (used in every political story of newspaper).
FIGURE 4
Common People Narratives in News Stories per Press System

N=6113 stories from three news outlets per country; intensity of using common people narratives can vary between 0 (not used in a newspaper’s average story at all) to 1 (used in every political story of newspaper).
FIGURE 5
Privatization in News Stories per Press System

N=6121 stories from three news outlets per country; intensity of privatizing public figures can vary between 0 (not used in a newspaper’s average story at all) to 1 (used in every political story of newspaper).
### TABLE 1

**Popularization in News Stories, as Expressed by a Five-Item “Popularization Index”**

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**Average**

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**Standard Deviation**

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**Coefficient of Variation**

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Total N = 6134 articles. Table shows average frequencies of “sensationalization”, “scandalization”, “emotionalization”, “personal narratives” and “privatization” as expressed by a joint index that ranges from 0 to 1, meaning that these content features may not be used at all (=0) or in every political story (=1). Top part of table presents four univariate ANOVAs at national level; bottom part four univariate ANOVAs at organizational level. Means with different superscript letters within a decade are significantly different at the p < .001 level; means with the same superscript within a decade are not statistically different (based on post-hoc Dunnett’s T3 test for unequal group variances at p < .05 level). Statistically significant differences between two points in time (1960s & 1970s; 1970s & 1990s; 1990s & 2000s) are indicated by asterisk, meaning: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.