

## ***Auntie Knows Best? Public Broadcasters and Current Affairs Knowledge***

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Public service broadcasters (PSBs) are a central part of national news media landscapes, and are often regarded as specialists in the provision of hard news. But does exposure to public versus commercial news influence citizens' knowledge of current affairs? This question is investigated in this article using cross-national surveys capturing knowledge of current affairs and media consumption. Propensity score analyses test for effects of PSBs on knowledge, and examine whether PSBs vary in this regard. Results indicate that compared to commercial news, PSBs have a positive influence on knowledge of hard news, though not all PSBs are equally effective in this way. Cross-national differences are related to factors such as *de jure* independence, proportion of public financing and audience share.

The availability of news about current affairs, both domestic and international, is essential for fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. People rely on news about the world around them in order to participate in democratic governance, but also to make basic choices about how to live from one day to the next. Economic news can help us decide whether to save or spend; consumer news helps determine the scale of our purchases; environmental news can change not just our consumer behaviour but what we do at home as well.<sup>1</sup> In short, news matters.

The belief that easy access to news strengthens the democratic process has been a central justification for public service broadcasting (PSB). The argument is as follows. Commercial media need audiences and advertisers to survive; market incentives lead to the overproduction of content that is popular, and a lack of supply of the kind of information that meets the requirements above. Commercial broadcasters may be beholden to advertisers, and/or may show partisan biases. PSBs, funded largely if not

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., R. Lance Holbert, Nojin Kwak and Dhavan V. Shah, 'Environmental Concern, Patterns of Television Viewing, and Pro-Environmental Behaviors: Integrating Models of Media Consumption and Effects', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47 (2003), 177–97; Stuart Soroka, 'Good News and Bad News: Asymmetric Responses to Economic Information', *Journal of Politics*, 68 (2006), 372–85.

entirely through public funds, are not vulnerable to market forces, and are required to be impartial and fair on political matters (though there is some variance here, which we discuss below). In short, PSBs are intended to help citizens get more of the information they need, particularly information that commercial media cannot or will not provide.

Whether PSBs regularly achieve this objective is not clear. There are real differences in the funding, independence and audience share of PSBs across countries to be sure.<sup>2</sup> And the funding crises that many PSBs have experienced in recent years suggest that politicians and publics are somewhat sceptical about the role these broadcasters can (and should) play in the future.<sup>3</sup> Public broadcasters have also been subject to a range of negative stereotypes related to inefficiency, aloofness, and pretention. In Britain, the latter two sentiments are perhaps best captured by the tongue-in-cheek ‘Auntie’ nickname, sometimes applied to the BBC. Indeed, the well know mantra of PSBs, to inform, educate and entertain, also comes across as somewhat antiquated in a modern digital media environment in which the ability to satisfy our information needs seems nearly limitless.

It is clear that the number of news sources competing for the consumer’s attention has increased dramatically. Today, the typical citizen in the developed world decides not just which medium(s) to use for news, but also decides between many different newsrooms offering coverage of daily events. There are so many sources that we cannot possibly attend to all of them; moreover, citizens are heavily constrained in the amount of time they can or want to spend acquiring current affairs information in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Few citizens, then, get news from even a wide range of the available sources. Contemporary patterns of news consumption are thus highly specialized and increasingly non-random.

It is in this context that this article explores the impact of public versus commercial television news exposure on citizens’ knowledge of current affairs. More specifically, we investigate the proposition that public service broadcasters produce higher levels of knowledge about domestic and international affairs than do commercial broadcasters. We test this proposition across six countries with varying media landscapes, and in so doing are able to also examine the possibility of cross-national variance in the impact of PSB versus commercial broadcasters – heterogeneity based on factors related to the national media systems, including the proportion of public financing, daily audience share and independence of PSBs. In short, we seek to determine whether exposure to different

<sup>2</sup> See Chris Hanretty, ‘Explaining the De Facto Independence of Public Broadcasters’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 40 (2010), 75–89; Johannes Bardoel and Leen d’Haenens, ‘Reinventing Public Service Broadcasting in Europe: Prospects, Promises and Problems’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 30 (2008), 337–55; Sara Connolly and Shaun P. Hargreaves-Heap, ‘Cross Country Differences in Trust in Television and the Governance of Public Broadcasters’, *Kyklos*, 60 (2007), 3–14; Mijeong Baek, ‘A Comparative Analysis of Political Communication Systems and Voter Turnout’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 53 (2009), 376–93; Shanto Iyengar, James Curran, Anker Brink Lund, Inka Salovaara-Moring, Kyu S. Hahn and Sharon Coen, ‘Cross-National versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information: A Media Systems Perspective’, *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 20 (2010), 291–309.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Matthew Hibberd, ‘Conflicts of Interest and Media Pluralism in Italian Broadcasting’, *West European Politics*, 30 (2007), 881–902; Alessandro D’Arma, ‘Broadcasting Policy in Italy’s “Second Republic”’: National Politics and European Influences’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 31 (2009), 769–86; Terry Flew, ‘The Special Broadcasting Service after 30 Years: Public Service Media and New Ways of Thinking about Media and Citizenship’, *Media International Australia*, 133 (2009), 9–14; Bernie Grummell, ‘The Educational Character of Public Service Broadcasting: From Cultural Enrichment to Knowledge Society’, *European Journal of Communication*, 24 (2009), 267–85.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Annie Lang, ‘The Information Processing of Mediated Messages: A Framework for Communication Research’, *Journal of Communication*, 50 (2000), 46–70.

models of news provision – market-driven versus public-service oriented – influences the stock of knowledge people have about current affairs. Are PSBs more efficient than commercial newsrooms at informing citizens? Are all PSBs equally effective? Answers to these questions matter not just for how we understand television news, but also speak to the future provision of publicly funded versus commercially funded news (on television and otherwise) more generally.

Testing the impact of public versus commercial broadcasters on current affairs knowledge is the substantive focus of what follows, but we seek to make a methodological contribution as well. The media effects literature, at which this article is aimed, has waged a longstanding battle with the issue of selection effects – an issue which almost certainly worsens as the media environment diversifies and fragments.<sup>5</sup> Particularly where cross-sectional survey research is involved, it is widely acknowledged that attempts to link media exposure with outcome variables such as beliefs, opinions or any form of behaviour are vulnerable to reverse causality counterfactuals. In other words, it is difficult to figure out whether media exposure drives knowledge ( $X \rightarrow Y$ ) when it is also possible that knowledge leads to media exposure ( $X \leftarrow Y$ ).

Recent work has demonstrated that, particularly in the current media environment, the two effects occur simultaneously. People do learn from media, but knowledge and interest also determine which media people are exposed to.<sup>6</sup> We cannot completely resolve this issue, of course – at least not without long-term panel data, but we do discuss below the possibility that the technique of propensity score matching provides an appropriate strategy for producing somewhat more conservative estimates of media effects; that is, estimates of media effects that are somewhat less affected by endogeneity.<sup>7</sup>

Results suggest that watching PSB news programmes is related to higher levels of ‘hard’ news knowledge than is watching commercial broadcasts for the same amount of time. In other words, controlling for the differences in the audiences for public versus commercial newscasts, it appears that people tend to learn more about domestic and international affairs from following PSB news for a few hours a week than they do from following commercial media. Where ‘soft’ news is concerned – knowledge of current sporting and entertainment headlines, for instance – there is no clear advantage to getting news from public or private media sources. Thus, results do not support the contention that while PSBs focus on hard news, commercial broadcasters are the specialists for knowledge on soft news.

This is the general tendency across countries, at least. For certain countries in our sample, however, the knowledge gap between PSB and commercial media is entirely absent. In general, knowledge gaps between PSBs and commercial broadcasters are widest in countries where public broadcasters attract significant daily viewership, where the share

<sup>5</sup> Lance W. Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, ‘A New Era of Minimal Effects: The Changing Foundations of Political Communication’, *Journal of Communication*, 58 (2008), 707–31; Sendhil Mullainathan and Andrei Shleifer, ‘The Market for News’, *American Economic Review*, 95 (2005), 1031–53.

<sup>6</sup> Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle? Political Communications in Post-Industrial Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jesper Strömbäck and Adam Shehata, ‘Media Malaise or a Virtuous Circle? Exploring the Causal Relationships Between News Media Exposure, Political News Attention and Political Interest’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 49 (2010), 575–97; James Avery, ‘Videomalaise or Virtuous Circle?’, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14 (2009), 410–33; Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Jingbo Meng, ‘Reinforcement of the Political Self through Selective Exposure to Political Messages’, *Journal of Communication*, 61 (2011), 349–68.

<sup>7</sup> See online Appendix for further discussion of this point.

of PSB revenue derived from public monies is high, and where institutional rules of independence from national governments are strongest.

The first section of this article reviews the literature on the relationship between PSBs and citizen knowledge. Subsequent sections introduce our cross-national survey data, discuss the potential advantages of a propensity score analysis approach to studying media effects, and then implement that analysis. The results suggest differences across countries, and so we undertake a final analysis to make sense of these differences using cross-national media system variables. These results are discussed as they relate both to the justification for PSB, and to our understanding about the effects of media consumption more generally.

#### PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL BROADCASTERS COMPARED

The possibility of knowledge gaps resulting from exposure to primarily commercial or public newscasts presupposes that the newscasts are in fact markedly different. Where PSB news varies significantly from commercial news, the potential for knowledge effects is strong, all else being equal. If PSB and commercial news programmes are quite similar, however, differential effects on knowledge are less plausible.<sup>8</sup> When content is similar, evidence for more (or less) informed PSB audiences is quite likely to be an artefact of the audience being more (or less) informed to begin with. That said, the probability of selection effects should increase where public and commercial newscasts are substantively different –real (or perceived) differences between news providers is precisely what should lead well-informed citizens to consistently select into particular streams of news. In short, teasing out the impact of PSBs versus private broadcasters, controlling for selection effects, is difficult.

Several recent studies involving PSB and commercial media content have focused on coverage patterns related to the supply of current affairs information.<sup>9</sup> Generally, results are consistent with respect to the issue of hard versus soft news content: PSBs tend to report more hard news on average than the commercial newscasts in their markets.<sup>10</sup> Numerous case studies highlighted the well-known mantra of ‘informing, enlightening and entertaining’ that is widely associated with the institution of public broadcasting;<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> But not inconceivable, since news programming judged similar in content might still produce knowledge effects via presentation and/or framing differences from one newscast to another.

<sup>9</sup> Jochen Peter, Edmund Lauf and Holli A. Semetko, ‘Television Coverage of the 1999 European Parliamentary Elections’, *Political Communication*, 21 (2004), 415–33; Toril Aalberg, Peter van Aelst and James Curran, ‘Media Systems and the Political Information Environment: A Cross-National Comparison’, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15 (2010), 255–71; Christian Kolmer and Holli A. Semetko, ‘International Television News: Germany Compared’, *Journalism Studies*, 11 (2010), 700–17.

<sup>10</sup> Although it must be noted that various studies have reported strong similarities between PSB and commercial media content in terms of news frames, source selection and audience integration among other factors. See, for example, Matthew R. Kerbel, Apee Sumaiya and Marc Howard Ross, ‘PBS Ain’t So Different: Public Broadcasting, Election Frames, and Democratic Empowerment’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 5 (2000), 8–32; Claes H. de Vreese, ‘Election Coverage – New Directions for Public Broadcasting – The Netherlands and Beyond’, *European Journal of Communication*, 16 (2001), 155–80; William Hoynes, ‘Political Discourse and the “New PBS”’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7 (2002), 34–56; Peter Lunt, ‘Television, Public Participation, and Public Service: From Value Consensus to the Politics of Identity’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625 (2009), 128–38.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Debrett, ‘Riding the Wave: Public Service Television in the Multi-Platform Era’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 31 (2009), 807–27; Håkon Larsen, ‘Serving The Democracy: The Debate on Public Service Broadcasting in Norway and Sweden’, *Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning*, 49 (2008), 313–42; Håkon Larsen, ‘Legitimation Strategies of Public Service Broadcasters: The Divergent Rhetoric in

and entertainment is typically cast third of the three objectives. What this means is that, on a regular news day, people are likely to encounter a greater proportion of foreign news, domestic and international politics, and public-policy oriented reports if they tune into a PSB newscast rather than a commercial newscast. Conversely, watching commercial newscasts increases the likelihood of exposure to what is typically regarded as soft news – such as crime, human-interest, celebrity or entertainment-oriented stories.

In fact, research in this vein has pointed to heterogeneity not just across newscasts in terms of soft versus hard news, but also with respect to the placement and volume of current affairs programming airing on a typical day.<sup>12</sup> Practically speaking, the literature suggests that during prime time, when television audiences spike, citizens residing in the most commercialized media systems are least likely to encounter (hard) news programming on any free-to-air television channel. Countries where public broadcasting plays a leading role in the media system are where (hard) news programming tends to flourish during prime time. In short, the aggregate provision of news versus entertainment programming varies according to the media system.

None of this necessarily means that living in highly commercial media contexts leaves citizens with less news to select from and promotes lower levels of news consumption, of course. It is entirely possible that other media – online, radio or print – compensate for relatively low levels of prime time television news in commercial media systems. Online media content is not restricted geographically, and thus there is little to prevent citizens in more commercialized systems looking elsewhere for news if they choose to do so.

The important point is this: the more commercialized the media system is, the more proactive citizens may need to be about seeking out meaningful news on a day-to-day basis. Inadvertent or incidental exposure to the news during prime time news programmes occurs more frequently in countries where public broadcasting is a strong component of the national media system.<sup>13</sup> And where PSB and commercial newscasts are concerned, there is evidence that hard news tends to receive shorter shrift on commercial compared to public television. In a nutshell, there is evidence that the quantity and quality of news varies systematically across public and private broadcasters. The potential exists, then, for a link between PSB and knowledge (driven by some combination of exposure and selection bias).

#### CURRENT AFFAIRS KNOWLEDGE AND NEWS EXPOSURE

Much of the extant literature about news exposure and knowledge acquisition has questioned whether different media produce different effects. Until recently newspapers and television tended to dominate the debate, though a growing body of work now focuses on online news consumption. While many have found positive effects of

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Norway and Sweden', *Media, Culture and Society*, 32 (2010), 267–83; Kees Brant, 'Auditing Public Broadcasting Performance: Its Theory and Practice', *Javnost*, 10 (2003), 5–11; Bardoel and d'Haenens, 'Reinventing Public Service Broadcasting in Europe: Prospects, Promises and Problems'; Grummell, 'The Educational Character of Public Service Broadcasting: From Cultural Enrichment to Knowledge Society'.

<sup>12</sup> Aalberg, Aelst and Curran, 'Media Systems and the Political Information Environment: A Cross-National Comparison'.

<sup>13</sup> On inadvertent exposure, see Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



newspaper consumption on knowledge and particularly factual information gain,<sup>14</sup> others have pointed to comprehension benefits and longer-term memory retention resulting from television news exposure,<sup>15</sup> and others still have cast a positive light on online media where integrated knowledge gain, political interest and participation is concerned.<sup>16</sup> So, clearly all media matter in one way or another. That said, most studies suggest that one's preferred news media form, or modality, is significantly related to their performance on a battery of current affairs questions.<sup>17</sup>

As noted above, previous research suggests that PSB news programming varies significantly from commercial television newscasts. At the very least, PSBs cultivate a reputation (deservedly or not) for reporting current affairs in distinct ways from their commercial rivals. Thus, compared to people who regularly watch commercial news programming, it seems reasonable to expect that those who routinely consume PSB newscasts have higher levels of hard news knowledge; conversely, PSB viewers may be less knowledgeable about soft news.

Few studies have empirically addressed this possibility of knowledge gaps resulting from exposure to public and commercial television, and within this small literature results are rather mixed. Consider some recent results from two panel studies. Using Norwegian election study participants, Jenssen finds no evidence that exposure to NRK news – from Norway's main (public) broadcaster – was more informative than following commercial news.<sup>18</sup> Another panel study in the Netherlands and Denmark involving knowledge of European Union events and leaders finds positive effects for public broadcasting in certain contexts.<sup>19</sup> Using cross-sectional Dutch Election Study data, Aarts and Semetko find strong evidence that not just knowledge but also attitudes and engagement vary according to public versus private media consumption.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Stephen Earl Bennett, Richard S. Flickinger, John R. Baker, Staci L. Rhine and Linda M. Bennett, 'Citizen's Knowledge of Foreign Affairs', *Harvard International Journal of Press and Politics*, 1 (1996), 1–29.

<sup>15</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Processing Politics: Learning from Television in the Internet Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Xenos and Patricia Moy, 'Direct and Differential Effects of the Internet on Political and Civic Engagement', *Journal of Communication*, 57 (2007), 704–18; Kajsa E. Dalrymple and Dietram A. Scheufele, 'Finally Informing the Electorate? How the Internet Got People Thinking about Presidential Politics in 2004', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 12 (2007), 96–111; Shelley Boulianne, 'Stimulating or Reinforcing Political Interest: Using Panel Data to Examine Reciprocal Effects between News Media and Political Interest', *Political Communication*, 28 (2011), 147–62; Tom P. Bakker and Claes H. de Vreese, 'Good News for the Future? Young People, Internet Use, and Political Participation', *Communication Research*, 38 (2011), 451–70.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, the impact of one medium versus that of another may have less to do with the medium itself than with the content of that medium. Knowledge effects resulting from selecting newspapers instead of television newscasts are likely to be due to the tendency for newspapers to print more relevant news for the task of answering the knowledge indicators. In this way, findings on newspapers versus television may not be very different from research focused on differences between public and commercial news programmes.

<sup>18</sup> Anders Todal Jenssen, 'Does Public Broadcasting Make a Difference? Political Knowledge and Electoral Campaigns on Television', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 32 (2009), 247–71.

<sup>19</sup> Claes H. de Vreese and Hajo Boomgaarden, 'News, Political Knowledge and Participation: The Differential Effects of News Media Exposure on Political Knowledge and Participation', *Acta Politica*, 41 (2006), 317–41.

<sup>20</sup> Kees Aarts and Holli A. Semetko, 'The Dividend Electorate: Media Use and Political Involvement', *Journal of Politics*, 65 (2003), 759–84.

While panel studies provide some real strength in terms of causality, existing work is limited in its generalizability. To our knowledge, only three (non-panel) studies have addressed the knowledge question with data from more than two countries.<sup>21</sup> All suggest that there are modest knowledge gaps based on PSB viewership. Holtz-Bacha and Norris find significant knowledge effects for public television preferences in ten out of fourteen countries.<sup>22</sup> Jenssen *et al.* find positive effects of PBS news exposure and mainly negative effects for commercial news – though most effects, but not all, are not significant when controlling for background characteristics and political interest. Popescu and Toka also report positive effects across thirty-five country cases, but only among those least informed to begin with, and the effect varies according to the broadcasting model.<sup>23</sup> In each case, results are limited to European countries, and to specific knowledge of European political issues and/or party placement on ideological scales. Generally, results point to some important differences between public and commercial broadcast news on current affairs knowledge. And the Popescu and Toka paper is one of several recent studies to focus on the influence not just of specific media outlets, but media systems on various forms of citizen engagement in public life.<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, Aalberg and colleagues' exhaustive thirty-year, six-country study suggests that the daily diet of news programming varies according to the (system-level) degree of media commercialization.<sup>25</sup> Overall, the supply of prime time news programming is greatest in countries where public broadcasters dominate in terms of audience ratings (such as Norway and Sweden) and lowest in countries where commercial media control the market (for instance, the United States).<sup>26</sup> Dual broadcasting models (for example, the United Kingdom) – in which public and private channels coexist on a relatively equal footing – fall somewhere in between when it comes to prime time news availability.

The recurring message, in short, is that simply living in more commercially-oriented (or 'liberal') media systems makes an individual less likely to be politically engaged and broadly less aware of the events occurring in the world around them.<sup>27</sup> As Aalberg and

<sup>21</sup> Christina Holtz-Bacha and Pippa Norris, 'To Entertain, Inform, and Educate: Still the Role of Public Television', *Political Communication*, 18 (2001), 123–40; Gabor Toka and Marina Popescu, 'Public Television, Private Television and Citizens' Political Knowledge', *EUI Working Papers RSCASS* (2009); Andres Todal Jenssen, Toril Aalberg and Kees Aarts, 'Informed Citizens, Media Use, and Public Knowledge of Parties Policy Positions', in Toril Aalberg and James Curran, eds, *How Media Inform Democracy. A Comparative Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 138–58.

<sup>22</sup> Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 'To Entertain, Inform, and Educate'.

<sup>23</sup> Toka and Popescu, 'Public Television, Private Television and Citizens' Political Knowledge'.

<sup>24</sup> See also: Mijeong Baek, 'A Comparative Analysis of Political Communication Systems and Voter Turnout'; Shanto Iyengar, Kyu S. Hahn, Heinz Bonfadelli and Mirko Marr, "'Dark Areas of Ignorance' Revisited: Comparing International Affairs Knowledge in Switzerland and the United States', *Communication Research*, 36 (2009), 341–58; James Curran, Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund and Inka Salovaara-Moring, 'Media Systems, Public Knowledge and Democracy: A Comparative Study', *European Journal of Communication*, 24 (2009), 5–26; James Curran, Inka Salovaara-Moring, Sharon Coen and Shanto Iyengar, 'Crime Foreigners and Hard News: A Cross-National Comparison of Reporting and Public Perception', *Journalism*, 11 (2010), 1–17.

<sup>25</sup> Aalberg, Aelst and Curran, 'Media Systems and the Political Information Environment'.

<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that the Aalberg *et al.* study does not find evidence of cross-national news supply convergence over the past thirty years. If anything, the opposite trend is occurring: that is, the amount of news programming offered (and consumed) in commercialized versus publicly-oriented systems is diverging if we focus on peak viewing hours and audience share.

<sup>27</sup> Though note that we should be careful not to blend individual-level and country-level hypotheses. Within countries, exposure to public broadcasting may be associated with higher levels of current affairs

Curran report, for instance, citizens who are not interested in politics and choose not to pay attention to domestic news, still manage to be relatively well informed in European countries with strong PSBs. Yet within the United States, those with little interest in politics tend to be largely uninformed about current affairs.<sup>28</sup> Put another way, where private companies dominate the news media landscape, citizens tend to be less aware of what and who is making news nationally, and also in others parts of the world. Moreover, it appears that knowledge gaps between traditionally advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society widen in more commercialized media settings.<sup>29</sup> What this all suggests is that people who are motivated to get informed are able to do so in spite of the media system in their country, but that current affairs awareness for those with fewer resources and/or weaker motivation is strongly tied to their national media context.

Ultimately, what remains unclear is not so much whether the media system plays a role in knowledge transmission (it clearly does), but to what degree PSB matters in each case. The fact is that PSBs exist in one form or another in virtually all developed countries, and they operate in varying contexts of commercialization. Yet PSBs differ widely in terms of audience share, levels and types of public funding, and institutional independence from the political process. This raises the possibility that knowledge effects resulting from exposure to commercial or public news are not always consistent. Is exposure to public broadcasting related to increases in knowledge of current affairs? Under what conditions do public broadcasters best perform the educative and enlightenment function they all profess to fulfil? We turn now to these questions.

#### METHODOLOGY

The reference country for almost all media system and knowledge research is the United States. Widely acknowledged as the prototypical commercial (liberal) media system,<sup>30</sup> however, PSB news plays a marginal role in the news diet for the vast majority of Americans.<sup>31</sup> We accordingly do not examine the impact of PSB in the United States below (given the very low number of regular PSB viewers, the American survey did not ask about PSB consumption), though we do look at American as well as Australian data to explore briefly the impact of television exposure versus newspaper readership on knowledge. Those results are included in the online appendix, and discussed briefly in the concluding section. Here, we focus on six countries for which we have comparable survey

*(Fnote continued)*

knowledge. But across countries, the existence of PSBs may or may not be associated with the provision of (and knowledge of) current affairs news. A strong PSB may increase the volume of current affairs information available on its own; it may encourage private broadcasters in the same market to present similar types of information; and/or it may encourage private broadcasters to do exactly the opposite – to focus exclusively on soft news and entertainment since the PSB takes care of the rest. The ‘net’ effect on the availability of hard news, in short, is not clear; nor is the connection between PSBs and aggregate-level knowledge across countries. See also a related discussion in the conclusions.

<sup>28</sup> Toril Aalberg and James Curran, ‘Main Conclusions’, in Toril Aalberg and James Curran, eds, *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 189–99.

<sup>29</sup> Curran *et al.*, ‘Crime Foreigners and Hard News’; Curran *et al.*, ‘News Content, Media Consumption, and Current Affairs Knowledge’, in Aalberg and Curran, *How Media Inform Democracy*.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Iyengar *et al.*, ‘“Dark Areas of Ignorance” Revisited’.



data, and in which the PSB receives a reasonable audience share: Canada, Italy, Japan, Norway, Britain and South Korea. Note that these six provide a good amount of variance where media system variables are concerned. We discuss media systems in more detail in the sections that follow.

Data for all countries was drawn from a unique survey on news exposure and political knowledge, fielded (nearly) simultaneously in 2010 across eleven countries.<sup>32</sup> Surveys in each of the six (plus two) countries used here were conducted online by YouGov Polimetrix. Details of these surveys, including survey firms, field dates and availability, are provided in the Appendix.

As noted above, a central issue in the study of media effects, particularly though not exclusively in cross-sectional data, is the problem of self-selection. PSB may well provide a greater amount of hard news information than commercial broadcasting. But it is almost certainly also true that people interested in news, and with higher levels of hard news knowledge to begin with, choose to watch PSB, while those with less interest are less likely to do so. Thus, we cannot easily tell which came first, the chicken (knowledge) or the egg (PSB exposure).

The result where statistical analysis is concerned is that the importance of media to political knowledge is, as a consequence of endogeneity, fairly easy to overestimate. Indeed, several studies, by controlling for self-selection, have rendered ostensibly positive effects for newspaper consumption on knowledge spurious because newspaper readers were knowledgeable, motivated or better educated to begin with.<sup>33</sup> Finding an appropriate way to control for the cognitive and demographic differences between media audiences is essential.

One potentially useful approach is propensity score analysis. The approach is designed to allow for more reliable causal inferences in those observational studies for which randomization was not possible.<sup>34</sup> The crux of the method is as follows: based on a number of background characteristics, captured in the ‘propensity score’, those in a treatment group are ‘matched’ to a group of similar others in a non-treatment group. The idea is to approximate randomization in treatment – to produce two relatively similar groups, one exposed to a treatment and the other not. The difference in outcomes between these two groups is then the critical test of the impact of treatment.

Comparing means across two groups is of course relatively easy; producing the groups themselves is rather more difficult. Doing so relies on a propensity score, capturing similarities in individuals across  $n$  dimensions. That score is typically produced in a regression model of the binary treatment variable. So, in the current case, we first use a probit regression model to estimate the likelihood that different individuals are exposed to public television. The results (predicted likelihoods) from that regression are the propensity score. ‘Like’ individuals, who were exposed to public television or not, where

<sup>32</sup> Three of those countries – Greece, Columbia and India – are not included here due to differences in survey methodology and data availability.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Russell W. Neuman, Marion R. Just and Ann N. Crigler, *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> The classic explications are Donald B. Rubin, ‘Matching to Remove Bias in Observational Studies’, *Biometrics*, 29 (1973), 153–83; Donald B. Rubin, ‘Estimating Causal Effects to Treatments in Randomized and Nonrandomized Studies’, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 66 (1974), 688–701; Paul R. Rosenbaum and Donald B. Rubin, ‘The Central Role of the Propensity Score in Observational Studies for Causal Effects’, *Biometrika*, 70 (1983), 41–50; Paul R. Rosenbaum and Donald B. Rubin, ‘The Bias due to Incomplete Matching’, *Biometrics*, 41 (1985), 103–16.

likeness is determined by their propensity score, are then selected into the treatment and non-treatment groups.<sup>35</sup> And the differences between the two groups in terms of outcomes (here, political knowledge) is the critical test of the impact of treatment (here, public broadcasting).

The central difficulties in employing matching methods lie in the production of the propensity score, and then the matching. In short, the estimation of a propensity score is subject to all the same problems as a regular ordinary least squares (OLS) model. Using the correct set of covariates to produce propensity scores is critical. As may happen with regular regression models, the exclusion of an important covariate opens up the possibility that estimated effects are a consequence not of treatment alone, but something else. That is, an inadequate propensity score model leaves open the possibility that the matching methods approach does not get around the problem of endogeneity.<sup>36</sup> To be clear, then: we do not claim here that matching necessarily removes the difficulties associated with endogeneity in the estimation of media effects. But a properly-specified propensity score model can yield somewhat more accurate (and often more conservative) estimates of treatment effects.<sup>37</sup> In this case, we view propensity score matching as a potentially useful way to remove some, though probably not all, of the problems associated with self-selection. It is in this way not unlike a similarly-specified regression model, though with some additional statistical advantages.<sup>38</sup>

We estimate matching below using 'pscore' in STATA.<sup>39</sup> There are a number of different matching algorithms available.<sup>40</sup> Here, we rely on radius matching;<sup>41</sup> though our results do not change fundamentally when other matching algorithms are used.<sup>42</sup> The models for

<sup>35</sup> Note, then, that unmatched individuals are dropped from matching analyses. This is of course one of the major differences between matching and more traditional approaches.

<sup>36</sup> For more thorough accounts of these issues, see, e.g., James J. Heckman, Hidehiko Ichimura and Petra E. Todd, 'Matching as an Econometric Evaluation Estimator: Evidence from Evaluating a Job Training Programme', *Review of Economic Studies*, 64 (1997), 605–54; Dan A. Black and Jeffrey A. Smith, 'How Robust Is the Evidence on the Effects of College Quality? Evidence from Matching', *Journal of Econometrics*, 121 (2004), 99–124; Charles Michalopoulos, Howard S. Bloom and Carolyn J. Hill, 'Can Propensity-Score Methods Match the Findings from a Random Assignment Evaluation of Mandatory Welfare-to-Work Programs?' *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86 (2004), 156–79; Jeffrey Smith and Petra Todd, 'Does Matching Overcome LaLonde's Critique of Nonexperimental Methods?' *Journal of Econometrics*, 125 (2005), 305–53; Kevin Arceneaux, Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, 'Comparing Experimental and Matching Methods Using a Large-Scale Voter Mobilization experiment', *Political Analysis*, 14 (2006), 37–62.

<sup>37</sup> For a similar approach, see Matthew S. Levendusky, 'Rethinking the Role of Political Information', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 75 (2011), 42–64.

<sup>38</sup> Those advantages are discussed in some detail elsewhere; see fnn. 34 and 35, as well as the online appendix. And note that in this case, just to be sure, all the results reported below were replicated using a more traditional regression approach. Results are very similar, though with a somewhat larger effect for media exposure. This is in line with the expectation that proximity matching would yield somewhat more conservative estimates; but our focus here is not to test the relative merits of proximity matching, but rather the impact of public versus private broadcasting on knowledge, and in this regard the differences across media and across countries are very similar using either approach.

<sup>39</sup> Sascha O. Becker and Andrea Ichino, 'Estimation of Average Treatment Effects Based on Propensity Scores', *Stata Journal*, 2 (2002), 358–77.

<sup>40</sup> For a particularly useful discussion, see Marco Caliendo and Sabine Kopeinig, 'Some Practical Guidance for the Implementation of Propensity Score Matching' (IZA Discussion Paper No. 1588, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Rajeev H. Dehejia and Sadek Wahba, 'Causal Effects in Nonexperimental Studies: Reevaluation of the Evaluation of Training Program', *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 94 (1999), 1053–62.

<sup>42</sup> Additional results are available upon request.

propensity scores are relatively simple, but also thorough. The ‘treatments’ investigated below are as follows: (a) public television viewing, and (b) commercial television viewing. In each case, we produce a binary treatment variable that divides the sample roughly in half, where one group watches four days or less and the other watches five days or more.

Each of these treatment variables is regressed on a series of demographic and other variables likely to affect media exposure. We include the following:

- *Age*: two dummy variables for 35–54 years and 55 and over, with 18–34 years as the residual category.<sup>43</sup>
- *Education*: an ordinal variable where 1 is primary education, 2 secondary education, and 3 tertiary education.
- *Political Interest*: an index based on self-reported interest in national news, international news and local news. In all countries, respondents are asked to rate their interest in each on a five-point scale. In each country, the index is used to produce an interest scale, recoded here to produce four categories (roughly, quartiles), and then split into dummy variables for the second, third and fourth categories, where the first tercile is the residual category.
- *Exposure to Other Media*: a continuous index, recoded into terciles by country, based on self-reported (5-point) exposure to newspapers, radio, and online news.

Propensity scores are generated country by country, rather than on a pooled basis, in order to allow for the fact that the correlates of media exposure matter differently in each country.<sup>44</sup> The magnitude of individual coefficients varies, of course; so too does the proportion of variance explained by our model. Pseudo  $R^2$  for the binary probit estimations ranges from roughly 0.05 to 0.25, for instance, with an average of about 0.12.<sup>45</sup> And to review: the idea is to match respondents based on basic demographics, interest in politics and exposure to other media; compare differences in political knowledge across two groups with similar propensities to watch public (or private) television, but where only one of those groups has actually been regularly exposed to public (private) television; and then use the estimated difference in means as the test of the impact of the treatment variables.

Political knowledge is measured using an index of between ten and sixteen knowledge questions, capturing knowledge of hard and soft news, both national and international. These knowledge questions are included in the online appendix; suffice it so say here that the questions tap a combination of hard and soft news knowledge, both domestic and international. The use of both hard and soft news items is relatively unique; as is the use of knowledge questions focused in part on events in the news at the time of the survey. International news knowledge questions were common across all surveys; domestic news stories obviously varied from country to country, but were designed to be similar in theme and difficulty. In each country, regardless of the total number of questions, the resulting cumulative knowledge index was rescaled to range from 0 to 1, where 1 reflects a correct score across all available questions. In order to account for the possibility that, despite our best efforts, the difficulty of questions varies

<sup>43</sup> Age is divided into groups, rather than used in its raw, interval-level form, in order to achieve balance for the matching procedure. That said, results do not change when the interval-level measure of age is used as a control in an OLS regression.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, for recent work exploring variations across countries in the individual-level predictors of news consumption, see Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck, ‘A Matter of Context: A Comparative Study of Media Environments and News Consumption Gaps in Europe’, *Political Communication*, 28 (2011), 110–34; Arild Blekesaune, Eiri Elvestad and Toril Aalberg, ‘Tuning out the World of News and Current Affairs’, *European Sociological Review*, 28(2010), 110–26.

<sup>45</sup> See online appendix for complete results.

somewhat from one country to the other, we use knowledge measures below rescaled to standard units (standard deviations from the mean, within each country).

## RESULTS

### *Public or Private Broadcasters: Where Should You Get the News?*

Does it matter which television channel you watch news on? The short answer is yes, but the leading public broadcaster is not the consistently better option, at least where learning about current affairs is concerned. In some countries PSB is the best option, in others countries there is little difference between public and private networks.

These points are evident in Figure 1, in which levels of overall, hard and soft news are compared across public and private news exposure treatments. The figure shows knowledge effects by country based on consumption of PSB versus commercial news, controlling for age, education and political interest and other media use. The y-axis shows the impact of treatments in standard deviations of knowledge. Statistical significance is not shown in this figure, but is included in Appendix Table A1, which shows (a) sample sizes for control and treatment groups, and (b) the estimated average treatment effect on the treated (ATTR), based on radius matching, alongside the associated standard error and *t*-ratio.

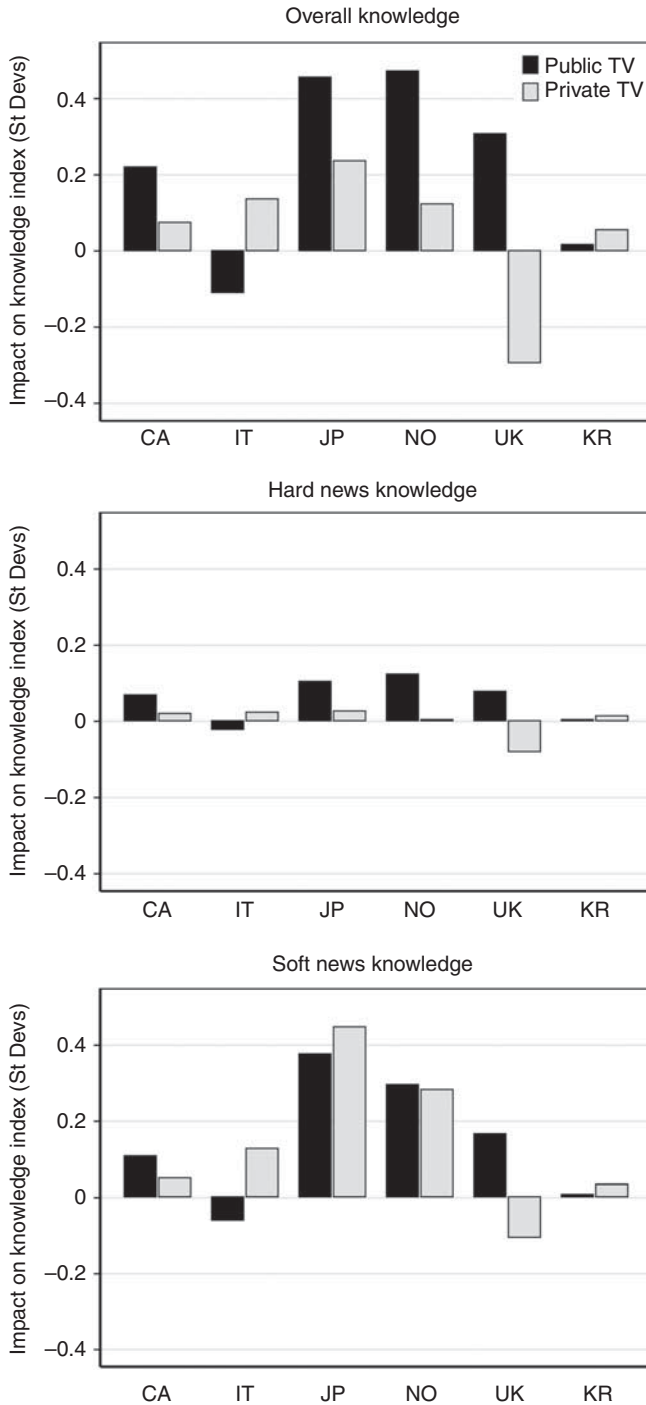
In the top panel of Figure 1, it is clear that the type of television channel watched makes a difference for overall current affairs knowledge. In Norway, and to lesser extent in Canada and Japan, exposure to news from the public channel has a stronger positive effect on overall knowledge than exposure to commercial television news. Note that in each of those three countries exposure to private television also has a positive impact on knowledge – albeit to a lesser degree than public news exposure. That is not the case in Britain. Those who watched BBC news scored higher than those who did not, but those who regularly consumed news from the leading commercial channel, ITV, scored lower. Indeed, the British knowledge gap between public and private news exposure is quite striking.

Perhaps the key point is that in all cases, save for Korea, television viewing habits – i.e., getting news from public versus private newscasts – are strongly correlated with overall knowledge. That being said, the direction of effects does not always favour public broadcasters; and the impact is still not perfect when we isolate hard news knowledge, in the second panel of Figure 1. The story for soft news is similarly not exactly as we might expect. Recall that the literature suggests that heavy consumers of commercial media will score higher on our questions about celebrity entertainers, athletes and general human-interest events. This expectation holds for Italians and, to lesser degree, for Korean and Japanese respondents. Yet in Canada and Norway there is little difference between public and private news for soft news knowledge. Most intriguingly, for viewers of the BBC in Britain, public news exposure has a considerably larger impact on a person's ability to correctly answer soft news questions than commercial media.

### *Private, Semiprivate and Public News: The United Kingdom*

For Britain only, we can incorporate semiprivate television news exposure, and we do so by adding Channel 4 news exposure to a separate country-specific analysis.<sup>46</sup> The analysis provides a unique opportunity to look at the relationship between market exposure and

<sup>46</sup> Established in 1982, Channel 4 was Britain's second commercial broadcaster, though it was not exclusively commercial – rather, it reflected (and continues to reflect) a compromise between public-service and commercial approaches. It is publicly owned, and largely commercially funded; at the same time, it has a remit of public service obligations and is regulated by the Office of Communications (Ofcom).



*Fig. 1. The effect of public versus private television*  
 Note: Based on propensity score analysis, controlling for age, education, political interest and media use.



impacts on knowledge. Our expectation is that semiprivate news exposure will fall somewhere in between the BBC and ITV. Partial market exposure means there is some pressure to generate advertising revenues through flashier (and perhaps less informative) content; that said, partial immunity from the market may lead to somewhat more substantive content as well.

We anticipate that knowledge of current affairs, particularly one's ability to correctly answer questions about foreign affairs or domestic political issues, is bolstered most by regular exposure to BBC news, followed by Channel 4 and then ITV news respectively. As depicted in Figure 2, this appears to be the case. (As above, detailed results are provided in Appendix Table A1.) For overall knowledge, BBC and to a lesser extent Channel 4 news viewing tends to be associated with the ability of the British respondents to answer the full battery of current affairs knowledge questions. As we have already seen, ITV news consumption is negatively associated with a person's ability to answer knowledge questions correctly, all else being equal.<sup>47</sup> This pattern holds not just for overall and hard news knowledge, but also (somewhat unexpectedly) for soft news knowledge as well.

### *Explaining Variance among Public Broadcasters*

The foregoing analyses point to similarities but also differences in the relationship between exposure to public broadcasters and citizens' current affairs knowledge across countries. It is not clear why, for instance, broadcasters such as the BBC, NHK (Japan) and NRK (Norway) appear to be superior to their private counterparts in this regard, when in other countries such as Italy and Korea there is very little to distinguish the public broadcaster from other media. We explore here three potential avenues for explaining these differences.

First, we consider whether differences in the financial architecture of the various broadcasters may be related to knowledge gaps. Results for the United Kingdom in Figure 2 already point in this direction – that is, they already suggest the possibility that there is a relationship between market exposure and the transfer of information. So in the top panel of Figure 3 we plot the proportion of each broadcaster's total revenue that it receives from public funds (*x*-axis) against the knowledge gaps in each country produced by exposure to public versus private news content (*y*-axis).<sup>48</sup> In other words, we are plotting the broadcaster's proportion of public funding against its relative ability to increase knowledge. The logic is that as a public broadcaster becomes more exposed to market pressure – i.e. reliant on advertising revenue – its programming begins to resemble that of its commercial rivals.

The top panel of Figure 3 suggests a modest relationship between the public funding of the broadcaster and knowledge. Public broadcasters in countries where knowledge gaps are widest tend to also have most of their revenue derived from public monies. Countries like Canada, and particularly Italy and Korea, where the public broadcasters are most

<sup>47</sup> Note that the negative coefficient for ITV news is a little peculiar. We might expect private news to not contribute to knowledge; to actually reduce knowledge is another matter. That said, the impact is not implausible: exposure to private television content may distract enough from current affairs information gleaned elsewhere that viewers know less about current affairs than they would had they not spent so much time on ITV. Of course, this may also be partly a product of self-selection – those who know less about current affairs continue to know less by watching ITV.

<sup>48</sup> All financial information applies to the 2010 fiscal year (ending 31 March 2011) and is sourced from Annual Reports published online by each broadcaster.

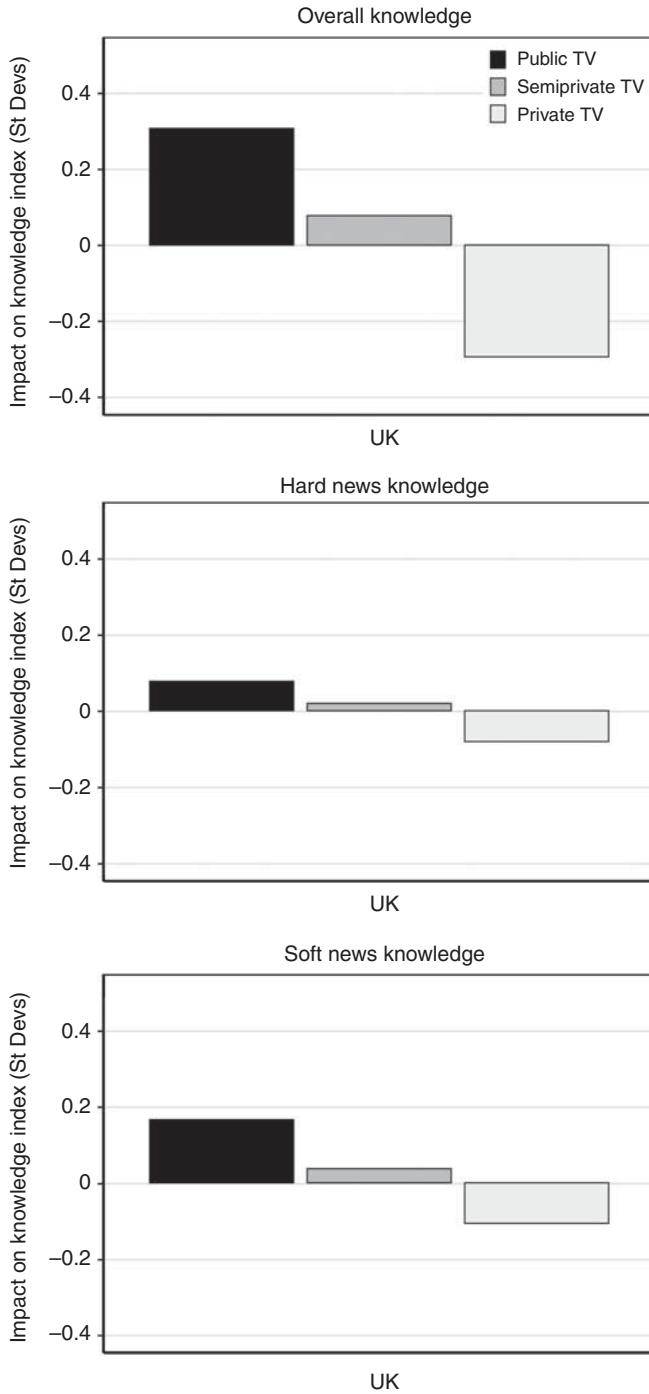


Fig. 2. The effect of semiprivate television  
Note: Based on propensity score analysis, controlling for age, education, political interest and media use.

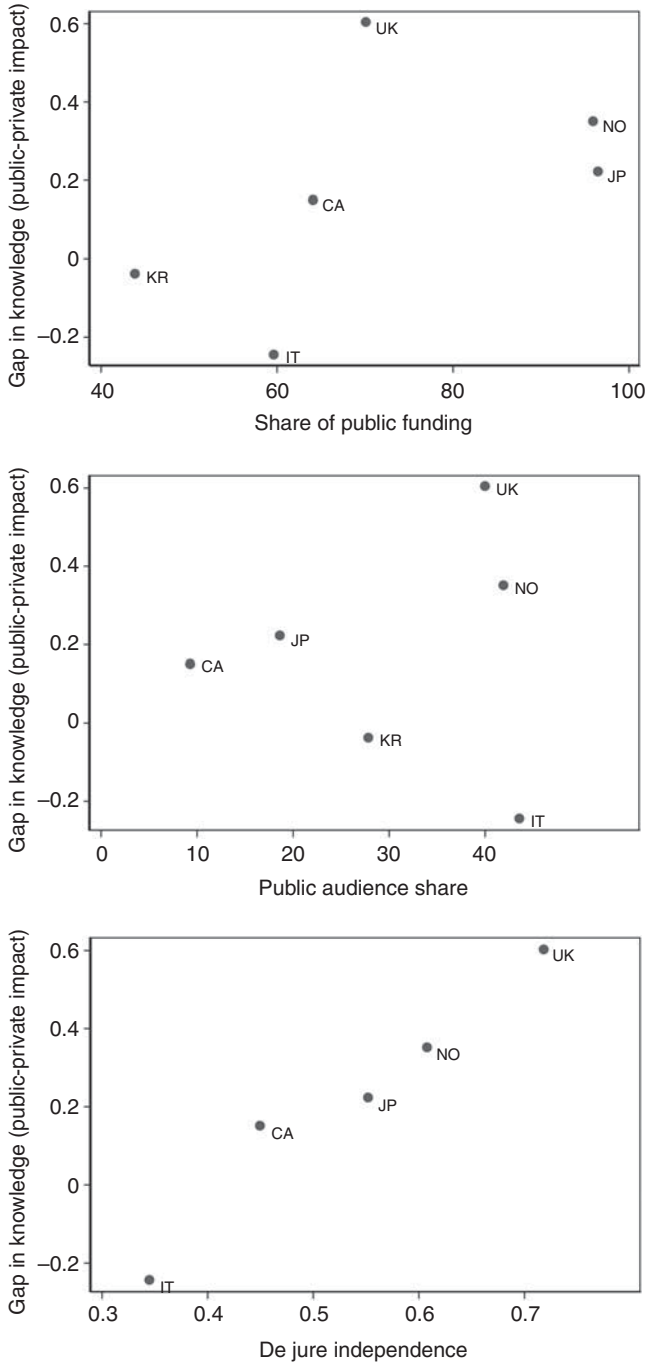


Fig. 3. System measures and the knowledge gap

reliant on commercial revenue streams are also where knowledge gaps between public and commercial television news are weakest.<sup>49</sup>

The second panel of Figure 3 examines the relationship between audience share and knowledge gaps. Audience share is measured as the percentage of total television viewing that the main public broadcaster achieves, on average.<sup>50</sup> Here we are interested in whether public broadcasters that attract large daily viewing are also those that provide the most education. One possibility is that a high daily audience share for the public broadcaster should be indicative of a public service-oriented media system. Another is that in countries where the PSB shows the most popular entertainment programmes (proxied by audience share), there is the greatest inadvertent exposure to news. Recent studies have demonstrated that relative to market-based systems, public service-oriented systems are indeed more likely to cultivate informed citizens.<sup>51</sup> Thus, we anticipate that the leading public broadcasters in this type of media environment are particularly successful at doing just that.

Results do suggest that the PSB's audience share is positively related to the level of knowledge in each country. Norway and Britain, where the public broadcaster attracts high daily ratings, are also where the knowledge gap between commercial and public news exposure is widest. Knowledge gaps are somewhat lower in Canada and the Japan, but so too is the daily audience share for public broadcasting programmes. The outlying cases are Korea and Italy, where the leading public broadcaster draws a considerable share of viewers, yet there is virtually no difference between public and commercial news in fostering current affairs knowledge.

Finally, the bottom panel of Figure 3 explores the possibility that the institutional framework of the public broadcaster influences its mandate to inform and enlighten. Specifically, we are interested in the degree of institutional independence the public broadcaster has from the political process. The reasoning is that autonomy from everyday politics should serve to enhance journalistic objectivity and generally to enable editors and journalists alike to pursue and report stories in the manner most consistent with the goals of public broadcasting.

To gauge public broadcasting autonomy we rely on a measure of *de jure* independence (legal protection) adopted from the recent work of Hanretty.<sup>52</sup> *De jure* independence (*x*-axis)

<sup>49</sup> Note that we do not distinguish between public monies derived from licence fees versus parliamentary appropriation. Though we might expect that those broadcasters reliant on compulsory, universal licence fees would be most inclined to air content with broad appeal (i.e., something for everyone/audience-driven); and parliamentary appropriation may be the funding model best suited for public broadcasters to act as 'market failure broadcasters' – filling gaps in programming created by entertainment-driven commercial media. This is purely conjecture at this stage, however.

<sup>50</sup> Here, audience share is proportion of total television viewing, on average, for each hour of prime time. Note that we include all channels available from the main public broadcaster in each country. Thus in Britain, for instance, audience share is the combined share for BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three and so forth. Note also that the standard definition of prime time varies somewhat by country, but ranges from a minimum of 18:00 to a maximum of 23:00. Audience numbers are current (2010 and 2011), as reported in the Annual Report of each broadcaster and which frequently appear in press reports within in each country. Media use is typically measured by private, independent firms such as BBM Canada, Auditel Italy, BARD UK, and Gallup Norway.

<sup>51</sup> Iyengar *et al.*, 'Cross-National versus Individual-Level Differences in Political Information'; Curran *et al.*, 'Media Systems, Public Knowledge and Democracy'.

<sup>52</sup> Note the *de jure* independence is unavailable for Korea. For the indicators of *de jure* independence, see Hanretty, 'Explaining the De Facto Independence of Public Broadcasters', and also Chris Hanretty, *Public Broadcasting and Political Interference* (London: Routledge, 2011).

is scaled from 0 to 1 and includes thirteen indicators ranging from the nature of executive appointments and dismissals to requirements for reporting to parliament and governments. As illustrated in the bottom panel of Figure 3, the relationship between *de jure* independence and knowledge gaps appears to be quite robust. The Italian public broadcaster is clearly the least independent of the broadcasters, and its impact on knowledge is less than that of the main commercial network.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as noted previously, watching news broadcast by Italian public television has a net negative impact on knowledge. At the other end of the spectrum, public broadcasters in Britain and Norway scored highest on *de jure* independence and were also responsible for the widest knowledge gaps.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What do our results suggest about the relative success of public over commercial broadcasters in producing an informed citizenry? Public broadcasting, in some countries at least, clearly matters. Controlling for self-selection as best we can, it appears as though those exposed to public television news learn more about hard news (and in some cases soft news as well) than those exposed to private television news for the same amount of time per week. This effect is markedly greater, however, in countries where the public broadcasters are funded mainly if not exclusively from public money, and where they also have *de jure* independence from government. Essentially, freedom from interference by market forces and government seems to lead to a form of public broadcasting that is markedly ‘better’ than its commercial rivals.

Might something else fill the void if PSBs were to disappear from the national media landscapes? We cannot rule out the possibility that in the absence of a strong public broadcaster, commercial stations would produce news more like PSBs. This seems doubtful, however. It is costly to assemble hard news; and news gathering in foreign countries is particularly expensive. This is perhaps why one of the main commercial news broadcasts in the United States, called ‘World News’, offers less than 2 minutes of international affairs coverage per day.<sup>54</sup> Broadcasting requires good (highly paid) journalists to produce current affairs programming, and for the most part advertisers are not very interested in hard news.<sup>55</sup> There is evidence that the quantity of public affairs news supplied by commercial broadcasters is not much affected by market conditions,<sup>56</sup> and there is also a growing sense that part-time citizen journalists, PR specialists and bloggers simply cannot replace full-time paid professional journalists.<sup>57</sup> Editing, fact-checking and job security are important parts of news production. So, independent, well-funded public broadcasting may really make a difference.

<sup>53</sup> Note, the *de jure* independence statistic for RAI corresponds with 2005 broadcasting legislation in Italy. It is possible that the impact of the Gasparri Law on RAI, enacted in the spring of 2004, is not fully captured by this statistic.

<sup>54</sup> Tove Brekken, Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud and Toril Aalberg, ‘News Substance: The Relative Importance of Soft and De-contextualized News’, in Toril Aalberg and James Curran, eds, *How Media Inform Democracy: A Comparative Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 64–78.

<sup>55</sup> James T. Hamilton, ‘The (Many) Markets for International News: How News from Abroad Sells at Home’, *Journalism Studies*, 11 (2010), 650–66.

<sup>56</sup> Philip M. Napoli, ‘Market Conditions and Public Affairs Programming: Implications for Digital Television Policy’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 6 (2001), 15–29.

<sup>57</sup> Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that will Begin the World Again* (Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010).



Another possibility is that news reading is more educative than news watching. If this is true, the absence of a strong public broadcaster might make little difference to citizens' knowledge of current affairs; people would either learn (or not) primarily from newspapers and news websites, and PSBs would not be missed either way. Our evidence for this proposition is scant, however. As presented in the online appendix, newspaper reading is not consistently more strongly associated with knowledge (hard or soft) than is television viewing. In short, our analyses do not support the view that newspaper reading has a stronger effect on citizen knowledge than viewing news on television.<sup>58</sup>

None of this is to say that PSB is a magical elixir for countries with low levels of political knowledge. In some countries, including Japan and the United States, the public service broadcaster is regarded (perhaps justifiably) as bureaucratic and intellectually aloof. Existing work also points to real problems with reliance on public broadcasters in post-authoritarian countries.<sup>59</sup> And work on media systems (rather than individual broadcasters) suggests that variation in political knowledge might be seen as a product of the larger media system, rather than the product of individual news outlets.

We have focused here, however, on the potential differences between public and private broadcasters in producing political knowledge, across a range of six developed countries. Analyses suggest that the more PSBs come to resemble their commercial counterparts in terms of dependence on advertising revenue, the less distinguishable their effect on citizens becomes. Similarly, and perhaps most importantly, political independence appears to be a key prerequisite for PSBs ability to perform the educative task they are expected to fulfil.<sup>60</sup> Note that these patterns are based on trends from a limited number of countries – trends which cannot be confirmed statistically, and may not be generalizable given our relatively small sample. That said, this is among the most detailed individual-level cross-national studies of the impact of public versus private broadcasters to date. We are inclined to see the results in Figure 3 as, at least, strongly implying a link between the funding and content of PSBs.

Thinking more broadly, this study clearly has implications for evaluating the role of public service broadcasting. It has often been pointed out that the audience share of public broadcasters is declining as a consequence of the growth of channel competition.<sup>61</sup> Intensified competitive pressure has led, it is suggested, to a weakening of public purpose in some public channels' output.<sup>62</sup> This tradition records in effect 'the decline and fall of public broadcasting' – the title of a well-known book.<sup>63</sup>

One response to this decline literature has been to question the speed and extent of the decline. Thus, it has been argued in relation to some European and English-speaking

<sup>58</sup> In Norway and Britain, for instance, television viewing has about twice the impact of newspaper consumption on what people know about the world.

<sup>59</sup> Devra C. Moehler and Naunihal Singh. 'Whose News Do You Trust? Explaining Trust in Private versus Public Media in Africa', *Political Research Quarterly*, 64 (2011), 276–92.

<sup>60</sup> Recall also that knowledge variance between disadvantaged and advantaged groups is directly related to the broadcasting model. Disadvantaged groups in the United States perform especially poorly on knowledge indicators which suggests that gaps between groups will grow as media systems become more commercialized and/or if PSBs weaken.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Petros Iosifidis, *Public Television in Europe: Technological Challenges and New Strategies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Emily Seymour and Steven Barnett, 'Factual International Programming on UK Public Service Television, 2005' (London: Communication Research Unit, University of Westminster, 2006); Brian Winston, 'Towards Tabloidization? Glasgow Revisited, 1975–2001', *Journalism Studies*, 3 (2002), 5–20.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Tracey, *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

countries that public broadcasting's audience share has stabilized or increased where there are two or more public broadcasters; that survey evidence indicates a public willingness to pay more for public broadcasting (with the exception of Canada); and that some public broadcasters have launched successful websites.<sup>64</sup> The implication is that public broadcasting is worth supporting because it remains popular.

Another response has been to reformulate the case for public service broadcasting within the framework of neo-liberal thought. Public broadcasting, it has been argued, is worth preserving because it constitutes a still valid way of compensating for continuing market failure (a tendency towards oligopoly) or as a way of reaping positive externalities that cannot be realized fully through the market process.<sup>65</sup> Public broadcasting, in other words, has a legitimate place within a market system.

The implication of this study, in contrast, is that public broadcasting has an important role in supporting full citizenship. It suggests that the functioning and performance of public broadcasting should be evaluated not only in terms of customer satisfaction, or within the horizon of market thought, but in terms of what television can contribute to the functioning of democracy. In short, given that public affairs knowledge appears to be significantly improved through the publicly-funded provision of news (here, on television, but potentially online as well), governments' decisions about funding for public broadcasters seem in many cases to be very much like decisions about just how well informed their citizens will be.

<sup>64</sup> Chris Hanretty, *Public Broadcasting's Continued Rude Health* (London: British Academy Report, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Gavyn Davies, 'The BBC and Public Value', in Dieter Helm, Damian Green, Mark Oliver, Simon Terrington, Andrew Graham, Bill Robinson, Gavyn Davies, Jeremy Mayhew and Luke Bradley-Jones, eds, *Can the Market Deliver? Funding Public Service Television in the Digital Age* (New Barnet, Herts.: John Libbey, 2005), pp. 129–50; Andrew Graham and Gavyn Davies, *Broadcasting, Society and Policy in the Multimedia Age* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2001).

APPENDIX TABLE A1 *Proximity Matching Results*

	<i>N</i>		All News			Hard News			Soft News		
	treat	control	ATTR	se	<i>t</i> -ratio	ATTR	se	<i>t</i> -ratio	ATTR	se	<i>t</i> -ratio
<i>Public TV</i>											
CA	302	457	0.221	0.074	2.975	0.067	0.020	3.265	0.106	0.075	1.422
IT	485	419	-0.109	0.070	-1.572	-0.024	0.014	-1.714	-0.060	0.069	-0.867
JP	549	377	0.455	0.070	6.544	0.103	0.017	6.132	0.376	0.074	5.112
NO	575	347	0.471	0.070	6.754	0.123	0.019	6.619	0.295	0.075	3.954
UK	664	233	0.307	0.084	3.643	0.078	0.021	3.670	0.165	0.089	1.857
KR	537	655	0.016	0.059	0.265	0.004	0.012	0.300	0.007	0.059	0.116
<i>Private TV</i>											
CA	401	351	0.072	0.077	0.929	0.020	0.022	0.919	0.049	0.078	0.624
IT	231	644	0.136	0.078	1.754	0.021	0.015	1.378	0.128	0.077	1.661
JP	768	151	0.235	0.111	2.105	0.026	0.026	0.976	0.449	0.113	3.968
NO	566	347	0.122	0.075	1.624	0.005	0.020	0.241	0.281	0.076	3.686
UK	328	549	-0.295	0.070	-4.213	-0.080	0.018	-4.560	-0.105	0.070	-1.506
KR	439	753	0.055	0.062	0.896	0.012	0.012	0.928	0.033	0.061	0.535
<i>Semiprivate TV</i>											
UK	141	726	0.078	0.096	0.813	0.020	0.023	0.868	0.037	0.100	0.372

*Note:* Propensity scores are based on probit models with age, education, political interest and other media use as independent variables. Results are estimated using radius matching method.