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“To Entertain, Inform, and Educate”: Still the Role of Public Television

CHRISTINA HOLTZ-BACHA and PIPPA NORRIS

The introduction of commercial television in West European countries during the 1980s was accompanied by a fierce discussion about the consequences of ending the monopoly of public broadcasting. While proponents of market liberation argued that the outcome would produce greater diversity of contents and audiences, opponents feared negative consequences from this development. Against this background, the study reported here analyzes data from the EU member states to assess the relationship between preference for either public or commercial television and political knowledge. Findings show that in most countries preference for public television goes hand-in-hand with greater knowledge of EU political matters. The conclusion considers the consequences of these findings.

Keywords European Union, political knowledge, public broadcasting, television news, television privatization

One of the most dramatic changes transforming broadcasting in postindustrial societies has been the growth of commercial competition. Two decades ago, all European countries had a monopoly of public channels except for Britain and Italy (with dual systems) and Luxembourg (all commercial). In 1980, there were 36 public and 5 private channels in Europe. The common aim of public television in the Reithian tradition was to serve the broader public good, combining popular mass entertainment with serious informational programs about public affairs. By 1997, the balance of stations was reversed: Only three countries had purely public national channels (Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland), and across Europe there were more commercial (55) than public (45) stations (Norris, 2000).

This development has fueled a fierce European debate. Visions about the commercialization of the media market went hand-in-hand with fears about the loss of the public service broadcasting ideal. Proponents who favored opening television to free competition pointed to the chance of greater diversity of outlets maximizing audience choice. Opponents often referred to the U.S. experience, equating commercialization with Americanization, and warned of negative consequences for society and the individual. One major

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concern was that entertainment programs would outweigh and marginalize informational content, leading to an impoverished public sphere. The sudden expansion of private channels produced a surge in the amount of imported television programs, mainly from the United States, which many Europeans feared could also endanger national media content production and national culture. In general, commercial television was expected to be of "lower quality" than public television, and it was believed that this might reduce standards on the public stations. A related worry was that a shrinking audience for public TV would undermine the rationale for continued financial subsidies like license fees (see, for example, discussions about commercialization in Blumler, 1992; Humphreys, 1996; McQuail & Siune, 1998; Tracey, 1998; Weymouth & Lamizet, 1996).

There is nothing new about concern over commercialization. As early as 1948, Lazarsfeld and Merton, in their classic article "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action," argued that "the social effects of the media will vary as the system of ownership and control varies" (p. 106). They also accused the U.S. media of preventing the development of a critical perspective on society: "Our commercially sponsored mass media promote a largely unthinking allegiance to our social structure" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, p. 108).

Thirty-five years later, when the debate about the introduction of commercial broadcasting revived in Europe, not much research was available that assessed the impact of private ownership on the audience. Most West European countries have allowed commercial broadcasters to enter the market. But the discussion about commercialization continues in full swing; studies have focused mainly on competition between the traditional public stations and the new commercial channels and on the consequences of this development for the content and quality of broadcasting. But what has been the impact of this development on the public, particularly their levels of information and knowledge about public affairs? Despite much intense speculation and heated debate, this topic has attracted surprisingly little systematic research and even less comparative work allowing us to generalize with some confidence across different national cultures and media systems.

To explore this important issue, this article examines survey evidence in the 15 member states of the European Union to see whether habitual watching of commercial television is consistently associated with lower levels of knowledge of politics and international affairs, as some fear, and whether public television still serves its role to educate and inform, as others hope. We first outline the previous literature and our core propositions. We then set out the Eurobarometer survey data and key concepts. Next, we describe the distribution of the public and private sector audiences, and also levels of political knowledge, across the EU. The analysis divides the European public into four groups, depending on whether they usually watch public or private TV and whether they regularly watch TV news or not. As we will see, the most striking finding to emerge from this analysis is that commercialization *does* matter. Watching public television is associated with higher levels of political information than watching commercial TV. Moreover, even with prior social and attitudinal controls, those who regularly watch public television news turn out to be the *most* informed of all European groups. In contrast, those who watch commercial TV entertainment are the least informed. While there are obvious problems in determining the direction of causality for this association on the basis of evidence from cross-sectional surveys, nevertheless the consistency of this pattern is striking. Our conclusion considers reasons for this pattern and alternative interpretations of our results.

Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

With the growth of commercialization in the 1980s, European research has focused on structural changes in the broadcasting industry and the impact of these developments on the contents of programming and, to a lesser extent, on audience viewing patterns. In the early days of media diversification when West European countries were beginning to establish dual broadcasting systems, Becker and Schoenbach (1989) addressed the question of how the media audience would “cope with plenty.” Later studies found that the new variety of channels led to an increase in the amount of time audiences spent viewing television, and it was overwhelmingly the entertainment programs that profited from this increase (e.g., for Germany, Kiefer, 1996). At the same time, with the multitude of channels, the audience share for individual programs necessarily decreased and the audience became more and more fragmented, which in turn has led to concerns about possible far-reaching effects of audience and media fragmentation on society (Holtz-Bacha, 1997b).

Previous studies of the television audience have mainly concentrated on the possible effects of commercialization on political attitudes. In a study done in the early years of the dual broadcasting system in Germany, Pfetsch (1991) found a clear relationship between preference for commercial television and low use of news and public affairs content, low political interest, low political efficacy, and a preference for materialism. In contrast, viewers of public television showed higher political interest, scored higher on political competence, and leaned more toward post-material attitudes (Pfetsch, 1991, p. 197). As Pfetsch pointed out, the question of cause and effect remains open for two reasons: Although based on panel surveys with two waves within one year, the data do not allow an assessment of changes in political orientation because these attitudes are conceived to undergo only long-term changes. Furthermore, and even more important, the preference for commercial or public television and the political attitudes under question are confounded. Viewer characteristics such as educational levels or political interest influence both the selection of programs and political orientations.

Another German study by Schulz (1998) found that preferences for commercial television channels and high attention to entertainment programs were negatively correlated with political competence, conceived as consisting of political interest and internal political efficacy. The researcher thus corroborated Pfetsch’s findings and described them as resulting from a “self-selection strategy” (Schulz, 1998, p. 532). That is, viewers with low political competence tend to avoid traditional news and public affairs programs and instead prefer entertainment offerings and so-called soft news.

However, further analysis of the relationship between media use and political attitudes produced findings that contrast with those of earlier research. While several studies conducted in Germany during the late 1980s and early 1990s observed a correlation between preference for entertaining media content on the one hand and political efficacy and trust on the other hand (e.g., Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Jäckel, 1991; Pfetsch, 1991), Schulz (1998), using data from the mid-1990s, observed a positive correlation between general television use and political competence. In addition, channel repertoire (the availability of a multitude of television channels) and attention to TV information were positively correlated with political cynicism even after multivariate controls. Schulz interpreted his findings in the light of the recent changes that affected the television market and their consequences for content: Because of the heightened new competition, Schulz (1998) believes that all television channels have become more negative and more sensational (p. 537). Convergence between the offerings of commercial and public channels

is suppressing the former differential effects of different channel preferences on viewers' attitudes.

Norris (1997) similarly analyzed the impact of exposure to different television news programs in the context of the 1992 British general election. She found a systematic difference by sector: Viewing public broadcasting news—*BBC2's Newsnight* and *BBC1's 9 O'Clock News*—was associated with higher levels of information, whereas viewing commercial broadcasting news—*ITV's News at Ten* or the other early evening news programs which tended to fall into the “softer” news category—generally was not. This pattern was not uniform, however, as viewing *Channel 4's 7 O'Clock News*, which provided extensive serious electoral coverage, was also associated with higher knowledge. One of the few comparative studies that has examined the impact of the type of programming viewed on knowledge of foreign affairs, Bennett, Flickinger, Baker, Rhine, and Bennett's (1996) five-country study, confirmed that watching TV news was positively associated with knowledge, while watching popular television entertainment programs showed a strong negative association with foreign affairs knowledge. While suggestive, this study did not go further to explore the influence of broadcasting sector per se on knowledge.

Thus, previous studies are suggestive but limited. Given systematic cross-national differences in public broadcasting organizations and traditions, it is difficult to know how far we may generalize from the experience of watching particular stations, for example, whether regular viewers of ZDF in Germany are similar to viewers of BBC1 in Britain, ORF2 in Austria, or RAI1 in Italy. Nor is it clear how far we can extend findings about TV's impact on attitudes such as political efficacy and trust to more general claims about its impact on levels of political knowledge and information. Many American studies have examined the impact of exposure and attention to television news on political knowledge but have not distinguished between broadcasting sectors, mostly because of the small size of the audience for public broadcasters PBS and NPR (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 178–217).

Yet, there are many reasons to believe that, despite heightened competition, private and public television may continue to differ systematically in the content of their programming and that, in turn, regular viewing of public service television, particularly public sector news, may therefore gradually have a diffuse influence on the public's knowledge of politics and awareness of international affairs. Our argument develops certain testable hypotheses based on three main assumptions, namely, that (a) public service broadcasting continues to serve a more informational role than private television stations; (b) in their news coverage, in particular, commercial TV is more entertainment oriented than public TV; and (c) there is a process of interaction between habitual patterns of media use and political knowledge.

The Informational Function of Public Service TV

When public service television was founded in Britain in 1927, Lord Reith's classic definition of the core responsibilities of the BBC was to “entertain, inform, and educate,” an ethos that was subsequently adopted widely in other European countries. As such, the duty of public broadcasters was certainly to provide popular entertainment, such as music, arts, and drama, but also to serve the public by extended coverage of public affairs, world events, and parliamentary debate. Although public television has been transformed over the years, from the wireless to the Internet Age, nevertheless these core principles continue to be reflected in the standards guiding broadcasters. In

contrast, we expect that most broadcasting stations that are totally financed through advertising are mainly interested in attracting a large audience (and thereby charging high prices to advertisers), unless a regulatory framework exists that mandates them to target minority groups. Decisions will therefore be guided by the goal of maximizing audience size. This has consequences for the overall structure of programming and the balance between information and entertainment. As a result, we expect that commercial channels will usually broadcast more programs at peak- or prime-time that are designed to attract the mass audience, such as movies, sports, game shows, telenovelas, and popular sitcoms, while in contrast public service channels will tend to give higher priority to documentaries, current affairs, news, and arts. This distinction between sectors is not watertight; for example, we would not expect this pattern to apply to commercial 24-hour news broadcasters, such as SKY News and CNN International. Some public sector channels and programs are also designed to be more mainstream and popular than others. For example, content analysis comparing the amount of coverage of international affairs across European channels in the 15 member states of the EU found considerable variations among channels within each sector, as well as differences between sectors (Norris, 2000, Figure 5.1). Nevertheless, as a working proposition we assume that there is still a distinction in programming between sectors, so that the balance of coverage will usually be more informational on public service stations and more entertainment oriented on commercial channels.

The Entertainment-Oriented Focus of Commercial TV News

Moreover, when commercial channels broadcast news and public affairs, we would expect that these programs tend to be presented in a more entertaining way. This blending of informational content and entertaining presentation has been dubbed “infotainment” and has become a major issue for research (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; see also the recent discussion between Brants, 1998, 1999, and Blumler, 1999). There has been much debate—but little systematic empirical evidence—that commercial news has certain features that are characteristic of “tabloidization,” particularly greater negativity and personalization, an increase in sensationalism, and an overall lowering of journalistic standards (see, e.g., Esser, 1999). One important feature of “infotainment” is a greater focus on domestic issues, notably human-interest stories, and a relative neglect of “hard news” about political events, policy issues, and international affairs. Studies in several European countries examining differences between public and commercial channels in the extent and manner in which they present the news have yielded ambiguous findings (e.g., for Sweden, Hvitfelt, 1994; for Germany, Bruns & Marcinkowski, 1996, and Pfetsch, 1996; for Denmark, Powers, Kristjandottir, & Sutton, 1994; for the Netherlands, van Praag & van der Eijk, 1998; see also the overview in Brants, 1998). While we surely have to acknowledge national particularities here, the heterogeneity of methods and measures used by researchers may be another reason for the disparate picture.

However, we assume that there continue to be systematic differences between the contents of news coverage by sector, with “infotainment” more commonly found on commercial channels, reflecting their need to maximize market share.

Interaction Effects

Lastly, we assume that in the long term there is a reciprocal process of interaction between patterns of media exposure and political knowledge. That is, we assume that

there may be some *selection effects* such that people who are most interested in news and informational programs may turn more often to public TV. Conversely, people who are more keen to watch action movies or popular game shows may surf more frequently to commercial channels. But we also assume that in the long term there are some *media effects* that result from this exposure. That is, where TV-watching habits are relatively fixed, and people habitually prefer either commercial or public television, repeated exposure to each sector will have a long-term cumulative effect on the audience. People who habitually watch more public TV, and especially more public TV news, will gradually come to learn more about current affairs, to be better informed about political issues, and to be more aware of global events. Thus, we assume that frequent attention to news about Berlin, Washington, DC, and Brussels will eventually increase viewers' stock of political capital, helping them to make sense of the world. We do not assume that the direction of any effects is one-way; rather, we assume interactivity between media use and cognitive knowledge.

If these assumptions are correct, then they suggest certain specific propositions that can be tested in this study. As outlined in Figure 1, we can draw a distinction between what we can term *channel effects* that result from regular exposure to public or private stations and *news effects* that result from frequency of exposure to news. First, if public service TV continues to play a distinctive role, we hypothesize that those who regularly watch public TV (irrespective of the specific program) will have higher levels of political knowledge than those who regularly watch commercial channels (*Hypothesis 1*).

Moreover, we expect that regular exposure to public service television interacts with exposure to news to maximize the conditions leading to an informed public. Thus, we hypothesize that those who watch public TV news will have the highest levels of knowledge about politics and international affairs relative to all other groups (*Hypothesis 2*). Although widely assumed, few previous studies have analyzed this proposition systematically. Moreover, the corollary is that we would expect to find that those who watch commercial TV with little news exposure will have the lowest political knowledge relative to all other groups (*Hypothesis 3*).

Lastly, given substantial differences in patterns of public service and commercial programming between countries, we expect that the size of the knowledge gaps between these groups might vary significantly by nation (*Hypothesis 4*). These propositions seem plausible, based on our core assumptions, and we now turn to examining whether the evidence supports them.

Method and Data

These propositions cannot be tested adequately within the United States, which, because of its long tradition of commercial broadcasting with only a marginal role for PBS, does

		Channel Effect	
		Prefers Public Channels	Prefers Private Channels
News Effect	Regularly watches news	Maximum	Moderate
	Does not watch news regularly	Moderate	Minimum

Figure 1. Predicted relationship between type of TV use and levels of political knowledge.

not offer enough intra-system variance for comparing the impact of either sector. The situation is different, however, in Western Europe. Since the late 1980s, developments have led to the establishment of dual broadcasting systems in most European countries, that is, a television market where commercial and public stations compete within certain regulations. Although the size of the audience for the public stations declined considerably after commercial television entered the market, in most countries public broadcasting has retained an important role and is still a serious competitor to the commercial newcomers (see, e.g., Østergard, 1997). The 15 member states of the European Union provide a suitable comparative framework because they are all postindustrial societies, sharing similar levels of socioeconomic development, political cultures, and established democratic political systems.

A note on the country classification is useful. Luxembourg never had public service broadcasting and Austria did not have a dual broadcasting system when these data were collected, so both countries are therefore excluded from the analysis. Northern Ireland, although part of Great Britain, is treated separately because the media landscape in Northern Ireland differs from the rest of Great Britain due to its geographical proximity to the Irish Republic and because of its internal political situation. In addition, East and West Germany were combined for the analysis because the television system was similar in both societies. The 14 remaining EU member states therefore offer an opportunity to study the impact of preference for public or private sector television on the attitudes and information of viewers.

Data for the study derive from the spring 1996 44.2 Eurobarometer survey. The Eurobarometer is conducted regularly in all member states of the European Union (EU). The questions for all countries are the same, involve the national languages, and may be supplemented by additional questions concerning specific national issues. The following analyses are based on a data set that was assembled between February and May 1996, with more than 65,000 interviews conducted in the 15 EU member states. The national samples are representative of the respective populations. The cross-national span of the Eurobarometer and its large sample size make it particularly suitable for our purposes.

Awareness of the European Union and its institutions was used as the dependent variable reflecting political knowledge of international affairs. This is admittedly only one relatively narrow type of political knowledge; for example, we were unable to tap into matters like awareness of citizenship rights and civic affairs, social and economic issues, or party policies, examined elsewhere (Norris, 2000, pp. 208–232). Nevertheless, within Europe an awareness of basic facts like the number of EU member states, the name of the president of the European Commission, or the name of the European currency (the euro) does provide an indication of some fundamental aspects about the European Union that are arguably necessary prerequisites for further political engagement. Knowledge of the European Union and its institutions is based on an additive scale of the answers to 10 questions that asked respondents about EU related facts such as the current number of states in the EU. Answers were coded 1 for correct and 0 for wrong, so that the highest value that could be reached on the knowledge scale was 10 (original questions are provided in the Appendix). The scale produced a normal distribution.

Respondents were also asked for their preferred national television channel. Channels for each country were subsequently identified as either public or commercial, allowing for a categorization of individual channel preference. Respondents were also asked how often they watched the news on TV, using a five-point scale ranging from never (1) to every day (5). Similar items monitored use of other media, including daily

newspapers and radio news. These frequency measures are limited, and ideally it would have been highly desirable to be able to distinguish between the overall amount of TV viewing of all types of programs and attention to political news, but these items were not available in the Eurobarometer survey, so this matter will have to await further research.

An ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression model was computed on the knowledge scale. For controls, several sociodemographic variables that are known to be influential either for media use or for political attitudes were included, as well as an indicator for political interest and a 10-point left-right scale that measures where a respondent places her or his views about political matters (1 = left, 10 = right). Details of coding are given in Table 1. The multiple regression model controls for the influence of other variables simultaneously. That is, if we find a significant correlation between the dependent variable (knowledge) and media use, this relation holds true while, for example, education and other sociodemographic variables that might influence the relation between knowledge and media use are held constant.

Table 1
Model predicting political knowledge, EU

	b	Standardized β	Coding
Structural variables			
Gender	.828	.17	Male (1), female (0)
Age	.008	.06	Years
Education	.603	.20	Standardized 3-pt. scale
Income	.184	.09	Standardized household income
Attitudinal variables			
Left-right ideology	.019	.02	10-point scale left (1) to right (10)
Political interest	.545	.15	Frequency of political discussion
Media variables			
Preference for public TV	.402	.09	Public (1), commercial (0)
Frequency watch TV news	.054	.02	From never (1) to everyday (5)
Frequency read newspaper	.266	.14	From never (1) to everyday (5)
Frequency listen to radio news	.138	.09	From never (1) to everyday (5)
On-line	.128	.01	On-line user (1), not (0)
Constant		-2.11	
R^2		.23	

Note. All coefficients are significant at $p < .01$. Political knowledge is measured on a 10-point scale as discussed in the text.

Source: Eurobarometer 44.2, spring 1996, N. 65178.

Findings

Preferences for Public TV

First we describe the distribution of preference for either public or commercial television in EU countries. The results shown in Figure 2 reflect the diverse media environments that the audience encounters in the EU member states. The countries differ in the time when they introduced commercial broadcasting, leading to different stages in the development of the dual broadcasting system in different countries. In addition, although most EU member states today have a dual broadcasting system with commercial and public television competing for their audience, the market in some countries has many more channels than in others. This is a consequence either of a country's geographic situation, with channels from neighboring countries being available either through cable or by satellite (e.g., Belgium), or of the size of the population that provides a more or less lucrative advertising market (e.g., Germany).

Countries in Figure 2 are ranked according to the percentage of viewers naming a public channel when asked for their preferred television station. Denmark ranks first, with only about 7% of the respondents preferring commercial TV. That is easily explained by the fact that Denmark had not yet introduced a terrestrial commercial television on the national level. The Nordic channel, broadcast for Scandinavia from London via satellite, is the only commercial channel that is available nationwide (Petersen & Siune, 1997). The situation in Ireland, ranking second, is similar insofar as the commercial channels available in the country (ITV and Channel 4) are broadcast from Great Britain (Kelly & Truetzschler, 1997). Thus, with the overwhelming majority of Irish respondents stating a preference for public service television, it becomes clear that this also expresses the audience's allegiance to national television in contrast to British commercial offerings.

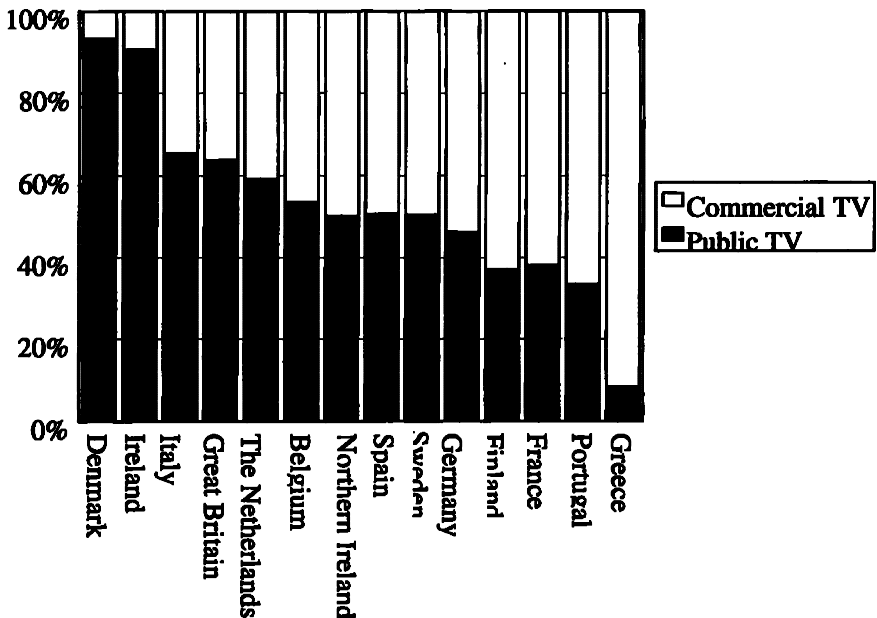


Figure 2. Preference for public or commercial TV.

In Italy about one third of the audience prefers commercial stations to public television. With the exception of Britain, no other EU member state has such a long tradition of dual broadcasting as Italy. Commercial television was introduced in Italy in 1976 (Mazzoleni, 1997), necessarily leading to a loss in audience shares for the public service channels, although 20 years later a majority of the audience still prefer public TV.

Turning to the other end of the rank order, we find Portugal and Greece, together with Finland, France, and Germany, among the countries where the majority of viewers prefer commercial over public television. As Southern European countries, Portugal and Greece belong to the group of so-called TV-predominant nations where the electronic media plays a much more important role than newspapers (Norris, 2000). The countries of Northern Europe and Scandinavia in particular are newspaper nations, with a high ratio of papers per inhabitants. The marginal role of public television in Greece may be explained by the fact that these state-owned channels are controlled by the government and may therefore be discredited, reflecting in part the country's recent history. In addition, Greek public channels failed to adapt themselves to the new competition in the television market (Dimitras, 1997). While commercial broadcasting was introduced in Greece at the end of the 1980s, the dual system in Portugal did not develop before the early 1990s. However, a majority of the Portuguese TV audience already prefers commercial over public television, and this is due to the success of only one commercial channel. It is open to discussion whether this pattern was influenced by the role of the broadcasting media during the dictatorial regime from 1926 until the revolution in 1974 and the subsequent nationalization of broadcasting in Portugal (Nobre-Correia, 1997).

Like the other South European countries such as Portugal and Greece, Italy also is a TV-dominated country. However, unlike Portugal and Greece, the data in Figure 2 show that a majority of Italians prefer the public channels. This exception to the general "rule" indicates that several factors influence preference for public or commercial channels in a given country. In Italy, where commercial TV is closely associated with media tycoon and politician Silvio Berlusconi, there may be political reasons for some viewers to prefer the public channels. Also, the successful adaptation of the public channels to commercial formats may have helped them to keep their audience.

Finding that a majority of Finnish viewers prefer a commercial channel comes as a surprise. As with the other Nordic countries, Finland is regarded as a newspaper nation. However, commercial television in Finland has a tradition dating back more than 10 years. It was introduced in 1986 when the MTV group started broadcasting at first as a window program on the public channel until it got its own channel in 1993 (Tapper, 1997). France has a somewhat longer tradition of commercial television. Privately owned television began in 1984 when the subscription channel Canal Plus entered the market. In 1987, the public channel TF1 was privatized, quickly became a success, and finally gained the highest market share among French national television channels (Palmer & Sorbets, 1997).

Germany has become the most diverse TV market in Western Europe. With a comparatively long tradition of privately owned broadcasting dating back to 1984 and a central geographic situation allowing for foreign channels to broadcast into the country, the German audience today can choose from many channels. Although the traditional public service channels are still comparatively strong, commercial television has quickly gained the major share of the market (Holtz-Bacha, 1997a; Kleinsteuber, 1997).

Hence, beneath the data in Figure 2 are diverse reasons that must be considered when interpreting audience preferences in each country. These reasons include historical and political factors as well as structural characteristics. In addition, "public service

television” varies from public stations that are independent of the state (e.g., the BBC), to public service stations with some state influence (as for a long time in France), to completely state-owned television (as in Greece).

Cross-National Levels of Political Knowledge

There are also substantial cross-national differences in levels of knowledge about politics and international affairs that are evident in the individual EU member states. As shown in Figure 3, Luxembourg ranks first. This result can be attributed partly to the fact that the president of the European Commission at the time of the survey was from Luxembourg, so the answer to the question asking respondents to identify the EC president was local knowledge in this country. Moreover, some of the core EU institutions such as the Parliament are located in Luxembourg, which may have led to a particular awareness for these matters and helped respondents identify the location of most European institutions (Luxembourg was one of two possible correct answers). Comparisons across different dimensions of knowledge examined elsewhere suggest that countries which ranked relatively poorly on awareness of EU institutions also displayed little knowledge of the euro (Norris, 2000, pp. 224–225), suggesting a systemic pattern at work.

Without further analyzing the factors that influence knowledge levels in the different countries, it is difficult to find a pattern that underlies the findings presented in Figure 3. However, as to the question raised in this article, it is interesting to note that Austria and Denmark rank second and third. These are countries where commercial television did not exist at all or played only a marginal role at the time of the survey. A wide range of factors, well outside the scope of this study, may plausibly explain some of these variations in awareness of European politics and institutions, including social background factors such as levels of higher education as well as attitudes such as pro-European Union sentiment and the salience of Europe on the national policy agenda (Niedermayer & Sinnott, 1995; Norris, 2000).

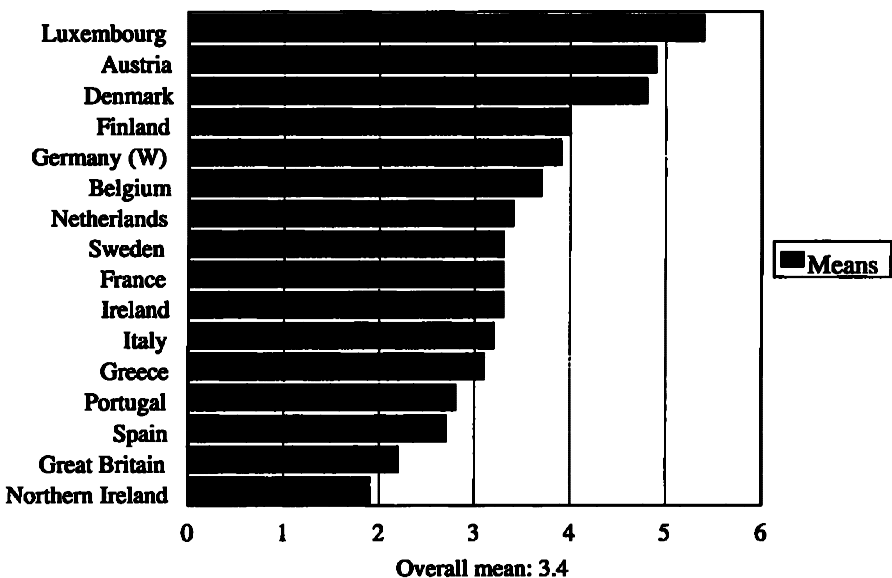


Figure 3. EU knowledge by country.

Preference for Public TV and Political Knowledge

To move to the issue at the heart of this study, what is the relationship between regularly watching public sector television and awareness of politics and international affairs? The simple mean scores, without any prior controls, indicate that preference for public TV was positively associated with higher knowledge: Those who preferred public TV scored almost 4 correct answers out of 10, as compared with a score of 3 out of 10 for those who preferred commercial TV. The knowledge gap by sector was not large, at around 10%, but this can be attributed in part to overlapping channel watching, given that people who preferred one channel still often viewed many others. When tested by analysis of variance (ANOVA), the difference between groups proved statistically significant.

Was this knowledge gap the result of the type of people who opted for public TV, such as their prior education or social class? To answer this question, we must move from descriptive statistics to multivariate analysis. Table 1 displays the results of the full multiple regression model on knowledge with social, attitudinal, and media controls. Although using the same model for each nation, to clarify the results only the coefficients for the effects of public TV are presented in Table 2. Beta coefficients show the

Table 2
Predictors of political knowledge by nation

	Model I: preference for public TV		Model II: preference for public TV + news	
	Standardized beta	R ²	Standardized beta	R ²
Netherlands (NL)	.19*	.15	.19*	.15
Belgium (B)	.18*	.29	.18*	.31
Finland (F)	.17*	.21	.16*	.21
Sweden (S)	.12*	.15	.13*	.15
Denmark (DK)	.09*	.14	.12*	.14
France (F)	.09*	.15	.09*	.16
Britain (GB)	.09*	.24	.10*	.24
Germany (D)	.07*	.14	.09*	.14
Spain (E)	.07*	.24	.07*	.25
Italy (I)	.06*	.20	.09*	.16
Greece (GR)	.02	.24	.03	.25
Ireland (IRL)	.02	.22	.04	.22
Portugal (P)	.01	.31	.02	.32
Northern Ireland (NIRL)	-.06	.20	-.05	.20

Note. Standardized beta coefficients predicted scores on the 10-point political knowledge scale with the following variables being controlled simultaneously: gender, education, age, income, left-right scale, and political interest. See Table 1 for the full model. Model I includes only preference for public TV (1) or commercial TV (0). Model II includes preference for public TV * frequency of exposure to TV news.

Source: Eurobarometer 44.2, spring 1996.

* $p < .05$.

strength of the relationship between the respective independent variable and the dependent variable while controlling for the other independent variables. The R^2 coefficients shown for each country indicate the percentage of explained variance for the dependent variable in the whole model.

With the exception of Northern Ireland, the relation between preference for public television and political knowledge is positive in all countries and statistically significant in 10 out of 14 nations. The results confirm that preference for a public television channel goes hand-in-hand with more knowledge of politics, even with the battery of controls, supporting our first hypothesis. Four countries stand out here with a beta coefficient higher than .10: the Netherlands, Belgium, Finland, and Sweden. In these countries the correlation between knowledge and preference for public channels is comparatively strong.

Interaction Effects: The Impact of Public TV News

Does it matter what type of program you watch, as well as what sector? This can be analyzed by combining channel preference with the frequency of watching television news. The use of two separate questions in the survey leaves open whether the news was regularly watched on a public or commercial channel, but we think it is likely that respondents often turn to the news on their preferred channel or think of the station on which they watch the news when asked for their channel preference. Combining these items allows us to classify people into the four groups identified in Figure 4: *public TV news* (viewers who prefer public TV and watch TV news every day), *public TV entertainment* (viewers who prefer public TV and watch news less frequently), *commercial TV news* (viewers who prefer commercial TV and watch TV news every day), and *commercial entertainment* (viewers who prefer commercial TV and watch news less frequently).

We can compare the mean scores on the political knowledge scale for these four categories of viewers without any controls. The results of the analysis for all EU

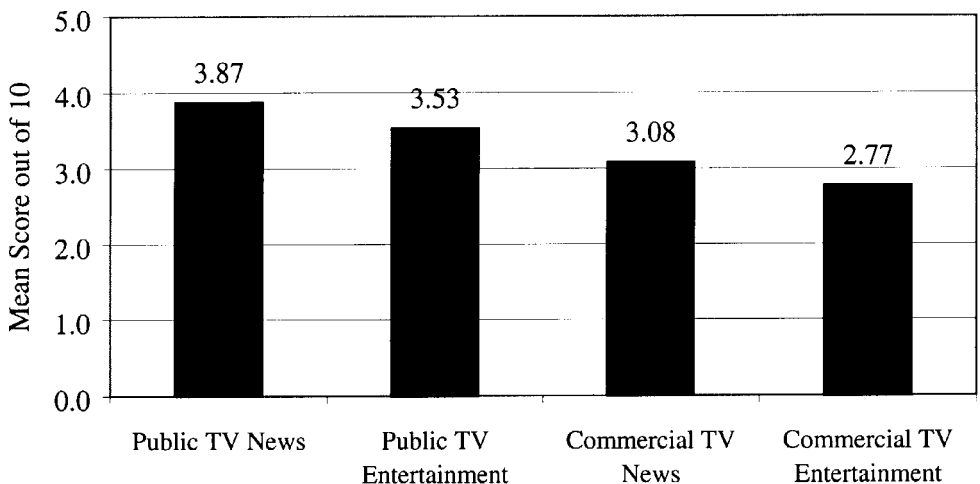


Figure 4. Levels of political knowledge by group.

member states in Figure 4 show that the groups fell into a linear pattern as expected; the public TV news audience scored highest on the knowledge scale (3.87 out of 10), as compared with a score of 3.53 for the audience for public TV entertainment, 3.08 for those who prefer commercial television news, and 2.77 for those who prefer commercial TV entertainment. ANOVA showed that the difference between groups was significant ($\eta^2 = .174$, $p < .01$). These results confirm our hypotheses that there are interaction effects between channel and news exposure, so that public TV news produces the most informed public (*Hypothesis 2*) while commercial entertainment produces the least informed public (*Hypothesis 3*).

Yet, we might also expect some important variations between countries, depending upon the nature of the media system and particularly whether the schedules of commercial stations are purely entertainment dominated (such as movie channels) or whether they give more emphasis to documentaries, news, and current affairs (such as SKY News and the History Channel). Figure 5 breaks down the level of political knowledge by group within nations, where two main patterns emerge. In half of the nations, there is a linear association between groups in the expected direction, with each group showing progressively lower levels of political knowledge, notably in Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Britain, and Finland. In these countries, to predict levels of political information, it is more important to know what sector is watched rather than what program is watched. In contrast, in six countries the pattern indicates that it is more important whether viewers regularly watch news programs rather than what channel they watch them on. This pattern is evident in Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden. In two countries no pattern can be discerned: Northern Ireland, where the results may be unreliable due to the small sample size, and Austria, where there was no commercial channel. The comparison confirms our fourth hypothesis, that the differences between groups vary systematically by nation. To go further to explain the differences between these nations we would need more detailed information about the pattern of television broadcasting and the contents of programming in the public and commercial sectors, which is a topic for future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

In many West European countries, commercial television has made a successful entry into the market and gained a considerable share of the audience. In some countries preference for commercial television is higher than for the traditional public channels; in several others commercial stations and public stations are about equally popular. Where commercial television is in a clear minority role, this is often due to its late introduction.

Our findings concerning the relation between channel preference and political knowledge support pessimistic expectations about the consequences of the introduction of commercial broadcasting. In most countries, higher levels of knowledge are positively and significantly correlated with preferences for public broadcasting, and in particular with preference for public TV combined with regular exposure to news.

We cannot establish the direction of causality that underlies this persistent association. Although regression analysis models build on assumptions about the direction of the causal relationship in determining a dependent variable, data derived from a cross-sectional survey do not allow for any such assessment. However, our findings do allow for interpretations on the basis of plausibility. Three possible interpretations seem plausible.

The *selection effects* hypothesis holds that because of prior social and political attitudes, some people choose to watch public sector TV in general and public sector

Types of Viewers:

1. Public TV News
2. Public TV Entertainment
3. Commercial TV News
4. Commercial TV Entertainment

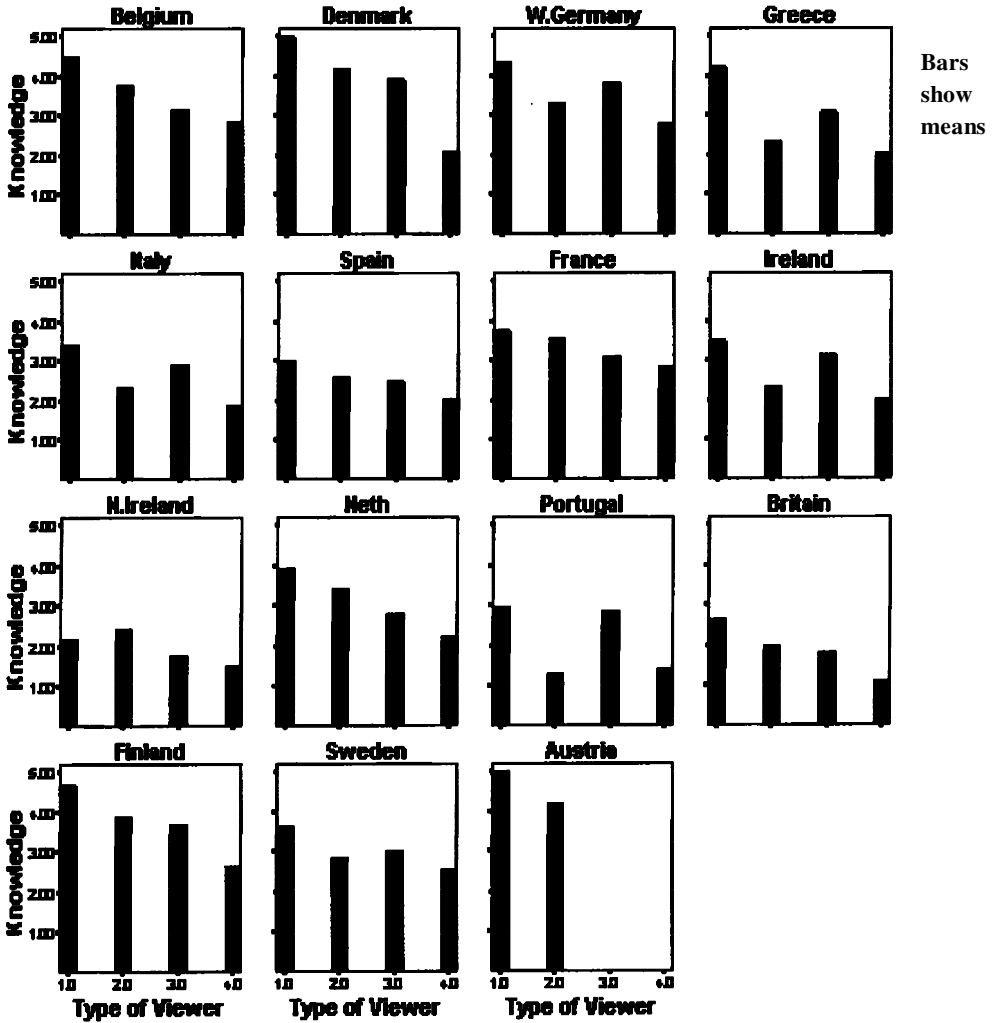


Figure 5. Level of political knowledge by type of viewer.

television news in particular. In this view, we expect that people watch the types of programs that most interest them. In this case the direction of causality runs from cognitive skills to media use, and the more politically knowledgeable choose to watch the more informative public TV news.

Alternatively, the *media effects* hypothesis suggests that because of prior media habits, some people who regularly watch public sector TV in general and public sector TV news in particular thereby learn more about events in Brussels and Strasbourg, hear

about the politics of the European Union, and thus become more politically knowledgeable. If citizens get most of their knowledge about politics through the media rather than through personal experience, and if this is even more the case for more “distant” matters of European politics, then at least some impact of the media on the level of political knowledge may be expected. In this view, the direction of causality runs from the news media to knowledge, and exposure to public TV news produces a more informed public.

But rather than an overly simple one-way flow of causation, it seems most plausible to assume that in the long term there is an interactive process, or *virtuous circle*, between media habits and political knowledge (Norris, 2000). That is, people who are more politically aware may well turn on the news and watch current affairs documentaries on public TV, but, in turn, repeated exposure to these programs also increases people’s levels of civic information.

What are the broader implications of these findings? The results at the individual level have to be understood within a broader social context. If the audience for public stations is shrinking and the commercial sector is expanding, this is probably not good news for public knowledge of current affairs. If people are increasingly watching movies rather than documentaries and soaps rather than current affairs, then we can expect the public to gradually tune out from civic engagement. On this basis, European concern about the consequences of commercialization for the public sphere may well be justified. But this assumes that, given limited leisure time, watching TV is a zero sum game: The more people watch one channel, the less they watch another. On the other hand, less pessimistic conclusions can be drawn if the main impact of the growth of commercial channels has been to supplement rather than replace public service TV. People may be transferring their time and energies from one leisure pursuit (like bowling) to another (watching television) rather than trading off between TV programs. The explosion in the number of European stations on terrestrial, cable, satellite, digital, and broadband services has produced far greater diversity on television and more facilities to channel surf with the remote from the couch. In this context, people in Sweden, France, and Germany may now be watching more films *and* more news, more MTV *and* more CNN, more commercial *and* more public TV, more entertainment *and* more informational programs, in which case there may be less cause for concern about the democratic implications of this study.

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Appendix: Items Used for Constructing the Knowledge Scale

Do you happen to know . . . ?

- (a) The current number of states in the European Union (correct answer: 15)
- (b) The name of the President of the European Commission (correct answer: Jacques Santer)
- (c) The number of (nationality) Commissioners (correct answer is 2 in D, E, F, IT, UK; 1 in all other countries)
- (d) The name of one (nationality) Commissioner (correct answer in D, E, F, IT, UK: name 1 or name 2; correct answer in all other countries: name 1)
- (e) The recently chosen name for the European currency (correct answer: euro)
- (f) The country which holds the Presidency of the European Union since January 1 and until end of June 1996 (correct answer: Italy)
- (g) The current value of the ECU in (national currency) (correct answer: between value 1 and value 2)
- (h) The city in which most of the European Union institutions are located (correct answer: Brussels or Luxembourg)
- (i) One of the two colors of the European flag (correct answer: yellow/gold or blue)
- (j) The year when notes and coins in the European currency will be introduced (correct answer: 2002)

Answers scored as correct, incorrect, or don't know