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DIVERSITY IN ONLINE NEWS

On the importance of ownership types and media system types

Edda Humprecht and **Frank Esser**

This paper examines diversity in online news with special attention paid to the role of different types of media ownership (meso level) and media systems (macro level). After identifying relevant perspectives and operationalizations of diversity, and discussing the economic implications of ownership and market conditions for diversity, the study tests four hypotheses with a content analysis of 1660 stories from 48 news sites in six countries (United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland). Findings show that online news attains the highest levels of diversity (measured with three different indices) in national environments with strong public service media, and that even in the internet age, public broadcasters add considerably to the diversity of political news. The much discussed category of made-for-Web outlets (including the Huffington Post and Rue89) revealed considerable variety in ownership and escape simple explanations with regard to diversity.

KEYWORDS content analysis; diversity; international comparison; online news; public service media; public sphere

Introduction

Journalistic news coverage plays an essential role in providing audiences with diverse, multifaceted perspectives on political debates of public relevance (van Cuilenburg 2007). This variety in content, and more specifically in news reporting, can be regarded as a prerequisite for the media to fully exercise its democratic mandate. Both the question of which issues should receive prominence through gatekeeping and agenda setting and the question of which actors should be subjected to the criticism and control function of the media cannot be answered without also taking diversity of issues and actors into account (Christians et al. 2009). According to McQuail (1992), diversity in public affairs coverage is crucial because the news media are expected to create a mediated public sphere that reflects the diversity of interests, voices, and views in society.

However, the commercialization of media markets, combined with competition for audience attention and advertising revenue, have negatively affected news content (McManus 2009). Market logic is increasingly shaping the production and presentation of news; this promotes the personalization of debates, simplification of complex issues, and polarization of conflicts (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Baum and Groeling 2008; Curran 2011). Co-orientation, the focus on established sources, or the representation of competing policy agendas lead journalists to neglect the norm of diverse reporting (Althaus et al. 1996; Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Tresch, Sciarini, and Varone 2013). When the quality of content declines in this way, the likely result is public cynicism and

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an alienation from politics (Blumler and Cushion 2014; Cushion 2012; Jebiril, Albæk, and de Vreese 2013). In particular, online news media are assumed to play a key role in this trajectory because of their weaker financial bases: they are under pressure to produce low-cost content with young and less-experienced staff (Redden and Witschge 2010). In this context, we must evaluate the diversity of political news produced by online media and whether differences in diversity can be attributed to the organizational and national environments in which these media are produced.

Operationalization and Development of News Diversity

A growing body of literature documents the importance of news diversity and the need for additional research in this area, particularly from an international comparative perspective (Baden and Springer 2014; van Hoof et al. 2014; Humprecht and Büchel 2013; Powers and Benson 2014). Moreover, given the political implications of the issue, news diversity is a high priority in media policy circles and has been the object of numerous investigations by governments and regulatory bodies (Hellman 2001; van der Wurff 2004). Although the amount of literature on news diversity has increased sharply, its empirical definition remains contested.

According to Hellman (2001), we can only discuss news diversity if we apply an external standard to media content, be it public evaluation, comparison with social reality, or analysis of its sources and viewpoints. A lack of diversity is usually established by identifying types of news content that are missing from or underrepresented in a particular news outlet. Single news stories cannot be considered diverse in any absolute sense. Karppinen (2013) criticizes naïve notions of pluralism in policy debates, arguing that too much diversity can even cause dysfunction in an integrated public sphere because it contributes to audience fragmentation and widening societal gaps. However, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) argue that media professionals as well as policy makers tend to prioritize only the most high-profile issues, thus neglecting other democratically relevant topics and debates. In their view, professional consensus across media organizations, similar routines of news production, and reliance on standard information sources all push news workers to cover similar issues. When media outlets shift their attention to new and emerging issues and stories, these replace or crowd out others—by way of a zero sum game—instead of enriching the range of debated issues (Jones and Baumgartner 2004).

Regarding the effects of news diversity on the public sphere, Ferree et al. (2002) have added another perspective to the conversation. The authors identify four normative models of public debate, with perspectival diversity playing a significant role in two of them. In the “representative liberal” model, the range of legitimate viewpoints in a society is proportionally based upon the views of relevant political actors—usually elected political elites. Viewpoints of other actors play subordinate roles. In a “participatory liberal” model, the views of non-elite actors are considered important. Both models focus on representing democratic interests and consider diversity to be achieved if all relevant actors are able to introduce their views in the public sphere. The normative claim behind these understandings of news diversity is that news media should reflect a variety of perspectives within debates (Benson 2013; van Hoof et al. 2014).

Based on this understanding, many studies consider the diversity of political (elite) actors represented in the news media (Ho and Quinn 2009; Pritchard 2002). They investigate the *diversity of speakers* in the news coverage produced by individual outlets to

determine whether there is a balanced representation of political interests (Benson 2009; Powers and Benson 2014). Some studies also focus on the news outlet's coverage of different branches of government, as it has been established that the increasing commercialization of news media may lead to overemphasis on the executive branch while neglecting the legislative and its decisions (Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008). Other scholars in this field are examining the *geographical perspectives* taken by the news media (Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008; Wanta, Golan, and Lee 2004). Theoretically, political interests can be stratified geographically, with elite interests concentrated at the national level and non-elite interests at the local, regional or even global levels (as observed in discussions of the social consequences of globalization or free trade agreements). A strong concentration on nationally circumscribed issues, for example, neglects the political relevance of international or bilateral developments that may affect multiple nations (Iyengar et al. 2010). In federalized countries, a decrease in coverage of regional content can impede democratic processes. Moreover, research on the representative and participatory models of the public sphere has established that low levels of diversity among news media seem to correlate with greater reliance on news agency materials which leads to increased homogenization of the news (Hood 2007; Napoli and Yan 2007; Poindexter 2006).

Another understanding of diversity underlying these two models is operationalized as *viewpoint diversity* (Ho and Quinn 2009; Pritchard 2002). It is argued that different interpretations of a complex reality can exist simultaneously and that the level of careful reflection on these interpretations is a crucial measure of a debate's quality. By representing different viewpoints, the news media enable their audiences to consider issues from multiple angles and to develop complex understandings of these issues. However, traditional mass media have been criticized for presenting only a limited range of viewpoints (van Hoof et al. 2014). Some authors see audience participation as a way to increase viewpoint diversity, others call for professional intervention (Dahlgren 2005; Gerhards and Schäfer 2010). However, it remains difficult to operationalize exactly what type of variety in news content actually contributes to viewpoint diversity (Benson 2009; Napoli 1999).

Finally, it is important to recognize that different understandings of diversity depend on the normative perspective taken, which in turn affects empirical measurements of diversity (van Cuilenburg 2007). Many studies implicitly assume that "important" speakers (e.g., powerful elites) and "alternative" viewpoints should be represented in a debate. However, Althaus (2012) points out that those studies fail to mention the evaluative standards used to reach conclusions. Moreover, they do not take into account that different understandings coexist and that this might affect the evaluation of those findings (Althaus 2012). To address this gap, we aim to analyze different operationalizations of news diversity derived from the different normative models. Moreover, we apply these concepts to online news media. As the fastest-growing information provider in history, the internet initially seemed to promise to increase the diversity of news stories being both produced and consumed.

Economy of Media Ownership

Some studies have attempted to operationalize media diversity at the content level and to link it with ownership types (Ho and Quinn 2009; Napoli 1999; Pritchard 2002). Findings have shown that news diversity is hampered by profit motives and by media organizations' attempts to maximize readership. Hamilton (2004) argues that the news media,

including its journalists, can be understood as an economic good. In his view, cheap-to-produce and easy-to-sell content is rapidly gaining ground in commercially oriented outlets (Hamilton 2004). Moreover, reporting that relies on personalization, simplification, and polarization seem to attract larger audiences and thus more advertisers than in-depth and perspective-rich reporting does (McManus 2009). Against this background, several authors have highlighted the differences between privately and publicly owned news outlets with regard to the diversity of their output (Aalberg and Curran 2012).

Picard and van Weezel (2008) discuss different forms of media ownership—including public, private, and employee ownership—and examine the economic and managerial foundations of these models. They conclude that financially strong and stable media organizations are most likely to perform well in public-interest terms. Dunaway (2013) observes that for the United States, ownership structures and economic incentives, in combination with political contexts, influence the likelihood of positive, neutral, or negative tones in political campaign news. She concludes that different ownership types have consequences for news production and that profit-driven ownership types may be particularly powerful.

Several studies find positive effects of public service media on news performance (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Cushion 2012; Sehl, Cornia, and Nielsen 2016). Although public service media often have hybrid business models consisting of public fees as well as advertising revenues, it has been found that a higher proportion of public funding goes hand in hand with higher measures of democratic news performance (EBU Media Intelligence Service 2016; Tambini 2015; de Vreese, Esser, and Hopmann 2017).

Finally, made-for-Web outlets are relatively new entities that are currently working to establish themselves and find their niches in the market. Compared to long-established media organizations, they often invest in news production to create added value (Sirkkunen and Cook 2012). In addition to these economic reasons for differences in content production, there are also professional reasons. Many new start-ups have been founded by journalists who previously worked in the newspaper industry and grew frustrated by constant pressures to cut costs and editorial services. They now aim to demonstrate that high-quality internet-based news is not only feasible but can be a viable alternative to traditional news sources (Humprecht and Büchel 2013; Levy and Nielsen 2012).

In brief, many authors point to the potential effects of media ownership on news content and quality. Scholars, particularly from Europe but also from the United States, agree that different forms of ownership may influence whether a news outlet's goals are more market and profit-oriented or more professional and quality-oriented (Demers 1996; Krumsvik, Skogerbø, and Storsul 2013).

News Diversity in Comparative Perspective

At the national level, news organizations are embedded in wider political and economic contexts. Ferree et al. (2002) argue that different political systems lead to different conceptions of the public sphere. One finding of their comparative analysis on a controversial issue (abortion) is that Germany—a representative democracy—largely exemplifies the representative liberal model. Such differences not only shape journalistic practices but are also reflected in each country's media system itself and in the way news media are regulated and publicly evaluated. The authors argue that different ideals of the public sphere are rooted in different political systems. In this reasoning, the idea of elite dominance is more pronounced in representative democracies, while other systems, such as presidential

democracies, rather emphasize popular inclusion. These differences are also reflected in journalistic practices, such as the norm of “balanced” reporting in US journalism (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004).

Concerning news diversity, comparative research has found that the amount of foreign news that is regularly reported, as well as the geographical range of this news, varies across countries. News outlets in the United States, for example, report only a small amount of foreign news compared to other countries (Wu 2000, 2007). Reasons include the country’s size and self-centrality. In contrast, foreign reporting is much higher in Singapore, Canada, and many European countries (Cohen 2013).

Benson (2013) finds higher levels of actor diversity in French newspapers compared to US newspapers. American journalism prefers a more narrative-driven style that constructs news around a single storyline, whereas French journalism takes a multiperspectival approach to important topics in each day’s newspaper by using multi-story “news ensembles” (Benson 2013). These are some of the professional differences underlying the above-mentioned different models of the public sphere, each of which attaches different degrees of importance to different actors and regions.

In some countries with strong public service broadcasting, for instance, scholars have found positive spill-over effects on private broadcasters; having a vibrant public competitor exerts a positive stimulus on all journalists working in the news business (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010). In Norway, for instance, Ihlen et al. (2010) found a commitment to public service obligations even at broadcasters with different funding models. These findings show that news diversity is not only shaped by ownership differences and available resources but also by journalistic standards and audience preferences—all of which need to be taken into account if we are to comprehensively explain differences in news diversity.

Online News Media and News Diversity

Online news have become one of the most important sources of information in many Western countries (Cole 2015). Therefore, scholars have started to scrutinize the content of online media in detail. Some have found a significant decrease in quality as a result of financial constraints and greater competition (Phillips 2010). Others blame the fact that digital technology fosters mutual observation, pack mentalities, and lifting of story ideas without attribution (Boczkowski 2009).

Powers and Benson (2014) examine news diversity in Web-based and printed news outlets in the United States, Denmark, and France. Understanding news diversity as actor and topic differentiation across both news outlets and platform types, they find higher levels of diversity in online than in printed newspapers. Much greater variation, however, is found among different countries, a finding explained by the path-dependent effects of national media systems. French online news sources are less homogeneous than those in the United States due to France’s more competitively structured centralized markets, higher degrees of political parallelism, and the presence of government subsidies intended to expand the range of debate and expression (Powers and Benson 2014).

Hypotheses

In forming our hypotheses about variation in news diversity across online outlets, we have accounted for differences in ownership types and media systems. Based on the

lessons of previous scholarship, our approach to news diversity is twofold. First, informed by representative liberal theories, we assume that inclusion of a wide range of elite actors contributes to diversity in news coverage (elite dominance). Second, diversity of geographical regions and opposing viewpoints are assumed to reflect the normative perspectives of participatory theories (popular inclusion). These theories focus on the exchange of arguments (both established and alternative) and the distribution of elite actor groups or geographical regions. These two perspectives—the representative liberal and the participatory liberal model—differ in the way they model the public sphere. However, we assume both to be shaped by macro- and meso-level conditions.

Based on existing research, we conclude that news organizations can be categorized according to two basic orientations: a professional orientation pursuing normative goals (such as diversity) and a profit orientation that neglects normative goals (to maximize profit). We therefore expect news outlets with a professional orientation to offer diverse news coverage that includes a wide range of actors and regions, as well as opposing viewpoints.

The first two of our hypotheses derive from research arguing that ownership differences affect news production (Dunaway 2008, 2013; Napoli and Gillis 2008). Private, and especially corporate, news organizations tend to prioritize profits over professional goals. Thus, it can be assumed that corporate media are primarily driven by profit considerations. Owners of these websites want to maximize readership, whether for reasons of profit, advocacy, recognition, or impact. Therefore, they focus on stories that will attract large audiences. In this context we assume:

H1: Corporate news outlets will be less diverse than public media in their coverage of actors, geographical regions, and viewpoints.

The second hypothesis focuses on professional differences between ownership types. Several studies have shown that new entrants into the media market, such as Web-only outlets, produce content that is more diverse because they are less oriented toward mass audiences and need to create added value to distinguish themselves from existing sources and demonstrate their commitment to high professional standards (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008; Humprecht and Büchel 2013). Therefore, these outlets may incorporate a broader range of actors, regions, and viewpoints.

H2: Media that are made specifically for the Web report on a more diverse range of actors, regions, and viewpoints than do the online versions of long-established offline outlets.

Finally, we address the structural conditions of newsmaking. It has been argued that media systems shape production routines and thus the news that is available to the public (Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Esser and Umbricht 2014; Powers and Benson 2014). Research has shown that in countries where journalism is strongly narrative-driven and commercialized (e.g., the United States), the news produced is less diverse (Benson 2013). Media system characteristics such as high market commercialization or competition have been found to affect high news performance negatively (Esser et al. 2017).

In contrast, public investment in the media sector may also influence the diversity of the news produced, as public media are generally guided by goals that are more professional than commercial (Aalberg, Blekesaune, and Elvestad 2013; Nielsen and Linnebank 2011). To reflect these influences, we propose:

H3: News outlets from the United States show lower levels of news diversity than do news outlets from Western European media markets.

H4: News outlets from media systems that invest heavily in public media (e.g., United Kingdom, Germany, or Switzerland) show higher levels of news diversity than outlets from other systems (see Brüggemann et al. 2014).

In summary, H3 and H4 posit cross-national differences and within-nation similarities in news diversity and therefore partially overlap with H1 and H2, which posit that all media systems reflect differences based on the types of ownership that comprise them. Analysis of these differences allows us to demonstrate how news content is shaped by organizational and national factors such as the editorial missions of news outlets and the regulatory regimes of media systems (Reese 2001).

Data

To test our hypotheses, we sampled online news outlets from countries with different media systems and different types of ownership.

Different ownership types are assumed to vary in their degree of profit orientation. Drawing from a distinction made by Picard and van Weezel (2008), we use here a slightly modified typology of online media outlets:

- *Private broadcasters* (corporate-owned with a profit-oriented organizational goal).
- *Public broadcasters* (financed by fees, or by public or state funds, with a primary public service mission).
- *Corporate newspapers* (owned by a media chain or by a stock exchange-listed company, with a profit-oriented goal).
- *Independent newspapers* (alternative ownership form with a moderate profit orientation).
- *Popular newspapers* (tabloid-style mass-market outlet with a profit orientation).
- *Made-for-Web news providers* (either online-only digital native, or—where inexistent—online news provider with a profile and organizational structure that is independent of its offline parent company).

In order to account for varying degrees of profit and public service orientations, our typology includes different types of for-profit media. Furthermore, we sample national as well as regional news outlets to account for different market structures and target audiences. While in some countries, regional newspapers cover local, national, and international news, and can reach a wide readership (e.g., Germany), they are less important in other countries (e.g., Italy). Popular outlets are included because participatory liberal theories explicitly emphasize the importance of popular media since these media can put people uninterested in politics in touch with politics (Ferree et al. 2002). Popular outlets are usually corporate-owned and tend to reflect limited editorial missions that restrict news diversity. Furthermore, we sampled the public news platform Swiss Info because Switzerland has no national private television broadcaster with a news website.

To analyze the impacts of different levels of press subsidies and investment in public media, our comparative design includes countries representing the liberal, the democratic-corporatist, and the polarized-pluralist models as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004),

namely the United States and United Kingdom (liberal), Germany and Switzerland (democratic-corporatist), and France and Italy (polarized-pluralist).

Measures

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of 48 online news outlets from six media systems. For the content analysis of routine-period news, 1660 stories were retrieved from the websites listed in Table 1. On seven days selected from a constructed week in June and July 2012, we captured five political articles per outlet at 2 pm local time, yielding a total of 280 political articles per country. We randomly selected these articles from each news outlet's homepage to ensure variation in length and story type (straight news, features, etc.).

Political news stories are defined as stories containing at least one political or politico-economic actor (individual or collective) that is mentioned at least twice. We required that the actor be mentioned twice to ensure that we sampled relevant articles. Six bilingual coders were trained intensively over a six-week period and supervised closely during coding (October 2012 to February 2013) to ensure that they understood both the news routines of the selected outlets and the coding instructions. To ascertain intercoder reliability, a test was completed at the conclusion of coder training and at the beginning of actual coding. The test showed substantial agreement and satisfactory values of Cohen's kappa >0.76 .

We examined the diversity of actors, regions, and viewpoints in two steps. First, we investigated how often different elite actors and geographical regions were mentioned in the political news coverage of *single outlets* during a given time period. We calculated the relative entropy index, which has been successfully applied in several studies of news diversity (see Dworak, Lovett, and Baumgartner 2014; Hellman 2001; Tresch, Sciarini, and Varone 2013; van der Wurff 2004). Second, we measured whether different viewpoints were presented within *single articles*. These views were subsequently linked to the main actors appearing in the news stories.

To analyze elite actor diversity, we coded six actor groups representing political elites (up to five actor groups per news story). This measurement is based on the idea of elite dominance in representative liberal theory assuming that citizen's views are represented in public discourse by legitimate representatives. Our actor groups included: executive (head of state and national government), legislative (national parliament and national parties), judicial (national courts and judges), national administration (prosecution, regional government authority, and police or army), foreign politicians (foreign heads of state and other foreign politicians), and international organizations (supranational and international organizations). Our goal in this process was to examine how attention is allocated to different powers in online news coverage.

The concept of geographical diversity is rooted in the participatory liberal model of public discourse that emphasizes popular inclusion on different levels. To analyze geographical diversity, we coded the geographical perspective taken by the author of each individual news story. To do this, we assigned each news story to one of the following categories: local perspective (city or region) within the home country; national perspective (e.g., politics of national relevance in the home country of the news outlet); relationship between the home country and foreign countries reported from a domestic angle (e.g., foreign politician visits home country, own politician visits a foreign country, relationship

TABLE 1
Sample of online news outlets

	Switzerland	Germany	France	Italy	United Kingdom	United States
Public TV	SRF, Swiss Info	ARD	France 2	RAI	BBC	NPR
Private TV		NTV	TF1	Sky Italia	Sky UK	CNN
Corporate	<i>Tages-Anzeiger,</i> <i>Südostschweiz</i>	<i>Die Welt, Der Westen</i>	<i>Le Figaro, Ouest</i> <i>France</i>	<i>Repubblica, Corriere</i> <i>della Sera</i>	<i>Daily Mail, The</i> <i>Times</i>	<i>Washington Post, Los</i> <i>Angeles Times</i>
Independent	<i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung,</i> <i>Landbote</i>	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,</i> <i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	<i>Le Monde,</i> <i>Libération</i>	<i>Il Fatto Quotidiano,</i> <i>Unita</i>	<i>The Guardian, The</i> <i>Telegraph</i>	<i>New York Times, Tampa</i> <i>Bay Times</i>
Popular	<i>Blick</i>	<i>Bild</i>	<i>Le Parisien</i>	<i>Leggo</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>New York Daily News</i>
Web-based	<i>News</i>	<i>Spiegel Online</i>	<i>Rue89</i>	<i>Linkiesta</i>	<i>Open Democracy</i>	<i>Huffington Post</i>

of the home country to the European Union or to the United States, etc.); foreign perspective (e.g., reports about a country other than the home of the news outlet); or European/multinational/global perspective reported from an international angle (e.g., reports about the European Union, groups of countries, and world regions).

Next, we calculated relative entropy indices of elite actor and geographical diversity for each outlet. This measurement reflects the degree of diversity for each news outlet under study, based on all coded articles. The relative entropy index (H) represents the sum of the probabilities that the different categories (of actors and regions) are represented in the news coverage; high relative entropy implies a high probability that many (or all) categories are represented. The more actors or regions that are covered and the more evenly they are distributed, the higher the relative entropy score—and thus the news diversity. The index is calculated as follows:

$$H = \frac{(\sum p_i \log_2 p_i)}{\log_2 K}$$

In this formula, p_i denotes the relative frequency of one given category i within the news coverage, and K denotes the total number of categories included. The relative entropy index is standardized so that its values vary from 0 to 1. High relative entropy close to 1 implies that many or all categories of news diversity are equally represented, whereas values close to 0 indicate low diversity (e.g., when all stories belong to one category). The relative entropy index has some advantages compared to other measures, such as the concentration index, because it takes into account the number of possible categories.

Finally, the concept of viewpoint diversity reflects the quest of empowerment that is imbedded in the participatory liberal model. To measure viewpoint diversity, we coded 40 actor types representing different realms of the public sphere, such as actors from politics, economy, civil society, science, news media, showbusiness, and others. For each news story we coded whether speakers with opposing viewpoints (expressed in separate quotations) existed. In contrast to the measures for elite actor and geographical diversity that are aggregated to the outlet level, viewpoint diversity reflects a more rigid understanding of diversity since different viewpoints have to be included within single news stories. Viewpoint diversity was coded on a nominal scale and subsequently transformed into an index ranging from 0 (indicating zero opposing viewpoints within the news stories of an individual news outlet) to 1 (indicating opposing viewpoints in all news stories of an individual news outlet). The existence of opposing viewpoints was coded if at least two opposing opinions by different actors (belonging either to the same or to different actor categories) were mentioned in the news story.

Findings and Discussion

We first address the diversity of actors in online news. [Table 2](#) lists the percentages of political actor groups covered by the media outlets in the sample. Across countries as well as ownership types, two groups of actors are dominant: national executive-branch leaders and foreign politicians. However, the latter are not covered equally in all countries. While Swiss (35.7 percent) and British (43.7 percent) online news outlets produce higher proportions of stories featuring foreign politicians, US (20.6 percent) and French (16.8 percent) websites produce substantially lower proportions of these stories. This is in

TABLE 2

Actor groups represented in online news (%)

	Executive	Judiciary	Legislative	Foreign politicians	National administration	International organizations	N
Country							
France	50.0	4.7	11.1	16.8	12.9	4.5	279
Germany	26.1	3.3	13.1	31.0	14.4	12.1	279
Italy	32.3	4.3	19.6	20.2	16.8	6.7	276
Switzerland	19.4	2.6	14.8	35.7	18.5	9.0	267
United Kingdom	22.9	3.1	3.3	43.7	17.4	9.7	280
United States	28.6	13.6	12.3	20.6	20.6	4.3	279
Average	29.9	5.3	12.4	28.0	16.8	7.7	1660
Ownership type							
Public TV	26.7	4.7	14.1	33.5	11.7	9.4	245
Private TV	30.7	6.1	8.7	30.7	14.2	9.4	173
Corporate	31.5	4.6	12.1	23.7	20.9	7.1	412
Independent	29.0	4.7	13.2	27.5	17.7	7.8	417
Popular	31.3	6.4	14.6	22.8	18.2	6.7	206
Made-for-Web	31.7	6.0	10.6	32.9	12.1	6.6	207
Average	30.2	5.4	12.2	28.5	15.8	7.8	1660

agreement with previous findings that US media focus predominantly on American national events (arguably due to the large size of the United States) and that French media focus on decisions made in Paris, arguably because France is a strongly centralized country (Kuhn 2014; Wu 2000, 2007). The national legislative branch of government is rarely covered by news outlets in any of the countries included in this study. This points to the assumption that national parliaments are more and more marginalized in media coverage as a consequence of increasing personalization—a phenomenon driven by commercialization and tabloidization (Negrine 1999; Rahat and Sheafer 2007; Wolfsfeld 2011). This development is viewed as problematic because it shifts media and public attention from national decision-making processes to the implementation of laws.

How does the ownership of a media outlet affect its news coverage? We found that corporate and popular news outlets most often cover the executive branches of government, while public outlets report most frequently on foreign politicians. This finding can be linked to professional practices and routines. Stories on the executive branch are often highly personal, and members of the national government can be reached more easily by national news outlets. Extensive reporting on foreign politicians, in contrast, often requires the input of foreign correspondents and is thus easier for outlets that have international contributors and foreign offices.

Online news outlets take a predominantly national perspective (Table 3), while local or global perspectives appear least often. Again, French (57 percent) and US (59.1 percent) outlets exhibit mostly national perspectives, while British (35.4 percent), Italian (42.4 percent), and Swiss (43.4 percent) outlets allocate their attention more equally across local, national, and global perspectives. Similar to our findings for actor groups,

TABLE 3
Geographical regions represented in online news (%)

	Local perspective	National perspective	Bi-lateral perspective	Foreign country perspective	Global perspective	N
Country						
France	10.0	57.0	9.3	15.8	7.2	279
Germany	3.2	43.7	15.1	16.5	20.1	279
Italy	21.0	42.4	13.8	11.6	10.9	276
Switzerland	7.1	43.4	14.6	21.0	13.5	267
United Kingdom	2.1	35.4	9.3	30.4	22.1	280
United States	10.0	59.1	11.1	15.1	3.9	279
Average	8.9	46.8	12.2	18.4	12.9	1660
Ownership type						
Public TV	4.5	44.5	15.9	19.6	14.7	245
Private TV	12.1	45.1	9.2	22.5	10.4	173
Corporate	10.0	48.1	11.9	16.3	12.9	412
Independent	11.8	44.6	11.3	18.5	13.4	417
Popular	9.2	53.9	13.6	15.0	7.3	206
Made-for-Web	3.4	46.4	11.1	20.8	17.9	207
Average	8.5	47.1	12.2	18.8	12.8	1660

The category “no territorial reference” has been excluded.

geographical diversity in news coverage is particularly limited in countries with presidential political systems (in our study, the United States and France) where news media seem to focus more on national affairs than is the case for other countries.

Opposing viewpoints are only presented in 16 percent ($N = 266$) of all online news stories sampled. Most frequently, this is in the context of representatives of national governments being confronted with opposing views or adopting contrary positions themselves (in 19.5 percent of those 266 stories). Opposing viewpoints are also found in the context of articles about foreign heads of state and members of foreign governments (11.8 percent). However, distributions vary strongly across countries (see Table 4). In France, 33.5 percent of stories featuring opposing viewpoints involve representatives of national governments, whereas in Switzerland the same is true for only 8.8 percent. Foreign politicians with contradictory views are cited most often in German and least often in Italian online news (18.1 percent versus 7 percent, respectively). Alternative views of individuals are expressed in 13 percent of Italian stories featuring opposing viewpoints but in only 8.8 percent of stories published by French or British online outlets.

Similar variations are found across ownership types. While the views of national governments are featured in 22.1 percent of online news stories produced by private television stations and in 21.6 percent of those produced by corporate outlets, only 10.3 percent of online stories by public broadcasters present national government representatives as contenders in controversial debates. In contrast, public media mainly cite foreign politicians as holding opposite views (18.3 percent), whereas popular media hardly consider the views of foreign politicians at all (5.6 percent). Opinions expressed by individuals are most frequent in debate coverage by made-for-Web outlets and least numerous in independent outlets (13.7 percent and 8.8 percent, respectively) (Table 5).

In exploring the causes driving these differences, we expected online news produced by corporate outlets to offer less diversity than news produced by other sources. This is because the resources required for news diversity often do not align with a profit orientation (H1). The results of a one-way independent analysis of variance (ANOVA) support this expectation (Table 6). Corporate outlets have low degrees of elite actor diversity

TABLE 4

Top 10 actors in online news stories offering opposing viewpoints (across media systems) (%)

	France	Germany	Italy	Switzerland	United Kingdom	United States
National government	33.5	14.8	21.0	8.8	16.4	12.0
Foreign head of state	8.8	18.1	7.0	12.5	14.0	8.5
Individuals (person concerned)	8.8	9.7	13.0	11.0	8.8	11.3
National executive/administration	3.2	7.9	5.0	8.8	6.4	7.0
National head of state	5.6	6.0	5.0	5.9	5.8	4.9
National legislative	7.4	3.7	4.0	8.1	0.6	2.1
National parties	0.7	3.7	15.0	0.7	2.3	5.6
Police and military units	4.9	1.9	3.0	0.0	2.9	8.5
Other foreign politicians	0.0	5.1	3.0	1.5	7.0	4.9
Supranational organization	0.0	8.8	6.0	0.7	3.5	0.7

Subsample of $N = 266$ news stories offering opposing viewpoints.

TABLE 5

Top 10 actors in online news stories offering opposing viewpoints (across ownership types) (%)

	Public TV	Private TV	Corporate	Independent	Popular	Made-for-Web	N
National government	10.3	22.1	21.6	23.2	17.8	17.9	205
Foreign head of state	18.3	14.8	6.3	15.1	5.6	6.3	124
Individuals (person concerned)	9.7	10.7	9.4	8.8	11.1	13.7	105
National executive	4.0	2.0	9.4	7.7	3.3	5.3	64
National head of state	3.4	9.4	6.3	3.5	7.8	6.3	59
National legislative	9.7	3.4	3.5	3.5	4.4	3.2	48
National parties	6.3	0.0	2.7	3.5	8.9	2.1	38
Police and military units	0.6	6.0	3.5	4.6	4.4	2.1	38
Other foreign politicians	5.1	2.0	3.9	3.9	2.2	0.0	35
Supranational organization	4.0	6.0	3.1	2.5	1.1	1.1	33

Subsample of $N = 266$ news stories offering opposing viewpoints.

(0.14), as well as low geographical diversity (0.20). However, these outlets still produce average quantities of news stories containing opposing viewpoints. Interestingly, private outlets score highest on viewpoint diversity despite also having a strong profit orientation. However, our analysis shows that these private outlets limit their online stories containing opposing viewpoints to the positions of national and foreign governments but rarely consider perspectives beyond these. In other words, private outlets do not offer much meaningful diversity of voices in their coverage of political controversies.

Moreover, we find that public outlets score highest and differ significantly from private outlets in their coverage of actor and geographical diversity (0.21 for elite actor diversity; 0.31 for geographical diversity). Differences in coverage of opposing viewpoints is less striking, although public outlets do carry significantly more news stories featuring opposing views (0.18) than do corporate (0.16), popular (0.11), or made-for-Web outlets (0.12). These findings are in agreement with previous studies showing that public outlets perform significantly better in evaluations of whether news coverage conforms to democratic values (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010). One explanation for these differences between public and private news media might not only be the profit orientation of the latter but also the public service commitment of the former. Of course, a public service commitment can also be found in certain private news organizations. However, most European public broadcasting providers have an explicit performance-related mandate to further democratic ideals (Cushion 2012).

H2 suggests that made-for-Web outlets offer more diverse content than do other ownership types. While we are able to confirm this hypothesis in the context of elite actor diversity, it must be dismissed for geographical and viewpoint diversity. Web-only outlets score highest on the entropy index for elite actor diversity, thus diverging significantly from other private outlets. However, on the entropy indices for geographical and

TABLE 6
Dimensions of diversity by countries and ownership type

	France	Germany	Italy	Switzerland	United Kingdom	United States	F values
Elite actor diversity	0.12 ^a	0.24 ^b	0.12 ^a	0.14	0.24 ^b	0.11	$F(5, 1654) = 256.463, p < 0.0005$
Geographical diversity	0.18 ^a	0.19 ^a	0.34	0.29 ^b	0.26 ^b	0.15	$F(5, 1654) = 111.714, p < 0.0005$
Opposing viewpoints	0.25 ^a	0.19 ^{a,b}	0.09	0.13 ^b	0.16 ^b	0.13 ^b	$F(5, 1653) = 6.779, p < 0.0005$
	Public TV	Private TV	Corporate	Independent	Popular	Made-for-Web	
Elite actor diversity	0.21 ^a	0.14 ^b	0.14 ^b	0.16	0.13 ^b	0.22 ^a	$F(5, 1654) = 48.399, p < 0.0005$
Geographical diversity	0.31	0.22 ^{a,b}	0.20 ^a	0.20 ^a	0.27 ^c	0.25 ^{b,c}	$F(5, 1654) = 31.455, p < 0.0005$
Opposing viewpoints	0.18 ^a	0.22	0.16	0.18 ^a	0.11 ^b	0.12 ^b	$F(5, 1653) = 43.079, p < 0.0005$

Total $N = 1660$ news stories. The table shows means of actor and geographical diversity expressed by relative entropy indices that range from 0 to 1, meaning that the underlying categories may not appear at all (= 0) or in every political story (= 1). Viewpoint diversity is expressed on a nominal scale. The top part of the table presents three univariate ANOVAs at the national level. Means with the same superscript letter within a row are not statistically different (based on *post hoc* Games-Howell's test for unequal group variances). The bottom part of the table presents three univariate ANOVAs at the organizational level. Means with the same superscript letter within a row are not statistically different (based on *post hoc* Gabriel's test for unequal sample sizes).

viewpoint diversity, made-for-Web outlets get average or low scores compared to outlets from other ownership types (see Table 6). It can be assumed that the ownership status of Web-only outlets is heterogeneous. Some of the made-for-Web outlets under investigation, such as *Open Democracy* (United Kingdom), *Rue89* (France), or *Linkiesta* (Italy), have clear professional guidelines that correspond to the assumptions presented in this study. However, the German website *Spiegel Online* is an independent spin-off of the employee-owned news weekly *Der Spiegel* and combines high-quality journalism with the successful formula behind widely read news sites. *News.ch*, a made-for-Web outlet in Switzerland, is essentially a news aggregator chosen because (at the time of sampling in 2012) it was the best equivalent in Switzerland to Web-only sites in other countries (digital native news sites such as *Watson* only appeared later). However, there are no distinct editorial guidelines at *News.ch*, and it can therefore be assumed to reflect typical features of Swiss online journalism. Finally, the US-based *Huffington Post* is a blog-style news outlet and has no editorial staff that explicitly cover foreign politics. It can therefore be assumed that the above-mentioned effects on news diversity only apply to the first group of made-for-Web outlets (from the United Kingdom, France, and Italy), while the others (Switzerland and United States) are more oriented toward mainstream coverage.

H3 and H4 concern differences among countries. H3 suggests that media systems with traditions of narrative-driven, commercialized journalism, such as those in the United States, provide less diversity. This hypothesis is confirmed because US media score low on all diversity indices in Table 6. This result also aligns with the frequently heard argument that the United States has limited interests in foreign affairs, probably due to its large size and desire to address a high volume of domestic news (Wu 2007). Another reason for these low scores may be related to the marginal role of public media in the United States (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Powers and Benson 2014).

H4 expects countries with strong public broadcasting providers to show high levels of news diversity due to positive spill-over effects on other media. Regarding elite actor diversity, this hypothesis is confirmed: the United Kingdom and Germany show the highest scores on the elite actor diversity index (0.24) while the United States scores lowest (0.11). Furthermore, Table 6 shows slightly different patterns for geographical diversity: intensity levels are highest for Italy (0.34) and Switzerland (0.29) but lowest for the United States (0.15). The high value for Italy is the result of exceptional events in local reporting, including a powerful earthquake in Emilia Romagna and the Pope's visit to Milan.

There are also differences among countries with regard to the inclusion of opposing viewpoints. French online news includes the highest number of divergent views within the same news stories (0.25), followed by German news (0.19). In contrast, Italian websites score lowest (0.09). A complete analysis of France, however, reveals that even if its websites are offering many articles representing opposite viewpoints, these articles are reporting on a limited range of national actors. Based on our overall results, it can be concluded that German and British websites provide the highest levels of news diversity across the various categories, as exemplified by their consistently high scores on all tested indices.

Conclusion

Our findings show that content diversity in online news media is in general relatively low. However, we found that the degree of diversity is highly dependent on organizational (meso-level) as well as political and professional (macro-level) environments. The United

Kingdom, Germany, and France show the highest overall proportions of news diversity. Across all ownership types, public media perform best. These national patterns suggest that media systems that financially support strong public service-oriented news outlets are most likely to create media discourses that meet the normative goal of diversity in voices, backgrounds, and perspectives. Even in the internet age, public outlets are best equipped to further the diversity-related ideals of the public sphere, in the contexts of both single news stories and overall coverage. In contrast, the US media landscape achieves, on average, the lowest diversity rates—an outcome not entirely unexpected considering its high degree of commercialized journalism and the low status of its public media. Furthermore, the political system as well as the country's geographical size are possible reasons for more nationally oriented news that feature speakers only of the two leading parties (Benson 2013; Boykoff and Boykoff 2004).

These findings point to the assumption discussed earlier that prevalent understandings of the public sphere differ between countries. Representative liberal theories argue that decisions by accountable representatives best serve democracy and that therefore public discourse should be characterized by elite dominance (Ferree et al. 2002). To account for this understanding, we measured the level of elite actor diversity in political news. Based on our findings, we can conclude that elite actor diversity is most prevalent in the representative democracies of Germany and the United Kingdom.

In contrast, participatory liberal theories emphasize empowerment and popular inclusion in the public discourse. We took these considerations into account by measuring diversity of geographical regions and viewpoints. Our study shows that the ideal of popular inclusion is most likely reflected in French and German news content (viewpoint diversity) as well as in Italian news (geographical regions). Based on these findings we conclude that different ideals of the public sphere can coexist within single countries. Moreover, normative ideas are threatened by commercialization. This is most likely the case in the United States where news outlets fall short on all applied measures of diversity.

This observation brings us to our findings on the organizational level. Our findings support the hypothesis that private media offer less diversity; this applies in particular to corporate media organizations. We expected made-for-Web outlets to offer increased diversity as a way of distinguishing themselves from established news providers. However, we could not find evidence to support this. We conclude that initial hopes of greater diversity through internet news start-ups do not seem to have materialized. But we must also acknowledge that this conclusion is still tentative, as the subgroup of made-for-Web outlets in our sample was too heterogeneous to allow a final conclusion on this matter.

Our findings have implications for assessing the relationships among national media systems, ownership types, and democratic news reporting. Our discussion of diversity is rooted in the question of whether online news media are likely to enhance or reduce citizens' access to a wide variety of information sources. We tentatively conclude that both online and offline outlets offer approximately the same ranges of diversity in their news coverage. As in the world of offline journalism, some online news sites limit their content to what is economical to produce and generates the highest number of clicks, thus encouraging a concentration on certain actors, regions, and viewpoints at the expense of others. In contrast, public news outlets tend to provide higher levels of news diversity and offer content that is otherwise neglected. Our findings therefore suggest that funding public media can be an effective way for policy makers to foster the type of variety in news reporting that is beneficial to democracy.

Another noteworthy conclusion is that differences in news reporting among countries continue to exist even in a globalized age. One likely explanation for this finding is the fact that most online news outlets still focus on national markets, which is reflected in country-specific content. Moreover, national cultures of media production evolve in tandem with national conceptions of the public sphere, and the values underlying these media-political relationships are internalized by national communities of journalists and passed on from one generation to the next. The effects of socialization within journalistic training programs and news organizations consolidate these cross-national differences. In light of these circumstances, comparative research represents a promising strategy for gaining deeper understanding of the context-dependency of news production.

Following the suggestion of Powers and Benson (2014), we included made-for-Web outlets in our media sample and expanded our country sample to six, thereby allowing a broader representation of Hallin and Mancini's three models of Western media systems (consistent with previous diversity scholarship). This wider database made it possible to examine ownership differences and variations among countries simultaneously. However, our study focuses on a limited sample of general news stories published on just seven days (but spread out over seven weeks). Future research should first consider whether diversity in online news changes over longer periods and then examine contributing factors to this change with more extensive longitudinal designs.

A limitation of our study is the heterogeneity in ownership types among made-for-Web outlets. Our findings cannot be interpreted with a one-size-fits-all mentality because this category of outlets has developed very differently in the countries included in this study. While in the United States, France, and Italy, online-only news outlets emerged early and are by now well-established, online news in Germany and Switzerland remains significantly behind this trend. One reason for this uneven development is that Germany and Switzerland have not faced as much disruption in the offline media sector as some other countries which has kept incentives for launching a wave of start-ups low (Brüggemann et al. 2016). Future research may wish to explore the question of which conditions favor launching waves of digital start-ups and to what extent national media systems truly benefit from these start-ups in terms of added diversity.

Previous scholarship has focused on the online-offline distinction and presented evidence indicating greater diversity in online media (Baum and Groeling 2008; Powers and Benson 2014). In an effort to take the next logical step, we concentrated our attention on online news exclusively and examined the influence of ownership forms and types of media systems. Our conclusion—that diversity is highest in online public spheres with strong public service media—is not without controversy and will hopefully stimulate the debate on this issue further.

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