

# Fairness, Informativeness and Scrutiny

## *The Role of News Media in Democracy*

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### **Abstract**

The chapter outlines the theoretical premises of the Swedish Media Election Studies and some principal empirical findings. The role of the media in democratic societies is to contribute to free opinion formation by fulfilling two normative functions: to inform the citizenry and to scrutinize those who govern. On the descriptive level three functions are distinguished: to supply different opinions, to provide information on issues, and to expose misbehavior. These descriptive functions correspond to three normative demands: fairness, informativeness and scrutiny. Empirical conclusions are based on analyses of the medias' impartiality, their information value and informativity score, and the quality of their scrutiny.

Swedish news media in general, and the public service broadcast media in particular, fulfill the demands made of them to a considerable degree. On balance, after nearly thirty years of empirical study in the Swedish Media Election Studies project, my assessment of the performance of Swedish news media is largely positive.

**Key Words:** media and democracy, election campaigns, functions, fairness, informativeness, scrutiny

### **Introduction**

*... I think that television poses no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself.*

The conclusion is Pierre Bourdieu's, which he set out in the introduction to his book *On Television and Journalism* (Bourdieu 1996:10).

Are the media a threat to democracy? Researchers who study the media and journalism find little that is novel or particularly original in Bourdieu's analysis and critique of television and the mechanisms that govern the journalistic field. He echoes rather many scholars in the fields of Media Studies or Mass Communication. Critical points are the media's predilection for disturbing news and conflict, journalists' distancing and cynical perspectives on politics, a focus on personalities and on politics as a game of strategy, and an increasingly commercial rationale.

In a comprehensive review of the (primarily American) literature on the subject, media researcher Doris Graber reaches a quite different conclusion: "Evidence from content analyses, focus groups and intensive interviews supports the conclusion that the news supply is adequate for citizens' civic needs and that they use it judiciously" (Graber 2004).

Although Graber's conclusion is decidedly more positive, the research on which it is based hardly lacks critical views of the kind Bourdieu and other more pessimistic media critics put forward. The difference resides in the conclusions drawn, and these mainly have to do with the functions different analysts assign to the media and the normative expectations they attach to them. That is to say, the contrasting assessments of the roles media *actually* play in democratic society is mainly a consequence of the beholder's normative ideas about the roles the media *should* play.

One's normative starting points and conception of democracy are, in other words, decisive for one's assessment of media performance. We should bear this in mind as we proceed to analyze the role news media should play in a democracy and how the media fulfill the tasks society assigns to them.<sup>1</sup> And we should bear in mind that media play other roles, too. They are there to entertain, to provide vicarious experience and sensations, and to make money. The discussion of normative roles and expectations discussed here is therefore confined to media that are professionally journalistic. They are referred to in the following as "news media".

## The Free Exchange of Ideas

Anyone who approaches the question of the media's roles in democratic society encounters at the outset two fundamental questions: On what basis, with what right, can we assign certain tasks and apply certain normative criteria to the media? And, if we find such a basis, who should decide which tasks the media should be expected to perform?

To my way of thinking, there is no definite answer to the first question. Any analysis of the roles media *should* play in democratic society necessarily springs out of a normative position concerning the nature of democracy – the fundamental constitutive principles of democratic rule.

Answers to the second question may be formulated with reference to classic political doctrine, modern theories of democracy and normative theories of the media.<sup>2</sup> As I see it, democracy is based on two fundamental democratic values: the sovereignty of the people and the free exchange of ideas.<sup>3</sup> The two fundamental values are interrelated; democracy requires that both be satisfied. It is entirely possible for a dictator to reflect the will of the people while forbidding the free exchange of ideas; conversely, there are societies in which ideas may be exchanged freely, but can never influence policy.

Thus, on the basis of normative democratic criteria, we might formulate the task of news media in the service of democracy, as follows: In a democracy media should work for the realization of the will of the people by facilitating the free exchange of ideas. The principal task of the media in a democracy is to contribute to *free and autonomous opinion formation* in society.

This essay will make use of the terms presented in the figure on the next page.

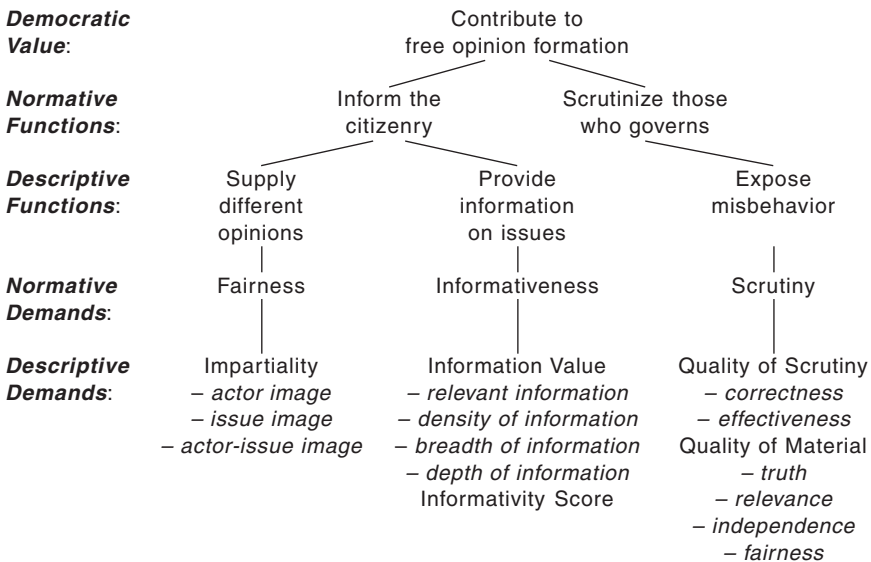
## Normative Functions

How can the media best contribute to the realization of the fundamental democratic value, a free exchange of ideas?

In both the classical literature on democracy and normative media theory ideas about which tasks the media should have in democratic society revolve around two central themes: how media should relate to *those who govern*, i.e., government and influential figures, and how they should relate to *the governed*, the public (Asp 1992).

Taking our starting point in the concept of ‘rational Man’, the notion that individuals themselves are best equipped to decide what lies in their interests (a tenet of classical democratic doctrine and a fundament of liberal ideology relating to the press), and the principle that one of the functions of the media in democratic society is to ensure that citizens have access to sufficient information to enable them to act in accordance with their interests and preferences (a fundament of the social responsibility theory of the press), the task of news media in relation to “the governed” may be formulated, as follows: News media should provide citizens with such *information* as enables them to freely and autonomously form opinions on *issues of consequence to society*. The better the media perform this task, the more they contribute to fulfilling that fundamental democratic value, free opinion formation.

**Figure 1.** *The Functions of News Media in Democracy – Theoretical Premises*



Starting with the notion that the media should monitor and stand independent of the powers of the state and the notion that the media have a duty on behalf of the public to keep holders of power under scrutiny, we may formulate the function of news media vis-à-vis those who govern, as follows: News media should freely and independently keep holders of power under surveillance and *scrutinize* their actions so as to enable citizens to form an opinion of their rulers’ *performance*. The better the media perform this task, the more they contribute to fulfilling that fundamental democratic value, free opinion formation.

Thus, citizens are assumed to function as individual decision-makers, and it is the duty of the media to contribute to free and autonomous opinion formation by providing the citizens with a sufficient basis for the rational assessments that enable them to form opinions on issues of consequence to society and the actions of those in positions of power.

*To inform the citizenry* and *to scrutinize those who govern* are in this connection considered two separate and equally important normative functions. This is by no means self-evident. One might well consider the media’s scrutinizing ‘watchdog’ function as

a means to achieve the overarching objective of providing a solid basis for citizens' rational decision-making. Such a view means that the prime function of the media in democratic society is to inform the public, and that scrutinizing holders of power is part of that function.

As for the opinions citizens form on issues of consequence to society, they are perceived to spring jointly out of perceptions and conclusions regarding the issues per se and perceptions and conclusions relating to those who represent different opinions on the issues (Asp 1986:62ff). The normative function to inform the citizenry is thus a composite of two different descriptive functions: to provide information on issues, and to present different opinions.

News media perform their informing function by *giving opinions currency* and *providing information about issues*; they perform their surveillance function by *revealing wrongdoing on the part of holders of power*.

## Normative Demands

What normative demands can be made of the media regarding how they should go about fulfilling their democratic functions?

As regards the media's information function, one may demand that news media are *informative*, that they provide the kind of information that citizens can form independent opinions on public affairs issues and that they are *fair* in their representation of opinions: that they do not favor one or another opinion at the expense of others.

As regards the media's scrutinizing function, one may demand that they, on behalf of the public, *scrutinize* individuals in positions of power so that abuses of power and other impropriety are made known and that they provide citizens with enough information so that they can form their own opinions and conclusions about leaders' behavior and character.

## Informative Media

The principle that news media should be informative may, on the basis of democratic norms, be formulated, as follows: News media should give citizens information that enables them autonomously to form opinions on current issues.

The principle is hardly problematic on the normative level (albeit it lacks a foundation in classical democratic theory). It is, however, somewhat problematic on the descriptive level inasmuch as we need to specify what we mean by "informative media" and how we should go about measuring media's performance in this respect.

To my way of thinking, the citizen's information needs represent the norm against which news media's reporting should be assessed. First and foremost, rational decision-making requires access to *relevant information*. Relevant information is, in principle, any and all information that speaks for or against a given position on an issue. But access to relevant information is not in itself sufficient. Relevant information must be communicated in a reasonable proportion relative to the total information flow. We need to specify a requirement of *information density*.

Frequency of relevant information may, however, be achieved through a parrot-like iteration of a handful of arguments. Consequently, the demand for information density must be combined with the requirement of a modicum of diversity or breadth. Maximum *information breadth* is when all relevant aspects that speak for or against a given opinion

or position have been offered. *Depth of information* is necessary, as well. That is to say, the media should provide the information that permits the citizen to judge the validity and strength of the arguments presented, e.g., by relating the facts, motives and valuations that underlie various arguments, by putting the issue in context, and by predicting the consequences of one or another position on the issue at hand.

Density, breadth and depth of information are each important in their own right, but from the citizen's point of view it is the combination of the three that constitutes the media's *informative value*.

Information value is closely related to the space accorded an issue or election campaign. It is therefore necessary to assess how effective media are as information media: what I call their *informativity score*. A news medium may, for example, present relatively little information in absolute terms, but nonetheless be very informative and thus be of great value to the citizen.

I use the terms informative value and informativity score in the Swedish Media Election Studies (Medievalsundersökningarna), where, operating on the descriptive level, I assess media's actual value as sources of information. When making a balanced judgement on a normative level, I speak of *informativeness*, more and less informative media.

## **Fair Media**

The demand that news media should be fair may on the basis of normative democratic principles be formulated, as follows: News media should treat various views and ideas in such a way that no view is unduly favored or discounted.

The demand of fairness is, in terms of its normative fundaments, somewhat more problematic than the demand that media be informative. Partisan or biased news reporting in any given medium is not incompatible with the value of the free exchange of ideas and free opinion formation. Indeed, on a systemic level it may even fulfill the value better. But although impartiality cannot be required of any individual medium on the basis of democratic principles, it can be demanded of media that through laws and regulations or through observance of voluntary ethical rules, are required to maintain an impartial stance in news reporting. Formulated in this manner, one may readily apply the demand of impartiality to practically all Swedish news media.

Now, what do we mean by *impartiality* – that the media do not unduly favor or discount a political actor or a given point of view? And what do we mean when we say that media are biased in their reporting of the news?

The question of whether the media have in fact favored a party or point of view must be distinguished from the normative question of whether the media have unduly favored it or put it at a disadvantage. That an actor has received favorable treatment in news reporting does not necessarily mean that the actor has been unduly favored. The conclusions we draw on the descriptive level do not automatically apply on the normative level.

To establish bias on the descriptive level requires a positive theory that is comprehensive in its description of the ways in which an actor may be favored or discounted in news reporting. The theory must cover all aspects, as an actor may have been discounted in one respect, but favored in another. My starting point is that individuals' political behavior is a function of their perceptions and valuations of two objects in the realm of politics: actors and issues. On the basis of this simple premise we can, through deductive reasoning, identify three different ways in which an actor may be favored or put at a disadvantage by the media.

First of all, an actor may be favored or discounted by the *image* he or she is given as an *actor*. Secondly, he/she may be favored or discounted by how an *issue* is presented to the public, e.g., favored through an emphasis on issues, phenomena that are consonant with the actor's personal world-view and priorities. Third, an actor may be favored or discounted by the way he or she is depicted in *relation* to various issues, phenomena and contexts. For example, an actor may be favored if the media associate him/her with the substantive profile he/she prefers and may, by the same token, be put at a disadvantage if he/she is presented in connection with phenomena and contexts that the actor finds undesirable or at odds with his/her priorities and preferences.

How can we determine whether extensive media coverage has been favorable or unfavorable? That an actor receives a lot of coverage is not necessarily favorable, nor is little coverage necessarily unfavorable.

In the Swedish Media Election Studies, what decides whether reporting is deemed favorable or unfavorable are a set of simple assumptions about what under normal circumstances might be considered favorable or unfavorable: that, for example, it normally would be favorable for a party or political idea to receive a lot of attention; that it is normally more favorable to be applauded than criticized; that it is normally more favorable to be described as being in harmony than in conflict; that it is normally more favorable if the media's depiction of actual conditions corresponds to the impression the actor wishes to give, and so forth.

Together, but also each separately, the three ways to favor or disadvantage someone or something provide a basis for assessments of the degree of bias in media coverage. An actor, party or idea may receive favorable treatment (extensive coverage) in one respect, but be put at a disadvantage in another (covered in unfavorable contexts). Conclusions as to a medium's bias therefore have to be based on a global assessment of all the ways that media coverage can favor or put an actor at a disadvantage.

When I draw conclusions about favorable or unfavorable election coverage on a descriptive level, I use the term *impartiality* (in its three respects). When I judge whether or not the tendency is undue, I speak of degrees of *fairness*.

## Scrutinizing Media

The demand that news media should be agents of scrutiny may be formulated on the basis of normative democratic principles, as follows: News media should scrutinize those who govern so that abuses of power and other impropriety become known to the public; they should provide citizens with such information as enables them to make independent assessments of the issue at hand.

The normative demand that the media should, freely and independently, scrutinize holders of political power is more firmly rooted in classical political thought than the ideas that news media should be informative and fair. The media as the fourth estate is a central element in the liberal tradition and in classical democratic doctrine. Less clear on a descriptive level, however, is what is meant by the 'fourth estate' and what demands may be made of the media as agents of scrutiny.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the media should be autonomous in relation to the objects of their scrutiny. That the press should be independent of the state and its representatives is a fundamental premise in classical liberal ideology. In normative theories of the press of more recent vintage, independence of the state is equally fundamental, but perhaps less cen-

tral, and the focus of scrutiny (and thus the institutions that the media should be independent of) has broadened.

Another fundamental premise is that media's attention should be focused on officials' deeds. As I see it, the media's function as fourth estate does not have to do with the content of officials' policies or political statements, whether they concern what their parties have achieved or the policies they intend to carry out in months and years to come. We should make a clear distinction between the media's scrutinizing role and their duty to inform. An examination of the parties' platforms or programs is part of the duty to inform; here, scrutiny is the means and information the objective. In the case of the scrutinizing function, scrutiny is the objective and information, investigation and publication the means.

Media's duty to scrutinize is also limited to certain kinds of deeds, namely, abuses of power and other impropriety, whether unlawful, immoral or unethical. An analysis to determine whether or not politicians have kept their election promises is not automatically part of a news medium's duty to scrutinize. When media examine or scrutinize, they are not necessarily performing the watchdog function inasmuch as all news journalism contains some measure of investigation.

Thus, news media shall stand independent of the powers that be and scrutinize the performance of holders of power with a particular focus on abuses of power and impropriety. Who, then are "holders of power", and in what ways should they be subjected to scrutiny?

The nature of the media's scrutiny may, as I see it, be specified in terms of two dimensions: *the scope of scrutiny*, i.e., the variety of holders of power to be subjected to scrutiny, and *the duty of the scrutinizer*, i.e., the kind of scrutiny media should undertake.

As for the scope of scrutiny, the holders of powers specified in classical liberal ideology of the press were rulers, that is, the Crown and subsequently also bureaucrats and other figures in government. These figures are still the most important objects of scrutiny in more recent normative theories of the media, but "holders of power" is defined more broadly. For example, the Charters of Swedish public service television companies (SVT and TV4) contain an admonition to "scrutinize authorities, organizations and private firms that exert influence over policy affecting the public". An American journalist, Peter Dunne, broadens the scope yet more in his oft-quoted dictum that media should "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable".

The media's duty to scrutinize the powerful lies at the core of liberal ideology of the press. The media should act as watchmen and sound the alarm whenever they detect abuses of power or other misconduct among the ranks of the powerful. Or, as Alexis de Tocqueville reported from his travels in the then-24 states of the USA in the 1830s: "The press monitors what government officials are doing and alerts citizens to misbehavior" (cited in Heffner 1984, ch. 11).

The media as active scrutinizers of politics and society represent a younger tradition, having its roots in the American tradition of 'muck-raking'. Thus, the emergence of active scrutiny and investigative journalism on the part of the media is mainly a result of newspapers' successive break with partisan politics, the professionalization of journalism and the emergence of 'objective journalism' in the USA during the first decades of the twentieth century (Schudson 1978).

Taking our starting point in ideas about the role the media should play (passive monitoring or active scrutiny) and the scope of the focus (only figures in government or all wielders of power and influence in society), four different kinds of tasks may be

discerned: (1) monitoring of holders of political power; (2) monitoring of all wielders of power and influence; (3) scrutiny of holders of political power; and (4) scrutiny of all wielders of power and influence in society.

Normative principles of democracy give no clear indication as to the character of media scrutiny or where the emphasis should rest. An actively investigative role where journalists, acting on behalf of the public and independent of the various power centers in society, actively scrutinize every individual in a position of power or influence with respect to both their private and public acts gives the media a considerable measure of power, much more than if the task is confined to monitoring the political leadership with a view to policing abuses of power. The demands set out in the following would, however, appear to apply irrespective of the scope of the task we assign the media and choose as our normative premise.

Two fundamental demands may be formulated: the one has to do with the quality of media scrutiny, the other, with the quality of the material on which the media base their scrutiny.

First of all, the media should contribute to bringing any misdoings that may occur to the public's attention. They should, in the service of the public, sound the alarm whenever abuses of power and other misconduct is discovered (cf. the debate between Zaller 2003, Bennett 2003, Patterson 2003 and Graber 2003). The media may themselves sound the alarm or pick up and spread alarms from other media as well as from monitoring agencies, public and private. This sort of relay function is naturally more common than discovering wrongdoing on one's own. But the media can also fulfil their monitoring function without doing anything at all; their sheer existence – the risk of getting caught – may have a deterrent effect on those they are set to monitor. In all probability this is the very most common way in which the media fill their monitoring function – although, of course, we cannot be certain.

Two different demands can be made of *the quality of media scrutiny*. First, that the media's judgement is *correct*, i.e., that what is disclosed as impropriety is actually wrong. Secondly, that the media are *effective*, i.e., that abuses are discovered and made public.

Making demands on the normative level is straightforward enough, but on the descriptive level it is difficult to determine to what extent the media live up to them. The measure of the media's success must be a combination of good judgement and efficiency on the part of the media. The better their judgement and the greater their efficiency in discovering and disclosing wrongdoing, the more successful they are in their watchdog function. This implies that very few exposés in the media may nonetheless represent a high degree of efficiency if in fact there is very little wrongdoing in a society or political system (which in turn may be a consequence of the presence of monitoring by the media).

As for the *quality of the material* the media gain access to, we may say that the information presented to the public should be of such quality that it allows people to draw their own conclusions about abuses of power and other wrongdoing on the part of elected officials and bureaucrats. Four demands may be made of the material: first and foremost is the absolute demand that the information presented be *true*. Secondly, it should be of importance to people, i.e., *relevant*. Relevance has to do with both what has been done and who did it. A minor misdeed on the part of a leading politician may be very relevant to the citizenry; similarly, gross abuses on the part of a minor official may also be highly relevant.

A third demand is that the scrutiny be *independent*. It shall be performed independent of other power centers and should not be done on anyone's behalf. The demand is somewhat problematic inasmuch as investigative journalism is often based on information that is leaked by someone who has something to gain by the facts being brought to light. Most major exposés are a consequence of one power player's desire to embarrass or otherwise put a rival player at a disadvantage. The media's independence in such cases consists mainly of verifying the information against other sources. The decision to publish is thus a matter of weighing the truth and relevance of the information against the knowledge that one is serving someone's interests. Newsdesks most likely experience such bouts of conscience rather frequently.

A fourth demand is that the media are *fair* in their scrutiny, fair in the sense that the accused is given the right to tell his/her side of the story and that in presenting the facts of the case the journalist does not suppress material that speaks for the accused. Here it is more a question of giving the person "a fair hearing" than of maintaining impartiality of the kind demanded of media as communicators of opinion.

### **Testing Media Performance**

At the outset I noted that the choice of normative premises is decisive for one's assessment of media performance, as the choice of premises determines which functions and tasks are assigned to the media and what criteria are applied to measure performance.

The empirical assessment of media performance in connection with election campaigns that follows here takes its starting point in the two fundamental normative functions assigned to news media, namely, informing the citizenry and scrutinizing figures in positions of power.

In practice, however, it is necessary to set priorities. The Swedish Media Election Studies do not include any comprehensive or systematic measures of the kind of scrutiny we expect of 'the fourth estate', but only quantitative measures of the amount of coverage media have given various scandals and other irregularities. Consequently, the discussion that follows is not based on any systematically designed empirical test of media scrutiny in connection with election campaigns.

Media performance as vehicle of information has been studied mainly in connection with three national referenda: a referendum on nuclear energy in 1980, one on whether or not Sweden should join the European Union (EU) in 1994, and one on whether or not Sweden should join the European Monetary Union (EMU) in 2003. Referenda make special demands with respect to the information function inasmuch as voting concerns a (single) substantive issue. In the EU referendum, however, the analysis of the media's information value was limited. Consequently, our empirical test of how informative the media are is mainly based on the referenda on nuclear energy and the EMU.

The media's representation of opinion has been studied in connection with nine parliamentary elections between 1979 and 2006 and the three above-mentioned referenda. The demand of impartiality in campaign coverage is particularly relevant in the case of general elections, since voting means taking a position vis-à-vis different political actors, parties or political ideas. Political bias, the extent to which the parties have been treated fairly in the news media, has been assessed in relation to all the election campaigns. The descriptive demand of impartiality has, as we recall, three aspects. Thus, we examine whether any particular party or alternative in the referenda has been favored or put at a disadvantage by the way media have described them as actors, by the media's

representation of the issues, or by the way the parties are associated with various issues and contexts.

## **Media Scrutiny**

In their scrutinizing function the media should ensure that voters are aware of any impropriety that politicians or public officials may have committed. They should also provide voters with the information voters need in order to be able to form an independent opinion on the issue at hand. Does the election campaign coverage of Swedish news media satisfy the demands that may be made of the media with regard to their duty to scrutinize holders of power?

The demand that media scrutinize holders of power is not voiced to the same extent during election campaigns as the demands that news coverage should be fair and informative. As a consequence, the Swedish Media Election Studies have not focused on the scrutinizing function in any systematic or comprehensive fashion, in part because empirical tests of performance in terms of the demands that scrutiny shall be correct and effective require data from other sources than media content. It should be pointed out that the demands that are made of examinations of the parties' and candidates' policies relate, to my way of thinking, to the media's informative function and are therefore included in the Media Election Studies.

It is not possible to give a general, empirically founded answer to the question of whether or not the scrutiny undertaken during election campaigns is correct or effective. In quantitative terms the media's scrutinizing role of the sort associated with 'the fourth estate' is less salient than their informative role. Less than 10 per cent of the media coverage concerns exposés of abuses of power and other wrongdoing.

Obviously, it is difficult to determine empirically whether or not the media's revelations are correct, i.e., that it actually is a question of abuse of power or wrongdoing. Everyone who has studied election campaigns knows that as elections near, scandals pop up that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. This may be an indication that the media's threshold may be lower as elections approach, and that the media's judgement might be a little less correct than at other times. But an opposite hypothesis is also possible. We know, for example, that editors are acutely aware that many people are interested in training the spotlight on one or another rival; consequently, they may be less likely than normal to give scandals attention.

Swedish media's scrutiny in election campaigns is mainly focused on Social Democrats. Whether this attention is undue or correct and whether it is efficient is open to debate. What suggests that it may be correct is the circumstance that the Social Democrats have ruled Sweden most of the time during the interval under study. It is conceivable that Social Democrats, influenced by their many years in power, are more prone to abuses of power, etc., than bourgeois politicians are. But it is also possible that the media tend to choose to scrutinize Social Democrats and Social Democratic ministers more than representatives of other parties or blocs.

## **Informative Media**

That news media give the voters the kind of information that helps them take a stand on the issues at hand is particularly important in referenda, where each individual voter has a more distinct policy-making role than in general elections. The media's value as

sources of information has therefore been studied primarily in connection with Sweden's three most recent national referenda: on nuclear energy in 1980, on membership in the European Union in 1994, and on membership in the European Monetary Union/adoption of the euro as the coin of the realm in 2003.

Crucial to rational decision-making is access to information that is of relevance to the decision at hand.

All three referenda gave rise to tremendous amounts of information in the press, radio and television, which culminated during the last intensive campaign month. In addition to regularly scheduled newscasts radio and television carried special election programs, and newspapers published special supplements that presented the arguments for and against nuclear energy, for and against Swedish entry into the EU, and for and against adoption of the euro. Provided the voter had the time and the energy, he or she could read, listen to and watch information about the subject of the referendum several hours each day in the last month of the campaign.

Media reports focusing on the actors in the campaigns and the referendum as a political contest make up a good share of the coverage, however. Indeed, a share equal to that devoted to the issues. These proportions have changed over time. Media coverage leading up to the referendum on the European Monetary Union/the euro in 2003 was more focused on the political contest per se than either the referendum on nuclear power in 1980 or that on EU membership in 1994.

Albeit the causality behind longitudinal variations is not always easily determined, this finding suggests a certain shift from politics toward tactics, from issue toward personalities, from substance toward game. In public service television and radio, whose news services are largely comparable, the shares of primarily issue-focused news items were 52 per cent in the referendum on nuclear energy, 50 per cent in the referendum on EU membership, and 44 per cent in the referendum on the EMU/euro.

The trend in comparable metropolitan newspapers is even more marked: 60 per cent on nuclear energy and the EU, and 48 per cent on the euro. A similar trend is noted in the provincial press.

Thus, there would seem to be a trend in news reporting toward treating politics as a game, the players involved, the campaign and public opinion. The change is most pronounced in the metropolitan press, and least in the tabloid press and broadcast news.

There are two conceivable explanations for these findings: Either there has been a change in political journalism, or the change mirrors a change in how politics is conducted, i.e., actual differences in the referendum campaigns. That the change is not equally apparent in all media speaks in favor of the former explanation, that journalistic praxis has changed. Differences in the campaigns would most likely have been reflected across the board.

Although much of the reporting has to do with "the game of politics", all three referenda gave rise to vast amounts of decision-relevant information on the issue at hand. The metropolitan morning papers contained much more of this kind of information than provincial newspapers, and the provincial and tabloid press offered more than radio and television. These findings are not surprising when we consider that the incidence of information depends on the "space" available for news on the subject. There is a big difference between the amount of news copy in a metropolitan morning paper and that in a television newscast.

But, even if newspapers offer more decision-relevant information than radio and television newscasts, radio and television overall nonetheless carried a considerable

volume of decision-relevant information. Viewers who watched the main evening newscast on *SVT2 (Rapport)*, plus all the special election programs on *SVT1* and *SVT2* the last weeks of the three campaigns, and readers who read everything about the referendum in the two most important Swedish newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* (Stockholm, morning) and *Aftonbladet* (national, tabloid) partook of roughly the same amount of decision-relevant information.

It is commonly assumed that the brevity of newscasts in the broadcast media mean that they are more information-dense than print media that have more space at their disposal. The differences are not very big, nor is the relationship totally consistent. In the referendum on the euro in 2003, radio and television were more information-dense than either the metropolitan or the provincial press, but in 1980 on the issue of nuclear energy newspapers were more information-dense than broadcast media, albeit the differences were not as pronounced as in 2003.

Metropolitan morning papers are no more information-dense than provincial papers or the tabloid press. In the euro referendum in 2003, for example, provincial papers were even more information-dense than the metropolitan morning press. No systematic differences among newspapers were noted in connection with the 1980 referendum.

Thus, it is impossible to point to any one category of media as being the most information-dense. Television studio debates and “Meet the Press”-type interrogations are generally more information-dense than news reporting. This is probably not surprising, since the point of the program is to confront and examine the different campaign organizations’ arguments. The fact remains, such programs are more information-dense than news media.

Theoretically speaking, a high frequency or density of information may be achieved by repeating a single argument over and over again. Thus, the criterion of density needs to be complemented with a criterion of breadth. Generally speaking, the media differ more with respect to breadth than they do in terms of information density. The greatest breadth was noted for metropolitan morning papers, where *Dagens Nyheter* in connection with both referenda, on nuclear energy and on the euro, offered by far the greatest variety of information. Provincial papers and the tabloid press displayed clearly less breadth, but least breadth was noted for radio and television newscasts.

Voters who read a metropolitan morning paper were also exposed to a broad variety of information and slants on the issue at hand, but those who watched all the programs offered on the subject by *Sveriges Television (SVT)* were exposed to a more or less equally broad spectrum of arguments. Thus, one did not have to reside in Stockholm, Göteborg or Malmö to have access to a broad assortment of arguments and facts relating to the three referenda. Even those – a majority of Swedes – who did not have access to a metropolitan morning paper were well served by the news media.

The media should also supply information that allows voters to form an opinion of the validity and logic of the arguments presented to them by reporting the facts and rationales that underlie the arguments, that is, background and ‘depth’. This entails putting the issue in context and discussing the consequences of the alternatives voters may choose between.

In the case of the euro referendum in 2003 roughly one-fifth of the total news coverage offered background and depth. This was a somewhat greater share than in the referendum on nuclear energy in 1980. But we note major differences between news media, and between the two referenda. It is therefore difficult to discern any general pattern or trend concerning the depth of news media coverage, other than that metropolitan morning papers offered the most depth in both cases.

In two respects, however, changes over time are apparent. First, the provincial press and public service television (SVT) news departments offered information of much greater depth in 2003 than they did in 1980. Secondly, SVT's election specials offered less depth in 2003 than in 1980 – less than one-fifth of the information offered about the European Monetary Union in 2003 was background and depth, compared to nearly half of the coverage devoted to the referendum on nuclear energy in 1980. These observations lead us to conclude that television exhibits an increase in information-density, but a decrease in depth over the course of the period studied.

From voters' point of view, then, the ideal medium will offer density, breadth and depth – the sum of which is the medium's overall information value.

A calculation of the media's combined information value in terms of these three dimensions results in a wider gap between the best and the worst media. This is because media that are good on one dimension tend to be good on the others, as well. The metropolitan morning press clearly has greater information value than the provincial press and a considerably greater information value than radio and television newscasts.

Thus, access to a metropolitan morning paper gives the voter a much better chance to acquire the information he or she needs to make a rational choice.

But this is not to say that television is a poor source of information. In both referenda the total referendum-related news coverage on public service television was of the same information value as the most informative of metropolitan newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter*.

Yet another dimension is important from the media consumer's point of view, namely, how efficiently the media communicate information – what I call their "informativity". This is important inasmuch as consumers nearly always have to (or choose to) expose themselves to only a sample of the content the media offer. A highly informative medium is one that gives readers, listeners or viewers a substantial amount of information in relation to the time they devote to it.

Which media should voters turn to for information if they have little time to spare?

In both the referendum on nuclear energy in 1980 and that on the euro in 2003, the election specials on *Sveriges Television* were the most informative. Viewers received much more information in shorter time than they would have got if they had read a metropolitan morning paper or partaken of radio and television newscasts. Thus, the election specials on public service television not only have high information value, they also score high on informativity, i.e. they are efficient.

We note two important changes over time with respect to the media's informativity. Both television news and the provincial press had higher informativity scores in 2003 than they had in connection with the 1980 referendum. In 2003 all provincial newspapers had an even higher informativity score than the metropolitan press, whereas the opposite was true in 1980.

Did Swedish news media fulfill the demands that may be made of them as sources of information on the basis of normative democratic principles? Were they informative?

The answer naturally depends on the measuring stick one applies. According to the norms I apply and the empirical findings of the Swedish Media Election Studies, my answer is Yes. Swedish voters had very good opportunities to gather the information they needed to make a well-informed choice in the three referenda. Information on the issues was relatively abundant (dense); it displayed considerable breadth and some depth, as well.

Nor was the quality of information confined to those having access to the metropolitan morning press. Together, television newscasts and election specials displayed very

high information quality, as did provincial newspapers. Thus, even those who lived in the countryside, those who were not particularly interested in politics, elderly people and people with little formal education could via their local newspapers and television weigh the various arguments against each other and form their own position on the issues to be decided in the respective referenda.

## **Fair Media**

In the role of communicator of opinion news media should treat different opinions in such a way that no opinion is unduly favored or put at a disadvantage. The media's fulfillment of this demand has been studied in connection with nine general elections and three referenda.

What do the findings tell us? Do Swedish news media give fair accounts of the political alternatives put before voters?

The first way in which a party may be favored or put at a disadvantage is through the image media give of the parties as actors, the attention devoted to the actor, and how the actor is depicted.

Generally speaking, we find a close correspondence between the media exposure parties are accorded and their popularity among the electorate.<sup>5</sup> This holds true in all the elections and in all news media; furthermore, newsdesks' selection of subjects is also very uniform. It is probably not a party's popularity per se that decides how much coverage it receives. It is rather the consequence of a two-step assessment of newsworthiness: the relevance of the news story is a function of the party's political weight and importance, and an indicator of these aspects is the support the party has among voters.

At the face of it, this kind of assessment would appear to favor large parties and put smaller parties at a disadvantage. But, attention is only one of the ways an actor can be favored. Another aspect is the kind of attention the actor is accorded. Extensive exposure often means a lot of criticism, in which case it is far from certain that media attention will have a favorable effect. Consequently, one cannot simply conclude that large parties are generally given more favorable treatment in the media than small parties.

Although news selection is quite similar among Swedish news media, we also note, particularly in the early years of the period, that the party a medium supported in opinion columns tended to receive more exposure in the medium than other parties. In the first three general elections (1979-1985) party partisanship was fairly pronounced in Swedish newspapers. Over the period under study we find that the two 'extremes' in our sample, *Svenska Dagbladet* (Conservative) and *Arbetet* (Social Democratic), gradually came to be more alike.<sup>6</sup> In the last two election campaigns that *Arbetet* covered, the paper treated the Social Democrats and the non-socialist bloc basically the same, and in the three most recent election campaigns *Svenska Dagbladet* has resembled *Dagens Nyheter* and *Göteborgs-Posten* (both "independent Liberal").

In terms of the parties' exposure in news columns, then, we may say that Sweden in the early 1990s no longer had a party press in the traditional sense – not in Sweden's major cities in any case. On the other hand, we do find traces of a certain amount of bloc partisanship in the news coverage of the most recent three elections.

Another way a party may be favored or discounted is through how the media present the issues – the amount of attention different issues or phenomena are given, and how they are depicted.

In virtually every election campaign it is possible to point out one or another party that has been favored or put at a disadvantage by the way different issues have been treated and how conditions are described by the media. But although we can identify “winners” and “losers” in this regard, there is no one party or political view that systematically has been favored or discounted in the election campaigns of the last twenty-five years. The only systematic difference that we note is a tendency, perhaps not entirely unexpected, for the two largest parties, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives, to have more influence over the media’s agenda than other parties.

The third principal way a party may be favored or disadvantaged is the way in which the media associate the party with different issues, phenomena and contexts – i.e., the “issue profile” they assign to the parties. A party’s success in an election campaign often has to do with whether or not it has managed to reach the public on the issues it wishes to talk about – and to avoid those issues that may cast the party in a negative light.

Here, too, it is possible to identify at least one party in any given election that has been favored or disadvantaged in relation to their issue profile. But, again, there is no one party or set of political views that has been consistently favored or disadvantaged.

There is one general characteristic of Swedish news media’s election coverage, however. Parties are often forced to speak and take stands on issues that they would rather not discuss. There is generally a poor fit between the issue profile the party would like to project to the public and the profile the public partakes of via the media. This is particularly true of television news programs, where a negative selection principle often applies. But the poor fit applies equally to all the parties. No party or set of political views has unequivocally and systematically been put at a disadvantage more than others.

These findings may be summarized in *two general conclusions*. *First*, there is always at least one party that is favored or discounted by the way news media report about the election campaign. This holds true for all the election campaigns studied, and it applies to all the news media studied: newspapers and radio and television newscasts. But, there is no systematic pattern in the partisanship observed. That goes for public service radio and television and TV4, and for much of the metropolitan press.

One reason is that the news media function both as collaborator and as adversary vis-à-vis the parties. Sometimes journalists and media play along with a party, sometimes they play against it. The roles shift from election to election; the parties can never be sure which role the media will play. Journalists can transform extraneous events, chance occurrences and seemingly meaningless details in a campaign into issues that can decide the election. Events that either make the journalist valuable collaborators or formidable adversaries.

*Secondly*, the media are very similar with respect to how they report election campaigns. The similarities with regard to both selection and presentation are more characteristic of Swedish election coverage than the differences. Swedish election campaigns in the media are essentially about the same issues, no matter which newspaper or news program one turns to – the media become their own measuring stick. Thus, if a party finds itself favored or disadvantaged the treatment will be replicated in all media – and in the same way.

Are Swedish news media non-partisan? Is election coverage fair? The answer depends on one’s time frame. If we look at any given election and consider the media’s impartiality on a descriptive level, the answer is No, since there will be at least one party that is highly favored or put at a clear disadvantage in any given election campaign.

But the answer is Yes if we consider individual election campaigns and the media's partisanship on a normative level, since the degree of their partisanship is seldom "undue". This is in any case true of public service radio and television, who are required by law and their charters to maintain an impartial stance in news reporting. In the instances where a party has clearly been disadvantaged in news coverage, the cause is usually a blunder on the part of the party or the result of the sniping between rival parties. Likewise, when a party has been favored, it is generally due to a popular political initiative or success in a public debate.

In the Swedish press, however, some papers still fly their party's colors, in news columns, as well. On the whole, however, Swedish newspapers are much less partisan in the period studied than in the era of the party press.

The answer is also Yes when we view media performance in the longer term. In each campaign we can identify at least one party that has fared ill in the press, but there is no consistent pattern as to which party fares ill from election to election. Thus, in the long term news media's coverage of parliamentary elections may be considered fair.

One must attach certain reservations to the answers given above in the case of the three referenda. Newspapers' news coverage of the referenda campaigns is considerably more partisan than their coverage of general elections. Radio and television, on the other hand, are even more impartial in their treatment of the alternatives than they are in their treatment of the parties in election campaigns. In the referendum on Sweden's nuclear energy program in 1980, newspapers differed widely as to how they treated the three alternatives, and the differences corresponded closely to the papers' position in opinion columns.<sup>7</sup>

Newspapers differed markedly in the referenda on EU membership in 1994 and membership in the European Monetary Union in 2003, as well. The Yes campaigns predominated in the news in both cases, by roughly two to one in terms of volume. But, although "Yes to the euro" dominated news space in 2003, on balance the "No" alternative received more favorable treatment. This contrasts markedly with the media's treatment of the alternatives in the referendum in 1994, where "Yes" both was allotted more space and received more favorable treatment. The results of the two referenda contrasted, as well: voters approved membership in the European Union, whereas they said No to the euro.

The differences noted between coverage in the 1994 and 2003 referenda applied to all the news media studied: the metropolitan, tabloid and provincial press, and radio and television newscasts. The election specials on television remained strictly non-partisan in all three referenda.

As to an assessment of news media's impartiality in the referendum campaigns, we can only say Yes with strong reservations. Radio and television newscasts and election specials were largely impartial, whereas news reporting in the press was more partisan.

Do Swedish news media fulfill the normative demands that can be made of them? Are they fair in their news coverage?

In the long term and overall, we may say that Swedish news media are fair in their coverage of election campaigns, especially with respect to parliamentary elections and especially in radio and television. The alternatives voters can choose from are presented fairly in the sense that none of the alternatives is favored or discounted unduly.

The question remains whether the media are fair in their treatment of politicians as a profession. The media's decidedly critical scrutiny of politics in connection with election campaigns is fair in the sense that it does not turn a blind eye to anyone, but it is

unfair in the sense that the spotlight is trained on politicians more than other holders of power.

## **Ideals and the Real World**

In large-scale modern societies recurrent elections are the institution that makes democracy possible. Ultimately, the free and independent choices citizens make between competing political alternatives is the foundation upon which democracy rests.

In contemporary democracies the performance of mass media is crucial. If free opinion-formation is a necessary prerequisite to democracy, free and independent mass media are a necessary prerequisite to free opinion-formation. The media are a vital part of the democratic infrastructure. They provide information to voters, while they also provide platforms for the parties and candidates who compete for voters' support. If the media do not fulfill their communicative functions, elections cannot fulfill their function as mechanisms of democracy.

It is in this context that the Swedish Media Election Studies are carried out. How well do Swedish media serve this vital democratic mechanism? Are news media fair, informative and scrutinizing?

Our assessment of their performance depends, as I observed at the start, on our normative starting points. My personal assessment – based on my normative starting points and empirical studies of nearly three decades of election campaign coverage – is more in line with the Doris Graber's conclusion than with the fears expressed by Pierre Bourdieu.

## **Notes**

1. The theoretical starting points referred to here represent the fundament for the Swedish Media Election Studies (Medievalsundersökningarna) that are carried out within the framework of the research program, "Journalism and Democracy" in the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JMG) at Göteborg University. The analyses cover news media's coverage of nine general election campaigns (1979-2006) and three national referenda (on nuclear energy in 1980, entry into the European Union in 1994, and membership in the European Monetary Union in 2003). The coverage of general elections is limited to the final four weeks of the campaign in the press, radio and television. In the case of referenda, the material also includes all broadcast programs relating to the referendum as well as editorials and other op-ed material in the press. The empirical findings of the first Media Election Study are reported in Asp (1982), and the theoretical starting points in Asp (1986). Ensuing studies have been reported in conjunction with each election. I have chosen not to refer to my own work in the discussion of empirical findings here.
2. The tasks assigned to the news media and the expectations regarding their role in a democracy are outgrowths of normative assumptions which are discussed in Asp (1992). The theoretical underpinnings of the Swedish Media Election Studies are specified and further elaborated in Asp (2006), on which the present article draws extensively.
3. The discussion in the present article is based on conditions in Sweden. The expectations and requirements made of the media should therefore be those that are considered legitimate in Swedish society. The theories and the normative and descriptive criteria discussed here are, however, of the sort that may be assumed to apply to democratic rule as such. (For a primarily American discussion, see for example Zaller 2003, Bennett 2003, Patterson 2003, Graber 2003, Gans 2003, Patterson 2000, Page 1996, Schudson 1995, Patterson 1993, Iyengar 1991, Keane 1991, Lichtenberg 1990, Entman 1989 and Strömbäck 2005).
4. Surprisingly, the literature contains few attempts to specify the concept of the media as 'the fourth estate' or the scrutinizing role of the media (Strömbäck 2003, Ekström, Johansson & Larsson forthcoming). A search using the term "watchdog journalism" on Google, for example, turns up 1,340,000 hits.

and “investigative reporting” 2,760 000 hits. In the literature the terms are often used interchangeably, despite their different epistemological origins.

5. Seven parties were represented in the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) during the greater part of the period studied. In the elections of 2006 the Social Democrats received the least share of the vote in their history (35.0%) and lost power to “Alliance for Sweden”, a coalition of four non-socialist parties.

The Social Democrats have ruled most of the time since modern democracy was introduced in Sweden. Between 1998 and 2006 the Social Democrats ruled with the parliamentary support of two small parties: the Left (5.9%), to the left of the Social Democrats, and the Greens (5.2 %) who won representation in the Riksdag in 1988.

The winning Alliance in 2006 comprises the Conservatives, a Liberal-Conservative party that veered toward mid-spectrum in 2006 with remarkable success (26.2%); Center, a formerly agrarian party which in recent years has courted small enterprises (7.9%); the Liberals, who have turned from their traditional social-Liberal emphasis toward market liberalism (7.5%); and the Christian Democrats a socially conservative party (6.6%).

6. *Arbetet* (Malmö), the flagship of the Social Democratic fleet, ceased publication in 2000.
7. The referendum on nuclear energy was something of a “special case”. Normally, voters are given a choice between two alternatives – often Yes vs. No. But the issue of nuclear energy cut across party lines and threatened to splinter all the parties, particularly the largest ones.

Sweden’s nuclear program was half-built when the nuclear accident at Harrisburg (USA) occurred. The accident forced the ruling Social Democrats to accede to popular demands for a referendum. Alternative 2, a “yes-and-no” position (fulfillment of the nuclear program, but a phase-out of the reactors as renewable sources of electricity could be phased in), was a (successful) strategy to defuse highly negative public opinion in the aftermath of Harrisburg.

The three alternatives, the turmoil in the parties, and the fears surrounding nuclear energy at the time surely impacted on news reporting of the referendum campaigns.

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