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It Didn't Happen Here: Commercialization and Political News Coverage in Swedish Television 1998–2010

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Commercialization and political news

In most democracies and for most people, television constitutes the most important source of political and current affairs information. How television news covers election campaigns may thus have significant influence on how voters perceive and evaluate the candidates, parties, and issues at stake. At the same time, critics claim that media commercialization in terms of increased market-orientation has changed the style and character of election news, from descriptive to increasingly interpretive journalism, and from framing politics as issues to increasingly framing politics as a strategic game and as scandals. Notwithstanding such claims, there is a lack of longitudinal studies investigating television election news coverage and, overall, empirical evidence for possible effects of media commercialization on election news is rather scarce. Against this background, the objective of this chapter is to study changes in television news journalism in Sweden across the four election campaigns 1998–2010 and to discuss whether any changes can be related to media commercialization.

Due to changes in media technologies and as a result of deregulation, media environments across the world have transformed and expanded significantly during the last few decades. More specifically, deregulation of broadcast media systems and the development of cable and digital television have radically increased the number of channels (Prior, 2007; Debrett, 2009); the rise of 24-hour news channels has increased the number of hours broadcast from both old and new channels (Lewis and Cushion, 2010); and the amount of information available through the Internet is virtually limitless. Taken together, this has created a greater surplus of information and a greater deficit of attention than ever before, which in turn has radically

increased the competition for audience attention as well as for advertising and for pay-TV revenues. This, in turn, has increased the commercial pressures on the media.

It has simultaneously become common wisdom that media commercialization has had, and continues to have, detrimental consequences for the quality of political news journalism (Neveu, 2002; Sand and Helland, 2004; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). Patterson (2000), for example, claims that media commercialization has resulted in a greater tendency for the media to frame politics as a strategic game rather than in terms of issues, and to interpret rather than describe what is happening: 'Of the many effects of commercialism on news content, none is more consequential than the media's tendency to report politics not as an issue but as a game in which individual politicians vie for power' (2000: 253–254). He also claims that: 'Today, facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in election reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illustrate it. The theme is primary; the facts are secondary' (Patterson, 1993: 67).

Despite these and other claims that the quality of political news journalism has changed, and perhaps also deteriorated, as a consequence of increasing media competitiveness and media commercialization (Biltereyst and Desmet, 2010; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011), there is however a general lack of longitudinal studies comparing news across time. There are some exceptions (Benson and Hallin, 2007; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011; Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck, 2013), but overall, empirical evidence for the effects of media commercialization on political news journalism 'is relatively scarce' (Vliegenthart et al., 2011: 93). This holds particularly true with respect to changes in television news: to the extent that research compares political news journalism across time or space, the focus is almost exclusively on newspapers (Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008).

The paradox, then, is that most theories on how media commercialization and increased competitiveness have contributed to changes in political news have been developed with a focus on changes to broadcast and digital media, while most of the – overall rather limited – empirical data on changes to political news journalism across time focuses on print media. In addition, most research on changes to political news as an effect of media commercialization has been done within the United States (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994). This is problematic not only because the United States is an exceptional case (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), but also because all major American television channels have always been heavily commercialized (Auletta, 1992). This lack of variation makes it difficult to investigate whether or how media commercialization influences the content of news journalism (Strömbäck, 2007).

In order to remedy this situation to some degree, the objective of this chapter is to compare television news journalism in Sweden across the four national election campaigns in 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010, and to

discuss whether any changes may be related to the commercialization of the Swedish media system. The dependent variables will be the degree of interpretive journalism and the degree of strategic game and scandal framing in television news, since these features have been previously singled out as consequences of media commercialization (Patterson, 1993, 2000).

Television under market pressure

Despite the contemporary excitement surrounding digital and social media, it is essential to remember that in most modern democracies, the majority of citizens still access their political information from the mass media, in particular from television (Panagopoulos, 2009; Papathanassopoulos and Negrine, 2011; Purcell et al., 2010; Shehata and Strömbäck, 2014). Thus, election news coverage in television may be influential on the way voters perceive political issues, evaluate political candidates or finally make voting decisions (Hopmann et al., 2010). Consequently, it is important to ask which factors are relevant in explaining the nature of political news in television. In this chapter, a theoretical point of departure is to analyze political news coverage in television as a product of the commercialization of contemporary broadcast media systems.

Commercialization has been described as ‘the most powerful force for homogenization of media systems’ (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 273). The general trend in European broadcasting systems in recent decades has been the transformation from almost purely public service broadcasting to the increasingly dominant role of commercial broadcasters (Esser et al., 2012; Iosifidis, 2010; Donders, 2012). European media systems were deregulated as a result of liberalization and market trends among national governments. The liberal arguments focused on the ineffective management within public service media companies, and the lack of interest in meeting the desires of their audience (Keane, 1991; Donders, 2012). This new liberal media policy was basically made possible by the development of media technology, in particular satellite and cable television, which offered new choices and increased competition in the dualistic national media markets that straddled traditional public service media and new private media (Gripsrud, 2010; Saura and Enli, 2011).

In all European countries, public service monopolies were dismantled. As might be expected, public service media lost substantial audience market shares and money, even if this development was less distinct in some countries than in others (Aalberg et al., 2010). In almost every European country today (the only exception is Denmark) commercial television dominates in terms of audience market shares (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2011), and the increased competition forces public broadcasters to adopt much of the logic of commercial television (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, the degree of commercialization – or the extent to which public broadcasters

adopt the commercial logic – remains disputed. Public service company strategies may vary in different countries due to historical traditions of media governance and expectations among the public (Esser et al., 2012). Still, all public service broadcasters have to relate to the challenges created by the increasingly competitive environment (Nord, 2012).

The theory of commercialization of national television markets is closely associated with the idea of ‘market-driven journalism’, where the main assumption is that broadcasters in heavy competition for audiences and revenues tend to avoid intense and in-depth coverage of political issues, as such coverage is perceived to be too dull and expensive, whatever its substantive importance (Neveu and Kuhn, 2002; McManus, 1994). Previous studies confirm this assumption to some extent. Some studies of commercialized television markets claim that one result is more superficial news coverage in general (Underwood, 1998).

Another analytical framework for understanding political news coverage predicts that journalistic interventions will be greater when there are higher levels of competitive pressure, and greater in commercial – compared to public service – channels, because a more significant degree of journalistic intervention is part and parcel of greater audience-orientation. The arrival of commercial television in Britain in 1955, for example, was perceived as an early catalyst for changes in the culture of political journalism in the UK, and contributed to the gradual phasing out of a more sacerdotal style of reporting in favor of a more pragmatic and audience-oriented approach to political news coverage (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Esser, 2008; Semetko et al., 1991).

There are however only few studies that directly investigate the linkage between media commercialization and increased media competitiveness on the one hand, and changes in political news journalism on television on the other. This holds particularly true for the study of election news, which is the focus of this study. Furthermore, the dependent variable varies across studies, also complicating comparisons across countries. One study, for example, compared politicians’ perceptions of the quality of political news journalism in the UK and the Netherlands, and found that politicians in both countries claimed that the quality of political journalism had deteriorated as a result of competition-driven news media (Stamper and Brants, 2011).

As a second example, a longitudinal comparison of political news coverage of the three Norwegian elections in 1965, 1989 and 2008 found a considerable increase of opinion polls and speculations in both newspaper and TV news reporting. The heightened status and market value of interpretative and political game-framed news were explained as a result of increased competition and supply of information, and were confirmed for both public and private television (Allern, 2010).

Longitudinal studies of potential effects of media commercialization and increased competitiveness on television news journalism are rare. However,

one study of Swedish television news between 1990 and 2004 showed that news programs became more commercialized with respect to presentation and form than with respect to the actual content. This study also suggested a curvilinear development where television news became more commercialized during the first years of commercial competition before it stabilized to a level where it was less commercialized than it was in those first years of competition, but more commercialized than it had been during the monopoly era (Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007). With respect to the coverage of Swedish election campaigns, earlier research suggests that media commercialization may contribute to an increasing tendency to frame politics as a strategic game, but that it cannot explain the extent to which political news journalism on television is interpretive rather than descriptive (Strömbäck, 2007, 2008; Strömbäck and van Aelst, 2010). These studies did not, however, compare as many national elections as the present one, and it is thus unclear how far those results can be generalized. Before presenting the results of this study, the following section focuses on the conditions of the Swedish television market and the hypotheses raised for testing the media commercialization thesis.

The Swedish TV market: structure and players

Historically, the Swedish television market has been associated with public service television, which was introduced in 1957. For some decades, public service television operated in a monopoly market, with specific state regulations regarding program content, non-partisanship and financing. No private or commercial television stations were allowed to broadcast from Sweden or be aimed at the Swedish public. Even today, a huge majority of politicians still defend public service TV as a decisive instrument for free information and fair reporting within the Swedish society. The public service TV channels are prohibited from broadcasting commercial advertising and are financed by mandatory license fees (Nord and Grusell, 2012; Strömbäck and Nord, 2008).

The commercialization of the Swedish television market could be described as a gradual, but unavoidable process. The system began to break down with the advent of cable television and on New Year's Eve 1987, the first private, commercial cable television station (TV3) started to broadcast in Swedish. Since the station was based in London, it was out of reach of the Swedish authorities, who unsuccessfully tried to enforce the Swedish law on broadcasting.

Thus, changes in media technology and a more liberal political climate created the preconditions for the deregulation of the broadcast media. Public service television's terrestrial monopoly disappeared in 1991 as the private commercial channel TV 4 was introduced. The broadcast monopoly in Sweden was broken and the markets were now open to new commercial

actors. TV 4 is financed by ads, while its program policy was originally defined by a legal act, which had many similarities to the public service concept. The digitalization of the television market for the whole country was completed in 2007, and since then TV4 has operated as a purely commercial television company (Lund et al., 2009). The table below illustrates the weakened market position of Swedish public television (Table 12.1).

Public service TV channels lost about one-third of their daily audiences during this period under strong market pressure from commercial competitors. However, public service TV is still alive and competitive, at least compared to many other European countries. In fact, the Scandinavian countries are still described as somewhat of a 'heartland' for public broadcasters and it is widely accepted and appreciated in the society, but nevertheless facing new challenges in the digital and increasingly competitive media environment (Lowe and Steemers, 2012).

The study

The objective of this chapter is to compare television news journalism in Sweden across the national election campaigns in 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010, and to discuss whether any changes can be related to media commercialization. As discussed in previous sections, the key dependent variables in this study will be the framing of politics as a strategic game or as scandal, and the prevalence and development of interpretive journalism. The argument for using game-framed news stories and interpretive reporting styles as indicators of media commercialization is that both these types of political journalism increase the possibilities of dramatizing the reporting of political events and attracting a larger audience. Based on the previous discussion of media commercialization and political journalism, four hypotheses will be tested, as detailed below.

H1: The share of election news stories framing politics as a strategic game or as scandal has increased, while the share of news stories framing politics as issues has decreased, on both public service and private channels during the period 1998–2010.

Table 12.1 Some key figures for Swedish public television, 1998–2010

	1998	2002	2006	2010
<i>Total daily TV viewing time (min)</i>	144	147	154	166
<i>Number of domestic public TV channels</i>	2	3	5	7
<i>Public TV audience market share (%)</i>	48	43	38	35

Sources: Carlsson & Facht (2010), Myndigheten för radio och tv (2011) and European Audiovisual Observatory (2011).

H2: The share of election news stories where news anchors are interviewing other journalists, who are acting as news analysts, has increased in both public service and private channels during the period 1998–2010.

H3: The share of election news stories characterized by an interpretive journalistic style has increased in both public service and private channels during the period 1998–2010.

H4: The changes in political news stories, as hypothesized above, have been more pronounced in private than in public service channels during the period 1998–2010.

Methodology and data

The analysis of commercialization trends of political news in television is based on comparison across time in one single country. While ‘horizontal’ comparisons between countries are definitely much more frequent in political communication studies, there are situations where ‘vertical’ comparisons of different epochs in one single country may be useful for analyzing changes in political communication systems (Kleinstauber, 2004; Gurevitch and Blumler, 2004).

Such comparisons across time have the limitation of focusing on one single case compared to comparisons across space. Still, one-case comparisons are often perceived as sufficient and relevant if the research problem addressed refers to this particular case, and if the purpose is to test hypotheses based on theoretical concepts (Anckar et al., 2013). In this chapter, the objective is to compare changes in Swedish television news during election campaigns and test different hypotheses derived from the thesis of media commercialization.

To investigate the hypotheses above, this study draws upon on a quantitative content analysis of the three main television news programs in Sweden: the public service news programs *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*, and the commercial news program *TV4 Nyheterna*. The study includes the main daily news show for each program during the last three weeks before the national election days in 1998, 2002, 2006 and 2010. Manual selection was used to identify and select for analysis all news stories that explicitly referred to domestic political actors or institutions, or the upcoming elections. The unit of analysis was full news stories (for more details, see Strömbäck, 2013).

Operationalizations

The key variables in this study are (a) the framing of politics and (b) interpretive reporting. The framing of politics was coded on a *dominant frame basis*. Coders were asked: ‘What is the dominant frame?’ They could choose between *strategic game frame*, *issue frame*, *scandal frame* and *other*. For the purpose of this study, stories in which the strategic game frame, issue frame or scandal frame was not dominant will be excluded from analysis. Coders

were instructed to code for *strategic game frame* if the news story focused on the tactics or strategies of political campaigning; on the horse race and battle for voters; on the perceptions or images of politicians; on political power as a goal in and of itself; or on politicians as individuals rather than as spokespeople for certain policies. (For a review of conceptualizations and operationalizations of the framing of politics as a strategic game in previous research, see Aalberg et al., 2012.) If the news story focused on issues and issue positions; the substance of policies; on real-life conditions with relevance to issue positions; or on what had happened or what someone had said or done with respect to issues and issue positions, coders were instructed to code for *issue frame*. In terms of *scandal frame*, coders were instructed to choose this framing if the news story focused on scandals involving politicians, defined as behaviors or gaffes treated by the news as if they constituted legal or moral transgressions. When deciding what frame was dominant, coders were instructed to give extra weight to how the news story was announced: that is, the lead-ins.

With respect to the *journalistic style and interpretive reporting*, two variables will be used (for a review of conceptualizations and operationalizations of interpretive journalism in previous research, see Salgado and Strömbäck, 2012). The first of these targets news stories in which the news anchor interviews another journalist in the studio, with the latter explicitly acting as a news commentator or news analyst. Coders were asked: 'Does the anchor interview another journalist, who is acting as news analyst?', and instructed to code 'yes' or 'no'. The second variable focuses on the journalistic approach or style, disregarding the format. Here coders were asked: 'What is the dominant journalistic style?' They could choose between either a descriptive or interpretive journalistic style, and were instructed to code for an *interpretive journalistic style* if the news story to a significant extent analyzed, evaluated, or explained a situation while also describing aspects of it. Particular attention was to be paid to the dominant storyline, and whether it appeared to be chosen by the journalist, and the use of evaluative comments or value-laden vocabulary by the journalist. If the news story mainly told what had happened or what someone had said in a rather straightforward, descriptive style, with an emphasis on what, where, when, who, they were instructed to code for a *descriptive journalistic style*. In cases where the dominant journalistic style could not be decided, coders had the option 'cannot be determined'. This option was seldom used, and such cases will be treated as missing data in subsequent analyses.

The total dataset includes 1,161 news stories, distributed across news programs and election years as described in Table 12.2.

This descriptive data shows a rather stable pattern across years and news programs: in each election, the three news programs' combined broadcast between 280 and 299 news stories on the elections, and in all elections but the last, each of the public service news programs (*Rapport* and

Table 12.2 Number of political news stories included in the content analysis

	1998	2002	2006	2010	N
<i>Rapport</i> (PSB)	107	103	116	106	432
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PSB)	101	108	97	94	400
<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i> (C)	72	73	86	98	329
N	280	284	299	298	1161

Note: The total number of political news stories in the main daily news shows during the last three weeks before election day.

Aktuellt) broadcast more news stories than the commercial news program (*TV4 Nyheterna*). In these respects, there are no significant changes across years, and no tendencies towards commercialization. It remains to be seen whether the same holds true with respect to the framing of politics as a strategic game and the extent to which news is interpretive.

Results: no consistent trends across time

According to the first hypothesis, the share of election news stories framing politics as a strategic game or as scandal should have increased, while the framing of politics as issues should have decreased, in both public service and private television channels during the period 1998–2010. The results with respect to scandal and game framing are presented in Table 12.3.

The results show that there are both stability and change across time. The perhaps most notable difference across election years is related to the extent to which the news programs applied the scandal frame. In 1998 and 2002, on average 13 and 6 percent of all news stories framed politics in terms of scandals, while in 2006, on average 19 percent of all news stories did so. In 2010, the corresponding share was less than 1 percent. Another notable difference is related to the extent to which the news framed politics as a strategic game. In both 1998 and 2002, on average 36 and 32 percent of all news stories framed politics as a strategic game, while in 2006 the share declined to, on average, 26 percent, before it increased sharply to, on average, 52 percent in 2010.

When comparing the individual news programs, the overall results suggest that commercial news is, rather consistently, more prone than the public service news to framing politics as a strategic game or as scandal. With respect to the framing of politics as a strategic game, this pattern holds true for 1998, 2002 and 2010, while with respect to the framing of politics as scandal, the pattern holds true for 1998, 2006 and 2010. In 2002, the public service news program, *Rapport*, applied the scandal frame more often than both the other public service news program, *Aktuellt*, and the commercial news program *TV4 Nyheterna*. In 2006, the public service news

Table 12.3 The framing of politics as a strategic game or as scandal (%)

	1998		2002		2006		2010		N
	Game	Scandal	Game	Scandal	Game	Scandal	Game	Scandal	
<i>Rapport</i> (PSB)	35	11	22	8	27	6	52	0	413
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PSB)	30	10	29	3	27	18	47	0	385
<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i> (C)	44	20	49	6	23	39	58	2	313
N	259		272		290		290		1111

Note: Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest integer. Excluded from the analysis are cases where strategic game frame, issue frame or scandal frame were not dominant.

programs applied the strategic game frame more often than the commercial news program, which, on the other hand, applied the scandal frame in exactly 39 percent of all news stories.

What these results suggest, among other things, is that the scandal frame and the strategic game frame appear to function as communicating vessels: when the use of one of these frames increases, the other decreases. Further support for this can be found in Table 12.4, which shows the share of news stories in which the media apply the issue frame. According to many observers (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993), not only is the framing of politics as issues and substance normatively preferred, as it is assumed to include more of the kind of “information people need to be free and self-governing” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 12). It is also often assumed to be a negative relationship between degree of media commercialism and the framing of politics as issues and substance (Patterson, 1993; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck and van Aelst, 2010). If the degree of media commercialization has increased and is an important antecedent of the framing of politics, altogether this suggests that the share of news stories framing politics as issues or substance should have decreased in both private and public service channels, and that it should be lower in the private than in the public service channels (Table 12.4).

The results do not show any clear, linear trends across time, but they also show that the issue frame has consistently been applied less frequently in the commercial than it has in the public service television news. The difference was most obvious in 2002 and least pronounced in 2010, but the pattern holds true in each and every election campaign. The results also show a decrease in the share of news stories framing politics as issues during the last two election campaigns under study. The share of news stories framing politics as issues, as a strategic game, or as scandal fluctuates over the years and there are no linear trends covering the full time-period, but public service news consistently applies the issue frame more often than the commercial news. At the same time, the framing of politics as scandal and as a strategic

Table 12.4 The framing of politics as issues and substance (%)

	1998	2002	2006	2010	N
<i>Rapport</i> (PSB)	54	69	66	48	413
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PSB)	60	68	54	53	385
<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i> (C)	36	45	38	39	313
N	259	272	290	290	1111

Note: Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest integer. Excluded from the analysis are cases where the strategic game frame, issue frame, or scandal frame were not dominant.

game function as communicating vessels: in election years when there are many scandals, all media – but in particular the commercial media – frame politics as scandal, partly at the expense of the framing of politics as a strategic game, while in election years where there are fewer scandals to report on, the framing of politics as a strategic game increases.

To sum up the results thus far, since there are no linear trends across time with respect to the framing of politics as a strategic game or as scandal, while the share of news stories framing politics as issues decreased during the last two election campaigns, at best there is only partial support for H1. Alas, the part of H4 focusing on the framing of politics is also only partially supported. At the same time, the results showing that the share of news stories framing politics as issues and substance has consistently been lower in the commercial channels compared to the public service channels supports the notion that the degree of media commercialism does influence the framing of politics.

The second and third hypotheses focus on the degree to which journalism is and has become interpretive, another hypothesized consequence of increasing media commercialism (Patterson, 1993, 2000). One way to measure degree of interpretive journalism is to focus on the extent to which journalists are interviewing other journalists, who are acting as news analysts. Hence, H2 predicted that the share of news stories where news anchors are interviewing other journalists, who are acting as news analysts, would have increased in both public service and private channels during the period 1998–2010. The results are presented in Table 12.5.

The results show that there has indeed been an increase in the share of news stories where the news anchor is interviewing another journalist, who is acting as a news analyst. The trend has not been linear, but for all three channels the highest share was found in 2010. The results also show that both the increase and the share are higher in the private than in the public service channels, thus lending partial support to H4.

The extent to which news anchors interview other journalists, who are explicitly acting as news analysts, does however not tell the full story of how interpretive the news coverage actually is. Even news stories that, at

Table 12.5 News anchors interviewing other journalists, who are acting as news analysts (%)

	1998	2002	2006	2010	N
<i>Rapport</i> (PSB)	0	3	7	9	432
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PSB)	11	12	13	15	400
<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i> (C)	10	10	7	25	329
N	280	284	299	298	1161

Note: Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest integer.

first, appear to be straight news may, in fact, be characterized by an interpretive journalistic style: where the journalist not only focuses on what, when, who and where, but also evaluates, analyzes and tries to explain why something has happened, why someone acted or spoke in a particular way, or speculates about motivations or future outcomes (Salgado and Strömbäck, 2012). Another measure of interpretive journalism thus focuses on the overall journalistic style, distinguishing between an interpretive as opposed to a descriptive journalistic style. H3 thus predicted that the share of news stories characterized by an interpretive journalistic style would increase between 1998 and 2010. The results are shown in Table 12.6.

In contrast to the results pertaining to how often news anchors interview other journalists who are acting as news analysts, the results do not show any clear trends with respect to the share of news stories where the dominant journalistic style is interpretive rather than descriptive. For *Rapport*, the share decreased rather than increased between 1998 and 2010, while it fluctuated between elections for *Aktuellt* and remained stable for the private channel, *TV4 Nyheterna*. Hence, H3 must be rejected. The same holds true for the part of H4 predicting that the hypothesized increase in an interpretive journalistic style would be more pronounced in the private than in the public service channels. However, it is worth noting that the share of news stories with an interpretive journalistic style was higher in the private than in the public service channels in the two last elections. This may suggest that there is some kind of linkage between media commercialism and the extent to which the journalistic style is interpretive, although more research, covering more elections, is needed before any such conclusions can be drawn.

Conclusions: not only commercialization

When analyzing the changes within political news in public and private television in Sweden between 1998 and 2010, the patterns are not very clear. The share of game and scandal stories varies over time, but there is no general trend for the continuing increase of such news stories. Furthermore,

Table 12.6 Share of news stories characterized by an interpretive journalistic style (%)

	1998	2002	2006	2010	N
<i>Rapport</i> (PSB)	48	41	35	31	429
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PSB)	37	52	35	34	399
<i>TV4 Nyheter</i> (C)	45	44	43	44	327
N	277	281	299	298	1161

Note: Percentages have been rounded off to the nearest integer. Cases where the journalistic style could not be determined have been excluded.

there seems to be a dependent relation between game stories and scandal stories: if one category is declining the other one is expanding. On the other hand, the share of news stories framing politics as issues decreased in the last two election campaigns analyzed, compared to the 2002 election when this framing of politics was the most pronounced. In essence, there are no clear signs of continuous commercialization over the full time-period in terms of an increased amount of scandal or game-framed news, or a decrease in issue-framed stories, although the framing of politics as issues decreased during the last two election campaigns. Thus, the first hypothesis is, at best, only partially confirmed in the study.

The results with respect to the prevalence of an interpretative reporting style in TV news are somewhat contradictory. Generally speaking, journalists appear more often in an interpretative role – in situations where journalists interview journalists – but the overall share of political news characterized by an interpretative style in political news reporting has not increased. This holds true for all TV channels examined, regardless of whether they are public or commercial. However, the increase of the first indicator is slightly more articulated in commercial news, and during the last two elections, an interpretive journalistic style has been more common in the private than in the public news programs. Thus, the second hypothesis about an increasing share of news stories where journalist interview journalists who are acting as news analysts is confirmed, while the third hypothesis about an increasing share of interpretative style in reporting is not confirmed in the study.

The final hypothesis predicting that changes within political news would be more pronounced in private than in public television is confirmed to some extent, but patterns are not that clear. The development of news stories with strategic game frames and scandal frames is similar in all TV news programs, while interpretive elements have increased more in private television than in public television.

Consequently, the overall picture is that the character of political news in public and private television in Sweden has not changed fundamentally in the analyzed period between 1998 and 2010. There are more journalists interviewed by other journalists in news programs, and the share of

news stories framing politics as issues decreased during the last two election campaigns, but no other clear and consistent indicators of a growing commercialization, as it has been defined in this study, during the full time-period between 1998 and 2010. If the amount of strategic game frames and interpretive reporting are perceived as signs of growing media commercialization as claimed in some studies, they are not evident in the case of political TV news development in Sweden. On the contrary, there seems to be limited influences of the current TV market situation on political news coverage of election campaigns.

This is not to say that commercialization does not matter, but rather that the effects of commercialization are contextual and complex, and that there may be other more important factors than current media market conditions when analyzing the character of political TV news during Swedish election campaigns 1998–2010. For example, the results in this study indicate that the electoral context as such may be highly relevant for the style of reporting. When election campaigns are dominated by political scandals, the framing of politics as scandals increases in political journalism. In situations where political scandals do not occur to the same extent, scandal reporting decreases and strategic game frames become more frequent. This is a general trend that can be observed in all TV channels in the study, but at different levels.

Electoral events seem to be more or equally important in determining the character of political TV news in comparison with media commercialization and increased competition among broadcasters for audiences. Political news coverage changes between elections, but these changes generally influence all TV channels in the same direction. Thus, differences between public and private channels are not increasing or decreasing, but remain more or less the same. The assumptions of consistent trends in political news coverage, shaped by a more competitive and commercialized media system, have not been confirmed.

An alternative explanation for these results may be that news coverage of elections is still not an area of true competition between the main TV channels in Sweden, but is instead a kind of 'free zone' where the battle for viewers is not as central as in entertainment TV formats. Prime-time shows, sport, movies and sitcoms may be perceived as truly competitive areas, while political reporting during election campaigns is traditionally seen more as a duty, or a democratic obligation.

It should also be noted that the case of Sweden might be too specific to draw general conclusions from. The main commercial broadcaster, TV4, has the history of a 'hybrid' TV channel, and operated under 'public service-like' conditions with regard to content regulations until 2007. This might explain why political news on TV4 has not adapted or assumed purely commercial aspects of news in the period analyzed here. The former role of TV4 as a bridge between public broadcasting and commercial competitors without

any news at all may thus explain its current profile of political news. It is also important to take into account that the study does not include the very first years of TV news competition in Sweden, in the early 1990s, as there is a lack of available data for this period. An analysis of political TV news coverage during the first phases of competition may have resulted in different observations to those made in this study of the last decade, when market positions were more stable than they were during the 1990s.

Finally, this study of political TV news developments in an increasingly competitive media market indicates that changing patterns of political news coverage may be both contrasting and complex. Significant trends in political news coverage are not easy to detect, and the development might often be curvilinear rather than linear, dependent on different contextual factors, and more complex than is sometimes assumed. For example, the main TV news programs observed here seem to be as influenced by the current electoral context as by the forces of commercialization on the media market.

In essence, the direct and unequivocal impact of media commercialization on political TV news frames and styles seems to be rather limited. Generally, the main TV news programs in Sweden stick to more traditional reporting, and between 1998 and 2020, there appear to have been few dramatic transformations in Swedish election news coverage on TV.

Thus, this study of political TV news in Sweden across time does not confirm a direct and unequivocal correlation between media commercialization and political journalism reporting styles. As in most other European countries, the domestic television market has become more commercialized and competitive as more channels and choices are offered to the audience. Still, this development has not fundamentally altered the nature of election news coverage in the main TV news programs. Whether this is mainly a result of specific media- and politics-relations in Sweden, or more general factors, is not possible to say from this one country study. Thus, more comparative research across both time and space is needed in order to further analyze the relations between media commercialization and the development of political journalism.

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