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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore differences in television news format and news framing between the US and Sweden. The study focuses on the news programs broadcast by the top three television networks in the US and the top two public service channels and the leading commercial television channel in Sweden: *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News* and *ABC World News*, and *Rapport*, *Aktuellt* and *TV4 Nyheterna*, respectively. Using the most different systems design, the content analysis reveals significant differences between the two countries across a number of important variables: amount of domestic vs foreign news coverage, level of journalistic visibility, length of politicians' sound bites, attribution of responsibility and thematic vs episodic framing of the news. The discussion addresses the possible causes for these cross-cultural differences as well as the potential implications for news audiences in both countries.

Keywords

comparative media research, framing, mediatization, television news, television news format

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Introduction

For most people in advanced democracies around the world, television constitutes the most important source of information on politics and other matters beyond personal everyday experiences. As noted by Gunther and Mughan (2000: 402): 'Everywhere, television has become the pre-eminent, if not overwhelmingly dominant, source of national and international political news for the majority of the population.' Consequently, how television news programs cover the news matters for people's understanding of and knowledge about what is happening locally, domestically and internationally. Research has also shown that television news can exert an agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004) as well as frame-setting (Iyengar, 1991) and priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987) influence over audiences.

The importance of television news for people's understanding of and knowledge about current events notwithstanding, it is well known that television news is shaped not only by the events covered in the news themselves, but also by journalistic norms and values, including prevailing notions of journalistic professionalism and newsworthiness (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006), access to and availability of sources (Gans, 1980), organizational, institutional and financial restraints (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994) and TV news format and grammar (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Hart, 1999).

This is, of course, true of all news media and their reporting, not just television news. All 'news is the product of a social institution, and it is embedded in relationships with other institutions. It is a product of professionalism and it claims the right to interpret everyday occurrences to citizens and other professionals alike' (Tuchman, 1978: 5). Still, television news is unique in that the format is severely restricted by and intimately tied to technological developments, and because television news has a special logic that follows from its format and its reliance on visuals as well as audio and verbal content (Hart, 1999; Postman, 1986). Exactly how important technologically shaped or other universal format factors are, as compared with factors that can be expected to vary across countries – for example, notions of journalistic professionalism and newsworthiness or organizational, institutional and financial factors – is however unclear. Although several of the factors influencing television news content are valid across countries and media systems, we also know that there are differences in television news between different countries. In this sense, the medium itself is not, as McLuhan (1964) famously claimed, the message. Stated differently, while television news's dependency upon the format is a constant, the exact format used is a variable, and the same is true with respect to several other factors influencing television news content.

Despite this, there is a tendency in the literature to talk about television news in general, although most research is based on single-country studies. Much research on television news thus falls prey to what Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 74) refer to as 'naïve universalism', or what Livingstone (2003: 483) calls 'the blithe assumption that what holds in one country will surely hold elsewhere'. To avoid this tendency and increase our understanding of the degree to which factors universal for television news – i.e. technologically shaped format factors – can explain television news's format and framing, comparative research is clearly warranted. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate semi-structural differences and similarities in television news's format and framing between two countries that constitute most different cases – Sweden and the US.

Sweden and the US: Most different cases

When doing comparative research, the selection of cases is of utmost importance. In this context, there are basically two different approaches that can be taken, although both should be perceived as ideal types: the *most similar systems design* and the *most different systems design* (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). When following the most similar systems design, the scholar selects systems that are as similar as possible along relevant dimensions. Similar systems with respect to the independent variables should lead to similar results with respect to the dependent variables. If differences still are found among otherwise very similar countries, then the number of factors that can contribute to explain those differences are limited and, ideally, sufficiently small to allow explanations in terms of those differences (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Wirth and Kolb, 2004). When following the most different systems design, the scholar selects systems that are as different as possible along relevant dimensions, and then focuses on similarities that appear across the otherwise highly different systems. The assumption here is that systemic differences do not matter much when explaining the phenomenon under study; thus, as long as the results show similarities across countries, the differences on the systemic level are considered unimportant from an explanatory point of view (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Wirth and Kolb, 2004).

In political communication research following the most different systems design, two countries that have often been selected are Sweden and the US (Åsard and Bennett, 1997; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Miller and Asp, 1985). According to the typology proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Sweden and the US belong to different models of media and politics. Whereas Sweden is considered a prototypical example of the democratic corporatist model of media and politics, the US is considered a prototypical example of the liberal model. Both countries are advanced democracies, but within the family of western democracies, they constitute highly different cases with respect to both political and media system features and their interrelationships (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005; Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Not least important in this context is that Sweden and the US have very different broadcasting systems. Whereas the US has one of the most commercialized and competitive broadcasting systems in the world (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hamilton, 2004), Sweden has a dual system of public service and commercial broadcasting (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull, 2001) with a strong tradition of public service broadcasting. Two of the three leading television news programs in Sweden are in fact broadcast on public service television, whereas the third is broadcast commercially. This is in sharp contrast to the US, where the public service audience share is only about 2 percent (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Based on this, Sweden and the US were selected for this explorative study. To the extent that television news in these two highly different countries is similar, this can be interpreted as meaning that technologically shaped or other 'universal' factors are important in explaining television news format and framing. To the extent that television news in these two countries is different, this can be interpreted as meaning that factors that vary across countries, for example, journalistic norms and values or different systemic factors such as degree of commercialism, are more important than technologically shaped or other 'universal' factors in explaining television news format and framing.

Television news format

According to Altheide and Snow (1979: 10), 'Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication.' While television news format is a constant across borders in that it relies on audiovisual media and, in some respects, focuses on covering news and current events, it is a variable in that the news format can differ with respect to the organization of material, the visibility of journalists, the typical length of news stories, the length of sound bites used and the emphasis on domestic vs foreign affairs. These semi-structural differences present in TV news can consequently provide valuable insights into the nature of television news reporting and style in different countries. Therefore, this study focuses on the following aspects of television news format in Sweden and the US: length of news stories, length of politicians' sound bites, degree of journalistic visibility and focus on foreign vs domestic affairs.

All news programs consist of a number of news stories or segments, each of them focusing on a particular event or theme. However, the number and length of the news stories vary; whereas some are rather short and only read by the news anchor, others are considerably longer and may include footage from the field, interviews with various sources and perhaps stand-ups by the reporters covering the events. The number and length of news stories are an important part of television news format, as longer news stories allow more in-depth reporting. This might encourage learning from the news, whereas short news stories filled with information might make it more difficult for viewers to process the information (Graber, 2006: 202–3).

While the number and length of news stories are important variables, there is little theorizing and research comparing the number and length of television news stories across countries. Research on Swedish television news has nevertheless shown that the average length of news stories on the three most important news programs during the period 1990–2004 ranged between 97 and 110 seconds, and that it was somewhat shorter on the most important commercial news program – *TV4 Nyheterna* – than on the two public service news programs – *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*. The overall tendency during the 1990s and early 2000s was that the news stories became somewhat longer, although this tendency appears to have been reversed in 2004 (Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007). With respect to the US, Graber (2006: 204) has shown that 37 percent of the television network news stories are shorter than 60 seconds, whereas 45 percent of the news stories are between 61 and 150 seconds long. The Swedish and the US research in this area are not fully comparable, however, due to differences in, for example, sample size, time frame and variable operationalizations. Thus, it is not clear whether news stories are longer in Sweden or the US. Therefore, our first research question is:

RQ1: Are there any significant differences in the average length of Swedish and US television news stories?

In contrast to the paucity of research on the number and length of television news stories in different countries, there exists a developed body of research on the length of politicians' sound bites in television news, although this research has mostly focused exclusively on US television news in the context of election campaigns (Adatto, 1990; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007; Hallin, 1992; Lowry and Shidler, 1998). As shown by

Hallin (1992), the average length of politicians' sound bites in US television's election news coverage shrank from 43.1 seconds in 1968 to only 8.9 seconds in 1988. According to Farnsworth and Lichter (2007), the average sound bite continued to shrink after that, from 8.4 seconds in 1992 to 7.8 seconds in 2004. Although other studies (Esser, 2008) show that the average sound bite was somewhat longer in 2004 (8.8 seconds), there is broad scholarly agreement that the length of sound bites in US television's election news coverage has shrunk during the last decades. This suggests that the number and length of sound bites is not decided by any universal factors, but rather by factors associated with the media's organizational and institutional needs in particular settings and changing notions of journalistic professionalism and newsworthiness.

Consequently, the development toward shrinking sound bites has been interpreted as a development toward increasing 'mediation' (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007; Hallin, 1992) or 'mediatization' (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008) of politics and television news, or as increasing 'media interventionism' (Esser, 2008). Whether this trend is universal or specific to the US remains to be comprehensively investigated. The only study we are aware of comparing the average length of sound bites across countries thus far suggests, however, that the sound bites are shorter in US television election news than those in German, British and French television election news (Esser, 2008). With respect to Sweden there are no data on the length of politicians' sound bites in election news stories. Outside the context of election campaigns, research in Sweden has shown that the average length of sound bites during the period 1998–2004 was 16 seconds (Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007: 161), down from approximately 30 seconds during the 1980s (Asp, 1995). Thus, while there is some research on the average length of sound bites both in Sweden and the US, there are no studies directly comparing sound bites across these two countries and outside the context of election campaigns. Nevertheless, based on the reviewed literature from other Western European countries it can be expected that the average length of politicians' sound bites is shorter on US television news than on Swedish television news. Hence our first hypothesis is:

H1: The average length of politicians' sound bites will be shorter in US television news than in Swedish television news.

As noted earlier, the trend toward shrinking sound bites can be seen as an indicator of increasing mediation, mediatization or media interventionism. All these concepts refer to a reporting style that is highly media-centered and governed by media logic rather than political logic. Such reporting style emphasizes the role of the media and the journalists themselves, rather than their sources or straight facts. As noted by Farnsworth and Lichter (2007: 91):

Television news can adopt a style of presentation that either transmits the behaviour and ideas of the candidates as much as possible in their own words or those of their surrogates, or one that emphasizes the role of journalists who summarize, contextualize, and evaluate this material on-camera.

The extent to which TV news reporters appear on-camera can accordingly be seen as another indicator of media interventionism or the degree to which the news stories are

mediated or mediatized. Journalists can appear on-camera by doing stand-ups, by being interviewed live on location by the news anchor, or by being interviewed by the news anchor in the studio. What matters most theoretically is not how journalists appear on-camera, but rather the extent to which they do so.

Although several studies have demonstrated increasing journalistic visibility on US television network news (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007; Graber, 2006; Patterson, 1993), we have not come across any studies comparing the level of journalistic visibility – and hence, the degree of media interventionism or media-centered reporting style – in Swedish and US television news. However, studies in other Scandinavian countries have shown a less journalist-centered TV news reporting style (Holm, 2006), again suggesting that technologically shaped or universal format factors are less important than factors associated with the media's organizational and institutional needs in particular settings and different notions of journalistic professionalism and newsworthiness. Based on prior research on US and Scandinavian television news, it can thus be expected that the level of journalistic visibility will be higher in the former than in the latter case. Hence, our second hypothesis is:

H2: The level of journalistic visibility will be higher in US television news than in Swedish television news.

US media have been often criticized for being too focused on domestic rather than foreign affairs. This trend is especially visible in television news in the US, where declining amounts of foreign news reporting have been observed on all dominant television channels (Graber, 2006). According to the Project of Excellence in Journalism, in 2008, US network news devoted approximately 15 percent of their news hole to US foreign affairs; additionally, they devoted approximately 8 percent of their news hole to non-US foreign affairs. Compared to the 1970s and 1980s this represents a decreasing share, while it represents an increasing share as compared to the years preceding September 11 (Project of Excellence in Journalism, 2008). According to Graber (2006: 318), the overall conclusion that can be drawn is nevertheless that: 'compared with attention to domestic affairs, foreign news is a neglected stepchild in terms of space, time, and prominence of display', particularly if the issue or event does not have a profound impact on 'the political, economic, or cultural concerns of the United States'.

Although the number of studies comparing the amount of foreign news reporting across countries is rather limited, available evidence shows that US network news devotes less attention to foreign news than their counterparts in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, Spain, Italy, Norway and Denmark (Rössler, 2004: 282), suggesting again that technologically shaped or universal format factors are not very decisive for how television news covers daily events. With respect to Swedish television, research shows that about 40 percent of all news stories focus on foreign news, and that this share has remained rather constant during the last decades (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull, 2001; Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007). Thus, the downward trend in foreign news coverage observed for US television news does not appear to have its equivalent in the Swedish context. Hence, our next hypothesis is:

H3: US television news will devote less attention to foreign news than Swedish television news.

Television news framing

Framing research provides a theoretical framework for how national political and media systems affect media content. A number of studies have shown strong framing effects of media content on audience perceptions and interpretations of events as well as on policy support during times of crisis (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2004; Iyengar, 1991). Looking at the news coverage of the Persian Gulf Crisis, Iyengar and Simon (1993) found that episodic, military framed television news coverage affected the public's preference for a policy solution, i.e. it strengthened support for the military as opposed to the diplomatic option. In a study focusing on the EU enlargement issue, it was shown that framing enlargement in either strategic or issue terms had a significant impact on audience issue evaluation and political cynicism (de Vreese, 2004). The effects of media framing on audience perceptions, evaluations and attitudes make framing a worthy area of investigation, especially in the context of cross-cultural comparative research.

Some previous studies have looked at the framing of television news (Iyengar and Simon, 1993; de Vreese, 2004), as TV remains the most popular medium among the public at large. Yet most prior research has focused on print media framing of different issues or events. Studies typically focus on the elite press, selecting one or more prestigious newspapers or magazines within a country rather than multiple media across multiple countries. Another limitation of previous studies is their focus on specific events, for example, elections or military conflicts, as opposed to routine news coverage.

Nevertheless, there are a number of studies that document the preponderance of episodic framing that dominates US media (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Dimitrova, 2006; Iyengar, 1991). It has been shown that the US news media, especially television, tend to offer episodic framing of issues or events. Episodic framing describes a style of TV news reporting that provides news coverage devoid of context, like a 'fleeting parade of events'. In contrast, thematic framing is less personalized, offers more background to news stories and shows relationships between actors involved. Iyengar (1991) has furthermore shown that those who watch episodically as opposed to thematically framed news stories are more likely to blame issues on individual rather than systemic factors. While there is little research on how much episodic coverage is provided on Swedish television, European news coverage in general has been seen as more in-depth and offering more context to stories (Swanson and Mancini, 1996), which of course may be related to the less commercialized structure of European news. If correct, the implication is that technologically shaped or universal format factors are less important than situationally shaped factors – for example, degree of media commercialism – for the use of thematic as opposed to episodic frames. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Episodic framing will be more common in US television news while thematic framing will be more common in Swedish television news.

Related to the contextual framing of events is the issue of responsibility attribution. If the media tend to frame events in mostly episodic terms there is less opportunity to offer viewers reasons for particular problems or information about possible solutions to those problems. One of the few comparative studies examining Swedish and US media, which focused on the Iraq War, showed that the responsibility frame was almost entirely absent

from US news coverage but was common in Swedish news coverage (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005). While that study focused on a particular conflict and how it was covered in newspapers, this leads us to believe that the responsibility frame will also be more common in Swedish than in the US television news. This would also imply that technologically shaped or universal format factors are less decisive for the framing of politics and society than factors related to the particular settings in which television news operates.

H5: The responsibility frame will be used more frequently in Swedish television news than in US television news.

Method and data

A quantitative content analysis of the leading television news programs in Sweden and the US was conducted. The top three television networks in the US and the top two public service channels and the leading commercial television channel in Sweden were selected for analysis. In the US, the study included the following news shows: *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News* and *ABC World News*. In Sweden, the study included *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*, both public service news shows, and *TV4 Nyheterna*, the top commercial news show. The sample covered two weeks of routine news coverage on the selected channels – from 19 October 2007 to 1 November 2007. Only weekday newscasts were examined; weekend newscasts were excluded from analysis, as were economic news reported in separate broadcasts (i.e. *A-ekonomi* and *Ekonominyheterna* on *Aktuellt* and *TV4 Nyheterna* respectively), news about weather and sports and advertisements. Apart from these exclusions, the study includes all topics and all news items broadcast during the selected time period.

The unit of analysis was the individual television news story. To ensure consistency, a news story was defined as a clearly separate news segment that focused on one main event, topic, or issue. The segment could be introduced by a news anchor or aired on its own as video with voice over package. The counting of seconds began when the anchor introduced the news story and continued until a shift to another news segment occurred. The counting of seconds thus included the anchor lead-in and out messages referring to a specific news story. In addition to standard coding categories such as date and time, the variables of interest fall under two broad categories: TV news format and news framing. The operational definitions for each variable are provided in the following.

Television news format

To gauge journalistic visibility in the news story, we combined the following three variables: the presence of a stand-up by a news reporter (a stand-up refers to a journalist talking to the camera on location); inclusion of an anchor interview of the journalist covering the story live on location; and inclusion of an anchor interview of a journalist or news commentator in the studio. Coders also recorded the number of sound bites by politicians that were present within a news story based on the number of times a politician spoke in a news segment; when the same politician was speaking multiple times, each time was counted as a separate sound bite. Each coder also recorded the combined length of sound

bites by political actors aired in the news story, as measured in seconds. Political actors were defined as elected politicians or candidates running for office at various levels (local, regional, national/federal).

Additionally, we coded for the dominant focus of the news story. If the news story overwhelmingly focused on domestic affairs, coders marked 1; they marked 2 if it overwhelmingly focused on foreign affairs; and 3 if the news story focused on both domestic and foreign issues (hybrid news). For example, news stories about the current situation in Iraq, which also reported on the US involvement in the country, would, in the US case, be counted as hybrid news, providing that the American involvement was not just briefly mentioned. Stories on the European Union, which also reported on the Swedish involvement in EU matters, would, in the Swedish case, similarly count as hybrid news.

News frames

A frame was defined as the central organizing idea of the news story that provided context or background to the event or issue covered (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987: 143). Two particular frames – both generic – were of interest in this study. First, using Iyengar's (1991) distinction between episodic and thematic frames, we coded for the contextual framing of each news story. Episodic framing refers to stories where the coverage does not go much beyond a particular event or incident; context is largely missing from the news report and the news report primarily takes the form of a case study. Thematic framing, on the other hand, positions an issue or event in a broader context and deals with its meaning or implications for society, going beyond the single event. A thematically framed story places public issues in a broad context by focusing on general tendencies in society. If the story is about poverty, for instance, a thematically framed news report may include information about poverty trends in the country and the possible causes related to the phenomenon while an episodically framed story may focus only on the plight of a particular person or family and how they are dealing with this issue.

The responsibility frame was also of interest to this study. Following Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), responsibility framing could be manifested by cases where the news story (a) suggested that a specific actor or institution had the ability to alleviate a particular problem or issue, (b) suggested that some specific actor or institution was responsible for the problem/ issue, or (c) suggested solution(s) to the problem/issue. Looking at the US mortgage crisis as an example, we could see two possible cases of responsibility: a news story that focuses on a family that loses their home and blames them for taking a bad mortgage loan; or another story about the same family where responsibility is attributed to bad economic policies. Still, the responsibility frame is present in both cases. It is also conceivable to have news reports about the same incident that do not delve into responsibility issues. Such stories would exemplify cases when the responsibility frame is absent.

An intercoder test was conducted on all variables of interest in this analysis. Using Holsti's formula, a total of 17 items (6 percent) were randomly selected from the US data. The intercoder reliability was established at .89, which was considered acceptable.

Results

The analysis included 682 news stories, 308 of which came from US television and 374 from Swedish television. The number of stories aired on each news channel was fairly similar; the breakdown was as follows: 95 (13.9 percent) news stories from *ABC World News*, 108 (15.8 percent) from *NBC Nightly News*, 105 (15.4 percent) from *CBS Evening News*, 166 (24.3 percent) from *Rapport*, 107 (15.7 percent) from *Aktuellt* and 101 (14.8 percent) from *TV4 Nyheterna*. In order to assess the differences between US and Swedish television news, chi-square and *t*-tests were conducted depending on the level of measurement for each variable.

Our research question asked whether any significant differences existed with respect to the length of Swedish and US television news stories. To answer this question, we compared the difference in means between the US and Swedish sample. The overall length of the news stories analyzed ranged from 6 to 878 seconds ($M = 108.87$, $SD = 94.77$). The mean length of US news stories was 112.01 seconds ($SD = 107.07$) while the mean length of Swedish news stories was 106.28 seconds ($SD = 83.36$). In other words, the average US news segment was about 1 minute and 52 seconds long while the average Swedish news segment was about 1 minute and 46 seconds long. However, the difference was not statistically significant ($t = .79$; d.f. = 680; NS). This implies that television news is structured and formatted along similar lines across countries.

The first hypothesis predicted that the average length of politicians' sound bites would be shorter on US than on Swedish television news. The combined length of politicians' sound bites per news story ranged from 0 to 141 seconds ($M = 7.01$, $SD = 20.192$). The results of an independent samples *t*-test indicate that, indeed, politicians' sound bites on US television news ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 12.169$) were shorter than those on Swedish television news ($M = 9.73$, $SD = 24.619$). This difference was significant ($t = -3.92$, $p = .000$, d.f. = 680) and lends support to hypothesis 1. We also found that the number of sound bites by politicians present within a news story was higher in Swedish coverage than in US coverage ($t = -2.42$, $p = .016$, d.f. = 680), despite the fact that news stories on average tended to be of similar length. These results suggest that Swedish television news gives politicians more airtime than US television news does.

Indirectly, these results also indicate that the level of journalistic visibility is higher on US than on Swedish television news, which was proposed in the second hypothesis. In order to measure journalistic visibility, a binary nominal variable was created. If any of the following elements were present – a stand-up by a news reporter, an anchor interview of the journalist covering the story live on location, or inclusion of an anchor interview of a journalist or news commentator in the studio – the news item was given a value of 1. If none of those elements was present, it received a value of 0. The chi-square test indicated statistically significant differences between the Swedish and US television news coverage across this nominal variable ($\chi^2 = 151.69$, $p = .000$, d.f. = 1). Specifically, 189 (61.4 percent) of the US news stories contained at least one element of journalistic visibility compared with only 59 (15.8 percent) of the Swedish news stories.

Our third hypothesis predicted that US television news shows were likely to devote less attention to foreign news than Swedish television news shows. The results show that

while 241 (78.2 percent) of the US news items focused on domestic news, only 235 (62.8 percent) of the Swedish news items did. Conversely, 101 (27 percent) of the Swedish news stories focused predominantly on foreign news compared with only 35 (11.4 percent) of the US news stories. About 10 percent of the news items in both countries focused on hybrid news. These differences were significant ($\chi^2 = 26.48, p = .000, d.f. = 2$). Hypothesis 3 was thus supported.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that episodic framing would be more common for US television news than for Swedish television news. The results indicate that this was indeed the case ($\chi^2 = 68.13, p = .000, d.f. = 1$). Only 24 (7.8 percent) of the US news stories were thematically framed compared with 128 (34.2 percent) of the Swedish news stories. The contextual framing of the vast majority of US news stories was thus episodic (92.2 percent). Episodic framing was also dominant in the majority of Swedish news stories (65.8 percent), but to a lesser extent. Consistent with prior research, hypothesis 4 was supported.

The last hypothesis predicted that responsibility framing would be more common in Swedish than in US television news. This hypothesis was also supported ($\chi^2 = 81.97, p = .000, d.f. = 1$). While 29.9 percent of the Swedish news stories contained the responsibility frame, only 3.2 percent of the US news stories did so.

Discussion

While television news is unique in that the format is restricted by and intimately tied to technological developments, and television news has a special logic that follows from its format and reliance on visuals as well as audio and verbal content, there is relatively little research on how important technological or universal format factors are in shaping television news, as opposed to factors that can be expected to vary across countries, for example different notions of journalistic professionalism or organizational, institutional and financial factors. In fact, much research on television news implicitly assumes that 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan, 1964) and that research findings from one country apply to other countries, as if television news constitutes a fixed format. The lack of comparative research on television news has only reinforced this tendency.

This study explored semi-structural differences and similarities in television news format and framing between two countries that can be considered as most different cases – Sweden and the US. Consistent with the most different systems design, similarities in television news format and framing can be interpreted as if differences on the system level are inconsequential with respect to television news formats and framing, while differences would mean that similarities such as technologically shaped or other universal format factors across countries are of less importance when trying to understand the formats and frames used. The results show that the only case where television news in Sweden and the US was rather similar was with respect to the average length of news stories. Here it appears as if there is a standard that is fairly universal. In all other cases, the differences between Swedish and US television news were significant.

To begin with, the average length of politicians' sound bites was significantly shorter in the latter than in the former case. Not only was the number of sound bites by politicians lower in US news stories that contained political sources, the average length of

politicians' sound bites was also shorter. These results suggest that the level of journalistic interventionism (Esser, 2008) is higher in US than in Swedish television news, and that in this respect, there does not exist a 'universal' television news format.

The finding that the level of journalistic visibility was significantly higher on US television news than on Swedish television news also supports this interpretation. Taken together, these results suggest not only that the level of journalistic interventionism is higher in the US than in the Swedish case, but also that US television news is more mediatized than Swedish television news. Phrased differently, our findings suggest that US television news audiences are more dependent upon the journalists and their framing, summaries and evaluations than Swedish television news audiences are – for better or worse. It also suggests that in terms of journalistic visibility, there does not exist a 'universal' television news format.

The results also show that US television news focuses more on domestic and less on foreign news than Swedish television news. This result fits nicely with previous research that US television news is heavily focused on domestic affairs while foreign news remains the 'neglected stepchild' in terms of space and time allotted (Graber, 2006). Considering that our results also show that almost nine out of 10 news items on US television news were episodically framed – in contrast to the Swedish television news, where about one-third of the news items were thematically framed – one may conclude that US television news programs offer only limited opportunities for their audiences to learn about and understand current affairs in general and foreign affairs in particular. Adding to this, the results also show that the responsibility frame was barely present in the US television news stories while it appeared in almost one-third of the Swedish news stories. It is likely then that US television news – at least compared to Swedish television news – provides its audiences with only limited opportunities to learn from and make use of the news. Considering the democratic importance of the media and people holding those in power accountable, the low share of news stories including the responsibility frame is particularly noteworthy. Important to note, though, is that television news as such should not be blamed for episodic framing or lack of responsibility frames. To blame television as a medium or television news as a format would be to select the wrong targets, as the results suggest that in all these cases, the explanations may be found in factors that vary across countries and that are located on other levels of analysis.

In this context, there are several plausible reasons for the differences in television news format and framing between the two countries. First, all US news programs included in our analysis are broadcast on commercial stations that compete for ratings on a daily basis. Thus, US television stations face different market pressure to Swedish television stations, two of which are public service broadcasters. In essence, commercialism might be contributing to the differences in television news format and framing between Sweden and the US.

Related to this, Sweden and the US belong to different models of media and politics (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The interrelationships between media and politics in these two countries vary, and there are also differences in how journalists interpret the concept of journalistic objectivity (Patterson, 1998). Thus, both the media systems and political systems as well as the interrelationships between those might be crucial not only on a macro level of analysis, but also with respect to television news's format and framing.

A third possible explanation for the differences in television news's format and framing could be rooted in cultural factors, i.e. that Sweden and the US have different political communication cultures (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Esser, 2008; Pfetsch, 2001, 2004). In essence, the informal and unwritten norms and expectations with respect to political communication and news processes and the relationships between political actors, media actors and the citizenry might vary across the two countries. For example, whereas high journalistic visibility is perceived as 'normal' and in accordance with prevailing notions of journalistic professionalism in the US, in Sweden it is perceived as an exception rather than a rule and as something that goes against pre-valing notions of how visible journalists 'should' be. In fact, previous studies of Scandinavian television presentation style have suggested that cultural values make 'on-camera TV journalists seem unnecessary' (Holm, 2006: 377). This is not the case, however, for the Anglo-American style of TV news reporting where journalists are encouraged to connect with the viewer directly on camera. Such differences could explain why reporter stand-ups were less frequent on Swedish television news compared with US television news.

There might of course be other reasons for the differences between television news format and framing found in this study. The most important lesson, though, is that the number and average length of politicians' sound bites, the degree of journalistic visibility, the use of episodic as opposed to thematic framing and the use of a responsibility frame cannot be explained by features inherent in television as a medium or television news as a genre. In these respects, the medium is not the message.

Thus, scholars should be careful not to assume that findings regarding television news in one country apply elsewhere. There are significant differences between television news in different countries, and while there are many aspects of television news other than those investigated here, overall the results suggest that television news format and framing are not determined by technological or other universal factors but by the specific setting in which television news operates.

Limitations and future research

Stressing the need to be cautious before making general statements about television news, several limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged. First, the content analysis covered only a two-week period. Additionally, two unusual events took place during the period under investigation: a political scandal in Sweden and the devastating California fires in the US. The coverage of these breaking news events may have affected our results. Selecting a longitudinal research design and covering a longer time period may help avoid such limitations. Also, our analysis focused only on national news coverage. Admittedly, the characteristics of news coverage may differ when looking at regional and local news programs.

As an exploratory study about the structural differences in news format and news framing across countries, we nevertheless find the results of this study encouraging and pointing toward the need for further comparative research on structural differences in television news format and framing in general, and with a focus on routine news reporting and the antecedents of television news format and framing in particular.

Future research should encompass print and online news media as well. Such studies will allow scholars to see if the cross-cultural differences identified here hold true for other media. Understanding the reasons behind such differences is another worthwhile area of investigation. Finally, future studies should examine how the differences in television news format and framing affect people's knowledge, attitudes and behavior. It is especially important to investigate the influence of television news on those who are not politically interested and do not seek additional news channels, as they might be particularly dependent on TV news for the information they need to be free and self-governing, which is one of the primary functions of the media in any democratic society.

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