

From Hard to Soft News Standards?

How Political Journalists in Different Media Systems Evaluate the Shifting Quality of News

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Recent surveys of American journalists highlight a growing uneasiness regarding professional roles and quality standards. Similar concerns are also reflected in the data of a recent survey of leading Austrian political journalists. To find out whether the quality standards actually changed and how American journalists as well as—from a comparative perspective—Austrian political journalists evaluate the quality development of journalism, explorative interviews were conducted with thirty-one leading American print journalists, and assessments were compared with the patterns found in a recent survey of Austrian political journalists. Comparing the results of the American and Austrian studies, striking similarities were found. The convergence of problems as seen by journalists operating in fundamentally different media systems and communication cultures seems to confirm a kind of “homogenization” of journalistic cultures—beyond divergent institutional and market constraints within given media systems. Some of the demonstrated findings seem to point out that not only are market pressures and hypercommercialization responsible for the quality problems of political journalism but also that the quality of interaction between journalists and politicians has changed substantially. This in turn had direct effects upon the quality of reporting.

Keywords: *political journalism; journalistic quality standards; quality of news; homogenization of journalistic cultures; Americanization*

Hypercommercialization, channel fragmentation, shrinking audiences for conventional news formats, and drastic news room cutbacks—trends observable not only in the United States but also in Western European media systems—have changed the practices of journalism substantially and challenged the “autonomy and relevance of professional journalism’s training, ethics, and truth claims” (Altheide 2004: 295). As Blumler and Kavanagh (1999: 218) noted,

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journalism comes under increasing pressure to demonstrate its compatibility with media organizations' goals. Conventional norms of journalism come under as much pressure as its quality standards (Kuhn and Neveu 2002). Leading American and European researchers have detected some structural trends in the media coverage of politics and public affairs such as a shift from hard news to soft news (Patterson 2000a); increasing focus on personalization and privatization of politics (Bennett 2003a); infotainment-journalism or "hybridization of news" (Weischenberg 2003); shrinking sound bites or ink bites and a substantial reduction of policy-centered coverage (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003); a more journalist-centered coverage of politics focusing on journalists' commentaries instead of statements of politicians (Neveu 2002); and the rise of "meta-coverage" focused on the tricks and hidden tactics of candidates and their handlers as journalists, confronted with scripted events, spin masters, and message discipline, attempt to reestablish control over their own products (Esser et al. 2001).

Not surprisingly, the consequences of profound changes within the media systems as well as increasing tensions in the relations between the press and political elites have stimulated the ongoing debate over the quality and future of news reporting, culminating in the alarming question, "Will political news endure in a form we can recognize, with its function for the public and for political actors more or less intact, and its defining qualities preserved? If not, what will be the consequences?" (Swanson 2003: 25). Recent data from a survey of American journalists (Pew Research Center 2004b) highlight a growing uneasiness of journalists regarding their professional roles and quality standards:

- Roughly half of the journalists at national media outlets (51 percent) believe that journalism is going in the wrong direction.
- Sixty-six percent of journalists have come to believe that increased bottom-line pressure is seriously hurting the quality of news coverage. Ten years ago only 41 percent shared this opinion.
- As the biggest problem facing journalism today, 41 percent cited problems with the quality of coverage (e.g., reporting accurately, not relevant/out of touch, sensationalism, lack of depth/context, missing balance in reporting).
- An increasing percentage (30 percent in 2004 compared to 25 percent in 1999) mentioned business and financial factors (e.g., cutbacks and downsizing of staff, bottom-line emphasis and pressures by corporate owners as well as commercial advertisers) as responsible for journalistic failures.
- Credibility problems of the press have been mentioned by 28 percent of journalists interviewed.

As political journalism in the United States has been a professional role model for European journalists and the American media system is an advanced representation of structural trends and constraints shaping the emerging third phase

of political communication systems (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Hallin and Mancini 2004), it is appropriate to investigate the quality standards of American journalists in more detail.

American Journalism under Stress

According to a verdict of one of the most distinguished figures of American political journalism—David S. Broder—the press system is on the verge of collapse stemming from “a widespread loss of confidence in both the values of journalism and the economic viability of the news business” (Broder 2004). A series of press scandals over fabrications and deceptions have shaken the foundations of American journalism during the past years and even led to the resignation of top editors at *USA Today* and the *New York Times* (Mnookin 2004).¹ Yet it is not only the press scandals that are contributing to the professional disorientation of American journalism; experienced journalists report about a structural *déformation professionnelle*, regarding standards and quality of news (Anderson 2004), which has been affirmed by the regular studies of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. After comparing the coverage in newspapers, nightly news, and news magazines over a twenty-year span, the study revealed that there has been “a shift toward lifestyle, celebrity, entertainment and celebrity crime/scandal in the news and away from government and foreign affairs, although infotainment still comes nowhere near dominating the traditional news package” (Committee of Concerned Journalists 1998). Several years after the shock of 9/11, the threat of terrorism, and the war in Iraq, the committee’s State of the News Media Report 2004 draws a more divided picture: “Quality news and information are more available than ever before, but in greater amounts so are the trivial, the one-sided and the false” (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004).

This “gap between process- and substance-oriented coverage” (Gulati et al. 2004: 241) becomes especially evident in the media coverage of campaigns.² A content analysis of the evening news coverage of the 2004 primaries by the Center for Media and Public Affairs shows that coverage of the primary contests from January through Super Tuesday was down 17 percent in airtime from 2000. Only 18 percent of all coverage was issue-oriented while 77 percent dealt with the horse race (Center for Media and Public Affairs 2004a). Observations of a process-oriented, game- and horse-race-centered campaign coverage focusing on narrow sound bites (Hallin 1992), tactical motives of candidates, and primarily metapolitical issues highlight structural weaknesses, which journalists are self-critically aware of according to a recent survey conducted by the Committee of Concerned Journalists among its members (Committee of Concerned Journalists 2004).

Even more cause for concern is provided by the findings of long-term studies signaling a shifting quality of news toward soft news coverage. According to

Patterson (2000b: 3–4), a content analysis of a large sample of randomly selected news stories during the period 1980 to 1999 showed the proportion of soft news stories without an explicit public policy component increased dramatically from less than 35 percent of all news stories in 1980 to roughly 50 percent in 1999. The content of news has obviously shifted from substantial levels of reporting on government activities and policy problems “to an increasing proportion of soft news features that resemble entertainment formulas more than the they represent the kind of hard information that citizens might use in grasping the political events that affect their lives” (Bennett 2004a: 283).

While some researchers like Patterson and Bennett are warning of the negative consequences of the proliferation of soft news, others are pointing out factual-knowledge-enhancing effects with consuming soft news programming, at least among relatively apolitical segments of the public (Baum 2003: 187). For inattentive citizens, according to Jamison and Baum (2004), consuming soft news seems to be a more efficient way to match public policy debates to their interests than consuming traditional hard news. Graber (2003: 147) even speaks of the necessity of a major paradigm overhaul since “differences in preferences suggest that we need different genres of news for different clients.” This is again contrasted by findings that the demand for soft news is limited (Prior 2003: 167). Additional studies matching the content quality of local news stories in 50 television markets nationwide to corresponding rating success showed “that solid reporting and focus on significant issues actually produces better ratings and reporting hard news stimulates viewer interest” (Just and Belt 2004: 20).

The observable gradual shift from hard to soft news—although hard news continues to dominate news output (Patterson 2003a: 140)—has also started a controversial discussion regarding the professional standards of journalists (Bennett 2003b). According to Zaller (2003), it would be time to leave the traditional normative “Full News Standard of News Quality” behind and to develop a standard more tailored to the needs of the low information voters. Zaller recommends an alternative news standard according to which “journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining” (p. 122). Robert McChesney, one of the most ardent critics of American media policy, reflects the shifting standards of news and the proliferation of soft news when he describes the U.S. media system as “inadequate journalism and hyper-commercialism” (McChesney 2004: 11). Soft news is actually cheap to produce and it “works reasonably well for the commercial purpose of grabbing audiences and delivering them to advertisers” (Bennett 2004b: 137). Yet not even the commercial news formulas have been able to stop the decay of ratings of nightly network news, the shrinking audience for news programs, and the gradual decrease of newspaper circulation and readership (Pew Research Center 2004a; Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004).³

In spite of these structural weaknesses and problems of the American media system, which have been documented and analyzed in numerous publications (Downie and Kaiser 2002; Jamieson and Waldman 2003; McChesney 2004; Patterson 2000b, 2002), it seems to be premature to fully question the quality standards of American journalism. Bennett (2004a: 292) warns rightly of an “alarmist framing of the problems” and an “overgeneralization about breakdowns in the press system.” A collapse of professional norms of journalism could only be referred to if even the hard journalistic quality standards had changed in the direction of soft standards.

Approaching the Quality of News

Despite the intensity of the discussion regarding the decay of journalistic quality, few attempts have been made to define quality journalism in a form that makes it possible to measure the journalistic criteria of quality empirically (Meijer 2001). The discussion too often remains on the normative level or appears to be satisfied with the differentiation of various kinds of news (like soft news versus hard news), rather than “to redefine ‘quality’ news and ‘popular’ news as particular approaches to news, rather than as a normative standard or a deviation from that standard” (Meijer 2003: 22). Since the central question confronted by my coresearchers and I (see Plasser et al. 2004) relates to the professional quality standards of journalists, and since we wanted to explore what journalists think about the quality of their work, we oriented ourselves on the definition given by the German journalism researcher Weischenberg, who defined journalistic experience of quality as a “set of attitudes relating to the quality of journalism” (Weischenberg 2003: 169), which shape news decisions and styles of news reporting.

To find out whether the journalistic quality standards actually changed from hard to soft standards, and how American journalists as well as—from a comparative perspective—Austrian political journalists evaluate the quality development of political journalism, we conducted explorative interviews (in the form of personal and telephone interviews) with thirty-one leading political print journalists during the fall of 2004.⁴ The questionnaire focused on their professional evaluation of changing quality of coverage and their expectations about the future of political news in a fragmented news environment.

The interview partners had on the average thirty years of professional experience; averaged fifty-four years of age; and defined their positions as managing editors, national editors, front page editors, political columnists, political correspondents, or bureau chiefs. The leading political journalists among them are working in the newsrooms of the following print media: the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*,

Newsweek, *Time Magazine*, *US News & World Report*, and the *Associated Press*. The selection of the interview partners was based on data from the *News Media Yellow Book* 2004.

Due to the comparative design of the study, data from a recently conducted survey among Austrian political journalists have been included and compared to the American data and patterns found in the explorative study of American journalists. Obviously, comparing the conceptions of American journalists, who are working in a highly fragmented, market-driven, and media-centered political communication system with the professional orientations of Austrian journalists, who are operating in a comparably traditional, homogeneous, public service TV-dominated, highly concentrated, and party-centered media system, matches the criteria of a most different systems design. However, our interest was also to investigate possible transnational trends in political journalism driving political journalism. It can therefore be argued that a comparative approach promises to provide evidence whether a transnational pattern of shifting quality standards in journalism has emerged.

The Austrian data represent findings from a study of ninety-five leading political journalists, of whom forty-two are working in the national print media. The survey was conducted in the fall of 2003 by means of personal, face-to-face interviews (Plasser et al. 2004). The comparison is based on questions that we also asked our American interview partners; basically they referred to the evaluation of perceived changes in the quality of political journalism as well as journalistic practices and standards. The responses of the interviewed journalists were recorded and later transcribed. The verbatims have been systematically categorized according to a system of codes. Due to the small case numbers, quantitative presentation of results was not chosen; instead, we present the response patterns in a condensed, narrative form, which better expresses the character of an explorative, qualitative study.⁵

The Quality of News as Seen by Leading American Political Journalists

According to data from a recent survey of journalists conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in association with the Project of Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, quality of coverage, business and financial pressures, as well as a loss of credibility appear to be the top problems facing American journalism today (Pew Research Center 2004b). Concentrating on leading print journalists' assessments of the most important problems facing political journalism today, we found a more accentuated and more differentiated pattern when looking at the transcripts of our exploratory interviews with thirty-one prominent print journalists. They concentrated on three problematic developments:

1. from their professional point of view, increasingly superficial, more partisan, and less relevant coverage of political affairs;
2. the increased challenge for professional journalists to get beyond spin and controlled access; and
3. intensified competition, rising economic pressures, and increased production stress.

The problem of increasing superficiality of reporting is generally referred to as the question of how to get away from the superficial coverage of gaffe and faux pas of politicians and how to withstand the trend toward soft journalism. The primary concerns about quality in the minds of national editors and commentators are to not be subsumed in a culture of political talk, to avoid only entertaining the public, and to not take the easy way out when confronted with complex issues. A second development, which proves to be potentially dangerous to the quality of reporting is represented by the increasingly biased and partisan type of news coverage. The challenge lies in finding an unbiased and balanced approach, to avoid seeing events through a “partisan prism,” and to report neutrally and nonideologically about both sides. Due to the increasing partisanship and polarization of society, a more disinterested third view ought to be presented by political journalists.

In addition to the impression of a growing superficiality and an increasingly partisan style of reporting, journalists also see a problem in the relevance of the reports for readers. The ability to be relevant and helpful to the people by explaining and giving more attention to complex political issues is viewed as weakening by professional journalists, as is the readiness to focus on relevant decisions and problems responsible for the current situation. Finding new ways of reporting complex issues is therefore seen as a central challenge for quality-oriented journalism. The quality of reporting is not only questioned by top journalists due to faulty developments of journalism in general, but it is equally threatened by the increased professionalization of the candidates and their media consultants. For leading journalists, getting beyond spin is the second most important problem facing political journalism today. In view of the increased capability of political elites to control the agenda, the core challenge now is to conserve the professional autonomy of journalism. Sorting out the rhetoric to find the truth, reporting about the facts behind the scene, focusing on the effectiveness of political operatives in manipulating the press, getting beyond “expert spinning machines,” relying on one’s own investigation, and evaluating what is real and what is spin are—in the words of the top journalists interviewed—the most important challenges facing a professional, independent journalism today.

It is obviously not easy for journalists to cope with these challenges since direct access to important sources is increasingly denied. Journalists mention that they get no direct access to political candidates and that access to candidates is controlled by “palace guards.” Journalists report that candidates seem to “see

campaigns as one big TV-ad" and do not want to "spoil it" by interviews. These are the words used by leading journalists to describe the changing quality of interaction between press and politicians and therefore its consequences for reporting in general.

Intensified competition and rising economic pressures were less strongly accentuated in our study as a top problem compared to the results of the Pew Research Center survey of journalists, where every third respondent mentioned rising bottom-line pressures as a core problem of American journalism. Too much urgency and competition, resistance to the demands of the market place, and a race to the bottom following the desire for a "scoop at all costs" were seen as contributing factors to rising credibility problems by our interview partners. The latest press scandals and media affairs have also been viewed as a result of exclusively market-driven journalism.

The Pew Research Center survey already showed that journalists evaluate news reports in a quite differentiated way. About one-third of the national print journalists interviewed considered the quality of coverage to be the most important problem facing journalism today, while another third explicitly mentioned that the press is doing well regarding the quality of coverage in terms of scope, relevance, depth insight, clarity, and accuracy (Pew Research Center 2004b). Equally diverging evaluations were found in our study. Every fourth journalist believes that the quality of political journalism in the United States generally increased during recent years, one-third believes that it decreased, one-fourth perceived an ambivalent development, and for one-fifth the quality of political journalism has remained stable.

Journalists who perceived an increased quality of political journalism mentioned first of all that more attention is paid to in-depth analysis now. According to these positive assessments, more time and space is devoted to exploration and to provide more in-depth analyses of the character of politicians. Especially major mainstream papers appear to strike a balance between the news of the day and smart analysis. They run larger graphical presentations and more frequent serial reporting about relevant issues. These measures for the improvement of the quality of news have been accompanied by more sophisticated reporting and considerably higher standards as well as by a broader variety of the presentation of news and more sophistication of coverage.

Among the practices and standards journalists see as having improved during recent years are more and newer sources of news being available for the public, more and faster access to news on the Web, more voices, and a huge variety of viewpoints. They explicitly refer to Internet bloggers as "watchdog groups" representing an addition as well as a corrective to the mainstream media. These qualitative improvements of reporting were primarily explained by better education of the new generation of journalists as well as the greater availability of financial resources. Larger staffs, more resources in newsrooms, more time and

resources devoted to news gathering and reporting, as well as the recruiting of better educated journalists have contributed to the increase of the quality of news from the perspective of the optimists. The proliferation of bloggers and millions of ordinary citizens engaging in Internet writing are also seen as a cause of the perceived quality increase of the press as well as a better educated public providing a higher demand for quality papers.

Yet some journalists also detect a decreasing quality of political journalism in the United States focused primarily on the rise of a more partisan press. Less objectivity and a stronger ideological orientation of the media have occasionally been interpreted as a rise of a European-style partisan press, especially pointing to the coverage offered by Fox News. The practice to engage former political consultants and close advisers of presidents and federal candidates as commentators and talk show hosts contributes, from the more critical perspective, to an increasingly partisan tonality of the coverage. Political strategists and partisans acting as reporters consequently also create more politically biased news. Closely tied to these views are observations about a loss of fairness and balance of reporting. Declining fairness and accuracy, a loss of seriousness, as well as a tendency toward hypercriticism are said to have contributed to a loss of quality in the mainstream media. Some journalists maintain that this development could in turn cause intensified news management and spin control of politicians and their media consultants. Journalism—according to the pessimistic view—is used as a sounding board rather than to help frame the debate in a way that is fair and comprehensive.

From the critics' viewpoint, however, the increased partisanship is only one factor that has contributed to the loss of quality of political journalism in the United States. The other one, which is at least equally important, is seen in the shifting standards of news. The trend toward infotainment and softening of news leads to the news becoming entertainment programs. News, according to the critics among the journalist, is nowadays more buffeted by rumors, controversies, and trivialities. The trend toward entertainment and sensationalism is for some based on the progressing commercialization, which is also made responsible for the increasing focus upon horse race journalism. In a mixture of self-criticism and resignation, this trend has been summarized by one national editor as follows: "other than horse race, politics doesn't get covered."

A further indicator of a substantial loss of quality in American journalism is seen in the decline of in-depth reporting and in a trend toward superficial reporting. Too little checking of facts, superficial analysis by pundits, the rise of opinion journalism, and news more focused on predicting the outcome than dealing with facts and context—such are the critical voices among journalists, who perceive substantial quality problems of journalism and also associate them with the series of recent press scandals.

Reasons for the decreasing quality of political journalism are primarily seen as due to increased competition and commercialization of the media system. Critics believe that a huge race for ratings and circulation is taking place resulting in an increased competitive nature of journalism. Stronger commercial pressures; diminishing resources available in terms of the number of journalists, producers, and research staff; changing recruiting practices of media management; management decisions focusing on demographics of readership and circulation gains; and less space available for in-depth reporting stand for a hypercommercialization of news and more entertainment-oriented news outlets. According to the critical journalists, this trend is reinforced by the dynamics of accelerated news cycles. Press coverage seems to be driven by a tremendous volume of information from TV news channels and a growing need to fill the 24/7 news cycle; this in turn increases the pressure of the time factor, aggravated by Web site bloggers, who additionally influence the agenda of the mainstream media with their instant commentaries.

Consequently, commercialization and accelerated dynamics of news cycles appear to contribute to the shifting professional standards of political journalism. This development includes the privatization of coverage focusing primarily on the private life and character of politicians; the rise of "punditocracy" working against fact-based reporting; and the proliferation of an opinionated, highly speculative style of coverage, which several of our interview partners also described as a proliferation of the 24/7 style of cable TV-news. Occasionally these shifting standards of professional journalism are also considered to be a consequence of the changing quality of interactions between reporters and politicians. Compared to earlier years, this relationship is said to have become more distant, there is a lack of opportunities for confidential off-the-record talks, and the controlled and limited access to politicians in turn affects the quality of coverage.

As becomes evident by these evaluations of the qualitative development of journalism, the leading representatives of print journalism are evenly divided regarding their assessments of the state of their profession. When asked about their evaluation of the general direction in which political journalism in the United States is heading, one-third stated that it was the right direction, one-third believed it was the wrong direction, and one-third remained ambivalent. This distribution corresponds to the one found in the Pew Research Center's (2004b) survey of American journalists (52 percent right direction, 42 percent wrong direction, no category for ambivalent responses provided).

Those respondents who felt that political journalism in the United States was moving in the right direction were primarily convinced of the visible attempts of journalism to maintain its standard of quality. Compared to former years, this striving for quality is expressed by a deeper and richer style of reporting and greater endeavors to select relevant topics. Optimistic evaluations perceive a higher sensibility of journalists toward hidden processes and the strategic

motives of politicians. From this point of view, the absolute requirements for securing quality standards of journalism include the attempts to place events in a critical context, trying to find a better political balance and more flexibility, as well as being ready to choose new ways of presenting stories. Frequently these journalists also mention a higher awareness of problems, which is also interpreted as a reaction to the recent press scandals and media affairs having shaken up the more sensible segments of journalism. Additionally it is believed that a stronger orientation toward the interests of readers and a higher sensibility for the informational needs of a politically interested audience have contributed to a partial redirection of a political journalism after it had been disoriented by the press scandals. A greater emphasis on the developments of the media system is placed by those who see the positive development of journalism based on new digital partnerships and the enlargement of the available supply of information. In this context, they refer to the convergence of the Internet and mainstream media, offering new opportunities for synergetic digital partnerships as well as the broadening of sources of political information.

Those who deem political journalism to be on the wrong path are basing their negative evaluations mainly on the consequences of a continuously growing market orientation of journalism. The overriding goal of media management is said to maximize profit and to minimize costs, which in practice leads to staff and newsroom cutbacks. Journalism exclusively focused on ratings and circulation logically tends to move in the direction of soft news, frivolities, trivialities, and opinions and speculations camouflaged as facts to stop dwindling circulations and the loss of audience particularly among the younger generation. For some leading print journalists, a direct connection exists between forced commercialization and the tendencies toward opinionated journalism. Rather than reporting things as they are, an opinionated journalism is offering speculations and personal value judgments; this development is characterized by increasingly superficial research, no backups, poor sourcing, and no evidence for statements.

The increased partisanship of the press is also seen by critical journalists as a step in the wrong direction. They observe an increased polarization and bias of political journalism, a loss of balance and overt partisanship, again explicitly pointing to Fox News but at the same time commenting with resignation that a more partisan audience obviously prefers more partisan news. There are also comments about intensified spin control by political elites and their PR machines. Professional and meanwhile generally obtrusive spinning makes it increasingly difficult to reach the core and to evaluate what is real and what is spin. This might—according to the sorrowful evaluation by a veteran journalist—“threaten the honest brokers of facts and ideas and make custodians of fact to prisoners of spin.”

Leading print journalists are evenly divided regarding their assessments of the future of political journalism. Asked how they would describe the future of news

reporting and which trends they see, 50 percent of them laid out more or less optimistic scenarios about the future of political journalism, 40 percent were pronouncedly pessimistic, and 10 percent were ambivalent. The optimists among the leading print journalists interviewed base their positive scenario of the future on three expected developments:

1. a productive partnership between old and new news media,
2. the unchanged need of the audience for seriously prepared information, and
3. signs of a refocusing on quality standards.

Productive partnership for the journalists means an increased importance of the Internet and of an array of Web sites for the public to use in the search for information, which major newspapers meet by offering attractive online editions, interactive discussion forums, and special informative offers with rich materials and graphic support. Several national editors also addressed the partnership between major newspapers and cable TV or satellite radio. For instance, the *Chicago Tribune* set up a local TV studio in its newsroom and the *New York Times* is beginning to offer its own TV news program out of its newsroom. According to several journalists interviewed, the proliferation of the Internet has indirectly impacted quality. Bloggers and Internet writers bring more scrutiny and act as external “watchdogs” monitoring and questioning the accuracy of mainstream media news reporting.

The pessimists are basing their scenarios primarily on three negative developments:

1. the consequences of ongoing fragmentation,
2. the irreversible trend in the direction of infotainment and soft news, and
3. a “Europeanization” in the sense of an influx of partisan press practices into the American media system.

The progressing fragmentation concerns—in the opinion of the pessimists—not only the media markets but also the offered information. Genuine political reporting, they fear, would be increasingly displaced by the fragmentation of the media and the stronger competition for readers and viewers leading to a market-driven style of soft and superficial reporting, a dominance of entertainment factors, and a convergence between politics and entertainment. The pessimists expect these trends to be even greater in the future. According to these negative voices, there will be a “sell out,” the public will be flooded with superficial information ad nauseam, with endless discussions about who is ahead and who is behind, too many interpretations and opinions instead of fact-based reports, a more TV-centered style of coverage with show-biz character and with more reliance on one-sided, highly speculative information provided by bloggers and partisan Web sites.

The rise of a partisan press has occasionally been referred to as a questionable version of “Europeanization” of American journalism, which is understood as the placement of the media on a left/right continuum as well as a polarized partisanship of journalists. Some even chose the metaphor of a “Balkanization” of the media to describe the trend in the direction of a partisan opinion journalism, which is believed by the pessimists to become further aggravated. According to this prognosis, those media-fighting partisan trends are going to have to fight against shrinking audiences, since the public will mostly join those who are taking sides. The polarized partisan division in American society appears to favor more politicization and partisanship of the media reacting consciously or unconsciously to the growing partisan expectations of their audiences.

Assuming an ongoing fragmentation of news channels and news audiences, intensified competition and increasing bottom-line pressures, we asked our interview partners about their assessments of these developments on quality and credibility of political journalism in the United States. The dominant pattern of their responses is characterized by severe concern. Four mostly critical lines of argumentation are only opposed by few positive evaluations. The most frequently used argument refers to the negative consequences of increasing bottom-line pressures for quality and credibility of political journalism. Quality could suffer and will decrease due to these growing bottom-line pressures. As the expenses for serious coverage are extremely high, some media cannot and will not afford them. Journalists anticipate a more market-oriented style of journalism treated by the management as a commodity, which in turn will further the trend toward cheaper soft news coverage in contrast to hard and in-depth news produced by a staff of professional journalists doing diligent reporting every day. Also, the accelerated news cycles allow less time for serious reporting and checking of facts. Smaller audiences and more news outlets competing for them result in newsroom cutbacks and fewer resources available for sophisticated reporting. With the merging of media companies, there is also an increased danger in the concentration of ownership and more pressure to target readers in specific socioeconomic groups by customizing and merchandizing the news.

According to the data of our exploratory study, leading political print journalists are aware of a gradual shifting quality of news, which seems to be related to three main developments:

1. Increased competition stress and hypercommercialization foster more market-driven styles of reporting, moving slightly away from the traditional, fact-oriented toward a softer, more customized way of reporting.
2. Changes in the quality of interaction between politicians and reporters, controlled access, and increased capabilities of political elites to influence the issue agenda of media and to put spin on stories minimize the capability of reporters to get beyond the spin, in turn resulting in a declining quality of news.

3. The increased partisan division of American society is partially reflected in an increased partisanship of the press, occasionally lowering traditional standards of fair and balanced reporting to please and react to expectations of divided partisan readers and viewers.

Surprisingly, these developments are not a unique feature of American journalism but are also detectable in data of a recent survey of Austrian political journalists, operating in a fundamentally different, homogeneous, and less market-driven media environment.

The Quality of News as Seen by Leading Austrian Political Journalists

Similar to their counterparts in the United States, leading Austrian political journalists are also questioning the quality of news. According to data from a recent survey of leading political journalists in Austria, 50 percent are under the impression that the quality of political journalism has decreased in the past years. Another 18 percent have an ambivalent view, and only 19 percent speak of an improvement. The quality of Austrian journalism is evaluated most critically by producers and journalists working in the electronic media, while news editors from the print media tend to view the situation somewhat more positively. The evaluations made by journalists on the executive and senior levels are more differentiated. Among managing editors and producers, an improvement in quality is seen by one-third, another third sees it ambivalently, and one-third explicitly speaks of a diminishing quality of political journalism. The most critical judgments are made by editorial managers and their substitutes. Two-thirds of the managers of national political newsrooms mentioned a recognizable decrease of quality of political journalism in Austria.

This perceived quality decrease is seen in part as due to the consequences of tougher competition over ratings, readerships, and the advertising market and in part as due to the professionally precarious developments of journalism itself. The first concern refers to economizing journalistic activities, which is frequently considered to be the core problem of the professional reality of journalism. Austrian journalists see the consequences of an increased commercialization of the news business, primarily in a reduction of staff, which consequently impairs time-intensive research activities. The increasing bottom-line pressure, which is placed on journalists by editors and executives, leads to a conglomeration of economic and journalistic goals; this in turn produces uncertainty about the role of journalists and—due to the increased time pressure caused by newsroom cutbacks—favors uncritical headline and event journalism. The intensified competition for public attention increases the pressure to report exclusive statements and facts, but at the same time also leads to a mainstreaming of news reporting in the sense of consonant conformity of coverage.

Critical observers, who see an upswing in headline and event journalism, are primarily pointing out a *déformation professionnelle*. Political journalism is perceived as concentrating increasingly on painting things in black and white, dramatic effects, pointed citations, quickly consumed bits of information, and camera-ready events instead of solid background information. The focus on accelerated news cycles, sensationalism, and easy-to-use news actually displaces the coverage of more complex topics and problems (see Table 1).

The intrusion of fun and entertainment factors in political journalism is also considered to be a professionally faulty development that might lead to a loss of substantial content of news. Critics of journalistic quality among news people are especially concerned about an undesirable closeness between some reporters and top politicians leading to an affirmative type of event journalism.

The negative trends are mitigated only slightly by selected comments about qualitative improvements of political journalism. The one-fifth of national political reporters who perceive some signs of improvement of journalistic quality mention an increased preparedness of reporters to engage in intensified individual research, an expansion of reporting on background information, and a growing initiative of national political journalists to report about controversial issues and to define the news agenda autonomously. Occasionally they even noticed a greater distance between journalists and politicians, which was viewed as an ambitious attempt to defend one's professional autonomy.

Austrian television journalists tend to evaluate the changes in the quality of news more severely and more negatively than print journalists. Two-thirds view the commercialization and the trend in the direction of a marketing-oriented journalism as the cause for the decline of quality, while only every fourth print journalist associates the qualitative changes with increased bottom-line pressure. Infotainment and the increasing conglomeration of hard and soft news are mentioned as problems by 40 percent of the TV journalists interviewed but only by 22 percent of the print journalists. The reduction and "short breath" of accelerated news cycles is perceived by 40 percent of the TV journalists but only by 15 percent of the print journalists as a problematic trend.

On the other hand, Austrian print journalists much more often emphasize positive, news-enhancing trends. Every third print journalist addresses an increased readiness to provide a more accurate and critical examination of facts. One-third of the print journalists point out more intensive individual research at their own papers, and every fifth finds increased autonomy and more professional distance to the political elites. Yet besides these positive perceptions by the print journalists, they express many critical observations, primarily dealing with the increasing concentration on images and layout, a trend in the direction of headline and event journalism, as well as deficits in the qualifications of the young generation of reporters.

Table I

Ambivalent trends in political journalism as seen by Austrian top journalists (in percentages)

	Definitely Applies	Applies Partially	Does Not Apply
Question: "Please tell me for each one of the following trends whether it also applies to Austrian political journalism in recent years?"			
To place persons as acting agents in the center of reports	88	12	0
To place conflicts in the center of reports	87	11	2
To reduce the length of reports and contributions	70	20	10
To work out the staging character of politics for the audience	55	34	11
To present politics primarily in an entertaining way	53	41	6
To focus on negative aspects	50	39	11
To allow ever shorter appearances of politicians	37	30	33
To avoid reports about complex, difficult topics	33	43	24
To produce stories without time-consuming research	31	47	22
To report mostly critically about political elites	25	54	21
To address the private and family life of politicians	24	42	34
To separate less between facts and opinions	17	56	27
To generally reduce national political reporting	5	20	75

Sources: Survey of leading Austrian political journalists, 2003; Plasser et al., 2004: 272.

This high degree of self-criticism with which Austrian political journalists address professional weaknesses and undesirable developments is also reflected in their evaluation of general changes regarding political communication in the mass media. Transnational trends like the progressive personalization of reporting, the tendency to focus on conflicts, as well as the reduction of the amount of political coverage are in the opinion of most respondents also clearly present in Austrian political journalism. Fifty percent of top journalists also believe that the tendency to present politics in an entertaining way and to focus on the negative aspects has been reinforced. Yet half of the journalists in Austria also recognize a corrective trend toward a reflexive metajournalism, which is trying to show the staging character of politics for the audience.

There is a more differentiated evaluation, however, of trends like the reduction of the appearance of top politicians in reports or the elimination of more complex topics that are difficult to communicate and need time-consuming research; they are only clearly registered by one-third of the top journalists in their everyday work, with varying estimates depending on topics and contents. Two-thirds of the broadcasting journalists observe a progressive tendency to allow only shorter personal statements and sound bites by politicians, and 50 percent of broadcast journalists perceive an increasing editorial restraint at the communication of more complex topics as well as a tendency to do without investigative research. Yet there is no reduction of the volume of national

political coverage noted and no growing mix up of facts and opinions, although half of the journalists perceive at least a punctual departure from the categorical rule of this separation within Austrian present day journalism.

Professional observers of political communication in Europe, Asia, and Latin America recognize an increasing tendency for an Americanization of the process of political communication since the eighties, with the exact meaning of the term remaining mostly diffuse. This lack of clarity is also reflected in the responses of Austrian journalistic elites. Seven out of ten Austrian journalists perceived signs of a tendency toward an Americanization of the culture of political communication in the past years, which is traced back to the modified acceptance of American patterns of reporting and news formats. One-fifth of Austrian top journalists, however, believe that the described developments have been primarily a consequence of the growing TV orientation in the political competition as well as of the commercialization and privatization of national media systems, and are only partially influenced by American news and presentation formats.

The question of who bears the primary responsibility for the tendencies toward Americanization is also answered ambivalently. The majority of the top Austrian journalists interviewed point out that the relationship between politics and media has to be principally viewed as communicating vessels; the tendencies toward Americanization are mutually introduced, reflected, and reinforced by both groups of players. The journalists argue mostly self-critically, only viewing themselves in part as victims of the Americanization of politics, their PR strategies, and styles of election campaigns. The journalist interview partners do not at all identify the tendencies toward Americanization only in the communication behavior of political elites, to which journalists would be forced to react. Rather, more than half of the journalists perceive a tendency toward Americanization within the everyday work of reporting and the products of journalism.

The most prominent tendency of Americanization of reporting is the personalization of politics. Individual actors, their personality, style, and appearance are increasingly the focus of coverage, forming a star system, in which prominence and image force competence into the background and further a shallowing of discussions of political issues in the mass media. The slogan-oriented journalism of "bits and bytes," which are presented to the audience in a short and appealing way, is believed to displace comprehensive reports about complex problems. This editorial practice appears to be increasingly defined by headline journalism instead of the depth of research warranted by an ambitious background report.

Another indicator of the tendency toward the Americanization of the culture of political communication is seen by Austrian journalists in the progressive reduction of messages to sound bites, embedded in ever-faster-changing news cycles. This causes a more superficial use of sources and citations and accelerates the "breaking news" character of news reporting. Every third top Austrian journalist mentioned the increasing tendency toward dynamism and reductionism as

a problem for political journalism; it is primarily believed to be caused by the increased pressure of competition and production as well as the forced commercial direction of the Austrian media system.

Comparative Conclusions

Looking at how leading political journalists in the United States as well as in Austria evaluate and assess the shifting quality of news, we find striking similarities. We are apparently confronted with transnational trends, which are also observable in an institutionally most different media system such as Austria, where comparatively small contextual changes resulted in a pattern similar to the reflections of American journalists. This effect can be noted in spite of the fact that American journalists operate in the most competitive, market-driven, and professionalized media system of the world.

Considering the divergence of market pressures and competition stress in these two media systems, it appears that any explanation that reduces the decline of quality of journalism solely to intensified commercialization and the proliferation of news outlets may be too narrow. Apparently there is an overestimation of the effects of the market-oriented approach as opposed to the professional approach for the decision about what is news. Beam (2003: 371) has been able to prove that "changes in context and journalistic practices do seem to be associated with the market-oriented model, but they are not always as dramatic as critics have asserted." We therefore tend to approximate the assumption of Bennett (2004a: 292), who believes that "it is still not clear how much of this problem is due to changes inside the media alone." This is congruent with the hypothesis of McLeod (2000: 21) stating that many of the problems of news media performance "reflect constraints at levels beyond the individual: in microsocial interactions with news sources and at a macrosocial level in organizational and institutional relations of media and political systems."

Some of the demonstrated findings seem to point out that not only are market pressures and hypercommercialization responsible for the quality problems of political journalism but also that the quality of the interaction between journalists and politicians has substantially changed as a consequence of "source professionalization" (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), professional news management, spin control, and restricted direct access to politicians. This in turn had direct effects upon the quality of journalistic reporting.

Contrary to the popular assumption that professional standards of political journalists have moved away from the professional standard model of news, the data seem to confirm the viability of professional standards at least among leading news people.⁶ Although leading political journalists in both countries assess the state of political journalism and the quality of coverage in a very critical

manner, there are no indicators that they are willing to reduce their professional standards of news gathering and reporting.⁷ Despite an overwhelming skepticism regarding the future of political journalism—especially among leading American print journalists—there is also sufficient evidence for intensified endeavors to maintain and improve the quality of coverage and to adjust to fundamental changes within the media system as well as within the ways the public gets its political information.

What our explorative comparative study seems to confirm is a kind of “homogenization” of journalistic cultures—beyond divergent institutional and market constraints within given media systems. According to an assumption of Hallin and Mancini (2004: 294), “differences among national media systems are clearly diminishing. A global media culture is emerging, one that closely resembles the Liberal Model,” which is represented by central features of the American media system. This does not imply that journalistic cultures become standardized following strictly the American way. Resuming the striking convergence of problems as seen by political journalists operating in fundamentally different media systems and communication cultures, it will be a fascinating task for political communication scholars to track and analyze different strategies to cope with the problem of maintaining the quality of news in a form compatible with the democratic standards of an informed public and a responsible press.

Notes

1. In view of the significant increase in media reporting and media criticism in the U.S. news media (Fengler 2001, 2003), ombudsmen, press councils, local journalism reviews, public editors, and platforms like the Committee of Concerned Journalists, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the Free Press Organization and journals like the *American Journalism Review* or *Columbia Journalist Review*, one should not underestimate the potential of media self-regulation.
2. This weakness also becomes evident in the election eve coverage of the networks (Patterson 2003a).
3. Regarding the long-term changes in political information behavior, see the Biannual Media Consumption and Believability Study (Pew Research Center 2004a).
4. We conducted also nine additional interviews with leading news producers of the nightly networks news (NBC, ABC, CBS) and the cable TV news (CNN, Fox). Due to the low number of cases and in order to reach professional homogeneity of the interview partners, we based our analysis exclusively on the responses of thirty-one leading print journalists.
5. For analysis, we used the qualitative-hermeneutic approach to verbal information, which represents a dense analysis of response patterns.
6. This is also confirmed by the time series data of surveys of American journalists covering the time span 1992 to 2002 (Weaver et al. 2003).
7. Investments in the quality of the journalistic product seem to be financially worthwhile too. As shown by comparative analyses, “positioning the newspaper as a serious, high-quality product was one of the best predictors of an increase in circulation” (Schoenbach 2004: 221).

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