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**A comparative study of how political journalists in four European countries reported on the coronavirus pandemic**

**Barrow, C.**

This is a PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster.

# UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER⊞

**A comparative study of how political journalists in four European countries reported on the coronavirus pandemic.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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# ABSTRACT

International comparisons of the culture of political journalism are made more difficult and complex by differences of salience in the chosen countries during the period of measurement. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a rare opportunity to compare national patterns of media coverage and the associated culture of political journalism while controlling for salience, as all countries were experiencing the pandemic in the same way at the same time.

This study uses multiple methods. It begins with qualitative content analysis, measuring and analysing a limited sample of the television and press coverage in the UK, France, Germany and Switzerland in November 2020. The study then contextualises the data within scholars' familiar classifications of the political, economic and media environment, and finally, applying the methods of thematic research, seeks explanations from 22 semi-structured interviews with senior practitioners in political communication and journalism in the respective countries, and within the EU itself.

France and Germany are members of the EU, the UK and Switzerland had strong associations with the Union. Germany and Switzerland are federations, with traditions of consensual, multi-party government, which in the Swiss case is reinforced by a layer of direct democracy though regular referenda. The political systems in the UK and France while differing, share a majoritarian and indeed adversarial political culture. All have dominant, regulated public broadcasters.

Despite the many differences the evidence of this study suggests that there is a strong correlation between the consensual style of government, civic trust in all its forms and the political culture of the country and that this is expressed through similarities in the media output during this unique period. The UK's majoritarian parliamentary system and highly competitive media are associated with a significantly different style of political journalism.

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# STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby confirm that this thesis is the product of my own work. All sources used are referenced.

Signed _Barrow_         Date 31. May 2023.

# INTRODUCTION

The nature, style, and content of the exchange between the media and politicians influence what citizens read, see and believe about what their government is doing. In any given country the culture of this exchange depends on many factors; on the political system itself, the commercial situation of media businesses, and the culture of journalism, among others.

Elected representatives owe their allegiance simultaneously to their electors, to the national, regional, or local interest, to their party and its policy platform, and to any coalitions of which that party is for the time being a member.

Additionally, each individual politician has a political career. Some aspire to go all the way to the top in a career that might last twenty or thirty years. Others might be content with a more limited, usually local role, or a career lasting one or two terms, often with a specific legislative or administrative aim. Explaining to the citizen these individual and collective choices by elected representatives and parties is the business of political journalism.

Except for the public service broadcasters, media organisations are businesses, and as such must seek to maximise long term shareholder value. They are not exclusively dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of democracy. To make money they need to attract an audience, do whatever it takes to make news interesting, to encourage people to pay for it. Even the public broadcasters need to demonstrate their appeal to audiences, to justify their privileges and status.

That which interests the public is in the media's interest. What is in the public interest is not necessarily of interest to the media.

Politicians are elected for a term, during which governments, coalitions and leaders may come and go for all sorts of reasons. At the end of the term, they must stand for re-election. To maximise the chances of being seen by the electorate as worthy of re-election, candidates need to communicate what they have been doing during their term of office. Often a representative will be chosen by tens or even hundreds of thousands of electors, and as it is impractical to communicate to more than a few on an individual level.

Politicians need to get their photograph, their activities and their views into the newspaper or television and, increasingly significantly, onto social media. Or they can literally or metaphorically attach to their lapel a rosette symbolising their political party, and thus rely on the party's wider reputation and stated position on political issues.

Journalists in democracies with a free press are also expected to shine a light on the failings of government, and report on the competition inherent in political life. Scrutiny can be uncomfortable, even conflictual for the politician, and can threaten the relationship between

the journalist and the public servant. It can however enhance the career and reputation of a journalist, and the commercial success of their employer.

Political journalists depend for their success on getting, and keeping, good relationships with, and access to good information from, politicians and high government officials. In turn, those politicians and officials seek to ensure that their work is positively and accurately reported in the media, to improve both the support for their programmes and their eventual success at the polls.

The relationship between politicians and political journalists is therefore symbiotic. Each group needs the other; each has an interest in preserving the relationship, to be able to continue using it for their own ends. (Bird and Dardenne, 2009; Johansson, Malling and Nygren, 2019)

The media cannot avoid being politically significant in a democracy, however much they might try, or be required, to be fair and impartial.

Political systems and habits differ in different countries, as do electoral arrangements and cycles. The competitive positions and business strategies of media organisations vary, as do the habits and norms governing journalism. Systems of regulation also vary – some preferring unfettered freedom of speech, some rather enforcing accuracy and impartiality. Finally, and importantly, there are national differences in the patterns of trust concerning the information passing among the citizen, the media, and politicians.

The rules under which the exchange is conducted between journalists and governments will necessarily vary from country to country. The relative power balance is different in each place. The economy of attention differs in each place. The patterns of trust, in public servants, information and the media, vary also. Each of these components affects the very polity of the country.

Comparing media systems theoretically within the broad classifications of political systems is not new. Siebert placed media within authoritarian and pluralistic systems nearly seventy years ago. More recently Hallin and Mancini suggested subclassifications within free democratic societies. However international qualitative comparisons of the style and culture surrounding the interface between politicians, the media and the citizen form a relatively new field of study. It was less than 10 years ago that Albaek was able to say that theirs was the first systematic international comparison of political journalism. Whilst there is some data on values and trust and a certain amount of observational material on how journalists go about their work in specific countries, Weaver regarded the methodology of comparative journalism as being in its infancy. Studies comparing aspects of the style of this type of communication remain rare, and studies comparing like with like are rarer still. (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Weaver et al., 2009; Albæk et al., 2014)

The core of this study is the specific examination of an unusual set of circumstances that present a unique opportunity for comparative analysis. The experiment compares how political actors and the news media in four countries, each with a different political and media culture, handled the arrival of the devastating second wave of COVID-19 towards the end of 2020. The uniqueness of this opportunity for comparison rests on the simultaneous impact of the same phase of a global pandemic on the domestic agenda of each country, when the impact was, as we shall see, very similar.

**Introduction to the study; research questions.**

This research sets out to explore how these exchanges were conducted in the UK, France, Germany, and Switzerland: near neighbours in Europe and all prosperous, democratic, and free countries. The countries are geographically close, have considerable shared history and traditions but have developed quite different political cultures and media practices.

The economic and social differences between these countries, on a world scale, are small. They all lie within the top 15% economically, as measured by GDP per capita, and within the same group of 20 countries regarding inequality, as measured by the GINI coefficient. Politically, all are pluralist liberal democracies. Internet penetration is similar. These similarities will allow the subtler variables in the systems of communication between politicians and the electorate via the media to be isolated and studied without the confusion caused by larger differences.

This study focuses on a particular moment, when there was a rare opportunity for comparison, free of many of the usual confounding factors. The pandemic was, during almost all of 2020, the most salient political and public policy issue in Europe. The effects on almost all areas of life were immense, and, short of war, unprecedented. Governments everywhere faced a new and unpredictable challenge. There are many similarities between these countries, economically and socially. The pandemic would in the end affect them all in much the same way. Although the paths might differ and the interventions too, in the end the infection and casualty rates were similar and the way out, through attrition of the disease itself and by vaccination, was the same everywhere. The salience of the story was the same everywhere.

This research begins by mapping core differences in political and media systems, assesses the media's output at the time and explores with practitioners how they went about their business during the pandemic.

Two research questions are being addressed in this study:

a) Were there material differences in the way in which the media handled the pandemic in each country?

b) If there are, can we discern from the respective countries' political or media environments or the accounts of the practitioners involved, any reasons as to why this might be?

As this is a comparative study, explanations for significant differences between the countries will be sought. For reasons set out in the methodology chapter, analysis focused on the following dimensions:

- The national culture – political systems, civic trust, and belief in government

- Ownership – private control of the press vs. the public service broadcasters
- Regulation – the duty to be impartial, fair, truthful and/or accurate.
- Commercial considerations – the public demand for information
- External pressures – the influence of government and the local establishment
- Professional culture – information, analysis, or opinion
- The influence of social media on the subject matter and process of journalism.

The combination of these elements provides valuable insights into the determinants of differences between the political cultures of countries that have much in common, and the consequences for democracy in each country.

The analysis of the political and media landscape in the countries being studied will be located within the frameworks proposed by scholars in recent years.

The nature of political communications culture in these developed European democracies will be compared alongside what Mazzoleni described as mediatisation, where the media's values and agenda have grown in salience and importance in political life over recent years (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008).

Norris observed that comparative studies of political communication were hampered by the lack of a theoretical framework within which to analyse differences in complex systems. Esser points to complexity as the issue; there are so many variables at work that it is difficult to isolate the effects of single factors on the culture of political communication (Norris, 2009; Esser and Pfetsch, 2020a).

The components of the study are organised as follows.

Chapter 1 explores the components and drivers of political culture in a democracy and identify differences in the political systems in the four countries.  Some classifications of political culture in the literature will be compared, alongside the theories of mediatisation.

Chapter 2 considers the literature of media values and logic, the role of the media as watchdog and how the democratic role is protected by regulation and in some cases subsidy. Market pressures will be reviewed, including those arising from the rapid growth of social media and the transfer of advertising spend to the platforms.

Chapter 3 reviews the theory of trust and its effects: trust in politicians, the media generally and especially the news, the public service broadcasters and predominantly private press.

Chapter 4 considers the literature regarding the behaviour of journalists and politicians and review the institutional and power structures governing the exchange.

Chapter 5 describes the political and media systems country by country.

Chapter 6 reviews the relevant methodology literature and sets out the chosen research design for the two phases of the research. The first phase will assess and code a sample of the broadcast and print media output in each country in November 2020, the height of the pandemic. The second phase will consist of interviews with twenty-two senior journalists exploring how they went about their work during the pandemic generally, including this period.

Chapter 7 sets out the results of each phase of the research, from the political and media landscape through the media output to the thematic analysis of the interviews with the practitioners.

Finally, in Chapter 8, these strands are brought together in conclusions that address the research questions.

## Chapter 1 - The components of political culture in a democracy

### 1.1 Politics

Governments everywhere take decisions to allocate resources, commission collective projects, provide common services and protect the nation and its citizens from external threats and domestic risk. Laws and quasi-judicial decisions are made for these purposes. How are these decisions arrived at? How are citizens involved and consulted before the decision? How is the decision defended afterwards?  And how are the results assessed?

In democracies many of these decisions are made by elected representatives themselves. Many more are made by people who are accountable to elected representatives. Journalists, the media organisations for whom they work, the various social media and other platforms they and others use to distribute their output, these together form the lens through which the public judges the potential and actual performance in office of those representatives.

However, there are important differences in the way politics works in different countries, and some of these may influence the way in which journalists and politicians interact.

### 1.1.1 Corporate, Pluralist or Liberal?

Hallin and Mancini attempted to place media systems into their political context using, for the countries in this study, just three categories. Liberal, Polarised Pluralist and Democratic Corporatist. In doing so the authors openly acknowledged that these categories would not map perfectly on to every country and singled out France in that context. Furthermore, in the twenty years since publication, much has changed in media landscapes (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 2012).

The Liberal model emphasises individual and press freedom and political independence and is cautious about state intervention. It prevails in the US and the UK, although broadcast media in the UK remain heavily regulated.

The Polarised Pluralist model (to which France is assigned by the authors) is predicated on the acceptance that there is an engaged political elite composed of several factions of opinion, many of which are irreconcilable. Political parallelism is common, diminishing journalistic professionalism accordingly. France, the authors admit, lies uneasily in this category, having many of the characteristics of its Democratic Corporatist neighbours Germany and the Benelux countries. The French press offers a greater representation of civil society viewpoints, a stronger emphasis on both the ideological aspects of politics, and interpretation and opinion are mixed with factual reporting (Benson and Hallin, 2007).

The Democratic Corporatist model emphasises civic society, with organised social groups contributing to a collective vision of the common good, which transcends social divisions. Germany and Switzerland are placed in this category. Government is heavily involved in the media, for example via Germany's carefully balanced State level Broadcasting Councils that regulate both content and ownership. While diverse views are represented in aligned media outlets there is a strong normative overlay of the pursuit by society of the common good.

Some scholars have suggested that the UK does not fit as well as the authors suggest, and press subsidies are now very minor in the Democratic Corporatist countries. French newspapers have in recent years become considerably less politically aligned, and much more like their counterparts in the neighbours that form part of this study (Norris, 2009; Humphreys, 2011).

Siaroff, writing five years earlier, in a study primarily about economic, rather than political integration, set out to assess by different measures the degree which countries were pluralist or corporatist in their patterns of influence on policy formulation. Corporatist systems would be correlated with consensus policymaking; the main interest groups having been involved in its creation. In pluralist systems, the Government may listen to all the voices competing for influence, but the decision is the Government's alone. Several signs of corporatism were scored to derive a single national index for each country. He found striking differences between the countries under review. The range of index measurements was between 1.15 and 5. Switzerland and Germany's indices were 3.3 and 3.5 (indicating relative corporatism), whereas France's was 1.67 and the UK's 1.65 (indicating relative pluralism). This study will return often to this significant observation (Siaroff, 1999).

It will be seen as this thesis develops that the present analysis owes more to Bourdieu than to Hallin and Mancini. It will be seen that while political systems are broadly fixed, as are the legal regimes and codes of regulation of media output, much about the day-to-day influences on the field or arena occupied by political journalists is subject to change in response to day-to-day pressures that are in constant flux. The pandemic offered an opportunity to examine this while at least some of these forces were paused.

### 1.1.2 Political systems, Majoritarian or Consensual?

For our purposes, the more useful categorisation of *political* systems, may be that of Lijphart. Reviewing data from thirty-six countries the main distinction made is between the consensus democracies, such as Germany and Switzerland, and the majoritarian democracies, being the UK and, to a lesser extent, the semi-presidential France (Lijphart, 1999).

Majoritarian political systems embrace the principle that the right to govern belongs to representatives of the majority. The presumption normally is that there is no place for those who are not part of this majority. For example, in England, voters elect a single member in a constituency. Votes for other parties are 'lost', in the sense that they have no further impact on the composition of the government after the election. When electing a national

government for the UK, constituencies in all nations send representatives to a single parliament. The Government is in most cases formed by a single party, the leader of which becomes head of Government and appoints all the ministers. The main losing party forms an Opposition and is expected to expose and challenge the weaknesses of the government.

The UK's political system thus is institutionally adversarial, enshrining binary conflict between Government and the Opposition. Lijphart (ibid.) describes it as one of the most rigorously majoritarian in the world. He also notes that, in majoritarian systems, interest groups tend to be held at arm's length by the executive, rather than being brought into formal deliberative structures. Interest groups frequently use the media as part of a campaign to make their case to decision makers, and it is for media organisations to choose whose campaigns they cover. During the COVID pandemic for example, groups representing businesses such as travel, airports, and hospitality all made their case through the newspapers and broadcasters as well as lobbying ministers directly. Sometimes opposition politicians would add their voices to politically significant lobbying efforts.

Importantly, Lijphart also observes that, in practice, the first-past-the-post voting system, when coupled with a majoritarian government, tends to impede the rise of new parties. In a proportional system, of the kind we see in Germany and Switzerland, the barriers to entry for small parties are lower, and these parties can rapidly acquire significant influence, especially when coalition negotiations are finely balanced, and they hold the balance of power.

As an illustration of this observation, he calculates the 'effective number' of political parties, shows the UK at 2.16, Germany at 3.09, the mean of all 36 countries at 3.19, France at 3.26 and Switzerland at 5.2. This shows just how much the UK and Switzerland are outliers at each end of the spectrum.

"…the majoritarian model of democracy is exclusive, competitive and adversarial, whereas the consensus model is characterised by inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise…" (Lijphart, 2012, 2).

Lijphart concludes that the conventional wisdom is wrong in stating that majoritarian government provides the clear decisive decisions that are thought to be essential preconditions of good government. He found that voter turnout, trust, contentment with the political system were all generally higher in consensus systems. At least for the countries in this study we see the same pattern today[1].  This coincides with the conclusions from the field of management and leadership that organisations that seek consensus prior to implementing their decisions are more *effective* than those with a command-and-control mindset.


### 1.1.3. Power distribution inside the state machinery

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[1] See Table 1 in section 3.3 below.

Electoral systems have important effects on the distribution of power in a country. Presidential systems with direct elections must have safeguards against autocracy, and as in the US, reserve powers are vested in one or more separately elected bodies. Where Parliament is supreme however, the election of two houses of parliament by different methods, as is the case in France, Germany, and Switzerland, strengthens interests that might otherwise be underrepresented. So does devolution to States, regions, or cantons, especially if their governments are elected via different systems.

Proportional electoral systems not only better reflect the whole of the range of opinion of the electorate but also tend, over time, to result in a distribution of votes among a wider range of parties with none commanding an overall majority. A coalition or minority government needs to be formed after each election and maintained by constant compromise and agreement between its members. However proportional systems, based on party lists of candidates, (whose chances of being elected depend on where they stand on the list) often gives considerable power, within each party, to unelected party officials. (Banducci, Donovan and Karp, 1999)

The Swiss system is one of the purest cases of consensus democracy. Agreement between the various levels of government is often required to pass laws or confirm executive decisions. The federal government's powers are limited by constitution, central action is constrained by powerful cantons, there are separate electoral systems for each chamber, a weak multi-party executive and the residual referendum power in the hands of the people. There are twelve political parties represented in parliament, four of which are represented in the seven-person executive. All play a part in a major piece of legislation.

The Swiss political system has a component of direct democracy, and the constitution provides for referenda, which must be called on certain issues, and can also be called by a qualifying minority of voters. In Switzerland these are frequent events, occurring several times a year; this contrasts with the other three countries, where referenda are rare.

The UK consists of four countries but is by no means a federation. The Prime Minister of the UK has unusually strong powers of patronage. There is no English Parliament; Northern Ireland is often ruled directly from Westminster. Central government in Westminster under the parliamentary system determines most matters and only relatively few, health and education in particular, are devolved to the parliaments of Wales and Scotland. Tax raising powers of the devolved administrations are constrained. Local government is also weak in Britain, having been reformed during the Thatcher period of the 1980s.

### 1.1.4 International influences

Two of the countries in this study, France, and Germany, are members of the European Union, so a considerable part of the laws of these countries are reserved to the supranational body. Switzerland and the UK both have significant treaty obligations with the European

Union which oblige the country's politicians to take account of a wide-ranging body of EU law when making their decisions.

## 1.1.5 Electoral participation

Turnout comparisons between countries are distorted by differences among the political systems themselves. The French President is directly elected, for example, whereas the Chancellor of Germany and the Prime Minister of the UK are indirectly elected by a Parliamentary process.

The turnout in French presidential elections can reach 80%, whereas for parliamentary elections it can be as low as 38%. In the UK, 65-66% of registered voters participate in national elections, compared with Germany, where 71-77% do.

Turnout in national elections in Switzerland is considerably lower, at only 45-48%. Indeed, Switzerland's turnout has been declining for some time and the country was 137th out of 171 countries for turnout in national elections between 1945 and 1998. Jackman ascribed this phenomenon to voter fatigue as voters go to the polls much more frequently in Switzerland than elsewhere, with an average of five referenda a year, alongside the regular cycle of communal, cantonal, and federal elections (Norris 2000, Jackman 1987).

European Union level elections also have very low rates of turnout. LeDuc attributes this to the perception in both cases that the effect of voting will be a mere adjustment to numbers of representatives calculated by a remote formula, rather than a discernible change of direction in policy (Mattila, 2003; LeDuc, Richard and Norris, 2014).

In most countries, referenda usually present rare binary choices on major issues of contention and national division. Turnout therefore tends to be relatively high. This was the case in the recent referenda in the UK on Brexit and Scottish independence.

Swiss referenda are however often held on relatively minor issues, as they are triggered either automatically under the constitution or by voter initiative. Turnout is often, though not always, low. While this is sometimes seen, on general principles, as evidence of disinterest in politics or weakness of civic pride, the preferable explanation may well be that offered by Blais who attributed it to several factors, including the complexity of the Swiss system, but not least the frequency of these votes themselves. This suggests that the Swiss might feel that they have many opportunities to influence policy, so that they feel free to participate in only half of them (Blais, 2014).

In countries where general elections occur every 4-5 years, participation in each one might be expected to appear to be that much more important.

If citizens can be persuaded to believe that elections produce disproportionate, unfair results, the legitimacy of the government and its decisions could be more open to question. As a consequence, there would be a reduction of trust and civic cohesion that would otherwise assist those who work to build a consensus. (Lijphart, op.cit, 2012). Gallagher proposed an index of proportionality of electoral systems which is a proxy for the fairness of election results in multi-party systems. The formula tends to emphasise the unfairness of the 'wasted vote' in first past the post systems, so the index for the strongly majoritarian systems in France and the UK could be expected to be higher than Switzerland and Germany, with their mainly PR electoral systems. However, the differences in indices of disproportionality, across the years 1981-2010, were very marked indeed. Germany and Switzerland were measured at 3.08 and 2.56 respectively. This compares with UK's index at 16 and France's at 19.6 (Gallagher, 2014).

### 1.1.6 Coalition formation

In all systems most aspiring and elected representatives form into political parties that are coalitions between people who share some policy values and objectives. Some of these last for many years, others flower and die rapidly. In some places these political parties form coalitions with other groupings in parliament either to form whole governments or merely caucuses for a temporary shared aim. There is a tendency for major coalitions to be reviewed after national elections change the composition of the elected body.

Countries such as France and the UK that are used to majoritarian government often see, and indeed expect to see, radical change after an election in which the governing party is replaced by the other main party, not least because the incoming group will often have spent the previous few years criticising the whole programme of the Government. Corporatist countries such as Germany and Switzerland, who are used to government by coalition, may see some adjustment of the pattern of support for the main parties but overall, the coalition logic may change little after national elections. Government policy may be expected to evolve gradually, rather than in great leaps. This has indeed been the case in Germany and Switzerland in recent years. Chancellor Merkel led her coalition governments for 16 years and the so-called 'magic formula' has governed the composition of the multi-party seven member Federal Council of Switzerland since 1959.

### 1.1.7 Politics and the media

Although it can be argued, (and this study does), that the broad Hallin and Mancini classifications do not do justice to the complexity of the differences between European political systems, it must be remembered that the authors set out to classify media systems, not political systems as such. It is surely right to analyse media systems in the context of the political system they inhabit.

The media is an integral part of the political process and a participant in the creation of its culture, not merely an observer. The political media, in a well-functioning democracy, is very far from being a mere instrument of politicians, distributing their messages. The societal rules governing the exchange between politicians and the media themselves affect political behaviour, and vice versa. A shared understanding is important, not least to respect confidences and certain sources, to observe embargoes and background briefings. Too much hostility causes relationships to break down and obstructs the flow of information. Where there is too little, political coverage can become anodyne and uninteresting and may well be ignored. All participants in the process of communicating with the public have something to gain from shared norms and understandings (Gans, 1979).

Davis studied the relationship between Westminster's lobby journalists and the politicians on whose activities they report. He provides an illustration of the way in which information circulates and is used within the closed world of the Westminster Lobby. The Lobby is a membership organisation restricted to political journalists who need direct access to Parliament and those who work there. There are explicit rules about what can be disclosed and what must be kept confidential. It provides a safe space for journalists and politicians to exchange information and gossip under shared understandings. His study was based on a set of 60 semi-structured interviews with members of the UK Parliament, members of the House of Lords, and lobby journalists. The study was designed to show how what is commonly known as the "Westminster village" functions. The research describes an intense and continuous exchange of gossip about who's up who's down, with politicians testing how ideas would 'play' with audiences, experimenting with how announcements should be crafted to get the best reception, either in the press, with the audience or with other politicians. Politicians also use lobby journalists to understand what other politicians are up to, and to obtain intelligence on the activities of hostile forces, whether within or outside the politician's own grouping (Davis, 2009).

A very large study of quality newspaper reporting in Germany from 1949 to 1995, Kepplinger showed that over that period the nature of political communication changed. While the amount of policy and decision-making has remained constant as has the amount of communication from other people and organisations active in public life, the amount of communication from politicians has approximately doubled. The additional messaging deals with matters that politicians would like to do or think ought to be done by other people or organisations. The researchers also found that statements were driven by media values, emphasising declarations of possible solutions of problems, statements of conflict, reactions to conflict and demands for action. This type of communication was designed to meet both the politicians' need for profile or attention and the media's need for urgent and immediate news. Politicians and journalists, feeding each other, have in this way informally interposed themselves, and their respective ecosystems, between the formal structures and processes of Government and the citizens they serve (Kepplinger, 2002).

Most significantly among the four countries being studied the UK is the only one with a dominant (and highly competitive) national press and media system. It has more than ten

national daily newspapers with substantial reach. It is to be expected that the market position of a media organisation will make a difference to editorial decisions. Put another way, if one national newspaper is competing with another, it is to be expected that superior national newsgathering expertise will be the basis of competitive advantage. In a study of how British and Spanish journalists dealt with scandals, Sanders and Canel showed that while the norms governing the investigative work were similar in the two countries, the British were much better at telling the story in such a way as to get attention. The authors suggest that this supports the explanation that skills in storytelling and attention-winning techniques are significant differentiators when working in a strongly competitive environment (Sanders and Canel, 2006).

These studies tell us little about the topics of salience, indexation, or public policy formation. They do however show how highly specialised groups of professional communicators in Germany and domestic journalists in London exercised in their respective countries a significant influence in the media system connecting politicians with citizens.

There are competing pressures in the relationship between politicians and the media referred to it as a 'tug of war'. Many scholars have sought to identify who is 'winning' that battle. While at times one side is more powerful and exercises that power, it seems clear that this binary characterisation is less useful than one that is more nuanced, recognising that times and circumstances change and the relative strength of the two 'sides' shifts as well. During the pandemic it was the politicians who had the upper hand but during a major election it is the journalists and media organisations who have the power to frame and lead the debate, however carefully they may try to avoid political bias (Gans, 1979; Barnett and Gaber, 2001).

Van Aelst suggests a co-production, power-based model where the media provides an arena for society's actors and a set of functions that are useful for politicians in several ways. Each participant draws benefits from the other at different times; the relationship is more subtle and complex than the conventional models of observer and observed, speaker and reporter. (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016). Moreover, Esser identified national differences in the way the relationship worked, with French journalists being more sacerdotal and less independently minded than those in the UK and Germany. In the latter countries, at least during election periods, candidates were confronted with journalist viewpoints and interpretations rather more, and in the UK with aggression as well (Esser, 2008).

Strömbäck provides the clearest exposition of the evolution of mediatisation of politics. He suggested that there are four stages of mediatisation. First the media becomes more important, then more autonomous, then increasingly dominant until finally the requirements of the media pervade and shape political life. As the political-media nexus in a country passes through each stage the work of providing a neutral forum for political information and debate, holding the powerful to account, is increasingly subordinated to the quest for attention and circulation, which drive profitability. Strömbäck argues that this process is not inexorable. It can be slowed by regulatory measures, or alternatively by the encouragement and support of these practices and values in the hands of a public broadcaster, such as those

who dominate the news in the countries of this study. But he warns that increasing commercial pressures on media organisations, of the kind that have arrived since his paper was written, will tend to encourage mediatisation of the news agenda (Strömbäck, 2008). The UK was one of the first countries in which political communications were professionalised (Esser, Reinemann and Fan, 2001; Lees☐Marshment, 2001).

Oborne showed that determined politicians can also influence the culture and process of communication, to maximise advantage. Writing principally about the Blair years in the UK, he showed how the politicians began to control the media in a way that had not been done before. The Labour party, initially in opposition and then in Government, responded aggressively to hostile coverage, rewarded and punished journalists for their good and bad behaviour by rationing access to stories and spokesmen accordingly. The media's logic was, at least for a period, made to obey political logic. The public space was thus for a time dominated by the values of the Government, permissive of immigration, encouraging globalisation to keep prices low, embracing Continental social democratic principles in public life, and a light touch approach to regulation and business (Oborne, 2014).

However powerful these influences might be on how politicians and the media interact, they are not immune to the power of popular opinion, forcibly expressed. In the second decade of the 21st Century, following the banking crisis, protest movements suddenly became more prominent in all the countries in this study, although their antecedents had been there for some while.

The right wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the Schweizer VolksPartei (SVP) in Switzerland, and the movement for Brexit in the UK, all of these were legal, indeed democratic uprisings against the prevailing orthodoxy. Street protesters in France such as the *gilets jaunes* often cross legal boundaries, their supporters frequently painting a picture of social groups that had been ignored or left behind by the elite consensus between the media and politicians of their countries. A similar example of a democratic disconnect leading to a change of political balance is provided by the climate change activists, who predominantly come from the middle class but who feel that their issue has been ignored by business, working people and mainstream political parties alike. Indeed, in Germany has this grouping has found a strong political voice, with the election of significant numbers of Greens to the Bundestag.

This narrative suggests that even in these four democracies that have gone quite a long way along the road marked by Strömbäck, alternative voices continue in a democracy can still find a way to express themselves.

The circumstances of COVID provide us with a case study of the wholesale suspension of traditional freedoms and the introduction of government substantially by decree, with the consent of the people, at least for the duration of the pandemic. This consent was tacit in three of the four countries. Switzerland held two referenda to confirm popular support, which was given.

This study will show how journalistic scrutiny was applied to the respective governments' actions in this exceptional political environment, where the impact of political decisions was felt more immediately and strongly than usual, and where many of the normal habits of political reporting had to be revised.

**Chapter 2** - **The Media**

**2.1 The democratic role - freedom**

It is a commonplace that a democracy needs a free press to function properly. France, Germany, and the UK have all within living memory limited the freedom of the press, most notably during the Second World War. That said, Freedom House lists all four countries among those who have the highest degree of media freedom in the world and considering both civil and political rights all are within a few points of each other in their index (90-96) (www.freedomhouse.org.).

It is however important to consider what that freedom really delivers. The democratic value of the press primarily consists in curating and delivering news to its audience, enabling citizens to make informed choices as to how to use their democratic voice. Choices are primarily made by voting, but also show up in the form of opinion research, protest, campaigning and lobbying, in all their forms.

Broadcasters and newspapers are expected to report on political developments and current affairs. It is one of the main reasons why citizens turn to them. This is particularly so when there is a major impending crisis or decision, or at election time. (See Table 12 in section 7.1.3, which sets out audience figures before during and after the pandemic). There is a demographic factor as well. Not everyone evinces the same interest in political life. The Hansard Society found that increased political interest, knowledge and likelihood of voting correlated with being white, being a member of social classes A and B, and being between the ages of 45 and 65. Perhaps the day-to-day ins and outs of political life are of consistent interest only to a minority of the populace, predominantly the more affluent, educated and influential, those in older age groups, and those for whom a particular issue appears to be of special importance. These groupings map neatly on to the core readership of the quality press (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007) (www.hansardsociety.org.uk Annual report, 2019).

The extra value of a *free* press is that material can be brought to light, and opinions aired, that are uncomfortable for the democratically elected government of the day. This discomfort might arise from the disclosure of personal or financial impropriety, misconduct or failure in office, broken promises or outright lying. Less arresting, but nonetheless important, there may be alternative views of the best way to approach a public policy problem, and the steps that the government proposes to take may need to be justified or defended. The media can provide a place where these matters can be displayed to citizens and debated through detailed research and opinion pieces, allowing decisions to be made in the light of all relevant information.

These freedoms are jealously guarded by the media, who claim that they are vital for the healthy function of a democracy, and this should justify rejection of all attempts at regulation.

It is said that only well-informed citizens can make good decisions about public policy issues and only those citizens can choose their leaders well. Whilst the practice of a qualified franchise is now firmly in the past, at least in Europe, it is clearly desirable to inform the whole electorate as effectively as possible and this aim that has underpinned the state's involvement in public broadcasting systems everywhere (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995).

It has also presented a conundrum for the newspaper industry's lobbyists when it came under financial pressure from the decline in advertising revenue. In the UK the case was made by the press to the Cairncross review that this function of journalism was of sufficient national importance that the press should be subsidised or supported by the state to deliver this when media businesses could not afford to do so. The reasons considered by the Review were the increased competition for advertising revenue from social media platforms and other tech businesses, coupled with the high cost both of investigative journalism and local reporting (Cairncross, 2019). This lobbying position in the UK represented a departure from the press's traditional opposition to taking subsidies.

> "Jon Ensslin, President of the Society of Professional Journalists, also dismisses the idea of subsidies, saying *you can't have a watchdog that is dependent for its meal on the people it is supposed to watch*" (Brüggemann et al., 2016).

This has been the industry's position in Germany as well. In France, where there are subsidies, the industry supports their continuation in line with the Government's policy objective of promoting pluralism of outlets to secure independence from Government.

Blumler stressed the complexity of the relationship between politicians and the media. While the media may from time to time use their power, their power to persuade depends on appearing interesting, but disinterested, and so the relationship in the end bears on that of trust, to which we will return (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler, 2015).

The sociologist Michael Schudson, writing primarily about the stories carried by the media in the US, accused the free press in a liberal democracy of '… a preoccupation with events, a morbid sports-minded fascination with gladiatorial combat, a deep, anti-political cynicism, and a strong alienation of journalists from the communities they cover' (Schudson, 2008).

UK politicians, whether in Government or in Opposition, frequently complain that the media, cloaking themselves in their mantle as self-appointed watchdogs, only report those matters that portray politicians in a negative light, because those are the most likely to secure the attention of audiences. This tends to encourage the view on the part of the citizen that the politicians they elect are at best incompetent and at worst venal or deceptive. Surveys regularly show that he low levels of trust of politicians is surpassed only by those accorded to journalists (IPSOS MORI, 2019).

More subtly, the suggestion is often made in France but also in Germany, Switzerland and to a much lesser extent in the UK, that because journalists and politicians all inhabit the same social milieux, a shared 'establishment' or elite view is arrived at and duly promulgated in the media. Politicians who go along with this worldview are therefore not subjected to the

scrutiny they deserve. Finally, this gives fuel to political populists (and indeed revolutionaries), who exploit this phenomenon to recruit people who feel that they are outsiders, left behind or ignored by the political establishment (Mazzoleni, 2008).

We can see how the political system itself can influence what is interesting to political reporters. In countries with a consensus-seeking style and multi-party coalition government, such as Germany and Switzerland, there are fewer dramatic events. The media has time to pay attention to issues, rather than parties. If they seek drama, journalists will pay attention to the behaviour and fortunes of smaller, more radical and therefore newsworthy parties, such as the SVP in Switzerland, the AfD, FDP and Greens in Germany, who might in time become important players on the national scene.

In the UK by contrast, where the political system works against the sprouting of small parties, the media tends to concentrate almost exclusively on the competition between the two main parties, and the smaller players find it hard to get their views heard, far less given proper examination, since their votes in parliament carry so little weight.

In short, debates in parliament, in all countries, tend to be given more prominence when there is a possibility of a change in the distribution of political power, or standoff between conflicting groups where the outcome is uncertain. Drama, cliff-hangers, turning points can all be used to attract the audience's interest. A dramatic dénouement on a minor issue can therefore get more coverage than the pedestrian business of policy development.

Pfetsch contrasted the systems of political communication in the US, Germany and the UK, finding that the US system followed media logic, the German political logic and the UK fell somewhere in between (Pfetsch, 2008).

Finally, the arrival of online platforms and social media is changing the marketplace for attention, and this will indirectly affect political life. Matters that cause a social media storm can, for this reason alone, become more salient for mainstream journalists. Newman, writing in an earlier phase of the social media revolution, told of increasing engagement between mainstream media and social media but stopped short of saying that social media was driving journalistic content. Further, social media can perform three distinct functions: suggesting content to journalists, distributing or marketing journalists' output, and tailoring content by providing feedback. Newman later showed how social media use had moved on to a point where the MeToo and Grenfell stories were led or substantially informed by social media (Newman, 2009, 2018; Tandoc and Vos, 2016).

The most important sign of impending change is provided by the movement of advertising expenditure from the traditional media to the digital platforms. Gurevitch wrote of the pressure on costly investigative journalism from the reduction in the income of newspapers. Since that time that pressure has only increased. That said, collective and not for profit foundations are being formed and funded expressly to support independent investigative journalism: the Bureau for investigative Journalism, Bellingcat, ProPublica in the US are

examples. The platforms are however here to stay, changes in audience attention are likely to become permanent, and advertisers will inevitably follow the eyeballs. Whilst digital content produced by media organisations will still attract advertising, the commercial media will need to find or increase other sources of income, and the most obvious source is subscriptions. This is beginning to require a change in the style of publications away from arresting headlines designed to attract attention on the newsstand, towards a longer-term focus on exclusive content, such as opinion pieces, that is not available elsewhere. These adjustments will need to take place against a backdrop of declining income (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

Practitioners are asked about these developments as part of this study.


## 2.2. Public service broadcasters and political control

Before television became the dominant medium for news in the first half of the twentieth century the public square was populated by often partisan newspapers and public meetings addressed by politicians who had honed their skill in persuading a crowd.

Between 1945 and the turn of the century, broadcast media, mostly publicly owned and/or regulated everywhere, brought unfamiliar views and political debate into every citizen's living room. At the same time politicians adapted to the new medium and developed strategies not only to look and sound convincing on television and radio but also to influence, even direct what was covered and how.

For this reason, it is settled policy at least in western Europe, that broadcasters be required to report in a fair and balanced way and should be accountable for this to a regulatory body. The regulatory regime naturally needs to steer a course between allowing professional journalistic autonomy while also injecting a measure of accountability in respect of their value to the citizens who after all pay for them (Aalberg and Curran, 2012).

Germany recognizes that the oversight of media organizations is political, rather than neutral and professional, and has constructed an elaborate political structure to oversee media throughout the country. Regulation is a devolved matter and is in the hands of the Länder, whose work is informed by broadcasting councils representing local interests. The Federal Constitutional Court guarantees the whole system and has been a champion of the independence of journalism from political and special interest influences. In this latter context there is also a limit on the audience share that can be owned by any media organisation.

The press in France is not regulated as such though it must obey the general law, for example the strong and wide-ranging laws on privacy and hate speech. Broadcasters, in exchange for the financial support they receive through the licence fee, are required to encourage pluralism and diversity of thinking as well as encouraging and supporting French culture and mores.

French journalists pay more attention to company guidelines than external regulators (Fengler et al., 2015). Their activities are policed by the Conseil Superieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) a government-appointed national commission, whose remit is predominantly the enforcement of the general law, rather than a framework tailored for the media.

In the UK, The Office of Communications (OFCOM), a government body, regulates all aspects of communication in the UK, and in relation to all broadcasting, ensures that content exhibits due impartiality over the news cycle. The Government appoints the Chairman of the BBC and the regional representatives who act as non-executive directors, while the rest of the directors are appointed by the BBC itself. All of Channel Four's non-executive directors (a majority) are appointed by OFCOM with the approval of Ministers.

Swiss regulation resembles the British model with the Federal Communication Office imposing a quality assurance code on the broadcasters. There are constitutional guarantees of press freedom.

Benson showed that the best regulatory regimes for broadcasters exhibit four main characteristics: an adequate licence fee or other funding, preferably agreed on a multi-year basis, guarantees of freedom from government influence on programming, independent oversight agencies, and consultative councils linking audiences to the broadcaster. (Benson et al., 2017).

The regulatory systems do not provoke significant controversy in Germany or Switzerland. In Switzerland journalists pay more attention to codes of practice and ombudsmen than to self-regulatory bodies. The system in France in is seen to have difficulties from time to time in dealing with threats to autonomy and accountability. An example of this arose when the Sarkozy government controversially imposed a president on the public broadcaster and attempted to interfere in executive editorial appointments.  From time to time there are similar concerns in the UK regarding the Government's role in appointing people to the BBC Board (Fengler et al., 2015). The controversy surrounding the Prime Minister's involvement in the appointment of Richard Sharp as Chairman of the BBC is a very recent example.


## 2.3. Funding and subsidy

Public service broadcasters in free democracies tend nowadays to be respected primarily for their thorough and balanced coverage of public affairs and are seen to make an important contribution to public life.  All the countries in this study support a public service broadcaster with state funds or a licence fee. They attract large shares of their potential audiences, especially for news. And they carry more news and current affairs than their commercial rivals (Aalberg, Van Aelst and Curran, 2010).

Germany and the UK support their public service broadcasters through a licence fee, as does Switzerland, having put the matter to a national referendum in 2018. France abolished its

licence fee in 2022, (fulfilling President Macron's election promise) and now funds its broadcasters from the Value Added Tax.

While in France there are subsidies to the newspaper sector, some of which are intra company, public subventions of the press are minor in all countries in this study. Governments direct taxpayer money and regulatory attention primarily to the public broadcasters, not least because of their influence on audiences.

Whether public broadcasting is supported by a license fee or through general taxation, the periodic negotiations with politicians for financial support must inevitably involve an element of assessment by the political class of whether the broadcaster 'merits', the public support that it is getting.

The behaviour of the broadcaster, as well as its audience profile, are important factors in any such assessment. Thus, a public broadcaster needs to comply with standards imposed under its charter or constitution, be mindful of the views of politicians, all the while doing all that commercial broadcasters must do to attract audiences. Where the public broadcaster is allowed to accept advertising, additional consideration needs to be given to securing and maintaining advertising revenue. In short, the public broadcaster discharges an important democratic function, and is subsidised to do so, but then has a wider group of stakeholders to satisfy (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Schudson, 2008).

Current affairs coverage, especially overseas, is expensive; commercial channels tend therefore to reduce it to the minimum consistent with their licence agreements. News programme makers such as ITN and news agencies such as Agence France Presse grew up to share and spread the cost of news gathering, but it remains something of a luxury to companies funded by advertising. The universalist ambition of the 20th century may be difficult to sustain; it is certainly easier for a politician to justify a public subsidy to secure the impartiality of the news and niches such as local reporting which the commercial outlets find hard to justify. In relation to news and current affairs the public broadcasters only need to convince the taxpayers or the politicians that represent them, that the public value delivered is worth the political cost of the subsidy. It is more difficult to justify using public money to allow state broadcasters to compete with the commercial sector on entertainment programming.

But there are other privileges of broadcasters that are in the hands of politicians, in addition to those that affect all media. Although less significant in the digital era, no broadcaster can function free to air without a spectrum licence. In some countries there are cost differentials and other subtler advantages distributed directly or indirectly among broadcasters by political choice, by regulation or by domestic or transnational competition policy. For example, some believe that the support by the NewsCorp for the Labour Party in the UK in 1997 was given primarily because it was clear that they were likely to win. Others believed it was motivated by helping the Murdoch businesses to secure Government clearance of the merger of BSB and Sky some years later (Oborne, 2014).

Commercial channels maximise audiences and the associated advertising revenue principally by focusing primarily on entertainment, crime, and visually appealing news, reducing the emphasis on hard public affairs coverage (Arbaoui, De Swert and van der Brug, 2020).

Thus, neither the public sector broadcasters nor their commercial competitors are immune to external pressure, either from being accountable to the government of the day, or from the pressure to build audience share by modifying editorial policy. This is a live debate, at least in the UK and France, but it is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that the PSBs' constant need to justify their privileges can be expected, depending on the political environment, to have some effect on editorial decisions about the coverage of politics.

## 2.4 Digital and social media effects.

### 2.4.1 Business matters

At a global level, advertising dollars are migrating from the broadcast and print media to the social media platforms, and this has consequences for publications that relied on this income. Between 2010 and 2014 print newspaper advertising in the EU declined by 23% (Björkroth and Grönlund, 2018). Now audiences, via subscriptions, are the biggest source of revenue for the press, increasingly surpassing occasional newsstand sales.

Paying for newspapers via a subscription has been very much the norm in Continental Europe, with newsstand sales a much smaller part of overall revenue mix than in the UK. So, moving across to a paywall/subscription model for digital access as newsstand sales decline may be unfamiliar in the UK, but it is far from unproven as a business model (Cairncross, 2019).

There has also been a sharp drop in the readership of physical newspapers in the past ten years. Many print publications now arrive with their readers in digital form. (Reuters DNR, 2021).

Holt identified a divide along the lines of age, in that older people tend to use legacy media whereas younger people tend to get their news more from social media. It is political interest that drives political participation, regardless of the medium, and this does tend to be stronger in older people (Holt et al., 2013).

While there is undoubtedly a substantial change under way in the business model of print journalism, things are not quite as gloomy as they are sometimes painted. Those newspapers that have elected not to charge their digital customers but instead rely on advertising have seen their readership increase and have also maintained their financial viability. So have those who have adopted a subscription or hybrid model. The evidence for this lies in the fact

that despite the changes in the marketplace media organisations continue to survive, with no national titles closing in the past few years. Indeed, some organisations are specifically designed to meet the democratic need of informing citizens, and these also seem to be doing well. Private Eye in the UK, and Mediapart in France, both concentrate on investigations, political satire or opinion. Private Eye has a mixed newsstand and subscription model, with no digital, while Mediapart, founded by two Le Monde journalists, offers a wholly digital service to 140,000 subscribers in France and has been profitable since its inception (Cairncross, 2019). ProPublica in the US, Bellingcat, the various international groupings of investigative journalists who gave us the Panama Papers, all these organisations seem to be sustainable financially, in the digital environment, while contributing their voice in the public square. They do however depend on charitable and other public interest funding.

### 2.4.2 The PSBs

Indeed, as the business model for the press changes and becomes more challenging, the position of the public broadcaster, substantially or wholly sustained by taxation, becomes increasingly exceptional. The pure public broadcaster such as the BBC does not need to choose between subscribers and casual sales, between subscription income and advertising income, between delivering directly or through the platforms. ITV and Channels 4 and 5 are all free to accept advertising, while subject to the due impartiality rule in their news coverage. For reasons of branding and trust, PSBs want to retain control of their content and the context in which it is seen, and this may limit their engagement with the platforms. But to secure their entertainment and sports content they do need to compete with much better funded commercial channels and platforms (Martin, 2021).

Drawing on the Mapping Digital Media project produced by the Open Society Foundation in 2013, Tambini examined developments in the field of public and state broadcasting caused by the arrival of digital media. A tension was identified between the need to be commercial to maximise audience reach to justify the subsidy, while also eschewing commercialism to evidence their role in filling a gap left by the commercial market (Tambini, 2015).

The press may claim that the BBC, with its free to user content, is making it harder for British newspapers to justify charging for their content, but there are other countries, such as Finland, Denmark, and Norway, all of which combine substantial PSB viewership alongside substantial and sustainable subscription income for the press (Cairncross, 2019).

By and large, Tambini concludes that although there have been changes, they have not been, at least up to the time of his writing, as large or disruptive as some feared, particularly in Western Europe. But as Kalsnes points out, the short-term impact of technical innovations is often overstated, while their longer-term effects are often underestimated (Kalsnes, 2017).

### 2.4.3 Content

The business models for the digital offer vary and differ from the print version. Some offer their product with advertising, but free to the user. Others prefer a subscription model, making only a sample of their content available for free, the main publication being behind a paywall with minimal or no advertising. Either way, the calculation of audience is changing from the crude measurements of overall circulation and readership towards the more precise evaluation of reader attention to individual items of content that is afforded by digital means. This will be explored in this study's interviews with practitioners.

The amount of information available to anyone connected to the internet is vast and the mainstream media's role as gatekeepers has morphed to being curators of information about the political world (Kalsnes, 2017). The arrival of social media platforms in the 21st century also brought with it the free expression of the blogosphere, and a new battle for control of published content began. Without doubt in a world of finite attention, the arrival of social media has weakened the legacy media's grip on what we read of political events.

Humprecht identified that there were substantial national differences in the subject matter and people treated in the news, and further demonstrated that the greatest diversity was shown by media organisations in the public sector followed by large well capitalised media groups, who share a common characteristic with the public sector, being financial resilience (Humprecht and Esser, 2018).

### 2.4.4 Politicians

Politicians nowadays tend to avoid freewheeling discussions on the record, since different statements to different audiences can now be easily accessed and compared and are therefore fraught with danger. A careless, spontaneous remark in the wrong place can bring a hitherto promising career to an untimely end. Professional politicians' interventions on social media are now carefully managed and rarely go beyond the messages approved by their organisations. (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

In time, social media will host a new ecosystem. Politicians and their handlers are already adapting to a new medium, developing new strategies to get their messages across. Social media provides a medium rather like political advertising where an unfiltered message can be transmitted directly to the public, without comment from journalists.  Early practitioners of this new skill in the US included Howard Dean, Barack Obama and, most strikingly and indeed successfully, Donald Trump. These skills are now being internalised in many countries at greater or lesser speed. Zhuravskaya, in a meta study, suggests that social media can be a vehicle for free expression that exposes the weaknesses of autocratic regimes, although in the short term it can create echo chambers and some associated polarisation.  The study also suggests that in the case of more democratic environments, it remains unclear whether, in the medium term, politicians and journalists will simply adapt to the new media as they did to the arrival of television and the internet itself, and that the processes of

government and scrutiny will continue substantially unchanged, albeit mediated in a different ecosystem. Interestingly however, Theocharis showed that opening of a Facebook account of itself tended to lower rates of political engagement and participation both offline and online. (Theocharis and Lowe, 2016; Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov, 2020).

### 2.4.5 Journalists

Journalists report that social media is useful in many parts of their work. It offers a conduit for breaking news. It broadens the range of sources. Issues worth following up often arise first as a social media controversy. It offers a crude and flawed proxy for public opinion Journalists also use the platforms, especially Twitter, to promote their own brands, those of their organisations and their published content (Hermida, Lewis and Zamith, 2014; McGregor, 2019; Mellado and Hermida, 2021).

Gilardi found that Swiss politicians took more notice of social media posts by those people who were attentive to public affairs than to the newspapers or political parties themselves. It was social media that drove the salience, of the mask issue This study shows (section 7) that the anti-vaccination protests in Switzerland would not have been as well supported if it were not for the promotion of the issue in social media (Gilardi et al., 2020).

Finally, the internet has made many of the tasks of a journalist more efficient; the search for information is one of them. It is now much easier to check a story online, and to use technology to search and scrape public information for newsworthy material. Robots are even being deployed to search for local information and indeed to write basic articles about local event such as sports matches and public expenditure. This all used to be done by journalists. Now these tasks can be more efficiently done by machine. AI may take this even further. The process improvements afforded by digital technology are opportunities as well as threats to media businesses.

The key question for this study is whether these pressures are the same in all the countries under review. The practitioner interviews in this study will show how these emerging trends and business choices are beginning to have their effects on political journalism.

### 2.5 Media values: the importance of salience

The literature of 'media logic' or media values centres on the selection of stories for publication. A rational commercial organisation will tend to prefer those containing  the types of information that will conform to the brand value and adopted style of the publication, appeal to its target audiences and retain and increase circulation accordingly (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

The more media organisations value circulation, the greater their interest in dramatic events. Fires, disasters, crime with weeping or injured victims, warfare, falls from grace or respected

figures, financial and especially sexual scandals, deadlines, casualties, all these contribute to exciting and compelling news. News with arresting headlines.  News we are told that we cannot be without.

In the political arena this means that journalists seek out stories that tend to exhibit these characteristics, and the associated policy issues will thus become more salient and attract more attention from politicians. Equally, as Gaber pointed out, there is an incentive for politicians and political managers to frame their bids for publicity in terms that reflect the values of the newsroom, to attract the attention of the press (Gaber, 2000; Gaber and Fisher, 2022).

In this context quality newspapers may have a different strategy from that of the popular press. Quality newspapers are profitable at lower levels of circulation because they reach opinion formers and the wealthy, so they can charge more for their content and their advertising. That affects their tone and content. By contrast the popular press competes by maximising circulation and reach, using sensationalist and populist methods to do so (Seymour-Ure, 1974).

In the case of the broadcast media the picture is more complex. In all countries it is recognised that the broadcast media is by some distance the most popular source for coverage of news, and to a lesser extent, current affairs. (See Chapter 7). In all the countries under review there is a regulatory framework which imposes normative boundaries on the freedom of broadcasters. Mostly these norms revolve around the length and timing of main news bulletins and fairness or balance in reporting.

As an example, the regulatory regime governing the BBC in the UK is reflected in its own mission statement, requiring it to act in the public interest. This had particular importance when the lives of citizens were at risk through disease. It was also required to observe due impartiality, and in the case of the pandemic this covered not just political difference but also scientific controversy. Although journalists and editors needed to be mindful of the public interest, they may also wish to maintain their role of holding to account the public services and those who lead them, all the while maximising audiences.

In some countries there is the obligation to give equal or at least fair amounts of time to different political parties at election time. In this respect the UK and Germany have different approaches to fairness, and these differences have political consequences, particularly for incumbents (Semetko, 1996).

The rewards to all the players depend on getting noticed. Salience as an issue permeates the business of media as well as the political landscape. All political groupings nowadays use similar media management techniques, and this may satisfy society's need for pluralism. Social media is taking this process further, although the consequences of this remain unclear (Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Lees☐Marshment, 2001; Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov, 2020).

This study controls for salience in that its whole purpose is to explore national differences in the handling of a single issue of paramount and unambiguous importance, a worldwide pandemic. The isolation of a single policy issue of exceptional importance in all countries at the same time will provide new information on differences in how politicians related to the media in each country, and how journalists chose to respond.

The first part of the field study aims to reveal how in different countries the output of the media reflected the institutional tension between politicians and the media. The second part asks practitioners for their views as to why. Journalists might have chosen to ask challenging questions of officials and ministers about the successes and failures of each Government's approach to the pandemic, asking for a proper balancing of immediate and longer-term health considerations, as well as the effects of health measures on the economy. But maybe journalists would in these circumstances prefer to hold their fire, in the interest of maintaining confidence in public officials. It will become clear whether any of the usual rules of political and business competition would be set aside for the duration of the emergency.

## Chapter 3 - Trust in politicians and the media.

### 3.1 Why trust is important in the culture of the political media.

Citizen information only assists democracy if people trust what they are being told. So, the argument that the media are important in a democracy depends in turn on the degree of trust placed in the statements of politicians and the content of the medium by which they are reported (Warren, 2018).

Relationships of trust therefore lie at the centre of political culture. During the pandemic, government instructions and guidance were necessarily communicated via the media. Tsai, writing about Ebola in Liberia, quite a different society, nevertheless showed that there was a positive correlation between trust in Government and obeying public protection rules. Trust in the scientists to recommend the right measures, trust in politicians to balance the risks, trust in the media accurately to report and fairly to assess what was going on; all were important to ensuring compliance during the pandemic. (Tsai, Morse and Blair, 2020)

At the most basic level, to be trusted, a politician needs to be perceived as telling the truth. This is not as simple as it seems since they are also expected to be consistent, not just with other statements of their own, but also with the policy declarations of the other bodies and groups they support (Friedman and Kampf, 2020). These include their colleagues in the party, including fellow coalition partners, and the policy of national and local governments which their party controls.

Loyalty, truth, and consistency are easily picked apart by a well briefed journalist, especially with the assistance of the internet, and if they are successful in this endeavour, their reporting may lead to mistrust of the politician.  By the same token, if journalists report political statements without challenging them, they risk being seen as mere mouthpieces for élites and politicians and may themselves be mistrusted accordingly. Trust is therefore important, indifferent ways, and to different degrees, for all those in the political arena.


### 3.2 Trusting the news.

Early research by Tsfati and Cappella showed that people who are sceptical of the mainstream media consume the same amount as those who trust it, but in the form of a more varied diet including non-mainstream media. Otherwise, consumers of non-mainstream media are more sceptical, and consumers of mainstream media are more trusting. Also, consumers of non-mainstream media tend to have more extreme political views than consumers of the mainstream. Indeed, much of the material online in the non-mainstream media is aimed at reinforcing the idea that mainstream media is not to be trusted. The research is based on US data from 2000 where the internet was less developed than it is today, and the social media revolution had barely started. Talk radio is for example the main non-mainstream medium studied (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). Much more recent research

shows by contrast a greater interest in politics among those who use alternative news sources. However, a second and significant finding is that when people who usually choose mainstream media are exposed to alternative news sources, their interest reduces (Reiter and Matthes, 2023).

An international comparative study showed that political interest, interpersonal trust, and exposure to the mainstream media were all positively correlated with trust in the media, whereas social media news consumption was negatively correlated. There is also a relevant finding that government control of media outlets is positively associated with trust, in countries with a high level of democracy, as all the countries in this study are. In view of the rapid development of social media and the consequent changes in the economy of mainstream publications in recent years. It is important to note that this study is based on the World Values Survey's 2005 data, and the results will need to be seen in that light. (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014).

Schranz also found that trust depended on the behaviour and prior attitude of the receiver of information. For example, trust reduced when people consumed online a wide variety of traditional media, rather than a single outlet.  Apparently, it is the variety, and inevitable inconsistency, that undermines trust, rather than the online nature of consumption. Further, those whose views were strong and lay at the poles of political debate trusted the media less than those whose views are more middle of the road. This confirmed the earlier finding (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014; Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018).

Avery researched political trust (measured as trust in the federal government of the United States) after the 2000 US presidential election and discovered that the effect of the media on trust depended on previous levels of trust. Those with low levels of trust were not affected either way, but among those with high levels of trust increased exposure to newspapers and decreased exposure to broadcasts news would improve trust. In other words, those who approached any of the media with an attitude of cynicism or mistrust would discover nothing to disabuse them of their theory, and so their mistrust would persist. Those who were already engaged would increase their trust, especially if they read a lot of newspapers (Avery, 2009).

Kalogeropoulos, in a study of 35 countries, found that the more news we consume, the more we trust its providers. There is however one exception, which is where the individual's main source of news is social media created online. In this case trust reduces as exposure increases. This effect is not associated with the use of online versions of the mainstream press, only to material generated online, such as social media and blogs. This must be considered together with the finding of Toff, that the trust gap between online and offline news is largely driven by people who do not online news because they do not trust it. These form a core group expressing mistrust, which increases as more and more actual users of online news discover its weaknesses. (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter and Eisenegger, 2019a; Toff et al., 2021).

Arlt investigated whether trust in the media (in the German speaking part of Switzerland) was related to political orientation. Her research confirmed what has been found elsewhere, that

trust among those who consume public broadcast media is higher than among those who do not. Those on the right of the political spectrum, those who consume non-mainstream sources of media such as internet news sites, those who have populist attitudes or who do not feel that they can influence the direction of politics in their country, all these categories trust the mainstream media significantly less. She points out, as do other researchers, that the direction of causation remains open. It is quite possible that those of the right and the left both mistrust the media because of what they perceive to be a liberal or establishment bias (Arlt, 2019).

Finally, a meta study covering 32 studies of more than 38,000 respondents, across contexts, found that coverage of the tactical games of politicians, the 'horse race' frame, tended to increase cynicism, reduce knowledge of policy and encourage negative views of the news. However, it did not of itself correlate with reduced political participation. (Zoizner, 2021; Gaber and Fisher, 2022).

Seen together, these studies suggest that we tend to trust the media we consume, but if we allow ourselves to be exposed to more varied media, especially with a greater proportion of social media, we become more sceptical.

All these studies measure correlation, rather than causation. It may be that we choose to read or watch an outlet and subsequently through familiarity come to trust it. Or we seek out an outlet whose approach or slant coincides with our own, reinforcing our trust. Or, contra, we might be a loyal and regular consumer of a tabloid because of its entertainment content, mistrusting and avoiding the news pages.

## 3.3 Trusting the Government

There are significant national differences in the degree to which citizens in the countries in this study trust 'the Government' of their country, which term embraces a series of national institutions, all of which were involved in handling the pandemic.

**Table 1 Trust in Government.**

| Switzerland | 85% |
|---|---|
| Germany | 65% |
| France | 41% |
| UK | 35% |
| OECD average | 51% |

Source: Gallup World Poll 2020 (OECD)

## 3.4 Trusting the media in comparative perspective.

The 2022 Reuters Digital News Report on trust in the media contains striking conclusions about the differences between the countries in this study in respect of media trust.

The proportion of those with a medium or high level of trust overall in the media is markedly higher in Germany and Switzerland than in France or the UK.

**Table 2 Trust in Media**

| Switzerland | 46% |
|---|---|
| Germany | 50% |
| France | 29% |
| UK | 34% |

(Reuters DNR 2022)

Trust in the main public broadcaster showed a similar pattern.

**Table 3 Trust in Broadcasters**

| Switzerland | 71% |
|---|---|
| Germany | 67% |
| France | 53% |
| UK | 55% |

(Reuters DNR 2022)

A separate finding in the same report shows a correlation of mistrust with those in each country who believe there is undue political influence on media output.

The press in the UK is trusted very much less than that in France and in Germany, and indeed less than the EU average.

**Table 4 Net trust in the press:**

| UK | -60% |
|---|---|
| France | -1% |
| Germany | +25% |
| Switzerland | N/a |
| EU average | -1% |

Source: (European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

(Researchers using different methodology suggest that levels of trust in Switzerland are comparable to those of Germany (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018).)

In 2017 Pew asked citizens whether they regarded the press in their country as fair, conveyed news of the Government properly and was accurate.

**Table 5 Fairness and accuracy: measures of perception**

| % agreeing country's media does well or very well with: | Fair treatment of politics | Coverage of government/ leaders/ officials | Accurate news |
|---|---|---|---|
| Germany | 72 | 77 | 75 |
| UK | 52 | 64 | 64 |
| France | 47 | 54 | 54 |
| Switzerland | n/a | n/a | n/a |

Source: (Pew Research Center, 2018).

In the same report the researchers found that if people trusted the government to do what was right for their country, they would also express satisfaction with the media in that country. The correlation was 0.87. Pew's researchers also demonstrated that the key dividing line, in terms of media trust, is between those who hold populist views and those who don't, rather than between the traditional camps of the left and right of politics. However, since the mistrust of elites, especially government elites, is an essential element of populism, this correlation is not entirely surprising.

Schranz conducted a major study of levels and drivers of trust in several European countries, including those in this study. The results showed that the most significant driver by far of media trust was the consumption of media, especially the broadcast media and subscription press outlets. There were less significant and but nonetheless positive correlations with socio-demographic factors, especially increasing age, and political orientation, mainly with those who have a more centrist alignment. No conclusion is offered about the direction of causation, but we tend to trust those media we consume, and we tend to trust the media generally if we consume it widely. Significant use of public broadcasting output correlates with higher levels of trust in the media generally. So does trust in politics and government (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018).

Hanitsch found that, contrary to the popular view, trust was not declining everywhere, but rather depended on the political context. This affected trust of the pronouncements of politicians, whether watched directly or mediated in the press. Trust was negatively correlated with the degree of polarisation in the country's politics. This effect was also described by Vallone as the hostile media phenomenon, the belief among people with very strong and definite views that if the media does not share these views, it must be biased or hostile. Hanitsch showed that it was declines in political trust that led the tango, *causing*

declines in trust in the press (Vallone, Ross and Lepper, 1985; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl, 2018).

Trust in the media is correlated with the degree of institutional trust in the society. It is arguable that citizens base their initial trust on the levels of trust in society generally but are willing to abandon this trust if their chosen media do not justify it.

This analysis goes some way towards explaining why media and institutional trust are both higher in Germany and Switzerland, our consensus countries, than they are in France and the UK, where politics is more polarised. This effect may be even stronger where political polarisation contains an element of anti-elite populism, as it also does both in France and the UK.

These studies seek explanations for differences in trust in terms of the political conditions in the country or in the attitudes of audiences. There may be a further reason for these differences. It may lie within the media's approach to salience.

The many critics of the style of political reporting point to how commercial and other considerations drive media organisations to chase audiences by providing excitement in their political coverage. Interest can be enhanced by characterising forthcoming elections as horse races, by promoting the revelation of crime, scandal and gossip, by depicting deserving or emotionally appealing cases being ignored by government, by reducing nuanced discussion, generally by emphasising conflict and political failure rather than success. All these practices generate attention, and, it is argued, tend to reduce political trust. This argument is especially directed at television and the consequent disaffection is often referred to as video malaise (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; Gaber, 2018).

Norris reviewed the literature on perceived disaffection with media and politics because of chasing audiences for profit. She argued that not only is there scant evidence that the media causes political malaise, but by contrast there is a positive feedback loop, that she calls a virtuous circle, where the more media output people watch, the more engaged they are in politics and by implication more trusting of the system in which politics operates. She also points out that the amount of information now made available through the plurality of channels, (let alone more recent digital developments) has led to the ordinary citizen today becoming better informed, with a wider perspective, and more engaged than their counterpart fifty years ago. In this she takes issue with those who argue that a varied diet of media causes mistrust (Norris, 2000).

This explanation does however support the most unambiguous and clear observation from the data assembled here, namely that Germany and Switzerland exhibit high levels of civic and political trust while also showing relatively high levels of trust in the media in their countries, relative to levels in France and the UK.

## Chapter 4 - The rules of the game

### 4.1 Mutual self-interest

Politicians' chances of advancing their agenda are enhanced by making their communications interesting to journalists and editors, so that they and their issue are likely to appear in the media. Alternatively, a story can be downplayed or eclipsed by making it uninteresting or by drawing attention to a more interesting story in another area. Managing the content and timing of political messaging with the media is therefore a key skill for politicians anywhere, as is the building of trust. Final decisions on what to cover and how to cover it rest with media organisations. On this basis, what the media wants, the media gets.

This is however only true of media organisations considered collectively. News organisations are, as we shall see, in competition with one another, and different stories appeal to different outlets. Further, as we have seen, media organisations are all facing increased competition for attention from the social media platforms.

To maintain the flow of information and to differentiate themselves from their competitors, political journalists need to cultivate strong relationships with their sources - government officials and political operators of all kinds. Journalists owe some duties to their sources: there is a particular need for common understandings about the scope and limitation of confidentiality. But for the most part their allegiance is to their reputation, their career, and their employer, who has commercial interests that guide their choice of news values.

The realities of political life mean that there is a value to the publication in allowing journalists to build up specialised experience and contacts in the field. That is why they tend to stay longer in post than other reporters. Journalists cannot be too single-minded, however. In their dealings with politicians, they may need to behave like professional colleagues, as if they were working in the same organisation as the source, even though they are not. In this capacity they may, for mutual benefit, exchange information that they have picked up around the political circuit or elite social group. This type of exchange improves the journalist's relationship with sources and builds mutual trust over time, to the benefit of both (Davis, 2007, 2009).

The closer these relationships become, the greater the temptation to distort the transmission of information in the interests of maintaining them. Any distortion, or misplaced judgement of salience, reduces the quality of the output, and can diminish both the relationship of trust between the reader and the publication, between the politician and the journalist and of course depending on what form it takes, between the politician and the electorate. Understanding how these relationships differ in each country is the main reason for the

second part of this study, where key practitioners explain how they went about their business during the COVID pandemic.

## 4.2 Political logic or media logic

Mazzoleni posited that political communication in a country conformed either to a 'political logic' or to a 'media logic. Politicians seek to promote themselves, their agendas, parties and coalitions by any means that works. In that sense all systems are driven both by political and by media logic at different times and circumstances, and the differences between the practices in different countries are influenced by the form of government and the nature of the media (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

In the former, messages are created by political organisations and issued to the media under their own conversational paradigms, reflecting the state of competition between parties or the development of political ideas or movements. The media is seen as a relatively passive spectator, a channel hungry for information.

Where media logic prevails, politicians can only obtain attention by creating events and framing narratives that satisfy the criteria for news values, emphasising immediacy, drama, crime, crisis, conflict, and personalities. Those who win the battle for attention win elections. (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007).  The US offers the purest example of this, where name recognition, personal charisma and familiarity are the main planks of candidates' campaigns, in preference to fully worked policy platforms. In Europe the UK is, at least in this respect, the nearest to the American model, followed by France (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

Vos and van Aelst assessed 16 countries (including those in this study) using content analysis to see what it was within the political and media system that determined the attention given to heads of government, cabinet members, party leaders, and ordinary politicians. Broadly, they concluded that neither political logic nor media logic prevailed, rather that the political and media systems were interdependent. Journalists responded to the distribution of power in the country. The wider the dispersion of power among national and local politicians, the more the media will cover the lesser players. In majoritarian systems such as the UK and France more prominence was given to the head of government, whereas in countries where coalitions were prevalent or consensus was the norm (Germany and Switzerland), greater prominence was given to cabinet members and party leaders, possibly for their importance in maintaining coalition and therefore stability. Federal systems tended to lead to greater coverage of ordinary (often state level) politicians. Online media generally also tended to give more coverage to this level (Vos and Van Aelst, 2018).

Maurer and Pfetsch conducted an eight-country survey of the perception of the degree of mediatisation in the relationship between politicians and journalists. They surveyed a large sample (n=1740) of politicians and journalists in eight countries, including France, Germany, and Switzerland. In all countries participants in public life agreed that media logic has come

to dominate political logic. This effect was reduced if the media elites were close to political elites, as has been found to be the case in France. France's politicians tended to resist, rather than accept the dominance of media logic. In Polarised-pluralist countries such as France, conflict between the two groups was more marked than in the Democratic-corporatist countries of Germany and Switzerland, where cooperation was the prevailing norm (Maurer and Pfetsch, 2014). While it is not clear whether increased trust causes this cooperation or whether the cooperation increases trust, suffice it to say that the correlation between the two is a significant finding, to which we will return.

## 4.3 Impact of social media

Bennett and Pfetsch showed that the landscape of political communication is being changed by the user generated material being carried on the many digital platforms. This material contains facts that are not necessarily checked and opinions and attributions that are not just accidentally, but often deliberately distorted to advance a political agenda (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). This challenges the usual paradigm of communications scholars, namely that politicians seek to communicate with citizens either in person or via legitimate institutions of the media. Now we must accept that the plurality of communication has markedly increased, and new skills and tools of analysis will be needed to determine the pattern of power among the wider range of influencers in the political arena.

Blumler makes a similar point suggesting that previous theories of political communication and effects research, developed when media channels were fewer and subjected to filters provided only by journalistic norms, now need to be revised or re-evaluated in the context of today's multi-channel digital landscape. This builds on an earlier paper, which argued that regulatory frameworks, conceived in the previous period where the media economy was simpler, now need to be revised (Blumler and Coleman, 2013; Blumler, 2015).

No longer is there a single set of similar channels of communication between the politician and the citizen, collectively understood as two sides of the communication process. The new landscape can no longer be regulated in the same way. Indeed, in the social media space the only rules are provided by the platforms themselves, and these businesses are not influenced by journalistic norms and practices such as fact checking and editorial oversight. Indeed, in their home country, the USA, they are specifically exempted under the law (Section 230) from being treated as publishers and are therefore not accountable for the content they promulgate. Elsewhere, in the UK and to an increasing extent in the EU, governments are beginning to develop regulations for the platforms' content.

All the social media platforms practise a degree of moderation, though the rules they use are opaque, and the implementation, across billions of posts, is inevitably patchy and inconsistent. Some platforms have taken it upon themselves to make significant decisions with political connotations, as Twitter did by switching off President Trump's account after the Capitol riots.

There is additional evidence, provided most obviously by President Trump, that politicians, notably in the US, but also in other countries, have also moved on from the age of passive media, through the practice of attempted media control, towards a world where some politicians bypass the legacy media altogether and concentrate on social networks to communicate directly with their supporters. This can lead to routines that are designed to win attention by media-friendly events and this gain personal publicity, rather than to make a political case (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018).

However, more benignly, it has in recent years become considerably easier for politicians, officials and journalists and indeed lay people alike to access a wealth of material that was previously much harder to find. The internet generally affords a series of tools that enable journalists to build stories and check facts much more efficiently than previously.

Facebook is an important source of leads and information, but it is Twitter that dominates the professional scene for journalists. This platform enables journalists to see what is important to their professional peers, and what is salient in the marketplace for content. It is an effective disseminator of conflict, at the same time assisting fast fact-checking by indicating those who have different views of an issue.  It also affords the facility for journalists to contact prominent Twitter users and to promote themselves and their stories independently of their employers. (Eurobarometer, 2012). There are also indications of a comparative difference here. British and French journalists used Twitter 25% more than German journalists. The study did not include Switzerland (Engesser and Humprecht, 2015).

Serious players from think tanks and research organisations used to disseminate their ideas through small gatherings. It is now open to them to marshal a genuine policy debate online in a way that might not have happened before the online media system developed (Blumler and Coleman, 2013).

**4.4 Culture**

Blumler and Gurevitch (op.cit.) also describe the relationship between the politician and the media as being like a marriage, where two people with differing objectives cooperate to get what they each need from the relationship. Different marriages operate by different rules, and live with different degrees of conflict, depending on environmental and personal factors. Some rules are agreed between the players, others are derived from society. All journalists operate within a mutually understood and agreed system of confidentiality with their political counterparts. Orebro, in a study of relationships between Swedish municipalities and their local journalists, also noted that the relationship was symbiotic and multi-dimensional, governed by professional norms and characterised by mutual trust and control (Örebro, 2002).

Semetko, citing Inglehart's 1977 book *The Silent Revolution,* writes that political culture exists as an autonomous and measurable set of values. Measurement may well be hampered

by hypocrisy among the participants. For example, journalists may claim that they are pursuing the noble aim of holding the powerful to account, whereas they might merely be trying to catch a politician in a minor inconsistency to create a newsworthy gaffe. Politicians, especially in an emergency, might believe they have the right to pursue their aims without being questioned by a disinterested or even hostile media (Semetko, 1996).

Those involved in political exchanges with the media of ten find that they need to adopt social norms in order to regulate their conduct. Examples, apart from the universal use off the record briefings, are the Chatham House rule, the UK Parliamentary Lobby, and the German Hintergrundskreise (politically or geographically segmented groups of journalists who meet politicians regularly for confidential briefings).

British journalists frequently see themselves, rightly or wrongly, to be *outside* the political system, basically neutral, even disrespectful, evaluating, observing, and calling politicians to account. In Germany they see themselves as being *active participants* in the system, whose mission is to build consensus around what is best for the country. They are expected to be politically engaged, rather than neutral. (Pfetsch, 2008). Among other features of the democratic-corporatist style, Swiss journalists see themselves as neutral observers more than anything else, with a small element (5%) of analysis in their reporting (Bonfadelli et al., 2012; Esser et al., 2012).

## 4.5 The pandemic

Bennett and Pfetsch observe that in times of war or national emergency the public returns to authoritative sources of news, and this was evident during the pandemic (Reuters DNR 2022). Lives were at stake, accurate information was important, and people looked, more so than usual, to their leaders and to the media for that guidance. The mainstream media were essential for informing the population about the progress of the pandemic and what people are and are not allowed to do. Governments turned to medical doctors, public health experts, epidemiologists to frame and communicate their messages. These advocates were chosen not only for their expertise but also because they enjoyed much higher levels of public trust than politicians (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; MORI, 2019). The pandemic brought national communications cultures into sharp focus and afforded an unusual opportunity to compare the political and media (and social media) cultures in the context of the same event in different countries.

## 4.6 Lasting effects

Communication systems arise from an interplay between three main factors, the *political system*, whether presidential or parliamentary, the *media system*, whether wholly commercial or with a major public sector component, and the *political culture*, whether adversarial or consensual in style. Each will be considered in the following chapters.

We can see from the foregoing, and from the previous chapters, that the relationship between journalists and politicians is complex and dynamic. It is always dependent upon a pattern of many forces, and these forces are not fixed, but vary in relative strength all the time.

The forces that bear directly on journalists are, among others, career considerations, personal values, corporate values, peer pressure, the competitive position of the individual and the employing organisation, the chosen business strategy, the general professional culture, regulation, and external norms and what might be called the 'spirit of the times', the 'prevailing wisdom', 'élite opinion'.

Politicians must think about where they are in their career, the interest of their party, faction, coalition partners or other groupings, their personal political agenda, the demands of consistency, choosing the moment for a big move, the state of nearby networks of power, the need for attention (or obscurity).

Bourdieu writes of the relative strengths of fields surrounding institutions and while he uses the concept of a struggle between forces, which implies a certain dynamism, his understanding was based on the relative consistency of these forces over time. That would make the task of inter-country comparison rather easier than it is. Were it not for the arrival of the internet and social media it would be possible to argue that *plus ça change,* however the relative power of those influences on the media is changing rather quickly and we can already see signs of certain politicians at least responding successfully to the changed environment. Benson suggests that journalists collectively might be seen as mediating between market and civic power, and that understanding lies with the micro examination of the operation of these relationships (Bourdieu, 1993; Benson, 2006).

This study will work on the assumption that in a time of economic flux, only the most major differences are likely to persist over time. Differences at national level that persist even during a time of great economic and social change, caused by a major event that dominates the news, point the way towards cultural forces whose influence will continue to be felt despite the fluctuations of day-to-day life.

# Chapter 5 - Media and political landscapes in each country

## 5.1 The UK

### 5.1.1 Political system

The United Kingdom consists of four nations, each with a subtly different political system to govern devolved matters but all of which participate in national elections on the same basis.

650 constituencies, each of roughly 60,000 voters elect a member of the House of Commons, the Lower House of Parliament at Westminster, by a first past the post system The maximum period between national elections is five years. The Prime Minister has the right to call a national election at any time prior to the end of the five-year period, at a time of his choosing.
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Turnout in national elections has reduced in recent years, from 76% in 1966 and settling in 2010 and 2015 at around 65-66%. The 2016 referendum on Brexit attracted a turnout of 72%, and the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 produced 84.6%. European and local elections generally attract fewer voters - only 36.9% of voters participated in the 2019 EU election.

The Upper Chamber, or House of Lords, has a constitutionally limited, revising role in legislation, as all but 92 of its members are appointed - for life - by the Prime Minister of the day. The remaining 92 have hereditary membership of the House.

The Welsh Senedd elects half of its 60 members by a first-past-the-post constituency system, and half by the additional vote PR system, with half the seats being allocated from closed party lists.

The Scottish parliament is similar, with 73 members directly and 56 indirectly elected.

In Northern Ireland the 90 members of the assembly are elected in constituencies by the Single Transferable Vote with seats on the executive allocated to the parties using the d'Hondt system.

Each of these alternatives tend to produce more accurate reflections of popular opinion than the pure first past the post system, but also by fragmenting the electorate among smaller parties, tend to result in government by coalition among two or more of the parties.  In the UK the main political parties are themselves broad coalitions. Social democrats, trade unionists and ideological socialists coexist within the Labour Party, just as nationalist free marketeers, and believers in 'big state' intervention and globalism coexist in the Conservative party.

The constitution of the Westminster parliamentary system is majoritarian in that the Government is formed by a party or group of parties that can command a majority in the

House of Commons and which can get its legislation through. Single party government has been the norm in recent times, although there have been short periods during which two of the three main parties have to a degree collaborated in forming a government.

There is a degree of consensus in UK politics, in that many of the main issues regarding public ownership and wealth distribution have been settled in recent decades and whilst there are political forces advocating wholesale change to the system, notably around climate change policy, none has the potential fundamentally to disturb the political status quo. If anything, there is a perception that the next development will be the creation of a party of the centre but that may be frustrated by the strength of the first past the post system. For that reason, British political pluralism is only moderate (Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

The Prime Minister, operating within a cabinet, has exceptionally wide powers of patronage, with the freedom to appoint political supporters to important positions within public bodies of all kinds. The Government has for example the power to appoint both the Chairman of the BBC and the members of the Board of its regulator OFCOM.

For the past hundred years the national political stage has been dominated by two major parties, Conservative and Labour, with occasional incursions from smaller parties, mostly the Liberals, Scottish Nationalist or Liberal Democrats. The two main parties regularly share two thirds of the recorded votes; in the 2019 election they shared 77%. Political debate therefore tends to take a binary, adversarial form, between the Government of the day and the Official Opposition. This is not the case in the devolved nations where there are substantial secessionist movements in all nations, actually sharing power in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

It is hard to overstate how pervasive is this adversarial system. It tends to reduce a discussion of the national interest or the best course of action to a simple presentation of the view of the Government and the view of the relevant representative of the opposing party. Lobbying organisations pressing for their own interests make their case and the two main political groups normally take contrasting positions designed to optimise political advantage for their own parties.

Journalists attempting fairly to represent the arguments often content themselves with giving equal time to pairs of political opponents, who will often try to play the issue tactically. It is in normal times relatively rare for political journalists to investigate policy issues in depth with subject matter experts. The pandemic was an exception, and the media brought in experts in medicine, public health, and epidemiology to examine and test government policy.

Clearly it is not possible for the range of political opinion in a country to be represented accurately by three major parties, two large and one small. In countries with a tradition of post-election coalition, the proliferation of smaller parties allows the political journalist to describe the political landscape in terms of the agenda and objectives of each of the many parties, and the consequent behaviour of those parties, within coalitions of government.

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Political journalists looking for early warning of newsworthy events must sniff out internal disagreements and splits that threaten either the unity of one or other of the main parties or of changes in party leadership. As a result, political reporting in the UK is disproportionately focused on personality-related issues, rather than policy.


## 5.1.2 UK media

### 5.1.2.1 Broadcast media

Given the dominant position of the BBC in the broadcast landscape of the UK and its role as an exemplar of public broadcasting overseas, it is worth considering how it came into existence, and to detail its semi-detached relationship to the UK state.

The BBC was created by a group of wireless manufacturers in 1922, as a radio broadcaster, led by John (later Lord) Reith. From the beginning funding was available from a radio licence fee. Shortly after its creation, two Government committees were set up to consider its ownership and role.

The nascent national broadcaster was seen as a powerful and influential voice in the public sphere, and there were some who wanted it to be obedient to the government of the day, especially in times where the national interest was at stake. But there were others who took the view that independent journalism had an intrinsic value, and the BBC's impartiality would itself be, and would enable the BBC to become, a valuable national asset. Reith himself was convinced of this and was a vigorous advocate of an arm's length relationship between the national broadcaster and the state.

Against the backdrop of the BBC's coverage of the General Strike of 1926, there emerged a political consensus that the BBC should be independent, but within limits. The BBC's managers won the confidence of the Government in the pre-war years and kept it during the war by maintaining their journalistic independence while doing nothing to harm the war effort. Television broadcasts began in earnest after the war and the finances of the national broadcaster were secured by the introduction in 1946 of a television licence and fee, in addition to the radio licence.

Using Barnett's phrase, the BBC was to enjoy 'constrained independence' from the British state. Its terms of reference and governance were enshrined in a Royal Charter, renewable every ten years. The Government appointed its Governors. They in turn and appointed the executive team, who were expected to be both impartial and editorially independent (Barnett, 2011). In its essence, this formulation persists to the present day, although the exact governance mechanisms have changed. The BBC Trust replaced the Board of Governors as the guardian of the public interest and the license fee at the 2006 review of the Royal Charter.

In 2017 a Board was constituted and the responsibility for regulation was passed to OFCOM, a government body.

Now, according to Hallin and Mancini, the BBC represents the purest form of the "professional model" of public broadcaster, constitutionally independent of government itself, trusted to make journalistic judgements fairly, regulated to do so by a government organ. (Hallin and Mancini, 2012),

In 1955 the BBC's monopoly as a broadcaster was ended by the creation of ITV, a commercial channel providing content through regional franchisees.

In 1964 the BBC introduced BBC2 to provide quality programmes for more minority interests. This move was replicated in the independent sector by the creation of Channel 4 in 1982, government-owned but financially independent, commissioning third party content, and supported by advertising and subscriptions from the ITV companies.

News has always been a loss leader for TV companies and in the UK, the commercial broadcasters use a shared resource, ITN, to provide news material under contract to its subscribers. In the case of radio there is a parallel network, IRN, which supplies almost all commercial radio stations.  IRN's newsgathering and distribution is now subcontracted to Sky News. After the Broadcasting Act of 1990, there was an increasing consolidation of the central ITV company which became publicly quoted, commissioning programmes individually from independent companies. This gradually replaced the regional franchise system.

All this consolidating change was rendered necessary by the increasing competition from the satellite and cable networks. Within 20 years after the 1990 Broadcasting Act, a system that contained four main channels had expanded dramatically to make more than 100 channels available in the UK today.

Since the early 1980s when CNN began to address an international audience several international news broadcasters have been created, mostly offshoots of domestic news organisations, each bearing the distinctive hallmarks of the nations in which they are based. Some are there for commercial reasons, others serve as an instrument of soft power projection for their country. CNN, BBC World News, Sky News, France 24, DW, Al-Jazeera are the best known in Europe. These services also make their content available on the internet.

### 5.1.2.2 Broadcasting statistics relating to news and current affairs.

Though it is declining somewhat, at 71%, TV remains the news medium most used by UK adults (Reuters DNR 2022).

Most people get their news from multiple sources (6.1 on average). When asked their single most important source of news, 47% of English people name BBC1. (Slightly more in Wales and Northern Ireland, slightly less in Scotland). In relation to current affairs, 62% name a TV channel, and of those, 71% use BBC1 (OFCOM annual reports, 2019, 2022).

BBC One has the largest reach of any TV channel for news in the UK, being used by 52% of the population; that figure has declined by thirteen percentage points since 2010. The corresponding figures for ITV news are 31%, Sky 8% (OFCOM annual report, 2022).

Some social media users are ultimately watching mainstream TV material though their feeds. Social media tends to increase the reach both of newspapers and broadcasters. That said, the BBC has nearly four times as many Facebook followers as the Daily Mail, the most read newspaper. Half of all UK adults report that they consume news via social media, predominantly Facebook, however slightly less than half of this news comes to social media from news organisations (OFCOM annual report, 2019).

OFCOM (2022) also report marked differences as to the preferred sources of news between age groups and indeed socio-economic and ethnic groupings. For example, people 65+ are nearly five times more likely to get their news from television than are 16-24-year-olds, where social media reach is higher. They also watch TV news for much longer (4 hours per week, compared to 20 minutes). Attitude figures (as to trust and quality) are also reported to be consistent with pre-pandemic levels.

### 5.1.2.3 Press

Unusually among the European countries, the UK has a highly competitive national press. There are ten daily and eight Sunday national newspapers, all published in London and accounting for 86% of all newspaper sales (Esser, 1999). In 2020, 47% of the adult population used a newspaper, either physically or online, as a source of news. By 2022 that proportion had reduced to 38%. Only 7% of the population uses a newspaper as their *most frequent* source of news; that role belongs to television (Reuters DNR, 2022).

The circulation leaders, the Daily Mail and the Sun have similar overall print circulation (1.25m and 1.4m respectively) but the Mail and its sister publication Mail on Sunday are read 50% more than the Sun for their news coverage. The left-leaning Guardian sells only 141,000 copies, compared to the centre-right Times and the right leaning Telegraph which sell nearly 400,000. (ABC 2019)

The industry has in recent years been engaged in a battle for circulation in a changed marketplace. There are significant strategic choices facing owners seeking to maintain advertising revenue as print users decline and the online market polarises between free access and the subscription model. Some, like the Times, put their content behind a paywall, whereas others, like the Guardian, offer free access but rely on donations and advertising.

The move cost the Times two thirds of its readership, while the Guardian garnered tens of millions of additional readers.

Overall, across the industry, print editions' reach reduced very sharply whereas digital readership was maintained or in some cases increased. Newspaper circulation has roughly halved across the board in the ten years since 2010. The London Evening Standard has not followed this trend, increasing its circulation when it became a free newspaper, and the free online editions of the Mail and the Guardian have also seen marked increases in reach, compared to their previous print circulations. The Guardian's free digital offer has considerably greater reach than the Telegraph or the Times, which operate paywalls. The Mail Online is free to those who accept advertising, and its weekly readership still leads the rest of the nationals at 9.6m.

The magazine sector is less important, with only one in ten people consuming news this way (Press Gazette March 16, 2023; Reuters DNR 2022; OFCOM News Consumption Report 2022).

**5.1.2.4 Ownership concentration and regulation.**

Two of the main free-to-air broadcasters, the BBC and Channel 4, are in public ownership, although C4 does not receive public money, obtaining most of its revenue from advertising. ITV, BSkyB and the myriad cable channels available in the UK are in the private sector.

The historical oversight arrangements for the BBC have been described above.

There have been a series of regulators of the independent television companies, the Independent Television Authority, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (which also regulated independent radio stations), and the Independent Television Commission. The ITC took on the regulation of cable and undertook a programme of liberalisation of the franchise system.

Since 2003 all the broadcast media have been regulated by OFCOM and are now obliged to observe the duties contained in the Broadcasting Code of 2017. OFCOM's governance is not party political in the sense that political parties are not represented on its Board. However, ministers appoint the Chairman and Board members.

OFCOM polices the broadcasters' legal duty to present the news and current affairs with "due impartiality". The meaning of the adjective 'due' in this context means, for example, that the broadcaster is under no obligation to give equal time or weight to all points of view on a subject, but rather to treat the main arguments in the matter fairly, or without bias. Errors are to be promptly corrected. Stuart Hood, a former BBC controller, wrote that broadcasters and the BBC alike:

*'…interpreted impartiality as the acceptance of that segment of opinion which constitutes parliamentary consensus. Opinion that falls outside that consensus has difficulty in finding expression'*

Gaber identified the significance of the choice of subject matter as a component of balance and therefore a legitimate concern for regulators. Media logic might lead to choosing a topic because it is controversial rather than important. The choice of subject matter is as important as the balance of its handling. Indeed political managers in the UK know that health stories, for example, play well for Labour, whereas immigration and culture war stories play well for the Conservatives, regardless of the impartiality with which each is handled (Curran and Seaton, 1982; Gaber, 2018).

Broadcast journalists in the UK cherish their impartiality and freedoms and often take the position (as will be shown later when they are interviewed) that they are detached observers of the day-to-day hurly-burly of politics, rather than participants in the political process. The BBC is of course not immune from the risks of groupthink or shared bias, and it is this that from time to time gives rise to protests from politicians. From time to time the BBC has been accused of bias by both Labour and Conservative parties, most especially when each was in Government.

OFCOM also manages spectrum licences, as well as regulating postal and telecommunication services. With the convergence of online communications and broadcasting OFCOM is beginning to consider whether it needs to oversee the activities of online media distributors and social media platforms. The Online Safety Bill is currently going through the UK Parliament and seeks to give OFCOM the necessary powers to regulate platforms and content available online.

The press is under no such obligation of impartiality.  In the earlier part of the 20th century newspapers had very clear affiliations and sympathies with political parties, and indeed the 'press barons' as they were known, would think nothing of telling elected politicians what to do, sometimes successfully. This personal exercise of power has diminished, though it has not disappeared, and from the accounts of journalists interviewed for this study it is clear that the owners of newspapers in normal circumstances expect their editors to manage content with an eye on the bottom line, rather than a preconceived party-political agenda.  In the 1960s the Times grew its circulation at the expense of diluting the wealth profile of its readers. The consequence was a loss of advertising revenue. Editorial policy was therefore changed with a view to attracting fewer, wealthier readers. (Curran and Seaton, 2009).

Rupert Murdoch's News Corp has a 32.5% market share in the UK, and continues to own the Times, a quality newspaper, and the Sun, the most widely read tabloid (f the Mail is not so classified). News Corp has now considerably reduced its media interests in the UK with the sale of its remaining shares in BSkyB to Comcast in 2018. The Telegraph, the Mail, the Express and the Mirror, the Independent and the Guardian each have different private

owners, assuring a reasonable degree of competition in the national newspaper marketplace (Gaber and Tiffen, 2018).

Each national title has a distinctive political identity, especially the Telegraph and the Guardian, although none is specifically aligned with a political party, following the closure of the Labour-supporting Daily Herald and its relaunch as the Sun in the mid-1960s.

The owners and managers of newspapers have successfully argued over many years that the laws governing competition, bribery, libel and interception of communication, coupled with a voluntary code, are sufficient constraints on the freedom of the press, and that any form of statutory regulation would threaten freedom of speech.

After a major controversy and criminal trial regarding the conduct of journalists on the (now defunct) News of the World, the Government set up the Leveson public inquiry which reported in 2012. Although a Press Recognition Panel was set up to recognize those regulatory organisations that met the Leveson criteria, most of the press initially refused to be regulated in this way and so the main effect of Leveson in practice was the change of the name and format of the voluntary self-regulatory body. The Press Complaints Commission was abolished, and the Independent Press Standards Organisation now regulates those newspapers and magazines that choose to become members. Most national newspapers have joined, the significant exceptions being the Guardian, the Financial Times and the London Evening Standard. 2600 publications are regulated by IPSO, which has in five years received 95,000 complaints, of which it has upheld 175. It has completed no arbitrations and issued no financial sanctions. (Press Gazette report 3 March 2022).

One of the stronger arguments for the independent regulation of the press is the desire to limit the influence of powerful owners on the presentation of the news. The Leveson inquiry took evidence from owners, editors, journalists, and politicians, and among many significant disclosures were accounts of exchanges between Rupert Murdoch, the owner of News Corp and prime ministers Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron in which attempts were being made by one side or the other to exchange newspaper support for political ends. Rupert Murdoch admitted a personal role in these exchanges. (Leveson, 2012)

The success of the press in resisting attempts to introduce a statutory system to regulate them is due in no small measure to the mediatization of politics in which politicians depend for their success on constructive relations with editors and senior political journalists. The power of journalists may be declining in the internet age, and trust has never been high, but media organisations are still able to influence politicians to permit them to carve out an unregulated space for their freedom to publish what they like, governed only by market forces. Likewise, Seymour-Ure pointed out that the media 'got away with it' in its aspiration to be accountable only to their conscience and to the market. He wondered how long that could continue, but nearly forty years later, the press remains effectively unregulated. Even after the prosecutions and ensuing Leveson report into phone hacking, the UK has only a voluntary and, to its critics, toothless code of regulation, run by senior press figures. Ramsay points out that the

IPSO process only meets 13 of Leveson's 38 recommendations regarding regulation, and fails to satisfy some of the most fundamental, including independence and effectiveness (Seymour-Ure, 1974; Curran and Seaton, 2018; Ramsay, 2021)

### 5.1.2.5 Journalism culture

Estimates of the number of journalists employed in the UK differ but lie between 30,000 and 50,000, of whom about a third will be engaged in production or the magazine sector (Sanders and Hanna, 2021). The BBC employs around 7000 journalists, and it is reasonable to expect that the other broadcasters between them employ a similar number. So broadcast journalism may account for half of the industry.

British journalism has been described by as having a 'gung-ho' culture, with an 'adversarial mindset' (Henningham and Delano, 1998). They write, (ibid, 157):

*The strongly competitive newsgathering environment in the UK, particularly in London, may result in a culture in which ethical constraints are somewhat blurred'.*

They also point out that in a 1995 survey more than half of British journalists believe that it is very important to be an adversary of public officials by being constantly sceptical of their actions. The corresponding figure for German journalists is 14%. (Ibid., 156). English law does not protect personal privacy, except indirectly through the laws on trespass, copyright, and defamation (Robertson and Nicol, 1992).

There is however some more recent some survey evidence that these attitudes are less evident in new entrants to the profession (Hanna and Sanders, 2007). Former Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger, giving evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (HLCC 2008:46,) *"it is good that in Britain you have a highly regulated BBC at the heart of the broadcasting industry...set against the more 'Wild West' of the printed word"* (Henningham and Delano, 1998).

The median age of journalists in the UK is around 32. In Switzerland it is 45 (NUJ report cited by Sanders and Hanna). Although most come from middle class backgrounds (those with professional or managerial parents) and about half have a bachelor's degree, the profession is poorly remunerated, especially at the beginning of a career, with nearly half of all journalists earning less than the national average wage (Sanders and Hanna, 2021).

Lobby journalists, covering the specific beat of Westminster politics, are specialists, with their own norms and working methods. Confidences are shared and observed, and thus protected, politicians and journalists work together daily to advance their differing objectives to mutual advantage. Politicians often test policy ideas on journalists and even use the lobby to communicate with other politicians. As Davis puts it, the currency of this debate is salience and agenda setting, rather than policy formation which is the province of lobbyists, PRs, think tanks and civil servants (Davis, 2009).

In the past the political class would be dominated by policy experts, lawyers and landowners, whereas nowadays there is a regular exchange where journalists and lobbyists become politicians and vice versa (Oborne, 2014).

Two distinctive characteristics of British journalism are not replicated elsewhere.

There is a small group of broadcast journalists who have achieved prominence by specialising in the inquisitorial approach to political interviews. Beginning with Robin Day and David Frost, continuing to the present day with John Humphreys, Andrew Marr and Andrew Neil, Emily Maitlis, Martha Kearney and Kirsty Wark, these journalists approach an interview with a well-researched, aggressive style designed to expose policy failures, weaknesses, and contradictions, particularly in a politician. This phenomenon is sufficiently common, especially at election time, to form an important part of the political culture, encouraging in response a defensive and evasive approach by politicians, rather than a respectful clarification and explanation of the matter under discussion. Often interviews are refused because of the known approach of an interviewer. Furthermore, as Stromer-Galley and Lees Marchment pointed out more than 20 years ago, political messaging and especially election campaigns are more tightly controlled than previously an d politicians have become much more cautious as a result. (Stromer-Galley, 2000b; Lees-Marshment, 2001).

Secondly, most newspapers, and especially the 'quality' press, devote an increasing amount of space to opinion pieces written mostly by well-known regular columnists, sometimes augmented by one-off pieces by public figures. On a typical day there might be five or six such columns, in addition to an editorial section. The growth in this genre is one by-product of the preference for factual reporting in the rest of the paper, and the lack of money for lengthy and painstaking investigative reporting, in the worsening financial climate for newspapers. The interviews with practitioners show that this is becoming a lever for attracting subscribers, and competitive advantage.

**5.1.2.6 Trust**

Schranz noted that trust was correlated with frequent use of a medium. The Pew Research Center reported in 2018 that 79% of UK adults trust the BBC. No newspaper in the UK reached over 50%. The dominant position of the BBC and the broadcasting media more generally, being associated with high levels of trust, suggests that the UK's regulatory system for enforcing the impartiality of broadcasters is broadly working (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018). (Pew Center May 2018 Factsheet on News Media and Political Attitudes)

Sky scores more highly than the BBC on audience perceptions of quality (83%:78%), impartiality (72%:62%), and trust (75%: 73%). This supports the suggestion that people trust whatever it is they happen to consume, rather than deciding what to consume based on their perception of quality (OFCOM 2022).

Reuters identifies that trust in the news overall has fallen 12 percentage points (to 36%) since 2015. However, broadcasters are trusted much more (60%+) than newspapers (40-50%). The Daily Mail, one of the most popular newspapers is among the least trusted (23%), suggesting that the readers choose it for a reason other than its news coverage (Reuters DNR 2021).

Trust in the British press (rather than broadcast media) has never been lower. In 2016 public trust in the British press was lower than in 31 other European countries. Continuing a trend that has operated since the 1980s, just 18% of British adults trust their national newspapers to tell the truth (Curran and Seaton, 2018).

## 5.2 Germany

### 5.2.1 Political system

The Head of State in Germany is the President, who is elected every five years to this largely ceremonial role. The electorate is a Federal Convention, which consists of the members of both houses of the Federal Assembly, and an equal number of electors appointed by the governments of the Länder (States). The Head of Government is the Chancellor, who is elected by an absolute majority in the two houses of the assembly, to serve a four-year term.

The Bundesrat, the Upper House, consists of 69 members appointed by the State governments. It shares legislative competence on all laws, but its consent is required on all laws affecting state legislatures. There are no direct elections to this body, but its composition is determined by the ruling parties in each state. Members are delegates (not independent representatives) of their States and must cast the State's vote as a bloc. Their number reflects the population of each state, under a formula which significantly overweights the smaller States.

This body enshrines the importance of the States in the German constitution and significantly fetters the Federal Government. However, by the same token it increases the importance of parties to the Government of Germany, as control of a party, or coalition of parties, can deliver control of both houses and the Federal Government.

The Bundestag, the Lower House, has 299 members, although this can vary. Members are elected by two methods. Half are elected by popular vote of single member districts under a first-past-the-post system. The rest are elected by PR on a closed party list system in State-wide elections held at the same time. Seats are allocated on the second round of PR to ensure that parties' vote share in a particular state is reflected in the number of representatives sent by that State to sit in the Bundestag.

This complex political system was designed to be reflective both of geographical interests through the enshrined influence of the States, and political views, through the implied role of the political parties.

The vote shares of the main parties were as follows and given the complexity of the translation of these national numbers into seats it is not surprising that coalition government is the norm in Germany.

**Table 6 Turnout and vote shares in German Federal Elections 2009-21**

|         | 2009  | 2013  | 2017  | 2021  |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| CDU/CSU | 33.8% | 41.5% | 32.9% | 24.1% |
| SPD     | 23%   | 25.7% | 20.5% | 25.7% |
| AfD     |       |       | 12.6% | 10.3% |
| FDP     | 14.6% | 4.8%  | 10.7% | 11.5% |
| Left    | 11.9% | 8.6%  | 9.2%  | 4.9%  |
| Greens  | 10.7% | 8.4%  | 8.9%  | 14.8% |
| Other   | 6%    | 11%   | 6.2%  | 8.7%  |

| Turnout | 70% | 71% | 75% | 77% |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|

Source: Bundeswahlleiter. (Federal returning officer)

The rate of participation in elections has been rising over the past decade, after falling since 1969. The vote shares of right- and left-leaning parties has been broadly stable, however there has been a splintering of the larger party blocs, weakening the main parties and their leaders and requiring frequent renewals of coalitions with smaller blocs. It remains to be seen if the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) will maintain its vote share as the Christian Democrat Union (CDU) has backed away from its accommodative stance and the immigration issue consequently loses salience.

Overall measures of civic trust in Germany have been rising for some years and as we saw in Chapter 3 above are, alongside Switzerland, high by international standards. Research has shown that 54% of Germans are satisfied with the direction of the country (IPSOS MORI, 2019).

Kampfner has stressed the importance in Germany of the search for consensus between and within institutions. Indeed, there is a constitutional requirement for politicians to seek consensus in government. The designers of the post war settlements were keen to ensure that politics would be locally led, with power being shared between the levels of government, in a conscious attempt to avoid the repeat of the nationalist politics of the period between the two world wars (Kampfner, 2020).

In large industrial concerns the principle of codetermination between management and unions is well established. The watchword in public and industrial policymaking is slow and steady, giving everything proper consideration, in the light of national values and interests.

Local cohesion is important, he says. Germans are attached to their home State, or origin. It often comes up in conversation, in an atmosphere of noting and respecting differences between people from different parts of the country. The capital is not the most important place in Germany, as it is in France or the UK.

All of this is reflected in the media landscape, with important regional and local press, and State level regulation of broadcasting.


## 5.2.2 German media

Political considerations run though the whole commercial and regulatory environment for the media in Germany.

### 5.2.2.1 Broadcasting

As in the UK the public broadcasters ARD/ZDF are supported by a licence fee, although they are also permitted to accept paid advertising.

The Allies designed the system after the Second World War, and in drafting the 1949 constitution were keen to ensure that the national broadcasters did not have an unduly dominant position, and so were keen to reserve regulatory powers to the Länder. This resulted in regional differences in the system. In the US zone advertising was permitted, whereas in the British zone the public service model was preferred (Semetko, 1996).

The public sector monopoly was abolished, and private companies were allowed to compete from 1984. This was a relaxation promoted by the CDU at the time to counteract the perceived liberal bias of the public broadcasters. Public broadcasters were however seen by the Government (and the courts) as a public good whose public sector ethos was seen to be a desirable influence, to be preserved, alongside commercial competitors.

The new franchises were readily taken up by the large media companies, of which the largest were Bertelsmann/RTL and Axel Springer. Although the States have placed a limit on

audience share of 30% and there are smaller competitors, there is an effective oligopoly among commercial broadcasters with which the Federal Cartel Office has been loath to interfere.

As elsewhere, commercial broadcasters neither give as much airtime to news, nor do as much newsgathering as their public counterparts. They are required to promote balance. De Bens (1992) found that ARD/ZDF are much stronger generally on information content: news current affairs and documentaries; more so indeed than many international competitors. Pfetsch reported convergence as regulation was further relaxed (Pfetsch, 1996).

Advertising revenue to the commercial broadcasters increased tenfold between 1989 and 1997, reaching €6.8bn.  At the same time the public broadcasters lost 60% of their advertising revenue, though this was more than made up by a €6bn increase in their license fee income (Humphreys, 1999).

Audiences for the main public TV channels are much higher, at 54%, than that of the regional or local newspapers which together reach 26% (Reuters DNR 2021).

Tagesschau, ARD's flagship news bulletin recently reached 48% of the population. All the regional newspapers together with the commercial TV channels reach 33.8%, Radio reaches 20%, Bild newspaper alone 11%. Many of these channels are now accessed online (Hasebrink and Hölig, 2020).


**5.2.2.2 Press**

63% of Germans read a newspaper every day. This proportion is higher among older people but 45% of 20–29-year-olds also read one daily. Both numbers have declined by more than 10% since 2010 (Zeitungsverleger, 2018).

During the Weimar Republic the media was highly partisan and there was a high degree of political parallelism. One third of the media was controlled by political parties at that time. After the war, following the intervention of the Allies in the media system, there arose a commitment to a common public interest and to professional standards of conduct (Hallin and Mancini 2012).

There are 344 different daily titles, of which only seven are distributed nationwide. Aggregate newspaper sales in 2010 were 29 million copies a day. By 2016 this had almost halved to 16m, however.  Even after this decline BILD still dominated, selling 10m copies, followed by the Süddeutsche Zeitung (1.1m) the Frankfurter Allgemeine (680,000), Die Welt (670,000) and Handelsblatt (420,000). These proportions are also reflected in the online editions of these publications. It is noticeable that there is one main tabloid paper in Germany, (whereas in Britain there are five), with aggregate sales two thirds of tabloid sales in the UK. Also, in the UK there are 84 regional dailies, compared with Germany's 375. Five

large companies dominate the newspaper market. These are Axel Springer, Südwestdeutsche Media-holding, Funke Mediengruppe, DuMont Schauberg and Madsack, who together controlled a market share of 42% in 2016 (Esser, 1999; Nel and Milburn-Curtis, 2019).

Online news consumption has by contrast risen and 68 per cent of Germans receive news online (Reuters DNR 2022). The shift in readership to online is arguably less important to the industry than the reduction in advertising revenue in the sector. This declined from €6.6bn to €2.6bn between 2000 and 2016. This has had to be made up by the strengthening of subscription income, which cover two thirds of the revenues of German newspapers, however some cost cutting has also been required to maintain profitability. (medialandscapes.org, 2022)

Fewer newspapers are being sold, albeit for a higher price.  For all the reductions in circulation, the reach of newspapers is increasing because of the internet. Regionals and tabloids are suffering more than the national dailies, with their richer readership. This has increased pressure on the cost of journalism (Brüggemann, Esser and Humprecht, 2012).

The number of journalists reduced by 15% in the twenty years to 2012, a modest reduction compared to the 30% loss in the US. However, the EU reports that there are 42,000 journalists in Germany, more than either France (27,000), the UK (33,000) or Switzerland (5,000) (Eurostat, 2019).

The industry benefits only from some minor tax reliefs on distribution and VAT rates. Uniquely amongst countries classified by Hallin and Mancini as Democratic Corporatist, Germany and Switzerland do not significantly subsidise print media.


### 5.2.2.3 Regulation

Regulation of broadcasting is the responsibility of the Länder, advised by and acting through professional Mediaanstalten. Each has a Broadcasting Council representing local economic and political interests. There is a strong political dimension here, as each State appoints some members directly and influences the appointment of others. Where national rules are proposed, these must be agreed by treaty with the Länder, through what is ultimately a political process.

Semetko observes that journalists are known to some degree by their political sympathies and the public sector broadcasters make a point of sharing out sensitive posts to ensure that both main party groupings are appropriately represented. This is not the case with the private broadcasters (Semetko, 1996).

There is a legal duty on publishers to be fair and informative and to distinguish appropriately between fact and comment. There are no limits on who may own newspapers although there

are rules limiting the ownership of radio stations by newspaper groups. No newspapers receive a public subsidy.

Newspapers are overseen by the respected German Press Council, a voluntary self-regulatory body formed by publishers and journalists (and partially financed by the Government) with the aim of preserving the reputation of the German Press, while protecting its freedom (Presserat.de, 2023).

The German system is based on the notion that social organisations (including but not limited to political parties) are all part of the fabric of German society and therefore are entitled to a say in the regulation of media institutions. They all have a place therefore on the broadcasting councils. Rather than forcing the media to be independent of government this tends to bring society in, the reinforcing the social consensus. The whole system of regulation is overseen by the Federal Constitutional Court which has made it clear that it expects journalists to be independent, free of influence by the governments of the Länder and specific social forces (Humphreys, 1999).

### 5.2.3 Trust

Trust in the news overall is at 50% in Germany, 12th out of 46 countries surveyed by Reuters. This compares to France at 29%, Switzerland at 46% and the UK at 34%. That said, trust in Bild, by far the most popular newspaper is at 20%, whereas the trust in TV news is much higher, 66-67% (Reuters DNR 2022).

### 5.2.4 Culture of political journalism

There are important differences in the way political debate is conducted in the German media, compared to that of its neighbours.

Media organisations have duties of fairness under the law, and political parties have duties under the constitution to pursue consensus as well as the national interest. The prevailing style of political dialogue is that of moderate language, free of insults. There is, for obvious historical reasons, a suspicion of demagoguery. By contrast reflective, thoughtful contributions to debates are prized. In the broadsheets, thorough research and intelligent analysis is expected (Kampfner, 2020).

In Germany journalists are expected to debate and expose where the national interest lies. 71% of German journalists report having a mission to express ideas and shape opinions. That measure in the UK is 45% (Henningham and Delano, 1998). This phenomenon was confirmed (albeit with slightly different methodology) in a more recent study (van Dalen and Aelst, 2012). The researchers found that British journalists reporting politics prioritised speed while German journalists, by a wide margin, assigned a greater importance to investigation, analysis and interpretation.

Journalists in Germany conventionally do not disclose private information about public figures. Indeed, the right to privacy and personal reputation is constitutionally guaranteed. The Bundespressekonferenz is the German equivalent to the UK Lobby. This group arranges meetings where journalists can meet and discuss public affairs on the mutual understanding of confidentiality  (Coliver, 1993;  Esser, 1999).

That said, it was not so long ago that most press outlets in Germany had an identifiable political allegiance and 'line'. Journalists working for the Axel Springer organisation still have clauses in the contracts requiring them to support liberal economics and the right to exist of the State of Israel. (AxelSpringer.com, 2023). Just as this group's papers aligned with the CDU/CSU, so the Bertelsmann group supported the SDP and other parties of the Left. People expected the media to be aligned. These alignments have diminished in Germany (as elsewhere). Today the main fear is that the historically left-leaning press are being squeezed out by titles that reflect the dominant consensus around free market, liberal values. German newspapers do not participate in the support of political parties during elections. All of that said, press outlets do retain reasonably clear political alignments.  As in the UK, these do not map exactly onto *political party* allegiances. From Right to Left: Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeiner Zeiting, Süddeutsche Zeitung and the Frankfurter Rundschau (Hallin and Mancini 2012).

Pfetsch compared the political culture in Germany with that of the US.  Interviewing 112 senior practitioners, her research showed that political debate was driven by different factors in each country.  Agreeing with the taxonomy of roles posited by Blumler, she found that the organisational structures and norms pointed towards media driven coverage in the US, with politicians pursuing coverage, any coverage, by creating hooks that engaged with the news values of the media. She attributed US behaviour to their presidential system, political parties that lack strong identities, and a media system driven entirely by commercial values. The prevailing norms of the profession of journalism were also important. In the US, professional detachment and objectivity is the predominant norm. The relationship between media and politicians was transactional, not enduring (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Pfetsch, 2000).

In Germany by contrast, the style is politically driven, in that politicians seek out opportunities to get their message across and tend not to seek personal awareness and recognition for their own sakes. Political messages are originated by politicians based on distinctive policy platforms and distributed through a regulated mixed economy media system to a public that appreciates thoughtful discussion. The media values, and works to preserve, its relationship with the political structures of the country. Pfetsch (ibid.) concludes that, in dealing with the media, the goal of politicians the US is attention, whereas in Germany it is persuasion.

That said, in a 2005 study of professional norms perceived by German journalists demonstrated that the dominant objective was neutral and precise reporting, and clarification of complex issues for the benefit of the readership. Persuasion, or influencing opinion, was

rated as being much less important. This is supported by the prevalence in the newsroom of the practice of colleagues checking each other's work for accuracy. Two thirds of journalists said that this was their usual experience. Finally, the researchers found a distinctly ethical basis for journalistic practice, with several the techniques used by investigative journalists in the UK or the US being frowned on in Germany. Examples of such outlawed practices might be using private documents without permission, using hidden cameras or microphones, or paying sources for information (Weaver and Willnat, 2012).

**5.3 France**

**5.3.1 Political system**

The President of France is directly elected every five years.

The President of France is the Head of State, and the Prime Minister the Head of Government. The President appoints the Prime Minister, based on the expectation that they will be able to form a government that will command the support of the Assemblée. Once appointed, only the Assemblée can dismiss the Prime Minister, although the President can dissolve the Assemblée, triggering a national election. Senior ministers are appointed by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister, and junior ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister. That said, the President also has an executive role, chairing the weekly meeting of Council of (senior) Ministers.

The French legislature is composed of two houses, the Sénat and the Assemblée Nationale. Legislation must pass both houses. The Senate tends to be more conservative, and its members older than the members of the Assemblée. It has certain constitutional roles, including approval of changes to the constitution, and the President must step in should the elected President of France become incapacitated or there is a vacancy for other reasons.

The Sénat, the upper house, is elected by an electoral college formed mainly of local councillors, mayors, and people they appoint. Senators represent a département, and collectively they represent the regions of France. The aim of the design of the electoral college is for the Senator to reflect the majority political views within in each département. In effect this means that the appointment of Senators is controlled by local party activists, their friends and associates. They serve for terms of six years and 50% retire every three years, so the political composition of the Senate lags that of the Assemblée. The Senate provides scrutiny and a political counterweight to the power of Paris. It derives its legitimacy from being in closer touch with the departments and the regions, and by the experience of its members, who tend to be older, often approaching the end of their career in politics.

The Assemblée has 577 members, directly elected by popular vote in constituencies, with two-round system as for the Presidency. The winning candidate is the one who gains an

absolute majority in a two-person runoff round, the other candidates having been eliminated in the first round. The last Assemblée elections were held in June 2022.

Presidential elections attract a very high turnout, more so than the assembly elections which are held in the same year. Elections are held in two rounds, with the two candidates winning the most votes in the first round competing in a runoff.

**Table 7 Turnout in national elections in France 2007-2022**

| Turnout | 2007 | 2012 | 2017 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Presidential election | 84% | 80% | 74% | 72% |
| Assembly election | 60% | 53% | 38% | 47% |

Source: French Government

So apart from elections, and the normal business of policy announcement and enactment, the major political events are the dissolution of the assembly by the President, calling an election, matters that might lead to the resignation of the government or of a particular minister, or the passage by that Assemblée Nationale of a vote of no confidence in the Government. Since the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958 there have been 42 governments, of which only ten have lasted more than two years.

France is categorized by Hallin and Mancini alongside the rest of Southern Europe, as Polarized Pluralist, but it does not wholly fall into this category, as it has a strong legal system and powerful bureaucracy and consequently clientelism is weaker than in other comparator countries. Despite its majoritarian politics its strong legal and regulatory framework renders it more like its Democratic-Corporatist neighbours than to the Polarised-Pluralist countries (Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

### 5.3.2 French media

France differs from the other three countries in this study owing to the important position of the French state within the media sector. The management of the sector has been a significant strand of the national public policy debate since the Second World War. Until 1982 the state had the monopoly of the broadcast media, and since 1982 there have been no less than six statutes gradually releasing the state's control  While there is less state intervention with the press, the industry continues to enjoy a level of subsidy considerably greater than elsewhere (Kuhn, 1995).

### 5.3.2.1 History

Chalaby described the period in the seventy years preceding the second world war, when there was a wide-ranging public debate about the French constitution, with the royalists at one end and the communists at the other. He suggests that this may be a partial explanation of why opinion is so important in the French press. France is contrasted with the UK and the US, where constitutional matters were already settled. This went alongside the historic parallelism of the French press with political parties (Chalaby, 1996; Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The freedom of the French Press was guaranteed in the law of 1881 which remained the governing statute except for wartime when Government took control. Germany also imposed control and censorship during the occupation of France during the Second World War. Upon the Liberation, all media that had continued to publish during the war were closed and their assets nationalised. The Ministry of Information then put these assets at the disposal of new publications that emerged from the underground press of the Resistance (Eveno, 2018).

From the end of the Second World War until the early 1980s central state control was thought to be necessary to cement the position of the Government as the embodiment of the national will, and increasingly to settle and reinforce the predominance of French culture against growing tides of internationalism. This policy was seen by De Gaulle as especially important when the new medium of television began to be more important in the 1950s and 1960s. (Kuhn 1995). Seen politically, state control would also reduce the risk of regime instability, smooth over the deep faultiness in French society, and support a powerful, centralised Presidency. Puustinen notes that France is exceptionally diverse, in that 56% of French people claim to have a 'foreign' background, suggesting that even now there is a reason that the State might think it needs to reinforce French culture through its influence over the media (Puustinen, 2007)

**5.3.2.2 Broadcasting**

There are six national TV channels in France, three of which (France 2, 3 and 5) are publicly owned, and three (TF1, M6 and Canal+) are in the private sector.  The public channels have a 45% market share, the rest commercial. TF1 is by far the most viewed single channel, claiming 19.8% of the population's viewing time. France 2 reaches 17.1% providing general interest material, with a public service ethos, like that of the BBC in the UK. 25% of its material is described as news or documentary, a considerably larger proportion than that of any other public or private sector station (Mediamétrie, July 2021).

In 2006 a public private partnership launched France 24, as a substantially news channel along the lines of CNN and Al Jazeera. It is distributed online and by satellite. It claims to reach 325 million households in 183 countries, and broadcasts in three languages. It is now 100% state owned.

95% of the population has a television and the average French person watches 3h 41m per day (more during the pandemic).  Of this about 15% is news. This is about six times the amount of time devoted to newspapers (Statista, 2023; Mediametrie, 2021).

### 5.3.2.3 Press

The high point of the daily press industry was reached in 1968, when 13 million copies were produced. By 2009, there were barely 9 million. In the UK the decline over this period was 30%, whereas in Germany the circulation was stable. All the national newspapers in France would be what in the UK are classed as the quality or broadsheet press. The national newspapers are produced in Paris and although they may all have their distinctive character and political orientation, they can all be described as serious quality press, serving elite interests and those who have an interest in public policy and current affairs. They provide a level of detail and debate that supplements television coverage of these matters (Kuhn, 1995)

First among them is Le Monde, (circulation 330,000) which prides itself on its independence, cemented by the fact that its constitution requires it to be 60% owned by its journalists.  In the 1950s and 1960s, when Gaullism was at its height, it was seen as somewhat to the left of centre. With the election of Mitterrand however, Le Monde demonstrated that it could scrutinise and challenge a leftist Government just as effectively. As an élite newspaper it tends towards the progressive in covering public policy, while maintaining a conservative stance on business and economic matters (Benson, 2004). Le Figaro, owned since 2004 by Serge Dassault and conservative in orientation, is regarded as the journal of the French bourgeoisie. Like Le Monde it sells 330,000 copies a day. (Eveno, 2018).

Libération was founded in 1973 by Maoists but now simply left of centre. The Guardian is probably the UK equivalent. It has a circulation of 120,000. L'Humanité is the organ of the Communist party, and its fortunes have declined along with those of the party. It now sells 50,000 copies.

Kuhn also notes that increased political volatility in France has meant that newspapers have tacked towards the centre in their political position, being careful not to lose circulation by alienating readers. French newspapers continued with their firm political alignments longer than in other countries. There is no national tabloid in France, although in 2002 there appeared Metro and 20 Minutes, highly successful freesheets aimed at commuters. The national newspapers in France have an unusually small share of the domestic market, compared to other countries in this study.  Taken together, the circulation of newspapers in France, per head of population, is about half that of Germany and the UK. (Kuhn 1995). The market share of national newspapers in France is relatively low among Western European countries, and 31st in the world. (Kuhn, 1995; Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

70% of the press in France today is regional, rather than national. The regional press sells six million copies a day. Whereas the national press may have an identifiable political line, the regional press tends to deal with national issues in a more neutral (if popular) way, following, rather than leading the political consensus. There has been some consolidation and the number of titles had reduced from 175 in 1946 to 55 in 2004. Most are losing readers still. A further difference in France compared to the rest of Europe is the size of its magazine sector. Magazines represent 53% of the turnover of the French press. The corresponding figure in the UK and Germany is below 50%. (Media Landscapes, 2019) (Puustinen, 2007; Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Eveno, 2018)

The regional press and the magazine sectors, in aggregate, have a much larger circulation than the national newspapers, and tend to be relatively neutral politically. In 2003, 17.5% of the population read a national newspaper every day, whereas 38% read a regional newspaper daily. 20% read a weekly publication, 97% read a magazine once a month. L'Equipe, covers sport, and the magazine sector deals mainly with the comings and goings of celebrities. Despite the decline in circulation of the main titles, the industry remains substantial, turning over about €10bn, and employing 100,000 people. Between 1965 and 2006, the number of journalists employed in the media has risen from 10,000 to 37,000 (Eveno, 2018). Furthermore, the number of daily titles per million of population, a measure of diversity of information sources, is also low in France at 1.7 per million. In the UK this measure is 2.1, in Germany 5.1 and in Switzerland 14 (World Press Trends 2009).

### 5.3.2.4 Ownership

There are only a few large press groupings left in France, being Dassault, Lagardère, Le Monde, Amaury and Bayard, all of which have interests across the main sectors of the print media. None is dominant. French law prohibits the ownership of newspapers by public companies, to prevent unbridled commercial considerations to dictate the character of publications) This together with the chronic unprofitability of national newspapers means that they remain the province of engaged individuals, with all that that implies for editorial independence (Puustinen, 2007; Benson, 2004; Eveno, 2018).

As late as 1991 Hersant, a major owner, was quoted as saying that in choosing a job journalists must identify and apply to work at a publication that coincides with their politics. Indeed, under a special media provision of French labour law, a change of the political stance of a newspaper allows journalists to resign and claim compensation for constructive dismissal (Weaver and Willnat, 2012; Mcmane, 2021).

### 5.3.2.5 Regulation

Television and radio are regulated by the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA). Its members are expected to be independent though they are appointed by various parts of the

state. This organization appoints the heads of public broadcasters and oversees their operation. The guiding principles of regulation are ensuring pluralism and the expression of a diversity of opinion. French identity and cultural diversity are to be preserved and the French language is to be defended and preserved (Puustinen, 2007).

The regulations governing broadcasting require that the time given to political representatives should be allocated in three equal parts, to the Government, the parliamentary majority and the opposition.

The press is not directly regulated in France - there have been attempts to create a Press Council, but none has ever been established. As mentioned, there are restrictions on public companies owning newspapers and concentration of ownership is also restricted. There is a voluntary code governing the behaviour of journalists, written by the journalists' union in 1918 and readopted in 1938. It remains in place (Kuhn 1995).

There is also a strong privacy law (Article 9 of the Civil Code) that makes it both a civil tort and, in most cases a criminal offence, rather than a regulatory matter, to publish details of an individual's private life or to take or publish a photograph or recording of an individual in a private place without their express permission. Neither truth, public interest nor the absence of malice is a defence. There are similar restrictions regarding Government secrecy that also protect public officials against excessive criticism. There are also strong regulations governing hate speech. As a practical matter this means that personal scandal forms a relatively small part of the public sphere, the exception being financial scandal involving public officials, which are regarded as a matter of public concern (French Foreign Ministry-www.diplomatie.gouv.fr; 2023).

Specialists in European law identify a tension between the right to privacy under Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights and the right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of ECHR. European law has however consistently supported the freedom of the press, indeed going so far, in the Handyside case in 1976, to rule that this principle overrides the rights of the individual (Eveno, 2018).

**5.3.2.6 Subsidies**

Radio and television in the public sector are supported in France by a licence fee, which pays for 75% of the costs of the organisations, the balance being made up by advertising.

The French State has long accepted, more especially after the Second World War, that the press is an essential bulwark of the democratic life of the nation It has provided subsidies that today amount to over €1bn, more than 10% of the turnover of the print media (Benson and Powers, 2011).

The press enjoys a reduced rate of VAT, exemption from the tax on the professions, subsidy for distribution costs including postal and rail transport charges, company tax relief for press investments, and a substantial subsidy of the cost of subscription to the State-owned Agence France-Presse (AFP). There is also an implicit subsidy in the state ownership of the AFP. Further, since 1970, L'Humanité, La Croix, France-Soir and Libération and certain regional weeklies with low circulation have all received direct subsidies to preserve their viability. There have also been direct payments to publishers to assist with the cost of modernisation of production (Eveno 2018).

These subsidies are considerably greater than those enjoyed by the press in the other countries in this study. The UK exempts the press from VAT, Germany does not provide any subsidies. Switzerland grants postal subsidies and a small reduction in the rate of VAT, albeit to a much lesser extent than France.


### 5.3.3 The internet, subscriptions, and advertising

The French press, along with that of every other developed country, has been impacted by the arrival of the internet in its marketplace. Its effects come in two forms. Many newspapers have chosen to have an online offering as there are many readers who prefer to get their news this way. Selling online is clearly cheaper and easier than distributing the physical newspaper, and subscriptions are more attractive for the publication than the purchase of single copies.

Content produced by those publications that allow free sharing circulates easily over social media, as do the tweets of well-known journalists and bloggers. Thus, social media has become a provider of news and current affairs content. Some people use social media as their sole or main source of news.

As elsewhere this has had the consequence of diverting advertising spend in France from the print and broadcast media to social media companies that offer superior reach and targeting, at a fraction of the cost of traditional advertising. A page view on the internet sells for 2-5% of the cost of a view of an ad in the newspaper. A publisher's online readership therefore needs to be 20-50 times greater than the print version to attract the equivalent advertising revenue.

The competition from digital news providers has led publishers in the UK, Germany and Switzerland to cut costs, among other things by moving away from traditional methods of news production. The French Government's subsidies have encouraged investment and innovation in this area, but the French press has retained its high-cost model, and this has squeezed the profitability of newspapers in France. Le Monde for example has adopted a mixed model, with some content made available for free and supported by advertising, whereas the main content is available only on subscription. Post-2001 its digital version has become one of the most viewed sources of news in France (Eveno, 2018).

That said, advertising expenditure generally in France has for some years lagged that of the other countries in this study. Expenditure per capita in 1986 was $81, whereas in Germany it was $133, the UK $146, and Switzerland $213. Furthermore, the press in France took a smaller (and indeed sharply declining) share of overall advertising spend than its European counterparts, so the French press is much more dependent on attracting subscribers or selling individual copies than in the other countries (Kuhn 1995).

Digital advertising is growing very quickly in all European countries. It increased fourfold between 2009 and 2019, now for the first time surpassing 50% of all expenditure. UK advertisers spend more than three times as much per capita on digital than those in France (iabeurope.eu; 2021).

### 5.3.4 Style and content

The political agenda is set by the strong centres in the Elysée and the Matignon, initially cascaded through the broadcast media, with the debate being carried forward in the national dailies, and neutrally reported in the regional press (Kuhn,1995).

French journalism has always preferred expression over observation, commentary over reportage, ideas over facts. Although there is a culture of balancing competing values and ideas via a mix or reportage and debate, a style known as 'chronique' (Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

It might be thought that in view of the economic pressures of reduced advertising income and significant state subsidies, together with a considerable, if waning, involvement of the state with the media in France, the media in turn would be tempted to be less assiduous in its task of challenging the government of the day.

Benson and Hallin used content analysis to compare the degree to which French and US journalists felt free to criticise the policy of their governments. The period studied was from 1965 to 1997 and contrasted the New York Times with Le Monde and Le Figaro. Editorials were excluded from the study. The authors set out to test whether the dependence on, and close involvement of, the French state causes uncritical journalism, prefers to cover state actors over citizen voices, and whether opinion or interpretation is more common in the French, rather than the US titles. They found that the French press was more critical of the Government, less neutral and fact based, more critical of elites, and more willing to give voice to citizen groupings, especially trade unions. More generally there was more opinion printed in France than in the US which tended to prefer factual coverage. They also found evidence that these tendencies were increasing over time. The authors offer the potential explanation that a critical stance is necessary to legitimise the press and protect it from the accusation of being in the pocket of the elites (Benson and Hallin, 2007).

In a similar study, of the handling of the single topic of immigration, but reviewing a wide range of national dailies, the research showed that the level of criticism of the State in French newspapers was somewhat more than in the US, despite the existence of the subsidy system supporting the French press. He also observed that the level of criticism was consistent across the French titles, despite their differing political orientations (Benson and Powers, 2011).

Benson (ibid.) also identifies a distinctively French journalistic cultural form, the '*débat ensemble'*. An article or indeed current affairs broadcast handling a controversial topic will set out the facts but then report a range of opinions from different interested parties. Ferree, writing about the German press and comparing it with that in the US, identifies a similar tradition there. In the US the tendency is to stick to the facts, leaving opinion to another section of the paper. Pluralism of ideas is therefore assured within each newspaper, not just across the sector (Ferree et al., 2002). These authors also note that it is cheaper, and indeed less risky, for French papers to host a debate setting out the opinions of interested parties, than to conduct original investigative journalism.

The CSA conducted a survey of 405 French journalists in 2007, for *Les Assises du Journalisme pour Journalisme et Citoyenneté,* to understand their perception of the influences on their work. 38% cited the pressure to please advertisers or help to make their publications profitable, considerably more than editorial pressure at 22%, or political pressure, at 5%. Although as we have seen above, it is common practice in France for a journalist to work for a newspaper with whose politics they agree, so the perception of political pressure is likely to be low (Mcmane, 2021).


### 5.3.5 Trust

Eveno cites an annual study by La Croix on the confidence of French people in their media.

*Pour une nette majorité de Français, les journalistes sont courageux, competents et serieux, mais on ne les croit ni independants ni honnêtes.*

(By some margin journalists are seen as courageous, competent, and serious, but they are also regarded as neither independent nor honest) (Eveno, 2018, Chapter III, section II.1).

Schranz, in a 13-country study of media trust, found a correlation between low use of public broadcasting and low readership of newspapers and low levels of trust in the media. These are characteristics of the French media market, as is political alienation, another driver of mistrust. Starting at low levels, trust in French institutions is also falling. Between 2001 and 2018 French people have been losing trust in their government by 7%, the press 4% and political parties 5%. In Germany these figures show increases in trust in these institutions of 15%, 12% and 15% respectively. Moreover France shows some of the world's highest rates

of dissatisfaction with parties and politicians (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018; IPSOS MORI, 2019).

The Reuters Digital Trends report of 2021 found that trust in the news media in France was at 30%, 43rd of the 46 European countries surveyed. Reuters attributes this partly to the dissent expressed by the *gilets jaunes* movement. The main media brands, being the regional and local papers, TV news, Le Monde, Figaro and 20 minutes all enjoyed levels of trust between 45% and 64%.

## 5.4. Switzerland

### 5.4.1 Political system

Switzerland, a country of about 8 million, is by some distance the smallest of the countries in this study. It is a federation of 26 cantons. Subsidiarity is a guiding principle of the constitution, and the federal government has responsibility only for those functions specifically designated by the cantons.

The central state guarantees citizens' rights and the rule of law and enjoys competence in the field of foreign policy, the armed forces, borders, and money, but in most other areas of life, including health, the cantons have exclusive jurisdiction.

There are two chambers at the national level. The Lower House, (Nationalrat or Conseil National) and the Upper House, (Ständerat or Conseil des États). Both have equal status and are elected on the same day every four years.

The Conseil National has 200 seats, and members represent constituencies of approximately equal population. In almost all cases the electoral system is first past the post. Six seats elect their members under proportional representation.

The Conseil des États has 46 members. 20 cantons each elect two members, and six, known as 'half-cantons' elect one each. There are two rounds of voting - the candidates with the fewest votes being eliminated in the first rounds of voting. There is a list PR system only for four members, in two cantons. Those elected are representatives of their cantons, not delegates.

There are six main political parties in Switzerland, and the top three share 55% of the vote. Somewhat unusually in Western Europe the leading party is the SVP, (Swiss People's Party). Its platform includes opposition to immigration, combined with the support for free markets, socio-cultural conservatism, and opposition to multiculturalism.

The executive body is the Federal Council, which has seven members who by convention are appointed by political parties according to what is known as a 'magic formula' which reflects

the size of parties' representations and the major language groups in Switzerland. The Federal Council (collectively) is at once the Head of State and Head of Government. The President is elected for a year and members of the Federal Council take turns to hold this role.

Politics in Switzerland is complicated and opaque, as ad hoc consensus is the main way to get things done. Parliament and the Executive are however frequently reminded by the referendum system of their responsibility to the broad mass of the population, and it is these referenda and their associated campaigns that engage the media and the public.

An unusual, and well-known aspect of the political system is the element of direct democracy. On three to five occasions each year, the people vote in a referendum on around twelve to fifteen matters selected for this purpose by the federal government or by a qualifying number of members of the public. A referendum is required: on a popular initiative requested by 100,000 voters; opposition by 50,000 voters to a proposed law; any constitutional change; or to approve certain obligations to international organisations. In each case the protagonists set out their case, the Federal Council expresses a view, as do the main political parties, trade unions and interest groups. These statements are sent to the voters along with their voting forms.

Issues which excite a great deal of popular interest are the subject of major advertising campaigns and are extensively debated in the media prior to the referendum date. Research has shown that high levels of media attention follow from expensive paid-for political campaigns, and this tends to favour the populist SVP, the best-funded political party. There are no campaign spending limits for referenda in Switzerland (Bernhard, 2012; Udris, Eisenegger and Schneider, 2016a).

Even though only 15% of legislative initiatives arise from the people, media salience studies have shown that 70% of media coverage of legislative change relates to referenda and the associated campaigns (Tresch, Sciarini and Varone, 2013).

Turnout in national and local elections has declined since 1967 from 66% to its present levels of 45-48%. In most cases referendum turnout is at about the same level, rising into the 60s for significant and controversial issues. Exceptionally, as in the case of a recent vote on EU membership, it exceeds 60%. In Switzerland the political system implies that there must be constant campaigning. Elections are frequent and the town, district, cantonal and national level, and interleaved with often high-profile referendum campaigns. Civic duty and pride in Switzerland are exceptionally strong and electors come under peer pressure to keep up with political matters especially at local level (Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018).

One explanation for low turnout at national level might be that the composition of the Federal Council rarely changes, despite all the movements at lower levels. So, a voter could be forgiven for feeling that their vote is not going to change very much. This is supported by the

relatively high turnout in decisive referenda, the frequency of which might be expected otherwise to cause voter fatigue (LeDuc, Richard and Norris, 2014).

Although there are vigorous debates in Switzerland just as there are in any country, this is a consensus-oriented country following the concordance model of government. There is no such thing as an Official Opposition, rather all the main parties are seen to be part of the Government, coming together in the national interest, albeit from their different viewpoints and interests. It is unsurprising therefore that there is a consensual, pluralist and discourse-oriented focus in politics - opposition is respectful and rational and there is very little evidence of personal or negative campaigning, While the rise of the conservative and anti-immigrant SVP in recent decades might appear disruptive and populist, it seems to have had little impact in terms of reducing the quality of the debate generally. Further, as they have a member of the Federal Council, the SVP leader serves at the highest level of Government (Esser, Humprecht and Büchel, 2012).

## 5.4.2 Media system

### 5.4.2.1 Regional differences

The most significant difference in the Swiss media market, as compared to other European markets, is attributable to there being four official languages in the country. German is spoken by more than 63%, French just over 20%, Italian and Romansch less than 5%. English is widely spoken as a second, common or business language. Significantly, where a Swiss from one language region wishes to communicate with another, the preferred vehicle is usually English, rather than one of the official languages of Switzerland. 40% of the population regularly uses more than one language. There are clear regional differences in culture and popular opinion, as is evident by polling and a careful analysis of referendum and election results.

Furthermore, a substantial minority of Swiss residents look to the larger neighbour with whom they share a language (France, Germany or Italy as the case may be) to broaden the otherwise somewhat insular Swiss point of view. The Reuters Institute Annual Survey (2020) showed that 24% of people in the German speaking part also get their news from outlets in Germany. In the Suisse Romande, the French speaking part, that percentage rises to 36%. Thus, the cultural borders of Switzerland are more porous than they might appear, and Swiss publications do not have such a strong command of the attention of Swiss residents as they might in other countries. However, it is rare for Swiss to read a Swiss publication from another language region (Udris et al., 2020).

Like Germany (and unlike France), the capital city is not the centre of all political and commercial life in Switzerland. Different industries in Switzerland are widely distributed. For example, the centre of Swiss media is in Zurich, also a wholesale financial centre, with some private banking remaining in Geneva. The Government is in Bern, and there are world class

centres of academic excellence in St Gallen, Lausanne and Lugano, as well as Zurich. International organisations are mainly based in Geneva.

### 5.4.2.2 Broadcasting

Some 65% of Swiss residents watch TV daily, and the public channels dominate the market, with (depending on the region) a 25-30% market share. 60% of the population however separately watch non-Swiss TV, primarily from the neighbouring country speaking their language – Germany, France, or Italy (Media Landscapes 2015). Private TV originating in Switzerland, with a market share of about 1%, has never been able to support itself financially by advertising and since 2008 it has been supported by a share of the license fee, in exchange for accepting regulation of standards of journalistic quality.

Switzerland has a low consumption of TV, watching an average of 114 minutes. The dominant public broadcaster, SRG/SSR, is financed by a SFr. 1.3bn licence fee levied on households at SFr. 335 per annum. It also receives 37% of total advertising expenditures in Switzerland. Originally SRG/SSR had a total broadcast monopoly, but permissions were granted in 1983 for private FM radio and in 1993 for private television channels (Statista 2023).

The licence fee (Sfr 1bn) was the subject of a referendum campaign in 2018, in which the public voted to retain it by a 72% majority. Much of the argument revolved around the network's support for cultural and to a lesser extent geographical diversity, and the public broadcaster has subsequently responded by further broadening its offer.

### 5.4.2.3 Press

Linguistic and cultural differences mean that media outlets are regionalised, although ownership is not.  Although newspapers are distributed across the language barriers across Switzerland, this serves primarily those whose mother tongue or connections are in a different region from that in which they live. There is no widely read national newspaper that publishes versions in the several languages. There are however more than 70 local and regional titles. Since 1990 the number of titles has fallen by 40%, although the aggregate circulation has reduced by only 13% (Bonfadelli et al., 2012b).

The German-speaking population of Switzerland is much larger than any other and as a consequence there is more diversity and quality in the press in that part of the country (Eisenegger, 2020).

Three large media organisations, Tamedia, Ringier and Neue Zürcher Zeitung, dominate the market. Together they own over 82% of the print market in the German speaking part of Switzerland, 89% in the French and 68% in the Italian parts. These companies own similar

proportions of the online market as well. Ownership of the print media has been shown to have very little effect on the quality of the news output (Udris et al., 2020; Vogler, Udris and Eisenegger, 2020).

Competition from online and from freesheets has increased the financial pressure on traditional media outlets. Indeed, after only a few years the freesheet 20 Minuten, with its sister 20 Minutes, has become the most read newspaper in Switzerland, also enjoying the largest advertising revenue of any Swiss publication. It is tabloid in its content and style. (Reuters DNR 2021).

The further deterioration of revenues due to pressure from online media has driven a significant search for cost savings and with the very substantial concentration of ownership of print media, the inevitable consequence has been an increase in the sharing of news content between outlets. The University of Zurich 2020 annual review of media content records an increase in shared content of 7% since 2017. This is an important shift in a country that has historically set great store by its marked political and geographic diversity.

The press prior to the 1980s tended to be politically partisan, though in recent years these affiliations have largely disappeared.  Udris notes however that the squeeze on operating margins of traditional media caused by the competition from online advertising has rendered the independent press vulnerable to influence by well-funded right wing populist parties. These parties try to use their ability to place political advertising to influence the editorial content of influential newspapers. In this context they cite the politicisation by the SVP of the Weltwoche and the Basler Zeitung and a failed attempt to do the same with the highly influential Neue Zürcher Zeitung. These scholars go on to suggest that media attention to referendum campaigns correlates with previous salience, populist involvement and, importantly, political advertising spend (Udris, Eisenegger and Schneider, 2016b).

In 2020 when coronavirus arrived, interest in the news increased and so did digital subscriptions. But when advertising revenues dropped sharply, many Swiss media firms have had to introduce short time working or request state support, which was forthcoming, in the amount of SFr. 30m. This has accelerated a trend in advertising which has seen online advertising revenues surpass those of traditional print and broadcast media for the first time in 2020 (Eisenegger, 2020; Bonfadelli and Meier, 2021).

**5.4.2.4 Journalism culture**

There is no requirement for a formal training in journalism to practise as a journalist in Switzerland and indeed professional training is less common than it is in other comparable nations. For the most part, on the job training and apprenticeship have in the past been the main methods of education, although this is changing: in recent years just over half of journalists now have university degrees in the subject.  Even though 20% of the population of Switzerland is foreign, 94% of journalists in the country are Swiss, and 92% grew up in Switzerland.

Journalists in Switzerland tend to be somewhat older than in Germany, France and certainly the UK, with the average age of print journalists being 45.

A 2008 survey showed that 95% of Swiss journalists perceived their role predominantly as a neutral reporter of facts, perhaps with some analysis, acting as a guide for the interested citizen. Fewer Swiss journalists (78%) would see their mission as a watchdog, uncovering scandals and abuses of power. Fewer still (45%) regard their role as providing a voice to the weak.  Although most media do not have identified political allegiances these days, just over half of journalists in a 2008 survey said that the organisation for which they work is guided by political or ideological views. Two thirds of journalists in Switzerland identify themselves politically as being somewhat to the left of centre (Bonfadelli et al., 2012b).

**5.4.3 Trust**

Trust generally in Switzerland is high. In a study conducted in 2009 49% of Swiss people agreed with the proposition 'most people can be trusted'. This compares with 42% in Germany, 30% in the UK and 18% in France (OurWorldinData.org, 2014).

Moreover, an unusually high proportion of Swiss (85%) are satisfied with (or neutral about) their government. The corresponding figure in Germany is 65%, the UK 35% and in France 41%. The world average is 37% (Gallup World/OECD 2022).

The picture regarding trust in the media is more nuanced. Swiss and Germans report high levels of trust in the media *they use* (58% and 62%) but lower levels of trust (51%, 53%) in the media more generally.  Seen another way, more than two thirds of Swiss trust the TV news in their language area, the relevant regional newspaper, or the quality newspaper in their part of the country. That said, all these levels, while similar to those in Germany, are 10-20 percentage points higher than in the UK and France. (See tables in Chapter 7).  Swiss levels of trust in social media, measured by Reuters DNR 2022, (at 20%) while lower than their trust in other forms of media, are still higher than in other countries (6-14%) (Eisenegger, 2020).

Arlt identifies a factor driving mistrust in the media, based on a populist anti-élite narrative associated with the largest political party, the SVP. She also found that this phenomenon was much less marked in those with a preference for the (public service) national broadcaster as the primary source of their news. If we assume that the public broadcaster's output generally conforms to elite opinion, this finding supports the view that people tend only to trust media with whose political positions they agree (Arlt, 2019).

The Harvard/WVS electoral integrity project ranked 160 countries by the perception among their populace of the integrity of elections in their respective countries. This reinforced the observations about trust set out above, with Germany ranked at 6th, Switzerland 10th, France 19th, and the UK at 40th of the countries assessed (Norris and Grömping, 2019).

**5.5 Overview and summary**

Despite differences in their political system, political participation is falling in all the countries except Germany, where it is increasing.

All media systems are affected broadly in the same way by the migration of readership and advertising revenue to online news delivery. This has happened faster in the UK than elsewhere as online news subscriptions now reach more than twice as many people as the print versions. The shift to digital increases competition and reduces the funds available for journalism and newsgathering. In all countries the historic links between media outlets and political parties have been weakening, though Switzerland aside, most publications do have a known position on the political spectrum. In Switzerland that character is largely regional in nature.

Switzerland and the UK both have overwhelmingly dominant public service broadcasters, supported only from state funds and enjoying high levels of trust and reach. Regulation mandates impartiality and is conducted at a national level. In Germany there are more channels, all of whom carry advertising, and regulation is conducted at the local state level. France has more channels still, following its policy of pluralism as a method of regulating the output.

Public broadcasters in Germany, Britain and Switzerland all dominate the sector and attract large audiences, in contrast to France, where the audiences, as a proportion of the population are considerably smaller, and a private broadcaster has a slightly larger audience than the main PSB channel. In Switzerland the public tends also to watch news and current affairs from the neighbouring country whose language they speak.

Switzerland and Germany both have higher levels of newspaper usage, much of which is secured by subscription, whereas readership of printed and online news in France Germany and the UK's is 33% lower than that in Switzerland (Schranz, Schneider and Eisenegger, 2018).

The press in the UK is national and is highly competitive. There are well known star journalists on the political beat both in the press and on TV, who compete among themselves, as well as on behalf of their organisations. In the other countries the national press sector is smaller, though more significant in opinion formation in the political arena. In France the national press is relatively small and while it remains influential with the elites, readership is declining. Regional titles are strong in France, Germany and Switzerland, for different reasons, with magazines concentrating on local issues, lifestyle and sport, most notably in France.

The culture of opinion journalism in France is of the free and open exchange of ideas, rather than the support for a known political line. Wealthy people own media outlets in France and

in some cases use them to promote their own ideas. The search for the national interest pervades political journalism in Germany. This contrasts with the UK, where there is an adversarial tradition.

The German and Swiss press have a strong tradition of accuracy, with articles being checked with colleagues and even with interviewees to ensure the facts are right. There are regulatory bodies who hear complaints against media outlets. The media enjoys higher levels of trust in these countries than in the UK and France. In France, pluralism is encouraged by the authorities, coupled with strong laws protecting individual privacy and unjustified attacks on public officials. In Switzerland there is a tradition of factual reporting. The PSBs are trusted more in Germany (67%) and Switzerland (71%) than in France (53%) and the UK (55%) (Reuters DNR 2022).

The British and French media, especially those who form elite opinion, are overwhelmingly based in the capital city. In Germany major national newspapers are based in large secondary cities, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich rather than Berlin, and in Switzerland the newspaper industry is entirely regionalised, with most media organisations based in Zurich, Lucerne Geneva and Lausanne rather than in Berne. Gaber, in a comparative study of the UK and Australia, suggests that where media organisations are centralised, as they are in the UK, competition is enhanced (Gaber and Tiffen, 2018).

**Table 8.  Print use, paid online news, PSB audience, news from social media.**

| Category Description | UK | France | Germany | Switzerland |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Weekly print newspaper reach** | 17% | 15% | 26% | 40% |
| **Online news subscriptions** | 9% | 11% | 14% | 18% |
| **Watched PSB in last week** | 50% | 36% | 50% | 68% |
| **Use Facebook for news** | 19% | 39% | 17% | 27% |

(% of adults) (Reuters DNR 2022)

## Chapter 6 - Methodological approach

**Introduction**

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which differences in media output are influenced by political systems, media structures, or journalism culture.

Despite the forces of globalisation, and the influence in Europe of the European Union, a transnational organisation, it remains the case that media systems are predominantly national (rather than international) in character. The dominant broadcaster is usually supported and regulated by state institutions. Newspapers with a large international reach, such as the Financial Times, are few, and have small specialist audiences. Domestic news dominates all mainstream outlets. Therefore, the chosen unit of comparison in this study is the nation state (Albæk et al., 2014).

Differences in media output in a particular country are usually dominated by considerations of salience, which will depend primarily on domestic events that will differ from events in another country. Thus, it is usually impossible to control for this externality in an international comparison of media behaviour. The pandemic afforded an unusual opportunity to look at the media's treatment of a phenomenon which was equally salient in most, if not all, European countries.

Comparing media output in normal times presents very significant challenges. Very large amounts of published and broadcast material need to be collected and classified in order reliably to identify systemic or persistent national differences in the output, and the results are obscured or confused by the noise generated from daily national variance in issue salience. The pandemic was, in late 2020, undoubtedly the most important and salient public policy issue in all the countries being studied. Everywhere thousands of people were dying, hospitals and public health systems were at breaking point and unprecedented restrictions were being imposed on the movement of people and the operations of businesses. In this study, this variable, salience, can be isolated and controlled for. In all cases governments were seeking to maximise their success in dealing with the pandemic and, it must be assumed, claim implicitly the political credit for its performance. Furthermore, as we shall see, government communication lay at the heart of the efforts to get citizens to do as much as possible to maintain public health.

So why choose the UK, France, Germany, and Switzerland?

These countries have many similarities. They are neighbours on the continent of Europe. They are all, by international standards, politically stable democracies, relatively wealthy with substantial economies, internationally engaged, with similar levels of inequality. France and Germany are members of the EU, Switzerland and the UK are not, though both have close ties to the Union, and many of their laws converge. All have a substantial regulated

public service broadcaster. In all countries the media face similar economic challenges. All have very high degrees of penetration of the internet and the use of social media (Reuters DNR 2022).

In addition to their official languages, English is widely used as a second language, especially among the élites in these countries. All are in the top quartile for English proficiency (English First, 2022). This facilitates a shared understanding of scientific research, 90% of which is published in English (Di Bitetti and Ferreras, 2017). The science was an important part of the rationale for Government action and therefore also an important part of the media coverage.

Why choose November 2020 for the comparison of the pandemic-related output of the media?

While COVID-19 was a global phenomenon, prevalence and indeed case fatality rates in a particular country were dependent on the interventions of democratically accountable government agencies. The chosen period is one during which all European countries were facing the same huge challenge with the pandemic, were using the same interventions to control it, and with broadly the same degree of success and failure. (See Table 13 in Chapter 7). The choice of the period of the COVID pandemic, and a moment within it when all these countries were experiencing similar outcomes, isolates and allows a degree of comparison of national differences in media scrutiny. To the extent that the authorities fall short of expectations, it is journalists, acting in their watchdog role, who ought to be bringing this to the attention of the public.

There are important differences, in theory, regarding the level of government responsible for health policy and interventions. Public health policy is made nationally in France, however under constitutional rules in Germany, Switzerland and the UK, responsibility for health lies at the regional level, with the German Länder, the Swiss Cantons and the UK's four nations. As a practical matter however, policy was finally made at the national level in each country, with a certain amount of friction and/or argument with the local bodies in each case.

The similarities between these countries, not only in respect of the pandemic, but also in terms of their place in the world, living standards, economic conditions and measures of inequality and transparency, suggest that the chosen methodology is an example of the most similar system design, specifically and additionally controlling for some of the international, and all of the subject matter dimensions from the list of variables that might explain differences in media content. (see Chapter 7, Table 10, Table 13) (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

Pfetsch, addressing the conclusions of researchers using the 2008-9 large-N study of attitudes, cautions that differing political circumstances (such as elections) can skew the responses to survey questions. In the case of the present study, 2020 was not an election year in any of the countries studied, with German federal elections a year in the future, and elections in the other countries even further away (Pfetsch, 2014).

The remaining drivers of differing media output in each country should therefore be the political environment, business and professional culture in which journalists operate. These factors are the intended object of comparison.

This is multi-method research, triangulating the phenomenon to be explained in three different ways. Qualitative differences are identified by a review of the output of the media and explanations sought from the accounts by practitioners of the influences on their work at the time. These are set into the context of the political and media systems of the countries to assist the search for correlations and explanations (Flick, 2018).

The research is conducted with no preconceived hypotheses as to differences or causation. It is thus in the tradition of grounded research. The research design offers the opportunity more effectively to identify those aspects of national political systems, differences in the ecology of the print media, journalistic cultures and norms as the candidate determinants of the amount, and style, of media coverage of the pandemic in each country.

The empirical part of this research is in three parts, each designed to shed light on a major component of the culture of political reporting. The first compared the structure of the political and institutional environment in which political journalists work in each of the countries. This was followed by a review and analysis of a snapshot of some of the media's actual output. This provided the context for a number of semi structured interviews with practitioners with a view to understanding the social, professional, and institutional influences on their work during the pandemic.

The first part used published sources and past research for statistical and other evidence of the landscape. The second part reviewed a sample of media outlets in each country and assessed and compared the output applying a common coding framework. Thirdly, practitioners (journalists, editors, broadcasters, and official spokesmen) with direct first-hand experience of the coverage of the pandemic were interviewed based on a semi-structured questionnaire.

Considered together, the evidence collected by these three methods is designed to show, for each country, differences, and interactions along seven dimensions. These are derived from the hierarchy described by Shoemaker, modified to reflect the themes that emerged from the interviews with practitioners (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

- the national political systems and civic trust
- the culture of public and private media outlets
- the system of regulation
- public demand
- pressure from Government and informal networks
- professional culture of journalism; fact and opinion
- social media – usage and influence

## 6.1 The institutional, political and health landscapes

The cultural influences on the interface between politics and the media in any one country depend on several factors. Some stem from the system of government itself - how local or how remote, how responsive, how accountable. Others depend on the impact of different types of media, the press, the PSBs and social media. The consumption of different types of media is compared here. Trust is important too, not only levels of interpersonal or civic trust, but also the inherent trust in institutions and media narratives. Finally, since media coverage is compared during a specific month, statistics are included on how the pandemic had evolved in each country to that date, and how successfully that country's Government had been handling it.

This is the focus of the first part of the research, which uses existing sources of information to describe the media and political landscape in each country, as well as the state of the pandemic there in the run up to November 2020.

The tables that follow in Chapter 7 set out, for each country being studied:

> The political structure – Table 9
> Descriptions of head of Government, voting systems including the use of referenda, the classifications of media ad political systems in the literature, and data on citizen participation in elections.

> Economic profile – Table 10.
> Measures of GDP, development, inequality, transparency and internet penetration

> Media statistics – Table 11
> Reach of newspapers, online news, PSB and social media. Reach and trust of PSBs before during and after the pandemic.

> Attitude and Trust - Table 12
> Trust in fellow citizens, the Government, the news in general, the news from the PSB and the news from social media

> State of the pandemic in late autumn 2020 – Table 13.
> Daily and cumulative cases and deaths, stringency of restrictions, and the state of public opinion.

## 6.2 The media's output

### 6.2.1 Research design

This second part of the research is the analysis of the coverage of the pandemic in certain media outlets during a short period when it was at its height. The sample was drawn from the most significant types of media outlet in each country. The comparison, across all the countries, consisted of an assessment of 20 television news bulletins and 60 issues of selected newspapers during November 2020.

This section explains the research design, how the media were selected, what data was collected, and how it was analysed. The findings are separately reported in Chapter 7.

The objective was to identify broad differences at the country level as to how the media reported and commented, both on the pandemic itself and the attempts of the authorities to bring it under control. The research design therefore necessitated the choice of a period when the background environment in which the journalists were operating was as similar as possible across all the four countries, leaving mainly the inherent political, professional, and cultural differences to explain the differing output.

International comparisons of cases and death rates sometimes gave politicians and officials reasons to claim success, but these successes were often fleeting. There was for example a widely held view in Europe over the summer of 2020 that the pandemic was on the way out; previous lockdowns having prevented a second wave. Regulations and restrictions were being relaxed everywhere. This optimism turned out to be misplaced. In September cases began to rise again everywhere. By November case numbers and deaths were heading towards a winter peak that was to be even higher than the first. Vaccines were on the way but were not to arrive for several months yet, and it was not yet known how effective they would turn out to be in preventing severe illness and death.

All the countries that form the present study were in this position in November 2020.  Some, notably Germany, were performing better than others in terms of cases and deaths, but the direction of travel was the same everywhere. (See Table 13 in Chapter 7).

In short, by November 2020 the pandemic had given the lie to the previous confidence of politicians and commentators alike. The pandemic had presented unprecedented challenges to systems of population health and therefore were posing questions to politicians and commentators that were quite new. Many had to familiarise themselves for the first time with concepts from epidemiology and risk management generally. Journalists had to render these concepts accessible to the general population and respond, to a greater or lesser extent, to public opinion and alarm.

During autumn and early winter 2020, the role of journalists in explaining the pandemic and holding the powerful to account for their actions in controlling it, could never have been more important or necessary. Rarely would the normative environment for politicians and indeed journalists be stress-tested as it was to be in November 2020.

The total media environment is now becoming more hybrid, as pointed out by Chadwick. Newspapers, broadcast material, blogs, tweets, and other social media entries all form a pattern of mutual influence, persist for much longer than before and remain searchable and available for many years. Unmediated social media is doubtless a significant driver of public opinion, and indeed the attention and maybe also the opinion of journalists (Chadwick, 2017).

The evaluation of differences of political and media culture between countries needs in the first instance to be placed in the context of a sample of the each of the main types of media that is as far as possible representative as well as comparable. The most important media outlets were identified - in the main those of each type with the largest audiences.

The output of a sample of the professional media was chosen to indicate differences in the political and media culture in each country. For each country the research was conducted on the main TV evening news, two large circulation quality newspapers with political affiliations that were internationally comparable, (albeit not representative of the whole spectrum of political opinion) and one large circulation popular newspaper. The rationale for these choices is described below, in sections 6.2.2 and 6.2.3.

There were some significant international news stories in that month, notably the deaths of Maradona and Sean Connery, as well as the first signs of a breakthrough in the vaccine research, however the lack of variation in the pandemic coverage over the different days assessed suggested that this sample was reasonably likely to be typical of the media coverage in each country at the time.

It should be admitted however that robustness could be improved by widening the sample to cover more months, and more outlets this capturing different phases of the pandemic when the behaviour of the authorities and the attitude of journalists and their audiences might have been different. There would however have been a cost in the form of new and confusing factors, such as national differences in the evolution of the pandemic and differences in extraneous salient news items.

The aim was not to provide an exhaustive and statistically robust comparison of all the media output in each country during the pandemic. Rather it was to provide a context for the interviews with practitioners.

Five days of output were assessed and, with minor exceptions, the same five days in each country and across each outlet.

The days sampled were weekdays, and widely separated (first Monday, second Tuesday, and so on). Political news is usually concentrated on the working week, whereas the weekend coverage tends to be less immediate, more reflective. In fact, there were five Mondays in that

November, and so to stay within the month, the days Monday 2nd, Tuesday 10th, Wednesday 18th, Thursday 26th and Monday 30th were chosen. [2]

Each outlet was analysed, first by determining the proportion of total news and op-ed coverage specifically dedicated to the pandemic and its management.

The content of COVID coverage was further coded to show the proportion belonging to each of the following categories: -

A Reporting, substantially factual, of:

 Policy - government announcements, justification, background. (A1)

 Prevalence – national and local statistics on deaths, cases, increases and decreases. Epidemiological forecasts, reproduction rates (A2)

 International comparisons – news about how the pandemic was developing or is being handled in other countries (A3)

 Reporting of political moves. This includes steps by political parties, including regional politics involving Länder, Cantons or equivalent.

B Reports of the impact of the disease. This refers to human impact, on people or families, hospitals, schools, and universities.

C Reports of the impact on business and the economy; companies, airports, tourism, layoffs, unemployment.

D Opinion pieces:

 supportive of government policy (D1)

 substantially balanced assessment of government policy or action (D2)

 critical of government action, whether for being too stringent or too permissive (D3)

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[2] There was one small exception owing to unavailability at the publisher of certain editions of BILD newspaper in Germany; In this case, the dates were Monday 2nd, Friday 6th, Wednesday 11th, Tuesday 17th and Thursday 26th. Two of these dates are the same as for the other publications. The other three were also distributed on different days of the week. All the dates are non-consecutive. There was no evidence that the structure or style of the paper differed between the days sampled.

E Reporting of the science. This includes pieces about the value of masks and social distancing, development, effectiveness, and risks of vaccines, not their deployment, which is policy and therefore A1

F Coverage of pressure groups, mostly business-related. These tend to be longer-form articles and reports, often placed by or in response to an industry pressure group that is asking for government support or a piece suggesting that the regulations be changed to help a particular sector.

Depending on the context, different parts of a single article could be allocated to different categories. The coding framework was set in advance after a pilot test on two newspapers and one broadcast (Deacon et al., 2021). The modifications made after that pilot are described below.

The analysis was conducted by a single individual (the author) reading the text in the original language, being fluent both in French and German.  This part of the study does therefore depend on the assessment and therefore judgement of just one person and while the assessment provides valuable context to the interview evidence, it accordingly does not support firm generalised conclusions. While there was no need for a check of inter-coder reliability, biases are probably inescapable, but there is the offsetting advantage that the coding judgements were more likely to be applied consistently across all the media and countries being compared. The extraction of the material and coding took place over an eight-week period at the end of 2021 (Lacy et al., 2015).

It was important to choose outlets for analysis that had large circulations or audiences, to reflect the mainstream culture of journalism in each country. The circulation figures given are for the printed version. Depending on the business strategy of the publication, the digital subscription base or online readership could be very much higher.

As this is a comparative study, the aim was also, as far as possible, to match the political orientations of the newspaper selections in the comparator countries. In terms of political orientation, the broadcast outlets chosen had either adopted or were legally required to be impartial, and in the case of the press the avowed political orientation of the publications chosen was of the centre or centre-right, mirroring that of the governments in these countries at the time.

The following sections describe how the media were chosen for analysis.

### 6.2.2 Television

In each of these countries, as with many others in Europe, most people turn to the evening television bulletins for their coverage of the main issues of the day. In the UK, Germany, and Switzerland the most-watched news channel is also a public service broadcaster. In France this is not quite the case: France 2, the PSB, has a 39% market share compared to its private

competitor BFM TV News, which has 40% (Reuters DNR 2021). Despite this slightly lower market share, France 2's output was assessed for reasons of consistency. The research in all the other countries assessed public service broadcasters and introducing a private one in the case of France would have introduced a confounding factor to correct for a very small difference in audience share.

The main evening bulletins were the BBC's News at 10, the ARD's Tagesthemen, France 2's Journal de 20h, and SFR's nightly news. Again, the bulletins of the five non-consecutive days were assessed.

BBC1's News at 10 is its flagship evening news bulletin, 30 minutes in length, and timed to lead into local news and Newsnight, a current affairs magazine show on its sister channel BBC2. It has an audience of six million, about 10% of the UK population, over twice that of ITV News at the same time. (BBC, ITV published figures 2020). 50% of the UK population watch it in any given week (Reuters DNR 2022).

ARD's Tagesthemen is broadcast at 10.15pm, for 30-35 minutes. unlike the more popular (and, significantly, shorter) Tagesschau, it tends towards more long form segments. It has an audience of 2.5 million and is regarded as one of the most important vehicles for opinion formation in Germany. As a news organisation it is watched by 50% of Germans at least once a week (Reuters DNR 2022).

France 2's Journal de 20h, as the name suggests, airs at 8pm and has an audience of 6 million, 10% of the population.

The Swiss RTS 1 Romande news is the French version of the national TV news service, shown at 730 each evening. It runs very slightly longer than 30 minutes. It has a dominant audience share in the Romande, being seen by 72% of the population at least once a week. The figure for the corresponding broadcast in the German speaking region (which is much larger) is 64% (Reuters DNR 2022).


**6.2.3 Press**

**6.2.3.1. Popular newspapers**

After television, the popular press is the next most important media outlet, at least in terms of readership. The Sun, and BILD were assessed, along with the Swiss 20 Minutes which is now read by more people than Blick. In France there is no tabloid press as it is known in the UK, but the nearest equivalent is 20 Minutes.

The Sun is Europe's best-selling tabloid newspaper, selling 1,210,915 print copies daily according to Wordsrated 2023 (wordsrated.com/European-newspaper-publishing-statistics). Like the Times it is owned by NewsCorp. Over the years it has taken sides and has been

involved in many controversies, most involving celebrities, but despite its frequent political statements and even campaigns, alongside both main political parties, its editorial line is commonly regarded as being conservative and nationalist in tone. There would be a case for considering the freesheet Metro instead, as it has recently surpassed the Sun in terms of readership. Metro is only distributed in commuter stations in large centres of population and is firmly apolitical, carrying no opinion columns, and much of the news coverage is celebrity driven. Metro practises a different sort of journalism from the rest of the mainstream media and it would be an outlier in any account of the political/media interface in the UK. The Sun, which is also a truly national general newspaper using a more typical form of popular journalism, was therefore preferred for this study.

The French 20 Minutes is the most read newspaper in France. It is distributed free of charge online and to urban commuters in main railway stations. It has a print circulation in Paris alone of 805,000 (IPSOS). It claims strict neutrality and rigorous fact checking in its journalism. It is owned by French private interests and is not connected with the Swiss newspaper of the same name.

Germany's BILD, published by Axel Springer, sells 1,150,000 print copies daily (Accenture, 2021). Its headquarters is now in Berlin, having moved there from Hamburg in 2018. It publishes 32 local editions in Germany. Despite its claim to be independent it is generally accepted in Germany that it is conservative and nationalist in its approach. In recent years the editorial line has tended to be critical of the centrist Angela Merkel.

The Swiss 20 Minutes (20 Minuten in the German part) is the most widely read daily newspaper in Switzerland, with a print circulation in both main languages of 593,955. It is tabloid in format and is distributed to commuters free of charge. It is majority owned by Tamedia, a company with a 41% share of the Swiss press market Tamedia has not been known to take a political line, although in the specific case of Switzerland the consolidation of its editorial offices into two has been criticized for a uniformity of coverage that does not reflect the special and unusual diversity of the Swiss communities they serve (Eisenegger et al., 2019; Bonfadelli and Meier, 2021).

### 6.2.3.2 Quality newspapers

The coverage of two quality newspapers in each country was then assessed. This reflects the considerable impact that these outlets have on élite opinion and the government agenda. It should be noted that at the time all these countries had centre/centre-right governments and the papers chosen were either determinedly neutral or had tendencies towards the right. Whilst there is a case, in terms of political balance, for choosing a left- and a right-leaning news outlet in each country, this would have introduced an avoidable distortion, as the political positioning of the main quality newspapers is not comparable between these countries. Choosing newspapers with a similar alignment to the government of the day also

tends to understate the level of criticism in the press more generally, although the same approach was used in each of the comparator countries.

For the UK the candidate quality newspapers are the Guardian, the Times, and the Telegraph. (The Daily Mail, which is in some respects a popular newspaper, outsells the three newspapers selected, but as there is no equivalent in the other countries of the study, so it was not included in the assessment.)

The Times is undoubtedly more centrist than the other two and positions itself as the newspaper of record of the UK. The Telegraph, always firmly to the right, has its equivalent in France and to a lesser extent in Germany, so it was decided to assess the Telegraph and the Times, representing the right and the centre-right of the political spectrum.

NewsCorp's Times has a weekly circulation of 365,880, slightly more than the 317,817 figure for the Telegraph, owned by the Barclay family, and considerably more than the Guardian, 105,000 (ABC 2023, reported in Press Gazette February 2023). All have a substantial digital subscriber base in addition (Reuters DNR 2021).

In Germany Die Welt and the Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) were assessed. These differ from each other politically and regionally; The former being based in Bonn, the latter in Munich. The differences need to be seen in a German context however where political differences mostly lie within a narrow range. Die Welt is centre-right, being published by Axel Springer, whereas SZ is more centrist, though its main base is in deeply conservative Bavaria. Die Welt had in 2018 print sales of 165,000 and the SZ had 361,507 (ivw.de). The Frankfurter Allgemeine was considered, as it has a somewhat larger circulation than Die Welt, but for reasons of political and geographic balance the Welt and SZ were preferred.

In France Le Monde and the Figaro were assessed. Figaro is as firmly to the right as the Telegraph in the UK, though with considerably larger sales (331,927). Le Monde is seen as an establishment paper, the most trusted in France.  Its print sales (393,109) are greater than that of Figaro, and it has a news website that is one of the 50 most visited in France. Despite being privately owned, its editorial stance is constitutionally guaranteed to be controlled by its journalists and the paper can be said to be neutral politically (www.acpm.fr).

In Switzerland assessment was made of the TagesAnzeiger, the main quality daily for the German speaking cantons. Based in Zurich, it has a print circulation of 130,957 within the German-speaking population, which is 5 million. TagesAnzeiger is part of the dominant Tamedia group.

For the French speaking region, Le Temps was assessed. Based in Lausanne with a print circulation of 36,391, it claims a readership of 84,000 and has an equivalent position to that of the TagesAnzeiger in relation to its own language community. It is privately owned and has no political affiliation.

**6.2.4 Research challenges with the TV and press analysis**

The material assessed was either physical copies or microfiche in the case of newspapers or a video recording of broadcasts. Almost all the material was available from the British Library. The exception was BILD newspaper which had to be purchased from the publisher. In all cases the print, rather than the digital version of the newspaper was assessed.

A pilot test of the coding methodology was conducted. A diary was kept of the decisions made during the media analysis. These were all made in the light of experience with the first two or three newspapers or broadcasts. It was decided after the pilot to introduce three new categories: A4 – the reporting of political manoeuvring, E - coverage of the science, and F – coverage of pressure by interest groups. The whole sample was then reassessed using the modified categories (Deacon et al., 2021).

A decision had to be made about whether advertising would be treated as part of the newspaper or not. It was decided after the pilot that it should be treated as part of the publication, so a page that was 50% A1 and 50% advertising would be classified as a 50% A1 page. This provided a basis for comparing print content with the public service broadcasters which carried no advertising and comparing papers that relied on advertising and those who relied on subscription or digital income.

It became clear while reviewing the British quality newspapers that there would be an issue with how to treat the sport and business sections, which in some cases were in separate sections of the paper, in others integrated with other types of news. A decision was made after the pilot to ignore the sports sections throughout but treat the business sections as an integral part of the analysis. The pandemic clearly had a massive impact on sport organisations, with many competitions having to be cancelled or conducted behind closed doors. However sports coverage was usually about the actual sport events that remained, rather than the impact of public health interventions.  By contrast the impact on business was pervasive and differed widely. It was a significant consideration for governments politicians and journalists alike, and therefore the coverage was *about* the effects of the pandemic on business and *about* Government actions. Lifestyle and arts supplements, magazines also formed no part of the assessment, to make the figures as comparable as possible. Letters pages were treated as non-COVID coverage, (since journalistic input was only the selection of letters for publication). Guest opinion pages were assessed.

After the pilot testing the classification and consequent assessments were usually straightforward and unproblematic. It was permitted to code a single article as falling into more than one category and this resolved most issues.

Examples of some of the more difficult classifications were as follows:

- In the French press there were many accounts of disobedience towards the rules. These were coded as human impact, not as politics or policy.

- A German profile on a vaccine manufacturer was eventually classified as 100% COVID, 50% business coverage and 50% science.

- The Süddeutsche Zeitung is produced in Munich and on some days has a section devoted to the local area and its news. Since no other publication being assessed had such a section, and it did not carry very much coverage of the pandemic, it was decided to omit it altogether from the assessment.

- In Switzerland the TagesAnzeiger carried a long piece covering policy in Germany. Coverage of policy in foreign countries was relatively unusual so it did not merit a separate classification, so it was decided to allocate it 50% to policy, (as the target of the article was Swiss policy), and 50% to international comparisons (for that is what it contained).

- In the case of television bulletins, the section containing the headlines was omitted from the analysis because in most cases that broadly reflected the balance of the main articles of the bulletin, and in the cases where it did not, the classification of the main elements of the whole bulletin is the more significant to this study.

- Reports that mentioned the pandemic but were not about it were counted as non-COVID items.

- Amongst the Swiss programming there was an extended and uncritical interview with Alain Berset, then the Federal Health Minister. It was treated as policy coverage, rather than political or opinion.

- In the UK and France, coverage about possible future policy moves was coded as Policy, rather than opinion.

- In the UK there was often a gentle emphasis in the BBC's analysis coverage that the Government should 'do more', by providing more resources to protect people or bringing in stronger measures to control the pandemic. Where this was a clear statement, emphasised by the presenter, it was coded as opinion critical of the Government.

### 6.2.5 Generalisability

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs there are several aspects of the content analysis that suggest caution in deriving generalisations from the results. The aim was to provide context for the practitioner interviews which form the main evidential base for this study. The sample was a snapshot of different units of output, drawn from a single month when the

pandemic, itself a highly unusual event, was at its height. It will necessarily be untypical. Additionally, the newspapers were chosen, not to be representative of the whole political spectrum, but rather to be significant publications with a political alignment broadly resembling that of the government of the day. This is likely to understate the level of criticism of government policy that would be evident if other newspapers, especially those from the political left, had been included in the sample.

## 6.3. Research with practitioners.

### 6.3.1 Research design

The primary challenge of this phase was to ensure that the sample of practitioners was able fairly to represent the nature and style of the exchange between officials and political leaders and the reporting journalists, and more generally the culture surrounding political reporting in the media.

Sending out a standardised opinion survey to randomly selected individuals from different publications and broadcast organisations might have generated a satisfyingly large number of responses for analysis, enabling conclusions to be drawn that might appear to more robust statistically, however there would still be issues regarding the representativeness of the sample, given that participants would self-select among those who received the questionnaire. The most senior and experienced journalists, who would have most to contribute to a study of their work culture during an unprecedented event, would ipso facto be the least likely to complete a research questionnaire (Deacon et al., 2021).

It was therefore decided to invite for interview a smaller number of senior and knowledgeable people in key positions, aiming to achieve a fair account of professional experience and expertise in relation to the coverage of the pandemic both in the country and ideally in its neighbouring countries as well.

The format of the interviews, semi-structured with defined initial prompts, allowed a wide range of follow up questions designed to elicit a rich and broad account of the subject matter, more so than would have been available from a written survey. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.

### 6.3.2 Interviewee recruitment

This was purposive sampling, designed to recruit interviewees with a good level of seniority and an ability to situate the pandemic reporting in the context of the typical culture governing journalists in the subject countries (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Bryman, 2016; Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016).

The aim was to find interviewees had extensive experience in the field but who were nonetheless in the front line, as reporters or editors during the pandemic. Interviewees were chosen not only to be representative of the profession in each country, but also ideally to have an international perspective covering one or more of the other countries in the study.

Answering questions, particularly searching questions, from a university researcher is never going to be high on the daily list of priorities for a busy and/or senior journalist. In practice those who made themselves available often said that they did so because they believed that the topic was interesting and potentially important. Two of the interviewees were professional acquaintances of the researcher, although all came via personal networks and the snowball effect of recommendations made by other interviewees. There was therefore a degree of opportunism in the search, offset by the need to recruit an appropriate range of practitioners, so that their accounts, considered together, presented a reasonably accurate picture of journalism at the time.

Approximately half the approaches were successful. It was noticeable that despite several approaches, only one broadcast journalist in the UK made themselves available. (A director of the BBC was contacted and confirmed to the researcher that there was no policy prohibiting their participation, and it was simply a personal question of availability and interest).

In the event 22 practitioners were found who had different roles in different organisations during the pandemic. Many of them had experience in more than one of the countries being studied, and in more than one form of media. It is not appropriate therefore to classify them exclusively by the specific country or outlet of their connection. Most were in the later stages of their careers, being over 50 years of age. There were just two interviewees whose political allegiance was evident from the interview. Eight were female, reflecting very approximately the proportion in the profession.

Reviewing the methodological literature in a medical context Vasileiou suggested that saturation for qualitative interviews would be reached at sample sizes between 12 and 20. The Hagaman study, which reached a similar conclusion, covered cross-cultural research on multiple sites and in this respect resembled the present study. (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Hagaman and Wutich, 2017; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

As the interviews were completed the responses, with few exceptions, tended to converge around some common themes, and many of the responses coincided. This indicated that the sample had been big enough to generate reasonably reliable information for the study.

A decision was made at an early stage in the research design to offer anonymity to interviewees. The rationale was to ensure that the evidence of the interviews would not be influenced by considerations of how their employer, or the audience, might react to the observations being made. The descriptions that follow, along with those used in the reports of

what was said, have been drafted to preclude the exact identification of the speaker.  The interviewees can however be described as set out below.[3]

1.  Senior civil servant in the UK Cabinet office, with communications responsibility; teaches Government communications internationally.

2.  Award-winning German broadcaster, working in the UK. More than thirty years' experience, both within and outside Germany.

3.  Editor of a Sunday newspaper in the UK, with experience of one of the other countries in the study.

4.  Representative of trade body, former communications director of a political party and former political editor of newspaper in the UK.

5.  Senior British journalist working in France – long standing correspondent of a British newspaper.

6.  UK civil servant specialising in digital communications.

7.  French print journalist – senior business correspondent with 20 years' experience.

8.  European comment editor of UK daily with experience working in France, Germany, and UK, among other countries.

9.  British lobby journalist, former political editor of a popular newspaper.

10. Senior print journalist working in London for 20 years for a German outlet.

11. Spokesman for UK government department, former print journalist.

12. Former editor of quality UK newspaper.

13. Political editor of UK broadcaster with more than 20 years' experience with various networks.

14. Owner and presenter of leading Swiss talk radio station.

15. Editor of German news weekly with experience in UK.

16. EU Commissioner.

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[3] The names of all the interviewees are known to the researcher's supervisor who can confirm their experience and seniority.

17.  Journalist working in London for a Swiss newspaper. Ten years' experience both in Switzerland and overseas.

18.  Editor of Swiss quality newspaper.

19.  German broadcaster, editor of daily news show on public broadcaster in Germany.

20.  Senior journalist on UK quality newspaper, with 30 years working experience in France and Germany.

21.  Journalist working in London for a German quality newspaper.

22.  Swiss journalist - Berne correspondent during pandemic, former broadcaster with the national PSB.

### 6.3.3 Structure and conduct of the interviews, and handling of the data.

Practitioners were told in an email sent in advance that the purpose of the interview would be to understand and contextualise the differences revealed by the research to date, and thereby gain an understanding of the culture of political journalism in their country. The full questionnaire is shown in Appendix 2.

To take maximum advantage of the interviewees' experience, the interviews were semi-structured and conducted in three cases face to face, otherwise over Teams. They were in all cases conducted in English, though some expressions were clarified by reference to interviewees' first language if that was not English. No interviewees were excluded from the study for reasons of language, nor did it appear that those for whom English was not their mother tongue had any difficulty with responding to the questions.

The design and direction of the interview questions was based on the results of the first two parts of the research.

Questions covered audience demand, Government action, reduction of journalistic scrutiny, the role of opinion, treatment of politics, coverage of international comparisons, media ownership and regulation, external pressure and the emerging importance of the internet and especially social media. The aim was to uncover the normative influences, (whether from within media organisations or from generally accepted professional standards, efforts by government spokesmen and politicians to control the message in the national interest) and any resistance to that on the part of the media, perceptions of conflict, and dominance of one logic (political or media) over another (Cammarano and Medrano, 2014; Lengauer, Donges and Plasser, 2014).

The same initial questions and prompts were put to all interviewees; however, follow-up questions were asked, and issues or statements were further explored, to understand and compare as far as possible the whole culture and system of communication. Additionally, practitioners were asked about their own perceptions of international differences in the cultures of journalism.

Each interview, whether it took place in person or by videoconference, was recorded, using an independent device.

The audio file was given a code and uploaded into a cloud file accessible only from the researcher's computer.  The file was also uploaded into a transcription programme and a Word file produced. This was edited for manifest error and corrected. A copy was anonymised and saved for archive purposes.

### 6.3.4 Extracting and interpreting findings

The transcripts were first edited to remove material extraneous to the study, repetitions, words spoken by the interviewer, and social pleasantries. This reduced some 120,000 words of material by about 70%.

This part of the research was more a search for explanations and hypotheses by the assessment of data. The methodology is more in the tradition of grounded research to develop theory, or the generic inductive qualitative model, rather than statistical analysis. It seeks to advance knowledge and understanding by exploring the reasons why and in what ways the media output in each country differs from that in the other countries (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Hood, 2007; Bryman, 2016).

Even as the interviews were progressing, some themes began to emerge, so there was occasionally an opportunity to use subsequent interviews to explore and corroborate these themes. As a first step a larger number of candidate themes were considered and ultimately seven areas were identified within which to organise the responses of the interviewees. These were chosen to reflect the themes of the responses and the more important aspects and influences on the culture of journalism during the period. The aim was to bring together subsets of the responses that would shed light on the research questions of the study.

Factors that were external to media organisations included the political system, and the system of regulation in the country. Internal factors included the organisational and professional culture and the business context. The externalities of audience behaviour, such as the explicit demand for information, the pressures emanating from social media and other informal sources of data, alongside the pressure from networks of peers and the Government, these forces together formed a third aspect.

The seven areas of responses were separated and grouped into the following themes:

- national political systems and civic trust
- culture of public and private media outlets
- system of regulation, impartiality
- public demand
- pressure from Government and informal networks
- professional culture of journalism; restraint, fact and opinion
- social media – usage and influence

The substantive remarks by the interviewees on these topics (in their edited form) were then grouped under, the four country headings under each of the seven themes being studied. (Where the EU official had a relevant opinion, that evidence was added as a fifth 'country' category).

The themes emerging from these subsets were then easier to see and compare among the countries. Having begun with the 120,000 words of 22 verbatim transcripts, the material would finally be organised in about 30 national and thematic categories, each with 1000-2000 words of relevant accounts, from which conclusions could be drawn.

The interview questions were designed to provide a rich, thorough, and comparable account of the media's operations and influences during this historically significant event. Themes were extracted and analysed without prior theory development. The thematic analysis method is designed to develop promising hypotheses or explanations, rather than to confirm or reject hypotheses formed in advance (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Clarke, Braun and Hayfield, 2015).

The thematic analysis in this study centred on differences between the journalists' work in the subject countries as stated in the accounts given by practitioners. These accounts were contextualised against the actual media output assessed in the content analysis, and finally candidate explanations and conclusions were related to the political and media landscapes in the countries to reveal correlations and possibly causes. Together, the three sources of information, and the three comparisons would indicate the answers to the research questions; these are discussed in Chapter 8.

No one source or method would be determinative; the different comparisons would complement one another. However, only the practitioner interviews can shed light on the motivations lying behind the media output data. Methodologically this approach aims to increase the robustness of the conclusions by the triangulating three different methods (Morgan, 1998; Patton, 1999; Bryman, 2016; Deacon et al., 2021).

The findings set out in Chapter 7 are thus grounded in the data, rather than preconceived. This study is therefore in the tradition of grounded research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It differs methodologically to the extent that that the codes for the content research were substantially pre-determined, and the questions in the interviews were pre-set, necessarily

limiting the comparison and therefore the potential themes to certain aspects of the culture of political journalism.


### 6.3.5 Ethical clearance and retention of data

University ethics clearance was obtained with conditions. Conditions were satisfied and formal approval was obtained before recruitment of interviewees started.

A pre-interview email was sent to every interviewee explaining that it formed part of a doctoral research programme. An explanation was given of how data would be handled, and confidentiality assured.  University contacts were given, for verification or for any eventual problems were given. Consent was always obtained, in the form of an explicit oral confirmation by the interviewee before the interview proceeded. The interviewee was advised, that within a period of 30 days after the interview, they may withdraw their consent to these terms, in which case the recording and any transcript would have been destroyed. This period was chosen to strike a balance between ensuring the interviewee remained comfortable with the process, while avoiding the disruption to the analysis if permission to use some data is withdrawn long after the interview takes place. In no case was consent withdrawn.

The undertaking was given to the interviewee in writing not to identify them or publish information allowing third parties to identify them or their affiliation, or to attribute any quotation to their employer.  Such information will remain available to the researcher and to the University, who also undertake not to disclose it to third parties.

Permission was sought however generally to report remarks in the form 'a journalist from a quality newspaper in Germany said...', without naming the journalist or the newspaper. Exceptionally, if a particularly important observation were to be made, and attribution could be significant, express permission might be sought from the interviewee to include the specific quotation including its attribution. If this permission were to be withheld, the information would not be published. As it happened, no such request was made of any interviewee.

This approach has been chosen because in some cases the profile of the interviewee might be such that they could use the interview to push an agenda of their own.  Adopting the default position of confidentiality, and indeed anonymity, minimises this risk. In fact, no quotes were attributed to any interviewee in such a way that their identity could be revealed.

The recordings of interviews and full transcripts will be transferred to and held securely on the University's drives when this thesis is finalised. Until then, and while it is being processed, data was held on the researcher's own computer, under password protection. Data will be retained for five years, in accordance with university policy.

# Chapter 7 - Research results

## Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the three pieces of research, arranged under three headings.

Section 7.1 describes and compares the political landscape in each of the countries and sets some aspects of media usage and trust into the context of general trust in institutions and governments. Section 7.2 sets out the results of the review of the content of the television and press output in each country. In section 7.3 the results of the interviews with practitioners are described and contextualised under the seven thematic headings that emerged during the investigation.

## 7.1. Political, and economic comparison; differences in patterns of trust

The tables and commentary in this part of the research show, for each country, the substantially fixed political and economic structure within which media organisations function.

## 7.1.1 Political comparison

As has been described in Chapter 1, there are significant differences between the political systems of the countries being studied. See Table 9.

Germany and Switzerland share several important characteristics that distinguish them from the UK and France. These countries are federations, with significant powers assigned under the constitution to the Länder or cantons. Their constitutions were assessed by Lijphart as strong. They have significantly more accurate proportionate voting systems. Governments are invariably formed by coalitions, rather than being majoritarian with alternating major parties (Lijphart, 1999).

Swiss citizens vote frequently, which maybe the cause of low turnout in individual elections and appear to suggest lower political engagement. However, the system of direct democracy, with its frequent referenda, ensures that the many levels of government are forcibly and frequently made aware of the views of their citizens.

The UK has no written constitution but does have a scheme of devolution for each of its four component regions (nations, in the case of Wales and Scotland). France and the UK are for most political purposes highly centralised, with power being concentrated in their capitals. Significantly however in the context of this study, health is devolved, at least theoretically in Germany to the Länder, and in Switzerland to the Cantons and in the UK to Scotland, Wales

and Northern Ireland. French policy remained centralised in Paris. In the UK there was during the pandemic a substantial measure of similarity between the approaches subnational governments, whose policy largely differed only in minor matters of degree or timing of measures and restrictions.

In practice, as will be seen later in the interviews with practitioners, in all these countries, despite the constitutional settlement, central or federal government officials took on the leading role in handling the pandemic.

As mentioned above, Hallin and Mancini classified Germany and France as democratic corporatist, and the UK as Liberal, and with some hesitation assigned France's media systems to the category of Polarised Pluralist (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

**Table 9 Political Comparison**

| Category Description | UK | France | Germany | Switzerland |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Head of Government** | Prime Minister | President | Chancellor | Federal Council |
| **Voting systems used** | First past the post | Two rounds to reach 50% | Partly first past the post, partly proportional | Wholly proportional |
| **Role of referenda** | Nationally three in 50 years, all on Europe | Nationally five in last 50 years, on constitution and Europe | Constitutional and state boundaries. No national referenda | On any issue if thresholds reached. 5x a year |
| **Hallin and Mancini classification** | Liberal | Polarised pluralist | Democratic corporatist | Democratic Corporatist |
| **Lijphart Classifications (1981-2010)** | | | | |
| **Federalism index** | 1.40 | 1.50 | 5.00 | 5.00 |
| **Effective number of political parties** | 2.27 | 2.94 | 3.30 | 5.50 |
| **Index of proportionality** | 16.00 | 19.56 | 2.55 | 3.08 |
| **Constitutional rigidity** | 1.00 | 2.00 | 3.50 | 4.00 |
| **Voter participation; turnout** | | | | |
| **in national elections** | 65-66% | 80% | 71-77% | 45-48% |
| **in recent referenda** | 72% | 69% | N/A | 49% |

## 7.1.2 Economic comparison

Table 10 tells a story of similarity. All these countries are rich, highly developed European industrial countries with a substantial agricultural sector. They all have a high standard of living. They are all similar in terms of measures of inequality, and the perceived integrity of their governments. All have very high levels of internet penetration.

**Table 10 Economic comparison**

| Category Description | UK | France | Germany | Switzerland |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Per Capita GDP (PPP $000)** | 43 | 43 | 50 | 65 |
| **Human Development Index (UN) (World ranking)[4]** | 0.92(14) | 0.9(24) | 0.93(5) | 0.99(2) |
| **GINI Coefficient (World Bank)** | 34.8 | 31.6 | 31.9 | 32.7 |
| **Index of perceived corruption (TI world ranking)** | 78(11) | 71(22) | 80(10) | 84(7) |
| **Internet penetration (Reuters DNR 2022)** | 95 | 92 | 96 | 94 |

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[3] There are many measures of quality of life, all of which place these four countries in the top two deciles of the world. the UN Human Development index was chosen for this study.

### 7.1.3 Measures of Attitude and Trust

One of the most significant, measurable, and indeed consistent differences between the countries in this study relates to trust. Germans and Swiss exhibit significantly higher levels of trust in each other, their government, the news generally, and the public broadcaster's news output than French and British people.

The relevant figures are highlighted in the Table 11 below.

In no country is there a significant level of trust of news obtained from social media, particularly not in the UK. It is a notable finding though that trust in social media news is three times higher in Switzerland then in the UK, and 50% higher than in Germany, the other high-trust country in this study.

**Table 11 Measures of Trust**

| Category Description | UK | FRA | GER | SWI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| **Percentage agreeing 'Most people in my country can be trusted'** (Our World in Data 2014) | 30 | 18 | 42 | 49 |
| | | | | |
| **Percentage satisfied or neutral about the Government** (Gallup World/OECD 2022) | 35 | 41 | 65 | 85 |
| | | | | |
| **Index/percentage of people's trust in 'The News'** | | | | |
| (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter and Eisenegger, 2019b) | 3.15 | 2.85 | 3.33 | 3.22 |
| (Reuters DNR 2022) | 34% | 29% | 50% | 46% |
| **Trust in PSB news** (Reuters DNR 2022) | 55% | 53% | 67% | 71% |
| **Percentage trusting social media news** (Reuters DNR 2021) | 6% | 15% | 14% | 20% |

(Emphasis added in red)

It is often said that there is a migration of audiences towards highly trusted outlets such as the public broadcasters during a crisis. The UK Prime Minister's broadcast to the nation imposing the first lockdown in 2020 attracted an audience of 27 million, one of the largest in history. Over the pandemic however, the picture is not so pronounced. Van Aelst found that in most countries the pandemic occasioned a small increase (less than 5%) in TV news consumption generally (PSBs and commercial channels alike) and a much larger increase (more than 10%) in the use of the internet for news  (Van Aelst et al., 2021).

This is supported by the figures extracted from the Reuters reports, set out in Table 12 below.

The Reuters Digital news report does its fieldwork annually in January and early February, so the 2020 report was researched before the pandemic and the 2021 report was researched

during the second lockdown. It gives a good picture of the impact of the pandemic on patterns of usage and trust in the public broadcast media of the countries being studied. The figures are set out in the following table.

**Table 12 Percentage weekly reach and audience trust of news from main public broadcaster**.
(Source: Reuters DNR 2019-2022)

| | **2019** | **2020** | **2021** | **2022** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UK (BBC)** | | | | |
| Reach | 68 | 56 | 57 | 50 |
| Trust | 69 | 64 | 62 | 53 |
| **France (France Televisions)** | | | | |
| Reach | 44 | 36 | 39 | 36 |
| Trust | 59 | 58 | 62 | 53 |
| **Germany (ARD)** | | | | |
| Reach | 54 | 55 | 54 | 50 |
| Trust | 70 | 70 | 70 | 67 |
| **Switzerland (SRF German)** | | | | |
| Reach | 67 | 69 | 66 | 64 |
| Trust | 73 | 76 | 77 | 73 |

Audiences and trust of the BBC in the UK both showed a steady decline over the period immediately before, during and after the pandemic, the rate of decline reducing somewhat during the lockdown periods. France shows a similar pattern. In Germany and Switzerland, trust remained stable at the much higher levels that are usual in those countries with audiences remaining stable during the pandemic followed by much smaller declines afterwards.

A BBC interviewee referred to the audience figures for their coverage of the virus as being 'off the charts' - unprecedented numbers of viewers. That may have been so for the regular press conferences given by ministers and their scientific advisers, and the announcements of changes to the government's control measures. OFCOM reported that 30% of viewers increased their use of BBC news after he first lockdown. 66% of viewers said that the BBC did well overall, and 30% used the BBC more (OFCOM November 2021, based on fieldwork in April 2021).

These accounts are not necessarily inconsistent, as the methodology differs, Reuters DNR asking those surveyed in January about news channel use in the past week. There is little doubt that the press conferences were widely watched, on all channels, but the regular news bulletins only showed small clips of the conferences and the overall trend of coverage and trust over the years is clear from the Reuters DNR reports.

**7.1.4 The Pandemic in each country November 1-2, 2020.**

The statistics in this section show the immediate background to the media's coverage of COVID-19 in the month of November 2020. It provides a particular context for the assessment of how vigorously journalists shone a light on the performance of their politicians. Where restrictions are burdensome and deaths are numerous, we would expect to see more critical coverage, and vice versa.

In all countries cases and deaths were rising again after a period over the summer when they had declined. The UK, France and (highest of all) Switzerland had had considerably higher levels of cases (per million) than Germany. Switzerland had shown itself to be much better at treatment, with a lower case-fatality rate than the other countries. Germany had clearly done better than all the other countries in handling the pandemic thus far. Cumulative cases and deaths were at levels that were a fraction of those elsewhere, but significantly they were already rising again, and would by the end of the pandemic approach those of the worst-hit countries. The UK and France imposed much tougher restrictions than Germany, where arguably there was less need, and Switzerland, where treatment was effective.

A significant majority of Germans and Swiss thought at that time that their government had handled the pandemic well, twice as many as in Britain. The British Medical Journal convened focus groups two weeks after the first lockdown. They found that there was considerable uncertainty about the pandemic and lack of confidence in Government pronouncements (Williams et al., 2020).

Sanders found that government pronouncements about the pandemic did not conform to the rules usually adopted by high reliability organisations such as nuclear power stations and airlines that prioritise safety above all. Government spokespeople, especially in the UK in the early stages, seemed to be almost careless with the truth and unapologetic when things did not turn out as planned. Despite all this however, compliance with the lockdown rules was much higher than expected. This does not necessarily contradict the evidence on believing trusted sources, rather it suggests that fear and associated caution may be a stronger force. This is supported by evidence both of widespread compliance with the rules and weaker trust in government during the later stages of the pandemic (Newton, 2020; Sanders, 2020).

Overall, levels of media trust rose during the COVID period, and reduced everywhere subsequently, approaching previous levels (Reuters DNR 2022).

**Table 13 State of the Pandemic November 2020**

| Category Description | UK | FRA | GER | SWI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **(Per million of population)** | | | | |
| **Daily new cases** | 337 | 680 | 181 | 829 |
| **Daily new deaths** | 3.9 | 5.1 | 1 | 5.9 |
| **Cumulative cases** | 15.2 | 21.6 | 6.5 | 17.7 |
| **Cumulative deaths** | 686 | 549 | 125 | 280 |
| **Stringency index (of restrictions)** | 79 | 75 | 61 | 42 |
| **Source: Our World in Data** | | | | |
| **State of Public Opinion** | | | | |
| Percentage of population believing that | 32 | 31* | 61 | 62 |
| their government is handling the | | | | |
| pandemic well (strongly agree+agree): | | | | |
| **Source Gallup, Voice of the People, (fieldwork November 2020)**[5] | | | | |
| ***Institut Montaigne (Fieldwork May 2020)** | | | | |

### 7.1.5 Public opinion during the pandemic

YouGov's public opinion research measured the attitude of citizens to their government's approach over the life of the pandemic. France, Germany and the UK were included in the study, though Switzerland was not. The research showed that attitudes tracked one another in the three countries studied, with two exceptions, both justified by events. The first was a positive evaluation of the German government's performance in the initial months of the pandemic. The second was a positive assessment of the British government during the vaccination procurement and roll-out period. (yougov.co.uk/covid-19. YouGov Covid-19 Tracker – Government handling.

### 7.2. Results of content analysis, November 2020

As set out above, this work involved the comparison of the output of the main public TV news channel, two outlets of the quality press and one of the popular or tabloid press, in each of the four countries on five non-consecutive days in November 2020. The COVID-related content was assessed and coded according to a common set of criteria[6].

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[5] Gallup, Voice of the People, annual year end survey 2021
https://www.gallup-international.com

[6] Note the caution in section 6.2.5 above about generalising from this data

### 7.2.1 Television Content

**Table 15 Television Coverage**
(Outliers in red – noteworthy result, significantly different from the other countries' figures)

| Percentage of COVID coverage: | UK | FRA | GER | SWI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A1 Policy | 20.9 | 10.3 | 13.3 | 19.7 |
| A2 Prevalence | 10.7 | 5.9 | 0 | 4.3 |
| A3 Intl. comparison | 0 | 16.8 | 3.1 | 4.3 |
| A4 Reporting of political manoeuvring | 7.6 | 0 | 21.9 | 0 |
| B Human impact | 24.3 | 22 | 14.5 | 28.7 |
| C Business/economic impact | 7.7 | 21.4 | 9.8 | 15.2 |
| D1 Opinion supportive of Govt | 0 | 0 | 5.9 | 0 |
| D2 Opinion giving balanced assessment | 3.8 | 2.6 | 14.8 | 0 |
| D3 Opinion critical of Government | 15.1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| E Science | 4.7 | 16.4 | 16 | 10.7 |
| F Pressure Groups | 5.2 | 4.6 | 0.7 | 17.1 |
|  | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
|  | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Percentage of bulletin devoted to COVID | 48.8% | 23.2% | 35.6% | 30.2% |

The evening TV news is the most important single media outlet in each country, somewhat more so in difficult times. Differences here are likely to be highly influential with the public, given the high levels of trust of PSBs.

All the public service broadcasters are regulated and obliged to be impartial. There were however significant differences in the way the PSBs handled the pandemic.

Overall, the BBC in the UK devoted nearly half its main evening bulletin to COVID, 50% more than the other countries, more than twice the proportion in France.

There was a concentration on policy moves in the UK and Switzerland. In the UK this might be explained by the markedly increased complexity of the rules at the time where different rules applied in different regions and localities. Prevalence was also emphasised in the UK, partly because there was a regular standardised daily report of cases and deaths in each bulletin. With differences in the rules in different localities, prevalence locally was closely watched and widely reported. The UK carried much less science coverage than the other countries. France gave the most. France also devoted more time to international comparisons, and indeed to the impact on businesses of the pandemic and associated restrictions.

Germany allocated more time to politics, which is likely to refer to seeking consensus between the federal and state governments. Its coverage of the impact on individuals was lower, which might be explained by the lower case and death rates in the country.

There were apparently large differences in the opinion content, where the BBC in the UK was the only broadcaster carrying opinion that was critical of Government policy. This usually took the form of its own reporters questioning the wisdom or effectiveness of Government policy. This contrasts somewhat with Morani's finding, that the BBC carried less scrutiny of Government policy by independent experts than did other channels. The present study however counted scrutiny in the voices of BBC journalists as criticism, and this formed a substantial part of the coverage in the bulletins assessed. (Morani et al., 2022).

Germany carried more opinion than any of the other countries, but on the days assessed it was either supportive of the Government or balanced.

Switzerland's coverage was concentrated on the policy and its impact on individuals, businesses, including the views of pressure groups such as those representing the tourism industry, some of whom would clearly have liked the Government to do something differently. Together these reports of impact amounted to 60% of the total coverage, considerably more than in other countries. By contrast, there was no opinion content, at least not expressed in the voice of the media outlet. This might indicate either that Swiss journalists adopt a sacerdotal approach to those in authority or that Swiss broadcast journalists adopt the style of letting the facts speak for themselves.

**7.2.2 Quality press coverage**

**Table 16**

| | UK | | | FRA | | | GER | | | SWI | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | TIMES | TEL | AV | MOND | FIGA | AV | WELT | SDZ | AV | TEM | TA | AV |
| **Percentage of COVID coverage:** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **A1 Policy** | 19.3 | 22.3 | 20.8 | 12.5 | 11.5 | 12 | 6.2 | 3.3 | 4.8 | 2.9 | 4.5 | 3.7 |
| **A2 Prevalence** | 6.7 | 2.4 | 4.6 | 4.0 | 5.5 | 4.8 | 0.1 | 14.5 | 7.3 | 1.0 | 0.8 | 0.9 |
| **A3 Intl. comparison** | 12.7 | 4.4 | 8.6 | 11.0 | 3.8 | 7.4 | 10.7 | 12.8 | 11.8 | 8.2 | 20.9 | 14.6 |
| **A4 Political manoeuvring** | 5.3 | 4.3 | 4.8 | 1.6 | 7.7 | 5.4 | 6.9 | 11.2 | 9.1 | 10.6 | 3.1 | 6.9 |
| **B Human impact** | 10 | 15.2 | 12.6 | 26.3 | 18.1 | 22.2 | 15.4 | 11.5 | 13.5 | 40.6 | 10.6 | 25.6 |
| **C Business/economic impact** | 25.3 | 17.6 | 21.5 | 17.9 | 23.4 | 20.7 | 22.3 | 17.4 | 19.9 | 26.1 | 23.8 | 25.0 |
| **D1 Opinion supportive of Govt** | 2.1 | 0.8 | 1.5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2.6 | 1.3 | 2.4 | 1.4 | 1.9 |
| **D2 Opinion giving balanced assessment** | 0 | 1.9 | 1.0 | 0.6 | 6 | 3.3 | 4.9 | 2 | 3.5 | 0 | 18.4 | 9.2 |
| **D3 Opinion critical of Government** | 1.6 | 7.4 | 4.5 | 2 | 7.7 | 4.8 | 6 | 3.3 | 4.7 | 1.9 | 0 | 1.0 |
| **E Science** | 10.7 | 13.7 | 12.2 | 8.6 | 6.8 | 7.7 | 18.4 | 15. | 16.8 | 5.3 | 10.9 | 16.2 |
| **F Pressure Groups** | 6.4 | 10 | 8.2 | 15.5 | 9.5 | 12.5 | 8.4 | 6.3 | 7.4 | 1 | 5.6 | 3.3 |
| | | | 100 | | | 100 | | | 100 | | | 100 |
| **Percentage of newspaper devoted to COVID** | 10.1 | 15.5 | 12.8 | 14.8 | 15.3 | 15.1 | 22.3 | 9.7 | 15.9 | 9.8 | 11.4 | 10.6 |

(Rows and columns may not total exactly owing to rounding differences)

Overall, these papers devoted 10-15% of their coverage to the pandemic, considerably less than the broadcasters who allocated between 33% and 48%.

As with the BBC, UK newspapers gave much more space to policy than did other countries. This may have been caused by the complexity of the UK rules at the time.

in Switzerland, however, the newspapers gave policy much less space than its national broadcaster did.

German newspapers allocated 7% to prevalence, much more than other countries, possibly because they were proud of their relative success but possibly also because the figures were deteriorating. Swiss and French newspapers gave more space to human and business impact stories than the other countries. All the newspapers made international comparisons a part of their reporting, but the German and Swiss papers gave it more space.

German newspapers also covered their internal political manoeuvring much more than the other countries, reporting efforts to reach consensus between the States and the Federal Government.

As regards opinion, the quality newspapers each country carried roughly the same amount of opinion, Switzerland somewhat more. The balance of the opinion was however different, with German and Swiss papers offering both supportive, balanced and critical pieces. French and British papers carried opinions that were mostly critical of Government policy, and it was especially noteworthy that on the days assessed (which might not have been typical) there was no opinion coverage in the French quality papers that was supportive of Government policy. By the same token they also devoted more space to pressure groups aiming to change government policy

The German and Swiss papers carried more science than the others, 30% more than the British, twice as much as the French.

### 7.2.3 Popular (tabloid) press coverage

**Table 17**

| Percentage of COVID coverage: | UK | FRA | GER | SWI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sun | 20 Minutes | Bild | 20 Minuten |
| A1 Policy | 24.7 | 26.5 | 9 | 19.2 |
| A2 Prevalence | 1.2 | 3.3 | 2.4 | 6 |
| A3 Intl. comparison | 0 | 2.8 | 2.4 | 4.2 |
| A4 Reporting of political manoeuvring | 1.8 | 6.1 | 14.4 | 0 |
| B Human impact | 10 | 8.3 | 33.7 | 19.8 |
| C Business/economic impact | 19.7 | 12.2 | 0 | 4.2 |
| D1 Opinion supportive of Govt | 0.6 | 0 | 9.6 | 4.2 |
| D2 Opinion giving balanced assessment | 2.9 | 0 | 2.4 | 1.1 |
| D3 Opinion critical of Government | 4.7 | 0 | 18.7 | 3.5 |
| E Science | 20 | 6.8 | 6 | 13.8 |
| F Pressure Groups | 14.4 | 9.5 | 1.2 | 24 |
| Percentage of newspaper devoted to COVID | 5.70% | 10.80% | 12.60% | 6.50% |

20-25% of the COVID coverage was dedicated to policy, except in the case of BILD in Germany, that carried half as much. As with the other media the German outlet gave considerably more space to internal political manoeuvring.

BILD also carried much more human impact coverage than the other countries' popular papers and no reports of the effects of the pandemic on business. The French and British

papers gave much more coverage to the impact on business. BILD giving this aspect no space at all and 20 Minuten in Switzerland very little.

20 minutes in France gave no opinion at all, whereas BILD devoted fully 20% of its COVID coverage to opinion, of which more than half was critical of the Government.

The British and the Swiss popular press carried much more science than the Germans and the French.

As with other outlets the Swiss and the British carried disproportionately more coverage of the campaigns of pressure groups of people and industries affected.


**7.2.4 Overall averages of coverage**

Table 18 summarises the results set out in the other tables, along with some simple averaging of the numbers. While the precision of adding percentages is open to question, especially if unweighted by audience size, it does give a general impression of the emphasis in each country's media. It also allows a cross-cutting analysis of the different approaches taken by the media, arranged by subject matter.

All types of the media in the UK were substantially focused on policy, its development and application, rather more so than in the other countries. In France the average is inflated by the attention paid to the issue in the popular newspaper studied, and in Switzerland, the average was reduced by the relative lack of coverage in the quality press.

The French and Swiss media took an interest in international comparisons, which featured hardly at all in the UK.

As mentioned earlier, the media in Germany reported on the political manoeuvring more than in other countries, possibly because of their political structure and the tension between a respected Chancellor and powerful presidents of the Länder.

German and British media devoted considerably less of their coverage (31.2%) to the impact on people and businesses than France and Switzerland (37.6%).

One of the most striking findings was the amount of opinion that was carried by the media in Germany; 20% of the overall coverage, which compares with 1%, 3.6% and 6.9% in the other countries. Alongside Switzerland the opinions expressed in the German media were more evenly distributed between those supportive and those against Government policy than those in France and the UK, where there was more criticism of the Government.

**Table 18 Overview of media coverage**

| Percentage of COVID coverage: | UK | | | | FRA | | | | GER | | | | SWI | | | | AV OVERALL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Q | TV | TAB | AV | Q | TV | TAB | AV | Q | TV | TAB | AV | Q | TV | TAB | AV | |
| **A1 Policy** | 20.8 | 20.9 | 24.7 | 22.1 | 12 | 10.3 | 26.6 | 16.3 | 4.8 | 13.3 | 9 | 9.0 | 3.7 | 19.7 | 19.2 | 14.2 | 15.4 |
| **A2 Prevalence** | 4.6 | 10.7 | 1.2 | 5.5 | 4.8 | 5.9 | 3.3 | 4.7 | 7.3 | 0 | 2.4 | 3.2 | 0.9 | 4.3 | 6 | 3.7 | 4.2 |
| **A3 Intl. comparison** | 8.6 | 0 | 0 | 2.9 | 7.4 | 16.8 | 2.8 | 9 | 11.8 | 3.1 | 2.4 | 5.8 | 14.6 | 4.3 | 4.2 | 7.7 | 6.3 |
| **A4 Reporting of political manoeuvring** | 4.8 | 7.6 | 1.8 | 4.7 | 5.4 | 0 | 6.1 | 3.8 | 9.1 | 21.9 | 14.4 | 15.1 | 6.9 | 0 | 0 | 2.8 | 6.6 |
| **B Human impact** | 12.6 | 24.3 | 10 | 15.6 | 22.2 | 22 | 8.3 | 17.5 | 13.5 | 14.5 | 33.7 | 20.6 | 25.6 | 28.7 | 19.8 | 24.7 | 19.6 |
| **C Business/economic impact** | 21.5 | 7.7 | 19.7 | 16.3 | 20.7 | 21.4 | 12.2 | 18.1 | 19.9 | 9.8 | 0 | 9.9 | 25.0 | 15.2 | 4.2 | 14.8 | 14.8 |
| **D1 Opinion supportive of Govt** | 1.5 | 0 | 0.6 | 0.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1.3 | 5.9 | 9.6 | 5.6 | 1.9 | 0 | 4.2 | 2.0 | 2.1 |
| **D2 Opinion giving balanced assessment** | 1.0 | 3.8 | 2.9 | 2.6 | 3.3 | 2.6 | 0 | 2.0 | 3.5 | 14.8 | 2.4 | 6.9 | 9.2 | 0 | 1.1 | 3.4 | 3.7 |
| **D3 Opinion critical of Government** | 4.5 | 15.1 | 4.7 | 8.1 | 4.8 | 0 | 0 | 1.6 | 4.7 | 0 | 18.7 | 7.8 | 1.0 | 0 | 3.5 | 1.5 | 4.7 |
| **E Science** | 12.2 | 4.7 | 20 | 12.3 | 7.7 | 16.4 | 6.8 | 10.3 | 16.8 | 16 | 6 | 12.9 | 16.2 | 10.7 | 13.8 | 13.6 | 12.3 |
| **F Pressure Groups** | 8.2 | 5.2 | 14.4 | 9.3 | 12.5 | 4.6 | 9.5 | 8.9 | 7.4 | 0.7 | 1.2 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 17.1 | 24 | 14.8 | 9 |

## 7.3. Results of Interviews with practitioners

(*In this section the italicised text is an account of what has been said in an interview. It is not an exact verbatim account. It has been edited to correct for hesitations and repetitions in speech, while fully preserving the meaning of the interviewee's observation. The description of the role of the interviewee has been slightly adjusted and varied to preclude identification of the individual. For the same reasons, some references to specific publications on which the interviewee works have been removed or anonymised).*

## 7.3.1 The Government

### UK

In the initial days and weeks, the Government had to get people to accept that there was a problem that was likely to require it to take drastic measures. The images from Italy of the overwhelmed hospital system were crucial, and the extensive coverage that the BBC gave to the crisis in Italy did create a sense of alarm about what could happen in Britain.

The UK's National Health Service (NHS) and Public Health England were in the front line of handling the pandemic. The NHS has been a political battleground between the Labour and Conservative parties for many years. After being accused, rightly or wrongly, of underfunding the NHS, the Conservative party could not contemplate presiding over the collapse of the health service even in the face of a pandemic. So the images from Italy were significant politically as well as in terms of public health.

In times like these doctors, scientists and officials are more trusted than elected politicians. (IFG 2015)[7]. The government made full use of this aspect in designing the way policy was presented as the pandemic unfolded. An experienced political editor said: *But I think it was a very good idea to have medical experts who...were telling it like it was, in that there is a profound suspicion of whether politicians are necessarily telling you as it is, or as they would wish you to think their view is. I think people don't trust politicians. it's just the way we select politicians doesn't suit them for doing this kind of thing.*

The government therefore emphasised direct communication through trusted speakers such as the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser and the media in general faithfully reported what they said. Government press conferences were unusually widely watched and reported, with considerable levels of engagement evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of questions put to Downing Street through the Government website.

A senior Government spokesman said: *the credibility of government goes up in a crisis. The reason we continued with those press conferences is they got up to 30 million viewers a day, typically four to 5 million viewers, which was a power we didn't think we had to convene.*

The chief medical officer and chief scientific officer were important advocates in the early weeks. When the advice of experts began to be less consistent and subject to change or challenge by other

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[7] Institute for Government, commentary on IPSOS MORI Veracity Index (instituteforgovernment.org.uk 5th February 2015).

experts, criticism began to emerge in the media. Public support, which was initially almost total, became more difficult to sustain.

The editor of a national newspaper said: *I think that people were giving the Government the benefit of doubt; there was a national emergency like wartime but at the same time, I do think that … there was also criticism…. I think when …nobody knows what's happening you've got to cling to whatever authority there is. So, you've got the chief medical officer and …you know where to get information from. But as these things change, …when people change their mind and all that sort of stuff, then then I think …more critical thinking is possible.*

A government spokesman said*: So, I think that was the bit that the Government started to struggle with, as things wore on, continuing to make the case for the 'why'. I think that the original awareness was good, but it was the continuing coverage that was needed to keep that support going.*

It appears to be part of the self-perception of journalists in the UK that they are more challenging to those in power than are their Continental counterparts, as the following quotes illustrate.

A senior government spokesman said: *Our people, our journalists are far more challenging, they will take a different, a perverse view…and it has always been thus, you know, you could think back to the 18th century in the way that the newspapers derided the Prince Regent and all those folks so I think I think it's interesting how the cultures have continued down to this day.*

A European Union official said: …. *there is no doubt that the British press (especially the tabloid press, but not always only the tabloids) has repeatedly contaminated the necessary spirit of sobriety that some of these public policy debates would require. Not only around the health, but also about the single market, about the Euro, about European integration, all this would have been much easier if there were to be a more factual, more sober coverage.*

Mistakes in Government communication sometimes revolved around excessive complication such as the complex rules about social distancing and the opening and closing of parts or all of retail and hospitality outlets.

A government spokesman said: *I think the government learned from some mistakes that it did make when they overcomplicated things. So for example, having the tiers*[8].

Over time there was an increase in public scepticism about the measures despite the lack of political opposition to Government policy. Indeed, three interviewees reported that party politics was substantially suspended during the pandemic. None of the usual cut and thrust of political life was happening so there was nothing much for the political journalist to report, at least in the way they would in normal times. Because politics-as-usual was suspended the accepted wisdom regarding UK media behaviour did not apply, or at least did not apply in the usual way. The habits and reflexes of political journalists were not readily applicable to the new situation presented by the pandemic.

A senior political broadcaster said: *there was a different question as well, because a lot of the politicking that journalists cover is what's going on in and inside political parties and the fight between the opposition and the government. Now, the opposition basically supported the government. Dissent internally in the governing party basically disappeared. Certainly, for the first*

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[8] This refers to the policy which allocated quite small areas - a few square miles - to one of four categories, with increasingly stringent restrictions on people and businesses.

*lockdown. It was only once you start to get far through that you start getting dissent around lockdown. Politics as normal, both between and within the parties, was kind of suspended anyway. So, it's not that journalists decided not to cover politics. That was less politics going on.*

The UK also did not see the political polarisation evident in the US, where the principle of lockdown itself separated Republicans and Democrats. The political parties broadly had a shared view of the right approach to take to the pandemic. Instead of normal party-political competition, other divisions emerged. Controversy centred on the libertarian arguments, the costs, and the balance between health, education, and business. But these divides did not fall along party lines. Journalists sought to find splits within the governing party on these issues, but such was the force of communication from the centre of government and the health consensus that certainly in the initial months these issues did not get much traction.

These differences were evident in the lines taken by national newspapers, with the Telegraph for example being against lockdown on civil liberties grounds, while the Guardian, for example was in favour of lockdown and school closures on public health and employee safety grounds.

A national newspaper editor said: *this was framed as: this is about liberty, individual liberty. Who's for lockdown? For mask wearing, and how does that play with civil liberties? Then should we be locked down further or not? And depending on where, you sat in the political spectrum in the media, I mean, so we put Mail here, Telegraph, Sun to a degree and then the Mirror there, the Guardian here somewhere the Financial Times in the middle. (i.e. it wasn't party political)*

One German journalist said how surprised she was that there was not more coverage of the ineffectiveness, the lack of transparency, even potential corruption around the procurement of personal protective equipment, given the sums of money involved and the seriousness of the allegations.

Politics was not entirely absent from the British public square during the pandemic. The leaders of the devolved nations carved out a distinctive position in the exercise of their health responsibilities. A government spokesman said: *I think that the UK political parties had a walk-on role in this. I think the interesting point is it did create space for the politicians and nationalist politicians in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to make a case.*

There was a nationalist dimension as well. The Government resisted international comparisons when they were unhelpful, but clearly the success of the development and deployment of vaccines was a major political win for the Prime Minister, with echoes of the arguments for Brexit being played out in the travails of the EU on vaccine procurement.

A Swiss broadcaster said*: I see a major difference between what's happening in Switzerland and what's happening in the UK where it was highly politicised. Boris Johnson was clearly trying to put himself forward, the man who saved the country, this idea of Britain leading the charge on vaccinations, which was being over-blown tremendously.*

## FRANCE

A leading correspondent said of France: *The French are notoriously critical of their leaders. Macron was no exception. There was a time during the first wave, when the death rates in France and the UK were pretty much parallel. And Macron was, on 32% approval rating and Johnson at*

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*67%: they weren't doing anything different. But that's just a reflection of the fact that the French expect everything from their government, and this gives them the right to be very upset about it when they don't. The Brits expect very little and are quite happy when they get something.*

Initially the Government was successful in its messaging but the debacle over the change of policy on masks undermined that confidence and indeed ended one minister's political career[9]. Journalists did not hold back in exposing this. Government credibility was later won back, but it took time. A national newspaper journalist said: *in France, the government was held to be to be lying, when ministers went out saying that masks wouldn't help. They were not necessarily experts. So that was not true. And then there were there was a very wide tide of opinion in the media that the government was deliberately obfuscating and lying because there was a shortage of masks.*

However fierce their internal disputes, French people are distinctly patriotic and proud of their role on the international scene. There is a tradition of debate, and it is rare for any debate, even political debate, to end in a compromise. It is more common for the debate to be closed with everyone holding to the positions with which they entered it. The French media tends to be sober and factual, certainly by comparison with the British. The French media looked to international comparisons, mainly with Germany and the UK to evaluate how their government was doing, whether the restrictions were worth it. The most important measure of this was death rates per capita.

A leading French correspondent said: *As you know, France has a very strong opinion, a strong sense of its own importance in the world, something different as a model of civilization, and in a way that Germany does not even the UK does not; America does, the United States does. France is the European United States...believing it has a vocation... to lead the world with a model of civilization. You can you feel it reading all the French media there's a general patriotic consensus ... the French like knocking France as well but it's paradoxical as you know, they can knock France amongst themselves, but elsewhere defend it very strongly.*

The same correspondent added: *France is the most conspiracy-mad country in the Western world ...it's very similar to Russia[10]. The French mentality towards information and news is very similar to the Russian one, they don't trust anything. Research shows the French believe hugely more than most other countries in in all the usual conspiracy theories.*

Despite the approaching election, party politics was substantially suspended during the pandemic, although it re-emerged at the end. There were clear signs of rallying around the flag and indeed an unusual respect for officials and ministers who were having to handle a dangerous but unprecedented phenomenon on a day-to-day basis. The ratings of all politicians (especially those who were medically qualified) went up during the first wave but fell in the second, as the academic community divided, and the vaccination controversy grew.

A leading reporter said: *I think Marine Le Pen was critical (of the Government handling). But the mainstream parties were not using the government handling as a political weapon. Yes, they did accuse Macron of using the pandemic as a way of suppressing political debate as a whole because of the national motion. That there was not, there was not too much point scoring over the actual*

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[9] Junior health minister Agnes Buzyn, a former doctor, lost her job in February 2020 because of criticism of her statements regarding the pandemic.)

[10] An IFOP survey for Fondation Jean Jaures in 2018 showed that 79% of French people believe at least one conspiracy theory; for example, 54% believe that the CIA was implicated in the Kennedy assassination; 16% believe that there was no moon landing and 9% believe that the world is flat. (Agence France Presse, 2018).

*handling. By the spring last year, the opposition generally accepted that Macron's handling was going down well, and they were not going to score a lot by criticising it.*

A business correspondent on a French national paper said (about the presidential elections): *the whole pandemic anaesthetised the political campaign and political debates for a long time, until quite late in the campaign. It was late when the vaccinations came along at the end of 2020, beginning of 2021. So, just in the last year of the campaign, this freedom business, which obviously plays to right wing parties, became very strong.*

# GERMANY

Germany is a high trust country and people gave the government the benefit of the doubt in the early days of the crisis. German media tends to report government decisions, once made, as immutable rather than questioning them. A Swiss editor with experience of Germany said: *I think the German culture is that the government decides something, it's a rule by law. Media reports about it, nobody basically questions it, everybody observed that it's being obeyed.*

That said, Germans do tend overall to appreciate a strong state and the effective exercise of authority under the law, especially in times of crisis. A senior German political journalist said: *Before the financial crisis, it was fashionable to be very sceptical about the state – it shouldn't be too big. And now after the pandemic, at least in Germany, people really appreciate a strong state. From my perspective, that should be debated much more. To what extent do we want this to stay this way? Or should it change?*

The overwhelming cultural theme in German politics is consensus, which has served Germany well since the 1950s. Dissent, especially in the form of argument for its own sake, is not highly regarded in Germany. Several interviewees mentioned the danger of smugness stifling the open political debate that might have thrown up the best solutions. When the consensus solution appeared to be breaking down during the second wave, there was a sense in Germany that the foundations of trust in their society and institutions might be crumbling, or at least be misplaced. A senior journalist said: *the States and the Government, what they were doing, those aspects became more important. Were they doing the right thing? What are the alternatives? Is the advice they get good? And do they follow the best advice. is the is the whole political decision-making process up to the task? I mean, it was an unprecedented challenge. The structure of the administrative machine and of the state in general is normally made for business-as-usual issues and this... was not one of those.*

The questions that were being asked in the media were about whether the German Government was getting the best scientific advice, and whether the federal system was up to the task. Health is devolved to State and local government, and this helped with enforcement and contact tracing, certainly in the early days. There was an overwhelming need for a national response as well and tensions arose between the levels of government, as shown above in the section on the media coverage.

A senior political correspondent from a German periodical said: *the grand coalition is the most German way you can govern Germany*[11]. *So, the corporatist consensus-oriented way Germany works was very much in evidence. And again, the non-political character of the challenge, the fact that you must rely on science, which prides itself as being not political, as your main point of*

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[11] The term 'grand coalition' is used to refer to coalitions which include both major parties, who traditionally oppose each other, the CDU/CSU Christian Democrats and the SPD, the Social Democrats.

*reference, all this contributed to the non-adversarial way in which the German system, politicians and the public media went about their job.*

The same correspondent said: *The anger and dissent were concentrated in the five states, former East Germany. A lot of people in the East felt that they had been taken over by Western Germans, after 1989, and all these orthodoxies about liberal democracy and capitalism and conventional thinking on moderation, were just forced on them. You can have too much consensus. If there was more of it out there in the open, including in the media, it might be healthier, be a kind of safety valve. This is the legacy of the German past. People see dissent as a dangerous luxury.*

As there was a national coalition government anyway, the opposition was led by the right wing nationalist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party which had recently become a significant force in German politics. This had the paradoxical effect of helping the Government, as campaigns led by the AfD are generally regarded as being beyond the range of serious political discourse.

The London correspondent of a German broadcaster said: *the AfD played a very small role only in this politics during the pandemic. During the pandemic, they clearly had no answer. And people didn't want to hear or listen to right wing populism in a situation where it's where it's about their own lives. They tried to stir up the anti-Vax feelings and so on, but they didn't get very far.*

Those most resistant to the curtailment of freedoms during the pandemic were those parts of the country that were formerly Communist under the East German regime. Also, with those who saw echoes of the Nazi era. A correspondent with experience across Europe said: *The legacy - not only of Nazism, but also communism in East Germany, means that any threat to civil liberties is taken seriously in the media. They've been brought up to see themselves as on the front line of defence of human rights and democratic government. BILD in its own way sees itself as a defender of liberty.* A senior journalist on a national newspaper said: *the media at the beginning showed that kind of trust in the communication of what the what the government was going to do. But that completely fell apart by the autumn of 2020, and especially with BILD, the tabloid part of Axel Springer, and it became fierce and, and indeed toxic. The media coverage, how the media reported, then became ideological in Germany.*

Earlier in the pandemic this resistance revolved around restrictions on movement and association; later it was about vaccines and particularly the proposal to make them compulsory, but the backdrop was the same, and it was not party politics. It was about freedom, individual liberty. There was however always a clear consensus among the mainstream parties.

Chancellor Merkel, who after all came from the former East Germany, was popular and trusted, both as a scientist and a respected leader approaching retirement. A British correspondent with many years of experience of working in Germany said: *So, the German media, the mainstream media mostly backs that kind of approach, even though they can still be critical on certain measures and so on. It's not tame exactly, but it's not argumentative for its own sake. There was a sense of national emergency in 2020, and the consensus style, that has been embedded in German politics for 70 years or so, suited Merkel very well.*

The main challenge of governing Germany during the pandemic was around the role of the Länder (States). The 16 Länder have wide ranging powers over health issues. The same correspondent continued: *So, each of the governments of the States had to be brought into discussions about what to do. They didn't always have the same views. It required Merkel and the federal government to kind of knock heads together a bit. She didn't always get her way.*

A German political writer said, referring to the largest party, the CDU: *there was a feeling of a crumbling. Suddenly, of all parties, this party seemed to fall apart. And that was not only because Merkel was about to leave, but also because nobody knew what they what the CDU stood for. There was a divergence between the Länder (States) and the Bund (Federal government), but also within the CDU. Within the government, the grand coalition, there was friction. And there was also the health minister of all people who also seemed to be a secret contender for the post (of Chancellor).*

This showed itself in the media content study (Section 7.2) when so much of the coverage in German media related to internal discussions between different levels of Government.

The local health offices were in the initial stages very effective in contact tracing and isolation in communities. Performance was good and the country had a certain pride in that. As the pandemic wore on however, this confidence turned to disappointment especially when the procurement of vaccines went awry.

A German correspondent in London said: *I mean, the comparison, who is best, who's doing it best became partly a nationalistic or patriotic thing for the press, in certain phases in both countries (Germany and Britain) in a different way.*

## SWITZERLAND

The Swiss system is often imagined, and may indeed seem, to be one of unquestioning compliance and trust in institutions. In fact, several interviewees were at pains to explain that it is in fact quite the opposite. A journalist on a national Swiss newspaper said: *There's nothing naturally cohesive about Switzerland. There's very little In Switzerland that's unthinkable. If there is a problem in the society somewhere, direct democracy allows it to come to the surface and be discussed and dealt with*

The constitutional structure of Switzerland begins with a commitment to political subsidiarity.

The same journalist: *We were kind of sceptical to begin with about, like, you know, central power, which is a very federalized country, decentralised, much more than the UK. the relationship between citizens and authorities is fundamentally different also through this tradition of direct democracy.* Referring to the Federal Council, created under a numerical formula from the main political parties with its rotating presidency*: We have a one president of the Federal Council changing every year because we were so sceptical that somebody should accumulate too much power .*On the importance of referenda and their relation to issue salience*: And obviously, every law passed in Parliament is subject to a referendum if enough people sign. Even if it's a kind of the most boring... referendum, you still must somehow cover it. In the UK it would never achieve salience. Whereas in Switzerland, it does. Politics is not top down.*

In the case of the pandemic, there was initial resistance to the lockdown proposals, and later to the vaccination programme. The health ministry had to explain to the public the science behind its recommendations and be held to account on its performance.

A former broadcaster said: *the political parties were trying to find a position in this whole framework... the SVP gave a voice to all these movements who were critical of the measures, who didn't believe that Switzerland risked having huge problems like in other countries. This became a huge movement at the end. The SVP was against the two COVID law referendum propositions, but they also accepted the results at the end.… That was also an act of political responsibility.*

The system of trust in Switzerland is conditional, and is based on government by consent, not imposition. Once these democratic hurdles had been passed, compliance was high.

A national newspaper editor, from the German speaking part said:  *People listened, they got the message, they thought about it, they went to meetings just like us to get further information, etc. and they obeyed. And in Switzerland, I think the rule is that basically we are okay with following rules that we're told to, but they should make sense. As they see that, others follow, and everybody follows, there is a certain social pressure. They introduced a rule that there should be no more than five people in the house, including children, which meant that if you have a household of four, I mean, nobody could have a couple of coming to visit. I observed, for example, that people decided, we will decide for ourselves and broke the rule quite often.*

Trust in society depends on the perception by the Swiss population in general that the regulations and obligations being imposed make sense. This point was made more than once. The media's role was to inform and report, rather than to question or debate.

A former broadcaster, now a print journalist, said:  *It was very important for the people to understand why they have these new duties, and to understand what exactly the risk is. People wanted information from the government, from all the levels of government, also to make their own assessment of the situation. The second might be the more important part, to really understand what's exactly the situation is, to be citizens who can make their own decisions.*

As in Germany, the Swiss authorities enjoy high levels of trust, not least because of the system of direct democracy in which means that individuals are engaged with major issues of detail in national policymaking through regular referenda. There is a preference for technocratic solutions, confidence in institutions and civic consent based around the idea that when it comes to the most important matters, the people have always had the chance, or at least the chance, to vote on them.

Party politics, never too strident in Switzerland, was muted during the pandemic. Parliament was suspended for several weeks at the beginning and public interest was centred on the Federal Health Office and the science, including the statistics of prevalence.

A national newspaper editor said:  *the government is run by a coalition of all the major political forces.  And then in the beginning even parliamentarians were so scared that they didn't hold the normal parliamentary session for several weeks. At the very beginning, there was no parliamentary opposition to what the government did under emergency law. We had two referenda that endorsed policy. Also, after a short time parliament started working again and things went to Parliament and were discussed etc.*

Health is normally a matter for the cantons but to their quiet relief the federal government took it over under emergency powers, leaving the cantons with the responsibility for the implementation of the vaccination programme.

There were controversies, and one interviewee with knowledge of both countries said that these were more vigorous than in the UK. A Swiss newspaper editor said: *the Left tried to profile themselves as the ones in favour of help at any cost, always asking for more direct help, subsidies. The SVP, on the Right, was the opposite - they questioned the policy fundamentally on libertarian grounds. The FDP, as usual, needs to get the point of being the liberal economic force of reason.*

A Swiss broadcaster said: *it was very clear the Federal Council were in charge. That was very, very clear. So, although it's mostly non-political, there are always political voices, questioning the value of lockdowns or the vaccinations or all of that. But I felt the Federal Council weren't being buffeted*

*by those voices. They were really going on the numbers and the science and listening to the people in the federal health office.*

## EU

The European Union draws attention to the fact that that despite this initial resistance from some of its members it emerged finally as a multilateral/multinational force within Europe, trusted to do things collectively. In this they cite the procurement and delivery of a very large vaccination programme. The Commission claims that much of health policy was also quietly but effectively harmonised across the EU, notably the mutual recognition of health passports.

Anti-EU feeling in Germany grouped around the vaccine procurement issue later during the pandemic when German politicians, initially at least, supported the idea of going it alone. There was a belief that Germany could have done it better and didn't need the European Union. The EU process looked messy and slow, while Britain was racing ahead. This argument, combined with libertarian arguments about freedom of individuals to choose what medicines are introduced into their bodies justified and led to a certain civic unrest. There was therefore a persuasive case for national (rather than supranational) management, which was played out in the press, especially the nationalist Axel Springer titles, BILD and Die Welt.  The Germans and to some extent the French, had presented the EU with a major challenge by questioning and resisting centralised vaccine procurement and delivery. The EU attributed this to political posturing ahead of their pending elections. There was also the controversy with the British about the Astra Zeneca vaccine.

In the end the Union believes it has been strengthened by its actions during the pandemic and subsequently in the context of the war in Ukraine.

A leading official of the EU said:  *Wherever I travelled, or interacted during that period, people would ask me the same question: What is Europe doing about the pandemic? and then I think we rose to the occasion because the things that we would done during these two years and a half were unprecedented both in nature in intensity and depth. It was like, you know, we designed, funded and implemented the biggest vaccination programme in the history of mankind. We set up a common recovery instrument based on the issuance of common debt. Again, unprecedented. We invented this mobility certificate, which was imitated by 65 countries across the world. So, this is what the pandemic changed in the interaction of the media and politics. The pandemic in a way shifted the way the media reality around the European Union developed after many, many years.*

## Summary and discussion

In the **UK** the Government rapidly concluded that scientific experts and health officials were more trusted and effective than politicians in getting the messages across. Simple messages were chosen over complex explanations. Social media was deployed to for hard-to-reach groups. Much of the cut and thrust of political journalism stopped because there was less to report on, and because at least in the initial stages as the editor of a national newspaper told this researcher, journalists as well as the public at large were willing to give the Government the benefit of the doubt in their handling of the pandemic. Party politics was effectively suspended, as the main opposition party chose broadly to support the Government, arguing only about the timing and severity of measures, not about the

overall approach. Scepticism grew over time however and disagreements centred on the libertarian, economic and to a lesser extent educational arguments against lockdown.

**France** has more of a tradition of debate in public life, and French people are generally somewhat mistrustful of authority and resistant to the restriction of freedoms. As elsewhere the debate centred on liberty and individual rights. According to an interviewee, national pride remained intact despite a certain disappointment in Government performance that grew over time. Normal politics was suspended, certainly until the second lockdown, which coincided with the commencement of the 2021 Presidential election campaign. The Right accordingly made attempts to discredit the Government, without success, and soon gave up. Interviewees suggested that journalists felt free to expose failings in Government policy throughout. Apart from some policy slips, for example on the need for masks, French people initially accepted that their government was doing a good job and media criticism was accordingly somewhat muted.

**Germany,** like Switzerland**,** is a high trust country, believing in its people and their government as well as the media. It also operates by cross-party consensus. German media gave the Government the benefit of the doubt in its handling of the pandemic. There was a spirit of national consensus and a willingness to obey Government decisions once they had been arrived at. Party political debate was limited. Germany was justifiably proud of the national effort in the initial stages of the pandemic, which produced very much better results than neighbouring countries. This was largely due to the success of the local health authorities who were able to trace contacts very effectively when infections were relatively few. This very success produced one of the main areas of contention as the pandemic progressed, between national and local measures and responsibility. This was reflected in the output of the media in Germany which showed a marked concentration on the debate within the Government as to whether the Federal or States governments should lead the fight against the virus. The early successes also led the German media to devote considerable coverage to international comparisons and emboldened those who wanted to resist the EU's attempts to promote transnational solutions to PPE shortages and vaccine procurement.

In **Switzerland,** the principle of subsidiarity, or government by consent, is an important force in public life. The constitution forces decisions to be taken at the lowest feasible level, and ultimately be subjected to a vote of the people in a referendum. This really is government by consent.  So, while the media were generally supportive of the Government there was some resistance when the Federation took the responsibility for managing the pandemic away from the Cantons. Government policy was explained in very detailed press conferences, which were faithfully reported in the media. So, the Federal Government had to justify itself continuously, not in parliament but rather to the public, to secure compliance. As in other countries the resistance to Government policy came from the libertarian and populist right, but other than this, normal politics was, as elsewhere, set aside for the duration of the pandemic. Lockdown policy was twice tested in a referendum, and in each case the people supported the Government.

**The EU** claims that the success of their work on the pandemic in solidarity with member states was a significant advance. This may be a partial view. While the EU may have come through in the end, it had had to overcome a fair amount of opposition from its members on the way. In the same vein, there was pressure in Germany and to a lesser extent in France to go it alone and not join in with EU initiatives. Some in Britain, including the Prime Minister, claimed that the British success with

vaccination was achieved despite some difficulties with the EU and was a benefit of the UK's new-found independence from the Union. The EU aspect of the vaccine procurement controversy did not affect Switzerland, as it is not a member, but there was a degree of harmonisation of the system of vaccination passports within the Schengen area, of which Switzerland is part.

## 7.3.2 The influence of owners
### UK

By far the largest group of those interviewed felt that the owners are influential in setting the overall culture of newspapers, however on a day-to-day basis the editor-in-chief is by far the most important determinant of what gets printed. It is very rare for an owner to take a specific view on a specific day's issues. Several alluded to the powerful influence of Rupert Murdoch in the past but also added that he was much less involved than he once was, and not at all during the pandemic.

A British journalist on a national newspaper said: *I don't think there's massive day to day interference. anymore. I think Murdoch probably did interfere heavily in his younger days, but I don't think he does any more. But if you look at the most strident biased right wing British newspapers, I guess the Mail and the Express, it's the editors that are that are pulling the strings, really. Though it is another matter whether those editors would be there if the owners didn't support them...*

A government spokesman with a newspaper background also said: *the influence of the owner is not as important as that of the editor. The editor sets the style and content of the papers every day.*

A senior government spokesman said: *I think it's very much the expertise in my case of a political editor, on the pandemic of the health editor, in conjunction with their colleagues on routine issues once the general stance of the newspaper has been set. I know the political editor of The Daily Mail, has got fair latitude to pursue stories which he thinks will gain traction with the newspaper's readers.*

An editor of a UK national newspaper said: *the most successful press Baron of the last 50 years was Rupert Murdoch in Britain, you know, he backed the Tories in 1979 and Labour 1997. It feels as if he was capturing the public's mood, rather than necessarily trying to dictate it.*

The culture, corporate line, attitude to issues is determined by the management of the publication, sometimes for purely business reasons, sometimes for political reasons. Either way, journalists will know what they must write to get their material published - there is no point in writing articles or indeed working for a newspaper that doesn't want to publish what you write.

A German journalist working in London said: *Yes, I think (*owners are influential*). I mean, of course, the Times does have a lot of journalists who all would say that they work independently, but the way certain stories are pushed, and the way they are now launched is clear to those journalists as well. You wouldn't really step over certain marks when you work for the Telegraph, of course not. But even when you work for the Times, there are certain limits and people know that without feeling censored.*

A senior broadcast journalist said, in response to the question about whether ownership matters: *Of course, it does. Rupert Murdoch has a particular view on the world. It doesn't dictate what their coverage is. Not many people writing for Telegraph were going to get a story in the paper arguing the case for having another lockdown. Now, it doesn't mean that they don't do the news properly.*

*But your question was, does it have an influence? Of course, it has an influence. Sometimes you have owners who are happy to either bankroll or run or look at the business end and who don't want to get involved editorially. I think Murdoch was much more much more interfering 20 or 30 years ago than he is now, but if there was another Scottish independence referendum, I'm fairly sure that Murdoch would suddenly be very, very involved in the day-to-day*[12].

A national newspaper editor said:  *Not relevant, not during the pandemic. It's an interesting question, which I would tend to restrict to endorsements in an election. I mean, this is where Murdoch will be involved. He would take a view, and that will be communicated. But he would not be trying to rewrite the front page of the report on the pandemic. He doesn't micromanage coverage. On the Mail (with the Rothermeres) there was aggressive coverage against the Tory government, which is not approved on the Daily Mail, I think there was an intervention there. On the Telegraph. I don't think they were involved really. Certainly, FT, nobody would interfere at all. So, Guardian doesn't apply. Sundays? Can't think of it. It is done. It's just you just don't have in Britain, proprietors or CEOs saying: why are we covering it that way?*

Editors did talk to ministers during the pandemic, not least because they wanted the Government's financial support[13]. A senior Government spokesman said: *in any case, the editor will want to check in with cabinet ministers, with the head of government from time to time, and I know did so more routinely in this crisis. I know of at least two owners who did get involved at the most senior levels of government and there are probably more.*

The BBC as the public service broadcaster dominates the news in normal times. It is often thought to be trusted as a source of reliable information; this being especially prized during a major crisis. However, as we have seen above the annual figures from the Reuters DNR reports 2019-2022 tell a broader story of steady decline of the reach of BBC TV and radio news, from 68% to 50%. Trust figures show a small increase, from 59% to 62% during the pandemic, followed by a marked fall, to 53% in 2022.

A senior Government spokesman said: *The …influence and dominance of the BBC has grown tremendously. It's true of people who live in Westminster. It's true for people who live across the UK, and so on. So given that they are the number one medium online, there was significant impact on certain newspapers who felt the pandemic was damaging their sales and their advertising.*

A leading political broadcast journalist said: *our figures for that period, were just extraordinary. We had like 30 million people watching the press briefing. We had 8 million people watching the six o'clock news with 8 million people watching the 10 o'clock news; the figures for the broadcaster's website broke all the records.*[14]

The BBC's editorial line during the pandemic prioritised the safety of the population and compliance with the rules, to very good effect. Although this had the consequence that the coverage gave rather less emphasis to the effects on businesses and in particular the indirect consequences of closing schools.

A senior Government spokesman said: *the BBC were very focused on this national mission about keeping people safe, and probably missed that important public policy question (about lost education, and the effects on business).*

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[12] But see section 5.1.2 above on the Leveson inquiry
[13] Which was given, see section 7.3.4 below.
[14] This may be an exaggeration, or at least a reference to peak, rather than average figures.

A Swiss journalist, speaking about London said: *I think the BBC was generally quite... helpful to the government. I think it was also a way for them to ...we know that... they're under pressure from the Conservative government, and there was an opportunity for them to show how helpful they can be.* This may be so. OFCOM praised it thus: *The BBC is the most used news provider in the UK, and it plays an important role in keeping audiences across the UK informed with up to date and accurate news. This was particularly evident during the pandemic.* (OFCOM Report: How OFCOM regulates the BBC, 2022)

## FRANCE

Several interviewees mentioned the trend for national media organisations to detach themselves from historic connections with organised politics in the form of political parties, and in some cases to come into the ownership of very rich individuals, mainly on the right wing of the political spectrum. This trend has recently manifested itself in the creation of new TV channels. C-News was identified as the platform that enabled the right-wing candidate Eric Zemmour to make a run for the presidency.

A Paris correspondent for a UK national said:  *ownership is now going over very heavily to billionaires, most of them right wing. So, there is a very close tie between ownership of media and political alignment still, although the identification with parties is no longer anywhere near as strong as before.*

A journalist with wide experience in Europe said*:  in France, Vincent Bolloré who owns C-News, and is in the process of buying the Journal du Dimanche, the editorial changes that have that have become evident after his acquisition of... are very clear. I would suggest that Eric Zemmour would never have got anywhere near the presidential elections..., if he hadn't had the platform that he had on C-News.*

This type of owner tends generally to intervene more, though most said that they were not particularly involved during the pandemic, except perhaps on subjects relevant to their business interests. The interviews produced little evidence either way of owners seeking directly to influence the Government, although it of course remains a possibility. The Paris correspondent of a UK newspaper said that President Macron was personally actively sought to influence the media's coverage. (see section 7.3.5).

## GERMANY

Interviewees familiar with both countries said that the ownership of media outlets in Germany is less important than it is in the UK.

Many however made the exception of the Axel Springer group, owners of Die Welt and particularly Bild, among several other publications. The latter has a tradition of nationalism and tends to be a thorn in the side of the centrist consensus in Germany. They like to see themselves as outside the system asking the tough questions.  Die Welt has similar culture and editorial direction although it is much less evident in its day-to-day coverage. There is however a specific emphasis on issues of freedom and personal autonomy in Die Welt.

A senior German journalist on a national periodical said: *the most opinionated media conglomerate in Germany would be Axel Springer. Even with Bild (that have a tradition of journalistic activism), I would say that the proprietor of the ownership structures is much more anonymous than in many, in for example the UK. The position or the political leanings of the proprietor count for somewhat less than in the British system. In the context of this big consensus machine that is German politics and public opinion someone in a way had to take upon themselves the role of asking uncomfortable questions. And largely it was Bild as the largest tabloid paper, who did this.*

A senior journalist with experience of the group to which Bild belongs said: *I mean, they have now a desk, it's called Desk Freedom. Now, they have a commentator that is a freedom commentator. There is certainly a very strong political agenda, coming from the top that I mean, if you now write about freedom, and defending freedom in in Germany against 'state dictatorship in Berlin and the Chancellor's Office', your career chances are better. There have also been reports of resignations over the editorial line during the pandemic, especially among science writers.*

A financial journalist with wide experience in continental Europe said: *In the case of Bild unquestionably yes, the owner is influential. Die Zeit, proudly looks back on its heritage as, as the thinking paper for the centre-left, you know, tracing its origins to the Helmut Schmidt time and so on. Die Welt a bit less so. But it's, again sort of declined in importance.*

Interviewees reported that German TV coverage of the pandemic was like that of the BBC, showing a strong sense of responsibility for public safety. In this it faithfully reflected government policy.

The financial journalist added: *They (ARD/ZDF) are public broadcasters and, and to watch the German news, it's almost like going back in time, to BBC One in the 1970s. It hasn't really changed a great deal.*

## SWITZERLAND

The general view of all those interviewed was that the owners of media businesses do not interfere with or influence coverage much in Switzerland, and especially not during the pandemic. They tend rather to reflect the view of their readership. There was however one incident, described later, where the owner of Ringier, a company that controls several outlets, sought to guide journalists to go easy on the government during the crisis.

A broadcaster said: *I've never really got a sense from the papers, that let's say they take a political stance. Like any other paper, they will try to reflect the views of their readership. So, the Blick newspaper, for example, will probably be very sympathetic to the Swiss People's Party (*SVP, a right-wing populist party*)*

An editor of a national German language paper said: *The NZZ has a very special structure. Nobody can own more than 1% of shares. So, no shareholder can have an influence on the NZZ. Ringier owns Blick. And there might be more of an influence through the owners there. In Tamedia there is still a family, the Konnick family and they could, as principal shareholder, try to influence. But it wasn't clear. I mean, it wasn't obvious that Tagesanzeiger was influenced. In the case of Ringier. Mark Walter, I think even said that he wanted to support the Government.*

A Swiss journalist said: *Not really; honestly; no, I don't think so.*

The public broadcaster firmly followed the official Government line and stayed away from the controversies regarding freedom and vaccinations. The facts were supplemented by analysis, rather

than political or moral comment.  It tended to be the press, rather than the radio or TV, who dealt with controversial issues such as the trade-offs and the effects on business and education, and later, vaccinations.

The editor of a national newspaper said: *we saw a big difference between the public radio and TV that basically very much followed the official line and (not very critically) reported what the health minister was saying why this and that should be shut down. And we were more asking ourselves does it make ...sense? I personally tried to, to make the point that there are always trade-offs (with the economic cost).*

## Summary and discussion

In the UK newspapers tend to have a distinct personality and recognisable editorial line, which mostly relates to the business strategy of the outlet, and is designed to attract subscribers, customers or advertisers in its chosen target market. Although the interviewees suggested that the owner's political sympathies were not as influential as they are sometimes reported to be, senior newspaper people are clearly well aware of the views of the owner and ensure that the publication's output duly takes that into account.  In most cases having agreed the strategic direction and appointed the editor, owners are mostly not perceived to intervene much in day-to-day editorial decisions. Editors did talk to ministers during the pandemic with a view to getting government support for their industry, and in some cases exemptions from the regulations for their staff.  The Government for its part wanted supportive treatment for its policy platform.

The broadcasters, especially the BBC, dominate the media scene, and saw increases in audiences during the pandemic, particularly for flagship news bulletins and the coverage of government press conferences. The BBC chose to devote an unusually large part (nearly 50%) of its news coverage to the pandemic, and as the evidence of the content analysis showed, its reporters did often question government policy, while maintaining a focus on safety and compliance with the rules being promulgated by the Government. Their somewhat restrained reporting was regarded as both important and helpful to the national effort to control the pandemic.

In France the historic alignments are fading and there have been a series of recent interventions by wealthy individuals either buying publications or starting TV channels. These people are perceived to be right-leaning, though not party political. This was not perceived to affect the coverage of the pandemic. Journalists suggested that international comparisons were frequently covered in the newspapers though evidence from the content analysis showed that it was the broadcasters who devoted more of their coverage to this issue during November 2020.

German television, the ARD, like the BBC, supported the Government's efforts at health and safety, although the content research showed that ARD carried rather less criticism of their government's pandemic policy. The ownership of media organisations was perceived generally to be unimportant, with the major exception of the Axel Springer group, owners of BILD, Die Welt, and Der Spiegel, who were frequently mentioned as politically driven, questioning Government policy from the libertarian and nationalistic standpoint for which they are known.

Interviewees from Switzerland remarked that the Swiss state broadcaster was very factual in its coverage. very much supported the Federal health office line, as did most of the media and the ownership of outlets was not seen as particularly important. Print journalists were slightly more challenging than the broadcasters, especially when policy was being put to a referendum.

### 7.3.3 The duty of impartiality and the influence of regulators

**UK**

In the UK only the broadcasters are under a legal duty to be impartial in their reporting. This requirement has been internalised among broadcast journalists and it is now part of the work culture in those organisations.

Especially in the circumstances of the pandemic, BBC news people reported that they felt they owed a duty to the public rather than to their organisation.

A senior broadcast journalist said: *I think the way to see it, you're regulated by OFCOM, or you're not. So it's the regulation that's important. Working for the BBC, I feel like we have a contract with the public. All I want to do; all I'm interested in doing is find out what's true and try to explain that to the public. If I work for a newspaper, I have got to do something else, which is trying to write through the lens of where the paper's going. And I have never at the BBC been told what to say ever. I have confidence that I never would be.*

A government spokesman with both a print and a broadcast media background said:  *I think there was less pressure as a broadcast producer to be either way, because you're expected to be impartial. So that's just what you did. You're a journalist, and you're reporting on this story as you saw it, and you had signed a code and you knew what you were operating under. Whereas as a print journalist, there is more of a pressure to be one way or another. You will always know as a print journalist, if stories were going to diverge from the newspaper's line or style, they wouldn't make it into the paper.*

Impartiality is a significant force at the BBC. Journalists feel they must get at the right answer – they cannot be wrong – even more so during the pandemic since lives may depend on it. This tended to manifest itself in the concentration on the safety side of public debates during the pandemic.

The broadcaster added: *I think that I can't allow myself to be wrong.  Whereas in a paper, you can take a chance, you can take a gamble, you can be wrong, and there aren't any consequences.*

Interviewees reported that the pressure on the BBC to report impartially came from self-regulation and from officials rather than interventions from OFCOM, the regulator. Impartiality is measured by OFCOM over the whole news cycle and not item by item.

Impartiality is sometimes taken to mean staying within the range of the establishment consensus or communicating the received wisdom of élites. In news analysis or comment programming balance is often used as a yardstick for impartiality, despite these being quite different concepts.

A German broadcaster said: *In the UK, you can be quite aggressive in the papers. Yes. The BBC is different, of course. And, and the BBC is, of course impartial. We, I think, go to the BBC when anything very serious happens. Because we have confidence that it will be pretty close to the right answer. Whereas all the newspapers have known lines.*

A Government spokesman said: *in this time of crisis, the audience, the public gravitated back towards the BBC, towards us, a bit more. And therefore, I think some of that noise on the press side of things was greyed out or less influential than it traditionally is. I think as things wore on the bear garden got a bit more ferocious.*

A national newspaper editor said: *The BBC, when it talks about impartiality, it becomes a sort of consensus, establishment view of the world, and therefore being impartial, so, so why I think that was a bit of a problem for the BBC, I think they would reflect whatever the current view was, of what more could be done. The BBC's questions always were, (and Sky and others, and ITV), why aren't you locking down more? Why aren't you locking down harder? Why aren't you locking down faster? When you're compelled to be impartial, you often end up parroting whatever the elite received wisdom happens to be at that moment.*

A senior journalist on a national paper said: *Broadcasters are required to be impartial, but they're required to be impartial in their news coverage, not necessarily in their comment and discussion. And I think that the 24-hour news, rolling news channels, it's almost impossible for them to manage - at least they can claim impartiality over a longer term.*

## FRANCE

In France the public service broadcasters tend to be magisterial in tone, and somewhat limited in scrutiny, following the consensus. The broadcasters' duty of impartiality was much less commented on by the interviewees in relation to France, Germany and Switzerland than it was in the UK.

A French correspondent of a UK national newspaper said: *French TV and radio, it tends to be very tame in their news reporting, much less aggressive and punchy than the UK or US television. The state broadcasters are a bit grand and lofty, go for the high tone. There is this obligation with them of objectivity and neutrality. The state broadcasters assume that everybody has got a university degree.*

Private broadcasters by contrast are seen as much more edgy and political. This was particularly so in the case of C-news which sees itself as the equivalent of Fox News in the US, GB News in UK.

There is a tradition of debate shows, where a neutral chair will lead a discussion among experts on the issues of the day, without taking a particular line. The purpose seems to be to clarify and explain, rather than to cross-examine or challenge.

He added: *Overall the debate is a bit soft, and they look for consensus. To use the French expression, they stroke the public 'dans le sens du poil', in the direction of their fur.*

## GERMANY

Broadcasters are required to be impartial, and they interpret this into editorial policy by reflecting the line of the government and the German tendency to trust authority. The public broadcasting system's governance reflects the main interests and political forces in German society. This tends to ensure that broadcasters' line is within the generally accepted consensus of the country. The German PSBs are seen as somewhat less critical, less sceptical, than the British.

In the case of the pandemic there was a tendency to allow the government some leeway. Not to say that there wasn't some criticism, but it was all within the range of officially sanctioned opinion. All television channels tended not to give that much space to people who are sceptical about the government's approach. Even with vaccines which were much more controversial, they gave the government the benefit of the doubt and encouraged people both to get the vaccine and accept the brand that was being offered. A leading print journalist said:  *They (PSBs) are somehow close to the world of official Germany. Somehow, they cut them, the government, more slack, than then they should and it's not it's not so much a party political thing. It is more, that there's a tendency, and this is a German tendency anyway, to trust authority.*

A German broadcaster agreed: *German media, that public television at least I can directly speak for, did almost the same as the BBC, not showing sceptics. Many journalists, and I think that that is the same in both countries, decided to go with government messaging and be rather pro vaccine, mainly because they were not medically qualified to do anything else.*

Print journalists are expected to report factual issues fairly, on pain of being referred to or sanctioned by the relevant Press Council, which is formed in a similar way to the broadcasting councils.

A German print journalist said, (and another agreed): *It's not quite like what you have here with OFCOM. We have the Press Council (Presserat) and the print media like the broadcasters can be told off.  The boards of the big broadcasters, the ARD, and ZDF is this parity of politicians sitting on those boards alongside other people. If there's a violation of standards, people can go and sue the newspapers or the broadcaster at the Presserat.. So, they get sanctioned…like broadcasters…for not being impartial.*

# SWITZERLAND

The regulator of the public broadcaster is the Federal Communications Commission, for whom the watchword is accuracy.

A Swiss broadcaster said: *I think provided that we're broadly speaking, accurate, that's what people will really care about, that's what the Federal Communications will care about. Whether we were accurate, not broadcasting a political party's propaganda.*

Although the press is free politically and is under no obligation to be impartial, this freedom is circumscribed by a press oversight committee which addresses complaints of privacy violations, as well as inaccurate or unfair reporting.

A national newspaper editor said: *Basically, (press is) totally free. But of course, we have to follow certain standards in our journalistic work, and somebody can complain to us and also to our oversight body if we violate the rights of people, for example, if you name a person that is not a public interest and doesn't want to be named. This is the general law of privacy. Then you have an oversight. The so called Presserat (Press Committee). they actually read this and can complain that they feel that some reporting was inaccurate or unfair. There are professors and there are also representatives of the media on this Committee.*

There is an ongoing discussion, especially coming from the political Right, that the PSB has a left-wing bias, tending towards statist solutions and against individual free choice.

A print journalist with a broadcasting background said: *I think that the printing and online press is far more free than the SRG (PSB); its stations have to follow a public mandate. It's a public concession which writes down this approach to attitude. But among especially SRG there is an ongoing discussion, especially from the Right, that they are too left-wing or biased against liberal and towards statist solutions. I think however the Swiss public media are more independent than for example, the German public media. In UK, the BBC is also by my opinion, more independent than German public media.*

## Summary and discussion

Public broadcasters in all the countries (except France) dominate the marketplace for attention and are required by statute or by their regulator to be impartial. There is no exact equivalent requirement regarding the press in any country.

In the UK all broadcasters are regulated and must show due impartiality over the news cycle. During the pandemic this led to somewhat cautious reporting on the part of the BBC, focusing on public safety and control measures, often asking whether more should be done. There is no such legal obligation on the press, which is fundamentally only constrained by the libel laws and the industry's self-regulatory body.

In France this obligation only covers those broadcasters in the public sector. Their output was similar in tone and content to that of the UK broadcasters. The private broadcasters and the press are free to take a political line. There is a tradition of long form debate shows where a plurality of views is expressed. There are stringent laws in France prohibiting the undue criticism of public officials and generally protecting privacy.

In Germany all media are required by regulation to be fair in their handling of issues, and by law to respect citizen privacy. Their supervisory bodies include representatives of the political parties. Only the state broadcasters are generally seen as the voice of 'official Germany' and this role was important during the pandemic.

In Switzerland SRG/SSR is a dominant broadcaster like the BBC and required by law to be impartial. Like the BBC it has detractors who see it as too statist in its editorial line. As in Germany, journalists may choose their topics but are required to meet a duty of fairness in their reporting.

Despite these differences in regulatory regimes, interviewees in all countries suggested that the PSBs, along with other broadcasters, acted as public information channels, faithfully reporting government information and exhortation[15]. Criticism was in general somewhat muted, and it was mainly for the privately owned press to ask the awkward questions about Government policy.

This illustrates the different responses within publicly accountable organisations between the duty to be impartial and fair, and the duty to help the Government to change public behaviour in the interest of saving lives.


### 7.3.4 Commercial considerations; customer demand


**UK**

Interviewees reported overwhelmingly that most people using the media in the UK wanted reliable information from trusted sources. People wanted to know about the practicalities, risks, and the regulations. They wanted to know that the Government had a plan and was acting decisively to handle the pandemic.

The editor of a national paper said the concerns were, in this order:  *What is the risk of infection? How long will the lockdown last?  What are the rules for social distancing?  How is vaccination going to be rolled out, how do I get it?*

The public wanted also to assure themselves that there was a plan in which they could have confidence, that officials were protecting the population by following the science and medical advice. This in turn engendered trust and compliance.

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[15] this perception is not confirmed by the media output analysis in section 7.2 which showed that the BBC carried significant critical coverage regarding government measures.

The same editor: *Security and a decisive response to a public health crisis, which It soon became. They wanted to be reassured that the national government was responding effectively and decisively to a public health crisis with a capital C.*

A journalist, with both broadcast and print experience said: *Clarity: people were thirsty, hungry, desperate for information, which was going to have an influence over their decisions almost in real time. Can I send my kids to school, am I allowed to buy a pint? Am I allowed to open my shop tomorrow? And it was very, very unusual to have a moment when the audience is looking to the media to provide information that will influence their decision making about their own lives in real time.*

Another print journalist said people wanted to know: *what is the risk of infection? how long will the lockdown last? what are the rules for social distancing?*

Members of the public were keen to know about what was going to affect them - whether they could use public transport, airports or go on holiday. This was more important than the general situation across the country generally, and certainly more important than international comparisons.

A senior Government spokesman: *And the volume of questions (to the Government's website) I think, is indicative of a certain failing in the news media, but also a desire to hear directly from government.*

The media, by contrast, was concentrating on the progress of the pandemic, death rates and rates of hospitalisation. A minority of the media (notably the Daily Mail) also paid a lot of attention to the damage to the economy and to children's education caused by the restrictions being imposed.

During the pandemic UK newspapers were facing a massive loss of advertising, both directly and indirectly because of the temporary closure of many businesses. The pandemic also occurred during a period when the drivers of, and demand for, journalistic content had been changed fundamentally by the digital revolution. Some of the newspapers themselves were threatened with closure. The government bought space for pandemic-related advertorial in six hundred publications each week. This deal was effectively a £35 million support package for the industry through the pandemic[16]. A Government spokesman: *In exchange 600 national, regional and local newspapers would provide a page in every paper every week. Those pages were advertorial, but they were written by journalists. So, the newspaper industry was employing its own journalists to write advertorial on behalf of government on public health issues. And we found that that was credible for the demographic that reads newspapers, probably people like us, it worked locally and nationally.*

The programme was criticised for its focus on the larger publishers, to the exclusion of smaller, independent publications who would also be struggling to maintain their businesses during the pandemic (Heawood, 2021).

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[16] Although taking a slightly different form, this was in line with one of the recommendations of the Cairncross review, subsequently rejected by the Government (Cairncross, 2019).

Much though journalists value their position within a democracy as commentators, gatekeepers and holders of the powerful to account, it must not be forgotten that most media organisations are first and foremost businesses (or in the case of state broadcasters, make business decisions to meet their mandate within budgetary constraints). The design of their organisations to achieve financial objectives is at the heart of the media industry. Advertisers used to be important to media organisations. In most cases now they are much less so; publishers giving evidence to the Cairncross Review demonstrated that digital media has scooped up much of the advertising revenue that the press used to enjoy. (Cairncross, 2019). Most but by no means all newspapers have gone across to a pay wall and subscription model. The Daily Mail and the Guardian are exceptions, which still offer their material free online, funded by advertising, and have been rewarded with increased circulation.

Furthermore, while measured circulation and associated secondary readership used to be the principal yardstick of commercial and therefore journalistic success, there was considerable scope for different views of what made a paper popular.

The interest of readers and potential subscribers can now be measured in a way that it never could before where the key set of metrics has now changed to page views, clicks and dwell time in individual articles and paragraphs, rather than overall sales of the whole publication on the news stand. When modern tools of measurement are being used in a newspaper, journalists are directly confronted with the fact that that the purpose of the newspapers is to make money; that they must attract the interest of readers, particularly subscribers, as well as advertisers.

A journalist on a national newspaper said: *it used to be used to be based on newsstand sales, but it's now essentially based on page views, and people don't click on things that are boring, but important. Our interest is to play up to the human drama and to maximise the, to maximise the attention, but we may not necessarily be serving our readers in the best possible way.*

A local government officer and former political party spokesman said: *Journalists chase audience. They have no choice but to become more opinionated, entertaining. I think it is at least rose-tinted glasses by the older generation of journalists that it (measurement by digital means) doesn't matter. It does matter, because they're simply not going to be employed for very long unless they engage their readers. The nature of journalism has changed completely to sort of into what is derogatorily called clickbait journalism.*

A national newspaper journalist said: *at (our paper), we have a tool, that tells you how many people have read your story, how long, where they are in the world? what device they are reading your story on. Where they navigated to after your story, whether they stayed on the site. So here is the editor's dilemma; we must deal with this, we must make a decision. Okay, this isn't necessarily going to be massively read. But we consider it as important. And we consider it's part of our journalistic/editorial duty to (the newspaper) to run it...*

There is a clear distinction made between commoditised news which is available everywhere at no cost, and the components of added value, which in the case of political coverage takes the form of opinion and analysis.

The editor of a national newspaper said: *We can measure everything nowadays, via our website, our app, and so on. And so, we have very, very good data, which we never had before. We know exactly what our subscribers are interested in. In the digital world, we know and live in a digital world, which is a bit more like TV ratings. And TV has always had to follow the reader, the viewer, and maybe less so in Britain because of BBC, but you know, it's going that way. But newspapers don't have to do that. And, you know, it's the explanation, I think, for the salience of commentary.*

A different editor of a national paper said: *So, the way we attract readers...we used an engagement metric. How long are people spending reading this article? It's a measure of value. Is it being shared? Are people coming back? But whenever anybody tried to tell me or one of my colleagues, that this isn't really playing, I don't give a crap. And because we decided what we're doing. And by the way, if we're making money and subscriptions going up which they were, you're not going to tell me what plays and, you know, having spent, by that time, coming up to four decades in journalism, three and a half of the (newspaper as editor) I wasn't going to be told what to write.*

These different viewpoints illustrate two different business strategies, one giving primacy to authoritative writing and analysis, building brand loyalty through internal perceptions of quality, the other seeking commercial advantage by responding to the measured attention of the readership on a day-to-day basis. In both cases the final and decisive measure will be medium term profitability.

## FRANCE

There was a demand for reliable information regarding public health and about the changing rules and restrictions. The media saw their primary duty as to explain what was going on, and how the pandemic could be handled, both by the Government and by individuals.

A national newspaper journalist said: *there was a lot of fear on what was going on. What were the risks to themselves, and collectively? So, the pressure on the media, really, as a first basic duty was to try and explain as much as possible. What was going on? How to cope with it, how to handle it? I think that was probably the first degree of interest from readers individually, what is my risk, but I think there was a desire to understand what the global impact was as well, for society, for our country, for the world, for the hospitals, for the economy, which was very disrupted.*

A print journalist said: *News about changes in the rules and restrictions. This was very big; I think both in Britain and France.*

Given that people in France were said to start from a position of general suspicion of public pronouncements it was important to reassure the public that the Government knew what it was doing, and the right steps were being taken.

The French correspondent of a foreign paper said: *Reassurance. They mistrusted people in authority. They wanted to be convinced that the government knew what it was doing at the beginning of the COVID epidemic. And it looked, to a lot of people as if they didn't. So, there was a quite a lot of disapproval.*

The media appropriately covered personal risks first but also the overall impact on the economy, schools, hospitals, national life and international comparisons. However, there were no accounts in the interviews of changing practices of journalism in response to the rise of digital media.

## GERMANY

As with the other countries the popular demand was for good information about how the pandemic was proceeding and how people could protect themselves. The emphasis was on facts, science, rules and reassurance.

A senior journalist on a national paper said: *it was two things, and not at the same time. Firstly, it was mostly about information. I mean, people didn't know how dangerous this was. They also wanted to know what they could do to protect themselves. And obviously, this was something they, they turned to the media for.*

Another print journalist said: *solid information in the beginning, especially when everyone was nervous, and nobody knew what we were dealing with here. Information and maybe some sort of, we'll get through this. Don't panic, just stick to the rules and you'll be fine. (*Our paper*) is expected to be constructive. And that's what we tried to be. We also started to try to stick to, obviously, facts and figures. By and large, I think that (*our paper*) tried to maintain the scientific line.*

The initial successes of government policy led to a degree of self-congratulation, which later gave way to disappointment, when case rates approached the averages for comparator countries.

A senior newspaper journalist said: *in Germany, the first phase of the pandemic was very different because the local levels of the Gesundheitsämter (public health offices) were super-efficient. They identified people quickly, they're isolated quickly, they went in quite robustly. And until the autumn of 2020, Germany had very low case rate, (which completely changed after that, and it became disastrous). We felt in Germany that actually, we were doing quite well, looking around... Italy, England.*

A press journalist said: *There was a lot of appetite for international comparisons. China, (authoritarians do it better?) Australia and New Zealand (zero covid?) Sweden (laissez faire?) UK (Liberal?). These comparisons were a proxy for the debate about strategy. The terms of the debate were not 'Is our government failing', but rather constructively 'is there a better way, scientifically?'*

A German broadcaster in London said: *reporting from Britain, they (the German audience) mostly wanted to know how Britain dealt with it in comparison. It was not so much the interest about how Britain is doing as such, but more 'are they doing that better than we are?'. It was more about can Germany learn something from how it is spread and who is doing it better than we are. So, it was very self-referential.*

A senior journalist on a national paper said: *In a way for the media, it was a gift. Because we made a lot of subscriptions. People went back to mainstream media. They wanted scientific explanation.*

*There was a lot of interest in good practice, comparing what others are doing in terms of lockdown in terms of vaccine and Britain obviously played a very special role in that, was a comparator.*

During the pandemic people demanded reliable information and got it from the conventional mainstream media. Several journalists reported that the pandemic has convinced many of the value of proper fact checked journalism in its competition with the blogosphere. The detailed verification skills behind quality journalism aligned with their understanding of the science helped significantly in building the subscriber base. Optimists in the industry hope that this will be a lasting trend.

A senior writer on a national paper said: *I have to say that it (*the pandemic*) also gave a kind of boost to serious professional journalism, because this was something that you really don't want to get from some blogger.*

The pressure from management to help the outlet make money is more and more important in the journalist's daily work. There are indications that the business strategy issues that are very much alive in Britain are beginning to make themselves felt in Germany.

A senior German journalist on a national paper said: *I used to be basically doing what the wires do. And no one pays for that. We need subscribers. We need the stuff behind the paywall. So, either you have exclusive stuff, or you need to do something that's different. That means that the whole economic model for newspapers has changed, though the broadcasters, especially the state ones, are fine.*

## SWITZERLAND

Again, reliable information was in demand, though this was easily available from public sources as well. In the beginning it was about personal risks and the restrictions, later it was about access to vaccinations.

A Swiss broadcaster said*: I think the main interest really was information about where they can go, what they were allowed to do, how far they can travel and all of that. When the vaccination programmes started, it was how can I sign up? who's eligible first? There was a lot of information, solid information, practical things that they would want to know. I think in retrospect, it was not political. They understood that this is a pandemic. This is family. This is bad. Certainly, they wanted to know what the hospitalisation rates were the death rate; people would, understandably be very interested in that.*

An editor of a national paper said: *I don't think the feeling was the feeling of war time; it was it was more the feeling of an exceptional situation where one has to find the most reasonable solution. That this was all about life and so the natural reaction of many journalists and people was to save life.*

Regulations were initially issued on a cantonal basis; this made following them immensely complex. There was a lot of interest in the travel restrictions and especially in the operation of

borders. People were interested in data regarding local cases and hospitalisations, so that they could judge the effectiveness of their canton's response. The emphasis of much of the coverage was accordingly on the science and the visualisation of data.

The editor added: *Accordingly, we tried to provide on reliable statistical information, national and international, what's really happening and how it compares what we now know about who is affected.*

There was a massive increase in traffic of mainstream media websites as people looked for information. Data journalism became more and more important as differentiators for quality outlets. Others might provide surprises or shocks, but the quality outlets provided hard and reliable information, which was in demand.  One quality outlet reported subscriber increases of up to 15%. A reporter on a national newspaper said: *We had a spike in readers and people who really craving you know, the latest information. I think science-based fact-based journalism was very important especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Data visualisation was a major development in journalism because it became so important, and people were really looking for that.* A national newspaper editor said: *we experienced a huge surge in digital interest on our website, on every topic that was related to Corona...we find that generally as a (trusted paper) if there is something that that is surprising or shocking or so on, then people search for reliable information and come to us.*

As the pandemic wore on, dissenting voices emerged, and international comparisons became more important as a way of assessing how successful Switzerland's policy was. A newspaper journalist said: *Yes, I think international comparisons were important especially when Switzerland had very high cases. We are decentralised: each canton can basically do whatever they do[17]. So, the comparisons were internal as well. Then there was a second half of the game where there was a lot of self-criticism and a lot of people, maybe I can't necessarily call them from the left only but people who are advocating stricter measures and wanting to prioritise public health. They were saying 'we're doing worse than everybody else'.*

As advertising revenue reduces, those outlets that have erected a paywall depend more and more on subscription revenue. Those that have taken this step are in a much more direct sense accountable to their readers. This forces a certain independence from the elites. Editors used to believe that they knew instinctively what people wanted. Now this can all be measured. This has affected the way journalists work. Now there is a drive to deliver copy that meets the measured needs of subscribers and potential subscribers. Furthermore, as subscribers become more important and advertisers less so, the influence of big and powerful business interests on the newspapers' editorial line has waned.

A newspaper editor said:  *Although the economic section discusses economics and companies, they have no way of influencing us or requiring from us to write something. Earlier on, they had maybe a certain influence through advertisement, because, say 20 years ago, 80% of our revenues were adverts. And that decreased so much that we are now responsible to our readers. So, we really work to be independent to the best of our knowledge. Over the past 20 or 30 years the journalists' monopoly has gone. We used to be able to write what we wanted. Now we know much more about*

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[17] The rules were eventually harmonised across Switzerland, although case rates and deaths were reported cantonally.

*what the reader wants, and we must provide it because we want them to keep subscribing. The simple news is everywhere for free. We must ask ourselves how to add value. Every morning we look at what is most read, so the way we work has changed.*

## Summary and discussion

Practitioners in all countries reported that people wanted 'good reliable information' from 'trusted sources.' There were distinct if subtle differences of emphasis in what the media in the different countries gave to their audiences. Some referred to this being a period when real, fact-checked journalism was more valued than the sometimes-untrustworthy material on social media.

Journalists in all countries referred to the increasing use of digital methods of measurement of the interest shown by audiences in the material that is published. Twenty years ago, the commercial success of a publication would be measured in its circulation, revenue, costs and profits overall. It would be hard to isolate the effect of the content on the readership numbers. But as the digital editions become a more important and representative part of the readership, the methods for measuring reader interest have become more precise and accurate and are beginning to shape editorial decisions in the most competitive markets.

This was most strongly emphasised in the UK, where the national newspaper industry is famously competitive. It is also strategically differentiated, with some outlets preferring a paywall/subscription strategy, and others preferring a freesheet/advertising model. Measurement is important in both cases. The other country in which this was mentioned was Switzerland, with its large number of small titles. It was not mentioned by French practitioners.

Interviewees reported that UK audiences wanted to know the risks and have confidence in the Government's plans, but more importantly they wanted to know what they could and could not do. UK journalists placed considerable emphasis on policy, especially the frequently changing rules that the public had to try to keep up with and obey. This was more important than the prevalence and death rates. The media tended also to report on the patterns of cases and deaths in different parts of (and nations of) the country. Only a minority of the media focused much attention on the impact on education, and the effects on business.

Interviewees said that French people wanted to understand the whole picture of the pandemic, at home and abroad. Understanding the rules was important, as was confidence in the authorities. The range of issues covered was reportedly wider than in the UK. The French media emphasised the impact on businesses and individuals, of both the pandemic itself and the regulations that were introduced to combat it.

In Germany the emphasis of the coverage was said to be factual and scientific. As elsewhere people needed to know the exact rules that they had to follow. Initial pride at Germany's relative success gave way to a search, by international comparison, for better solutions. The content research showed how much differing opinion was presented, advocating different solutions. There was also considerable emphasis on the residual politics, around the competition between federal and state governments for control of the health measures. This, rather than being party political, reflected

differing views of the best solution for the country. The mainstream media experienced an increase in audiences and indeed subscribers as people sought out reliable information.

The Swiss place a great trust in the collective wisdom of all the components of their system of government to debate and deliver the right answer. So, the media covered local and international comparisons, coupled with a good deal of coverage of the scientific aspects of the pandemic, to justify the measures to a watchful and cautious public. Swiss people also wanted practical information so that they could make their own assessment of the reasonableness of the measures. Local data was important, not least because much of the Swiss press has a regional focus and the health authorities are in normal times cantonal. The shift to subscription income caused the newspapers to move their focus away from the élites towards issues that are important to their own readership, which may be regional or even local.

### 7.3.5 Pressure on journalism from the Government; the influence of informal networks

**UK**

There was a regular exchange of views between officials, politicians, and the leaders of media organisations to try to coordinate the national effort and secure maximum compliance. The Government went to great lengths to correct information that was wrong or inconsistent with their messaging and was particularly assiduous in addressing the BBC. Exchanges with the BBC tended to happen separately from the regular press conferences, given its importance as an outlet and the nature of broadcast journalism, where only a part of what is discussed in the 'Westminster Village' will find its way into a broadcast on political events.

The editor of a national newspaper said: *Governments always try and put pressure on newspapers and journalists and there's always battles between journalists and editors, and number 10. And that was a case under Labour it was the case under the Tories when Mrs. May was PM, was the case under Boris, but to me, I didn't think there was anything particularly different.*

Another editor said: *So, they (the Government) will be sensitive to if the Prime Minister was making a statement about lockdown measures, if the BBC or in another public broadcaster on the lead item, 'the government knew on March 16…', that kind of 'gotcha' type story. That would certainly be an area of great contention; there would be calls, more than calls…because you're digging up what ministers may or may not have been told, while ministers are trying to get a message across on public health measures.*

A senior political broadcaster said: *All governments always try to get the media to promote the government line, and all opposition parties always try to get the media to promote their line. It's what communications teams are paid for. It doesn't mean that they ever succeed. So, there's nothing new or different about that. The Director of Communications at a political party or government, you're probably going to have about 200 journalists trying to get your attention every single day. They're very pragmatic about where they put most of their focus. Quite literally, you just must have a pecking order about who you're going to pay attention to, whose calls you are going to return.*

*Because that's just about eyeballs or readership. You're using the access, that that outlet has, to your voters.*

A former head of communications for a political party said:  *The power of a Robbie Gibb or a Lee Cain (*Government political spokesmen*) to influence a newspaper editor is hugely diminished because there is a much a much smaller gap between the parties now. There are also more of them and there's a more contested environment, so their effectiveness is diminished.*

This kind of pressure happens in normal times but was more intensive during the pandemic. In the case of a health emergency the justification for the pressure was significantly different – it would have been less about party politics and more about public safety, saving lives, and that clearly is much more morally charged.  That said, one interviewee commented that the pressure on the media was nowhere near as severe as it was during the Brexit debate, where both sides worked very hard to persuade the media of the merits of their case.

Personal, trusting relationships and background briefings between MPs and political journalists have always been important in the British media landscape. A former political editor said: *I think there's so much in British journalism is about personal relationships between individuals. Yes, trust is the basis of everything. Both knowing that, generally respectable, respected journalists will treat a piece of information properly. I think it has changed and I think it's much more voracious. And the relationship today is much more venal.*

This suggestion of venality does not refer to financial corruption, but to the daily private exchange of information, the transactional and symbiotic relationship between journalists and politicians at all levels. Uniquely among European countries the UK Parliamentary system includes the Lobby, a grouping of accredited journalists who are trusted with off the record Government briefings and informal exchanges with Ministers, parliamentarians, and their staffs. According to Davis (2009): *journalists are seen as more than a simple means of message promotion to the public. They also act, often inadvertently, as information intermediaries and sources for politicians trying to gauge daily developments within their own political arena.*

Lobby Terms (rules limiting attribution and preserving confidentiality) still exist but not for foreign outlets, because it is believed that they have less at stake in observing the rules of the 'club' and retaining access. A German broadcaster, working in London, said: *It is said the Westminster lobby system excludes foreign journalists because they do what they need to do in their own country. (*The Britis*h) can't control them, so they must deal with the foreign press in a different way. Why would you do that? Because you want to control your own press? That has consequences for the quality of journalism here. You can almost feel it. (*The British*) seem to be always playing within the circus. They're not really looking at it from a distance like they should.*

During the pandemic such exchanges were fewer and less important, as most political debate had ceased, and the Government was the only or main source of public service information.

# FRANCE

The main vehicle for communication was the government press conferences which lasted for several hours giving detailed technical explanations of what was going on. These were led by several ministers; it was significant that the health minister, Olivier Véran, was himself a qualified doctor.

President Macron led the efforts to persuade the population to accept the *pass sanitaire*, with some success. The government in France, as in England, bought advertising space with the dual objectives of supporting newspapers and getting the message across. The business correspondent on a national newspaper said: *the commercials were taken by the government, bought by the government for messages and information, saying 'wash your hands' or 'stay at home'.*

The Paris correspondent: *Macron calls editors. I have had colleagues who have had calls from Macron if he doesn't like a story. Everybody knows that the owners, the politicians, the editors are all circulating in the same dinner parties all the time. So there were messages to go easy on all the pandemic, I now know.*

There was pressure applied to media organisations to support the Government's efforts, but by and large they tended to maintain their independence and felt free to talk about wasn't really working. However, defeating the pandemic was seen generally (at least among the administrative elite) as a national effort and the media were mostly prepared to play their part. Several interviewees mentioned the decline of elite influence. 30 to 40 years ago there was an establishment elite embracing those who had come from the Grandes Ecoles, especially the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, and those in Government. A European journalist said: *in France, ministers tend to go public with their pressure now. There was a time when the French press was a lot more submissive, with high-ranking journalists moving around with high-ranking politicians. But I think that's much less the case now. And I think most politicians have grasped that. It's become like everywhere else; I suppose much less clubby. (*French*) journalism has got a lot more professional.*

A Paris-based correspondent for a UK national paper said: *French media: there was traditionally great complicity between the 'pouvoir', the ruling establishment and the media. That's changed a lot over the last 30-40 years. But it's the media becoming less reverent, now they're still they're still more respectful and reverent towards authority than the UK media.*

Even now, owners, editors and politicians in France often move around in the same social circles. This is where journalists have traditionally been encouraged to see things the Government's way. Influence is applied by ministers, sometimes in public. It remains a force and it was suggested that everybody knows that it is there. In this respect France is similar to Switzerland and the UK but different from Germany, where these social bonds were not as frequently referred to.

A senior reporter on a national newspaper said that here was some evidence from inside the Interior Ministry at the very beginning of the crisis that government officials deliberately exaggerated the seriousness of the pandemic to scare the population into compliance. They said: *There was a paper that circulated within the Interior Ministry, at the very beginning of the pandemic, it was not an official paper, they hastened to say when it leaked, but it was 'let the media portray our immediate future with this pandemic in the harshest possible tones'. Create a panic, make sure that people are asked by the children, will we be safe? And in autumn? Do we have to stay in the home and so on?*

Most interviewees reported that there was no need for government pressure on the media and this could all be done in the open by convincing argument and proper statistical and epidemiological support. The whole political class is much more consensual than in England or in France. People agree more, they seek common ground and compromise together.

There is no privileged access for political journalists although there are background briefing meetings that take place in private under what in the UK is called the Chatham House Rule; the 'Hintergrundskreise'. Unlike the UK lobby, these are not particularly exclusive, and are easy for journalists to access.

A German broadcaster with experience of both the UK lobby and the German briefing system said: *it's way less controlled in Germany. I think journalism is better in Germany to a certain extent. Because people agree with each other more on certain things, the questioning of politicians is not as tough as it is in UK sometimes. We don't have this adversarial thing. Parliament is around people who are cooperating. In Germany, the whole system is more social democratic, more cooperative. Put another way, in Germany, there is a robust debate. But the purpose of the debate is to find a solution. In England, there is also a very robust debate, but it's about who's winning, who's losing.*

Chancellor Merkel, as a scientist, and as a national leader for 16 years, was central to the communications effort in the initial stages. After a period when she said very little, she eventually made a rare, but commanding appearance on national television with a successful appeal for calm and solidarity in the national effort to overcome the crisis. She was perceived by the interviewees to have shown leadership and understanding of the scientific and medical technicalities.

There was frustration with sub-national and supra-national institutions, but these were overcome by strong interventions by the federal government and the Chancellor. She was able to knock heads together in the necessary consultations with the local state governors. A senior reporter on a national newspaper said: *It was the feeling that the decision-making process itself was very complicated and slow. And this made it difficult for the government to get across the idea of urgency; how do you tell people that something is very serious, when on the other hand, it takes so long in the German federal structure, when the Länder might not agree.*

# SWITZERLAND

The main medium for Government communication with the media, and indeed the country, was the detailed and thorough press conferences at the Federal Health Office in Berne. Exhaustive explanations continued until the journalists had run out of questions. These press conferences were also live streamed to the public.

A Swiss broadcaster said: *But it was all done through the press conferences, and that's when they announced the change. They certainly weren't spending any money placing government messages in the media. That suggests to me they trusted the media to report accurately what they were saying, obviously the federal government has the confidence that if they said something at the press conference that will be accurately reported in the media.*

A print journalist and former broadcaster said: *The public service media, were more loyal, closer to the Government. Then there was the Ringier group, the publisher of Blick (among other titles). Ringier's CEO is the squash partner of the health minister, so the coverage was very much in favour of the ministry. It was the same CEO who gave that speech to his crew saying let's go easy on the Government. We Swiss thought this was the wrong thing to do in a democratic country.*

There was in general very little contentious party politics around the pandemic. Most political parties were behind the government on this. This assisted in maintaining trust in the institutional response.

There was some tension between the cantons and the confederation as to who was to be in charge, as health was traditionally a cantonal responsibility. At the beginning the mitigation efforts were conducted at a cantonal level but soon the confusion was such that it was decided to take all decisions regarding the regulations at the federal level. Later into the pandemic, the cantons asserted their rights, along with the scientific community and the forces of liberalism, to diverge from the central state view. This was played out in two referenda, in which the people voted to support the Government.

There was also a strong coordination between all the various commercial and governmental interest groups which permitted fast coherent decision-making. This is a technocratic process without much political position taking. A national newspaper editor said: *I think you saw that the way politics is organised was always important in any country. France is a presidential top-down country, while Switzerland is much more of a consensus. And I also think that the government, the policy in Switzerland was relatively effective, because there was an informal, strong exchange between all the parties, all the different economic associations.*

Interviewees referred to substantial informal exchanges within the power structure especially at the federal level and among the large commercial institutions and media. However, power structures in Switzerland are quite diffused, being centred often on the 26 cantons and associated local institutions, with every major policy move being potentially subjected to a referendum.

A member of the editorial board of a Swiss newspaper said: *I remember that I was on holiday when this started. I was in Scandinavia skiing and the then head of the Banking Association called me and said, you know, we must do something, this is totally crazy, but the Federal Council wants to shut down the country.*

This would be quite a normal informal exchange within the Swiss system. Switzerland is quite a small country and the number of people involved at the highest levels of the media and government are correspondingly few.

The arrangements for supporting businesses and companies through the pandemic by providing direct financial support and loans were agreed between the banks and finance ministry in a few days and were eventually delivered through networks of trust, backed by legally binding declarations, but minimal initial audits and checks. In other larger countries this would have taken much longer to approve and implement and might have been more prone to error and fraud. In Switzerland the banks know both their business customers and the Government well and were able to operate a system that was, at least in the first instance, largely based on trust.

A broadcaster and print journalist said: *My partner is American. She says Switzerland is a supper club. On the level of the Confederation quite a small class of people are in unique contact with each other, but on the other side, many of the important decisions for the day are with the cantons. There are checks and balances among some groups of people.) Yes, of course (there are links) between university background, also the Swiss army. I live in a city where I know people…. it's a very informal, unwritten and not easily described way of communication.*

Another broadcaster, speaking about Government pressure said: *there might have been something along those lines with the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation. But no, not on a commercial level. Like I say that the press was really just reporting fairly accurately what the Government was saying, what was going on.*

A print journalist said: *I don't exclude it. But they don't have a lot of influence. The health minister was a Social Democrat, Alain Berset[18]. Will his chief of staff call my editor in chief? I don't think it would go down very well, he won't listen, doesn't yield the power over. I think it's probably more subtle that the spokespeople would talk to individual journalists. I think that did, of course, happen.*


**The view from the EU**


A very senior EU official agreed (regarding Government intervention) that: *in France, that dialogue happens all the time. In Germany, it does as well. But in Germany, the media listen. In England, those calls happen occasionally. But everybody knows where the newspapers stand. And in Switzerland, nobody quite knows how it how it goes.*

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[18] President of Switzerland, 2023

*Probably a caveat would be that it's even easier in France because there are fewer and fewer owners. In Germany, it's exactly like that. But it requires more of an effort. Because other than the well-known groups that own the federal heavy-hitting papers, there is also an extensive ecosystem of regional press of regional papers, very present in the Länder, that operate in in different political economic realities at regional level with the regional banks, regional interests. And in Switzerland, yes, that is very Swiss. Nobody really knows how it works.*

## Summary and discussion

Reports from the UK of Government pressure on the media varied, but most suggested that it was at normal levels, albeit more focused on the single issue of the pandemic. Government sources said that they concentrated on the BBC as the most significant an influential outlet. Steps were taken to maintain the authority of key spokespeople. The deal to purchase advertorial in newspapers increased the influence of the Government.

With party politics being substantially suspended, the channels of communication were different. The parliamentary lobby is normally an important channel for political exchanges among senior journalists and politicians. This was not so significant during the pandemic, given the political hiatus. This was very much top-down messaging, telling the people what they needed to do, and persuading them to obey the rules. Interviewees did not present much evidence that the press moderated their coverage to reflect the seriousness of the situation. Competition among the media continued unabated.

In France the health minister, a medical doctor, led the very detailed press conferences that were the backbone of the commercial operation. The media retained its independence, but accounts suggest that there was, as usual, some overt and informal social pressure on the media to support the Government operation. Government disagreement with an outlet is more and more communicated in public statements. The informal private networks that used to influence the media are still there, but are much less influential, as the media is rather less élite controlled than it used to be. However, there were reports of a continuing pattern of influential social exchanges between groups with a shared history or education.

In Germany there was some evidence of media manipulation at the beginning but overall, the story was of a cooperative effort between the authorities and the media to secure the right result for the country. Germany, like Switzerland, has a more consensual politics than the other countries, and coalition government is the norm. Political competition is not the usual way to resolve differences, the checks and balances being provided within the federal system. In Germany there is an appreciation for scientific and technocratic solutions; the Government was led by a scientist, Angela Merkel. The Robert Koch Institute was front and centre of the science and epidemiology. There was a robust discussion between commentators in the media, which carried opinion from all sides. It was reported that there was no real need for Government pressure, as the German system achieved the Government's objectives without intervention.

Swiss officials from the Federal Health Office held long and detailed press conferences to communicate the key data and control measures. There was some evidence of a spirit of consensus

like that in Germany though there were tensions between levels of Government. The media was trusted to be factual and helpful, which by and large they were. If there was pressure it would have been used to influence the state broadcaster. There was evidence that at the federal level there is a small group of people with multiple connections in business, finance, media, and political life who are in frequent contact. They have links from school, region, university, and the armed services and were much in evidence as the response to the pandemic was created and evolved.

There is a hint in the accounts of journalists that one of the differentiating strengths of the leadership of the continental countries consisted in the technical skills of the leadership. The leadership style of Macron and Merkel and the Swiss Federal Council were seen as technocratic whereas the style of Prime Minister Johnson was more political, and the British Government fielded technical experts in his main set piece events.


### 7.3.6 Institutional and professional cultures - holding back, fact and opinion.


## UK

Anglo Saxon political journalism is particularly competitive, with a relatively large number of national titles. Especially in the tabloid space is has the reputation of driving circulation with dramatic headlines, often with stories of scandal and personal failings. The standard of evidence for all that which is published in the press is lower than for broadcasters, and the press's appetite for drama means that it can be used by lobbyists, politicians and others who want to get their views across. In this context the Mail's strident coverage of Imperial College's gloomy projections at the beginning of the pandemic was both important and influential.

A French business correspondent said: *British/Anglo-Saxon journalism is respected throughout the world. Very competitive press. Effective in getting news. That said there is a pack mentality, and it is very petty; there is a lack of depth, the newspapers are quite light. Also, a good headline is often taken in preference to the facts.*

A UK journalist said: *The press tends not to emphasise subjects that are boring but important and the pandemic was at the very beginning one of those things. Subsequently it gained much greater salience of course as the threat and the restrictions became central to people's lives.*

This leads to a degree of mistrust of the press on the part of the public, and relative confidence in the BBC which is, for several reasons, less influenced by these forces.

Trust in mainstream institutions including the media has been in decline in recent decades but this trend was reversed through the pandemic. In a survey of 29 countries media trust scores rose by 2% and Government trust scores rose by 5% between 2019 and 2021 (Ipsos Mori Global Trustworthiness Monitor 2021).

The BBC claimed significant increases in viewer numbers, and this created a virtuous circle, linking greater trust in them as the national public broadcaster with close Government relations, based on fair representations of government pronouncements on the progress of the pandemic and the reasons for regulations.

The BBC did concentrate on the government's messages, as did ITV. Broadcasters felt a duty to use their trust and reach to do the best they could to support the national effort to keep people safe.

A senior Government spokesman said: *The answer is they did moderate their coverage. But there were heroes and less heroic types in this. The BBC played a blinder and I think they stepped up to the national challenge, followed closely with ITV. My instinct is that Sky remained far more interested in the political dynamics and creating a row when they could, rather than genuine public information. Now that's a balance. They were providing public information, but they would pivot to the row where they could.*

A senior Government spokesman said: *We were concerned that the news media were not really focusing on the practical health information that the public required. Now, to be fair to the news media, they did quite a lot of it. But we were still a bit sceptical, particularly as the pandemic progressed.*

Several interviewees felt that in relation to the pandemic the media was more respectful of the government than usual, conceding that this situation was new to everyone involved, so journalists were inclined to give the Government and their advisers the benefit of the doubt. Further, even the parliamentary lobby saw the subject matter as being health rather than politics, this being assisted by the fact that normal political debate was effectively suspended. The sport of political knockabout pretty much disappeared, as did the reporting of it.

An editor of a national newspaper said: *I don't think that the newspapers themselves acted like it was wartime, but they were much more conciliatory to the government...it could not be the Government's fault that this epidemic is suddenly arisen. It was a complicated relationship. The media was much more respectful of authority, and less critical probably of the government than it normally would be.*

An official said, when asked about media scrutiny being more muted: *Yes, I think so. I think the tenor and the tone of the questions in those press conferences were probably less abrasive than you would normally get from UK media. I think there was a binding together of the nation in a kind of National Emergency situation. I think it was quite fragile. But I think there was a period there definitely where the media were a bit more supportive and a bit more kind of collegiate.*

An editor of another national newspaper said: *I think they asked a lot of hard questions, pointing out the inconsistencies. in my general view, they didn't hold back. The Telegraph: there was maybe a little bit of wartime spirit, where people sort of said, 'Let's try...we're in this together'.*

A senior broadcast journalist said: *I do think that lots of journalists probably particularly in broadcast felt a different sense of responsibility. I certainly did. And I don't really think that's a bad*

*thing. There is a certain element of political journalism, it can be a bit of a sport, who's up, who's down, it's sort of fun, right? During a period where people knew what was going on and we were seeing that people were losing their lives and all the rest, I think people comported themselves in a way that was less focused on the politicking, and more focused on the practical outcomes of the decisions that were being made.*

Alongside the reports of a coming together in the national interest, some interviewees pointed out how willing journalists were to question the scientific justification for policy. In this respect interviewees mentioned outlets who devoted substantial resources to data journalism, combing the published data for lessons and comparisons. There was in general a move towards facts and figures, rather than statements of intent and policy, and data became a more important part of the analysis of what was going on.

A national newspaper editor, alluding to the flow of data from the Government, said: *There were one or two good people challenging this. The Spectator. Then there was Ed Conway on Sky News, he's outstanding at data interpretation. Obviously, the FT did a lot of international stuff.*

Regarding the vaccines, the media did not focus on the potential side effects but rather made the underlying assumption that the benefits outweighed the risks and focused instead on delivery issues.

It is often said that British journalism resembles the American model, carefully separating news from opinion. The review of the media output on the pandemic showed that this is not always the case. For example, many articles questioned the epidemiological projections and suggested different policy approaches to mitigation. Analysis lies between the two and is more expert insider commentary than normative in nature. In general opinion pieces in the UK are more polemical than those on the continent.

A journalist on a national newspaper said: *In news stories in British newspapers, we'll stick to what appears to be factual reporting within the context of the line of the outlet. I think British comment pieces are more polemical than continental comment pieces.*

Ministers and print journalists alike were reported to believe that opinion pieces are important, although the view from Government media professionals is that they don't change a great deal.

A senior broadcaster: *I think you get traditional comment or opinion-based columnists: It might be Janet Daley, David Aaronovitch, Andrew Marr, Fraser Nelson, whatever. People know what they're getting when they choose to read that, it's a view and it is comment or opinion, that's fine. Then you get the absolute other end of the spectrum, which is simple factual reporting of what happened. In the middle, when you're talking about politics and economics, you get what I would call analysis where the anchor in the studio would say, 'tell us what this means'.*

Opinion, depending on the authority of the writer, is however important commercially. It is a key differentiator of brands within a fragmenting print industry, and it drives subscriptions which are now, for some newspapers, their main source of revenue. Older journalists may say that nothing has

changed, but the measurement of the interest patterns of subscribers does matter and will over time change what appears in the press.

Another editor said: *Oh, it's very important. But it's not very important because the media says it is, it is very important because in subscription businesses, the subscribers are very interested in opinion. This especially true in a society that is more ideologically riven now than it used to be.*

A national newspaper editor: *Very important. Extremely important. There are several reasons for this. I thought this was one of the key differentiators. if you're just churning out or recycling news that everybody else has got, you need ways of differentiating but for that you want beacons of authority. You want people who have clear views, highly readable. So, opinion in the age of media fragmentation, having brands if you like, beacons of authority, people who've got a firm position can speak and write eloquently. That's crucial.*

## FRANCE

In general, the French media, especially the state broadcasters, have in the past tended to be more docile in their political coverage than their more opinionated British counterparts. There is no equivalent of the British tabloids, the Mail, the Sun and the Mirror. The trend in recent years however has been towards harder questioning of political actors, encouraged by the arrival of independent commercial channels (especially those with distinct political personalities).

People in France are struck by the ferocity of the British media's examination of their leaders.

A UK government official, speaking about French counterparts: *Officials in France were surprised at the level and kind of questioning that the government came under from the from the British media; they are continually surprised by the ferociousness of our press in terms of how they treat the government with...don't have that, like that reserve that kind of respect the government in the way that they are used to in France.*

However, a French journalist said that there is now some convergence. *TV Political journalism has changed massively. The reverential interview with a senior journalist has given way to politics as entertainment, more short form, looking for clashes, to get ratings. Simplifying issues for the general public, who are encouraged to interact. Dumbing down...maybe less elitist. But the British do this sort of thing much better – they have gone even further.*

During the pandemic the tendency was still to go along with the government line, although the media remained unforgiving of clear mistakes and notably the EU's efforts on the vaccine programme.

Journalists were also quick to cover bureaucratic overreach, manifested in trivial rules such as those about what could be sold in which shop. The U-turn on mask mandates was however given

due exposure and prominence, ending the relevant minister's career.[19] From time-to-time press scrutiny forced the Government to step back.

The key divide in France, as elsewhere, was between the consensus for caution within the scientific community and the traditional resistance of the population to being ordered around by officialdom. Journalism progressively questioned the scientists as the Government itself also moved towards opening back up after lockdowns.

It was striking that none of the interviewees emphasised the concept of a national effort in France to defeat the virus. This was a theme in each of the other countries.

Opinion is an important aspect of the French press, where there is a tendency to commission pieces from external writers, rather than regular columnists. Opinion is more often combined with factual reporting than in other countries. Where a clear line is taken it tends to be more polemical than consensual, seeking to shift or reframe the debate. Opinion pieces are commissioned in from outside more and more by the main quality newspapers, in line with their house view.

A British journalist working in France said: *Yes, there's quite a lot of opinion in French media I know Germany less. there's traditionally a lot of space for opinion in French papers for papers' own editorial opinion. And tribunes as they call them, platforms for people, outsiders, to, to voice their own views, there are pages and pages and at the Monde, the Figaro every day. The overall voice of the paper can be heard in the types of opinion pieces that it carries.*

A journalist with wide experience across Europe said: *in much of continental journalism, there is the tradition for opinionated report or for the amount of opinion that is contained in what is supposedly a news article is significantly higher on the continent than in the UK, within the context of the overall line of the of the paper. The continental style of comment is completely different; it's actually much more analytical. Often a lot more academic. It's what we would usually call, analysis, rather than opinion.*

Politics in France has in recent years become more contentious and partisan and the media is following the same path. Consensus and compromise have never been part of the French political culture.

The same journalist went on to say: *In France and in other continental countries they are developing a more adversarial approach to politics. After Macron lost his majority and the far left and the far right are well represented in Parliament for the first time. There's a degree of venom in there that I don't think we've seen for a long time. So, to that extent the media is also becoming more adversarial and more partisan.*

A government spokesman said: *the strength of the regional media in Germany and France is important. They have far stronger regional outlets.*

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[19] See footnote 13 in section 7.3

The industry in France is characterised by national publications in decline and strong regional publications with wide circulation. Demand for local papers emphasises factual local reporting, and in the case of the pandemic that meant reporting local prevalence and regulations, rather than the national picture.

The nationals are declining in relative importance, and they face the same cost pressures as in the UK. A national newspaper journalist said: *the mainstream French print media is kind of not really that influential, these days, I mean, they're very low circulation and not anything like as powerful as they used to be.*

# GERMANY

The interviews confirmed that German media and indeed society, tend to respect authority especially if it is backed by evidence and science. German people tend to believe the government and trust statements in the German media.

A European journalist on a UK national paper said: *I think the German media which by and large, with probably only one exception, Bild, is pretty docile. I don't think they jumped on it (the masks issue) at all.*

Several interviewees mentioned that in relation to the pandemic the German media was not particularly strident, even by German standards. There was a reported sense of national unity and purpose, shared by journalists, facing a national threat together. The question on people's minds was 'how can we do better, what is better for Germany?' rather than 'what have the Government messed up?' There was however considerable coverage of the conflict between the states and the federal government impeding effective policymaking.

A leading journalist on a national paper said*: I myself experienced this, I thought that, you know, things are going to fall apart. And I must put my shoulder to the wheel. (And help the Government, in my capacity as a journalist). I can say for my part that once we had enough immunisation, and it was up to people to, for God's sake, get their shot. That's where when I felt, you know, entitled or free to criticise the Government more.*

There was a reluctance on the part of the press to come out firmly against the Government. When BILD and Die Welt asked the question whether all the lockdown rules were necessary, they themselves came in for a lot of criticism. However, they were also mindful that this line brought them subscribers.

A journalist on a national paper in Germany said*: We knew that being critical brought us subscribers. From people who felt that their views were ignored in favour of the state consensus. I think it's part of a democratic society that you allow views. But you must be careful that you don't transport news or coverage, which is not scientifically based, because you have a responsibility there.*

A UK editor with wide experience across Europe said: *I would have thought the Germans were more reticent about really going hard for the government. They don't like challenging authority. it takes a lot. On the pandemic, I think they were careful not to be critical. They started to be when the vaccine rollout was obviously going too slowly and the weaknesses in distribution, they then started to speak up about that. They were pretty kid gloves with Merkel partly because she'd been around a long time. Merkel was given a lot of respect because she wasn't up for election. She was going and was widely respected..., the science aspect. So ...and the consensus approach to the German idea of 'Wir suchen eine Lösung' (*we are looking for a solution*) as opposed to 'what have we got wrong?'.*

That said, more than one interviewee pointed out that although German media did make international comparisons, the country was reluctant to learn lessons from the way some Asian countries handled the pandemic, partly on nationalistic, partly on libertarian grounds.

There is a convention of checking copy with sources before publication, and a general distaste for background discussions that are not for publication. So, the British sport of catching a policymaker out is not part of the media scene in Germany.

A German reporter on a national newspaper said: *Checking copy: It's a normal practice.*

Another said: *Even in Germany, most politicians have grasped that the risk to them, of a behind the scenes approach to the media; leaking; is probably more damaging than coming out upfront with what you want to say.*

Germans were reported to be cautious in general about the scientific basis for medication, so the anti-vaccination lobby was relatively strong. The mask issue was not particularly salient, and the policy reversal was forgiven. However, there was a good deal more questioning when it came to vaccines.

There was reportedly some evidence that citizens were rather more inclined to question policy than were the media. Furthermore, there was the issue of EU procurement - German sentiment was in favour of a national solution, and this was reinforced by the slowness of the Brussels machinery. This controversy was well aired in the press, and BILD took a particularly strong nationalist (and anti-EU) line on it.

As elsewhere the probing of policy became more strident as the pandemic unfolded and it became clear that Germany was not indisputably more effective than any other country. That said, there was a tendency for the media to celebrate German success stories.

A journalist with experience in several European countries said: *In Germany the initial feeling in the media was that the government's really done this extremely well, because look at us, compared with our neighbours, we've got very low rates of infection. But then, of course, as the year moved on in 2020, the rates in Germany began to really increase to the point where there was not much difference. And at that point, you began to see criticism, not saying the whole thing was exaggerated but rather that the authorities have got to be more consistent in what they're doing.*

*Media commentary centred on the fact that in an emergency that's national and international in scale the federal system in Germany can be a stumbling block, because you constantly must have these meetings to get everybody on board at state level.*

Several interviewees said that opinion in Germany handles issues in depth backed by a more analytical or academic approach. There is more opinion content than in France, though less than in the UK. And it is more integrated into mainstream coverage than in the UK. Die Zeit, for example, is dominated by opinion and analysis. However, the purpose of opinion journalism is to suggest a desirable, workable solution to a public policy problem, in Germany's national interest.

The editor of a European newspaper said: *there are commentators obviously in Germany, but they do tend to be the pipe sucking variety. It's not quite the same as reading Charles Moore or Martin Wolf or... I mean, they've just got that tradition.*

A print journalist on a national daily said: *Comment pieces (in Germany) are a lot more analytical than they are opinionated, or if they are opinionated, they will be opinion based on demonstrable fact analysis.*

There is a difference in style between older journalists and their younger colleagues.

A senior journalist on a national newspaper said*: older journalists tend to be more rigorous about the distinction between reporting and being activist. Younger ones tend to be more relaxed about allowing their commitment to a cause to show in their writing…it's more of a kind of integral journalistic personality, who express themselves and a cause whenever they open their laptop and start typing.*

Another said:  *In highbrow Germany, Die Zeit is essentially, overwhelmingly commentary and opinion, it's not really reporting, but it's very influential among the élites, politicians and the opinion formers.  And then the television news in Germany, was simple, straight reporting, and then they'll turn to a well-known person for a two-minute commentary.*

A national print journalist said*:  the opinion pieces? Yes. They are very, increasingly important. I do know that we of course, gained a lot of subscribers. Did you see that with the New York Times? They never had more subscribers than during the Trump years.*

## SWITZERLAND

In general, the broadcast media and the press alike faithfully and neutrally reported the efforts of the federal government to control the pandemic. The media were essentially a communication channel for Government information.

An editor of a national newspaper said: *I think in the beginning Public Radio and TV often acted, a bit like this (moderating coverage to support Government). Which was a bit of a surprise to me because they always emphasise how independent they are of the state. But, in the beginning, they were acting like propaganda in war times?*

The public media were naturally close to the Government, partly because of their mandate. The press is free, but at least one outlet admitted pressure from its owner's management to follow the Government line.

A reporter on a national paper said: *I think so. Yes. Ringier is a big publishing house, Blick is their main tabloid. And apparently, the CEO said, on tape that he advised the journalists and the different outlets to moderate their content to foster trust in government. This is the only case where there is some hard evidence but nonetheless people (journalists) felt it's a national emergency. There was some rallying behind the flag.*

The press overall was understanding of the Government's position and clearly moderated their coverage, which is not especially aggressive at the best of times. After the initial efforts to control the impact of the pandemic, the media took the view that this pandemic was not so deadly in Switzerland, given its stable and well-resourced health system. Then the media resumed its more familiar watchdog role, mainly questioning the need for all the restrictions. The media research shows that Swiss newspapers devoted significant coverage to the travails of businesses impacted by the restrictions being imposed. This is partially explained by one interviewee who pointed out that there were three times as many lobbyists seeking to influence the Federal Government in Bern as there are journalists.

A national editor said*: if we talk about the NZZ that is very important. They want to be a voice of liberal reason. And in that sense, also an opinion former. They commented on all the steps taken by the government, sometimes supportive, sometimes saying that this is too much.*

Swiss newspapers do not have a political affiliation, although many of them are regional, and therefore differ by focusing on local issues and interests.

A Swiss broadcaster said: *Swiss papers don't really have a personality. In the UK, you can say, well, the Daily Telegraph says this, because they would, and The Guardian says that because they would. You don't get that here.  The French language papers take a different view on something than the German language papers, it's a linguistic cultural issue, not a political position by the paper issue.*

Editorial and opinion content is signed by the journalist who is responsible, and columnists build a reputation for their opinion pieces. Mostly they are commissioned pieces - it is rare for a journalist to have a regular column with complete freedom to write what they want.

## Summary and discussion

For the most part, British newspapers and broadcasters supported the first lockdown.  Although interviewees said that the famously fierce tradition of British journalism was generally muted during the pandemic. But journalists were invited to put questions to ministers at the regular televised news conferences. These were searching and in some cases hostile. The content research illustrates how much coverage the BBC gave to questioning the government's actions. There was a

sense in some parts of the media that the Government itself was feeling its way, with limited evidence, and who was to say that they were wrong. As time went on, there was more and more questioning, even of the science, as some outlets assigned teams of data journalists to analyse the public information.

Editors of quality newspapers said that opinion, particularly from authoritative and respected journalists, was a key differentiator and an important driver of subscriptions as such material is not so easily available on social media.

In France there was generally less public questioning of authority than usual, but there was no evidence of restraint in reporting of clear mistakes. Journalism in France used to be more reverential of authority, especially the President, but this has diminished considerably in recent years, along with the expectation that journalists will be politically aligned with their papers' own philosophy. Strikingly, none of the interviewees referred to a collective national effort. As billionaires have been taking over media organisations, the characteristics of the normal commercial market are beginning to be imposed.

On opinion, observers of French media said that there was a less clear distinction between fact and opinion in normal news articles, and opinion pieces themselves tended to be more polemical than in other countries.

The Germans' respect for authority and unity of purpose have already been mentioned. The media tradition is not to be too hard on the Government, which is assumed to be acting in good faith, even though opinions might differ as to the wisdom of a particular policy. One publisher took a distinctly critical line during the pandemic, in keeping with its regular libertarian line but also with an eye to subscriptions.

There is generally more opinion on German media, taken as a whole, and some publications, such as Die Zeit, are mostly commentary. Opinion in the German media has a distinct tendency to be analytical and scientific. There is a generational shift under way as well, in that the more senior journalists talk of a careful separation of fact and opinion, whereas the younger colleagues, especially those who are politically engaged, tend to allow a campaigning posture into all their writing.

In Switzerland the media were neutral and factual throughout the pandemic, more so than usual. The defeat of the pandemic was presented as a national effort, which the public ought to support. Opinion pieces are placed separately, often from outside, and signed. Although the justification for the measures was questioned, this was usually based on practicality or efficacy, balanced against the loss of freedom.

### 7.3.7 Social media

**UK**

There was evidence that people wanted to hear directly from the Government during the pandemic. Live streaming and watching on catch-up was important for audiences who wanted to hear the Downing Street briefings unmediated, unfiltered. Ask.gov.uk produced 850,000 questions from the public during the pandemic.

A senior Government spokesman said of social media: *it does, in my experience, drive serious journalists, by which I mean tabloid and broadsheet journalists, who want to try and work out how they can imitate the sort of approach that is taken on social media.*

The internet is allowing the communication of a great deal of deliberate disinformation and erroneous material. However it can also can allow research, international comparisons, access to academic studies, confirmation of stories and facts all to be accomplished within minutes. Such tasks might have taken weeks of a journalist's time (or indeed a citizen's) only a decade or two ago. By the same token there is more to sift through, cross reference, verify. Discrimination of fact from fiction is an increasingly important skill, both for journalists and for their readers. Seeing something in print from a respected mainstream media outlet is not the same as seeing text on an unmoderated social media feed, and people need to adapt to the new environment for news.

Some of the platforms are so concerned about fake news or harmful content that they act as censors, to some degree reinforcing the influence of élite opinion, especially that from the US West Coast. In this sense the Trump phenomenon still hangs over the social media industry internationally.

The increased speed of the news cycle was cited by many and attributed to the influence of social media. Two interviewees said that this effect was much greater in the UK than in France or Germany

Twitter was much used by journalists (it was mentioned often in UK interviews). Its effect has been to speed up the flow of news, sometimes at the expense of depth or quality. The short form of Twitter militates against nuance and thinking carefully before posting. It also quickly generates a reaction. There is a constant pressure to tweet something out to keep a star journalist's name out there. The most popular view on Twitter is not necessarily representative of the country. Twitter entrenches élite opinion: journalists and sometimes lobbyists and fringe politicians talking among themselves.[20]

A national newspaper editor said*:  The most powerful social media.... massively most powerful in terms of moulding journalists, elite opinion, is not those kinds of things. It is Twitter. And it is primarily people who are already... often quite elite types.*

A senior political broadcaster said: *So, I think politicians use it (Twitter) sometimes to try to avoid being asked questions they use online, just to put stuff out there.*

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[20] See Chapter 4 above

A senior Government spokesman said: *That's why I would argue that figures like Boris Johnson, or Donald Trump, leaving aside their politics, or your view of them, the way they occupy the media space, and they sort of intuitively say something or are seen doing something. And that creates the awareness is they believe is to understanding and political support is a different model to that that Blair employed in terms of the set piece events and sticking to the Lines to Take.*

The editor of a national paper said: *The use by individual journalists of Twitter must be stopped. Lack of nuance in 280 characters, instant judgement, trigger happy reporting, and it does reflect on the organisation for whom they work. It is to the detriment of considered reporting. Fragmentation is the most important effect of social media's rise. We used to be the trusted mediators, gatekeepers. Now there are myriad sources, many unreliable.*

There may be a silver lining for reliable, verified journalism and the related opinion and analysis in a world that includes social media. This may well represent the primary reason for people to pay for curated, verified news.

Mainstream media companies see social media channels also as distribution, rather than competition. However, the ability to measure readership with granular precision means that online versions of newspapers are increasingly tailored to the different audience that is generated (and measured) through SM channels, and which therefore diverge from the legacy print versions.

The same editor added: *social media affects the delivery of the paid for media. I would still say that's important because these paid for media need that. So, the social media companies are all being the gatekeepers. (*The media companies*) use social media and Google as a means to reach new readers and then then get them to pay. So, it's a sort of distribution... it's a different kind of mechanism. But it's still a very important one.*

Algorithms collect interest, likes and reactions and a virtuous circle is created. However polemical or shocking material will generate more interest, and this increases the apparent support for radical or polarising views. Algorithms also generate echo chambers of people who agree amongst themselves. Critical, dissenting voices tend to move to places where they are liked more or otherwise get traction.

An official working on social media within Government said: *then there's the algorithmic challenge which we all face, which is undoubtedly promoting radical reactions, or encouraging rhetoric. And I think that makes things difficult for all communicators. But it also creates this kind of polarisation within audiences, and then I think has fractured our audiences and the public in a way that makes it very hard for them to come back for us, to bring them back together, as government communicators on these red button issues. identity stacking that goes on, whereby, you know, if you feel a certain way about Brexit, you feel a certain way about the vaccine, you feel a certain way that all these things that are triggered for you, you start to follow the accounts, the content that feeds that identity.*

Another journalist now working in Government said: *also, young people are presented with news they haven't subscribed to because the algorithms latch on to what their friends are saying.*

The press, when its gatekeeping function was uncontested, was the main agenda-setting force in British journalism. Now there is emerging evidence that this is being supplemented by social media, in that issues can generate considerable interest in the informal channels and the mainstream media picks them up consequently. Furthermore, now that much news content is consumed online, it is much easier to see what is being read, liked, and commented upon, and newspapers are responding to that. Readers, if unwittingly, now have a role in deciding what goes into the paper, which in turn influences the broadcasters (see Chapter 4 above)

That said, while reader interest is often measured, as we saw in previous interview reports editors do not follow it slavishly[21]. They use their judgement in choosing material that will help their outlet to meet their owners' business objectives. They are still free to cover something that they believe to be important. In this context the physical newspaper, the online and the broadcast content can diverge, because of the different methods of measurement that are used to calculate reader engagement.

An official working on social media said: *we are starting to see a bit more of a discrepancy between the things that are resonating online, versus what the broadcasters will lead with in their bulletins and what the more papers will lead with on their on their front pages. And I think that is quite interesting, quite an interesting realignment of the media. And I don't think most traditional media is caught up.*

Social media usage data was used to plug gaps in compliance that showed up when people were being asked to go and get vaccinated. Certain hard-to-reach groups were identified by the vaccine data and were then targeted directly by the Government using social media.

An official said: *it shone a light on the fact that lobby journalists, the people making our news,..come from a very small district and, and are not necessarily reflective of what is happening out in the in the wider country. I think that was the case with the Black community, I think we all went on a journey with that with the kind of vaccine issue and became aware of things that we were not aware of in those. I think they (political journalists) were found a little bit wanting on that stuff, and the lack of diversity came through.*

*What was what was difficult, if not nigh on impossible, was targeting by ethnic groups, which we knew we were having a problem with, we could obviously use geography as a bit of a proxy. But that was that was a challenge. And that's where the influencer campaign was coming through targeting Black and other ethnic minorities, around vaccine uptake.*

An official working on social media in Government saw the potential of social media to change the way democratic processes work. He said: *my optimistic view of the changing media landscape, if we can get it right in government is that it's a huge democratising force, digital media, if you use it to its full potential. Changing the way we think about the public, and changing the way we dialogue with them, using digital to fuel a kind of participatory democracy, and to bring some of that kind of level of engagement and trust back with the public...*

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[21] See UK paragraphs in section 7.3.4 above

## FRANCE

Many of the points made about the impact of social media on British journalism were also made in relation to France, and indeed the other countries. Social media speeds up the cycle of news – it is twice as fast as Germany. Twitter was mentioned less than by UK interviewees, although usage data suggest that French journalists are frequent users.

Some matters particularly emphasised by practitioners in France were as follows.

The long form, print versions of the media, especially the quality newspapers based in Paris, are declining in importance, in favour of broadcasters and the social media channels.

Because controversy generates interest, which in turn drives advertising income, there is an incentive to encourage polarisation. Important material that is not immediately arresting or interesting tends to get dropped. A journalist with wide European experience said*: More adversarial, venomous politics, means more page views... the tragedy is that 'boring, but important' is the casualty.* Further, algorithms tracking clicks comments and likes on social media encourage the creation of echo chambers. A business correspondent on a French newspaper said: *there is a tendency of social media users only to read what they already believe.*

The business correspondent was acutely aware of the impact of the internet and social media on his profession. He said: *Twitter has been important, speeding up the news cycle, getting reactions. We have also noticed that our open fact checking site had led to an increase in our subscriptions.*

## GERMANY

While the internet can speed up fact checking there is a great deal more unreliable information out there. Checking it all increases the pressure on journalists. Many stories broken on Twitter eventually turn out to be wrong once the facts are fully known. Traditional habits of journalism are under a lot of pressure to change. The next generation will not be able to cruise along on one story a day.

The pandemic put a premium on reliability of information. People were perceived to appreciate the value of professional journalism – however there was also an echo chamber effect reinforcing elite opinion. It was difficult to retain an appropriate distance to form a judgement.

A senior German journalist: *So, the, pandemic was both a chance to, to show to people with, you know, curated professional journalism is for, as well as a challenge in terms of how, despite this kind of national effort thing I mentioned in the beginning, how do we keep some distance from what the government is doing.*

One journalist mentioned that Facebook had the effect of putting controversial journalists and public figures in personal danger, as their addresses, locations and itineraries could be made available informally online in a way that would not have been done by the mainstream media.

The acceleration of the daily news cycle was ascribed to the influence of social media in general and Twitter in particular. Twitter was very important – although the reason given was different than in other countries. The platform connected journalists to scientific explainers, to areas of contention, also to what the competition was showing an interest in. If the media was showing no interest in an aspect, people from the scientific community who wanted to get their views across (usually on the side of caution), took to Twitter to do so, as a journalist on a national German newspaper explained: *It does influence a lot, because it's the genuine voice of people. ...the famous COVID scientists on Twitter... what they put out, and at the time, it was very stark... I'm constantly on Twitter, because they know why they say what they say on Twitter, because they want attention because they want to set the agenda. So, it has a massive influence, of course.*

Another agreed: *Yes, it has changed things. It broadens your view of what the political temperature is. it hasn't been only a danger, of course, incredible bullshit is being spread, but also, it's a direct way for people to communicate about science. My personal experience of Twitter, for example, isn't that it's just hostile and diverse. It's also instructive. And again, a lot of interesting links and connections via Twitter.*

## SWITZERLAND

Social media does provide a counter to élite consensus, which is well entrenched in Switzerland. Although most of the people who post and who have large followings are either journalists or otherwise politically engaged.

A broadcaster said: *I think the biggest change again has been social media. It's made traditional debate far more polarising; mainstream media must react to that polarising factor. So, therefore, mainstream media is, is looking at what probably in the past would have been considered rather extreme views on each, each side of the issue. Politicians now must respond to this.*

Social media allowed the anti-vaccination campaigners to attract and mobilise followers. Conspiracy theories can easily spread online and are difficult to rebut through the mainstream media: social media channels must be engaged for that.

The mainstream media was generally clearly saying that there was nothing to these arguments from a scientific point of view. Although the demonstrations were small by the standards of larger countries, they were significant for Switzerland and would not have been as successful were it not for the social media campaigns.

The broadcaster added: *In the pandemic context, it was social media that drove the demonstrations, the antivaxxers, and the anti-maskers, etc. I do wonder if social media didn't exist, we would have seen the marches on the streets, those for the antis. I think professional*

*journalism has been shown to be giving the right information and not being swayed by some of the crazy anti-vaccine stuff that was coming out.*

If fact-checked curated journalism is strengthened by the contrast with social media material, a virtuous circle could be imagined, strengthening civic trust. (Finland for example teaches media evaluation skills in primary schools as they regard this skill as important to strengthening informed citizens).

A print journalist said: *Working for a newspaper is nowhere near as comfortable as it used to be. It is a hamster wheel now, feeding on drama, storms and spats that come along quickly and are easily understood and digested.*

A Swiss journalist and broadcaster said: *the public media really lost a monopoly because of YouTube and podcasts distributed via social media channels. You must distinguish between Twitter which is in a way a journalist- and politician -controlled situation.*

A journalist on a national newspaper said: *Scientists don't necessarily need to wait anymore to be called by the (national media), but they can just come out and put everything out there and influence the debate immediately.*

## Summary and discussion

The rise of social media is often described as changing the culture of journalism. In every country more and more people are getting their news from their computers, laptops, tablets and mobiles. More and more people are accessing mainstream media through these devices, which is a change with subtle effects, not least in the increasing availability to publishers of granular data about audience preferences. As a separate phenomenon, social media usage is also on the rise and many people encounter news from mainstream media as they use social media for other purposes. Furthermore, the unmoderated blogosphere is becoming more and more significant as a source of information and opinion.

The published figures for accessing news through social media platforms do not carefully distinguish between these components of the growing digital world, and more detailed research is required to make the distinction between the evolutionary change of using the platforms to access mainstream media, and the revolutionary change where citizens receive most of their knowledge of current affairs from the unmoderated blogosphere.

**Table 19 Use of social media for news.**

|  | Social media | Twitter |
|---|---|---|
| **UK** | 38% | 13% |
| **France** | 40% | 9% |
| **Germany** | 32% | 4% |

| Switzerland | 43% | (less than 7%) |
|---|---|---|

(Reuters DNR 2022)

So, while, except for Germany, the use of social media is somewhat comparable, Twitter is a much more important platform in the UK than in the other countries in this study.

The European Commission 'Journalists and Social Media' report (2012) found that Facebook and Twitter were the main social media platforms used by journalists. While Facebook was used both for social and work purposes, Twitter is used predominantly for work in France Germany and the UK (the report did not cover Switzerland). Only UK journalists reported using Twitter privately. Furthermore, although journalists would prefer to access material in their own language, the majority would be able to follow in English. Most regarded it as a useful tool and use it frequently.

With this as a background, we can now turn to the accounts of our interviewees.

Practitioners in the UK pointed out that the internet itself had transformed journalism, proliferating the amount of information available. This has increased the workload on journalists. Discrimination remains essential. Facebook and social media generally were seen mainly as channels for distribution of digital content, tempting readers over the paywall.

Twitter was important however as a professional medium, speeding up the cycle, affording dialogue (and competition) amongst journalists. As such it may reinforce groupthink in the profession. Some referred to the fact that it offered an efficient way of keeping up with breaking news. It is also used to enhance the reputation of journalists by promoting their stories and views.

Social media is acquiring an agenda-setting function, in that 'what is trending on social media', twitter spats and viral messaging are sometimes newsworthy in themselves. Reference was made to the polarising effects of algorithms, creating echo chambers and reducing exposure to alternative views, leading users to overestimate the extent to which their views were widely shared. Reader interest, as shown by social media traffic, can and does prompt investigation and possible coverage in the mainstream media outlets.

During the pandemic the Government used social media to influence some minority communities that conventional media campaigns were not reaching.

Many of these points were made in relation to the other countries, although the emphasis was different.

In France it was suggested that the media landscape was becoming dominated by the broadcasters and social media, to the exclusion of the press, which was in decline. This had the effect of emphasising the contentious, the dramatic, at the expense of issues that were politically important. Additionally, French journalists mentioned polarisation and the effect of social media as reducing the importance of the national Parisian newspapers.

Germans were more positive. The internet widened the view of journalists and afforded them the opportunity to show the relative value of quality journalism, compared to the blogosphere.

During the pandemic German scientists who took a rather more cautious view of the measures required and would make their views known on Twitter in the hope that they would be taken up by journalists and thus find their way to decisionmakers.

Switzerland is known for its elite consensus and social media tends to challenge this somewhat cosy environment. Politicians, officials and indeed journalists must respond to issues given a voice on social media. It is said that without it the anti-vaccination campaign would not have achieved the support and leverage it did.

British, German and Swiss practitioners all referred to the hope that proper fact-checked journalism may emerge the winner in the battle for attention and influence against less reliable social media sources.

# Chapter 8 Discussion and conclusions.

This study set out to address two research questions.

 a) Whether there were material differences in the way the media handled the pandemic in each country, and

 b) Whether we can discern from the countries' respective political or media environments or the accounts from the practitioners involved, any reasons why this might be.

The international comparison of political systems is a developed field of scholarship, whereas the comparison of how media systems arise and work in different countries is in its relative infancy (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Albæk et al., 2014; Esser and Pfetsch, 2020b).

Political systems are designed to persist over time. It is difficult to change the law in most countries, and it is exceptionally difficult to change the constitution, which in some countries, such as Germany, guarantees press freedom and sets the pattern for government regulation. As political systems undoubtedly influence political journalism, the work of Lijphart, Siaroff and Gallagher provided context for the characteristics of the political systems of the countries in the study. France and the UK are strongly majoritarian, with voting systems that are less accurate in reflecting public opinion because of the use of first-past-the-post voting methods. The culture and political systems in Germany and Switzerland are considerably more strongly consensual and cooperative in nature, and there was evidence that they were designed to be so (Lijphart, 1999; Siaroff, 1999; Gallagher, 2014).

Hallin and Mancini, introducing their famous classifications, acknowledged that they would at best be rough descriptions of types of media systems that share some common characteristics. There would also be some differences which future comparisons would reveal with greater precision. They also acknowledged, with considerable prescience, that the systems they described were not static, and would evolve over time. They could hardly have been expected, in 2004, to anticipate in detail the changes that the digital revolution would unleash. In their 2012 work on Eastern Europe, they accepted that historic factors might be less important than they had previously thought, and that rapid change in political systems can cause, or at least contribute to equally rapid and fundamental change in media systems. The authors also pointed out the dearth of comparative data on which to base firmer conclusions about the relationship between the media and social systems (Hallin and Mancini, ibid.).

The results of the present study unexpectedly revealed some of the changes to political and media culture that are being brought about by the digital revolution. Some politicians are communicating directly to citizens avoiding traditional gatekeepers and commentators in the media. The decline of advertising revenue has forced publications to maximise subscriber income and is doing so by trying to add more value in their journalism, with more internet-enabled research and opinion content. These are being moderated by slower-moving differences in national culture while at the same time being fuelled by the microeconomics of the media industry, so the speed of change appears not to be the same everywhere. The accounts of the interviewees do however suggest that

the digital revolution is changing the shape of journalism more quickly in the UK than elsewhere, though the other countries are not far behind.

One of those slower-moving elements of political and media culture that emerged strongly from this study was trust in institutions. We saw that there was a marked difference in the pattern of trust between the four countries. Trust in institutions, government and the media overall is markedly higher in Germany and Switzerland than it is in Britain and France. It is not entirely clear what the drivers of that difference might be, and it is beyond the scope of this study to research it. The accounts of journalists from those countries do however confirm that this factor influences their work. Furthermore, there was a particular emphasis in the German media on working alongside the authorities to discover and support what was in the national interest.

Barnett (2001) and Oborne (2014), described the professionalisation, even manipulation of the media by political managers in the UK in terms of a battle for power.  Mazzoleni (1999) described the tension between political logic and media logic and suggested that while there are distinct and identifiable stages in the transition from one to the other, politicians remain in control. Strömbäck (2008) identified the cultural significance of strong public service broadcasters, less driven by the chase for attention, as a steadying force, slowing the march of mediatisation. Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) posit a model of co-production or arena where politicians and media operators either struggle or cooperate to deliver their messages. Davis, likewise, describes the symbiotic nature of these processes, since both sets of operators need each other to carry out their roles or functions. The analysis of these scholars all in different ways lend support to the field theory advanced by Bourdieu, in which the social roles and relationships in fields such as this, are not at all fixed by externalities, but are rather in constant flow or flux, and adapt to other players depending on the circumstances of the time. There are longer term trends in the distribution of power between politicians and the media, but equally there will be short term variations around the trend line caused by specific events. The coronavirus pandemic was just such an event (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999b; Barnett and Gaber, 2001; Strömbäck, 2008; Oborne, 2014; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016).

## 8.1 Content analysis

The content analysis, discussed in detail in section 7.2, showed several differences in the coverage, of which the most significant were these.

In the UK the BBC devoted considerably more airtime to the pandemic, and concentrated on policy moves, particularly changes in the regulations. Its COVID content was nearly 50% of the evening news bulletin, compared to 23-35% in the other countries. It is likely that the complexity of the regulations was one of the reasons for this. During the period when the broadcast news was being assessed the Government in the UK was localising the lockdown rules, assigning all areas into three categories depending on the patterns of prevalence. This created many anomalies and complexities, and the BBC covered these thoroughly, alongside their usual reports from the four nations. Local prevalence and human impact were also stressed at a local or regional level. There was less coverage of the science, and more emphasis on whether more could be done to keep the population safe. The practitioners said that audiences wanted to hear primarily what they were permitted to do,

and the BBC responded to this. Furthermore, British ministers largely confined their public appearances to the set piece press conferences when they were flanked and supported by official experts. That left the broadcasters discussing the pandemic in 'two-way' interviews between an anchor and a local or specialist correspondent or sometimes between an anchor and an expert with a contrarian view. This often amounted to an implicit criticism of the government.

Like the BBC, the British press concentrated on policy, and emphasised the impact on business and the economy, giving due exposure to the cases being made by lobby groups as well. There was strong coverage of the science and more opinion than in France or Switzerland, and much of it was critical of the Government. Critics of the British press, especially the tabloids, suggest that their journalism does not rigorously separate fact from opinion, but this was not evident from the assessment in the content analysis. There were few instances where a single article had to be split into factual and opinion codes, and salience was of course eliminated as a factor.

French public television gave less than 25% of its airtime to the pandemic, the lowest of all the countries and half that of the UK. The emphasis was also quite different, giving more than half of the coverage to the impact on business, comparisons with other countries, and scientific developments. The evidence from the practitioner interviews tentatively suggests that the topics covered by the French media, being national prevalence, the science and international comparisons, together with a national (rather than local) system of prevention could be handled in less airtime than the thorough discussion of local differences of prevalence and regulation that was required in the other countries. French newspapers also covered policy but did not give as much space to international comparisons as their broadcasters. The business impact was emphasised, along with coverage of pressure groups, but there were very low levels of comment and opinion.

Germany's ARD gave a larger portion of its bulletins to reports of wrangles between different levels of government, which was a major feature of political life in Germany during the pandemic. Relatively less airtime was given to reports of the impact of the pandemic. Opinion was featured, but it tended to be constructive and evenly balanced between those who supported, and those who criticised the government's actions.

German newspapers, like their television counterparts, covered the internal politics between levels of government extensively, and allocated rather less space than the other countries to the effects on businesses and more to the impact on individuals. There was more opinion coverage in the German press than in the other countries and while it tended in the quality press to be balanced in nature, but in the case of the tabloid BILD was generally critical of the Government, mainly on the grounds of the restriction of individual liberty. The science of the pandemic was given more coverage than in the other countries, at least in the German quality newspapers.

In Switzerland most of the coverage was about impact – on individuals and on business. The coverage was factual, with no opinion content. The Swiss newspapers are also mixed, in that the tabloid gave more space to policy, whereas the quality press emphasised international comparisons. All newspapers however stress the human impact, with the quality press also covering the impact on business. Space given by the press to opinion was lower than the average, although what was there was balanced in nature.

In all countries the coverage of the pandemic took up less of the edited space in newspapers than on the television news.

## 8.2 Background considerations

The search for explanations for these differences began with the analysis of the differences in political systems, media systems, the culture of trust in the country and the way in which political communication is carried out.

### 8.2.1 Political systems

The chosen countries have markedly different political systems. Britain and France are majoritarian, with relatively few parties competing for unfettered control of the government. Their electoral systems produce relatively disproportionate results.

Germany and Switzerland are corporatist, with many parties and a tradition of cooperative government pursuing consensus by way of coalition. Electoral systems are more proportionate and additionally Switzerland has an overlay of direct democracy with frequent referenda on controversial subjects.

All countries have their right-wing populist element, although it is stronger in France than in the other countries; it is for example quite foreseeable that their leader might one day become president of France. This is significant in this context because the populist argument includes an element of mistrust of élite consensus in the country.

### 8.2.2 Media systems

In all countries the public service broadcasters are the most watched and indeed the most trusted sources of news, and this was more so during the pandemic, though in France the private providers come closer than in the other countries (Reuters DNR 2019-2022). In all countries the public service broadcasters are funded by a licence fee or general taxation and are regulated to be impartial or fair in their coverage.

The structure of the British press is unusually competitive, with a relatively large number of national titles in all categories. The press in the other countries is more regionalised. In France the opinion-forming national newspapers in Paris are in decline and in Switzerland there is no national newspaper at all. The German press industry is quite strong and widely read, with a tradition of subscription, which tends to slow the impetus for change. The French press is normally subsidised by the government, although not to a significant amount, and French government, alongside the British, provided their press with additional support during the pandemic.

There is no statutory press regulation in any of the countries. The French system relies on encouraging pluralism, and the general laws protecting privacy and undue criticism of officials. In

Germany fairness is formally policed under and industry code, as it is in Switzerland. The system in England is a weak form of self-regulation.

### 8.2.3 Trust

Although their professions are among the least trusted in society, both politicians and the media rely on trust to succeed. There is evidence of marked differences in levels of trust among the countries in this study. On measures of satisfaction with the government, trust in fellow citizens, the news generally and the PSBs specifically, Germany and Switzerland score significantly higher than France and the UK.

Media malaise is much discussed among scholars, who debate whether aggressive competition for attention using shock journalism might encourage mistrust of politics and its practitioners, and cause disengagement by citizens. (Barnett and Gaber 2001, Norris 2000). It may however well be that this marked difference may be explained by competition for attention among British media outlets, coupled with the tendency in majoritarian systems to use the horse-race frame to describe politics, and the increasing professionalism of the political class. These factors at least correlate with lower levels of trust in our small sample and did indeed emerge as a factor during the interviews in this study.

### 8.2.4 Political communication

Maurer showed that media logic had come to dominate the relationship between politicians and the media in all countries in this study, but additionally it showed that conflict between them was lower in the democratic corporatist countries, including Germany and Switzerland, where institutional cooperation is correlated with trust. (Maurer and Pfetsch, 2014)

There were differences in how the news about the pandemic was communicated in the different countries. In France and the UK communications about the pandemic were led by the head of government or the health minister, with a changing cast of supporting experts. In Germany and Switzerland officials and experts were considerably more prominent and the explanations were less political and more technocratic and detailed. This coincided with, and was duly reflected in, the factual tone of the media's reporting in those countries.

### 8.3 Thematic discussion

The themes arising in the interviews with the 22 practitioners were set out in section 7.3 above and are summarised and discussed below.

Some aspects were common to the accounts in all countries. All audiences wanted reliable information from trusted sources, although there were accounts of people looking to the internet to research the pandemic for themselves. Politics as usual, in the form of party-based debates covering the full range of the government's activities, was effectively suspended everywhere. As the whole world battled the pandemic, many events in national life that make up the political news simply were not happening. Parliaments were not sitting and parties who did not participate in government

(in the majoritarian countries) generally went along with the measures being implemented by the executive. When the scale and impact of the pandemic first became clear, in the spring of 2020, the initial shock led journalists everywhere to give the government the benefit of the doubt, recognising that this was a new situation, where nobody could be expected to have all the answers. However, as the pandemic wore on, the normal process of scrutiny began to return everywhere, though it is clear from the practitioner accounts that it was more searching and critical in the UK, and to some extent France, than it was in Germany and particularly Switzerland. It appears that this can be traced back to the traditions of journalism and the structures of the media marketplace. British journalism, characterised by significant competition between national titles with large circulation, has always had a robust tradition of sceptical analysis of politics, and while some elements of the French press are somewhat sacerdotal in their coverage of central government actions, there is a tradition of vigorous national debate hosted by the media which was resumed as the pandemic wore on.

### 8.3.1 Government approach

With normal politics suspended, technocratic management of the pandemic by decree was the norm. There was some political dissent from those campaigning for liberty but broadly this did not get traction anywhere. In the UK there was some evidence of politicisation of the success with the vaccines, contrasting it with the slower and more bureaucratic pace of the EU.

The UK had the most stringent restrictions, followed by France, Germany, and Switzerland. (Table 13 in section 7.1.4). They also differed in different parts of the country and much of the policy coverage centred on these differences. The UK government created a sophisticated media strategy, focused on the national broadcaster, but also buying space in many newspapers to support the press while the publications' own journalists wrote the copy for the advertorial space purchased by the Government. In France the controversy centred on restrictions of liberty, which were being stoked by the opposition party in preparation for the forthcoming election campaign. As stated above the coverage of the government in Germany was technological, concentrating on the science to see whether other countries might have found better solutions. Switzerland is the only country in the group that put its policy to the people in two referenda, both of which came out in support of the government. Practitioners spoke of the government needing to justify its policy and the restrictions to a sceptical population.

### 8.3.2 The influence of ownership of the media.

In the UK, personalities, in the form of editors-in-chief and the owners that appoint them, are much discussed in media circles, to a greater extent than elsewhere. Newspapers mostly have known political stances, which are pursued with a greater of lesser degree of persistence, although in most cases these do not exactly map on to the political parties. The impartial, state-owned and regulated BBC remains the dominant force in British media. In Germany, France and Switzerland, ownership of media outlets is not so important. In France, the media have lost their erstwhile political affiliations, but a small number of very rich individuals now control some of the newspapers and are opening TV channels that mostly lean to the political right.

In Germany the titles in the Axel Springer Group tend to support libertarian and nationalist causes: this was reflected in their pandemic coverage, but it is the only national difference in output that could be unambiguously attributed to owners.

### 8.3.3 Public broadcasters

The role of, and respect for the public broadcasters is similar in all the countries. Their audiences generally were stable or rose somewhat (±3-4%) in all countries as the public turned to them for reliable information, and governments concentrated on them as preferred, indeed dominant channels of communication, and the PSBs faithfully reported the government's messages. Trust of these outlets also rose slightly but both effects fell back again after the pandemic. (Table 12 in section 7.1.3). Accounts of the way in which the public broadcasters dealt with the pandemic were broadly similar in all the countries.

### 8.3.4 The duty of impartiality and the influence of regulators

The exact form of regulation and the duty of impartiality laid on broadcasters differs somewhat in all the countries but there is no evidence that these differences had a significant impact on their coverage of the pandemic. The German and Swiss press have a duty to report both fairly and accurately is consistent with their tradition of using a factual tone in news reporting and indeed with the accounts of interviewees. This is coupled with a careful separation of opinion writing, apparently selected to show a balance of opinion, as shown in the content analysis above.

### 8.3.5 Commercial considerations; consumer demand

Journalists reported that everyone wanted 'good reliable information' during the crisis. There were national differences however in the topic the public was interested in. In the UK it was policy, in the form of what people were allowed to do in their daily lives, possibly because of the complexity of the rules in different parts of the country. This explained the amount and detail of the BBC's nightly coverage. In France it was impact – the impact of the pandemic and the regulations on people and businesses. In Germany it was improvement – 'how can we as a nation learn and do better'. In Switzerland it was more about justification, whether the restrictions were both necessary and effective.

Less directly, in every country, as more and more people consume their media in digital rather than printed form, it is now possible precisely to measure the patters of attention of readers and use this information to tailor journalism to meet the publication's commercial objectives, whether it be to drive up subscriptions and/or advertising. The development of this technology, its deployment, and the degree of interest in its results appears to be moving at a different pace everywhere. There is some evidence that it is advancing faster in the competitive marketplace of the UK, where most of the main opinion-forming newspapers have gone over to a paywall/subscription model, and reporters with experience of the Guardian (which is distributed without subscription) spoke of the deployment, some years ago, of the information system that measures attention article by article,

paragraph by paragraph. This appears to be progressing more slowly in France, where it was hardly mentioned. It may be that the national policy of media pluralism, supported by subsidies, lessens the commercial pressure on media businesses to modernise.

**8.3.6. Pressure on journalism from the Government; the influence of informal networks.**

In normal times there are different practices in all the countries as to how the government seeks to influence the output of the media. In Britain and France this is much discussed, as politics has become more professional, and politicians have in recent years become more adept at media management. In France the current President is reported as frequently telephoning media outlets to correct a story. In Germany and Switzerland, the accounts suggested that such overt pressure would be unusual, and indeed unlikely to succeed.

During the pandemic all governments were vitally interested in finding the best way to disseminate their public health messages during the pandemic. In the UK there were reports of a continuing dialogue between ministers, government spokesmen and the BBC about how they were approaching the issue editorially. For their part newspapers feared for their income, and a package of government support was made available, with what was believed to be favourable effects on editorial policy at least in the early stages.

In France it was business as usual, with a degree of moderation, but the journalists felt free to take on the government if they felt it was important. There were suggestions too about the tendency of influential people to socialise together; this might lead to elite influence on the media, and indeed business interests were well covered in the French press. The corporate, collective tone of German media and the checks and balances within the government meant that there was no need for specific intervention to get reasonable support for its factual and technocratic messaging.

Switzerland is a much smaller country than the others and accounts of collaboration among the elites are common. At a federal level there were reports of cooperation among the larger businesses, financial institutions, and influential newspapers, and while there is little doubt that it influenced policy, there is little evidence that it affected media coverage.

**8.3.7 Professional culture of journalism**

British journalism is known for its searching scrutiny of Government policy. The British media remained broadly supportive of the Government's approach and the normally fierce style of the press was somewhat muted. Normally political journalists are assisted by the function of the parliamentary lobby, where competing ideas are constantly being discussed by politicians with a trusted inner circle of journalists. With politics suspended, these rules changed, and journalists had to adapt to the top-down style of government communications during the pandemic. This led to the development in some publications of data journalism units to use internet-based research methods to test and scrutinise the scientific basis for government policy.

After a few months, sharp questioning of policy began to re-emerge in the UK and France. In France there was an element of rallying round the flag, but the style of the media did not change much. In Germany the sense was that this was a national crisis that had to be managed by technical measures properly applied in the public interest. In Switzerland journalists tended to respect the line taken by the Federal government and keep their coverage factual and indeed deferential. However, it was openly acknowledged in the interviews that restrictions on liberty of this magnitude would need to be confirmed by referendum, which indeed they were. It is inherent in the referendum procedure that both sides of the arguments are widely reported, and it is this process, rather than contention between journalists and government, that guides the reporting of a debate about a major policy. Indeed, at the time of writing in the spring of 2023, another referendum is under way in Switzerland to remove the special powers the government assumed for the management of the pandemic.

### 8.3.8. Social media.

The interviews with journalists gave quite a different picture of the importance of social media in the different countries. It was a major topic in the UK, where despite the public mistrust of much of the content, it was variously reported to be setting the agenda, speeding up the news cycle, affording new ways to source and distribute stories, and marketing journalistic content. Digital tools, precisely measuring audiences, and affording the tailoring of copy were mentioned frequently. This contrasted most markedly with France, where it was hardly mentioned at all, and somewhat with Germany and Switzerland, where these tools and platforms were not yet widely used but were being deployed more and more.

While some news platforms and social media outlets are transforming the journalism industry there was very little evidence that they were responsible for national differences in the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. Social media is acquiring an agenda-setting function, but the evidence is mixed and in the present context the salience of the pandemic was similar everywhere (Gilardi et al., 2020; Bollenbacher, Loynes and Bryden, 2022). It was evident that people who were curious about the science or the way other countries were dealing with the pandemic did turn to the internet for information. Those who believed the conspiracy theories about the motivation of governments and vaccine manufacturers did find support on social media. Many of the protests, especially in Switzerland, were described as larger than they would have been without social media. But the impact on coverage of the pandemic was harder to discern.

### 8.4 Conclusion.

Despite its acknowledged importance to the democratic process, the comparison of international differences in media output is a relatively new field of academic study. Research that seeks to trace the causes of such differences within the culture of journalism itself are rarer still. One of the reasons for the absence of such studies is complexity. The forces at work on in the arena or field, (in the special sense described by Bourdieu) are many, and their strengths vary over time. Commercial

and competitive pressures on the outlet, responses of audiences, advertisers, subscribers, government subsidies, not to mention reputations and relationships, all play a part in determining what is published on a given day. Furthermore, the issue of salience will, on a given day, suggest a different pattern of subject matter to the journalist or publication in each country.

The present study isolates for analysis the handling of a subject matter that was equally important everywhere and it is believed to be the first comparison of its kind. Some complexity remains, so it is only the clearest inductions from the evidence that are likely to support valid and repeatable conclusions.

The evidence of this study shows that Germany and Switzerland, despite significant differences in size, share some fixed characteristics. Their constitutions are federal with strong local government, constitutionally guaranteed. Their electoral systems, while different, give an accurate representation of the support for individual parties. Smaller parties can be created and build support. Coalitions, cooperation, and consensus building more generally are part of the culture of government, and in Germany the duty to seek consensus in government is incorporated in the constitution. In Switzerland direct democracy tends to keep politicians in touch with the mainstream of public opinion. Citizens reflect these virtues by trusting their public institutions considerably more than in France and the UK.

The broadcasters are regulated in these countries as they are everywhere, but in Germany and Switzerland there are also strong regulatory bodies enforcing the duty of fairness and accuracy on the press, while also guaranteeing its freedom. There is not perceived to be any conflict between these objectives.

It was not inevitable that these factors would cause the media to behave any differently, but it appears that they did. The output was more rooted in science and more factual. Opinion was more balanced and reported to be more thoughtful than polemical. Practitioners explained that the German media and establishment sought to discover what was best for the country. In Switzerland there was a deference to the authorities, coupled with a respect for the difficulty of their task. Everyone wanted to bring the population together to obey the rules, subject to those rules being reasonable (and agreed by the populace in a referendum).

In France the historic political parallelism of newspapers and the state control of the broadcasters has diminished a great deal but there remains a tradition of open debate and challenge which was operating as usual during the pandemic. Journalists did not hold back, however as French law prevents undue or unwarranted criticism of public officials carrying out their mandates, and this may well have reduced the level of criticism of the French government's actions.

The British press, with more than ten competing national titles with wide circulation is different from that in the other countries. Competitive advantage is often sought, depending on the type of newspaper, through scoops, sensationalism and scandal, opinion, investigations and campaigns, and political access. Apart from rule breaking by government figures there were few of any of those things to report during the pandemic, although this type of issue came to the surface again when normal politics began to emerge afterwards. There was relatively little political disagreement, and with the suspension of normal life, not much else was going on. The Government was the source of

all reliable information on policy moves, and the only debate was about the science and the comparative effectiveness of the measures. Many journalists therefore turned their hand to reporting on these new areas, applying familiar techniques, and investing in the resources and skills in data journalism and scientific evaluation.

There is considerable evidence therefore that the political system itself, alongside the competitive situation in the economy of the media generally are the most important factors influencing the culture of political journalism and the style of reporting.

It appears that the system of regulation contributes, but it was not often cited by the journalists as an important factor. The principle of French regulation is pluralism, to allow a debate to occur within the confines of the general law, and the system of regulating the press in the UK is weak. The focus of regulation in Germany and Switzerland is fairness, accuracy, or impartiality.

Similarly, with one exception, it appears that the ownership of outlets also did not materially influence the coverage. Granted, many outlets have a known stance on the political spectrum and the internal culture of journalism and coverage of the pandemic reflected that, but the study revealed no accounts of effective owner intervention, except in the case of the Axel Springer group in Germany, which did cause BILD, and to a much lesser extent Die Welt, to take a more libertarian and nationalist stance.

It is important to note that this study, while one of the first of its kind, was conducted on the media of four countries which are similar, but not typical. Many political systems are less free and less democratic than those of these countries. There are many systems in use around the world to regulate and control of the media, some formal, some informal, many benign, some less so. This study shows that these factors are likely to have different impacts on the culture of journalism in the country, but there is no normative implication to be drawn from the conclusions of this study that the rich countries of Northern Europe have superior answers to issues of media freedom and democracy.

That said, there are more countries to which this methodology could usefully be applied. As an example, Sweden is a high trust country which took a different approach to control of the pandemic. The Swedish Government published its commission's report into the handling of the pandemic. A recent Swedish study, based on quantitative opinion research on a large sample with, showed increases in institutional trust during the pandemic. A further study used similar methods to compare trust of the authorities during the pandemic in Sweden with that of Denmark. (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Nielsen and Lindvall, 2021)(Swedish Corona Commission Report, Swedish Government, 2022)

It would be instructive to build on these by applying the methodology of the present study to the behaviour of political leaders, journalists and the media in that country.


**The future impact of the digital revolution**

The digital delivery of news media of all kinds, and the separate phenomenon of accessing the news and current affairs via social media, are both on the rise everywhere. Media organisations initially saw digital as an opportunity: a low-cost distribution channel, and one which told them more about their audience than they previously knew. Advertisers, for similar reasons redirected their spending towards social media and digital outlets rather than legacy media. This changed the economics of media companies. If legacy organisations do not make changes to their business strategy, the amount of money available for journalism, particularly local or investigative journalism, will reduce, and productivity will need to improve. There are already established companies such as United Robots in Sweden that use existing technology and AI to automate some routine reporting tasks, such as sports and, in the political arena, the coverage of opinion polling and election results.

Journalists, especially those in the UK and France, report the increasing speed of the news cycle. Twitter is mostly used for professional reasons, including for journalists to talk to each other and to subject matter specialists. It was important during the pandemic, connecting scientists, public health officials and epidemiologists with the journalist community. Facebook is by contrast primarily used for personal reasons, to which the news is often incidental. Among young people in particular, Instagram and TikTok are increasingly influential in the news arena. At the same time, the internet has considerably increased the number of tools available to journalists to research a topic from the desk, rather than in the field, and this significantly increases their efficiency.

It was a significant finding that even these four countries, chosen as they were for their similarities, are developing in the new world of social media at a different rate. Switzerland has the highest use of social media for news, but the lowest use of Twitter. Twitter is much used in the UK and France whereas Germans use social media less. There may be all kinds of reasons for these differences, and language may well be an important one, but it is to be expected that over time these numbers will converge, and the new methods of handling information will eventually and inevitably force change upon the legacy media everywhere.

Bennett points the way to new approaches to communications research in the social media age. The model of broadcasters and print journalists collectively acting as gatekeepers, deciding what the people need to know, discharging an assumed democratic mandate, is becoming progressively more outdated. Although the legacy media retains large audiences and remains influential there are now new players in this arena. The tech industry acknowledges that its algorithms have political significance. Platforms understand that they need to protect their audiences from harmful material. The definition of harm is however subjective, and the Santa Clara Valley of California is not the only source of wisdom on the matter. As the debate develops between the platforms and lawmakers in the countries in which they operate it may be that these companies will be required to develop something that resembles an editorial policy and be accountable for it to their audiences and users (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018).

Tandoc saw an increasing role for audiences in a form of co-production, where users in different ways contribute content to media organisations, distribute content, by liking and following, while indirectly tailoring content as media organisations look at their audience's increasingly visible digital footprint (Tandoc and Vos, 2016).

New and old gatekeepers alike are being influenced more and more by the wisdom of the crowd, via the competition for attention. The algorithm is, like the media business, driven by profit, by the pursuit of advertising revenue. It can perform its task clinically and single-mindedly, free of the normative intervention of journalists.

It is for future research to assess the effect that social media algorithms will have on the salience of issues in the news. The effects on our politics could be profound.

We can already see some different effects in these countries. In France our interviewees spoke of increased polarisation – an effect that has been noted in the US in the context of Donald Trump. In Germany they spoke of doctors and other scientists who found a voice and an outlet on social media that they would not otherwise have had in the conventional media. This gave them political influence. In Switzerland journalists told us that the anti-vaccination protesters would not have got the numbers out on the street were it not for a social media campaign.

What is less easy to see without future research is how these new channels are affecting journalism and its consumers. Perhaps we will see a resurgence of curated and fact-checked journalism as a reaction to the free expression and consequent misinformation and mistrust of social media today. Perhaps the platforms will move in this direction as well. Perhaps people will be willing to pay for good journalism. Perhaps only certain people will. If so, it matters who these people are. It matters how the profession of journalism responds in the new environment. All of this must be explored in future research and comparative research will be an essential tool to reveal the effects and indeed dangers for democracy.

The salience of issues, debates about solutions, exposure of error and wrongdoing, all of this depends on the system of civic information we choose. This decision lies at the heart of the political system in our countries. It could hardly be more important. During the pandemic, after all, lives depended on it.

<center>**Appendix 1. Ethics**</center>

**PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET**


**Title of project:**

Researcher(s):       Colin Barrow

Supervisor:          Professor Steven Barnett

You are being invited to take part in a research study on how political journalists covered the pandemic in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. The aim of the research is to understand the reasons, similarities and differences between these countries in respect of the relationship between the media and the Government. This research is being undertaken as part of the researcher's studies for a PhD in the Communications programme at the University of Westminster.

The study will involve you participating in an interview lasting about 60-70 minutes, either face to face or by video call


**Please note:**

- Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.

- You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

- You have the right to ask, within 30 days of the interview itself for your data to be withdrawn as soon as this is practical, and for personal information to be destroyed.

- You do not have to answer questions either on questionnaires or in interviews if you do not wish to do so.

- Your responses will normally be made anonymous, unless indicated above to the contrary, and will be kept confidential unless you provide explicit consent to do otherwise.

- No individuals should be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the research, or any publications arising from it.

- All computer data files will be password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

- All hard copy documents, e.g. consent forms, completed questionnaires, etc. will be kept securely and in a locked cupboard, wherever possible on University premises. Documents may be scanned and stored electronically. This may be done to enable secure transmission of data to the university's secure computer systems.

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- If you wish, you can receive information on the results of the research. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive this information.

- If you have any questions, the researcher can be contacted during and after participation by email: w1809675@my.westminster.ac.uk, or by telephone: +447785 250515

- If you have a complaint relating to this research you shpuld contact the Head of School, Michaela O'Brien (Mobrien@westminster.ac.uk), or by telephone (0207 911 5000).

**CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Study:**

**Lead researcher:**      Colin Barrow

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| I have been given the Participation Information Sheet and/or had its contents explained to me. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I have had an opportunity to ask any questions and I am satisfied with the answers given. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I understand I have a right to withdraw from the research at any time and I do not have to provide a reason. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I understand that if I withdraw from the research any data included in the results will be removed if that is practicable (I understand that once anonymised data has been collated into other datasets it may not be possible to remove that data). | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I would like to receive information relating to the results from this study. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I wish to receive a copy of this Consent form. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I confirm I am willing to be a participant in the above research study. | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |
| I note the data collected may be retained in an archive and I am happy for my data to be reused as part of future research activities.  I note my data will be fully anonymised (if applicable). | Yes ☐ | No | ☐ |

**Participant's Name:**          _____

**Signature:**          _____  **Date:** _____

This consent form will be stored separately from any data you provide so that your responses remain anonymous.

_____

I confirm I have provided a copy of the Participant Information Sheet approved by my supervisor to the participant and fully explained its contents. I have given the participant an opportunity to ask questions, which have been answered.

**Researcher's Name:** Colin Barrow

**Signature:**          _____  **Date:** _____

**Appendix 2 Interview Introduction and Questions**

<div align="center">Introduction sent to all participants.</div>

I would like to give you a little more detail on the background to the study. The main part of my career was in the private sector in law and finance, but I subsequently spent fifteen years as a full-time politician in local government in the UK, finishing up as leader of Westminster Council, a role I held for four years. So, I have seen something of the media and politics close to!

I am now conducting doctoral research at the University of Westminster, where my topic is a comparative study of media and politics: how the media work with political issues in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. I wanted to do this because I suspect that the adversarial nature of British politics might inhibit the open discussion of political ideas and government performance. I was interested in whether other styles might more effectively provide citizens with the information they need.

As the period and topic for the comparison I have chosen the coronavirus pandemic, which affected all the countries in broadly the same way at the same time. Some of course did better than others from time to time, and the interventions differed as well.

Comparative research exploring political and media cultures in different countries is a relatively new field. The first piece of field research, now completed, compared the news output from the TV, and certain newspapers in each of the chosen countries during November 2020.

In this second stage I will be interviewing up to ten people for each country with experience in this area, mostly journalists, to understand the culture within which they work, what are their resources and sources, the pressures they work under, and how those things influence what appears in print and on air. Interviews usually take place by Zoom or Teams but can equally be in person. 45 minutes is a good average.

Colin Barrow CBE
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+447785 250515

*Disclosure:*

*While all PhD theses are ultimately published, I want to assure you that these interviews are confidential, in that I will never refer to what is said in such a way that an interviewee can be identified by name, unless the person interviewed authorises the quotation and its full context. This interview will be recorded and may be transcribed. The data will be maintained under my control or that of the university for up to five years after publication of the thesis and will not be disclosed to any third party without your permission. The transcript of this interview may remain on the University's records after that date, but it will be anonymised to maintain confidentiality.*

Interview Questions

Interview questions

1.      What do you think (your country's) readers or viewers wanted, more than anything else, from the media during the pandemic?

*(Prompts)*
   i.   *Stories about the impact on ordinary people*
   ii.  *Stories about the impact on business and institutions*
   iii. *Assessments of how the government was doing*
   iv.  *News about changes in the rules and restrictions*
   v.   *Prevalence data, cases and deaths*

2. During a national emergency, a pandemic that is causing thousands of deaths, people naturally look to the Government to take the right steps to protect the population and communicate what they are doing and why they are doing it. The only way they can do this is through the media. How do you think the (country's) government went about this, and was it successful?

*(Prompts)*
      i.    *persuading people to obey the health advice*
      ii.   *Instructing people what to do and why*
      iii.  *Explaining the science*

3. Do you think that (your country)'s journalists moderated their coverage, or challenged policy less, because of the risk to life if people did not have confidence in government policy?

4 There are quite wide differences in how much opinion is carried by the media in different countries. How important is this aspect of journalism in (your country?)

5. All government action is to some extent political. Those in charge defend what they do, and those who would like to be in charge offer suggestions about how it might be better. How was the politics handled in the media in (your country)?

*(Prompts).*
     *such as:*
          *Political parties*
          *Ministry of health vs finance or business*
         *Political subdivisions: cantons, Länder*
         *Geographies*

6. In some countries there was a lot of coverage of international comparisons, prevalence, deaths, restrictions. How important do you think that was in (country)

*(Prompt).*

*Germany and Switzerland did much more of this than the UK or France: perhaps because Germany was proud of its record and Switzerland is small?*

7. Do you think that the ownership of the media influences how events like this are covered?

*Prompts:*

*Do you think that in their everyday work, journalists and editors like you bear in mind the 'line' of their employer?*

*Do you think that journalists on the (example publication) would be expected to cover the pandemic differently from those working on, say (another example)*

8 In most countries broadcasters are legally required to be impartial, whereas the press is free to handle the news as it sees fit. How did this work in (country)? How do you think this affects the work of the broadcast journalist? Do they take account of what is being said in the press?

9. Do you think that there was any unusual political or peer pressure applied to the media in (country) to encourage them to promote the Government line, given the seriousness of the pandemic?

    *prompt:*
        *as in wartime?*

*or was it business as usual?*

10. These days many people, especially younger people, get their news from social media, and other sources that are not moderated and curated as newspapers and broadcasters are. Do you think that has affected the way you work or the way that journalists in general work in your country?

    *Prompt:*
        *For example: In the context of the pandemic social media have been blamed for the spread of disinformation about vaccines and undermining support for government measures.*

11. We have covered several aspects of the culture governing the media in this interview. Looking back at your career, do you think that there have been significant changes in the environment for political journalism in (country) in recent years?

12. Finally, thus far the questions have all been about the media in (country). This is a comparative study however, and we are looking for similarities and differences between countries. You might be familiar with how the media works in (the three other countries) Are there any significant differences in relation to the culture of political journalism that you would like to tell me about?

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