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# 1

## Political Journalism in Western Europe: Change and Continuity

*Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Raymond Kuhn*

The gallery in which the reporters sit has become a fourth estate of the realm. The publication of the debates, a practice which seemed to the most liberal statesmen of the old school full of danger to the great safeguards of public liberty, is now regarded by many persons as a safeguard tantamount, and more than tantamount, to all the rest together. (Macaulay, 1828)

Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact. ... [Publishing] is equivalent to Democracy. ... Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. (Carlyle, 1841)

### Introduction

In its self-conception, the popular imaginary, and the social sciences, political journalism is regarded as a key part of democratic politics and at the very heart of the journalistic vocation. The venerable notion of the 'fourth estate', attributed to the eighteenth-century conservative politician and philosopher Edmund Burke (though probably first developed by

Thomas Macaulay and then later ascribed to Burke by Thomas Carlyle) still captures the ideal and to some extent the actual position of political journalism. It is a formally independent institution that is part and parcel of representative politics, engaged in criticising those in positions of power, promoting particular political actors, issues, and views, keeping people at least to some extent informed about public affairs and mobilising citizens for political action – all often done in concert with other estates, but never simply as their instrument. Political journalism is about professional achievement, personal fulfilment, and often money – especially after the commercialisation of the press and later broadcasting – but it is also about politics, power, and what Macaulay called ‘the safeguards of public liberty’. It is, in short, as much about democracy as it is about the media.

In its paradigmatic late twentieth-century form of mass politics pursued by mass parties covered by mass media, political life in Western European democracies was intimately intertwined with different, distinct national varieties of political journalism, developed within newspapers and broadcasters that reached far wider audiences than the nineteenth-century reporters Macaulay and Carlyle wrote about. Today, in the early twenty-first century, journalism is still, for good and ill, at the heart of politics. Yet many parts of the equation are changing across Europe. Popular political participation is on the decline (or at least changing) in many countries. Parties have lost both their mass membership and the firm loyalty of previously committed voters in a process of partisan de-alignment evident across different political systems. Consolidated mass media environments defined by print and broadcast media have begun to give way to much more diverse, fragmented, and digital media landscapes that give audiences many more options for active engagement and selective use. Just as politics today is different from the politics of the immediate postwar period and the media of today are different from the media of the 1970s, political journalism today is different in many respects from that of previous generations. It remains deeply shaped by historical legacies and is still practised in the shadow of inherited norms and ideals associated with an earlier age, supported by news organisations developed in another time and oriented towards predominantly national political systems that reflect centuries-old political and constitutional theories and distinct paths to democracy. But political journalism is also changing and reinventing itself as a craft and as a profession. Journalists find themselves faced with audiences that are often more sceptical, less interested, and more scattered; they work on their own or for media companies facing

ever harsher competition and a rapidly changing business environment; and they confront a political world undergoing its own profound changes. In short, political journalism in Western Europe is in transition.

## **What we know about political journalism in Western Europe**

This book presents an overview of the combination of change and continuity that characterises political journalism in Western Europe in the early twenty-first century, a time of considerable turmoil especially in the media industries that have traditionally underpinned reporting, but also in how political actors and ordinary citizens relate to journalism. It is concerned with political journalism broadly understood as including at its core the coverage produced by dedicated political reporters who in many countries do their daily work in constant and close contact with elected officials and their aides. It also embraces running political commentary provided by various pundits, news coverage by general assignment reporters and others that deal with issues of political importance, and even some coverage labelled as ‘foreign affairs’ or ‘international news’ that actually overlaps with domestic democratic politics (for example, news about the European Union). While political communication is a much broader phenomenon, including activities such as grassroots canvassing, professionally produced campaign communications aiming to circumvent journalistic scrutiny, and the mediation of politics through entertainment shows and other forms of political culture, conventional news coverage remains the single most important source of information about public affairs for most European citizens (Bennett and Entman, 2001; Richardson et al., 2013). Political journalism is thus worth examining in its own right.

In this book we ask a set of simple but important questions about political journalism. How does it work in our selected countries? What are the similarities and differences in how it operates? How is it changing? Finally, which issues cut across national borders? We address these questions by covering both national developments in five different Western European countries (France, Italy, Germany, Denmark, and the United Kingdom) and a range of cross-cutting issues including coverage of the European Union, the role of public service broadcasting, and long-term trends in reporting styles and international news. Throughout the book we examine political journalism as it is practised at the intersection between

political and media systems, as part of politics as much as part of the media (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Cook, 1998; Kuhn and Neveu, 2002). The focus is on how political journalism, understood primarily as the product of interactions between professional journalists and political actors and oriented towards a popular audience still generally seen as consisting of mostly passive receivers, operates in Western Europe today, and how it has changed in recent decades as part of wider economic, social, and technological transformations sweeping across the continent.

Self-reflexive journalistic scrutiny of political coverage, personal accounts by prominent political journalists and politicians, and a growing body of academic work focused on political journalism mean we know much more about this topic than we did. Comparative studies of political journalism allow us to outline from the outset a number of shared characteristics of Western European political journalism at the turn of the century. It is a form of journalism that has become increasingly independent of narrow party-political or proprietorial agendas and is increasingly driven by its own professional, organisational, and – in the case of private-sector media – commercial logics. It generally covers politics in ways that are focused on personalities and political manoeuvrings more than parties and policies, on successions of individual events more than drawn-out processes, and on conflict more than compromise and cooperation. It focuses overwhelmingly on a narrow and partial range of political issues, actors, and institutions, subjecting to the light of publicity only a small subset of the political processes playing out at any given point in time, paying attention only to a small minority of those involved, and covering leading figures from national parliaments and governments far more than other important arenas like local government, interest groups, and the governance networks they are part of or, for that matter, European Union-level institutions. Yet, for all its shortcomings, it also keeps those who actually follow the news consistently better informed about public affairs than those of their peers who do not (Curran et al., 2009).

Political journalism is a journalism that generally shares with the majority of politicians, social scientists, and European citizens a 'legitimist vision' of electoral politics, accepting the latter's basic legitimacy as indisputable and its importance as a given, and often by implication regarding any outside challenge to this system with considerable scepticism (whether confronted by the populist comedian-turned-anti-politician Beppe Grillo in Italy, the Pirate Party in Germany, or the



Occupy movement in the United Kingdom). It is a form of journalism that is, all talk of 'citizen journalism' aside, overwhelmingly practised by salaried white-collar professionals working for legacy news media organisations such as newspapers and broadcasters (including their online operations). It is a journalism that in Western Europe is deeply shaped by the particular combination of private-sector elite newspaper journalism with often pronounced partisan overtones (in Northern Europe combined with a pronounced populist streak in the form of widely read tabloids) and a generally strong tradition of widely used public service broadcasting that differentiates it from, for example, American political journalism. All these characteristics have been highlighted in academic studies of political journalism especially from the 1990s onwards (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Brants and Voltmer, 2011; Kuhn and Neveu, 2002; Norris, 2000). All of these features remain relevant today, underlining how contemporary political journalism is in many key respects a continuation of well-known decades-old trends.

## **Different models of Western European political journalism**

Just as broadly similar developments rooted in the 1990s or even before continue to define the practice and output of contemporary political journalism, older, deeper-rooted institutional differences also continue to shape the news produced. Throughout the book, chapter after chapter confirms that historically inherited national differences remain pronounced even within the relatively similar family of Western European democracies. Europe is not internally homogenous. Even after more than half a century of European political and economic integration, different countries have significantly different domestic political systems, economic structures, and nationally oriented news media. While on-the-ground variation is considerable and does not always neatly follow national borders or theoretical expectations, comparative media researchers interested in political journalism often use a conceptual typology developed by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) to categorise European media systems on the basis of: (a) how developed their media markets are, (b) the extent to which media organisations are directly or indirectly intertwined with the political system, (c) the development of journalistic professionalism, and (d) the degree and character of state intervention in the media sector.

On the basis of these four variables, Hallin and Mancini offer three ideal types that several contributors return to in later chapters, but are worth introducing briefly here. The first is a 'liberal' model, characterised by the relative dominance of market mechanisms and commercial logics across the media sector. The United States is seen as the clearest example of this model; it is not common in Europe, where virtually every country has some sort of public service broadcasting provision and many newspapers have stronger roots in politics than in the market. The second is a 'democratic corporatist' model, characterised by the co-existence of commercial media, media with roots in civil society and political groups, and public service media. Germany is seen as a particularly important example of this model, the Low Countries and the Nordic countries also. The third is a 'polarised pluralist model', characterised by weakly developed commercial news media, a high level of interpenetration between media and politics, and substantial state intervention in most media sectors. Many Mediterranean countries, including Italy, Spain, and Portugal, are seen as close to this model.

Although some countries, including France and the United Kingdom, are hard to place, Hallin and Mancini's typology offers a useful way of thinking about high-level differences and similarities even within – from a global perspective – a relatively homogenous region like Western Europe. (All the countries covered here are by global standards affluent and politically stable, as well as enjoying high levels of media freedom.) The three stylised models capture important variations in the structure of media industries and their relations to politics – and thus the structural frameworks within which political journalists operate – though research suggests that one should not assume that such systemic differences always translate directly into parallel differences in terms of news media use, news media content, or indeed into professional journalistic self-conceptions (Dalen, 2012; Esser et al., 2012; Hanitzsch, 2011; Pfetsch, 2004; Shehata and Strömbäck, 2011). Media environments and their relations to the political system are important in shaping political journalism, but professional milieus also have their own internal dynamics and ultimately the impact of political journalism also depends on how citizens relate to it – whether they pay attention to it, whether they feel it is relevant for them, and whether they trust it.

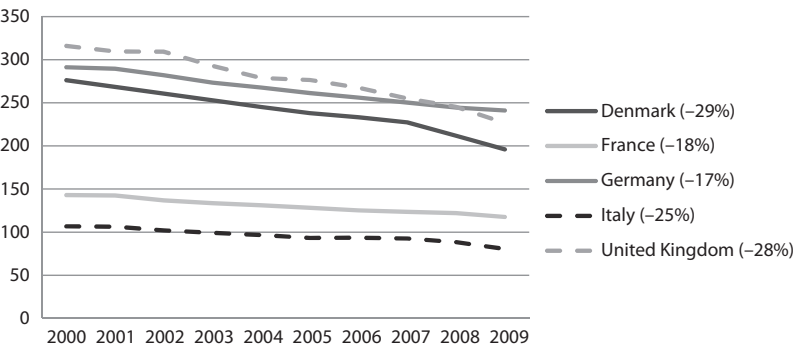
## Structural changes affecting Western European political journalism

While the shared trends of personalisation, an emphasis on politics over policy, some tendencies towards popularisation, and the enduring importance of inherited institutional differences represent important continuities, change is also afoot. Western European political journalism is changing in response to both external and internal factors. In this opening chapter we focus principally on those *external* variables that are largely shared across different national Western European systems. The individual national case study chapters deal in greater detail with the *internal* factors that vary from one country to another. Political journalists across Western Europe have to contend with a structural transformation in the industries that have sustained and constrained the profession for decades (especially in the case of newspapers); with changing audiences who are less credulous, deferential, and patient, as well as increasingly empowered by various digital media and a growing number of media options to choose from; and with political actors who often dedicate more and more resources to handling their media relations (often in part by hiring experienced journalists as advisers).

All five Western European countries dealt with in detail in this book have increasingly diverse media markets, high levels of social media use, and far more internet users per capita than the global average. All have newspaper industries undergoing a rapid and often exceedingly painful transition as print circulation declines and advertising revenues erode, in many cases with direct consequences for the number of journalists covering politics. All of them have seen political parties, interest groups, government agencies, and major corporations invest in expanding their public relations efforts. A few quantitative indicators provide a sense of the scale and scope of change in the media sector. Figure 1.1 charts the decline in paid printed newspaper circulation in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2009. (The figure in parentheses is the accumulated drop in circulation over this ten-year period.) While inherited differences in newspaper circulation continue to shape these national media systems, clearly separating countries with historically strong commercial newspaper industries from those without, overall print circulation is declining. This is undermining the business models of many newspaper companies even as they reach more readers online than ever before (newspapers dominate online news provision in France, Germany,

and Italy, and loom large in Denmark and the United Kingdom, though public service broadcasters dominate the sector in the UK in particular).

While paid print newspaper readership has declined over the last decade, overall television viewing has remained stable. What has changed is what people watch. Most Western European countries have moved from limited channel choice and a few big audiences as recently as the late 1990s to a multi-channel environment first with cable and satellite pay-TV and later with digital terrestrial free-to-air transmission. In the early 2000s a limited number of channels still attracted substantial audiences, but many more channels drew limited niche audiences. In terms of the number of people reached and the time spent engaged, television remains the single most important and most extensively used source of news across Western Europe, while print, though still important, is in decline. On the rise, in contrast, are digital media, as people get news online – often from legacy media companies like broadcasters or newspapers – via desktops, laptops, and increasingly via mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. The spread and domestication of digital and networked communication technologies have been so fast and so thorough, especially amongst affluent Northern Europeans, that it is easy to forget what a dramatic shift we have seen in media use in recent years – comparable perhaps only to the rapid rise of television in the 1960s. A survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism captures how widely used various ways of accessing news were across Western Europe as of 2012 (see Table 1.1).



Source: adapted from Nielsen (2012a) with additional data from the World Press Trends database.

**Figure 1.1** Paid newspaper circulation per 1,000 population

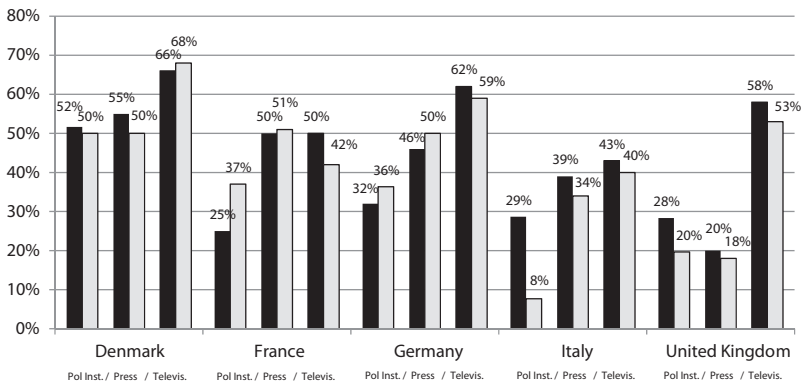
**Table 1.1** Weekly access of news by source

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>
Television	81%	80%	87%	76%
Online	82%	77%	61%	82%
Print	57%	57%	68%	54%

Source: from the 2012 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman, 2012). 'Which of the following news sources have you used in the last week?' Conducted with a representative sample of the online population in each country, Denmark (N=1002), France (N=1011), Germany (N=970), United Kingdom (N=2173). Given the methodology, the results do not reflect the media habits of adults with no regular internet access, estimated to about 10 (Denmark) and 20 (France, Germany, and the UK) per cent of the population in 2012.

The media sector is not the only one that has experienced significant change over the last decade. Western European politics has also changed, in part as a continuation of older trends towards de-alignment, changes in party organisations, and the loosening of corporatist networks between governments and interest groups, in part also as a result of institutional change, especially at the European Union level, and in part because of sharply dropping public confidence in many countries after a decade of political problems, scandals, and the recent financial and economic crisis (Dalton, 2007). Eurobarometer survey data ten years apart, from 2002 and 2011/2012, illustrate some of these changes in our five selected national case studies (see Figure 1.2). In Germany and particularly Denmark, relatively stable and sizeable proportions of the population responded in both 2002 and 2012 that they 'tend to trust' national political institutions. In France, trust increased substantially in the same period. In both Italy and the United Kingdom, however, there was a marked decline in confidence (the Eurobarometer surveys suggest this was also the case in many other EU member states). In the United Kingdom, the proportion who expressed some trust in national political institutions declined from about three in ten in 2002 to only one in five in 2012. In Italy, where in 2002 fewer than one in three had said that they 'tended to trust' national political institutions, by 2012 the figure was fewer than one in ten (only 4 per cent of respondents expressed any trust in political parties).

It is important to keep in mind that stable and relatively high levels of public confidence in national political institutions, especially in Northern Europe, undermine the idea that all Western democracies face a crisis of



The first two bars for each country represent trust in political institutions. The second two bars represent trust in the press. The third two bars represent trust in television. The black bars represent data from 2002 and the grey bars, data from 2012. ‘Political institutions’ is the average of the number of people who say they ‘tend to trust’ national governments, parliaments, and political parties.

Source: data from Eurobarometer 57 (2002), Eurobarometer 76 (2011) and Eurobarometer 77 (2012).

**Figure 1.2** Percentage of people who ‘tend to trust’ political institutions, press, and TV (2002/2012)

legitimacy today. Yet clearly many established democracies suffer from a ‘democratic deficit’, with representative political institutions seen as delivering less than citizens expect (Norris, 2011). Interestingly, however, the same Eurobarometer surveys that document the growth of this deficit (especially in Italy and the United Kingdom) also suggest that in all five of our national case studies television is generally trusted by more people than are national political institutions. Moreover, although trust in the media has dropped in several of them, the decline is not as sharp as the decline in confidence in political institutions.

Faced with changes in the media and in the citizenry they seek to appeal to, political parties have in many countries tried to expand their own independent campaign communications as well as their public relations efforts (Davis, 2002; Esser et al., 2001). Across Western Europe overall campaign expenditures have grown and political actors have invested more in media management. Yet although the resources involved have increased, things need to be kept in perspective. In France, the

official cap for presidential campaign spending is €22.5 million per candidate. In 2012, around 35 million votes were cast in the decisive second round, which suggests that about €1.30 was spent by the two major candidates combined for each vote cast (although the actual expenditure of the Sarkozy campaign was put under investigation). In Germany, the combined campaign budgets of the major parties was about €70 million in the 2009 federal elections; 43 million votes were cast, suggesting about €1.60 spent for each vote. In the United Kingdom, the three major parties spent a combined £30 million (€35 million) in the 2010 general election; 27 million votes were cast, suggesting about €1.30 per vote cast. By contrast, recent elections in Brazil saw major party expenditures in the region of €4.00 per vote cast, and in Mexico's presidential elections about €3.00 per vote cast (Plasser and Lengauer, 2008). The extraordinarily expensive 2012 US presidential elections saw the two major candidates alone spend almost €7.00 for each vote cast.

These changes in part reflect parallel displacements in terms of the rise of digital media, the relative decline of print and the fragmentation of many media audiences, as well as increasing investments in political communication. But they also reveal persistent particularities and new peculiarities from country to country (Nielsen, 2012a). The relation between these structural changes and conditions on the ground are rarely simple or transparent. Consider legacy media, new media, and the political uses of PR. While newspapers are struggling to readjust across Western Europe, they have suffered far more in the United States; moreover, revenues have so far declined more in the United Kingdom (with its historically strong press) than in France (with its historically weak press) (Nielsen and Levy, 2010). Freesheets have established themselves as significant sources of news, especially in bigger cities in Denmark, France, Italy, and the UK, but are absent in Germany. Internet use has grown rapidly and is high by global standards across Western Europe, but it is far higher in Denmark and Germany than in Italy. Nevertheless, Italy has seen more spectacular examples of internet-assisted political activism and more innovative online-only journalistic start-ups in recent years than its Northern European neighbours (Bruno and Nielsen, 2012; Vaccari, 2011). Political actors are ramping up their public relations efforts in all these countries, but the resources at their disposal vary widely: from the vast personal fortunes of Silvio Berlusconi to the largely publicly funded Danish parties, with the fundraising-driven British parties somewhere in between (Davis, 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær et al., 2011). These pronounced cross-

national differences matter as much as the similarities when it comes to understanding political journalism in Western Europe. That is why this book includes both country-specific chapters that examine political journalism as it is practised at the intersection between media, politics, and the public, and cross-cutting comparative chapters that have a more thematic focus.

## **Similarities and differences in the changes affecting political journalism**

We have produced this book to provide an overview of political journalism in Western Europe in a transitional period characterised by both change and continuity. It is narrowly focused on Western Europe, understood here as the group of high-income, mixed-economy democracies that remained free of authoritarian influence throughout the postwar period and aligned themselves with the so-called 'Western world' during the Cold War. Precisely because we believe historical inheritances and social, political, and economic differences are key to understanding political journalism, we do not believe that these countries are representative of all of Europe, let alone the rest of the world. Nonetheless, we consider that these countries, lumped together in one corner of a wider and much more diverse world, with their approximately 300 million inhabitants, their dominant role in the European Union – the largest economy in the world and the most ambitious and painful experiment in supranational economic and political integration – and the distinct democratic, journalistic, and political challenges they face at the turn of the century, merit close analysis on their own terms. From a global perspective Western Europe is a very odd place – more affluent, more secular, well past its imperial 'peak,' with political systems and media companies sometimes tracing their roots back all the way to the eighteenth century and the democratic revolutions of the nineteenth century, profoundly shaped by its unusual twentieth-century commitment to public service broadcasting. It is worth examining as the oddity it is, not because of any universal pretensions.

The starting point for the analyses presented in the rest of the book has been the overarching question of how much similarity and difference contemporary developments in political journalism exhibit across Western Europe. Here we suggest that three trends in particular cut across all the countries covered in this volume:



- an accelerated news cycle, driven especially by 24/7 rolling news channels and continuously updated newspaper websites, and increasingly also social media sites like Twitter. This results to some extent in 'churnalistic' tendencies, where pre-produced material substitutes for reporting;
- a general shift in the balance of power between increasingly time- and resource-pressed journalists on the one hand and increasingly professionalised political sources, especially around top politicians, major political parties, and well-organised interest groups, on the other; and
- a clear move from analogue to digital media on the supply side (allowing for clear generational differences in demand). This is a shift in which legacy news media organisations remain far more important than start-ups in terms of news provision, dominating online news almost as much as they do offline news.

It is noteworthy that the chapters in this volume identify these three trends in very different countries, with significant variation in the structure of media systems, political systems, and national economies. Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, for example, are very different countries with distinct journalistic traditions and political cultures. Yet the three trends of accelerated 'churnalism', empowered sources, and digitisation dominated by legacy media are to be found in all three countries. While these trends are certainly shaped in important ways by national variations in politics and culture, they seem driven for the most part by the combination of cross-cutting economic and technological forces and certain shared professional journalistic and political practices.

It is also worth highlighting, however, that some trends visible in other high-income democracies seem less present in Western Europe. This challenges the idea that contemporary economic and technological developments point in the same direction across the world, or even across the 'Western world'. For example, three trends that have been particularly evident in the United States in recent years seem much less pronounced in the countries covered in this volume. These are:

- a high degree of fragmentation of the largest news audiences (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011), driven by the decline of free-to-air television news viewership and print newspaper readership, combined with the rise of niche-oriented cable television and online news;

- an increased tendency towards more explicitly partisan political journalism (Baum and Groehling, 2008; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008), especially on new niche news media fighting to draw and retain a loyal audience, but also in the form of vibrant community blogs and smaller groups engaged in politically charged forms of 'guerilla journalism'; and
- a significant and growing proportion of the adult population who obtain a large part of their news about politics and public affairs through social networking sites and in the form of material that perhaps originates with legacy media organisations but is not accessed through channels they control (Williams and Delle Carpini, 2011; Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009).

In terms of audience fragmentation, the largest television channels *are* losing share in Western Europe and newspapers' print audiences *are* declining. Yet across their analogue and digital offerings, large news organisations like the BBC in the UK (a public service broadcaster), TF1 in France and RTL in Germany (private broadcasters), *Ekstrabladet* in Denmark (a tabloid newspaper), and *La Repubblica* in Italy (a broadsheet newspaper) all reach very large audiences, in some cases larger than they ever have before. In terms of partisanship, partly this is nothing new in Western Europe, where elite (broadsheet) newspapers in particular have often had distinct and fairly political editorial lines, and partly the development of such forms of journalism is restricted by impartiality rules for licensed broadcasters, whether public or private. In terms of social media, most Western European countries have levels of internet use, broadband access, and social media use that equal or exceed levels in the United States; but recent surveys suggest that most Europeans, even though they use digital media frequently, have not made these a central part of the ways in which they routinely obtain news about public affairs or connect with political processes (Newman, 2012).

In short, although the same economic and technological forces that have helped propel the United States towards a media environment characterised by audience fragmentation, partisan polarisation, and an increasing reliance on social media over news media are at work across Western Europe, it is far from clear that the end result is the same, given the very different political and cultural contexts, as well as different histories, of individual countries. Stronger, more developed national media have retained a larger audience share in smaller, more homogenous

European countries and remain as popular online as they are offline. Partisanship, already being present, has not increased significantly even as new media have become available and competition intensifies. (Italy, with its highly politicised and polarised media, is a partial exception to this.) Though social networking sites are wildly popular across Western Europe, they have so far not become a particularly important platform for accessing news for the general population, who in 2012 still relied more on the analogue and digital offerings of legacy news media.

## **Power and public liberty: the politics of political journalism**

The daily operations of political journalism in different Western European countries – as well as the direction of change in this transitional period – are shaped in part by social, economic, and technological factors largely external to the profession itself (including those we have dealt with in this chapter) and in part by dynamics internal to journalism and its institutionalised relationship with the political world (later chapters deal with these in greater detail). The independent and enduring importance of different journalistic traditions and different kinds of relationships between reporters and their political sources is demonstrated time and again throughout the book, underlining that even at a time of great structural change in the media sector, we cannot understand political journalism without also understanding politics (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Cook, 1998; Pfetsch, 2004). This fundamental point was the one Thomas Carlyle made Edmund Burke emphasise when he attributed the idea of the ‘fourth estate’ to him and called journalism not only ‘a power’ but also ‘a branch of government’. By highlighting the physical location of nineteenth-century reporters inside parliament itself, in the gallery, he also underlined how close political journalism is to politics. The physical, social, and symbolic proximity between journalists and politicians and the potential for the use and abuse of power that such proximity represents constitute significant themes more than 150 years later across Western Europe. It is striking that both British and Danish journalists use the same metaphor and describe politicians, political reporters, and pundits as parts of the ‘Westminster bubble’ and ‘Christiansborg bubble’ respectively. Moreover, in both countries research shows that many people often feel political journalists cover politics on its own terms, using its internal

language, and thus making it hard for citizens to make sense of the news, let alone the substantive issues covered (Couldry et al., 2010; Harrits, 2006). In Germany, there is talk of a 'politics-media village' or a Berlin 'spaceship', largely separated from the rest of the Federal Republic and the concerns of ordinary people. In France, relations between the journalistic and political elites are extraordinarily close (and sometimes intimate). In Italy, where individual top politicians and their entourages are sometimes defined as a distinct beat, the close everyday relations between reporters and officials seem almost formalised. In all these countries, it is clear that we need to pay close attention not only to the routine interactions between journalists and politicians, but also to the informal and formal ties that bind them together in relationships that are adversarial one moment and symbiotic the next, as well as to the paths via which some journalists move into politics (as advisers or candidates) and sometimes back to the news media.

In many cases, the ties between media and politics go well beyond the individual networks cultivated in these half-secluded social worlds of political gossip, technocratic jargon, and informal social exchanges. It is clear that in countries as diverse as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, top politicians have cultivated high-level contacts with media owners and executives and through these have tried to influence news coverage. In France, President Sarkozy was seen as close to the Lagardère group with its many print and web publications as well as to the Bouygues group, which owns the commercial television station TF1. In Germany, press watchdog groups have expressed rising concern about political attempts to influence public service television, while several prominent politicians have been regarded as being too close to top editors at the tabloid *Bild*. In the United Kingdom, successive governments from both the centre-left and centre-right have assiduously courted Rupert Murdoch's News International titles (including the broadsheet *The Times* as well as the tabloid *Sun*) and the influential *Daily Mail*, as well as exerting extensive pressure on the BBC in an attempt to influence its coverage. In Italy, high-level ties between media and politics are far more than informal, taking on formal character in the *lottizzazione* practices that divide up editorial control of the main public service Rai channels between the political parties (Mancini, 2007a) and most obviously in the direct control former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi exercised over most of the commercial broadcast sector through his company Mediaset (as well as the control his brother Paolo exercises over the nationally distributed broadsheet

that he owns, *Il Giornale*). Not only political journalism, but also the organisations that sustain and constrain it, can be highly politicised and never entirely free of political influence, as commercial media companies are in a regulation-sensitive business and public service media ultimately depend on political support.

It is important to be aware of these many and close ties between political actors, journalists, and media organisations and to critically examine their implications for political journalism and its role in democracy, but also to recognise that they may be a necessary part of journalistic work. Political journalists are in many cases uncomfortably close to the powerful people they cover, highly dependent on access to maintain their own professional standing, and tightly intertwined in their daily work with political institutions that many European citizens no longer trust. This can be a problem, but it is also part and parcel of what political journalism is – a profession that claims to serve the public and has to at least be seen as in part doing so in order to retain its special standing in contemporary democracies, while at the same time one that remains deeply dependent on political actors as it tries to do this. Political journalism is thus ‘part of government’ in Carlyle’s terms, at least as much as it is a ‘safeguard of public liberty’ as Macaulay would have it. These two facets are not in direct contradiction with each other, a bad side and a good side of political journalism so to speak, but more in constant and necessary tension. The profession can only serve as a safeguard for public liberty insofar as it is seen as a power and is involved in processes of government. But being so risks compromising its ability to serve the public whenever it gets too close to those it covers and moves too far away from its popular audience. Almost 200 years after Macaulay first used the term, after the rise of first industrialised mass media and later digital, networked media, after many transformations in both journalism and political life, the notion of the ‘fourth estate’ remains a useful way of thinking about the position of political journalism. It is tightly intertwined with politics and always potentially compromised by this relationship, but it is also a potentially powerful safeguard of public liberty precisely because this relationship exists. In short, political journalism cannot be practised in splendid isolation.

As is made clear throughout these chapters, Western European political journalism in the early twenty-first century is in a transitional period, characterised by both change and continuity. It is that period we examine in this book, trying to capture both the structural changes

journalists have to contend with as well as the role their own profession and their relations to politics play in shaping the direction of travel. Political journalism always and continuously reinvents itself, changing in dramatic ways from the reporters of the time of Macaulay and Carlyle (who wrote for numerous competing limited-circulation periodicals) through to twentieth-century newspaper and television journalists (who could count on audiences in the hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions), and on to today's multi-tasking newsmen and newswomen (who produce around the clock for numerous platforms that range from mass audience evening news bulletins to social media updates read by a few hundred aficionados). Throughout each of these reinventions, political journalism has provoked complaints from critics about personalisation, an obsession with politics at the expense of policy, and tendencies towards popularisation. It has also occasioned warnings of a 'crisis of journalism', of a decline in standards, and of a trivialisation of public discourse – warnings that are as old as journalism, standards, and public discourse itself. These criticisms – both when they hit the mark and when they do not – are testimony to the importance contemporary societies assign to political journalism and the widespread belief that it occupies a special position, exercises real power, and, at best, helps make democracy possible – and thus calls for critical scrutiny as well as careful practice. It is a special position that each generation of political journalists has inherited since the nineteenth-century reporters Macaulay and Carlyle wrote about, but also one they have had to win anew as their vocation goes through various transitions – such as the early twenty-first-century one we analyse in this book. It is a position that journalists lose at their own and democracy's peril.

## **Structure of the book**

In this opening chapter we have provided a brief overview of political journalism in Western Europe, highlighted some of the inherited differences that exist within this group of otherwise relatively similar countries, outlined what we see as the most important structural changes currently affecting Western European political journalism, and alluded to some of the ways in which developments in this part of the world differ from those in, for example, the United States. We have emphasised that this book is about change and continuity in Western European political

journalism and these themes run through the different chapters that make up the rest of this volume.

Among the main *changes* are the effects of technological shift, including the impact of the decline of the business model for paid newspapers; the expansion of news provision in broadcast and online media; the huge amount of news and journalism available to audiences; and the professionalisation of sources. Evidence of all of these changes can be found in our five national case studies. Yet, as has been emphasised in this opening chapter and will be clear from a reading of these case studies, the precise impact of these changes varies, in part because of national variations in the institutional configuration of political systems and media systems, in part because of cultural differences that even in a globalised and regionally integrated Europe remain relevant. The *continuities*, including the continuing importance of national differences, can be seen clearly both in terms of the overall development of media industries from country to country, but also when one examines more qualitative phenomena like the close relationships that exist between political elites and journalists. The existence of such close relations is emphasised in all of the national case studies, and would appear to be a strong element of similarity across Western European political journalism, and not a surprising one. (It would be a strange environment indeed in which politicians and journalists did not regularly meet up, did not have off-the-record conversations, and did not sometimes trade favours, including information and sometimes exposure.) But when one examines more closely the character of these linkages, national differences, even amongst neighbouring countries, appear. For instance, while in France several prominent top politicians and political reporters have been openly romantically involved in recent years, across the Rhine in Germany, the use of the casual *du* rather than the formal *Sie* as a form of address is considered inappropriately intimate for reporters in their dealing with sources. As later chapters show, the more one drills down into the details of political journalism across Western Europe, the more it becomes clear that while there are evident similarities across the region, differences – sometimes structural and formally institutionalised, sometimes at the level of informal norms and everyday practices – are also pronounced.

The book is divided into two parts which provide more detailed analysis of the issues raised in this opening chapter. The first part consists of five national case studies, with chapters on France, Italy, Germany,

Denmark, and the United Kingdom respectively. Each of these chapters focuses on what the relevant author considers to be key features of contemporary political journalism in that particular country; hence, the organisational format of these national case study chapters is deliberately heterogeneous. We start with two examples of the so-called 'polarised pluralist' model (France and Italy) because they are quite different from the media systems and political cultures most familiar to the Anglophone world, then move on to the 'democratic corporatist' cases (Germany and Denmark) that together with the Mediterranean model dominate Western Europe, and finally examine the United Kingdom which, while having much in common with continental Northern Europe, also has some affinities with the more 'liberal' model of the United States.

In Chapter 2 *Raymond Kuhn* argues that several features of contemporary political journalism in France are national variants of broader cross-national trends that are commonly to be found in other Western European political communication systems. Notwithstanding this, however, he makes clear that there are certain features of the French case which, although they do not make its political journalism exceptional, differentiate it in certain important respects from that of many other Western European systems. These features include the very close relationship (both historic and ongoing) between the state and media, the particularly close nature of the interdependences between elite politicians and political journalists, certain norms and values prevalent in the journalistic culture, the lack of a tabloid press, and specific legal provisions such as the law on the protection of privacy.

In Chapter 3 *Alessio Cornia* shows how the close relationship between media and politics in Italy means that political journalism there has changed much less over the last decade than the wider Italian media system in which television retains its primacy as a means of political information and where newspapers still have limited print circulations. Cornia particularly emphasises the importance of the competitive framework of the national political system and the polarised nature of the country's political culture as explanatory variables for the current state of political journalism in Italy. Interestingly he also points to examples of what he calls a radicalisation of media partisanship which is affecting Italian political journalism in a context of significant political instability in terms of party competition.

In Chapter 4 *Carsten Reinemann* and *Philip Baugut* focus on Germany, arguing that the German media system has so far been less disrupted by the



rise of digital media than many other countries' (the newspaper industry is doing relatively well, television audiences are eroding only slowly, and, while internet use is widespread, online news is still less important here than elsewhere). Nonetheless, German political journalism has actually changed in significant ways as a result of an accelerated news cycle, greater emphasis on chasing audiences, and growing reliance on increasingly professionalised political sources. They also note trends towards a further political media de-alignment, especially in the elite press, contrary to developments in France and Italy.

In Chapter 5 *Mark Blach-Ørsten* focuses on political journalism in Denmark and identifies parallel developments towards an ever more competitive news regime where political journalists – who still predominantly work for a few relatively strong newspaper companies and broadcasters – increasingly compete for stories (as the volume of production has increased to feed an accelerated news cycle and multiple new platforms), for attention (as citizens have more and more platforms to choose from), and for access (as top politicians and their PR people increasingly impose strategic control over the flow of information to select journalists). This results in 'churnalistic' tendencies even as the media system as such seems stable.

In Chapter 6 *Aeron Davis* paints a darker picture of the situation in the UK, arguing that UK political journalism is reeling under the double impact of the economic crisis and the internet on the media organisations that have historically sustained it (in particular newspapers). Increasingly overworked journalists are becoming ever more intertwined with the politicians they cover, dependent on press releases and strategic leaks in their coverage, lacking the resources to critically scrutinise the material they are offered, and increasingly oriented towards insular insider audiences. Many (although not all) of these trends are observable in public service media, such as the BBC, as well as in the commercial print and broadcast media. The political journalism emerging is, Davis suggests, more superficial and sensationalist, less informed and less investigative, more desk-bound, more cannibalistic, and generally prone to taking newsgathering short-cuts.

The second part comprises five chapters on cross-national themes. This section recognises that while political journalism in Western Europe remains deeply shaped by country-specific national traditions and contextual variations, there are also a range of important issues that cut across countries. In Chapter 7 *Olivier Baisnée* examines a very

specific type of political journalism – coverage of the European Union. He analyses how the gulf between EU journalism and conventional political journalism grows ever wider. Though the supranational union is clearly political and of great substantial importance, its political processes provide a poor fit for forms of political journalism which are increasingly oriented towards well-known personalities (of which there are few in Brussels), focused on partisan conflict (which in the EU is replaced by fluid, temporary, and issue-specific coalitions), and concerned with fast-moving events (one thing EU decision-making is not). Baisnée's chapter invites us to carefully consider the boundaries of the concept and practice of political journalism in a decision-making context where politics is conducted in a quite distinct form from that of national political systems.

In Chapter 8 *Stephen Cushion* examines the role of public service media, especially licence-fee-funded, independent public service broadcasters like DR in Denmark, ARD and ZDF in Germany, and the BBC in the UK. Public service media are one of the most important sources of political news in most Western European countries, and set the region apart from much of the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> While they have certainly not been immune to the tendencies towards personalisation, process-orientation, and popularisation that characterise Western European political journalism more generally, Cushion shows how public service media demonstrably contribute to keeping people more informed, and more evenly informed, than commercial news media alone – even in countries like France and Italy where they are less generously funded and less editorially independent than their counterparts in Northern Europe.

In Chapter 9 *Rasmus Kleis Nielsen* pursues the possibility of Western European exceptionalism even further, comparing recent developments in political journalism in the United States with trends in selected Western European countries, demonstrating the important, persistent, and systemic differences that exist on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but also identifying some similarities along the lines foreshadowed in this opening chapter. He highlights increased audience fragmentation, an accelerated news cycle, some tendencies towards partisan polarisation in the media, the increased importance of non-journalistic actors in shaping and sharing news, and declining trust in traditional sources of political news as five of the most important facets of current changes in American political journalism, comparing US developments in each of these areas with the situation in France and Germany.

In Chapter 10 *Andrea Umbricht and Frank Esser* adopt a longitudinal approach to the question of convergence or divergence in political journalism, presenting an extensive content analysis of print media reporting in a sample of five Western European countries and the US during the period from the 1960s to the 2000s. They identify both a remarkable consistency in how German and Swiss newspapers have covered politics over the last half-century as well as significant changes in coverage in France, Italy, the UK, and the US, but find little evidence to support the notion that national differences in the content produced by political journalists are fading away.

Finally, in Chapter 11 *Kevin Williams* adopts a historical perspective, focusing on contemporary concerns over the perceived decline of international news reporting. By going back to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discussions, he shows how the trope of decline has dominated discussions of foreign correspondence for more than half a century as European and American news organisations, tightly intertwined with imperial systems, retreated from the world after World War II. Williams' chapter is an important reminder that contemporary debates about the quantity and quality of journalistic coverage frequently echo the concerns of previous generations of commentators. His chapter also shows the methodological difficulties inherent in longitudinal comparison in the provision of a particular type of journalistic content, especially as in the internet age one might argue that the amount of information available about what is happening outside of one's national borders has never been more widely or easily available.

## Note

- 1 Some non-European countries also have licence-fee-funded public service broadcasters, including Japan and South Korea, as well as the former British colonies of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. However, in the rest of the world, many nominally 'public service' broadcasters are more properly understood as state broadcasters, under the control of sitting governments and directly dependent upon them for day-to-day funding.