



REUTERS  
INSTITUTE for the  
STUDY of  
JOURNALISM

# WORKING PAPER

---

Is Watchdog Journalism Satisfactory Journalism?  
A Cross-national Study of Public Satisfaction with  
Political Coverage

---

Nael Jebril

May 2013

# Is Watchdog Journalism Satisfactory Journalism?

## A Cross-national Study of Public Satisfaction with Political Coverage

Nael Jebril

University of Oxford, UK

### Abstract

This study examines the relevance of the watchdog journalism model to the general public. Drawing on panel surveys in three media systems the study examines the relationship between news media use, watchdog reporting perceptions and news satisfaction. The analysis suggests a rather favorable public perception of the watchdog model; perceiving news media to perform according to the watchdog model increases news satisfaction. Furthermore, perceived watchdog reporting was found to mediate the effects of news exposure on satisfaction with political coverage. These findings indicate that despite the important differences in what citizens actually get from the news and how satisfied they are, there seem to be similar expectations of the media that determine their level of contentment with political coverage. The results are discussed in light of research on watchdog journalism.

### Introduction

The watchdog ideal reflects the long-established liberal conception of the news media as the fourth estate (Norris, 2012: 2). Central to this journalistic paradigm is the belief that journalists should carry out an investigative and watchdog role on behalf of the public (Waisbord, 2000), which finds expression in an objective, factual, and critical reporting style. Some previous studies identified the watchdog role model as the most popular among journalists worldwide (see Weaver and Wu, 1998), but recent research suggests that the watchdog role for journalism is most pervasive in Anglo-American democracies, where a long tradition of liberalism has encouraged scepticism towards the potential abuse of power (Norris, 2012: 12). Watchdog journalism has been subject to considerable skepticism for its potential harm to the public. Critics argue that journalism has become indiscriminately critical and corrosively cynical of officials and candidates (Clayman *et al.*, 2007: 24). This can lead to overemphasized sensational reporting that is argued to increase apathy and cynicism about politics (McNair, 2001) and to decrease news credibility (Wang and Cohen, 2009). Thus, the literature suggests that the watchdog journalism ideal may

be far from universal and that its resonance with audiences may vary across time and space.

Several studies have looked at the relevance and importance of the watchdog model to journalists and media workers, but empirical evidence supporting audience preference for neutral, factual watchdog journalism is scarce. This study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the effect of perceived watchdog reporting on news satisfaction. A cross-national panel survey data is used to examine the antecedents and dynamics of news satisfaction in three countries with different media systems and varying journalistic cultures as proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This variation allows for testing (1) whether presumed differences in news content across the three countries are perceived by the country's populations, and (2) whether watchdog journalism is rated satisfactory in each of these three different contexts. If so, perceived watchdog journalism might be a key mediator between news media use and public satisfaction with political coverage.

## **News Satisfaction**

Satisfaction has been widely studied in several social science disciplines, such as organizational communication, applied psychology, and market research, but remains a largely underexplored topic in media effects research. Communication scholars have rarely investigated satisfaction beyond the uses and gratification paradigm, which provides that "media and content choice is generally rational and directed towards certain specific goals and satisfactions" (McQuail, 2005: 424). Although satisfaction is an important antecedent to behavior (see Pinkleton and Austin, 2002), the communication field includes no satisfaction literature capable of advancing both theory and empirical research (see Patwardhan *et al.*, 2008). Satisfaction with media coverage is described as "a general feeling of fulfillment as the result of repeated exposure to a particular content genre" (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1985: 339), a definition that stems from consumer research, which perceives satisfaction as "a complex emotional response following experience with a product" (Oliver, 1981).

Media satisfaction has been used both as a dependent and independent variable in media effects studies. Studies have shown that satisfaction is a significant predictor of newspaper readership (Burgoon and Burgoon, 1980) and a more useful predictor of cynicism and negativism toward the media than the frequency of media use or measures of the perceived importance of the media (Pinkleton and Austin, 2002). Satisfaction is a positive predictor of using and revisiting Internet websites (Zhang and Gisela, 2000) and has been employed as a preliminary indicator for analyzing public perceptions about political balance in print and television news media (e.g. Albæk *et al.*, 2010). Media researchers have found that higher levels of exposure affect satisfaction with television viewing (Perse and Ferguson, 1993) and that evaluations of media performance are strong predictors of overall satisfaction with cable service (Jacobs, 1995).

In this study news satisfaction is conceived as a response following media exposure (e.g. Perse and Ferguson, 1993; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Palmgreen

and Rayburn, 1985). News is a “product vested with public interest” rather than a “commodity product” (see McQuail, 2005), and an evaluation of media use is assumed to precede the feeling of satisfaction (see Patwardhan *et al.*, 2008). The paper firstly examines the effects of perceived watchdog reporting on the dynamics of news satisfaction and, secondly, analyzes the mediating role of watchdog reporting in the relationship between news media use and public satisfaction with political coverage.

### **Watchdog Journalism**

The watchdog function of journalism is at the heart of several news organizations today. The watchdog model has shaped the normative expectations we have of the media at the level of media structure (professional values and relations between the media and the state), conduct (the manner of operation), and performance (i.e., news content—what is actually transmitted to the audience) (McQuail, 2005: 192).

The watchdog model has important implications for the relationship between the media and the state (media structure). While authoritarian theories hold that journalism should always be subordinate to the interests of the state in maintaining social order or achieving political goals, the liberal press theory expects the press to provide a marketplace of ideas and sees the government as the primary (if not only) threat to press freedom. In addition, the watchdog model dominates the occupational ideology of journalists (news conduct). Even though full professionalization of journalism has been held back by the internal diversity of the media (McQuail, 2005: 288), comparative studies of journalists’ profiles have identified the prevalence of common professional values that are closely related to the watchdog ideal. The degree, however, to which this model is embraced varies across journalistic cultures (Van Dalen, 2012; Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2011). At the level of news performance (actual news content), the watchdog model has three classical elements: objectivity, factuality, and critical coverage. These news characteristics reflect the active-neutral dimension that is pivotal to the watchdog role conception among journalists.

#### *Objectivity*

The ideal of objectivity is central to journalists’ professional self-perception (Weaver and Wu, 1998). Although no one can be value neutral, journalists (and researchers) adopt like concepts, such as fairness, professional distance, or impartiality (Deuze, 2002: 12). Objective journalists are required to maintain detachment and neutrality toward the object of their reporting, to abandon partisanship and bias, and to maintain strict attachment to accuracy and other truth criteria, such as relevance and completeness (McQuail, 2005). Thus, the operationalization of objectivity often contains elements of factual reporting (Chalaby, 1998) and may be compromised by incomplete information (Austin and Pinkleton, 1999). Several newspapers conform to the concept of objectivity by distinguishing between news reporting and editorial pieces. Objectivity is often threatened by bias, which is defined as “any tendency in a

news report to deviate from an accurate, neutral, balanced and impartial representation of the reality of events and social world according to stated criteria" (McQuail, 2005: 548). Critics of the objectivity norm claim that it serves to hide personal bias, which journalists inescapably introduce into their writing (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

### *Factuality*

Fact-centered discourse originated with the development of the commercial press, which emphasized news at the expense of political rhetoric and commentary (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 207). The watchdog journalist is, above all, a broker of relevant information with a distinctive, objective style of reporting based on facts (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). The watchdog role is meant to distinguish between factual coverage and commentary. The latter usually involves the exercise of judgments that are either normative (e.g. what is good or bad) or empirical (e.g. what is true or false) (see Benson and Hallin, 2007). Surveys across Europe on journalists' role perceptions have shown that journalists most like to view themselves as disseminators of news (see Weaver and Wu, 1998). This specific role requires the quick reporting of hard facts to the public (see Deuze, 2002). For this reason, factuality is achieved through the "inverted pyramid" structure, which allows "the most important information" to come first, followed by progressively "less important information" (Thomson *et al.*, 2008). In an effort to achieve factuality and to maintain an independent position, journalists emphasize the apparent objectivity of their sources—for example, by attributing facts to official sources (Ericson, 1998).

### *Critical Coverage*

Critical reporting originates from a move in journalism toward critical professionalism, reflecting a social change: "affluence, political stability, and increasing educational levels led to a general cultural shift towards 'post-materialist' values of participation and free expression" (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 271). When journalists assume a critical stance toward the state, they become representatives of generalized public opinion, and their discourse is distinct from the discourse of parties and politicians (Norris, 2000). Watchdog journalists have often been adversarial and skeptical in their coverage (Patterson, 1998). In fact, several studies have shown that news content in recent years has become more critical of officials and their policies (e.g. Patterson, 1993). The aim of critical reporting is to safeguard effective political competition by ensuring that claims about a government's record or a candidate's qualifications for office are open to external scrutiny and evaluation (Norris, 2000: 29). Significant evidence exists today, however, that in pursuing this goal, journalists have become excessive in their critical coverage of the government (see Clayman *et al.*, 2007, for a review).

## Is Watchdog Journalism Satisfactory Journalism?

The central goal of this paper is to examine the effects of perceived watchdog journalism on the dynamics of news satisfaction. The investigation fits in with media performance research, and strives to scrutinize some of the criticism aimed at the watchdog model as a journalistic ideal as well as to advance our understanding of the relationship between news media use and public satisfaction with political coverage.

First, the effects of perceived watchdog reporting on news satisfaction dynamics will be examined. Since critics and political journalists generally uphold the watchdog model as the ideal one (e.g. Weaver and Wu, 1998), the public is expected to associate it with “good journalism” as well. Thus, it is hypothesized that public perception of the fulfillment of watchdog criteria in political reporting is positively related to public satisfaction with political news.

Second, the influence of perceived watchdog reporting on the relationship between news exposure and satisfaction with political coverage will be investigated. Scholars contend that focusing on media use as an independent variable usually has a significant impact on the outcomes of media research (see Pinkleton and Austin, 2002). Previous studies have also shown a positive correlation between news exposure and public perceptions of media performance, such as those related to credibility assessments (e.g. Rimmer and Weaver, 1985). In this study, perceptions of watchdog reporting will be introduced as a mediator in the relationship between media use and news satisfaction. More precisely, it is postulated that the potential effects of news exposure on satisfaction with political coverage can be partly explained by the perception of watchdog journalism.

### Cross-national Design

The typology developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their book, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, was used to inform the country selection in this paper. Britain represents *the Liberal Model* known for its early development of press freedom and the predominance of commercial and professional journalism. Denmark represents the *Democratic Corporatist Model*, which features three major coexistences; a strong mass-circulation commercial press and media that are tied to political and civil groups, the presence of both political parallelism and professionalization, and the traditions of both press freedom and active state intervention. Spain represents the *Polarized Pluralist Model*, which is characterized by a high degree of political parallelism and a weak development of the commercial press. The country also features a relatively weak public service regulation compared to Britain and Denmark.

Taking advantage of the cross-national design, the paper examines whether differences in news satisfaction can be explained by the perceived presence (or absence) of watchdog journalism. Several scholars, however, have argued that the watchdog ideal is not applicable as a journalistic model outside the West (Joseph, 2005). Mancini (2000) has argued that the watchdog model does not describe

journalistic practice in Italy, which, like Spain, belongs to the polarized pluralist media system. Content analysis has indeed shown that in southern Europe journalism is often characterized by partisanship (Roncarolo, 2009) and a more literary reporting style (Benson and Hallin, 2007), which are at odds with the watchdog ideal as described above. It remains an empirical question whether audiences in different countries are sensitive to these cross-national differences. If cross-national differences in watchdog journalism can explain differences in news satisfaction, we can conclude that the watchdog model travels well among audiences.

## **Dataset**

A two-wave panel survey with a representative sample of the Danish, British and Spanish populations was conducted through managed online access panels<sup>1</sup>. Data gathered in this way provide a clearer picture of causal influence than do cross-sectional analyses, because one can control the time ordering of effects and the influence of prior scores on the outcome measures (Slater, 2004: 173). The general population targeted was from 18-65 years old and the questionnaire length was about 15 minutes for each wave. The balance of the panel was insured by considering only respondents who answered both waves of the survey in the analysis. Questionnaire scripting and layout were centralized and invitations did not include the survey topic as people with particular interest in the topic would be more willing to participate than people without strong feelings about politics. The source questionnaire was first scripted and finalized in English and then translated to Danish and Spanish. A strict translation procedure was applied, including proof-reading and back-translation of fieldwork versions by experts operating as independent third parties. This procedure is essential for reliability of multi-lingual surveys in cross-national comparative research (Vijver & Tanzer, 1997). The response rates in Denmark were 75% in wave I and 68.2% in wave II; in Britain 63.3% in wave I and 74.4% in wave II; and in Spain 74.7% in wave I and 74.6% in wave II. A net sample of 1,539 respondents in Denmark, 1,571 respondents in Britain, and 1,642 respondents in Spain participated in both waves.

## **Results**

### *Perceived Watchdog Journalism and Satisfaction*

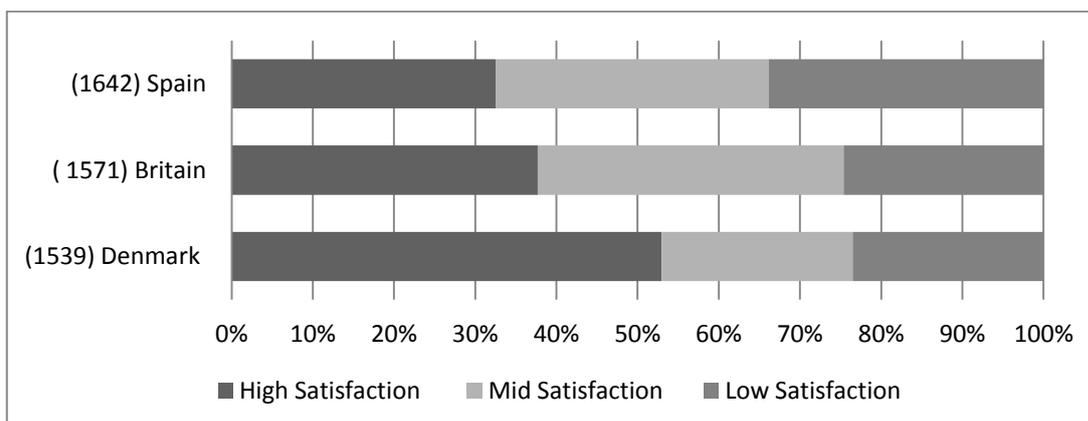
The analysis starts by providing an initial insight into the perceived watchdog style in the three countries. To measure perceived watchdog reporting, respondents were asked to rate each news outlet (per country) according to the following watchdog criteria: objective, informative, and critical-of-government news reporting<sup>2</sup>. The question was: "Media are different in the way they operate and cover issues. Using the scale provided, please rate each of the following media." The scale ranges from (1) operating not according to "watchdog criteria" at all to (7) operating very much

according “watchdog criteria.” An additive measure of perceived watchdog reporting was then formed for respondents completing all items ratings.

Van Dalen *et al.* (2012) showed that the reporting style of Spanish journalists is more partisan and less pragmatic than that of their colleagues in northern Europe. These cross-national differences are recognized by the audience. Danes (M[mean]=4.5, SD=.72) and Brits (M=4.4, SD=.88) perceive the journalistic style of their media to be significantly more in line with the watchdog ideal than the general population in Spain (M=4.2, SD=.89)<sup>3</sup>.

The Spanish audience is also the least satisfied with media coverage. To measure audience satisfaction with political coverage respondents were asked to answer the following question: “How satisfied or not are you with the way in which national politics is covered by the media in general?”<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 shows aggregate news satisfaction per country. The chart shows that Denmark comprises the largest proportion of highly satisfied individuals (55%), followed by Britain (40%), then Spain (33%). Denmark also has the smallest proportion of dissatisfied respondents (20%), followed by Britain (26%), then Spain (34%). Figure 1 further shows that moderately to highly satisfied panelists outnumber dissatisfied ones in the Danish and British sample, while respondents in the Spanish sample are homogenously distributed over all three categories. On average, respondents in Denmark and Britain showed the highest levels of overall satisfaction with political coverage, and those in Spain the lowest.

**Figure 1**  
*Satisfaction with National Politics Coverage at the Aggregate Level*



*Note.* Data entries are percentages.

On the aggregate level a relation between perceived watchdog reporting and news satisfaction is found. The Spanish public, which judges the news to be least in line with the watchdog model, is also the least satisfied with news coverage. To see whether this relation also holds at the individual level, I turn to multivariate analysis and run models predicting satisfaction with political coverage in the first wave of the survey.

**Table1** Explaining News Satisfaction at Wave1 of the Survey

	Denmark				Britain				Spain			
	Model1		Model 2		Model1		Model 2		Model1		Model 2	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender (female)	.05*	.07	.04	.10	.01	.07	.01	.10	.04	.07	-.05*	.08
Age (in years)	.04	.00	.04	.00	-.00	.00	-.07*	.00	.03	.00	.02	.003
Education	-.13***	.03	-.13***	.04	-.00	.04	.01	.06	-.08**	.04	-.07*	.05
Ideology	.11***	.01	.01	.02	.07**	.02	.07	.02	-.00	.01	-.03	.02
Political Interest	.00	.02	-.05	.03	.05	.02	.06	.03	.10***	.02	.07	.02
News Exposure	<b>.09**</b>	.03	.05	.04	<b>.07**</b>	.04	.03	.04	<b>.07**</b>	.02	.00	.03
Watchdog Perceptions			<b>.38***</b>	.07			<b>.29***</b>	.05			<b>.37***</b>	.04
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.04		0.20		0.01		0.10		0.02		0.16	
N	1425		673		1292		673		1545		1048	

*Note:* OLS regressions. Model 2 includes only respondents who answered the watchdog perception items. Entries are standardized beta coefficients. \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$ .

Table 1 reports the results of two multiple OLS regressions for each of the three countries (before and after accounting for perceived watchdog reporting in the analysis). The models control for gender (coded as female), age (in years), education<sup>5</sup>, political ideology, and political interest, since these variables may potentially influence news satisfaction. The descriptives and specific wordings for the controls can be found in the Appendix.

Model 1 shows that media use is a significant positive predictor of satisfaction with political coverage in all three countries. However, the significant effect of news exposure on satisfaction is indirect which can be seen when controlling for respondents' watchdog-reporting perceptions. The effect of watchdog perceptions is significant in all three contexts (see model 2). The inclusion of watchdog perceptions into the model substantially increases our understanding of respondents' satisfaction levels. Model 2 explains variation in news satisfaction by 20% in Denmark, 16% in Spain, and 10% in Britain compared to model 1, which only accounts for 4%, 2%, and 1% of the variation in the three countries respectively. The relation between perceived watchdog journalism and satisfaction of coverage that was found at the country-level is therefore confirmed at the individual level in a cross-sectional design.

#### *Explaining Change in Satisfaction*

The panel design allows for an even stronger test to determine whether perceived watchdog journalism leads to news satisfaction. For this analysis the data from the three different countries is combined in one analysis. Between the two panel waves, the aggregate levels of news satisfaction have slightly increased. Dynamic pooled OLS regression models are used to examine whether this change in satisfaction with political coverage is (at least partly) a function of watchdog reporting perceptions. Pooled OLS regressions allow us to establish a causal relationship between news satisfaction and the perception of watchdog reporting by controlling for respondents' initial levels of news satisfaction in the first wave of the panel survey (see e.g. de Vreese 2005; de Vreese and Semetko, 2002, for similar analysis technique). In addition, the models control for news attention and interpersonal communication; political discussion is considered a conduit for gaining second-hand information from the news (Scheufele 2002). Finally, country effects are controlled for since the sample comes from three different populations<sup>6</sup>. Similar control variables are used in the mediation analysis. The descriptives and specific wordings for the controls can be found in the Appendix.

**Table 2** Predicting Change in Satisfaction with Political Coverage

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>
News Satisfaction w1	.50***	.01	.40***	.01
Interpersonal Communication	-.04**	.01	-.04*	.01
News Attention	.11***	.01	.06**	.01
News Exposure	.01	.01	-.02	.01
Denmark	.11***	.04	.02	.05
Britain	.05***	.04	.00	.05
Watchdog Perceptions			<b>.36***</b>	.02
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		0.304		0.42
N		4751		2545

*Note:* OLS regressions. Model 2 includes only respondents who answered the watchdog perception items. Entries are standardized beta coefficients. \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , \* $P < 0.05$ .

Table 2 reports the results of two multiple OLS regressions (before and after accounting for perceived watchdog reporting in the analysis). Model 1 shows that attention to the news increases satisfaction with political coverage, whereas interpersonal communication decreases news satisfaction. News exposure has no effects on the dynamics of news satisfaction. The model also shows significant country differences for respondents' change in levels of news satisfaction. Model 2 shows that perceived watchdog reporting is the strongest predictor of news satisfaction: the more the respondents perceived news reporting to be following the watchdog model, the more their satisfaction levels increased between the two panel waves. Including perceived watchdog reporting in the analysis increases our understanding of the variation in the dependent variable by more than 10%. The effects of news attention and interpersonal communication are reduced but remain significant after controlling for watchdog-reporting perceptions. The differences between the countries, however, are no longer significant: differences in perceiving watchdog reporting seem to explain the difference in news satisfaction between Denmark, Britain, and Spain. These results support the expectation in this paper that perceived watchdog journalism is an important predictor of satisfaction with political news<sup>7</sup>.

To test the second research question I turn to mediation analysis. A variable may be called a mediator "to the extent that it accounts for the relation between the predictor and the criterion" (Baron and Kenny 1986, 1176). The traditional approach to testing mediation is the causal-step approach, in which all causal steps are tested separately. This approach requires a significant effect of the independent variable ( $X$ ) on the mediator ( $M$ ) and of the mediator on the dependent variable ( $Y$ ). In addition, a significant total effect of  $X$  on  $Y$  must be present initially, and  $Y$  should not cause  $M$  (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

After controlling for the mediator in the model, the mediation is deemed to have occurred if the total effect has decreased to zero (perfect mediation) or to a non-

trivial amount (partial mediation). The causal step strategy has been criticized for having low statistical power, type I and type II errors, and for not yielding any point estimate or standard error of the mediation effect (Preacher and Hayes, 2004, 2008). Further, the literature is in disagreement on whether an initial total effect of X on Y should be significant (see Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Instead of the causal step approach, Preacher and Hayes' (2004) methodology for indirect effects is used to test the role of perceived watchdog reporting as a mediator. This formal significance test utilizes a bootstrap method that addresses mediation effects more directly than the causal step strategy. Several studies have used the bootstrap method to examine indirect relationships (e.g. Brandt and Reyna, 2010; Birnie *et al.*, 2009; Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). The "bootstrapping" is achieved by taking a large number of samples from the data and computing the individual indirect effect for each sample (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). The distributions of these indirect estimates serve as empirical, nonparametric approximations of the sampling distribution of the indirect effect under study (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In this paper bootstrap estimates for the indirect effect of perceived watchdog reporting are calculated using 5000 bootstrap samples and 90% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals for those estimates - the equivalent of a one-tailed significance test. Interpretation of the bootstrap data is accomplished by determining whether zero is contained within the 90% confidence intervals (thus indicating the lack of significance).

**Table 3** Static and dynamic mediation of the indirect effect of watchdog perceptions on satisfaction with political coverage. Statics model controls (gender, age, education, ideology, political interest and country dummies). Dynamic model controls (news attention, interpersonal communication and country dummies).

	<i>Point estimate</i>	BCa* 90% CI	
		<i>Upper</i>	<i>Lower</i>
Static indirect effect			
Watchdog Perceptions	0.0632	0.0481	0.0796
Dynamic indirect effect			
Watchdog Perceptions	0.0454	0.0326	0.0590

\* BCa = bias corrected and accelerated bootstrapping confidence intervals. Static model (n=2382; 5000 bootstrap samples), Dynamic model (n=2533; 5000 bootstrap samples). Confidence intervals containing zero are interpreted as not significant.

The OLS regression models investigating the antecedents and dynamics of news satisfaction (see tables 1 and 2) are used for the mediation analysis. The separate prediction models of news satisfaction are pooled into a single model before undergoing static mediation analysis. Table 3 reports the estimates of the indirect effect of perceived watchdog reporting for the static and dynamic OLS regression models (see method section for list of controls), and the 90% bias-corrected and

accelerated confidence intervals for those estimates. If zero is contained within the 90% confidence intervals, the indirect effect estimates are interpreted as nonsignificant. Table 3 shows that the 90% confidence intervals for the static and dynamic OLS regression models do not contain zero, thus confirming the second expectation in this paper that perceptions of watchdog reporting significantly mediate the effect of media use on satisfaction with political coverage.

## Discussion

This paper explored the antecedents and process of news satisfaction. It examined the relationship between perceptions of watchdog coverage, media use, and news satisfaction dynamics in three different media systems. Citizens in Denmark and Britain perceive their media to act more as watchdogs than citizens in Spain do. Danish citizens are by far the most satisfied with their media's coverage of politics, followed by Britain. In Spain, the satisfaction is the lowest with more than one-third being outright dissatisfied. The analysis shows that perceived watchdog reporting increases satisfaction with political coverage; the more respondents perceived news media to perform according to the watchdog journalistic ideal, the more they are satisfied with the overall coverage of national politics. The analysis further provides that respondents' perceptions of watchdog coverage mediate the effects of news exposure on satisfaction with political coverage. These relationships were investigated through a two-wave panel survey. Likert-scale measures were calculated for respondents' personal evaluations of national news outlets according to the watchdog-model criteria.

Journalism researchers generally agree about the inadequacy of the watchdog model as an empirical journalistic standard (see Clayman *et al.*, 2007). Objectivity, informational quality, and critical stances to power holders do not always go together. That said, the evidence provided in this paper suggests a rather favorable public perception of that model. Perceived watchdog characteristics in the news proved to be important determinants of the viewers' qualitative media experience. Thus, the general public's appreciation of the watchdog model is evident, regardless of critics' fears that it may eventually lead to cynicism and disaffection with politics (see above). The significance of perceived watchdog news is not merely confined to its positive influence on public satisfaction with political coverage; rather, watchdog news also explains the mechanism that underlies the observed effects of media use on news satisfaction dynamics.

Critics have claimed that there is potential conflict between the ideal of objectivity and the need for the journalist to function as an active watchdog in the public interest. They argue that the watchdog model, because of its critical nature (see Entman, 1989), requires journalists to actively select and shape news information and that, in practice, the line between "reporting" and "interpretation" often becomes blurred (Norris, 2000). This study has shown, however, that being critical of government is not at odds with the objectivity norm in the minds of the public. The respondents had no problem evaluating news content as critical and, at the same time, as informative and objective. Previous survey research has shown a

similar affinity between the watchdog role and the objectivity ideal among journalists; the watchdog role, it is argued, can motivate journalists to conform to the objectivity ideal so that they can defend themselves against accusations of political and ideological bias (Skovsgaard *et al.*, forthcoming). Although journalists' role conceptions may differ in various countries (McQuail, 2005: 287), the effects of perceived watchdog reporting on people's news satisfaction dynamics do not.

The effects of perceived watchdog reporting on news satisfaction dynamics were highly positive in all three countries. These results show that the watchdog model is well received by audiences across Europe. However, as is so often the case, high-minded concepts such as objectivity, factuality, and critical reporting can be understood differently by different people and can be used and abused. Even if the watchdog model, despite its critique, would become a worldwide proxy "label" of good journalism, viewers and readers might perceive very different media outlets as living up to these standards. Therefore, one has to be wary of extrapolating what news people will actually watch or buy from their expressed preferred journalistic model. Taking this line of selective self exposure one step further, it is speculated that audiences may not only opt for media outlets that concur with their own political preferences (as the self selection literature would predict), but perhaps the watchdog function is also a parameter influencing media choice.

Some concerns could be raised about measurement and analysis in this study. Whereas a generalized measure of news satisfaction has been used, watchdog perception scales are drawn from evaluations of a limited number of news outlets<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the analysis in this paper lacks model comparison. Only the effects of perceived watchdog reporting on news satisfaction dynamics have been estimated; the relative impact of the watchdog model on those dynamics versus other news-reporting paradigms remains undecided<sup>9</sup>.

Audience research is often conducted for commercial purposes and has been used as a primary tool for close control and management (see McQuail, 2005). Due to a focus on commercial audience research, few studies have examined the relevance of normative journalism models to the public. This paper analyzed the antecedents and dynamics of public satisfaction with political coverage. Although critics challenge the capacity of the watchdog model to shape the actual practice of journalism or to serve as an adequate counterweight to official power (see Clayman *et al.*, 2007: 24), the fourth-estate ideal is apparently largely representative of international audience beliefs and expectations regarding the function of news media in democratic societies. Thus, cross-nationally, citizens have similar expectations of the media that determine their level of contentment with political news coverage. There are important differences, however, in what they actually get from the news and in how satisfied they are.

## Acknowledgments

This research is supported by a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council and the Educational Fund of the Danish Press. The author wishes to thank Claes de Vreese and Erik Albæk for comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and Arjen van Dalen for helping in revising the manuscript. In addition, the author would like to thank TNS Opinion for a smooth collaboration on the panel surveys.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first wave of the survey took place from 10-20 October 2008, the second wave from 7-14 November 2008. A quota system was used in Britain and Spain in order to ensure a well-distributed sample in terms of gender, age, level of education and level of urbanization while it was not needed in Denmark because the Danish panel generated samples that are demographically well-distributed. The panel surveys were conducted by TNS opinion.

<sup>2</sup>Media exposure (outlet level): number of days (per week) using each news outlet, ranging from 0 (none) to 7 (seven days). DK: *DR1*,  $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=2.32$ ; *TV2*,  $M=4.0$ ,  $SD=2.4$ ; *Politiken*,  $M=.91$ ,  $SD=2.0$ ; *JyllandsPosten*,  $M=.78$ ,  $SD=1.81$ ; *EkstraBladet*,  $M=.78$ ,  $SD=1.76$ . Britain: *BBC*,  $M=2.44$ ,  $SD=2.32$ ; *ITV*,  $M=1.33$ ,  $SD=1.94$ ; *the Guardian*  $M=.46$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ; *Daily Telegraph*,  $M=.55$ ,  $SD=1.54$ ; *the Sun*,  $M=.66$ ,  $SD=1.65$ . ES: *TVE*,  $M=2.21$ ,  $SD=2.30$ ; *Antena3*,  $M=3$ ,  $SD=2.47$ ; *Informativos*,  $M=2.72$ ,  $SD=2.37$ ; *ABC*,  $M=.66$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ; *El Pais*,  $M=1.28$ ,  $SD=2.07$ ; *El Mundo*,  $M=1.20$ ,  $SD=2.08$ . The questions on rating news-outlets are included only in wave II of the panel. The sample size changes according to the number of respondents who report reading or watching a particular news outlet. The sample size of respondents completing all watchdog ratings: DK,  $N=688$ ; Britain:  $N=735$ ; ES,  $N=1092$ . The scale includes a "don't know" option that is treated in the analysis as not answered. Observations for each watchdog criteria were stacked together, regardless of news outlet or country type, to form a single dataset ( $N=19107$ ). A principal component analysis with orthogonal varimax rotation was conducted for the three selected dimensions of watchdog reporting and confirmed the presence of a single factor with an eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 60% of the total variance. Eigenvalue for the single factor: 1.81. Items loading on the watchdog factor: "objective"=0.88, "informative"=0.87, "critical to government"=0.51.

<sup>3</sup> ANOVA showed a significant mean difference between these scales:  $F(2, 2530) = 29.92$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . Multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni adjustment showed a significant mean difference only between Spain and Britain ( $= -.21$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ) and between Spain and Denmark ( $= -.30$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

<sup>4</sup> The following are the mean scores per country on a scale from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 7 (very satisfied): DK wave I,  $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=1.33$ , DK wave II,  $M=4.51$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ; Britain wave I,  $M=3.99$ ,  $SD=1.39$ , Britain wave II,  $M=4.09$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ; ES wave I,  $M=3.71$ ,  $SD=1.41$ , ES wave II,  $M=3.82$ ,  $SD=1.42$ . To test for potential sensitization effects, fresh samples of approximately 200 respondents each in all three countries answered the satisfaction question in wave II of the panel. The mean scores for the new samples showed no substantial difference to mean scores calculated for respondents taking part in both panel waves.

<sup>5</sup> The respondents' education levels were recoded due to differences in the education systems across the three countries (see Appendix).

<sup>6</sup> Bivariate regression models (per country) showed similar results in terms of direction and strength.

<sup>7</sup> Forced media ratings were avoided in this study by adding a "don't know" option to evaluation scales so that only respondents who are familiar with the actual news coverage

provide news performance judgments. Including this option, however, greatly reduced the size of the samples.

<sup>8</sup> A generalized satisfaction measure was used for a comprehensive notion of this concept. The sampled news outlets are representative of some of the most important national news sources in each country. Future research may consider measuring news satisfaction per outlet to provide greater detail about the relationship between news satisfaction and watchdog-reporting perceptions. The analysis in this paper has basically shown that news satisfaction is largely dependent on public perceptions of political news coverage.

<sup>9</sup> Future research on the influence of several, competing news-reporting models on news satisfaction would further our knowledge about the relationships investigated in this paper, and would likely increase our understanding of the variation in news-satisfaction dynamics.

## **Appendix: Overview of Control Variables**

Gender: female=1; male=0

Age: in years

Education: recoded into four categories, comparable across the three countries, ranging from 1 (primary school), 2 (high school or equivalent [about 13 years' training]), 3 (BA or three years of vocational training or equivalent [16 years]) and 4 (masters or postgraduate training [19+ years]).

Political interest: one item scale response from 1 (not interested at all) to 7 (very interested). Question wording: <How interested or not are you in politics?> DK, M=4.96, SD=1.46; Britain, M=4.30, SD=1.65; ES, M=4.36, SD=1.68.

Interpersonal communication: a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often). Question wording: <How often did you discuss domestic politics in the last three weeks?> DK, M=3.92, SD=1.64; Britain, M=3.52, SD=1.82; ES, M=4.49, SD=1.70.

Attention to national politics coverage: a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often). DK, M=4.64, SD=1.41; Britain, M=4.35, SD=1.62; ES, M=4.77, SD=1.54.

Political ideology: respondents are asked, <In politics, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means the extreme left and '10' means the extreme right?> DK, M=4.7, SD=2.16; Britain, M=5.1, SD=1.83; ES, M=4.59, SD=1.8.

## References

- Albæk, Erik, David N. Hopmann, and Claes H. De Vreese. 2010. *Kunsten at holde balancen; dækningen af folketingsvalgkampe I tv-nyhederne på DR1 og TV2 1994–2007* [The art of keeping balance: Coverage of parliamentary election in television news on DR1 and TV2 1994–2007]. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Austin, Erica W, and Bruce E. Pinkleton. 1999. The relation between media content evaluations and political disaffection. *Mass Communication & Society* 2:105–22.
- Baron, Reuben M., and David A. Kenny. 1986. The moderator–mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51:1173–82.
- Benson, Rodney, and Daniel C. Hallin. 2007. How states, markets and globalization shape the news: The French and US national press, 1965–97. *European Journal of Communication* 22:27–48.
- Birnie, Carolyn, M. Joy McClure, John E. Lydon, and Diane Holmberg. 2009. Attachment avoidance and commitment aversion: A script for relationship failure. *Personal Relationships* 16:79–97.
- Brandt, Mark J., and Christine Reyna. 2010. The role of prejudice and the need for closure in religious fundamentalism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36:715–25.
- Buffardi, Laura E., and W. Keith Campbell. 2008. Narcissism and social networking web sites. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34:1303–14.
- Burgoon, Judee K., and Michael Burgoon. 1980. Predictors of newspaper readership. *Journalism Quarterly* 57:589–96.
- Chalaby, Jean. 1998. *The invention of journalism*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Clayman, Steven, John Herritage, Mark Elliott, and Laurie L. McDonald. 2007. When does the watchdog bark? Conditions of aggressive questioning in presidential news conferences. *American Sociological Review* 72:2341.
- De Vreese, Claes H. 2005. The spiral of cynicism reconsidered: The mobilizing function of news. *European Journal of Communication* 20:283–301.
- De Vreese, Claes H., and Holli A. Semetko. 2002. Cynical and engaged: Strategic campaign coverage, public opinion, and mobilization in a referendum. *Communication Research* 29:615–41.
- Deuze, Mark. 2002. *Journalists in the Netherlands: An analysis of the people, the issues and the (inter-)national environment*. Amsterdam: Aksant Academic.
- Donsbach, Wolfgang, and Thomas E. Patterson. 2004. Political news journalists; partisanship, professionalism, and political roles in five countries. In *Comparing political communication: Theories, cases, and challenges*, eds. Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch, 251–70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Entman, Robert M. 1989. *Democracy without citizens: Media and the decay of American politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ericson, Richard V. 1998. How journalists visualize fact. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 560:83–95.
- Hallin, Daniel, and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing media systems. Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanitzsch, Thomas. 2011. Populist disseminators, detached watchdogs, critical change agents and opportunist facilitators: Professional milieus, the journalistic field and autonomy in 18 countries. *International Communication Gazette* 73:477–94.
- Jacobs, Randy D. 1995. Exploring the determinants of cable television subscriber satisfaction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 39:262–74.

- Josephi, Beate. 2005. Journalism in the global age: Between normative and empirical. *Gazette* 67:575–90.
- Mancini, Paolo. 2000. Political complexity and alternative models of journalism. In *De-Westernizing media studies*, eds. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, 265–78. London: Routledge.
- McNair, B (2001) *News and Journalism in the UK*. (2nd edition). London: Routledge.
- McQuail, Denis. 2005. *McQuail's mass communication theory*. 5th ed. London: Sage.
- Norris, Pippa (2012). 'The watchdog role of journalists: Rottweilers, Alsations or Poodles?' In the *Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*. Eds. Mark Bovens, Robert E. Goodin & Thomas Schillemans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A virtuous circle. Political communications in postindustrial societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver Richard L. 1981. Measurement and evaluation of satisfaction processes in retail settings. *Journal of Retailing* 57:25–48.
- Palmgreen, Philip, and J.D. Rayburn II. 1985. A comparison of gratification models of media satisfaction. *Communication Monographs* 52:335–48.
- Papacharissi, Zizi, and Alan M. Rubin. 2000. Predictors of Internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44:175–96.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of order*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1998. Political roles of the journalist. In *The politics of news: The news of politic*, eds. Doris Graber, Denis McQuail, and Pippa Norris, 17–32. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Patwardhan, Padmini, Jin Yang, and Hermant Patwardhan. 2008. Understanding media satisfaction: Development and validation of an affect-based scale. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Chicago.
- Perse, Elizabeth, and Douglas A. Ferguson. 1993. The impact of the newer television technologies on television satisfaction. *Journalism Quarterly* 70:843–53.
- Pinkleton, Bruce E., and Erica W. Austin. 2002. Exploring relationships among media use, frequency, perceived media importance, and media satisfaction in political disaffection and efficacy. *Mass Communication & Society* 5:141–63.
- Preacher, Kristopher J., and Andrew F. Hayes. 2004. SPSS and SAS procedures for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers* 36:717–31.
- Preacher, Kristopher J., and Andrew F. Hayes. 2008. Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods* 40:879–91.
- Rimmer, Tony, and David Weaver. 1985. Different questions, different answers? Media use and media credibility. *Journalism Quarterly* 64:28–36.
- Roncarolo, Franca. 2009. News coverage of elections in the long transition of Italian democracy. In *The handbook of election news coverage around the world*, eds. Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Kaid, 308–23. London: Routledge.
- Scheufele, Dietmar A. 2002. Examining differential gains from mass media and their implications for participatory behavior. *Communication Research* 29:46–65.
- Shoemaker, Pamela J., Stephen D. Reese. 1996. *Mediating the message. Theories of influences on mass media content*. 2nd ed. White Plains: Longman.

- Skovsgaard, Morten, Erik Albæk, Peter Bro, Claes H. de Vreese. Forthcoming. A reality check: How journalists' role perceptions impact their implementation of the objectivity norm. I. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*.
- Slater, Michael D. 2004. Operationalizing and analyzing exposure: The foundation of media effects research. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81:168–83.
- Thomson, Elizabeth, Peter R.R.White, and Philip Kitly. 2008. Objectivity and hard news reporting across cultures: Comparing the news report in English, French, Japanese and Indonesian journalism. *Journalism Studies* 9:212 –28.
- Van Dalen, A., Albaek, E., & de Vreese, C. H. (2012). Different roles, different content? A four country comparison of the role conceptions and reporting style of political journalists: *Journalism*, Vol. 13, Nr. 7, 2012, s. 901-920.
- Van Dalen, Arjen. (2012) The people behind the political headlines: A comparison of political journalists in Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and Spain. *International Communication Gazette* 74(5) 464–483.
- Van de Vijver, Fons, and Norbert K. Tanzer. 1997. Bias and equivalence in cross-cultural assessment: An overview. *European Journal of Applied Psychology* 47:263–79.
- Waisbord, Silvio. 2000. *Watchdog journalism in South America*. New York: Columbia.
- Wang, Tai-Li, and Akiba Cohen. 2009. Factors affecting viewers' perceptions of sensationalism in television news: A survey study in Taiwan. *Issues & Studies* 45:125–57.
- Weaver, David and Wu Wei (eds) (1998) *The Global Journalist. News People Around the World*. Creskill: Hampton Press.
- Zhang, Ping, and Gisela M. von Dran. 2000. Satisfiers and dissatisfiers: A two-factor model for website design and evaluation. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 51:1253–68.