

The News Deficit

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND DANIELLE HAAS



In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas. Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at theresearchreport@cjr.org

A YANK, A BRIT, A DANE, AND A FINN walk into a bar.... You've heard this one?

Well, not the way it is told in the March *European Journal of Communication*, in which James Curran (Britain), Shanto Iyengar (United States), Anker Brink Lund (Denmark), and Inka Salovaara-Moring (Finland) compare the mass media of their respective nations. (Full disclosure: Michael Schudson is personally acquainted with Curran, Iyengar, and Lund.)

Unsurprisingly, the joke is chiefly on the Yank. The scholars conducted a survey that found Americans know less about international politics than the Europeans. Only 37 percent of Americans could identify the Kyoto Accords as a treaty on climate change compared to 60 percent in Britain and more than 80 percent in Denmark and Finland. Even when it came to identifying the Taliban, Americans came in last—58 percent of Americans answered correctly, compared to 68 percent in Denmark, 75 percent in the UK, and 76 percent in Finland.

Why do Americans fare so poorly in these comparisons? The authors think that U.S. television has a lot to answer for, and, judging from the study, one could find that answer in government funding and the public-service culture that attends it. According to the study's month-long analysis of news content (in 2007), more than 80 percent of the mostly state-funded news programming on Finland's leading channels is hard news, nearly 30 percent is foreign, and less than 5 percent is entertainment-focused. America's ABC and NBC offer a frothier mix, with 63 percent hard news, 20 percent international, and 14 percent pop-culture. Britain's BBC1 and ITV (the public-service channel of Britain's commercial broadcasters), meanwhile, fall somewhere in between.

Not only is European TV news more serious, it is more popular. News on the U.S. public broadcasting system that Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law in 1967 to "enrich man's spirit" attracts just 2 percent of television viewers, compared with the public channels in England, Finland, and Denmark, which draw 43, 44, and 64 percent, respectively. European TV news is more visible than U.S. network news; news on leading channels can be found several times an evening during

prime time, a timeslot not cordoned off for entertainment only. This helps European television "minimize the knowledge gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged." According to the study, that knowledge gap, between the educationally and financially well off and their less advantaged neighbors, is much smaller in Europe than in the United States. Government support of television is one reason why.

Today, government funding for journalism is in the air, even in the U.S. Geneva Overholser, once editor of the *Des Moines Register* and now director of the USC School of Journalism, and Geoffrey Cowan, former dean of USC's Annenberg School for Communication, wrote in a January 19 *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, "Today, we need to think anew about how government can ensure that citizens get the information they need and want." And former *Orlando Sentinel* writer Mark Pinsky has urged for the revival of a Federal Writers' Project for journalists. Supporters of federal intervention note that the government has subsidized newspapers since 1792 through preferential postal rates.

To be fair, American college graduates did a touch better in the study than well-educated Danish and British citizens in their knowledge of hard news (though still lagging behind the Finns)—maybe because, as the study discovers, U.S. newspapers do a bit better than European papers in emphasizing hard news.

As for less affluent, less educated Americans, the scholars do not think the scant devotion to hard news on U.S. television alone accounts for their poor showing in public-affairs knowledge. The complexities of culture, educational opportunities, and relationships to traditional authority (MSM included) won't likely be circumvented by the force-feeding of hard news through television. Still, this study in comparisons throws into stark relief the state of news literacy in the U.S., one useful gauge of the health of democracy. Its findings are important and troubling—and no joke. **CJR**

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