

The political independence of public service broadcasters

Chris Hanretty

18th December 2009

Definitions

- Political independence
- Public service broadcaster

Hypotheses

- Legal protection
- News market

Statistics

- Measurement

Histories

- Case selection
- A typical North European story
- The Southern European 'non-story'

Conclusion

Definitions

What is political independence?



What would demonstrate a lack of political independence?

Formally...

- the degree to which PSB employees take day-to-day decisions about their output or the output of subordinates, without
- receiving and acting on the basis of instructions, threats, or other inducement from politicians, or the anticipation thereof;
- or considering whether the interests of those politicians would be harmed by particular choices about output.

What is a public service broadcaster?

- Organizations like the BBC, Rai, Corporation for Public Broadcasting (USA)
- ... but not like Channel 4 or TV2 (Denmark)

Formally...

A broadcasting organization which is

- funded through some form of taxation (inc. licence fee)
- broadcasts to residents of same state that funds it (no Voice of America)
- with stated aim of broadcasting a wide range of socially useful material
- and where the top posts are appointed by the state

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses

1. The greater the legal protection enjoyed by the broadcaster, the more independent it will be
2. The larger the market for news in the country of the broadcaster, the more independent it will be

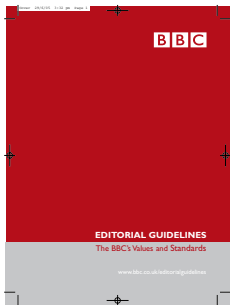
Legal protection

- Politicians have legal means to sanction or reward the broadcaster
- Appointments, funding, inquiries, and so on
- The more limited these means, the more limited the sanctioning (rewarding)...
- ... and the more independent the broadcaster

Size of the market for news

- Bigger market for news (per capita), more journalists (per capita)
- More journalists, journalists associations, wire services start
- Professional norms develop...
- ...which can then be repurposed by PSBs to defend themselves

Key examples



- BBC borrowed their first rules for editing news from Reuters
- Sveriges Radio borrowed their first editorial guidelines wholesale from the Swedish Journalists' Union

Statistics

Measurement

- Statistical models provide rigour, precision
- But require our items of interest to be quantified
- How to do that for our two independent variables -- size of the market for news and legal protection?
- How to do that for our dependent variable, political independence?

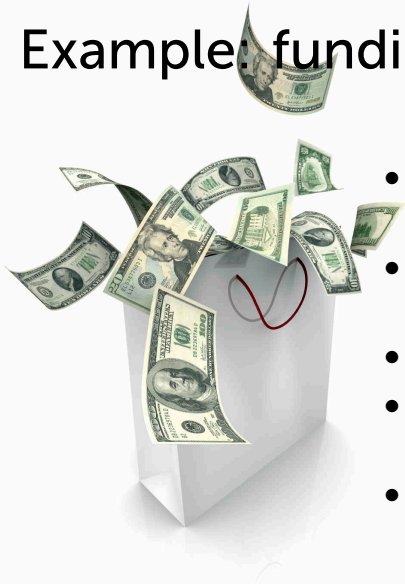
Size of the market for news

- Use press circulation per capita as a measure of market size
- Postpone point about professional development
- ranges from 75 copies per 1,000 population (Greece) to > 500 (Sweden)

Legal protection

- Build an index of legal protection
- 13 index items, each scored in the interval [0,1]
- Includes items on reporting, funding & borrowing, appointment, dismissal, and tenure
- More independent responses scored higher

Example: funding



- Automatically updated licence fee: 1
- Discretionally updated licence fee: 0.75
- Advertising: 0.5
- Pluri-annual grant from parliament: 0.25
- Annual grant from parliament: 0

Political independence

- We can't tackle this directly
- We must use a proxy
- My proxy is executive turnover

Formally...

$$\text{Independence} = \frac{(1-TOR)+(1-VUL)}{2}$$

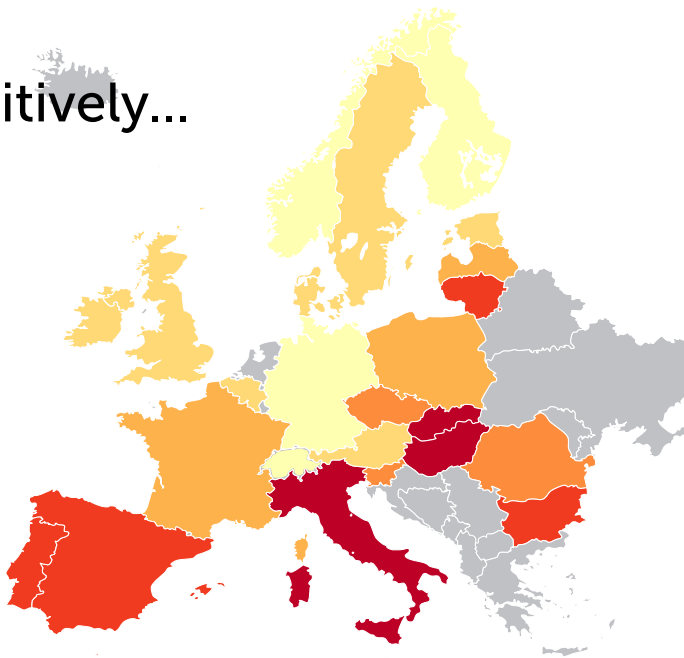
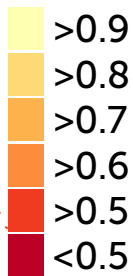
where

- TOR = Chief executive turnover (reciprocal of avg. duration)
- VUL = Percentage of govt. changes followed within six months by change of executive

Example: Austria

- Fourteen changes of government in the period
- Two of these followed within six months by change in DG of ÖRF
- So $VUL = \frac{2}{14} = 0.14$
- Average tenure of ÖRF DG was 5 years 1 month
- So $TOR = \frac{1}{5.083}$
- and the independence score is $\frac{0.86+0.803}{2} = 0.83$

More intuitively...



Results

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Independence} = & -0.126 + \\ & 0.411 \times \text{Legal protection} + \\ & 0.125 \times \text{Market size} \\ & -0.038 \times \\ & (\text{Market size} \times \text{PostCommunist}) \end{aligned}$$

which explains around half of the variance (N=36)

Histories

Historical analysis

- Statistical analyses are good for some things
- but it's not always convincing
- and I can't treat the use of professional norms statistically

So an analysis of specific cases is needed.

Case selection

- 6 cases chosen
- 2 from each of Hallin & Mancini's (2004)
- 3 types of media system



 Rai
 RTVE






- Rai
- RTVE
- BBC
- RTÉ



- Rai
- RTVE
- BBC
- RTÉ
- SVT
- DR



-  Rai
-  RTVE
-  BBC
-  RTÉ
-  SVT
-  DR



A typical (North European) story (1)



A public broadcaster is formed.

A typical (North European) story (2)



- The press gets worried.
- They push for a monopoly on broadcast news.
- This leads to fatally dull but reliable news.

A typical (North European) story (3)



A forceful chief executive decides that such rules can help him protect the company.

A typical (North European) story (4)



Rules are created, borrowing from wire agencies or journalists' unions.

A typical (North European) story (5)



Rules are then “trotted out to every earnest American researcher that comes along”.

A typical (North European) story (6)



- Politicians are (almost) happy.
- Why? Because a rule-following public broadcaster is not a partisan one.
- Why? Because complaints can be adjudicated.

What about the Southern European story? (1)

- Weak press interests
- So no agency copy
- (But lots of government press releases)

What about the Southern European story? (2)

- Some strong chief executives
- But rarely interested in news
- And often unable to impose a set of rules on journalists

What about the Southern European story? (3)

We can't be continually attacked from the outside... and have to go forward without even some cover from [the board]. Give me a document I can hold on to, and from which I can give instructions

-- Biagio Agnes, former DG of Rai

Table: Comparison of countries

Country	Market for news p/c	Press monopoly on b/c news	Internal codes	Ombudsman/ complaints board	Independence
Sweden	Large	Yes	Yes (1960-)	Yes (1933-)	High
UK	Large	Yes	Yes (1987-)	Yes (1971-)	High
Ireland	Moderate	No	Yes (1989-)	No	Moderate
Denmark	Moderate	Yes	Yes (2003-)	Yes (2004-)	Moderate
Italy	Small	No (Rai)	No	No	Low
Spain	Small	No	No	Yes (2007-)	Low

Conclusions

Conclusions

The size of the market for news and the degree of legal protection enjoyed by the broadcaster explain the degree of political independence had by the broadcaster

- This is not a complete explanation
- It works best for Sweden, the UK, and Spain
- it works less well for Italy and Denmark
- and some key factors are missing

Thank you



<chris.hanretty@eui.eu>
<www.chrishanretty.co.uk/>