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Running head: SOUND-BITE JOURNALISM & PUBLIC ARGUMENT

The Impact of Sound-Bite Journalism on Public Argument\*

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### Abstract

The rise of sound-bite news is one of the most widely bemoaned findings in political communication research. Yet, the detrimental effects of this trend have been more assumed than demonstrated. This study examines one consequence of sound-bite journalism: the creation of incomplete argument, in which speakers presenting their political position in the news do not also justify it. Drawing on data about television news in Germany, Russia, and the United States, it shows that shrinking sound bites consistently reduce the probability of opinion justification across widely differing national contexts. Sound-bite journalism emerges as harmful to television news' ability to produce public justification.

*Keywords:* Sound-bite journalism; TV news; news quality; justification; public discourse; mediated deliberation

### The Impact of Sound-Bite Journalism on Public Argument

Critics have long charged television news with not providing politicians sufficient time to articulate their positions on issues and argue their points, thus producing a largely fragmented, journalist-centered public discourse (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Lichter, 2001; Patterson, 1993). Systematic evidence of the shrinking sound bite in television news first appeared in the United States (Adatto, 1990; Hallin, 1992), and since has been established as one of the most replicable findings in the U.S. (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) and other national contexts including Australia, France, Germany, and the U.K. (e.g., Esser, 2008; Schulz & Zeh, 2007; Young, 2008). In the U.S., the average politician sound bite in election campaign news has shrunk from 43 seconds in 1968 (Hallin, 1992) to about 9 seconds in 1992, a level at which it has stabilized since (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011).

However, although scholars are often damning in their assessment of sound-bite journalism, little systematic empirical research exists on the actual substantive costs associated with sound-bite journalism. Normative assessments of sound-bite journalism thus largely remain what Althaus (2012, p. 97) refers to as unsubstantiated “normative assertions.”

This study addresses this problem and provides a more empirically saturated normative assessment of sound-bite news. In particular, it proposes that an important and likely consequence of shrinking sound bites on television news is the emergence of incomplete argument, in which speakers presenting their opinion on a political issue are less likely to also get to justifying it while on air. The article first summarizes the scholarly discourse regarding the empirical evidence and normative assessment of sound-bite news. It then introduces *opinion justification* as a central component of political argument in general and mediated deliberation in particular. After establishing the normative value of justification, it discusses theoretical grounds for expecting a detrimental effect of sound-bite news on the occurrence of opinion justification on the news, and the expectation that it is particularly pronounced for non-journalist speakers. The study then tests these expectations using a cross-

national, multi-level analysis of justification in television news in three countries: Germany, Russia, and the United States. In the process, it shows that shrinking sound bites have a significant negative effect on the probability of opinion justification, but also this effect is robust across national contexts and generally more pronounced for non-journalist speakers than journalists speaking on the news. Ultimately, sound-bite journalism emerges from the analyses as largely deleterious to television news' ability to produce public justification.

### **Sound-Bite News**

The literature suggests several factors are responsible for a near-universal decline in uninterrupted speech in television news in late modern Western democracies. These factors include technological advances in editing (Hallin, 1992) and increasing competitive pressures on television stations (Patterson, 1993, p. 159). The latter has resulted in greater journalist interventionism, a move towards a more arousing and vivid, fast-paced style of reporting that does not anymore provide a space for the lengthy development of complex arguments on complicated issues (Patterson, 1993). Sound-bite news may also be a byproduct of journalists' attempts to regain control over their product in the face of increased professionalized communication strategies on the part of political actors. This journalistic "fight-back" (Zaller, 1999) results in a more fast-paced, journalist-centered style of reporting that leaves little room for non-journalist speakers to expound their views in longer segments of uninterrupted speech (Esser, 2008, p. 417).

Media interventionism can be seen as part of the general *mediatization* of politics, a process in which the influence of the media increases relative to actors from the political system (e.g., Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). In this view, shorter segments of uninterrupted non-journalist speech on television news exemplify how media content is governed by a distinct "media logic" (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 35). Indeed research shows that sound bites tend to be shorter on for-profit television stations where commercial pressures and mediatized reporting are more pronounced (Esser, 2008; Lichter, 2001).

For the most part, academic commentators have expressed concern over these developments. Although some maintain that longer sound bites would not necessarily entail a more democratically valuable news discourse (Stephens, 1996), or even that the rise of sound-bite journalism has elevated, not diminished, the importance of public speech (Foley, 2012), the general sense among scholars seems to be that there is something fundamentally wrong with sound-bite journalism. While these concerns are often not very explicit, the underlying sentiment showing through is that the fast-paced, fragmented style of political speech produced by such journalism vitiates the possibility of a sufficiently information-rich news product (e.g., Bennett, 2009, p. 179). For example, Kathleen Hall Jamieson writes:

The notion that the end of rhetoric is judgment presupposes that rhetoric consists of argument—statement and proof. Morselized ads and news bites consist instead of statement alone, a move that invites us to judge the merit of the claim on the *ethos* of the speaker or the emotional appeals (*pathos*) enwrapping the claim. In the process, appeal to reason (*logos*)—one of Aristotle’s prime artistic means of persuasion—is lost. (1988, p. 240)

Similarly, Whaley and Holloway (1997, p. 294) note that “argument,” in the traditional sense, has become a rare feature of public political discourse.

In sum, the empirical evidence clearly suggests decreases in sound-bite lengths and their stabilization on low levels in a wide range of countries. Some studies have investigated the antecedents of shrinking sound bites (Esser, 2008), others their effects on citizens (Donsbach & Jandura, 2003; Russomanno & Everett, 1995). Quite surprisingly though, no larger-scale study has yet investigated whether the “degradation of coverage” (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011, p. 26) generally assumed to be associated with sound-bite journalism actually exists and, if so, the magnitude of the “problem of sound bites” (Patterson, 1993, p. 160). As this study shows, sound-bite journalism provides citizens with consistently less information

about the reasons political actors draw on to justify their actions, leaving them less well-equipped to make up their minds about political issues based on substantive reasons.

### **The Role of Justification for Democratic Public Discourse**

The “substance” that is supposed to suffer from sound-bite news (e.g., Lichter, 2001, p. 23) is not often specified in the literature and thus notions of what exactly it is that may lack in such news necessarily remain vague. One particularly important substantive component of news discourse can be found in the justification of political opinions. This section briefly explains why justification is a central component of a democratic public discourse from both a normative and an empirical point of view. The next section argues that it is precisely this feature of television news discourse that is particularly affected as the duration of sound bites shrinks.

As a communicative phenomenon, justification relates to the normative role of news journalism. Indeed, the production and dissemination of political justifications can be considered a fundamental part of that role (Ettema, 2007). Public justification is central to most liberal models of democracy (Chambers, 2010), with theories of deliberative democracy in particular emphasizing its value for democratic life. From this theoretical perspective, the normative value of public justification derives from both its cognitive-epistemic and social-moral functions.

In cognitive-epistemic terms, the public circulation of justifications for political ideas is valuable because it creates for citizens the kind of transparency and intelligibility of the world around them necessary to exercise autonomous political judgment (Waldron, 1993, p. 58). Public and contestable justifications are also expected to make it more likely that the democratic process will produce reasonable policy outcomes, which increases its legitimacy (Habermas, 2006, p. 413). In social-moral terms, the public justification of political ideas can be understood as necessary for realizing a principle of mutual respect for persons (Larmore, 1999) or even a principle of justice per se (Forst, 2012).

Public justification thus is a normatively significant demand towards political communication in liberal models of democracy, especially those of a deliberative bent. The question of whether sound-bite journalism impacts the degree to which justification can transpire in the news therefore has clear normative import.

One important aspect of the normative social-moral and a cognitive-epistemic arguments for public justification is that its mere presence is a requirement for the realization of both its epistemic and moral ends. From an epistemic perspective, more public justification will generally be preferable over less justification because public justification invites public contestation and criticism that may not otherwise have occurred. Additionally, it is precisely the self-corrective capacities of public discourse to separate good from bad public reasons that makes it so attractive to deliberative theorists (Habermas, 1992, p. 458, 2006, p. 416). From a social-moral perspective as well, public justification is a normative good *per se*, since the provision of reasons to affected others corresponds to their basic right to be respected as autonomous moral persons (Forst, 1999, p. 40).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, empirical research suggests that people's opinion formation may be more deliberative when they frequently encounter justifications in public discourse. Justifications given for opinions presented on the news may function as *cognitive cues* that prime viewers to engage in more thoughtful reasoning. "Reflective cues" can induce greater cognitive effort, influence the importance citizens attach to having reasons for one's political opinions (Manosevitch, 2009; see also Hwang, Gotlieb, Nah, & McLeod, 2007) and may even prompt more deliberative behaviors (Manosevitch, Steinfeld, & Lev-On, 2014). Similarly, research in small-group deliberation has shown that as citizens get exposed to more reasons for different opinions they become more likely to revisit their own positions in their light (Schneiderhan & Khan, 2008).

Observing opinion justification on the news may shift citizens' focus to positive social norms related to rational, reasoned thinking and discussion, and prime reflective behaviors in



them. The mere presence of public justification of political opinions is not only central to contemporary normative accounts of democracy, but also has “hard” empirical benefits for individuals’ opinion formation.

Television news is a particularly important and consequential site of public justification as it still is the most important source of political information for the most people in most countries (see Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013). This is also true because both journalists and politicians have considerable incentives to present justifications in the news. Journalists should be motivated to produce public justification in their news products out of professional ideals such as to “keep people informed” (e.g., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001) and pursue “journalism as reason-giving” (Ettema, 2007). Political actors, on the other hand, should be motivated to engage in justification on the news when confronted with demands to justify their standpoint by journalists or political competitors (Peters, 2008, p. 239).

Television news is therefore a highly probable and relevant public space for the production of public justifications, which play a normatively and empirically important role for democratic discourse. This idea has appeared in several studies of justification in the news (e.g., Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Gerhards, Neidhardt, & Rucht, 1998; Maia, 2009; Renwick & Lamb, 2013; Rudd & Fish, 1989). However, this study is the first major undertaking to link political justification in the news to sound-bite journalism.

### **The Role of Time for Justification in the News**

The temporal context of a news show likely has consequences for the probability with which it features justifications for presented opinions. In general, the temporal context of a newscast is the amount of airtime that is available for its distinct components. It can be differentiated into three levels, each corresponding to one of several nested content units that together form a complete newscast: the duration of the individual broadcast, the duration of an individual news item within a broadcast, and the duration of an individual utterance with a news item. These units will to some degree be related to one another. However, this study is

concerned with the direct effect of available time on justification in the news. Since the presence (or absence) of a justification is most proximally a feature of individual utterances (not of news items or entire broadcasts), this study focuses on the effects of utterance durations on the occurrence of opinion justification and brackets the length of news items and broadcasts.<sup>2</sup>

Normative concerns over the possible impact of decreasing sound-bite lengths on substantive debate cannot be confirmed by studying sound bites in isolation. As mentioned above, sound-bite research has remained largely descriptive and has not looked at the consequences of shrinking sound bites.<sup>3</sup>

A causal relation between the length of an utterance made on the news and the likelihood of it carrying a justification in addition to an opinion indeed has face validity for two reasons, one of them structural and one motivational. Regarding the structural basis of the time-justification relation, it is important to recognize that justification—and argumentation more generally—constitutes a relatively complex type of communicative structure. Proposing a justification makes sense only if there is something to be justified. A point of view, opinion, position or at any rate a claim to the rightness of some proposition has to be disclosed, explained, and expected to be understood before a speaker may reasonably proceed to justifying it by giving reasons for its validity (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 2).

Justification thus is a posterior component in the basic structure of argumentative communication, which suggests that, under time constraints, it will be relatively likely to be either omitted by an anticipating speaker or cut out by a journalist packaging distinct statements into an integrated news item (Jamieson, 1988, p. 240). In fact, evidence suggests that journalists constructing the news disproportionately deselect justifications from the universe of potential information to be reported (Kuhlmann, 1999, p. 284).

Regarding the motivational basis of the time-justification relation, it is reasonable to expect that the more time speakers are given to complete a statement without being cut off

after the presentation of their political position on an issue, the more likely they will try to defend it with a justification. For politicians (or otherwise interested actors) this is true because, like in most mass media forums, public contestation in television news exhibits a triadic structure that encourages the political actors to address the mass audience in an effort to win its support rather than talk to each other (Peters, 2008, p. 239). Although alternative means of crafting persuasive appeals (e.g., charm or various rhetorical devices) may be available, speakers will often use the time they are given in such a forum to produce justifications supporting their own point of view or criticizing alternative standpoints, thereby increasing the overall degree of justification-giving on the news. For journalists, it is reasonable to expect greater justification-giving with more time if the diversification of justifications and viewpoints is part of their internalized professional role conception or external professional demands held against them. Journalists also should tend to use additional speaking time for adding justifications to previously presented opinions.

Nevertheless, journalists also have informational commitments that extend beyond the presentation of justification and will have more alternatives for using additional speaking time compared to other types of speakers (they could, for example, choose to create informational diversity by presenting a greater number of opinions instead of more justifications). The expectation therefore is that the positive association between available speaking time and justification probability will be lower for utterances made by journalists than for the direct utterances of non-journalistic speakers (“sound bites”).

**H1:** The probability of an utterance presenting a political opinion to present a justification will be positively related to the duration of the utterance.

**H2:** The probability to present a justification will be more strongly related to the duration of a direct utterance by a non-journalist speaker (sound bite) presenting a political opinion than to the duration of a direct utterance by a journalist presenting an opinion.

### **Design and Methods**

The data to test the above hypotheses were generated in a large-scale quantitative content analysis of the eleven main evening television news shows of ten national television channels in the United States, Germany, and the Russian Federation (see Online Appendix I for a detailed overview of the studied media sample).<sup>4</sup> Because the theoretical rationale presented above is expected to hold universally across different national contexts, this study does not focus on the differences and comparisons between the three countries. However, as they cover widely differing types of formal democracies they allow for a hard test of the robustness of the hypothesized effects of utterance duration against the effects of social context: Germany represents a consensus democracy, the US represents a majoritarian democracy, and Russia represents a delegative (or: illiberal) democracy (Lijphart, 2012; Merkel, 2004).<sup>5</sup> The TV channels were selected to include public-service, commercial, and (for Russia) state-controlled channels that were among those with the greatest market shares in their respective category. The sample also included both general-interest and news-only channels from each country to produce a sample of television news that is more generally representative than one including only channels in either category.

The two Russian general-interest channels represent different levels of direct government influence: from 2009 to 2010, REN-TV still realized a requisite degree of independence from government control, and could be regarded as “semi-autonomous” at that time, while Pervy was under direct control by the state. The selected news-only television channels were either non-partisan (n-tv, CNN) or partisan (Fox News, R24) and the selected news programs included four in-depth news shows (CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360°*, ARD-*Tagesthemen*, PBS’s *News Hour*, and Fox News Channel’s *Fox Report*) next to traditional, fact-centered nightly news bulletins.

The study analyzed newscast content worth of two constructed weeks from each channel, random-sampled from the six-months periods between October 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010 and from April 1, 2010 to September 30, 2010. The sampled newscast content was

recorded and coded directly without reliance on transcripts. Importantly for this study, this allowed for the reliable coding of temporal information.

Coding captured all newscasts in their entirety but since the focus of this study is on *political* justification, all analyses reported below include only news stories on primarily political topics (i.e., stories relating to a policy domain, politics, or other coverage related to a need for collectively binding decisions by political institutions). Stories that dealt with business, culture and science, society, sports, accidents, natural disasters, criminal cases, service news, lifestyle, and religion were excluded from the analysis. Further, since the focus of this study is on the justification of political *opinion*, all reported results are based on analyses of all utterances giving a subjective interpretation or opinion regarding a political issue. The analyses reported here thus included all utterances that contained interpretation or opinion in news items with a political topic. The analysis encompassed a total of 476 political news items with a cumulative duration of 17.2 hours. Of these, 329 news items were included because they contained at least one opinion-presenting utterance. Overall, the study included 1,559 opinion utterances found in these 329 political news items.

Variables used in this study were measured on three levels of analysis: the level of the utterance (Level 1), the level of the news item (Level 2), and the level of the individual broadcast (Level 3).

An utterance was defined as a continuous speech act that contains a substantial statement. Utterances were differentiated into two categories: direct and quoted utterances. If a (direct) utterance contained a quote of another speaker, the quoted utterance was identified as a separate (quoted) utterance and all utterance-level variables coded separately for both the direct (quoting) and quoted utterance. Coders were allowed to code up to three quoted utterances per direct utterance; quoted utterances were coded in the order of their appearance. Whenever “utterances” is referred to below without giving a further qualification the term

encompasses both direct and quoted utterances. A total of ten variables were used in the analyses reported below.

*Justification.* The dependent variable, opinion justification, was coded for all utterances (direct and quoted) containing interpretation or opinion. Coders first determined whether the utterance related to a position, objective, or action relevant to society (i.e., an attitude of “public” relevance that would therefore also be subject to the public justification requirements of liberal democratic theories). If so, they proceeded to deciding whether the societally relevant position, objective, or action was justified through some form of argumentative support. The coding protocol employed a low threshold for the identification of a justification. For example, the utterance “The government’s policies were successful, as they moved Germany forward” would have been classified as a position *with* justification, even if it was very brief and vague. The coding protocol thus used a liberal operationalization of opinion justification. By using an operationalization that does not demand a fully developed argument and captures also the condensed forms of argument typical of postmodern mediated discourse (see Aden, 1994), the coding provided for a hard test of the expectation that shorter statements of opinion are less likely to include justificatory support. In other words, reductions in opinion occurrence as measured by the coding instrument always indicated the complete absence of any uttered justification, not just the presence of some reduced form of argumentative support. The justification variable is a dummy variable indicating the presence of a justification for each utterance containing an actor’s political opinion (for coding and recoding details, see Online Appendix II).

*Utterance duration.* The independent variable was captured by a stopwatch measure indicating the length of an uninterrupted sequence of speech, in seconds.

Beyond the two focal variables, all content was also coded for six additional indicators of deliberative news content expected to influence the likelihood of opinion justification that figure as statistical controls in the models presented below. *Civil society speaker* measured

whether the speaker of the coded utterance belonged to (organized or unorganized) civil society; *meta-deliberation* measured whether an utterance referred to the nature, rules, or discursive meanings of a public debate; *responsiveness* measured whether the speaker of the coded utterance reacts to the substantial position/opinion of another speaker or actor; *news item type* measured the journalistic form of the coded news item (e.g., filmed report, interview, or journalist commentary); *decision-relatedness* measured whether the coded news item referred to a collectively binding political decision; and *opposing positions* measured whether speakers with opposing/contrary positions (expressed in separate utterances) were mentioned in the news item. Detailed information about the coding instructions given to coders and the recoding operations performed for each content indicator used as control variable in this paper is available in Online Appendix II.

These content indicators, along with regression dummies representing national and organizational context differences, were included as statistical controls in the regression models presented below. The context variables controlled for baseline differences in the likelihood of justification presentation between the countries (DE, RU, US) and types of organization (public service, commercial, state controlled) studied. In this paper, these variables are not of substantive interest and results on their effects reported elsewhere. They are not explicated here due to space restrictions. However, they were included in the analysis to provide controls for systematic content differences between newscasts that could otherwise lead to spurious relationships of sound-bite length with justification likelihood.

Coding was done by eight undergraduate and graduate student coders who underwent intensive, multi-wave coder training (approx. 50h per coder). The entire corpus of television material was coded twice by sets of two independent coders. Double-coding was reliable at > .7 using either kappa or alpha for all but three variables (topic, decision-relatedness and justification). However, the final data reflects coder agreement at a greater level since in a final coding step pairs of coders identified *all* coder disagreements and adjudicated them via

consensus decisions to further reduce error in the data (see Orwin & Vevea, 2009, p. 184).

Detailed information about the quality of the data, including coder training, coding procedures, and intercoder reliabilities is available in Online Appendix III.

In sampling terms, each newscast thus constitutes a cluster (Level 3) within which news items (Level 2) are nested. News items, in turn, form clusters within which individual utterances (Level 1) are nested. Treating hierarchical, multi-level data as single-level data runs the risk of producing biased estimates of effects and severely biased estimates of standard errors that, if uncorrected, will suggest greater confidence in the results than is warranted (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012, p. 2). In order to produce unbiased parameter estimates and standard errors, the data were analyzed using logistic multilevel modeling (MLM, Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In addition to parameter estimates and statistical tests, the study presents predictive margins plots below. These plots display the predictive marginal probabilities of opinion justification. Predictive margins imply the average treatment effect (AME): for a continuous independent variable the AME is simply the average slope of the predicted probability curve shown in the plots (Long, 2014).

### **Results**

The first step was to estimate an empty three-level model of opinion justification without any explanatory variables (Model 0, fit statistics in Table 1). The next step was to estimate a main effects model including all control variables and the indicator of sound-bite length, utterance duration (Model 1). Table 1 reports estimated logit coefficients and their standard errors, and the average marginal effects (AMEs) of utterance duration, as well as fit statistics (estimates for variables that are not of substantive interest here not shown).

[Table 1 about here]

Estimates for the empty model (Model 0) show that 7.3% of the total variance in opinion justification is due to differences between news items and 12.9% of the variance is due to differences between individual broadcasts. The remaining 79.8% is variance on the utterance



level. The likelihood for a political opinion of getting justified thus varies considerably between individual broadcasts and news items. An initial likelihood ratio test comparing the empty model with the corresponding standard single-level logit regression model supports this conclusion: The model fit of the multilevel model is significantly better than that of the corresponding single-level model,  $\chi^2(2) = 100.35, p < .000$ . The data thus support the notion that opinion justification in the news should be treated as a multilevel phenomenon, even when looking at its communicative context only.

Model 1 includes the effect of an opinion utterance's duration on the probability of justification. Hypothesis 1 predicted that longer opinion-presenting sound bites would, on average, be more likely to include a justification for the opinion presented. The data strongly supported this expectation: The more time a speaker had at her disposal to present a political opinion, the more likely she was to also present a justification for it. This effect was highly significant and robust against all other controls,  $z = 6.23, p < .000$ . The average marginal effect of utterance duration across all observations indicates that for every ten seconds added to an opinion statement, the probability of opinion justification rose by an average four percentage points. The left-hand panel of Figure 1 illustrates the strongly positive overall effect of utterance duration across all opinion utterances in the studied samples.

[Figure 1 about here]

Note that the analysis thus far combined both direct ("primary") and quoted utterances by journalists and non-journalistic speakers. It thus provides an overview of all opinion presentation happening in the news, including journalists' presentation of other actors' opinions and justifications (for example when journalists provide a summary of a debate). However, Hypothesis 2 predicted that an increase in available time for an uninterrupted block of speech will raise the probability of justification more for non-journalistic speakers appearing on the news than for journalists. In other words, utterance duration was expected to

matter more for justification in opinion-presenting sound bites than in opinion-presenting journalistic speech.

To test this interaction hypothesis, this study estimated a re-specified version of Model 1. This new model, Model 2, differed from Model 1 in two ways: First, it used an alternative indicator for type of speaker that distinguishes between journalists and non-journalistic speakers instead of central and civil society speakers. Second, a multiplicative term representing the interaction between speaker type (journalistic vs. non-journalistic) and utterance duration was included into the model. The results provide strong support for Hypothesis 2 (Table 1). First, the main effect of speaker type shows that journalists, overall, are much less likely to provide justifications for opinions they present (either their own or others'). The AME suggests that, on average, this justification probability gap between journalists and non-journalists on the news amounts to 23 percentage points and is statistically significant,  $z = -8.83, p < .001$ .<sup>6</sup>

More important in terms of the hypothesis is the interaction of journalistic speakers and utterance duration. Its effect is highly significant and negative, indicating that the positive effect of utterance length on justification probability is lower for journalists than for non-journalists. The average marginal effect for this interaction suggests that the difference in justification probability between journalists and non-journalists grows by an average seven percentage points every ten seconds. The right-hand panel of Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities of justification for journalists and non-journalist speakers and illustrates both the general justification gap between the two groups and the magnitude of the difference in how the available time leads them to engage in opinion justification. A 30-second opinion statement by a non-journalist has more than a 70 percent probability of being accompanied by a justification; an opinion-presenting statement of the same length coming from a journalist only has a probability of a little more than 30 percent to come with a justification. Speakers

who are not journalists clearly are more inclined to use additional speaking time given to them to provide justifications.

[Figure 2 about here]

The data thus indicate a strongly positive effect of sound-bite length on justification probability across the sample. But how robust is it? Figure 2 plots the predicted probabilities of justification in opinion utterances by non-journalists (i.e., sound bites) as a function of their duration for Germany, Russian, and the United States: Inspection of the display shows that the duration effect is indeed robust and occurs across national contexts. Although some cross-national variation exists, and confidence intervals widen due to the lower number of observations (especially for longer utterances in Germany), the trend is as expected: In each country, longer utterances are more likely to provide at least one justification for a presented opinion and the effect thus appears to be a fairly universal, transnational phenomenon. Some cross-national variation is apparent regarding the shape of the probability curve: While increases in justification probability with greater uninterrupted speaking time are highest for sound bites of up to 25 seconds in U.S. newscasts, in Russia (and to a somewhat lesser extent in Germany) the slope of the probability curve is steepest at about 45 seconds. In the U.S., speakers in the news get to, or are pushed to, deliver justifications quickly; in Russia an opinion utterance must be much longer to also present a justification—which, of course, lowers the overall level of justification in the news, as had become evident in the cross-national comparison.

In sum, this study finds that the effect of utterance duration on justification probability is strongly positive, robust across national contexts, and more pronounced for sound bites of non-journalistic speakers than journalists.

### **Discussion**

The public justification of political alternatives is the lifeblood of democracy. Whether television news discourse is vibrant and filled with public justification or quiescent and

emptied of political justification is important because public justification is both normatively and empirically central to achieving the epistemic and social-moral ends of democracy.

This study examined the effects of sound-bite length on justification in the news – namely, the consequences of time available to speakers on the news on their probability to go beyond presenting their opinion on an issue and instead also justify it. The purpose of this analysis was to assess the actual substantive cost of the oft-bemoaned rise of “sound bite news” (Hallin, 1992) for citizen audiences. Observers have frequently deplored this development in television news, pointing to outcomes such as loss in substance and increased journalist domination of the news product (Lichter, 2001). But few studies actually investigated this empirical expectation.

The proposition tested in this study was that such public justification for political opinions will disappear from television news as sound bites shrink, due mainly to the basic structure of argumentative communication, in which the justification of standpoints occupies a posterior position (Jamieson, 1988), but also due to the general incentives for and motivation of speakers on the news to use additional speaking time for justifying their stances. More specifically, this study expected that non-journalist speakers will generally be more inclined than journalists to use additional on-air seconds to present justifications for political standpoints.

The analyses presented here produced evidence of the real substantive costs of sound-bite journalism. Longer opinion-presenting utterances, irrespective of who made them, were significantly more likely to contain a justification for the political standpoints expressed. Further analysis showed that uninterrupted speaking time mattered more for the likelihood of justification if the speaker was not a journalist. In other words, “sound-bitten” external speakers indeed showed a greater tendency to use additional speaking time for justification.

Independent analyses in the German, Russian, and the U.S. contexts indicated that the chilling consequences of short sound bites for the degree of opinion justification are a fairly

universal phenomenon. The three national contexts studied here differ widely, which put to a hard test the theoretical expectation of sound-bite news leading to incomplete argument. The empirical results indicate that shrinking utterance durations universally diminish the amount of justification for political opinions appearing in television news largely irrespective of social context.

These findings have implications for multiple literatures in communication. By uncovering a harmful consequence of sound-bite journalism they provide grounds for a renewed, evidence-based critique of the conditions responsible for the near-universal trend of shrinking sound bites in television news. Scholars like Bennett have long argued that modern communication technologies and corporate profit motives combine to produce “generic, ‘lowest-common-denominator’ information formats” (2009, p. 40) that are biased towards fragmented and dramatized news content that leaves little room for principled political argument. If market-based models of news production shape news products such that they appeal to the widest possible audience at the smallest possible cost to producers (e.g., Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1994), and if this leads to sensationalism (Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001), horserace coverage (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004), and sound-bite news (Esser, 2008), the present study provides empirical evidence in support of a case against purely market-based models of media production.

In line with how shrinking sound bites stem, in part, from journalists’ increasingly interventionist orientations (Esser, 2008, p. 404; also Zaller, 1999) and a general move from “sacerdotal” to “interpretive” journalism (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012), the findings presented here show that ever shorter segments of uninterrupted speech are more problematic with regard to the information value of politicians’ and other non-journalists’ utterances vis-à-vis those of journalists. By implication, they should caution against risks regarding the justificatory quality of television news that accords a more prominent and evaluative role in

news coverage to the producing journalists (on interpretive journalism, see Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012).

Beyond the critique of news production processes, the findings of this study may have implications for partisan polarization in news audiences and the processes by which they form their individual political preferences. Today's media environment is highly fragmented and features a rising number of sometimes highly partisan media. This new landscape may diminish the ability even of mainstream newscasts to let audiences attend to truly argumentative exchanges and reciprocal justification between opposed political camps, which may make polarization based on partisan elite cues more likely and promote the projection of elite-level polarization—on the upswing since the 1990s (Hetherington, 2001)—onto the general public.

If political elites are given less opportunity to explain and justify their opinion it may also be more difficult for voters to *accurately* identify the substantive positions of parties and candidates. In that way, sound-bite news could not only inhibit in viewers the formation of well-reasoned policy opinions but also undermine their elective affinities with specific parties and candidates that match their own political preferences. Sound-bite news may thus contribute to a less effective and rational “partisan sort” (Levendusky, 2009).

While this study expected the hypothesized associations to hold largely independent of social context, it is still important to keep in mind the differences in the political and media systems between the studied countries in making sense of the empirical findings. Opinion justification in television news may suffer from shrinking sound bites everywhere, but the degree to which this makes a difference for the democratic quality of public discourse is likely to vary with the political context. For example, the data on opinion presentation gathered for this study show that Russian newscasts were clearly the least inclined to present political opinion, generally trailing behind the U.S. and German stations. Of course, if news discourse is depoliticized or “empty,” in that it does not often feature a lively exchange of political

opinions and is dominated by state and ruling-party representatives, it will be less relevant in absolute and normative terms for the overall quality of public debate if the opinions that are presented in the news are justified or not. In this sense, the negative effect of sound-bite news on opinion justification is more democratically detrimental in an entrenched liberal democracy like the U.S. than in a defective democracy like Russia.

Before concluding, it is important to note as a limitation that this study did not measure instances in which a speaker presented her opinion in one utterance and justified it in another, subsequent one. While no clear evidence suggests this, if instances of such “scattered justification” were to occur frequently on television news, sound-bite journalism would become less problematic for public justification.

As a general implication, this study points to a need for communication scholarship to investigate closely the normatively important outcomes expected from the communication phenomena of interest. The study provides such an empirical normative assessment: It demonstrates how an oft-bemoaned but never-studied outcome of journalistic routines associated with media commercialism and concomitant content biases diminishes the contribution that television news can make to democratic discourse. Importantly, this assessment was not based on ad-hoc or commonplace intuitions about what a good democratic discourse should look like, but grounded in a reading of contemporary normative democratic theory (Althaus, 2012).

In doing so, the study draws attention to the problematic nature of sound-bite journalism and provides firm evidence for it. Surely, more work needs to be done to not only estimate rates at which public justification in television news suffers from sound-bite journalism, but the degree to which this lowers the amount of thinking citizens invest in their opinion formation during and after watching the news. For the time being, we may state that while sound-bite sizes shrank in the last few decades, a tectonic shift in Western democracies may have taken place with regard to the capacity of television news to render substantive

justifications to its audiences. Perhaps more generally, we may also state that sound-bite journalism emerges from this study as clearly detrimental to news as a purveyor of public argument.



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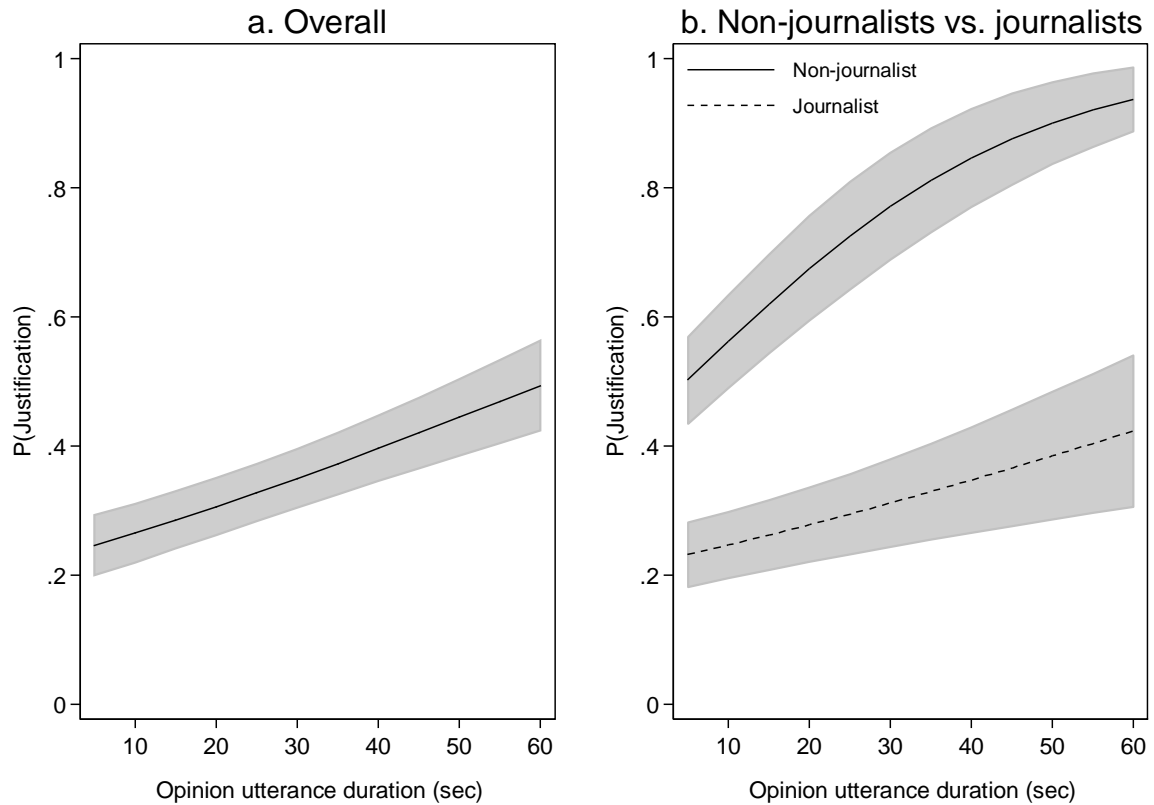
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**Table 1:** Logistic Multilevel Regression Models of Opinion Justification in Television News

	Opinion justification			
	Model 1:		Model 2: +	
	Utterance Duration Effect		Utterance Duration × Speaker Type	
	B (SE)	AME	B (SE)	AME
Type of speaker: journalist (base: non-journalist)			-1.09*** (0.15)	-.233
Utterance duration (sec)	0.02*** (0.00)	.004	0.05*** (0.01)	.007
Type of speaker: journalist × Utterance duration (sec)			-0.03*** (0.01)	-.007
<i>-2LL</i>	1834.68		1750.45	
<i>AIC</i>	1862.68		1778.45	
<i>N</i> (broadcast level)	101		101	
<i>N</i> (item level)	329		329	
<i>N</i> (utterance level)	1,559		1,559	

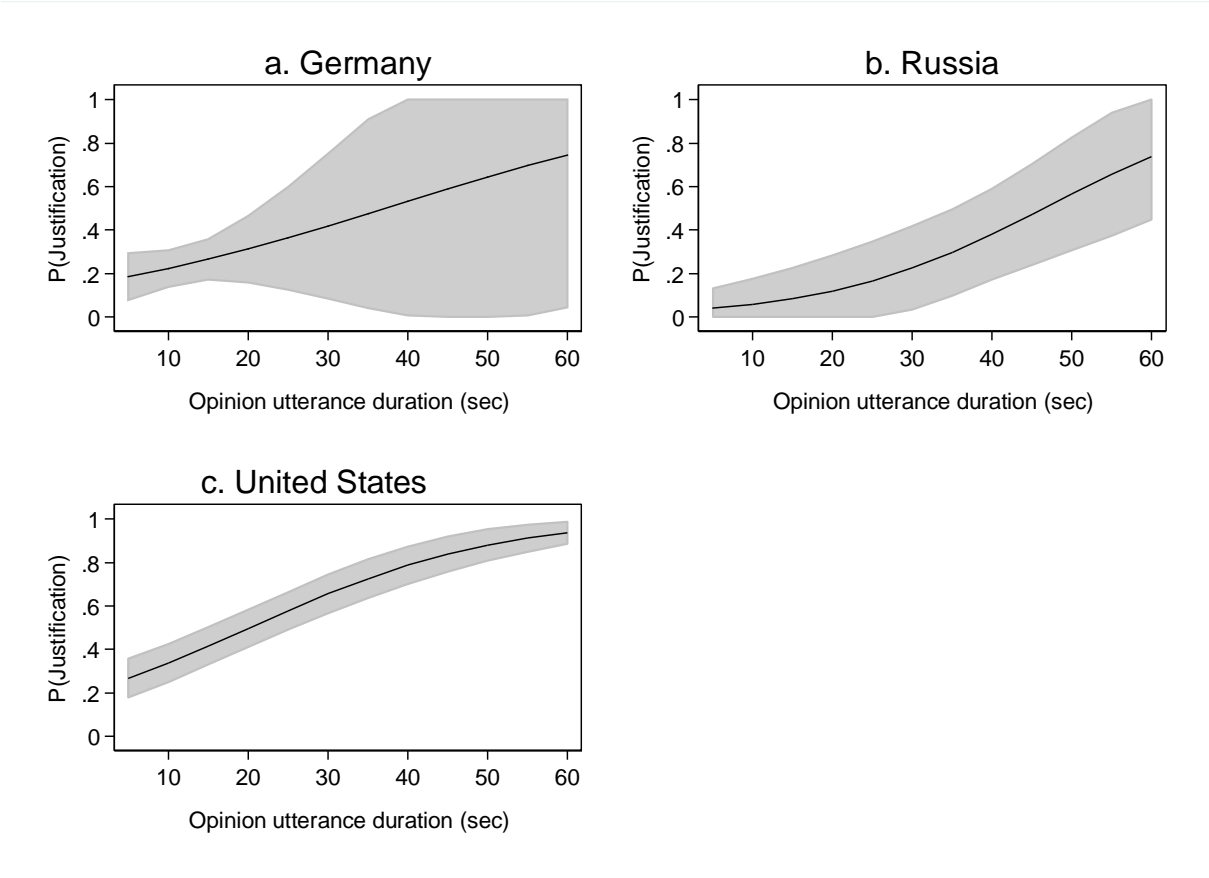
*Note:* Cell entries are fixed-effects estimates from random-intercept models using mean-variance adaptive Gauss-Hermite quadrature estimation. B (SE) denotes the unstandardized logit coefficient with standard error in parentheses; AME denotes the average marginal effect on predicted probabilities;  $-2LL$  denotes  $-2$  log likelihood; AIC denotes the Akaike Information Criterion. <sup>a</sup> Models 1 & 2 also included controls (not shown here) for the national context (Germany/Russia/US; dummy-coded), organizational context (commercial/nonprofit), type of speaker (civil society/political center/other; dummy-coded), meta-deliberation (yes/no), responsiveness (yes/no), news item type (dialogical vs. non-dialogical), decision-relatedness (yes/no), and opposing positions (yes/no). Specification of Model 2 was identical to Model 1, except for an alternative indicator of speaker type and the multiplicative interaction term. Empty model (Model 0) fit statistics:  $-2LL = 1911.30$ ,  $AIC = 1917.30$ . Utterance duration variable was centered at its mean in Model 2. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).





**Figure 1:** Average marginal effects of temporal context on opinion justification in the news, overall and journalist versus non-journalist utterances

*Note:* Plot a. displays predictive marginal probabilities of opinion justification (with 95% confidence interval band based on a normal approximation, using delta-method standard errors) based on Model 1 for all opinion-presenting utterances ( $n = 1,559$ ). Plot b. displays predictive marginal probabilities of opinion justification (with 95% confidence interval bands based on a normal approximation, using delta-method standard errors) based on Model 2 for all opinion-presenting utterances by (a) journalists and (b) non-journalists ( $n = 1,559$ ). For both groups, analysis included all primary (“direct”) utterances presenting own or quoted opinion. The interaction between type of speaker and utterance duration was statistically significant,  $z = -4.37$ ,  $p < .001$  (two-tailed).



**Figure 2:** Average marginal effects of temporal context on opinion justification in the news, by country

*Note:* Plots a.-c. display predictive marginal probabilities of opinion justification (with 95% confidence interval bands based on a normal approximation, using delta-method standard errors, out-of-scale values below 0 and above 1 trimmed) based on Model 1 for all opinion-presenting utterances by non-journalist speakers in German (n = 145), Russian (n = 71), and US-American television news (n = 542).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that normative democratic theory assumes every public justification to make equally valuable contributions to democratic discourse (to state the obvious, justifications can be sincere or insincere, truth-seeking or manipulative, and so on). In fact, theorists and journalists alike often note that it is one of the key democratic functions of journalism to generate and disseminate public reasons that are both grounded in fundamental values (Ettema, 2007) and nonpartisan, accurate, and fair-minded (Schudson, 2013) and thus *considered* in a strong normative sense. Such journalistic consideredness may also set apart the democratic quality of contributions to public discourse by journalists themselves, guided as they often are by these values, and their sources, who often play a more substantively self-interested role in public debates and may be less liable to strong norms of reasonableness. These differences have to be borne in mind when considering the mere volume of justification in the news, as this paper does.

<sup>2</sup> Note that a focus on the effects of utterance duration (sound-bite length) also captures any effects of item and broadcast durations on justification in the news that are mediated by utterance duration. A focus on the utterance level captures the consequences for justification in the news of a “trickle-down economics of time” in television newscasts while avoiding an artificial division of effects (through statistical control) into several levels that really are situated on the lowest level (the individual utterance). Importantly, the focus on utterances also avoids the risk of underestimating the true effect of utterance durations by subtracting any effect of higher level durations that work through them.

<sup>3</sup> One exception is a study of campaign coverage before the 2009 German national election that found shorter opinion utterances to be somewhat less likely to present a reason than their longer counterparts (Weinmann & Löb, 2012, p. 78).

<sup>4</sup> The following news programs were analyzed in this study. German programs: *Tagesschau* (ARD), *Tagesthemen* (ARD), *RTL aktuell* (RTL), *Nachrichten (n-tv)*; U.S. programs: *PBS NewsHour* (PBS), *World News* (ABC), *Anderson Cooper 360°* (CNN), *Fox Report* (Fox News Channel); Russian programs: *Novosti* (Pervy), *Novosti 24* (REN-TV), *Vesti. Seitschas* (Rossija 24). For the German public service station ARD, both prime-time evening newscasts were analyzed (*Tagesschau* and *Tagesthemen*).

<sup>5</sup> Of the three, Russia represents the most extreme case and at the time of data collection could have also been classified in some respects as a repressive authoritarian state. With regard to the media system, however, at the time, the commercial Russian channel in the sample, *REN-TV*, was not yet fully controlled by Russian state authorities or affiliates and partly owned by German media corporation Bertelsmann and thus expected to operate in an at least partly independent manner (see Online Appendix I). Autonomous, non-state-controlled justification in the news should therefore at least not have been completely repressed or otherwise controlled during the studied period.

<sup>6</sup> Because this is an interaction model, this effect is not a standard main effect, but a conditional effect of speaker type for an average-length opinion utterance (i.e., the value of the mean-centered utterance variable equals zero) (Jaccard, 2001). However, the corresponding standard main effect model (excluding the interaction term) shows that the standard (overall) main effect of speaker type is similar in size ( $AME = -.218$ ,  $z = -8.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ).