Media and Corruption: We Need to Talk about Television

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Introduction

A free, independent and diverse media scene has long been regarded as key ingredient of democracy and good governance. Greater media presence allows for the diffusion of information, which enables citizens to hold office holders accountable; in turn, politicians, aware of media scrutiny, are less likely to engage in corrupt behavior (e.g. Adsera et al. 2003; Pellegrini and Gerlagh 2008). Media freedom, also shows a robust relationship with corruption even when other determinants are taken into account (Brunetti and Weder 2003; Chowdhury 2004). However, readership figures do not tell us which kind of information circulates, and freedom indices typically reveal little about the nature of pressures the media are subjected to. As Lindst and Naurin (2010) note, media systems are connected to politics and economics in ways that challenge simple models. The “power of information” is, among other factors, shaped by the sanctioning capacity of citizens. For example, recent studies find that the impact of press freedom on corruption is conditioned by regime/level of democracy (Kalenborn and Lessmann 2013; Bhattacharyya and Hodler 2015). Yet, the findings with respect to which political institutions allow citizens to sanction corrupt behavior are contradictory (see review in Chang et al 2010.) Corruption studies are just beginning to investigate the interplay between media and institutions such as electoral systems or presidentialism vs parliamentarism (Camaj 2013).

Comparative investigations of linkages between media characteristics - other than presence and freedom - and corruption are still largely missing¹, though some findings point to the importance of the relationship between government/political parties and the media. Attempting to disentangle the effects of various forms of media control, Freille et al. (2007) find that the political dimension of Freedom House’s Media Freedom Index (rather than its legal control dimension) is what limits media capacity to act as a check on corruption. Public/party media ownership has been associated with lesser government performance (Djankov et al. 2003; Besley and Prat 2006; Besley and Burgess 2002). However, the data exploited in these studies hardly reflect the variations in characteristics of public broadcasters such as Rai Uno in Italy and

¹ The gap is nowhere more glaring than in wealthy democracies, where access to free media and citizens’ sanctioning capacity is typically high. The majority of previous comparative studies involved a larger number of countries; however, OECD countries almost all range in the highest quintile when it comes to measures of media access or freedom.
the BBC in the UK, for example. A more complete picture of the media is needed to further our understanding of the link between information and corruption.

We follow Freille et al. (2007) in trying to identify the characteristics of media that bear most on corruption. We use recent data on media systems in 33 European countries. The expert survey allows to gauge the extent to which outlets are influenced by politics, as well as the quality of content measured by argument diversity and information accuracy. Our results show that greater influence of politics and lower information quality of television news content – not newspapers - is associated with higher levels of corruption; the link is particularly strong in the case of public television.

**The media, politics and information quality**

The importance of the ‘political factor’ resonates with the large literature on the impact of partisanship on voter evaluation of politicians’ performance (measured by the state of the economy or corruption, see for example Eggers 2014 for a brief review) as well as with the work of scholars of media systems. The latter focus on links between politics and media in the form of political parallelism, ownership and regulation as well as journalists’ professionalism (eg. Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2000; Blumler, McLeod and Rosengren, 1992). However, comparative research is constrained by the shortage of standardized measures of the influence of politics on media. As a result, the bulk of comparative research is qualitative and focused on a limited number of cases. Quantitative works, often concerned with democratic output such as citizens’ information level, largely uses ownership categories such as public, mixed or private media systems, differentiated by the importance of public broadcasting services.\(^2\)

Public service broadcasters (PSB) have been found to contribute to information levels because of the higher quality public affairs programming (Holtz-Bacha and Norris 2001; Aarts and Semetko 2003; Toka and Popescu 2009). Shehata et al. (2015) find that in Sweden, inadvertent learning from exposure to public television was particularly relevant for the least interested viewers. Curran et al. (2009) find that PSB systems offer more hard and international news, fostering public knowledge, thus contributing to greater news consumption and narrowing the knowledge gap between the more and less-educated citizens than market driven or mixed

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\(^2\) Quantitative studies also feature market size but they are largely focused on the US due to detailed data available at the local market level in that country.
media systems. Yet not all public broadcasters offer the same type of content, nor promote knowledge about politics equally well; it depends on how well PSBs are insulated from government interference and market forces (Soroka et al. 2013; Hanretty 2010). Looking at the diversity of sources of stories aired by televisions channels in 11 countries, Tiffen et al. (2014) do not find meaningful differences in all contexts. Jenssen (2009) finds that exposure to public or private television makes no difference for political knowledge in Norway.

Private ownership on the other hand is often associated with ‘commercialism’, sensationalism, and ‘horse race coverage’ of electoral campaigns (Aalberg et al. 2011). Such characteristics are generally not deemed as conducive to the type of news that citizens need). But again, this expectation is not borne out in a systematic manner. Operationalizing horse race coverage by the number of references to polls is EU elections coverage in 27 countries, Banducci and Hanretty (2014) find that such references are more frequent in broadsheets (typically ‘quality newspapers’) than on commercial television. They also find greater reliance on polls in less competitive markets and where journalists are more professionalized.

A number of authors argue that newspapers are more important than television and radio when it comes to effects on citizens’ information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Newton 1999; Price and Zaller 1993), based on the idea that broadsheets offer more or higher quality content. However, it has been argued that television can more easily attract attention and facilitate information retention (Graber 2001, Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992, Kwak 1999). At the system level, Shehata and Stromberg (2011) find that media environments dominated by newspapers are associated with a greater impact of class on the news consumption gap between those are interesting in politics and those who are not. Overall, while many micro- and macro-level studies associate a specific media format(s) with content and effects, there is a need for further investigation.

Experimental studies (including those exploiting ‘natural’ or quasi-experimental conditions) shed light on the media-corruption relationship from another angle. Politicians exposed as corrupt in the media may lose some votes, but are not necessarily thrown out of power.

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3 Horse race type of coverage is based on considerations about the strategy of parties and candidates as well as opinion polls, as opposed to more substantial coverage of candidates’ views and issue positions. Elenbaas and de Vreese (2008) finds that it fosters political cynicism in young voters.

4 Another factor that matters in their study is party systems’ polarization (greater polarization is associated with greater use of polls in the media). ‘Politics as a game’ may well be a characteristics of coverage which attracts partisan readers (see Iyengar et al. 2004).
office. Chang et al.’s (2010) study of Italy after the Second World War demonstrate that media coverage about corrupt behavior did not lead to the electoral demise of politicians until the Mani pulite (Clean Hands) investigation received unparalleled media attention in the mid-1990s. Yet Ferraz and Finan (2008) find that Brasilian mayors’ reelection rates did decrease in the wake of media exposure, especially where corruption was more severe. In both cases, the effects were more pronounced where there were press circulation was higher/radio outlets more present.

Studies that directly manipulate media content also show mixed results. Reinnika and Svensson (2004, 2005) finds that an information campaign in national and local newspapers in Uganda contributed to curb graft by local officials; the publication of data pertaining to central grants resulted in schools located closer to a newspaper outlet receiving a greater share of the grant, and seeing student enrollment and test scores increase. In contrast, Humphreys and Weinstein (2012) find that Uganda politicians did not respond to country-wide dissemination of information about their performance; transparency did not impact their chances of reelection in the subsequent election either. Banerjee et al. (2010) found the same lack of impact for a pre-election campaign urging villagers in India not to vote for corrupt candidates. Chong et al. (2015) found only a small negative effect for information dissemination about corrupt mayors in Mexico; interestingly, when high levels of corruption were reported, challengers’ electoral scores were even more adversely affected than incumbents’; turnout also took a significant hit.

These results suggests that media effects on corruption are sensitive to a number of factors, one of them partisanship. In their analysis of the Italian case, Chang and his colleagues (2010) propose that a threshold in media coverage has to be reached to insure that corruption is electorally salient; they also speculate that the information must be credible, which might not be the case if it is disseminated by partisan media. Individual experimental and survey data also indicate that partisan attitudes influence how media information is received. Anduiza et al. (2013) find that partisanship colors citizens’ judgement, making them more tolerant of corrupt acts committed by members of their preferred parties. Larcinese and Sircar (2014) find the same moderating role of partisanship in the UK in the wake of the coverage received by a scandal about MPs’ expenses. In their operationalization of corruption scandals in Spain, Fernandez-Vazquez et al. (2014) do not consider accusations made by partisan actors, including “partisan-leaning newspapers[s].”
Few macro-level comparative studies of corruption have focused on media ownership. Observing that state ownership often leads to bias coverage in favor of the government, Djankov et al. (2003) investigate the link between governance and state/public media ownership in a cross section of nearly 100 countries. They find that state ownership, especially for newspapers, translate into more corruption. According to Gentzkow, Glaeser, and Goldin (2004), the development of a nonpartisan press, allowed by increasing sales and competition, ensured that newspapers published more and less biased reports about corruption scandals in the United States in the 20th century.

These suggest that partisan news is bad news when it comes to holding politicians accountable, in part or mostly because it provides less, or incomplete, or inaccurate information to citizens. But again this may apply differently based on media systems’ characteristics. In the highly partisan Spanish media system, Baumgartner and Chaqués-Bonanfont (2015) find that two newspapers with partisan audience devote significantly greater space to cover corruption scandals and other faults of the rival party, in an otherwise similar agenda. As noted by Dunaway et al. (2015, 17), ‘media bias’ has come to designate anything between the “willful distortion of fact to hard and critical yet ‘earnest’ coverage”. Yet the two are conceptually quite different. This means that, whenever possible, we should treat political influence and other aspects of information quality as distinct factors. For example, Dunaway and her colleagues find that slanted stories offer more information about issues in campaigns news in US local, mainstream newspapers. That is not to say that political influence and information quality cannot be connected. As the results below will show, in the real world, they are often related.

**Data and hypotheses**

We rely on the Control of Corruption Index (CCI) from the World Bank Governance Indicators (2009) as our dependent variable. It builds on a large number of data sources, which include expert and citizen perceptions; it thus gauges a wide range of aspects of corruption (see Bauhr and Grimes 2014; these authors also provide useful remarks on the validity of the CCI).  

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6 It is common for measures of governance/corruption to include elements linked to the media. It is also the case of the CCI, with a survey question about corruption in the media taken from the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer Survey). The advantage of an index combining a larger number of factors is to render the weight of the media element much less significant, rendering it less likely that the measure is directly connected to
The independent variables come from the EMSS expert survey conducted in 33 countries in 2009 and 2010 (Popescu, Gosselin and Santana Pereira 2010). The survey queried over 650 experts on aspects such as media partisanship, information accuracy, diversity of arguments available, journalist professionalism. Most questions pertained to media systems as a whole; others asked respondents to evaluate up to ten media outlets offering political coverage on a daily basis in 2009 in each country (3 to 5 TV channels and 3 to 5 newspapers with at least a 5% audience/readership in each country).

We use the battery of questions pertaining to specific outlets, more precisely the questions aimed at evaluating partisanship, advocacy, accuracy and diversity of views in 289 individual outlets in the 33 countries included in the survey. The question about media partisanship read thusly: “How far is the political coverage of each of the following media outlets influenced by a party or parties to which it is close?” (see Table A1 in the Appendix for question wording and reliability scores). Following Popescu and Toka (2012) we combine these four questions into two scales: the Political Commitment scale measures the extent to which party and ideology colors public affairs coverage; the Information Commitment scale gauges the quality of information based on the factual accuracy as well as the diversity (balance) of political views available in each outlet’s coverage (see Table 1 for correlations between the scales). The Political/Information Commitment labels reflect the previously mentioned idea that if misinformation can be due to partisanship, complete and accurate information and politically neutral coverage need not go hand in hand. For example, tabloids may provide a poorly researched yet ‘neutral’ coverage of politics; similarly, the content of a reference newspaper can be politically colored, yet provide multiple points of view and be the product of serious fact-checking process). These two dimensions take into account that partisanship and information quality are key elements in the causal mechanisms proposed by macro and micro level studies of media effects on corruption. While cross national data does not allow a direct test of either of these mechanisms (experimental data is better suited for that purpose), the EMSS offers the possibility to deepen our understanding of the role of the media environments with respect to corruption; the media remain an overwhelmingly national affair, structured by language, focus day-to-day variations in media content. We also used Transparency International’s index as a dependent variable and obtained similar results to those presented below.
on national politics/events, distribution networks, as well as the influence they have on each other’s coverage).

Unlike Popescu and Toka however, we distinguish between newspapers and television, as well as between private and public television channels. The media and corruption literature has almost entirely focused on the press; yet television remains an important, if not the main source of political news for most citizens. While we make no formal hypothesis pertaining to the links between specific outlet types and corruption control, the works reviewed in the previous section showed that we can certainly refine our knowledge by examining both types of information sources (TV\newspapers, public\private) separately.

The EMSS data also includes system-level evaluations of journalistic professionalism, as well as external diversity (the extent to which it is possible to find a variety of views in the media), as well as evaluations of information depth, contextualization, sensationalism, personalization, and the presentation of politics as a game or a horse race. While these evaluations do not pertain to specific outlet type or ownership, they provide a useful complementary check on our interpretations of the results for the Political and Information Commitment dimensions.

Finally, as controls, we use level of democracy (an average of the Freedom House and Polity measures of democracy) and wealth (GDP in 2000)\(^7\), which have been systematically linked to corruption in previous macro studies. They are entered in OLS regression equations with each characteristic of media systems taken separately given the limited number of countries for which data is available.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Along with the CCI index, level of democracy and GDP are taken from the Quality of Government dataset (Teorell et al. 2012).

\(^8\) We also conducted analyses with party system polarization and competition (we used Banducci and Hanretty’s (2014) measure of competition in media market to assess whether having more effective players on the media scene made a difference). The results were not significant (including the coefficients of various interactions terms). This was to insure that the results we observe for the media variables are not entirely or mostly attributable to characteristics of the party system. Obviously, media and politics can be more or less tightly enmeshed, depending on media systems; the relationship is often anchored in traditions and historical developments (see Hallin and Mancini 2004). The data we use aimed precisely at attempting to take this relationship into account in a quantitative manner.
Based on the existing literature, we hypothesize that:

1) a stronger information commitment will be associated with better control of corruption;
2) a stronger political commitment will be associated with lower control of corruption.

**Results**

Table 1 displays the bivariate correlations between the Political and the Information Commitment scales (Table A2 in the Appendix displays a fuller set of correlations). Like Popescu and Toka (2012) who proposed the two dimensions, we note that certain characteristics of media tend to go together. Presenting information for television and newspapers separately yields useful insight: first, political bias often affects both television and newspapers, thus coloring whole media systems. Second, more politically biased media television outlets – but interestingly not newspapers - typically display lower commitment to information quality gauged by factual accuracy and viewpoints diversity. Such linkages between media aspects (as well as with those of the wider political environment) characterize the ideal types proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to compare media systems in the western world.

< Table 1 >

In Table 2, the Baseline model shows that the relationship between level of democracy and wealth on the one hand and corruption on the other is strong, in line with previous works on the determinants of corruption. Then, the two dimensions of media performance assessed in this paper, Political and Information Commitments, are subsequently added to the Baseline model to compare their contribution to overall variance (Tables 2 and 3). The results show that both dimensions are important for corruption control. A larger influence of parties and an advocacy stance is linked to less control of corruption, while a more robust commitment to presenting accurate information and all sides of an argument is linked to better corruption control. However, the media outlets that matter in this respect are only television channels, and not newspapers. This confirms the importance of considering these types of outlets separately when trying to assess the impact of media contexts. The different outcomes for broadcasting outlets and the press may be due to a number of reasons. One might be historical traditions; after all, newspapers...
started out as partisan affairs and in many media systems, have kept a partisan/ideological coloring. There are also typically more newspapers than television channels in a media system; the audience of the former is likely to be more segmented than the latter’s, conferring greater weight to television news content. Public television, which in some countries commands a very significant audience, has yet a distinct status, imbued (at least in theory) with a civic orientation.

Because of this status of public broadcasting services, we also present the analysis for public and private TV channels separately in the right side columns of Tables 2 and 3. Political Commitment of public TV channels adds the most to the level of explained variance in our measure of corruption; private channels also matter, albeit less so. Where information quality is concerned, it is public television outlets alone that drive the positive association between TV Information Commitment and control of corruption; the coefficient for private television outlets is not significant. These results highlight the key relationship between the performance of public broadcasting and holding corruption in check.

< Tables 2 and 3 >

Other questions featured in the EMSS allow us to further check on the robustness of the association found between the political and informational aspects of media performance. The measures are available at the system level only (and not for each outlet like the variables behind Political and Information Commitments). When journalists’ political orientations are public knowledge, control of corruption is significantly lower. It is also the case when “media outlets in general succeed in serving as watchdogs scrutinizing the actions of government official on behalf of citizens”. External diversity (the presence of all major political opinions) in broadcasting outlets is significantly associated with better control of corruption control; however, external diversity in newspapers is not.

Still at the system level, whether tabloid and quality newspapers cover the news differently or not did not display a significant coefficient; nor did the question gauging the reliance of the media in general on a more or less wide range of specialists to present information and analyses, nor questions about the depth/richness of media information. The EMSS includes a

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9 The results pertaining to these complementary, system level media characteristics are not shown but are available from the authors.
Commercialisation Index gauging personalization, sensationalism and gamification of the depiction of politics in national media systems. Taken separately, these three variables do not pass the significance threshold. However, the index displays a significant negative coefficient, albeit only at the .1 level.

Potentially anchored as much in the political and the information dimensions, journalists’ professionalism (gauged with three questions about journalists’ ethical motivations, excellence criteria and training quality) and overall media credibility in a country make the strongest contributions to overall explained variance in corruption control than any other individual media characteristics considered in this analysis (always in addition to the Baseline model). Overall, the information gleaned at the system level supports the results shown in Tables 2 and 3: politicization matters most (in a bad way), and information quality too (in a good way), but to a lesser extent. And it is television that stands behind the relationships, not newspapers.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we investigate in further details the aspects of media that might be at work behind the oft noted relationship between media and corruption in macro studies. The expert survey data we used provides comparable measures of characteristics of 289 media outlets in 33 countries in Europe. In this preliminary analysis, we relied on two dimensions of media performance for which up to ten outlets were individually evaluated in each country. The analysis shows that politicized news content spells bad news for corruption control, while information quality is associated with less corruption. However, this applies only to television (and especially public television), and not to newspapers.

It is hard to tell whether it is because of political commitment per se in television that corruption is less under control, or because political commitment is often the companion of less accurate and less diverse information in the 33 countries involved in the analysis. Despite the fact that this cross national study cannot reveal much about causality, it does suggest citizens need both credible (not overly partisan) and quality information to hold politicians accountable. The results are compatible with the criticism addressed to the principal-agent mechanism; the idea that once the media tells about corruption citizens will activate sanctioning mechanisms is too simple. This mechanism supposes that citizens consider all corruption information in the
same manner, no matter the media source or their own beliefs; we know from survey and experimental studies that it is not the case.

Our next step is to bring together a quantitative analysis and a more detailed qualitative examination of how media characteristics – partisanship and information quality as well as other aspects covered by the EMSS - combine in patterns that may be linked to corruption in different settings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political commitment TV</th>
<th>Political Commitment Newspapers</th>
<th>Information Commitment TV</th>
<th>Information commitment Newspapers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>-.622***</td>
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<td>-254</td>
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<td>Information Commitment TV</td>
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Table 2. Political Commitment and Control of Corruption (OLS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline (controls only)</th>
<th><strong>Political Commitment TV</strong></th>
<th><strong>Political Commitment Newspapers</strong></th>
<th><strong>Political Commitment Public TV</strong></th>
<th><strong>Political Commitment Private TV</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>beta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.024</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.006</td>
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<td>.326</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.312</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real GDP (2000)</td>
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<td>.000</td>
<td>.496</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.679</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable of interest</td>
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<td>.002</td>
<td>-0.086</td>
<td>.291</td>
<td>-0.304</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted Rsq</td>
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<td>.860</td>
<td>.805</td>
<td>.869</td>
<td>.843</td>
</tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Table 3. Information Commitment and Control of Corruption (OLS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Information Commitment TV</th>
<th>Information Commitment Newspapers</th>
<th>Information Commitment Public TV</th>
<th>Information Commitment Private TV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beta</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>Democracy (FH/Polity 2009)</td>
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References


Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992


Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008


Shehata ,Shehata, David Nicolas Hopmann , Lars Nord , and Jonas Höijer. 2015. Political Communication 32 (3) : 18


Appendix

Table A1. Media Characteristics – question wording and reliability scores (EMSS 2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Question wording</th>
<th>Item reliability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>How far is the political coverage of each of the following media outlets influenced by a party or parties to which it is close? (0=not at all; 10=strongly)</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>To what extent does each advocate particular views and policies? (0=never; 10=always)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>To what extent do these media provide accurate information on facts backed by credible sources and expertise? (0=never; 10=always)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>To what extent does each present equally well the arguments of all sides in political debates? (0=never; 10=always)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Political Commitment**: the weighted national mean of the sum of the *Partisanship* and *Advocacy* variables, themselves the mean expert rating of (all TV, public TV, private TV and newspapers) outlets on the questions in Table A1 above. The weight of each outlet was proportional to its 2009 audience size reported in European Audiovisual Observatory (2010) and, for newspapers, circulation as reported in Zenith (2010). In the EMSS data, the corresponding variables are ‘partall’, ‘partpbtv’, ‘partprtv’ and ‘partnews’.

**Information Commitment**: the weighted national mean of the sum of the *Accuracy* and *Diversity* variables, themselves the mean expert rating of (all TV, public TV, private TV and newspapers) outlets on the questions in Table A1 above. Weighting was similar to Political Commitment. In the EMSS data, the corresponding variables are ‘qualall’, ‘qualpbtv’, ‘qualprtv’ and ‘qualnews’.
Table A2. Bivariate correlations - Media Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partisanship TV</th>
<th>Partisanship Newspapers</th>
<th>Advocacy TV</th>
<th>Advocacy Newspapers</th>
<th>Argument Diversity TV</th>
<th>Argument Diversity Newspapers</th>
<th>Accuracy TV</th>
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<td>Accuracy Newspapers</td>
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Note: Only significant coefficients appear in the table.