



From Couch to Poll: Media Content and the Value of Local Information

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Department of Statistics, Ludwigstr. 33, Room 144

and online via Zoom (Link)

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We study the impact of media content on the political engagement of citizens and politicians. The Canadian media landscape evolved as a dual system of public and private broadcasters, where content systematically varied across broadcaster type. Until 1958, policy prioritized expanding coverage to the largest number of Canadians by inhibiting competition in television markets – Canadians received public or private television, but never both, allowing us to separate the impact of public vs. private content within the same media type. Using newly digitized data on the timing and location of television transmitter installations, we map the public-private rollout of television onto electoral districts. We use these data to explore the impact of television content on two aspects of the political landscape: voters and politicians. For identification, we construct a novel measure of expected treatment from a set of randomized television networks, conditioning each network on the correct number of transmitters in a given year and their sampling probability. Our estimates rely on plausibly exogenous variation in signal strength above or below expected signal strength. We find that television's introduction reduced voter turnout, but this effect is driven exclusively by content in public television markets. We then show that private broadcasters produce more local informational content than public broadcasters, with no discernible difference in entertainment content across broadcaster type. The results suggest that the substitution away from other media focused on local informational content has no impact in private television markets, given the local relevance of private television content. To substantiate the impact of local news, we leverage 4-million parliamentary speeches from elected politicians in the House of Commons to construct various measures of speech localness. We find that politicians in private television districts speak more often and more intensively about the local communities they represent than politicians in public districts. We also find that politicians are more willing to vote against party lines on behalf of their constituents in private television districts, suggesting that politicians are held accountable by locally relevant news in terms of their rhetoric and actions in parliament.

**Biography:**

Mathias studied at the University of Mannheim from 2007 to 2010, at the Goethe University Frankfurt from 2010-2012, and completed his PhD in Stockholm in 2018. Since then, he has been employed as a Post Doc at the Chair of Economic History under the supervision of Prof. Davide Cantoni. The focus of his research is the evaluation of large amounts of data. For example, he analyzed satellite data for the entire western USA (Bühler 2022) and the share of women in the human capital elite of Germany since the 8th century (Bühler et al 2023). Mathias teaches the lecture and seminar 'Causal Inference' and regularly participates in seminars and lunches.