

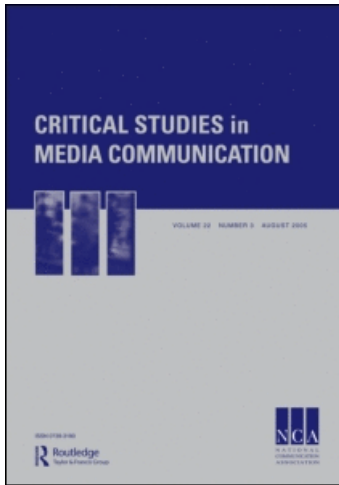
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Frame Diversity and Citizen Competence: Towards a Critical Approach to News Quality

Mauro P. Porto

This article identifies two basic models of citizen competence (the ignorant citizen and the rational citizen) in which normative theories of journalism and standards of news quality are grounded. I propose the interpreting citizen as an alternative view of citizen competence. According to this model, the availability of diverse interpretive frames in the public realm, particularly in the news media, is an important precondition for enhancing citizen competence. Given flaws in existing standards for evaluating journalism quality, the news media should be judged in terms of their performance in presenting diverse interpretive frames, rather than in terms of informational goals.

Keywords: Citizen Competence; Framing; News Standards; News Quality; Diversity

The quality of modern democratic systems and the role of mass media in those systems have long been major topics of public and academic concern. Discussions of media and democracy have often been guided by standards that are used to judge the performance of both citizens and social institutions, including news media. Nevertheless, theories of democracy and theories of communication frequently neglect the central role played by normative assumptions about citizen competence. Even though political and media theories are grounded in specific understanding of the conditions that facilitate or prevent the fulfillment of civic roles, these standards are rarely scrutinized in detail. Because normative perspectives on citizen competence are decisive in shaping theoretical frameworks and research agendas, I identify major

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approaches in this field and propose an alternative model that focuses on the role of the news media in shaping citizens' ability to perform civic roles.

This article discusses some of the main positions in the debates about citizen competence (see Elkin & Soltan, 1999; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2001; Marcus & Hanson, 1993; Weissbert, 2001). Thus, the focus is not on the concept of citizenship, but rather on the specific conditions that allow or prevent effective civic participation. As many authors have pointed out, normative assumptions about democracy always shape, implicitly or explicitly, studies of news and communication (Baker, 1998; Bucy & D'Angelo, 2004; Bybee, 1999; Peters, 1989; Stromback, 2005). I offer a more solid normative basis for journalism research by focusing on the question of how the news media facilitate or impede citizen competence. This is important, since we are still a long way from a coherent normative theory of journalism (Bucy & D'Angelo, 2004, p. 11; Schudson, 1995, p. 29).

After identifying two basic models of citizen competence (the *ignorant citizen* and the *rational citizen*), I demonstrate how contemporary standards of news quality are rooted in these normative theories of citizenship. I then propose the *interpreting citizen* model as an alternative framework of citizen competence. According to this model, the availability of diverse interpretive frames in the public realm, particularly in the news media, is an important precondition for enhancing citizens' ability to interpret political reality in a consistent way. I use this model to propose an alternative approach to news quality, the *News Diversity* standard. This standard judges the performance of the news media in terms of the presentation of diverse interpretive frames, rather than in terms of informational goals.

Models of Citizen Competence

Classical democratic theory assumes that well-informed citizens develop rational preferences and that these preferences shape the actions and policies of democratic governments. Nevertheless, research has generally found very low levels of information among the public, leading to the "paradox of mass politics," the gap between the expectation of an informed citizenry put forward by democratic theory and the disconcerting reality of widespread ignorance revealed by surveys (Neuman, 1986). This paradox can also be expressed as the "democratic dilemma," the fact that the people who are called upon to make reasoned choices may not be capable of doing so (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

The paradox of mass politics leads to an important question: how are we to solve the democratic dilemma? I argue that two main models of citizen competence have competed as explanations since the early twentieth century, presenting specific answers to this fundamental puzzle. On one hand, the ignorant citizen model affirms that citizens' low levels of information prevent them from effectively performing their civic roles. On the other, the rational citizen model states that low levels of political knowledge do not necessarily undermine citizen competence, since citizens rely on a variety of shortcuts that allow them to compensate for lack of information.

The Ignorant Citizen

Several observers of contemporary political processes are pessimistic regarding the democratic dilemma. According to Lippmann (1922), one of the first to stress the shortcomings of the process of public opinion formation, people develop their understandings of the world in an indirect and distorted way, based on “pseudo-environments,” or false fictions about their environment. Lippmann argued that ordinary citizens do not have time to pay attention to public matters and that their perception of the information provided by the press is distorted. Because most individuals do not have much information about public affairs, for democratic systems to work well is difficult, or even impossible. Although less pessimistic, some scholars have also called attention to the democratic dilemma. Schumpeter (1976), for example, argued that a reduced sense of responsibility explains ordinary citizens’ ignorance and lack of judgment in domestic and foreign affairs. In his view, typical citizens drop to lower levels of mental performance as soon as they enter the political field, arguing in a primitive and affective way.

With the development of new methods in the social sciences for the study of public opinion, particularly survey research, these diagnoses of low levels of information among the mass public gained an empirical basis. In a study of the 1948 presidential election, Columbia University researchers argued that in a democracy citizens are expected to be well informed about political affairs; they are supposed to know the relevant facts, the alternatives proposed, and their consequences (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1986). By such standards, the author concluded, U.S. voters fell short, since they were not well informed on the details of that campaign and their perceptions were colored by emotion.¹

University of Michigan researchers also highlighted the low levels of information and political sophistication among mass publics (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964). Converse (1964), for example, argued that the distribution of information among citizens was “astonishing,” since very little information went beyond the top level of ideologically sophisticated individuals. Later, Converse (1975) stressed that the most basic fact of studies of public opinion and electoral behavior is the extremely low level of information on public matters. The Michigan group argued that Americans do not form their preferences based on coherent ideologies, but rely instead on shortcuts like party identification to make their political choices.

Research indicates, then, that citizens’ low levels of information essentially prevent them from effectively performing their civic roles. The solution frequently suggested has been the adoption of elitist institutions, or the development of a concept of democracy centered on the elite. Lippmann (1922), for example, argued that a representative government cannot work successfully without an independent expert organization to make the “invisible facts” comprehensible to the electorate. Such an organization would avoid the “intolerable and unworkable fiction” that every citizen must acquire competent opinions about all public affairs. For Lippmann (1922), political scientists, and not the press, would be capable of building such an

organization. Because of his focus on elites and experts, Lippmann did not provide a comprehensive solution to the democratic dilemma. His realist model of democracy ignored the role of political parties and civic groups in articulating opinions and in providing collective bases for political action (Schudson, 1995).²

Dewey also stressed the important role of experts in solving the problems of public opinion. According to Dewey (1991), in a work originally published in 1927, all important governmental issues are too technically complex for ordinary citizens and experts are better equipped to deal with them. Otherwise, decision by majority (“counting heads”) transforms the public into a ghost that obscures, confuses, and misleads governmental action in a disastrous way. Nevertheless, contrary to Lippmann, Dewey recognized that an emphasis on the role of experts involves important dangers.³ According to Dewey, a government by experts who are not accountable to the citizenry cannot “be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few” (p. 208). The most important task would be to improve the methods and conditions for debate, discussion, and persuasion. Nevertheless, Dewey never specified how these conditions could be improved in the context of complex representative democracies.

Schumpeter’s (1976) solution was to replace classical theory with a competitive theory of democracy. Democracy is then defined as the set of procedural rules, the “method” that allows sections of the elite to acquire power through a competitive struggle for votes. He simplified the role of citizens as giving a mandate to the elite faction they prefer. By applying market theory, Schumpeter tried to reconcile elite theories with democratic theory.

The Rational Citizen

One of the positions taken about the democratic dilemma affirms that the public’s low levels of information are serious obstacles to citizen competence. Nevertheless, several authors have argued that ignorant citizens can make coherent and reasoned choices. One of the first to develop an argument along this line, Key (1966) offered an “unorthodox” reading of survey data: Voters are not fools; in general, they behave in a rational and responsible way in the electoral process. Even those who shift their allegiance to different parties between elections base their decisions on issues, consider the actions of the government, and hold coherent preferences. Expanding Key’s approach and looking at five decades of public opinion surveys in the United States, Page and Shapiro (1992) rejected the view that low levels of information necessarily lead to volatile preferences. They argued that low levels of information seem to affect the capability of some people to make reasoned choices, but at the aggregate level opinions are stable and rational; the electorate makes consistent decisions across time (see also Converse, 1990).

The notion that citizens are competent despite widespread political ignorance gained strength among political scientists with the emergence of rational choice theory in the 1950s and the work of Downs (1957). Rational choice theorists have argued that “low-information rationality” allows citizens to develop reasoned

preferences. One central aspect of Downs' argument is that the search for information has its own costs (in time, attention, effort, etc.) and the benefits are not always evident. To make rational choices with the least effort possible, voters use shortcuts in their search for information. For example, identification with a political party or the adoption of an ideology replaces the need for more detailed political information. Based on Downs and other sources, political scientists developed a new approach to public opinion research, known as *heuristics*, which focuses on how "cues" or "rules of thumb" function as shortcuts in reasoning, allowing citizens to compensate for lack of information (Ferejohn & Kuklinski, 1990; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1994; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1994). Popkin (1994) presented one of the most important arguments in the development of the notion of "low-information rationality." Referring to primary elections in the United States, he argued that voters use different kinds of shortcuts to evaluate, obtain, and store information. According to Popkin, when taking political decisions, people incorporate what they have learned in their previous experiences, daily lives, media exposure, and electoral campaigns. In this way, despite low levels of information, their decisions are based on substantive issues in the political process.

Another version of the rational citizen model emerged more recently, based on a critique of the informed citizen ideal. When analyzing American civic life since the War of Independence, Schudson (1998) showed how specific institutions and political practices led to particular notions of the "good citizen." The informed citizen ideal was promoted by the reforms of the Progressive Era and since then has acquired a dominant position in political and popular discourses. Schudson argued that such a model failed to solve the relation between popular and expert knowledge and that it needs to be modified. Schudson (1998) suggested that the obligation of citizens to know enough should be understood as an obligation to monitor the environment. *Monitorial citizens* scan rather than read the informational environment; their function is to watch the political environment, not to collect information.

In sum, different versions of the rational citizen model tend to agree that low levels of information do not prevent people from making rational choices. They lead to the conclusion that the electorate is capable of fulfilling the expectations of democratic theory, at least in relative terms. Contrary to the ignorant citizen model, which tends to propose elitist solutions to the democratic dilemma, the rational citizen approach assumes that the democratic system works well despite citizens' low levels of information. Not surprisingly, scholars in this tradition tend to propose marginal changes to existing institutions and systems, or propose no changes at all.

Why are theories following the rational citizen model so complacent as regards the political system? One main reason is a normative bias which tends to assume that democratic institutions and systems work well. Issues of economic, political, and symbolic inequality are practically absent from these models. There is a surprising lack of concern with the fact that privileged groups may influence the process by which citizens' preferences develop, such that the process sustains their own positions in political and social hierarchies.

Standards of News Quality

A vital premise of this article is that contemporary assessments of news quality are rooted in these models of citizen competence. The standards that scholars apply to evaluate news making processes and institutions are based on specific understandings of civic roles. Nevertheless, current normative approaches to journalism rely on models of citizen competence that have failed to provide a satisfactory answer to the democratic dilemma. In the specific case of the news media, only more recently have scholars started to investigate the relationship between paradigms of citizen competence and the normative standards frequently used to judge the quality of news (Bennett, 2003; Graber, 2003, 2004; Patterson, 2003; Zaller, 2003). Although these efforts present valuable conceptual frameworks that connect the fields of democratic theory, political psychology, and journalism studies, they have several important shortcomings.

The Full News Standard

Zaller (2003) starts with the question: what clear normative perspective should we use to judge the quality of news? According to Zaller, most scholars answer this question by assuming the Full News standard, which affirms that the news “should provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day, including the performance of top public officials” (p. 110). The Full News standard has its origins in the ignorant citizen model of citizen competence outlined above. Zaller (2003) correctly pointed out that this standard relies heavily on the informed citizen ideal promoted during the Progressive Era. As a result, the Full News standard tends to judge the quality of news in terms of its success or failure in building an informed citizenry. When considering the performance of the news media in those terms, scholars usually present pessimistic assessments. Since the news media tend to present information in a distorted way, by personalizing, dramatizing, or decontextualizing the important events, they fail to improve the public’s information about public affairs (Bennett, 1998; Patterson, 1994).

The Burglar Alarm Standard

After arguing that the Full News standard makes heavy and unrealistic demands on citizens, Zaller went on to outline a less stringent approach. Based on McCubbins and Schwartz’s (1984) notion of “fire alarms” and on Schudson’s (1998) monitorial citizen, Zaller developed the Burglar Alarm standard as a more appropriate framework. According to this perspective, journalists have the responsibility to call attention to urgent matters through noisy and excited tones. Alarms going off at irregular intervals are able to catch the attention of monitorial citizens, rousing them to action. According to Zaller, by following the Burglar Alarm standard the media

would allow citizens to acquire the information necessary to hold politicians accountable.

Also following Schudson's footsteps, Graber (2004) argued that the monitorial citizen is a "realistic, politically sound concept" (p. 563). Since human capacity to absorb information is limited, Graber called on scholars to abandon outdated paradigms that impose unrealistic expectations on the citizenry. She concluded that the quantity and quality of the news that various media supply is adequate for citizenship needs, since they perform their obligations on a "low-information diet, supported by an array of well-developed decisions shortcuts" (p. 563).

As I have already noted, the monitorial citizen model that inspires Zaller and Graber is part of the rational citizen paradigm of citizen competence. Schudson's (1998) critique of the informed citizen ideal is linked to the notion that low information levels do not prevent people from performing their civic duties effectively. Although Schudson does not ground the monitorial citizen in a specific intellectual tradition, Zaller (2003) located its origin in theories that apply the notion of heuristics and other similar effort-saving techniques. Thus, the monitorial citizen and the Burglar Alarm news standard are both rooted in the rational citizen model of citizen competence.

Conceptual Problems in the Theorization of News Standards

Existing standards about news quality make significant contributions to more comprehensive normative theories of journalism. Nevertheless, they have several important blind spots that limit their ability to solve some of the most fundamental problems in the fields of citizen competence and media performance. Zaller is correct when stating that the Full News standard makes heavy and unrealistic demands on citizens. One of the central problems is the standard's expectation—rooted on the ignorant citizen model of citizen competence—that the central task of the news media is to build an informed citizenry. The Full News standard reflects a "transmission view" of communication, which focuses on the role of the media in imparting, sending, or giving information to others (Carey, 1989). As Jones (2006) puts it, trustworthy and unbiased information about politics is a necessary and important ingredient of citizenship; however, studies of media and citizenship frequently ignore the fact that there are many reasons why citizens engage in communicative acts that are either unrelated or tangential to the desire to be informed. Among the communicative processes necessary to democratic citizenship, critical media scholars have emphasized the role of the news media in ensuring the public's access to a diversity of frameworks of interpretation, especially those originating from subordinate groups (Curran, 1996; Murdock, 1999). Thus, one of the shortcomings of the Full News standard is its focus on information and consequent neglect of the links between political power and the struggles over interpretive frameworks.

The Burglar Alarm standard also has several detractors. For example, Zaller's framework has been criticized for neglecting the problem of "false alarms," or the

presence of “dramatic coverage that alerts us to problems that are often inconsequential or simply nonexistent” (Bennett, 2003, p. 132). Zaller does not consider the fact that uncontrolled frenzies and sensationalism tend to become more frequent with the news media’s growing focus on soft news, which undermines their ability to sound the relevant alarms (Patterson, 2003). The Burglar Alarm standard has also been criticized for not providing instances in which a public problem exists but no alarm sounds (Bennett, 2003). Zaller argued that government officials or civic groups will force the press to sound alarms when it fails to act. His framework is therefore based on the problematic assumption that the system is functioning well, despite evidence showing that the news media tend to react to a problem only when government officials and other elites engage in public conflicts over issues (Bennett, 2003).

The Burglar Alarm standard has a third important flaw not noted above. Similar to the Full News approach, the alarm metaphor neglects issues of power and political inequality. For example, it does not specify the conditions for effective monitoring. In particular, it does not consider the possibility that privileged groups might shape citizens’ environment in a way that prevents them from identifying issues that deserve their reaction. Groups with political, economic, and social influence have the ability to eliminate from the public agenda issues that are harmful to their own interests (see Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). They can also legitimate and naturalize proposals that harm the public interest and sustain particularistic demands (see Lukes, 1974), making it difficult for monitorial citizens to identify any need to react.

In neglecting power and inequality, the Burglar Alarm standard presents an unsatisfactory conceptualization of the environment in which citizens live. One of the problems is its reliance on the heuristics approach, which assumes that cues or rules of thumb function as shortcuts in reasoning, allowing citizens to compensate for lack of information. But as Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) observed, the heuristics model ignores the fact that cues which could work as shortcuts might be missing from citizens’ environment. Empirical studies of cue-taking have consistently shown that when researchers provide people with statements from political leaders or prominent groups in surveys or controlled experiments, participants readily take the cues. In the political world, however, “usable cues are not regularly available” (pp. 156–157).

To be effective in solving the democratic dilemma, standards of news quality should be able to verify which cues, if any, are available in the news coverage. These standards should also investigate how social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities restrict the range of shortcuts provided by the news media. As I show next, the *interpreting citizen* model offers more appropriate tools to investigate which interpretive frames are presented by news reports, how these frames are organized within each report, and how these symbolic patterns affect citizens’ ability to perform their civic duties.

The Interpreting Citizen Model

As we have seen, previous models of citizen competence have failed to provide a comprehensive solution to the democratic dilemma. The interpreting citizen,

I believe, offers a more solid normative basis for the development of standards of news quality. According to the interpreting citizen model, ordinary citizens can fulfill the expectations of democratic theory if two conditions are met: (1) such expectations are understood in terms of citizens' ability to interpret political reality in a consistent way, rather than be well informed; and (2) a diversity of interpretive frames are available in the public realm, particularly in the news media. In relation to the first condition, it is necessary to specify what makes someone capable of interpreting political reality in a consistent way. In relation to the second, it is necessary to explain how to ensure a plurality of interpretive frames in the news media.

The Menu of Choices and Citizen Competence

The interpreting citizen model builds on the heuristics approach by stressing that mental shortcuts allow citizens to develop consistent preferences about public matters, even when they have low levels of political knowledge. But how to define consistency? This is an important question, since the concept has not been used in a consistent way in the literature (Sniderman & Bullock, 2004). To clarify the concept, I draw on recent scholarship in public opinion and political psychology. As Sniderman and Bullock (2004) showed, the concept of consistency has been traditionally understood as an individual-level variable, with three main meanings: as constraint, which predicts citizens' position on one issue given their positions on another; as stability, which indexes the predictability of citizens' positions on the same issue at an earlier point in time; and, finally, as congruence, or the predictability of positions citizens take on specific issues given their general political orientations.

Sniderman and Bullock (2004) argued that these traditional approaches ignore the fact that in politics citizens are presented with an organized menu of choices, and that therefore their preferences depend on the organization of this menu. As a result, consistency should be understood as jointly conditional on the characteristics of citizens as choosers and the menu of options they face as citizens. Thus, citizens' ability to make consistent choices "is contingent on the organization of the menu of choices presented to them" (p. 343). According to the authors, political parties and candidates are the most important forces shaping the menu of choices. They hypothesized that the more central any issue is to partisan competition, the stronger the tendency to congruence. In this perspective, consistency and contestation go hand in hand, since citizens "can coordinate their responses to political choices insofar as the choices themselves are coordinated by political parties" (p. 338).

The interpreting citizen model builds on this innovative and emerging conceptual work by defining consistency in terms of the diversity of shortcuts available in citizens' environment. However, contrary to Sniderman and Bullock, the model defines the news media, instead of parties and candidates, as the most important forces in shaping the menu of choices. A key assumption of the model is that a more diverse news environment leads to more consistency in citizens' preferences. Conversely, the more restricted the menu of shortcuts in news coverage, the weaker

the consistency. Thus, the interpreting citizen model defines consistency in terms of exposure to competing interpretive frames.⁴ Research into information processing demonstrates that when people are exposed to several competing interpretations they are able to think about the political situation in more complex and original ways (Bennett, 1981, pp. 96–97). On the other hand, citizens' ability to develop original and critical understandings is limited by a narrow range of interpretations in the public realm.

We can now clarify the first condition for the solution to the democratic dilemma presented by the interpreting citizen model. As we have seen, this model suggests that democratic theory's expectations must be understood in terms of citizens' ability to interpret political reality, as opposed to the demand of being well informed. The previous discussion has shown that what makes citizens capable of interpreting political reality in a consistent way is the availability of competing interpretations of political events and themes in their environment. Only when exposed to competing interpretive frameworks do citizens have access to cues that enable them to think about the political situation in more complex and original ways, even when they are not well informed.

Frame Diversity and Citizen Competence

As we have seen, the menu of choices that citizens face in processes of political deliberation is a key variable determining the consistency of their preferences. But what types of cues are more important in terms of the menu of choices? The political psychology literature has identified a broad variety of cues that citizens can rely on, including statements presented by political parties, interest groups, politicians, and other fellow citizens, as well as levels of consensus among visible political elites (Kuklinski & Quirk, 2001). In the development of the interpreting citizen model, I focus on the role of interpretive frames as a key type of shortcut that citizens rely on when forming their preferences.

It is beyond my purposes here to review the growing and complex literature that applies the concept of frame to the analysis of the news media (for more comprehensive reviews, see Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Entman, 1993, 2004; Garragee & Roefs, 2004; Scheufele, 1999). For the sake of conceptual clarity, I focus on the role of a specific type of frame, which I call "interpretive frame." Interpretive frames offer a specific interpretation of a political event or issue (see Porto, 2001, 2007). These frames, in turn, have specific "sponsors," the various social actors that promote specific interpretations of political reality, including politicians, organizations, and social movements (see Garragee & Roefs, 2004). The interpretation that is promoted by this type of frame usually involves one or more of the following: (1) problem definition; (2) attributions of responsibility and causes; (3) assessments about the significance of political events or issues; (4) arguments about consequences; and/or (5) treatment recommendations. I therefore follow research that links frames explicitly to evaluations of specific issues or events (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Entman, 2004; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987).

The concept of interpretive frame does not exhaust the types of frames found in political discourse. For example, the interpreting citizen model does not consider format-based frames, such as the “news frame,” as opposed to “issue frames” (Nelson & Willey, 2001), or the so-called “procedural frame,” as opposed to “substantive frames” (Entman, 2004). Thus, the model does not include news presentation styles that promote a specific interpretation of politics or elections, defined in the literature in terms of the “horse race,” “game,” “conflict,” or “human interest” frames. One of the reasons for the interpreting citizen model’s emphasis on substantive frames is the fact that they play a much more significant role in enhancing citizen competence than procedural frames. As Entman (2004), p. 6) puts it, procedural framing does little to motivate or equip the public to engage in political deliberation. By presenting simple and condensed evaluations of events or issues in one or more area of controversy (problem definition, responsibilities, consequences, and remedies), interpretive frames work as effective shortcuts that allow citizens to form preferences even when they lack political knowledge.

Despite its potential to illuminate discussions of citizen competence and news quality, studies about news frames have some deficiencies that the interpreting citizen model attempts to overcome. Two central problems must be emphasized. First, framing research has frequently neglected broader issues of political and social power. Garragee and Roefs (2004) argue that this neglect often reflects failure to trace frames back to their sponsors, especially in terms of interpretations that originate from social movements and marginalized communities. According to Garragee and Roefs, a “meaningful examination of frame sponsorship acknowledges that access to news as a political resource is distributed inequitably within American society and that this inequality has profound implications for the framing of issues” (p. 220).

A second shortcoming of framing research is its tendency to treat media content as homogeneous and to rely on simplistic operationalizations of news frames. For example, controlled experiments usually expose subjects to news stories with a single interpretive frame. These procedures are usually justified in terms of the need to increase control over other factors that could otherwise interfere with the results, but they frequently overstate media effects (see Druckman, 2001). They are also based on problematic assumptions about the environment within which citizens deliberate. According to Sniderman and Theriault (2004), framing studies neglect the fact that frames are themselves contestable. These studies “have instead restricted attention to situations in which citizens are artificially sequestered, restricted to hearing only one way of thinking about a political issue” (pp. 141–142). Nevertheless, framing effects vary significantly depending on whether citizens are exposed to a single frame or to competing frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Porto, 2001; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Only more recently have scholars started to theorize about situations in which competing frames coexist and to develop typologies of competitive contexts within which framing effects occur (Chong & Druckman, 2007b).

Taking into consideration these flaws in framing research, the interpreting citizen model identifies two key requirements for advancing research into citizen

competence and news frames. First, better indicators of frame diversity in news texts are necessary. In particular, we need new conceptual tools to analyze how frames are organized within individual news reports and within the general flow of news stories about a particular event or issue. This is important, since the level of frame diversity in news stories has important consequences for citizen competence. According to the interpreting citizen model, when the menu of choices includes a diversity of interpretive frames, citizens are able to develop consistent preferences. Conversely, when the range of cues in citizens' environment is restricted, serious obstacles emerge for citizen competence.

The second important step is to reintroduce power to framing research. When considering the range of frames available in processes of political deliberation, it is necessary to identify the sponsors of the main frames and whether certain actors or groups are consistently marginalized or excluded in the news coverage. If organizations and leaders who represent significant segments of the citizenry are systematically excluded by news media, the democratic dilemma cannot be solved. Thus the news media have to include interpretive frames promoted by the institutions and representatives of disadvantaged groups, since these frames can work as shortcuts for their members in figuring out their preferences.

Limits of the Interpreting Citizen Model

This article presents the interpreting citizen as a new model of citizen competence that implies a specific solution to the democratic dilemma. By focusing on the interpretive activities of citizens and on the availability of interpretive frameworks in the public realm, the model offers an alternative normative basis for judging news quality. It should be noted, though, that the model has some limitations. For example, the analysis and proposals presented here refer mostly to media systems based on the principle of internal diversity and therefore are not applicable in the same manner to systems based on external diversity (see McQuail, 1992, pp. 145–147). Internal diversity refers to the condition where a wide range of points of view is offered by the same channel, usually with a view to reaching a large and heterogeneous audience. Such arrangements are characteristic of societies, such as the United States, where a small number of large circulation newspapers and broadcasting stations, mostly privately-owned, compete for the same large, national audience. Conversely, external diversity refers to a condition where the full range of relevant differences in a society is matched by an equivalent range of separate and autonomous media channels, each catering to its own group of interest. The system is characteristic of societies divided culturally and linguistically, or of those with a strong partisan press, such as the Netherlands and Sweden. Although the interpreting citizen model could be applied to societies based on the principle of external diversity, it is important to stress the fact that it focuses primarily on media systems that rely on the notion of internal diversity. Without denying a place for partisan and community media in democratic politics, the model implies that each news outlet

should provide audiences with a plurality of interpretive frames when covering political events and issues.

The News Diversity Standard

A central argument of this article is that models of citizen competence lead to specific standards of news quality. When evaluating the performance of the news media, scholars reflect, more or less explicitly, specific understandings of the conditions that facilitate or prevent the fulfillment of civic roles. The interpreting citizen model offers a different normative basis for judging media performance. According to this normative approach, which I call the *News Diversity* standard, news media should be judged in terms of their performance in presenting diverse interpretive frames.

The News Diversity standard takes frame diversity as a central criterion for evaluating the role of news media in shaping democratic politics. The standard needs to be complemented by further theorization and empirical studies. Meanwhile, I suggest that the model presents a typology (below) of the form of news segments as a concrete operationalization of the concept of frame diversity. Additionally, the standard implies specific expectations about news-making values and practices.

Operationalizing Frame Diversity: The Form of News Stories

How can the menu of choices that news media present to citizens be identified? To analyze how interpretive frames are structured in the news media, I modify Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliot's (1983) typology and propose classifying the form of news stories according to the following categories:

1. Restricted: when only one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the news story
2. Plural-closed: when more than one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the news story, but the frames are arranged in a hierarchy so that one is preferred over the other(s) and presented as more valid/true
3. Plural-open: when more than one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the news story, but treated within a more indeterminate relation where no interpretation is preferred
4. Episodic: when no interpretative frames are presented and the news story has a descriptive tone.

One of the main assumptions of the classification is that more plural and open forms offer a broader range of alternatives to citizens, and therefore strengthen citizen competence. On the other hand, restricted and closed news coverage that consistently privileges certain interpretive frames limits citizens' ability to interpret political reality in consistent ways. As I have shown (Porto, 2001, 2007) through controlled experiments and survey data, when news coverage is restricted to a limited range of interpretive frames—usually the ones promoted by official sources and other

powerful actors—more citizens interpret political events and issues according to the dominant frame; conversely, more plural forms in news reports allow citizens access to a more diverse set of interpretations that might be used as cues in the process of preferences formation.

Classifying the form of news stories allows the operationalization of the concept of frame diversity. As a result, it helps to overcome framing researchers' tendency to view news content as homogeneous and to neglect how frames might be contested by counter-frames in the same news story. The typology of the form of news segments has also enormous implications for citizen competence, but only more recently have scholars began to explore them. For example, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) showed that citizens tend to deviate farther from their core values when they receive uncontested single frames than when they receive balanced frames. Chong and Druckman (2007b) developed a typology of competitive contexts that go beyond one-sided communication. Despite these important new efforts in theorizing competitive deliberative environments, we still lack systematic tools to identify levels of frame diversity in news content. The News Diversity standard's typology of the form of news segments is therefore helpful.

How to Ensure Frame Diversity in News Coverage

While News Diversity requires further elaboration, I can present some preliminary recommendations for journalists interested in enhancing citizen competence. As discussed above, the standard evaluates media performance in terms of the presentation of a diversity of interpretive frames. This, however, goes well beyond traditional calls for "balance" in news coverage. In countries with a two-party system in particular, citizens need a broader variety of cues in the news media than those resulting from the traditional routine of "hearing both sides." Thus, in the case of the U.S., limiting news coverage to the interpretive frames promoted by both parties contributes to building an artificially homogeneous environment that treats politics as a competition over a narrow range of issues.⁵

The News Diversity standard implies that journalists should familiarize themselves with the issue positions emerging from civil society, especially from organizations representing disadvantaged groups. One of the most important obstacles in this regard is journalists' bias against civic groups and social movements, usually defined in terms of the pejorative term "special interests." Skocpol's (2003) analysis of how the media can contribute to revitalizing democracy and strengthening associational life in the United States makes this point clear: "Without necessarily intending to do so, national media outlets have adopted strategies for portraying and gathering information that encourage unrepresentative leadership, ridicule organized group activities, and ignore or disparage representative politics" (p. 276). According to Skocpol, the news media rarely provide informative coverage about the issue positions of civic leaders who organize or represent significant sectors of the American public, especially in terms of subordinated groups.

Research into journalists' sourcing patterns confirms Skocpol's criticism. It has been found that when interest groups are included in news coverage, corporations and business tend to dominate, while labor organizations and citizen action groups not only receive less emphasis but also tend to be framed in terms of unpopular protest activity (Danielian & Page, 1994). Studies of the news coverage of think tank organizations and interest groups show that the key variable determining their visibility is funding, since journalists privilege a handful of Washington-based institutions with the biggest budgets and significant organizational resources (Rich & Weaver, 2000; Thrall, 2006). Thus, organizations that have major advantages in obtaining funding from corporations, foundations, and governments tend also to have a privileged position in the news.

Even when non-elite civic groups are presented in the news, they have significant difficulties framing the relevant issues. One study of the guests appearing in network news and interview programs showed a preponderance of government officials and other political insiders. Moreover, when non-government sources appeared in these programs, their joint appearance with officials usually forced them to operate within the terms defined by governmental processes (Reese & Danielian, 1994). Furthermore, news media often ignore the frames promoted by civic groups and structure the debate around their own frames, favoring issue positions that fit journalistic news criteria of drama, conflict, and good visuals (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001).

Leaders and organizations of minority groups face similar obstacles. A study of news coverage of black leaders in national and local news in the U.S. has shown that African-American leadership is frequently misrepresented, framed in terms of "special interests," or linked to wrongdoing and corruption (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In such a context, the citizenry in general, and African-Americans in particular, have major difficulties knowing the interpretive positions that emerge from black organizations and leaders.

According to the News Diversity standard, these obstacles to frame diversity in news coverage create serious obstacles for media competence and political deliberation. The menu of choices to which citizens have access is severely limited if news institutions do not open debate to positions beyond the political parties; if they maintain a bias against civic groups and organized collective action; if they privilege organizations with more resources and influence; or if they misrepresent the interpretive positions of civic groups, especially from minorities and other marginalized communities, or put them in a unfavorable context. As Callaghan and Schnell (2001) argued, the news media can "actively limit the public's right to access and evaluate different policy platforms and thus diminish the quality of political dialogue" (p. 203). Previous standards of news quality have failed to take these important factors into consideration.

Conclusion: Citizen Competence and News Standards

As Table 1 shows, each of the three news standards discussed in this article is rooted in a particular model of citizen competence. Table 1 also shows that the focus of the

Table 1 Three Standards of News Quality

News standard	Model of citizen competence	Main focus	Condition to solve the democratic dilemma
Full News	Ignorant citizen	Information	An informed citizenry
Burglar Alarm	Rational citizen	Shortcuts	Citizens capable of using shortcuts effectively
News Diversity	Interpreting citizen	Interpretive frames	Diversity of frames in the news media

News Diversity standard is not on information or shortcuts, but rather on the diversity of interpretive frameworks in the news environment. Finally, each standard implies a different solution to the democratic dilemma. While the Full News standard requires an informed citizenry, the Burglar Alarm expects a public capable of using shortcuts to monitor the political process. The News Diversity standard, on the other hand, requires a plural news environment to ensure that citizens are capable of performing their civic duties.

Instead of conceiving of news standards as opposing and antagonistic perspectives, they should be viewed as complementary. I agree with Bennett (2003) that normative perspectives on news quality often interact with each other and that journalistic practices are often a result of these interactions. Nevertheless, most normative theories of journalism have failed to incorporate critical approaches to citizen competence that focus on power inequalities and frame diversity. I hope the interpreting citizen model of citizen competence and the News Diversity standard will contribute to establishing a more solid basis for evaluating the role of the news media in contemporary democracies.

Notes

- [1] The Columbia School was heavily influenced by democratic realism, which tends to question the rationality of ordinary citizens and to promote the view that politics should favor the needs of politicians and parties (Bucy & D'Angelo, 2004).
- [2] I am not suggesting that Lippmann's path-breaking work is irrelevant to contemporary discussions of news and citizen competence. I nevertheless agree with Petersen (2003) that the importance of Lippmann lies more in the questions he raised than in his answers.
- [3] For a comparison between Lippmann and Dewey, see Peters (1989), Schudson (1998, pp. 211–219), and Bybee (1999).
- [4] This definition of consistency admittedly remains too general and it is not yet clear how to operationalize it. Kuklinski and Quirk (2001) reviewed studies of public opinion and concluded that they generally failed to present coherent or satisfactory measures of civic performance. To advance in this direction, I present a specific indicator for consistency, which needs to be further developed and clarified. I propose comparing the preferences of groups who have been exposed to competing frames to those of groups who have been exposed to a single interpretive frame. The assumption is that, everything else being constant, the first group will achieve more consistent preferences than the second.
- [5] As Page (1996) puts it, the two-party system contributes to the illusion that every issue has only two sides and tends to stifle dissent. Several authors argue that the media often restrict

debate by organizing it primarily in relation to the narrow range of frames that originate from the two-party system, while “illegitimate” challengers are rarely offered the opportunity to oppose dominant frames (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Reese & Danielian, 1994; Tuchman, 1978, p. 112).

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