FACT SHEET

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The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement

Attention to Media and Trust in Media Sources: Analysis of Data from the IEA Civic Education Study

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The role the mass media plays in the development of young people's civic knowledge and engagement can be examined from several perspectives. Television viewing, for example, has been used in educational settings to complement classroom learning on issues ranging from elections and campaigns to violence reduction. On the other hand, there also is considerable ambivalence about young people's media use that should not be overlooked. In this fact sheet, we report data from the IEA Civic Education Study—a two-phased study of 14- and 17-year olds' civic knowledge, attitudes and activities conducted in 29 countries in 1999 and 2000 with nationally representative samples of students. The information from this study is used to address three main points concerning the media and civic engagement. First, we describe, through an international comparison, young people's exposure to news on television and radio and in newspapers. Second, we examine adolescents' trust in the media and compare that trust to their trust in their national governments across several countries and the United States. Third, we present correlates of media use—looking separately at newspaper reading and television viewing. In addition to examining these issues across all countries in the study, we focus specifically on data for three countries: Chile, Portugal, and the United States.[2]

Background

Over the past 25 years, many studies have explored the association between television viewing and/or newspaper reading and the understanding of current events by young people. For example, research conducted in the 1980s in the United States strongly suggested that viewing television news and reading newspapers both play important roles in the acquisition of current events knowledge.[3] The research yielded conflicting results related to the effectiveness of viewing news on television as compared to reading the news. Some researchers argued that while individuals can be exposed to large amounts of news by viewing television, the information has less depth, and may not promote the same level of critical analysis.[4]

One way to increase political interest among children and adolescents is to link media use with classroom instruction. Yet, media sources are sometimes looked at with

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skepticism—even suspicion—by educators. The Newspapers-In-School program in Argentina, established in 1986, was designed to bring local newspapers into Argentine classrooms, promote the discussion of current events, and encourage political interest among students.[5] A 1995 evaluation of the program found that newspaper use in the classrooms had a positive influence on students' discussions of politics with their families and friends, their interest in politics, their expression of support for democracy and their tolerance for diversity, with results strongest among lower socioeconomic background students. Research on a similar program has found parallel results in the United States.[6]

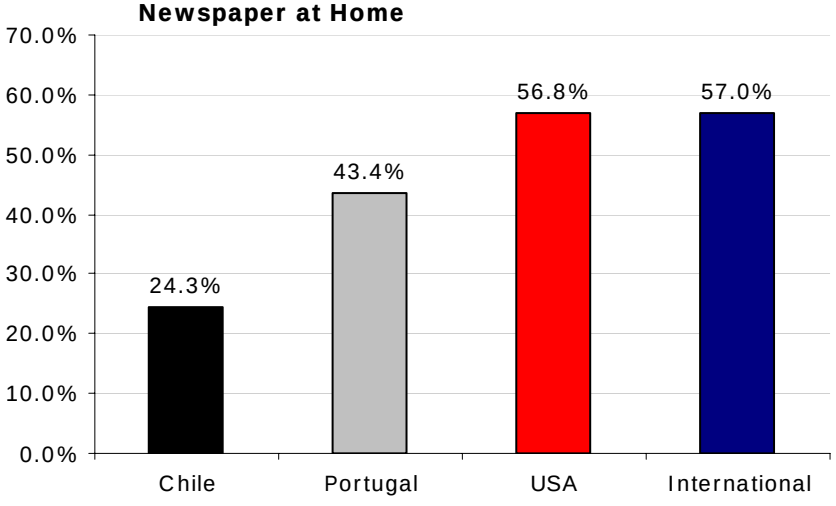
With regards to entertainment media, Carlson (1985) found that those adolescents who watched many television crime shows reported a distorted version of the criminal justice system and a belief that the world is a violent and "scary" place.[7] Shanahan (1995) concluded that adolescents in the United States, particularly those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, were more likely to report attitudes consistent with an authoritarian political orientation if they were heavy television viewers.[8]

To summarize, media effects on civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviors are mixed. There are both intended and unintended consequences of media use—some positive, and other less so. However, one thing is clear: Young people in most industrialized countries are engaged, even fascinated, by the media.

Exposure to Media

As discussed above, many researchers and educators have acknowledged the role the media can play in the development of young people's social attitudes and political knowledge. Given that they may absorb a great deal of social information from television (even when not watching the news), students were asked to indicate how many hours per school day they spend viewing television or videos in general. Analysis of data from the IEA Civic Education Study[9] shows that young people spend a substantial amount of time viewing television and videos. Across all countries, 30% of 14-year-olds were heavy television viewers, watching between three and five hours of television or videos on any given school day.

Figure 1: Exposure to Media in 14-Year-Olds: Percent of Students who Receive a Daily Newspaper at Home

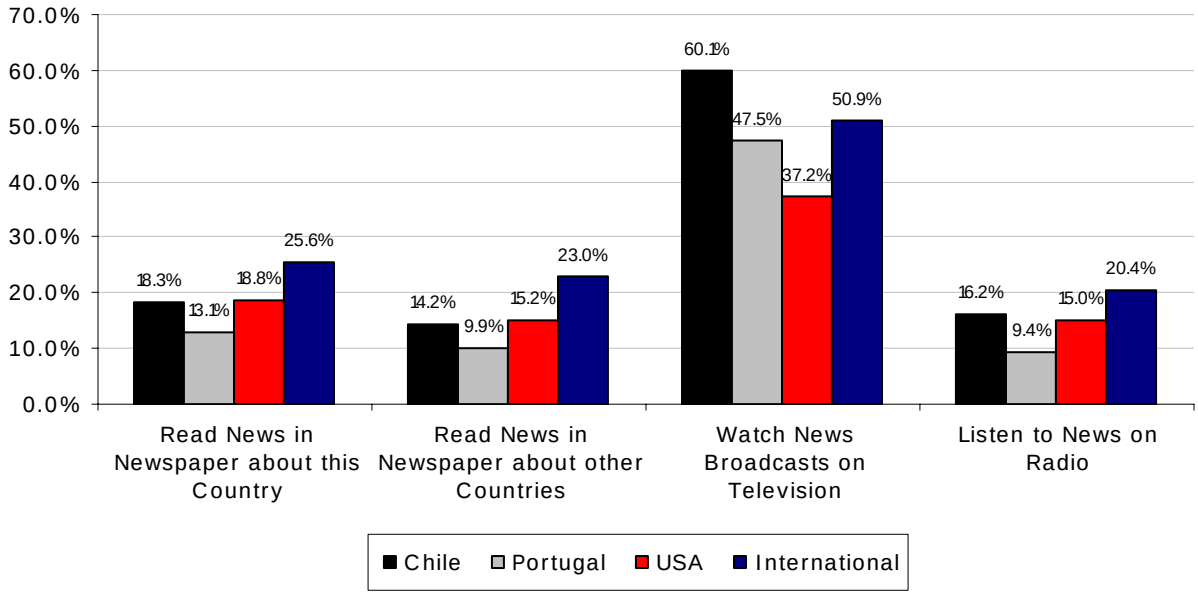


While television-viewing patterns were similar across the three countries analyzed here, adolescents' reports about exposure to newspapers in their homes varied substantially (see Figure 1[10]). In Chile, only about one quarter of the 14-year-olds reported that they

received a daily newspaper at home. The percentage of 14-year-olds with a daily newspaper at home was higher in Portugal, almost 45 %. Still higher—by close to ten percentage points—was the percentage of U.S. 14-year-olds receiving daily newspapers (57%). The U.S. proportion was quite similar to the proportion of students from all 28 countries reporting newspapers available at home (found in the bar labeled International).

The lack of a newspaper at home could partially explain why so many of the young people surveyed reported that they most often received news from television. Television news programs appear to be the primary source of political information for young people. Consistent with international findings, the 14-year-old students in Chile, Portugal, and the United States watched television news broadcasts far more frequently than they listened to news on the radio or read news in the newspapers (Figure 2). For example, while 60% of the Chilean 14-year-olds reported that they often listen to news broadcasts on television, only 18% reported that they read news about their country in newspapers. In Portugal, 48% of the 14-year-olds often watched television news, and 13% read newspaper stories about Portugal. Finally, in the United States, the gap between watching television news and reading newspapers was smaller, although still substantial. While 37% of the U.S. students reported that they often watched television news, 19% reported reading newspaper stories about their country.

Figure 2: Media Use by 14-Year-Old Students: Percent of Students who Often...

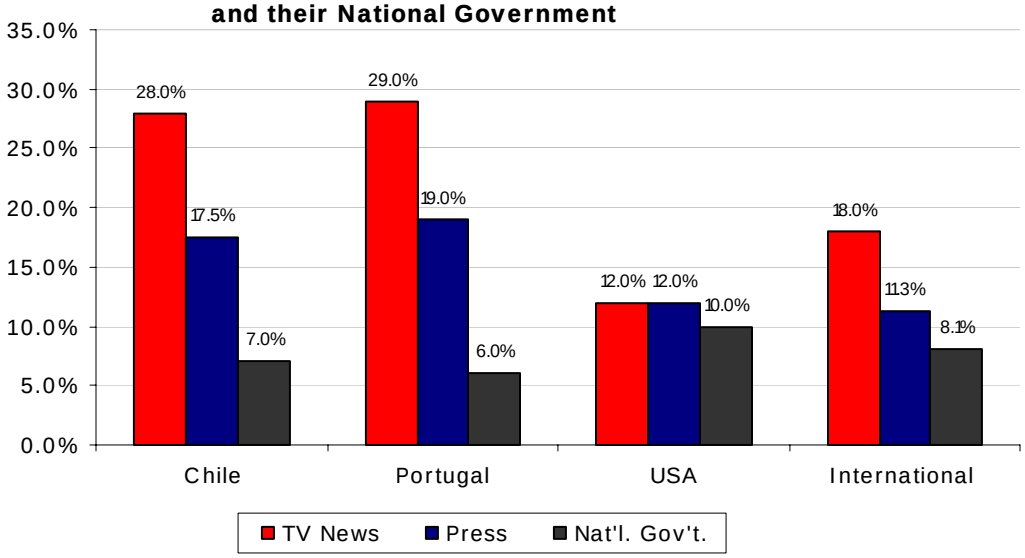


Trust in Media

Adolescents are not only heavy consumers of television news broadcasts, but substantial proportions in some countries also express confidence in what they see and hear. One way to look at trust in the media is to examine the differences between the percentages of students who report that they always trust two different forms of media—television and

the press—versus the percentages who report that they always trust their national governments. In Chile and Portugal, almost 30% of the 14-year-olds indicated that they always trust news on television, while slightly less than 20% of students in these countries indicated the same level of trust for the press. In contrast, only about 6-7% of the Chilean and Portuguese 14-year-olds expressed this level of trust in their national government. A relatively small proportion of United States students indicated that they always trusted television and the press (12%), and the proportion reporting this level of trust for the national government was very similar at 10%. In the United States, the media sources are trusted less than in other countries, while government is trusted somewhat more. Internationally, the pattern appears more similar to that found in Chile and Portugal than to the one found in the United States. Figure 3 illustrates these differences.[11]

Figure 3: Percentage of 14-Year-Olds Reporting they *Always* Trust Television News, the Press, and their National Government



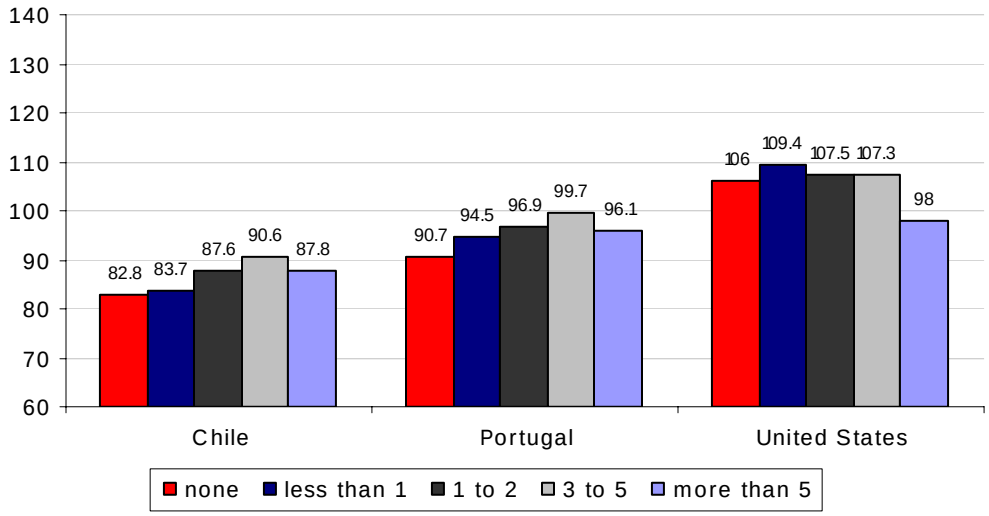
Civic Knowledge and the Media

In this section, we explore the relationship between civic knowledge and media use. To examine this relationship, we start by relating media consumption in general—a measure of television-watching—to scores on the Civic Education Knowledge test administered to all students participating in the IEA Civic Education study. We then observe both these scores and reports of expected future civic engagement as they relate to the use of the media as a source of news. In order to take into account possible effects of the educational resources available at home, the mean civic knowledge scores reported here are calculated controlling for the number of books in the students' home. While the averages and frequencies reported here cannot be interpreted as evidence of a causal link between media use and civic knowledge and/or engagement, they do provide a general description of these relationships that can direct further research.

Does television viewing relate to students' civic knowledge?

Many have argued that the more time students spend watching television, the less time they have to focus on schoolwork or other activities. For example, in all countries participating in the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study, the group of adolescents who watched more than five hours of television each day had the lowest average math scores.[12] Somewhat surprisingly, in the civic education data the relationship between television viewing and test scores varied across countries. In Chile and Portugal, the students who watched more television had somewhat higher civic knowledge scores, with the highest average scores observed among students who watched between three and five hours of television. In contrast, students in the United States who watched less than five hours of television a day showed higher knowledge scores than those watching more than five hours (Figure 4).

Figure 4: 14-Year-Old Average Civic Knowledge Scores by the Number of Hours Watching Television

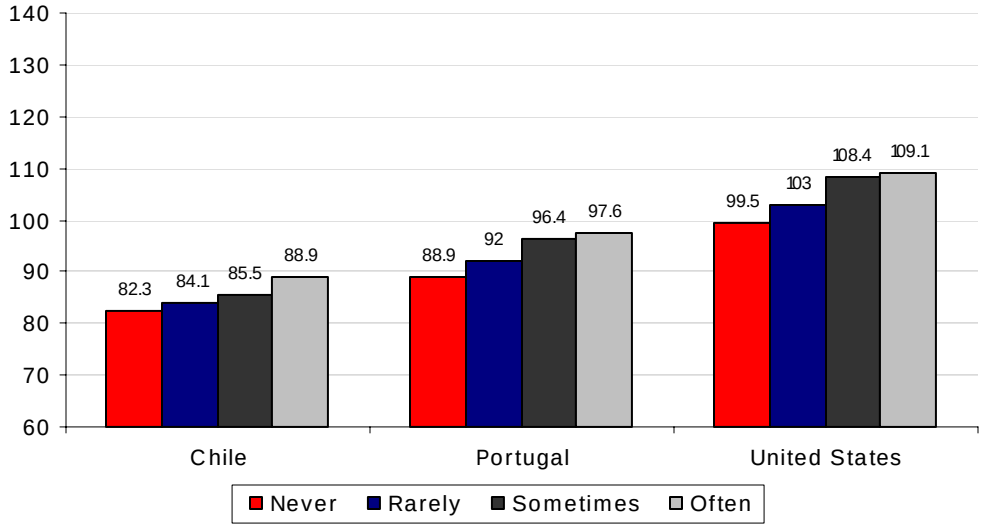


Note: Means are for an IRT score scaled with an international mean of 100 and an SD of 20 (based on 38 civic knowledge items); the analysis here controls for number of books in the home.

Does watching television news relate to students' civic knowledge?

A second question looks specifically at viewing television news rather than television viewing in general. Assuming that many adolescents who watch television news do so at home with their families, this relationship could help to explain how the media and the home jointly influence civic knowledge development. Here, the findings are consistent with the research discussed in the introduction. Students who watch more television news have higher scores in tests of civic knowledge. In all three countries, the students who watch the most television news have the highest average test scores (Figure 5).

Figure 5: 14-Year-Old Mean Civic Knowledge Scores by Frequency of Television News Viewing

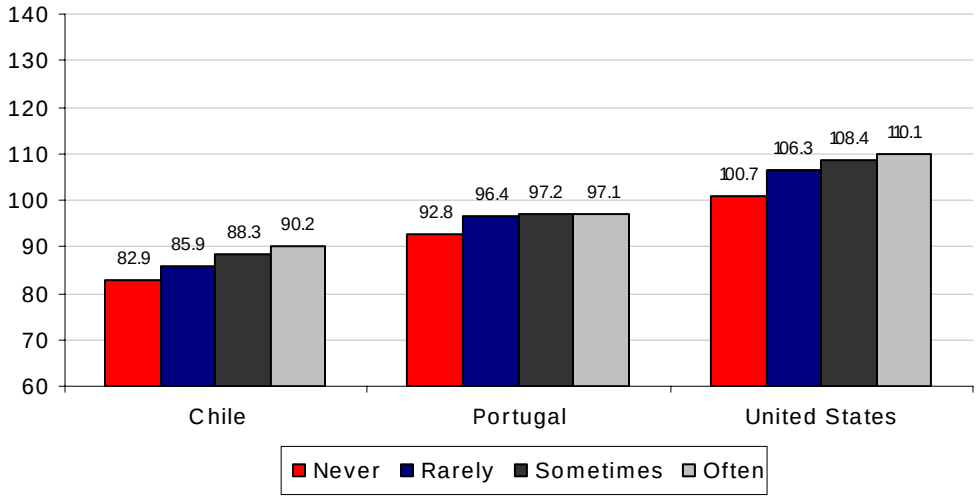


Note: Means are for an IRT score scaled with an international mean of 100 and an SD of 20 (based on 38 civic knowledge items); the analysis here controls for number of books in the home.

Does reading newspapers relate to students' civic knowledge?

A third question relates to newspapers. Some research (previously discussed) suggests that reading newspapers provides students with more in-depth understanding of current events and politics than does television viewing. Similar to what was found with regard to television news viewing, students who frequently read news about their country in newspapers had higher average levels of civic knowledge (Figure 6). These differences are clearest in Chile and the United States. Since newspaper reading is related to higher political and civic knowledge,[13] encouraging the use of newspapers at school may be beneficial, particularly where few homes receive daily newspapers.

Figure 6: 14-Year-Old Mean Civic Knowledge Scores by Frequency of Newspaper Reading

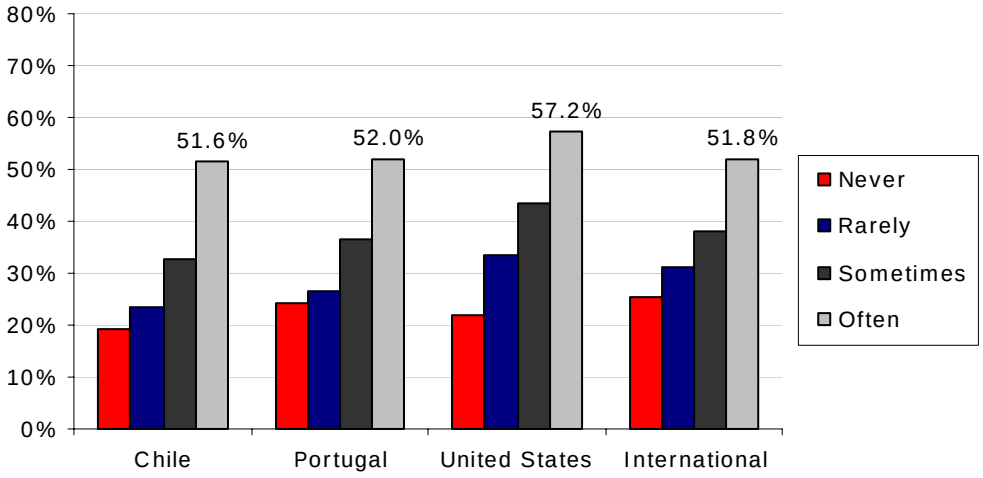


Note: Means are for an IRT score scaled with an international mean of 100 and an SD of 20 (based on 38 civic knowledge items); the analysis here controls for number of books in the home.

Does reading newspapers relate to students' expectation that they will vote?

A fourth and final question examines the relationship between media consumption and one form of civic engagement—adolescents' expectations that as adults they will vote in national elections. Here, relationships appear to be more substantial than those found for media use and civic knowledge. Students who reported that they read domestic news in newspapers were more likely to indicate that they expected to vote as adults than students who were less frequent consumers of news (Figure 7). This holds true for all countries. This further supports the importance of newspaper reading noted in discussing civic knowledge.

Figure 7: Percent of 14-Year-Old Students who Expect they will *Certainly* Vote in National Elections by Frequency of Newspaper Reading



Notes

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[2] Portions of this fact sheet appear in a somewhat different form in the following report: "Strengthening Democracy in the Americas" by J. Torney-Purta and J. Amadeo, Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 2004. The report is available upon request from fpilotti@oas.org. For a more complete description of the IEA Civic Education Study, please refer to the following two international reports (found at www.wam.umd.edu/~iea.): "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen", by J. Torney-Purta, R. Lehmann, H. Oswald, and W. Schulz, Amsterdam: IEA, (2001) and "Civic Knowledge and Engagement, An IEA Study of Upper Secondary Students in Sixteen Countries", by J. Amadeo, J. Torney-Purta, R. Lehmann, V. Husfeldt, and R. Nikolova, Amsterdam, IEA, (2002).

[3] See G.M. Garramone and C.K. Atkin, "Mass Communication and Political Socialization: Specifying the Effects," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50 (1) pp. 76-86 and M.M. Conway, M.L. Wyckoff, E. Feldbaum and D. Ahern, "The News Media in Children's Political Socialization," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 45 (2), pp. 164-178.

[4] See L. Linnenbrink and E.L. Anderman, "Motivation and News-Seeking Behavior," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, 1995.

[5] Teachers who volunteered for the program received training and guidelines for classroom activities. However, many resisted the program because they viewed the media as a "competing form of socialization." See S. Chafee, R. Morduchowicz and H. Galperin, "Education for Democracy in Argentina: The Effects of a Newspapers in Schools Program," in O. Ichilov (Ed.), *Citizenship and Citizenship Education in a Changing World*, pp. 149-173, London: Woburn Press, 1998.

[6] See M. McDevitt and S. Chafee, "Closing Gaps in Political Communication and Knowledge: Effects of a School Intervention," *Communication Research,* 27 (3) pp. 259-292.

[7] See J.M. Carlson, *Prime Time Law Enforcement: Crime Show Viewing and Attitudes Toward the Criminal Justice System*, New York: Praeger, 1985.

[8] See J. Shanahan, "Television Viewing and Adolescent Authoritarianism," *Journal of Adolescence*, 18 (3) pp. 271-288.

[9] See Note 2 above, especially Torney-Purta et al 2001 and Amadeo et al 2002.

[10] All figures are based on data from the IEA Civic Education Study. Nationally representative samples of 14-year-olds tested in 1999 totaled 5,688 in Chile, 3,261 in Portugal, and 2,811 in the United States. Students' responses are reported in percentages except for the Civic Knowledge Score. The IRT scores for civic knowledge found in Figures 6, 7, and 8 are standard practice in studies such as the NAEP and the IEA studies and are more fully explained in Chapter 3 of Torney-Purta et al, 2001.

[11] Patterns of results are quite similar when the percentages for "always" and "most of the time" are added together. See Torney-Purta et al, 2001, chapter 5.

[12] *Child Trends*, March 2003, www.childtrends.org.

[13] Both Linnenbrink and Anderman (1995) and analysis of the IEA data (reported in Amadeo et al 2002) suggest that it is.