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Media Malaise and the Decline of Legitimacy

Any Room for Good News?

Peter Van Aelst

6.1 Introduction

When things go wrong in society, the news media are in the front row to get the blame. This is also the case when dealing with falling levels of political trust and rising political cynicism. There are, of course, good reasons for that; for ordinary citizens, the news media are the dominant way to learn about most issues, actors, and policies. Or as Strömbäck and Shehata (2010: 575) put it: “The media constitute the most important source of political information and channel of communication between the governors and the governed.” Most people have little direct contact with politicians and learn about political actors and public policy via the news media. Not having any other sources or lacking direct experiences, for some issues (e.g. foreign events), the media sometimes even have a monopoly on information provision. In short, politics is highly mediated (Bennett and Entman 2001), and if politics is losing some (or most) of its prestige, it is not unlikely that the mass media are part of the problem. This media-is-bad-for-democracy forms the core argument of the media malaise theory.

The claims that the media might have damaging influences on (perceptions of) politics are almost as old as the media itself, or at least go back to the first studies on media and politics. For instance, pioneers in political communication such as Kurt and Gladys Lang (Lang and Lang 1959), even before the 1960s, referred to the potentially damaging effects of election coverage on how voters perceived politics. Later on Robert Dahl (1967) linked the growing

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“political malaise” among younger parts of the population, in particular, to the role of television. It was, however, only in the mid-1970s that Robinson (1976) more systematically studied the potentially negative effect of television on its audience and labeled it as “video malaise.” Robinson showed in an experimental design that a current affairs program about the Pentagon could have negative effects on the public perception of the US military. He argued that the mechanism works via the large inadvertent audience that lacks the political sophistication to resist the interpretative, conflictual, and “anti-institutional” coverage. The result is “more cynical, more frustrated, and more despairing” citizens (1976: 426). Since then, many scholars have built on the work of Robinson, broadening it to include more types of media outlets such as newspapers and more recently also new media. The often-cited study of Capella and Jamieson (1997), also using experiments, showed a significant effect of strategic coverage on cynicism. The more politics was presented as a strategic game the more cynical people perceived politics, and politicians in particular. This spiral of cynicism has found some (partial) confirmation in different contexts (e.g. Pedersen 2012; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001; De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008).

In the US, in particular, the number of studies focusing on the negative effects of media coverage on politics has grown steadily. The titles of some of these studies leave little doubt on their findings: *Good intentions make bad news. Why Americans hate campaign journalism* (Lichter and Noyes 1996); *The nightly news nightmare: Television’s coverage of US presidential elections* (Farnsworth and Lichter 2007); “Breaking the news: How the media undermine American democracy” (Fallows 1996); “Bad news, bad governance” (Patterson 1996). Thomas Patterson is one of the loudest and most pessimistic voices when talking about the impact of the media on audiences and ultimately trust in democracy. In his study on campaign coverage of the late 1970s he concluded that “In its coverage of a presidential campaign, the press concentrates on the strategic game played by the candidates in their pursuit of the presidency, thereby de-emphasizing questions of national policy and leadership” (Patterson 1980: 21). In his later work the lists of complaints at the address of the media has become longer and more diverse. It is not only about television, but about all types of media outlets, and not only about the strategic, cynical reporting style, but also about too much soft news and infotainment (Patterson 1993, 1996, 2002).

The media malaise thesis has not been left unchallenged. Scholars such as Pippa Norris, Kenneth Newton, and others claim rather the opposite effect: in contrast with media consumption in general, news consumption is correlated with higher political knowledge, higher political trust, and more political participation (Holz-Bacha and Norris 2001; Newton 1999; Norris 2000). Norris talks in this respect of a “virtuous circle” of positive attitudes toward politics and media use. People who are interested and knowledgeable about politics,

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are more inclined to watch the news and in turn learn more about politics, become gradually less cynical and more inclined to participate (Norris 2011). These optimistic accounts of the media have found ample confirmation across time and countries. Scholars found positive relationships between media use and political variables, such as political knowledge (e.g. Aarts and Semetko 2003), political interest (e.g. Strömbäck and Shehata 2010), political participation (e.g. Schuck, Vliegenthart, and De Vreese 2016) and also political trust (e.g. Adriaansen, Van Praag, and De Vreese 2010).

Although the debate on “media malaise” versus “virtuous circle” has been linked to a variety of political effects, ranging from political knowledge to political participation, we restrict our discussion, in line with the central query of this book, to measures of political support, in particular political trust and political cynicism. The concept of cynicism, which is used extensively in the media effects literature, refers to opinions about (the morality and motivations of) individual politicians and leaders, while trust is mostly related to political institutions and support for the political system in general. We will focus on the role of traditional news media such as newspapers and television news, but end with some thoughts on the growing role of social media.

This chapter aims to provide a systematic review of the available evidence on the effect media have on political support. We deal with the two central claims of the media malaise theory. First, that there has been a general decline of political support because of the growing share of negative news coverage of politics. This suggests a change over time in the way politics is portrayed in the media. Second, to support this longitudinal view, scholars have suggested that a negative or cynical framing of politics has an immediate harmful effect on the political attitudes of individual news consumers. In other words, we first investigate the broader development in the media sector, and next the micro process that might explain the link between citizens’ media use and exposure and political support (see also Figure 1.2 in Chapter 1). We end the chapter with some insights in to what aspects of the news might reduce cynicism and enhance trust.

6.2 Studying the Political Media Environment in Longitudinal and Comparative Perspective

In Chapter 2 of this book Van Ham and Thomassen conclude that there is no overall structural decline of political support since the mid-1970s, but that there is large variation in levels of support across time and space. To link some of these developments to the role of the media, we need to first have a closer look at the available evidence about levels of trust and political journalism in longitudinal and comparative perspectives.

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The most explicit criticisms of the media have been voiced in the US. Patterson and others have explicitly linked the increasing amount of strategic news coverage and “bad news” to declining support for politicians and political institutions. The origin of the changing attitudes of journalists toward politics is situated at the end of the 1960s and strongly influenced by dramatic events such as Watergate and the contested Vietnam War. Since then US journalists see it as their main task to bring forward the “real” story that played behind the scenes. It is argued that the original skepticism has been replaced by a cynical view on politics. Politicians are driven by their own personal interests, and it is up to journalists to reveal that. This has led to more interpretative journalism with a focus on the strategic motivations of politicians, more “bad news,” and a focus on conflicts. According to Patterson (1993) the share of negative news coverage at election times has risen from twenty-five percent in 1960 to sixty percent at the beginning of the 1990s.¹ In 2000 he notes: “The real bias of the press today is not a partisan one, but a pronounced tendency to report what is wrong with politics and politicians rather than what is right” (Patterson 2000: 14).

Can the growing negativity of the news be held responsible for the decline in political support witnessed in the US at the end of the 1960s and most of the 1970s (Dalton 2004; see also Chapter 2 in this volume)? At least two concerns preclude a direct link. First, there is no empirical proof for a causal relationship between this change in journalistic style and the steady decline of political support in the US at the end of the 1960s and most of the 1970s. So it might be that the more critical and less respectful attitude of the media toward political institutions and actors is rather a reflection of a broader trend of declining respect for authority than the cause of it (Norris 1999a). Studies that tried to find a causal link between media coverage and political attitudes over time have remained scarce and results mixed. Norris (2011), for instance, combines news content, and more particularly, the amount of scandal coverage, with aggregate public opinion data over the last decade (2000–10). Using time series analyses she shows that this specific type of coverage does not affect public attitudes in the United Kingdom, but it does slightly negatively affect satisfaction with the government in the US. This different impact of scandal news on political trust might be caused by the type of scandal that is reported on, as Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012) show that only scandals that involve multiple parties are negatively effecting people’s satisfaction with democracy.

A second reason to be careful when making a link between media coverage and political trust is that the claims of Patterson and others mostly focus on election coverage. The campaign period might be rather atypical and not representative of routine political coverage (Van Aelst and De Swert 2009). A recent comparative study of political news in routine times showed

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relatively low levels of negativity in US news coverage (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, and Berganza 2016). Furthermore, election campaigns run by US candidates have always been negative, and this has merely further increased during the post-war era (Soroka 2014: 18). Although the effect of negative campaigning on political attitudes is open for discussion, it seems that the negativity of US campaigns is also the responsibility of the political candidates (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). We will come back to this point in the discussion.

In short, there is no proof of a causal link, but still the decline of political support starting at the end of the 1960s in the US has gone together with a steady increase of more strategic and negative news coverage at election times (but not in “routine” times between elections). Can we make similar comparisons about the trends in other countries? The available evidence is very limited. A notable exception is the study by Kepplinger (2000) who analyzed political reporting in the German press over a period of forty-five years (1951–95) and public opinion data about the declining image of politicians. He finds that statements about German political elites have become gradually more negative over time and that this seems related to the less positive perceptions of the morality and capabilities of politicians. However, again, these descriptive findings should be treated with caution, as a causal analysis is lacking. Furthermore, Kepplinger shows that after a steady increase of negativity between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1980s, statements in the press became less negative again, while public trust in individual politicians further declined. The author also notes that the increase in negative statements about politicians is mainly caused by other politicians. Reinemann and Wilke (2007) come to similar findings in their longitudinal analysis of the main candidates for the chancellorship in the election coverage by the German press. After an increase of negativity, between 1949 and 1980, a negative tone toward both incumbent and chancellor has become the norm (see also Magin 2015).

More European studies have been conducted about changes in political reporting since the 1990s. In general, the coverage has *not* become more strategic or negative. Zeh and Hopmann (2013) show that in Germany and Denmark there is no significant increase in negativity toward candidates between 1990 and 2010. Vliegthart et al. (2010) come to similar conclusions about the UK and the Netherlands, and rather find an opposite trend, with a slight increase in positivity toward politicians. A finding that is confirmed for the Netherlands, where since the turn of the century, election news is less focused on the contest and less negative (Takens, Van Atteveldt, Van Hoof, and Kleinnijenhuis 2013). In sum, we can conclude that over time political news has become more strategic, critical toward political actors, but that this trend has mainly occurred before the 1990s, and since then did not persist.

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Most European countries seem to have followed the US trend toward more critical news coverage, but at a slower pace and, certainly less systematically at election times. The central role of public broadcasting in most European countries might be part of the explanation. For instance, in the beginning of the 1980s the BBC coverage of the campaign was much more guided by a respectful “sacerdotal approach” toward politics, while US media were already much more guided by their own news values (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, and Weaver 1991). In many European countries, public broadcasters at that time devoted relatively little attention to politics during election times as they were afraid to be seen as biased or offending politicians in power. Since then public broadcasters have broadened their range of news programming (Aalberg, Van Aelst, and Curran 2010). Also outside election time the supply of information in most European countries has grown rather than diminished over the last decades. In a comparative study of thirteen European democracies, Esser and colleagues (2012) showed that the amount of attention given to news and current affairs has risen significantly since the late 1970s. The introduction of commercial broadcasting has not led to less, but rather to more news as some of them also presented news and public affairs in lengthy and prominent time slots (see Figure 6.1). At the same time, the political news coverage of the public broadcasters has become less cautious, with journalists

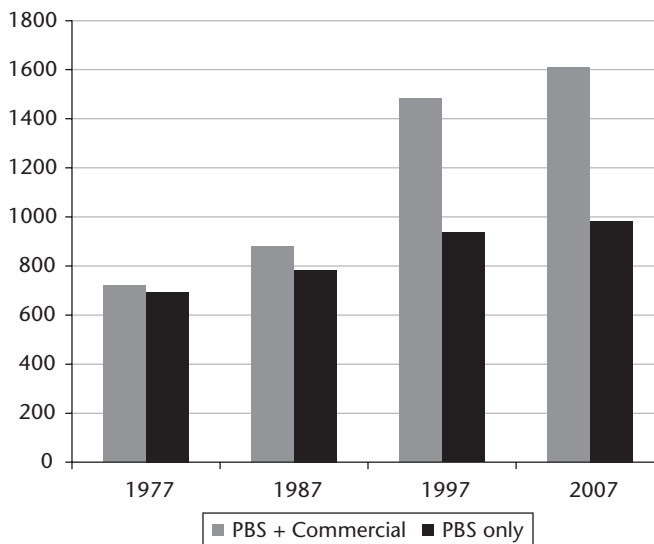


Figure 6.1 Number of minutes for news and current affairs per week on the two most important commercial and public TV channels in thirteen European countries (1977–2007)

Source: Esser et al. (2012).

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being more active and intervening. In contrast to the US, this interpretative style of reporting has, however, not gone hand in hand with an outspoken cynical or negative view on politics (Brants and Van Kempen 2002; Goddard, Scammell, and Semetko 1998; McNair 2002; Van Aelst 2007).

Thus, empirical evidence at the macro level of a growing share of negative news coverage of politics is at best mixed. Nevertheless, there is certainly evidence of long-term changes in political journalism. Can we see these changes as (partial) causes of changes in political support over time? This remains largely an open question as strong proof is lacking. In an attempt to answer this question, we will look at the micro process connecting media use and political support in Section 6.3.

6.3 Individual Media Use and Political Support

If negative news coverage in the media undermines political support, we should expect to find a negative association between citizens' exposure to media and their levels of political support. In this section we investigate to what extent there is indeed a negative association between media use and political support. We also take a long-term perspective to evaluate to what extent this relationship has changed in the past decades. We used the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970–2002 (edition v2.0.1, Schmitt et al. 2008), and updated the trend file until 2014 with Eurobarometer data available via GESIS/ZACAT.² As not all Eurobarometer surveys ask questions about media use, the resulting data set covers the period from 1983 to 2014, a period of thirty years, with data on media use being collected for nineteen years in that period.

As an indicator of political support, our dependent variable, we restrict ourselves in this chapter to *satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's own country*. This variable is measured on a four-point scale, running from (1) not satisfied at all, to (4) very satisfied. For our analyses, we collapsed this scale to two categories: (0) not satisfied at all/not very satisfied, and (1) fairly satisfied/very satisfied.

Our main explanatory variable at the micro level is media use. Here we rely on the media use index variable available in the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970–2002 (edition v2.0.1, Schmitt et al. 2008), and update it until 2014. The media use index variable combines three variables measuring respondents' frequency of usage of different news media, namely television, newspapers, and radio.³ The index is a four-point categorical variable ranging from very low to very high.⁴ The index is constructed as follows: if television, radio, and newspapers are all used several times a week or more, overall media use is classified as very high. If two out of three media types are used several

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times a week or more, overall media use is classified as high. If only one medium is used several times a week or more, overall media use is classified as low, and if all three media are used less than several times a week, overall media use is coded as very low (see *Codebook Trend File 2005*).

As control variables we include a number of variables that have been found to affect political support in previous research (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011), namely, the level of education, age, gender, marital status, and whether respondents were unemployed. As we seek to analyze as long a time period as possible, we include the set of countries where media use questions have been asked by the Eurobarometer from 1983 onwards, i.e. the nine EU member states at 1973: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark (EU9). In order to keep the presentation of results simple, we present our results by country.

We use logistic regression, and test the robustness of our results with multi-level logistic regression, correcting standard errors for clustering within years. The results remain substantively the same in these models and are available on request from the author.⁵ We model change in the effect of media use on satisfaction with democracy over time by including an interaction term of media use and year in all models. Table 6.1 presents the results of models testing only the main effect of media use on satisfaction with democracy, and Table 6.2 presents results of models including the interaction effect with year.

The results in Table 6.1 demonstrate that, contrary to what media malaise theories would predict, media use has a consistent and significant positive effect on political support in all nine European democracies in our sample. The strength of the effects differs considerably between countries, with media use being most strongly associated with high levels of satisfaction with democracy in the Netherlands and Denmark, and the weakest associations in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Ireland. However, these findings are based on pooled data from 1983 until 2014, so it is entirely possible that the relationship between media use and political support changed over time. Table 6.2 therefore shows how the effect of media use on satisfaction with democracy has changed in this time period.

The main effect of media use now shows the effect of media use in the first year for which we have data, 1983. In that year we do find some evidence for a negative association between media use and satisfaction with democracy: in Belgium and in Germany those respondents who used more media were also more dissatisfied with democracy. However, in the other seven European democracies the association between media use and satisfaction with democracy was positive (though only significant in four countries). Interestingly, it is in Belgium and Germany (and Denmark) where the interaction effect with year is significant, suggesting an increasingly positive association between media use and satisfaction with democracy over time. In the other countries

Table 6.1 The effect of media use on political support in nine European democracies (1983–2014)

	France	Belgium	Netherlands	Germany	Italy	Luxembourg	Denmark	Ireland	United Kingdom
<i>Independent variables</i>									
Media use (1–4)	0.123*** (0.016)	0.071*** (0.015)	0.223*** (0.020)	0.110*** (0.014)	0.127*** (0.018)	0.093** (0.030)	0.199*** (0.025)	0.077*** (0.018)	0.068*** (0.015)
<i>Control variables</i>									
Education (1–10)	0.105*** (0.005)	0.033*** (0.005)	0.077*** (0.005)	0.016*** (0.004)	0.027*** (0.005)	0.013 (0.008)	0.100*** (0.006)	0.062*** (0.006)	0.062*** (0.005)
Age (15–97)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.008*** (0.002)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)
Gender—female (0–1)	-0.111*** (0.027)	0.081** (0.027)	0.041 (0.030)	-0.041* (0.020)	-0.033 (0.030)	0.090+ (0.046)	-0.106** (0.035)	-0.077** (0.029)	-0.028 (0.024)
Marital status—married (0–1)	-0.007 (0.028)	0.055* (0.028)	0.072* (0.032)	0.022 (0.021)	-0.005 (0.032)	0.061 (0.050)	0.105** (0.036)	-0.071* (0.031)	0.042+ (0.025)
Unemployed (0–1)	-0.343*** (0.056)	-0.429*** (0.050)	-0.508*** (0.066)	-0.939*** (0.037)	-0.302*** (0.070)	-0.277+ (0.155)	-0.399*** (0.065)	-0.793*** (0.053)	-0.394*** (0.045)
Constant	-0.934*** (0.070)	-0.380*** (0.075)	0.067 (0.090)	-0.271*** (0.059)	-1.505*** (0.079)	0.504*** (0.131)	0.390*** (0.102)	0.309*** (0.082)	-0.200** (0.065)
N level 1 (respondents)	23,105	23,199	23,500	41,918	23,525	11,393	23,297	22,420	29,770
N level 2 (years)	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19

Source: Eurobarometer. Logistic regression; dependent variable: not/not at all satisfied with democracy (0); very/fairly satisfied with democracy (1). P-values: + 0.1, * 0.05, ** 0.01, *** 0.001.

Table 6.2 The effect of media use on political support over time in nine European democracies (1983–2014)

	France	Belgium	Netherlands	Germany	Italy	Luxembourg	Denmark	Ireland	United Kingdom
<i>Independent variables</i>									
Media use (1–4)	0.095+ (0.051)	-0.133** (0.050)	0.131* (0.066)	-0.217*** (0.049)	0.134* (0.057)	0.166 (0.107)	0.028 (0.079)	0.183** (0.060)	0.046 (0.049)
Year (1983–2014)	-0.002 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)	0.003 (0.009)	-0.033*** (0.006)	0.033*** (0.006)	0.030* (0.014)	0.014 (0.011)	0.015+ (0.008)	0.008 (0.006)
Media use *Year	0.001 (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.004)	0.009** (0.003)	-0.004+ (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
<i>Control variables</i>									
Education (1–10)	0.104*** (0.005)	0.019*** (0.005)	0.066*** (0.006)	0.011** (0.004)	0.010* (0.005)	0.000 (0.009)	0.057*** (0.006)	0.061*** (0.006)	0.053*** (0.005)
Age (15–97)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.001+ (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.006*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.001* (0.001)
Gender—female (0–1)	-0.112*** (0.027)	0.074** (0.027)	0.030 (0.030)	-0.045* (0.020)	-0.066* (0.030)	0.071 (0.047)	-0.117*** (0.035)	-0.078** (0.029)	-0.031 (0.024)
Marital status—married (0–1)	-0.006 (0.028)	0.047+ (0.028)	0.079* (0.032)	0.021 (0.021)	-0.039 (0.032)	0.041 (0.050)	0.117** (0.036)	-0.073* (0.031)	0.053* (0.025)
Unemployed (0–1)	-0.346*** (0.056)	-0.470*** (0.050)	-0.521*** (0.067)	-0.938*** (0.037)	-0.386*** (0.071)	-0.388* (0.157)	-0.410*** (0.065)	-0.793*** (0.054)	-0.413*** (0.045)
Constant	-0.877*** (0.163)	-0.030 (0.169)	0.133 (0.233)	0.636*** (0.178)	-2.081*** (0.176)	-0.111 (0.384)	0.411 (0.282)	-0.061 (0.213)	-0.329* (0.165)
N level 1 (respondents)	23,105	23,199	23,500	41,918	23,525	11,393	23,297	22,420	29,770
N level 2 (years)	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19

Source: Eurobarometer. Logistic regression, dependent variable: not/not at all satisfied with democracy (0), very/fairly satisfied with democracy (1). P-values: +0.1, *0.05, **0.01, ***0.001.

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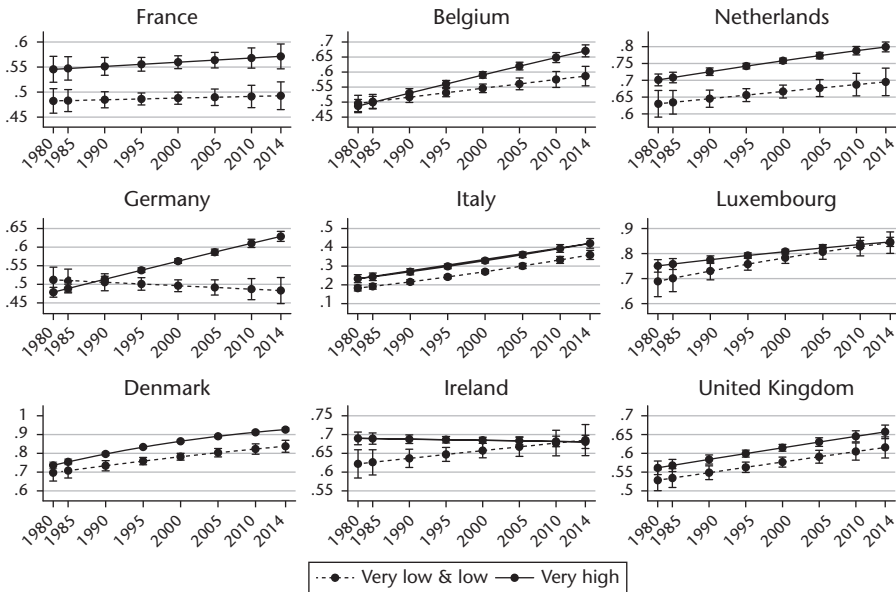


Figure 6.2 Probability of being satisfied with democracy by time and media use in nine European democracies (1983–2014)

the interaction effect does not appear to be significant, though the trend is positive in six out of nine countries.

However, a more accurate way to interpret interaction effects is to present predicted probabilities of being satisfied with democracy by different levels of media use. These are presented in Figure 6.2. To improve readability the figure contrasts respondents with very high media use to respondents with low media use.⁶

As Figure 6.2 shows, with the exception of Belgium and Germany in the early 1980s, in all other time periods and in the other seven established European democracies, respondents with higher levels of media use are more satisfied with democracy, and levels of satisfaction with democracy appear to go up over time in all nine European democracies except Ireland. Hence if anything, exposure to news media increases political support, rather than decreasing it as media malaise theory suggests. Moreover, the differences in political support between low and high media users are not large in most countries, suggesting that the media have only weak effects on political support (Newton 2006a).

However, a problem with analyses such as the ones presented here is that it is unclear what the exact content was of the media that citizens' were exposed to, and hence this might include both negative news coverage as well as other

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news coverage, potentially diluting media effects on political support. Moreover, an even more serious concern is the direction of the causal relationship: is media use shaping citizens' political support or are citizens with high political support using more media? Therefore, in Section 6.4 we will focus on short-term effects studies that can make much stronger claims on the causal relationship between media consumption and measures of political trust and political cynicism.

6.4 The Contingency of Media Effects on Political Support

Empirical research on the micro-level link between media and political support has generally not found strong effects. Multiple studies do find significant effects from media on political trust and cynicism. However, these effects are mostly modest and hardly ever seen as the main drivers of political trust. For instance, Aarts and colleagues (2012) show in their study of six Western countries that the effect of news exposure on political trust is weak and mostly disappears after controlling for education. "Education is the main driver of trust (and knowledge), not the media—and this point can hardly be over-emphasized" (Aarts et al. 2012: 117). Earlier Moy et al. (1999: 149) concluded along the same lines that "factors other than the media must be examined when seeking to explain America's confidence crisis" (see also Gross, Aday, and Brewer 2004; Moy and Scheufele 2000). Another important nuance is that the effects of media exposure are most outspoken on political cynicism and much less on the more general indicators of political trust. For instance, based on experiments, Jackson (2011) finds that people became more cynical after exposure to strategic news coverage. However, the effect is only significant for the specific politicians featured in the (experimental) news story and not for the general confidence in politicians or the working of democracy (but see Shehata 2014). In short, the effects of media on political trust are often absent and when present mostly modest at best.

Although the ongoing discussion on the potential positive or negative role of the media in politics sparked a lively debate, given the empirical findings mentioned earlier, one might raise the question of how useful it is to keep the clear distinction between "media malaise" versus "media mobilization," or "spiral of cynicism" versus "virtuous circle." Also Curran and colleagues (2014: 15) complain in a recent article that scholars are forced to choose between "the view that the media radiate democratic influence in a nimbus of virtue or the opposing view that the media turn people off by distorting its true nature." To move beyond the discussion of the media as good cop or bad cop, it is more useful to investigate under what conditions media can have certain effects. Also in the empirical literature, there is a growing

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consensus that impact of the media on the public is *contingent* on the medium, the message, and the receiver. Thinking in terms of contingency of media effects is nothing new. In the debate on the democratic role of the media, however, the focus has perhaps been too much on stressing the positive or negative outcomes, rather than their conditional nature. Studies show that both medium, message, and receiver characteristics mediate the effects of news exposure.

It has become common sense in media effect research that media messages are not received in a similar way by a passive, homogeneous audience, but rather actively processed and dependent on different personal characteristics of the *receiver* (McQuail 1993). Also in the debate on media and trust, scholars have devoted extensive attention to the moderating role of individual features. A central dispute in the literature deals with the role of political sophistication, mostly operationalized in terms of political knowledge, political interest, and education. The question is whether the media mainly influence more highly educated people who follow politics closely or the politically less sophisticated. In general, the picture is not straightforward. For education it seems that most studies do not find any interaction effect: trust levels of more highly educated people are not more or less influenced by media coverage than those of lower-educated people (e.g. Aarts et al. 2012; Valentino et al. 2001). The results on the moderating role of political knowledge are mixed. Some studies find stronger effects on people with low political knowledge and political interest (e.g. Jackson 2011; Schuck, Boomgaarden, and De Vreese 2013), while other have found some indications that actually the more knowledgeable (De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008) and those more interested (De Vreese 2005) are affected more. This difference might be explained by the specific types of frames under investigation. While presenting politics using a general “game frame” (e.g. referring to winning and losing) might be more likely to influence the less sophisticated, De Vreese and Elenbaas (2008) argue that more knowledgeable citizens can make more sense of complex strategic news frames (e.g. stressing the role of spin doctors in influencing media coverage), and therefore are more influenced by them. Another related variable of importance, in particular in the US, is partisanship. For instance, Valentino and colleagues (2001) show that in the US only the trust of non-partisans is negatively affected by strategic news coverage, while most partisan voters are left unaffected. Finally, a Dutch study finds that, in particular, levels of cynicism about politics among young people are affected by campaign coverage. The effect is, however, not negative but positive: more substantive news coverage leads young people to trust politics more, not less (Adriaansen et al. 2010).

In terms of the *medium* the classical distinction is made between the role of television versus newspapers. In general, newspaper-reading is associated with

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higher levels of trust, while the relationship with television-viewing is mostly neutral (Ceron 2015; Newton 1999). Avery (2009) shows with his panel study of a US election that watching television leads to more cynicism while reading a newspaper rather boosted trust. However, these effects are only present among voters with relatively high levels of trust. No effects are found among those already mistrusting the government at the start of the campaign. This confirms the downside of the virtuous circle of Norris: those who are cynical and not engaged are unlikely to get positive attitudes from the media, which they often also mistrust (see also Earl Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, and Bennett 1999). When we further differentiate between types of television there is a growing consensus that public broadcasting is most likely to contribute to a virtuous circle of media exposure, political knowledge, and attitudes. Most recently, an eleven-country study confirms the importance of public television (Curran et al. 2014; Soroka et al. 2013). Without claiming a causal relationship, watching public broadcasting stations (PBS) is positively connected to knowledge, interest, and confidence toward politics (see also Hooghe 2002). This positive relationship is absent for viewers of commercial television. However, when we focus on the relationship between public broadcasting and political trust, the relationship is less straightforward. Aarts et al. (2012) find a positive relationship in Sweden and Belgium, but not in Norway, the UK, and the Netherlands. Also the seminal study of Aarts and Semetko (2003) clearly shows that in the Netherlands watching public television was correlated with higher political knowledge and turnout, but again there was no correlation with political trust. In a recent study Strömbäck and colleagues (2015) confirm the positive link between watching public service television and political trust, although this relationship has become weaker in the last three decades.

A third and most recent evolution in studying the conditions of media effects on political attitudes and participation is also taking into account the *message*, or more correctly the actual media content that people consume. For instance, Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) find that following the news about an EU referendum in the Netherlands on the public broadcasters has the strongest effect on political cynicism. This can simply be explained by the fact that in this campaign the public news broadcast had the highest amount of strategically framed campaign news. More and more, studies that test the effect of strategy news (e.g. Adriaansen et al. 2010) or soft news (e.g. Boukes and Boomgaarden 2014) on political cynicism have combined content analyses data with news exposure measures. This allows researchers to better measure the amount and type of content people actually received. In this way, for instance, Shehata (2014) shows that Swedish voters who consume a larger diet of strategy rich news become more cynical and less trusting, but that also the opposite effect is significant: the more voters receive substantive

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news coverage of the election the less cynical and the more trusting they turn out to be.

In sum, studying the conditionality of media exposure is necessary to nuance both positive and negative effects the media might have on feelings of trust and legitimacy toward the political system. The combination of content analysis with public opinion data seems to be the most fruitful way forward. The challenges for this line of research are, however, not small. The growing proliferation of media outlets and the increasing importance of the new media make it more difficult to “capture” the actual news content people consume. Furthermore, these studies often focus on specific events or specific periods that make it difficult to study the long-term implications of the relationship between media and political legitimacy.

6.5 Summarizing: How Media Affect Political Support

In this chapter I tested two related claims of the media malaise theory. First, that there is a decline in political support because of increased negative and cynical political news coverage of politics. Second, to support this longitudinal view, that this type of media coverage has an immediate harmful effect on citizens’ political trust and support for the political system. To start with the second claim: is there a negative link between news coverage and political attitudes? As our analyses of public opinion data and an extensive discussion of the literature indicates, the answer is probably “no,” but perhaps the safer answer would be “it depends.” First, we showed empirically that media use is not negatively but *positively* correlated with political support in nine Western European democracies. Controlling for several relevant characteristics, people who use more media are more satisfied with the functioning of democracy than people who have low levels of media use. Furthermore, this relationship seems to have become somewhat stronger in recent decades. Although these findings go against media malaise theories, they do not prove a causal relationship. Therefore, we took a closer look at existing studies.

Overall, a majority of studies do not find a strong causal relationship between media use and measures of political trust. Research that focuses especially on political cynicism, operationalized as the opinions about what drives individual politicians, does find a media effect more often, but again seldom a very strong one. On the basis of the modest and mixed findings in his study on political cynicism in Denmark and the Netherlands, De Vreese even concludes that “cynicism is perhaps little more than an indication of interested and critical citizenry” (De Vreese 2005: 294).

In that respect there is very little reason to assume that media are the drivers behind a decline of legitimacy, if such a trend existed (see van Ham and

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Thomassen, Chapter 2, this volume). This being said, scholars seem to recognize that news coverage of specific events or periods can have both negative as well as positive consequences for political trust. The effect is, however, seldom straightforward but contingent on the predispositions and characteristics of the receiver, and more importantly on the exact amount and type of news that people consume. In that sense, the research shifts from measures of mere news exposure to integrating actual content analyses into research designs are welcome. So overall this overview provides little support for the media malaise theory, but on the other hand, there is also not that much proof for the “virtuous circle” that Norris (2000) suggested. This is mainly due to the focus of this chapter on the political trust dimension of the virtuous circle and not so much on knowledge, interest, and participation. For these other dimensions news consumption might be more beneficial, even if the coverage is not that positive for politics. For instance, there is evidence that conflictual campaign coverage mobilizes people to turn out to vote (e.g. De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; De Vreese and Tobiasen 2007; Lengauer and Holler 2012), but simultaneously has negative effects on levels of trust. This indicates that some news content might be “good” for interest and participation, but “bad” for political support.

Even more difficult than linking media coverage and political trust in the short term, is judging the claim that the rise in critical news coverage is responsible for the gradual erosion of political legitimacy in the long term. Although a causal claim cannot be made, we must acknowledge that both trends, at least in the US, have taken place around the same time. So, at least there is ground for concern. At the same time, there is scholarly consensus that people need information about politics to act as citizens in a democracy and that the news media are an important source of information in this respect. Even Patterson, one of the most outspoken critics of the media, states that: “There is something worse than exposure to persistently negative news, and that is no news exposure at all” (Patterson 2002: 97). In this respect Patterson was worried that the decreasing amount of campaign coverage in the 1990s would lower the involvement of the American voter. Also other US scholars warn us that the real problem for democracy is the decreasing amount of hard news in combination with growing numbers of commercial channels and new media opportunities. This creates a context in which people can more easily avoid political information altogether and can go “newsless” (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007). Ironically, in the initial video malaise thesis of Robinson (1976) the inadvertent audience was considered the most vulnerable group for the damaging influence of the news media. Forty years later the analysis has been turned upside down: not the presence of these accidental news viewers, but rather their disappearance is seen as problematic. The question is whether this shrinking supply and demand of news is a

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general trend. Recent comparative studies show that the US is clearly different from most European countries, with a relatively low amount of attention for news during prime time and in comparative perspective an extremely low amount of people watching it. “The US stands out as a low-trust, low-knowledge and low news-consumption country” (Aarts et al. 2012: 117). In the future, the ongoing commercialization and fragmentation of the media landscape might bring Europe somewhat closer to the US situation. In particular, the growing importance of new and social media might be important to scrutinize.

This chapter is mainly concerned with traditional media as they still outweigh the new media in terms of political news; and at this stage the most important “new” media are still the online versions of traditional news media (Mutz and Young 2011; Shehata and Strömbäck 2014). However, the rapidly growing success of social media indicates a transition from low to high choice media environments. More than ever, people can choose when, how, and what kind of news they consume. As a consequence, people might be more influenced by the information of likeminded (virtual) friends, and no longer confronted by traditional news that sometimes challenges their preexisting views. This trend raises democratic concerns about citizens increasingly living in algorithm-shaped “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011) and reinforcing “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2007). This means that people might further narrow their information diet and increasingly live in homogeneous information environments. However, at this stage, the extent to which this trend will influence levels of political support remains unclear.

Therefore, future research will need to devote more attention to social media as alternative sources of information with potential positive and negative effects on political attitudes (Kenski and Stroud 2006; Moy and Hussain 2011). Recently, some scholars have looked at the relationship between political trust and social media. Based on Eurobarometer data Ceron (2015) comes to the conclusion that people who consume more news via social media have significantly lower levels of trust in political institutions. Johnson and Kaye (2015), on the other hand, find that in the US only the use of some types of social media (blogs, YouTube) are related to lower levels of trust, while others such as Twitter and Facebook are slightly positively correlated with political support. Both the negative and positive relationships are weak, again. These studies give us a first insight on how social media and political trust correlate, but we need more advanced studies to know what people consume, share, and produce on social media, before we can actually take into account potential effects of social media on political support (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012 on social media use and social capital). This future research agenda becomes more relevant in countries where trust in traditional media is declining and people are relying more, or even exclusively, on social media.

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We need only think of the prevalence of fake news stories on Facebook and Twitter during the 2016 US election (falsely accusing Trump and Clinton of acts they did not perform) to understand how problematic low-quality information on social media can be for people's trust in political actors.

6.6 Conclusion: What is Bad News and Who is to Blame?

At this stage neither old nor new media seem to be the drivers behind long-term trends in political support, though they may well be associated with short-term fluctuations in political support. This general conclusion might sound reassuring, however, at the same time, studies have shown that under certain circumstances cynical or negative coverage can have potentially negative consequences for public support of political actors and institutions. This raises more fundamental questions about what political news is or what it should be. We address two related issues: When is the news about politics too negative and who is to blame for that?

The discussion on what kind of political news we consider most appropriate for citizens is not an easy one to answer. Of course, this is related to broader views on news and democracy (Strömbäck 2005), but also more concretely to the nature of politics itself. For instance, can we expect media to present an issue in a non-conflictual manner if there is open and intense disagreement between politicians? In line with the work of Schattschneider (1960) conflict, defined as the competition of ideas, can be considered as a natural part of a healthy democracy. So it would be strange to expect the media to ignore the conflictual nature of politics, or to consider the attention for conflict in the news as merely something that journalists independently add to make their coverage more attractive. Probably, the critique is not that the media report political conflicts, but rather that they create conflicts, or at least over-represent them. The same goes for the attention to strategy and electoral competition: not their presence, but their dominance is considered problematic. To determine when media "distort" political reality requires a kind of benchmark to place media coverage in perspective. These benchmarks are, however, not easy to define. Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza (2012) for instance, argue that it is hardly possible to empirically distinguish between "media-initiated" negativity added by journalists and "media-disseminated" negativity added by political actors or others. They are probably right when it comes to a stand-alone content analysis. However, some studies have tried to overcome this issue by using alternative benchmarks. For instance, Kahn and Kenney (1999) asked US campaign managers to judge the degree of negativity of campaign ads and news coverage. It turned out that they were able to distinguish between criticism and "mudslinging" in both ads and news coverage.

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This distinction proved to be highly relevant as negative ads and news coverage increased turnout, while mudslinging had the opposite effect. The authors conclude that “negative information is helpful and motivates participation as long as it addresses relevant topics and is presented in an appropriate manner” (1999: 878).

This brings us to the question to what extent the media can be blamed for the sometimes negative effects their coverage has. A revealing study in this respect has been conducted by Mutz and Reeves (2005). In three experiments they test the potential negative effect of “uncivil” political debates on television viewers. It turns out that when politicians in the debate interrupt each other, raise their voices, and show non-verbal disrespect for their opponent, viewers trust in politics goes down. The effects are substantial and not only affect trust in politicians, but also in institutions such as Congress and the presidency. When viewers watched a debate with exactly the same level of conflict, but with “civil” politicians, the negative effects on trust remained absent. Can the media, or in this case television, be held responsible for the damaging influence on citizens’ confidence in politics? Of course the media cannot be blamed for simply broadcasting a political debate. On the other hand, we should not be naïve as we know that media favor at least some drama and tension to make a political debate more attractive for the audience. In fact, the study of Mutz and Reeves also shows that the uncivil debates are considered as more interesting and exciting. This leaves political journalists with the dilemma that making political programs that are the most thrilling, probably also have the most negative influence on political trust.

The attention for what “bad news” is and how it is caused remains an important challenge for future studies. However, a future research agenda should perhaps also look at the potential opposite effect of “good news” on political support. Until now, the research agenda was perhaps too much occupied with the potential link between “political malaise” and “media malaise.” Even Norris (2011), in her most recent opposition against media pessimists focused more on showing that a negative relationship is absent, rather than clarifying or deepening the potential positive relationship. This is perhaps not surprising as scientists may be—just like journalists—more focused on the negative and less on the positive (Lau 1985). But maybe it is time to put the opposite questions center stage. What amount and types of news content might enhance political trust and limit cynicism? Which people might benefit most from following the news? When do social media have a positive impact on confidence in politics? Some studies discussed earlier fit this research agenda. For instance, Adriaansen et al. (2010) indicating that substantial news coverage was able to reduce cynicism among younger citizens is intriguing, while Shehata (2014) shows that in Sweden even institutional trust can be enhanced when campaign news is mainly about issues and

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policy, instead of focusing on politics as a game. Also the study of Kahn and Kenney (1999) is worth mentioning as they suggest ways to distinguish between substantial disagreement with its positive effects and aggressive personal attacks that lead to the opposite. These findings require more investigation before we can generalize them. Of course, even a research agenda that looks for positive effects, should not be blind to the many shortcomings and distortions in how media portray politics and its potential detrimental consequences. Or to put it in the words of the famous media sociologist Michael Schudson (1995: 3): “Everyone in a democracy is a certified media critic, which is as it should be.”

Notes

1. Using a slightly different approach, Zaller (1999) finds for the same time period an increase from 5 percent to 20 percent negative news. Benoit and colleagues (2005) don't find an increase of negative campaign news in the *New York Times* between 1952 and 2000, as campaign news has always been more negative than positive. They do confirm an increase of more strategic news coverage over time.
2. The trend file was updated until 2014 for all variables as media use questions not asked in the 2015 Eurobarometers.
3. While online media use has increased in recent years, questions about online news media use were not asked in earlier Eurobarometers. Hence to ensure comparability of our data over the thirty-year period analyzed here, we only consider media use of these three more traditional media sources.
4. Note that the media use index variable in the Mannheim Trend File is coded from very high to very low, but we reversed the scale to make the interpretation of results more intuitive.
5. Note that in Table 6.1. we report results for media use taking media use as a quasi-continuous variable, in order to ease interpretation of results for the interaction term with year. The predicted probability graphs that are shown in Figure 6.2 are based on analyses with media use index as a categorical variable, combining low and very low media use to prevent empty cells in some country-years. The results of these models are substantively the same as the ones presented in Table 6.1 and are available on request from the author.
6. Note that these categories include a substantial proportion of respondents. In the pooled data set across the nine European democracies, forty-eight percent of respondents fell into the very high media use category, thirty-three percent fell into the high media use category, and nineteen percent into the low and very low media use categories.