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**Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior**

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**Chapter 2**

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**SUBSTANCE MATTERS:****HOW NEWS CONTENT CAN REDUCE POLITICAL CYNICISM**

*This chapter was published in International Journal of Public Opinion Research, co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.*

**Abstract**

This chapter compares the impact of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism among younger people (18–34 year-olds) as compared to non-young citizens. While studies on the *unfavorable* impact of strategic news have yielded mixed results, the possible *favorable* impact of substantive news has not been studied extensively. This chapter draws on a panel survey ( $n = 703$ ) conducted before the 2006 Dutch elections, together with content analysis of television and newspaper items during the campaign period. Contrary to what we expected, we did not find any effect of strategic news on political cynicism. Also, we did not find any effect of exposure to substantive news on political cynicism among non-young citizens. Among younger citizens, however, we found a clear negative effect of substantive news on political cynicism. This suggests that young adults can experience a process of secondary socialization, in which exposure to substantive news may reverse the “spiral of cynicism”.

### Introduction

Common wisdom and recent research emphasize increasing discontent among citizens in several democracies (e.g. Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007). The possible causes have been extensively discussed. The mass media are often mentioned as causes of cynicism. Since Robinson (1976) used the term “media malaise” for the perceived detrimental effects of media use on political attitudes and behavior, many scholars have scrutinized the effects of media use on political attitudes and behavior. Attention has been directed at the medium as well as its content (Newton, 1999). The *medium* that is most often related to unfavorable attitudes is television (Putnam, 2000; Robinson, 1976). Most authors who study *news content* focus on the unfavorable effects of specific coverage, such as entertainment (Holtz-Bacha, 1990), negative or uncivil coverage (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993, 1996) or strategic coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). Our focus is on the effects of the latter on cynicism, and specifically on the idea that strategic news induces political cynicism and reduces levels of political trust, a process that has been labeled the “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

In response to the media malaise theory, other scholars have described a “virtuous circle” in which news media use increases political trust and knowledge and leads to mobilization (Norris, 2000b). Several authors have found favorable effects of specific media forms such as newspapers (Aarts & Semetko, 2003) and even television (O’Keefe, 1980; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998), or more specifically public broadcast television (Aarts & Semetko, 2003) and broadsheet newspapers (Newton, 1999). Nevertheless, little attention has been directed to the favorable effects of news content. We argue that if strategic news content can induce cynicism, other sorts of news content may reduce it. Therefore we focus not only on the possible detrimental relationship between exposure to strategic news and political cynicism, but also on the possible beneficial relationship between exposure to substantive news and political cynicism. We have therefore studied the relationship between news exposure and political cynicism over the course of a national election campaign and combined a content analysis of news media with a panel survey.

The effects of news content on political attitudes are not the same for every citizen (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). This study focuses on the possible effects of news content among younger citizens. Younger citizens have less stable attitudes than older ones and may not yet be politically sophisticated since they have less political experience and

weaker partisan ties. We therefore expected young people's attitudes to be particularly affected by media coverage, either favorably or unfavorably (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008).

### **Changing News Content**

Media systems in modern European democracies have changed dramatically in recent years. On the one hand there has never been more political information available to citizens (Esser, et al., 2010). On the other hand, some research also suggests that the way the media report the news has shifted from a mostly descriptive manner to an interpretative style. Substantive news has become less prevalent as strategic news becomes more prevalent and polls are published on a daily basis (e.g. Brants & van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2008a; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). What exactly defines substantive and strategic news? *Political substantive news coverage* — also called policy-oriented or issue-oriented coverage — provides information about present and future government policy, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).<sup>15</sup>

*Strategic news coverage* includes coverage of gains and losses (often based on poll results), power struggles between political actors, the performance of political actors, and public perception of their performance. Strategic news also includes “horse race” news or game-oriented news; words of warfare and (sports) games are often used (Jamieson, 1992 in: Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Other scholars have included the electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalition formation, and the non-substantive attacks of one political actor on another (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

### **Political Cynicism: Distrust in Reliability and Competence**

Political cynicism is regarded by several scholars as the opposite of political trust (Dekker, et al., 2006), as harsh distrust (Eisinger, 2000), or as the absence of trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). In other words, there is a scale that runs from high trust to high distrust or political cynicism (Miller, 1974a). In this vein, Krouwel and Abts (2006; 2007) have developed a more comprehensive scale of the degree of negativity of political attitudes, ranging from trust to skepticism, distrust, cynicism, and alienation. Several other authors explicitly regard political cynicism as the opposite of political trust (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber & Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Peterson & Wrighton,

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<sup>15</sup> Some scholars also state that substantive news deals with proposed solutions to problems that matter to citizens. Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.* add that it describes parties and candidates as actors who sincerely try to identify and solve problems, which would mean that it gives no judgment on politicians' motivations and therefore offers a neutral assessment. The latter is not necessarily true, since a news item can be both substantive and strategic.

1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008). In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes. We focus on political actors (politicians and political parties) as the object of these attitudes, because we expect attitudes towards political actors to be more likely to be affected over the course of a national election campaign than, for example, attitudes towards the political system (for an overview of the possible objects of political attitudes, see Easton, 1965, 1975; Norris, 1999).

Two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: trust in *political actors' reliability* and trust in *political actors' competence* (Aberbach, 1969; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). In Chapter 1, we used closed-ended as well as open-ended questions to test the possible dimensions of cynicism. In this study we confirmed the dimensions reliability and competence. Political actors' reliability is related to their integrity, the extent to which they hold their promises, whether they act in the public interest and whether they are responsive to the public. Political actors' competence has to do with their ability to do their job, the extent to which they take charge of problems, and whether they know what is important for the people. We regard *political cynicism as strong distrust in political actors' reliability and / or competence*.

### **The Potential Effects of News Content on Political Cynicism**

Political trust has declined and cynicism has risen in the past decades (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007), and this is often blamed on the media, which has shifted from substantive to strategic news. To most citizens, the media are important sources of political information, as are conversations they have with acquaintances who in turn also receive their information from the media (Graber, 1988, 2001; Mutz, 1998). One can thus speak of a mediated reality. If a source has such a large impact on what citizens know about political actors and their actions, one may wonder what impact their style of coverage has on citizens' attitudes. Political journalists exert power over the public sphere, simply because they determine what is politically relevant and what is not (Habermas, 2006). The media thus affect the formation of public opinion as well as individual opinions and attitudes. Evidence suggests that citizens rely on the media as a source of information about political actors, as well as for an interpretation of the context in which they place the information (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001).

The media malaise theory suggests that the media unfavorably affect political attitudes. If indeed they do, which aspect of media reporting is responsible? As mentioned

earlier, many researchers point to the shift from purely descriptive to more interpretative journalism. News reporting is to a high extent defined by the strategic frames that provide meaning to political events and political actors' behavior. When the media report mainly about the strategies political actors pursue in order to gain or affirm their positions, and political actors' motives are reduced to their individual interests, citizens may start to believe that political actors primarily act in their own interest, and strategic news coverage may in this way induce political cynicism. In other words, strategic framing in terms of political actors' personal interests instead of the public interest results in political cynicism.

Evidence of the effect of strategic news is mixed. Several scholars have shown that strategic news coverage unfavorably affects political attitudes; it induces political cynicism and lowers levels of political interest and trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001). Some remarks have been made on the evidence regarding this "spiral of cynicism", and scholars have shown that the effects are contingent on several factors. Valentino, Beckman et al. (2001) have shown that the effect of strategic news on participation and trust in government is moderated by personal characteristics. De Vreese (2005) has shown that the unfavorable effects of news on issue-specific cynicism are contingent on the level of strategy reporting in the news. Also, the effects might be short lived: De Vreese (2004) has shown that while strategic news fuels political cynicism and activates negative associations with a specific issue, these effects do not persist over time.

In this chapter, we study the relationship between strategic media reporting and political cynicism. We consider citizens' cynicism towards political actors in general, whereas most previous studies have considered cynicism towards a specific issue or towards a political campaign. Also, we look at all strategic news reporting, while most research has focused on strategic news reporting on a specific issue. We are interested in the extent to which strategic news content in general affects the level of the "generic" political cynicism of media users. We do not have any reason to expect that strategic news affects cynicism towards political actors' reliability in a different way than cynicism towards their competence. Therefore, we do not distinguish between the two and formulate the following hypothesis: *(H1) Strategic news content induces cynicism on the part of citizens about political actors' reliability and competence.*

If a specific kind of news content can *induce* cynicism, other kinds of news content may *reduce* it. In other words, there may be a sort of news content that reverses the spiral of cynicism. In line with Cappella and Jamieson (1997), we expect that substantive news coverage, that is, news about issues, may have this effect. When citizens are exposed to media

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that mainly report the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes, this may induce cynicism. Conversely, if citizens are exposed to media that report mainly substantive issues and political actors' societal goals and viewpoints, citizens may believe that political actors act primarily in the public interest. This line of reasoning is similar to Iyengar's (1991) about the impact of thematic news reporting that places single events in a broader context.

How exactly can substantive news be influential? Citizens do not process all the information they are exposed to, and afterwards remember only a part of it. Graber (1988; 2001) describes how people use "on-line processing"; they merge the details of information into a general meaning and pay less attention to the rest of it. Later, when they are exposed to new information, this general meaning may attach itself to it. In addition to the meanings they have attributed themselves, citizens rely on meanings that journalists assign to information. When repeatedly exposed to substantive news coverage, in which journalists give meaning to the acts of political actors in a substantive manner, citizens may adopt this interpretation. News that explains which issues are addressed by political actors — instead of what political actors' strategic motivations are — may remind citizens of the public interest political actors pursue and can thus reduce the aspect of cynicism towards political actors that concerns *reliability*. Similarly, news coverage about political actors' policy actions — instead of what they have achieved in the polls — can reduce the aspect of cynicism that concerns *competence*. In this way, substantive media reporting may lead to an increase instead of a decrease in trust.

Studies relating substantive news coverage to political cynicism are less prevalent than those relating strategic news to political cynicism. As Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) have noted, studies that use aspects of the news as a predictor for trust tend to concentrate on unfavorable effects of the news, like negative statements, strategic news, and uncivil behavior. There are exceptions, but these studies do not concentrate on substantive news. Valentino, Beckman et al. (2001) have shown that people who are exposed to strategic frames express lower levels of trust in government than those exposed to issue news, but their study did not take into account what would happen if these respondents were exposed neither to strategic nor to substantive news. In a series of studies on the effect of strategic news, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that issue frames did not reduce issue-specific cynicism and that in some cases it did not even evoke less cynical reactions than strategic news. Their study, however, was on the impact of news coverage in a certain policy field on issue-specific cynicism, not on cynicism towards political actors in general. In this study, we investigate the impact of substantive news in all kinds of prevalent news stories on general political cynicism. We formulate the

following hypothesis: (H2) *Substantive news content reduces cynicism among citizens about political actors' reliability and competence.*

### **The Next Generation: a Focus on Younger Citizens**

Younger citizens have less stable attitudes than older ones and they therefore may be more susceptible to information from the media to which they are exposed (McLeod & Shah, 2009). Jennings and Niemi (1978) have shown that though political orientations are far from stable at any stage of life, younger citizens' orientations are less stable than those of their parents. If younger citizens have less stable attitudes, we can also expect those attitudes to be more easily affected by media coverage. Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) have focused specifically on the effects of strategic news exposure and argued that younger citizens may be more receptive to negative and strategic news because of their more volatile attitudes. Younger citizens would thus more likely be caught in a spiral of cynicism.

Two reasons why younger citizens have less stable attitudes may be that they are less politically sophisticated and that they identify less with political parties. Valentino, Beckman *et al.* (2001) showed that the strength of media effects depends on the level of sophistication and party identification of the news consumer. First, the least sophisticated citizens are the most likely to be prone to cynicism because they are less able to put a news item into perspective (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Younger citizens are less politically sophisticated because they lack political experience and they cannot yet rely on a broad base of knowledge to which they have been exposed in the past; they process information less readily (Lau & Redlawsk, 2008). It is therefore harder for young people to place a news item in a broader context or to put it into perspective. Graber (2001) has argued that as people grow older, they interpret new information with schemas they have in memory, because this saves mental energy. These schemas are formed during the formative years of one's life and often remain intact afterwards. Only when exposed to new facts or unfamiliar situations are people likely to attach meaning to the information and store it in their memory. We would like to argue that the formative years of a person politically are not only those of childhood, but also those in which s/he first experience election cycles. Younger citizens have not yet attached meaning to all aspects of the political and are therefore more open to new information (Graber, 2001).

Secondly, non-partisans do not have ties to a specific party and are therefore more easily persuaded by short-term influences, such as news coverage (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) argue that trust can only exist when there is a relationship between political actors and the public. In this relationship, trust is based on the



idea that the political actors represent the public interest. Political cynicism can exist when this relationship is weak or absent. Party identification is lower among younger citizens as compared to older citizens (Converse, 1976; Dalton, 2002), since younger citizens have not yet developed a strong relationship with specific political parties or politicians and their vulnerable relationships with them can be damaged more easily. Younger citizens' lower levels of party identification may therefore be another reason for the larger effect of news coverage on political cynicism.

The evidence on the relationship between media use and political cynicism among the younger generations is limited. There is some evidence concerning the level of political cynicism. Dalton (2004) showed that although trust was relatively high among the young in the past, in several countries trust has declined sharply in this group. Van der Brug and Van Praag (2007), for example, studied the level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in the Netherlands and showed that differences between generations are small and have not changed in the past three decades. Contrary to this finding, Bennett (1997) showed that while young Americans are as cynical as their parents, their parents express significantly higher levels of involvement. Many young Americans do not vote, do not engage in political conversations, and seldom or never follow what is going on in politics. Others argue that younger generations' engagement is not declining, simply changing. Citizens nowadays are more actively involved in democratic decision-making, and authors have pointed to a shift from traditional participation to elite-challenging forms of political action (Dalton, 2006, 2008; Inglehart, 1977, 1990).

As mentioned, Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) studied the impact of strategic news on political cynicism among young Dutch adults and found a positive effect of exposure to strategically framed referendum campaign coverage on cynicism towards the campaign. They argued that young citizens are more likely to be prone to media-induced cynicism than older ones. Their study was concentrated on young citizens and the differences within the youngest age cohort. They had to rely on other studies to compare young citizens with older ones. In our study, we compare younger citizens (18–34 year-olds) with older ones to determine to what extent the effects noticed in the younger cohorts differ from those in the older cohorts. We look at the differential effects of strategic as well as substantive news coverage among the younger generation. This is relevant because it can deliver more insight into how political cynicism develops, since we expect younger citizens to be more susceptible to change. It is also important to know how cynicism develops among younger citizens because they are the future of democracy. To gain more insight into the development of cynicism among younger

citizens, we formulated two extra hypotheses: (H3) *the effect of strategic news content on cynicism is stronger for younger citizens than for non-young ones*; and (H4) *the effect of substantive news content on cynicism is stronger for younger citizens than for non-young ones*.

### **Data and Methods**

In this chapter, we focus on the 2006 Dutch national election campaign. After decades of relative stability of political cynicism in the Netherlands, the aggregate level of political cynicism increased substantially prior to the unique elections of 2002, and while the level of cynicism fell again in 2003, in 2006 it rose again (DPES, 1977-2006). Political cynicism among Dutch citizens has not only grown, but also seems to be more volatile. This combined increase and volatility render the Dutch electorate a useful site for studying the causes of political cynicism. This chapter draws a combination of a content analysis and survey data.

### **The Content Analysis**

We analyzed the content of the Dutch national television programs and newspapers in the eight weeks prior to the elections (between September 27 and November 22, 2006). The content analysis was conducted by eleven native Dutch speakers. To test for inter-coder reliability we randomly selected a subset of 73 newspaper and television stories from the included news outlets. The reliability estimates for the various measures are given below. We report mean pair-wise agreement and Cohen's Kappa, which is a measure that controls for chance (Riffe, et al., 1998). Overall, we found that the reliability of our measures was sufficient.

The news content is analyzed separately for news programs (NOS Journaal, RTL Nieuws, Hart van Nederland), current affairs programs (Een Vandaag, Nova/Nederland Kiest), regular newspapers (Algemeen Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf, Trouw, de Volkskrant) and free newspapers (Metro, Sp!ts). We analyzed all television news and current affairs programs that were broadcast in the research period. For the selection of regular newspapers, we used the online newspaper database LexisNexis (2006), and searched keywords related to the election campaign. Free newspapers were selected by hand from their own websites. From all the newspapers, we took a systematic sample<sup>16</sup> of the articles found, and coded 41 percent of the articles in our target population. For the analyses in this chapter, all

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<sup>16</sup> We ordered the newspaper articles chronologically and by outlet. We decided to separate the articles into two periods: (1) the actual campaign phase – which was the four weeks before the elections – and (2) the four weeks prior to the actual campaign phase. Since the actual campaign phase is the most important phase we wanted to place larger weight on this period. We randomly selected articles in both phases. We coded 49 percent ( $n = 1735$ ) of the articles in the actual campaign phase and 17 percent ( $n = 508$ ) of the remaining articles.

items coded as campaign news are included.<sup>17</sup> We coded items as campaign news when they were presented as such, or when they satisfied one of the following criteria: the presence of a national party leader; events within the framework of the elections; reference to the elections, election programs, or election campaigns; or reference to the (present or future) government, its composition, or its policies (*pair-wise agreement* = 82.27 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .65).

The unit of analysis was the individual news story. In order to give larger television items more weight than smaller items, the data were weighted by the size of the item. For example, a 60-second item counted twice as much as a 30-second item. Also, we gave newspaper articles on the first page twice as much weight as articles on other pages. We conducted our analyses on the weighted as well as on non-weighted data. Results were similar; the weighting affected neither the direction nor the level of significance of the effects.

Our indicators of substantive and strategic news were based on Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and De Vreese (2005). As indicators for the presence of substantive news we registered whether the story: (1) predominantly dealt with substantive public policy issues, problems, and solutions, (2) described the substance or detail of legislation, proposed legislation, or government programs, (3) provided descriptions of politicians' stances or statements about substantive policy issues or (4) dealt with general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public. If one of these elements was present, we coded the item as being substantive (*pair-wise agreement* = 82.80 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .66). The percentage of substantive news, then, was the percentage of stories in which the news was depicted in a substantive way.

As indicators of the presence of strategic news we registered whether the story: (1) was mainly about politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, or generally winning or losing, (2) predominantly dealt with politicians' or parties' strategies for winning elections or issue debates (e.g., campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers), (3) dealt with a future coalition or government formation, (4) made use of the language of wars, games, or competition, or (5) paid attention to polls. If one of these elements was present, we coded the item as being strategic (*pair-wise agreement* = 79.20 percent, *Cohen's Kappa* = .58). The percentage of strategic news was the percentage of stories in which the news was depicted with a strategic frame. Items could be substantive and strategic, or both or neither. 68.4 percent of the items were coded as substantive news, and 49 percent as strategic news. More precisely, 40 percent of the items was only substantive, 20 percent was only strategic, 29

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<sup>17</sup> For the analysis in this article 2,148 items were used: 1,367 regular newspaper articles, 138 free newspaper articles, 413 TV news items and 230 items in current affairs programs.

percent was both substantive and strategic, and 12 percent was neither strategic nor substantive. We included the values for the different news outlets in Appendix E.

### **The Survey Data**

The survey data set we used was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and news paper *De Volkskrant*. These data were gathered during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections. The data had a panel component, with three time points in 2006: February (t0), September (t1), and in November before Election Day (t2). We used a computer assisted self-interviewing method (CASI), which means that the selected respondents ( $n = 1700$ ) received an email inviting them to participate and filled in the questionnaire on a computer without the interference of an interviewer. At t0, the response rate was 66 percent ( $n = 1115$ ). At t1, the recontact rate was 78 percent ( $n = 870$ ), and at t2 it was 81 percent ( $n = 703$ ). We used the t1 and t2 data ( $n = 703$ ). Our data were by and large representative of the Dutch population; Appendix F shows that our respondent data mirrored census data in terms of age, gender, and education. The survey data had an extensive battery of news media use questions, which enabled us to connect our content analysis to this data. This chapter is based on the t1 news media use data. For every medium we asked how much respondents use these media normally (from never to almost daily). To test our third hypothesis, we distinguished between younger and older citizens. Younger citizens were those aged 18 to 34 years ( $n = 144$ ). Ideally, we would have preferred to narrow down this group, but the number of respondents in the younger group would have been too small to run a multivariate analysis.

In media effects research, most scholars use an issue-specific measure for political cynicism. For example, following Cappella and Jamieson (1997), Elenbaas and De Vreese (2008) measured political cynicism among citizens with statements concerning the content of the campaign, politicians' attitudes during the campaign, and citizens' perceived ability to gather information. The political cynicism scale we use in this chapter consists of statements tapping into more general political cynicism. To measure political cynicism, we draw on a standard set of items from electoral research in the Netherlands<sup>18</sup> and add new items, inspired by the results of Chapter 1.

The standard items concerning political actors' reliability were: (1) "Politicians consciously promise more than they can deliver"; (2) "Ministers and junior ministers are primarily self-interested"; and (3) "In enabling someone to become Member of Parliament,

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<sup>18</sup> These items have been used in Dutch parliamentary election studies since 1977.

friends are more important than abilities”. We chose to keep these statements for reasons of comparability and to add others for reasons of conceptual completeness. Critics argued that the traditional items were not strong enough (Dekker, et al., 2006) and thus included what we considered a stronger statement: (4) “Political parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion”. A large majority of the respondents agreed with this statement (see Appendix G), which means that in future research we should find an even stronger statement. We also added three statements about politicians’ competence: (5) “Politicians do not understand what matters to society”; (6) “Politicians are capable of solving important problems”; and (7) “Most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing”.

The seven items were measured in two waves and loaded on one dimension (t1 scale values:  $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = .51$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ , t2 scale values:  $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = .51$ ,  $\alpha = .87$ ). We note that Chapter 1 and the literature suggest two dimensions. Apparently, when citizens are asked non-aided in an open-ended questionnaire, many of them mention either reliability or competence and therefore two dimensions arise. When they are prompted with closed statements about both reliability and competence, then the two aspects appear to coincide.

More information about the political cynicism scale and the exact wording of the questions is included in Appendix G. The t2 political cynicism data were used to test the effect of news content on the *level* of cynicism. The t1 and t2 political cynicism data were used to test the effect of news content on the *change* in degree of cynicism during the campaign.

### **Combining the Content Analysis and the Survey Data**

To connect the content analysis data to the survey data, we analyzed the news content variables for each medium (based on the content analysis). In other words, for each television program and each newspaper, we determined the percentage of news items that could be called substantive and the percentage that could be called strategic. We merged these news content variables with the level of news media use (in the survey). So, for each television program and each newspaper, we connected the level of substantive news in content analysis to the extent to which the individual respondent uses it, ranging from never to almost daily. The extent of use of substantive news is thus based on the level of substantive news in all the media someone uses and on the level of usage. For strategic news we did the same. In this way, we constructed variables to determine to what extent respondents were exposed to substantive or strategic news.

Based on the content analysis data, for each medium the percentage of substantive news (SU) was determined, ranging from 0 to 1. For example, the score for the current affairs program Een Vandaag is  $SU_{EenVandaag} = .826$ . For every respondent, the use of each medium (M) was registered, ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (almost daily). For a respondents who uses Een Vandaag almost daily,  $M_{EenVandaag} = 5$ . The percentage of substantive news was then multiplied by the use, which yielded the substantive news exposure for this medium:  $SU_{EenVandaag} \times M_{EenVandaag}$ . This was done for every medium. The sum of all substantive news exposure ( $\sum SU * M$ ) was calculated and divided by the total news media use ( $T = \sum M$ ), in order to correct for the level of news media use. The average percentage of substantive news a respondent was exposed to in the media s/he used, was calculated as  $SU_{average} = (\sum SU * M) / T$ . In the same way, the percentage of strategic news a respondent was exposed to was calculated as:  $ST_{average} = (\sum ST * M) / T$ .

### Control variables

Based on extant research, we expected political cynicism to be related to other political attitudes and we therefore controlled for these attitudes in our model. The political interest scale combined interest in the election campaign and talking about politics with acquaintances ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = .70$ ,  $r = .44$ ). The political knowledge scale was based on the number of politicians someone recognizes out of 11 national party leaders ( $M = .84$ ,  $SD = .17$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ). Furthermore, we controlled for socio-demographic factors likely to be related to political cynicism. Dalton (2004) showed that although trust used to be higher among the young and among those with higher education, in several countries trust has declined sharply among these two groups. As mentioned earlier, previous research has shown that satisfaction with the way democracy works in the Netherlands has been almost equal among generations in the past three decades (Van der Brug & Van Praag, 2007). Van der Brug and Van Praag also showed that satisfaction with the way democracy works is still positively related to education. We included age and education as well as gender, since there may be a relationship between these socio-demographic variables and political cynicism.

### Results

To test the effect of strategic and substantive news on political cynicism, we used OLS regression. Table 2.1 shows models for the entire sample ( $n = 703$ ), the younger respondents (18–34 year-olds,  $n = 144$ ) and the non-young respondents (35 years and older,  $n = 557$ ). We included both strategic and substantive news in one model and controlled for

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other variables. Contrary to what we expected, we found that the amount of strategic news citizens had been exposed to was unrelated to their level of political cynicism, both in the entire sample, as well as among younger respondents. This means that our first and third hypotheses are not supported: strategic news content does not induce cynicism about political actors' reliability and competence among citizens, neither in the whole population, nor among the youngest cohorts.

Table 2.1: Regression Model Explaining Political Cynicism

	<i>All respondents</i>			<i>Younger respondents (18-34 years)</i>			<i>Non-young respondents (35 years and older)</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
intercept	3.40	.41		4.61	.81		3.09	.48	
control variables:									
gender	-.06	.04	-.06	.03	.08	.03	-.07	.04	-.07
age	.00	.00	.00	-.01	.01	-.11	.00	.00	.00
education	-.05	.01	-.15***	-.07	.03	-.23**	-.04	.01	-.14**
political interest	-.04	.03	-.06	-.06	.06	-.09	-.04	.03	-.05
political knowledge	-.12	.12	-.04	-.07	.22	-.03	-.14	.14	-.05
news exposure:									
*strategic	.30	.64	.02	-.21	1.37	-.01	.40	.72	.02
*substantive	-.56	.38	-.06	-1.54	.73	-.19*	-.16	.45	-.02
adjusted R-square		.04#			.14#			.02	
N		703			144			557	

*Note.* Cell entries are unstandardized B coefficients, standard errors and standardized  $\beta$  coefficients. Data were collected during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; # R-square significant  $p < .001$

We also expected a negative relationship between exposure to substantive news and political cynicism. This effect appears to be very weak for the entire sample. Considering the two age groups, there is a negative effect of substantive news and political cynicism for the younger group ( $-.19, p < .05$ ), while there is no effect for the non-young group. This means that our second hypothesis is not affirmed, since there is no significant effect for the whole population. Our fourth hypothesis is supported: the negative effect of substantive news on cynicism is not stronger for younger citizens, but exists only among younger citizens. The more substantive news a young citizen is exposed to, the less politically cynical the person will be.

Considering that there might be a relationship between the effects of substantive and strategic news, we controlled for an interaction effect between substantive and strategic news, which appeared to be non-significant. The interaction effect did not affect the values for the main effect and was therefore not included in the models. This means that strategic substantive news affects political cynicism to the same extent as non-strategic substantive news.

The control factor that has a significant effect on political cynicism is education, which is negatively related to political cynicism for both age groups. This implies that less educated citizens express somewhat higher levels of political cynicism than highly educated ones. Other socio-demographic variables were not significantly related to political cynicism, nor were political interest and knowledge.

Table 2.2: Time Model Explaining Political Cynicism at t2

	<i>All respondents</i>			<i>Younger respondents (18-34 years)</i>			<i>Non-young respondents (35 years and older)</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>β</i>
intercept	.81	.29		1.01	.58		.72	.33	
cynicism t1	.74	.03	.73***	.76	.06	.76***	.73	.03	.73***
control variables:									
political interest	-.01	.02	-.02	-.01	.04	-.02	-.01	.02	-.02
political knowledge	-.00	.08	.00	-.02	.14	-.01	.00	.09	.00
news exposure:									
*strategic	-.00	.43	.00	.32	.87	.02	-.04	.49	-.00
*substantive	-.15	.25	-.02	-.80	.47	-.10*	.05	.30	.01
adjusted R-square		.54#			.62#			.53#	
N		702			144			557	

*Note.* Cell entries are unstandardized B coefficients, standard errors and standardized  $\beta$  coefficients. Data were collected during the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; # R-square significant  $p < .001$

Although the regression model in Table 2.1 suggests that substantive news reduces political cynicism among younger citizens, we considered that it was still possible that the relationship is the other way around. Therefore in a second model presented in Table 2.2, we added a time component: we added the political cynicism level at t1 (just before the actual campaign started) as a predictor for cynicism at t2 (just before the elections were held) and studied the causes of change in the level of cynicism during the campaign. We did not control



for socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, and educational level. These variables do affect the level of political cynicism in the long term, but do not change over a period of one month. We did control for political interest and knowledge, since these variables can change during a campaign period.

Not surprisingly, in this model political cynicism at t1 (September) is a strong predictor for cynicism at t2 (November). Nevertheless, exposure to substantive news still predicts a part of the variance in political cynicism ( $-.10, p < .05$ ). Even with the small group size ( $n = 144$ ), the regression coefficient is still significant. These results mean that substantive media coverage can reduce political cynicism among younger citizens during a campaign period. It can thus cause a change in political attitudes during a relatively short period.

### Discussion

We studied the effects of different sorts of news content on political cynicism in the context of the 2006 Dutch national election campaign and compared younger citizens with non-young ones. We found no impact of strategic news on political cynicism, contrary to what we expected. We did not find a significant effect of substantive news on political cynicism among the population as a whole. Among younger citizens (18–34 year-olds), however, substantive news had a clearly decreasing effect on political cynicism. It even explained changes in levels of political cynicism during the campaign.

Our results are in line with studies that have found a favorable effect of media use on political attitudes (O'Keefe, 1980; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). The idea that news content can not only induce cynicism, but also reduce it, was alluded to in earlier texts as well (Norris, 2000a), but had not been compellingly demonstrated in a combined analysis of panel survey data and news content analysis data. Previous studies showed that those exposed to strategic frames express lower levels of trust in government than those exposed to issue news (Valentino, Beckmann, *et al.*, 2001), but that issue coverage did not *reduce* issue-specific cynicism among the whole population (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Our study is also in line with the fact that others found an increase of political support for *all* politicians in a campaign, which suggests that the high information intensity of a campaign has a favorable effect on citizens' feelings about politicians (Van der Brug & Van der Eijk, 2005; Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998).

It is remarkable that we did not find a relationship between strategic news and political cynicism because this is not in line with what we expected based on the available literature.

There may be several reasons for this. Different data collection methods are used in this literature, including both experiments (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and combinations of surveys and content analyses (e.g. Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008). This makes it unlikely that the data collection method was the cause of the difference. The literature that showed a clear effect of strategic news on cynicism was based on data collected in the U.S. in the 1990s (e.g. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Studies in Europe have been conducted (2008) that posit some constraints on the relationship. It is possible that the relationship is less clear-cut in a European political setting than in the U.S. Another explanation may be the operationalization of strategic news content and political cynicism. In this chapter we have focused on all strategic news content during an election campaign, instead of strategic news content concerning a specific issue. We have also focused on the cynicism of citizens towards political actors in general, instead of cynicism towards a specific issue or towards a campaign. It is exactly these differences in conceptualizations that may explain why our results differ from those of Elenbaas and De Vreese (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001), who found a relationship between exposure to strategically-framed referendum campaign coverage and cynicism towards the campaign among young citizens.

It has been argued that the impact of news content varies across individuals (Jennings & Niemi, 1978), but to our knowledge this is the first study that has compared the effects of strategic and substantive news on younger citizens with the effects on the non-young population. Exposure to substantive news coverage led to lower levels of political cynicism among younger citizens, while we found no effect among non-young citizens. This finding may be explained by the fact that young citizens' political attitudes and orientations are less stable than those of older citizens (2000b). Older citizens have relatively stable attitudes that do not change easily during a campaign. Younger citizens do not yet have such stable developed attitudes and thus can be more easily influenced by media exposure.

### **The Possible Favorable Effect of Substantive News – and its Constraints**

We think that our findings have some relevant societal implications. Can we conclude that there is little reason to worry about strategic coverage, as long as it also contains substantive information? The results suggest that coverage of political actors' strategies for pursuing their goals will not induce cynicism as long as it concerns goals related to substantive issues. Neither will ideological differences of opinion between political actors lead to cynicism.

Substantive news coverage may reverse the spiral of cynicism and lead to a virtuous circle, as described by Norris (2002; 2004). Citizens use their experience with political

information to give meaning to new information. Younger citizens, being less experienced than older ones, are more dependent on journalists' interpretations. When news covers political actors' viewpoints and policy actions and journalists give meaning to political information in a substantive manner, this can lead young and less experienced citizens to feel more positively about political actors' motives and competencies, because it helps them to understand what is happening in politics. Surprisingly, younger citizens' political cynicism was not affected by strategic news. Although we cannot expect that all citizens will be willing to be exposed to substantive news, this at least suggests that education about how a democratic system works can reduce negative attitudes towards politics.

Extrapolating from this study, the question is how to confront cynical young citizens with politically substantive information. Of course, one can and should expose youngsters to political information at school, but this knowledge should also be maintained in adult life. A few decades ago, almost all citizens watched political news, not because they liked it, but because they were confronted with it on the same network in their favorite shows. Schoenbach and Lauf (2007) call television's ability to disseminate political information to non-interested citizens the "trap effect". Nowadays, many more networks are available and consumers can choose networks that do not broadcast political information. Most media companies are confronted with strong competition and have an incentive to provide the coverage that their users prefer. Prior (De Beus, Brants, & Van Praag, 2009) has shown that this fragmentation of the media market negatively affects American citizens' level of political knowledge, and that there is a growing gap between more highly educated news junkies on the one hand and the rest of the American public, which consumes less politically substantive information, on the other. The same pattern is visible in many European countries, where the growth of commercial networks and the internet have fragmented the media market as well.

Many young citizens — and specifically cynical young citizens — are not highly politically interested and make little use of so-called quality media that contain high levels of political information, such as public broadcasting and quality newspapers. Young citizens more often use commercial television, free newspapers, and the internet. On the internet, people are not confronted with news unless they are looking for it. Most commercial networks in the Netherlands — and in some other countries too — broadcast no news at all (2007) because they think their consumers are not interested in news. It is very unlikely that those networks will broadcast more news in the near future — let alone more substantive political information. The free newspapers include a reasonable amount of news about politics, and this is probably the only way to reach young citizens who are not highly politically interested.

In summary, it is very hard to expose youngsters to political information. This will be a very complex problem for governments in the future. Although exposure to substantive news can lead to a virtuous circle, it is also possible that a lack of exposure to substantive news limits citizens' understanding of politics and trust in political actors, and may then lead to a spiral of cynicism.

### **Lessons for Future Research**

Our results have implications for future research as well. Mapping media effects in a survey with a short time interval is extremely difficult. In this study we found that younger citizens are more easily affected by media use than older citizens. The younger citizens in this study were between 18 and 34 years of age. The strongest media effects will most likely be visible among young adults, who can vote for the first or second time in their life and are starting to think about politics. Binnema, Adriaansen, and Verhue (2001) showed that in the first years of adulthood, citizens become more interested, less cynical, and more inclined to participate. These authors suggested that in these first years of adulthood (18–25 year-olds) a significant process of political socialization takes place. While the influence of parents and school decreases, other sources of influence — such as friends, colleagues, and the media — become more important and this leads to a process that could be called “secondary socialization”. The formative years for a citizen are during the first election cycles s/he experiences. In the Netherlands, young citizens, who have recently received the right to vote, being exposed to information they are not familiar with, start to attach meaning to it.

This chapter has shown that this process is visible among citizens between early adulthood and their mid-thirties, but it is probably most visible among the youngest adult citizens. For this reason, research on media effects among the youngest adult citizens would probably yield the most insight in attitude change. Further research on this group should therefore be carried out to provide a more detailed understanding of *why* substance matters and *how* news content can reduce political cynicism.

