Growing into citizenship: The differential role of the media in the political socialization of adolescents

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Tuned out" (Mindich, 2005) and "alienated" (Henn & Weinstein, 2006). These are just two of the labels scientists, journalists and politicians attributed to the youngest generation of citizens. According to many of these voices, young adults are less engaged in politics than ever before. This claim can be supported by numbers: Only 26% of American university freshmen think that politics is important (Galston, 2001) compared to 58% in 1966. On top of that less and less adolescents follow political information in the media in the US (Patterson, 2007). In Europe, there is similar evidence. Electoral participation of the young is dwindling (Dalton, 2006). In Germany, for example, adolescents are less likely to join political parties (Niedermayer, 2006) or even develop a preference for one (Mößner, 2006). Henn and Weinstein (2006) observe a comparable alienation from politics in the UK among the young.

This development is a serious threat to democracy. A democratic political system cannot function without a *demos*, an active citizenry that cares and participates. Any democratic system depends upon legitimization through its citizens, through voting and by participating in politics. Yet, the youngest generation of citizens in Western democracies is growing up disengaged or even alienated from the political world – and are likely to remain so throughout their lives (Sears & Valentino, 1997).

In this context it is important to consider the role of the media to understand why so many adolescents are socialized in a way that leaves them feeling like they have no part in the political system. Especially since the media play a prominent role in the lives of adolescents. According to 2010 data of the European Social Survey, 93% of European adolescents use the Internet every single day, and 95% watch TV on a daily basis. Children and adolescents aged 8 to 18 use media over 8 hours a day (Foehr & Roberts, 2010). Moreover, media can be – depending on content and the way they are used – a benefit or a curse for the process of political socialization. On the one hand media are a place where adolescents can seek out as well as be exposed to political information, discuss political issues or even participate in politics, for example by signing online

petitions. On the other hand, media use takes up a great share of their time that could have been used for community service or other activities known to foster positive attributes of citizenship (Putnam, 2000). Additionally, some media content, for example highly strategic political information that portrays politics as a game of egoistic power players, might even be detrimental to the development of positive political attitudes. It is important to note that *media* are understood in the broadest sense here; the term includes traditional media sources like TV, newspapers and the radio as well as online news sources or participatory online media like social network sites.

Given the significance of the issue, the literature on the differential effects of media use on political socialization is relatively thin (Delli Carpini, 2004). This holds in particular with regard to long-term effects. Since the pioneering work of Chaffee and colleagues in the 1970s (for an overview see Chaffee & Yang, 1990) only few scholars have investigated the influence of media on political socialization over a longer period of time, (e.g. McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010; Hooghe, 2012). Yet, the world of political socialization has changed considerably since Chaffee and colleagues published their work during the heyday of political socialization research in the 1970s (Shapiro, 2004).

Changing agents and processes of political socialization. Past research often singled out parental influence as *the* main driving force of political socialization (for example Hess & Torney, 1967), yet recent studies find parental influence to be close to insignificant (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012). This is due to a fundamental transformation of the political culture in the past decades. Party alignments have weakened and political cynicism is generally on the rise (Hetherington, 2005). Yet, if parents have distanced themselves from politics, they cannot serve as political role models in the way they used to anymore. At the same time, social movements like the anti-globalization movement have entered the playing field and act as independent agents of socialization, motivating young and old to become engaged in often short-lived issue oriented initiatives (Norris, 2003).

Changing media system. A second factor that has changed over the past decades is the media system. Here, in particular two developments are important.

First, political information has changed in content. The news is increasingly entertainment oriented and focuses on persons rather than issues. This development can be related to the general growth in apathy towards politics, mentioned above (Wirth, 2000). Second, the Internet has become an integral part of our everyday lives, especially for the young. Whereas the advent of online media has first been regarded as a threat to political socialization (for an overview see Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001), the academic debate concerning the potency of the Internet for the political socialization of the young now focuses on its opportunities (Coleman, 2008).

Research question

Given all these developments, we are in need of an update of our understanding of the processes and mechanisms of political socialization, in particular with regard to the role of the media herein. The key question of this dissertation is how media influence the development of political knowledge, political attitudes, and political participation today, given that the role of other agents of socialization has changed.

It is the aim of this dissertation to contribute to the understanding of the media's role in the political socialization process of adolescents by focusing on a few key aspects characterizing the media landscape in the 21st century: a) the advent of *online media* as a regular source of information on the one hand and an interactive platform enabling political discussion and engagement on the other; b) the *dynamics* of media influence, acknowledging that the causal relationship of media use and outcome variables of political involvement is interdependent: and c) *differential effects* of specific content and different media types.

Growing into democratic citizenship

The concept of political socialization has been thoroughly debated in the social sciences. In 1959 Hyman defined it as a person's "learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal position as mediated through various agencies of society" (p.25). Scholars of social sciences still broadly accept this definition; however, the *political* aspect of political socialization remains relatively vague in

this definition. Sigel (1965) suggests defining political socialization as "the process by which persons learn to adopt the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors accepted and practiced by the ongoing (political) system" (p.1). This definition is useful because it specifies the areas in which political socializations takes place: *norms*, *values*, *attitudes* and *behaviors*. The definition also makes clear that political socialization is a normative process – citizens are shaped within a specific political system.

However, from today's perspective Sigel's definition can be criticized for a number of reasons: First, the individual is regarded as a passive object upon which norms, values, attitudes and behaviors are imposed. Yet, recent theorizing clearly shows that we are active participants in our own political socialization (Sears & Levy, 2003). By seeking out information about politics, negotiating its meaning and choosing the political experiences we want to participate in, we have decisive role in the formation of our political identity. Second, Sigel's definition neglects the notion of agents that mediate the political socialization process, which has been a part of Hyman's definition. Agents of political socialization are for example: parents, peers, teachers, but also the media. Finally, Sigel's definition describes a developmental process with a static outcome, whereas political socialization is now understood as a life-long process in which political cognitions, affects, norms and behaviors are constantly evaluated and potentially adapted as the political system changes around them (Sears & Levy, 2003). That being said, within this life long process, adolescence plays a pivotal role, as it marks the period in life in which individuals face their first electoral decision. Moreover, policy decisions gain relevance when adolescents become increasingly independent of their parents. I therefore define political socialization as a life-long process in which individuals acquire knowledge, norms, values and behaviors relevant to the ongoing political system. This process is mediated by various agents, one of which is the media.

Studying political socialization among adolescents

As mentioned above, adolescence is a pivotal period in life with regard to the process of political socialization. Children already become familiar with aspects of the political system as early as the age of six (van Deth, Abendschön, & Vollmar, 2010), but their understanding of the complex interplay of political institutions that characterizes politics remains superficial. During childhood parents are the prime agent of political socialization. By demonstrating what it means to be a citizen as well as discussing politics they can spark children's first interest in politics (Chaffee, McLeod, & Atkin, 1971). As children grow into adolescence, however, parental influence becomes less and less important and peers and teachers enter the playing field as important agents of political socialization. Again, conversations about politics are the key environment in which political socialization takes place. To give an example, classroom debates in which students take on a pre-determined standpoint on an issue and defend it, are proven to be a very efficient tool to foster political participation (Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009).

During late adolescence and early adulthood the life of many young citizens changes drastically. As they graduate from secondary school and start a working life or continue their studies elsewhere, their social environment changes. Teachers and friends from school loose influence and media take their place to a large extent as the prime source of political information and agent of political socialization. It is important to note that changes in importance as agents of socialization are different from individual to individual and generally gradual process. This also implies that several agents play a role in the socialization process at the same time. This is why it is so crucial to study precisely adolescence as a period in life with regard to media effects on political socialization. We need to understand how adolescents are influenced by the media and whether or not these processes are alike for all adolescents.

There is an additional reason why it is interesting to study adolescence in the context of political socialization. During late adolescence young citizens are eligible to take their first electoral decisions. The decision to turn out or not in the first two elections highly correlates with turnout later in life (Franklin, 2004; Sears

& Levy, 2003). At the same time, young citizens also increasingly face the effects of policy decisions taken by the government. They start to pay taxes or are enrolled in the educational system, which is subject to government regulation. This means that politics become a relevant factor in their lives for the first time, the question is whether they want to be a part of it or not.

<div align="center">**Analytical model**</div>

In this dissertation I focus on three areas of political socialization: the development of political knowledge, political attitudes and political participation. In the following section each of these outcome variables will be discussed in the context of potential media effects. Figure 1.1 presents a simplified model of all causal processes investigated.

Figure 1.1: Analytical model of media influence on political socialization
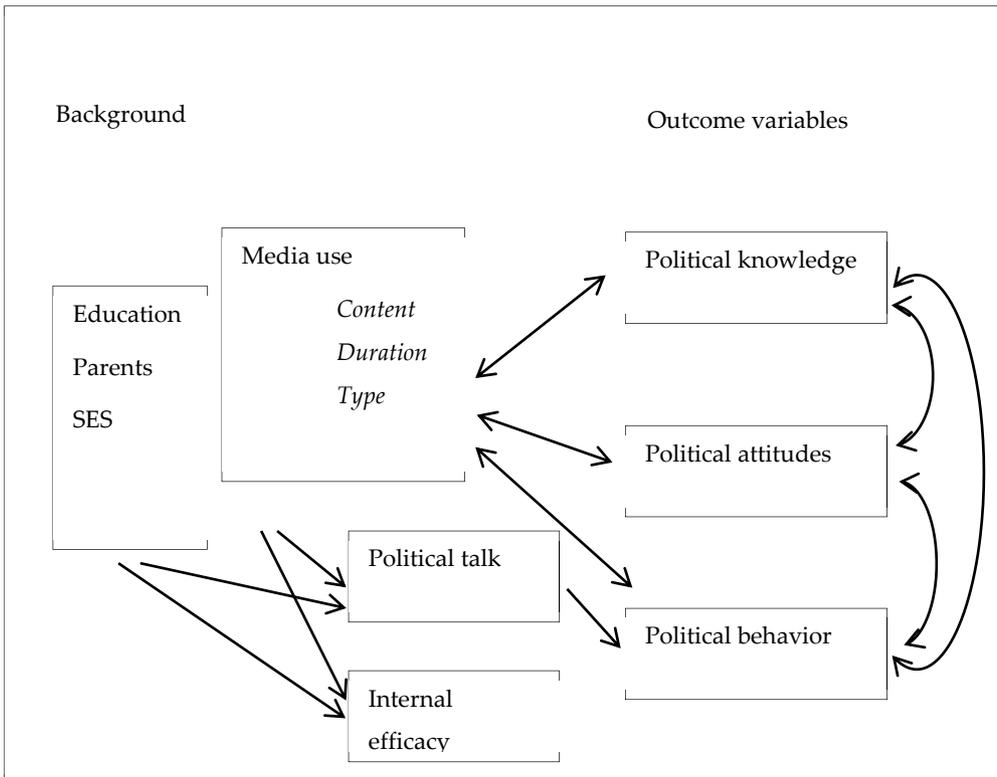
It is important to note that the mechanisms of media effects should not be understood as a simple stimulus-response process. In fact effects of media on variables of political socialization should be understood as reciprocal and conditional upon a number of characteristics on the individual level (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). I will briefly describe each of the key elements and connections from Figure 1.1.

Political knowledge

Although the development of political knowledge is not explicitly included in Sigel's influential list of areas of political socialization it is key to the cultivation of democratic citizens. In order to take informed decisions and participate, citizens need a basic understanding of political structures and processes (*structural political knowledge)* as well as an overview of current issues at stake, and ongoing political debates *(factual political knowledge).* Media use, in particular news use, can contribute to political learning with regard to both dimensions of political knowledge by presenting information on current events and thereby demonstrating the political process. However, political learning through news media is not a straightforward stimulus-response reaction because it is conditional upon a number of factors, among which existing political knowledge. Therefore the causal relationship of news use and political knowledge is best conceptualized as a mutually interdependent spiral (see chapter 3).

Political attitudes

Political attitudes, like political cynicism or political trust describe a cognitive-affective perspective on the political system and its actors. Political attitudes are important determinants of political behavior (Hooghe & Quintelier, 2011). To illustrate this with an example: political cynicism has been found to have demobilizing effects on political participation (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), although there is also evidence to the contrary (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). Let us use the example of political cynicism again to illustrate potential media effects on political attitudes. There is ample research on theorizing claiming that specific media content, for example conflict-framed news stories or coverage of

political scandals, portrays politics in an overly negative light. Exposure to this type of content gives the audience the impression that politics is a power game of egoistic players who are not concerned with their interests (see also Chapter 2). Additionally, effects of media content on cynicism are conditional upon characteristics of the media user as well as the context in which media is used (Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013).

Political behavior

Political participation is investigated as an area of political socialization affected by media use. In this dissertation I explicitly choose to employ a broad conceptualization of political participation, thereby deviating from the majority of research on political participation that mainly focuses on electoral participation. My definition of political participation includes all acts intended to influence the political system: from spraying a political message on a wall to engaging in a political campaign. I use this broad definition for three reasons. The first is of practical nature. Adolescents are only eligible to vote once they have reached voting age. Yet, the crucial phase of political socialization starts before they are allowed to vote for the first time. Hence other modes of participation need to be considered when studying change in participation at this age. The second argument is theory-driven. Democracy today is a complex process of negotiating interests. Citizens have ample opportunities to be part of the policy making process even during an electoral cycle. In particular through the advent of the Internet and its possibilities to connect with like-minded people (for example by starting an online petition), citizens can directly influence parliamentary decision making. Although most of these initiatives are not directly legally binding, they still put pressure on political actors to consider the people's will. Third, we need to consider new forms of participation to validly tap into the lifestyle of the youngest generation. Flexibility is a key characteristic of the young generation in their private as well as their professional lives. This also holds for their approach towards political participation, as Norris (2004) points out. Instead of aligning themselves with a political party, young people prefer to form short lived coalitions around one specific issue (for example to stop a study reform) that

quickly dissolves once their goal is reached or the issue is off the political agenda. Consequently, a multitude of political activities need to be considered when measuring the level of political participation among adolescents.

Now turning to potential media effects on political participation, the evidence of extant studies is mixed. According to the literature, media have the power to mobilize and demobilize its audience – depending on characteristics of the user as well as the media source. For example, online media are likely to trigger different types of political engagement than offline media will do (Vissers, Hooghe, Stolle, & Maheo, 2012). Entertainment media use, in particular regular watching of sitcoms, has been found to be negatively related to political participation (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003), whereas the use of news media is likely to mobilize individuals. It is important to note that the causal relationship of these processes goes both ways. Additionally, there are two mediating factors between news use and political participation: conversations about politics with parents or peers and political efficacy. The first mediator, political talk, has been established in the work of McLeod, Shah and colleagues (2010). They demonstrated in multiple studies that exposure to news in the media among adolescents only inspires adolescents to participate in politics, if the information obtained is processed and evaluated through talking to family or friends. As I also point out in Chapter 4 there is also a second mediating factor between news use and political participation: political efficacy. To be specific: internal political efficacy defined as the feeling to be competent and informed enough to participate in the political process. Internal efficacy mediates the effect of political information use on participation because information needs to be processed in order to be effective. Once adolescents feel like they have understood what they have been exposed to, they feel competent enough to participate.

Research design and data

Two data sources
To investigate the role of the media in political socialization of adolescents I rely on two data sources in this dissertation: the European Social Survey (ESS) and an

originally collected four-wave survey. This second dataset was collected for the purpose of this study among a representative sample of 15 to 18 years olds in the Netherlands between 2010 and 2012.

The ESS data set enables a comparative perspective of the phenomenon. The comparison I undertake in Chapter 2 is twofold: Adolescents across Europe are compared to each other and adolescents are compared to adults. The comparison of European adolescents has two advantages. First, it allows testing the influence of system-level factors, such as the democratic performance of a country. Second, by studying 22[1] countries at the same time I am able to assess whether media influence on political socialization varies among different contexts. This helps to answer the question whether the causal mechanisms of media influence are conditional upon a specific type of political or media system.

The second comparative perspective concerns potential differences in media effects on adolescents and adults. As explained above, media effects during adolescence are in the focus of this dissertation, because this period is so crucial in the process of becoming a democratic citizen. As I choose to focus on one specific age group, I implicitly assume that the impact of media on adolescents is inherently different than it is for adults. It might be stronger, due to sheer amount of time adolescents spend with the media, but it might also be weaker as the media are only then becoming an influential player in the formation of political knowledge, attitudes and behavior. Using ESS data in the second chapter enables me to test this assumption explicitly and find out whether there is in fact a difference in media effects between adults and adolescents.

The four-wave panel survey was specifically designed for the purpose of this dissertation in cooperation with our project partners Frank Esser and Ruth Kunz at the University of Zurich, who carried out a similar panel survey in Switzerland in the same time period. The survey was collected within the broader frame work of project IP10 as part of the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) *democracy* funded by the National Swiss Science Foundation. The data collection in

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[11] For specifications on the ESS data see Chapter 2.

the Netherlands was partly funded by NCCR and partly founded by the Amsterdam School of Communication Research.

Using panel data to study political socialization is a worthwhile undertaking, as political socialization is a dynamic process that plays out over a long period of time. To study such a process reliably it is crucial to analyze the phenomenon longitudinally. A cross sectional study can only focus on the level of political engagement or knowledge at a specific point in time. By using panel data, I am setting out to study growth or decline in the dependent variables and how changes in media use relate to either of them. This creates an inclusive picture of the causal relationships that are at work. A second advantage of using panel data over such an extended period of time is that I am able to depict a significant part of the adolescent political socialization trajectory. This implies that media effects observed in this study are long-term media effects that are likely to last longer than the study period of two and a half years, and certainly longer than media effects found in experimental studies.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used to collect the data consists of 59 questions in the first wave and 50 questions in the second and third wave. The majority of questions asked in the questionnaire consisted of multiple items that were separately rated. Respondents took about 30 minutes on average to fill in the questionnaire during the first wave, and 25 minutes during the second and third wave. The final wave was meant as a brief check-up after the elections and therefore only contained 5 questions. All questionnaires were administered online.

The variables measured range from the dependent variables political engagement, political knowledge, and political attitudes to standard socio - demographic control variables such as education and age. Other important control variables are parental and peer influence, political norms, and political experiences. The variable measured most detailed is the main independent variable in this dissertation: media use. The questionnaire contains a set of questions that tap into general media use and access to media (internet access at

different locations, whether or not their parents are or were subscribed to a newspaper). Furthermore, a total of 27 news outlets – online, televised, or in print – were presented to the respondents. For each of these outlets respondents reported their usage per days in a typical week. Moreover, I collected data regarding their online activities, how attentively they used the news, and regarding their interpersonal communication about politics.

Sample

The survey was carried out by the Dutch opinion institute Gfk, which also recruited the respondents. To arrive at a sample representative for the population (Dutch adolescents 15 to 18 years old at the beginning of the survey), a light quota sample was drawn from their database, which is representative of the Dutch population. The quotas we applied were age (15 to 18), gender, and education. For specifics on each wave see Table 1.1. Panel attrition did not lead to a significant change in the composition of the panel with regard to key demographic variables age, gender, and education.

Table 1.1: Fieldwork data per wave

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Wave 4
N	1653	1186	888	746
Field period	6/16/2010 – 7/10/2010	6/16/2011 – 7/10/2011	6/14/2012 – 7/3/2012	9/14/2012 – 9/24/2012
Attrition rate	-	28%	25%	16%

Outline of this dissertation

The empirical studies presented in the next chapters of this dissertation all contribute to answer the key question whether and how media use influences the process of political socialization. Therefore, each study investigates a different aspect of the analytical model introduced above, focusing on specific dependent variables and causal mechanisms. The line of arguing in this dissertation leads

from broad to specific. Whereas I analyze very general effects of media use in the first study, the last study investigates the effects of a specific TV program, which was specifically designed to reach and mobilize the youth.

As mentioned above, Chapter 2 is based on data of the European Social Survey and serves the purpose of placing the subsequent studies into context. In this study I zoom into the subject by comparing Dutch adolescents, the group investigated in Chapters 3 to 5, in two ways: by looking at multiple political and media systems and comparing media effects on adults and adolescents within these systems. The main dependent variables in Chapter 2 are political attitudes and political engagement. In this chapter the causal mechanisms are tested rather crudely, which is mainly a consequence of data constraints.

The dynamics of the causal mechanism between political outcome variable and media use, however, is studied into detail in Chapter 3 by using the example of political knowledge. By relying on panel data and Structural Equation Modeling I provide evidence that the relationship between political knowledge and news media use is best described as a mutually reinforcing spiral.

In Chapter 4, I disentangle the effect of different media sources. TV, print and Internet news are analyzed separately to find out whether one source is more influential than the other. In particular online media are the focus of this study. I distinguish between traditional unidirectional news sources and interactive platforms allowing to discuss politics or even get engaged straight away. Moreover, I provide evidence that the causal mechanism between media use and political participation is mediated by internal political efficacy, the feeling that one is informed enough and capable to participate in the political process.

In the final empirical chapter, I take the argument beyond the status quo and analyze how a political information program designed to appeal to an adolescent audience can contribute to the political mobilization of the young. The study investigates whether integrating content and stylistic features in a political information program, which appeal to a young taste, can inspire the audience to become more active in the political world.

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