Transformations of television systems: Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes

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This thesis investigates the transformation of West-European television systems since the onset of the liberalisation process through a systematic comparison of 17 television systems between 1980 and 2008. The transformation of West-European television systems is analysed through a dualistic approach by analyzing the changes in media structures along the related, but distinct dimensions of audience fragmentation and dependency on commercial income. The thesis investigates the consequences of these transformations for political content, political competition and political attitudes. The analysis shows that these transformations have increased sensationalism in news coverage. While audience fragmentation compels political parties to pay more attention to the immigration issue in comparison to other issues, this fragmentation compels them to differentiate themselves rather than to imitate the issue owner. Contrary to common expectations, the analysis also shows that increased audience fragmentation and dependency on commercial revenues in television systems are associated to higher instead of lower political trust.
Transformations of television systems

Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes
Transformations of television systems

Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes

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Foreword

Writing this thesis was accomplished with the company and support of a lot of people. I would like to thank all of them and acknowledge how everyone has helped me in her own way during the process of writing this book.

When I came to Amsterdam in the summer of 2000, the University of Amsterdam was a welcoming place to me. At the time, I did not know that it would become my home for more than 10 years. I would hereby like to thank my professors and lecturers in sociology (especially in the first and second year) who, through their teaching and enthusiasm, made me fall in love with social science.

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Oxford, December 2013
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In memory of my grandfather Bassou
Chapter 1

Changing West-European television systems in comparative perspective
A theoretical and methodological discussion

1.1. Introduction
The wave of deregulation and liberalisation of West-European economies which started in the late 1970s and intensified in the late 1980s, and was seen as a solution for a general economic stagnation, was echoed in media policy, especially with regard to television. In most West-European countries, television used to be organised as a public institution and enjoyed a monopoly. Liberalisation refers to the process of opening of the television sector, which was previously dominated by one or few – generally public – players, to competition by other – mainly commercial – providers. This process has gone hand in hand with the re-regulation of the sector rather than deregulation per se (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). In European broadcasting, this process implied the entry of private channels to the broadcasting scene, which previously was the quasi-exclusive domain of

1 I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO), which funded this PhD-project (Project number 311-99-112).
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public service players. This also involved a more relaxed regulation towards advertising (Dyson & Humphreys, 1989).

These changes were accompanied by a shift in the objectives of television as an institution. By the early 1990s, West-European television systems had transformed to a dual system in which public interests had to compete with commercial goals. Liberalisation and (re-)regulation subsequently allowed for more competition and encouraged growing advertising-dependency of broadcasters. Increased competition and reliance on mainly advertisement-generated commercial revenues created television systems in which commercial considerations became increasingly important. In the pre-liberalisation era, the primary objective of West-European television systems was serving the ‘public interest’, while, after the liberalisation, economic interests became more and more dominant. Scholars see the increasing focus on ‘economic matters’ away from the focus on the public and democratic role of media as the most important shift in media policy in the 1980s (McQuail, Siune, & Euromedia Research Group, 1986). This has led to drastic changes in the media environment.

Media environments or so-called ‘media systems’ are relevant for studying the relationship between media and politics. When producing media content, media companies and media outlets operate in a particular system, which structures and constrains their actions. Such contextual factors may affect the nature of media content. Political parties and politicians have to act in a media environment that is to some degree ‘predefined’ by structural characteristics. As consumers of media content, citizens also depend on the media environment as it partly determines or constrains their choice of media content (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b; Prior, 2007). This study focuses on television, as it is still the most frequently used medium by audiences as a source of political information and entertainment.
Until recently most research on the consequences of media systems for political attitudes focused entirely on individual-level exposure, and has not paid attention to effects of the media environment on political attitudes. To fill part of this gap, this thesis focuses on the media environment as an important factor determining or at least influencing the level and nature of political information available to citizens. Recently, studies have started to emerge that stress the importance of the media environment for the nature of news coverage and citizens’ political knowledge (cf. Aalberg et al., 2013; Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Curran, Iyengar, Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Esser et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2010). This thesis contributes to this emerging field of studies that argue how the media context is crucial in studying the relationship between media and the political system.

This study distinguishes itself from the bulk of these previous studies by its different conceptualisation of the media structure. While prior studies start from the premise that structural supply side characteristics determine consumption of media content and therefore neglect the role of demand side characteristics, I start from the premise that supply and demand in the media market are intrinsically interrelated. My conceptualisation of media structure is not a static one that is (totally) predefined outside media users. Rather, I conceptualise media structure as the result of interactions between supply side characteristics of television systems and consumption patterns of media users.

This thesis investigates the aggregate level changes in television systems after the large-scale introduction of commercial television in the 1980s through a comparative study of 17 West-European media systems. It argues that a more nuanced understanding of these changes can be achieved by focusing on the two separate dimensions of (1) advertising dependency and (2) audience...
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fragmentation. This thesis investigates how media systems have changed along both dimensions and analyses the relevance of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation for political communication. Subsequently, it analyses the consequences of increasing advertising dependency and audience fragmentation along three different analytical dimensions: (1) media content, (2) political competition between political parties, and (3) political attitudes of citizens.

In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly describe the historical liberalisation process of West-European broadcasting systems. The analytical focus will be on the consequences of this process at the organisational level of broadcasting systems, addressing the following questions: How has this liberalisation process changed the way broadcasting functions? How can we understand the consequences of this development in broadcasting systems for democracy?

1.2. History of West-European broadcasting in a snapshot

From the beginning of broadcasting, European government broadcasting policies have been interventionist in nature. After a brief experimental phase in the 1920s, which included amateur and commercial stations, radio broadcasting remained state-controlled in most European countries. Television emerged in the early 1950s. Notwithstanding variations between countries, the organisational structure of West-European broadcasting showed considerable similarities. It was generally organised as a public institution with a monopoly over television and radio. Most public television systems consisted of one or two (and in a few cases three)

\[\text{2 Although there are several other studies about West-European broadcasting systems, this brief historical overview mainly draws on Noam (1991), because his study provides a comparative perspective, which goes beyond the specificities of national systems and is similar to the comparative approach of this thesis.}\]
Changing West-European television systems in comparative perspective

channels with national coverage. Although their organisations were placed under government control, they usually had semi-independent boards appointed by governments or major political parties. In some cases, politicisation along party lines was reflected in media systems (Noam, 1991).

Financing was generally based on license fees and public funds, which were in some cases supplemented by advertising revenues. Only the Luxembourg and Monaco broadcasting systems established themselves early as profit-making businesses. From 1955 onwards, Britain had a dual system with commercial television operating alongside a public broadcaster. Finland permitted a private broadcaster to broadcast some hours on its public channel. In France and Sweden, the public channels were independently organised. Because of the presence of different language groups, Switzerland and Belgium developed separate national broadcast institutions for these different groups. In the Netherlands, the different religious and ideological pillars of society formed separate broadcasting organisations, which collaborated under one single broadcasting authority.

Within these variations, the institution of public broadcasting generally held a domestic monopoly, which would last for approximately 30 years. West-European broadcasting systems, although some where profit-oriented, shared the ‘public service’ ideology of providing entertainment, information and education to all citizens in the ‘public interest’. Competition between public broadcasters was limited and heavily regulated. A certain but limited degree of ‘commercialism’ was accepted in some countries while loathed in others (e.g., Scandinavia and the Low Countries) (Dyson & Humphreys, 1989, pp. 138-139).

By the mid-1980s, socio-political pressures in favour of breaking up this public television monopoly had risen high throughout West-Europe. In the early 1990s, this monopoly was broken either through domestic liberalisation, or by the
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introduction of foreign public and commercial television via cable television (Noam, 1991, p. 8). In the 1980s, the weight of policy arguments had shifted towards a market model of broadcasting. Broadcasting had come to be viewed as an enterprise, public funding became increasingly questioned, and governments stimulated competition (Dyson & Humphreys, 1989).

While these changes are commonly attributed to technological innovation, they were also driven by national and international economic and socio-political trends and shifts in economic ideology. In several cases liberalisation started in a context of terrestrial commercial broadcasting where no new technology was used. Already in 1958, in Sweden and Denmark pirate ships started targeting young audiences via radio broadcasting. This practice extended to the Netherlands (1959), Belgium and Britain and attracted a devoted audience. By the 1960s and 1970s these commercial ventures extended to non-commercial initiatives by community groups all over Europe and gained not only more popularity but, more importantly, also political legitimacy (Noam, 1991).

Although the audiences of these pirate broadcasters were small, their presence and popularity challenged the ‘taken for granted’ status of the monopolistic public broadcaster. Some of these non-profit pirate stations were legalised as a political compromise in an attempt not to introduce ‘private’ television. For instance in the Netherlands, the former pirate television station ‘Noordzee’ was integrated in the structure of public television in 1966 as the TROS broadcasting organisation (Bardoel, 2008). This was the first opening in the process of political will developing in favour of changing broadcasting systems, and the start of a process in which the distinction between community radio station and commercial stations became more and more blurred.
Changing West-European television systems in comparative perspective

From an economic perspective, big publishers saw European broadcasting liberalisation as an opportunity to expand their business. Albeit modest, the successful breaking up of the total public monopoly was the long-awaited political opportunity for commercial interests in the printed press industry. This industry was highly concentrated and dominated by a few large and powerful publishers and had reached ‘natural’ limits to its growth in domestic markets. Although some publishers feared that private television would compete with newspapers for public attention and advertising money, other publishers considered television to be a good opportunity to expand their business. They started to promote the idea of private television and succeeded in attracting political and public support (Noam, 1991).

In addition, the advertising lobby was very strong and pushed for access to electronic media (Humphreys, 1996, p. 172). This promotion gained political attention and support from the political right but in several cases also from the left, especially in France. External factors such as the European Community’s liberalising media policy also played a role. This is exemplified by the 1989 Television Without Frontiers Directive, which undercut national protectionist policies and stimulated deregulation, cable penetration and the advent of satellites, which in turn made broadcasting an increasingly international matter, and which therefore facilitated the legal entry of commercial broadcasting (Bardoel, 2008). Technological progress provided political arguments to be used in an on-going political contestation between pro- and anti-liberalisation camps. New technology undermined the relevance of one of the arguments for a public monopoly in broadcasting, which was ‘spectrum scarcity’. Spectrum constraints meant that just a few television channels could broadcast simultaneously. With the advent of new technologies for multi-channelling this argument lost its power.
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These changes in broadcasting systems may have already been lurking at the horizon sometime before the onset of the liberalisation process. Public broadcasters mostly relied on licence fees, but these stagnated when almost all households owned a television set, while operating costs kept on rising. In need of more revenues and faced with the unpopularity of increasing licence fees and the difficulty of generating more income via government subsidies, public broadcasters considered advertising to be an attractive way to generate more revenue. In this context, public broadcasters in several West-European countries expanded the time spent on advertising. Although advertising was still highly regulated in content, amount and timing, this somehow challenged their legitimacy as a non-commercial institution.

Even in the cases where public broadcasters in Europe did not partly rely on commercial revenues through advertising, this option was often a subject of political discussion and a powerful argument used against public funding of television and its overall monopoly. The funding of public television was and has remained a contested subject of political debate. This indicates that economic interests were the most important driving force behind changes in media policies rather than technological changes per se. In the Dutch case for instance, while introducing commercial television was still perceived as a bridge too far in 1967, regulated block advertising was introduced in public television as a concession to socio-political pressures (Bardoel, 2008).

Nowadays, the importance of economic factors is obvious in the framing of the debate on broadcasting policy. After the entry of commercial television, the debate increasingly questioned the legitimacy of public television. Pro-liberalisation actors have argued that the regulatory and funding benefits to public television disturb competition in television market, which is supposed to be ‘free’.
Other studies have argued that, because of competitive pressures in the new television environment, public television programming has become increasingly similar to that of commercial television making the legal benefits and even existence of public television questionable. However, the empirical evidence for this convergence is mixed (De Bens, 1998).

1.3. Theoretical and methodological implications of the liberalisation process in television systems

1.3.1. Convergence in broadcasting: do national comparisons still make sense?

In most countries, broadcasting systems were historically organised as domestic systems (Negrine & Papanathanassopoulos, 1990). Everywhere, the idea of national broadcasting has been associated with national identity and political support (Chalaby, 2005). Yet the liberalisation of broadcasting systems and the rise of new technologies have fundamentally questioned this idea of 'national television'. Three related but different consequences of the liberalisation process have rendered the use of the nation state as a unit of analysis in comparative media research potentially problematic:

1. Media companies increasingly operate internationally, which might imply that companies define their market responses also at the international rather than at the national level only;

2. National media systems may have converged (to the liberal libertarian model) to such extent that there may be no significant differences left between national media systems;
In addition to the increase in international trade in media content and programming formulas, convergence in journalistic culture and practices might have taken place, which possibly implies that audiences in different countries are exposed to largely similar media content.

I will discuss each of these potential problems in turn. First, the liberalisation wave has facilitated the creation of international media mergers and, hence, cross-national ownership. Media companies are no longer operating as domestic players but are more and more oriented towards international opportunities outside national markets. This is not only the case for commercial operators but also for strong public television organisation, such as the BBC and France Television. The emergence of the European Union as a supra-national regulatory body questions the relevance of a national comparative methodology even more profoundly.

This internationalisation process is illustrated by the creation of international television channels, both in terms of ownership as well as funding. Such television channels attract funding from advertising in different countries and facilitate cross-country flows of capital, expertise and media content. This indicates that competition between television companies for advertising revenues increasingly takes place across frontiers rather than at the national domestic level. This renders any (absolute) assertions about competition intensity at the national level potentially misleading. In addition, because of technological convergence and cross media ownership, media owners nowadays compete with each other transnationally and across various media platforms.

A possible implication is that the relevant market for audiences is not restricted to the national level only, but also includes the European/international level. One could therefore argue that the old conception of broadcasting systems as national domestic systems is no longer applicable in the present-day reality.
Nevertheless, there is a danger in overstating this point. Because of national linguistic and cultural differences, people's media content preferences and patterns of use of television might differ across countries. Audiences still display a strong preference for culturally relevant domestic media content where it is available (Tunstall, 2008). Although they operate at the international level, media companies offer different national channels. This shows that media companies have to take account of national and local specificities, notwithstanding the internationalising of their activities and ownership structures. Such national specificities in language, culture and media use are an obstacle for full trans-nationalisation that would lead to complete convergence. In addition, national regulations of TV content are still relevant and these still differ significantly between European countries (Hardy, 2008, p. 166).

The strength of national public television and audience preferences for national content push commercial players to develop nationally specific channels and programming, which limit the convergence and similarities between national television systems. This shows that the ‘frontiers’ of a national broadcasting system can only be demarcated by analysing the use of channels by national audiences, irrespective of the question whether these channels are national or international in their ownership or even audience targeting. This thesis is therefore based on an audience-oriented approach and applies the national audience use of television channels as a criterion to define (national) television systems.

A second potential problem for the comparison of national television systems is that the process of liberalisation and (re-)regulation might have led to convergence between television systems towards the liberal or libertarian model, with the US serving as the prototype of the latter (d’Haenens & Saey, 2001). Hallin and Mancini (2004b) argue that differences among media systems in general have
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diminished to the point that it is reasonable to ask “whether a single, global media model is displacing the national variation of the past, at least among the advanced capitalist democracies discussed in this book” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b, p. 251). If there are no substantial differences left between media systems, we can no longer observe a systematic relationship between media system characteristics on the one hand and characteristics of parties, media content and citizens on the other.

The question of media systems convergence is highly relevant to my approach because if there are no differences between countries in their media systems, the differences between countries in patterns of political communication cannot be explained by media system characteristics. This begs the following question: Are there still differences between national television systems that would justify a cross-national comparison? The empirical part of this thesis therefore starts by analysing the convergence between West-European television systems. It investigates the national level consequences of the liberalisation process. How have television systems changed at the national aggregate level? Did these television systems become more similar as a consequence of the liberalisation process? To what extent are there still differences between countries? The results of these investigations show that there are still substantial differences between the European television systems, so that further analyses of the consequences of these differences are feasible.

The question of system convergence does not only apply to economic factors. A third possible problem could be that internationalisation and globalisation have given rise to international trade of media content and intensified contacts between media organisations all-over the world, which results in stronger transnational organisational and journalistic practices (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990).

3 This thesis focuses on the same countries as Hallin and Mancini (2004b).
This might imply that journalistic practices are increasingly shaped by a global journalistic culture rather than being dependent on national specificities.

An important aim of this thesis is to investigate whether and how aggregate level changes in television systems have affected media content and especially news coverage since the introduction of commercial television in the late 1980s and early 1990s. If journalistic practices are increasingly similar, thus producing more similar content, we would have no variation in the dependent variable in an analysis of how media systems affect the content of the news. Chapter 3 of my thesis investigates differences in news coverage across television systems in relation to aggregate differences between television systems. Do the changes in the television system favour sensationalism in news coverage? Do public television and commercial television converge in their news coverage because of the changes in the television system? Chapter 3 shows that there is sufficient variation in content to render such an analysis feasible.

1.3.2. The recursive nature of media structure: The intrinsic relations between supply and demand

Broadcasting systems were initially organised as public institutions with the main purpose to serve the public interest. The entry of new commercial operators into the broadcasting institution introduced two forces of change. The first one is the entry of commercial operators, implying that a commercial logic penetrates the entire television system. The second one is that competition becomes intensified between an increasing number of channels. In addition, liberal government policies and new technologies facilitated the expansion of media companies and mergers. On the one hand, this led to a concentration of channel ownership and the rise of big transnational media mergers. On the other hand, this led to an explosion in the
Transformations of television systems

number of channels and news outlets and an intensification of competition for audience shares (Jackson, 2008).

It is often argued that the ‘old’ public television as a caring institution provided citizens with a healthy diet of political information, education and entertainment. Before the 1990s, broadcasting used to be supply-oriented, or, in other words, organised ‘from the interior of the organisation to the exterior’. Its internal goals of serving the (supposed) public interest determined its output, for instance in the form of high-quality, diverse programming. After the liberalisation, broadcasting systems became more market-oriented and started to use various marketing strategies. Television systems have thus become more demand-oriented, or ‘organised from the exterior to the interior’.

It has been argued that these developments have changed the orientation of broadcasting systems (and media systems in general) from a citizen-oriented system to a consumer-oriented system. While television systems were previously aiming at providing information, education and entertainment from a perspective of a ‘caring’ public television that is aware of the interests of viewers as citizens; the new system aims at satisfying the wants of the viewer as a sovereign consumer (Blumler & Nossiter, 1991).

However, this way of understanding the consequences of the transformations of media systems can be misleading because of at least two reasons: (1) it creates an artificial dichotomy between the citizen and the consumer; and (2) by staging media organisations as the most important agents in determining the nature of media content, it conceptualises media users as passive beings.
Living as a consumer in capitalist democratic societies is an inherent part of modern citizenship. After all, consumption patterns are inherent to modern individual identities (Bauman, 1998; Tomlinson, 1990). The transformations in the media environment were accompanied by socio-cultural changes, in particular the rise of a consumer culture in which consumption and individuality became increasingly dominant (Bauman, 2001, cited in Jackson, 2008). Several social transformations in the twentieth century such as secularisation, individualisation and urbanisation established the foundation of a ‘consumer culture’ (Bauman, 1998). So the ‘citizen’ and ‘consumer’ are two inseparable identities of modern individuals.

Some have argued that the rise of media and advertising, through their power to generate and create demand to compel consumers to buy, have been a key player in the rise of a consumer culture (Ewen & Ewen, 1982). But this may overstate the importance of changes in the media compared to other major social transformation processes, such as individualisation and secularisation. Consumer culture is an ideology that is an inherent part of capitalist society where consumption is the twin sister of production. While media may have offered channels and possibilities to stimulate this ideology, they are the result rather than the cause of major social transformations that have engendered changes in media systems.

A one-sided focus on the media as the main actor also overlooks the fact that people express their choices and in this way exert agency to determine their consumption patterns. For instance, Dahlgren (2000) argues that news media audiences in high-choice environments increasingly behave as consumers, since they have relinquished their former loyalties to public television and established media, and are obtaining their news diet from various resources. As the same
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processes towards more consumerism, initiated and stimulated by capitalist forces, are simultaneously taking place in media systems and among audiences, it is difficult to disentangle the causal relationships between media and audiences. This begs the question: How can we study media effects and how can we conceptualise the relationship between the media environment and audiences?

Drawing on Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration, Webster (2011) offers a way out of this ‘chicken and egg’ debate. Webster provides a dualistic conceptualisation of the media environment: “Duality is a process through which agents and structures mutually reproduce the social world” (Webster, 2011, p. 45).

The media environment is embedded in larger social changes and reproduces social structures by the mutual interaction between agents (audiences) and structural factors (rules and resources, such as the number of channels). Agents and structure should therefore be conceptualised as mutually related. Therefore, the relation between media and audience is recursive rather than unidirectional.

The media environment or structure can be conceived of as the result of an interaction between audiences (demand side) and media (supply side). Any analysis of the media environment that does not *simultaneously* take into account how demand and supply sides are intrinsically and reciprocally linked will lead to deterministic reasoning. The failure to take account of the dualistic nature of the agency of audiences and the relevance of structural factors leads us either to conceptualise audiences as passive pawns and media as having the upper power, or, conversely, to conceptualise citizens as being totally free to choose what content they are exposed to, thereby neglecting the relevance of structural factors.

People express their media content preferences within the structure that is available to them. Structural factors such as the presence of public television or the channels available enable and constrain media choice. However, while expressing
their preferences, people both reproduce and alter that very system. For instance, media companies take account of market measures indicating media use and adjust their programming according to information about consumption patterns (Webster, 2011). When it comes to programming structures, Webster (2009, p. 225) argues that: "In the short term, the structure of program options constrains and directs [audiences], in the long term, its very design depends on the actions of agents [(audiences)]". Such a dualistic conceptualisation is particularly needed in the study of new media environments, where several market information measures, such as data on popularity of TV programs, are increasingly used by media suppliers and media users (Webster, 2011).

In my characterisation of television systems, I do not focus only on supply side characteristics, but also take into account the consumption patterns of audiences. The media system is relevant to the extent that it provides an opportunity structure within which people make choices in terms of media consumption patterns. However, the choices people make and the way they consume ‘media supply’ influences and continuously changes this structure, as media companies are likely to adjust their programming based on changing consumption patterns. So, the relationship between demand and supply is recursive. The resulting media environment reflects a marriage between supply side characteristics and audiences’ media use. As I will argue below, this dualistic approach to media structure is reflected in the way I operationalise the two television systems characteristics that are central in this thesis: 1) dependence on advertising and 2) audience fragmentation. These dimensions are often confused but are analytically distinct and therefore need to be studies separately.
1.3.3. The relevance of advertising dependency as a characteristic of the television environment

Advertising-dependent media function in a dual market in which they ‘sell’ audiences to advertisers. In such a media system the direct customers of media companies are advertisers (Napoli, 2003). The relationship between audiences and advertising-dependent media is mediated by advertisers’ demands. Advertising is generally the principal revenue for private television but most publically owned television channels have also come to partially rely on advertising. The basic principle of the commercial logic is to generate profit, which is essential for businesses to survive and flourish. Although it seems that satisfying consumer demand is key to making profit in media environments, profit is also dependent on production costs.

Profit making relies on two related mechanisms: (1) minimising costs and (2) maximising revenues (i.e., audiences). Advertising revenues are a rough function of audience shares but the costs of production are typically not. So audience demands are not the only important factor determining how broadcasting organisation function, but advertiser demands and production costs also play a vital role. This implies that expensive content will not be produced when a low-cost programme can attract the same audience size. Programmes that are seen as generating a ‘social surplus’ may therefore not be produced (Blumer & Nossiter, 1991). In debates on West-European broadcasting systems, this is one of the core arguments to legitimise the existence of public television.

This thesis considers advertising dependency at the aggregate television system level to be an important dimension for comparing national television systems. This dimension or variable proxies the likelihood that media organisations will neglect less profitable content and focus on content that attract large audiences. This variable is particularly relevant for characterising West-European television
Changing West-European television systems in comparative perspective

systems because of the co-existence of public funding and public television. As this thesis will show, the level of public funding and the importance of public television in terms of audience shares vary considerably between West-European systems. However, advertising dependency does not explain the process through which audiences/advertising money are attracted and maximised. Audiences are important for advertisers not because of their size alone, but also because of their purchasing power and their expected propensity to buy their products. Some audiences may be interesting for advertisers even if their size is relatively small, as long as they represent an interesting niche. This can explain why commercial channels also produce relatively less popular programs such as news programs. In addition, maximising audiences might be achieved by harvesting multiple ‘small’ audiences. This process will be analysed in the next section.

1.3.4. The relevance of audience fragmentation

The entry of new players into West-European television systems has expanded media choice in terms of the number of available channels and it has also intensified competition. Because of the presence of public channels, competition in West-European countries also takes place between commercial and publicly owned operators. The nature of this competition may be different from competition in totally commercial systems. From a theoretical point of view, the effects of competition partly depend the level of on advertising dependency. As advertising dependency increases, media organisations and media content may become increasingly oriented towards commercial goals. While the struggle for revenues may be different in national contexts where not all channels depend on advertising revenues (the West-European case), the struggle for audiences might nonetheless be fierce. This exemplifies the need to make an analytical distinction between
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advertising dependency on the one hand and competition or audience fragmentation on the other.

One of the ways media organisations can cope with the increasing competition in television markets is the use of multi-channels to create and target specific audiences that are relevant to specific advertisers. As the number of television channels increases, the audience becomes increasingly fragmented. Audience fragmentation occurs as a two-way process. It is partially bottom up, because audiences are increasingly choosing the kind of programs they like, and it is partially top-down as media corral a desirable audience to advertisers in order to expand revenues (e.g. Richardson, 2007). Audience fragmentation across channels should therefore be seen as an illustration of the duality of media structure (see also Webster, 2009).

The process of segmentation is often based on constructing and defining different groups of consumers based on their lifestyle and consumption patterns. McQuail (1994: 290) calls this kind of audience groups ‘gratification sets’ which he defines as “[sets of audiences] formed on the basis that it satisfies some individual need or purpose independent of the media, relating, for instance, to political or social issue or a need for specific information” (quoted in Richardson, 2007: 78). When segmentation is perfect, the groups are non-overlapping and homogenous according to specific criteria. Media content is produced to attract audiences that are interesting to particular advertisers. Segmentation therefore serves the individual consumer interests only seamlessly if these interests happen to coincide with the interests of advertisers.

It is noteworthy that public broadcasters too are involved in and affected by this process of multi-channelling and audience targeting, even in cases in which they do not depend on advertising (the BBC is an example). One could therefore be
tempted to argue that audience fragmentation is not a result of marketing strategies but mainly a result of technological changes. Using multi-channels and new technologies has enhanced the competitive position of public television in Western Europe (Jakubowicz, 2006). As such, the use of multi-channelling is a successful market strategy that is not restricted to commercial market players.

Having channels and programs that cater to specific audiences is not something new to European broadcasting systems. In fact, state regulation ensured that broadcasting arrangements reflected social and cultural cleavages within different countries. These cleavages run across national language differences (Belgium and Switzerland for instance) or other socio-political and religious cleavages (the Netherlands for instance). In the Netherlands, social, religious and political fragmentation ('pillarisation') was mirrored in the way public broadcasting was arranged in the form of independent but largely publically funded media organisations (Haak & Snippenburg, 2001).

However, in the old television environment channel choice was limited and programming that took account of social cleavages did not lead to fragmentation of audiences. In some ways, in the Dutch case for instance, the presence of various programming structures for various socio-political groups on a limited number of public television channels has paradoxically contributed to the gradual disappearance of the social relevance of these cleavages instead of reinforcing them, because it enabled audiences to share experiences through television (Wigbold, 1979).

The new divide that advertisers and media nowadays reproduce seems to be more and more related to consumption patterns. Whether and the extent to which contemporary media consumption patterns are related to ideological differences is an increasingly popular question in studies of new media. There is debate about
whether fragmentation of audiences in combination with selective exposure will lead to the creation of ‘exposure enclaves’ (Sunstein, 2001), or ‘gated communities’ (Turow, 1997), that are totally homogenous and whether this leads to a polarisation of audiences (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010; Prior, 2013).

In this thesis I conceptualise audience fragmentation as reflecting two simultaneously occurring but analytically distinct dimensions. The first one indicates the intensity of competition in specific media markets. The second indicates the extent to which audiences constitute small fragments instead of a one mass audience.

Audience fragmentation indicates the intensity of competition and forms a structural limitation to media companies. As audiences for specific channels become smaller, revenues decline. This might lead to cutting costs, which might affect investments in programming (Picard, 2000). Audience fragmentation pushes media companies to develop strategies that allow them to compete by attracting and keeping desirable audiences. The need to manufacture news that attracts and retains audiences creates what Entman (1989, p. 49) describes as the ‘production bias’.

The desire to produce appealing news generates three production biases: simplification, personalisation, and symbolisation. All three result in a tendency to select news that is dramatic and sensational (Entman, 1989). The production bias is not only about the selection of topics in the news but also about the way it is reported, so that there is a tendency to report in a dramatic and negative way, to emphasise the urgency of the situation and the need for political action. Tendencies to negativism in the media are often seen as an “… inevitable consequence of increased media competition and the commercialization of broadcasting” (Schulz, Zeh, & Quiring, 2005, p. 75).
In this thesis, I study some of these claims. I investigate whether audience fragmentation and advertising dependency stimulate sensationalism in news coverage. In addition, building on the assumption that the desire to attract and maximise audiences will lead to a focus on scandal news and negative news about politicians, I analyse whether audience fragmentation and advertising dependency is related to lower levels of trust in politicians.

A second key dimension of audience fragmentation is that it implies the demise of the 'mass media'. In other words, audiences constitute different small segments and do not form a mass audience anymore. The direct implication of audience fragmentation is the increasing scarcity of public attention (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). This fragmentation process is also something that has taken place at the level of political parties. Mainstream parties have seen a decline in their vote share over the years. Both audience fragmentation in mass media and the decline of mass parties or mainstream parties result from wider social developments such as individualism and secularism, which are both intrinsic to contemporary capitalist societies.

Political parties are highly dependent on the media to communicate with potential voters. Therefore, audience fragmentation causes fundamental problems for political parties. In an increasingly fragmented media landscape, the media and political parties are compelled to develop new ways to attract and retain public attention. One of the questions that I address in this thesis is: how do parties behave in such a fragmented media environment? How does audience fragmentation affect their competition strategies?
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1.4. Structure of the thesis

To summarise, this thesis investigates the implications of the new television environment on politics through a comparative study of 17 West-European media and political systems. The thesis provides a conceptual framework to understand this relationship by describing the changes in the television system after the liberalisation along the two dimensions of (1) advertising dependency and (2) audience fragmentation. Most ‘media effect studies’ use lower level data on media outlets and/or media use to draw inferences on the effects of the media environment. This study explicitly focuses on structural characteristics of the media environment to study the relationship between media and politics. It analyses the extent to which the two characteristics of the television system affect: (1) media content, (2) political competition between political parties, and (3) political attitudes of citizens. I use multilevel analysis in order to differentiate the relevance of the media environment to the political system at the aggregate level as well as at the meso-and micro-level. This modelling strategy allows to empirically test the contingency of media environment effects.

The thesis is a collection of six chapters, most of which are designed as separate articles. As a consequence, some repetitions in the conceptualisation and methodological discussion were inevitable. Chapter 1 introduces the rationale, relevance and aim of this thesis and outlines the theoretical background of subsequent analyses. Chapter 2 investigates the changes in broadcasting systems after the introduction of commercial television: How did the liberalisation process in the 1980s leave its imprint on aggregate, national level television landscapes? Chapter 2 also elaborates why the thesis focuses on the two dimensions of (1) advertising dependency and (2) audience fragmentation. Using these central

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4 The total number of countries is 16, but Belgium has two television systems. The number of television systems included in the analyses varies across chapters depending on data availability.
indicators of media system change, and drawing on a new dataset compiled for this study, I subsequently investigate whether these changes have led to a growing convergence of national television systems.

Chapter 3 analyses the relevance of the ‘new’ television environment for news coverage. It tests the hypothesis according to which advertising dependency and audience fragmentation lead to increasing sensationalism in news coverage. Do we see convergence between news coverage of public and commercial television in television systems where audience fragmentation and advertising dependency is high?

Chapter 4 analyses the consequence of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation for political competition. It does so by focusing on the question of whether the relative saliency of a sensational issue (in this case immigration) depends on the extent to which television systems are fragmented and dependent on advertising revenues. This enables me to assess whether parties adapt their competition strategies in accordance with the level of audience fragmentation.

Chapter 5 addresses the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis. Several scholars have expressed fear that increasing competition and dependence on advertising would ultimately generate a spiral of cynicism about politics and politicians, because of the supposed increased media focus on sensational and negative news. This chapter investigates whether audience fragmentation and advertising dependency are negatively correlated with trust in politicians and whether they are related to a loss of trust in politicians under different groups of audiences.

Chapter 6 concludes by discussing the empirical findings and investigating their broader implications for our understanding of the relationship between...
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media systems and politics. Based on the empirical findings and the limitations of this study, the chapter also identifies promising avenues of future research.
Chapter 2

Convergence of West-European broadcasting systems 1980-2008

Abstract

It is widely thought that differences between West-European broadcasting systems have diminished, with the introduction of commercial television, and the liberalisation of media policies, since the late 1980s, and hence, that a process of convergence between television systems towards the US model has taken place. This study investigates the validity of this convergence hypothesis by comparing changes in West-European broadcasting systems drawing on a new dataset encompassing 17 West-European media systems over the period 1980-2008. I distinguish between two dimensions of broadcasting systems: (1) the television system dependency on advertising, and (2) competition / audience fragmentation. I develop instruments to measure positions on these two dimensions. The analysis shows that these two dimensions are cross-sectionally independent. The results confirm an overall trend of convergence towards more fragmented, competitive and advertising-dependent broadcasting systems. However, significant differences remain between television systems with regard to the level of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation.

Keywords: Television systems, cross-national comparison, competition, audience fragmentation, advertising dependency, multidimensional empirical indicators/instruments.

This chapter is a revision of a paper co-authored with Wouter van der Brug and Philip van Praag.
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2.1. Introduction

The dominant view in the literature on broadcasting systems is one of growing convergence among West-European systems and an increasing similarity of West-European systems to the US media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004a, 2004b; Humphreys, 1996; Siune & Truetzschler, 1992). Hallin and Mancini (2004b, p. 41) even argue that this could lead to “complete homogenization, to the point that national differences, including differences between the United States and Europe essentially vanish”.6 However, others argue that convergence towards the American model is exaggerated (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Aalberg et al., 2013; Tunstall, 2008). These authors point out that important differences still exist between national television systems. At one end of the spectrum we can distinguish the US market-oriented television system which is dominated by commercial interests and entertainment-oriented commercial television (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b; Voltmer, 2000). On the other end of the spectrum there is Norway with a popular public television and more regulations of commercial television (Aalberg et al., 2013, p. 3).

The core assumption of the convergence thesis is that media systems have become increasingly similar to the American model. However, when referring to convergence, different studies look at rather different dimensions of media systems. Sometimes the convergence thesis refers to media content that has become entertainment-oriented everywhere; other times it refers to journalistic practices and values, media structures and broadcasting policy, technological convergence and generally, the separation of media institutions from the political system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b chapter eight). In the case of television, convergence to the liberal model has been stimulated by the introduction of commercial television in what has been labelled as the “commercial deluge” of the

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6 Hallin and Mancini (2004b) use the term convergence and homogenization interchangeably.
1980-90s (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b, p. 252). In this chapter, I investigate the extent to which the liberalisation process of broadcasting systems has led to increasing similarities between market structures of Western broadcasting systems. If convergence has happened between television systems and towards the liberal model, this should be visible at the level of market structures because this is where policy changes have a direct effect. To my knowledge there is no empirical study that systematically investigates this aspect of the convergence thesis.

Comparative analyses of changes in broadcasting systems are often based on rather crude classifications, such as whether countries have a public, a commercial or a dual broadcasting system (Brants & Siune, 1992; Curran et al., 2009). Some of these existing studies focus on judicial aspects, that is, how governments regulate the television markets and media content (e.g. Curran et al., 2009). While I acknowledge the importance of government regulations, and realise that these regulations affect the media market, I believe that it is necessarily to take into account the intrinsic relationship between supply and demand characteristics in order to be able to adequately study the media environment. This chapter considers media structures therefore, to be shaped by a mutual, recursive relationship between supply side structural characteristics and audience demands. In this sense the approach of this study to media structure is dualistic (Webster, 2009, 2011). This approach has the additional advantage of focusing on the observable effects of policy change rather than focusing on rules/regulations that may or may not have the intended effect. In addition, this approach does not make a categorical classification of media systems. I distinguish between two dimensions of broadcasting systems: (1) the extent to which television systems depend upon

7 The use of the two concepts of ‘dual television systems’ and a ‘dualistic media structure’ should not be confused. While dual systems refer to the coexistence of public and commercial television, the concept of dualistic structure (Giddens, 1984) refers to the recursive relationship between the demand and supply side of media structures.
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commercial revenues (especially advertising) and (2) the degree of audience fragmentation across television channels. Both measures are operationalised as an interaction between supply side and demand side characteristics. Using indicators of these two characteristics, I show empirically that these two are hardly correlated.

The chapter compares changes in West-European broadcasting systems drawing on a new dataset encompassing 17 West-European media systems over the period 1980-2008. The comparative analysis starts in the 1980s, shortly before many countries began to introduce dual broadcasting systems, allowing the coexistence of public service and commercial television stations. The following section discusses the literature on media systems change and argues why it is important to distinguish system level dependency on advertising from audience fragmentation in the analysis of the changing character of broadcasting systems. Section two operationalises these concepts and elaborates on the measurement instruments. Section three presents the data and the results. In the conclusion I reflect on the possibilities and limitations of the proposed measurements and how the (non-) convergence in these two aspects is related to other aspects of convergence of media systems.

2.2. Theoretical background

Earlier studies from the field of political communication have analysed the broad change in West-European broadcasting systems from public monopolies to dual systems by focusing on the issue of ownership and finance of public television. These studies reveal that European broadcasting displays a diversity of structures. Brants and Siune (1992) and later Siune and Hulten (1998) distinguish ‘pure’ public monopolies, which are entirely funded by public income, ‘mixed revenue’ public monopolies, which draw on commercial as well as public income, ‘dual systems’, in
which public television coexists with private television, and ‘pure commercial’ systems, which entirely rely on commercial revenues.

These studies showed that most countries developed from a monopoly of public television to dual systems. Despite their merits, these studies are based on rather crude categorisations. Because virtually all systems have now become ‘dual’, these kinds of classifications cannot provide a nuanced analysis of the extent to which, and according to which specific characteristics, national television systems have converged and what differences remain between them.

Later, Curran et al. (2009) provided a more sophisticated categorisation by paying attention to the degree of programming regulation imposed on private television; and strength (in terms of resources and audience) of public television, leading to a distinction between commercial (US), dual (Britain) and public service (Denmark and Finland) broadcasting systems. The study of Curran et al. focuses on four countries, which seem to represent ideal-typical cases of dual, public service and commercial systems. This categorisation is more difficult to apply to most media systems, which usually are situated on a continuum between these different categories.

The focus of existing typologies has been more supply side-oriented assuming that the supply side determines consumption patterns of media. The entry of commercial broadcasters to the television market has been a real game changer, which affected the public television stations and, more importantly, the importance of audience demand. On the one hand, non-profit, public interest-oriented media systems are shifting towards a system with increasingly strong commercial goals. The penetration of the commercial logic is not only driven by the rise of private broadcasting, but in several countries also by decreased public funding and an increasing importance of commercial revenue for ‘public’ channels. The opening of media markets to private players and the dismantling of public
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media monopolies have also increased competition intensity between a growing number of channels.

In all West-European democracies, public channels are therefore now facing competition from commercial providers for audience shares. On the demand side, after the liberalisation process audiences were offered a multiplicity of channels to choose from, which fundamentally changed patterns of audience television consumption. As audiences have more choice they also have more power to determine their consumption patterns and to define the media environment. This brief discussion shows that, in order to properly study the changes in television systems, we need to take account of the changing consumption patterns as well as the changing supply side characteristics. The study distinguishes two dimension of the media (television) environment: (1) the extent to which television systems depend on commercial revenues and (2) the degree of audience fragmentation across channels. We will discuss both in turn.

2.2.1. The advertising dependency of the television system

As Blumler, Brynin, and Nossiter (1986) and Blumler and Nossiter (1991) point out, financing is a key feature of broadcasting because it is associated with different broadcasting purposes. Although they are non-profit organisations, public broadcasters have increasingly, and to various degrees, come to rely on commercial revenues, and in this way they have also been increasingly affected by the commercial logic and market rules. Private broadcasters completely rely on commercial revenues and their main goal is to make profit. They can therefore be expected to follow market rules by producing content that attracts large audience shares, which makes them attractive to advertisers.

Commercial revenues may, on the other hand, give some freedom from political intervention by political parties or government (Hallin & Mancini, 2004b).
However, advertisers are primarily after public attention, which they obtain by paying advertising money to broadcasters, and they do not seek to inform or educate the public \textit{per se}. So, when broadcasters are dependent on advertisers they may for instance feel pressured to focus more on entertainment during prime time, and less on informative programming.

While this chapter does not aim to test the relationship between commercial revenues and content as such, this discussion shows that if we wish to describe the evolution of television systems, it is important to understand the extent to which these systems depend on commercial and, particularly, advertising revenues.

2.2.2. Competition and audience fragmentation

The second aspect I focus on is competition for audience shares. Although it seems reasonable to assume that market pressure on private television is higher because of their for-profit character, public television can also be affected by similar market pressures. Notwithstanding its non-profit character, public television finds itself needing to adapt to the new situation, and forced to compete with other (public and private) television stations to attract audiences for two reasons. First, it has to politically legitimise its existence in order to secure public funding. Second, if public television strongly relies on commercial revenues, it has to compete for advertisers to secure funding in the same way private broadcasters do. The ‘logic of the marketplace’ thus affects both public broadcasting and commercial television by compelling them to reconcile maximising audiences while minimising costs (Drijvers, 1992).

When commercial television stations entered the market in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of channels increased substantially, so that audiences became increasingly fragmented. The more fragmented audiences are, the less income each channel generates (Picard, 2000). Audience fragmentation across television
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channels indicates the difficulty of reaching audiences and can therefore be seen as a proxy measure for competition intensity of television systems.\(^8\)

The literature provides different accounts of the effect of competition on media content. Some have argued that in fiercely competitive systems, media are likely to appeal to the lowest common denominator by ‘dumbing down’ media content. Yet, on the positive side, it has been argued that competition guarantees more diversity of content, and more choice for audiences (Webster, 2005). A fragmented media environment might thus also provide opportunities for high-quality channels focusing on a niche of highly educated citizens who wish to be well informed (Prior, 2007). It has been shown that the relationship between the quality of the general offer of media content and competition intensity is non-linear. Moderate competition is correlated with higher diversity, while fierce competition leads to a decline of diversity (Van der Wurff & Van Cuilenburg, 2001).

From an audience perspective, the parallel processes of multi-channelling and audience fragmentation generate a high-choice media environment, in which consumer demands play an increasingly important role. Individual preferences are therefore believed to increasingly determine media content, to the extent that some hypothesise that there is a convergence between supply and demand (Webster, 2005). Individuals are inclined to select content that appeals to their personal preferences and corresponds to their previous beliefs and avoid content that is not. A fragmented media environment enables them to do so (Prior, 2007). As a consequence, the ‘exposure diversity’—the extent to which individuals are exposed to diverse content (Napoli, 2011)—may decrease as television systems become

\(^8\) Audiences fragmentation and competition are not fully equivalent, because one media company might own several channels. In fact, strategies to reduce economic uncertainty in complex markets may give rise to new monopolies (Graham & Davies, 1997). Even when the number of competing channels is large, the ownership of channels might be (nationally or transnationally) concentrated, which decreases competition intensity. Following (Van der Wurff & Van Cuilenburg, 2001) and (Van der Wurff, 2004) we assess competition through measuring audience fragmentation at the level of channels because our analysis is audience-oriented.

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more fragmented. The process of audience fragmentation and multi-channelling is likely to stimulate external diversity (different suppliers each offering different content) at the expense of channel internal diversity (each supplier offers a variety of content reflecting various points of views for instance). To be exposed to diverse content and opinions, the user is therefore required to use different channels, which requires a certain level of willingness and skills.

Based on our discussion, it is clear that competition is an important aspect of television systems, which needs to be measured in order to obtain an accurate depiction of how television systems have changed. Competition needs to be distinguished from advertising dependency. Commercially oriented television systems can theoretically exist without competition if one privately owned station would have a monopoly. Equally, a system can be quite competitive but not commercial, if there are several publicly funded television stations. While these extreme situations do not exist, the advertising dependency and the competitiveness of media systems are hardly correlated, as we will show below. This is why they should be measured separately, so that changes along both dimensions can be described, and that a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the character of media system change can be obtained.

2.3. Data and measures

In the previous section I distinguished advertising dependency and competition. Here, I will discuss how these concepts can be measured and will describe and discuss the data collected. The following section will map the extent to which West-European systems differ and have evolved and converged over the past decades.
2.3.1. Measuring advertising dependency and competition

**Advertising dependency**

The advertising dependency of a television system is measured by the extent to which television stations depend on commercial revenues. To calculate this dependence, it is sufficient to look at the dependence of public television on commercial revenues as we can safely assume that commercial television depends fully on commercial income sources (see also: Voltmer, 2000). However, I also want to take into account whether public television stations are large and important players, or whether they are quite marginal. Therefore, I also weigh the dependency on commercial revenues of public television by its audience share.

**Figure 2.1. The television system presented as a space defined by the source of income and audiences**

The measure of advertising dependency of a television system can be visualised by conceiving the television system as a two-dimensional 'space' defined by the total income and by the total audience (see figure 2.1). The area 'P' (public) is the 'non-commercial' part of this space. This area is the most independent from market forces. 'P' is equal to the product of the audience share of the television stations that...
receive public funding and the percentage of non-commercial income in that
television organisation.

Television channels that receive public funding are generally publicly owned,
but their funding is often partly commercial to varying degrees. Some public
channels even exclusively receive commercial income, such as Channel 4 in the UK.
If we subtract the publicly funded audience share from the whole media space we
obtain a measure of the part of the television system that depends on commercial
revenues. The index runs from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating that the system is fully
publicly financed and 100 indicating that the system is completely dependent on
commercial revenues.

\[
\text{Advertising dependency} = C = 100 - P \tag{1}
\]

Where: \( P = \text{proportion non-commercial income public TV} \times \text{Audience share public TV} \)

To assess the intuitive validity of this measure, imagine a completely non-
commercial television system in which public television has a 100 per cent
audience share and all revenues are non-commercial. In this system, \( P \) would be
equal to 100 and thus the advertising dependency is equal to 0. Until the end of
1980 many European broadcasting systems resembled this situation. On the other
extreme, imagine a system where public television has a (close-to) zero audience
(the US case for instance), or a television system where public television is
completely financed by commercial revenues. In this case \( P = 0 \) and the advertising
dependency is equal to 100.

Audience fragmentation

To measure audience fragmentation an index was constructed that simultaneously
captures the number of television channels as well as their relative market share of
audiences. The more the television sector is dominated by one or few channels, the
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less competitive it is. The index is not only determined by the number of channels, but also by the distribution of their market shares. We use a Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI= \( \sum m_i^2 \)) , which ranges from 0 to 1. An increase in the Herfindahl index (concentration) indicates a decrease in competition. When a television system only has two channels with an equal market share, the HHI is higher than when four channels have equal shares in the same market. A television system with four channels with equal market share is more competitive (lower HHI) than another system consisting of four channels with unequally distributed market shares. The major benefit of the index is that it gives more weight to larger channels and largely neglects channels with very small shares. This index has been used before to measure competition intensity on audiences in European television systems (Van der Wurff, 2004; 2005). This index is recoded so that higher values indicate higher levels of competition.

\[
\text{Competition} = 1 - \sum_{i}^{n} m_i^2
\]

In this formula, \( i \) is the index for television channels (from 1 to \( n \)), and \( m_i \) stands for the audience market share of a television channel \( i \) (expressed as fractions).

**2.3.2. Data**

This study is limited to 17 West-European liberal democracies: Austria (AT), Switzerland (CH), Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Spain (ES), Flanders (FD), Finland (FI), France (FR), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Great Britain (GB), Greece (GR), the Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Portugal (PT), Sweden (SE), and Wallonia (WA)\(^9\).

\(^9\) Belgium is divided into two (French-language and Dutch-language) television systems.
This is partly a convenience sample because of the limited availability of data in the 1980s. However, for theoretical reasons, the selected countries are highly relevant cases for the purpose of this study. All European broadcasting systems selected share a public service tradition and have experienced drastic changes since the 1980s as a consequence of the growth of commercial television.

Data were collected from various sources. I mainly relied on the UNESCO statistical yearbooks for data on the funding of television companies and organisations. Since audience data for this period are hard to find for most countries, other sources include various books, reports and articles on national media systems. Before 1990 a single accepted method of measuring audience size was not yet established in most countries. Nevertheless, estimates of audience shares could be found of various available channels allowing for an approximate comparison between countries. These data are used to get an approximate picture of the situation in the 1980s. Data after 1990 mostly originate from the yearbooks of the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO).

Another issue is how to deal with regional and foreign channels. Regional channels that are reported in the EAO yearbooks as additional national channels

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have been treated in the same way as other channels (EAO, 1998-2008). Although they might have a regional focus in their programming, these major regional channels reach a nationally significant audience share, and they can therefore be analysed on a similar level as national or international channels. Foreign channels that are reported in the EAO as additional channels are also included. Although some international channels do not specifically target the audience of the concerned country, they compete with other channels nevertheless. This approach is justifiable as these channels attract audiences that could have otherwise watched national channels.

In small countries, media in neighbouring countries influence competition on the domestic market, especially when they share a common language. This is also important for the measure of advertising dependency, since some national audiences watch public and private television of neighbouring countries. In cases where national systems do not permit private television, television systems in neighbouring countries may offer commercial broadcasting and, hence, influence the domestic market. For instance, in the case of Austria, the consumption of German commercial television delayed the appearance of commercial television, since it was believed that such a channel could not withstand German competition. In Switzerland there is no national private channel and competition mainly occurs between international private television and public national television. Our data also show that the use of television from neighbouring countries can change over time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Dutch television was popular in Flemish speaking Belgium but since 1994 a dramatic decline occurs for the audience of

12 We rely on the choices made by the EAO to report audience shares of channels. The EAO is the best available comparative database for our research purpose. In Spain we make a distinction between national and regional public television. Recent data about the share of commercial revenues of Spanish regional channels are not available. We use the estimates given by Bustamante (Bustamante, 1989, p. 76): we take the average of the shares of commercial income provided for the three regional public channels, we estimate the share of commercial revenues of total income for these channels by 40 per cent.
Dutch public television from 24 per cent in 1984 to only 4 per cent in 2006, probably as a result of the introduction of commercial television in Belgium.

2.4. Results

2.4.1. Convergence?

This section investigates whether European television systems have become more dependent on advertising and more fragmented competitive. To compare national media systems with regard to changing trajectories in competition intensity and advertising dependency, the position of the 17 countries is analysed in a space determined by two variables: advertising dependency (X-axis) and audience fragmentation (Y-axis). The values of the two variables range from 0 to 1 for fragmentation and 0 to 100 for the advertising dependency. The variables were rescaled to range from -50 to +50 to facilitate cross-country comparison.

Figures 2.2-2.4 show that the analytical distinction between advertising dependency and audience fragmentation among television channels is warranted and confirms that both concepts measure different things. Broadcasting systems that are highly commercially oriented while being relatively less fragmented (for instance Spain in the 1985) coexist with broadcasting systems that are highly fragmented while being relatively less commercially oriented (for instance Germany in 1985). In 1985, the correlation between advertising dependency and fragmentation was 0.53, which means that the two variables share 28% of their variance. The positive correlation shows that more commercially oriented systems tend to be more fragmented. However, the correlation is not strong enough to

13 Our measure of the advertising dependency is highly correlated with the media system typology by (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) while audience fragmentation is not. Over the entire period studied, democratic corporatists media systems score very low while Mediterranean polarised media systems score very high on advertising dependency.
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conclude that they measure the same thing, which also becomes clear from the fact that we observe media systems in all four quadrants of figure 2.2. The independence between audience fragmentation and advertising dependency remains during the entire length of the studied period, seen that the correlation decreases to 0.12 in 1995, and to 0.04 in 2008.

The results also show that fragmentation and advertising dependency are not an entirely new phenomenon in European television systems. Already in the early eighties most television systems were fragmented and commercially oriented, at least to some extent. The television system in the sample can be divided in four groups: (1) High advertising dependency and high fragmentation of audiences on the upper right hand side, (2) High fragmentation and low advertising dependency on the upper left hand side, (3) low fragmentation and high advertising dependency on the lower right hand side and, finally, (4) low advertising dependency and low fragmentation on the lower left hand side. Although the USA television system is not a part of our sample, according to other studies this system is characterised by a low audience share of public television, a strong dependence on commercial revenues and a high-choice media environment with a multiplicity of channels which implies a highly fragmented audience. The USA is the prototype of television systems situated in group (1).

Figure 2.2 illustrates the high degree of variation in the degree to which television systems were fragmented and advertising dependent in the 1980s. In this year, public television in Austria, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden still had a monopoly as the sole market provider. These countries had two public channels so that there is some degree of audience fragmentation.

In 1985, Spain had the most commercially oriented, albeit weakly fragmented system. This reveals that Spanish public television received an
important share of funding from commercial sources, and that state funding was very limited, unstable and dependent on the political will of governing parties (Bustamante, 1989). Also in France, the level of state funding often depended on the political colour of governing parties. Italy comes out as the most fragmented system reflecting the relatively high number of television channels. The UK and Italy were the first television systems that experienced significant competition between commercial and public television. However, the two systems differed enormously in terms of regulation: the UK had a highly regulated television environment as opposed to the highly unregulated system in Italy. While France is also part of the highly commercialised and highly fragmented group, competition took place between independent public channels (Le Comte, 1998).

In 1985, Flanders, Wallonia and Germany were already highly competitive but this competition took place in a system that did not depend much on commercial revenues. We lack quantitative data for Switzerland and Ireland in the 1980s thus they are not included in the figure. In that period these countries already had a highly diverse supply of television channels from neighbouring countries (for Switzerland see: Bonfadelli and Haettenschwiler (1989) and for Ireland see Holt & Sheehan (1997). Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Portugal belonged to the least commercially dependent and least competitive group, although Austria, Finland and the Netherlands had relatively more fragmented audiences.
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Figure 2.2. Television systems in 1985

14 See footnote 9 for data references. The scores of advertising dependency are based on the income of public television and the audience share of public television as a whole organisation, except in cases where public television is formed of independent organisations as is the case of France television before 1989 (Le Comte, 1998) and Germany. We took account of international public television when the audience share was relevant. In a few countries data about the audience shares of public television stations were not available for 1985. In these cases we estimated the audience of the public channels using the information from the next available year. For Austria for instance: in the year 1991, ORF1 and ORF2 have an audience share of 44% and 33% respectively (EAO 2001). In 1985 these were the only two channels and we assume that their relative popularity was the same in 1985 as in 1991. So we estimated the audience of ORF1 by \(100 \times (44/(44+33))=57.14\) and the audience share of ORF2 by \(100 \times (33/(44+33))=42.86\). This approach was employed for Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands where we used 1990 data, for Portugal, where we used data from 1993 and Greece, where we used data from 1989.
Figure 2.3. Television systems in 1995\textsuperscript{15}

![Figure 2.3. Television systems in 1995](image)

Figure 2.4. Television systems in 2008\textsuperscript{16}

![Figure 2.4. Television systems in 2008](image)

\textsuperscript{15} Data sources: the data for 1995 are included in the yearbook of the EAO (1998).

\textsuperscript{16} Data sources: yearbooks of the EAO (2008). The data for Italy are from 2007.
In 1985, only six countries were situated in the right-hand half of our television space. The UK, Italy and France all scored relatively high on fragmentation as well as on advertising dependency. Both Spain and Greece scored relatively low on competition and relatively high on advertising dependency. None of the four countries scored very high on advertising dependency or fragmentation. Competition in 1985 was not dominated by commercial objectives as the advertising dependency of the whole system is not very high. This suggests that in none of the countries there was a high commercial pressure in producing media content, with most countries scoring low on both dimensions. Norway and Denmark were least dominated by market pressures.

In 1995, the situation had changed dramatically, as all countries moved to the upper right quadrant (see figure 2.3). The UK and especially Italy, who were leading the transformation of European television systems, hardly changed their position and even started lagging behind some other countries. Spain moved from being a non-fragmented system to a highly fragmented system. This reflects the success of the new private channels in attracting audiences. In 1995, Greece had the most commercially oriented system, which reflects the weak position of its public television in terms of audiences and public funding, and Walonia comes out as the most competitive. Denmark takes an average position and has thus made a relatively big change in comparison with its position in 1985. Sweden is now the least commercially oriented television system but takes an average position in the competition intensity.

In 2008, the differences between countries became even smaller, confirming a clear trend towards convergence of West-European television systems (see figure 2.4). Between 1995 and 2008, countries changed more along the fragmentation
dimension than along the advertising dependency dimension. The Swedish system in particular, became much fragmented as a result of a decline in the audience share of public channels. Other television systems (e.g., Germany and Wallonia) hardly changed over this decade. The UK shifted towards a more competitive system and also became slightly more commercially oriented. Although the BBC is still the biggest player, it has gradually lost some of its audience to private television. In comparison to 1995, the UK and Finland made the biggest change towards a more fragmented television system. On the contrary, Flanders witnessed no significant increase in audience fragmentation and Wallonia even experienced a small decline. This might indicate that those two markets reached a new equilibrium and that public television established its competitive position as there was no further decline in its audience share. In Flanders, audience shares for both public television channels experienced an increase between 1995 (a total of daily audience share of 22.7 per cent) and 2008 (40.3 per cent) (EAO, 1998-2008).

The analysis shows that while in the 1980s all four categories of television systems distinguished above existed, by 1995 all television systems had become highly commercialised and highly fragmented, leaving us with model one only. In 2008 they are even more clustered together. So, this gives clear evidence of convergence between the selected television systems: they become increasingly similar and increasingly resemble the US model. Another feature of media system convergence is that audience fragmentation increased everywhere despite differences in advertising dependency. In the past, publicly dominated media systems were typically characterised by a low number of national channels, while the systems which were already more commercial (such as in Italy) typically had more channels. This relatively neat distinction between public systems with few channels and commercial systems with many channels has largely vanished over
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the past three decades. This is the consequence of the use of multi-channelling, which can be seen as a marketing strategy to attract various segments of the public (Turow, 2000). This strategy is increasingly used irrespective of the degree to which systems are advertising-dependent. The division of audiences into segments and fragments parallel with the increase of audience fragmentation is a key consequence of changes in television systems over the past 30 years.

2.4.2. How do the television systems differ in the 2000s?
In most countries, the largest changes occurred in the first half of the 1990s when commercial television was introduced across Western Europe. After this period, change has been slow in most cases. While the converging trend continued in the 2000s, this convergence seems to be influenced by national and institutional path dependencies, such as the existence of established and powerful media institutions – such as the BBC in the UK. Countries that scored relatively low on advertising dependency in the 1980s have generally become more commercially oriented in absolute terms, but 30 years later they still score low in comparison with other countries. This exemplifies the impact of state regulation through public funding.

Yet this path dependency and the role of state regulation do not form a constraint for audience fragmentation, which is the domain where most change has happened. The new technological possibilities of satellite television and multi-channelling have affected entire media systems (both public and private) and have fundamentally changed the way audiences use television. With the notable Italian exception, which was highly fragmented at the start of the period under study, most convergence seems to have happened on the dimension of audience fragmentation. Most media markets seem to have reached a new equilibrium, which is shown by the slow pace of change after the transition around 1990. This might be attributed to the nature of the evolution of industries, which have been transformed after a
technological innovation (cable, satellite and digital television) to reach their saturation stage after a certain period of time. But this slow pace of change also indicates that public television has succeeded to keep its position in a multichannel television environment.

Figure 2.5. A more detailed view of the television systems in 2008

In order to improve the understanding of the smaller remaining differences across countries, I have rescaled the measures in 2008 around the average of fragmentation intensity and of advertising dependency. The results shown in figure 2.5 reveal that, notwithstanding the general trend towards convergence, notable differences remain between countries. Greece scores the highest on the advertising dependency dimension, in relative terms, followed by Spain, Italy and France, while the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, Wallonia, and Austria take a somewhat intermediate position.

This dimension still generally reflects the old distinction between Mediterranean and more Nordic countries. In some countries this process of convergence towards a more liberal television system has even stagnated (Italy) and some other countries stand out for relatively low scores on both dimensions (Norway, Flanders and Finland). Flanders seems to go against the trend of fragmentation. While in the 1980s it was one of the most fragmented television systems, in 2008 it scores relatively low on this dimension. This seems to be related to the revival of its public television and the decline of the audience shares reached by channels from neighbouring countries. With highly advertising-dependent and highly competitive and fragmented television systems, all countries under study can now be considered to be situated in the television space where commercial pressure is high.

2.5. Discussion

This study focuses on two structural dimensions of television systems: (1) their advertising dependency and their (2) competition intensity indicated by audience fragmentation across television channels. Changes in advertising dependency and audience fragmentation were analysed across television channels in 17 West-European countries between 1980 and 2008.

The analyses showed that the analytical distinction between advertising dependency and competition intensity measured by the degree of audience fragmentation is empirically warranted and confirms that both concepts are related but relatively independent from each other. The two instruments provided an empirical basis for distinguishing four ideal-typical television systems: (1) Highly advertising-dependent and highly fragmented systems; (2) Highly advertising-dependent systems with low fragmentation; (3) Highly fragmented system with...
low advertising dependency; and (4) Systems with low advertising dependency and low fragmentation.

The empirical analysis shows that although all four types of television systems existed in the early 1980s, model 4 was still dominant. Almost thirty years later, model 1 had become dominant and the other three types no longer existed. All West-European television systems have become increasingly commercially oriented and audiences have become more fragmented while cross-country differences have become smaller. It can therefore be concluded that there has been a convergence between West-European television systems, as well as an overall shift towards US television systems, which represent the prototype of systems with high audience fragmentation and high advertising dependency. Nevertheless, the role of public television and public funding in Europe still is significantly higher than in the US, making the nature of competition fundamentally different.

The convergence of broadcasting systems is particularly visible along the fragmentation dimension. Historical and ideological differences in state regulation within Europe, as well as between Europe and the US, still appear to be relevant and this seems to impede total convergence. The largest shifts towards more commercially oriented and fragmented systems had already taken place around 1990. Although this process continued after the big transition from a public monopoly to dual systems, the recent pace of change has been relatively slow and significant national differences still remain.

Initially, between 1985 and 1995, the main shift was towards a growing advertising dependency. Since 1995, the advertising dependency has not significantly increased, but fragmentation has increased to a certain extent. Fragmentation of audiences increased despite differences in advertising dependency. These findings suggest that the marketing strategy of segmenting audiences is widely used even in less advertising-dependent television systems.
This indicates that the struggle to attract audiences is a dominant phenomenon in today's television systems. This also holds for those systems that do not rely heavily on advertising revenues, which can therefore be seen as another dimension of convergence.

Besides an overall convergence of television systems towards more fragmentation and advertising dependency, the changes in the 2000s have been relatively slow. This may point to a certain level of saturation, in which television systems have found a new 'equilibrium' after the double shock of the introduction of commercial television followed by the widespread use of new technologies by public and private television organisations.

With regard to commercial pressure at the system level, we can conclude that the likelihood that economic criteria will dominate content selection has increased: all broadcasting systems are now situated in the category of highly fragmented and highly advertising-dependent television systems, where commercial pressure is highest. The trend towards audience maximisation and cost minimisation is most likely to happen in the most fragmented and advertising-dependent television markets of the 2000s.

Although the examined television systems are now most likely to experience high levels of commercial pressure, some governments have attempted to reverse the commercial trend by increasingly subsidising public television (Spain, Greece) or by strengthening the position of public television (Flanders) and limiting advertising possibilities for public television (France). This shows that the trend towards fragmentation and a growing advertising dependency of television systems is not inevitable, but partly a matter of political choice. This points to the important role of public policy as an explanatory factor: public funding cuts, competition and fragmentation are part of larger trends towards neoliberal,
market-oriented policies, although significant cross-country differences persist in terms of policies and the character of media systems.

From an audience perspective, the high choice media environment, in combination with individuals’ limited capacity and willingness to process abundant information and selective exposure, is likely to reproduce existing differences between audiences. Individuals will be able to select content that resonates with their own preferences. Individuals who are highly politically interested might have a more diverse exposure by choosing a diverse channel repertoire, while individuals with less or no political interest will probably have a less diverse exposure to politically relevant information because they lack both interest and skills required in such a high-choice environment.

Differences between countries in these trends are likely to still be relevant as there is no complete convergence, while trends seem to even be reversing for some countries. The distinction between both dimensions of broadcasting systems is relevant for conducting cross-level research to investigate how both variables are meaningful to audiences in terms of media content (production) and media content exposure (consumption) and subsequently how this influences citizens’ political knowledge and political attitudes.

How do our findings relate to other dimensions of the convergences of media system thesis? In their recent book, Hallin and Mancini (2012) argue that empirical evidence is against a global convergence thesis of media systems toward the liberal model. Our findings show that for the established Western democracies of our study, we clearly found a convergence toward more audience fragmentation and more advertising dependency which both are characteristics of the American broadcasting model.

Yet, the central argument of the convergence of media systems as outlined by Hallin & Mancini (2004b) is that there is an increasing separation of media
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systems from political systems. This separation would be marked by an increasing professionalism of journalism and a decline in political party media parallelism. Both processes would illustrate a growing independence and autonomy of journalism.

Increasing audience fragmentation and advertising dependency may however obstruct this assumed tendency towards a more autonomous and independent field of journalism, even in democratic political systems. The increasing dependence of television systems on commercial revenues might diminish direct control from the state but it increases the dependence of media on the economic system. In addition, the increasing audience fragmentation might lead to the rise of new ties, instead of a separation between television systems and party political systems. There is evidence from the US that partisan media are on the rise because of high competition and audience fragmentation (see also: Hallin 2009). Media’s use of segmentation and niche targeting in combination with selective exposure may lead to polarisation of audiences.

This implies that the convergence on the fragmentation dimension might run counter another dimension of convergence, as argued by Hallin and Mancini (2004b), namely a general decline of media political parallelism and the dominance of ‘neutral’ journalism. If these relationships between audience fragmentation, media partisanship and polarisation are also taking place outside the US, this would imply that in the new media system the partisan ties between media and the political system might revive. However, these new ties seem to be led by audiences and the media rather than by political parties or states as in the old media system.

This analysis exemplifies that the convergence thesis is multifaceted and that it is not clear how its various dimensions relate to each other. One of the important dimensions of the convergence thesis is that media systems become more entertainment oriented under influence of increasing competitive and commercial
pressures. In the next chapter I will analyse how the two dimensions of television systems are related to sensational news coverage.
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Chapter 3

Sensationalism in news coverage
A comparative study in 14 television systems and 29 television stations

Abstract

Drawing on a sample of 14 television systems and 29 television stations, we investigate the effect of two dimensions of media systems on sensational news coverage: (1) the television system dependency on advertising as a source of income and (2) audience fragmentation. At the aggregate level, both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency yield significant effects on three dimensions of sensationalism. The news coverage of commercial channels is more likely to be sensational in topics and in storytelling compared to public television. The difference in these two dimensions of sensationalism between commercial and public channels increases as television systems become more fragmented. This finding does not support the common hypothesis according to which commercial and public broadcasters would converge as a consequence of an increasing audience fragmentation. The analysis reveals that both advertising dependency and audience fragmentation stimulate the use of sensationalist formal features - the third dimension of sensationalism -, without revealing any channel-level effects.

Keywords: audience fragmentation, sensational news coverage, television news, comparative communication, media systems.

This chapter is a revision of a paper co-authored with Knut de Swert, Stefaan Walgrave and Wouter van der Brug.
3.1. Introduction

When commercial television stations entered West-European media systems, many observers feared this would inevitably generate 'poor' quality media coverage. In this view, economic considerations would increasingly dominate journalistic production so that journalists could no longer serve their role of the democratic 'Fourth Estate' (Hamilton, 2004). Commercial television producers would consider their audiences as potential consumers who should get what they want (i.e., entertainment and sensation) instead of as citizens who should be informed and educated. This consumer-orientated style of news production and packaging would allegedly generate more entertainment-oriented news stories and news items that are 'sensational' or 'tabloid-like' (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; McManus, 1994) So, in commercialised media systems, news would be less informative and the credibility and objectivity of news reporting would therefore be at risk.

In the West-European context, the commercialisation of television systems is often portrayed as a historical shift from a system that was dominated by a government-funded public television monopoly to a mixed revenues dual television system in which public and private television co-exist (Brants and De Bens, 2000; Siune & Hulten, 1998). The general assumption of prior studies is that these changes in television systems will compel television channels to increasingly consider news as a commodity instead of a public good. It is often assumed that the urge to 'sell' the news in order to attract audiences and/or to make profit will inevitably lead to low quality news centred on infotainment, sensationalism and human-interest news (e.g. Manning, 2001).

Notwithstanding these claims, there are few empirical studies that have actually tested this assumed direct effect of the aforementioned changes of media

19 Implicit to this literature is the assumption that citizens do not really want to be educated or informed.
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systems on media content. Most studies that address these effects are channel level studies, while appropriate testing of such effects would require an analysis of the structural features of entire media systems affecting news coverage and would necessitate a comparative approach between national media systems. This is the approach of this study.

We investigate these common hypotheses about the effects of media system change on media content by analysing the relationship between the relative dominance of sensationalism in news coverage and two aspects of television systems: (1) Television systems’ advertising dependency; and (2) Audience fragmentation across television channels, indicating competition intensity. Drawing on data from 14 television systems and 29 private and public television stations, we analyse the effects of these two television system characteristics on sensationalism in news coverage, and also investigate whether channel level effects depend on these contextual characteristics. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses such a cross-level design to study sensationalism in news coverage.

3.2. Theoretical background

3.2.1. Characterising the television systems

The transformation of the television system from a pure public institution to a dual institution is often thought to have been accompanied by the adoption of more business-like management philosophies, values and approaches. In this process, television systems, which in most West-European countries were organised as a public sector institution, have been transformed into markets where competition for advertising revenues and audiences determine the delivered services. In Western Europe this process generally started in the 1980s. In this study we focus on two crucial components of this process of transformation: (1) Increasing
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advertising dependency of television systems; and (2) increasing competition intensity between television channels measured by the degree of audience fragmentation across channels. In chapter two, we operationalised these two concepts.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the introduction of commercial television stations changed the rules of the game of West-European television systems in two ways. First, it meant that new for profit actors, who mainly depended on commercial revenues from advertisers, entered television systems. Gaining substantial audience shares, preferably consisting of the right target group of consumers, was essential to the success of these channels. Second, while in most West-European countries public television stations are still important players, public channels increasingly had to generate part of their income from advertising. Public channels therefore saw themselves competing with private channels for audiences in order to generate revenues and in order to legitimise their existence. Both the entry of commercial TV and the increasing dependency of public television on commercial revenues increased commercial and competitive pressure in television systems as a whole.

The fact that there are more channels, each attracting smaller segments of audiences, implies that there is more competition among channels for audience shares and advertising money. Competition intensity between television channels is often cited as one of the most important driving forces of the so-called entertainment focus (Aalberg et al., 2013; Curran et al., 2009). Research has shown that when competition is fierce, television channels tend to produce increasingly similar and low quality programmes (Van der Wurff & Van Cuijlenburg, 2001).

We can therefore hypothesise that the more the system is dependent on advertising, the more news will be treated as a commodity, leading to the increasing
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domination of consumer-oriented styles of news production. Some scholars assume that if news becomes a commodity in commercially oriented media that it somehow automatically loses its informative and educative value. For instance, (McManus, 1995, p. 85) argues that: "to the extent that the business goal of maximizing profit dominates", competitors will offer "the least expensive content that guarantees the largest audience". He also asserts that the market rationale of minimizing costs and maximizing profits has produced trivial, superficial and often inaccurate reporting.

However, McManus describes this process of competition for the almost totally commercially oriented media context of the US. West-European television systems differ from the US system since they are dual systems consisting of a mix of public and private television. One can argue that the 'business goal of maximizing profit' is less dominant in European media systems because public television plays an important role, which benefits from government support in terms of funding, and because of the presence of content regulation. Competition in West-European television systems is therefore partly a competition between profit-oriented television channels and non-profit public television. This 'mixed' competition may not be completely driven by profit making as in the case of the US, where all news organisations are for-profit actors. However, the struggle to attract and retain audiences may not be less intense.

The related struggle of maximising audiences and revenues particularly applies to commercial channels. The more intense the competition, the more difficult it will be to attract audiences and advertising money. This would make it hard for television channels to invest in high-quality reporting, which would push them to produce low-cost and easy-to-sell media products (Picard, 2000, p. 178).
3.2.2. Sensationalism in news coverage

Empirical evidence suggests that news producers have used sensational ‘non-substantive’ news topics such as violence, crime, accidents, disasters, sex, and misconduct in an attempt to attract viewers (Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). The profit motive of media and the ability of sensational news to attract audience’s attention are often cited as the drive behind using sensational news. This alleged increasing level of sensationalism in news coverage is often seen as an indication of a supposed declining quality of news coverage.

Early research on sensationalism in news coverage has tended to operationalise sensationalism as an issue feature. In this logic, some topics are seen as emotionally arousing and are thus defined as ‘sensational’. This research made a dichotomous distinction between ‘proper’ and ‘entertaining’ news topics. Other scholars argue that sensationalism does not need to be a feature of news topics only, but should include its capacity to arouse audiences emotionally by addressing their human biological sensory system (Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011).

Following this literature, we focus on the characteristics of news that *arouses audiences emotionally* in the operationalisation of sensationalism. Arousing elements in a news item may occur along three dimensions. The first one is the topic, which is the traditional way of operationalising sensationalism. For instance, content about violence and sex are typically sensational issues. The second dimension is the storytelling perspective. In comparison to abstract information, using human exemplars giving concrete and emotional testimonies is considered to be salient information in news stories. Personalised exemplification exerts
considerable emotional influence on viewers’ processing of the news (Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2011). Ordinary people can be used in news as actors by commenting on a topic as a passer-by or as an eyewitness. In this way ordinary people function as actors in news and fulfil this function of exemplification. It has been argued that sensational news involves actors who tend to ‘personalize and dramatize news by ordinary people’ (Bek, 2010; Wang, 2012). Some empirical European studies have revealed the use of this strategy by commercial television stations (Hvitfelt, 1994 for Sweden). Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2005) found that, between 1995 and 2001, the use of ordinary people increased in Dutch television news coverage. As this period was characterised by an increase in news programmes, they suggest this trend may be explained by increasing competition.

The third dimension of sensationalism is the use of specific audio-visual features. In the relevant literature these are referred to as ‘formal features’. Using music and specific camera techniques arouses the attention of the audiences as it directly affects the human sensory system (Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). These sensational features include a fast editing pace, an eyewitness camera perspective, zoom-in camera lens movements, re-enactment of news events, the use of music, and voice-over narration (Wang 2012). Empirical research has shown that audiences pay attention to these formal features of news to make a distinction between serious news and sensational news. Audiences viewed news that used lavish audio-visual techniques as less serious (Grabe et al. 2001). The separation of these three dimensions of sensationalism will allow us to assess which of the strategies described above are most preferred by television channels. Our operationalisation of sensationalism for this study is elaborated in the section 3.4.
3.3. Hypotheses

Due to the lack of cross-national comparative data, most prior studies addressed the relationship between the transformations of television systems and media content by testing the differences between private television on the one hand, and public television on the other (for a review see: Schaap & Pleijer, 2012). Much of this research is based on the idea that public service and commercial channels have different goals (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). While public service broadcasting is mainly preoccupied with providing the necessary information for an informed citizenry, commercial broadcasters need to prioritise ratings for their survival, leading to a “greater responsiveness to popular pleasures” (Curran, 2000, p. 143; see also: Curran et al., 2009). In addition, the costs of sensational news are relatively low while its impact on attracting audiences seems high. This makes covering more crime, for instance, attractive for commercially driven media outlets (Esser, 1999). Several studies found that commercial channels air more ‘soft’ and sensational news than public broadcasters (Hvitfelt, 1994; Norris, 2000, pp. 110-111; Powers, Kristjansdottir, & Sutton, 1994). That is why we expect news coverage in commercial television to be more sensational in its selection of news topics, its storytelling perspective, and the formal features of sensationalism in comparison with public television news coverage.

Although commercial channels might be more sensitive to profit motives in their news production in comparison with publically owned television, comparing both types of organisations is not an appropriate methodology to empirically test of the claims stated above. This test does not take the market context in which the channels operate into consideration and can only say something about the behaviour of (some) commercial channels versus (some) public channels and does not allow us to directly assess the aggregate effects of the television environment on news content. After all, the programming of publicly owned channels is likely to also
be affected by the introduction of private channels and these channels have also become more dependent on advertising revenues. The choices made by television stations do not only depend on their public or private status, but also on characteristics of the market in which they operate which determine their competitive strategies. Theoretically, a commercial channel may choose for “dumbing down” quality in order to maximise profit, but another competing commercial channel might chose for quality instead, in order to make profit through reaching particular niche audiences targeted by particular advertisers. Such choices for a specific competitive strategy are likely to depend not only on the channel characteristics but also on competition intensity in the entire media system.

At the aggregate level, the tendency to ‘sell news for profit’ may also differ between television systems because some systems rely more on advertising revenues than others. In addition, at the aggregate level, the effect of ‘wanting to sell news for profit’ may be cancelled out when various channels use opposing strategies. Yet, these effects may reinforce each other when various channels choose the same strategy and start imitating each other. This last scenario is expected to occur in extreme competitive markets (Van der Wurff & Van Cuilenburg, 2001). Previous research has generated some evidence showing that competition affects television programming and news content (Atwater, 1984; Powers et al., 1994). Competition forces media outlets to cater to the prejudices of their readers; the more competition the more aggressive catering to these prejudices there will be (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). In a longitudinal study analysing the effects of competition on the Dutch television market, van der Wurff and van Cuilenburg (2001) found that under conditions of extreme competition, an excessive sameness of low-quality programming occurs. Similarly, a study of
Transformations of television systems

various television systems in Europe suggests that competition intensity in television markets has resulted in decreased quality and a “dumbing down” of media content (OSI, 2005).

These studies suggest that competition may lead to convergence of various channels towards similar, low-quality programming. However, most of this research is conducted at the channel level or in a single country. Recently, some cross-country comparative studies have been conducted, and also suggest that sensationalism is stimulated by higher competition (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Hendriks Vettehen, Zhou, Kleemans, D’Haenens, & Lin, 2012; Wang, 2012) and higher journalistic professionalism stimulates ‘soft’ news coverage (Wang, 2012).

This study responds to the need for more cross-level research in communication studies (e.g. Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006) and in comparative studies of sensationalism in news coverage (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2012). Our study differs from previous studies because it directly measures competition intensity at the television system level and analyses its effect on news content while controlling for the advertising dependency of the whole system. Another innovative feature of our study is its use of multilevel analysis, which allows for the analysis of macro-level effects while accounting for channel-level characteristics and analysing cross-level interaction effects. From the previous discussion we draw our hypotheses.
Sensationalism in news coverage

At the aggregate level:

- **H (1.a).** There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in topics selection.

- **H (2.a).** There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in storytelling perspective.

- **H (3.a).** There is a positive relationship between the advertising dependency and audience fragmentation of television systems and sensationalism in formal features.

At the channel level:

- **H (1.b).** There is more sensationalism in news topics in privately owned channels compared to public channels.

- **H (2.b).** There is more sensationalism in storytelling perspective in privately owned channels compared to public channels.

- **H (3.b).** There is more sensationalism in formal features in privately owned channels compared to public channels.

These hypothesised differences between private and public channels might depend on the competition intensity between television channels, which is known in the literature as the convergence thesis (Pfetsch, 1996). The realisation of the ideals of public ‘service’ television (e.g. Curran et al. 2009) may not be fully achieved in situations in which public television partly depends on commercial revenues and has to cope with competition from other television channels at the same time. Although most studies have found that European public broadcasting generally produces a more varied and educational programming than commercial (private)
Transformations of television systems

television (De Bens, 1998; McQuail, 1998; Pfetsch, 1996), signs of convergence in programming between commercial and public broadcasters have also been noted (e.g. De Bens 1998; Pfetsch 1996). Although the empirical focus of this study is on programming, the theoretical argument can be extended to news coverage. It is also possible that some commercial channels chose to compete with public television while imitating public television standard of content quality. Also in this case, convergence between both types of channels will result. Hence, public and private channels are both likely to be influenced by the larger media context, and convergence between programming/news coverage of public and private channels is more likely to happen in a competitive television context. This leads to the final set of hypotheses.

At the cross-level:

• **H (1.c). The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in news topics is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e. convergence).**

• **H (2.c). The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in storytelling perspective is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e., convergence).**

• **H (3.c). The difference between public and commercial channels in the share of sensationalism in formal features is smaller in more competitive television systems (i.e., convergence).**

### 3.4. Content analysis

To measure the dependent variables, which cover the three dimensions of sensational news, we rely on a content analysis of a sample of 29 daily newscasts
Sensationalism in news coverage

on public and private television stations from 14 television systems. This sample is taken from two existing data sets, which provide data on all variables for 14 media systems: Belgium (where we distinguish between the French and Dutch media systems), Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK. For Italy, Poland, Portugal and Switzerland the sampling period is January-March 2008 (Cohen, Hanitzsch, & Stepinska, 2013). For the other countries, the sample was taken between December 2006 and April 2007. These periods were selected as in none of the countries elections were called. Fortunately, no major news events dominated the international news agenda during that period. Even so, the exact same days were coded in all countries during the two sampling periods to avoid that large international events would bias the data and make them non-comparable between countries.

In almost all countries, we included the newscast that had the largest viewership of one commercial channel and one public broadcaster. In total 812 broadcasts and 13,444 news items were analysed and coded. Table 3.1 contains a description of the distribution of the news items across television station. The total number of items is large and the amount of items per country and per station is sufficient to be able to analyse sensationalism both at the country as well as at the channel level. The sample is partially a convenience sample. Availability of newscasts online and of native-speaking coders played a role, as well as the availability of data on audience shares and public versus commercial revenues. However, we consider the sample to be sound on theoretical grounds, because, with the exception of Turkey and Poland, the selected countries share similar traditions of public broadcasting and they have all experienced a liberalisation process of their television systems.
Table 3.1. Sample of 28 days of coverage in main evening newscast on 29 TV stations in 14 television systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Station</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Channel type</th>
<th># news items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VRT</td>
<td>Belgium-Flanders</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VTM</td>
<td>Belgium-Flanders</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTBF</td>
<td>Belgium-French</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL-tvi</td>
<td>Belgium-French</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBC</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTV</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fv2</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TF1</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARD</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZDF</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFE</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAI</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cana5</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTL4</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRK</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV2</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVP1</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVPN</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTP</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVI</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF1</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TeleZuri</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSR</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRT</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13,444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the number of news broadcasts is the same for all television stations, the total number of news items differs. This is due to two factors: the length of the main newscasts and the length of the news items differ across channels. In France, the commercial broadcaster TF1 had long newscasts with on average short items which explains the higher sample of news items (N=712) while the other extreme, ITV in the UK, had short newscasts leading to a smaller sample of news items (N=155). However, these different samples can still be compared since we took the main news shows aired in prime time for each country.

Coders, carefully trained, and most of them native speakers, watched the recorded news broadcasts, and analysed them item per item. Four per cent of the sample was double-coded (due to the difficulty of finding enough native coders in many different languages). The key variable from which our dependent variables are constructed is the issue code. Drawing upon a detailed issue-codebook containing more than 200 different issue codes, coders could attribute up to three issue codes to a single news item. In many cases, coders only gave one code, and the average number of issue codes per item is 1.47. The intercoder-reliability score for the issue code is satisfying, with Cohen’s kappa equal to 0.80. We recoded these original codes to construct a variable that indicates sensational news topics versus non-sensational news topics: If one of these three issue codes referred to crime (including crime policy, (political) corruption), misconduct, violence, disasters, accidents, terrorism, sex, drugs or celebrities, we consider the item to be about sensational topics (see Hendriks Vettehen et al. 2011).

We measure sensationalism in storytelling by investigating the use of personalised exemplification in news coverage by assessing the frequency of appearance of ordinary people as actors in news item. In news items an actor is

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20 See Appendix B for the list of sensational topics used.
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coded if s/he is interviewed or quoted in the news item or when s/he is the subject of the news item. Many different people are shown in news items and, in this study, the focus is on only one type of actor: involved individuals (bystander, witnesses, victims, and perpetrators). This category only contains ‘ordinary’ citizens and does not include the authoritative actors (politicians, police, advocates, justice) involved in the news story. The intercoder-reliability score for these variables is 0.90 Cohen’s kappa. Items that contain at least one of the ordinary actors above are defined as sensational news items.

To measure formal features of sensational news coverage, we focus on characteristics that elicit emotions. Each news item was scored on a number of dummy variables covering each sensational character (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). Because of data limitations we distinguish only two types of formal features: sensationalism in images and in sounds. Sensational images are images that are emotionally arousing, for instance images showing violence, dead bodies, or injuries of people. The sound of a news item can be sensational too: it can have a music score, contain dramatic sound (e.g. a gunshot), dramatic sound produced by people (e.g. crying and screaming), and/or incorporate sounds of joy. Sensationalism in these formal features is measured by six dichotomous variables: (1) the item shows violent scenes; (2) the use of images of dead people; (3) the use of background music in the news item; (4) the use of special effects in images (slow motion, speed-up motion, repetition of visuals, close-ups, soft focus, and other camera techniques); (5) the use of animated presentation exemplified by a stand-up journalist; (6) the use of pictorial or graphic representation (Chan & Lee, 2013; Wilke & Heimprecht, 2013).

In sum, our analyses employ three dependent variables: (1) Sensational versus non-sensational news topics; (2) Sensationalism in storytelling; and (3)
Sensationalism in news coverage

Sensational versus non-sensational formal features. These variables are binary: items with a sensational topic are coded as 1 and items with a non-sensational topic as 0. Items that use ordinary people as actors are coded as 1 and items not using ordinary actors as 0. As soon as a news item contains one of the formal features of sensationalism, we consider it to be a sensational item (score 1) and if none of these formal features is present we give it a score of 0.

3.5. Results

3.5.1. Descriptive evidence

Before formally testing our hypotheses we present some descriptive analyses that give us more information about our data and variables. Table 3.2 shows the distribution of sensationalism across countries and television channels among the three dimensions of sensationalism which form our three dependent variables: (1) the selection of sensational topics versus non-sensational news topics; (2) the use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling; and (3) the use of sensational formal features in news coverage.

Table 3.2 shows that sensational news topics generally only get slightly more news attention compared to non-sensational news topics, although there are some differences between countries. In Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and, to a lesser extent, Switzerland and Germany non-sensational topics get more news attention. France and Poland dedicate as much coverage to sensational topics as to non-sensational topics. In the other countries sensational news topics get more attention (i.e., more news items) than non-sensational news topics. Turkey, the Netherlands and Canada show the biggest preference for sensational news over non-sensational news.
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Table 3.2. Sensationalism in news coverage across countries and television channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% items with sensational news topics</th>
<th>% of items using ordinary actors</th>
<th>% of items using sensational formal features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Public TV</td>
<td>Commercial TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>59.10</td>
<td>57.69</td>
<td>51.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>55.00</td>
<td>52.77</td>
<td>57.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>50.78</td>
<td>50.71</td>
<td>50.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>49.94</td>
<td>45.41</td>
<td>57.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>42.36</td>
<td>42.36</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>40.95</td>
<td>39.08</td>
<td>43.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>51.65</td>
<td>53.85</td>
<td>49.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>50.37</td>
<td>50.54</td>
<td>50.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>40.48</td>
<td>38.64</td>
<td>42.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>49.13</td>
<td>46.36</td>
<td>57.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>61.77</td>
<td>60.48</td>
<td>63.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>62.43</td>
<td>56.19</td>
<td>69.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>57.07</td>
<td>54.27</td>
<td>61.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia</td>
<td>50.90</td>
<td>48.26</td>
<td>53.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50.36</td>
<td>48.03</td>
<td>53.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>13,444</td>
<td>7,430</td>
<td>6,014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data also reveal important differences between channels. Overall, public channels spend less coverage on sensational news topics than commercial channels do. However, this general picture does not hold true for all commercial and public channels. In Norway for instance, the public station (NRK) has more coverage on sensational topics whereas the privately owned TV2 has more coverage on non-sensational topics. In Canada, Flanders, UK, the Netherlands, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, France and Poland both the main commercial and the main public channel cover more sensational news topics than non-sensational topics.

Approximately one third of the items in our sample use individual actors to construct the news narrative. 22 per cent of the items only use authoritative actors, while 12.3 per cent of the news items use ordinary actors. We also see differences between private and public channels. There is generally a stronger tendency for commercial channels to use ordinary people as actors in news storytelling compared to public channels, although this is not always the case. For instance, the publically owned BBC (UK) and NRK (Norway) both use more ordinary people than their privately owned competitors. There are also differences between television systems. Poland stands out with both public and commercial channels having a high share of news items using ordinary people, while Germany has the lowest use of ordinary people in news coverage.

Approximately one third of the news items in our sample use at least one sensational formal feature. At the country level, Turkey and Poland stand out with a majority of news items using sensational formal features. The UK, France, Italy, and Canada have nearly as many items with and without sensational formal features. For the Walloon Public television RTBF, the French commercial channel TF1, and the British commercial channel ITV, 50 per cent of the items use at least
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one sensational formal feature. For the Italian public television Rai1 and the Polish commercial television channel TVN, a majority of news items have formal features of sensationalism. Turkish channels stand out in the use of sensational formal features. The Turkish public channel TRT, also uses a lot of sensationalist formats. On closer inspection, Turkish sensationalism is partly due to the abundant use of background music. Yet, even without taking music into account, the commercial Turkish channel Star would still be the champion of formal features sensationalism. Although commercial channels display more sensational formal features than public channels, the differences between commercial channels and public channels are generally small, and the variation between broadcasting systems as a whole seem more important.

To summarise these descriptive findings: sensationalism in news topics selection is relatively more frequent than sensationalism in storytelling and sensationalism in formal features. There are some differences between television systems in the levels of sensationalism in news topics and storytelling, but channel level differences are more important, with commercial channels depicting these two forms of sensationalism more often than public channels. Sensationalism in formal features also varies between commercial and public channels but the differences between countries seem to be more important. To understand these variations in the levels of sensationalism across countries and channels we will employ a multivariate, multilevel regression analysis, which will allow investigating whether the extent to which differences between channels and between countries can be explained by our two television system characteristics.

However, before doing so, we need to analyse the relationship between the three dimensions of sensationalism to see whether they can be seen as three variables underlying one unique dimension of sensationalism. We found that the
use of sensational formal features and the use of ordinary citizens as actors are significantly and positively associated with selection of sensational topics. In other words, sensational news topics depict more ordinary actors and more sensational formal features. At the channel level, the Pearson correlation coefficient between sensational news topics and the use of ordinary people as actors is 0.54 while the correlation coefficient between sensational news topics and the use of formal features is 0.43. However, the correlation between the use of ordinary people as actors and the use of sensational formal features was close to zero.

This evidence suggests that, at the channel level, sensational topics tend to be packaged using sensational formal features and sensational storytelling more often, compared to non-sensational topics. However, packaging strategies, storytelling and sensational formal features are not related. At the item level the correlations between the three variables are very low. We therefore conclude that at the item level, which is our level of analysis, the three variables constitute three separate dimensions of sensationalism, and that we should therefore analyse the three variables separately.

3.5.2. Explaining sensationalism

In order to explain the variation in the proportion of sensationalism (in topic, storytelling, and formal features) we estimate random intercept logistic multilevel models with three levels using the log link function for binominal distributions (Hox, 2002). The news items (N=13,444), our level 1 unit of analysis, are first nested in television channels (N = 29), the level 2 unit of analysis, which are nested in television systems (N = 14), the third level. The choice for this method is not only justified by the clustered data structure, but, more importantly, by the questions of
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our study that address the effect of the television system level (the macro-level) as well as the channel level (the meso-level) and the dependence of the latter on characteristics of the former (cross-level) (e.g. Slater et al., 2006).

We looked at the correlation between our independent macro-level variables before conducting the regression analysis. The correlation between competition intensity and the advertising dependency is low and not significant (Pearson’s correlations is 0.36). This exemplifies our theoretical argument that these two variables measure different aspects of media systems. In our analyses we proceed to test our hypotheses as follows: In model (1) we test the television system and channel level variables and in model (2) we add the effect of cross-level interaction.

Sensationalism in news topics

When accounting for differences in fragmentation of audiences and controlling for the advertising dependency, it appears that sensational topics have a significantly higher likelihood to be covered in the news than non-sensational topics (the effect of fragmentation is significant and positive, see table 3.3). However this likelihood is not very large: the odd ratio for the presence of sensational news topics to the expense of non-sensational topics as the television system gets more competitive is 1.03 (log odds is 0.03). Advertising dependency does not have any significant effect. Commercial channels cover sensational news topics more often than publically owned channels.

This difference between commercial and publics channels is important. The odds ratio for a commercial channel covering sensational news topics is 1.23 (log odds is 0.21). This means that, on average, commercial channels cover 23 per cent more sensational news topics compared to publically owned television channels.
### Table 3.3. A three level random intercept logistic regression model explaining sensationalism in topic news selection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising dependency</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial channel</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation *Channel</td>
<td>-0.03***</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated variances</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept variance television</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>system level</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept variance television</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>channel level</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goodness of fit</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIC (Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)</td>
<td>57.135.34</td>
<td>57.145.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)</td>
<td>57.150.35</td>
<td>57.160.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. System level effects are tested one-sidedly. N news items = 13444, N channels = 29, N television systems = 14. Sensational news topic = 1 and non-sensational topics = 0 (the reference category). Commercial channel = 1 and public channel = 0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

The cross-level interaction between fragmentation and the channel type is positive and has the same sign as the effect of the channel type. This implies that fragmentation strengthens the effect of the channel type: commercial channels in

---

21 The analyses were conducted using the GENLINMIXED programme in IBM SPSS version 19. The GENLINMIXED programme for categorical outcomes uses a method of estimation referred to as active set method (ASM) with Newton-Raphson estimation (Heck, Thomas, & Tabata, 2012). We also tested for the presence of cross-level interactions between advertising dependency and channel type, but none were present (results not shown).
more than average competitive television systems tend to significantly cover more sensational news topics, than commercial channels in less than average competitive television systems.

It seems that public channels are not significantly affected by the level of competition, although the direction of the effect of audience fragmentation on public channels is positive (0.01, see model 2). To see whether our results are robust, we performed a jack-knife test in which we excluded one country at a time (results not shown). We found the effect of channel type and cross-level interaction to be significant in all cases, and to have the same direction as shown in the table. The effect of audience fragmentation on public television which has not reached the significance level was positive in all cases. It reached the significance level in one case, that is, when we excluded Norway from the analysis.

In sum, our results support the hypothesis that audience fragmentation stimulates sensational news topic selection, but also show that the coverage of sensational topics does not depend on the level of the advertising dependency of the television system. H (1.a) is thus partly supported, while H (1.b) is fully supported as commercial channels have a clear preference for selecting sensational news topics compared to publically owned channels. H (1.c) is not supported and we cannot speak about convergence of public and commercial channels under the influence of stronger competition. When television systems are more competitive, commercial channels tend to provide more coverage for sensational topics than they already do irrespective of the level of audience fragmentation. Public channels are not significantly affected by audience fragmentation, neither positively nor negatively. So, audience fragmentation does not urge them to distinguish

---

22 The interaction between our two television system variables was positive but not statistically significant.
themselves by offering less sensational topics.

It seems that public television channels carefully observe the coverage of commercial channels without significantly following their behaviour. The presence of an aggregate positive level effect for fragmentation, even when controlling for the channel type (see the results of model 1), support this interpretation. We conclude that the results do not indicate convergence between private and public channels when competition becomes more intense, but also do not suggest divergence.

Sensationalism in news storytelling: the use of ordinary actors

When controlling for fragmentation of audiences and advertising dependency at system level as well as for channel type, we find that television systems which depend more on advertising have a significantly higher use of ‘ordinary actors’ in news coverage (see table 3.4). This effect is not dependent on channel level characteristics. Contrary to expectation, competitive television systems tend to use this strategy significantly less often. Commercial channels have a significantly higher use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling compared to public television channels. Model 2 suggests that the negative effect of fragmentation of audiences is related to the behaviour of public television. The effect of audience fragmentation on public channels is negative and significant (-0.06), while commercial television in more fragmented television system tends to use significantly more ordinary actors as news actors.
### Transformations of television systems

Table 3.4. A three level random intercept logistic regression model explaining sensationalism in news storytelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fixed effects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.12***</td>
<td>-2.01***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>-0.04**</td>
<td>-0.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising dependency</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial channel</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation * Commercial channel</td>
<td>- 0.05*</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimated variances</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept variance television system level</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept variance television channel level</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goodness of fit</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AICC (Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)</td>
<td>68.904.65</td>
<td>68.930.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)</td>
<td>68.919.66</td>
<td>68.945.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. System-level effects are tested one-sidedly. N news items=13444, N Channels=29, N television systems=14. Sensational news topics +1 and non-sensational topics =0 (the reference category). Commercial channel +1 and public channel =0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

With regard to our hypotheses, we can reject our proposition that, in the aggregate, audience fragmentation leads to the increased use of ordinary people as actors in news storytelling, but advertising dependency does, on the aggregate, lead to more sensationalism in storytelling. Hypothesis (2.a) is thus partly rejected. The effect of advertising dependency is positive and does not depend on the channel type, indicating that in highly advertising-dependent television systems, both
Sensationalism in news coverage

Commercial and public television make increased use of ordinary people in news storytelling. Commercial television uses ordinary people in storytelling significantly more frequently than public television. H (2.b) is thus fully supported. The empirical results do not support the hypothesis of convergence between commercial television and public television. Instead, the results suggest that in competitive television systems, public television distinguishes itself from commercial television by using ordinary people significantly less often than already is the case in less competitive systems. So, in competitive television systems, the distance between commercial television and public television becomes larger instead of smaller. H (2.c) is therefore rejected.

Sensationalism in the formal features of news

Table 3.5 shows that fragmentation of audiences; and advertising dependency are both significantly positively correlated with the use of sensational formal features in news coverage. This means that H (3.a.) is accepted. Contrary to the other dimensions of sensationalism, the results concerning the presence of formal features do not reveal any significant channel level effects. H (3.b.) is therefore rejected. The aggregate-level effects that we found do not depend on the privately or publically ownership of channels. H (3.c.) is therefore rejected: Commercial and public channels use formal features of sensationalism in their news coverage equally frequently.
### Table 3.5. A three level random intercept logistic regression explaining sensationalism in the formal features of news

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed effects</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.56***</td>
<td>-0.56***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising dependency</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial channel</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation *Commercial channel</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated variances</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intercept variance television system level</td>
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<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intercept variance television channel level</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goodness of fit</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AICC (Akaike Information Criterion Corrected)</td>
<td>59.808.89</td>
<td>59.820.217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion)</td>
<td>59.823.90</td>
<td>59.835.228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. System-level effects are tested one sidedly. N news items=13444, N channels=29, N television systems=14. Sensational news topics =1 and non-sensational topics =0 (the reference category). Commercial channel =1 and public channel =0 (the reference category). System-level variables are centred around the mean. Table entries are log odds robust estimates (SE).

### 3.6. Discussion

This study investigated the effect of television system dependency on advertising; and of audience fragmentation on sensationalism in news coverage. Following earlier research, this study measured sensationalism in news coverage using three dimensions. We distinguished sensationalism in news topics, sensationalism in storytelling by using personalised exemplification, and sensationalism in formal features through the use of emotionally arousing features in news coverage. To our
knowledge, this is the first study that simultaneously assesses aggregate level effects, channel level effects and cross-level effects on the three dimensions of sensationalism in news coverage. Empirically, these three dimensions appeared to be independent from each other. The empirical analyses revealed significant effects of audience fragmentation and television system advertising dependency across the three dimensions of sensationalism.

We found that, at the aggregate level, audience fragmentation leads to a small but significant increase in the selection of sensational news topics. The advertising dependency of television systems did not seem to matter in determining the degree of selection of sensational news topics. Commercial channels appeared to have a stronger preference for selecting sensational news topics, while increasing levels of system-level competition further reinforced this tendency. The analyses on sensationalism in news topics did not support the hypothesis that public and commercial television converged as a result of intensified competition. However, the analysis did not find evidence for a distinction strategy of public under increased competition either.

For storytelling – the second dimension of sensationalism – the empirical analysis offers a somewhat different picture than for sensationalism in news topics. Audience fragmentation has an aggregate negative effect on the use of personalised exemplification in news storytelling. The television system’s advertising dependency, however, has an aggregate level positive effect on sensationalism in storytelling. Again, commercial channels turn out to be keener to use personalised exemplification in news storytelling than public television. For this dimension of sensationalism, audience fragmentation is associated with a divergence, instead of a convergence, between public television and commercial television, resulting in a
negative aggregate-level effect of audience fragmentation on sensationalism in news storytelling.

The third dimension of sensationalism in news coverage relates to the use of sensational formal features in news coverage. The analyses show that both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency lead to a significantly more frequent use of sensational formal features in news coverage. Contrary to the two other dimensions of sensationalism, we did not find a channel level effect, indicating that there are no significant differences between commercial and public channels. Both channel types use the same amount of sensational formal features in their news coverage and this is not dependent on audience fragmentation and the advertising dependency of the television system. As this variable measures a 'technical' dimension of sensationalism, it may indicate an effect of professionalism in news production in terms of technical skills and what can be called a journalistic craftsmanship, which may be more developed in commercially oriented and competitive television systems. Technological innovation enables the use of technical formats that stimulate the senses and are emotionally arousing. Both public and commercial television systems use these technologies to make their news production more appealing to the audience.

This study showed that sensationalism occurs in the two stages of news production: during news selection and news packaging; and that both audience fragmentation and advertising dependency matter in this process. When competition increases, sensational news items are prioritised. It is often thought that sensationalism in news topic is detrimental to how well citizens are informed, as it intentionally leads to avoiding some ‘hard’ news issues. The idea is that this negatively influences political knowledge of citizens about certain important political and government matters. However, this negative perspective on
Sensationalism in news coverage

sensationalist media content has not been uncontested. Some have argued that people who would normally not watch ‘hard news’ will at least get some information if the news is offered in a more popular style (Brants 1998; Temple, 2006). News packaging provides the possibility of making even ‘difficult’ news items more appealing to the general audience (e.g. Franklin, 1997; Graber, 1994). This happens in the second stage of news production, which implies using sensational news storytelling and sensational formal features.

More sensationalist news packaging might engage the less politically-interested individuals but it might also lead to an oversimplification of news topics. The use of personalised exemplification gives the audience an ‘individualistic’ coverage of the news. This might lead to citizens being more interested in news topics because they can personally and emotionally identify with it. However, personalised news coverage might prevent the structural-causal coverage of the news, which may obstruct a more profound understanding of the news in structural and political terms (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; see for instance Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991 about the news coverage of crime).

In terms of the implication for audiences, most of whom watch commercial as well as public channels, our results suggest that commercial and competitive pressures in television systems matter for the level of sensationalism in news coverage and is thus expected to have indirect effects on the public. However, in a media system with multiple suppliers, individual level consumption patterns in terms of channel repertoires still matter as various suppliers might chose various strategies to sell the news. As we have shown in this chapter, there are important differences between television channels. The level and nature of sensationalism in news coverage on audiences will not only depend on structural level characteristics
Transformations of television systems

of the media system but also on channel level variables.

Although this is one of the first studies using a comparative cross-level design to study how characteristics of media systems affect sensationalism in news coverage, the limited number of broadcasting systems included is a clear limitation of our study. The limited number of television systems included statistically precludes the investigation of other relevant macro-level variables, such as cultural differences between countries. Nevertheless, this study has shown that different types of channels react differently to changes in the media context. As the number of channels increases, audiences have increasing opportunities to choose the channels that appeal to their preferences, tastes and predispositions. Future research on sensationalism in news coverage would therefore need to consider differences between audiences in their 'taste' for sensationalism in news coverage.
Chapter 4

Political Competition in a Fragmented Media Environment:

The immigration issue

Abstract

Using the immigration issue as a case study, this chapter investigates the effects of two television system characteristics on political competition: (1) the dependence of television systems on advertising revenues and (2) the fragmentation of audiences. Comparing political issues with each other, the analysis shows that audience fragmentation is positively related with the relative salience of the immigration issue. Large parties tend to pay more attention to the immigration issue in fragmented television systems, compared to small parties. The chapter also reveals that political parties in more fragmented television systems tend to separate themselves from the radical-right ‘owner’ of the immigration issue in their positioning and the amount of attention they pay to the issue. The analysis therefore shows that the common ‘imitation hypothesis’ of the radical right is not stimulated by audience fragmentation. Advertising dependency generally yields the same direction of effects as audience fragmentation, but this relationship is not statistically significant.

Key Words: Party competition, media systems, audience fragmentation, cross-national comparative study, immigration issue.

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This chapter is a revision of a paper by the author of this thesis.
Transformations of television systems

4.1. Introduction

The role of media systems is an often neglected factor in explaining competitive strategies of political parties. Although this role is acknowledged in the literature, there is limited empirical knowledge of the factors explaining cross-national differences in parties’ political agendas and, particularly, how these are affected by the nature of media systems. Media systems vary substantially across countries but it has remained largely unknown how these systems affect the relationship between mass media and macro-level politics (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup, 2008, p. 610; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010, p. 677).

Few, if any, studies have empirically investigated how media systems characteristics affect political party competition. This paper aims to fill part of this gap by investigating how television system characteristics affect the agenda of political parties and their competitive strategies. This is done through a cross-sectional comparative study of 16 political systems using the issue of immigration as a case study to understand to what extent variations in television systems can explain differences in political competition across countries.

In Western Europe, commercialisation is a concept that is often used to indicate the transformations that have taken place in television systems since the onset of the liberalisation process in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the literature there seems to be a consensus that commercialisation implies that “economic criteria have become more important for decision in the media than journalistic ideals” (Holtz-Bacha, 2007, p. 64). Commercialisation has gone hand in hand with a process of differentiation of media markets and television markets in particular. The number of television channels has increased massively and continues to do so. These developments are likely to have consequences for political parties. Like media products, political parties have to compete in order to get public

Although Belgium has two separate media systems, Belgium is considered here as one political system.
Political competition in a fragmented media environment

attention, while success is measured by audience shares (Holtz-Bacha, 2007). Since the start of the liberalisation process in the 1980s, the dual process of audience fragmentation and the increasing dominance of market logic in the media have posed a fundamental challenge to political parties.

Despite the higher availability of media, media attention remains structurally limited. Media attention is nowadays almost the only doorway to the public sphere (Koopmans, 2004), and political parties therefore compete to gain access. Criteria of newsworthiness and the potential to attract audiences determine who and what receives media attention. Media coverage might favour particular issues and particular politicians if these issues have a higher potential to attract audiences. This is more likely to be the case when competition for audiences and revenues between media is high.

This chapter investigates how competition intensity between television channels as measured by audience fragmentation as well as dependency on advertising is related to dynamics of political competition. This chapter tests two hypotheses about the relationship between the new television environment and party competition. The first is the imitation hypothesis, which emphasises the role of the media in leading political communication, and which predicts that in highly competitive and advertising-dependent television systems political parties will imitate the radical right because in such systems the radical right receives extensive media attention. The second is the distinction hypothesis, which predicts that political parties will distinguish themselves more from the radical right’s political stances in more competitive media environments. They are expected to do so, because in this way they are more likely to receive attention from different...
segments of audiences in highly fragmented television systems. The following sections will further outline the conceptual framework and hypotheses.

4.2. A changed media environment

Over the past two decades, West-European television markets have transformed from supply markets that were largely dominated by public television to demand markets characterised by increasing competition for audiences between commercial and public broadcasting stations. European television systems have become increasingly dependent on commercial revenues while the monopoly of public television disappeared to make place for a more competitive broadcasting system. Due to increased technological possibilities, media companies have increasingly used multi-channelling to reach and gain more audiences. As a consequence, audiences have become more and more fragmented.

This study focuses on two dimensions of television systems that characterise the new media environment: (1) the dependency on commercial revenues and (2) the intensity of competition as reflected in the audience fragmentation across television channels. Chapter 2 showed that these two variables are largely independent from each other.

Changes of media systems along these two main dimensions are a useful way of assessing the degree to which media systems are dominated by the economic logic. As the dependency on advertising revenues grows and the audience shares per channel decrease, the media may be pushed to adopt economic criteria as the most important guideline for assessing newsworthiness, and, hence, news selection. Audience fragmentation can also be seen as an indication of heterogeneous audiences and the increasing difficulties the media but also political
Political competition in a fragmented media environment

Parties have in reaching large publics. This could imply that in such fragmented media environments selecting news that target specific audiences could become an important criterion in the process of selecting news. In this context, news selection would be guided by two mechanisms: (1) targeting large groups when possible, which implies focusing on popular themes, alongside (2) separate targeting of specific groups. Television channels and programmes might employ these two mechanisms at the same time or separately.

4.3. Party responses and the issue of immigration

The ‘production bias’ stems from the need to manufacture news that is able to attract and retain mass audiences. In order to produce appealing news, the media employ three production biases: simplification, personalisation, and symbolisation (Entman, 1989, p. 49). This would lead to a bias towards dramatic and sensational issues, which could also push political parties to perceive these issues as important to the public. Political actors therefore see a need to engage with these issues. Whether the issue is important for the public is less relevant as long as politicians perceive this to be the case (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). If this assumption holds, media competition for audiences would affect political parties directly, irrespective of public opinion. Because of the assumed preference for simple, straightforward stories, competitive media environments may also be characterised by a preference to report about extreme rather than on more nuanced policy positions. Centrist policy positions require more time to explain, while radical positions are more clear-cut and fit more easily in short sound bites.

This production bias is thus more likely to exist in more competitive media systems because of the higher pressure to attract audiences through focusing on
sensational issues. The production bias does not only pertain to the substance of news but also to the way it is reported, coinciding with a tendency to report in a dramatic and negative way, emphasising the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate political action. Tendencies to negativism in the media are often seen as an “inevitable consequence of increased media competition and the commercialization of broadcasting.” (Schulz et al., 2005, p. 75). Because sensational issues are often issues associated to dramatic events these are the issues where media effects are most likely to occur.

The immigration issue is one of the political issues on which the media is likely to report using sensational language and images (e.g., massive arrival of boat migrants, associations with crime and terrorism, migrants’ flows and migrants’ floods, migrant invasion of ‘biblical proportions’...). Especially after 9/11, the immigration issue gained more attention in the media and has become increasingly associated to terrorism and crime. This makes immigration suitable for the purpose of this analysis. This paper investigates how political parties react to such competitive media environments with regard to the immigration issue.

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25 Media system effects are probably not only conditional on the sort of issue but also on its ‘novelty’ cycle. Both the nature and the novelty of an issue determines it newsworthiness and, hence, its media relevance. There is some evidence that the lack of novelty is one aspect that causes topics to decay in media coverage (Wu & Horberman, 2007).
4.4. The party system level: The relative saliency of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues

It is a common assumption that commercialisation of media has contributed to the rise of populism over the past decades. As Mazzoleni argues:

"The distinctive nature of the modern commercial media and their enormous capacity to affect the opinions and attitudes of mass audiences are key factors in the political arena and their contribution to the rise of populist groups in several national instances is a field that warrants investigation... It is a truism that the media simply cannot ignore what is newsworthy, and clearly newsworthy are the politicians defying the existing order, their abrasive language, their public protests, and the emotive issues brandished by charismatic leaders." (Mazzoleni, 2004, p. 3).

Mazzoleni argues that the increasing dominance of the economic logic in media has pushed media to give access, visibility and legitimacy to populist and extreme right-wing parties. In this perspective, the influence of the media is mainly exerted through influencing public opinion. The effects of the media may however go beyond public opinion by directly affecting political competition between parties, by giving more media attention to some political parties, leaders, and issues than to others.

According to several scholars, the attention given to the immigration issue and radical right leaders by the media has been one of the reasons behind the success of radical right wing parties (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Sterwart, & Horsfield, 2003; Mudde, 2004; Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007; Walgrave & De
Transformations of television systems

Swert, 2004). Because of the economic logic within media, news that attracts a large audience is seen as the most newsworthy. Hence, the radical right and their issues receive more attention from media in more competitive and commercially oriented media systems (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). This suggests that when competitive and commercial pressures on the media are high, that is, when advertising dependency and audience fragmentation are high, the immigration issue is likely to have more saliency. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- **H1a**: The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison to other issues on the macro-political agenda is higher in television system where advertising dependency is high.

- **H1b**: The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison to other issues on the macro-political agenda is higher in television system where audience fragmentation is high.

4.5. Party level

4.5.1. Imitation as a competition strategy

I expect other parties to change their strategies when they notice the media paying extensive attention to the radical right and its issues such as immigration. Prior work argues that the effects of media on political parties’ agendas depend on choices by political parties to react (engaging) or not (avoiding) to media attention. Parties have been shown to react to media attention only when the issue fits with their own agenda, and to avoid or ignore it when it does not. This shows that, instead of only passively reacting to media attention, parties also try to actively draw media attention to preferable issues (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010, p. 667). This concept of ‘selective emphasis’ puts the media in a passive position, and
ignores the structural limits of media attention that constrain the relative priority issues can get in media coverage.

While politicians may try hard to use a strategy of selective emphasis, as professionals, journalists and media companies have their own agendas and strategies of ‘newsworthy’ issue coverage. If the media are the leading actor in the construction of news, it is unrealistic to assume that journalists will be passively guided by politicians or that they cover politicians’ priority issues that do not fit within their own audience-seeking motives. If a party ‘owning’ an ‘attractive’ issue succeeds in drawing media attention, the media tend to put pressure on other parties to take a stand on the same issue. The media have an interest in pursuing issues that fit their economic logic of drawing large audiences. Therefore, politicians often find themselves in a situation where they are compelled to engage instead of avoid. In addition, extensive media attention for particular issues may compel other parties to perceive the ‘owning’ party as an electoral threat. This may put pressure on other political parties to give strategic attention to this issue even if they do not find it important to close the gap between them and the radical right.

This leads to the following hypotheses:

- **H2a:** The gap between the radical right and other political parties in the level of salience given to immigration becomes smaller as advertising dependency in the television systems increases.

- **H2b:** The gap between the radical right and other political parties in the level of salience given to immigration becomes smaller as audience fragmentation increases.
Transformations of television systems

Parties’ positions on issues are not only influenced by their own ideological position but also by media system characteristics, which are the focus of this study. Because of the extensive media attention for immigration, we can expect parties to be tempted to pay more attention to this issue. In addition, because of the extensive media coverage of the radical right, parties might perceive the radical right as an electoral threat. The radical right might have gained public support and its views might have gained legitimacy because of the extensive media coverage (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Parties would therefore be tempted to imitate the restrictive position of the radical right in order to gain public support. Political parties will react to the attention given to the issue owner (radical right parties) by adjusting their default position (prescribed by their ideological orientation) in order to be closer to the issue owner. This leads to the following two hypotheses:

- **H2c**: In television systems where advertising dependency is high, political parties will position themselves closer to the radical right position.
- **H2d**: In television systems where audience fragmentation is high, political parties will position themselves closer to the radical right position.

The imitation hypotheses predict a positive cross-level interaction between party type and television system characteristics.

Hypotheses H2c and H2d predict strong diffusion of restrictive immigration positioning across the political system in highly fragmented and advertising-dependent media systems. This might be seen as a ‘contagion effect’ from the anti-immigration party, with the whole political spectrum shifting to more restrictive positions, as observed and explained by Van Spanje (2010) and Davis (2012). The success of the anti-immigration party is not a necessary condition to find such

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26 We assume that party competition takes place along one dimension that is largely contained by a general left-right ideological orientation.
media effects. The media may be driven to report on immigration because it is a sensational issue that attracts high audience shares. It can therefore rather be the perceived success of such parties created by extensive media attention that explains such contagion, and such media attention can therefore independently contribute to the success of the radical right. While Davis (2012) and Van Spanje (2010) attribute the shifting of political parties towards more restrictive immigration positions to the presence and success of a radical right party, they neglect the independent influence that media (system) factors may have. Although this study is cross-sectional and I cannot make firm assertions on causal effects, this study investigates whether media system characteristics fuel or rather discourage the imitation of the radical right by other political parties.

4.5.2. Differentiation and distinction as a competition strategy

The previous paragraph hypothesised that political parties try to imitate the position of the radical right parties because they have gained visibility, popularity and perhaps legitimacy in the media and are therefore perceived as an electoral threat. The previous section has paid attention to the role of the media as leading actors in the process. However, depending on the media environment, politicians may make specific choices that do not necessarily follow mainstream media attention. This section explains how the characteristics of the media environment may directly affect the choices of political parties to imitate or distance themselves from the issue owner.

Research on political campaigns partly attribute changes in campaign styles to media system changes, including commercialisation (Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, Mancini, & Papathanassopoulos, 2007). With the professionalisation of
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campaigning, political communication has become a strategically planned affair in which parties use communication specialists to reach audiences that are no longer bound to parties by traditional ties. At the macro-level, the more fragmented audiences are, the more difficult the task of politicians to manipulate multiple news services to their advantage, and the lower the likelihood they will reach large audiences (Swanson & Mancini, 1996, p. 266). Nowadays, party campaigns use marketing strategies, increasingly relying on a scientific understanding of electorates to target specific categories of voters. Parties adapt their strategies to media requirements. Political figures increasingly appear on television channels and programmes that target specific audiences that are not commonly known to be very interested in politics, such as the youth. This may indicate that the marketing of political parties follows the segmentation of audience lines followed by media.

In addition, partisan audiences are likely to select news featuring the political figures and parties they prefer and reflecting their political predispositions (Klapper, 1960). In high-choice media environments the opportunity and tendency to select media that tend to reflect people’s own values and beliefs is generally greater. Such a media environment gives more room to political parties to target audiences that are most likely to be receptive to their own points of view. From this perspective, it can be argued that the new television environment stimulates political parties to differentiate themselves from each other more than in the old television environment, which was more focused on mass audiences. Evidence of a relationship between the audience fragmentation of television news and political preferences has been found in the US context (Chalif, 2011). In the European context, a study by van Kempen (2007) has shown that the television news party parallelism was present. Although it was relatively low in comparison with press party parallelism its aggregate effect on voter turnout was important (Van Kempen,
Audience fragmentation in the European context might be related to party preferences. This suggests that when audiences are fragmented each party is stimulated to target its own support base rather than imitating another party.

Moreover, a frequently used programming formula in competitive television environments is the ‘oppositional’ format of representation, in which politicians are ‘asked’ by the journalist to explain to the audience the differences in their positions. This formula stimulates the exposure of differences in points of views because imitation will be interpreted in favour of the opponent. Following this line of argumentation, we expect that parties will take more distance from the radical right among highly fragmented audiences. This leads to the following hypothesis:

- **H3**: As audiences become more fragmented, political parties take more distance from the radical right in: (a) their positioning and in (b) the saliency given to immigration.

Hypotheses H3 (a/b) indicate a negative cross-level interaction between audience fragmentation and party type.

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27 van Kempen (2007) measured television party parallelism by investigating the correlations between news programmes watched and party preference, using 1999 data on nearly the same sample of countries as this study.
4.5.3. Party size and the choice of imitation or distinction

In the political game, party size matters in how parties react to each other and to media system characteristics. Large parties tend to be ‘catch-all’ parties targeting the median voter. Large parties are also more likely to lose votes to new parties because they attract voters that are not part of the ideological grassroots of the party. If large parties focus their strategies on the margins instead of their core constituencies they would be tempted to imitate the successful formula of the radical right. Small parties are often niche parties and do not risk amending their agenda to compete with other parties. After all, their competitive advantage lies in their niche targeting. Particularly in a context where the radical right has an advantage in the media (which I expect in television systems with a high audience fragmentation and a high dependency on advertising revenues), imitation dynamics seem to be more applicable to large parties than smaller parties. In other words, larger parties will be more likely to imitate than to distinguish themselves from the radical right. This leads to the following hypotheses:

**H4a:** In advertising-dependent television systems, large parties are more inclined than smaller parties to integrate the immigration issue in their agenda and shift their position closer to the issue owner (i.e., radical right parties).

**H4b:** In television systems where audiences are fragmented, large parties are more inclined than smaller parties to integrate the immigration issue in their agenda and shift their position closer to the issue owner (i.e., radical right parties).
4.6. Control variables: Political and societal characteristics

In the interaction between media and political parties, characteristics of political systems may play an important role, and any analysis of media effects should control for them. Majoritarian and proportional systems differ in the number of parties and in the ideological position of political parties. In proportional systems, the number of parties tends to be larger and parties occupy a broader range of the ideological spectrum than in majoritarian systems (Cox, 1997). I control for the majoritarian versus proportional systems as it might affect political competition strategy.

In order to control for differences in political system characteristics, I use an updated index of Lijphart’s executive-parties dimension (Lijphart, 1999), developed by Vatter (2009). Vatter’s measure covers the period 1997-2006 and includes five variables: (1) the effective number of legislative parties; (2) the electoral disproportionality; (3) the executive-legislative relationship; (4) interest group corporatism; and (5) central bank independence. I label this variable consensualism.28 I also control for the share of non-EU migrants in the country as a percentage of the total population, because societies with higher levels of non-EU immigration may have a higher inclination to see immigration as a problem.29 In addition, I control for the size of the anti-immigration party.

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28 Higher scores on this index indicate more consensus-oriented democracies (Vatter 2009: 153).
29 Data are drawn from the World Bank Global Migrant Origin database.
4.7. Data and operationalisation

The data on the dependent variables as well as other party characteristics are drawn from the data set of Benoit and Laver (2007). In the 2002-2004 period, Benoit and Laver conducted expert surveys of party positions on various policy dimensions – including immigration – in 47 different countries, including West- and East-European countries, Russia, North America, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, and Israel. This chapter focuses on the following 16 West-European political systems for which data on media systems have been gathered by Author: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, UK, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden.

Experts were presented with one policy dimension at a time, and asked to indicate where each party was located on a 20-point scale. In addition to the party’s policy position, respondents were also asked to assess the importance of that policy dimension to each party, also on a 20-point scale. The position of parties with regard to immigration was measured on a 20-point scale, where lower scores stood for favouring policies designed to help asylum seekers and immigrants to integrate into society; and higher score stood for favouring policies designed to encourage asylum seekers and immigrants to return to their country of origin (Benoit and Laver 2007: 229). The importance score ranged from 0 to 20 with higher scores indicating that more importance is given to the immigration issue. The average score given by experts is used in the analysis.

In the same survey, experts were also asked to rank parties on their general left-right position using a 20-point scale. Following Sani and Sartori (1983) and Hazan (1995), this information was used to classify parties in 5 categories: the radical left (score 0-3.99), moderate left parties (4-7.99), centre parties (8-12),

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104 Most of their data are from 2003.
Political competition in a fragmented media environment

moderate right parties (12.01-16), and radical right parties (16.01-20). The dimension used to assess political competition is the left-right continuum. Party positioning on immigration in the political space partially depends on their general political ideology. Although there is a debate on multi-dimensionality of parties’ positions, most studies suggest that the multidimensionality of political issues at the party level can be reduced to the general left-right dimension, except for positions regarding European unification (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009).

The data on media systems were gathered by using the yearbooks of the European Audiovisual observatory (EAO, 2004). Those countries are selected because they shared similar traditions of public broadcasting and they all experienced a liberalisation process of their television systems. As Benoit and Laver gathered most of their data between 2002-2004, this chapter uses media system data from 2002.

4.8. Results

4.8.1. The party system level: The relative importance of the immigration issues on the macro-level political agenda

Hypotheses H1a and H1b predicted that in television systems where audience fragmentation and advertising dependency are high, the immigration issue would be relatively more salient on the political agenda. Table 4.1 shows the average scores of political parties in terms of saliency and position on the immigration issue. The data show that the immigration issue is important for all political party types,

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31 Data on French political parties’ ideological orientation were missing from the original data set (Benoit and Laver, 2007). We used information from the Chapel Hill Survey 2002 (Hooghe et al., 2010).
32 See the appendix for examples illustrating how we calculated the scores on the television system variables.
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although it is least important for centre parties. The centre and left parties tend to favour policies that favour migrants’ integration while right-wing political parties support policies favouring the return of immigrants.

Table 4.1. Mean scores of parties on saliency and position on the immigration issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Radical left</th>
<th>Moderate left</th>
<th>Centre parties</th>
<th>Moderate right</th>
<th>Radical right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saliency of the immigration issue (SD)</td>
<td>14.78</td>
<td>13.32</td>
<td>12.39</td>
<td>13.26</td>
<td>16.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.03)</td>
<td>(2.51)</td>
<td>(1.57)</td>
<td>(2.59)</td>
<td>(3.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party position on the immigration issue (SD)</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>7.94</td>
<td>12.61</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.87)</td>
<td>(3.23)</td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
<td>(3.51)</td>
<td>(2.97)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relevant question now is whether and to what extent the saliency or importance of this issue is related to media system characteristics. This section investigates this question at the party system level by comparing political issues to each other. The next section compares political parties to each other in their positioning and saliency given to the immigration issue.

The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues at the country level is assessed in three steps. First, the mean of the importance score given by each party to each issue is weighted by their vote share in the preceding election. Weighting is necessary in order to avoid skewing the results at the country level by extreme score of very small parties. Subsequently, the overall mean of these weighted mean scores across all issues is calculated. Finally the relative importance of the immigration issue is calculated by taking the weighted mean score of this issue as a proportion of this overall mean (see table

106
A score higher than 1.0 implies that the issue was scored as more important than the mean score for all issues in the country; a score of less than 1.0 implies the issue to be less important (Benoit and Laver, 2007, p. 157-58).

Table 4.2. Correlation between television system characteristics and the relative importance of the immigration issue in 16 countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advertising dependency</th>
<th>Audience fragmentation</th>
<th>Relative importance of the immigration issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising dependency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.00*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative importance of the immigration issue</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Table 4.2 shows the correlation between the relative importance of the immigration issue and our two television system variables. The two media system characteristics correlate positively with the relative saliency of the immigration issue. However, only audience fragmentation variable has a significant positive correlation with the saliency of the immigration issue. This suggests that the fragmentation of audiences may be more relevant than the relative dependency on commercial revenues in affecting the relative saliency of the immigration issues.

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33 We study Belgium as one political system although Wallonia and Flanders have separate media systems. We took the average of the scores of Flanders and Wallonia on both indicators of the media system to calculate the indicators for Belgium as a whole. The scores of television system variables, consensualism and the salience level of the immigration issue in comparison with other issues are shown in table (A.4.1.) in appendix C.

34 This correlation does not change even when controlling for the vote of anti-immigration parties (i.e. parties with scores higher than 18 on the importance on immigration).
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This supports hypothesis H1b and the idea that, in more fragmented media systems, media give relatively more attention to the immigration issue in comparison with other issues.

4.8.2. The party level: Position and saliency

The effect of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation on the positioning of political parties on immigration and on the saliency given by a political party to this issue is analysed through a random intercept multilevel analysis, in which parties are nested in media systems (see for instance: Steenbergen & Jones, 2002, where parties are nested in political systems). In our case, the use of multilevel analysis is not merely statistical in order to control for the dependence of observation at the party system level, but is also at the heart of our theoretical model. After all, our analysis is crucially interested in the cross-level interactions between media system variables and party characteristics.

Saliency

Table 4.3 presents the results of three multilevel regression models where parties are nested in media and political systems. The first model is our reference model in which the effect of the control variables is tested.\(^{35}\) The effect of party ideology on the saliency of the immigration issue is significant for all parties except the radical left parties (radical right parties are used as the reference category). The radical left parties do not significantly differ from the radical right parties in the saliency given to the immigration issue, even though their position is obviously quite different.

\(^{35}\) For all analyses reported in the chapter, we also controlled for the success (vote share in the last election) of the anti-immigration party (defined as a party with a score of 18 or higher on immigration position), but this did neither yield significant effects nor did we find any significant cross-level interaction with this variable. We report the analyses without this variable because by taking it out we retain more degrees of freedom to test our cross-level interactions.
The issue is least salient for the centre parties. The relative population share of non-European migrants and being a consensus democracy or not does not significantly affect the saliency of this issue for the radical right.

In the other models, we assess the effect of the television system variables separately since we are not able to test all cross-level interactions simultaneously. As advertising dependency and audience fragmentation are only weakly correlated and we do not expect the effects of one to offset the effect of the other, this strategy is unlikely to bias the results. Generally, advertising dependency and audience fragmentation have the same positive direction in their effects but only fragmentation yields a significant effect. Here again, as with relative saliency of the immigration issue, the nature of funding of the television system seems less important than the distribution of audiences across channels. Therefore, the following discussion focuses on fragmentation.

Within the context of fragmented media systems, the results support the distinction hypothesis rather than the imitation hypothesis. In fragmented television systems we see a polarisation around this issue: it becomes more salient for the radical right and comparatively less salient for the moderate right, centre parties, and the radical left. The moderate left is not significantly affected by audience fragmentation. This leads us to reject $H2b$ which predicted imitation in more fragmented media systems and to partly accept hypothesis $H3b$ which predicts stronger differentiation in more fragmented media systems. However, this does not apply to moderate left parties who opt for differentiation from the radical right but do not significantly do that more when audience fragmentation is high.
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Table 4.3. Media system variables and saliency of the immigration issue at party level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model with control variables</th>
<th>Model with Advertising dependency</th>
<th>Model with fragmentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intercept</strong></td>
<td>16.11***</td>
<td>16.01***</td>
<td>15.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radical left party</strong></td>
<td>-1.42</td>
<td>-1.53*</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate left</strong></td>
<td>-2.58***</td>
<td>-2.39***</td>
<td>-2.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.65)</td>
<td>(0.64)</td>
<td>(0.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Centre party</strong></td>
<td>-3.92***</td>
<td>-3.82***</td>
<td>-3.68***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
<td>(0.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate right</strong></td>
<td>-2.89***</td>
<td>-2.93***</td>
<td>-2.85***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.64)</td>
<td>(0.63)</td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-European migrants</strong></td>
<td>9.94</td>
<td>14.87</td>
<td>14.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.71)</td>
<td>(9.91)</td>
<td>(11.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consensus</strong></td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party size</strong></td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television system characteristic (TSC)</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>22.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.1)</td>
<td>(9.81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Party size*TSC</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.82**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radical left*TSC</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>-41.98***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.76)</td>
<td>(12.75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate left*TSC</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-6.05</td>
<td>-17.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.43)</td>
<td>(11.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Centre party*TSC</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-5.74</td>
<td>-27.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.91)</td>
<td>(12.30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderate right*TSC</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-14.11</td>
<td>-43.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.93)</td>
<td>(11.05)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residual variance</strong></td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country level variance</strong></td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
<td>(0.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variance explained in comparison with the control model</strong></td>
<td>5.40%</td>
<td>14.85%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deviance</strong></td>
<td>568.54</td>
<td>561.41</td>
<td>544.37***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table entries are ML estimates. Standard errors in brackets (the mixed procedure SPSS 19.0). *p <0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Dependent variable is saliency score on immigration issue at the party level (0 is low saliency and 20 is the highest importance score).

\(N\) (media systems) =16 and \(N\) (parties) =125

---

Macro-level variables are centred around the mean and party size is centred around the grand mean (mean=12.45; sd =12.59). The radical right is the reference category.

TSC (television system characteristic) indicates advertising dependency in the first model and audience fragmentation in the second model.

The model fit is tested in comparison with the control model.
Political competition in a fragmented media environment

With respect to party size, the results show that in more fragmented television systems, the immigration issue is particularly salient for larger parties. Thus $H_{4b}$ is supported with regard to the importance of the immigration issue.

Party Positions

The results with regard to party positions on the migration issue are presented in table 4.4 and mirror the general outcomes for the saliency given by political parties to this issue. Again the two media system variables show similarities in the direction of the effect but only the audience fragmentation variable yields significant effects. And again, a generally bipolar picture emerges: In more fragmented media systems the radical right tends to take a more radically restrictive position and other parties take a less restrictive position than they would have done on the basis of their ideological orientation only. Thus, $H_{2c}$ and $H_{2d}$ are both rejected.
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Table 4.4. Television system variables and party position on immigration issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model with control variables</th>
<th>Model with advertising dependency</th>
<th>Model with fragmentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>16.83***</td>
<td>16.80***</td>
<td>16.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
<td>(0.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical left party</td>
<td>-12.88***</td>
<td>-12.83***</td>
<td>-12.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.81)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate left</td>
<td>-11.23***</td>
<td>-11.22***</td>
<td>-10.87***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre party</td>
<td>-9.00***</td>
<td>-8.95***</td>
<td>-8.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate right</td>
<td>-4.42***</td>
<td>-4.35***</td>
<td>-3.96***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-European migrants</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>-3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.50)</td>
<td>(8.86)</td>
<td>(9.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.62*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.21)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
<td>(0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party size</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television system</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>27.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic (TSC)</td>
<td>(7.52)</td>
<td>(10.34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party size * TSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.39)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical left * TSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-8.75(</td>
<td>-9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10.98)</td>
<td>(14.90)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate left * TSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-10.10</td>
<td>-38.78**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.26)</td>
<td>(12.99)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre party * TSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-9.06</td>
<td>-27.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.96)</td>
<td>(14.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate right * TSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-8.02</td>
<td>-37.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8.88)</td>
<td>(12.71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual variance</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>5.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.89)</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country level variance</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.36)</td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
<td>(0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance explained in comparison with the control model</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>587.45</td>
<td>585.78</td>
<td>574.12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table entries are ML estimates. Standard errors in brackets (the mixed procedure SPSS 19.0). * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.
Dependent variable is position on immigration issue at the party level (0 is in favour of integration policies and 20 in favour of restrictive immigration). N (media systems) =16 and N (parties) =125.

Macro-level variables are centred around the mean and party size is centred around the grand mean (mean=12.45; sd =12.59).

TSC (television system characteristic) indicates advertising dependency in the first model and audience fragmentation in the second model.

The model fit is tested in comparison with the control model.
The results of the cross-level two-way interactions between fragmentation and party type partly support the hypothesis that in fragmented media systems parties take distance from the radical right position. In more fragmented systems, parties take more, instead of less, distance from the position of the radical right. Yet the cross-level interactions are only significant for the moderate left and the moderate right (H3a is partly supported). Centrist as well as the radical left parties seem to also take more distance from the radical right as audiences become more fragmented, but this interaction is not statistically significant. Party size does not have any significant effect on party positioning. H4 should therefore be rejected with regard to party position.

4.9. Conclusion

To my knowledge, this is the first time the effects of media system characteristics on political party competition are studied. Using the immigration issue as a case study and comparing 16 West-European political and media systems, this chapter has shown that media system characteristics matter for the competitive strategies of political parties. Political competition between political parties is not a ‘closed’ game between political parties determined by the internal dynamics of party competition only. The structural media characteristics are a crucial third factor to be taken into account.

The study made a distinction between two aspects of television systems: the dependency on commercial revenues (advertising dependency) and the fragmentation of audiences across television channels. Although the two variables generally yield similar effects, only the effects of audience fragmentation were statistically significant.
The study investigated two competing hypotheses concerning the behaviour of political parties in a media environment with a high audience fragmentation and high advertising dependency. It investigated whether the two television system characteristics stimulated the often-assumed imitation of the radical right, or instead stimulates other parties to differentiate from the radical right. Generally the results support the differentiation hypothesis, which defies the dominant imitation hypothesis.

If the competitive and commercial pressures encourage media to pay more attention to the radical right and their favourite issues, this does not automatically push all political parties to imitate the radical right. If there is a contagion effect from the radical right that affects the whole system, audience fragmentation and advertising dependency of television systems do not stimulate but rather offset this process. However, the results also show that in more fragmented media systems, larger parties tend to attach more importance to the immigration issue. In television systems with a fragmented audience, the immigration issue is more important in comparison to other political issues. This implies that media system characteristics affect the relative saliency of this political issue and that large parties pay more attention to the immigration issue when audience fragmentation across channels increases.

Although the immigration issue is more salient to large parties in more fragmented media systems, the results show that fragmentation does not lead these parties to imitate the substantive position of the radical right. This implies that larger parties enter into competition with the radical right by offering other solutions than the radical right. Although in fragmented media systems the radical right may be more successful in influencing the problem definition, fragmentation does not make large parties adopt far-right policy positions on the immigration issue.
In other words, as far as contagion from the radical right has happened, this is not a result of competitive and commercial pressures of media systems. Drawing on marketing terminology, we could conclude that, although larger parties focus on the same issue as the successful radical right, the style and packaging of the immigration issue used by political parties is still highly divergent from the radical right.

This chapter exemplifies that audience fragmentation in media landscapes is a variable that should be taken into account in studying political party competition. It also suggests that audience fragmentation is relevant in two ways. First, audience fragmentation affects the likelihood that media focus on sensational issues, which in turn affects the issue agenda of political parties. Second, in fragmented media environments political parties have various channels/programmes to make connections with various groups of audiences without being obliged to address the median voter. Such a media environment is likely to stimulate differentiation among parties and make them stress their differences rather than make them imitate each other.

Whether political parties will seek distinction by stressing their ideological orientation or stressing other non-ideological differences is an interesting question. From the results presented, it is not clear whether audience fragmentation stimulates the relevance of party ideology in defining party positioning and the saliency given to political issues. Some studies suggest that in high-choice media environments with high audience fragmentation, political polarisation may increase among voters (see: Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, for a review). It is however not clear which parties take advantage or stimulate this polarisation. Putting audience fragmentation at centre stage as a key variable therefore seems a promising avenue of future research to investigate the polarising potential of high-
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choice media environments. This can both be done using a bottom-up perspective of individual voters’ behaviour or using a top-down perspective by focusing on the behaviour of political parties.
Chapter 5

How the media context matters

Television systems and trust in politicians

Abstract

In this chapter, we estimate the impact of two media context factors on trust in politicians: (1) The television system level advertising dependency and (2) audience fragmentation across television channels. We measure these two variables in 17 European television systems, link these to individual survey data from the European Social Survey, and test their effects by means of multilevel analysis. The findings contradict elements of the common media malaise theory. We find that advertising dependency and audience fragmentation exert significant positive macro-level effects on trust in politicians, but that these effects vary across different groups of citizens. The positive effect of advertising dependency at system-level is particularly strong and significant among the most politically sophisticated citizens, whereas audience fragmentation only exerts a significant effect among the least politically sophisticated citizens. The results highlight the relevance of contextual media characteristics and point to mobilising forces within television systems but also exemplify the segmented nature of audiences.

Keywords: media malaise, political trust, audience fragmentation, commercialisation, competition, media systems

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42 This chapter is a revision of a paper co-authored with Wouter van der Brug and Philip van Praag.
5.1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, television markets in most West-European countries have transformed from supply markets, largely dominated by public television, to demand markets, with increasing competition for audiences between commercial as well as public stations. When commercial television was introduced, scholars expressed concern about how this would affect the content audiences would be exposed to, and, indirectly, how this would affect public opinion (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Brants, 1998; Djupsund & Carlson, 1998; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Norris, 2000).

These contributions were to some extent inspired by American scholars who introduced the ‘media-malaise’ thesis by arguing that, as a result of increased competition for market shares and the profit orientation of commercial television, the content of political information on television has become increasingly superficial, entertainment-oriented and cynical about politics. As a consequence of these changes in content, political engagement and support for politicians had declined, particularly among those who rely on television as a source of political information rather than on newspapers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993, 2000).

Patterson (2000, p. 244), for instance, declares the “commercial based news system” responsible for the rise of adversarial journalism both in the press and television. The focus of such journalism is “reporting politics not as an issue but as a (dramatic/strategic) game in which individual politicians vie for power” (p. 254). Such a strategic coverage confuses citizens about the substantive significance of issues and heightens their mistrust of political leaders (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Commercial and competitive pressure stimulates an aggressive interpretive approach in which journalists raise cynical questions about politicians’ motivations.
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(e.g., West, 2001). Such a cynical approach might contribute to ‘media-malaise’ (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Robinson, 1976) and declining trust in government (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). European scholars feared that the introduction of commercial television would have similar consequences in Europe. Scholars have shown that exposure to public television is positively related to political trust (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Hooghe, 2002). So, commercialisation processes in the media are often believed to lead to decreasing levels of trust, particularly among those who frequently watch commercial television (see Brants, 1998; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005).

However, these claims are not uncontested because no empirical study has systematically investigated the link between characteristics of the television or media systems on the one hand, and political attitudes on the other. Most studies ignore such contextual factors and focus on individual-level media content exposure or content of individual media to derive inferences about the media system environment such as competition intensity or a commercial orientation of media.43

Recently, scholars have begun to study the relationship between media system characteristics, political information and political knowledge (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Aalberg et al., 2013; Curran et al., 2009; Esser et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2010). These studies inform us that the quality of information in public service systems is generally higher compared to commercially oriented media systems and that citizens’ level of political knowledge is therefore higher in countries with public service television systems. Notwithstanding their merits, these studies do not tell

43 Researchers might be in risk of committing the fallacy of composition or atomistic fallacy because they might wrongly infer a relationship at a higher (media system) level based on the observed relationships at the lower (channel) level (Hox, 2002).
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us anything about the differences between media systems in competition intensity and as well as differences within dual (mixed) systems.

Instead of using a typology of media systems, our study employs two indicators that indicate competitive and commercial pressures at the system level of television environments. This chapter analyses the link between media environment characteristics and political trust. Apart from a study by Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing (2010), to our knowledge this is the first time the relevance of the television system environment to (political) trust is empirically investigated. Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing (2010) applied cross-national multilevel analysis and concluded that the (aggregate level) market share of public television is positively correlated with social trust but that ‘total television time’ has a negative effect on social trust. This study builds upon this contextual approach. We focus on two key variables that indicate the presence of commercial and competitive pressures at the television system level: (1) The dependency of the television system on advertising revenues as a source of income; and (2) Audience fragmentation across television channels indicating the intensity of competition. We distinguish these two aspects from each other and test their effects on trust in politicians.

We focus on trust in politicians because the media might tend to report about politicians (as persons) rather than about institutions. In addition, while citizens come in contact with various political institutions in their daily life, most of them never get to know a politician so that their perceptions about politicians mostly stem from media coverage. Trust or distrust in politicians may spill over to other levels of the political system (Dalton, 2004; Easton, 1975).

The relationship between competition intensity and the advertising dependency at system level on the one hand, and trust in politicians on the other, has not been tested in prior research. We argue that a lack of appropriate macro-
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level data and (until recently) insufficient methodological tools prevented scholars from properly testing the effects of media system variables (e.g. Slater et al., 2006). By testing these relationships, and by demonstrating that the level of advertising dependency at system level, and competition intensity have differential effects for different groups of citizens, we contribute to the knowledge on the effects of television systems on trust in politicians.

Even though much research has supported elements of the 'media malaise' hypothesis, it has also been criticised. Several scholars have for instance argued that the mass media, including television, still mobilise and inform citizens (Dalton, 2002; Norris, 2000). On the basis of a Swedish panel study, Prat and Strömberg (2005) concluded that the introduction of commercial television resulted in engaging the less informed people who were previously not exposed to television news, a finding that runs counter to the expectations of scholars cited above. In contrast to the 'media malaise' literature, the 'media mobilisation' literature states that there is easy access to ample political information nowadays, which makes people more aware of their political world and more politically educated. As a consequence, exposure to political information, including news on television, is related to higher levels of trust in politicians and lower levels of cynicism (Dalton, 2002; Norris, 2000).

We realise that the link between the media context and political trust is indirect, and that a number of intermediate effects are missing from our model. Various other elements of the media malaise theory therefore remain a 'black box' in this chapter, such as the possible link between the nature of political information and television system characteristics and the possible causal relationship between media content and trust in politicians. We also limit our study to television, even
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though we are aware that some have argued that superficiality, negativity and infotainment are not related to the television medium per se, but should mainly be explained by increased commercialisation of the media field in general (for an extensive review see: Newton, 1999).

5.2. Characterising the television system

5.2.1. Advertising dependency

In many West-European countries, public television has an official duty to inform the public. There are two ways in which governments have tried to guarantee that public television fulfills this role, that is, through regulation and through funding. It has been argued that the nature of revenues is more important than official regulation in determining the programme output of broadcasters (Kops, 2001; 2007). While public funding might ensure that programmes serve the goals of a democratic public sphere at least to a certain extent, commercial funding tends to divert attention away from such public interests. The priority becomes the financial considerations of commercial agents, such as advertisers, sponsors and shareholders (Minasian, 1964; Steemers, 2001, p. 73). Programming then becomes dependent on audience shares and upon advertisers’ assessments of whether a particular audience will purchase the advertised products (McChesney, 2004). Hence, advertising dependent television stations would give priority to ‘mass’ audiences or significant segments of audiences that are attractive to advertisers.44

In an advertising dependent television system, high-spending audiences tend to receive more attention, and low-income groups might be, in some cases, deliberately shunned (Baker, 1994; Curran et al, 2009; Curran & Seaton, 2003).

44 This suggests that when serious political news is a lucrative business, commercial media might provide this kind of content. We focus here on aggregate-level effects.
Various studies have indeed shown that in order to shape an advertisement-friendly environment, advertising-dependent media tend to depoliticise news content and therefore do not mobilise citizens (Baker, 1994; Lemert, 1984). Advertising dependent media tend to use a more 'neutral', professional style of reporting (Chalaby, 1996; Curran, 1991).

Until the 1980s, advertising in European broadcasting used to be either banned or regulated and restricted in amount, content and placement (McQuail, 1998, p. 110). The stagnation or reduction of public funding has also made public television more dependent on commercial revenues, increasing the dependence of broadcasting systems as a whole on commercial income mainly consisting of advertising revenues.

To summarise, a higher dependence on advertising as the main source of revenue generally leads to more entertainment programming and tends to depoliticise media content targeting a mass audience. A focus on entertainment, including political scandals, and de-politicisation of media content is supposed to lead to alienation from and mistrust of the political system and politicians (Putnam, 1995). We formulate our first macro level hypothesis as follows:

- **H1**: At the macro level, the system level advertising dependency is negatively correlated with trust in politicians.

### 5.2.2. Audience fragmentation across television channels

It is often argued that in order to attract the largest possible audience, media political coverage would be driven towards 'tabloidisation', entertainment and superficiality and that one of the most important consequences of commercial and
competitive pressure is the framing of politics as a (strategic/dramatic) game, making news less issue-oriented and more focused on politicians (e.g. Patterson, 2000).

However, the effects of competition on news coverage are disputed. While many economists believe that competition enhances the quality of media products in terms of accuracy, reduces bias and increases diversity, other researchers have argued that the relationship between competition and product quality and hence with news coverage quality is non-linear. Nicholson (1979) for instance, argues that with increasing competition, media organisations will produce goods that are different from those of other suppliers. Although producing soft news is also a strategy that is used by media companies to differentiate their products (Atwater, 1984), the strategy of differentiation would mean that at the aggregate level there is more variety in supplied content.

Van der Wurff and van Cuilenburg (2001) show that while differentiation occurs in the case of moderate competition, when competition is fierce television companies are pushed to fight for survival and produce cheap content targeting the ‘median’ viewer. Fierce competition would occur when there are many players in the market that are equally powerful with very small audiences, reflecting high levels of audience fragmentation. Thus, audience fragmentation might pose a structural limit on the capacity of television markets to produce high quality programmes and diverse content.

As more media companies enter the market, the average audience becomes smaller, generating less income, which would urge television companies to produce less expensive content (Picard, 2000). Audience fragmentation would therefore encourage television stations to focus on melodramatic, sensational and bad news (e.g., crime, sex and scandals and political wrongdoings) in order to attract a bigger
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Audience. Since the focus on scandal is expected to undermine trust in politicians, we would expect trust in politicians to be relatively low when audiences are the most fragmented. We can now formulate our second macro-level hypothesis:

- **H2**: At the macro level, audience fragmentation is negatively correlated with trust in politicians.

### 5.3. Individual factors conditioning media effects

We do not expect all citizens to be affected in the same way by media context characteristics such as audience fragmentation and advertising dependency. The effects of media context variables may be stronger for some groups than for others (McQuail, 1987; Miller, 1991). In this chapter we focus on two individual-level characteristics that may moderate the effects of contextual variables: political interest and attention to news on television. Unfortunately, the available European Social Survey (ESS) survey data does not contain information about which television station people are most exposed to, so that we cannot distinguish exposure to public television from exposure to commercial television. However, we can and will investigate how effects of television system characteristics are moderated by political interest and attention to news.

The literature suggests that the least politically interested and the politically least attentive citizens are most affected by media messages because they are more open to mobilising influences (Cappella, Price & Nir, 2002; Van Kempen, 2007). The smaller the repertoire and the more limited the information and arguments people have, the greater their readiness to accept and to be influenced by new information. ‘Those who fall into the news’ will suffer more from a hypothetical ‘media malaise’,  

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since they do not have sufficient political knowledge to be able to critically follow the news (Robinson, 1976). The ability to select media content suited to one's needs becomes crucial as the media system and in particular television becomes more fragmented.

In addition, there are also other mechanisms at play that are more closely related to the way television markets developed. The changes in structure from a supply to a demand market may well diminish the extent to which less interested and attentive citizens are actually exposed to 'hard news'. Research in the United States shows that a higher choice media environment leads to more selective exposure: "People who like news take advantage of abundant political information" (Prior, 2005, p. 577). The opposite may also be true: Less interested citizens can easily switch to other types of programmes, such as entertainment or infotainment.

However, there is no a priori reason to assume that watching other programmes will not lead to some kind of learning about politics and politicians (as a celebrity for instance), even though this might be another kind of political knowledge than 'facts'-based knowledge. While some argue that there is not much good in soft news (Prior, 2003), others argue that soft news, while not influencing recall knowledge about political information, does influence attitudes towards political issues and the way people make sense of their political world (Baum, 2003; Hollander, 1995, 2005; Norris, 2000).

If fierce competition and advertising dependency indeed lead to the predicted kind of programming and content, we expect the most politically sophisticated individuals to be the least affected. People who do not possess the ability and motivation to search for 'hard news', on the other hand, will be influenced the most by competition and the system level advertising dependency.

This leads to the following hypothesis:
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- **H3:** The negative effects of advertising dependency at system level and audience fragmentation on political trust are stronger for the politically less interested and the politically less attentive.\(^{45}\)

### 5.4. Control variables to be included in the model

Previous studies have indicated a number of individual-level variables that we need to control for in addition to the key variables political interest and media exposure. We will include them in the models without further discussion. Yet there are some aggregate-level variables that need discussing. Other researchers have shown that the effect of competition on media content partly depends on audience’s beliefs (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). The profit motive of television organisation implies that the selection of stories by journalists depends to a large extent on audiences’ shared preferences and tastes (Hamilton, 2004). The more these preferences are heterogeneous, the more the stories are likely to be diverse.

When the audience holds rather homogeneous beliefs about an issue, the media will slant their stories towards these beliefs. This may be the case in particular in a media context where competition is fierce. This means that we potentially face an endogeneity problem. A media bias could originate because of audiences’ homogenous beliefs about an issue and this bias could in turn strengthen

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\(^{45}\) Zaller (1992) demonstrated convincingly that there is a nonlinear relationship between political sophistication and the extent to which people are influenced by media messages. We also investigated whether the effects of system-level advertising dependency and competition were strongest for citizens with intermediate levels of sophistication. However, no evidence was found for such nonlinear relationships. We distinguished four levels of sophistication by creating three dummy variables. The interactions with levels of audience fragmentation increase linearly in strength with levels of political sophistication. In the sample, the effect of system-level advertising dependency is slightly weaker for the highest level of sophistication than for the second highest, but this difference is not statistically significant. We do not interpret this as a falsification of Zaller’s theory, because we have no direct information about the content that different groups of citizens are exposed to.
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these beliefs. In order to validly attribute effects to the media context, which may be caused by the distribution of beliefs in society, we will control for the heterogeneity in possible sources of individual beliefs.

The various political and demographic individual-level control variables (see model m1.1) already account for individual-level sources of beliefs about politicians that precede our media variables. However, also at the aggregate level societies differ in their level of social trust. These differences in collective trust may be partly reflected in the attitude of media in general towards politicians. Echoing a general ‘suspicious mind’ of societies, media may also adopt a suspicious attitude towards politicians. If most people think that others in general are not trustworthy this should result in a media coverage showing more often the negative side of a story than its positive side. However, if there is no consensus about the trustworthiness of others, media coverage is likely to be more segmented and diverse, and the aggregate effect is likely to be minimal to even absent. At the aggregate level we therefore control for the homogeneity of beliefs about the trustworthiness of people in general66.

Secondly, there are some characteristics of political and media systems that may be related to our macro-level media variables as well as to political trust, which we also need to control for. On the basis of the historical relationship between media and political systems, Hallin and Mancini distinguished three types of media systems: the democratic corporatist media system (Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries), the liberal media system (Britain and Ireland), and the polarised pluralist media system (France, Italy and

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66 Even if media do not have this information and cannot deliberately differentiate its content along these lines, differences in social trust might reflect general differences in social predispositions between individuals and groups. Controlling for these differences ensures that the effects of our media variables can be ascribed to the media context and not to population characteristics.
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Spain) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004a). We will check to what extent our contextual variables are correlated with the typology of Hallin and Mancini and control for it. Moreover, we will control for a typology of political systems developed by Lijphart (1999). Previous research indicated that political trust tends to be higher in countries with proportional systems of representation than in a first-past-the-post system. We use an updated index for the Lijphart’s executive-parties dimension developed by (Vatter, 2009). Vatter’s measure covers the period 1997-2006 and includes five variables: (1) the effective number of legislative parties, (2) the electoral disproportionality, (3) the executive-legislative relationship, (4) interest group corporatism, and (5) central bank independence.47

5.5. Data and measures
The individual-level data for our dependent variable and individual control variables comes from round 2 of the European Social Survey (ESS), collected in the period 2004 through 200648. Our dependent variable is trust in politicians and is measured by the question: “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust politicians? A 0 means that you do not trust politicians at all, and a 10 means that you have complete trust”.

To measure advertising dependency and audience fragmentation, we drew on the yearbook (2007) of the European Audiovisual Observatory for measuring the income of public broadcasting, and the audience share of national and international channels. We used the average public income and audience share over the years 2004-2005 and 2006 (for the operationalisation of television system

47 Higher scores of this index indicate more consensus-oriented democracies (Vatter, 2009, p. 153).
48 The data can be obtained through www.europeansocialsurvey.org. We use round 2 of the ESS because we also collected data on media systems for these years.
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variables, see chapter 2 of this thesis). We did so because the individual data are gathered over the period 2004-2006. We could have chosen to take the values for each year separately but we believe that taking an average of 3 years gives our aggregate measures more stability.

The values of advertising dependency of television systems range between 0.57 and 0.84. Greece and Spain score highest on system-level advertising dependency, followed by the Benelux countries. For Greece this is due to the non-popularity of its public television, for Spain this is due to the high dependency of its national public television stations on commercial revenues. Finland and Sweden are the only countries where public television organisations have no commercial income. Audience fragmentation scores range between 0.74 and 0.92 on a scale between 0 and 1. Norway scores the lowest on audience fragmentation and the Netherlands the highest.49

With regard to the heterogeneity measure of individuals' interpersonal trust, we use the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI).50

\[
\text{Heterogeneity} = 1 - \sum_i \rho_i^2
\]  

In formula 3, \( P \) is the proportion of people that have scored 'i' of the 10-point scale used to measure interpersonal trust. This index has previously been used to measure heterogeneity (Kaniovski & Mueller, 2006). The index runs between 0 and 1 with a value of 0 corresponding to maximum homogeneity and the value of 1 corresponding to maximum heterogeneity (see appendix for country scores).

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49 See appendix D for variable scores.
50 See: www.europeansocialsurvey.org for the exact variable wording.
Table 5.1. Bivariate correlation between macro-level variables (N=17).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Polarised Pluralist model</th>
<th>Democratic Corporatist model</th>
<th>Liberal model</th>
<th>Consensualism</th>
<th>Advertising dependency</th>
<th>Audience Fragmentation</th>
<th>Heterogeneity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Corporatist model</td>
<td>-0.78**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal model</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensualism</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.56*</td>
<td>-0.59*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising Dependency</td>
<td>0.74**</td>
<td>-0.73**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneity</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>-0.56*</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6. Analyses and results

Before estimating our model, we examined correlations between the macro-level variables. System-level advertising dependency and audience fragmentation are positively, but not significantly correlated (Pearson correlation 0.21). The variable indicating the degree of ‘consensualism’ is negatively but not significantly correlated with the system level advertising dependency and audience fragmentation. The system level advertising dependency is strongly correlated with Hallin and Mancini’s typology. The correlation between the system level advertising dependency and the polarised pluralist model is 0.74, and with the democratic
corporatist model category it is -0.73. Both of these correlations are significant at the highest level. Because of this high correlation we do not include this typology and system-level advertising dependency in the same model. Heterogeneity correlates positively though not significantly with both advertising dependency and audience fragmentation (0.40 and 0.47 respectively). Democratic corporatist countries are the most homogeneous in terms of interpersonal trust (see table 5.1. for the correlations between the macro variables and table A.5.1. in the appendix for the country scores on the macro-level variables).

We start our analysis by testing whether average trust in politicians varies significantly between countries. In other words: Is the country level a meaningful level of analysis? To answer this question, we compare the empty usual regression model and an (empty) random intercept ($U_{0j}$) model with trust in Politicians (TP) as a dependent variable. The results (not reported here) show that the average trust in politicians varies significantly from country to country. The model with a random intercept clearly fits the data much better than the model with a fixed intercept ($X^2(1) = 2162.96, p = 0.00$). The country level accounts for 13 per cent of the total variance in trust in politicians. The significance of the country level variation indicates the presence of contextual effects that are the interest of this study and justify the use of hierarchical multilevel modelling (Snijders and Bosker, 1999).

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51 We compare $m_{00}$: $\text{TP}_i = a_0 + \text{R}_i$ and $m_{10}$: $\text{TP}_i = a_{00} + U_{0j} + \text{R}_i$. $m_{00}$ is the fixed empty model compared with the basic multilevel empty model. The outcome variable Y (trust in politicians (TP)) for individual i nested in country j is equal to the average outcome for the population $a_{00}$ and a country specific effect $U_{0j}$ plus an individual-level error $R_i$ (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

52 The contrary is not true: if the inter-correlation is low this does not imply the absence of contextual effects. When the data are multilevel and/or the interest questions of the study are multilevel one should always use a multilevel model to analyse the data.
5.6.1. Across-the-board effects of television systems

Table 5.2 displays the results of the various models analysed. Model m11 analyses the effects of our individual-level control variables. For this analysis, the most relevant individual-level variables are political interest and media exposure: the amount of time spent watching the news, the total time spent watching television and the amount of time spent reading newspapers. The results show that political interest has a positive effect on trust in politicians. People who are more politically interested are also significantly more trusting. The effect of watching the news on political trust depends on the total time spent watching TV. The more time spent watching TV in general, the more negative the effect of watching the news.53

53 Without controlling for the effect of political interest, all media exposure variables are significant and the mean effect of time spent watching the news is positive. The finding that the effect of watching news becomes negative for people watching a lot of television seems to support the well-known Putnam position about television effects. We do not discuss this further as this is not the focus of this study (however, see Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing, 2010).
### Table 5.2. Individual, television-system and cross-level effects on trust in politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model $m_{1.1}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.2}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.3}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.4}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>4.08***</td>
<td>4.01***</td>
<td>4.02***</td>
<td>4***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
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</table>

#### Contextual variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.1}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.2}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.3}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.4}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising dependency</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience fragmentation</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.1)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterogeneity of beliefs about others trustworthiness</td>
<td>-0.50***</td>
<td>-0.49***</td>
<td>-0.51***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensualism</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Individual-level variables and cross-level interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.1}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.2}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.3}$</th>
<th>Model $m_{1.4}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td>0.41***</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest*Advertising  dependency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.07***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest*Fragmentation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.09***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours watching news (News)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News * Advertising dependency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News * Fragmentation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers news *News</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TV watching*News</td>
<td>-0.08**</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>-0.1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The probabilities we use in the deviance test are based on a comparison between the model in question and the model with only the individual variables. For the model with individual-level variables only the reference is the empty multilevel model. The number of countries in these models is 17 and the number of the individual level units is about 16,800. All individual-level variables, except age, gender and party partisanship are centred around the grand mean and the country-level variables are standardised. Age is centred so that the value zero corresponds to the age of 30 years. The dependent variable is trust in politicians measured on a 10-point scale (mean=3.87; SD=2.28): How much do you personally trust politicians? 0 means you do not trust politicians at all and 10 means you have complete trust in politicians. Political interest is measured on a 4 point scale (SD=0.9). Time spent watching news is recoded so that it is measured in hours (SD=0.61). The macro-level variables are standardised (see index for the scores).
## Television systems and trust in politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model m1.1</th>
<th>Model m1.2</th>
<th>Model m1.3</th>
<th>Model m1.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers news</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total TV watching</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Partisanship (0 is Partisan)</td>
<td>-0.27***</td>
<td>-0.27***</td>
<td>-0.28***</td>
<td>-0.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right scale (0 is left - 10 is right)</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
<td>0.06***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal trust</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Times experienced corruption public officials</td>
<td>-0.2***</td>
<td>-0.20***</td>
<td>-0.20***</td>
<td>-0.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective income</td>
<td>-0.19***</td>
<td>-0.19***</td>
<td>-0.19***</td>
<td>-0.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 is woman)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
<td>(0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01***</td>
<td>-0.01***</td>
<td>-0.01***</td>
<td>-0.01***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age2(*100)</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
<td>0.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-level variance</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual-level variance</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviance</td>
<td>72345***</td>
<td>72330.74*</td>
<td>72295.86*</td>
<td>72316.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained country-level variance (reference empty model)</td>
<td>35.72%</td>
<td>74.33%</td>
<td>76.20%</td>
<td>74.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained country-level variance (in comparison m1.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>60.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total explained variance (in comparison m1.3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.22%</td>
<td>5.65%</td>
<td>5.34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Other individual characteristics, however, seem to be more important than self-reported media exposure. People who have experiences with corrupt public officials have significantly less trust in politicians. People who trust other people in general, also have more trust in politicians. Partisanship is also significantly correlated with trust in politicians: partisans have more trust in politicians than non-partisans. The ideological placement of the respondent also seems to be of significant importance for trust in politicians, with right-wing people trusting politicians slightly more than left-wing people. When controlling for subjective income (feelings about own economic situation), education level is no longer relevant. People who report their economic situation to be satisfactory have higher levels of trust in politicians. Finally, gender does not seem to be relevant and age has a non-linear (first negative, then positive) effect. This model with individual-level variables explains 15.66 per cent of the total variance and 35 per cent of the country-level variance in trust in politicians.

Model 2 explores whether advertising dependency at system level, and audience fragmentation can explain part of the cross-country variance in political trust. In this model we also control for the type of democracy, and for the homogeneity in people’s beliefs about the trustworthiness of other people. Three of our contextual variables are significantly related to trust in politicians. Contrary to our expectations, audience fragmentation and the system level advertising dependency are positively correlated with trust in politicians and most heterogeneous countries are significantly less trusting in their politicians. We also tested for non-linear effects of competition, but found no significant effect of a squared term (results not shown). This could be explained by the fact that our

\[ p<0.05 \text{ one sided.} \]
Television systems and trust in politicians

selection of countries contains no cases with very low levels of competition. So, H1 and H2 find no support in our analyses. This model explains 60 per cent more country level variance than the previous model with individual level variables only.\textsuperscript{57}

5.6.2. Interactions between media context variables and political interest

To investigate H3 we tested two models with cross-level interactions between television system variables and relevant individual-level variables (see Table 5.2, model m$_{13}$ and m$_{14}$). Due to the relatively small number of our group level units (17), it is impossible to test all hypotheses simultaneously. We therefore estimate various models and test our hypotheses separately. Model m$_{13}$ presents the results of the cross-level interactions for political interest. This model analyses whether the contextual-level effects depend on the level of political interest. The results show that the effect of audience fragmentation weakens at higher levels of political interest (positive main effect with a negative interaction), while the effect of the advertising dependency at system level becomes stronger and significant (positive interaction with a positive main effect) at high levels of political interest. Thus for a

\textsuperscript{57}Researchers can never conclusively reject the existence of omitted variable bias in their research. This issue of omitted variable bias is often erroneously addressed by controlling for too many variables. One should however only control for explanatory variables that are 'antecedents' of the causal factor of interest and are both correlated with the dependent and the independent variable. One should not control for variables that are in part a consequence of the key explanatory variable (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). To ascertain that our results are not a result of omitted variables that affect both the dependent and the independent variables, we controlled for the percentage of people who experienced corruption by a public official at least once in the last five years and for the GDP per capita (while taking consensualism out of the analysis). Corruption might affect political trust as well as media coverage (results not shown) and the GDP per capita indicates difference in welfare that might be relevant for media system difference and trust in politicians. The aggregate effect of corruption was significant and negative as expected, but it did not affect the results of our media system variables and it became non significant after controlling for the individual level variables. The GDP variable had also no significant effects in the full model. We therefore do not include these variables in the final model.
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politically interested person, advertising dependency has a positive effect, whereas audience fragmentation has a positive effect on the least politically interested (see the plots of these interactions in figure A.5.1.-A.5.4. in the Appendix).

The observation that the media context has different effects on groups of citizens with different levels of political interest raises the question how strong and significant the effect is for the different groups. To address this question, we calculated the regions of significance; and the simple slopes of audience fragmentation and the system level advertising dependency in order to assess at which levels of political interest this effect is significantly different from zero (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006).

Figure 5.1. shows that the effect of audience fragmentation is positive and significant for political interest levels that are approximately equal to or lower than average. This effect becomes stronger as political interest decreases. Audience fragmentation has no significant effect on the attitudes towards politicians of those who are most politically interested. Figure 5.2. shows that the effects of the advertising dependency are significant for levels of political interest above 0.6. This corresponds to 49 per cent of the respondents who are moderately to highly interested in politics.

The results thus highlight considerable qualitative differences in how those who are politically interested and those who aren’t, are affected by the media system. Audience fragmentation mostly affects those who are least politically interested, while advertising dependency exerts a stronger effect on those who are most politically interested. This suggests that, contrary to conventional views, advertising dependency and competition relate to different processes of political communication, which further justifies the need to distinguish the two concepts.
Figure 5.1. Confidence bands slope of audience fragmentation for observed values of political interest

Figure 5.2. Confidence bands slope advertising dependency at observed values of political interest

The figures in this paper are produced using Preacher, Curran and Bauer (2006).
5.6.3. Interactions between media context variables and time spent watching news

Model m_{14} analyses the differential effects of audience fragmentation and advertising dependency at system level on respondents with different levels of attentiveness to the news. The results largely mirror the previous findings. Audience fragmentation has the strongest positive effect on the politically least attentive citizens, while advertising dependency mainly affects the politically most attentive citizens. To assess if these effects are significant for various levels of political attentiveness we plotted the confidence bands of the regression coefficient of competition in figure 5.3. The results show that audience fragmentation has a significant positive effect on people who spend just less than average daily time on watching the news. This applies to 38 per cent of the respondents.

The effect of advertising dependency also depends on the amount of time spent watching the news (see figure 5.4). The effect of advertising dependency is significant when the time spent watching the news is above the average, which is equivalent to watching more than one hour of news per day. People who satisfy this condition represent about 33 per cent of the sample (see table A.5.2. and A.5.3. in the appendix for the distribution of political interest and time spent watching the news).
Television systems and trust in politicians

Figure 5.3. Confidence bands slope of audience fragmentation by time spent on news watching

Figure 5.4. Confidence bands slope of advertising dependency by time spent on news watching
Robustness

We tested the robustness of the cross-level interactions first by investigating the existence of outliers at the macro level (see Table A.5.1. in the appendix). The Z-scores presented in this table show that no real outliers exist in our data. Second, for each of the models we followed a jack-knife procedure, where the models were estimated 17 times, each time excluding one of the 17 countries from the analyses. The results (not reported) show that in model m_{12} the aggregate effect of advertising dependency at system level varied between 0.15 and 0.26 and the aggregate effect of audience fragmentation varied between 0.05 and 0.45. Even though the direction of the effects is always positive, the main effects do not reach statistical significance in each of these analyses. In terms of statistical significance and explanatory power, cross-level interactions are more important than the main effect.

In model m_{13} the cross-level interaction of audience fragmentation and political interest varies between -0.9 and -0.1 and is always significant (at p < 0.000). The cross-level interaction between the system level advertising dependency and political interest varied between 0.04 and 0.1 and is also always significant at (p < 0.05). In model m_{14} the cross-level interactions between advertising dependency at system-level and time spent watching the news varied between 0.08 and 0.13 (always significant at p < 0.000). The cross-level interaction between audience fragmentation and time spent watching the news varied between -0.02 and -0.05. The significance of the latter cross-level interaction varied between p<0.000 and p<0.1 but when excluding the Netherlands or Germany from the analysis, this interaction becomes insignificant. So, of the four interaction effects, only this one is not robust.
5.7. Discussion

Over the past three decades, television markets in most West-European countries have transformed from supply markets that were largely dominated by public television, to demand markets characterised by increasing competition for audiences between commercial and public broadcasting stations. This is the first time a study estimates how the structure of different television markets affects trust in politicians. This question is important, because many scholars believe that a non-commercial media system would contribute to support for democratic governance through informing citizens about politics and by increasing political trust. Very competitive and commercial media systems would, in the words of Fallows (1997), “undermine democracy”. Even though much of the literature on this ‘media malaise’ originates in the American context, European scholars have also expressed concern about the introduction of commercial television and increasing competition.

Our study focused on two key structural aspects of television systems: advertising dependency at the system level, and audience fragmentation across television channels, which we see as a proxy for competition intensity. Contrary to hypotheses derived from the media malaise literature, we found that advertising dependency and audience fragmentation have positive macro-level effects. However, the effect of audience fragmentation and advertising dependency varies among different groups. While audience fragmentation is most relevant for those who are less politically interested and less attentive, advertising dependency is most relevant for the most politically interested and attentive citizens. With regards to trust in politicians, this study has shown that the general tendency in the
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literature to identify advertising dependency, media competition and, more generally, increasing 'commercialisation' of media systems as factors contributing to political mistrust are misplaced. This study found no evidence of negative structural effects of advertising dependency and audience fragmentation on trust in politicians.

We have shown that both advertising dependency and audience fragmentation have positive effects on trust in politicians, albeit on different groups of citizens. How do we explain these unexpected findings? Obviously, we have to be cautious in our interpretation of these findings, because we have not directly studied the contents of the messages our respondents were exposed to. However, a plausible interpretation could be that changes in the television market resulting from an increase in advertising dependency and cross-channel competition have altered patterns of political communication. As a result of the introduction of commercial television resulting in increased competition, audiences have obtained a wider choice of programmes to watch, with an increased differentiation between 'hard news' for the politically most attentive and interested and infotainment for the politically least interested.

The media systems' increased dependency on commercial income seems to serve the politically most interested and attentive citizens in providing a larger number of more varied news programmes. However, we did not find evidence that high levels of advertising dependency are 'harmful' for those who are not politically interested. According to much research, more competition leads to a wider availability of infotainment. Chapter 3 offered some evidence supporting these claims. This wider availability of infotainment could explain the positive effect of audience fragmentation on the trust levels of citizens with lower levels of political interest. These are people who normally do not watch 'hard news' regularly, but
gain more trust in politicians from seeing them appear in infotainment shows and other programs as a celebrity.

With the fragmentation of audiences, politicians appear on various channels and in less serious programmes that are less critical and which may in fact be more likely to portray them as likeable persons (Brants and Siune, 1998, p. 138; see also Baum, 2003). Other research has shown that watching entertainment programmes and talk shows in particular, is negatively associated with mistrust in politicians (Guggenheim, Kwak, & Campbell, 2011; Tsfati, Tukachinsky, & Peri, 2009). These programmes tend to picture politicians as likeable people (Baum, 2003); do not depict politics in divisive or strategic frames; and usually avoid incivility; which are all associated with cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). This interpretation of our findings suggests that political information processes are qualitatively different for both groups of citizens.

The most politically interested are not affected by audience fragmentation. Following our earlier interpretation, this implies that infotainment and entertainment dominance in a television system does not significantly affect people with high levels of political interest. The finding that this group is only affected by the degree of advertising dependency suggests that those who are the most politically interested benefit from an abundance of news, which in turn originates from their being a profitable segment in the media market interesting for advertisers.

This interpretation supports earlier research by Prior (2005) on the US. People who like news take advantage of abundant ‘traditional’ political information, which is partly offered by (thematic) commercial channels, some of which are entirely devoted to news. Contrary to Prior’s beliefs, also those who are less
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politically interested take advantage of the ‘non-traditional’ political information including infotainment and entertainment. Politically less interested citizens build their trust in politicians using infotainment. This finding supports research by Baum (2003), who argued that although infotainment might not increase the levels of (fact based) political knowledge, it does influence people’s perceptions of politics. He even argues that some people are better served by infotainment than by regular news programmes.

Our study challenges the common assumption that the commercialisation of media systems has negative effects on trust in politicians. The study also points to structural differences in political trust between the politically interested and news-attentive citizens on the one hand, and the non-news attentive, non-politically interested citizens on the other hand. The results suggest that political trust might be built on different types of political information by these distinctive groups of citizens.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the changes in West-European television systems since the onset of the liberalisation process in the 1980s and early 1990s by performing a systematic comparison of 17 television systems, drawing on existing data as well as on a new longitudinal dataset compiled for this study. The study has argued that the transformation of West-European television systems can be best analysed by taking a dualistic approach to media structure, since the liberalisation process has not only had direct effects for the supply side of media but has also fundamentally changed the way audiences are able to choose media content.

Since the start of the liberalisation process in the 1980s, West-European television system have become media environments where supply and demand are intrinsically related, where the media structures are simultaneously shaped from the top-down by media producers and bottom-up by media consumers. This transformation has been conceptualised as a change from broadcasting systems where market mechanisms played a minor role to systems where commercial and competitive pressure are important and often dominant.

This thesis has argued that the directly observable changes of this liberalisation process in television system are (1) the increasing number of channels, coinciding with an increased choice for television users and (2) an increasing dependency of the entire system on advertising revenues. The study has described changes in television systems, and also investigated the consequences of
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transformations along these two dimensions for (1) political content, (2) political competition and (3) political attitudes.

The first empirical chapter of this thesis focused on the convergence thesis of media systems. Hallin and Mancini (2004b) use this concept to indicate the process in which media systems become more independent from the political system. One of the driving forces of this process is the liberalisation of media systems. Various studies have linked the post-liberalisation transformation of television systems to a convergence of television systems towards the liberal broadcasting model. West-European broadcasting systems moved away from being a political-cultural, state-dominated institution to an industry in which market forces have become important or even dominant. In this sense, broadcasting systems have become less dependent on the party political systems and more dependent on economic markets.

This chapter started by investigating whether patterns of changes of television systems since 1980s have been similar across West-European countries. Have all West-European television systems have become equally dominated by market forces? To what extent does the effect of liberalisation vary across television systems? Or can we still identify differences between television systems at the structural level, which would lead us to question the convergence thesis.

To test the convergence hypothesis of media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004b), I compared 17 West-European television systems along the key dimensions of audience fragmentation and advertising dependency. These two dimensions are the most central characteristics of the complex consequences of the liberalisation process. The empirical comparison has shown that since 1985 television systems have become more fragmented and more advertising-dependent, and that the differences between television systems along these two
dimensions have become much smaller by 2008 compared to the 1980s. The analysis thus confirmed that convergence has happened between television systems towards the liberal broadcasting model. Competition intensity, which was measured by audience fragmentation and the dependency on advertising, increased in all studied television systems. This indicates an overall increase in commercial and competitive pressure at the system level.

Convergence has been strongest along the audience fragmentation dimension. Although all systems have become more advertising-dependent, the analyses also detected some path-dependencies: television systems that were less advertising-dependent in 1985 remain relatively less dependent on advertising. The analyses have also shown that significant differences persist across the studied television systems, which enables a cross-level analysis to study the relationship between television system characteristics and various dimensions of political communication.

The thesis has also highlighted the multifaceted and non-singular nature of this convergence process. Various scholars have predicted an overall dominance of entertainment-oriented media content as a consequence of the transformation towards a more competitive market-oriented television system. The style of broadcast journalism is believed to have shifted from a focus on information around the political system towards a popularised and dramatised style (e.g. Brants 1998). The thesis shows some evidence supporting these claims.

In chapter 3, I proceeded to investigate the relationship between the convergence of television systems at the structural level and the commonly hypothesised trend of dumbing down or popularisation of media content. The chapter investigated sensationalism in news coverage by comparing news coverage
Transformations of television systems

in 14 television systems and 29 television channels. The analysis assessed whether there is a positive relationship in news coverage between increasing audience fragmentation and advertising dependency on the one hand; and sensationalism on the other. The empirical analysis showed that audience fragmentation and advertising dependency indeed stimulate sensationalism in news coverage, lending support to the main argument in the literature that the increasing importance of market mechanisms in broadcasting has resulted in a more popularised style of news coverage.

However, the analysis also found significant differences between publically owned and privately owned television channels. Commercial channels tend to broadcast more sensational news and this tendency increases as competitive forces increase. The study finds some indication for a ‘distinction strategy’ of public television, which becomes stronger as competition becomes more intense. Contrary to expectations, the divergence between public channels and commercial channels is higher when competitive forces in the television environment are stronger. Because the study is cross-sectional it does not allow us to draw conclusions about the absolute level of sensationalism. However, since the most fragmented and advertising-dependent television systems have relatively more sensational coverage, which is in line with the general hypothesis in the literature, it can be argued with reasonable confidence that sensationalism in news coverage has increased everywhere and that this is a partial consequence of the increasing relevance of market mechanisms in the television environment.

Yet it is particularly in systems where competitive forces are high that the dissimilarity between commercial and public television grows. In other words, commercial television seems to be more affected by the level of audience fragmentation than public television. This indicates that commercial television is
relatively more prone to using sensationalism in order to gain a competitive advantage. These findings suggest that public television is most needed in a media environment where competitive pressures are highest, as in these contexts it can provide less sensational news coverage, which might increase the aggregate level diversity of news coverage.

The findings of the first two empirical chapters support some elements of the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis: specifically, those pertaining to the tendency of the media to popularise news coverage in order to maximise profit and attract audiences. As audience fragmentation and advertising dependency increases, media coverage, which includes news, becomes more entertainment-oriented, especially in commercial television. In Chapters 4 and 5 I investigated whether these trends have negative effects on political attitudes and the functioning of political parties, as the adherents of the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis believe.

Prior studies have linked the transformation of broadcasting systems since the liberalisation process to dynamics of political party competition (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). Several scholars have argued that because of the increasing commercial orientation of the media and because of competitive pressures within the media field, a media logic is created in which economic criteria dominate the definition of newsworthiness. Mazzoleni and his colleagues argue that, because of this new, commercial logic, the media tend to give more attention to sensational issues and favour politicians that have a more dramatic and provocative style of political communication. The radical right would for instance have gained stronger visibility and legitimacy through more extensive ‘sensationalist’ media coverage.

The analysis in chapter 4 is built on this common assumption in the literature and on the finding of the two first empirical chapters of this thesis. The chapter
Transformations of television systems

investigated the link between structural media characteristics and political competition between parties. It particularly investigated the relationship between audience fragmentation as the driving force to paying attention to sensational issues and provocative politicians on the one hand, and the relative importance given by political parties to the immigration issue on the other. According to the common ‘imitation’ hypothesis, political parties imitate the radical right’s immigration position and integrate the immigration issue in their agenda, and move also towards the right in their substantive positioning on the issue. This study added media system characteristics to the equation by investigating whether audience fragmentation and advertising dependency stimulates the imitation of the radical right party’s stances on immigration by other parties.

The empirical results showed a mixed picture. On the one hand, the analysis supports the claims that the saliency of the immigration issue is positively related to characteristics of the media environment: in television environments where competition is high, the immigration issue tends to be relatively more important in comparison with other political issues. The party level analysis showed that in television systems with fragmented audiences, large parties give higher importance to the immigration issue compared to smaller parties. On the other hand, when comparing parties’ substantive positions on the immigration issues, higher levels of audience fragmentation do not seem to urge political parties to take over political positions of the radical right. Quite on the contrary, under conditions of intense audience fragmentation, parties tend take more distance from the radical right.

This finding indicates that although the media might focus more on sensational issues, such as immigration, because of their appeal to large audiences and thus may increase the importance parties give to such issues at the expense of other political issues, this does not necessarily compel (large) political parties to
Conclusion

take over the substantive positions of the radical right. The findings suggest that a fragmented media environment does not stimulate imitation but rather urges political parties to polarise. By doing so it stimulates the larger mainstream parties to distance themselves from the radical right. While the radical right tends to take a significantly more extreme position, other parties chose a significantly more moderate political stance when audiences became more fragmented.

This thesis thus shows that audience fragmentation is an important media system characteristic that should be taken into account when studying political competition. The analysis suggests that political parties as professional organisations may take account of the heterogeneity of audiences to define how they stand in comparison with an (extremist) party that has an advantage when it comes to media attention. As audiences become fragmented in their media use, parties might strategically use various channels to connect to voters. Parties are no longer forced to target a median audience as in the old television systems. They can now reach various audiences separately and can target various segments of the audience without being worried of losing the ‘median voter’.

The new media environment thus offers various channels of communication to political parties that they can use efficiently in order to reach and convince people who they would potentially not have reached in the old system. For instance, the segmentation of audiences that occurs in a competitive media environment (top-down and bottom-up) can be efficiently used by political parties to target specific groups, such as younger voters, women or people who are less politically interested. Paradoxically, the use of this multiplicity of channels will compel political parties to have a very consistent story that is easily distinguishable from other parties’ story. From this perspective, in the longer term, and in a competitive media environment, imitation of a successful story can be a self-defeating move of
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a political party. While this media environment offers more possibilities (channels
and programmes) it also compels political parties to be clear and consistent about
where they stand. As politicians use various channels and programmes to
repeatedly explain their policy stances to various audiences, their story can be
easily checked by media and audiences, so this may provide an incentive for
politicians to have a more consistent story.

The analysis showed that political parties take more distance from the
radical right in their positioning, as well as with regard to the importance they
attribute to the immigration issue. It is an interesting question whether this implies
that ideological differences between political parties are being stimulated by a
fragmented audience. Although empirical evidence is contested, in the case of the
US it has been argued that audience fragmentation has stimulated a polarisation of
audiences. A combination of high-choice media and selective exposure would lead
audiences to expose themselves to content that reinforces pre-existing
predispositions. This alleged polarisation of audiences is expected to lead to a
polarisation at the level of political parties (see Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). To my
knowledge, for Western Europe there is no solid empirical evidence of such
audience polarisation under influence of audience fragmentation. Nevertheless,
this study suggests that the radical right tends to take more extreme positions in
more fragmented television systems. It is an interesting question for future
research to investigate whether audience fragmentation stimulates polarisation at
the party and the citizens’ level and whether and which parties benefit from such
audience fragmentation.

One of the core elements of the convergence thesis elaborated by Hallin and
Mancini (2004b) is that media systems have become increasingly separated from
political systems. Audience fragmentation in the new media environment offers
opportunities for renewal of the ties between the media and political systems. The
high-choice media environment stimulates segmentation of audiences, and enables
better opportunities to target audiences, including politically less interested
citizens, according to their political-ideological orientation. This may lead to the
creation of channels or television programmes that target ideologically
homogenous groups offering opportunities to political parties to give more
exposure to their ideology and/or leaders.

In this sense, the new media environment offers possibilities for a revival of
a partisan media and political media parallelism. In the old media systems, media
party parallelism was an indication of the interdependent relationship between the
media and the political system. However, in the new media environment the media
and audiences are likely to guide this process, and political parties have to manage
how to best use the opportunities offered by the interaction between media and
audiences.

While competitive pressures within the media system can favour the
coverage of particular issues and political figures in order to attract large audiences,
the structural continuing phenomenon of audience fragmentation might,
paradoxically, not lead to a blurring of political ideological difference between
political parties. Quite the contrary: from a theoretical point of view it offers
possibilities for the revival of party ideology, unless political parties are interested
in stressing other (non-ideological) differences among them instead.

Finally, chapter 5 of the thesis investigated the effects of the ‘new’ television
environment on audiences’ attitudes towards politicians. The adherents of the
‘media malaise’ hypothesis have argued that, because of their focus on
entertainment, sensationalism, and negative news coverage, commercially oriented
and competitive media systems would stimulate growing cynicism and distrust
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among citizens toward the political party system. Prior studies have linked the allegedly growing adversarialism in journalism to the increasing role of competitive and commercial mechanisms in the media (e.g. Patterson 2000).

To my knowledge, this is the first empirical study that directly investigates the relationship between media system characteristics and political trust. If the adherents of the 'media malaise' hypothesis are right, we would expect competition for audiences and advertising dependency to decrease the level of trust in politicians. Comparing 17 television systems and political systems, empirical evidence shows that in more competitive television system, the less politically interested and the people who are less attentive to news tend to gain rather than lose trust in politicians. So, the expectation of the media malaise hypothesis that the level of trust would decrease with competition is not empirically supported.

Empirical evidence also indicates that the group of politically interested people and heavy news watchers do not lose political trust when competitive and commercial pressures in the media systems increase. On the contrary, they gain trust in politicians when the media system becomes more advertising-dependent. At least for the West-European case, competitive and commercial pressures do not correlate with low trust neither among highly politically interested audiences nor among weakly or non-politically interested audiences. Critics might rightfully comment that this study is not longitudinal and therefore it cannot prove a positive effect of audience fragmentation and advertising dependency on trust in politicians over time. More empirical research is therefore needed. However, the few empirical studies that investigate the effect of the entry of commercial television on citizen’s political knowledge and interest (e.g. Prat and Strömberg 2005) support my interpretation. There is also no empirical indication that the year of our study might be a ‘special case’ that might explain the positive results we find.
However, the core element of the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis is that the change towards more competitive and commercially oriented media systems would lead to a ‘dumbing down’ of media content in a desperate struggle to gain an audience. This would translate in political distrust and cynicism and might affect the political agenda by favouring trivial sensational issues and stimulating ‘surrogate politics’ in which style triumphs over substance. Chapter 3 found some evidence supporting the claims that news coverage is indeed being dumbed down because of competitive and commercial pressures, especially for privately owned television. But the crucial claim of the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis that this dumbing down would be harmful to the relationship between politicians and citizens is not supported by our data. The findings suggest that the new media environment reinforces qualitative differences between various groups of citizens. Rather than leading to a general decline of trust in politicians as expected by the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis, it leads to the reconstruction of two different ‘types’ of trust in politicians.

The study suggests that trust in politicians among politically interested citizens is built on different kinds of information than among politically less interested citizens. In competitive media environments, those with little interest in politics can avoid news and conversely, people interested in news can watch large amounts of news. Some researchers have argued that two different public spheres emerge on the basis of these differentiated consumption patterns (Prior 2007). This study supports the idea of the existence of these two different public spheres, although it does not suggest the existence of an engaged public sphere (people who consume news) and a disengaged public sphere (people who do not consume news). The results suggest that both groups are engaged albeit in different ways.
The less politically interested who do not regularly watch news can gain more trust in politicians by watching them appear in infotainment, human interest, and other ‘non-political’ programmes, where they perform as a celebrity, often exposing their ‘ordinary’, human side (Temple, 2006; Tsfati et al, 2009). In this way, politicians can become emotionally closer to citizens with less political interest and are perhaps less seen as a part of an elite that should be considered suspect. It can be argued that the judgement of the politically less interested about politicians is largely built on emotional closeness and impressionistic images in the media, and such programmes could therefore potentially build political trust.

The other, smaller, group of heavy news watchers are more likely to form their judgement about politicians by using information that indicates their performances as a politician rather than as a person. These differences between the ‘quality’ of information sources of trust cannot be investigated by using the standard survey questions on political trust that most studies, including this one, use. Future studies and survey questionnaires should, instead of focusing on an increase or a decrease of trust, investigate the various components of trust, including this emotional dimension. The new media environment seems to have potential to positively bind audiences to politicians. It brings politics closer to everybody. However, it does so in different ways for different groups. This suggests that the new media environment reproduces existing differences in society but leads to the political inclusion rather than the exclusion of the non-politically interested.

From a normative-democratic perspective, this study shows that the new media environment is a challenge for democracy. On the one hand, politicians and political parties need media attention in order to reach the public, while on the other there is a tendency in highly competitive and commercial media environments to favour sensational issues. In order to gain media attention, it is
Conclusion

compelling for politicians and political parties to play the media game. Fierce competition in media systems may create a bias towards sensational issue that in ‘reality’ might not be that important for the sake of the general welfare of the public. This creates a challenge for political parties and politicians wishing to bring unattractive, non-sensational but nevertheless important political issues under the attention of the media.

Because of my dualistic conceptualisation of the media environment, the findings of this study emphasise the recursive relationship between media and audiences rather than blaming one or the other for the kind of content that is supplied and consumed. It is the interaction between audiences and media that results in a tendency to focus on sensationalism. Paradoxically, some aspects of sensationalism may actually be functional in bringing politics closer to citizens. This study suggests that new television environments tend to favour sensational issues above non-sensational issues, albeit that this particularly applies to commercial television. So, it may be true that, to paraphrase Postman (1985), we are entertaining ourselves [with politics]. The findings of this study suggest that we increasingly like and trust our politicians, the more we see them in the media, perhaps for the ‘right’ reasons (political competence and performance) but certainly also for the way they ‘perform’ in the media.

But does this imply that the adherents of the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis are right when they believe that this would lead to ‘death’ (to refer to Postman again). This thesis does not support this popular view. On the contrary, the findings rather suggest that competitive and commercial pressures in modern television systems are associated with higher levels of political trust, particularly among politically weakly interested. This somehow supports the thesis that ‘dumbing down is good for you’ (Brants 1998, Temple 2006). In some ways, this can be seen as a
democratic, non-elitist point of view. However, it may be more correct to say that, in any case, ‘dumbing down is good for politicians’, at least to some of them, sometimes.

The findings of this study suggest that we should question the frequently assumed link between not watching traditional news programmes and a general decline in political trust or political engagement. Nowadays, gaining information about politicians often happens outside established news programmes. In fact, the abundance of other programming formulas where politicians appear, offers possibilities for them to liaise with the electorate in different ways. Politicians often appear in talk shows, which portray them as ordinary ‘human’ beings. This storytelling style is a successful formula not only in media, but in popular culture in general, because of its ability to show the strength of the person as a ‘politician’ and at the same time portray his ‘ordinary’ side or even his ‘weaknesses’ as a human being (cf. the Oprah Winfrey formula).

These kinds of programmes produce an image of the politician who is emotionally closer to the general audience. It makes the politician a less distant person instead of belonging to an elite or privileged group. More importantly, it creates opportunities to make the ‘mistakes’ and even ‘wrongdoings’ of politicians seem ‘human’. The framing of political scandals in an emotive, personal and storytelling style may attract a larger audience than framing them in an attacking and aggressive way, which may put off some audiences. This way of storytelling happens more often on television than in newspapers. These kinds of media narratives may even make the often-criticised hypocrisy of politicians understandable and in many cases also forgettable and forgivable. Consequently, this tends to obstruct the structural analysis behind the story. For instance, a storytelling style would not analyse a corruption scandal as a part of structural
abuse of power, but rather as the failure of the politician as a person with his human weaknesses.

So, the way politicians appear in television programmes can attract previously non-politically engaged citizens, but it engages them in a different way than traditional news programmes do. The political judgements of the non-politically engaged are likely to be more strongly based on an emotional impressionistic image built around the politician in television appearances where it is less likely that policy issues are analysed in depth. In my view, this engagement is not entirely dissimilar to the 'old' ties between political parties and citizens that existed along traditional social 'frozen cleavages'. In the context of these old ties, votes were often primarily cast on the basis of an emotional tie through religion, class or ethnic belonging rather than on the basis of a rational 'neutral' judgement of the performance and capacities of politicians.

So what is different nowadays? It can perhaps be said that the old ties such as religion provided a generally more or less coherent frame of politics, but that the new emotional ties based on media performance do not. While the old ties lead to predictable and stable politics, the new ties are likely to create more political turbulence. An interesting question for future research would therefore be to analyse the relationship between the level of audience fragmentation and the volatility and unpredictability of voting behaviour.

While the new media environment might lead to more 'non-predictable' politics and may therefore yield a less stable political system, the engagement of politically less interested citizens via the media is as far from the ideal typical 'rational' citizen who is well informed and casts his vote on the basis of a well-balanced rational/pragmatic judgement, similar to the old engagement of the electorate with politics. If we expect the media to help citizens be informed and to
make ‘rational’ political decisions, this study suggests that not to be the case for the majority of people. After all, only a small minority (about 10 per cent) of citizens can be classified as heavy news-watchers.

Perhaps we should keep in mind that the ‘rational pragmatic’ citizen is only an ideal typical citizen who has never existed in reality. Even the most knowledgeable people build their judgement about important parts of their lives on emotional grounds. In fact, human beings cannot make judgements without employing the emotional part of their brain, as has been shown by neuro-scientific research. It does therefore not seem to be very helpful to blame the media for the way people build their (political) judgement, as the ‘media malaise’ hypothesis tends to do.

As this study focused on the interaction between citizens and media, it did not analyse the active role of political parties in shaping the media environment. When considering the media environment as a dualistic construct, it is important to take into account that the media, political parties and politicians are all dependent on each other. Media depend on political actors to provide newsworthy events and statements while political actors need media to pay attention to them and to reach their audiences. It would therefore be worthwhile to investigate whether structural differences between political systems in the direct relationship between media and political parties/politicians exist that might explain differences in political communication.

This thesis showed how the interaction between media and audiences turns out to be advantageous for politicians by increasing political trust. This finding contradicts some strands of the literature on the assumed ‘crisis’ of democracy that tend to blame the media for the decline of trust and political engagement (e.g. Patterson 2000). This thesis suggests that the decline of trust probably is not linked
to key changes in the media environment such as increased advertisement dependency, increased competition and increased audience fragmentation.

This begs the question whether, if media coverage enhances our trust in politicians, this is a ‘good thing’? Naturally this is not the case if our trust is misplaced. It seems therefore that the strongest responsibility in contemporary media systems lies with politicians, perhaps more than ever before: are politicians only people seeking access to office and power, or do they believe in democracy and democratic leadership? Do politicians want to connect with citizens by focusing on their image in the media to score points and attract voters, or are they interested in building long-lasting ties with citizens?
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Appendices

Appendix A (Chapter 2)

Example of how scores on the television system variables were calculated.

This appendix shows how the measures for advertising dependency and for audience fragmentation were calculated. It also presents graphs with the scores of all 17 countries in this study on the dimensions of audience fragmentation, advertising dependency and competition between television companies in the years 1980-2008. The data after 1990 mostly originates from the EAO (European Audiovisual Observatory) yearbooks. The data before 1990 for audience share and the share of commercial revenues of public television come from various national resources as well as UNESCO yearbooks. When channel level data for 1980s were not available, I estimated them using the closest available year, as explained in chapter 2. The data on audience fragmentation from before 1990 should be seen therefore as an approximation only.

For example, in 2002, Finland had the least commercially dependent media system but was moderately fragmented. In 2002 public television was for 95.8% financed by license fees and other public income. The audience share of public television in 2002 was 45.5%. The level of advertising dependency is therefore equal to 1-((0.958* 0.455)) = 0.564. In 2002 the daily audience shares of television channels included Yle1 (23.8%); Yle2 (21.7%); MTV3 (37%); SubTV (1.2%); Nelonen (11.6%). Other channels with smaller daily shares (totalling 4.7%) were not included (data source: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2007). I square all
these market shares (in proportions) and subtract them from 1. So the fragmentation intensity in Finland in this year is 0.74.

Figure A.2.1. Trajectories of Change in the advertising dependency dimension among West-European countries where advertising dependency was initially zero

Figure A.2.2. Trajectories of Change in the advertising dependency dimension in West-European countries where advertising dependency was initially moderate
Figure A.2.3. Trajectories of Change in the advertising dependency dimension in West-European countries where advertising dependency was initially high.
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Figure A.2.4. The fragmentation of audiences and competition intensity at the company level by country, 1980-2008 (the figures before 1990s are estimates only)
Appendices
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Appendices

Appendix B (Chapter 3)


Crime, violence, sex and drugs

- Violent demonstrations
- Terrorism
- Crime levels
- Petit/small crimes
- Espionage
- Prison conditions
- Corruption (not political)
- Police behaviour
- White collar crime
- Judicial decisions
- Child abuse
- Paedophilia
- Violence against women/wives
- Violence against husbands
- Political assassinations
- Murder
- Robbery
- Crime investigation
- Assault
- Rape
- Criminal association (e.g., Mafia)
- Fraud
- Political corruption
- Libel suit
- Disputes
- Strikes
- Drug problems
- Prostitution, women trafficking
- Sexual orientation issues
- Abortion
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Celebrities and fashion
- Celebrities’ including royalties’ personal news
- Fashion products and trends

Accidents and disasters
- Natural disasters – earthquakes
- Natural disaster – floods
- Natural disaster – famine
- Natural disaster – other weather
- Car accidents
- Plane crash
- Plane near accident
- Train accident
- Fire
- Work accident
- Military-related accident
- Home accident
- Crowd accident
- Other

Political misconduct
- Abuse of political power, corruption
- Commission of inquiry
- Resignation of politician

War and terrorism
- Wars between countries
- International tensions and disagreements
- International terrorism
  - Embargo
### Appendix C (Chapter 4)

Table A.4.1. Country scores on advertising dependency and audience fragmentation, consensualism and the relative importance of the immigration issue.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-1.21</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>-2.04</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relative importance of the immigration issue in comparison to other issues is taken from the calculation of Benoit and Laver (2007:173).
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The wordings of the questions asked by Benoit and Laver (2007) to experts to measure the positioning of parties on the ideological left right the immigration issue.

Left-Right

Please locate each party on a general left-right dimension, taking all aspects of party policy into account.

Left (1) Right (20)

Immigration Position

Favours policies designed to help asylum seekers and immigrants integrate into society (1)

Favours policies designed to help asylum seekers and immigrants return to their country of origin (20)
Appendices

Appendix D (Chapter 5)

This appendix provides information about the distribution of variables used in chapter 5. It provides the wording of survey questions, and some graphs that facilitate the interpretation of interaction effects and could be used to replicate the analysis.
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Table A.5.1. Z-scores of the independent and dependent country-level variables and the average and standard deviation of their raw scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Trust in Politicians</th>
<th>Audience fragmentation</th>
<th>Advertising dependency</th>
<th>Heterogeneity</th>
<th>Consensualism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>-0.82</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>-1.25</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>-1.33</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>-0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>-2.24</td>
<td>-1.59</td>
<td>-1.84</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>-2.27</td>
<td>-1.47</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-1.06</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A.5.2. Political interest distribution centred around the grand mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-1.39 (not at all interested)</td>
<td>15.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.39 (hardly interested)</td>
<td>35.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.61 (quite interested)</td>
<td>38.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.61 (very interested)</td>
<td>10.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average political interest = 2.38

Standard deviation = 0.9

### Table A.5.3. Time spent watching news in hours per day centred around the grand mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-1.75 (No time at all)</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1.50 (Less than 0.5 hour)</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1.00 (0.5 hour to 1 hour)</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.50 (More than 1 hour, up to 1.5 hours)</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00 (More than 1.5 hours, up to 2 hours)</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.50 (More than 2 hours, up to 2.5 hours)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00 (More than 2.5 hours, up to 3 hour)</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.75 (More than 3 hours)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average time spent watching news in Hours = 0.74

Standard deviation = 0.61
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Figure A.5.1. Effects of audience fragmentation on trust in politicians according to levels of political interest

Figure A.5.2. Effects of audience fragmentation on trust in politicians at observed values of time spent on watching news
Appendices

Figure A.5.3. Effects of advertising dependency on trust in politicians according to levels of political interest

Figure A.5.4. Effects of advertising dependency on trust in politicians according to time spent watching news
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Wording of core individual-level variables:

Trust in Politicians

"Using this card. Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust politicians. I read out: 0 means you do not trust politicians at all. And 10 means you have complete trust"

Values and categories

00 No trust at all
01 1
02 2
03 3
04 4
05 5
06 6
07 7
08 8
09 9
10 Complete trust
77 Refusal
88 Don’t know
99 No answer

For the wording of other variables see: www.europeansocialsurvey.org
**Hours of news watched on television:**

“And again on an average weekday. How much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programs about politics and current affairs?”

**Values and categories**

00 No time at all
01 Less than 0.5 hour
02 0.5 hour to 1 hour
03 More than 1 hour. Up to 1.5 hours
04 More than 1.5 hours. Up to 2 hours
05 More than 2 hours. Up to 2.5 hours
06 More than 2.5 hours. Up to 3 hours
07 More than 3 hours
66 Not applicable
77 Refusal
88 Don’t know
99 No answer

We transformed this variable by giving each individual the middle score of the category to which he/she belongs.
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Political interests

“How interested would you say you are in politics are you...”

Values and categories

1 Very interested
2 Quite interested
3 Hardly interested
4 Not at all interested
7 Refusal
8 Don’t know
9 No answer

This variable was recoded so that higher values indicate higher levels of political interest.
Appendices

Beliefs about others’ trustworthiness

“Using this card, generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”

“Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can’t be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted.”

Values and categories

- 00 You can’t be too careful
- 01 1
- 02 2
- 03 3
- 04 4
- 05 5
- 06 6
- 07 7
- 08 8
- 09 9
- 10 Most people can be trusted
- 77 Refusal
- 88 Don’t know
- 99 No answer
Experience of corruption public officials

“How often, if ever, have each of these things happened to you in the last five years? Public official (government officials, such as custom officers and to local officials, such as housing/building regulators etc) asked you for a favour or a bribe in return for a service.”

- 1: Never
- 2: Once
- 3: Twice
- 4: 3 or 4 times
- 5: 5 times or more
- 8: Don’t know

Subjective income

“What of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays?”

- 1: Living comfortably on present income
- 2: Coping on present income
- 3: Finding it difficult on present income
- 4: Finding it very difficult on present income
- 8: Don’t know
**Bibliography**


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Nederlandse Samenvatting


Dit proefschrift betoogt dat de belangrijkste gevolgen van de liberalisering van televisiestelsels bestaan uit (1) een toename van het aantal zenders, wat samengaat met een toename van de keuzemogelijkheden voor kijkers en een stijgende publieksfragmentatie, alsmede (2) een toename van de afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten. Het eerste deel van deze studie beschrijft de veranderingen in televisiesystemen langs deze twee dimensies. Het tweede deel van dit proefschrift onderzoekt de gevolgen van deze transformaties voor (1) politieke inhoud, (2) de concurrentie tussen politieke partijen en (3) politieke attitudes.

Het beschrijvende deel van dit proefschrift richt zich op het toetsen van de zogeheten convergentiehypothese, volgens welke mediasystemen steeds meer op elkaar zijn gaan lijken. Dit wordt gedaan door te onderzoeken in hoeverre veranderingspatronen van West-Europese televisiesystemen sinds 1980 verschillend zijn. De liberalisering van de media is een van de drijvende krachten in het convergentieproces van mediasystemen. Diverse studies hebben de transformatie van televisiesystemen sinds de liberalisering gekoppeld aan een convergentie van televisiesystemen in de richting van het liberale model. West-Europese televisiesystemen zouden daarbij getransformeerd zijn van politiek-culturele en staatsafhankelijke instituties tot een industrie waarin marktwerking belangrijk of zelfs dominant is geworden. Televisiesystemen zouden in andere woorden minder...
afhankelijk zijn geworden van de partijpolitiek en meer afhankelijk zijn geworden van de markt. Teneinde de convergentiehypothese van mediasystemen (cf. Hallin en Mancini, 2004) te toetsen, zijn 17 West-Europese televisiesystemen vergeleken op de dimensies van publieksfragmentatie en afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten. Als er hierbij nog steeds structurele verschillen tussen de televisiesystemen te identificeren zijn, zou dat aanleiding kunnen zijn om de convergentiehypothese in twijfel te trekken.

Uit de empirische vergelijking blijkt dat televisiesystemen sinds 1985 meer gefragmenteerder en afhankelijker van commerciële inkomsten zijn geworden (zie hoofdstuk 2). De verschillen op deze twee dimensies zijn tussen 1985 en 2008 veel kleiner geworden. De analyse bevestigt daarmee dat er convergentie tussen televisiesystemen heeft plaatsgevonden in de richting van het liberale model. De mate van publieksfragmentatie en daarmee ook de kijkcijferconcurrentie tussen televisiezenders en de afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten zijn in alle onderzochte televisiesystemen toegenomen. Dit wijst op een algemene toename van de commerciële druk en de concurrentiedruk op systeenniveau. De convergentie is het sterkste op de fragmentatiedimensie. Hoewel alle systemen afhankelijker zijn geworden van commerciële inkomsten is er ook padafhankelijkheid waar te nemen. Televisiesystemen die in 1985 minder afhankelijk waren van commerciële inkomsten zijn dat anno 2008 nog steeds. Ondanks de convergentie bestaan er dus nog steeds verschillen tussen de bestudeerde televisiesystemen.

Het proefschrift benadrukt ook het veelzijdige karakter van dit convergentieproces. Verschillende onderzoekers hebben voorspeld dat als gevolg van de transformatie naar meer concurrerende en marktgeoriënteerde televisiestelsels de media-inhoud steeds meer gericht zou worden op vermaak en entertainment. Er wordt daarbij verondersteld dat de journalistieke invalshoek is verschoven van een focus op ‘formele’ en ‘inhoudelijke’ politieke informatie naar een meer gepopulariseerde en gedramatiseerde stijl van berichtgeving (zie Brants 1998). De resultaten van dit proefschrift leveren op enkele, punten ondersteuning voor deze veronderstellingen.
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Om een deel van deze veronderstellingen te onderzoeken, analyseert hoofdstuk 3 de sensatiezucht in de berichtgeving van 29 televisiezenders in 14 televisiesystemen. De analyse richt zich op de vraag of er een positieve relatie bestaat tussen een toename van de publieksfragmentatie en de afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten enerzijds en sensationele berichtgeving anderzijds. De empirische analyse toont aan dat publieksfragmentatie en afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten inderdaad meer sensatie in de berichtgeving stimuleren. Dit biedt steun aan het argument dat een toenemend belang van marktmechanismen tot een meer sensationele stijl van berichtgeving leidt. Uit de analyse kwamen echter ook significante verschillen tussen publieke en commerciële televisiezenders naar voren. Commerciële zenders hebben een sterkere neiging om sensationeel nieuws uit te zenden en deze neiging neemt toe naarmate de concurrentie tussen televisiezenders sterker wordt. In tegenstelling tot de verwachtingen, worden de verschillen tussen publieke en commerciële zenders in sensationele berichtgeving groter naarmate de concurrentie sterker wordt.

Omdat het onderzoek cross-sectioneel van aard is, zijn we niet in staat harde conclusies te trekken over een toename in de sensationele berichtgeving. Aangezien is vastgesteld dat alle televisiesystemen over de afgelopen 20 jaar commerciëler en gefragmenteerd zijn geworden en aangezien beide kenmerken samenhangen met sensatiezucht, lijkt het echter aannemelijk om te veronderstellen dat de sensationele berichtgeving is toegenomen mede ten gevolge van de druk van marktfactoren. Desalniettemin is het verschil tussen de commerciële en publieke televisie het grootste in sterker concurrerende systemen. Dit suggereert dat de commerciële televisie meer wordt beïnvloed door de publieksfragmentatie dan publieke televisie. Commerciële televisie is dus meer tot sensatiezucht geneigd teneinde een concurrentievoordeel te behalen. Deze bevinding suggereert dat publieke televisie vooral nodig is in een medialandschap waar concurrentiedruk hoog is. In deze context kan publieke televisie minder sensationeel nieuws bieden, wat de totale diversiteit van de berichtgeving in het nieuws kan verbeteren.
De resultaten van de eerste twee empirische hoofdstukken ondersteunen enkele elementen van de ‘mediamalaise’ hypothese. Het gaat met name om de neiging van de media de berichtgeving te populariseren om winst te maximaliseren en publiek aan te trekken. Hoofdstukken 4 en 5 onderzoeken of deze ontwikkelingen negatieve effecten hebben op politieke attitudes en het functioneren van politieke partijen, zoals de aanhangers van de ‘mediamalaise’ hypothese stellen. Voorafgaande studies hebben namelijk betoogd dat er als gevolg van de toenemende commerciële oriëntatie van de media en de concurrentiedruk een media-logic is gaan heersen waarin economische overwegingen de definitie van nieuwswaarde zijn gaan domineren. Mazzoleni (2003) en zijn collega’s stellen bijvoorbeeld dat media als gevolg van deze nieuwe commerciële logica de neiging hebben om meer te berichten over sensationele onderwerpen en meer aandacht te geven aan politici met een meer dramatische en provocatieve stijl van politieke communicatie. Radicaalrechtse partijen zouden bijvoorbeeld door de uitgebreide ‘sensationele’ media-aandacht een sterkere zichtbaarheid en legitimiteit hebben gekregen.

Hoofdstuk 4 onderzoekt het verband tussen de structurele kenmerken van televisiesystemen en concurrentie tussen partijen. De analyse besteedt bijzondere aandacht aan de relatie tussen publieksfragmentatie (de drijvende kracht om meer aandacht voor sensationele onderwerpen en provocerende politici te geven) en het relatieve belang dat politieke partijen aan de immigratiekwestie geven. De empirische resultaten bieden een gemengd beeld. Uit de vergelijking van de aandacht die aan verschillende politieke issues wordt gegeven blijkt dat op nationaal niveau het relatieve belang dat partijen hechten aan het onderwerp immigratie (in vergelijking met andere politieke issues) positief correleert met publieksfragmentatie.

De mate van afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten correleert ook positief met de aandacht voor immigratiekwestie, hoewel deze correlatie niet significant is. Als we partijen met elkaar vergelijken blijkt dat in meer gefragmenteerde televisiesystemen grote partijen meer belang hechten aan de immigratiekwestie dan kleine partijen. Bij het vergelijken van inhoudelijke standpunten van politieke partijen over de immigratiekwestie lijkt een hogere mate van publieksfragmentatie politieke partijen niet te stimuleren om de standpunten van radicaalrechtse partijen over te
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nemen. Het tegendeel is zelfs het geval. Onder omstandigheden van intense publieksfragmentatie neigen politieke partijen er juist naar om meer afstand te nemen van de radicaalrechtse partijen. Dit geeft aan dat als de media zich richten op sensationele onderwerpen zoals immigratie dit het belang van dergelijke kwesties op de politieke agenda wel kan doen toenemen ten koste van minder sensationele (maar daarmee niet noodzakelijkerwijs onbelangrijke) politieke kwesties, maar dat dit politieke partijen echter niet toe aanzet de inhoudelijke standpunten van extreem rechts over te nemen. De resultaten suggereren dat een gefragmenteerd medialandschap politieke partijen stimuleert te polariseren en de grotere gevestigde partijen aanmoedigt zich enigszins te distantiëren van radicaalrechtse partijen. Terwijl de radicaalrechtse partijen een significant extremere positie innemen als publieksfragmentatie toeneemt, nemen andere partijen een significant in relatieve zin gematigdere houding aan.

Tot slot onderzoekt hoofdstuk 5 de effecten van de ‘nieuwe’ televisieomgeving op het vertrouwen van burgers in politici. De aanhangers van de ‘mediamalaise’ hypothese stellen dat commercieel ingestelde en concurrerende mediasystemen vanwege hun focus op vermaak, sensatie en negatieve berichtgeving een groeiend politiek cynisme en wantrouwen onder burgers jegens het politieke systeem in de hand werken. Eerdere studies hebben dit veronderstelde groeiende ‘adversialism’ in de journalistiek in verband gebracht met de toenemende rol van marktmechanismen in de media (zie bijvoorbeeld Patterson 2000). Als de aanhangers van de ‘mediamalaise’-hypothese gelijk hebben, zou concurrentie en afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten negatief moeten correleren met het vertrouwen in politici. Uit de vergelijking van 17 televisiesystemen en politieke systemen in dit hoofdstuk blijkt dat in meer competitieve televisiesystemen mensen met weinig politieke interesse en mensen die weinig aandacht aan nieuws besteden juist een hoger vertrouwen in politici hebben, en dus geen lager vertrouwen zoals de ‘mediamalaise’-theorie verwacht. Uit de empirische analyse blijkt ook dat de groep van politiek geïnteresseerden en ‘nieuwsverslaafden’ geen vertrouwen verliezen als concurrerende en commerciële krachten in de mediasystemen sterk zijn. Ze hebben
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Integendeel meer vertrouwen in politici als televisiestelsels afhankelijk zijn van commerciële inkomsten.

Omdat deze studie niet longitudinaal is, zijn we niet in staat om aan te tonen dat er een causaal effect bestaat tussen publieksfragmentatie en afhankelijkheid van commerciële inkomsten enerzijds en vertrouwen in politici anderzijds. Meer empirisch onderzoek is daarom noodzakelijk. Aangezien de trend in politiek vertrouwen in alle bestudeerde landen dalend is, tonen onze empirische resultaten echter aan dat het onwaarschijnlijk is dat dit deland vertrouwen verklaard kan worden vanuit de effecten van toenemende fragmentatie, concurrentie en de commerciële afhankelijkheid van televisiesystemen.


De kern van de ‘mediamalaise’-hypothese is dat de verandering naar meer competitieve en commercieel ingerichte mediasystemen zou leiden tot (1) een ‘vervlokeling’ van media-inhoud. Welke zich zou vertalen in (2) politiek wantrouwen en cynisme en de politieke agenda zou beïnvloed worden door een groeiende voorkeur voor triviale en sensationele onderwerpen. In hoofdstuk 3 vonden we enige onderbouwing voor het eerste deel van deze redenering. Maar de veronderstelling van de ‘mediamalaise’-hypothese dat deze vervlakking ‘schadelijk’ zou zijn voor het vertrouwen tussen politici en burgers wordt niet empirisch ondersteund. De resultaten suggereren eerder dat het nieuwe medialandschap kwalitatieve verschillen tussen verschillende groepen burgers versterkt.

In plaats van een algemene daling van vertrouwen in politici zoals verondersteld door de ‘mediamalaise’-hypothese, stimuleert het eerder het ontstaan
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van twee verschillende 'soorten' vertrouwen in politici. Deze studie suggereert dat het vertrouwen in politici onder politiek geïnteresseerde burgers berust op andersoortige informatie dan bij politiek minder geïnteresseerde burgers. In concurrerende mediaomgevingen kunnen mensen met weinig politieke belangstelling politiek nieuws gemakkelijk vermijden. Omgekeerd is voor mensen die geïnteresseerd zijn in nieuws grote hoeveelheden nieuws beschikbaar. Sommige onderzoekers hebben betoogd dat er op basis van deze gedifferentieerde consumptiepatronen twee verschillende publieke sferen ontstaan (Prior 2007). De resultaten van dit proefschrift ondersteunen dit laatste idee, hoewel onze resultaten suggereren dat beide groepen politiek betrokken zijn, zij het op verschillende manieren.

Mensen met een lage politieke interesse die niet regelmatig naar traditioneel nieuws kijken, kunnen vertrouwen in politici krijgen door hen te leren kennen via 'infotainment', 'human interest' en andere niet-traditioneel politieke programma's, waar politici optreden als beroemdheden en waar ze hun 'gewone', menselijke kant kunnen laten zien (cf. Temple 2006; Tsfati et al. 2009). Zo kunnen politici zich emotioneel dichter bij minder politiek geïnteresseerde burgers opstellen en worden ze daardoor wellicht ook minder gezien als deel van de 'verdachte' elite. Er kan worden gesteld dat het oordeel over politici onder de politiek minder geïnteresseerden grotendeels gebaseerd is op emotionele nabijheid en impressionistische beelden in de media. Het optreden van politici in dergelijke programma's kan daarom in potentie het politiek vertrouwen bevorderen.

De andere, kleinere groep van intensieve nieuwskijkers heeft meer kans om zijn oordeel over politici te vormen op basis van informatie over hun prestaties als politicus. Deze verschillen tussen de 'aard' van het vertrouwen kan echter niet direct worden onderzocht door middel van de standaard enquêtevragen over politiek vertrouwen waarvan de meeste studies – inclusief dit proefschrift – gebruik maken. Toekomstige studies en vragenlijsten zouden daarom de verschillende dimensies, inclusief de emotionele, van politiek vertrouwen moeten onderzoeken in plaats van zich te richten op een algemene toename of een afname van politiek vertrouwen.

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