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

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Chapter 1

Changing West-European television systems in comparative perspective

A theoretical and methodological discussion¹

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).

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

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 snapshot²

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)

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.

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 were 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

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.

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.

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 & Papathanassopoulos, 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;

- (3) 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 & Saeys, 2001). Hallin and Mancini (2004b) argue that differences among media systems in general have

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)³. 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

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

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 studied 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 costumers 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 (Blumler & 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

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 publically 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

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?

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.⁴ 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

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

media systems and politics. Based on the empirical findings and the limitations of this study, the chapter also identifies promising avenues of future research.