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

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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

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

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

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

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

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

among citizens toward the political party system. Prior studies have linked the allegedly growing adversialism 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

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?