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

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English summary

This thesis “Transformations of television systems Implications for media content, political parties and political attitudes” investigates 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 argues that the transformation of West-European television systems since the liberalisation wave can be best analysed by taking a dualistic approach to media structure. 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. West-European television systems have become media environments where supply and demand are intrinsically related.

This thesis argues 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, resulting in an increased audience fragmentation and (2) an increasing dependency of the entire system on advertising revenues. The study has describes changes in television systems along these two dimensions, and also investigates their consequences for (1) political content, (2) political competition and (3) political attitudes. The Results of this study show the importance of audience fragmentation at the media system level for processes of political communication.

The first empirical chapter of this thesis analyses patterns of changes of television systems since 1980s across West-European countries. 17 West-European television systems are compared 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.

Chapter 3 investigates 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 investigates 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. 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. 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.

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. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate whether these trends have negative effects on political attitudes and the functioning of political parties, as the adherents of the 'media malaise' hypothesis believe.

Chapter 4 analyses the link between structural media characteristics and political competition between parties. It particularly investigates 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 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 close the substantial distance between them and the radical right. The findings suggest that a fragmented media environment does not stimulate imitation but rather urges political parties to polarise. 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.

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. 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. As this study is not longitudinal, 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.

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 but leads to inclusion rather than exclusion to the political system. 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. In addition rather than stimulating imitation of successful politicians, who might be receiving more media attention, audience fragmentation is associated with a larger gap between the immigration issue owner and other political parties.