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Soft News With Hard Consequences? Introducing a Nuanced Measure of Soft Versus Hard News Exposure and Its Relationship With Political Cynicism

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Abstract

The possibly detrimental consequences of soft news are subject of popular and academic debate. This study investigates how watching particular news genres—soft versus hard—relates to cynicism about politics among Dutch citizens. A nuanced and novel scale measuring relative exposure to soft versus hard news is introduced using nonparametric unidimensional unfolding. The analysis of three public opinion surveys demonstrates a strong relationship between people’s position on this hard versus soft news exposure scale and political cynicism. People who watched relatively more soft news were more cynical about politics than people who watched relatively more hard news. This relationship was not conditional on individuals’ level of political knowledge and interest.

Keywords

soft news, hard news, political cynicism, surveys, unfolding

The introduction of the first European commercial broadcasters in the mid-1980s has increased competition between television channels for audience shares. Consequently, audiences have become more fragmented, viewership of traditional news has declined, and news coverage about politics has radically changed (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999;

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Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Plasser, 2005). Struggling to maintain their audiences, news producers felt the need to make their products more appealing (Gans, 2009; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), and have increasingly reported on dramatic and emotionally gripping issues, and presented issues with personalized narratives (Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011; Patterson, 2000; Scott & Gobetz, 1992). Hence, more and more news programs have emerged that can be labeled *soft news* (Holbert, 2005).

Scholars have frequently questioned whether soft news has beneficial or detrimental consequences for the quality of democracy. Remarkably, journalists themselves are skeptical about soft news' contribution and fear that a dumbing down of the news leads to more apathetic and cynical citizens (Nguyen, 2012). The academic debate, by contrast, centers on the ability of commercialized media systems to sufficiently inform citizens about political affairs (e.g., Thussu, 2007; Van Zoonen, 2005; Zaller, 2003). Quantitative research on the question whether the softening of news coverage stimulates a vital democratic culture in which more people engage with politics and public issues (Costera Meijer, 2003), however, generally relied on a simple, dichotomous conceptualization and measure of soft news exposure. This study proposes a more nuanced type of measurement. Furthermore, existing research has paid little attention to empirical investigations of attitudinal outcome measures.

A clear gap exists in the current literature regarding the relationship between soft news and citizens' view on politics in general. A large share of politically cynical people would silence public debate (Schyns & Nuus, 2007), decrease political engagement, lower turnout, and decline governments' perceived legitimacy (Dalton, 2000; Hart & Hartelius, 2007; Hetherington, 1998). By investigating how our exposure to soft versus hard news measure relates to citizens' level of political cynicism, we shed a new light on the question whether soft news benefits or harms the quality of democracy. The contribution of this study is thus twofold. Relating to methodology, we introduce a theoretically motivated new measurement of soft versus hard news exposure. Theoretically, we add to the debate of the potentially detrimental democratic effects of soft news by focusing on political cynicism.

We here stress that our study is concerned with news programs that primarily report on the news and current affairs of the day in a journalistic manner. These are programs that position themselves as being "news," but may still differ largely in terms of their content, focus, and presentation (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). We do not investigate infotainment programs such as daytime or late-night entertainment talk shows, political satire, entertainment shows with the latest gossips of celebrities, or fictional political drama, as these arguably represent different genres of political entertainment (Holbert, 2005).

Hard News Versus Soft News: An Oversimplified Dichotomy

Scholars have distinguished various functions the media should fulfill in a democracy: informing about issues of public interest, being a platform for dialogue between

societal representatives, controlling the use of power by governments, educating and socializing citizens about politics, and persuading these people to conform to democratic norms (Delli Carpini, 2004; Nisbet, 2008). However, since “a shift from programs in the public interest to programs the public is interested in” (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 150) has taken place, it is difficult to define and delineate what the politically relevant media are and which media would not conform to these democratic functions (Van Praag & Brants, 2000; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

Moreover, it is important to realize that a nominal dichotomous distinction between politically relevant and irrelevant media neglects the observation (e.g., Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Zelizer, 2007) that political relevance of media is much more a matter of degree than of “either-this-or-that”-extremes. After all, a medium may adhere to more or less of the described democratic functions and may do so more or less thoroughly than other media. The current study attempts to advance previous research by explicating the importance of treating the difference between hard and soft news media as an ordinal scale, and offers an operationalization of such a scale that could be used for analytical purposes.

The impact of popular, yet in some way informative, programs would be neglected by defining too narrowly which television programs are politically relevant and which are not (Baum, 2005). Most studies on political cognition, attitudes, or behavior only dealt with newspapers and hard news television programs, and do not investigate the influence of soft news media, apparently being put aside as being politically irrelevant (Baum, 2005; Holbert, 2005; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). However, soft news also deals with issues of political and societal importance regularly, whereas editors of hard news increasingly soften their content to keep audiences interested (Graber, 1994). By focusing only on the traditional hard news media, scholars create an artificial hierarchy in political information sources and forget to investigate the influence of programs that are the main or only source of political information for many citizens (Baum, 2003a; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). In the Netherlands, for example, both soft news and hard news programs draw considerable audiences from different backgrounds: Those watching soft news are generally lower educated and less interested in politics than viewers of hard news programs (Schönbach & De Waal, 2011).¹

What makes the rough distinction between hard and soft news even more artificial is that most news coverage has characteristics applying to hard news as well as to soft news, and is not an “either-or circumstance” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 6): “The difference between soft and hard news is one of degree rather than kind” (Baum, 2003b, p. 6). Hence, classifications into one or the other genre can be problematic, as most programs seem to belong to an in-between category (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). For example, programs may include elements of thematic as well as episodic frames (Iyengar, 1991). Although both frames are in much research understood to be different types of hard news, episodic framing actually is much more particular of soft news than of hard news (Baum, 2003b) as it emphasizes the experiences of individuals while not placing a topic in a broader political context, and thus has much in common with human interest styles of news reporting.

Previous empirical studies on soft news (e.g., Baum, 2003a; Rittenberg, Tewksbury, & Casey, 2012; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & van Meurs, 2013), however, still describe and operationalize news programs as a dichotomy of hard news versus soft news. In our view, it is more appropriate to think of soft versus hard news exposure as a scale on which the different news programs can be positioned along a continuum from hard news to soft news. Such a scale with hard news on one end and soft news on the opposite end of a continuum does not oversimplify the current media landscape (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Reinemann et al., 2012).

On one side of this scale, typical hard news programs could be placed that focus on issues in the fields of politics, economics, or society (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Accordingly, Patterson (2000) described hard news as the “coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life” (p. 3). The focus of hard news is mostly on the societal relevance of an issue, and the style is best described as rational, impersonal, unemotional, thematically framed, in-depth coverage of politics (Baum, 2003b), with attention for experts and politicians (Reinemann et al., 2012).

Soft news could then be placed on the other side of this scale being the opposite of hard news: “more sensational, more personality-centered, less time bound, more practical, and more incident-based” (Patterson, 2000, p. 4). Soft news programs have more entertaining elements in their shows and focus frequently on dramatic and sensational topics, such as crime, disasters, crises, or scandals (Baum, 2003b; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Patterson, 2000). Issues of political and societal relevance are also covered in soft news, but less prominently than in hard news (Barnett, 1998; Bird, 2009), without embedding them in a political context by relying disproportionately on episodic frames (Baum, 2004; Kitch, 2009), human interest information (Gans, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), and interviews with *the man in the street* (Baum, 2003b; Graber, 1994; Hvitfelt, 1994). By reporting news from such a human interest angle, journalists exemplify broader political issues with often dramatic individual case stories (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), because these are more appealing, comprehensible, and better understandable (Bird, 1998; Gross, 2008; Macdonald, 1998). Moreover, by favoring a focus on citizens rather than on politicians who are responsible for such topics, soft news opens the floor for populist anti-elite discourse (Atkinson, 2005; Norton, 2011) and provides less space for politicians to explain the situation and possible solutions (Reinemann et al., 2012).

The Established Effects of Soft News

Television enables people to learn just by passively watching (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1984; Graber, 1990). Some scholars, therefore, expected the television’s introduction to improve democratic quality by raising the level of political interest, and by bringing politicians and voters closer to each other than the press had done (Glaser, 1965). In that sense, television could be a *bridging medium*: enlightening and involving those who know less about politics, and thereby decreasing knowledge and

participation gaps (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). By contrast, others assumed television to make citizens less politically involved and to decrease their ability to understand politics (Manheim, 1976; Postman, 1986). Furthermore, the focus on negativity in television news could increase political cynicism and alienation from politics (Delli Carpini, 2004; Newton, 2006; M. J. Robinson, 1976).

Thus, opposing expectations have been voiced about television's contribution to a healthy democracy. Similarly, contradicting views exist on the soft news phenomenon. Some scholars assumed that soft news would make citizens pay more attention to public affairs, as it would be more attractive than hard news (Baum, 2003b; Zaller, 2003). For example, people who did not closely follow the hard news media were more likely to be attentive to and to develop opinions about international crises if they watched soft news (Baum, 2002), but not about less sensational issues as domestic politics. Moreover, and following Baum's (2003b) gateway-hypothesis, watching soft news with the intention of being entertained may at the same time unintentionally foster an interest in political issues or current affairs that are "piggybacked" in such shows and subsequently motivate the consumption of hard news to keep track of such topics (see, for example, Feldman & Young, 2008). Soft news can also be a democratizing factor (Barnett, 1998), because dramatized and personalized news coverage make politics more comprehensible for broader audiences and political engagement more pleasurable (Bird, 2009; Van Zoonen, 2005; Zaller, 2003).

The claim that soft news would attract broader audiences has, however, been questioned, as audience shares of soft news do not outnumber those of hard news (Belt & Just, 2008; Graber, 2003; Nguyen, 2012; Patterson, 2003). More extremely, soft news possibly even turns people off from politics and journalism, because relatively small issues are covered so frequently in very dramatized and alarming ways that people are less surprised by yet another "breaking news story" (Bennett, 2003), which might explain decreasing turnout rates among soft news viewers (Rittenberg et al., 2012). Furthermore, ratings-driven soft news might undermine public knowledge about larger, unsensational social or political topics (Bird, 2009), because of its lowered standards to meet the expectations of the widest audience possible (Thussu, 2007). A preference for soft news, for instance, seems unrelated to knowing more about a variety of news topics, while watching hard news and reading newspapers do positively relate to political knowledge (Prior, 2003).

While there are opposing findings for the contribution of soft news to citizens' political knowledge and their attentiveness to political matters, very little is known about the consequences of soft news for public opinion and political attitudes. One study showed that American citizens, especially the lower educated ones, who watched soft news, were more likely to oppose a U.S. intervention in a foreign conflict (Baum, 2004). Moreover, certain characteristics of soft news when present in hard news have been found to affect political cynicism differently (Jebiril, Albæk, & De Vreese, 2013). In the following section, we elaborate on the consequences of watching soft news and explain why it most likely positively relates to political cynicism.

Soft News and Political Cynicism

Along with introducing a more nuanced hard versus soft news scale, this study investigates the relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism among citizens. While it is well conceivable that soft news exposure leads to public cynicism, and while this matter is subject of popular and academic debate (Bennett, 2003; Nguyen, 2012), it has hitherto not been empirically addressed. Political cynicism can be defined as “an individual’s attitude, consisting of a conviction of the incompetence and immorality of politicians, political institutions and/or the political system as a whole” (Schyns & Nuus, 2007, p. 97).² As such, cynics are preoccupied with questioning politicians’ motives rather than objectively judging their behaviors (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Our study particularly focuses on cynicism toward politicians as they are most prominently present in public debate.

There is only little theoretical guidance when it comes to the influence of watching soft news on political cynicism. Therefore, we have based our expectations on what is known about the effects of particular content and style characteristics that are defining for soft news. Hence, there are several arguments as to why watching relatively more soft news would relate to higher levels of political cynicism.

First, soft news programs especially report on negative and dramatic issues (Baum, 2003b; Grabe et al., 2001; Patterson, 2000). Such topics will therefore become increasingly salient to citizens (Baum, 2007), and politicians may be perceived as not solving or being unable to alleviate these problems, which may decrease people’s trust in them. Hard news is less likely to cause such perceptions, as it reports relatively less on dramatic topics and more on general political issues, describes politically relevant topics from a policy perspective, and hence shows that politicians are working on solutions (Reinemann et al., 2012).

Second, when soft news reports on topics of political or societal relevance, this is mainly done by relying on episodic frames (Baum, 2004), without providing political context (Bird, 2009), and in personalized manners (Gans, 2009). Often, such issues are covered by focusing on one or a few individuals, who personally experience the news topic and thereby exemplify the broader issue (Bird, 1998; Machin & Papatheoderou, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Rucinski, 1992). News stories with such exemplars can strongly affect recipients’ perceptions of those topics (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000): Compared with baseline statistics or interviews with politicians, portraying normal citizens as examples of broader societal problems makes people believe these issues to be more severe (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996).

Furthermore, personalized information has the power to shift opinions in the direction of those expressed by exemplars (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997) and to generate sympathy for them (Gross, 2008; Kitch, 2009). As personal exemplars are mainly used to explain societal and political problems, and are frequently shown as being victims or opponents of governmental policy or political decisions (e.g., Jones, 2012; Norton, 2011), this most likely will affect opinions about politicians negatively. Moreover, due to the primary focus of soft news on citizens rather than thematically framing an issue and placing it

in a broader political context, ordinary people have the opportunity to complain about and speak badly about politicians, who in turn do not have a chance to respond (Reinemann et al., 2012). Such anti-elite discourse (Atkinson, 2005; Norton, 2011) probably also contributes to political cynicism.

Third, in its urge to achieve higher ratings, news programs often soften their content by devoting less attention to politically substantive topics such as policy plans and decision-making processes (Reinemann et al., 2012). Such a decrease of politically substantive (hard) news is often accompanied by an increase in news coverage that focuses on horse-race and strategic aspects of politics (Belt & Just, 2008; Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004; Just, Crigler, & Buhr, 1999). These aspects—horse-race and strategy—are repeatedly found to stimulate political cynicism as well (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; De Vreese, 2004; Jackson, 2011; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001).

The changing nature of news coverage may thus affect the opinions people hold about politics. However, this relationship can also be formulated the other way around: People's interest in and opinions of politics may influence what kind of media they tend to watch (e.g., Van Zoonen, 2005; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & Van Meurs, 2011; Zaller, 2003). Furthermore, to better understand the dynamics of media use and its influence, we should acknowledge that media selection is influenced by people's background characteristics and partly functions as an intervening variable between these background characteristics and the outcome of interest (Slater, 2007). In line with the selective exposure paradigm and uses and gratification theory (Lee, 2013; Levy, 1977; Rubin & Perse, 1987), what type of news media people chose to watch may, additionally, be influenced by the outcome of interest as well (e.g., fear of crime, polarization, or in our case political cynicism). This means that media selection (watching soft news) and media effects (on political cynicism) could form a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing process: Increased media use causes a strengthened attitude, which in turn stimulates the use of particular media, and so on.

So, whereas the topics covered as well as the presentational style in soft news probably increases political cynicism, there are also reasons why this process may work the other way around. Studies have shown that especially the people who are unknowledgeable about or not interested in politics watch soft news (Baum, 2003a; Prior, 2003); their lack of interest might be explained by a cynical view on political matters.³ Furthermore, it seems unlikely that people who are cynical about politics enjoy watching hard news programs in which politicians and experts discuss current affairs and political topics at length. We thus do expect a positive relationship between soft news exposure and political cynicism, but we refrain from formulating expectations regarding the causal direction of this relationship. Hence, we formulated the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism.

Effects of mass-mediated political information are increasingly recognized as being conditional (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). Previous studies found effects of

watching television news, soft news or not, to depend on viewers' level of political awareness (Baum, 2003a, 2005; Zaller, 1992): As people were more politically aware, the likelihood decreased that these people were affected by what they saw in the news. This also seems a reasonable assumption for the relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism.

First, following the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, people's motivation *and* ability generally predict whether they take a central or peripheral route of media processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005). Those with a strong motivation and high ability tend to take a central route by elaborating on the content of messages, whereas the ones who are unable or unmotivated to carefully process messages take a peripheral route and easily accept the information in messages. In terms of political communication and effects of soft news, one could argue that the ability component could be represented by political knowledge (e.g., Galston, 2001; Taber & Lodge, 2006), whereas the motivation component seems strongly related to political interest (for an overview, see Elenbaas, Boomgaarden, Schuck, & De Vreese, 2013). To evoke central processing, political knowledge alone has been shown to be insufficient: An internal or external motivation is needed to fully activate people's cognitive capacities (Prior & Lupia, 2008).

The more political knowledge people have, the better they are probably *able* to carefully process news broadcasts, while the more interested in politics they are, the more *motivated* they will be to do so (Taber & Lodge, 2006). This motivation is important, because carefully processing a message demands much cognitive effort. Subsequently, engaging in such careful processing has been shown to increase the ability to withstand and counter argue provided political information (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Kunda, 1990). By contrast, it is less likely that politically uninterested and unknowledgeable people are able and motivated to centrally process the news they see. Therefore, they will probably peripherally process the messages and be simply convinced.

Second, those people with sufficient political knowledge can rely on prior, already well-established information. Hence, new information will not have much influence on their opinions (Zaller, 1992). Those who have less prior knowledge, on the other hand, will find it harder to withstand the information forwarded in soft news, because they do not have much previous knowledge to draw upon. Hence, they are more likely to strongly integrate the information they are exposed to into their attitude toward politics.

When considering the relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism running in the other direction, that is, political cynicism influencing the relative amount of soft news exposure, it also seems likely that this link is strongest among politically unknowledgeable and uninterested individuals. Political cynicism leading to an increase in soft news viewing seems more plausible for people with little political knowledge or interest. After all, the politically interested and knowledgeable people most likely still want to know what is going on in the political arena (e.g., Elenbaas et al., 2013; Jennings, 1996; Leshner & McKean, 1997). This interest will especially be satisfied by hard news programs, as soft news programs normally report less on

political processes and do not regularly show interviews with politicians. Accordingly, this leads to the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism is less strong for people who have more political knowledge and political interest.

Method

This study relies on secondary analyses of public opinion data originating from three recent surveys with samples representative for the Dutch population.⁴ Every survey contained questions asking which particular news programs respondents watched and included items to determine respondents' level of political cynicism. The analysis of these three data sources helped to verify the robustness of the hard versus soft news exposure scale that we have created across time and data collections.

Data

We used survey data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) of 2006 and 2010. Fieldwork for these surveys was carried out in cooperation with Statistics Netherlands (CBS). Interviews were conducted face to face and by telephone; the second part of surveys was filled in via self-completion questionnaires. The response rate was 51.7% in 2006 and 58.3% in 2010. In both surveys, more than 1,500 respondents completed the questionnaire (2006: $n = 1,895$; 2010: $n = 1,633$).

The third source of data was the survey of the Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB) from the third quarter of 2009. Respondents for this survey were part of a panel based on random selection in the Dutch population. This survey had a response rate of 68.7%; 1,095 respondents completed the questionnaire (832 online and 263 on paper). Not all respondents were asked or answered all questions in the three surveys, which explains why the sample sizes reported here are higher than those used in the analyses.

Measures

Political cynicism. The dependent variable political cynicism was measured with indices of several items available in the three surveys. These items overlapped on many points and measured individual's responses to statements on different aspects of political cynicism on Likert-type disagree-agree scales. To give all items equal weight, they were recoded to range from 0 to 4, with the highest value indicating the most cynical response. Mokken scale analysis, which is a probabilistic version of Guttman scale analysis, confirmed the unidimensional structure of the political cynicism indices. Mokken scaling was used to create the latent variables measuring political cynicism, as assumptions of principal components analysis are often unjustifiably too strong to be satisfied by one-dimensional constructs consisting of relatively many items differing in frequency distributions (Van Schuur, 2003).

Table 1. The Five Items Used to Create the Scale Measuring Political Cynicism in the COB 2009 Survey ($H = .48$; $\alpha = .79$).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>H_i</i>
Most politicians are competent people who know what they are doing (recoded)	2.06	.45
Politicians often behave inappropriate to each other	2.20	.31
MPs and ministers do not care much about what people like me think	2.38	.55
Politicians are particularly interested in their own interest	2.58	.55
Politicians spend too much time discussing, and too little governing	2.86	.54

Note. COB = Citizens' Outlooks Barometer.

Table 2. The Ten Items Used to Create the Scale Measuring Political Cynicism in the DPES 2006 Survey ($H = .42$; $\alpha = .79$).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>H_i</i>
MPs do not care about opinions of people like me	1.35	.41
Parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion	1.45	.41
Ministers and junior ministers are primarily self-interested	2.25	.39
Politicians are capable of solving society's problems (recoded)	2.38	.39
Politicians only have fine talk	2.63	.45
Politicians are corrupt	2.74	.34
Politicians are profiteers	2.94	.45
Politicians are reliable (recoded)	2.97	.48
Politicians are honest (recoded)	3.06	.45
Politicians keep their promises (recoded)	3.43	.40

Note. DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies.

Performing Mokken scale analysis using MSPWIN 5.0 on the five items measuring aspects of political cynicism in the survey of 2009, a scale was found that satisfied the criteria of a good scale ($H > .30$; Mokken, 1971). A well-fitting and rather strong scale was formed with items about politicians' competency, behavior, efficiency, self-interestedness, and commitment ($H = .48$; $\alpha = .79$). Higher scores indicated more cynical attitudes toward politics. Table 1 shows the translation of the five items with their means and how well they fitted the Mokken scale measuring political cynicism (see the H_i -value for how well individual items fitted the scale, where $H > .30$ indicates acceptable fit).

The 2006 survey included 10 items measuring aspects of political cynicism. It was also possible to create a well-fitting and strong Mokken scale ($H = .42$; $\alpha = .79$) measuring political cynicism with these items (see Table 2) of which some were very similar to those in the 2009 scale.

Table 3. The 15 Items Used to Create the Scale Measuring Political Cynicism in the DPES 2010 Survey ($H = .45$; $\alpha = .88$).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>H_i</i>
Politicians are corrupt	1.08	.43
MPs do not care about opinions of people like me	1.29	.46
Most politicians are competent people (recoded)	1.45	.40
Politicians do not understand what is going on in society	1.62	.47
Politicians are profiteers	1.62	.47
Ministers and junior ministers are primarily self-interested	1.76	.51
Politicians are capable of solving society's problems (recoded)	1.83	.37
Politicians are reliable (recoded)	1.86	.46
Parties are only interested in my vote, not in my opinion	1.86	.52
Politicians only have fine talk	1.88	.50
Friends are more important than abilities to become MP	1.88	.50
Politicians are honest (recoded)	2.17	.43
MPs quickly lose contact with voters	2.43	.50
Politicians promise more than they can deliver	2.45	.38
Politicians keep their promises (recoded)	3.10	.39

Note. DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies.

The scale measuring political cynicism for the data of 2010 was somewhat stronger and also fitted well ($H = .45$, $\alpha = .88$). Even more items, 15 in total (see Table 3), were available to create this scale measuring political cynicism.

The scales measuring political cynicism were constructed by adding up the responses to individual items and subsequently transforming this sum in such a way that the additive scale ranged from the lowest possible score of -5 to a highest possible score of 5 on the political cynicism scale (2006: $M = -0.60$, $SD = 1.63$; 2009: $M = 0.81$, $SD = 1.69$; 2010: $M = -0.46$, $SD = 1.56$).

Exposure to hard news versus soft news. The three surveys that were utilized featured between 8 (2006 and 2010) and 10 (2009) items tapping which news programs respondents regularly watched. These items covered the most important and best-watched hard news and soft news programs on Dutch television at that time. The variables measuring exposure to news programs were treated as preferential choice data (Coombs, 1964); using nonparametric unfolding (Van Schuur, 1992), we were able to place respondents and news programs on a joint scale. The unfolding procedure that was followed to create and test this scale was based on people's reported viewing behavior, but the input for this method was provided by previous content analyses on these news programs. The scales ranged from hard news programs on one end to soft news programs on the other end of this continuum. The unfolding procedure determined with which items and in what order of items an optimal scale could be created. Basically, the more viewing behavior of programs overlapped, the more closely these news programs were positioned together.

Relying on this bipolar scale instead of on a dichotomy (e.g., counting the number of hard news and soft news programs a person watches separately), we created one variable indicating how “soft” a respondent’s news exposure was. This scale takes into account that the difference between hard and soft news is *not* one of two extremes, but one of a gliding scale with many intermediate classifications (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). By creating this hard versus soft news exposure scale, we can locate people according to their viewing habits more precisely than has been realized in the current literature.

Unfolding procedures order items (news programs) by the degree to which respondents’ preferences for these items (exposure to particular news programs) overlap (Van Schuur, 1992): The more the viewing behavior of two news programs overlap, the closer the items measuring exposure to these programs are positioned together. Nonparametric unfolding allows for an ordering of items (news programs), so the imaginary final scale of five items “A B C D E” will have a minimal number of respondents who prefer program B and D, but not C. Thereby, it minimizes the number of Guttman violations, which occur when people watch two news programs, but not the news programs that are positioned in between these two. If the unfolding scale holds, viewers of news programs that are closely positioned to each other will largely overlap. Hence, adjacent items (measuring exposure to these items) will correlate strongly and positively, whereas the items on the very left side of the scale will not or even negatively correlate with the items at the right side of the scale. This substantially means that the unfolding procedure assumes people who watch the “hardest” news programs to be relatively unlikely to also watch the “softest” news programs. Unfolding procedures create scales in which the probability to respond positively to an item decreases as the distance (to the left or to the right) is larger between a respondent’s score on this scale and a news program’s position on this scale.

The goodness of fit of an unfolded scale is assessed by its Loevinger’s coefficient of homogeneity, H . This statistic indicates the ratio of model violations relative to the number of model violations if items in the scale were statistically independent. H -values above .30 indicate satisfactory fit according to a rule of thumb (Van Schuur, 1992). Values of H are given for the overall unfolded scale as well as for the individual items in the scale; the latter indicate how well an item fits into the scale. Besides Loevinger’s H , there are other diagnostics to evaluate goodness of fit of unfolded scales: its correlation matrix and conditional-adjacency matrix. The unfolded scales we have created largely conformed to the expected patterns of these matrices.⁵

First, an unfolding scale was created using MUDFOLD 4.0 for the 2009 survey.⁶ In this survey, dummy variables indicated whether respondents regularly watched a particular news program (1) or not (0). To start the unfolding procedure, a theoretically based start set needs to be given; this start set was based on the degree of news programs’ informativeness found by Brants, Cabri, and Neijens (2000) and content analyses on topics, sensationalism, arousing characteristics, and human interest framing in various Dutch news programs (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Minkjan, 2012; Semetko

Table 4. The Hard Versus Soft News Exposure Scales Ordered From Hard News to Soft News Programs.

DPES 2006	H_i	COB 2009	H_i	DPES 2010	H_i
		Buitenhof ^a	.48		
Netwerk ^b	.42	Netwerk ^b	.43	Netwerk ^b	.54
Nova ^b	.44	Nova ^b	.47	NOVA ^b	.54
EenVandaag ^b	.36	EenVandaag ^b	.38	EenVandaag ^b	.47
Pauw & Witteman ^c	.36	Pauw & Witteman ^c	.41	Pauw & Witteman ^c	.45
NOS Journaal ^d	.41	NOS Journaal ^d	.40	NOS Journaal ^d	.46
RTL Nieuws ^d	.50	RTL Nieuws ^d	.47	RTL Nieuws ^d	.56
Hart van Nederland ^e	.46	Hart van Nederland ^a	.44	Hart van Nederland ^e	.54
Editie NL ^e	.51	4 In Het Land ^e	.42	Editie NL ^e	.60
		Editie NL ^e	.35		
Overall	.43	Overall	.43	Overall	.52

Note. H -values are Loewinger's coefficients of homogeneity. DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies; COB = Citizens' Outlooks Barometer. The programs can be described as belonging to the following news program genres:

^aSunday morning political talk show.

^bCurrent affairs programs.

^cNews talk show.

^dStandard news broadcasts programs.

^eNationally oriented news programs.

& Valkenburg, 2000). The start set of programs ranged from a serious discussion program purely dealing with politics broadcast on Sunday mornings, followed, respectively, by a current affairs programs, a serious news talk show, the news program of the commercial broadcaster, and ending at nationally oriented and popular news shows, because those contain most soft news elements, such as human interest frames, laypersons, music onsets, and close-ups (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Minkjan, 2012; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The remaining items, the news program of the public broadcaster and a current affairs program, were placed automatically on a location in the scale.

This automatic placement located both these programs on a position in the scale that theoretically made sense: the news program of the public broadcaster directly to the left of the news program of the commercial channel (both found to be rather similar by Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011), and the current affairs program besides the other current affairs program. This is an indication that indeed a valid hard versus soft news exposure scale was created. Furthermore, the homogeneity coefficient also revealed that this scale fits the data well ($H = .43$), just as the patterns in its conditional-adjacency matrix and correlation matrix did (see the online appendix).

The total scale (see Table 4) also made sense theoretically, as it ranged from news programs on the left side (hard news: *Netwerk*, *NOVA*, *EenVandaag*) that are more informative and less sensational than the programs on the right side (soft news: *Hart van Nederland*, *Editie NL*; Minkjan, 2012). Furthermore, two programs in the middle

of the scale (*NOS Journaal* and *RTL Nieuws*) have been found to use human interest frames less dominantly than a program on the right side of the scale (*Hart van Nederland*; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Finally, this soft news program, *Hart van Nederland*, has also been found to consciously soften hard news topics and to take the side of citizens rather than politicians or public servants (Beskers, 2011). *NOS Journaal* and *RTL Nieuws* also focus on soft news topics or report serious issues in personalized manners sometimes, but journalists of these programs experience this much more as a concession to economic pressures than the reporters of *Hart van Nederland* (Beskers, 2011). In addition, the audience characteristics of these programs also confirm the correct placement of programs on the hard versus soft news scale: The programs on the left side (hard news) especially attract audiences that are higher educated, more interested in politics and current affairs, have weaker entertainment preferences, and are more willing to learn about background information of news topics than the audiences of the news programs on the right side (soft news) of the scale (Schönbach & De Waal, 2011).

The 2006 and 2010 surveys also asked which news programs respondents watched, though more precisely (5-point scale; from *never* to *almost daily*) but for less programs. Using the same order of news programs as we had found in the unfolding analysis of the 2009 data, scales were created that also fitted these data well (2006: $H = .46$; 2010: $H = .42$). This confirmed that we successfully created a valid instrument to measure exposure to soft news programs relative to hard news programs. The identical program order with high H -values and the similar automatic placement of various news programs proved the robustness of this scale.

After the scales were created, scale values representing respondents' exposure to soft news programs versus hard news programs were calculated using Van der Brug's (1993) procedure.⁷ These scale values indicate how many item steps a respondent passed, and thus on which place on the hard versus soft news continuum a respondent's viewing behavior is situated: More to the left side (lower scores) means that a respondent especially watched hard news programs; more to the right (higher scores) indicated watching more soft news. As the hard versus soft news scale ranges from the "hardest" news program via intermediate classification to the "softest" news program, greatest weight is given to programs on the borders of this scale. Accordingly, a positive response to the softest news program, *Editie NL*, contributes a little more to a high score than the second softest program, *Hart van Nederland*. Similarly, a positive response to the hardest news program, *Netwerk*, causes a lower score than a positive response to *Nova*, which is the second hardest news program in the scale.

To make coefficients comparable across the three surveys, scores on this hard versus soft news exposure scale were recoded, so they ranged from -5 for the "hardest" possible news viewing behavior to 5 for people who only watched the "softest" news program on the scale (2006: $M = 0.23$, $SD = 1.33$; 2009: $M = -0.16$, $SD = 1.37$; 2010: $M = 0.22$, $SD = 1.47$).

Moderator and interaction terms. We have argued in the lead up to Hypothesis 2 that the ability to carefully process a political message could be represented by political

knowledge, whereas the motivation to carefully process such a message is probably strongly related to political interest. Accordingly, we have created a moderator variable that captures both these elements. Interaction terms were created with this variable to test whether the relationship between exposure to relatively more soft news and political cynicism was conditional on people's knowledge of and interest in politics.

The surveys of 2006 and 2010 explicitly measured how much respondents know from politics: Pictures of politicians were shown and questions followed about their names, parties, and functions. With 12 questions in 2006 ($M = 6.83$, $SD = 3.01$) and 12 questions in 2010 ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 3.25$), political knowledge could be measured in great detail. The survey of 2009 did not measure political knowledge explicitly. Previous studies on the effects of soft news (Baum, 2003a, 2004) were also confronted with this typical disadvantage of secondary data usage. Fortunately, a good alternative was available in this data set to estimate people's level of political knowledge. Items that measured how closely people followed local, national, European, and other political news on 0 to 4 Likert-type scales were combined into one latent variable ($\alpha = .84$; $M = 6.53$, $SD = 2.36$), which also ranged from 0 to 12. This seems a valid proxy to estimate respondents' level of political knowledge, as media are by far the most important source of political information for most people (Aalberg & Jensen, 2007; Newton, 1999; M. J. Robinson, 1976; Van der Eijk, 2000). Furthermore, it largely corresponds to other measures of political knowledge, because such measures are normally based on political affairs and politicians that have recently been in the news (J. P. Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1999).

In the 2006 and 2010 survey, people were explicitly asked about their political interest and they could indicate this on a 0 to 4 scale. In the 2009 survey, political interest was estimated with a question that asked how much time people spend following political affairs. Both the political knowledge and political interest variables were recoded to range from -0.5 to 0.5 and then added together ($r = .38$, $p < .001$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .55$). This created an interval scale ranging from -1 to 1 with the lowest score for people who were not interested in politics and had the lowest political knowledge, and the highest score for those who were very interested in politics and very knowledgeable (2006: $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.41$; 2009: $M = -0.12$, $SD = 0.30$; 2010: $M = -0.13$, $SD = 0.46$). Interaction terms were computed by multiplying respondents' scores on the hard versus soft news exposure scale with this political knowledge/interest scale, and by multiplying the political cynicism scale with the political knowledge/interest scale.

Control variables. The analyses controlled for all available potentially confounding exogenous variables, by including items for age, gender, educational level, and income.⁸ We also included control variables that measured the use of other media sources: newspaper reading and visiting news websites.⁹ Furthermore, we controlled for internal political efficacy and political preference.¹⁰ For comparative purposes, all these items were recoded to range from a lowest possible score of 0 to highest possible score of 1. They all may in some way affect the level of political cynicism and the relative amount of soft news exposure, but we do not elaborate on them separately, as this article primarily focuses on the relationship between political cynicism and exposure

to soft news. A correlation matrix of and the sample's characteristics on the employed variables are presented in the appendix.

Analysis

The relationship between the exposure to soft versus hard news and political cynicism was tested using structural equation modeling (maximum-likelihood estimation [MLE]; using AMOS 21) with both exposure to soft news versus hard news and political cynicism as endogenous variables, while controlling for possibly confounding exogenous variables.¹¹ As all variables were recoded to have the same range in the three surveys, and because there was no theoretical reason to expect relationships to be different in one year from the others, the surveys of 2006, 2009 and 2010 were pooled and analyzed in a single analysis in which we controlled for the survey from which data originated to take into account the differences in the scales measuring the endogenous variables (Nota bene, analysis of the surveys separately yielded largely the same findings).

The final structural regression model was created by retaining only the direct effects that were statistically significant from a model that perfectly fitted the data, $\chi^2(0) = 0$, controlled for all possible effects on hard versus soft news exposure and on political cynicism, and had a disturbance covariance specified between these two endogenous variables to take into account that both may share at least one common omitted cause. Covariances were also specified between all exogenous variables, and between the interaction terms and the endogenous variable they were created with. From this model, eight insignificant direct effects could be dropped, as these relationships probably do not exist in the real populations. This led to an over-identified model that fitted the data very well and had unique regression equations for both endogenous variables, so a reciprocal relationship could be tested between soft news exposure and political cynicism (see Figure 1 for a visualization of this model; a model without the disturbance covariance yielded similar findings).

Besides unique regression equations for the endogenous variables, testing a reciprocal relationship requires three other conditions (Kline, 2011). First of all, a sufficiently large number of observations is needed, which was established by combining the data of the three surveys ($n = 2,592$). Second, the causal structure should be stationary, which means that the relationships in the model do not change over time. As the yielded findings are very much in line with the findings of analyses of the three surveys separately, this requirement seems met. Third, an assumption of equilibrium is required, which means that the effects in the presumed feedback relationship have already manifested themselves and that the system is in a ready state. Previous research has shown that political cynicism is very stable in the Dutch context over the last decades (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Van der Brug & Van Praag, 2007) and news viewing behavior does not change a lot within individuals as this is routine behavior and mostly habitual (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997). Average exposure to light news, serious news, and serious background programs did, for example, not change much between 2006 and 2010 in the Netherlands (Wonneberger et al., 2013).

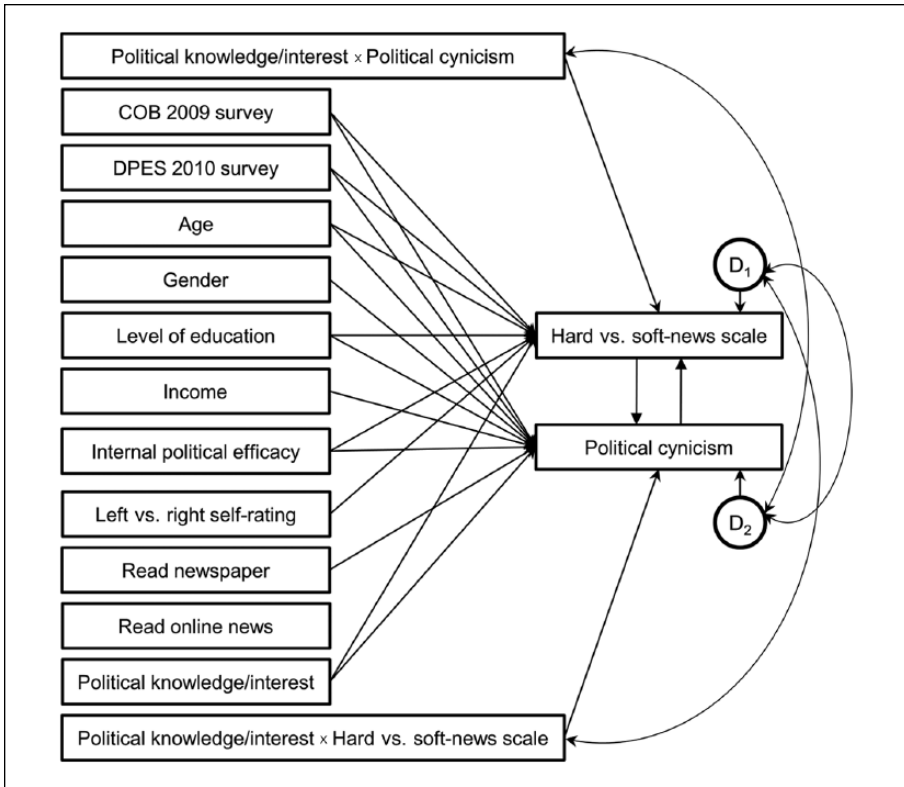


Figure 1. Structural equation models explaining the relationships between hard versus soft news exposure and political cynicism, and the interaction with political knowledge/interest. *Note.* For reasons of clarity, we did not visualize the specified covariances between the exogenous variables. D1 and D2 represent the unspecified causes of the dependent variables as analogous to an error or residual in a prediction equation. COB = Citizens’ Outlooks Barometer; DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies.

Both endogenous variables most likely are thus in a stable equilibrium. Hence, all requirements to test a reciprocal relationship have been met.

Results

Model fit indices and standardized regression coefficients produced by the nonrecursive structural regression models (with and without interaction effects) are presented in Table 5. The models predicted about one third of the variance, *R*², in the relative exposure to soft news, and about one fourth of the variance in political cynicism.

Looking at the relationships with the exogenous control variables, several patterns showed up. In general, higher levels of political cynicism were found for older people, males, lower educated citizens, and those with relatively low income and a low

Table 5. Results of the Reciprocal Structural Regression Model Predicting Political Cynicism and Hard Versus Soft News Exposure and the Relationships Between These Two Endogenous Variables.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Soft news	Cynicism	Soft news	Cynicism
COB 2009 survey	-.19***	.30***	-.18***	.34***
DPES 2010 survey	-.07***	.03	-.07***	.06*
Age	-.28***	.17***	-.27***	.23***
Gender (0 = female; 1 = male)		.10***		.10***
Level of education	-.11***	-.16***	-.12***	-.13***
Income		-.04*		-.04*
Internal efficacy	-.10***	-.10***	-.10***	-.07*
Left versus right political preference	.09***		.09***	
Read newspaper		-.04*		-.04*
Read online news				
Political knowledge/Political Interest scale	-.33***	-.06†	-.34***	.03
Hard versus soft news scale		.13*		.41*
Political cynicism	.14		.10	
Hard versus soft news scale × Knowledge/Interest scale				.08
Political cynicism × Knowledge/Interest scale			-.02	
Observations (<i>n</i>)		2,952		2,952
Squared multiple correlations (<i>R</i> ²)	.34	.23	.34	.19
Fit indices	$\chi^2(6) = 8.87, p = .181$; CFI > .99; SRMR < .01; RMSEA = .01, 90% CI = [.00, .03]		$\chi^2(4) = 4.02, p = .403$; CFI > .99; SRMR < .01; RMSEA = .00, 90% CI = [.00, .03]	

Note. Cells contain standardized regression coefficients. COB = Citizens' Outlooks Barometer; DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; CI = confidence interval. † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

internal efficacy. Frequent readers of newspapers were less cynical about politics. Watching relatively more soft news, on the other hand, was especially the case among younger and lower educated people, and those with a low level of internal political efficacy. In contrast with political cynicism, political preference played a role for news viewing behavior: Citizens with a right-wing political preference tended to watch relatively more soft news. Respondents' gender, income, and newspaper reading did not have a relationship with news viewing behavior.

Turning to the relationship of interest, we found that people's exposure to soft versus hard news was significantly and positively related to their level of political cynicism, in the case of an effect of the first on the latter, $B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = .13$, $p =$

.027, 10,000 bias-corrected bootstraps 95% confidence interval (CI) = [0.01, 0.31]. Therefore, we could confirm Hypothesis 1. However, the effect that runs in the opposite direction, from political cynicism to relative soft news exposure was far from significant, $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.12$, $\beta = .14$ $p = .345$, 10,000 bias-corrected bootstraps 95% CI = [-0.20, 0.42]. This implies that as respondents watched soft news programs more regularly, they had a higher level of political cynicism than similar people who watched hard news programs more frequently, while holding all other variables constant. Yet, we should be cautious about deriving too strong inferences about causality from this analysis as we are still relying on cross-sectional data. Refraining from formulating strong conclusions regarding the causal direction, the analysis, nevertheless, suggests that there is a robust relationship running from exposure to soft versus hard news to political cynicism.

In the second hypothesis, we expected that this relationship would be less strong among people with more political knowledge and political interest. Our data did not support this hypothesis. Although we found negative effects of political knowledge and interest on both soft versus hard news exposure and political cynicism, the two added interaction effects with this moderator on the endogenous variables turned out to be insignificant in Model 2. Relative to Model 1, including the interaction terms in the structural equation model did not significantly increase model fit either, $\chi^2(2) = 4.85$, $p = .088$. The assumption that the relationship between watching soft news and political cynicism is conditional on viewers' level of political knowledge and political interest could thus not be substantiated.¹²

As stated by Slater (2007), we could get more insight into the processes of media influence if we acknowledge that media selection is influenced by people's background characteristics and thus functions as an intervening variable between background characteristics and the outcome of interest. Speaking in analytical terms, media exposure could be the mediator in an indirect effect of background characteristics on a dependent variable, political cynicism in this case. Here, for example, the indirect effects of age, education, internal political efficacy, and political knowledge/interest via the hard versus soft news exposure scale on political cynicism turned out to be negative ($p < .05$) as the bounds of their 95% 10,000 bias-corrected bootstraps CIs did *not* positively exceed zero, implying a significant negative indirect effect. On the other hand, a significant positive indirect effect was found of political preference on political cynicism via relative soft news exposure, which means that as people's political preference is more right-wing, they become more cynical about politics due to their tendency to watch more soft news.

Discussion

This study has investigated the relationship between the news programs people watch—relatively more or less soft news—and their level of political cynicism. In line with theoretical accounts, we argued that the difference between hard and soft news is not between two extremes but rather of a gliding scale with many intermediate positions. This scale has been successfully operationalized employing nonparametric

unidimensional unfolding. Subsequently, the usefulness of this approach is illustrated by a hitherto novel investigation of the relationship of soft news exposure and political cynicism.

Earlier studies have found positive outcomes of watching soft news, as it would increase political knowledge and foster attentiveness among politically unaware people (Baum, 2003b). Accordingly, soft news may contribute to the quality of democracy, being a gateway to politics for politically uninterested individuals. However, our study presents a less positive consequence: People who watched more soft news had higher levels of political cynicism than those who watched more hard news. This relationship was found across-the-board, which puts into question the democratizing potential of soft news. An increase in knowledge and attentiveness (Baum, 2003a) seem to go hand-in-hand with an increase in cynicism (this study) as consequences of watching soft news. Not totally inexplicable, as learning about particular political topics—especially dramatic, negative, and strategic ones—may cause dissatisfaction with politicians. Soft news may thus bring citizens closer to politics (gateway-hypothesis), but they do not necessarily appreciate what they experience there.

The strong relationship between exposure to soft news and political cynicism can be explained by a potential tendency of politically cynical people to prefer soft over hard news. However, previous studies have found that such motivational viewing is only a weak predictor of news viewing behavior (Wonneberger et al., 2011) and that news consumption behavior is a routine and mostly habitual (Diddi & LaRose, 2006). Our statistical findings and the theoretical rationales that would predict soft news characteristics to cause political cynicism are, however, arguably more convincing. Soft news' tendency to focus on sensational and dramatic topics, such as crime, disasters, crises, or scandals (Baum, 2003b; Grabe et al., 2001; Patterson, 2000), to strategically and episodically frame politically relevant news stories with a focus on personal experiences and by showing ordinary people expressing their opinions and feelings (Bird, 1998; Machin & Papatheoderou, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Rucinski, 1992) probably evokes negative perceptions of the politicians responsible for governing society. Overall, there are several theoretical indications that soft news causes political cynicism; however, this study could not fully rule out that such an attitude causes increased soft news selection in its turn.

Furthermore, this study has shown that the relationship between exposure to hard versus soft news and political cynicism is not conditional on people's interest in and knowledge of politics: The relationship between seeing more soft news and people's level of political cynicism was not stronger for people who were less interested in and knowledgeable about politics. Additional analyses showed that interactions with citizens' level of education, which is the proxy used for political awareness in previous studies (Baum, 2003a, 2004), did neither affect political cynicism nor people's soft news viewing behavior. The analyses, however, confirmed that soft news viewing may function as an intervening variable between citizens' background characteristics and political cynicism. There were indirect effects of age, education, internal political efficacy, political preference, and political knowledge and interest on political cynicism via their direct effect on how much soft news people watched.

The samples of respondents in the three employed public opinion surveys were representative of the Dutch population, which allows us to draw generalizable conclusions. Furthermore, the news exposure scales we could create with these data sets measured people's news viewing behavior more sophisticatedly than prior research did. However, the use of secondary survey data also had limitations. First, questions were asked how often or whether respondents watched certain news programs; however, these were not all the possible news programs aired on Dutch television at that moment. A more extensive list of news programs in the surveys could have made the hard versus soft news scale somewhat stronger and more precise, or even multidimensional if exposure to infotainment programs, such as political satire or entertainment talk shows, would have been measured.

Second, though relying on generalizable data and controlling for important factors that relate to the selection of news media (i.e., age, gender, education, income, political awareness; Smith, Fabrigar, & Norris, 2008), the study was limited by an issue always associated with cross-sectional data: the difficulty to prove causality relationships, as there is no clear time order of cause and effect (Cappella, 2002; Schulz, 1997). Therefore, this study could investigate the *relationship* between exposure to soft news relative to hard news and political cynicism, but we are limited in speaking about an *effect* of the former on the latter. Experimental studies or panel data are needed to confirm this and unravel the direction of causality. Future research should also take into account the possibility that exposure to soft news and political cynicism may be part of a mutually influencing process (Slater, 2007). Experiments can, furthermore, shed light on the question which specific characteristics of soft news are causing political cynicism: Is it about the topics, the way news is presented, or perhaps both? Despite the data's limitations to investigate directionality of causality, we were very pleased with the three surveys, because compared with other surveys their questionnaires are rare in measuring exposure to many news programs that differ in their degree of hard versus softness, and at the same time allowed the creation of detailed political cynicism scales.

In sum, using a sophisticated and novel scale measuring people's exposure to soft news relative to hard news programs, this study established a robust nonconditional relationship between exposure to soft versus hard news programs and political cynicism. As cynical citizens expect to be disappointed by their representatives beforehand and are pessimistic about the rewards of political engagement (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004), they are less willing to engage in politics (Hart & Hartelius, 2007). Soft news may thus potentially constitute a danger for society's democratic quality. In addition, one may question whether an increase in cynicism toward politicians in general will reduce people's involvement with politics overall. Perhaps, the trend toward a softening of news, with more sensational, incident-based and emotional news coverage, will be beneficial for the popularity of populist politicians and their movements who make use of similar presentational styles (Albertazzi & MacDonnell, 2008; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). This assumption, however, needs empirical verification. Overall, this study offers a nuanced way of measuring exposure to soft news and initiates research on the effect of soft news exposure on political cynicism. Although we refrain from firmly establishing that soft news has hard consequences, we must conclude that the signs are not very good.

Appendix

Sample Characteristics and Correlation Matrix of the Used Variables

Table A1. Descriptive Information and Observed Correlations of the Variables in the Structural Equation Model.

Variable	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆	X ₇	X ₈	X ₉	X ₁₀	X ₁₁	X ₁₂	X ₁₃	X ₁₄	X ₁₅	X ₁₆
X ₁ : Age	1.000															
X ₂ : Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	.045	1.000														
X ₃ : Level of education	-.235	.082	1.000													
X ₄ : Income	-.027	.293	.341	1.000												
X ₅ : Internal efficacy	-.063	.209	.326	.195	1.000											
X ₆ : Left versus right self-rating	.019	.094	-.041	.009	.021	1.000										
X ₇ : Read newspaper	.279	.092	.126	.142	.101	.010	1.000									
X ₈ : Read online news	-.212	.112	.209	.128	.322	-.006	-.035	1.000								
X ₉ : Political knowledge/interest	.236	.203	.294	.224	.438	-.016	.368	.157	1.000							
X ₁₀ : Hard versus soft news scale	-.312	-.099	-.200	-.133	-.321	.078	-.211	-.110	-.472	1.000						
X ₁₁ : Political cynicism	.182	.023	-.332	-.167	-.156	.083	-.117	-.064	-.202	.144	1.000					
X ₁₂ : Hard versus soft news x Political knowledge	.130	.040	.049	.021	.101	.021	.062	.038	.142	-.362	-.018	1.000				
X ₁₃ : Political cynicism x Political knowledge	-.074	-.072	.010	-.045	-.066	.059	-.103	-.004	-.228	.080	.013	.166	1.000			
X ₁₄ : DPES 2006 survey	-.068	.037	.059	.090	-.127	-.029	.058	-.172	.248	.045	-.161	.042	-.066	1.000		
X ₁₅ : COB 2009 survey	.089	-.047	-.164	-.150	.205	.112	-.188	.123	-.095	-.109	.310	.089	.016	-.406	1.000	
X ₁₆ : DPES 2010 survey	-.003	.001	.073	.030	-.037	-.061	.093	.074	-.173	.042	-.088	-.114	.054	-.679	-.395	1.000
M	48.164	0.535	0.701	0.532	0.488	0.538	0.569	0.312	-0.035	0.151	-0.277	-0.288	-0.137	0.411	0.191	0.398
SD	15.834	0.499	0.283	0.330	0.189	0.294	0.495	0.463	0.428	1.402	1.700	0.605	0.741	0.492	0.393	0.490

Note. DPES = Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies; COB = Citizens' Outlooks Barometer.

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Notes

1. Considerable audiences are attracted by both hard news and soft news programs. *Editie NL*, *Hart van Nederland*, *NOS Journaal*, *RTL Nieuws*, *Pauw & Witteman*, and *Nieuwsuur* (which replaced *Nova*) are almost every day part of the top 20 most watched television programs in the Netherlands, which means that they attract on average between 15% and 5% of the Dutch population above 6 years old. These data are retrieved from *Stichting KijkOnderzoek* (<http://www.kijkonderzoek.nl/>), which measures audience sizes in the Netherlands. *4 in het Land* and *Netwerk* are not broadcasted any longer. *Buitenhof* is broadcasted on Sunday mornings and only attracts a small audience. The survey data used in this study imply even larger audience sizes, as survey questions asked whether respondents watched news programs regularly, whereas the audience data described above are on average and only for individual broadcasts.
2. The distinction in the definition of political cynicism between competence and integrity of politicians as two dimensions of political cynicism has empirically been confirmed (Adriaansen & Tiemeijer, 2011).
3. However, previous studies (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Leshner & McKean, 1997) did not yield a significant relationship between political interest and political cynicism.
4. Nationaal kiezersonderzoek 2006 and 2010, and Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven 2009. More information about the 2006 and 2010 surveys can be found on <http://www.dpes.nl/>. More information about the 2009 survey can be found on http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2009/COB_Kwartaalbericht_2009_3
5. Correlation and conditional-adjacency matrices are not presented in the article, because they require lots of space. Most deviations from a perfect unfolding scale in these matrices were small and could be explained by the time and channels on which programs were broadcasted; these are probably disturbing dimensions underlying the hard versus soft news scale. An appendix with the correlation and conditional-adjacency matrices is available on the website of the publisher as supplemental material.
6. Van Schuur (1992) describes this program and the unfolding procedure it follows in further detail.
7. Van der Brug's (1993) averaging method has the advantage, compared with the normal procedure for calculating unfolded scale values that it leads to less missing information and is less sensitive to small and often meaningless variations in response patterns. Following this procedure, the responses to news program exposure items were multiplied by the odd number of the location a program was assigned to on the unfolded scale (1, 3, 5, etc.), and thereafter divided by the total of the response values. The following calculation has been made, for example, to find the scale values for the data of 2006: $(Netwerk \times 1 + Nova \times 3 + program_i \times odd\ number_j + \dots + Hart\ van\ Nederland \times 13 + Editie\ NL \times 15) / (Netwerk + Nova + program_i + \dots + Hart\ van\ Nederland + Editie\ NL)$.

8. Education was measured on a 0 to 6 scale in the 2009 survey and on a 5-point scale in the 2006 and 2010 surveys. Income was measured on a 3-point scale in the 2009 survey, whereas this variable ranged from 0 to 19 in the 2006 and 2010 surveys (2006: for personal income; 2010: for household income).
9. Dummy variables were created indicating whether respondents read a newspaper almost every day or not. Similarly, dummy variables were created indicating whether respondents visited websites with political or societal topics more than once a week (2006 and 2010) or used Internet to follow news about national politics regularly to often (2009).
10. Internal political efficacy measures were formed by the cumulative score of the following variables: Did people consider themselves qualified for politics, did they believe to have a good understanding of political problems, and did they think that politics is too complicated for people like them (2006: $\alpha = .60$; 2010: $\alpha = .63$); in the 2009 survey, the following two items were used, how difficult people find it to understand politics, and how difficult people find it to express their opinions about political affairs ($\alpha = .71$). Political preference was measured in the 2006 and 2010 surveys by a 10-point left versus right self-rating scale; such a variable was not available in the 2009 survey, but we used the question on which party a respondent would vote if there were elections "today," a left-wing (0) or a right-wing (10) party.
11. Theoretically speaking, it would be most appropriate to also include variables as political knowledge and interest or exposure to other news sources as endogenous variables. However, this would unnecessarily make the model more complicated and lead to the same results for the relationship of interest. As this study focuses on the relationship between exposure to soft news and political cynicism, we decided to include only these two variables as endogenous variables for reasons of parsimony.
12. Using only political knowledge (ability) or only political interest (motivation) as the moderator yielded similar, insignificant findings for the interaction terms.

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