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### Spicing up politics: how soft news and infotainment form political attitudes

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*Chapter 1* \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction:**  
**Soft News, Infotainment, and**  
**the Formation of Political Attitudes**

“Now Lisa, I’m an entertainer. And you can’t entertain and inform at the same time.”

– Homer J. Simpson, January 8, 2012, in Episode 496 of The Simpsons.

Entertainment and journalism are deeply conflated in the current media environment, with the consequence that entertainment has become pervasive in the triangle of relationships between politics, citizens, and the media (Baym, 2010; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). This development began in the late 1980s when government regulations were relaxed in multiple countries that had not – until that time – permitted private parties to broadcast television (Barnett, 1998). Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) called the period since that time, “the third age of political communication,” which “is marked by the proliferation of the main means of communication, media abundance, ubiquity, reach, and celerity” (p. 213).

With the advent of commercial television channels, audiences gradually fragmented, and competition for viewers increased. Currently, news programs can therefore no longer simply assume that people will tune in; the new media environment provides the public many alternatives, and those not interested in politics and current affairs can simply avoid watching the news (Prior, 2005). To keep advertising revenues, an audience-centered approach to news making has allegedly become dominant in which the public is considered to consist of consumers who *want* to be entertained rather than citizens who *should* be informed (Barnett, 1998; Baym, 2010; Harrington, 2008). Therefore, news producers began to tailor their product to the needs of the market (McManus, 1995; Patterson, 2010).

Increasingly, news coverage has thus come to be understood as a potential source of revenue (Anderson, 2004; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Thussu, 2007). Consequently, many producers of news are guided by a *media logic* in which news outlets aim to commercially survive rather than by a *public logic* in which informing the audience is the primary goal (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Political journalism in this phase of media logic therefore has shifted from a descriptive and factual style of news coverage to an interpretive way of reporting.

A term borrowed from journalists, “soft news” (see Tuchman, 1973; Turow, 1983), has been used to describe this phenomenon (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Although there are different interpretations of this concept,

interviews with journalists (Plasser, 2005) and a review of scholarly definitions reveal that these all focus on three dimensions of news coverage (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012): (1) whether the covered subject matter is politically relevant or not; (2) whether political news items stress public relevance or personal consequences; and (3) whether political news coverage is objective and factual or explicitly includes the opinions and interpretations of journalists.

This dissertation investigates the effects of the changing nature of televised *political* news on citizens' political attitudes and therefore focuses on the latter two dimensions of "soft" news coverage. First, the effect of the increased focus on personal consequences is investigated (Chapter 2). Personalizing political news is more appealing to many people than factually covering the news because audiences can identify with the actors involved (Kitch, 2009) and more easily interpret the story (Graber, 1994). Softening news by portraying political issues in a human interest frame makes citizens willing to "eat their vegetables" (Serazio, 2009, p. 15) and may boost news programs' audience ratings.

The other prominent development in the coverage of political news (Plasser, 2005; Reinemann et al., 2012) is the increased expression of opinions in news reports by journalists themselves (Chapter 3). This deviation from traditional journalistic standards of objectivity has also emerged in response to increased competition within the media business (Plasser, 2005). Because many people prefer news that is consistent with their own beliefs (e.g., Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), one way of profit-maximizing for news organizations is to abandon objectivity standards and mix news coverage with explicit opinions (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Prior, 2013b). Opinionated news offers citizens a comfortable environment to follow the news and appeals to people's social need of being part of a community (Jones, 2011), which explains its popularity.

Lastly, not only has news turned entertaining by increasing the emphasis on personal consequences and the expression of journalists' opinions (Plasser, 2005; Reinemann et al., 2012), entertainment has also turned more political (Baym, 2010; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Although this phenomenon is not completely new, entertainment genres have increasingly taken up political topics in their programs (Brants, 1998). Political satire, arguably, is the most prominent example of this phenomenon (Chapter 4). This "fake news" genre (Baym, 2005) is particularly popular among young viewers (Hmielowski, Holbert, & Lee, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006; Young, 2004), who are an attractive target group for

advertisers. Politically, satire is relevant because it potentially attracts viewers that have tuned out from the traditional news (Mindich, 2005; Rottinghaus, Bird, Ridout, & Self, 2008; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Moreover, from a journalistic perspective, satire is important because it fosters more critical approaches to political matters than contemporary news media often can generate (Baym, 2005; Jones, 2009).

How political issues are covered on television is of great importance for the functioning of democracy (Baker, 2002; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Thussu, 2007); so is the increasing importance of new news genres. Television is still citizens' major source of news by far, even with digitalization and social media (Ofcom, 2014; Van Praag & Brants, 2014).<sup>1</sup> This medium thus remains relevant, but audience research has shown that the consumption of television news *within* the medium of television is indeed subject to change. People increasingly tune out from the traditional forms of news coverage (Mindich, 2005) and instead turn to lighter alternatives, including soft news and infotainment, or use these new news formats in addition to the consumption of hard news (Schönbach & De Waal, 2011; Wonneberger, Schoenbach, & Van Meurs, 2013; Young & Tisinger, 2006; Young, 2004).

This dissertation investigates the effects on political attitude formation of the three most prominent entertainment-oriented styles of political television coverage: (1) human interest framing that is used to make the traditional news softer; (2) opinionated news that has emerged out of commercial considerations as a new stand-alone format of news coverage; and (3) political satire as the most prominent genre of infotainment. In this manner, both the developing nature of news coverage with varying degrees of deviation from traditional news coverage and the incorporation of politics into entertainment programming are included.

### **News Coverage Becoming Entertaining and Vice Versa**

Ratings battles among media outlets have moved news reporting toward softer and more sensational styles of reporting (Thussu, 2007) to keep audiences interested in the coverage of politics and current affairs (Graber, 1994). Studies involving content analyses have confirmed that news coverage over time and across borders has become “softer” and more sensational. Scott and Gobetz (1992) showed that,

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<sup>1</sup> The Eurobarometer of 2013 (80.1) shows that in all European countries, television is the source most used to follow national as well as European political matters. In the United States, the situation is the same (Pew Research Center, 2013).

between 1972 and 1987, news was increasingly covered without policy elements but with a focus on human-interest issues. The increased softening of news coverage in the US has been shown to have persevered between 1980 and 1998 with less focus on policy components, increasing focus on sensational presentational style, and a doubled-up usage of human interest elements (Patterson, 2000).

Because media systems in the US and Europe differ in many aspects – and particularly with respect to the role of public broadcasting (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) – some may assume that the trend toward softer styles of news coverage might only occur in the US. This assumption, however, seems not to be true. Brants and Van Praag (2006) have shown that there are some signs of media logic in the Netherlands, and these signs have only become more prominent in their most recent observations as the substantiveness of election campaign coverage on television has clearly decreased over time (Van Praag & Brants, 2014, p. 93). A similar move toward game-framed campaign coverage, an intensified focus on personality, and short sound bites has been found in Germany (Schulz & Zeh, 2005).

European television news has also been shown to increasingly employ sensational tools outside of campaign periods. Emotions, personalization, and close-ups were found increasingly in Dutch news between 1995 and 2001 (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). Similar trends were observed in other parts of Northern Europe in the 1990's (Hjarvard, 2000; Hvitfelt, 1994). Personalization and the presence of laypersons were most prominent in news media that faced high market pressures (Hendriks Vettehen, Zhou, Kleemans, d'Haenens, & Lin, 2012), and these arousing news characteristics seem to be used as a reaction to new competitors, in particular (Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2011). Thus, content analyses provide abundant evidence to conclude that news has become more personalized over time.

Increases in the explicit expression of journalists' opinions instead of objective reporting, which is the other dimension of soft news (Reinemann et al., 2012), have not been demonstrated with longitudinal data. However, with the launch of cable news channels such as *Fox News* and *MSNBC*, in addition to the emergence of biased news shows such as *PowNews* in the Netherlands, it is obvious that opinionated news has become more and more prominent in the media landscape. Whereas news and opinion were previously strictly separated (Williams

& Delli Carpini, 2011), they are now intertwined within these opinionated news media.

To suit the political leanings of the majority of residents and to attract as many people as possible with their coverage of current affairs, news corporations attempt to reflect the political makeup of their distribution area when they produce content (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). A substantial proportion of the public, moreover, appreciates biased news because it helps them to more easily interpret political topics. They perceive the openness of journalists about their opinions as a sign of authenticity (Marchi, 2012). To attract audiences by fulfilling the needs for likeminded and opinion-guiding news, opinionated news media are biased in how news stories are framed (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Jones, 2012b; Norton, 2011), which experts and sources are selected (Aday, 2010; Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Leiserowitz, 2012), and how emotions are expressed (Peters, 2010).

The trend that political matters are addressed more entertainingly than has been done previously is not restricted to news outlets (Baym, 2010). Instead, several subgenres can be found under the infotainment umbrella. These subgenres vary in the political nature and implicitness of political statements (Holbert, 2005); think, for example, of entertainment talk shows, fictional political dramas, and political satire. The increased prominence of infotainment has eradicated the monopoly enjoyed by traditional news outlets to bring the public in touch with political affairs.

Political satire, in particular, has been considered an important form of infotainment. Although satirists consciously label themselves as “fake news” providers, this moniker definitely does not fully cover their political relevance. Political satire has been described as “the reinvention of political journalism” (Baym, 2005) and may engage with roles that traditional news media have failed to perform. By being humorous and denying that they are journalists, satirists create for themselves the freedom to reject the objectivity standard and the detached role that is expected from regular news (Baym, 2005; Jones & Baym, 2010). This role allows satirists to critically interrogate those in power and to resist the professional ways politicians and their spin doctors have developed to address the traditional news media.

Journalists in traditional news media have difficulties controlling those in power because they are faced with the media logic to produce easy-to-swallow, quickly manufactured, and inexpensive content (Thussu, 2007). Satire, instead, openly critiques this development and has blown new life into the search for

political truth by critically examining political representatives (Jones, 2009). Thus, those who accuse political satirists of being cynical toward democracy (e.g., Hart & Hartelius, 2007) seem to miss the joke. In particular, their infotainment programs enable political deliberation (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009), and call for informed participation and a revival of journalistic inquiry (Bennett, 2007; Hariman, 2007). Humor allows an escape from power structures, which removes any restrictions that journalists are confronted with. Moreover, by spreading dissident interpretations of political situations in primarily analytical, critical and rational ways, their audience can overcome the dominant messages of the elite and form political opinions independently and on their own (Gray et al., 2009; Warner, 2007).

### **Why Soft News and Infotainment Matter**

Notwithstanding the increasing prominence of entertaining forms of political coverage, previous research into political communication has mainly addressed the content and effects of traditional hard news media, such as newspapers and regular news programs. By ignoring more popular formats and keeping this research marginal, soft news and infotainment have apparently been considered politically irrelevant (Baum, 2005; Delli Carpini, 2013; Holbert, 2005; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). However, as “a shift from programs in the public interest to programs the public is interested in” has occurred (Brants & Neijens, 1998, p. 150), it is currently difficult to say which media are and which are not politically relevant (Van Praag & Brants, 2000; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Genres have collapsed (Jones, 2013) and the political relevance of a program is frequently not an “either-or circumstance” (Zelizer, 2007, p. 6), but “one of degree rather than kind” (Baum, 2003b, p. 6; see also Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014). Hard news, for example, can easily be turned soft, and vice versa (Boczkowski, 2009).

By too narrowly defining which media outlets are democratically relevant (Baym, 2010; Harrington, 2008), the impact of many programs that are an important source of political information for many citizens will be neglected (Baum, 2003a; Gans, 2009; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Popular forms of political communication have substantial democratic potential (Althaus, 2012) because they cut across citizens’ most important resources of political sense making (Van Zoonen, 2007): media discourse, experiential knowledge, and popular wisdom. By investigating the effects on political attitudes of other genres than the traditional news, this dissertation may help tear down the artificial hierarchy in



political information sources and acknowledges the role soft news and infotainment may have as accessible public spheres contributing to the quality of democracy.

### **Political Entertainment through the Lens of Democratic Theory**

The rise of entertaining news formats can be considered through the principles of democratic theories when compared to situations in which only regular news coverage would exist (Althaus, 2012). After all, the media and the political system are mutually dependent, and changes in one will have consequences for the other. Democracy allows the media the freedom of speech, whereas the media should inform and engage citizens with politics (Brants, 1998; Strömbäck, 2005). The latter occurs in the public sphere, which is largely constructed in and by the mass media in modern times (Habermas, 2006; Schulz, 1997). The public sphere, which by now may be called a “public screen” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002), accordingly is the environment in which citizens form their political attitudes to a large extent, and the media thus have the power to intervene in the formation of public opinion by selecting and presenting political issues.

For a democracy to function well, it is often assumed that the public sphere should encourage an unrestricted rational discussion that is open and accessible to all citizens (Habermas, 2006). However, political communication scholars typically assess developments in news coverage only according to whether it helps citizens to gain all of the information needed for the practice of self-government in the absence of political representatives (Althaus, 2012). Declining news standards and the decreasing popularity of hard news might be considered problematic from this perspective (see Gans, 2009).

However, most democratic theorists consider this republicanism theory of democracy as placing needless and unrealistically high expectations on citizens (Althaus, 2012). Alternative theories of democracy – pluralism and elitism – only expect of citizens that they realize when their interests are at stake and have the capacity to vote incompetent politicians out of office (Baker, 2002). According to these theories, developments away from hard news and toward softer, more entertaining forms of political coverage may potentially benefit democracy (Althaus, 2012; Baker, 2002).

Particularly with regard to the accessibility of the public sphere, a positive influence could be expected of the emergence of soft news and infotainment because significant numbers of citizens have always been excluded from the public

sphere (Fraser, 1990): There have been wide gaps between the “demanding *ought*” of democratic theory and the “sobering *is*” that can be found in most societies (Converse, 1964; Habermas, 2006, p. 411). Whereas citizens are expected to follow and engage in communication and discussion on the processes of political decision (Berelson, 1952), many have been found not to do so (Habermas, 2006). The traditional way of covering news may thus have done a poor job in enlightening and engaging the citizenry with politics (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

The reason for regular news coverage being likely to impede the political engagement of many citizens is that it is too fast-paced and too complicated for many citizens, and citizens also often perceive its content as largely irrelevant to their lives (Buckingham, 1997). Framing news in abstract terms rather than in personal experiences hampers understanding, and the lack of emotional appeals and obvious links to one’s personal life restrain people from paying attention (Graber, 2004). This implies that the media’s way of dealing with politics, and thus the public sphere, is not as accessible to citizens as it would ideally be (Buckingham, 1997).

The discourse of rationality that is expected to prevail in the public sphere may thus impede the engagement of many individuals (Dahlgren, 2005; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Fraser, 1990). Various scholars believe that too much is asked of citizens’ willingness and ability to engage in politics by this conception of the public sphere and by the way that political affairs are covered in the traditional news media. A detached, rational style is the usual manner in which traditional news media cover politics (Baum, 2003b), but a large share of the citizenry may be excluded from the public sphere because they are used to other styles of communication, such as narrative or emotional appeals (Baym, 2010; Graber, 2004). Rather than accusing citizens of being lazy and irresponsible, perhaps journalists should be blamed for insufficiently addressing the needs and communicative abilities of citizens (Buckingham, 1997; Graber, 2004).

A democracy that not only wants the elite to politically participate may become accessible to more citizens by complementing the rationalist style as not being the only way of presenting politics in the public sphere (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). For a popular inclusion in the public sphere, the latter should be open to a range of styles, modes, and topics that match the capacities, experiences, and interests of non-elite citizens (Baym, 2010; Ferree et al., 2002). The rise of tabloid newspapers in the nineteenth century, for example, coincided

with the first introduction of political life to the masses (Sparks, 2000; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

A democracy and media environment that accept heterogeneity in the communicative modes through which the public might engage with politics will assist non-elite citizens to learn about politics and to form political attitudes in ways that match their abilities and interests (Dahlgren, 2005). Thus, news coverage that is appealing to more citizens could be beneficial for democracy, as “preaching to an increasingly empty church” (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011, p. 94) is not particularly helpful. An entertainment approach toward producing news can make obscure political topics relevant for a broader but initially uninterested audience and may thus play a democratizing role (Bird, 1998; Harrington, 2008; Thussu, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for political coverage that is personalized, dramatized, and entertaining (Zaller, 2003), and the media should offer incentives for citizens to follow, learn about, and become involved with politics (Brants, 1998).

Following the preceding, one way to increase the accessibility of the public sphere is by changing the coverage of politics in the traditional news media to meet more realistic expectations about how citizens can engage with politics (Althaus, 2012). Another possibility is to establish alternative public spheres in which marginalized groups can gather and define for themselves what should be public and which discourses are appropriate (Fraser, 1990). This idea implies that the concept of a singular public sphere in which all citizens come together should be reconceptualized to a more realistic notion of a plurality of public spheres that also exist outside the traditional news media (Baym, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005).

Entertainment formats and opinionated news may function as these alternative public spheres. These genres attract citizens for reasons other than learning about current affairs (Lee, 2013a); nevertheless, they may still contribute to political engagement in ways that match their abilities, needs, and lack of interest, because these genres are less bound to journalistic norms and therefore can produce more diverse and accessible content (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Opinionated news, for example, tailors its content to the political preferences of one likeminded group. With such appealing content, it has the ability to help the targeted group promote their particular interests and inform them when their interests are at stake (Althaus, 2012).

Infotainment formats, such as entertainment talk shows, fictional drama, reality TV, and political satire (Curran, 2010; Holbert, 2005), on the other hand,

can provide citizens with sufficient knowledge to make the right vote choices without requiring them to watch serious content (Althaus, 2012; Baum & Jamison, 2006). By returning politics to the popular domain, entertainment genres can reconnect citizens with the public world in ways that they enjoy and that encourage political participation (Van Zoonen, 2005).

Not out of democratic ideals, but due instead to economic motives (Plasser, 2005; Reinemann et al., 2012), two developments have occurred that may thus be celebrated when considered from the schools of thought that are less demanding of citizens' engagement with democracy (Althaus, 2012). On the one hand, the traditional news media, which form the existing public sphere, have (at least partially) softened their content and thereby have become more accessible (e.g., Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Patterson, 2000; Sparks, 2000); whereas, on the other hand, opinionated news has emerged and entertaining formats have embraced politics to create compelling content and may thus be considered public spheres as well (e.g., Baym, 2007). This dissertation aims to answer whether and how these developments contribute to the formation of public opinion because that is an essential function of the public sphere. This investigation is conducted at the micro-level (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a) by studying the effects of soft news and infotainment on the political attitudes of individual media users.

### **The Effects of Soft News and Infotainment**

Baum's (2003b) gateway hypothesis predicted that viewers of soft news and infotainment would be exposed to political information as a by-product of entertainment-oriented content and thereby would "accidentally" acquire knowledge of political matters. Extant research has addressed knowledge effects but only found weak learning effects (Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Feldman, 2011a; Hollander, 1995; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Weaver, 1996) on topics that are easily made sensational, but not for topics such as primaries or policy debates (Baum, 2002; Baum, 2003a), and only among politically inattentive citizens (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Baum, 2003a; Xenos & Becker, 2009).

Acquiring political knowledge has been said to be normatively desirable (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) because it may contribute to the quality with which citizens perform their civic duties (Althaus, 2003; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000). Nevertheless, citizens do not *have* to be particularly well informed to come to reasonable opinions, for instance, by relying on shortcuts and heuristics (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). In addition, neither do most

democratic theories require people to be highly informed (Althaus, 2012). It can be deduced that news formats, thus, do not have to be particularly substantive and transfer much information to help individuals form reasonable judgments (e.g., Baum & Jamison, 2006). Thus, in the absence of clear effects on political knowledge, soft news and infotainment nonetheless may be really important for other elements of political reasoning such as the formation of political attitudes (Prior, 2003).

Political attitudes are of great democratic relevance. Once they are formed, citizens can engage in political conversation, raise their concerns, and express them by casting a vote (Taber & Young, 2013). Attitudes thereby influence government policy by means of election outcomes, but also because politicians are normally and to some extent responsive to public preferences in consideration of future elections (Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Wlezien, 2004; Wlezien, 1995). The attitudes of all citizens together exert a soft pressure on the state (Habermas, 2006) because public opinion makes manifest what a large segment of the population thinks and considers acceptable political decisions.

As a general matter (see Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010, for an overview), attitudes can be defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). Attitudes are considered important in the social sciences because they are assumed to mediate between exposure to new information and behavioral change (Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009), such as with, for example, vote choice. This dissertation focuses on political attitudes toward proposed government policies regarding the issues of healthcare, infrastructure, and public broadcasting. Although these attitudes may at first glance appear to be rather specific, they are actually part of a broader ideological economic dimension of political views (Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010; Treier & Hillygus, 2009). This dimension strongly structures citizens’ ideological self-placement – and together with social views – guides citizens’ political behaviors (Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Treier & Hillygus, 2009).

Political attitudes have many different origins ranging from value priorities, socialization, socio-economic status, personality, cognitive functioning, and even genetics (Albarracín & Vargas, 2010; Banaji & Heiphetz, 2010; Feldman, 2013). Nonetheless, these factors do not account for all of the variance in citizens’ political attitudes because these have been proven to be highly instable (Converse, 1964; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1989; Stimson, 1991). Because most citizens

do not have fixed issue preferences, plenty of possibilities remain for the environment to affect political attitudes (Albarracín & Vargas, 2010; Feldman, 2013). The media are a key player in citizens' environment and have been shown to cause significant shifts in public opinion (Zaller, 1992).

Shifts in public opinion reflect attitude change at the individual level. How attitudes are formed has been described as a process of succeeding phases. First, citizens must be exposed to information (frequently through the mass media), to which they should pay attention, and this information should subsequently be stored in memory (McGuire, 1985). Once information is received in memory, citizens must decide whether to accept it (Zaller, 1992). If accepted, the information becomes part of a larger mix of positive and negative considerations and, thereby, will alter the existing balance of one's set of considerations. Media exposure, thus, may eventually influence an individual's attitudes because attitudes are based on this affected set of considerations that can be sampled from the top of a person's mind when forming judgments (Zaller, 1992).

As competition among media outlets increased, citizens began to enjoy the capacity to only watch news that reflects their pre-existing views (e.g., Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) or not to watch any news if the individual is not interested in politics (Prior, 2005). The conclusion, therefore, has been drawn that this development eventually led to a "new era of minimal effects" (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) in which persuasive effects of the news media are unlikely. Exposure to media content under such circumstance would not provide information that alters the balance of someone's considerations and, thus, cannot affect someone's attitude.

However, this argument has been limited to traditional news media, once again. As discussed previously, many more genres should be considered politically relevant (Baum, 2003a; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011). Entertaining forms of political news may still generate important media effects, such as effects on political attitudes (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010), because they can attract people who tuned out from the traditional media and do not have strong opinions yet. Moreover, entertaining forms of political news might overcome any restraints to watching content that is not fully consistent with one's views because of the entertainment elements in it. Hence, information may be transferred that *does* alter the balance of considerations at the top of one's mind and thereby can affect political attitudes. Previous research has shown that these new formats of political coverage can indeed have such effects on citizens' attitudes toward political

subjects (e.g., Baum, 2004; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007).

However, it is problematic that the understanding of media effects on political attitudes through entertainment programming is limited regarding the underlying mechanisms at play (Bennett & Iyengar, 2010). This dissertation, therefore, focused on these effects from a micro-perspective by considering specific psychological processes that yield individual political attitudes as caused by the exposure to soft news or infotainment. Several causal steps are required before a message can have an effect (McGuire, 1985). The first step is to capture attention (Neuman, 2001), and entertaining political formats are well-suited for this purpose (Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2008).

What happens after attention has been paid is investigated in this dissertation by focusing on mediating processes that link exposure to soft news or infotainment with political attitudes; therefore, the mechanisms that may intervene between stimulus (soft news or infotainment) and response (political attitude) are investigated (Taber & Young, 2013). To illuminate the “black box” between cause and effect, classic theories in the study of media effects are connected to such new news formats.

Theories such as exemplification (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003), the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), and disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) have been shown to be of great value in the new political information environment. These theories explain how infotainment and soft news have effects on citizens’ perceptions of content and may indirectly affect political attitudes. Thereby, essential information is provided to understand the role of these media (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). In the theoretical models of the three chapters that follow, mediator variables are used that causally arise from the independent variable (exposure) and that serve as a cause for the dependent variable (attitude) (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Bucy & Tao, 2007). Thus, cognitive mechanisms are established that intervene between exposure and political attitudes.

Such effects on political attitudes may however not be the same for all citizens, because political information is not processed in identical manners (Zaller, 1992). Faced with a limited pool of mental resources, people match the information they receive with knowledge that they previously had stored in memory (Wicks, 2006). Hence, people pay particular attention to how situations might affect their personal interests and evaluate how it concerns the social groups

or political principles they feel sympathy for or commitment to (Kinder, 1998). To take this into account, the chapters on opinionated news and political satire include moderators in their theoretical designs. Both these genres carry a biased message that supports one political camp and disapproves of another camp. Therefore, how viewers perceive their content and process the information most likely depends on whether they affiliate with the groups that are disapproved of.

Differences in processing will subsequently lead to different media effects on, for example, political attitudes. Individual differences between viewers that cause variations in processing may thus enhance or reduce media effects. Moderators specify the conditions under which the direction or strength of independent variables' effects on dependent variables vary (Bucy & Tao, 2007). Together, this dissertation thus meets the expressed need to conceptualize conditional and indirect effects at the same time (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b): Investigated were both *how* exposure to infotainment and soft news affect political attitudes via mediating variables, and *whether* these effects were moderated by pre-existing differential-susceptibility variables.

### Research Design

Most of what is known about public opinion and political attitudes originates from cross-sectional data collected by survey research (Gaines, Kuklinski, & Quirk, 2007; Iyengar, 2001). Yet, this method is problematic when investigating *effects* on public opinion, or effects more generally (Freedman, 1991). Measuring both cause and effect at one point in time, inhibits firm conclusions about the causal order (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). Media use, for example, can be considered the *cause* of political attitudes, but can also be the *outcome* of it (Slater, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). To draw strong conclusions about media effects, the observation of media exposure should, therefore, precede the measurement of dependent variables and mediators.

Experiments and panel-studies permit such a disentangling of cause and effect over time. The choice has been made for the first over the latter, since experiments allow a greater control (Morton & Williams, 2008) that particularly is useful when studying the underlying mechanisms of media effects. By keeping constant as much potentially confounding variance as possible, the possibilities are kept at a minimal for alternative causes of the investigated succession of media effect processes.



Moreover, experiments are advantageous for the study of soft news and infotainment, because the content of such programs is regularly featured in traditional news coverage (e.g., Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013; LaMarre, 2013), and is often widely being dispersed on the Internet (Baym & Shah, 2011). This particular content, thus, not necessarily will be seen in the outlets they originate from. Hence, the people who indicate in a survey to not watch these programs may still be exposed to it, which troubles the investigation of their effects.

Furthermore, experiments overcome the severe complications of reliability that go together with all measurements of media exposure in survey research (Hovland, 1959; Prior, 2013a). Experiments leave little doubt about the content participants are exposed to and this content can be kept relatively comparable across conditions by only manipulating the specific content features the researcher is interested in. Hence, the variation in exposure is largely the consequence of the research design that is decided upon *before* the data are collected, while in observational data this is completely outside the control of the researcher (Morton & Williams, 2008).

Stimuli for this dissertation's experiments were manipulated in ways that similar information was provided but in styles that varied on the degree of being entertaining. In terms of framing, stimuli stayed as close as possible to equivalency framing relative to emphasis framing (Chong & Druckman, 2007a); for example, by using largely the same visuals and recording voice-overs by the same journalist. Hence, conclusions could be drawn that the style of presenting a news topic caused the effects on political attitudes and not any differences in provided information.

Besides control over the stimuli, experiments also have the advantage to control the context in which participants are exposed to these. Factors external to participants will, therefore, be the same in the different experimental conditions and cannot be of influence to the results (Bolton, 2010). Randomization, which is the main feature of most experiments, similarly reduces the presence of possibly confounding factors by assigning participants at random to conditions. Consequently, participants' characteristics on all potentially confounding variables should be equal among conditions *before* exposure to the stimuli. This means that any differences *after* the experimental treatment can directly be attributed to the stimuli. Therefore, no pre-test is needed in randomized experiments as post-test differences between conditions provide sufficient information to establish whether effects have occurred (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

When comparing experiments with survey methods, experiments are most precise in the inference of causality but are often less generalizable. In terms of external validity, both the stimuli as well as the participants of experiments are frequently not very representative of what can be found in the “real world.” The experiments of this dissertation tried to minimize both issues. First, the issue with stimuli generalizability has been dealt with by letting a professional journalist inspect and correct the texts of the manipulated news videos of the studies on human interest framing and opinionated news before he recorded the voice-overs. For the study on political satire, stimuli were developed by a professional satirist.

Second, the composition of experimental participant pools is often considered problematic in case these exist of “captive” populations such as college students (Hovland, 1959; Iyengar, 2010). Following the suggestion that online platforms give access to more diverse populations without geographical limitations (Iyengar, 2010), web-based experiments have been conducted with an adult population. Participants were recruited from the database of a market research company and quotas were set to make them as representative as possible for the Dutch population on demographic characteristics. This is beneficial for studying the conditionality of effects, because student samples often are very homogenous and vary too little to investigate a moderation of effects (Druckman & Kam, 2011). Another advantage of such non-student samples is that such subjects are not excessively overused for scientific studies yet; so, habitual responding is less likely to occur (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Lastly, the Internet as experimental setting is somewhat more realistic than university laboratories because many people already watch videos online (Iyengar, 2010).

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

The dissertation proceeds with three articles. Each article addresses a study investigating the effect and the involved underlying mechanisms of one new news genre on citizens’ political attitudes. Thereby, the question can be answered how soft news and infotainment contribute to the formation of public opinion, and, thus, how their role in democracy may be understood.

Chapter 2 addresses an investigation of the attitudinal effect of *human interest framed-news*. The experimental stimuli for this study were manipulated such that the effects of a strong human interest framed-news item could be compared with a news item without this human interest frame. Comparisons have also been made with a weak human interest-framed item to acknowledge that most news

stories are neither exclusively hard nor soft, but mostly in-between (Boczkowski, 2009; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Episodic framing (Iyengar, 1991) and exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) have been used as theoretical frameworks to consider why and how this personalized style of news reporting may affect the attribution of responsibility for societal problems, and subsequently influence political attitudes.

Chapter 3 presents a study on *opinionated news* and how this news genre affects political attitudes via two underlying processes. By manipulating both the presence of a journalist's explicitly expressed opinion as well as the presence of source cues, conclusions are drawn regarding the effects of this biased style of news coverage. Theoretical frameworks that are considered for this study are the influence of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003) and the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985).

Chapter 4 addresses a study on the way *political satire* indirectly affects political attitudes. Professionally created stimuli were employed that added a layer of humor to an existing news item. This existing news item, subsequently, was used as the condition with which the satirical conditions were compared. Disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) and theories that explain persuasive effects of entertainment-education (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002) are used to explain satire's effects.

General conclusions are drawn in Chapter 5 that looks back at the four preceding chapters and the empirical findings that were yielded. Conclusions are drawn regarding the role soft news and infotainment may have in citizens' political attitude formation, and also for democracy more generally. Moreover, this chapter discusses the shortcomings of the dissertation and suggests how scholars in the future can contribute to what has yet to be discovered about soft news and infotainment as sources of public opinion formation.