



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

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

Boukes, M.

Publication date

2015

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Boukes, M. (2015). *Spicing up politics: how soft news and infotainment form political attitudes*.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Chapter 5

Conclusion:

**The Theoretical and Political Implications of
Soft News and Infotainment**

The aim of this dissertation was to empirically investigate whether and how soft news and infotainment contribute to the formation of political attitudes. The emergence of lighter forms of political coverage is described in Chapter 1, where this development is also placed in the framework of democratic theory. The opportunity has been proposed that new news genres, such as human interest framed-news, opinionated news, and political satire, may function as accessible public spheres that allow citizens to form attitudes with regard to political matters. If this is truly the case, these genres may strengthen the functioning of democracy for two reasons: first, these entertaining forms of political coverage attract citizens other than those already interested in political matters (Van Zoonen, 2005; Zaller, 2003) and, second, having political attitudes is a precondition for active political engagement (Habermas, 2006; Taber & Young, 2013).

This last chapter summarizes the findings of the three experimental studies that were conducted to investigate whether and how the political attitudes of citizens were affected by exposure to entertaining forms of political news. Thereafter, broader conclusions are drawn about the implications of these findings for democracy and for the study of media effects in general. This chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of the research contained herein and an identification of the challenges for future research to contribute to a greater understanding of the role that new political genres perform in the functioning of the democratic political system.

Summary of Research Findings

The first empirical study, described in Chapter 2, focused on how *human interest framing* within television news influenced the formation of political attitudes. News about “hard” political topics is frequently softened in news broadcasts by personalizing these issues; in this manner, audiences can more easily understand these abstract topics and identify with the actors that are involved (Bird, 1998; Macdonald, 1998; Sparks, 2000). This study showed that framing news in a way that highlights personal consequences caused people to attribute responsibility to the government for the issue that is covered. This result contrasts with what one may expect following episodic framing theory (Iyengar, 1991) but can be explained by exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), which predicts that personalized news coverage will have a strong impact on one’s perceptions. The attribution of responsibility to the government subsequently negatively influenced citizens’ attitudes, such that exposure to the human interest-framed item indirectly

decreased support for the government to cut public spending related to a healthcare issue.

Chapter 3 investigated two routes of influence through which *opinionated news* can affect political attitudes. Opinionated news deviates from traditional news even more than human interest-framed news by moving away from standards such as objectivity, fairness, and accuracy (e.g., Jones, 2012b). Although these television shows by-and-large still label their products as “news,” it is argued that it would be better to consider opinionated news as a form of political entertainment. The experiment showed that opinionated news positively affected citizens’ attitudes toward the widening of a highway through the perception of a presumed influence on others (Gunther & Storey, 2003); this opinionated news also simultaneously negatively impacted the attitude by evoking emotions of anger through hostile media perceptions (Vallone et al., 1985). The latter occurred, in particular, for people with left-wing political preferences because they perceived relatively more bias in the content of the opinionated right-wing news source.

Chapter 4 established two paths that illustrate how *political satire* affects political attitudes. Compared with human interest framed-news and opinionated news, political satire deviates most from traditional forms of news coverage, and satirists accept this outright by labeling their content as “fake news” (Baym, 2005). Because entertainment forms such as satire naturally draw the attention of viewers (Moyer-Gusé, 2008), the attitude toward the satirized budget cuts of a public broadcaster was affected negatively due to the viewer’s absorption in the message, which was particularly the case for younger adults. However, the study also showed that discounting cues were evoked that counterbalanced this negative effect, because satire is perceived as funnier than regular news. Confirming disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), satire was not perceived as funny by those with political preferences incongruent with the humorous message, when such viewers were also provided with background information that made them aware of this incongruence.

In sum, political entertainment has been shown to influence citizens’ political attitudes indirectly via genre-specific underlying mechanisms that are moderated in two of the three cases by individual differences among viewers. The question as to *whether* soft news and infotainment can function as public spheres for the formation of political attitudes can, thus, be answered affirmatively. The answer to the question as to *how* this attitude formation occurred varies for the three genres because human interest-framed news, opinionated news, and political

satire have different characteristics that set in motion different processing mechanisms.

Political Attitude Formation through Soft News and Infotainment

Claims have regularly been made that entertaining ways of dealing with politics may undermine the quality of the political process and, more generally, the functioning of democracy (e.g., Hart, 1999; Postman, 1986). This view, however, ignores that the traditional news media's method of dealing with politics is far from perfect as well when considered from democratic ideals (Althaus, 2012). This is evidenced by the lack of democratic engagement and political knowledge among a large share of the population (e.g., Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Putnam, 2000), and the shift away from newspapers and regular news broadcasts (Mindich, 2005). Thus, the traditional news media frequently do not fulfill the roles that democratic theory has imposed upon them (Graber, 2004; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

Although television news attracted the majority of citizens until approximately thirty years ago, this was most likely rather the result of an obsession with television than due to an interest in the coverage of politics (Patterson, 2010; Prior, 2007). After all, once media choice increased, the news audience gradually broke down. News producers, some argue, should realize that audiences turned away from them because the traditional way of covering political affairs is too complicated and too fast-paced for the abilities of the average citizen (Buckingham, 1997; Graber, 2004) and does not address the motivations for people to tune in to television programs (Glasser, 2000).

It is considered not particularly rational for citizens to invest much effort in collecting and elaborating on political information (Althaus, 2012; Downs, 1957); similarly, it might be considered reasonable that many citizens have tuned out from the demanding and serious traditional news and instead prefer soft news and infotainment. After all, people watch news programs not only to gain information (Glasser, 2000) but also to be entertained, form opinions, and be prepared for future social interactions (Lee, 2013b). Soft news and infotainment, while not necessarily devoid of political substance (Baym, 2007; Brants & Neijens, 1998), provide content that also meets these needs other than only the transfer of information (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Lee, 2013b). Political satire, for example, is watched both to learn and to laugh (Young, 2013).

The question this dissertation sought to answer was whether the entertaining news media to which viewers are most likely driven partly out of pleasure-seeking motivations (hedonic concerns) also reach eudaimonic outcomes, such as feelings of meaningfulness, insight, or political attitudes (see Oliver & Raney, 2011; Roth, Weinmann, Schneider, Hopp, & Vorderer, 2014). The three empirical studies in this dissertation found mechanisms that seem to imply that citizens formed political attitudes after exposure to the stimuli. However, further elaboration is needed to argue whether these attitudes were formed in normatively desirable ways.

Consider, for example, the effects of human interest framing. The most logical line of reasoning would follow episodic framing theory (Iyengar, 1991): The problems of one person are exposed, and it thus makes sense to attribute responsibility to this individual. However, the opposite was found: The human interest frame cued people to attribute responsibility to the government. Following exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), the reason is most likely that personalized news coverage urgently stresses the problems of ordinary people and convinces recipients as to why the government should help. It is difficult to say whether one or the other is a better way of attributing responsibility. However, journalists use exemplars to illustrate broader issues (e.g., Daschmann & Brosius, 1999). Thus, by attributing responsibility to the government, citizens may understand correctly that the portrayed issue extends beyond the particular individual. The indirect persuasive impact of human interest framing may, thus, not be irrational after all.

The study presented in Chapter 3 on opinionated news shows a positive indirect effect of the influence of presumed influence mechanism (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Relative hostile media perceptions (e.g., Feldman, 2011c), which were cued by people's own political preferences, were shown to generate anger, which negatively impacted the attitude. Although such an affective mechanism may perhaps not be grounded in rational considerations, it prevents citizens from too easily swaying their attitudes according to a bias in news and consequences from subsequent third-person effects (Davison, 1983). For recipients of an opinionated news show with congruent political preferences, anger will not be evoked, and it might even be concluded that their attitudes will polarize. However, this finding might also be appraised from the bright side to posit that opinionated news makes citizens aware of what they actually think and thus leads them to form attitudes consistent with that.

Lastly, Chapter 4 showed that political satire indirectly influences political attitudes via absorption in its message. People, particularly younger adults, are so attracted to satire and willing to process it deeply to understand the jokes that they were not able or motivated to scrutinize the actual persuasive message (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Carefully evaluating the political content, thus, seemed to be switched off when watching satire, which would be disadvantageous, of course, for rational opinion formation. Once again, however, a process was found that counterbalanced this seemingly irrational persuasive impact. Satire provides discounting cues to take the message not too seriously. By the act of being funny, people realize it may be inappropriate to base one's attitude on satire and, hence, counterargue the arguments provided in it, which limits the persuasive impact of absorption.

What these three studies thus illustrate is that soft news and infotainment *can* contribute to the formation of citizens' political attitudes. This is done via exemplars, via perceptions of the opinion climate, and via absorption in a satirical message. Citizens, however, have been shown not to irrationally "go all-in," as is evidenced by the lack of significant total effects. Counterbalancing mechanisms compensate for the persuasive impact of these entertaining genres; thus, in the end and on average, entertainment media led to attitudes that are not much different from those based on traditional news exposure (see also Delli Carpini, 2012).

In times in which people have increasingly tuned out from the traditional news (Mindich, 2005; Wonneberger et al., 2013), soft news and infotainment may attract renegades – who otherwise might be lost to democracy – and allow them to form political attitudes. This will help democracy to function well, as it is essential that a large share of the citizenry is interested to some extent in political matters and holds political attitudes, such that they can engage in political discussions and express their viewpoints (Albæk, Van Dalen, Jebriil, & de Vreese, 2014).

The conclusion, thus, seems justified that soft news and infotainment do not damage the public sphere in terms of its ability to let citizens form political attitudes. Instead, by personalizing political matters, tailoring coverage to one's political preference, or adding a humoristic layer, news content most likely becomes more attractive and easier to understand for citizens who normally would not be engaged with politics. The public sphere thus becomes more accessible by softening the news but does not lose its essential capacity as a source of attitude formation. Accessibility of the public sphere has been considered a persistent barrier for the functioning of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005; DeLuca & Peeples,

2002; Fraser, 1990), which may be relaxed with more pleasurable forms of political coverage.

Not by increasing the accessibility of the public sphere formed by the traditional news media, but instead as alternative public spheres, political satire and opinionated news may politically involve the citizens who prefer to remain outside of traditional forms of news coverage altogether (see also Althaus, 2012). With the first primarily being a source of entertainment and the second being a community medium that is appealing to ideologically likeminded audiences, viewers probably tune in to these programs for motives other than those solely related to gaining information (e.g., Jones, 2011; Lee, 2013b; Young, 2013). Nevertheless, this dissertation shows that these genres can still function as spheres in which citizens shape their attitudes toward political matters.

The Underlying Mechanisms

As stated above, insignificant total effects were found in the empirical studies that have been conducted for this dissertation. Infotainment and soft news, thus, did not prove to be influential compared with regular news coverage, although this might be explained by the experimental method that was applied. To expect significant attitude shifts after exposure to only one short video may be naïve and shows little confidence in citizens' political capacities because media effects normally emerge out of an accumulation of repeated exposures (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). Therefore, the lack of significant total effects is consistent with previous research as evidence for strong persuasive effects of news media on attitudes and political behavior is scarce (Valentino & Nardis, 2013).

The insignificant overall effects, however, do not alter the fact that many interesting routes of influence have been found that run under the surface of these overall results. Investigating the underlying mechanisms has helped to understand why no overall effects were found in the experiments. Although there were mechanisms at play that indirectly influence attitudes congruently with the content of the message to which people were exposed, mechanisms were also found that opposed this influence. Studying the indirect effects thus brought a more balanced view to the media effects of interest to this dissertation; it shows that the assumptions of a persuasive impact are frequently not realized because there are more processes at play than might be predicted when relying on only one theoretical framework.

By investigating and analyzing the indirect effects of soft news and infotainment, the different mechanisms could be explicated through which these new news genres may affect citizens' political attitudes. Thereby, the relationships with mediating variables could be uncovered and deeper insight could be given into existing theoretical concepts that are deeply rooted in the field of communication science (Shrum, 2009). The study on opinionated news, for example, is among the first to have empirically verified how the influence of presumed media influence actually works (Gunther & Storey, 2003). This study also shows that perceptions of bias based on the hostile media phenomenon are indeed related to emotional responses – as might be expected from disposition-based processes (Raney, 2006) – that hardly had been shown before.

Most media effect research, particularly in political communication, has a cognitive bias. The role that emotions play is frequently ignored. Affective processes may, however, improve the explanatory power of our models because emotions frequently are the outcome of media exposure, and other media effects may indirectly emerge from these emotions (Nabi, 2009). The latter is demonstrated in Chapter 3 in which anger functions as a mediator between exposure to opinionated news and citizens' political attitudes. Thus, this study empirically confirms the role of emotions in political communication. However, as with previous research on emotions, how anger was measured might be questioned. Although comparable with previous studies incorporating this variable, the quality of self-reported emotion measures needs further investigation, just as standardized scales must be developed that are short enough to use in experimental research; so, the comparability of this type of research will improve.

As will be discussed in more detail below, analyses of indirect effects can result in difficulties convincing critical readers that the mediator affected the outcome variable (and not vice versa) when the mediating variables and the outcome variable are all assessed simultaneously after exposure to the experimental stimuli. The best defense against any accusations of reverse-causality is to build the investigation of indirect effects on solid theoretical grounds (Shrum, 2009). The three empirical studies have attempted to do just that by relying on renowned and previously acknowledged theories, which have been applied and extended in the context of soft news and infotainment: episodic framing theory (Iyengar, 1991) and exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) in Chapter 2; the hostile media phenomenon (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Vallone et al., 1985) and the influence of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003) originating from the third person

effect (Davison, 1983; Sun et al., 2008) in Chapter 3; and absorption (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002), disposition theory (Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), and message discounting (Nabi et al., 2007) in Chapter 4.

These classic theories, thus, continue to be of great value in the context of the current media environment. Although the field may increasingly begin to work with new media formats, scholars should thus not lose sight of them. Moreover, the indirect effects established in this dissertation show that affected variables, which are considered as an end in themselves in the renowned theories from which they originate, are frequently consequential and may function as mediators between media exposure and people's political attitudes. How people process and interpret media content eventually influences their attitudes toward the topic of content to which they were exposed. In this way, the relevance of these classic media effect theories is emphasized because they are shown to have consequences that reach further than how they frequently are understood.

Differential Susceptibility due to Moderating Factors

The studies on opinionated news and political satire both showed that the indirect effects were not equally effective for all participants. By including moderating variables, this dissertation explicitly distances itself from any hypodermic needle model that stipulates that media content exerts powerful and identical effects with little variation as a result of individual differences (Krcmar, 2009). The moderating influences of individual differences can be explained using a variety of theories (for an overview see Krcmar, 2009), of which disposition theory (Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972) obviously relates most to the investigated media and the results that were found. Disposition theory predicts that evaluations of media content are determined by people's existing opinions regarding the characters that are involved.

Political partisanship has been described as one of the key moderating variables of political communication effects (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). In the not so politically polarized environment and multiparty political system of the Netherlands, similar variables have also been shown to moderate the effects of opinionated news and political satire. Participants' ideological self-placement on a left-right scale (Chapter 3) and their response to how much they agreed with a political statement regarding governmental budget cuts in general (Chapter 4) moderated the effects on mediating variables, which were hostile media perceptions and perceptions of funniness, respectively.

This seems to be a positive sign regarding democratic ideals: Viewers processed the content of soft news and infotainment actively and with an eye on their political ideals. Apparently, citizens consider these entertainment genres as relevant political sources. Knowledge of how people precisely interpreted the content to which they were exposed was, however, limited as a result of the quantitative approach that was followed. It could be concluded that participants perceived bias and funniness to a greater or lesser extent as a consequence of their political preferences, but it would have been interesting to dig deeper into the multiplicity of meanings that audiences retrieve from infotainment content (Holbert & Young, 2013).

Thus, how much people are affected by soft news and infotainment depends on individual characteristics, which can be related not only to how much one's political preferences are in line with the content, but also to how much the content fulfills one's needs and viewing motivations. In the study on political satire (Chapter 4), emerging adults (younger than 30, see Coyne et al., 2013) were shown to process the content of political satire more deeply than news content, whereas the opposite occurred for older adults. Such a moderating effect has been called developmental susceptibility (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b) and seems to be rarely applied in studies on political communication. However, with decreasing interest among younger generations in traditional news coverage (Mindich, 2005), this notion is arguably increasingly important as a moderating factor.

With regard to moderated effects, a seemingly paradoxical conclusion can be drawn from the studies on opinionated news and political satire: Differential susceptibility may ultimately work out as a differential invulnerability. Persons that held worldviews incongruent with the opinionated news coverage were susceptible to evoke hostile media perceptions and subsequent feelings of anger, which eventually negatively impacted the attitude. By getting angry, these people counterbalanced the positive indirect effect caused by perceptions of a presumed influence of opinionated news. Therefore, they were not significantly affected overall. Similarly, those with views congruent to the political satire found its message most funny and, consequently, counterargued its argument more.

None of the experiments found significant overall effects. Nevertheless, this result does not indicate that no effects had occurred at all. What the moderated effects show is that some people were positively affected, whereas others were negatively or not affected. This indeed means that the average attitude in the sample was not affected significantly, but the attitudes of certain subgroups

may have shifted. In the experiment on political satire, for example, young people were most absorbed in the humorous content, but age did not moderate the perception of how funny the satire was. This result indicates that the negative indirect effect via absorption was strongest in this subgroup of emerging adults, whereas the positive indirect effect via the perception of funniness was just average on them. Thus, it might be assumed that the attitude of young people was negatively impacted due to the relatively strong impact of absorption.

Challenges for Future Investigations of Soft News and Infotainment

Just as in all scientific endeavors, this dissertation is not spared from shortcomings. The particular limitations of the separate empirical studies are discussed in their respective chapters. In this concluding section, the broader limitations are sketched together with challenges and research questions future research might focus on in attempting to shed a new light on the relationship between popular media forms and political attitudes. Although the characteristics of participant pools are frequently criticized for reducing the external validity of experimental studies, aspects such as experimental settings, social contexts, and treatment features are arguably equally or even more troublesome for generalizations (Druckman & Kam, 2011). The absence of choice possibilities, the quality of the participant pools, the social context, and the topic's characteristics are discussed in the next paragraphs as being the specific limitations of this dissertation. Lastly, innovative data collection methods, alternative political entertainment media, and additional moderating variables are suggested for future research.

Beginning with generalizability regarding experimental settings, it is important to note that the increased importance of soft news and infotainment stems from the rich choices offered by the current media landscape to avoid traditional news programming and to instead choose “easily digestible forms” (Delli Carpini, 2012, p. 13) of political information (Patterson, 2010; Prior, 2005). However, in most experimental work, there is no possibility for participants to choose what they want to see or to turn off the television (for a notable exception, see Ellithorpe, Holbert, & Palmer-Wackerly, 2013). Because actual exposure to political messages normally is not random, experimental designs with forced exposure, as were also applied in this dissertation, weaken the ability to generalize to normal circumstances (Iyengar, 2010). Experimental studies that have included choice possibilities found that the strength of effects often substantially decreases (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Arceneaux et al., 2013).

To improve the external validity, future studies may consider combining content manipulations with the possibility of self-selection (Iyengar, 2010). In such studies, media use could be considered as a mediator between the individual differences and motivations of people and the outcome variable (Oliver & Krakowiak, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b). Thereby, the assumptions that soft news and infotainment also attract politically uninterested citizens and overcome selective exposure can be verified. Moreover, researchers should always keep their eyes and ears open to any possibilities for field experiments because these make it possible to achieve results with great external validity (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007, is an inspiring example).

With regard to participant pools, students are often criticized for their lack of external validity. It has, however, been shown that using such participants does not always have to be problematic (Druckman & Kam, 2011). For homogenous treatment effects, student samples will also produce unbiased treatment effects. However, heterogeneous treatment effects were expected for opinionated news and political satire due to a moderation by political preferences and age. Arguably, student samples do not vary enough on these characteristics to investigate whether different people are affected differently by exposure to the same media content.

To be sure of sufficient variance on these hypothesized moderating variables, convenience samples were recruited from the database of a market research company and quotas were set to approach representativeness of the Dutch population on characteristics as age, gender, educational level, and ideological self-placement. These samples, nevertheless, do not provide any guarantee that findings are representative for the Dutch population as a whole. After all, people who voluntarily opt-in to participate in such panels also are just a minority, which may differ on other characteristics too. Yet, these samples were sufficiently distributed on the presumed moderating characteristics to investigate hypotheses of moderated media effects.

Regarding the participant pool, however, one may question whether the findings pertain only to a Dutch population or to soft news audiences and infotainment viewers more generally because the social context of experiments is another crucial factor for the generalizability of findings (Druckman & Kam, 2011). Participants from a highly polarized political context such as the United States may, for example, react more extremely to right-wing biased opinionated news (Chapter 3) or liberal political satire (Chapter 4). Moreover, Chapter 2 found that exposure to human interest-framed news led to attribution of responsibility to

the government rather than to the individual who was portrayed, which would be predicted by episodic framing theory (Iyengar, 1991). It is possible that the participants were particularly likely to attribute responsibility to the government because they have grown up and live in a country with a traditionally strong social security system. Cross-national experiments are required to investigate whether the perceptions of viewers from the United States, where episodic framing theory originates and where the social welfare state is much less evident, are affected by personalized news coverage in the opposite direction.

Treatments features are another issue with respect to generalizability. Consider, for example, the topics that were covered in the stimuli of the three experiments: the plans of the government to cut the budget for medicine, to widen a highway, and to reduce the budget of public broadcasting. Replication of these studies is necessary with stimuli that focus on other issues to exclude the possibility that the effects depended on the topic of stimulus materials. In addition to the social context, the deviation from episodic framing theory found in Chapter 2, for example, might possibly be explained by the issue of healthcare. Studies that found increased individual responsibility attribution relied topics for which exemplars more easily could be said to be responsible (e.g., when they were involved in crime, poverty, or immigration). Moreover, without replication, it is difficult to ensure whether the effects yielded with stimuli covering relatively low-profile topics would be similar for issues of a higher salience. After all, media effects may be moderated by the importance of news topics (Lecheler et al., 2009).

The limitations of the three empirical studies thus provide challenges for future research to conduct experimental studies with between-factors of national context, topic characteristics, and the possibility to choose media content. Such challenges arguably apply not only to investigations of soft news and infotainment's influence but also to the entire field of communication science. There are, additionally, some specific issues with respect to the study of political entertainment media that deserve the attention of future studies.

Future research may, for instance, want to consider the use of eye tracking methodology, facial expression reaction measures, or (neuro-)physiological measurements (Nabi, 2009). These innovative methods are still not very common in communication science generally, and political communication research especially. Yet, they may be relevant for the study of infotainment and soft news in particular, because these genres are supposed to be more than only cognitively

engaging and also speak to affectively engaging motivations for media exposure (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Lee, 2013b).

These methods, furthermore, have the advantage that data is collected at real-time and is, thus, not tapped after the experimental treatment but during exposure to the stimuli. Therefore, these methods can contribute to the weakness almost all existing indirect effect research is faced with, including this dissertation's. The analyses of underlying processes relied on cross-sectional data, because items of both the mediators as well as the political attitudes were measured after exposure to the stimuli. Causality could, therefore, actually have been the other way around as well. Moreover, analyses of mediating relationships are vulnerable to biased estimates (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010). Because mediators and the dependent variable almost always have unobserved confounding variables in common, indirect effects actually may partially flow through other mediators and, hence, the strength of indirect effects will be exaggerated (Green, Ha, & Bullock, 2010). Therefore, some have argued to manipulate the mediators as well. However, this is often problematic as it is hard to think of manipulations that *only* influence the mediator of interest (e.g., perceptions of bias) and *not* the unobserved confounding mediators, while at the same time influence mediators with an intensity similar to that of media content (Bullock et al., 2010). Hence, strong theoretical foundations are of crucial importance for the investigation and credibility of indirect effect processes (Shrum, 2009).

Besides addressing methodological issues, future research should also expand conceptually in considering what media are politically relevant (Delli Carpini, 2012). This dissertation focused on human interest-framed news and opinionated news as the most prominent examples of the development toward soft news (Plasser, 2005; Reinemann et al., 2012), and political satire as the most noticeable infotainment genre (Baym, 2010; Gray et al., 2009). However, there are media genres that received much less attention, although their content obviously is also of political nature and they attract large non-elite audiences. Particularly with regard to fiction, much remains to be discovered.

Think, for example, of cartoon series as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, or *Family Guy*. Characters in these series often deal with political issues and engage with the democratic system, which may influence viewers' political attitudes just as the genres that are investigated in this dissertation. Movies and television series that address political matters, such as *Frost/Nixon*, *Borgen*, or *House of Cards*, have been shown to let people actively engage with politics and critically reflect on the issues

being addressed (Van Zoonen, 2007). It would be interesting to dig deeper and investigate their persuasive effects. Pop music, evenly so, may bring politics and political arguments to the masses as is exemplified by *The Wall* of Pink Floyd, Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*, or Eminem's protest song *Mosh*. Computer games, such as *SimCity* or *World of Warcraft* are also highly political and let players actively deal with democratic issues. There are, thus, many more entertaining media genres that deserve empirical investigation of political communication scholars, but have not received much attention yet. These genres possibly influence political attitudes just as the political entertainment forms studied in this dissertation have shown to do, and they arguably may also impact citizens' engagement with democracy more generally.

Another direction for future research is found in alternative factors that possibly moderate the effects of exposure to soft news and infotainment. This dissertation showed that political preference and one's stage of life may influence susceptibility to the effects of opinionated news and political satire. Previous studies already showed that political interest and political knowledge may moderate these effects (e.g., Baum, 2004; Matthes & Rauchfleisch, 2013). However, what remains largely unknown is whether the motivations of people to consume such media influence their effects. Are those who consume political entertainment media purely with the goal of pleasure seeking affected differently than those who consume it because they expect to learn something from it (see, e.g., Feldman, 2013; Lee, 2013b; Oliver & Raney, 2011)?

Another promising moderator for future research is people's everyday media diet. Chapter 4 has shown that the provision of a news article before exposure to the stimuli influenced the processing of satire. However, not much is known yet about how forms of political entertainment function together with or in the absence of the consumption of traditional forms of political information on a day-to-day basis. Besides investigating how this moderates the influence on political attitudes, it would also be interesting to see how exposure to political entertainment influences the evaluation of and interest in traditional forms of political news coverage, and vice versa (Holbert & Young, 2013).

Notwithstanding the limitations of the empirical studies and the challenges that remain for the future, this dissertation produced evidence for the role that soft news and infotainment can play as a public sphere in which citizens can form political attitudes. In its pursuit, recent calls to simultaneously conceptualize conditional and indirect effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b) and to more firmly

integrate the effects of new news genres in theoretical perspectives (Delli Carpini, 2012) are followed. This dissertation has shown that similar attitudes are formed when comparing traditional forms of news coverage with entertaining forms of political coverage that arguably speak more to the interests, social needs, and entertainment motives of the man in the street. At a time when the interest in the traditional news media is decreasing (Mindich, 2005), it is reassuring to see that political entertainment media can also help citizens form political attitudes so that they eventually are enabled to participate in democracy (Althaus, 2012). Furthermore, this also implies a need for broadcasters, policymakers, and politicians to take these new forms of political communication seriously and not to look down on them from an elitist perspective. For citizens, these findings mean that, instead of feeling guilty about being a couch potato (see Reinecke, Hartmann, & Eden, 2014), they can feel comfortable about doing a useful job of preparing for their democratic duties by watching these spiced-up forms of political coverage.