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

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Althaus, S. L. (2012). What’s good and bad in political communication research? Normative standards for evaluating media and citizen performance. In H. A. Semetko, & M. Scammell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of political communication* (pp. 97-112). Londen, United Kingdom: SAGE.


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REFERENCES


## Appendix A:

Correlation matrix and descriptive information of Chapter 3

Table A1. *Descriptive information and observed correlations between variables used in the structural equation model (n = 231)*

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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>X₁</th>
<th>X₂</th>
<th>X₃</th>
<th>X₄</th>
<th>X₅</th>
<th>X₆</th>
<th>X₇</th>
<th>X₈</th>
<th>X₉</th>
<th>X₁₀</th>
<th>X₁₁</th>
<th>X₁₂</th>
<th>X₁₃</th>
<th>X₁₄</th>
<th>X₁₅</th>
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<td>X₄: Political preference</td>
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<td>-.099</td>
<td>.021</td>
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<td>X₅: Obj. NOS vs. Opi. PowNews × Political preference</td>
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<td>.063</td>
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<td>X₇: Obj. NOS vs. Opi. NOS × Political preference</td>
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<td>X₈: Presumed influence</td>
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<td>X₉: Perceived opinion climate</td>
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<td>X₁₁: Anger</td>
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<td>-.005</td>
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<td>.090</td>
<td>.357</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>-.112</td>
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<td>-.008</td>
<td>-.248</td>
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<td>X₁₃: Widening is essential</td>
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<td>.041</td>
<td>.269</td>
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<td>-.258</td>
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<td>X₁₄: First examine alternatives</td>
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<td>.301</td>
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<td>-.029</td>
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| Mean (M)                                                | 0.002 | -.001 | -.008 | -.017 | -.004 | -.061 | .013 | .736 | 61.805 | 4.671 | 4.983 | 4.370 | 4.890 | 3.880 | 3.952 |
| Standard deviation (SD)                                 | 0.501 | 0.435 | 0.429 | 1.414 | 0.707 | 0.630 | 0.618 | 1.814 | 14.732 | 2.679 | 3.838 | 2.305 | 2.063 | 2.398 | 2.173 |
Appendix B:

Correlation matrix and descriptive information of Chapter 4

Table B1. Correlation matrix of the variables used in the structural equation model of Chapter 4 ($n = 268$).

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>X1</th>
<th>X2</th>
<th>X3</th>
<th>X4</th>
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<th>X6</th>
<th>X7</th>
<th>X8</th>
<th>X9</th>
<th>X10</th>
<th>X11</th>
<th>X12</th>
<th>X13</th>
<th>X14</th>
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<th>X16</th>
<th>X17</th>
<th>X18</th>
<th>X19</th>
<th>X20</th>
<th>X21</th>
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<td>X2: Subtle humor vs. News item</td>
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<td>X3: News item vs. Harsh humor</td>
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<td>X4: Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info</td>
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<td>X5: Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>X6: (Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor) * Age</td>
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<td>X7: (Subtle humor vs. News item) * Age</td>
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<td>X8: (News item vs. Harsh humor) * Age</td>
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<td>X9: (Harsh humor vs. Harsh with background info) * Age</td>
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<td>X10: Existing preference (against vs. favoring budget cuts)</td>
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<td>X11: (Subtle with background info vs. Subtle humor) * Pref.</td>
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<td>-.366</td>
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<td>-.067</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.170</td>
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<td>.061</td>
<td>.207</td>
<td>.913</td>
<td>.851</td>
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</table>

Mean ($M$) | 0.009 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.017 | 40.623 | 0.331 | 0.456 | 0.734 | 1.378 | -.910 | 0.010 | 0.047 | 0.099 | 0.019 | 5.580 | 5.930 | 3.530 | -.051 | -.112 | -.545 | -.996 |      |

Standard deviation ($SD$) | 0.407 | 0.491 | 0.491 | 0.387 | 14.059 | 17.396 | 21.264 | 2.811 | 15.606 | 2.417 | 0.988 | 1.263 | 1.284 | 1.096 | 2.488 | 2.709 | 3.030 | 0.985 | 2.967 | 2.864 | 2.872 |      |
English summary

Television is still people’s major source of news by far. How political issues are covered on television and reach citizens is, therefore, of great importance for the functioning of democracy. With the great number of media options people currently have, citizens increasingly tune out from the traditional news media – newspapers and regular news broadcasts – and instead have turned to more entertaining alternatives. Think, for example, of “soft news” coverage that relies on personalized narratives behind larger political issues or opinionated news that explicitly includes the opinion of the journalist. Additionally, not only has news become more entertaining over time, entertainment has also turned more political. This is called infotainment. Hence, citizens can get in touch with political matters without actually watching news programs.

Claims have regularly been made that such entertaining ways of dealing with politics in the media may undermine the quality of the democratic process. This view, however, ignores that the traditional news media’s method of dealing with politics – serious, factual, and rational – is far from perfect as well when considered from democratic ideals. This is evidenced by the ever-existing lack of democratic engagement and political knowledge among a large share of the population; even in times when the serious media still had a monopoly on political news coverage.

A democracy that does not only want the elite to politically participate may become accessible to more citizens by complementing the rationalist style with more diverse ways of presenting politics in the public sphere. This traditional manner of communication only suits the knowledge and skills of a relatively small group of citizens and leaves most people in the dark about politics. 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. 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.

To investigate the consequences of soft news and infotainment for democracy, this dissertation explores whether and how these new news genres contribute to the formation of public opinion. Therefore, it 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 news coverage more personal; (2) opinionated news that explicitly includes
the opinions of the reporting journalists; and (3) political satire, the most prominent entertainment genre (comedy) that adopted politics. In this manner, both the developing nature of non-traditional news coverage and the incorporation of politics into entertainment programming are included.

To investigate whether and how exposure to these entertaining news formats causes attitude formation, three experiments have been conducted. Experiments are the most advantageous method for the study of media effects, because experiments allow for a strict control over the content to which participants are exposed. Hence, exactly those features that are particular for soft news and infotainment could be manipulated and their effects could be investigated by comparing it to (traditional) news coverage without these features. Stimuli for the experiments were manipulated in ways that similar information was provided but in styles that varied on the degree of being entertaining. The stimuli were crafted with the help of a professional voice-over and, for the last study, purposefully made by the producer of a satire program that is broadcasted on national television every weekday.

The first empirical study focused on how human interest framing within television news influenced the formation of political attitudes. A news story with a human interest frame explains a broader (political) issue by portraying one or more people who are personally involved with that issue. 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.

This study on human interest-framed news 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: The people who saw a mother argue against a ADHD health care policy reform that would hurt her child believed more strongly that the government should take care of this issue than people who saw a politician argue against this plain. The attribution of responsibility to the government subsequently negatively influenced citizens’ support for this plan.

The second experiment investigated how opinionated news affects the political attitudes of people. Opinionated news deviates from traditional news, even more than human interest-framed news, by moving away from journalistic standards such as objectivity, fairness, and accuracy. Although these television shows by-and-large still label their products as “news” (e.g., FoxNews), opinionated news would arguably be better considered a form of political entertainment.
The experiment showed that opinionated news positively affected citizens’ attitudes toward the widening of a highway through “the influence of presumed influence.” This means that viewers believe others are positively impacted by opinionated news and subsequently tend to follow how they believed others think about this subject. However, the opinionated news item also simultaneously negatively impacted the attitude by evoking emotions of anger through hostile media perceptions. 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.

The third and last experiment illustrates how political satire affects political attitudes. Compared with human interest framed-news and opinionated news, political satire deviates the most from traditional forms of news coverage, and satirists accept this outright by labeling their content as “fake news” and denying to (want to) have any influence on the political process. Yet, this study finds that satire actually has an influence on the political attitudes of its viewers, especially the younger ones.

Because satire, just as other entertainment forms, naturally draws the attention of viewers by absorbing them in the message, the audience’s capacity to critically evaluate the persuasive message is reduced. This absorption was particularly the case for younger adults. Hence, their attitude is easily swayed with the satire’s message. However, the study also showed that participants discounted the credibility of the message, which counterbalanced the negative effect on the attitude toward the satirized subject. The reason for this is that satire is perceived as funnier than regular news coverage. However, the satire was not perceived to be funny by those who had political preferences that were incongruent with the humorous message; though this was only the case for people who were provided with background information, so they could more easily be aware of the incongruence between their existing opinion and the satirical message they saw.

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 opinionated coverage to viewers’ political preference, or adding a humoristic layer, news content most likely becomes more attractive for citizens who normally would not be engaged with politics. The three empirical studies in this dissertation found mechanisms that imply that citizens indeed formed political attitudes after exposure to the stimuli. In times in which people have increasingly tuned out from the traditional
news, soft news and infotainment may attract those 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 following political matters and holds political attitudes, so they can engage in political discussions and express their viewpoints.
Nederlandse samenvatting

Televisie is nog steeds verreweg de belangrijkste bron van nieuws voor de meeste burgers. Hoe de berichtgeving over politieke onderwerpen er op televisie uitziet is daarom van groot belang voor de manier waarop de democratie functioneert. Door het grote media-aanbod van tegenwoordig zijn veel minder mensen de traditionele nieuwsmedia (kranten en televisiejournaals) gaan volgen. Daarentegen zijn er entertainende alternatieven in opmars. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan “soft news” verslaggeving die zich vooral richt op persoonlijke verhalen achter het nieuws (bijv. Hart van Nederland of EditieNL) of opiniërend nieuws dat nadrukkelijk de mening van de journalist naar voren schuift (bijv. PowNews). Niet alleen zijn er meer van zulke soorten “soft news” bijgekomen; entertainmentprogramma’s zijn zich tegelijkertijd namelijk in toenemende mate gaan richten op politieke zaken. Dit wordt infotainment genoemd. Als gevolg kunnen burgers nu ook met de politiek in aanraking komen zonder daadwerkelijk de serieuze nieuwsmedia te volgen.

Vaak wordt verondersteld dat deze vermakelijke manieren waarop media met de politiek omgaan de kwaliteit van het democratische proces in gevaar brengen. Een dergelijke veronderstelling ziet echter over het hoofd dat de traditionele manier waarop de media verslag doen van de politiek – serieus, feitelijk, en rationeel – ook verre van perfect is als je het beschouwt vanuit democratische idealen. Er is namelijk altijd een gebrek geweest aan kennis over en betrokkenheid bij de politiek onder het brede publiek. Dit was ook het geval toen de serieuze nieuwsmedia nog een monopolie hadden op de politieke berichtgeving.

Wanneer we streven naar een democratie waarin niet alleen de elite meedoet aan de politiek zal het mogelijk moeten zijn om op andere manieren deel te nemen aan het publieke debat dan alleen op een rationele en onpersoonlijke wijze. Deze traditionele manier van communiceren sluit alleen aan op de kennis en capaciteiten van een relatief kleine groep burgers en laat veel mensen onbewogen. Voor een bredere betrokkenheid bij de politiek moet het daarom mogelijk zijn om te communiceren in de stijl en over de onderwerpen die aansluiten bij de beleidswereld van het grote publiek. “Soft news” en infotainment nieuwsverslaggeving kan goed op dit ideaal aansluiten, omdat dit abstracte politieke onderwerpen relevant kan maken voor een breder en aanvankelijk ongeïnteresseerd publiek. Zo kan entertainment dus een democratiserende rol spelen in de maatschappij.

Om de bijdrage van “soft news” en infotainment aan de democratie te bestuderen wordt in deze dissertatie onderzocht of en hoe deze soorten van
nieuws de vorming van de publieke opinie beïnvloeden. Daartoe wordt onderzocht welke effecten de drie meest prominente vormen van entertainment-georiënteerde nieuwsvormen hebben op politieke attitudes: (1) nieuws dat op een human-interest manier wordt geframed, (2) opiniërend nieuws dat expliciet de mening van de journalist naar voren brengt, en (3) satire als het meest opvallende voorbeeld van entertainmentprogramma’s waarin politieke onderwerpen aan bod komen. Op deze manier worden zowel de entertainisering van politieke nieuwsverslaggeving als de toenemende aandacht voor politieke zaken van entertainmentprogramma’s meegenomen in de onderzoeksopzet van de dissertatie.

Om te onderzoeken hoe deze nieuwsgenres de vorming van politieke attitudes beïnvloeden zijn drie experimenten uitgevoerd. Experimenteel onderzoek is de methode waarmee media-effecten het beste te bestuderen zijn, omdat met experimenten door willekeurige toewijzing aan condities goed gecontroleerd kan worden aan welke media-inhoud mensen zijn blootgesteld en de invloed van bestaande meningen grotendeels kan worden uitgesloten. Voor de studies van dit proefschrift zijn nauwkeurig bepaalde aspecten van nieuwsverslaggeving gemanipuleerd die kenmerkend zijn voor “soft news” en infotainment. Vervolgens werd vastgesteld hoe mensen reageerden op nieuws met deze kenmerken en nieuws zonder deze kenmerken (regulier nieuws). De video’s waaraan mensen werden blootgesteld zijn vervaardigd met de hulp van een professionele journalist en, voor het laatste experiment, met de maker van de populaire LuckyTV-filmpjes Sander van de Pavert.

Het eerste onderzoek focust zich op de vraag hoe human-interest-geframed nieuws in het NOS Journaal de politieke attitudes van kijkers beïnvloedt. Een nieuwsitem met een human-interest-frame legt een (politiek) onderwerp met de hulp van een concreet voorbeeld van één of meerdere personen die persoonlijk betrokken zijn bij dit onderwerp. Op deze manier kunnen “harde” politieke onderwerpen “verzacht” worden, zodat mensen zich kunnen identificeren met de personen in het item. Als gevolg daarvan zullen deze abstracte onderwerpen relevanter lijken voor het publiek en gemakkelijker te begrijpen zijn.

Deze studie naar human-interest-framing heeft aangetoond dat zulk gepersonaliseerd nieuws ervoor zorgt dat kijkers meer verantwoording voor politieke problemen aan de regering toewijzen dan aan de getroffen personen. De proefpersonen die een negatieve reactie van een moeder zagen in een nieuwsitem over het voorgenomen plan van de regering om de vergoeding van ADHD-medicijnen te korten hadden sterker de gedachte dat door ADHD veroorzaakte
problemen de verantwoordelijkheid zijn van de regering dan van de betrokken individuen. Proefpersonen die een ongepersonaliseerd, regulier nieuwsitem zagen met daarin een vergelijkbare negatieve reactie van een politicus in plaats van de moeder beschouwden de overheid relatief minder verantwoordelijk voor deze problemen. Hoe mensen de verantwoordelijkheid voor dit probleem toekenden had vervolgens weer een sterke invloed op hoezeer mensen het bezuinigingsplan van de regering steunden of afkeurden.

Het tweede experiment onderzocht hoe opiniërende nieuwsverslaggeving (PowNews) de politieke attitudes van mensen beïnvloedt. Opiniërend nieuws wijkt af van traditioneel nieuws, nog veel meer dan human-interest-geframed nieuws, door zich niet te houden aan journalistieke principes als objectiviteit, accuraatheid, en hoor en wederhoor. Hoewel zulke media zichzelf doorgaans graag betitelen als "nieuws" (denk aan FoxNews of PowNews) wordt in deze dissertatie beargumenteerd dat deze vorm van journalistiek beter begrepen kan worden als een vorm van politieke entertainment.

Het experiment toonde aan dat kijkers meegaan met de (positieve) mening van de PowNews-journalist over de verbreding van snelweg A27 door een “invloed van een veronderstelde invloed.” Dit betekent dat proefpersonen na het zien van het opiniërende nieuwsitem dachten dat andere mensen hierdoor positief beïnvloed zouden worden en vervolgens de neiging hadden om de mening van deze mensen te volgen. Echter wekte de subjectiviteit van het nieuwsitem bij veel proefpersonen zoveel wrevel dat hun attitude tegelijkertijd ook negatief beïnvloed werd. Dit was voornamelijk het geval met mensen die een linkse politieke voorkeur hebben en daarom waarschijnlijk een slechte impressie hadden van PowNews of het gewoon oneens waren met dit specifieke item. De attitude van deze groep mensen werd door de gelijktijdige positieve en negatieve invloed gemiddeld genomen niet beïnvloed.

Het derde en laatste experiment illustreert hoe politieke satire (LuckyTV) de attitude van kijkers kan beïnvloeden. Vergeleken met de andere twee onderzochte nieuwsgenres wijkt satire het meeste af van traditionele nieuwsverslaggeving. De makers ervan zijn het hiermee meestal volkomen eens en ontkennen vaak enige invloed te (willen) hebben op het politieke proces. Toch vindt deze studie dat satire wel degelijk een invloed kan hebben op de politieke attitudes van vooral jongere mensen als je het vergelijkt met regulier nieuws.

Omdat satire, net zoals veel andere vormen van entertainment, de kijker opzuigt in het verhaal heeft het publiek een verminderd kritische vermogen om de
boodschap van het item te weerspreken. Vergeleken met traditionele nieuwsverslaggeving lijkt dit vooral het geval onder jongeren (<30 jaar). Ouderen daarentegen leken juist meer op te gaan in de traditionele vorm van nieuwsverslaggeving en werden dus minder beïnvloed door de satire. Net als in de studie met opiniërend nieuws werd hier echter ook een tegenwerkende invloed gevonden. Naarmate mensen de satire grappiger vonden bleken zij de boodschap minder serieus te nemen en werden hun attitudes minder sterk of helemaal niet beïnvloed. Niet alle mensen vonden de satire echter grappig. Proefpersonen die het qua inhoudelijke boodschap oneens waren met het LuckyTV-filmpje (er moet niet bezuinigd worden op de publieke omroep) en van tevoren een artikel hadden gelezen over dit onderwerp waren zich waarschijnlijk bewust van dit verschil van inzicht en vonden het filmpje daarom niet leuk.

Op basis van deze drie studies lijkt de conclusie gerechtvaardigd dat “soft news” en infotainment geen schade toebrengen aan het functioneren van de democratie, maar burgers juist de mogelijkheid bieden om politieke attitudes te ontwikkelen. Door politieke onderwerpen te personaliseren, nieuws vergezeld te laten gaan van de opinie van de journalist, of door een satirische laag over het nieuws aan te brengen wordt de politiek aantrekkelijker om te volgen voor mensen die zich normaliter niet betrokken voelen bij de politiek. De drie experimenten vonden verschillende mechanismen die impliceren dat burgers na het zien van vermakelijke vormen van politieke verslaggeving daadwerkelijk politieke attitudes (verder) ontwikkelen.

In de huidige tijd waarin mensen minder dagbladen lezen en minder vaak naar televisiejournaals kijken kunnen de onderzochte alternatieven voor de serieuze nieuwsmedia mogelijke “afvalligen” betrokken houden bij de democratie en hen toch enigszins politieke attitudes laten vormen. Dit zal een concrete bijdrage leveren aan het functioneren van de democratie, want dit politieke systeem werkt beter naarmate meer burgers de politiek volgen en daardoor politieke attitudes hebben, zodat zij zich kunnen mengen in discussies over de politiek en hun voorkeuren kunnen uiten.
Completing a PhD project and writing a dissertation is not an easy task, and without the help, support and the companionship of so many great people, this would have been a much harder endeavor. It is difficult to name them all, and that is also why I do not try to do so, but some I want to thank in particular. First, the members of the dissertation committee: Professors Hans Beentjes, Kees Brants, Lance Holbert, Peter Neijens, and Liesbet van Zoonen. All of them have written work that initially inspired me to apply for this project and helped me make sense of the concepts of soft news and infotainment. I am therefore very honored and grateful that they were willing to be part of the committee that assessed this dissertation.

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Speaking about methods, someone that played a crucial role in the development of stimuli of the last study is Sander van de Pavert, who is known from his LuckyTV-videos. I did not expect much of the e-mail in which I asked him for the possibilities to make stimuli for this project. I thought that, if he would already react, his price would be probably completely out of reach. But when he reacted, he proposed to participate completely voluntarily simply because Sander thought it was an interesting project. Besides delivering the greatest stimuli I could imagine for an experimental study to the effects of satire, Sander’s help taught me that nothing is impossible as long as you try it.

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Any shortcomings in the dissertation are, of course, entirely my responsibility.

Mark Boukes,

Amsterdam, November 2014.