Framing Europe: television news and European integration

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Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

Television news plays an important role in providing information about political and economic European integration. Citizens across Europe repeatedly identify television as the most important way of receiving information about European issues. Extant research explored antecedents of public opinion about European affairs, but has, by and large, neglected the role of media in the process of opinion formation. However, all contextual variables and individual-level pre-dispositions and characteristics not withstanding, this study shows that the information provided by television news is a key resource for public thinking about European integration.

The current project was designed to investigate the production, contents, and effects of the television news coverage of European affairs. The project takes a cross-national comparative perspective and focuses on Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The research was carried out at a key point in the European integration process and includes events such as the first-step introduction of the euro, the 1999 European elections as well as priority agenda issues such as the enlargement of the EU. The design is multi-methodological and draws on interviews with newsmakers, content analyses of news coverage, and experiments testing the effects of television news. The production of news about European affairs was investigated through interviews with journalists and editors in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The characteristics of the television news coverage of European political and economic issues were analyzed in four rounds of content analyses involving more than 10,000 news stories. The effects of news on audiences’ thinking about and attitudes towards European integration were investigated in two experiments conducted in cooperation with a national news program to improve the quality and validity of the studies.

In this final chapter the theoretical issues introduced at the outset, the methodological considerations discussed throughout, and the empirical data gathered on the production, contents, and effects of news about European integration are pulled together. First, the key findings of the project are summarized. Second, the merits and shortcomings of the study are discussed and the
findings are positioned within the context of the political communication literature. Third, the implications of the study with reference to three general questions are discussed: What did we learn in terms of theory building? What did we learn about journalism and European integration? What did we learn about politicians, media, and European integration?

The findings

Production: Europe in the newsroom. Based on interviews with journalists, editors, and Editors-in-Chief of the main evening television news programs in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, the organization of the coverage of European affairs, the perceived constraints and challenges in covering 'Europe', the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria when selecting European events and issues for coverage were investigated.

The coverage of European affairs is organized in a very similar triadic structure in the three countries. The central headquarters (in London, Hilversum, and Copenhagen respectively) coordinate and facilitate the coverage in cooperation with the parliamentary units (based in Westminster, London, Christiansborg, Copenhagen, and in The Hague) and the news programs' Brussels-bureaus. While there is a high degree of similarity in the organization of the European news coverage, there are differences in the degree of perceived autonomy of the journalists and correspondents which amount to internal friction over for example the volume of EU-related news (see below).

The most important constraints and challenges perceived by journalists and editors when covering European affairs fall into four areas. The first, ‘distance and time’, refers to the EU-decision making procedure in which key decisions are taken in EU power centers such as Brussels, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg. Despite the relative geographical proximity of these locations to Denmark, Britain, and the Netherlands, this was repeatedly identified as a barrier. In addition, the time span in which decisions are taken at the EU-level is considered a problem in terms of news reporting with issues put on the agenda and decisions taken months or years later. Time was also considered a challenge with regard to the length of television news. European affairs are perceived to be abstract and complex and these characteristics are difficult to reconcile with the television news format where ‘long’ stories generally have a maximum of three minutes.

The second challenge perceived by newsmakers in the three countries, labeled ‘access and terminology’, relates to the institutions of the EU. These institutions are considered closed and bureaucratic. The terminology used by the Union is perceived as complex and inaccessible. In addition, journalists, especially from the ‘smaller’ countries (Denmark and the Netherlands) considered the access to top officials and politicians cumbersome and restricted in compar-
is on with access to key members of the domestic administration, including for example, ministers.

The third challenge was identified within the news organizations and is labeled ‘internal disagreement’. Journalists assigned to ‘European’ stories experienced editors in the central newsrooms to be critical and difficult to approach with ideas for European stories. This view was reflected in the interviews with editors, who acknowledged being restrictive with regard to the volume of EU-stories.

The fourth and final challenge emerged from a (perceived) lack of audience knowledge about and interest in European affairs. Editors and journalists alike expressed concern over the difficulty of providing ‘intelligent’ news coverage with in-depth information about a topic where the audience competences are considerably lower than in the case of domestic politics. The comparison was made with domestic political news coverage which too is complex and abstract. However, audiences generally have some notion about the key stakeholders and political authorities, which is oftentimes absent in the European case leaving journalists with the need to explain and provide additional information so that news stories may become too ‘information dense’.

In sum, the perceived complexity of the issue, the lack of interest from peers and editors internally and the audience externally, as well of the lack of background knowledge were considered the key challenges.

Although the editorial policy of the different news programs varied, the approach of all programs was rather ‘pragmatic’, ‘conventionally journalistic’, and ‘analytical’ in Blumler et al.’s terminology (1989). A pragmatic approach implies that politics (including political campaigns) are not considered newsworthy per se but that political events and issues compete against other topics in the allocation of time in the news. The ‘conventionally journalistic’ and ‘analytical’ approaches refer to selecting events “laced with drama, conflict, novelty, movement, and anomaly” (Blumler et al., 1989, p. 163) and a role for political journalists in which they analyze and interpret in order to provide coherence in the individual news stories. These approaches are theoretically contrasted with a ‘sacerdotal’ approach in which political processes are considered crucial to democracy and therefore newsworthy per se. The attitude to politics is cautious and respectful and the role of the journalist is minimal, guided by the agendas of political parties and candidates.

Though this study is not designed to investigate changes over time in the approach to European politics and the role assumed by journalists, by bringing together what we know from previous research, we can expect that a systematic investigation would reveal that the approach taken by television journalists in the coverage of European affairs has changed considerably over time. Noël-Aranda (1983) concluded that broadcasters during the 1979 European election
campaign were 'cautious' and adhered largely to the agenda put forwards by politicians. This is no longer an appropriate description when assessing the approach taken by broadcasters in the 1999 elections based on the interviews. In 1999 all the news programs were pragmatic, but this took different forms. Some news programs chose to (i) neglect the elections due to an editorial assessment of the event as non-newsworthy (e.g., NOS Journaal and RTL Nieuws), or (2) to set their own agenda without paying attention to the political party agenda (e.g., DR TV-Avisen) or (3) to make the anticipated voter apathy a key theme in the coverage (e.g., BBC, ITN, TV2).

It remains an open question whether the findings presented in this study represent recent changes or a continuation of long-term evolving developments. In this sense, the findings are limited to the 1999 election only. Previous studies concluded that political journalism and the approach of broadcasters was rather 'sacerdotal', which meant that political campaigns were covered extensively and with only minimal and respectful intervention by journalists (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001). However, the findings in the current study dovetail with studies of political journalism during national elections that also suggest that 'sacerdotal' approaches have been replaced by more 'pragmatic' considerations and more selective editorial strategies (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001). One might even speculate that journalists and editors exert even more discretion in their coverage of European elections than when dealing with national elections. European elections are low-key events which provide more leeway for exerting discretion in terms of defining and implementing editorial policies.

The cross-national perspective showed that differences, such as those between the Danish and the Dutch broadcasters during the 1999 European elections, are rendered visible and interpretable by virtue of comparison. The Dutch news programs displayed their pragmatic approach towards the elections by means of a highly selective editorial policy whereby they only covered the European elections in one news story on the day prior to the elections. Danish news programs, however, were pragmatic in their deliberate and proactive editorial strategy in which the issue of fraud and mismanagement was brought to the fore.

According to the newsmakers, with respect to the application of news selection criteria, conflict and tension between elites as well as events with significant domestic consequences were among the key qualities that European events and issues should have to get in to the news. Despite this common ground, the different news programs applied news selection criteria very differently in relation to the 1999 European elections in terms of the sheer amount of news. The political event was not considered to have sufficient intrinsic importance or interest to yield coverage per se, but in the Netherlands this meant almost no news whereas in Denmark and Britain this meant covering the campaign but paying
only marginal attention to the issues put forward by the political parties and candidates. The European Parliament was evaluated critically by journalists in all three countries though for most part news was neutral. In general, the elections were not 'up-graded' and events in the campaign were mostly evaluated according to normal news selection criteria.

The pragmatic approach and choice to opt for the application of conventional news selection criteria did not detract from the aim that television should remain balanced and impartial. Despite the selective and at times assertive journalistic style, editors and reporters at all programs were still concerned with balance in terms of letting the various parties and political perspective on the EU be heard.

**CONTENT: EUROPE IN THE NEWS.** The analyses of the news coverage of European affairs included four distinct periods and more than 10,000 television news stories in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The results suggest important differences in the news coverage of European affairs between an election campaign, regularly occurring events (such as the EU summits), unique events (such as the introduction of the euro) and 'routine' news periods sampled throughout a 15-month period. The content analysis shows that news about European affairs is modestly visible in the three countries. EU news often deals with economic topics and it is heavily framed in terms of conflict. It has a primarily domestic focus with a predominance of domestic political actors who are either treated neutrally or evaluated negatively.

The analysis suggests that the 'European' news story is essentially a *domestic* story. Not only is the majority of actors in 'European news' from the country in which the news is broadcast, most of the news is also covered from a domestic angle and focuses on implications of EU issues in the country of the news program. The absence of a 'European perspective' in the news coverage of integration issues is striking, but is theoretically in line with news selection criteria such as *proximity* (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

The current study suggests that certain news selection criteria not only influence the choice of topics in the news, but also provide a template for organizing and structuring news stories. In this vein, the study shows that when European issues are covered in the news this often happens with a strong emphasis on *conflict*. This presence of the conflict frame suggests that the considerations made by journalists when choosing events and issues for the news (see Chapter 3) are translated into how these are presented in the news. Emphasizing the conflict-related aspects of an event or issue by framing it in terms of conflict may justify the publication of a news story above and beyond its news value and at the same time provides journalists with a clear conception of how to package and present the news.
The investigation of the *visibility* of European affairs in national television news shows that news organizations vary considerably in the volume of attention given to European affairs. This pattern is determined, on the one hand, by factors internal to the news organizations such as the editorial policies and resources investigated in covering European events. On the other hand, systemic characteristics affect the volume of the coverage. For example, studies looking at all EU countries in the 1999 European elections found the presence of a viable anti-EU party and political debates on European issues to be contextual-level factors that contributed positively to the amount of coverage (Banducci, Karp & Lauf, 2000; Peter, 2002). Putting these observations to a test in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, the proposed positive relationship between presence of anti-EU-sentiments (a polarized political climate) and visibility of the campaign on television news is supported. The relationship, however, does not appear to be linear or uni-dimensional so that the "the stronger the polarization, the more coverage". In Denmark, for example, the election campaign was more visible than in Britain even though the British Conservative Party is a strong and significant anti-EU party, whereas in Denmark, the opposition to European integration comes most strongly from smaller political movements that are successful at getting media attention. In sum, the volume of coverage appears to be influenced by a combination of factors including both contextual factors and factors internal to news organizations.

Finally, the analysis suggests that EU-related actors in the news are *most often not evaluated*, but if evaluated this is consistently *negative*. This finding suggests that the evaluation of EU actors is not different from but indeed rather comparable to the evaluation that national politicians receive in the news (Kepplinger & Weissbecker, 1991). In fact, this study did not find any discernable differences in the pattern of evaluation between domestic political actors and EU-actors. The conclusion from previous research that EU news is modestly negatively slanted (Norris, 2000) is sustained, but the important perspective is added that this 'bias' is not structural towards EU actors as an exception, but applies to the evaluation of political actors in the news in general.

It is of course important to note that this observation pertains only to the three countries examined in this study. However, a study examining the coverage of EU actors in television news in all EU member countries during the 1999 European elections provided supportive evidence of the pattern found in these countries (Peter & de Vreese, 2002). The 15-country study also found that EU actors were evaluated negatively, but that this was similar to the evaluation of other political actors. In countries where the overall evaluation of EU actors was, on average, positive, the evaluation of other actors was still modestly negative. These findings support the conclusion that though EU actors may be evaluated negatively, if evaluated at all, this does not deviate from the evaluation of
other political actors, neither in countries traditionally skeptical towards integration (such as Denmark or Sweden) nor in traditionally pro-integration countries (such as Spain and Italy).

Effects: Europe in Public Opinion. Survey-based research indicates that the level of support for the EU and its policies fluctuates (e.g., Eurobarometer, 56, 2002). A key question in the current study was to investigate the effects of frames in television news on public opinion and attitudes towards European integration. Previous research has, by and large, neglected the role of the media when discussing influences on public opinion about Europe (see Gabel (1998) for an overview). Other studies have tentatively concluded that the media matter in the process of opinion formation about Europe (e.g., Norris, 2000). A study of the 1999 EP elections examined the aggregate-level relationship between the evaluation of EU actors in the news and citizens’ satisfaction with democracy in the EU (Peter & de Vreese, 2002). The study showed that satisfaction with democracy in the EU was lower in countries with more coverage of EU representatives or when EU representatives were negatively evaluated. Moreover, the effects of evaluations of EU representatives on satisfaction with democracy in the EU were conditional on the amount of coverage. Taken together, these studies suggest that research pay more attention to the media when studying public opinion about European integration. However, these studies are not able to address issues of causality when discussing the impact of, for example, news media.

In the current study experiments were used to address questions about the effects of television news frames. Experimentation is generally superior to other research methods when trying to establish the effect of a variable (e.g., exposure to a certain news frame) on another variable (e.g., interpretation and evaluation of an issue) (Brown & Melamed, 1990). To address shortcomings in research involving television news, the experiments in this study were conducted in cooperation with a national news program in order to make use of realistic and professional stimulus material and to be able to embed the experimentally manipulated news story in the natural context of an evening news bulletin. In addition, the studies do not rely on student samples. Instead participants in the experiments included a broad array of audience members with variation in terms of gender, age, and education which have previously been identified as predictors of public opinion about European affairs (Gabel, 1998).

Effects of the Conflict and Economic Consequences Frames. Based on an extensive literature review and findings from the content analyses, the first study investigated the effects of the conflict and economic consequences frame. The results from the first experiment showed that frames in television news
have the ability to direct the thoughts of viewers when conceiving of contemporary political issues, such as the enlargement of the EU. Participants exposed to a news story framed in terms of conflict or economic consequences expressed thoughts about the enlargement that reflected how the news was framed. For example, participants who watched a story framed in terms of the potential economic consequences of the enlargement of the European Union addressed costs, benefits, and financial implications of the enlargement of the European Union.

The main effect of exposure to the conflict and economic consequences frame was significant after adjustment for the influence of individual-level characteristics such as verbosity and political knowledge. This is supportive of previous studies of the impact of conflict and economic consequences frames for print news (Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Taken together these studies provide empirical robustness to the effects of the conflict and economic consequences frames. The effects have been found in different national contexts, for both television (this study) and the press (Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999), in relation to high salience issues (such as increasing tuition fees for a student sample), and with respect to the less personally obtrusive political-economic issues of enlargement of the European Union.

The study was also designed to address a gap in previous framing effects research. A news frame can be conceived of as particular elements (frame-carrying devices) in a news text (e.g., Tankard, 2001). These parts of the news story are distinct from the core news facts which, naturally, are also the result of a selection process, but can be conceived of as independent and different from the news frame (see e.g., Price et al., 1997). In previous studies, the degree of presence of a news frame has been manipulated to investigate whether a frame strongly present in a news story elicits stronger effects than a news frame only marginally present (e.g., McLeod & Detenber, 1999; Tewksbury et al., 2000). These studies are roundly supportive of the notion that the degree of presence of a news frame affects the extent to which audiences make use of the frame. However, no study to date had investigated the relative importance of the news frame compared to the core facts in a news story. The current study found that a news frame plays an equally important role as core facts when individuals recap a news story in their own words. This implies that a news frame, often present in specific textual elements, and often less prominent compared to factual information, carries great importance for the public understanding of political issues.

**Effects of strategy news.** Given trends in journalism emphasizing strategy in political reporting and the fact that this type of framing was found (in varying amounts) in the content analyses reported here, the second experiment investigated the effects of strategic news coverage of European politics.
Specifically, strategy framed news was expected to influence political cynicism, issue evaluation, policy support, and mobilization. In addition, the study explored whether any effects induced by exposure to news framed in terms of strategy were persistent or whether they diminished over time.

The study suggested that exposure to strategic news encourages political cynicism. Participants who watched a news story framed in terms of strategy were significantly more cynical in their responses compared to participants who watched a news story with an issue-focus. As suggested in previous research, political efficacy and political knowledge also affected the level of political cynicism. Politically efficacious individuals were less likely to express cynicism. This finding is an experimentally based corroboration of Pinkleton and Austin’s (2002) survey-based evidence of the negative relationship between cynicism and efficacy. In addition, the study suggested that political knowledge contributed to political cynicism which is in line with Cappella and Jamieson (1997).

The study also suggested that the effects of the strategic frame were not persistent and that the effects on cynicism disappeared over time. The study was designed to control for any additional information that participants might have received in the period between the immediate and the delayed post-test. Given the historical timing of the study (in the aftermath of September 11, 2001), the virtual absence of news about European integration in the period makes the control compelling. It is therefore possible to rule out, with great confidence, that the changes in political cynicism emerged as a result of exposure to new information. However, this experiment is merely a first exploration of effects of strategic news in a temporal perspective and any firm conclusions about the longevity and robustness of effects on cynicism would require an elaborate research design.

The second set of hypotheses predicted that strategic news activates negative evaluations of a policy issue compared to issue-based news that renders more positive issue evaluations. The study supported these hypotheses as participants who were exposed to the strategy-framed news story listed significantly more negative thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the issue condition. Conversely, participants in the issue condition produced significantly more positive thoughts and comments about EU enlargement compared to participants in the strategy condition.

The third and fourth expectations were that strategic news would reduce policy support and depress voter mobilization. The findings suggested that exposure to either strategic or issue-framed news neither affected the level of support for EU enlargement nor the intention to vote. A similar level of approval of future enlargement of the European Union was found in the two conditions both immediately after exposure to the news bulletin containing a story about
the enlargement and in the delayed post-test. Additionally, participants in the two conditions did not differ in their intention to vote.

Taken together, the findings of the second experiment suggest that news media may indeed contribute to political cynicism and negative associations with political and economic issues. However, these effects diminish over time in a situation where audiences are not exposed to any new information, strategic or not. The study does not provide any evidence to suggest that the strategic mode of news reporting influences public support for policies on a routine political topic or that it depresses citizens' intention to vote. The study suggests that knowledgeable citizens were both more likely to express political cynicism and to evaluate the enlargement issue negatively, but they were at the same time more supportive of EU enlargement plans.

These findings may be seen as an addition to the 'spiral of cynicism' argument. Knowledgeable citizens appear to be more sophisticated in their information processing and to reflect at greater length about an issue. They rely more on a frame provided in the news when expressing reactions to an issue. However, this does not imply that a strong attitudinal change takes place. As argued in Chapter 6 these findings corroborate recent advancements in priming research that suggest that political 'experts' perhaps choose to rely on, for example, news when thinking about political issues (Miller & Krosnick, 2000).

Cynical and engaged? The experimental evidence can be used to make a more developed 'spiral of cynicism' argument. Citizens exposed to strategic news may become more cynical, but this cynicism cannot be equated with large shifts in policy support or depressed mobilization. The conclusion from this experiment dovetails with a study of the 2000 Danish national referendum campaign on introducing the euro. The referendum study draws on panel survey data with a nationally representative sample and content analysis of all major news outlets during the campaign. In the Danish campaign, the level of political cynicism about political candidates was fairly high one month prior to referendum day, the beginning of the 'hot phase' of the campaign. The 'hot phase' of the campaign produced an increase in the level of political cynicism and an increase in negative campaign evaluations. The news media contributed to this increase in cynicism so that persons who were exposed the most to strategic news about the campaign, even when controlling for a number of other influences, displayed the strongest increases in cynicism and negative evaluations of the campaign (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002b).

The referendum study also suggests that the strategic news coverage – and the cynicism and negativity that it fuelled – did not appear to have any detrimental influence on turnout or mobilization, as has been suggested in previous US studies of the effects of negative campaigning (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar,
What might explain these cross-national differences? One explanation seems to be the conditions under which the Danish referendum campaign took place. The Danish political tradition is fundamentally different from the US, one in which voters are generally engaged, and where participation in national elections is high (more than 80 percent of the eligible voters usually vote in national election and this is almost comparable in national referendums). Actual turnout in Denmark in the referendum remained high despite the presence of strategic news and its contribution to political cynicism.

All this is meant to suggest that in a context in which most citizens were aware of the issues at stake, strategic or negative news while increasing cynicism and negative campaign evaluations may have played little or no role in mobilizing electors to go to the polls or in encouraging them to stay home. It also may very well be the case that (European) voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and the importance of participating in an election. Earlier research suggests that there is a difference between cynicism about political candidates on the one hand and political institutions on the other (Erber & Lau, 1990). Voters may be dissatisfied, cynical, and negative, but still mobilized and sufficiently engaged to turn out to vote. Such an explanation finds resonance in recent work in political science trying to make sense of the Clinton era in American politics. Popular wisdom during the Clinton presidency and later studies suggested that citizens were stunningly capable of distinguishing their rating and evaluation of Clinton as a person, on which he scored poorly, and as a president, for which he received high ratings (see e.g., Shah et al., 2001; Zaller, 1998).

Some scholars argue that cynicism is little more than an indicator of ‘healthy skepticism’ which is a characteristic of a democratic political culture (Miller, 1974) with ‘critical citizens’ (Norris, 1999). Indeed, the fact that political news framed in terms of strategy fuels political cynicism and renders negative thoughts about individual politicians’ motivations is perhaps less detrimental to democratic processes than assumed in the literature (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Taken together, the experimental evidence reported here corroborates the evidence found in a study relying on panel survey data and content analytic measures. Both studies suggest that the findings from previous research arguing that individuals are influenced by strategic news not only so that cynicism and negative evaluations increase, but also so that support for policy issues and vote intention decrease, cannot be substantiated. In speculative terms, it may very well be the case that voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and the importance of participating in democratic processes.
Limitations of the study

The study aimed at investigating the ‘framing of Europe’ in national television news in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands by means of an integrated process model to framing. The design included interviews with newsmakers at key news programs in the three countries, various rounds of content analyses of the television news coverage of European affairs at different points in time, and finally individual-level studies of the effects of news about European affairs on the public’s issue interpretations, evaluations, political cynicism, and policy support. The project resides in the initial phase of an emerging research trajectory focusing on the interface between the politics and economics of European integration, the media, and public opinion. The study may ideally serve as a baseline from which further to develop this line of research. A number of limitations pertain to the current study. The findings must therefore be interpreted as tentative, marking the first steps in the direction of more sophisticated studies of this dynamic under the specific conditions of European integration.

Cross-national perspective. The study is designed with a cross-national component which was useful for understanding and interpreting differences in for example editorial policies and structures in the news. However, the study focused on only three current member states of the EU. Even though Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands represent a broad spectrum in terms of aggregate level public opinion towards European integration, the country sample has a strong north-European bias. Extending future research with countries such as Italy or Spain and even countries currently outside the EU would not only enrich the understanding of the dynamic, but would also potentially recast the findings in a different light.

Medium sample. A second limitation stems from the selection of medium. Though television is repeatedly identified as the key source of political information and information about European affairs (Eurobarometer, 56, 2002) and though most other studies neglect the influence of television and discuss the impact of the press only (e.g., Hewstone, 1986; Kevin, 2001), the focus on television news only undoubtedly affects the findings and limits the scope of the conclusions. While television may reach the largest audiences, is perceived as the most important source of information, and has the ability to direct attention to issues, newspapers provide more political and economic news and studies suggest that newspapers are processed more intensively and are a stronger predictor of, for example, political knowledge than television (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999). Future research may consider not only mainstream evening news and key national newspapers, but also include, for example, current affairs television programs, local press, and weekly magazines. In addition, interactive, on-line sources as well as interpersonal communication would be
useful additions to obtain a more detailed image of the news and information environment made available to European citizens.

**Content analysis.** The study covered the period 1999-2000. The sample does not allow for any historical comparisons or conclusions. Future research should aim at producing content analyses that replicate key variables so that comparisons over time become possible (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In addition, cross-national studies should aim at advancing the link between content analytic indicators and contextual variables. In analyses of news in more than one setting, it is important to identify and specify which factors influence and shape the volume and content of the news coverage (see Peter, 2002). In the analysis of the EP election campaign, it was not appropriate to formally model such relationships given the limited coverage (and the low number of cases) in the three countries.

**Public opinion expression.** The current study relies on experimentation as the method for understanding public opinion formation and change. The unique qualities and assets of experimentation in terms of internal validity, systematic observation, and causality guided the choice of experiments, but the endangered external validity in experiments is acknowledged. Future research should aim at designing studies that draw on truly multi-methodological designs in which, for example, experimentally established evidence is tested in a survey setting. Such designs should aim at integrating media exposure and attention measures with content analytic indicators (Riffe et al., 1998; Scheufele, 2000).

**Frame-building.** Theoretically, the current study would be enhanced by a more elaborate design in which the output from the political arena were integrated in an investigation of how and to what extent media pick up on this elite framing of issues. (see Terkildsen, Schnell & Ling (1998) for a discussion of an interactive model of public policy debate formation). Assessing for example the efforts of the European Parliament, as suggested by Meyer (1999), and comparing information from content analyses of, for example, party manifestos and press releases with interviews, observations as well as news media coverage, would make it possible to investigate the frame-building process in greater detail.

With these general limitations in mind, some theoretical and practical lessons can be drawn and paths for future research can be suggested.

**Theoretical lessons**

**Framing theory: the next steps**

Studies of framing to date have posed as many questions as they have answered. Research has offered too little in terms of structured theoretical and operational coherence which the “fractured paradigm” (Entman, 1993) of framing research
requires. This study proposed an integrated process model to framing that involves investigations of the production process (frame-building), content (news frames), and framing effects (frame-setting). This theoretical model can inform and guide the investigation of a communicative process in its entirety. Entman (1993) and later McLeod et al. (2002) suggested that the true potential of the framing concept lies in its ability to link research domains that are often treated as separate and disconnected while in fact interrelated and interdependent. The reciprocal process of production, content, and effects is one such example. Previous studies of framing have more often than not focused on either production (e.g., Liebes, 2000), content (e.g., Lawrence, 2000; Norris, 1995) or effects (e.g., Domke et al., 1999; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Few notable exceptions link content and effects (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Smetko & Valkenburg, 2000 / Valkenburg et al., 1999). Thus far no study has addressed the framing process in its totality. The potential virtue of applying an integrated process definition of the framing concept, as suggested in this study, lies in the coherence it offers for understanding the process.

This is not meant to suggest that theoretical parsimony in general is inherently and unconditionally preferable to specific approaches. The integrated process model is not meant to be prescriptive for future research. However, the approach is meant to suggest that findings pertaining to both the production process, the content, and potential effects are more easily understood when conceived in a broader perspective.

Throughout the research project, a number of issues have arisen that are in need of attention in the further explication and application of the framing concept. Three aspects deserve particular attention at this point: (1) the relationship between framing research and agenda-setting and priming research, (2) the psychological antecedents of framing effects, and (3) the moderators and mediators of framing effects.

Second level agenda-setting or framing? A contentious issue in recent political communication scholarship is the relationship between different cognitive media effects: agenda-setting, priming, and framing. While the discussion is not novel (see Price and Tewksbury, 1997), recent scholarly attention has fuelled the debate (Kiousis et al., 1999; Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; McCombs et al., 1997b; McCombs et al., 2000, Scheufele, 1999; 2000; Weaver, 1998). The question at stake is whether framing is considered a distinct media effect or a ‘second level agenda-setting effect’. Two perspectives are emerging but both suffer from lack of precision and terminological inconsistency. Furthermore, the research field is not yet sufficiently mature to classify framing as one particular kind of effect. Any attempt at doing this would entail a research program specifically designed to explore the antecedents and consequences of either
second-level agenda-setting or framing (Scheufele, 2000). The current study was not designed to reconcile or support either of the two perspectives, and it remains an unsolved question.

Proponents of the second level agenda-setting approach lend credibility and empirical support from one of the most widely cited theories concerning media’s role in the process of public opinion formation: agenda-setting. The link between agenda-setting and framing was succinctly summarized almost a decade ago: “Framing analysis expands beyond agenda-setting research into what people talk or think about by examining how they think and talk about issues in the news” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 70). The question is whether framing adds a new dimension (a second level) and is best conceptualized as a second level agenda-setting effect (e.g., McCombs et al., 1997a; Weaver, 1998) or whether framing is a distinct concept building on specific premises and should be treated accordingly (Scheufele, 2000).

SALIENCE AND ATTRACTIONS: TERMINOLOGICAL INCONSISTENCIES. The thrust of the second-level agenda-setting argument is that in addition to setting the agenda of issues, the media may also set the agenda in terms of which elements within these issues are emphasized (McCombs et al., 2000). Experimental evidence suggests that emphasis on candidate attributes (personality and qualifications traits) in news is mirrored by readers in different experimental conditions (Kiousis et al., 1999). In studies of elections in Spain it was found that attributes of candidates emphasized by the news media correlated with candidate attributes salient to audiences for these media (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998; McCombs et al., 2000).

Although these studies position framing as a second-level agenda-setting effect, neither offer any theoretical arguments or propositions as to why framing effects are best seen as a form of agenda-setting. McCombs et al. (2000, p. 90) conclude that agenda-setting has converged with framing and applaud the theoretical parsimony emerging. This conclusion is based on an argument of conviction rather than theoretical advancements or empirical data.

The strongest and most explicit plea for considering framing as different from agenda-setting comes from Scheufele (2000). Framing, it is argued, draws on other cognitive processing mechanisms than agenda-setting and priming that follow a model of attitude accessibility and a memory-based model of information processing. Agenda-setting has issue salience as the dependent variable and priming has issue salience as an independent variable for making evaluations of political leaders. Framing, Scheufele (2000, p. 309) argues, is based on the concept of prospect theory and on the assumption that “subtle changes in the wording of a description might affect how audiences think about this situation”. Moreover, it is stated that framing is not making some “aspects
of an issue more salient, but invoking interpretative schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information”.

As outlined above, Scheufele’s (2000) argument that salience per se makes an agenda-setting or priming study challenges extant research where these terms are used interchangeably. In framing research, Nelson et al. (1997) and Druckmann (2001a) have demonstrated how frames make certain considerations more salient for subsequent judgments. News frames affect attitudes by stressing specific values, facts or other considerations and endowing them with greater relevance to an issue than under an alternative frame. Moreover, Tewksbury et al. (2000) found evidence that the degree of presence – the weight or salience – given to a frame in the news affected the relative emphasis given to this frame in readers’ interpretation of a local policy issue. These studies in addition to the current study suggest that salience is a concept relevant to framing research.

McCombs et al. (2000, p. 90) argue that the “question of which of these conceptualizations or their intellectual descendants is the more productive will be settled by the accumulation of research. In the meantime, this variety of perspectives provides a rich research environment”. While the settlement of an intellectual dispute may find solution in the magnitude of research, the core of the dispute appears to remain unsettled. The ultimate test, as suggested by Scheufele (2000), is to explicate if and how framing differs from agenda-setting and priming in terms of its antecedents and outcomes.

Future studies need to empirically address this issue and provide compelling evidence of whether there is a link between first- and second-level agenda-setting. Are second-level agenda-setting effects conditional upon first-level effects? In other words must first-level agenda-setting occur before second-level agenda setting? If the news media ‘fail’ to set an issue on the public agenda, but the way this issue is framed still affects public perceptions of the issue, despite the low salience on the public and media agendas, is it still appropriate to speak of agenda-setting effects? If framing effects are second-level agenda-setting effects, what effects of the mass media are then not second or even third-level agenda-setting effects? Answers to these questions go beyond the scope of this current study. Initial answers should be empirically grounded, which is not always the case in the current debate.

The psychological antecedents of framing. A second issue that deserves attention in future framing research is the explication and identification of psychological antecedents of framing effects. Reviewing the existing literature, two strands of research addressing the effects of frames can be distinguished: framing as an accessibility effect and framing as a consideration salience effect.
Early empirical studies of framing effects conceive of the framing process almost entirely as an *accessibility* effect (Iyengar, 1991). Given the key role of news media for the provision of information about politics, news is a key determinant of accessibility. Television news, for example, makes information accessible or retrievable from memory, and easily retrieved or accessed information then dominates "judgments, opinions, and decisions" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 131). Iyengar (1991) makes no distinction in the psychological processes underlying agenda-setting, priming, and framing effects. They all amount to making certain characteristics more or less accessible in memory.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) review considerable literature in psychology to develop a mental model of framing effects. What news frames essentially accomplish, according to Cappella and Jamieson, is to activate knowledge and invite inferences by making certain beliefs more accessible for use in evaluations and interpretations of issues. Knowledge is defined as organized as nodes, concepts and constructs in more or less associative networks. Information provided by, for example, a frame in the news stimulates access to certain information in memory, making it more accessible. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) point out how the strategic news frame, by virtue of its focus on the behavior of politicians, for example, make salient self-interest, negative character attributions, and cue stock stories in memory about "politics as usual" which then in turn foster and reinforce political cynicism.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) thereby also introduce framing as an accessibility effect. However, they elaborate this model by arguing that political judgments, as a result of framing, are based on a combination of memory-based (such as accessibility) and on-line activities. Frames, upon activation of nodes, work either through memory, making certain considerations more accessible for use in subsequent judgments and/ or through immediate, on-line evaluation of these nodes which are then anchored or adjusted and used in subsequent judgments without necessarily accessing memory.

That framing effects might go beyond mere accessibility effects is a perspective that is gaining support in both theoretical arguments (e.g., Scheufele, 2000) and in several empirically based studies of framing effects (Druckman, 2001a; Nelson et al., 1997, Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Price & Tewksbury, 1997, Price et al., 1997).

Price and Tewksbury (1997) develop an elaborate model of the ways in which knowledge is activated and used in consequent political judgments and evaluations. This model is empirically tested in Price et al. (1997). They distinguish *applicability* and *accessibility* effects. Framing is seen as an applicability effect whereas priming is seen as an accessibility effect. Framing effects are immediate effects occurring during the initial message processing and the interpretation and reaction to specific news stories. Salient attributes of a message
affect the applicability of particular thoughts which result in their activation and use in evaluations (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Priming effects by contrast are second-order effects with a temporal component which they illustrate with the following example: “First, a media message renders one or another construct applicable, and that construct – say, unemployment – is activated. By virtue of its activation [...] that construct remains temporarily accessible. Subsequently, when a person is asked to evaluate the performance of the president, unemployment is likely to be activated” (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 197).

Most radically opposing the accessibility interpretation of framing effects is the work by Nelson and colleagues (Druckman, 2001a; 2001b; Nelson et al., 1997, Nelson & Oxley, 1999). The accessibility model is criticized for its dependency of memory for formulating attitudes (e.g., Nelson & Kinder, 1996). To put the accessibility theory to a test, participants in an experiment completed a reaction time task measuring the cognitive accessibility of concepts induced in the experimental news stories (Nelson et al., 1997). If framing effects are mediated by accessibility, the authors argue, then “participants should respond swiftly to words most consonant with the frame they viewed” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 573). No effect of framing condition was found on participants’ reaction time which is the empirical base to discard the accessibility explanation.

Framing effects stem from the weight and importance that citizens attach to certain considerations when making political judgments. News frames have impact on opinions and attitudes, not by mere accessibility, but by stressing specific values, facts or other considerations, endowing them with greater relevance to an issue than under an alternative frame. Selectively enhancing the psychological importance and relevance or weight to specific beliefs can be accomplished without accessibility of these concepts in memory (Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Nelson and Oxley (1999) find that salience attached to beliefs, activated by a news frame, is a strong predictor of political attitudes such as tolerance. One path to pursue in future research is to develop tasks including measures of reaction time to investigate whether responses occur on-line or whether they are memory-based (see Cameron & Frieske, 1994).

MODERATORS AND MEDIATORS OF FRAMING EFFECTS. A third aspect which framing research needs to focus on to advance the current knowledge is the area of moderators and mediators of framing effects. These have been subject of some discussion in the framing effects literature. Since the early studies of framing, there has been agreement on the importance of individual characteristics and context in the processing of information and in the susceptibility to frames provided by, for example, the news (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Graber, 1988; Neuman et al., 1992; Price et al., 1997). With the observation in mind that framing effects are not universal, it is intriguing that only few studies have explicated modera-
tors of framing effects. In particular within the ‘cognitive paradigm’ in framing research (as discussed in Chapter 2), there has been a strong focus on how audiences respond to and mirror frames in the news, but only limited attention has been paid to moderators and mediators of these effects.

In the media effects literature, political knowledge (oftentimes referred to as ‘political sophistication’ and ‘political awareness’) is a key variable, but there is only limited exploration of this in the framing effects literature. Price et al., (1997) found that political knowledge contributed to more elaborate responses to news, but did not find evidence that knowledge either enhances or depresses susceptibility to news frames. Rhee (1997) found political knowledge to significantly bolster readers’ use of an experimentally induced frame in their interpretation of an election campaign. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found greater ‘political sophistication’ (measured as high political knowledge) to be a significant positive predictor for political cynicism.

Given the inconclusive nature of previous research, this study investigated the role of political knowledge in the frame-setting process and found political knowledge to be a positive predictor for audiences to rely on a frame presented to them in the news. More sophisticated individuals tend to process new information (for example in the form of news frames) deeper and more actively. They may draw more on this resource of information in their subsequent interpretation and evaluation of the issue, but may not necessarily display attitude change.

More work is needed to explicate and model direct effects of individual characteristics as well as mediators and moderators. Future research should aim at identifying these influences and hypothesizing about directional effects so as to explore, for example, differences between how moderators behave in relation to high and low involvement issues.

Covering Europe: lessons for journalism

For journalists covering ‘Europe’, the ‘traditional’ constraints and challenges related to covering, for example, domestic political and economic issues, are somewhat magnified. While political reporting in general is challenged by the complexity of issues, potential lack of audience interest and knowledge, and internal tensions in the newsroom about the priority of political news, these challenges apply to the coverage of European affairs in manifold: European-level governance has a different pace from domestic local and national politics, the competence and organization of the institutions is different from domestic politics, the issues at stake involve the opinions and preferences of (at least) 15 countries, the audience oftentimes is better able to identify national politicians than EU-level politicians, domestic tax issues mean more to more viewers than,
for example, corporate tax harmonization in the EU, and journalistic colleagues are generally as skeptical towards EU news as they believe their audiences are.

Why worry about these challenges? The evidence in this study suggests that the choices made by journalists when covering Europe have significant implications for how the public perceives and evaluates European issues. To consider and explicate these challenges is therefore also a first step in considering the effects that these choices have.

What might be done to meet the challenge? The challenges are far from easy to meet. One solution lies in the field of education, not only for the audience, but also for journalists and editors. In a recent overview of developments and needs in journalism training, the issue of European integration emerged as a key area in need of attention (Bierhoff, Deuze & de Vreese, 2001). Journalism training in this field should be two-fold. There is a need for training in ‘bringing home the European story’, that is to make the complex political issues accessible and relevant to audiences without reducing the inherent complexity to simplicity. Refining the skills and tools to frame and find a peg in international political news in order to make it relevant to national audiences without compromising the inherently international nature of the issue is one area in need of attention.

The second area in need of attention in terms of education is ‘Sachwissen’, i.e. factual and procedural knowledge about the European integration processes, their historical and political antecedents, and future implications. The need for education in this respect is only likely to grow as the competences and authority of the Union expand to new areas. Many journalists covering EU affairs have perhaps too limited or outdated knowledge about the socio-political contours of the European continent which in the midst of the integration process help to explain and understand diverging national interest at the EU negotiation scene.

**Blaming the messenger: The fault of television journalism?** Given the effects of television news demonstrated in this study, does this mean that journalists are responsible for fuelling political cynicism about Europe? No. It is not a journalistic responsibility as such to promote integration in Europe. European integration is but one of several concurring political, economic, and social developments that compete for attention in the news. Journalists are obliged to cover the key issues of the political arena, but only if politicians are convincingly engaged in a topic, the discussion of how journalists choose to cover this issue emerges. And still, it is journalism’s responsibility to act as a watchdog and hold politicians accountable, even though this may be at stake with politicians’ interests.

However, it is a journalistic and editorial responsibility to reflect upon the choices made in the ‘Europe-coverage’. One conclusion from this study is that ‘Europe is a choice’. While television news programs were all pragmatic, that is
selective and critical in their choice of stories, the cross-national design showed that this may lead journalists to either, by and large, neglect the European story (such as in the Netherlands) or pro-actively set an agenda, independent from the politicians’ agenda (such as in Denmark).

Journalists are and should be aware of their role and the effects it has when covering, for example, European politics as a strategic game. As the Editor-in-Chief of ITN said: “It certainly gives the viewer the information they need to make their own judgment, but it may make politics appear quite arcane and quite marketing oriented and further removed from ordinary people’s worries.”

Not only the choice of whether or not to cover an event or issue, but also the framing of that event matters for the public understanding of the European integration process. The current study demonstrated the effects of journalistic framing of European affairs in terms of, for example, conflict, economic consequences or strategy. The study showed that the spin given to a story was equally important as key news facts when audiences processed the news. Other research has focused on the effects of advantageous and disadvantageous coverage of the enlargement issue. In one experimental study, participants who watched a story that focused on the historical rationales for EU enlargement and portrayed the enlargement as advantageous, led to higher levels of general EU support and higher levels of support for the enlargement plans in particular (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2002). Conversely, a disadvantageous focus and non-historical context led to lower levels of support. The conclusion is not that television news stories should always contain either positive interpretations or a broader historical context, but merely to say that if they do, this appears to have an effect. Therefore, the choices made by journalists and editors in the production process should be informed and conscious ones.

Creating Europe: lessons for the political arena

Almost two decades ago, Inglehart (1984, p. 20) suggested that the European Community was at a key moment in history in its decision whether or not to develop the community into a union:

“Probably, only a bold new departure can recapture the imagination and support of the most dynamic segments of the European public. If it is pursued vigorously, the proposed European Union might rekindle a European spirit, and provide a sense of purpose that is palpably lacking. Bringing about a European Union would not be easy: it will unquestionably give rise to opposition and could even split the Community, in a worst-case scenario. But the gamble is worth taking: if the Community allows itself to stagnate further, as it has during the past decade, it seems likely to become a moribund and largely meaningless institution”.

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Much of the skepticism and call for rigorous change voiced by Inglehart is applicable today. National and EU politicians would most likely argue that the European Union has become a reality, that monetary unity has been created by virtue of the common currency, and that the ‘European spirit’ is developing with the planned inclusion of former East European countries. It is hard to disagree with these points, but the question is whether these very ‘real’ changes matter.

Different scholars have demonstrated and alluded to the fact that public perceptions of political and economic issues such as European integration can be completely independent from factual indicators (Gabel, 1998; Hetherington, 1998). Public support is a key condition for a successful future integration trajectory. With public support for EU membership at best stable and support for crucial issues such as the enlargement declining, not only in the current member states but also in the ascension countries, the need for a change in the perception of the EU as stagnating, bureaucratic, and incompetent is evident.

The argument has been made elsewhere that political leaders are more often evaluated based on a perception of their performance rather than their real performance. The European Union and its leaders may therefore have more to worry about than political issues such as the ascension countries meeting the criteria for membership of the Union. If such issues are not communicated efficiently and convincingly, public perceptions of the costs and inadequacies of new member states may very well thrive regardless of the adoptions made by these new countries and rigorous tests by the EU.

This study demonstrated that characteristics of the media content, specifically the framing of European issues, have significant effects on how citizens process information and evaluate crucial agenda issues such as the enlargement. News media coverage influences the ‘trains of thought’ and can contribute to the public’s political cynicism and negative issue interpretations. The study also showed, however, that though key perceptions of European affairs are susceptible to news frames, this does not immediately lead to changes in support for, for example, the enlargement of the EU. Does this imply that there is ‘nothing to worry about’ because media framing effects are, in the first instance, short-term and do not affect levels of EU-support? Such a diagnosis is probably both flawed and short-sighted. After all, the observations that repeated exposure to similar messages and reinforcement of existing stereotypes is effective are not new (Lippmann, 1922; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Future research needs to disentangle the long-term effects of news and information on public opinion about Europe to investigate cumulative effects of particular information environments.

What then needs to be done in the political arena to contribute positively towards this process? The answer is not likely to be simple. For a start, to intervene in the process of cynicism activation when citizens are faced with new
information about European affairs, politicians are in need of refraining from using European politics to fight domestic battles. The regular EU summits, involving Prime Ministers from all EU countries, are used as battlegrounds for domestic political leaders. As discussed in Chapter 4, in the case of the Nice summit in December 2000, the EU was little more than a backdrop for British politicians against which domestic politics was discussed. When reviewing positive outcomes of international negotiations, politicians refer to having ‘protected national interests’ and ‘won the battle’ against the EU and other member countries. When reviewing less favorable results, national politicians refer to the ever-growing competence of the Union and absence of leeway for national interests and particularities. Using the European realm as a domestic political battleground in which blame can be assigned and credit taken – as discussed by van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) – fuels ‘us’ versus ‘them’ sentiments, skepticism, and political cynicism. Such strategic interpretations of European integration are therefore not likely to contribute positively to public opinion about European affairs.

Crucial issues such as the enlargement and the reorganization of EU institutions await in the near future. The importance of news and information in bridging the gap between the political arena and European citizens is not likely to diminish but rather grow. The last word has not yet been said about framing, European integration, and the role that journalists and politicians play in this process.