

# VU Research Portal

## Media Logic and Electoral Democracy

Takens, J.H.

2013

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Takens, J. H. (2013). *Media Logic and Electoral Democracy*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. Box Press.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

# 1 MEDIA LOGIC: THREATENING THE VIABILITY OF DEMOCRACY?

On 3 May 2004, Piet-Hein Donner, former Dutch Minister of Justice, criticised Dutch media's fulfilment of their democratic functions by stating that

*'[the] press may be a watchdog of democracy but a watchdog that gives a false alarm too often does not function. An information channel that gives biased and distorted information has no value'* [author's translation].<sup>1</sup>

He typified Dutch media's conduct as *'writing what people want to hear, what attracts attention, what sells, instead of what is really going on'*. He raised concerns about *'the potential hazards and social damage of media acting as a political factor without appropriate accountability'* [author's translations]. As will be clarified shortly, Piet-Hein Donner's criticism illustrates the topicality and significance of this dissertation's main research question: *Does media logic affect the viability of electoral democracy?*

On the day of the 2010 Dutch parliamentary elections, the most widely read newspaper – *De Telegraaf* – opened with a question in large print: *'Will Rutte or yet Cohen win the election battle?'* followed by the by-line *'VVD four seats ahead in latest polls'* [author's translations]. *De Telegraaf* headline is a schoolbook example of media coverage that is the product of media that aim for the most engaging storyline: the headline focuses on appealing party leaders rather than the abstract parties that they represent. It moreover presents elections as a battle between politicians rather than a means for voters to give politicians a mandate. The publication of the most recent polls on the day of the election highlights the fact that the elections are presented primarily as a horse race between politicians. This headline thus exemplifies media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni, 1987), which refers to news values and sto-

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech of Piet-Hein Donner on the occasion of the presentation of a study on press freedom in the Netherlands of the Dutch Association for Journalists (NVJ): [http://www.villamedia.nl/n/nvj/nieuws/2004mei3\\_donner.shtm](http://www.villamedia.nl/n/nvj/nieuws/2004mei3_donner.shtm).

rytelling techniques which media use because it fits their format or because it appeals to the public (Strömbäck, 2008).

The headline '*Will Rutte or yet Cohen win the election battle? VVD four seats ahead in latest polls*' also illustrates why the question concerning the influence of media logic on the viability of electoral democracy is so appropriate. The emphasis on party leaders, the electoral battle, and the electoral horse race gives voters a distorted picture of Dutch elections. Firstly, by focusing on party leaders alone, the headline portrays parliamentary elections as though they were presidential elections. However, in Dutch ballot boxes, voters are not given the choice of electing a president. Secondly, the headline portrays the election as a battle between the leaders of just two parties. However, that could not have been further from the truth. No less than ten parties succeeded in gaining a seat in parliament and even more parties participated in the elections. Mark Rutte's *VVD* and Job Cohen's *PvdA* received just 20.5 and 19.6 per cent of the votes respectively. The Netherlands therefore has anything but a two-party system. Finally, the headline provides information about the polls, which might persuade people to cast a strategic vote.

This headline is just one example of a newspaper portraying politics as exciting as possible, while it exemplifies the focus of widespread criticism on media and their logic, as voiced by Piet-Hein Donner. This dissertation will examine *over time* to what degree news coverage has been the product of media logic and how this affects the viability of electoral democracy. This chapter contains three sections. The first section positions media logic in the broader debate on the role of media in democracy. The second discusses the conceptualisation of media logic. The chapter ends with an outline of this dissertation.

## 1.1 Media logic and the interaction between press, politics, and the public

The press, politics, and the people are mutually interdependent. Journalists need politicians to provide them with newsworthy information to cover and they need citizens to devote attention to their coverage so that advertisements can be sold. Politicians need citizens' votes to stay in power and they need journalists to reach those voters. Citizens need the

media for information on societal developments and parties' policy preferences to enable them to make an informed voting decision, and they need politicians to represent their interests. Media, politics, and the people thus form an interdependent triad. This dissertation focuses on the influence of media on citizens. However, to study the influence of media on citizens we need some understanding of the relations between media and politicians too.

A central concept describing the relationship between media and other institutions, like politics, is *mediatisation*. Mediatisation refers to two interlinked processes: the institutionalisation of the media and the increasing influence of the media on other institutions (Hjarvard, 2008). To start with the former, media have gradually developed from entities that were essentially controlled by other institutions to become a single independent institution. For example, since the late nineteenth century – when political parties first emerged – Western European newspapers have been instruments of political parties. In the first half of the twentieth century, partisan newspapers started loosening their ties with political parties and gradually became independent institutions acting primarily in the public interest (Brants and Van Praag, 2006; Hjarvard, 2008). In recent decades, competition in the media market has increased. As a result, consumer interest rather than the public interest now steer the media in their news coverage. The logic of the media has accordingly changed from a logic directed at the public interest to a logic of what the public is interested in (Brants and Van Praag, 2006), what is referred to as *media logic*.

The influence of media logic on other institutions – like politics – is the second central tenet of mediatisation. As Hjarvard (2008: 113) puts it: 'By the mediatization of society, we understand the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic'. Strömbäck (2008: 234) similarly refers to 'the degree to which political actors are governed by a political logic or by media logic' as an important aspect of the *mediatisation of politics*. As an independent institution, media control valuable resources like broadcast time. According to the mediatisation thesis, other institutions have to comply with the logic of the media to gain access to these resources (Hjarvard, 2008).

The degree to which political news coverage and politics are ruled by *media logic* has presumably increased due to the dominance of the media as a source of political information and the loosening of the ties between the media and political institutions (Strömbäck, 2008). Mediatisation is therefore commonly portrayed as a unilinear process of steadily increasing influence of the media on politics. This process is argued to fully materialize at a certain point (Kepplinger, 2002). Strömbäck (2008) refers to this point as the point at which politicians do no longer just adapt to media logic but adopt it as their own. However, Strömbäck (2008) also rightfully argues that mediatisation does not need to be a unilinear process. The professional standards of the media can for example put a brake on the adaptation of media and politicians to mediatisation (Brants and Van Praag, 2006; Hjarvard, 2008).

Mediatisation is also often referred to as a unidirectional process whereby media set the conditions and politicians are forced to adapt to the logic of the media. However, as some authors rightly point out, the adoption of media logic by media and politicians is more likely to be a mutually reinforcing process. Kepplinger et al. (1991), for example, show that politicians stage conflicts because they generate media attention. In one of the few empirical studies on mediatisation of politics, Kepplinger (2002: 983) concludes that the adjustment to media logic by journalists and politicians 'reinforced each other until some sort of a saturation point was reached'. Because both journalists and politicians are guided by media logic in a mutually reinforcing process, 'what the media present as politics is partly the consequence of the conditions set by the mass media' (Kepplinger, 2002: 983). Media present politics in such a way as to fit media's own practices and routines (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Media focus for example on party leaders, the electoral battle, and negative news because this all fits important news values. Media also create events which fit their own logic like election polls (Patterson, 2005), televised election debates (Reinemann and Wilke, 2007), and even polls measuring who won these debates. What is more, media cover politicians who are behaving in such a way as to fit the logic of the media, like politicians who stage conflicts. So, media and politicians both adapt to the logic of the media.

The mutually reinforcing process of adaptation to media logic by both journalists and politicians also has consequences for the public.

What media portray as politics might actually be just a selection of political events that fit media logic or even political events, which are created by media or journalists to fit media logic, like polls, or mediated conflicts. Media logic thus takes shape in the content of political news coverage. This raises the question as to how the adaptation to media logic by both journalists and politicians affects the voter. Does the portrayal of politics in line with media logic influence the ability of voters to make a well-informed voting decision? So far, too little attention has been paid to the effect of media logic on the voter in an electoral democracy. In line with the work of Thomas Patterson, a broad body of literature has studied the effect of political news coverage on variables like political trust, political interest, and political participation (e.g. Adriaansen et al., 2012; Cappella, 2000; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006; De Vreese and Semetko, 2002; Kepplinger, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006; Maurer, 2003; Min, 2004; Mutz and Reeves, 2005). These political attitudes are highly valued from the perspective of participatory democracy, which strives for citizens' involvement. However, few studies have examined whether media logic affects voters' ability to cast a well-informed vote.

To summarize then, the literature on media logic has disregarded the effect of journalists' and politicians' mutually reinforcing adaptation to media logic on the voter. Media effect studies that analyse the effect of media content on the voter commonly focus on political trust, political interest, and the like. The question whether media content that is the product of media logic influences voters' ability to cast a well-informed vote has not been answered yet. It is the goal of this dissertation to fill this research gap and answer this question. To do so, I will first have to define what media logic is exactly.

## 1.2 Conceptualisation of media logic

The concept most central to an understanding of the way media portray politics is media logic. The term has been widely used in theoretical discussions on political communication but few studies have clarified how media logic manifests itself. The term 'media logic' was first coined in 1979 by Altheide and Snow (p. 10), who describe it as

*'... a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication. Format becomes a framework or perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena'.*

This description seems elusive (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011) but it does explain the main tenet of media logic, which is that media make their coverage, including the interpretation of events, fit their own format requirements. Also Hjarvard (2008: 113) emphasizes that media guided by media logic are driven by format requirements: 'the institutional and technological modus operandi of the media, including the ways in which media distribute material and symbolic resources and operate with the help of formal and informal rules'. Strömbäck (2008: 233) defines media logic as 'the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people's attention'. He thus broadens the definition of media logic by stating that media cover social events in a way that fits their format, i.e. 'to take advantage of their own format', but also in a way that is most profitable, i.e. 'to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people's attention'. This coverage of what is profitable also resonates in Brants and Van Praag's (2007: 100) description of media logic as media identifying 'less with the public interest and more with what the public is interested in, that is to say, with what they assume the public deems important and enjoyable'. In this dissertation, I follow Strömbäck's definition of media logic. I will consequently focus on news values and storytelling techniques that media use because it fits their format and because it is profitable. This conceptualisation of media logic underlines that media logic reflects a change from a focus on the public interest to a focus on what the public wants to read or watch in order to sell advertisements.

The term *media logic* implies that there are also other logics. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011: 33) for example describe how '[the] media's own formats and needs, rather than those of other social subsystems, take precedence and guide the media and their coverage'. Scholars commonly contrast media logic with political logic (Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck, 2008). For instance, according to Strömbäck (2008: 234) two aspects of mediatisation are 'the *degree* to which the media content is governed by a political logic or by media logic' and 'the *degree* to which political actors are governed by a political logic or by media logic' [emphasis in the original].

Strömbäck (2008: 234) describes political logic as 'the needs of the political system and political institutions – in particular, parties, but also governmental agencies as well as democracy as a set of norms and procedures'. Democratic politics eventually is about policy formation in line with the will of the people. However, to gain the authority to make policy decisions, parties first need to be elected. The 'needs' of political parties consequently consist of implementing their policies and in order to do so they need to communicate their explanation of societal problems and their solutions to these problems in the media. However, because media set the conditions of campaign communication, media logic might have partially become the logic of vote-seeking politicians. This dissertation focuses on the requirements on the media from the perspective of the needs of the institutions of electoral democracy.

It is furthermore important to emphasize that media logic refers to the logic of *the* media as a single institution (Hjarvard, 2008). It does not refer to the news values and storytelling techniques of individual journalists or newsrooms but to the news values and storytelling techniques that are shared by the media as an institution. It is a logic that is shared by public and commercial media, by television broadcasters, newspapers, and internet sources, and by so-called popular and quality media.

### 1.2.1 *CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS MANIFESTING MEDIA LOGIC*

To date, there has been little agreement on the quintessence of media logic. Altheide and Snow (1979: 10) ambiguously refer to 'a form of communication', which includes 'the various media and the formats used



by these media', which in turn consists of 'how material is organised, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication'. Other scholars have referred to the essence of media logic as 'the requirements of production routines and presentation genres' (Schulz, 2004: 92), 'the possibilities and the limitations of the medium' (RMO, 2003: 11) [author's translation], 'schemata which fit the rhetoric of especially the visual media' [author's translation] (Van Vree et al., 2003: 92), and the media's 'frame of reference' (Brants and Van Praag, 2006). More concretely, Strömbäck (2008: 233) refers to 'news values' and 'storytelling techniques'. In this dissertation, I will follow his conceptualisation of media logic. I consider news values and storytelling techniques as the essence of media logic because they show that media logic is not only determined by what is convenient due to format requirements, but also by what is expected to attract the public. News values help journalists to select news that is interesting to the public and storytelling techniques assist journalists in presenting this news in an engaging way. In addition to the previously mentioned personalisation and contest coverage, i.e. game coverage and horse race coverage, Strömbäck (2008: 233) refers to storytelling techniques as 'simplification, polarization, intensification (...), visualization and stereotypization'.

As previously noted, media logic comes to expression in the content of the news. How do these news values and storytelling techniques embodying media logic manifest themselves in the news? This question needs to be answered to be able to empirically study media logic. It is only when we know how media logic manifests itself in news content that we can measure its effects on the voter. In the literature on the content of political news coverage, three content characteristics, which correspond with important news values (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001), recur: personalised coverage (e.g. Campus, 2010; Mazzoleni, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1996; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007), contest coverage (i.e. conflict news, game news, and horse race news) (e.g. Brants and Van Praag, 2006; Mazzoleni, 1987; Patterson, 1993), and negative coverage (e.g. Balmas and Sheaffer, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2010; Kleinnijenhuis and Fan, 1999). Media's coverage highlights these characteristics because electoral strategies and the electoral horse race offer engaging storylines, because politicians are easier to identify with than

abstract political parties, and because people are assumed to be attracted to the negative.

The first content characteristic manifesting media logic, *personalised coverage*, refers to 'a heightened focus on individual politicians and a diminished focus on parties, organizations, and institutions' in the media (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007: 67). Media guided by their own logic focus on individual politicians because they want to attract news consumers, and news consumers identify more easily with politicians than with abstract institutions like political parties. Studies have shown that especially politicians with good charismatic skills are covered in the news (Sheafer, 2001; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). Photojournalists and especially television journalists moreover focus on politicians rather than institutions since this meets their visual requirements.

The second content characteristic manifesting media logic, *contest coverage*, refers to coverage that portrays politics predominantly as a political contest between political actors with limited attention for the issues at stake. It covers who is winning and who is losing in for example the polls, televised election debates, or in the eyes of journalists themselves. It also reports on conflict and cooperation between political parties. The amount of contest coverage is contrasted with the amount of issue coverage, which covers real world developments, like the state of the economy, and politicians' policy preferences. Media cover the electoral contest because it makes a more exciting storyline than detailed policy plans (Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011). The coverage of the contest in the form of the horse race and strategies has also been used as a *content* indicator of media interventionism (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011) and interpretive journalism (Brants and Van Praag, 2006).

The third content characteristic manifesting media logic is negative coverage. Different studies have shown that media have a tendency to cover *negative news* (e.g. Patterson, 1993; Pfau et al., 1998; Semetko and Schoenbach, 2003). Negativity is an important news value because negative coverage attracts more attention from the public than positive coverage (Meffert et al., 2006).

Some scholars have conceptualised media logic as the degree of media interventionism (e.g. Brants and Van Praag, 2006; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011). Media interventionism refers to 'the degree to which

the content of political news is shaped by journalistic interventions' (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011: 35). Media interventionism is commonly measured by form indicators, like the length of sound bites, the visibility of journalists, the use of wrap-ups and the like. Media interventionism also comes to expression in an interpretive rather than a descriptive style of reporting, i.e. a style in which 'interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illuminate it' (Patterson, 1996: 101). Form indicators have predominantly been used to study television news. Since the media logic thesis assumes that all media adhere to a single media logic, media logic indicators have to be studied across different media types, like television and newspapers. Since it is not possible to measure form indicators such as sound bites in an identical way for different kinds of media, I have decided to concentrate on content indicators.

### 1.3 Focus of this dissertation

The overarching research question of this dissertation is whether media logic affects the viability of electoral democracy. To answer this research question this dissertation sets three goals: to assess whether Dutch campaign coverage fulfils the requirements from media in an electoral democracy, to assess to what degree Dutch campaign coverage is the product of media logic, and, most importantly, to measure the effect of content characteristics which manifest media logic on the viability of electoral democracy. These three goals will be briefly outlined in this section.

The first step in answering the research question is an assessment of the degree to which Dutch media coverage meets the requirements from media in electoral democracy. This dissertation sets this goal because it is important to know whether concern about Dutch political news coverage is warranted at all. To answer this question, the requirements from media in electoral democracy first have to be identified. *Chapter 3* will elaborate on these requirements. In brief, media in electoral democracy need to provide citizens with information that they 'can trust and act upon' (Strömbäck, 2005: 339). For voters to be able to make an informed voting decision, media should cover 'what the most important problems are, what problems should have been resolved, how political alternatives have acted and voted during the last term, and who

has had the power to resolve what problems' (Strömbäck, 2005: 335). Voters moreover need diverse information (McQuail, 1992; Roessler, 2007). They need to be able to gather information about the wide range of political alternatives from which they can choose in the ballot box. They also should be offered information about the range of issues that political parties and other societal actors put on the agenda. As will be explained in *chapter 3*, diversity is especially important in multiparty democracies.

This dissertation will start with an assessment of the degree to which Dutch media meet the requirements of electoral democracy by providing voters the information they need to make a well-informed vote decision and by assessing the diversity of Dutch media in their coverage of parties and issues. The question that will be answered in the first part of this thesis reads as follows:

*RQ 1: To what degree do Dutch news media fulfil the requirements from media in an electoral democracy in their coverage of election campaigns?*

The second aim is to measure the manifestation of media logic in election campaign coverage. As previously noted, the effect of media logic on the voter is disregarded in the literature. Studies measuring the effect of political news content on the voter usually do not relate these effects to media logic. What is more, they commonly focus on requirements stemming from the participatory model of democracy, like political trust, political interest and the like, rather than requirements from the electoral model of democracy, like the question concerning whether media enable voters to make a well-informed voting decision. This dissertation fills these research gaps. To measure the effect of media logic on the viability of electoral democracy, the manifestation of media logic in the content of the news has to be measured first. This dissertation tests whether personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage manifest a single media logic. It additionally tests the implicit assumption underlying the media logic thesis that various media share a single media logic.

The second reason to study the manifestation of media logic in the content of the news is to shed light on developments in the degree to which media content is the product of media logic rather than of political

logic. As previously noted, the mediatisation thesis assumes that the influence of the logic of the media on their own conduct as well as on other institutions is increasing unidirectionally. Studies in the United States have indeed shown an increase in the manifestation of media logic in the content of the news in the form of personalised coverage (Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010), contest coverage (Patterson, 1993), and negativity (Patterson, 1993). Studies outside of the United States show mixed results. Some studies show an increase in personalised coverage (Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, in press), contest coverage (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Reinemann and Wilke, 2007; Schultz et al., 2005), and negative coverage (Kepplinger, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis, 2003) in Europe. Yet other – recent – studies have shown mixed results or even a decrease in personalised coverage (Kriesi, in press), contest coverage (Sheafer et al., 2008; Vliegthart et al., 2011), and negative coverage (Vliegthart et al., 2011). These mixed results demand a systematic assessment of the manifestation of media logic in the content of campaign coverage over time. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

*RQ 2: To what degree has Dutch political news been characterised by media logic over time?*

The final and most important goal of this dissertation is to measure the effect of media logic on the viability of electoral democracy. I will measure the effect of content characteristics associated with media logic on different aspects of voting behaviour. In representative democracies, elections serve to elect representatives whom best represent citizens' needs and interests. In order to give representatives a mandate, citizens cast a vote based on their needs and interests. Elections serve other functions too, like sanctioning current office holders. However, this dissertation will assess the effect of campaign coverage from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy. The viability of electoral democracy accordingly depends on the degree to which the election outcome reflects citizens' needs and interests, thereby giving elected representatives a clear mandate. In this dissertation, I will focus on two concrete threats to the degree in which the election outcome

gives representatives a clear and sustainable mandate: campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour.

The first dependent variable – *campaign volatility* – refers to changing voting preferences during election campaigns (Dassonneville, 2012; Granberg and Holmberg, 1991; Van der Meer et al., in press). Although these changing voting preferences are not incompatible with democracy in itself, they can form a threat to the viability of electoral democracy by delivering an unstable – seemingly coincidental – election outcome. This is especially the case when these changes are not based on voters' issue preferences. In this dissertation, I will examine whether media logic adds to the explanation of campaign volatility by focusing on one of the manifestations of media logic by testing the effect of the amount and tone of *contest coverage* on campaign volatility. A major concern regarding contest coverage is that it does not provide voters with the necessary information to make an informed voting decision. Without information about societal developments and parties' plans to address these problems, voters cannot make a voting decision based on policy preferences. Contest coverage provides information about who is leading at any particular point and who is instigating a fight. This information about the polls and relations between parties might induce voters to change their voting preference based on strategic consideration rather than based on policy preferences. These strategic considerations based on contest coverage are arguably more volatile than considerations based on issue preferences because poll rankings and patterns of conflict and cooperation change more easily than parties' issue positions. This dissertation empirically tests this assumption.

The second dependent variable, *personalised voting behaviour*, refers to voting behaviour that is predominantly motivated by a voter's evaluation of a party's leader. A personalised vote thus does not lead to a solid mandate for elected representatives based on voters' issue preferences. As previously discussed, personalised coverage is one of the content characteristics manifesting media logic. The media are just one of the areas in which individual politicians have become increasingly important at the expense of parties and other institutions. Personalisation also refers to the increased importance of individual politicians in political institutions and the behaviour of politicians and voters. Rahat and Sheafer (2007) show that institutional personalisation precedes

media personalisation, which in turn precedes personalisation in the behaviour of politicians. Personalisation especially raises concern in the context of parliamentary democracy because of its 'traditional emphasis on the role of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2010: 2). The criticism of the focus of the media on individual politicians seems to stem from the idea that personalisation in the media will increase its importance in the voter's mind. Thus far, it has not been empirically tested whether personalised coverage causes personalised voting behaviour. This dissertation will be the first to empirically test whether personalised news coverage causes personalised voting behaviour.

By studying the effect of contest coverage on campaign volatility and the effect of personalised coverage on personalised voting behaviour, this dissertation answers the following research question:

*RQ 3: Do content characteristics manifesting media logic affect the viability of electoral democracy?*

### 1.3.1 METHOD

One of the reasons that the influence of media logic on voting behaviour has been rarely empirically studied is that it requires large amounts of detailed data. To measure content characteristics manifesting media logic we need a detailed content analysis which simultaneously measures the attention for individual politicians and political institutions, which measures various types of contest coverage, i.e. poll coverage, coverage of conflict and the like, and which measures the evaluative tone of the news. In order to study individual level effects, we moreover need these detailed data for each of the most popular media. To be able to measure campaign volatility, i.e. *changes* in voting behaviour, we need panel data. We also need panel data to exclude the possibility that voting behaviour influences media coverage rather than the other way around. To be able to assess whether media logic is getting more, or maybe less, influential, we also need panel data and content analysis data based on more than one election.

I was in the fortunate position of being able to make use of a large dataset that contained all of these data. Since 1994, the Political Communication Workgroup of the Communication Science department at the VU

University has been gathering these data under the guidance of Jan Kleinnijenhuis. Teams of coders have analysed the coverage of the main news broadcasters and the national newspapers at a sentence level by means of a Semantic Network Analysis. The coverage in the three to nine months preceding the elections were coded. The coders measured which actors and issues were mentioned, the relationship between these actors and issues, and the direction of the relationship. I am much indebted to the four research institutes that included the questions that were necessary to conduct this study in their panel surveys. The institutes that kindly made their data available for scientific research are NIPO for the 1998 data, Blauw Research for the 2002 data, Ruigrok/NetPanel for the 2006 data, and Intomart GfK for the 2010 data. The fact that the data was so rich, did not make it an easy task to merge all the datasets into one dataset that served all the goals set for this dissertation. Although I have been involved in the project since 2002, for the first years of my project I was mainly dedicated to merging panel studies with slightly different questions and especially to matching the lengthy ontologies that were used to code the coverage of the different election campaigns. However, the final dataset made this a rewarding task. The dataset gives a rare opportunity to examine the effect of content characteristics that manifest media logic on voters' ability to cast a well-informed vote.

### 1.3.2 DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This dissertation answers the question concerning whether manifestations of media logic in media content affect the viability of electoral democracy. The dissertation is divided into three parts. Part 1 relates to the *viability of democracy*. In part 2, the *content* of political news coverage is studied. In part 3, the *effects* of news content on the viability of electoral democracy are measured.

Before turning to the assessment of the viability of democracy in part 1, *chapter 2* will provide a short description of the election campaigns under study based on the media coverage of these campaigns. Therewith this chapter illustrates how media use their own logic in the coverage of election campaigns.

*Chapter 3* is the first of two chapters on the viability of democracy. It discusses what one can expect from media in a democratic country.



The chapter starts by elaborating on how expectations from media performance depend on normative perspectives on democracy, followed by an elaboration on specific normative implications of electoral democracy, which is the model of democracy that forms the starting point of this dissertation. This chapter additionally discusses requirements from media that stem from institutional arrangements of electoral democracy, and ends with a discussion of historically developed expectations that belong to the Dutch media system.

*Chapter 4* continues with an empirical assessment of two concrete challenges that face Dutch electoral democracy: campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour. First, the chapter discusses the consequences of campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour. Are drifting voters as devastating for the viability of representative democracies as is often assumed? Is it the end of democracy if voters do not vote based on their preferences, needs, and interests? Second, empirical data are presented which measure volatility and personalised voting behaviour in the Netherlands.

*Chapter 5* is the first of two descriptive chapters on the content of campaign coverage. It examines the extent to which the highly diverse and volatile Dutch electorate received a diverse offer of political newspaper coverage during the 2006 parliamentary election campaign. It compares the level of diversity of five subscription-based national newspapers with a partisan history and two free dailies. Two forms of diversity were examined: party diversity (i.e., the distribution of attention to political parties) and issue diversity (i.e., the distribution of attention to issues).

*Chapter 6* ends the second part of the study by testing whether personalised, contest, and negative coverage manifest a single media logic by analysing whether these three content characteristics co-vary over time. It also tests the implicit assumption underlying the media logic thesis that media adhere to a single media logic as one institution. The study is based on television and newspaper coverage of five Dutch national election campaigns (1998 – 2010).

*Chapter 7* is the first of two chapters that examine media effects. It tests the effect of the amount and tone of contest coverage on campaign volatility and assesses whether voters shift between parties in response to coverage of the political contest or rather in response to coverage of

political issues. Additionally, it is tested whether voters respond more strongly to positive news or to negative news. The analyses are based on a content analysis of newspaper and television news coverage and panel studies conducted during four Dutch national election campaigns (1998 – 2010).

*Chapter 8* examines the effect of personalised news coverage on personalised voting behaviour. It tests whether voters' evaluations of party leaders affects their voting preference, thus testing whether leader effects occur at all. It continues with an examination of the effect of exposure to personalised coverage on the use of party leader evaluations in the voting decision. The study is based on a content analysis of the coverage of the 2010 Dutch election campaign and a 10-wave panel survey.

Finally, in *chapter 9* I will answer the research questions that were introduced in this chapter and discuss the wider social and scientific implications of this dissertation's findings.

