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Takens, J.H.

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9 AN AVERTED THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

Former minister of Justice Piet Hein Donner typified the conduct of Dutch media as ‘writing what people want to hear, what attracts attention, what sells, instead of what is really going on’. This is a description in point of media coverage that is the product of media logic. Media logic refers to news values and storytelling techniques which media use because it fits their format or because it appeals to the public (Strömbäck, 2008). These storytelling techniques include ‘simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization (...), visualization and stereotypization, and the framing of politics as a strategic game or ‘horse race’ (Strömbäck, 2008: 233). ‘Elite persons’ like party leaders, and negative news like coverage of political conflict are examples of important news values (Galtung, 1965; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). Media use these storytelling techniques and they cover political events that fit their news values because they need to produce news that attracts news consumers. Media coverage is also shaped by format requirements: television broadcasts need talking heads and newspapers need screaming headlines. This is called the logic of the media.

This dissertation examined whether media logic affects the viability of electoral democracy. This question is answered in three parts. First, I assess whether Dutch campaign coverage meets the demands on media in electoral democracy. I examine whether media comply with political logic, i.e. ‘the needs of the political system and political institutions’ (Strömbäck, 2008: 234). Second, the degree to which media coverage is the product of media logic has to be examined to be able to measure the effect of media logic on the voter. Since media follow their own logic in their selection and interpretation of political events, and politicians adapt to this logic, what media present as political reality is shaped by conditions that have been set by the media. Therefore, the third question is whether voting behaviour is affected by content characteristics associated with media logic, i.e. personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage. Two pressing problems of Dutch democracy that deserve attention are campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour. Therefore, I test whether the amount and tone of contest coverage affects campaign volatility and whether personalised coverage affects personalised voting behaviour.

The first three sections of this chapter will summarise the results of the empirical chapters (*chapters 4 to 8*) and answer the research questions. The fourth and last section will discuss the scientific and societal implications of this dissertation's findings. I will specifically elaborate on the measurement of media logic in the content of the news, the consequences of media diversification for the logic of the media, the relation between diversity and fragmentation, the question whether voters are consciously shifting or ruthlessly drifting, and finally I will return to the relation between press, politics, and the people.

9.1 Media content: Meeting democratic requirements?

First, the question was raised as to whether campaign coverage provides the kind of information that citizens in electoral democracies need. In *chapter 3*, I argued that multiparty systems require diverse media coverage, that the mandate function of elections requires coverage of societal problems and parties' plans to address these problems rather than the electoral contest, and that parliamentary systems require coverage of parties rather than individual politicians. This dissertation tested whether Dutch campaign coverage meet these requirements.

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

9.1.1 MULTI PARTY SYSTEMS AND DIVERSITY IN THE MEDIA

Chapter 5 presented a study that examined the diversity in party and issue coverage of Dutch newspapers. The study was based on a content analysis of coverage of the 2006 campaign of five traditional subscription newspapers and two free dailies. The analyses showed that *all* newspapers paid most attention to the incumbent parties and the largest opposition party, and that they focused on the same limited number of issues. Yet, traditional newspapers still leaned towards certain parties. The Christian newspaper *Trouw* for example leaned to the Christian democratic *CDA*, while the liberal *De Telegraaf* leaned to the liberal *VVD*. They thus paid more attention to the parties with which they were for-

merly aligned. Free dailies paid more attention to new parties and small opposition parties. The traditional newspapers' focus on formerly aligned parties might indicate that they still partly relied on their past performance, traditions, working routines, and relationships.

It is difficult to formulate a benchmark for the correct degree of diversity. Any benchmark would be arbitrary. For example, neither open diversity nor reflective diversity is a perfect measure of diversity (Van Cuilenburg, 1977; Van der Wurff and Van Cuilenburg, 2001). Instead, I compare the diversity in party coverage in the media to the diversity of parliament. The analyses based on the coverage of the 2006 campaign showed that vertical diversity – measured by the perplexity of the attention distribution – varied between 5.21 in *De Telegraaf* and 7.71 in *Metro*. Horizontal diversity – across media – amounted to 6.38. In comparison, the effective number of parties in parliament (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) amounted to 4.74 before the 2006 election and 5.54 after it. This means that the diversity of the media was higher than the diversity in parliament. Although all media paid most attention to the incumbent parties, they certainly did not focus solely on the parties in power. This especially holds true for the free dailies, which paid more attention to new parties and smaller opposition parties, implying that media promoted the diversity of the Dutch party system.

For an open debate, it is also important that media present viewpoints on a wide range of issues. The study presented in *chapter 5* showed that newspapers generally agreed on the most important issues on the agenda: right-wing issues, immigration, education, and left-wing issues. The analyses moreover showed that, in each of the campaigns under study, newspapers paid most attention to right-wing issues, like taxes and the budget deficit. This shows that the diversity of the issues that are discussed is limited. In other words, media are diverse in their coverage of various voices but these voices discuss a limited range of issues.

In conclusion, there is no reason to be pessimistic about the variety of political voices but some concern about the variety of the issues that they address is warranted.

9.1.2 THE MANDATE FUNCTION OF ELECTIONS AND CONTEST COVERAGE

Chapter 4 showed that strategic voting behaviour, which is incompatible with the mandate function of electoral democracy, is on the rise. By providing information concerning who is leading the polls and who is willing to cooperate with whom, media enable a strategic vote. Based on strategic coverage, voters might decide to vote for a party other than the one they would normally vote for based on their interests and issue preferences. In a consensus democracy in which parties have to form coalition governments, a vote based on a party's standing in the polls or its willingness to cooperate with certain parties is not irrational. Media cannot therefore be blamed for paying attention to the electoral contest too. Although there is no hard benchmark for the acceptable amount of attention for contest coverage, for a well-informed voting decision that reflects a voter's interests and issue preferences, coverage of societal developments and parties' issue positions is more important than contest coverage. The coverage of the electoral contest thus should not overshadow issue coverage.

The study presented in *chapter 6* showed that the degree of contest coverage has decreased over the last decade. However, in each of the election years under study, the amount of contest coverage as measured in the number of propositions exceeded the amount of issue coverage. Media thus are still more interested in the electoral contest than in the issues concerned in this contest. This is worrying from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy, which expects voters to make a well-informed decision based on their interests and issue preferences. First, a lack of issue coverage makes it harder to make an informed voting decision based on issue preferences. Second, an excess of coverage of the polls, conflicts, speculations on possible coalitions and the like might increase the appeal of a strategic vote. Third, media's accounts of criticism and support are not always indicative of true coalition preferences. While considering coalition considerations in the voting decision is rational, these considerations might be based on wrong impressions. Media focus on conflicts between parties who attack each other for tactical reasons. Parties even attack each other when they will probably be forced to cooperate after the elections. For example, during the 2006 campaign, *CDA* leader Balkenende fiercely attacked *PvdA* leader Bos: 'You're flip-flopping and you are dishonest'. This fierce criticism was

extensively covered in the news and had a negative impact on what was to become an ill-fated coalition government.

In conclusion, the excessive coverage of the electoral contest rather than the issues concerned in this contest is worrying from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy.

9.1.3 PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS AND PERSONALISED COVERAGE

As for the other aspects of media coverage, it is impossible to set a benchmark for the 'right' degree of personalised coverage. The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy in which voters elect parties and not a prime minister. However, during election campaigns, media often seem to think that party leaders are prime minister candidates. The televised election debates have for example been named 'prime minister debates'. Since the Netherlands has a parliamentary system and party discipline is strong (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011), individual politicians in reality play a relatively limited role. From that perspective, media should focus on parties and their relatively stable issue positions rather than on individual politicians. Yet we would not expect media to disregard individual politicians altogether. Parliamentary democracy might centre on parties but it is perfectly rational to take the qualities of the party leaders into account too. Voters have to trust that their party's representatives will and can represent them as they promise. Curtice and Holmberg (2005) moreover argue that it is rational to judge a party leader's competence rather than detailed campaign promises. Party leaders can also be held accountable more easily than abstract institutions like a political party (Dalton et al., 2002). It is nevertheless paramount that voters also get information about political parties.

The study presented in *chapter 6* showed that the attention for individual politicians varied between 47.7 percent in 2010 and 59.7 percent in 2002. Media commonly pay more attention to individual politicians than to political parties. 20.8 percent (2003) to 27.5 percent (2010) of the attention for political actors was paid to party leaders. While the relative attention for politicians is generally decreasing, the attention for party leaders is increasing. In other words, while centralised personalisation is increasing, decentralised personalisation is decreasing. The focus on individual politicians in general and party lead-

ers in particular makes individual politicians seem more important than they actually are in parliamentary elections. It is especially worrying when media focus on a very small number of party leaders. In 2002, Pim Fortuyn for example received no less than 24 percent of the attention for politicians (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2003). Judging from the news, established parties increasingly pushed their party leaders to the foreground after 2002 as well (Takens et al., 2011). Media increasingly seem to portray the electoral contest as a duel between two of these party leaders, like Wouter Bos and Jan Peter Balkenende in 2006 and Job Cohen and Mark Rutte in 2010.

The analyses in *chapter 8* moreover showed that media increasingly concentrate on party leaders as elections draw closer. In 2010, the attention for party leaders varied between 17.1 percent at the start of the campaign to no less than 55.7 percent at the end of the campaign. As the elections were drawing closer, media increasingly portrayed the elections as a battle between party leaders. This increase in the attention for party leaders towards the end of the campaign is worrying. It presents elections as a race between party leaders as if it is a presidential race for office, whereas Dutch voters elect members of parliament. What is more, the largest party does not always produce the prime minister and the prime minister is not always a party's leader. Media should therefore refrain from labels as 'prime minister candidate' for party leaders.

In conclusion, media pay more attention to individual politicians than to political parties. During the course of the campaign, media zoom in on party leaders. This is worrying from the perspective of parliamentary democracy 'with its traditional emphasis on the role of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2010: 2).

9.2 Media content: trends in media logic?

To be able to assess the effect of media logic on campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour, I first examined the degree to which campaign coverage is the product of media logic. I examined the manifestation of media logic by analysing three content characteristics that correspond with important news values and that form recurring themes

in the political communication literature: personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage.

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

Chapter 6 presented a study that measured the degree of personalised, contest, and negative coverage over time. The study was based on a Semantic Network Analysis of the coverage of five Dutch election campaigns (1998-2010).

Interestingly, the study showed that news coverage became significantly less personalised, less focused on the contest, and less negative in the period between 1998 and 2010. Although these trends are not in line with most studies on media personalisation (Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010), seminal studies on contest news (e.g. Patterson, 1993), or key findings regarding negativity (Lengauer et al., 2012), these results do confirm recent studies on trends in personalised coverage (Kriesi, in press) and coverage of conflict (Vliegenthart et al., 2011) in the Netherlands and other Western-European countries.

This decrease in the degree to which campaign coverage is personalised, contest-oriented, and negative at the start of the 21st century, followed an increase at the end of the previous century. Studies have shown that Dutch campaign coverage did become increasingly personalised (Kriesi, in press), contest-oriented (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003), and negative (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003) before the turn of the century. This dissertation thus shows that the degree to which media are guided by their own logic is not a unidirectional trend, as the mediatisation thesis assumes. Campaign coverage did become more personalised, more contest-oriented, and more negative. Yet, the influence of media logic on the content of campaign coverage reached a high around 2002 after which its influence started decreasing again.

While the negativity of the campaign has been decreasing since 1998, the degree of personalised and contest coverage started decreasing after 2002. The 2002 campaign was an exceptional one. The spectacular upsurge of the controversial newcomer Pim Fortuyn shocked The Hague. He gained a lot of media attention through controversial stances on multiculturalism and Islam and fierce criticism of the

incumbent parties. The earlier mentioned 24 percent attention for Pim Fortuyn was unprecedented. Contest coverage reached highs because of Fortuyn's criticism on 'the purple ruins', the widespread outcry over Fortuyn's immigration stances, and the *LPF*'s extraordinary upsurge in the polls. Because of the exceptional nature of this campaign, a downturn in the influence of media logic was almost inevitable. After this campaign, media were criticised for giving Pim Fortuyn unlimited access to the media but also for 'demonising' him. This finding raises the question whether media have reassessed their professional standards following the public outcry over their coverage of the 2002 election campaign.

The degree of personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage has decreased *simultaneously*. The three content characteristics co-varied over time and they related to one underlying factor, thereby strengthening my argument that personalised, contest, and negative coverage are three indicators of a single media logic. The study additionally tested the implicit premise underlying the media logic thesis that media logic refers to news values and storytelling techniques that are shared by media as a single institution. At a given point in time, media indeed differed little in the degree of personalised, contest, and negative coverage. The only significant differences in the degree of personalised, contest, and negative coverage between media were small differences between newspapers on the one hand and television news broadcasts on the other hand. Television news broadcasts focused more on individual politicians, while newspapers focused more on the electoral contest and were more negative. The study thus showed that personalised, contest, and negative coverage manifest a single logic that is shared by various media alike.

9.3 Media effects: harming the viability of democracy?

The main question of this dissertation is whether media logic affects the viability of democracy. The dissertation focuses on two pressing problems of electoral democracy in the Netherlands: campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour.

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

Before turning to the answer to this question, I will shortly discuss the findings regarding the degree to which campaign volatility and personalised voting behaviour pose a threat to the viability of electoral democracy (*Chapter 4*).

The analyses showed that inter electoral volatility is on the rise. Large shifts in vote shares of parties – up to over 30 percent in 2002 – show that the Dutch electorate is highly susceptible to change. An increasing number of voters postpone their voting decision until the last weeks before the election. This high level of indecisiveness implies that the potential for campaign volatility is increasing. The analyses indeed showed that voters change their voting preferences during the campaign period. Yet voters do not drift between random parties but rather shift between like-minded parties. However, in respectively 2002 and 2010, the far right-wing *LPF* and the right-wing *VVD* succeeded in attracting voters from across the whole political spectrum, including the left and far left. Although the number of voters who mention issue preferences as their primary reason for voting for a certain party is high and increasing, the share of voters that mentions a politician representing a party as the main reason to vote for that party is increasing as well. In other words, personalised voting behaviour is on the rise.

These short-term changes are a prerequisite for identifying campaign effects. These results underline the importance of studying the influence of media logic characteristics on campaign volatility as well as personalised voting behaviour. Did the amount and tone of contest coverage affect campaign volatility and did personalised coverage affect personalised voting behaviour?

9.3.1 *CONTENT COVERAGE AND CAMPAIGN VOLATILITY*

The study in *chapter 7* tested whether the *amount* and *tone* of contest coverage affect campaign volatility. The analyses were based on a Semantic Network Analysis of campaign coverage and panel studies conducted during the 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2010 elections. Exposure to contest coverage was expected to make voters more volatile since contest coverage is more dynamic than issue coverage and because it affects vote determinants that are more susceptible to chance than the vote

determinants that are affected by issue coverage. The multilevel analyses confirmed that *exposure to contest coverage increases campaign volatility*, while *exposure to issue coverage decreases campaign volatility*. If media pay relatively more attention to the electoral contest, voters become more volatile. If media pay relatively more attention to the issue concerned in this contest, voters consolidate their voting preference.

This study also put the negativity bias to the test in the context of campaign coverage. The negativity bias literature has shown that negative information plays a more important role than positive information in all kinds of information processing tasks. However, in the political context, the existence of a negativity bias is contested (Aarts and Blais, 2011). Therefore, the effect of both the amount and tone of contest coverage on campaign volatility was measured. This study confirms that this contestation is justified. The effect of contest coverage depends on both the type and tone of contest coverage. Voters become volatile in response to *positive* horse race news, i.e. parties' success, while they are not affected by *negative* horse race news, i.e. parties' failures. The opposite holds true for news about the relations between parties. Voters alter their voting preference based on *negative* news about conflict but they are not affected by *positive* news about cooperation. Thus, neither negative nor positive coverage has a bigger impact simply because it is intrinsically more noticeable or more memorable. Studies assessing the actor-centred tone of political news coverage (e.g. Lengauer et al., 2012) should consequently take into account that the effect of the tone of actor-centred news depends on the kind of coverage.

At the individual level, contest coverage causes short-term changes in voting preferences. The question is whether contest coverage affects the viability of democracy in the long term as well. In other words, do the individual-level effects correspond with macro-level trends? *Chapter 6* showed that contest coverage still exceeds issue coverage but that the degree of contest coverage is decreasing over time. Did inter electoral volatility decrease accordingly? The degree of contest coverage and inter electoral volatility did not always move in the same direction. Inter electoral volatility strongly fluctuated in the period under study. With 31.2 percent of the votes moving to another party, inter electoral volatility reached its high in 2002, as with the degree of contest news. While inter electoral volatility increased in 2006 and 2010, media

were less interested in the electoral contest in 2006 and only slightly more interested in 2010. The amount and tone of contest coverage nevertheless do influence campaign volatility, which implies that media effects should be taken into account in studies on volatility.

In conclusion, this study showed that positive contest news about parties' success in for example the polls and election debates as well as negative contest news about political conflicts makes people's voting preferences more volatile. This is a worrying finding. As argued in *chapter 4*, campaign volatility might make the election outcome seem arbitrary. If large groups of voters shift from one party to another and the polls show different frontrunners and a different winning coalition from week to week, the election outcome can seem arbitrary. If campaign volatility is high, the election outcome becomes highly dependent on the timing of the elections. This is bad for the – perceived – legitimacy of the election outcome and the coalition cabinet that is formed based on this outcome.

9.3.2 PERSONALISED COVERAGE AND PERSONALISED VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Chapter 8 contained an empirical test of the influence of personalised coverage on personalised voting behaviour in the context of the 2010 election. The study shows that the size of leader effects is moderated by the degree of personalised coverage in the news. If recent media coverage is more personalised, party leader evaluations weight more heavily in voters' voting decisions. The attention for individual politicians in the news primes the attention for individual politicians in the voter's mind. Does personalised voting behaviour at the individual level lead to personalised voting behaviour at the aggregate level? This is the question as to the relation between *personalisation of the media* and *personalisation of voting behaviour*.

The individual-level finding that exposure to personalised news coverage causes personalised voting behaviour is consistent with macro-level developments. *Chapter 4* showed that an increasing number of voters mentions politicians as the main reason for electing a certain party. Personalisation of voting behaviour – the *process* of the increasing importance of personalised voting behaviour – thus occurs in the Netherlands. Although the attention for individual politicians has decreased

since 2002, the attention for party leaders has increased. This increase in centralised personalised coverage is in line with the personalisation of voting behaviour, assuming that most of these voters vote for a party because they appreciate its leader. These findings are in line with the assumption in the literature that the *process* of media personalisation affects the *process* of personalisation in voting behaviour (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007).

Meta studies on personalised voting behaviour have found large differences in the degree of personalised voting behaviour between countries (Adam and Maier, 2010; Karvonen, 2010). By showing that personalised media coverage affects personalised voting behaviour, this study adds to the explanation of these cross-country differences. Further research should empirically assess the relationship between the macro-level process of media personalisation and personalisation in voting behaviour.

This study showed that personalised coverage moderates leader effects but the fact that this study showed that leader effects occur is an interesting finding in its own right. Leader effects have been contested in the political science literature (e.g. King, 2002). This dissertation showed however that party leader evaluations do influence voting preferences, even when controlling for voters' party evaluations, issue positions, and the lagged vote. This suggests that party leader evaluations do play a role in the voting decision of the 90 percent of the voters who do not explicitly mention individual politicians as a reason for voting for a certain party (*chapter 4*). *Chapter 8* showed that with a difference of less than one percentage point between the largest (VVD) and the second-largest (PvdA) party in the 2010 elections, the degree of personalised coverage could have made the difference.

In conclusion, leader evaluations do play a role in people's voting decisions. They play a more important role if media pay relatively more attention to personalised coverage. A personalised vote is not always a 'correct vote', i.e. a vote for the party with whose policy preferences a voter agrees most. Personalised voting behaviour consequently leads to a mandate that does not perfectly reflect 'the will of the people'. By causing personalised voting behaviour, centralised personalised coverage thus threatens the viability of democracy from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy.

9.4 Discussion

This dissertation unravelled the complex and dynamic relation between media coverage and voting behaviour. It showed that content characteristics that are the product of media logic influence voting behaviour. The amount and tone of contest coverage affect campaign volatility, while personalised coverage causes personalised voting behaviour. This section discusses the scientific and societal implications of these findings.

9.4.1 *MEASURING MEDIA LOGIC*

In this dissertation, I argued that there is a need for a means to measure the manifestation of media logic in the content of news coverage. This means is necessary to track short-term and long-term changes in the content of campaign coverage and to measure the disregarded effect of media logic on voters. I proposed measuring the manifestation of media logic in the news by analysing personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage. The longitudinal analyses presented in *chapter 6* showed that these three content characteristics co-vary over time and that they relate to a single underlying media logic. This dissertation thus showed that it is useful to study personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage simultaneously as indicators of media logic.

The factor underlying personalised, contest, and negative coverage explains 30 to 50 percent of the variation in the individual content characteristics. This means that the degree of personalised, contest, and negative coverage is not exclusively determined by media logic. It is also influenced by other factors. This is not surprising, since personalised coverage is, for example, neither inherently negative nor inherently contest-oriented. This implies that these content characteristics are useful tools for assessing media logic but that they cannot be used individually as proxies of media logic.

Moreover, I do not argue that personalised coverage, contest coverage, and negative coverage form an exhaustive list of content characteristics associated with media logic. These content characteristics correspond with important news values and storytelling techniques that constitute the logic of the media. However, other characteristics of the content of the news can be added. This study did not include form indica-

tors of media logic like the length of sound bites, lip flaps and the like (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011) because form indicators cannot be compared uniformly across television and newspaper outlets. Further research should explore whether trends in form indicators and content indicators of media logic co-vary over time. Does the degree of interpretive journalism, and other aspects of media interventionism, co-vary with content indicators of media logic?

Media logic refers to news values and storytelling techniques which media use for two reasons: because it fits their format and because it appeals to the public (Strömbäck, 2008). This dissertation showed that it is important to distinguish between news values and storytelling techniques that media use because it fits their format, and news values and storytelling techniques that media use because they want to attract readers and viewers. Television news broadcasters focus on individual politicians because the media's visual requirements ask for talking heads, while newspapers are more negative because negativity makes a catchier headline. Yet both newspapers and television news broadcasters do so because they need to attract news consumers. Personalised and negative coverage does not only fit media's format but it also fits important news values. In studying media logic, it is thus important to take both media format and media's commercial objectives into account.

By showing how media logic can be operationalised using content characteristics, the research design of this dissertation enabled the measurement of the effect of media logic on voters. Panel surveys containing detailed information about media exposure, voting behaviour, and political attitudes and a detailed content analysis are powerful means to track the dynamics in the short-term logic of the media and changing voting preferences.

9.4.2 *DIVERSIFICATION OF MEDIA AND POLITICS*

This dissertation measured the campaign coverage of the most widely read Dutch national newspapers and the most widely watched Dutch television news broadcasts, resulting in a large dataset with data about the most widely consumed media.

On average 1.8 million out of 16 million Dutch watch the public prime time news reaching 11 percent of the Dutch population.²⁹ In comparison, the most widely watched American news show has around 8 million viewers and reaches just 2.5 percent of the American people.³⁰ On average, Dutch people watch the news for 103 minutes each week (Wonneberger et al., 2012). Traditional national newspapers circulate 1.9 million copies each day, regional newspapers circulate another 1.5 million copies, and free dailies circulate 1.1 million copies (Bakker and Scholten, 2011: 19-23). In total 4.5 million newspapers are distributed in a country with 16.5 million inhabitants. In contrast, the most widely read American newspaper sells 2.1 million copies.³¹ Although television news broadcasters and newspapers reach a large proportion of the Dutch population, these are not the only relevant news sources.

As in most countries, Dutch media have diversified. First, the importance of news sources on the internet has increased. Therefore, future research should take the influence of internet coverage into account too. The most interesting question from the perspective of studying media logic is whether online news coverage uses personalised, contest, and negative coverage to the same degree as offline media. Furthermore, the question emerges as to whether internet formats have influenced the logic of online and offline media. Since internet news has to be produced even faster than in traditional media, internet news might rely even more on the short-term logic of the media. Other ICT developments serve to increase this speed of news production. Through Twitter, media can for example pick two opposing quotes to create a story about political conflict.

Second, politicians do not only appear in news programmes but also in entertainment programmes (Van Zoonen, 2005). It would be most interesting to study the degree of personalised, contest, and negative coverage in infotainment and entertainment programmes. In a thorough

²⁹ NOS jaarverslag 2012 [annual report of public broadcaster NOS]: <http://nos.nl/jaarverslag/nos-cijfers/22-kijk-luister-en-internetcijfers/>

³⁰ The Nielsen Company, NTI Total Viewers and Adults 25-54 Live + SD weeks of 8/20/12, 8/13/12 & 8/22/11: <http://www.nielsen.com/>.

³¹ Audit Bureau for Circulation, <http://accessabc.wordpress.com/2012/05/01/the-top-u-s-newspapers-for-march-2012/>

longitudinal study on personalisation in televised portraits of Dutch politicians between 1961 and 2006, Van Santen and Van Zoonen (2010) shows that attention for individual politicians' capacities – individualisation – did not increase. It would be interesting to study longitudinally as well to what degree infotainment programmes and entertainment programmes about politics cover the electoral contest rather than political issues, and how negative they are.

9.4.3 DIVERSITY AND FRAGMENTATION

Diversity in the coverage of political parties is encouraged by an open and proportional multiparty system like the Netherlands. Dutch constitutional lawmakers in the past designed the Dutch electoral system in this way to do justice to the diversity of Dutch society. In terms of open diversity, free dailies form a welcome addition to the Dutch media landscape. However, the coverage of the traditional newspapers – with the exception of *De Telegraaf* – was more diverse than the composition of parliament. Although this can be lauded from the perspective of the openness of the multiparty system, there is a flipside too. Since the coverage of parties is known to affect voting behaviour, by being as diverse as Dutch newspapers were in 2006, newspapers can also add to the fragmentation of the political landscape.

As discussed in *chapter 3*, the effective number of parties in the Netherlands is growing. In 2010, the largest party received just 20.5 percent of the votes. Four parties received more than 10 percent of the votes. Fragmentation makes it difficult to form coalitions, especially when parties at the extremes of the political spectrum are successful too. In 2010, the far right anti-immigration party, *PVV*, became the third biggest party with 15.4 percent of the votes, while the far left socialist party (*SP*) became fifth with 9.8 percent of the votes. It consequently took 127 days to form a cabinet – the first post-war minority cabinet. It lasted only 18 months. This example shows how high diversity can form an obstacle in coalition politics. It would be most interesting to compare the diversity of different media with the diversity of the composition of parliament. A longitudinal research design could show whether media diversify because politics diversifies or whether media diversification leads to diversification in politics.

9.4.4 CAREFUL SHIFTING OR RUDDERLESS DRIFTING?

This dissertation showed that contest coverage causes campaign volatility, while personalised coverage causes personalised voting behaviour. This dissertation thus gave a detailed account of how short-term changes in the media cause short-term changes in voting behaviour. I was most interested in the implications of these short-term changes in voting behaviour on the viability of democracy. However, these findings also raise interesting questions about what happens in the voter's mind. *Why* do voters alter their voting preferences? This dissertation started to answer this question by showing that party leader evaluations weigh more heavily if recent news was more personalised. Measuring the moderation effect of recent news on the effect of a voting motivation has been shown to be a fruitful approach for unravelling what is happening in the voter's mind. This approach can be extended to other voting motivations. It can answer the question as to *why* voters change their minds in response to news about parties' success and news about political conflict.

Does coverage of parties' success moderate the effect of party evaluations or the effect of issue evaluations? Does coverage of parties' success trigger party heuristics or issue preferences? In 2010, the *VVD* was portrayed as the sure winner of the elections: '*VVD* leading proudly'³². How did *VVD*'s success affect the voter? Did the coverage of *VVD*'s success seduce voters to follow the pack? Research has shown that coverage of parties' success can spur a bandwagon effect (e.g. Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006). Or, does coverage about, for example, the polls make political news more attractive, which in turn raises interest in parties' policy preferences (Bleske and Zhao, 1998; Meyer and Potter, 1998)? Voters might wonder why a party is so successful in the polls and inform themselves about their policy preferences. Further research on the moderating effect of coverage of parties' success should show whether contest coverage promotes a bandwagon effect or whether it makes issue considerations more important. This dissertation has shown that measuring the moderation effect of recent news on the effect of these vote motivations is a fruitful approach for answering these questions.

The finding that voters change their minds in response to political conflict raises a similar question: *How* does coverage of political conflict

³² '*VVD* fier op kop', *De Telegraaf*, 2 June 2010, Page 3.

affect voting preferences? Is a change in voting preferences an effect of a changing evaluation of the party being criticised, or rather an effect of a changing evaluation of the criticising party? Is this effect dependent on the relationship between the party being criticised and the criticising party? Another possibility is that criticism between parties raises awareness of the ideological differences between the parties. Fierce criticism between *D66* and the *PVV* might for example make voters more aware that *D66* is an anti-discrimination party, while *PVV* is an anti-Islam party. That way, conflict coverage could result in an informed voting decision after all. In other words, further research should assess whether coverage of conflict moderates the effect of party evaluations or rather the effect of policy preferences.

That voters are more likely to change their minds if media pay relatively more attention to the electoral contest does not mean that voters' policy preferences do not play a role in the voting decision. Scholars have convincingly shown that policy preferences do influence voting decisions (Aarts et al., 1999; Belanger and Aarts, 2006; Van der Brug et al., 2000). The study presented in *chapter 8* also showed that besides party evaluations, leader evaluations, and the lagged vote, voting behaviour is affected by agreement with a party's issue stances. Voters moreover mention interests and policy preferences most often as their main reason for voting for a certain party (*chapter 4*).

That a focus on issues generally makes voters less likely to change their minds also does not mean that issue coverage does not affect voting behaviour. Even if media do not pay much attention to issues in general, coverage of a specific issue can still influence party support. The salience of issue coverage has been shown to influence voting behaviour (De Vries et al., 2011; Sheafer and Weimann, 2005), and also the affective tone of issue coverage affects political judgements (Sheafer, 2007). Parties respond by taking strategic issue positions. Parties change their issue positions during election campaigns in response to other parties' issue positions and media coverage of support and criticism (Kleinnijenhuis and de Nooy, in press). Extensive coverage of specific issues will especially benefit those parties that own these issues. In 2010, the liberal *VVD* for example benefited from the coverage of the economy because the *VVD* has the best reputation in addressing economic problems.

Nevertheless, coverage of the electoral horse race and conflict and cooperation still has a stronger effect on the support for individual parties than the news coverage of issue developments and parties' policy positions (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b).

9.4.5 *THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PRESS, POLITICS AND THE PEOPLE*

In *chapter 1*, I discussed the mutually dependent relation between press, politics, and the people. This dissertation focused on the relationship between media and citizens by assessing whether the logic of the media affects citizens in an electoral democracy. I showed that campaign coverage that is the product of media logic makes it harder for people to make a decision based on their interests and policy preferences. Due to media logic, voters shift more often and they weigh leader evaluations more heavily in their voting decision. Yet, I also showed that campaign coverage is *decreasingly* influenced by media logic which suggests that the influence of the political logic is increasing. These findings regarding the interaction between the press and the people raise questions about the interaction between press, politics, and the media.

First, the influence of media logic on campaign coverage is decreasing. Media focus less on individual politicians like parliamentary democracy requires and they focus less on the electoral contest which is lauded from the perspective of the mandate variety of electoral democracy. Did media take steps to meet the needs of political institutions, or were politicians more successful in persuading the media to fulfil their needs? Media might have reassessed their professional standards after the public outcry over the media coverage of the 2002 election campaign. The other possibility is that politicians' campaign activities professionalised. Further research should examine whether the influence of media logic on the content of campaign coverage decreased due to changes in the media or due to change in politics.

Second, the media logic thesis claims that media cover what the public is interested in rather than what is in the public interest. In the end, news consumers are thus blamed for media logic. What is the role of the public? Is media logic, i.e. the use of storytelling techniques like simplification and polarisation and the adherence to news values, in line with what people want to see and want to read? Coverage of the elec-

toral horse race sells (Iyengar et al., 2004). The electoral horse race thus attracts news consumers. Does this also count for other aspects of the electoral contest, for personalised coverage, and negative coverage? Do voters *want* to read about conflicts, party leaders' tragic downfall, and speculations about future coalitions? Journalists' use of dramatic storylines probably influences news consumers need for this type of news coverage. News consumers are offered personalised, contest-oriented, and negative coverage. Once media start covering the election campaign along a certain storyline like the downfall of a certain party, news consumers will want to know how this dramatic story ends. News consumers might moreover be accustomed to campaign coverage that is the product of media logic.

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This dissertation showed that media logic has a negative effect on the viability of electoral democracy. It however also showed that the impact of media logic on the viability of electoral democracy is decreasing. The viability of Dutch democracy has not come under greater threat since the turn of the century. On the contrary, the news has become less personalised, less focused on the electoral contest, and less negative. Judged from the normative perspective of electoral democracy, this is a positive development. The negative effects of media logic have thus been partly averted with media's declining reliance on media logic. With headlines such as *'Will Rutte or even Cohen win the election battle? VVD four seats ahead in latest polls'* [author's translation] becoming rarer, voters are becoming increasingly informed about 'what is really going on'.