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Media in the Game of Politics: Effects of Strategic Metacoverage on Political Cynicism

Claes H. de Vreese and Matthijs Elenbaas

This study examines the effects of *generic* strategy news, self-referential *press* news, and “spin” spotlighting *publicity* coverage on political cynicism, against the backdrop of governance and policy. Drawing on data from two experiments allowing for replication within a single study, the authors demonstrate that exposure to both generic and publicity strategy news aroused political cynicism relative to issue-based news. In addition, the authors found positive interactions between political knowledge and strategic press and publicity news exposure, showing that more knowledgeable individuals were more strongly affected by these frames. The findings are discussed in the light of extant knowledge about framing effects and the media’s increasing use of metareporting.

Keywords: *strategic news; press framing; publicity framing; political cynicism; moderators of framing effects*

The news media generally take center stage in both popular and scholarly explanations of public disengagement from politics. Malign media effects on citizens’ political attitudes and behavior, whether observed or presumed, have often been attributed to the media’s contemporary coverage of political affairs, which, according to a good deal of assertions and empirical data, is increasingly framed in terms of *strategy*. Strategic news emphasizes the tactics that politicians use in pursuing political goals, as well as their performances, styles of campaigning, and battles in the political arena, whether in office, opposition, or during elections. Content analyses have shown that the strategy frame has become a leading angle in political coverage of both political campaigns and policy battles, usually at the expense of news about concrete differences in, and potential resolution of, issue positions between candidates and/or policymakers (Fallows 1996; Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Jamieson 1992; Kerbel 1997; Lawrence 2000; Lichter and Noyes 1996; Patterson 1993, 2002; Sabato 1991).

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By framing politics largely in strategic terms, zooming in on the tactical rationale and self-serving motives behind politicians' actions and words, the news media have been implicated in cultivating a "spiral of cynicism" that fuels public discontent and eventually leads to individuals' disengagement from politics. These claims have been backed by empirical studies finding a causal connection between strategic news exposure and political cynicism (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001; Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001; de Vreese, 2004).

More recently, various scholars have noted that, in addition to favoring strategy-oriented coverage in political news, political journalists are increasingly laying bare yet another part of the so-called process of politics, namely, the news media's *own* role in political, strategic, and democratic aspects of political campaigns and policy battles. Turning the spotlight inward, this form of news content, referred to as *metacoverage*, explicitly exposes the interdependent yet strained interactions between politics and the press, as well as the media strategies that politicians use to generate publicity, boost their images, and proactively or reactively manage the news. Studies have shown that journalists are especially prone to apply a strategy frame when covering the "mediatization" of electoral politics (e.g., Esser and D'Angelo 2006). "When political reporters relate the campaign as they experience it," Kerbel (1999) explicated, "they tell a tale of how politicians pursuing electoral advantage struggle with the press for favorable coverage or attempt to circumvent the press to get their version of events to the public" (p. 85).

Similar to the detrimental effects on political attitudes associated with so-called "generic" strategy frames,¹ scholars have likewise stipulated negative effects of self-referential press and political publicity metacoverage that is strategically framed (see Esser and D'Angelo 2003). However, while the evidence is strong that generic strategy frames cultivate political cynicism, very little empirical evidence exists to back up the speculations when it comes to strategy-framed metacoverage. The goal of this study is to examine the effects of generic strategy coverage, and press and publicity metacoverage, on political cynicism. We do so in a between-subjects experimental design that shows how exposure to *each* strategy frame in turn affects political cynicism when compared with exposure to the *same* issue-framed story. We hold that although the three types of strategy framed news are conceptually related, it is best at this early stage of empirical inquiry to examine the effects of each one discretely. The site of our analysis will be the policy arena rather than the more typically studied campaign context. Specifically, we examine framing effects on political cynicism in coverage of two rather high-profile issues in the context of European politics: health care liberalization and air travel safety. Finally, we address the important question of whether such effects are ubiquitous or contingent upon individuals' levels of political sophistication.

Strategic Metacoverage: A Clarification

Studies of political news have documented significant changes in how the news media have come to cover political affairs and campaigns. Drawing on the work of Patterson (1993) and Kerbel (1999), Esser et al. (2001) distinguished three developmental stages of political journalism. Whereas postwar news stories about politics were originally dominated by a descriptive style of reporting on issues, substance, and politicians' public statements, these substantive issue materials have gradually become interspersed with and contextualized by journalists' observations, interpretations, and analyses of the horse race as well as the motivations and tactics behind politicians' moves. Captured in a *strategy frame*, these news reports often *do* contain a significant issue discourse, yet "focus the reader on strategic intent" and discuss the issues accordingly (Cappella and Jamieson 1997: 111). Drawing on a sample of three decades of front-page articles in the *New York Times*, Patterson (1993) showed that the dominant mode of campaign coverage had shifted from an issue-based perspective in the early 1960s to a horse race and "game schema" in the 1990s, a development that more recently was corroborated by Farnsworth and Lichter (2003), in their extensive analyses of U.S. network coverage of presidential elections from 1988 through 2000.

Metacoverage, which according to Esser et al. (2001) represents a distinctive "third stage of political journalism" (p. 17), reflects a more recent and apparently growing tendency among journalists to cover not only the issues and strategies but also their own role in political processes. This development, documented by a body of content analytical studies of election campaigns on both sides of the Atlantic (D'Angelo et al. 2005; Esser and D'Angelo 2006; Esser et al. 2000; Johnson et al. 1996; Kerbel et al. 2000), affirms the widespread notion that the media are now an important, if not the most important, actor in politics and campaigns. As such, metacoverage can be considered an outcome of the relational environment of *media politics*: a modern and professionalized mode of governing, policy making, and campaigning that is tailored to the logic of the media system and increasingly draws on professional advisors, public relations staff members, and spin doctors for strategic communication, so as to set the agendas of the press, public, and elites in politics; frame debates on policy; and generate or continuously consolidate public support (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Cook 1998; Esser et al. 2001; Esser & Spanier, 2005; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Zaller 1999). "The most impressive evidence . . . on the news media as a political institution," Cook (1998) argued, "comes not from what journalists and their organizations do, but instead from the increasing attention that political actors in other institutions give to news making as a central part of their own job" (p. 165).

As a result, political communication has become an intrinsic part of the political story—not just in coverage of election campaigns but also in coverage of governance and policy making (Esser and Spanier 2005). In essence, meta-coverage mirrors both a journalistic defense strategy (i.e., an underlining of journalists' autonomy and control over the contents of the news) and a professional norm (i.e., the journalistic view that modern political life, campaigning, and policy making represent “a composite reality that cannot be covered fully and accurately unless news stories at times consider how the respective behavior of news media and political publicity intersect with each other”; Esser and Spanier 2005: 30; Zaller 1999). But in today's highly competitive media environment, part of the added value of metastories probably also lies in the fact that they are relatively easy to produce and arguably quite appealing to consume (see Esser and Spanier 2005: 45–47).

Metacoverage, however, is a broad concept that potentially comprises an array of media-related themes and latent meanings. In the most elaborate theoretical account in this literature thus far, Esser and D'Angelo (2003) distinguished two analytically separate types of metapropositions that do not displace but arise alongside other story topics such as issues, the personal character of politicians, and public opinion. Whereas *press* metacoverage spotlights the role(s) of the press in political affairs (e.g., press presence, behaviors, and influence), *publicity* metacoverage draws attention to the publicity efforts of political actors toward the media (e.g., political advertising, media appearances, spin doctors), but without overt reference to press roles. According to Esser and D'Angelo, journalists may additionally overlay both press and publicity stories using a conduit frame, which merely consists of cross-referencing among media; a strategy frame, reflecting the coarse and adversarial side of media politics; or an accountability frame, which exposes press and publicity moves in the light of democratic norms and values. Their stipulation challenges Kerbel's (1997, 1999) thesis that all metacoverage is uniformly strategy oriented and cynical.

This study is concerned with the strategy frame, which has been shown to be a leading frame embedded in metareporting of election campaigns (Esser and D'Angelo 2003, 2006; Kerbel 1994, 1997, 1999; also see Johnson et al. 1996). On the basis of the aforementioned typification, the strategy angle in metacoverage may take the form of either *strategic press* coverage, in which journalists self-referentially focus on the antagonistic relationship between press and politics and the news media's significant role in the strategic game of politics, or *strategic publicity* coverage, which emphasizes political strategists' calculated, artificial, and manipulative publicity and public relations efforts in relation to the mass media, yet without explicitly self-referring to the media's position in these processes per se. In both cases, Esser and D'Angelo (2003) stated,

a strategy script communicates that the news media or other communications media are enmeshed in the tactical aspects of campaign reality. It is a cynical frame of reference about media politics for it locates press and publicity behaviors within the clashing goals of candidates and the media. (p. 633)

Although the presence of the strategy frame in metacoverage has so far been studied almost solely in election news, the emergence of media politics as a modern form of governing, policy making, and permanent campaigning suggests that these “clashing goals” are bound to prevail in politics-press interactions beyond the context of elections.

Effects of Strategic Press and Publicity Coverage

Empirical observations suggesting that, first, press and publicity reporting appears increasingly present in political news content (e.g., Esser and D’Angelo 2003) and, second, substantial shares of this coverage are framed in terms of strategy (e.g., Esser and D’Angelo 2006) have given rise to the important and persistent question in the literature of whether exposure to these types of news stories is likely to cultivate public cynicism about politicians and political affairs. Most notably, Kerbel (1994, 1997, 1999) has advocated the notion that the media’s “cynical” depiction of media politics could indeed prove contagious to those consuming the news, stating that metastories have

compounded their impact by laying bare the acrid components of an acrimonious process to an already distrustful public [so that] the story about reporting the story further reinforces [the] perspective that all campaign actions are political and all political actions are staged for the cameras. (Kerbel 1994: 41–42)

Other scholars take the seemingly (but not necessarily) opposite view that metacoverage, whether strategically framed or not, provides important and enlightening information to citizens on the nature of political communication processes in today’s media politics environment (McNair 2000) and, moreover, prompts politicians toward democratically desirable principles and practices of communication and electioneering (Esser and D’Angelo 2006). But while recent scholarship shows that press frames can affect perceptions of the media themselves (D’Angelo and Lombard 2008), notions about the vicious or virtuous effects of the news media’s strategy-based approach to covering media politics put forward in the literature thus far have not been accompanied by empirical investigations.

Even so, judging from a considerable body of previous research on *generic* strategy framing effects, there is good reason to believe that, in line with Kerbel’s argument, the impact of strategic metanews exposure is more likely than not to be associated with higher levels of political cynicism relative to

issue-based news exposure. Several experimental studies, conducted predominantly in the United States, have convincingly demonstrated that participants exposed to strategically framed coverage of politics are significantly more prone not only to psychologically adopt the strategy frame in their interpretations and evaluations of political behavior, campaign processes, and issues (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Rhee 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001; Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001; de Vreese 2004) but also to prove more cynical as a result of this exposure (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Crigler et al. 2006; de Vreese 2004). In addition, studies by de Vreese and Semetko (2002), de Vreese (2005), and Elenbaas and de Vreese (2008), drawing on two-wave panel and cross-sectional surveys with measures of political cynicism and detailed data on news media use and content, conducted in different political and media systems, showed that, after controlling for prior levels of political distrust, the strongest *increases* in cynicism were among those individuals who had been exposed the most to strategic news.

We put forward a preliminary theory of strategic metacoverage on the basis of which we conjecture that strategic metaframes essentially work through similar cognitive mechanisms that are assumed to spark cynicism. Strategic press and publicity coverage, after all, frames politics as a fierce battle between politicians and journalists over interpretive dominance, in which politicians are, above all, strategy-oriented actors seeking to exploit the news media, or even purposely clash with them, to achieve particular political objectives or boost desirable public images. In doing so, press and publicity strategy frames are thus quite likely to promote or reinforce a cynical public mind-set about politics (see Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Accordingly, we expect not only exposure to generic strategy news but also strategic press and publicity news exposure to be associated with higher levels of political cynicism.

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to news framed in terms of *generic* strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news.

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to news framed in terms of *press* and *publicity* strategy produces a higher level of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news.

Political Knowledge as a Moderator of Strategic Framing Effects

According to previous research on political persuasion, there is reason to believe that the impact of news frames is not necessarily across the board but rather fluctuates across media users as a function of the individual characteristics that people bring to the media. Notably, Zaller (1992) showed that exposure and receptiveness (or resistance) to mass-mediated political information

varies as a function of individual levels of political awareness, so that politically aware individuals are more likely to be exposed to such messages but less likely to be persuaded. Drawing on Zaller's notion, Valentino, Beckman, and Buhr (2001) hypothesized that individuals "who are least resistant to the strategy message, but still exposed to it, may exhibit the largest and most negative attitude shift" (p. 350). The least sophisticated, then, should be most susceptible to accept the strategy frame, given the few alternative interpretations stored in memory that argue against strategic depictions of political behavior.

However, two studies that tested this hypothesis have relied on different measures of political sophistication and cynicism, and also produced ambiguous results. Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr (2001), who used formal education rather than political knowledge as the moderator variable, found a significantly negative impact of strategic news among less sophisticated subjects on civic duty and vote intentions but not on political trust in politicians and government. In a comparative two-wave panel and content analytical study, de Vreese (2005), who used political interest as the moderator variable, did find that strategic news exposure contributed to an increase in political cynicism about a public issue debate among less sophisticated individuals, but only in one of the two cases under investigation.

Given the inconsistent findings in previous research on the moderating role of political knowledge in relationship between strategic news exposure and political cynicism, we pose a research question:

Research Question 1: How, if at all, does political knowledge moderate the effects of generic, press, and publicity strategy coverage on political cynicism?

Method

Design

To investigate strategic framing effects, we draw on data from two experiments, both of which included four conditions, an immediate posttest, and a between-subjects design. Each of our subjects took part in one experiment only. The stimuli in these experiments embodied multiple versions of two fictitious newspaper stories on two respective issues: liberalization of the health care sector and security measures in air travel. We produced four versions of both articles, each of which framed the story in terms of issue substance, generic strategy, press strategy, or publicity strategy. In both experiments, the three strategically framed story versions represented the three experimental conditions, whereas the issue condition represented the control group.

We are interested in the differential effects of specific message characteristics (i.e., the story frames) across different issue contexts, which essentially calls for an experimental design based on multiple messages per treatment

level. Single-message designs, after all, do not allow the researcher to fully refute that any message feature other than the one of interest is responsible for a particular observed effect (Reeves and Geiger 1994; see also Druckman et al. 2006; Gaines et al. 2007). While our design does not draw on multiple news stories for each condition, it does incorporate two equivalent experiments with similarly manipulated messages per treatment level, so as to avoid idiosyncratic results. By producing rather than selecting the news material, we ensured full control over the experimental manipulation of the stimuli. First, we altered only the frames and nothing but the frames embedded in the various versions of the story *within* each experiment, leaving the rest of the story's body intact. Second, we used identical (i.e., similarly worded and placed) frames *among* the same story versions of both experiments. We thereby answer Reeves and Geiger's (1994) plea for "designs that allow for replication within a single research effort" (p. 179).

Sample and Procedure

A sample was drawn from the database of a large independent research organization in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited so as to take into account variation in terms of important sociodemographic indicators (e.g., gender, age, education). A total of 414 subjects participated in the experiment on health care liberalization (49.3 percent male, aged 18 to 66 years [$M = 43.4$ years, $SD = 12.9$ years]), whereas a total of 449 subjects participated in the experiment on air travel security (44.5 percent male, aged 18 to 66 years [$M = 42.3$ years, $SD = 12.8$ years]).

The two experiments were conducted between April 6 and 13, 2007. In both of them, participants were notified that they would be involved in a study on "current political affairs" and were then randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Among the various conditions of each experiment, no significant differences on important demographics and control variables (specified in Appendix B) were discerned.² The experimental procedure, which took about half an hour to complete, was composed of three stages. First, participants filled out a nonobtrusive pretest questionnaire including items tapping basic demographics, political knowledge, political interest, political efficacy, trust in government, and issue opinions. Second, depending on the random assignment to one of the four conditions in each experiment, participants read a manipulated newspaper article involving either the health care liberalization or air travel security issue. Just before being exposed to the story, participants were informed that the article had recently appeared in a leading Dutch national newspaper and that the layout of the article had been altered to provide no visual information about the actual source.³ Third, participants completed a posttest questionnaire including items tapping political cynicism. After completing the posttest, participants were debriefed and given a gift voucher.

Stimulus Material

The stories. The news material in each experiment (see Appendix A) comprised coverage of a political event taking place outside the context of an election or referendum campaign, which we considered appropriate in the light of previous studies emphasizing, first, the permanence of political campaigning (e.g., Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Fallows 1996; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Nimmo 2000; Pfetsch 1998; Scammell 1999), and second, the pervasiveness of the strategy frame, beyond electoral campaigns, in coverage of policy debates (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Jamieson 1992; Lawrence 2000).

In each of the two stories, a reporter describes a speech in which a European Commission official announces a new policy proposal, serving as the basic cause of the coverage and core story body embedding the different frames. The health care liberalization story focused on a proposal by European Union (EU) health commissioner Markos Kyprianou to set up a European health care legislation that liberalizes the EU's health care sector. The air travel safety story focused on an objective of EU justice commissioner Franco Frattini to reach an agreement between the EU and the United States on the sharing of airline passenger information with American intelligence agencies. We selected these topics because they were present on the political agenda but only modestly salient on the media agenda in the period during which the experiments were conducted. Our stimuli would thus be representative of real issues but not easy to discredit by our subjects, given that they had only limited opportunity to learn about the exact details (e.g., progress) of the decision-making process on these issues from the mass media.

The core story parts, consisting of the second, third, fifth, and sixth paragraphs, were identical among the four versions of each story, and expressed an issue topic by providing factual background information about the policy proposal. The experimental manipulation, then, consisted of the headline, lead part (first paragraph), and middle part (fourth paragraph). Each strategy frame mostly expressed journalistic material (i.e., paraphrasing, observations, and synthesis) rather than quoted material. The stories' issue versions were similar to the four paragraphs constituting the article's core body, except that a headline and lead part were added and manipulated in terms of an issue focus, basically representing a mere description of the bottom line of the policy proposal (see also Price et al. 1997).

The strategy frames. The literature conceptualizes news framed in terms of *generic strategy* as news that emphasizes the performance, style, and perceptions of politicians; analyzes their maneuvers in the light of calculated underlying rationales; uses war and sports language; and refers to public opinion polls (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Jamieson 1992; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr

2001). The lead part of both stories' generic strategy versions, titled "Kyprianou (Frattini) Seeks Pleasing the Health Care Consumer (Anxious Citizen)," describes how the respective commissioner's "meticulously thought-out charm offensive" is aimed at securing public and political support for his political agenda, his main concern being "to win the battle" as his "political prestige is on the line." The middle part explains the commissioner's emphasis in the speech on the positive features of his proposals as "tactics" to mold public opinion, which according to a recent poll is still critical of such measures, as well as to beat his political opponents.

News framed in terms of *press strategy* is defined in the literature as coverage that highlights the adversary relationship between politicians and the press and specifically accentuates the news media's role as an influential actor in the game of politics that forces politicians to adjust their tactics to press coverage (Esser and D'Angelo 2003, 2006). For example, the frame has been found to reoccur in stories on politicians complaining about their media treatment (Esser and D'Angelo 2003, 2006). In the press strategy version of each news story, the headline of which read "Kyprianou's (Frattini's) Own Story Only, No Questions from Cynical Reporters," the lead part refers to the government official as "Commissioner of Damage Control" who wants to repair what he considers a negative and erroneous depiction of his reform plans in the press. The middle section describes the commissioner's animosity with the press, suggesting that the commissioner used the speech to hit back at the press for their "partisan" coverage, while noting that he refused to take questions afterward from journalists whom his spokesperson called "cynical."

Finally, the literature conceptualizes news framed in terms of *publicity strategy* as news that lays emphasis on politicians' uses of media and public relations acts "in skeptical, sinister, demonic, and contemptuous lights"; analyzes their "tactical considerations and purposes behind publicity moves"; and refers to politicians' "images, facades, and presentational styles," yet without explicitly reflecting on the media's own role in these processes (Esser and D'Angelo 2003: 633). In the publicity strategy version of the articles, titled "Kyprianou's (Frattini's) Spin Doctors Shall Be Satisfied," the lead section reports that spin doctors are helping the commissioner to boost his image and "sell" his proposal, describing him as speaking with "rehearsed sincerity" during his speech. The first paragraph also refers to the media event as "a tightly scripted publicity offensive," which is reported on in further detail in the middle part, where the efforts of public relations staff members, such as the strategic positioning of audience members, are highlighted, and the work of spin doctors is depicted as "sinister."

Manipulation Check

Prior to conducting the actual study, we conducted a pilot study to assess the robustness of the experimental manipulation. Participants taking part in the

pilot study were students in various study disciplines pursuing bachelor's or master's degrees from the University of Amsterdam (health care $n = 78$, air travel $n = 79$). The results of the pilot study revealed a successful manipulation.⁴

Measures

Political cynicism. We selected five items from Cappella and Jamieson's (1997: 266) study, tapping public perceptions of politicians' motivations and integrity, and used them with slightly different wordings so as to apply to a more general political policy context than that of an election or referendum campaign: (1) The politician's proposal was concerned with standing in the polls, (2) the politician was concerned with winning and his popularity, (3) the politician was concerned with the problems in his administrative policy areas, (4) the politician was telling the truth about his goals, and (5) the politician was manipulative in the presentation of his proposal. After reverse coding responses to propositions 3 and 4, all items were added and averaged to form a scale of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 (health care $M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.86$, $\alpha = .70$; air security $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = .70$).

Control variables. We expected a number of variables other than news framing exposure to potentially shape participants' levels of political cynicism. In our analyses, we included age, gender, education, political knowledge, political interest, political efficacy, and trust in government as control variables in a conservative test. We additionally controlled for support for health care liberalization and antiterrorism measures in the health care and air security experiments, respectively. For descriptive statistics of these independent variables and wording of associated items, see Appendix B.

Results

Our hypotheses suggested that exposure to news framed in terms of generic, press, and publicity strategy generate higher levels of political cynicism relative to exposure to issue-based news. For each condition, Tables 1 and 2 display the means of political cynicism in the immediate posttest of the health care and air security safety experiments, respectively. Both experiments yielded highly similar results. Participants in the generic strategy conditions (health care $M = 4.55$, air security $M = 4.53$) as well as those in the publicity strategy conditions (health care $M = 4.64$, air security $M = 4.53$) showed significantly higher levels of political cynicism in comparison with participants in the issue conditions (health care $M = 4.12$, air security $M = 4.20$). Cynicism levels among participants in the press strategy conditions (health care $M = 4.38$, air security $M = 4.25$) were found to be somewhat, but not significantly, higher

Table 1

Political cynicism by experimental condition: Health care experiment

Issue (<i>n</i> = 121)	Generic Strategy (<i>n</i> = 92)	Press Strategy (<i>n</i> = 103)	Publicity Strategy (<i>n</i> = 98)
4.12 _{ax} (0.77)	4.55 _y (0.81)	4.38 _{ab} (0.89)	4.64 _b (0.89)

Note: Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences: $ab\ p < .001$, $xy\ p < .01$.

Table 2

Political cynicism by experimental condition: Air security experiment

Issue (<i>n</i> = 115)	Generic Strategy (<i>n</i> = 112)	Press Strategy (<i>n</i> = 109)	Publicity Strategy (<i>n</i> = 113)
4.20 _a (0.66)	4.53 _{by} (0.84)	4.25 _{ax} (0.81)	4.53 _{by} (0.83)

Note: Data entries are means and standard deviations (in parentheses). Different subscripts indicate significant between-condition differences: $ab\ p < .05$, $xy\ p < .10$.

than those among participants in the issue conditions. These findings thus confirm our first hypothesis but provide only partial support for our second.

We also examined the moderating influence of political knowledge in the relationship between news framing exposure and political cynicism, in addition to the frames' main effects, while controlling for other potential cynicism predictors. We turn first to the multivariate analysis of the health care experiment. Table 3 shows the hierarchical regression model examining political cynicism as the criterion variable. Of the demographic controls and predispositions included in model 1, both trust in government ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$) and support for health care liberalization ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) showed robust negative relationships with political cynicism, so that participants most distrustful of government and most opposed to health care market reforms were most inclined to adopt a cynical attitude. Model 2 shows that, after these controls, strategy news exposure accounted for an additional 6.2 percentage points of the variance. We found that, above and beyond the controls, the generic ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) and publicity ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) strategy frame exposure yielded strongly positive associations with political cynicism. Press strategy news exposure also exerted a positive effect on cynicism ($\beta = .11$), albeit on a lower level of significance than the other two strategy frames ($p < .05$). The interaction terms included in model 3 explained another 1.8 percentage points of the variance. Whereas exposure to the generic strategy frame maintained a positive main effect on political cynicism ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$), strategic publicity exposure's main effect lost significance in the final model.

Table 3

Effects on political cynicism by experimental condition: Health care experiment

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	.07 (.00)	.04 (.00)	.04 (.00)
Gender (male)	.07 (.08)	.09* (.08)	.09* (.08)
Education	.09 (.03)	.07 (.03)	.08 (.03)
Political knowledge	.02 (.04)	.05 (.04)	-.04 (.05)
Political interest	-.06 (.02)	-.06 (.02)	-.06 (.02)
Political efficacy	-.09 (.07)	-.10* (.07)	-.11** (.06)
Trust in government	-.26 [†] (.02)	-.27 [†] (.02)	-.27 [†] (.02)
Support for health care liberalization	-.21 [†] (.03)	-.21*** (.03)	-.20 [†] (.03)
Exposure to generic strategy frame	—	.20 [†] (.11)	.18** (.17)
Exposure to press strategy frame	—	.11** (.10)	.08 (.18)
Exposure to publicity strategy frame	—	.28 [†] (.11)	.07 (.18)
Exposure to Generic Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.03 (.08)
Exposure to Press Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.04 (.08)
Exposure to Publicity Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.26*** (.08)
Adjusted R ²	.15	.21	.22
Incremental R ² (%)	—	6.2 [†]	1.8**
n	414	414	414

Note: Ordinary least squares regression. Data are β values and standard errors (in parentheses). * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; [†] $p < .001$.

Instead, we found that the interaction between political knowledge and strategic publicity exposure emerged as a positive and significant driver of cynicism ($\beta = .26, p < .01$). In addition, political efficacy was negatively related to cynicism in model 3 ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$).

Table 4 displays the hierarchical regression model predicting political cynicism in the air security experiment. In model 1, we found trust in government ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$) and support for antiterrorism measures ($\beta = -.21, p < .001$) to be powerful negative predictors of political cynicism. Conversely, education was positively correlated with cynicism ($\beta = .12, p < .05$), so that higher educated participants were more inclined to express cynicism than those with lower education. The strategy frame exposure variables, introduced in model 2, enhanced the explained variance by an extra 3.4 percent. After the controls, generic ($\beta = .16, p < .01$) and publicity ($\beta = .19, p < .001$) strategy exposure exerted significantly positive main effects on cynicism. Exposure to press strategy framing proved an insignificant cynicism predictor. Finally, the moderator variables were inserted in model 3, which explained another 1 percentage point of the variance. However, none of these variables showed significant relationships with political cynicism, except for the interaction between political

Table 4

Effects on political cynicism by experimental condition: Air security experiment

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	.08 (.00)	.06 (.00)	.06 (.00)
Gender (male)	-.03 (.08)	-.04 (.07)	-.04 (.08)
Education	.12** (.03)	.12** (.03)	.12** (.03)
Political knowledge	.02 (.04)	.00 (.03)	-.10 (.06)
Political interest	.04 (.02)	.04 (.02)	.04 (.02)
Political efficacy	-.02 (.06)	-.03 (.06)	-.03 (.06)
Trust in government	-.26 [†] (.02)	-.27 [†] (.02)	-.26 [†] (.02)
Support for antiterrorism measures	-.21 [†] (.03)	-.21*** (.03)	-.20 [†] (.03)
Exposure to generic strategy frame	—	.16*** (.10)	.06 (.17)
Exposure to press strategy frame	—	.03 (.10)	-.09 (.17)
Exposure to publicity strategy frame	—	.19 [†] (.10)	.18* (.18)
Exposure to Generic Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.14 (.08)
Exposure to Press Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.17* (.08)
Exposure to Publicity Strategy Frame × Political Knowledge	—	—	.02 (.08)
Adjusted R ²	.11	.14	.15
Incremental R ² (%)	—	3.4 [†]	0.9
n	449	449	449

Note: Ordinary least squares regression. Data are β values and standard errors (in parentheses). * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; [†] $p < .001$.

knowledge and strategic press exposure, which demonstrated a positive yet marginally significant correlation ($\beta = .17, p < .10$). Also, the publicity exposure main effect was marginally upheld in model 3 ($\beta = .18, p < .10$).

In sum, the regression models for both experiments established main effects of generic strategy and publicity strategy news exposure, thereby reconfirming our initial findings about the cynical impact of both the generic and publicity strategy frames. In the health care experiment, furthermore, we found that the strategic publicity frame exhibited a stronger positive influence on relatively well informed individuals with regard to cynicism, while finding a moderately positive interaction between strategic press exposure and knowledge on cynicism in the air security experiment. These findings, although failing replication, suggest that strategic metacoverage stirs up political cynicism among politically sophisticated individuals in particular.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of strategic metacoverage on political cynicism, against the backdrop of governance and policy. Drawing on data from

two similarly designed experiments allowing us to replicate findings within a single study, we demonstrated that exposure to both generic strategy and publicity strategy news aroused political cynicism relative to issue-based news. In addition, we found positive interactions between political knowledge and strategic press and publicity news exposure, so that more knowledgeable individuals were more affected by these frames, thus showing higher cynicism levels, than those with less knowledge.

We found evidence of the hypothesized relationship between generic strategy coverage and political cynicism, which corroborates the findings of earlier studies (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; de Vreese and Semetko 2002) and additionally extends the literature to show that strategic *publicity* coverage cultivates public cynicism in similar ways. This finding begs the question as to how the publicity strategy frame and the generic strategy frame differ conceptually and in their effects. Indeed, a compelling case could be made that publicity propositions can be added or taken away from the generic strategy frame. The publicity strategy frame depicts politicians as calculated and deceitful users or, worse, manipulators of the media to their advantage. Like the generic strategy frame, the publicity strategy frame invites negative character attributions about political actors *primarily* by exposing politicians' behind-the-scenes maneuvers and motives as cynical, calculating, or dishonest, not just vis-à-vis the media but also, more important, toward the public. Indeed, a news story's emphasis on the underlying motivations for political actions is what Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr (2001: 351) considered to be the "core" of the generic strategy frame. This may also be the reason why, contrary to our initial expectations, the press strategy frame did *not* boost political cynicism levels as significantly as the publicity strategy frame. Effectively, the press strategy frame most of all puts the resentment and conflict between politicians and journalists at the center of attention, without so much as making salient that politicians' actions are motivated by self-interested aspirations such as power, popularity, and prestige. Perhaps this frame may even induce some public empathy with politicians, who just "can do no good" with the merciless press. It is up to future studies to not only to conceptually refine and (dis)entangle seemingly multifaceted strategy frames but also to investigate whether, and if so which, strategy elements play an independent role in fuelling public cynicism with politics.

Our study did not find any support for the assertion, brought to the fore in previous studies (Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001; de Vreese 2005), that individuals with relatively little prior knowledge about politics are most vulnerable to strategic framing. With regard to generic strategy exposure, we only found a significant main effect, suggesting a uniform response to the generic strategy frame. Quite on the contrary, in the connections among press and publicity exposure and political cynicism, we *did* establish moderation effects of political knowledge, and even though we did not replicate these results,

both these effects were *positive*. This suggests that knowledge facilitated the effects of strategic press and publicity framing, evoking cynical attitudes predominantly among the politically sophisticated. This finding is in line with a strand of studies on knowledge activation that have found stronger framing effects among *more* knowledgeable individuals (e.g., Druckman and Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997). These studies support the argument that knowledgeable individuals are more likely to be already aware and thus make sense of the considerations emphasized in a frame. As we mentioned earlier, strategic press and publicity frames stress the power of the press and its outwardly adversarial liaison with political elites, as well as the manipulation, strategic skills, and “stagedness” that come with political publicity. In addition, strategic press and publicity frames arguably present a more complex picture of the political process than the generic strategy frame, as more actors are involved (e.g., journalists, media, advisors, strategists), more “insider” information is offered, and plain political strategies become buried under more subtle media strategies. This is also why strategic metaframes might *appeal* to political junkies in particular. But to draw firm conclusions, more evidence is needed to disentangle the role of prior knowledge and other potential moderators in the relationship between strategic news coverage and political cynicism.

Taken at face value, our results at least partially validate claims and concerns previously put forward by Kerbel (1994, 1997, 1999) and others stipulating malign effects of strategic metacoverage. They also provide an ostensible confirmation of the reasonable notion, as articulated by a significant part of the scholarly community in political communication, that issue-based coverage evidently is the most desirable form of political news content (e.g., Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Lichter and Noyes 1996; Patterson 1993, 2002). Issue coverage, after all, is bound to boost public learning about substantive policy information, whereas strategic news—regardless whether it is framed in terms of generic, press, or publicity strategy—most likely suppresses it. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that strategy-based coverage of politics reduces information acquisition (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). However, judging from the available evidence, such effects are more likely to be subtle rather than overwhelmingly large, and people have found to be well able to absorb substantive political information from the news, regardless of how it is framed (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). Moreover, the merit of communicating strategy news, and press and publicity coverage in particular, one could contend, is that it informs the average citizen about the complex situations in which the media and political elites must interact in shaping political reality, which arguably provides a more adequate picture of the modern process of politics.

In fact, even though there is reason to be healthily concerned that citizens' strategic information diet or cynical beliefs might in turn disengage them from the political process, it is questionable whether the picture is really as bleak as scholars and media critics often assert (see Perloff 2003). Whereas Cappella and Jamieson (1997), for instance, warn that "the price for these reinforcing [cynical] beliefs is ultimately paid in public disengagement . . . from the political process" (p. 239), the evidence substantiating such claims, at least with regard to voter abstention, is actually quite scarce. An experiment by Valentino et al. (2001) showed that participants exposed to the strategy-based version of a campaign story were equally likely to report intending to vote as those exposed to the story's issue-based version, except for nonpartisans and nongraduates, who were somewhat less likely to say that they would. However, these interaction effects were only marginally significant. Other studies suggest that there is no relationship between cynicism and voting (Leshner and Thorson 2000). For example, de Vreese and Semetko (2002) and Elenbaas and de Vreese (2008) observed that turnout levels in a national referendum remained high and unrelated to the level of cynicism, despite their initial finding that exposure to strategic campaign reporting fueled cynical campaign attitudes among voters. The latter conclusion, in turn, is tentative in longitudinal perspective. Therefore, future research must address the question of whether, and if so under what conditions, the effects of continual and extensive doses of strategic political, press, and publicity news exposure might still produce a cumulative "sleeper effect" on political disaffection and alienation in the long run (see Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006).

The overall conclusion of the study is that when news media become preoccupied with politicians' political and publicity strategies, they may indeed breed political cynicism among those exposed to it. An important empirical question that remains to be answered, however, is whether strategic metacoverage might also affect the press itself. In reporting strategically—and, some would say, cynically—about media politics, journalists communicate to the public that political elites and the press are caught up in a bitter battle over control of framing and defining political reality. But claiming a more significant and active role on the political stage could also produce a backfiring effect, conceivably fueling public interpretations of press behaviors and scrutiny as being too negative, intrusive, or even disruptive to the political process (D'Angelo and Lombard 2008; Fan et al. 2001). Future studies, therefore, should specify whether strategic metacoverage also contributes to cynical public perceptions of the news media, which, justly or unjustly, are also held by many politicians.

Appendix A

The Stories

"Issue" version

Kyprianou Seeks Stronger Market Role in EU Health Care Law

From our correspondent

BRUSSELS, March 4—*The EU health care sector is in need of liberalization, while patient rights must be secured. That is the bottom line of a new proposal which health commissioner Kyprianou announced yesterday.*

In his speech, yesterday evening in Strasbourg at the annual conference of the Association of European Consumer Interests (AECI), Kyprianou emphasized the importance of further liberalization of Europe's health care sector.

"Open borders will offer patients more freedom of choice while cross-border competition among health care providers will lower fees." Patients want the best care as soon as possible, Kyprianou told his audience, and they are increasingly willing to travel across the continent to get it, adding: "I want to make sure that information becomes available on the quality and accessibility of health care in the various member states."

Kyprianou is to present a worked out proposal within the next few months, which could eventually result into a separate directive for health care. With that directive, Kyprianou wants to break open the member states' health care markets for once and all. "In Europe, we have free mobility of goods and services, and that increasingly holds up for health care as well," the commissioner stated.

"Issue" version

Frattini Seeks Deal with U.S. over Airline Passenger Data

From our correspondent

BRUSSELS, March 4—The EU is seeking to reach an agreement with the US on the sharing of personal information of airline passenger flying into the US. That is the bottom line of a new proposal which Justice commissioner Frattini announced yesterday.

In his speech, yesterday evening in Strasbourg at the annual conference of the Association of European Citizens Interests (AECI), Frattini called his plans for transference of airline passenger data to the US a "high priority issue" for citizens.

"Citizens demand more security and expect maximum protection from the EU against future terror attacks." The proposed measures, Frattini told his audience, are simply necessary to cope with increased terrorist activity in air travel, adding: "We are today confronted with a persistent and very real threat."

The United States say access to passenger data helps fighting the war on terror. The privacy sensitive information allows the US to screen overseas passengers wishing to enter the country. Airlines are expected to soon ask travelers for more personal data on flights to US destinations. The information will in turn be passed on to the American authorities.

(continued)

Appendix A (continued)

“Kyprianou” continued

There is little legal clarity about the rights of patients, which are currently only inferable from a handful of rulings by the European Court of Justice. As a result of these rulings, patients can already travel across the bloc for medical help, for which under certain conditions they are also reimbursed.

“Frattini” continued

The impending deal includes data on 34 personal characteristics, including name, home address, phone number, travel scheme, food preferences, reservation and travel date, credit card numbers, baggage numbers, no-shows, and type of ticket, one-way or return.

The Strategy Frames

Full stimulus material is available from the authors on request.

Headline

Generic strategy. Kyprianou (Frattini) Seeks Pleasing the Health Care Consumer.

Press strategy. Kyprianou’s (Frattini’s) Own Story Only, No Questions from Cynical Reporters.

Publicity strategy. Kyprianou’s (Frattini’s) Spin Doctors Shall Be Satisfied.

Lead Paragraph

Generic strategy. Health commissioner Kyprianou (Justice commissioner Frattini) is seeking to liberalize the EU health care sector (reach an agreement with the US on the sharing of airline passenger data). A meticulously thought-out charm offensive aims at securing public and political support for his reform agenda (plans). For Kyprianou (Frattini), only one thing counts: to win the battle. His political prestige is on the line.

Press strategy. Health commissioner Kyprianou (Justice commissioner Frattini), seeking to liberalize the EU health care sector (reach an agreement with the US on the sharing of airline passenger data), last week saw the press vilify his plans. Using a public speech to repair a “negative and erroneous” depiction of his intended reforms (plans), the commissioner of Damage Control took revenge.

Publicity strategy. Spin doctors are helping health commissioner Kyprianou (Justice commissioner Frattini), seeking to liberalize the EU health care sector (reach an agreement with the US on the sharing of airline passenger data), to boost his image

(continued)

Appendix A (continued)

and sell his intended reforms (plans). With rehearsed sincerity, Kyprianou (Frattini) yesterday addressed a conference. Nothing in the tightly scripted publicity offensive was left to chance.

Middle Part (Fourth Paragraph)

Generic strategy. Kyprianou's (Frattini's) tactics are to package the proposal as appealingly as possible, seeking to boost the plan's popularity as well as his own. Hence, his words should be read as an attempt to score with the public; a recent poll showed a majority of European citizens still skeptical of liberalization (data sharing). By winning the heart of the health care consumer (By focusing on security and playing on citizens' fears), the commissioner hopes to mold opinion and strike his political foes.

Press strategy. In his speech, Kyprianou (Frattini) hit back at the media, whom he accused of negligent, negative, and partisan coverage of his anticipated European health care (air security) directive. The commissioner, clearly on ramming course with the Brussels press, refused to take questions from reporters afterward. Asked for comment, a spokesman said the commissioner was "not in the mood for cynical journalists."

Publicity strategy. Kyprianou's (Frattini's) press officers keep strict watch that the appearance progresses according to script. The audience recurrently awards the commissioner with lengthy applause, especially the young staffers lined up strategically in front, in view of the cameras. Noticeable contentment among Kyprianou (Frattini) aides backstage. The work of spin doctors is sinister: spinning facts, managing the news, selling tough reforms (measures) to the public.

Appendix B

Overview of Independent Variables

Age: In years (health care $M = 43.35$ years, $SD = 12.94$ years; air security $M = 42.33$ years, $SD = 12.78$ years).

Gender: 0 = female, 1 = male.

Education: Scale ranging from 1 = primary school to 8 = university (health care $M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.62$; air security $M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.62$).

Political knowledge: Four-item index, with one open-ended and three multiple-choice questions, tapping factual knowledge about Dutch national and European-level political actors and bodies (health care $M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.30$, $\alpha = .62$; air security

(continued)

Appendix B (continued)

$M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.24$, $\alpha = .56$), and binary coded as either 0 = wrong answer or 1 = correct answer: (1) What political party is Maria van der Hoeven [Minister of Economic Affairs] a member of: Labor, Liberals, Greens, or Christian Democrats? (2) What government position does Guusje ter Horst [Minister of Interior Affairs] hold? (3) How many countries are currently members of the European Union: 15, 22, 25, 27, or 29? (4) Who is the Dutch EU Commissioner: Frits Bolkestein, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Neelie Kroes, or Ben Bot?

Political interest: Item tapping interest in politics on a scale ranging from 1 = *very low interest* to 11 = *very high interest* (health care $M = 5.45$, $SD = 2.79$; air security $M = 5.45$, $SD = 2.83$).

Political efficacy: Three items on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, recoded if appropriate, added, and divided by three to form a scale of political efficacy (health care $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.76$, $\alpha = .60$; air security $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.79$, $\alpha = .63$): (1) At times, politics can be so complex that people like me don't understand what is going on; (2) I think that I am better informed about politics than others; (3) There are so many similar parties that it does not matter who is in government.

Trust in government: Item on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *very low trust* to 10 = *very high trust*, tapping trust in government at the European level (i.e., trust in the European Commission) (health care $M = 4.24$, $SD = 2.11$; air security $M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.05$).

Ideology: Item tapping political-ideological preference on a scale ranging from 1 = *extreme left* to 11 = *extreme right* (health care $M = 5.65$, $SD = 2.32$; air security $M = 5.53$, $SD = 2.35$).

Support for health care liberalization: Three items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, added and divided by three to form a scale of support for health care liberalization (health care only $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.51$, $\alpha = .89$): (1) Stronger market forces in the health care sector is a good thing; (2) The stronger the competition among hospitals and insurance companies, the more patients will benefit; (3) Health care liberalization will have a positive effect on the quality of health care services.

Support for antiterrorism measures: Three items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, added and divided by three to form a scale of support for health care liberalization (air security only $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .79$): (1) In order to warrant the safety of citizens and prevent future terrorist attacks, it is necessary for citizens to disclose their personal data; (2) In the war on terror, citizens' privacy is being too much curtailed; (3) Measures such as disclosures of personal information will *not* help in the battle against terrorism.

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Notes

1. The term “generic strategy frame” has not been used before in pertinent studies. The word “generic” implies a hierarchical order of conceptualization, so that the generic strategy frame forms a general category, and the press and publicity strategy frames are subtypes of this general category. However, the term is introduced here not so much to imply such a conceptual hierarchy but rather merely as a convenient way to nominally distinguish this frame from the press and publicity strategy frames. We return to the conceptualization issue in the “Discussion” section of the article.
2. In both experiments, no significant variation between the different conditions was found for age, education, ideology, support for health care liberalization, or support for antiterrorism measures (all p values $> .10$).
3. The design also included a control condition, which was not exposed to any news. Participants in this condition only filled in the questionnaire. We treat the issue condition as the de facto control condition, as we are interested in drawing inferences about the way in which different news frames affect political cynicism (see Brown and Melamed 1990). To omit a control group in the design is in line with the procedures used in most experimental research on framing effects (Domke et al. 1999; Iyengar 1991; McLeod and Detenber 1999; Nelson et al. 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001; de Vreese 2004).
4. The pilot study’s manipulation check included ten items tapping subjects’ levels of agreement on a Likert-type scale. The manipulation was successful. Detailed results from this test are available on request from the first author.

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Biographical Notes

Claes H. de Vreese is a professor of political communication and director of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research.

Address: Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands; phone: +31-20-525-2426; e-mail: c.h.devreese@uva.nl.

Matthijs Elenbaas is a graduate student at the University of Amsterdam.