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# The Spiral of Cynicism Reconsidered

■ *Claes H. de Vreese*

## ABSTRACT

■ Public debate about and scholarly enquiry into the relationship between news media and political attitudes tend to highlight negative aspects. Research has shown that strategic news coverage focusing on politicians' motives and style rather than content and policies fuels political cynicism. This has been dubbed the 'spiral of cynicism'. This study, drawing on two-wave panel surveys and content analyses of news media in two countries, challenges this perspective. The negative effects of news on cynicism are contingent upon the level of strategy reporting in the news. Moreover, political sophistication is positively related to cynicism, suggesting that cynicism is perhaps little more than an indication of an 'interested and critical citizenry'. Finally, when the assumption that cynicism is detrimental to political participation is evaluated, there is in fact little empirical evidence to support a link between cynicism and voter turnout. ■

**Key Words** European integration, framing, political cynicism, political participation, strategic news

The news media's impact on political attitudes is centre-stage in much scholarly research. Conventional wisdom, also articulated by a significant part of the research community, is focused on the negative effects of news media on political attitudes and participation in democratic processes. According to Patterson (2002), the news media have contributed to declining interest and enthusiasm about politics in the US. The bleak

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picture is supported by, for example, Fallows (1996), Lichter and Noyes (1996) and more recently Farnsworth and Lichter (2003), who demonstrate that in political reporting the news media emphasize the horse race at the expense of policy issue stories and they argue that this in turn has significant negative effects on attitudes towards politics and voter turnout.

However, this perspective is not supported in all studies. Research on the 'virtuous' and 'vicious' contributions of the media to democratic processes is not novel (Holtz-Bacha, 1990); and as Perloff (2003) rightly pointed out in a review article, there is evidence that the relationship between the media and citizens is less unidimensional than some research suggests. In fact, recent studies based on survey evidence and media content data suggest that the media promote political and civic engagement (e.g. Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000) rather than political apathy and alienation (as suggested by, for example, Robinson, 1976).

The current study specifically reconsiders the 'spiral of cynicism' hypothesis. This hypothesis states that news media report largely strategically about politics, which fuels public distrust in and cynicism about politics and politicians. This cynicism erodes civic engagement and depresses electoral participation (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Moore, 1995). Strategic news reporting is conceptualized as news that focuses on winning and losing, is driven by 'war and games' language, emphasizes 'performers, critics and audiences', focuses on candidate style and perceptions and gives weight to opinion polls (Jamieson, 1992).

Contrary to most previous research, the current study tests this proposition in the context of European politics, outside the US and outside the context of an election campaign. The study suggests that the relationship between news media and political cynicism is conditional upon the pervasiveness and actual content of 'strategic' news. Moreover, the study considers the scant empirical evidence that political cynicism depresses political participation. The results show that strategic reporting is not per se cynicism-invoking and may play only a negligible role in citizens' considerations to turn out to vote. The study challenges conventional wisdom about the negative effects of news media and offers an antidote to what Perloff (2003: 730) recently labelled a 'persistent negativity' in research on politics and the media.

### **Strategic news coverage: a clarification**

According to Cappella and Jamieson (1997), strategic news dominates American news coverage of not only election campaigns, but also of

policy issues. The focus on winning and losing and polls is also highlighted in Patterson's (1993) discussion of the use of 'game schema' in election news. Game refers to strategies and (predictions of) electoral success, emphasizing candidates' position in the electoral race. Patterson (1993) provides evidence of the historical increase in the use of the game or horse race frame in the press coverage of US elections from 1960 until 1992.

The conceptual overlap between the strategy frame and the game frame has led some scholars to use the terms interchangeably (Lawrence, 2000). Lawrence (2000) investigated journalists' propensity to apply the game frame outside election campaigns, where it has been most vigorously discussed. She concluded that it is most likely to be applied to public policy issues when they are discussed in national election news or when Washington policy-makers are engaged in legislative conflict that promises a clear outcome. The game frame is less likely to be applied to public policy issues in other settings, such as in news about the implementation phase of policy-making or state-level political debates.

Previous research remains vague, however, about the classification of news as framed in terms of strategy. Cappella and Jamieson (1997: 48) note that broadcast segments and print news were 'identified as primarily strategic', but they do not elaborate on how this was assessed. Lawrence (2000) followed the method suggested by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and classified news stories as either issue-framed, game-framed or mixed. In these studies it is not possible to assess which elements of the strategy or game frame prevailed. Later experimental research has demonstrated that the presence of public opinion expressions and the use of war language – which are features of the strategy frame – do not boost readers' cynical reaction to news (Valentino et al., 2001a). It is therefore pertinent for future research to document clearly which aspects of the strategy frame are under investigation and how this is measured in analyses of news content.

### **Effects of strategic news**

Research on the relationship between media use and political attitudes has produced mixed results, but it relies on different conceptualizations, methods and measurement. Pinkleton and Austin (2001) link media use to cynicism. They found a negative relationship between reliance on newspapers as an important information source and cynicism, so that those individuals who perceive newspapers to be an important source were less cynical. In their study they discard the more commonly used

exposure and attention measures due to potential measurement errors. However, their study leaves unanswered the question of which features of the newspaper content yielded the negative relationship with cynicism and why other media were positively, albeit not significantly, related to cynicism. To answer this question, knowledge about exposure to different media is required, but more importantly, knowledge about the actual content that citizens were exposed to is required to make a compelling link between media use and political attitudes (see also Slater, 2004).

A seminal series of experimental studies by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) have forcefully linked exposure to strategic news to political cynicism. First, they found that participants exposed to strategic news remembered more strategy-based information about candidates compared to those who were exposed to issue-based news. Second, they found that strategic news enhanced political cynicism. Other studies have linked exposure to strategic news to interpretations of election campaigns and also to turnout, trust in government and civic duty. Patterson (2002: 83) concluded that game news leads to mistrust, which undermines the drive to vote. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) speculate about the negative consequences of strategic news reporting on electoral participation, but do not provide data from their studies to substantiate this claim. Rhee (1997), however, found strategic news to bolster participants' strategic interpretations of an election campaign and Valentino et al. (2001b) found strategic news to reduce learning. Finally, Valentino et al. (2001a) also found that strategic news depressed turnout intention and alienated participants with low education levels.

We focus on the relationship between strategic news and political cynicism, which is at the core of the spiral of cynicism hypothesis. Political cynicism is a contested concept in the literature, both in terms of its conceptualization and measurement (e.g. Erber and Lau, 1990; Hetherington, 2001; Valentino et al., 2001a). Cynicism has been defined as oppositional to political efficacy (e.g. Acock and Clarke, 1990; Acock et al., 1985; Craig et al., 1990; Niemi et al., 1991) and as inversely related to trust in different social, economic and political institutions (Mishler and Rose, 2001). However, cynicism is more than a proxy of the absence of trust and tends to correlate only modestly with conventional measures of trust (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997: 271). Thus it is important to understand its antecedents and potential implications for political behaviour.

The studies by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and others (Crigler et al., 2002; Rhee, 1997; Valentino et al., 2001a, 2001b) have compellingly linked exposure to strategic news coverage to political cynicism in

experimental studies in the US. While experimentation with controlled manipulations in media content is superior compared to merely establishing a relationship between news media use and political cynicism, extant research has two potential shortcomings. First, the high internal validity of experimentation comes at the price of unnatural viewing environments and forced exposure. The field needs complementary non-laboratory studies that can compellingly assess the effects of exposure to strategic news coverage. Essentially, this calls for a panel study in which respondents' level of cynicism is assessed repeatedly and the media content that these respondents are in fact exposed to is analysed for the presence of strategic reporting. Two studies have initially investigated the effects of repeated exposure to strategic news. De Vreese (2004) included a one-week delayed post-test in an experimental study and found that in the case where participants were not subsequently exposed to strategically framed news, the effect on cynicism that was established in the immediate post-test vanished. De Vreese and Smetko (2002) found that exposure to strategic news media reporting about a national political issue contributed to citizens' levels of cynicism, even when controlling for the initial level of cynicism in the campaign.

A second shortcoming is the gap in research investigating the relationship between strategic news reporting and political attitudes outside the US. We know from studies of national election campaigns in, for example, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands that the use of polls and the horse race frame is common in the election news coverage (e.g. Brettschneider, 1997; Norris et al., 1999; van Praag and Brants, 2000). Some scholars refer to strategic coverage as the dominant journalistic mode since the 1970s (e.g. Esser et al., 2001), but there is little specific evidence of strategic news reporting beyond the US example. This is important, since the pervasiveness of strategic news reporting has not yet been explored in a comparative perspective. Comparative studies, for example across countries, furthermore allow for investigating the potentially differential effects of news media depending on the perseverance of strategic reporting.

## Hypotheses

This study is concerned with the *dynamics* of the relationship between news media coverage of politics and political cynicism. The study builds on Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) seminal series of studies investigating this relationship and on later studies that have refined the hypotheses (de Vreese, 2004; Valentino et al., 2001a). The main hypothesis therefore is

that exposure to strategic news leads to political cynicism. However, we expect this relationship to be conditional upon the pervasiveness of the strategic news frame in the news so that cynicism is only affected if the elements defining strategic news are readily present.

In addition, we control for a number of variables that are also likely to influence the level and change in political cynicism. First, we expect *efficacy*, citizens' beliefs that their involvement and opinions matter to political decision-making, to be directly and negatively related to cynicism. Previous studies have demonstrated a robust negative relationship in several contexts and using both smaller experimental samples as well as locally and nationally representative survey samples (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Pinkleton and Austin, 2001). We secondly expect government evaluation to affect citizens' level of cynicism so that negative evaluations are related to higher levels of cynicism. We finally control for *political sophistication*, which we expect to be positively related to cynicism. This expectation is based on findings from previous research that suggest that political knowledge is positively related to expressions of cynicism (de Vreese, 2004; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). However, we also expect political sophistication to moderate the relationship between exposure to strategic news and cynicism for a particular subgroup of citizens. As Zaller (1992) argues in more general terms, media effects tend to vary across individuals, in particular as a function of political sophistication and awareness. Valentino et al. (2001a: 350) specified this relationship and suggested that individuals who might be less resistant to strategic news framing, but are still exposed to it, 'may exhibit the largest and most negative attitude shift'. In other words, we expect a positive interaction between low political sophistication and exposure to strategically framed news with regard to cynicism.

## Methods

To compellingly link news media with cynicism, we employ a design that taps the dynamics of attitudes and assesses the level of news reporting in terms of strategy. The study draws on two data sources to investigate the effects of news exposure on political cynicism. Two-wave panel surveys with measures of exposure and attention to various media outlets are linked to a content analysis of print and television news that assesses the level of strategic news reporting in the period between our panel waves. The design focuses on *change* in political cynicism as a result of exposure to strategic news coverage. The panel design has advantages above experimentation in that it does not involve forced exposure. It moreover

allows for investigating change at the individual level as a function of news that respondents were in fact exposed to. This is obviously desirable above cross-sectional data that only allow establishing a relationship between news media use and cynicism.

We conduct our study in the context of political cynicism about European Union politics. The context of European integration is particularly appropriate for investigating the dynamics of public opinion cross-nationally because it is more readily comparable across different contexts than domestic political issues, which can be biased by national idiosyncrasies (see, for example, Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001). We investigate the effects of news media coverage on political cynicism drawing on a quasi-experimental design. To ensure variation in the level and type of news media coverage we conducted a media content analysis and collected panel survey data in two contexts. The study was carried out in the period leading up to and including the December 2002 European Council meeting in Copenhagen. We chose Denmark because EU summits have the potential to generate less unfavourable news in the country that hosts the summit (see de Vreese, 2002). We chose the Netherlands as the comparison because we know that the news volume and tone is affected by EU summits in this country as well (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). This reduces the chances that the findings are idiosyncratic to the Danish case. Our panel surveys include a pre- and post-Council meeting wave with representative samples of the Danish and Dutch adult population electorate.

The surveys were fielded about three weeks ahead of the summit and immediately after the summit.<sup>1</sup> The response rates were in Denmark 77.9 percent in wave I and 82.8 percent in wave II with a net sample of 1288 respondents participating in both waves, and in the Netherlands 70.9 percent in wave I and 63.3 percent in wave II with a net sample of 2136 respondents participating in both waves.<sup>2</sup>

### *Panel survey*

The key *dependent variable* was political cynicism which was a four-item index based on the work of Cappella and Jamieson (1997). Given the issue-sensitive nature of earlier studies (referring to specific elections in the US), we adjusted our items to the research context of European politics in a non-election period. The items, measured on five-point agree/disagree statements, were: (1) the discussion about EU enlargement is about what is best for Europe; (2) the politicians are too superficial in

their argumentation about enlargement; (3) the discussion about enlargement gives me sufficient information to form an opinion; and (4) the discussion about enlargement is more about political strategies than content. The answers were recoded when appropriate to form a scale with a higher score reflecting a higher level of cynicism (Denmark wave I,  $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $\alpha = .68$ , wave II,  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ ; The Netherlands wave I,  $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ,  $\alpha = .59$ , wave II,  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ,  $\alpha = .60$ ).<sup>3</sup> This measure of cynicism taps negativism at the level of the quality of the debate and political leaders (e.g. Citrin, 1974) and not as the absence of trust at the level of institutions (see, for example, Miller [1974] and Erber and Lau [1990] for a discussion of this distinction).

The key *independent variables* relate to media use. We use a combined measure of exposure to television news and newspapers and attention to 'news about the EU'. We include attention given the potential inaccuracy of relying solely on exposure measures (Chaffee and Schleuder, 1986).<sup>4</sup> We use a combined measure of media exposure given the similarity between the media outlets in each of the countries. This is shown in the description of the results of the content analysis. A greater diversity in terms of the news media content on the relevant indicators would favour using our detailed exposure measure to each of the different outlets, but given the similarity we use an additive index. The index includes number of days watching television news (0–7) and reading a newspaper (0–7 in Denmark and 0–6 in the Netherlands) plus attention to EU affairs (ranging from 1 to 4).

In all analyses, we control for gender (coded as female), age (in years), education,<sup>5</sup> government evaluation, political sophistication and the respondent's level of cynicism at time 1 (see Markus [1979] for discussion on the use of lagged specifications in panel data). This makes it possible to control for prior levels of cynicism and to examine *change*. The descriptives for all variables as well as the specific wording of all items can be found in the Appendix. The specified regression models are ordinary least square models.

### *Content analysis*

To assess the strategic news framing of EU politics, a content analysis of television news and daily newspapers was carried out in the period between the two waves of the survey.<sup>6</sup> The sample consisted of the most widely watched public broadcasting news programmes (*DR TV-Avisen* [9 p.m.] in Denmark and *NOS Journaal* [8 p.m.] in the Netherlands) and the

most widely watched commercial television news programmes (*TV2 Nyhederne* [7 p.m.] in Denmark and *RTL Nieuws* [7.30 p.m.] in the Netherlands).<sup>7</sup> A total of 1477 news stories were coded from these four outlets.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper sample included the front-page of the five most widely read dailies in Denmark (*Politiken*, *JyllandsPosten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *BT* and *EkstraBladet*, all published Monday through Sunday) and in the Netherlands (*de Volkskrant*, *Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Algemeen Dagblad* and *Trouw*, all published Monday through Saturday). A total of 1797 newspaper articles were analysed.<sup>9</sup> The sample of news outlets covers the most important sources of political information and includes broadsheet and tabloid newspapers as well as public service and private broadcast news programmes.

The content analysis was completed by two native Dutch speakers and two native Danish speakers (all were MA students at the University of Amsterdam). Coders were trained and supervised frequently. In this study, we are interested in the extent to which the news media framed European politics in terms of strategy. We draw on five indicators for strategic news coverage, such as, for example, 'the story mentions how, in which way, politicians handle and present an issue'. The inter-coder reliability test conducted on a randomly selected sample of 50 news stories showed 94–100 percent inter-coder agreement for the topic measures relevant to this study.<sup>10</sup>

## Results

The content analysis of the news media showed, as expected, that there was much more news about EU politics in Denmark (where the EU summit took place) than in the Netherlands. Danish television aired 252 news stories about European affairs during the period of the study. Dutch television news aired 25 stories. Danish newspapers covered EU affairs in 84 front-page articles, whereas Dutch newspapers included 70 articles.

While news about European affairs was much more visible in Denmark, the level of strategic news framing was consistently higher in the Netherlands. As shown in Table 1, half of the news stories in the Netherlands, compared to about one-quarter in Denmark, discussed how politicians were handling an issue, whether it was competently, successfully and/or forcefully addressed. In about one-fifth of the news in both countries there were references to politicians' actions as instrumental to either consolidating or improving their stance in public opinion. In about one-third of the news in the Netherlands, and about 10 percent in Denmark, the news focused on politicians either gaining or losing.

**Table 1** Strategic news coverage

	<i>Denmark</i> (N = 350)	<i>The Netherlands</i> (N = 64)
Strategy 1: Focus on politicians' presentation and/or style	.29 (102)	.50 (32)
Strategy 2: Focus on politicians' actions as instrumental to consolidating or improving their public support	.19 (67)	.19 (12)
Strategy 3: Focus on winning and/or losing	.08 (27)	.30 (19)
Strategy 4: Reference to polls and/or public opinion	.14 (50)	.28 (18)
Strategy 5: Use of language from war and/or games	.27 (94)	.39 (25)

*Note:* Entries are mean occurrences of the different indicators of strategic news (on a scale from 0 to 1), in parentheses the absolute count. *N* denotes total number of stories.

Similarly, there were twice as many references to specific polls or public opinion in Dutch news as there were in Danish news. Finally, Dutch news utilized expressions from war and game situations in 39 percent of the stories, while this was 27 percent in Denmark.

The analysis of change in political cynicism showed the main effects of exposure to news media in both contexts (see Table 2). In one context, exposure contributed to an *increase* in political cynicism (the Netherlands) while in the other context news media exposure contributed to a *decrease* (Denmark). This differential effect can be explained in the findings from the content analysis, suggesting that in the context with a higher level of strategic news reporting, news media exposure contributed to cynicism, while in the context of less strategic reporting, news media exposure yielded a decrease in political cynicism. The interaction between low political sophistication and media exposure was a positive predictor of an increase in cynicism in Denmark. In other words, general media exposure led to a decrease of cynicism in Denmark, but among the low political sophistication group, exposure to news media contributed to an increase in cynicism.

In both countries, the logged measure of cynicism was – rather unsurprisingly – the strongest predictor for the level of cynicism in the second wave, suggesting a relative stability of this attitude (see Table 2). In our model of change, we found that in addition to news media coverage, political efficacy contributed to a decrease in cynicism. Positive

Table 2 Predicting change in political cynicism

	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>The Netherlands</i>	
	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>
Gender (female)	-.04	(.03)	-.02	(.02)
Age (in years)	-.12***	(.00)	-.01	(.00)
Education	-.03	(.02)	.07***	(.02)
Government evaluation	-.15***	(.02)	-.09***	(.01)
Political efficacy	-.17***	(.03)	-.09***	(.02)
Political sophistication	.05	(.03)	.08**	(.02)
Media exposure and attention to EU news	-.10**	(.01)	.09**	(.01)
Low political sophistication × media exposure	.06*	(.02)	-.02	(.03)
Prior cynicism ( <i>t</i> )	.53***	(.03)	.48***	(.02)
Adjusted $R^2$	.46		.30	
<i>N</i>	1140		2040	

Note: OLS regressions.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

evaluations of the incumbent government were related to lower levels of cynicism. Elderly respondents displayed a decrease, though this was significant only in Denmark. Finally, in the Netherlands, political sophistication was positively related to cynicism.

## Discussion

The study contributes to the broader, ongoing discussion of the effects of media on political attitudes and democratic processes (see, for example, Norris [2000] for a recent overview). The study challenges the pervasiveness of the spiral of cynicism by refining the argument and only partially confirms that strategic news focused on the presentation of politicians, their motives, and their stance in public opinion does indeed fuel cynicism about politics. Crucially, this relationship is contingent upon the level of strategy in the news. In the context where strategy news was relatively less present, exposure to news in fact contributed to a decrease in the level of cynicism. This finding calls for a reconsideration of the spiral of cynicism hypothesis.

The spiral of cynicism is not omnipresent and when distinguishing differences in news *content*, the effects are considerably different too. The

study provides partially supportive evidence for Valentino et al.'s (2001a) findings that less politically sophisticated individuals who are exposed to strategic news are particularly affected. In the Danish case we found that exposure to news was generally related to a decrease in cynicism except among the less politically sophisticated where news media exposure contributed to an increase in cynicism. In the Dutch case, we only found a significant main effect, suggesting a uniform response to strategic news, not moderated by the level of political sophistication. This does not invalidate Valentino et al.'s (2001a) conclusions based on their experimental studies, but makes apparent that additional studies must disentangle the potential moderators in the relationship between strategic news coverage and political cynicism.

As expected, we found respondents' feelings of political efficacy to affect the level of political cynicism. Politically efficacious individuals were less likely to express cynicism. This finding corroborates Pinkleton and Austin's (2001, 2002) work on the negative relationship between cynicism and efficacy. The study furthermore suggested that political sophistication contributed to political cynicism, which is in line with Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) findings. The positive relationship between political sophistication and cynicism reported here (and in de Vreese [2004] and Cappella and Jamieson [1997]), suggests that cynicism is perhaps little more than an indication of an 'interested and critical citizenry'. It seems that citizens have the capacity to be both interested and knowledgeable about politics while at the same time critical and rather disparaging about politicians and their performance. Such an explanation is supported in studies interpreting public opinion during the Clinton presidency. Popular wisdom during the Clinton presidency and later studies suggested that citizens were stunningly capable of distinguishing their rating and evaluation of Clinton as a person, on which he scored poorly, and as a president, for which he received high ratings (see, for example, Shah et al., 2002; Zaller, 1998).

This study has a number of caveats. It focuses on cynicism in a particular area of European politics. This is an advantage for the comparative design of the study because public attitudes towards European politics are more readily compared than attitudes towards different domestic political issues. However, it potentially limits the generalizability of the conclusions. This, nevertheless, is more likely to pertain to the level of cynicism than the underlying dynamics that are at the core of this study. In addition, for obvious reasons of comparability we rely on measures of strategic news reporting that have been developed in part in previous research. However, these measures are in need of

refinement. The presence of particular language and of opinion polls is less likely to drive cynicism than other more interpretative comments offered by journalists. In addition, the measures would benefit from a valence indication (see de Vreese and Boomgaarden [2003] for a discussion of valence news frames). In this study, Danish politicians' motivations were, for example, stressed in some stories only to say that they were doing their best to reach a deal in the negotiations about EU enlargement. A valence indication in combination with the strategy measures would capture such subtleties and may also help to explain the differential effects of exposure to different levels and different content of strategic news.

The study draws on a panel survey design, which is an asset in a subfield of research that relies primarily on experimentation. However, panels are known for sensitizing respondents, which may affect key dependent measures. In the second wave of the survey in the Netherlands, we included a control group that displayed the same level of political cynicism as our panelists so we consider the potential panel effects negligible, but note this for future research. Future research would also benefit from a longitudinal approach to the study of the relationship between the media and political cynicism. While our panel study and other experimental studies (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997) demonstrate that changes in cynicism can occur in response to certain news coverage, unanswered questions remain about the stability and duration of this change. In this vein, we should note that individual-level variations are more likely to crystallize into aggregate-level developments in the long term than in the short term (e.g. Blendon et al., 1997).

Finally, we need to beware sweeping generalizations about the relationship between news about politics and cynicism. While we demonstrated that the level of strategic news has differential effects, we should also look at contextual antecedents of these differences. The level and meaning of strategic news may indeed depend on political systems and differ between adversarial models (such as in the US and Britain) and consensual models (such as in the Netherlands and Denmark).

Does the conditional nature of the relationship between exposure to strategic news and political cynicism mean that the media are performing well as an agent in democratic processes? The study suggests that there is a critical threshold of strategic reporting that, when passed, fuels cynicism. Because we have no comparable studies that systematically assess the level of strategic reporting in different contexts over time, it is impossible to identify the exact level and content of strategic reporting required to fuel cynicism. Moreover, new styles in news reporting of

political and economic issues may play in to this equation. Some studies suggest that a substantial part of the news, also in Europe, is now devoted to self-referential meta-coverage, in which the news media report how other news media cover political events (Esser et al., 2001). This type of reporting may push strategic reporting more to the periphery of the journalistic toolbox, but it may itself have new and independent effects on the level of cynicism expressed by citizens.

In the literature on political cynicism there is a pervasive assumption that cynicism is detrimental to political participation (Patterson, 2002). Looking at the available evidence, this assumption is less compelling when empirically tested. Pinkleton and Austin (2001), for example, did not report the relationship between cynicism and voting intention, but reported a positive relationship between efficacy and voting, which was significant after controlling for previous voting behaviour. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) specify how cynicism erodes citizens' interest in politics, and Valentino et al. (2001a) report a direct negative effect of exposure to strategic news on turnout, but only among low educated and non-partisan participants and at a marginal level of significance. Leshner and Thorson (2000) found no relationship between cynicism and voting and de Vreese and Semetko (2002) found that although cynicism about a national referendum campaign was high and the news media contributed to an increase in the level of cynicism, the level of turnout remained very high. In sum, when the assumption that cynicism is detrimental to political participation is evaluated against the available evidence, there is in fact modest empirical evidence to support a direct link between high levels of cynicism and low levels of turnout. So far, we can only conclude that strategic news under certain circumstances can contribute to cynicism about politics, but a critical and reflexive citizenry might in fact be rather good news.

### Appendix: Overview of independent variables

*Gender:* Female = 1; male = 0.

*Age:* In years.

*Education:* was recoded into four categories, comparable across the two countries, ranging from 1 (primary school), 2 (high school or equivalent [about 13 years' training]), 3 (BA or three years' vocational training or equivalent [16 years]) and 4 (masters or postgraduate training [19+ years]).

*Government evaluation:* Item ranging from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good) rating of the incumbent government (Denmark  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ; the Netherlands  $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ).

*Political sophistication:* Item ranging from 'No' (1) to (4) high political interest (Denmark  $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .70$ ; the Netherlands  $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = .82$ ).

*Media exposure (additive) and attention to EU:* number of days watching television news (0–7) and reading a newspaper (0–7 in Denmark and 0–6 in the Netherlands) plus attention to EU affairs (ranging from 1 to 4), additive index ranging from 1 to 17/18, Denmark ( $M = 15.74$ ,  $SD = 3.51$ ), the Netherlands ( $M = 12.52$ ,  $SD = 3.49$ ).

*Efficacy:* Six-item (Likert scale) index as follows forming a scale of efficacy (Denmark  $M = 16.99$ ,  $SD = 4.10$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ; the Netherlands  $M = 16.50$ ,  $SD = 3.59$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ ). (1) At times, politics can be so complex that people like me don't understand what is going on; (2) People like me don't have a say in what the government does; (3) I think that I am better informed about politics than others; (4) MPs want to keep in touch with the people; (5) Parties are only interested in people's votes, not their opinions; (6) There are so many similar parties that it does not matter who is in government.

## Notes

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1. The fieldwork dates were: Denmark, wave I 21–28 November 2002, wave II 14–18 December 2002; the Netherlands, wave I 19–26 November 2002, wave II 17–21 December 2002.
2. In Denmark, the sample was drawn from the GfK Danmark database. A nationally representative sample of 1807 Danish adults (age 15+) was invited to participate in the study out of which 1444 did (response rate 77.9 percent). The same sample was approached in wave II and generated a response rate of 82.8 percent. In Denmark, the questionnaire was a postal self-administered paper and pencil questionnaire. Response rates of this magnitude are not unusual for survey research in Scandinavia, where actual turnout is also high (Granberg and Holmberg, 1991). In the Netherlands, the sample was drawn from the ITM International database with more than 55,000 respondents. A nationally representative sample of 5321 Dutch adults (age 15+) was invited to participate in the study out of which 3375 did (response rate 70.9 percent). Of these, 2136 participated in the second

wave resulting in a 63.3 percent response rate. In the Netherlands, the questionnaire was web-based. By making use of a similar layout of the questionnaire in the two countries, potential confounds due to question and response category layout were taken in to account (Dillman, 2000). To assess the quality of our data, we included the standard Eurobarometer 'support for country's EU membership' question in our survey. Sixty percent of our respondents in Denmark and 66 percent in the Netherlands reported considering the membership of their country in the EU a good thing. This compares to 61 percent and 69 percent respectively in Eurobarometer 58, which was fielded in October 2002 (Eurobarometer 58, 2003).

3. In the Dutch case, the third item was dropped due to low inter-item correlation.
4. We note, however, that using our exposure measure only (without attention to the EU news measure) yields very similar results and does not substantively alter the findings.
5. Respondents' reported level of completed education was recoded due to differences in the educational systems; see Appendix.
6. The content analysis was conducted between 25 November and 16 December 2002.
7. We acknowledge the dual funding of Danish TV2.
8. The entire news bulletin was coded. This included 554 stories from *TV-Avisen*, 458 stories from *TV2 Nyhederne*, 220 stories from *NOS Journaal* and 245 stories from *RTL Nieuws*.
9. The entire front-page of each newspaper was coded. If stories commencing on the front-page continued inside the newspaper, these stories were coded in full. A single headline (with no adjacent story) was not coded. Bullets (a headline and a few short, but full sentences) were included. The following number of articles were coded per newspaper: *Politiken* 260, *JyllandsPosten* 224, *Berlingske Tidende* 223, *EkstraBladet* 90, *BT* 89, *de Volkskrant* 214, *NRC* 231, *AD* 186, *Telegraaf* 135, *Trouw* 145. The low number of articles from *EkstraBladet* and *BT* is due to the tabloid format of the newspaper and the layout of the front-page, which includes only one or two stories per day.
10. The inter-coder reliability test was performed in pairs of coders for each language. The reliability test was conducted on 25 Dutch and 25 Danish news stories, randomly selected from the news outlets included in the study.

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