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The Real Spiral of Cynicism? Symbiosis and Mistrust between Politicians and Journalists

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Abstract

The relationship among media, politicians, and the public has been studied a lot, especially how the media's portrayal of politics affects people's (cynical) attitudes. Scholars know little about the antecedent of this assumed spiral of cynicism: How cynical are politicians and journalists about each other and about politics? Based on a survey among Dutch politicians and political journalists, the research presented in this article tries to fill this gap. The results show that politicians are rather cynical about media and journalists, especially when they feel media are out to set the political agenda. Journalists are equally cynical about politicians as the latter are about themselves, but it is a relative cynicism since it is lower than that of the general public. Journalists are, however, convinced that most politicians are driven by what we call "media salacity," a drive to get journalists' attention and coverage, a conviction shared, surprisingly, by the politicians themselves.

Keywords

video malaise theory, spiral of cynicism hypothesis, political journalism, politicians' media salacity, survey

It is common, or at least voiced, wisdom among politicians that today's media do little good for democracy. We see a "*soap-ification* of the debate about government and the public good," a Dutch minister complained. "Constantly public authorities are described as inefficient and blundering, that mistakes are made but never acknowledged. Then

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one should not be surprised when one day citizens do not trust anything anymore, including the media” (Donner 2005).

While probably unaware of the fact, the minister and with him many politicians refer to what in the past thirty years, particularly in the United States, has been researched and labeled as the video malaise theory or spiral of cynicism hypothesis. According to the intellectual father of the former theory, Michael Robinson (1976), cynicism breeds cynicism. Political reporters’ negative and anti-institutional bias as well as U.S. television’s preference for crisis and conflict result in skeptical reporting and in rising cynicism among the public. Twenty years later, Cappella and Jamieson (1997; also see Putnam 2000) also found that the style and the content (or lack thereof) of political journalism are the reasons that voters turn their backs on politics and distrust their leaders. They refined their operationalization of media cynicism to strategy coverage, which focuses on politicians’ motivations, on polls, on winning and losing, and on the metaphors that go with it: competition, games, war. Such reporting translates itself into a spiral of cynicism with the public, cynicism not only in terms of politics, politicians, and policy but also vis-à-vis the messengers themselves, the journalists as the reliable and trustworthy guardians of democracy.

The unilinear relationship among the negative content of (particularly) television, specific media use, and a cynical political attitude has met with its critics both inside and outside the United States. Bennett et al. (1999) found in their survey the opposite of video malaise: Heavy TV viewers are as cynical as or even less so than those who consume little news, while Pinkleton and Austin (2002) hardly noticed causality between use of news media and a politically cynical predisposition. The European picture that emerges from research is at best ambiguous as to the saliency and increase of media and public cynicism (see Newton 1999). Some twenty years ago, Holtz-Bacha (1990) found for Germany no relationship among media, information use, and political cynicism. Her colleague Schulz (1997: 66), on the other hand, later claimed that “the higher the dose of information a person gets from the electronic media, the more negative her or his image of politics.”

For the Netherlands, Brants and van Kempen (2000) *did* find a change in the style of political journalism but no indication of an increase in political cynicism among Dutch voters. Aarts and Semetko (2003) found that the users of tabloid news in the Netherlands are significantly less informed and involved than users of broadsheet and public broadcasting news. De Vreese (2005), however, concluded that a cynical attitude is partly dependent on political consciousness: Well-informed and politically interested audiences are more susceptible to political cynicism when confronted with strategic news than are the less politically conscious. Norris’s (2000) assumption may well be the solution to the ambivalence here. While finding in the European elections between 1989 and 1999 no proof that those most watching news would also be the most “turned off,” she concludes that the causality probably works both ways. Existing political attitudes lead to certain patterns of media use that again strengthen these attitudes, and vice versa, in a virtuous instead of a vicious circle, as Robinson had concluded a quarter of a century before.

The relationship among media, politics, and citizens has been much studied and the results equally much contested. Most attention has been given to the relationship between (negative) media content and citizens' (cynical) attitudes toward politics. Cynicism does not begin with content, however, but with the relationship between politicians and journalists. Little do we know how cynical politicians and journalists are about each other and about politics. Proof by example and by quote seems to indicate that (all?) politicians are notoriously dissatisfied with the way their views are portrayed in the media. If indeed they think journalists are doing a bad job, this is likely to affect their interactions with the media. Conversely, it might also be that journalists are cynical about politics and even about the media themselves, especially if they judge that the "good old days" were really different and their political reporting much better then.

The potential existence of a vicious spiral of cynicism between politicians and journalists would be crucial for understanding what comes before and thus might affect the spiral between media content and the public's political cynicism. This article focuses on the *antecedent* of the traditional spiral. Based on a survey among politicians and journalists in the Netherlands, it looks at the perceptions of their interactions in which the outcome, media coverage of politics, is created.

An Uneasy Relationship

Some, especially politicians after a lost election, say that there exists an unequal relationship between media and politics, with the former increasingly holding the latter in an iron grip. They argue that, next to the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary, the media can now be considered a fourth estate in the *trias politica*, but possessing power without a similar sort of accountability that controls the other three. Cook (1998) goes even one step further by claiming that the media have become political institutions in their own right. Others see the relationship as too close for comfort: Politicians and journalists are part of the same inner circle, breathe the same air under the cheese bowl of political communication, and have become not only too dependent on each other to create a situation of checks and balances but also too autistic to hear voices from outside the inner circle.

In their seminal article more than twenty-five years ago, Gurevitch and Blumler (1981) gave a more helpful and analytically lucid description of the uneasy relationship between journalists and politicians. Their relations are problematic because they are not authoritatively prescribed in advance, if only because that would be contrary to the idea of press freedom. As far as there is a more or less shared culture, it is open to contention and conflicting interpretation, especially when one of the actors thinks the other is not transparent or tries to control or steer the narrative and the image that is being communicated. Characteristic of media-disseminated political communication is that it entails interactions by "two sets of mutually dependent and mutually adaptive actors, pursuing divergent (though overlapping) purposes" (Gurevitch and Blumler 1981: 479).

New Roles, More Unease?

Ideally, the politician–journalist relationship is a symbiotic one, where the two sets of actors realize that they can benefit from each other because they need one another. Politicians need media and journalists to get their information across and reach voters and audiences, necessary conditions to be reelected. Journalists need politicians as a source of information and background knowledge, which can make them not only authoritative professionals but also, in a television-dominated political communication culture, celebrities. Both politicians and journalists have a scarce political resource that potentially holds them in a double bind: The first can withhold specific information or possess that secret or unknown piece of information that they can selectively distribute as a scoop, and the second can use the position of gatekeeper to selectively control access to the gateways of publicity to the public. It is a tense situation but potentially also one where *if you scratch my back I'll scratch yours*. At the same time journalists are often more interested in what the politicians do not want to be in the open, and the latter want to communicate their achievements, which the former might consider non-news. It is a delicate balance between the two, a tango of give and take, of contention and negotiation, only partly protected by a shared, but sometimes poly-interpretable, political communication culture. That culture finds its origin in the traditions of liberal democratic theory, dating back to John Stuart Mill and his ideas about the freedom of expression and the free marketplace of ideas (see Tumber and Prentoulis 2003).

Within this normative theory and considering their relative power without accountability, the media are expected to have a social responsibility toward society and the public interest from which specific functions follow (see van Cuilenburg and McQuail 1982; Gurevitch and Blumler 1990). These norms are not laid down in the constitution of liberal democracies, but they are what politicians, organizations, and maybe even the public now are expecting from the media. Media too pride themselves in these roles. In the first place they and their employees are seen to have a more or less educational function. They are expected to *inform*, in a fair and balanced way, others about the diversity of relevant events, issues, and opinions that exist in society and about the solutions that are being proposed for society's ills. That information is seen as a necessary precondition for informed and rational citizens participating in and strengthening democracy. The most reliable way for journalists to collect and disseminate that information is when they are independent from political and economic influence and interests.

In the second place media are expected to provide a *platform* for dialogue among citizens and for the articulation and expression of anxieties and anger, of ideas, wishes, and demands from society to those we have elected to represent us. In his description of the ideal typical public sphere, Habermas (1989) ascribed media a role not only in providing information and support for participants in that sphere but also in communicating the public opinion formed in the public sphere to the decision-making sphere of parliament and government.

In the third place media are expected to have a *control function*. Being professionally skeptical about political claims, they hold government—and in general the political,

economic, and social elite—to account for upholding its promises, for the honest execution of its policies, and for the fair use of its powers. As watchdogs of the misuse of power, they perform the role of solicitor for the citizens, who do not always have the time, tools, and publicity opportunities to control those they elected to power. In that sense, journalists have the same role as members of parliament (MPs) in their role as controllers of decisions and executors of power. The more the power of parliament is said to decline, the more important the watchdog function of the media becomes.

These three functions—information, platform, and watchdog—are generally seen as the socially responsible roles media and journalists are expected to play in a democracy. In practice, however, for most people the media, and especially television, have an *entertainment* function.

All these functions are not self-evident parts of the journalist's vocabulary or professional performance criteria. Research seems to indicate that journalists have a variety of role perceptions, with substantial differences among countries, depending on the political and media system, the (non)existence of public broadcasting, and the national political culture (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). For the Netherlands, we found elsewhere that political journalists see themselves predominantly as disseminators of information and as critical (advocacy) watchdogs (Brants et al. 2007). Providing analysis and interpretation of what goes on in the political realm tops their role perception, followed by investigating government claims. About three-fourths of the respondents also find getting news to the public quickly and critically following economic and political developments to be important. They do *not* seem to think that providing a platform is paramount for the media, at least compared to their disseminator and advocacy roles. They clearly have a problematic relationship with entertainment and report not considering the distracting role to be important for their work. For a majority, politics is clearly a serious business that should be separated from the fun and lightheartedness of entertainment. In other words, the new, less “serious” dimensions of journalists' functions do not come naturally.

This is how journalists in the Netherlands perceive themselves. If one listens in the corridors of power, however, politicians seem to have a rather different picture of the roles journalists play and the functions media have for society (e.g., Campbell 2007; Fallows 1997; Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur 2003). In their often angry discourse, it is as if the democratic functions are disappearing or being misused and gradually replaced by the infotainment of their entertainment function. The substance of political information, they say, is disappearing, and more frames and interpretations than facts and explanation are disseminated. The platform is more used by journalists for themselves or offered to “the man in the street” than by experts and rational citizens. The watchdogs are looking more for scoops and political scandal to “score” with what they think the public is interested in than to investigate and disclose what is in the public interest. At the same time journalists complain about politicians who, to control the uncertainty of the outcome of free publicity, have in a process of “mediatization” professionalized the art of news management and introduced the framing and packaging of spin (see Negrine et al. 2007).

A Relationship Turned Sour? Media Cynicism and Media Salacity

Where the relation between politicians and journalists was once described as symbiotic, it now seems to have turned into mutual mistrust. There are at least three—interrelated and mutually reinforcing—developments that would support or could explain this assumption. In the first place, a more general development has been observed from a party democracy to an audience democracy (Manin 1997) or, more somber, to a drama democracy (Elchardus 2002). Characteristic of such a democracy is a declining importance of political parties, party programs, and representation in general, reflected in lower interest and involvement by large parts of the public in governmental politics and a more central role of personae—their image, style, and visibility—of mass media and opinion polls. In an audience democracy the electorate holds politicians more to account for their “performance” than for what they have actually achieved and at best holds a more instrumental or reflexive position vis-à-vis politics: “What’s in it for me?” Charisma, exposure to what is propagated as authenticity, empathy, and visible action become preconditions for successful politics. With two-thirds of Dutch MPs less than four years in office, exposure, to be seen to perform, becomes even more a necessity and could well explain what journalists call their *media salacity*, the politicians’ repeated attempts and ultimate drives to get the camera’s attention.

In the second place we see the rise of a more market-driven news order. During a large part of the twentieth century, newspapers, radio, and television in most of Western Europe embraced a civic role, providing a public service and seeking to supply citizens with politically relevant information. Because of this sense of public interest, being a skeptical political watchdog did not hinder the relatively symbiotic relationship with political actors. However, increasing prosperity and individualization of citizens since the 1960s and 1970s, followed by technological and commercial media developments since the 1980s, have led journalists to reassess their role. For the United States, Hallin (1992) observes the passing of what he calls the “high modernism” in journalism and Patterson (1994) sees a change from descriptive journalism to a more interpretive style of reporting emphasizing the “why” more than the “what.” Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) speak about a third age of communication in most liberal democracies, highlighted by an intensified professionalization of political advocacy and antilistist popularization and populism.

Most of these changes have been observed for the Netherlands as well, be it in a less dramatic fashion (Brants and van Praag 2006). In general these developments have led to an increased intermedia competition and a shift from a supply market to a demand market in communication, in which media no longer decide what the audience should read or watch, based on what they are expected to need as democratic citizens, but where the assumed wishes and desires of the public have become more decisive for what the media select and provide (van Cuilenburg 1999). As a consequence, the selection of news, of what is politically relevant and who is politically important, could well be based more on market considerations, of what sells, than on what is relevant in the public interest. Under such circumstances, incidents and the latest polls become more

important than substantive coverage of political issues. It strengthens the need for politicians to “perform” in an audience democracy, to be authentic and empathic, populist, and entertaining, preferably all together. At the same time, they observe these developments with a mix of surprise, irritation, and aversion. Increasingly, they criticize the performance of the media while holding them responsible for the decline of trust in political institutions and politics in general. Growing media cynicism by politicians seems to be an inevitable consequence.

In the third place, the public is beginning to challenge the Enlightenment ideal of rational discourse and as the *vox populi* to demand a voice. Politics and political communication are usually more for than with, let alone by, the people. We see now, on one hand, that the *vox populi* is increasingly taken seriously in the media and by government and political parties in an attempt to be more responsive to a volatile public. But, on the other hand, the sociopolitical elite is uncertain and ambivalent about the people’s voice entering domains traditionally open only to them. The uncertainty challenges the roles politicians and journalists play and see for themselves and each other in an audience democracy. And it further challenges the notion of symbiosis in political communication.

Under these conditions one could expect to find a political communication culture that has shifted from symbiosis to mistrust and in which media professional skepticism has turned sour, where, first, journalism is driven by political cynicism, by a lack of trust in the reliability and integrity of political actors and in their capacity to solve problems, and by a disdain of their media salacity. Second, politicians are driven by media cynicism, by a lack of trust in the reliability and fairness of media professionals and their capacity to do a good job.

Explanations for Politicians’ Media Cynicism

Within the relationship between politicians and journalists we pay particular attention to politicians’ cynicism *vis-à-vis* the media. In our view, political media cynicism (regardless of whether the impression is correct or not) is an important cause of tension between politicians and journalists, and focusing on that could work as an antidote against the usual and sometimes blind focus on journalists only. That said, an important qualification has to be made: Not all politicians despise the media, and not all politicians share the cynical view of the functioning of the media. We do a first explorative—and to our knowledge unprecedented—analysis of *who* is most likely to be cynical about the media. In doing so, we include a measure of number of years in parliament to explore if experience is either positively or negatively related to media cynicism. It might well be that experienced politicians are more cynical, or it might be that newcomers are more cynical because their impressions are based on observations *outside* the inner circles of politics.

Furthermore, we assess whether the frequency of formal and informal contacts between politicians and journalists fuels or reduces media cynicism. After all, contacts between the two groups should in an optimistic scenario reduce the level of cynicism and in a pessimistic scenario increase the mutual distrust. We investigate whether

satisfaction with the media's portrayal of themselves and of politics in general affects politicians' view of journalists. We consider this an important point: After all, it might be the case that cynical attitudes of politicians are mostly a function of feeling "mis-treated" in their own media performance. Finally, we assess the relationship between the perceived function of the media in society (information, control, agenda setting, and entertainment) and the level of media cynicism. As discussed above, politicians and journalists disagree to some extent on the perception of the latter's informing and controlling role, but there is more unease about the entertaining functions of journalism. A perception of which role is most important for journalists is a potential cause for media cynicism.

Key Questions

In the context of the "media-politics" relationship turned sour, this study aims to investigate the following aspects. We first assess the degree of political cynicism of journalists and of politicians. We second look at the degree of media cynicism of politicians and, possibly, of journalists. We third investigate the perception that journalists hold of politicians' media salacity and that politicians hold of themselves. We finally take a closer look at the media cynicism of politicians and the explanatory factors that help us understand why some politicians are cynical vis-à-vis the media. Unraveling this phenomenon can help us to understand the antecedents of the spiral of cynicism between the media and citizens that has been richly investigated.

Method

To investigate the mutual cynicism of journalists and politicians, we carried out a survey among journalists specialized in domestic politics in the Netherlands and members of the Dutch Parliament. The names and addresses of the journalists were provided by the association of parliamentary journalists (PPV). In addition, telephone inquiries were made to newsrooms to collect extra names and e-mail addresses of journalists reporting about Dutch politics who are not members of the PPV. The participation rate among the journalists was 65 percent ($N = 104$).

The contact information for MPs was obtained from the Web site of the Dutch Parliament. The field period coincided with the period before an unexpected Dutch general election.¹ This had a negative effect on the response rate of MPs because politicians were preoccupied with campaigning activities at the time of the survey. For this reason, those MPs who had not already responded were approached again after the elections. The subsequent data collection led to a relatively long field period from September 2006 until January 2007. Ultimately, the response rate of the politicians reached a sufficient level of 46 percent ($N = 70$). The sample of politicians shows no systematic bias. All political parties are represented relative to their share of seats in the Parliament, with the exception of the liberal party VVD, which is slightly underrepresented.

The data collection was administrated mostly through the Internet. The respondents were invited to participate in an e-mail that provided a personalized link to an online questionnaire. In addition, the respondents received a paper version of the survey that could be sent to us by mail. Participants who had not already filled in the survey were reminded to do so after one week and after three weeks by email.

Measures of Dependent Variables

Media cynicism was constructed of seven items all measured on a 5-point scale (journalists/politicians: Cronbach's $\alpha = .78/.86$, $M = 2.78/3.71$, $SD = 0.66/0.73$). The items include statements about the quality of the content of the news media ("Today's coverage is too event driven," "Journalists pay too much attention to the political power play and not enough attention to the content of politics"), the style and character of journalists ("Many journalists are driven by the desire to execute power themselves," "What is most important to journalists today, is a sensationalist story that attracts a large audience," "Journalists are including too much of their own interpretation about what happens in politics in their stories," "Journalists today are too cynical"), and the potential effects of the coverage ("Today's coverage contributes to the lack of trust in politics").²

Political cynicism was measured with four standard items used in several national election studies on a 5-point scale ("You are more likely to get a seat in the Parliament through political friends than through hard work," "Ministers and junior ministers only care about their own interest," "Politicians promise more than they can hold, even though they know better," "Politicians do not understand what is happening in the society"). These form acceptable scales (journalists/politicians: Cronbach's $\alpha = .59/.72$, $M = 2.82/2.36$, $SD = 0.62/0.74$). Although we were not fully happy with the limited conceptualization of cynicism, to compare our data to public opinion data over the years, we decided against changing the items.

Media salacity taps the notion that politicians are giving their media-related activities a (too) high priority in their professional life. The scale consists of three items, measured on a 5-point scale: "Politicians do everything to get into the media," "It is more important for a politician to be in the media than to work hard," and "Politicians use journalists to leak information." These items form a satisfactory scale (journalists and politicians: Cronbach's $\alpha = .53/.62$, $M = 3.70/3.62$, $SD = 0.74/0.67$).

Data Analysis

To explore the phenomenon of the cynicism of politicians toward the media in depth, an ordinary least squares regression analysis was conducted with the politician sample. As predictors for media cynicism we included background variables,³ the frequency of formal and informal contact with journalists,⁴ the satisfaction with one's media portrayal and of politics in general,⁵ and the perceived function of media in society (information, control, agenda setting, entertainment).⁶

Table 1. Mean Comparison of Political Cynicism

	Journalists				Politicians			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a
Political career through friends rather than work	3.09	1.011	97	37.1	2.49	1.105	61	22.9
Politicians care mostly about themselves	2.15	0.817	98	8.2	2.05	0.902	61	8.2
Politicians promise more than they can deliver	3.7	0.976	98	67.2	3.10	1.091	61	39.3
Politicians do not understand society	2.32	0.904	98	15.3	1.79	0.897	61	6.5
Total (index)	2.82	0.625	97		2.36	0.74	61	

Note: All items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest agreement, 5 = highest agreement).

a. Share of respondents that agreed or fully agreed.

Results

Our first question concerns the level of political cynicism of journalists and politicians. Table 1 shows that journalists are marginally more cynical than politicians (2.8 vs. 2.4 on our political cynicism index, difference not significant). On one particular dimension (politicians promise more than they can deliver), there is a significant discrepancy, with journalists (67 percent) sharing this view much more than politicians (39 percent). However, with both groups below the mean, this suggests that they are in fact not very cynical. Table 2 shows that politicians are much more (3.7) cynical vis-à-vis the media than journalists themselves (2.8). Politicians find that journalists are too sensationalist (64 percent), too event driven in their coverage (80 percent), too focused on power struggles rather than substance (80 percent), and too interpretative (64 percent). Interestingly, journalists also find the coverage too event driven (66 percent), but they do not ascribe to the perception of politicians that journalists want to execute power (8 percent) or are too sensationalist (30 percent).

In terms of politicians' media salacity, our results show that journalists and politicians *both* believe that politicians are (too) eager and that it is important for them to appear in the media. They share this perception, as is shown in table 3. In fact, politicians suggest to the same degree as journalists that their fellow politicians "would do anything to get coverage."

We finally turn to our analysis of predicting politicians' media cynicism.⁷ Table 4 shows that those politicians who consider the media's primary function to be to inform are, *ceteris paribus*, less cynical. Conversely, those politicians who find the media too active in setting the political agenda tend to be more negative. The more satisfied politicians are with their own coverage and the media portrayal of politics in general, the less cynical they are. Or in more blunt terms, politicians who are dissatisfied with the

Table 2. Mean Comparison of Media Cynicism

	Journalists				Politicians			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a
Journalists want to execute power	1.90	0.893	100	8.0	3.03	1.041	60	38.3
Coverage too event driven	3.63	1.031	100	66.0	4.12	0.927	57	80.8
Coverage leads to lack of trust in politics	2.96	1.063	100	35.0	3.95	0.980	56	71.4
Journalists want more sensationalistic stories	2.77	1.151	102	30.4	3.75	1.023	57	64.9
Journalists are too cynical	2.65	1.040	102	21.6	3.71	1.115	59	62.7
Journalists interpret too much	2.81	0.895	100	25.0	3.75	0.958	56	64.3
Journalists pay too little attention to political content	3.14	1.203	102	49.0	4.11	0.928	56	80.4
Total (index)	2.80	0.664	94		3.71	0.732	51	

Note: All items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest agreement, 5 = highest agreement).

a. Share of respondents that agreed or fully agreed.

Table 3. Mean Comparison of Media Salacity

	Journalists				Politicians			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	% Agree ^a
Politicians do anything to get media coverage	3.63	1.120	101	61.4	3.80	0.879	60	73.3
To a politician it is more important to get media coverage than to work	3.45	1.118	101	59.5	3.23	0.981	60	45.0
Politicians use journalists to leak information	4.10	0.827	99	84.4	3.88	0.849	60	68.3
Total (index)	3.70	0.741	98		3.62	0.677	59	

Note: All items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest agreement, 5 = highest agreement).

a. Share of respondents that agreed or fully agreed.

coverage of themselves and of politics find the media to be dysfunctional. There are no differences with regard to age, gender, type, and frequency of contacts with journalists or length of parliamentary experience.

Table 4. Media Cynicism of Politicians (Ordinary Least Squares Regression Model)

	B	SE B	β
Age	-.004	.007	-.059
Gender	.037	.147	.029
Years in parliament	-.018	.018	-.111
Formal contacts	.077	.120	.075
Informal contacts	.123	.105	.128
Information function	-.193	.070	-.362**
Control function	.005	.051	.013
Entertainment function	.020	.043	.050
Setting political agenda	.149	.040	.431***
Satisfaction with own portrayal	-.186	.093	-.227**
Satisfaction with portrayal of politics	-.195	.095	-.232**

Note: $R^2 = .32$. Dependent variable = Index: Media cynicism.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

* $p < .05$

Discussion

There is a substantial body of research, be it with sometimes contradictory results, about how the media's portrayal of politics affects people's cynical attitude toward politicians and the political process (e.g., de Vreese 2005). That picture is partially the result of the relationship and the interaction between politicians and journalists. But we know little about the intricacies and the likes and dislikes of the central actors in the political communication process, that is, beyond the anecdotal, where the relation is sometimes described as one of symbiosis, with both actors profiting from each other's work, and at other times as a *marriage de raison*, an uneasy matrimony that, like so many in the real world, follows a bumpy road without much mutual trust, appreciation, or respect. Is that the picture that emerges out of the surveys among Dutch politicians and political journalists? Is there mutual mistrust, or, worse, are the two actor groups cynical even about their own profession and performance?

It is not surprising that journalists have a more cynical attitude toward politics and politicians than MPs do themselves. A healthy skepticism toward power holders has always been part and parcel of their professional luggage, but it now turns sour and beyond a professional critical attitude as watchdogs. Journalists certainly think that politicians promise more than they can deliver, a negative belief shared by a sheer 93 percent of the Dutch voters (Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2007). On the whole, though, cynicism among journalists is lower than among the public. According to the Dutch Election Study 42 percent of the Dutch believe that politicians "care mostly about themselves." This notion is shared by only 8 percent of the journalists (and 8 percent of the politicians too, by the way). The level of cynicism on the side of journalists is thus not likely to have substantial influence on their journalistic activities and their specific portrayal of politics and politicians. What may be surprising is the

relative agreement of politicians with the negative statements about themselves, but it might well be that they have not so much themselves as their fellow MPs in mind.

Maybe more striking is the degree of media cynicism of politicians. The old political adage may say that there is no such thing as a friendly journalist, but such skepticism is now turning to mistrust and cynicism. In their perception, journalists are too event driven and too eager for power struggles or for setting the political agenda themselves, and they are interpreting political reality more than covering the political issues and policy decisions in a substantial way. Journalists are certainly less cynical about themselves, but they still do subscribe to some of the depictions of their performance. For example, they share with the politicians (albeit at a lower level of agreement) the idea that the news is too event driven and too void of content. Both agreement and disagreement, and hence the ambivalence about their performance, reflect the unease and uncertainty about journalistic roles as disseminators, watchdogs, and platform providers in a competitive media market.

The mutual critique and occasional self-criticism also radiate a reflexive uncertainty about their own and each other's positions in society, a society that seems in flux, in doubt about its hitherto almost self-evident trust in the institutions and actors of political communication. The relative cynicism among journalists, politicians, and the public pertains to a wider sociopolitical context in the Netherlands and probably elsewhere. We note an increasing political disinterest and declining party loyalty, especially among the young, which goes hand in hand with populist antiestablishment sentiments, reflected not only within substantial parts of the electorate but also in the rise of new political parties. The already existing uncertainty among politicians, following the transition to an audience democracy, has increased because of rising electoral instability. Uncertainty among journalists, however, is new. While until recently they seemed aware of only a legitimacy gap between citizens and politics, we now witness a rude awakening of journalists to a gap between citizens and established media as well, a rift as large and threatening as that between citizens and politics, if not more so. Media and the political elite seem unclear on how to come to terms with this changed opinion climate, the outspokenness of the *vox populi*, and the instrumentality with which the *vox populi* looks at information, polity, and policy. Traditionally, politicians and journalists have communicated more to than with the people, let alone that the people could speak for themselves. Now it feels as if the roles and positions have reversed.

In a relationship it takes two to tango, and then the question becomes, who here leads the dance, the dynamic pull and push in the waning symbiosis? It seems to be the politician, although unwillingly and maybe unaware. To a large degree he or she shares the belief of journalists that most politicians are driven by a salacity to get media attention and coverage in an audience democracy. The salacity itself and the shared perception are certainly strong incentives for journalists to focus on the motives of politicians and could well lead to strategic news frames. At the same time, the most "media-cynical" politicians are the ones who believe the media do a poor job, are too agenda setting, and do not represent them well. If politicians are not in fact inflicting some of this coverage and subsequent cynical public attitudes, they at least seem to

fuel the fire by displaying cynicism toward the media. It seems the media salacity of politicians is provoking the kind of journalism they detest, which directly or indirectly stimulates the media cynicism of politicians. This is the real spiral of cynicism.

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Notes

1. The field period could not be postponed to ensure comparability to a parallel study in Belgium (see van Aelst et al. 2008). The general elections in the Netherlands were held in November 2006 because of the unexpected fall of the Balkenende government in June 2006.
2. A number of these items relate to roles that journalists might be expected to assume (e.g., focusing on events and being interpretative). However, these items measure cynicism toward the role of the media by phrasing the items as being to a "too great extent" (too event driven, too interpretative), thereby expressing cynicism vis-à-vis the functioning of the media.
3. Two background variables were included in the model: gender (*men* = 1) and professional experience, measured in years of parliamentary membership.
4. Formal contact is a 6-point additive scale consisting of the items "contact during press conference," "interviews," "receptions," "in the Parliament," and "by phone" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$). Informal contact is a 6-point additive scale consisting of the items "contact during lunches" and "other contact" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .418$). Higher values represent a higher frequency of contact.
5. Satisfaction with the media's portrayal of oneself and of politics is measured on a 5-point scale, with higher values indicating higher satisfaction.
6. For detailed information on the scale construction, see Brants et al. (2007).
7. We did the same analysis for the political cynicism of journalists, but this did not produce discernable factors.

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