Infotainment, cynicism and democracy: The effects of privatization vs personalization in the news

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Abstract
This cross-national study examines the effects of infotainment on cynicism about politics in Denmark, Britain and Spain. Drawing on panel surveys and media content analyses the study distinguishes between privatization and personalization elements in infotainment content and tests for their separate effects on political cynicism. The results suggest that the differential presence of infotainment elements is more consistent among countries than between media or news outlets. Exposure to privatization content has a positive effect on cynicism across the board. Exposure to personalization elements only increases cynicism among segments who are more interested in politics, and it decreases cynicism among the less interested segments. The results are discussed in the light of research on conditional media effects.

Keywords
Audience research, content analysis, effects, journalism, political communication

Introduction
Journalists are often criticized for blurring the line between news and entertainment. This phenomenon, also known as ‘infotainment’, is subject to continuous debate among
political communication scholars regarding its causes, meaning and most importantly its effects on citizens and democracy (Brants, 1998; Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001). The effects of infotainment on the quality of democracy have often been assumed, but only rarely empirically tested. Scholars generally argue that democracy requires the media to perform a number of functions particularly regarding the political system and political information (Strömbäck, 2005). They regard a shift towards sensation, emotions and scandals to be a major element in provoking a crisis of public life and a negation of the kind of journalism that is essential to democracy (Esser, 1999: 315). They also suggest that the result of focusing on persons instead of issues and on non-political traits instead of political qualities may be that citizens lack information to make qualified decisions in elections (Adam and Maier, 2010). Some researchers, however, expect a rather positive effect of infotainment news on democracy, because it attracts audiences who would otherwise not be exposed to news at all (e.g. Baum, 2003).

Infotainment research has mostly focused on the potential effects on, for example, citizens’ likelihood to participate in elections (see Adam and Maier, 2010). In this study we investigate the effects of exposure to infotainment news on citizens’ attitudes towards the politics. We analyse change in political cynicism. Political cynicism can be seen as a sense of powerlessness and distrust vis-a-vis politics. We analyse news content and panel data from three European countries (Britain, Denmark and Spain) and show that the effects of exposure to infotainment news on political cynicism can be both positive and negative depending on the nature of infotainment content as well as an individual’s interest in politics.

**Infotainment news**

The definition of infotainment is rather unclear and is hardly agreed upon by scholars (e.g. Brants and Neijens, 1998). It is part of a broader discussion about hard and soft news and thematic or episodic frames. Infotainment coverage is linked to soft news. This type of news is typically more sensational, more personality-centred, less time-bound, more practical and more incident-based than other news (Prior, 2003: 149). Infotainment content is also more aligned with an episodic rather than a thematic frame. A thematic frame focuses on broader social trends and places an issue in some general context, while an episodic frame focuses on individual cases and depicts issues in terms of individual instances or specific events (see Iyengar, 1991).

The research on infotainment tends to fall into one of two categories: either a macro argument looking at general trends or a micro argument focusing on specific features of the coverage. In the former category, Sparks (2000) describes infotainment as an overall trend of paying less attention to politics, economics and society compared to sports, entertainment and scandals. Some scholars refer to infotainment as an overall decrease in journalistic standards (Esser, 1999) or a spillover of tabloid news values and topics to quality news (Sparks, 2000). Infotainment is also addressed from a convergence perspective where public service stations are seen to cover more entertainment, while commercial and entertainment broadcasts strive to include more information in their coverage (Pfetsch, 1996; see also Brants, 1998).

In the latter category (looking at specific content features), Brants and Neijens (1998) refer to topic, style and format characteristics to identify infotainment. Similarly, Norris (2000) distinguishes between format, style and subject elements to describe the
phenomenon. Our study falls into this latter category since we content analyse different types of news media (tabloid and broadsheet newspapers; public service and commercial television) to identify the presence of infotainment content in the news, and later assess the effects.

Privatization vs personalization

In the controversy about what infotainment actually means, scholars often refer to personalization when they identify the presence of this phenomenon. Personalization is also a multifaceted concept that refers both to institutionalized politics, politicians’ behaviour and the media coverage of politics (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). Personalization in the media has been described as the focus on individual citizens and seeing larger social issues in terms of individual actors (e.g. Bennett, 2001). Others refer to it as the presentation of public figures as private persons (e.g. Latimer, 1984) or as changed criteria for evaluating politicians from features regarding their professional competences to features focusing on non-political traits (Adam and Maier, 2010: 216). Van Santen (2009) proposes a definition of personalization that entails a news focus on traits and skills of politicians (individualization), the competence of politicians (privatization) and the personal experiences and emotions of politicians (emotionalization).

In this study we distinguish between two aspects of infotainment coverage that are often lumped together in the literature: the personalization of politics and the ‘ordinary citizen’ perspective. The first aspect refers to the shift in journalism towards covering the private rather than the public side of politicians. This focuses on politicians’ private lives and scandals. We refer to this as privatization, which has conceptual overlaps with the categories proposed by Van Santen (2009). The second aspect refers to a shift in journalism towards a news form in which public issues are discussed, while privileging the viewpoint of the ordinary citizen (e.g. Neuman et al., 1992). The latter aspect may include human interest and emotionalized news and we refer to it as personalization.

Privatization in the news – on the one hand – is conceptually linked to strategic game coverage in the sense that it emphasizes candidates’ personalities rather than substantive party issues (see e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Scholars suggest that this type of privatization is connected with journalists’ increased focus on campaigns as a strategic game or horse race between candidates (Adam and Maier, 2010: 219). Strategic coverage has been found to positively affect cynicism and dissatisfaction with politics (see Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese and Semetko, 2002). Personalization in the news – on the other hand – is conceptually linked to human interest reporting and episodic news framing. Episodic frames make citizens emphasize individual responsibility and discourage them from attributing responsibility to government, whereas thematic framing points to the responsibility of the state (Iyengar, 1991).

Our conceptual distinction echoes recent work by Van Aelst et al. (2012) who highlight privatization (news focusing on politicians as private individuals, distinct from their public role) and individualization (news focusing on individual politicians as opposed to their parties). In our study we assess the effect of both privatization and personalization. These features can exist in both television and the press, possibly in the same news story, and their presence is expected to vary across different media and political systems (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004 for a discussion on media systems variations).
Effects of infotainment

The effects of infotainment on the public and on democracy form a controversial topic among political communication scholars. Exposure to infotainment news is argued to affect public cynicism and electoral behaviour (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Elenbaas and de Vreese, 2008). Several infotainment features such as the increased attention to triviality, scandals and entertainment are discussed under the heading of ‘video malaise’ (see Van Santen, 2009). Theories of media malaise state that systematic patterns of political reporting discourage trust in political leaders, reduce active citizenship and undermine confidence in the political system (see Norris, 2000; Robinson, 1976). Scholars generally argue that personalization of politics can have negative consequences for democracy (e.g. Kaase, 1994). This is because reducing the complexity of political processes to achievements and standpoints of individual politicians instead of reinforcement of national opinion building and decision making can weaken the influence of current issues and party programmes on voting decisions (Adam and Maier, 2010: 214). It has also been argued that the increased focus on private life and scandals can undermine the public’s involvement in the political process (Patterson, 1993) and may produce greater cynicism among readers (Norris, 2000: 73).

In addition, infotainment shares several tabloidization features like sensational reporting, which is believed to have a negative effect on citizens by increasing apathy and cynicism about the political system (see McNair, 2001; Schulz, 1998). Previous studies have further shown that sensationalism distorts comprehension and judgement (Vettehen et al., 2005), and it can have negative effects on the process of storing news messages (Grabe et al., 2000).

Even though infotainment is feared to reduce political discourses in the news and increase cynicism, few scholars mention potential positive influences that infotainment might have on citizenship and democracy. Brants (1998) argues that giving citizens voice a greater role is likely to increase involvement in politics and that personal characteristics of politicians can be important to democratic choices and evaluations in societies where differences and ideologies between political parties are less important and less visible. Similarly, Norris (2000) suggests that the characteristic style of tabloids may make politics more understandable and accessible among the less informed readers (see also Zaller, 1992). This is because citizens with fewer cognitive resources may focus more on the non-political traits of politicians than citizens with significant political knowledge. Infotainment coverage seeks to inform and entertain at the same time, and therefore it can be very appealing to people who are unwilling to give up entertainment while watching the news (Prior, 2003; see also Van Zoonen, 2005). Baum (2003) showed that consuming soft news influences the attitudes of politically inattentive individuals and that, in at least some fairly predictable contexts, it is also associated with enhanced factual political knowledge. The claim that infotainment can be beneficial for the less educated or less politically interested seems to be consistent with studies that show a positive relationship between political sophistication and cynicism (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). This relationship suggests that citizens can be interested and knowledgeable about politics, but still critical about politicians and their performance (de Vreese, 2005: 294).
Hypotheses

Our study builds on previous research predicting the antecedents of political cynicism through exposure to news (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Our main expectation is that exposure to infotainment elements in the news has both a positive and a negative influence on cynicism. Specifically, we expect privatization features to generate cynicism and personalization features to decrease cynicism. This is because privatization may distract from political content and focuses on private features and because focusing on political scandals is likely to result in negative rather than positive news reporting. This expectation corresponds with infotainment literature which points out that news focusing on politicians’ private lives and scandals may have a negative influence on the public and on democracy and with research showing that exposure to negative news leads to distrust in party leaders (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006). In comparison, personalization of the news may render politics more understandable by increasing the relevance and vividness of political issues (Zaller, 2003). This in turn might decrease citizens’ cynical attitudes.

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to privatization in the news increases cynicism about politics.
Hypothesis 2: Exposure to personalization in the news decreases cynicism about politics.

We additionally investigate if infotainment affects citizens with low interest in politics differently. We investigate this claim by accounting for the moderating effects of political interest in relation to both personalization and privatization elements. Previous research has shown that political interest is empirically linked to media use (Luskin, 1990) and news attention (Slater, 2004), and it often moderates effects of exposure to news media (Zaller, 1992). We expect political interest to only moderate the effects of personalized coverage on political cynicism so that those with less interest in politics become less cynical when exposed to personalization features. This is because personalization may make politics more understandable and relevant for people who are less politically engaged (rather than for those who are highly engaged in politics) by focusing on emotions and human interest stories. In other words, we expect privatization coverage to induce cynicism ceteris paribus, while we expect personalization coverage to have the opposite effect, especially among individuals with lower levels of political interest.

Hypothesis 3: The effects of privatization on political cynicism are unrelated to political interest.
Hypothesis 4: The effects of personalization on political cynicism are moderated by political interest so that those with lower levels of political interest become less cynical when exposed to personalization.

Our key interest is in exploring the conditional nature of the effects of exposure to these different features of infotainment news. To maximize the variation we opt for a comparative design. We have explicit expectations about the contents of the news in the different countries included in our study. We expect to find the highest degree of infotainment features in the news in Britain, the least in Spain, and with Denmark as the middle ground in this sample. We expect this to be the case given the degree of competition in the British news market (which is conducive to this type of reporting [Adam and Maier, 2010]) and...
because of the high degree of press-political parallelism in Spain (which is likely to reduce the focus on infotainment [Albæk et al., forthcoming; Van Kempen, 2007]).

Method

The study draws on the following primary data sources: a content analysis of the most important national news outlets for three consecutive weeks, and a panel survey with a representative sample of the targeted population. We believe this combination is preferable to relying exclusively on either surveys or content analysis, as they are not sufficient to detect effects (Adam and Maier, 2010). The content analysis is conducted in the period between the panel waves and it includes television and newspapers, commercial and public service broadcasts, and tabloid and quality press.1

The panel design allows us to investigate political cynicism as a function of exposure to infotainment news content rather than merely news consumption. Several studies have considered media use as the source of political cynicism (e.g. Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000). However, ‘media consumption does not offer a very convincing explanation for the level of political trust’ (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2006: 88). Thus, we follow studies by, for example, de Vreese and Semetko (2002) and Patterson (1993) and rely on the actual characteristics of news to better understand the relation between media consumption and political cynicism. We limit our analysis to political news because it is widely considered the most important source of political information (see Eurobarometer, 2001). The panel design is also used to ensure a natural viewing and readership environment unlike experimentation, which detects effects through artificial exposure.

We collected content data and conducted panel surveys in Britain, Denmark and Spain. These countries belong to three media and political systems that differ in their media industry competition, role of the state, legal authority and political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The structural differences between these countries are assumed to matter for the nature of political reporting, and therefore the amount of infotainment is expected to differ across cultures (see above). Adam and Maier (2010) have argued that the absolute amount of personalized politics can differ according to differences in the media and political systems. The three countries also vary in their levels of commercialization and tabloidization; Britain has the strongest separation between quality and sensationalist press, while tabloid formats do not exist in the Spanish national newspaper market. Previous research showed that that a higher degree of commercialization may boost infotainment coverage even in public broadcasting (Adam and Maier, 2010). In terms of research design, the comparative approach is applied to maximize variation in the presence of privatization and personalization elements in our content sample. However, the main goal of this study is to examine the effects of infotainment features on dynamics of political cynicism rather than to explain the differential levels of infotainment coverage and political cynicism in different contexts.

Content analysis

This study investigates the dynamics of political cynicism regarding domestic politics. The content analysis covers news items from the main national news bulletins of the
following public and private news broadcasts: BBC News at 22:00 and ITV Nightly News in Britain; DR1 TV-Avisen at 21:00 and TV2 Nyhederne at 19:00 in Denmark; TVE Telediario2, Antena3 Noticias and Informativos Telecinco in Spain; and the main news sections of the following broadsheet and tabloid newspapers: The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Sun in Britain; Politiken, JyllandsPosten and EkstraBladet in Denmark; ABC, El País and El Mundo in Spain. A total of 3994 broadcast and newspaper items were analysed to identify news about national politics. The unit of analysis is the single news item. Overall, 1393 newspaper articles and 403 television stories about national politics were identified and analysed to determine the presence of infotainment elements. The coding was done by 12 coders who are either native or fluent in the languages of the three countries. The coders were trained and frequently supervised before and during the content analysis. We draw on four indicators of infotainment news coverage that represent both personalization and privatization content. The pair-wise intercoder reliability test is conducted on a randomly selected sample of about 10% of the coded material and showed a Cohen’s kappa of .60, which is acceptable in large-scale, internationally comparative content analyses (Schuck et al., 2011).

**Measures**

*Infotainment news coverage.* We used four dichotomous indicators of infotainment derived from the literature. Privatization is operationalized as (a) the presence of moral or political scandal, and (b) the focus on the private life of politicians rather than presenting them as spokespersons for certain policies or ideologies. Personalization is operationalized as the presence of (a) a human example or human face to the story in order to illuminate developments in politics or society (e.g. by explaining an event through providing the experience of a citizen), and (b) explicit references to feelings or sentiments. A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation on all infotainment items confirmed the presence of two divergent factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 36% and 29% of the variance respectively. Two additive measures were formed (privatization vs personalization) which showed weak correlation with each other ($r = .07, p > .05$).

**Panel survey**

The two-wave panel survey with a representative sample of the British, Danish and Spanish populations was conducted through managed online panels. The general population targeted was from 18 to 65 years old and the questionnaire length was about 15 minutes for each wave. Only respondents answering both waves of the survey were included in the analysis (4752 respondents in total). Internet panels use self-administered survey modes which yield less socially desirable answers compared to interviewer-administered survey modes (see Fricker and Schonlau, 2002). The source questionnaire was first scripted and finalized in English and then translated to Danish and Spanish. The response rates in Denmark were 75% in wave I and 68.2% in wave II; in Britain 63.3% in wave I and 74.4% in wave II; and in Spain 74.7% in wave I and 74.6% in wave II. A net sample of 1539 respondents in Denmark, 1571 respondents in Britain and 1642 respondents in Spain participated in both waves.
Using multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis, we first test a model investigating the effects of unweighted news exposure on change in political cynicism. We then examine the differential effects of infotainment elements (privatization vs personalization) on the dynamics of political cynicism. Finally, we test a model investigating the moderating effects of political interest on changes of cynicism levels. To estimate the specific influence of exposure to infotainment styles on political cynicism, we incorporate the results of the content analysis directly into our media consumption measures as suggested by Slater (2004) and de Vreese and Semetko (2004). Individual respondents are assigned separate weighted scores determined by their frequency of exposure to the different news outlets in their countries as well as the average presence of privatization and personalization indicators in each news outlet for three consecutive weeks.

**Measures**

**Political cynicism.** Our dependent variable is general political cynicism. Individual responses in both waves were tapped using seven-point Likert agree–disagree scales: (1) It is easier to become an MP due to political friends than to competence; (2) Ministers and state secretaries are mainly focused on themselves; (3) Politicians promise more than they can deliver; (4) Politicians don’t understand what is happening in society. The items are inspired by previous work on political cynicism (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese and Semetko, 2002) and they were randomly rotated in the two waves of the panel survey. The items formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s DK w I, α = .79, w II, α = .79; GB w I, α = .85, w II, α = .86; ES w I, α = .81, w II, α = .83) with a higher score reflecting a higher level of cynicism (DK w I, M = 4.6, SD = 1.2, w II, M = 4.6, SD = 1.1; GB w I, M = 5.2, SD = 1.2, w II, M = 5.2, SD = 1.2; ES w I, M = 5.4, SD = 1.2, w II, M = 5.3, SD = 1.2). To test for possible sensitization effects in the panel, a fresh sample of around 200 respondents in all three countries was probed for the cynicism measure in wave II of the panel. The mean scores for the new sample did not show a substantial difference to mean scores calculated for respondents taking part in both panel waves.

**News media exposure.** Respondents were asked to report how many days a week they use the outlets mentioned above for news. The scale ranged from 0 to 6–7 (days per week). An overall additive exposure score was calculated at the respondent’s level and weighted by the content analysis findings for each outlet. Exposure to privatization: Denmark M = .51, SD = .49; Britain M = .98, SD = .91; Spain M = .60, SD = .39. Exposure to personalization: Denmark M = 4.48, SD = 2.37; Britain M = 2.34, SD = 2.07; Spain M = 2.44, SD = 1.68.

**Control variables.** To investigate the effects of exposure to infotainment coverage on political cynicism, we control for a number of variables including gender (coded as female), age (in years), education, political interest, interpersonal communication and attention to national politics coverage. Finally, we control for the lagged measure of cynicism in the first wave of the survey in order to examine change between the panel waves (see Markus, 1979 for a discussion). See Appendix for descriptives and specific wordings for control variables.
Findings

Descriptive results

We first look at the findings from the content analysis to assess the amount of national politics coverage and the presence of privatization and personalization elements at the medium, outlet and country levels. Figure 1 shows that the absolute news coverage of national politics varies substantially between newspapers in Denmark, Britain and Spain; all three newspapers in Britain contain at least twice as many news items about national politics as the Danish newspapers. The Spanish newspapers also have more national politics coverage than the Danish newspapers, but their page extent is also higher. Spanish news outlets apparently utilize personalization features the least on average, whereas almost half of the Danish news coverage is personalized. The two broadsheets in Britain, The Guardian (43%) and The Daily Telegraph (40%), personalize news coverage of national politics the most. Overall, the differential presence of personalization elements is more observable between countries than between mediums or news outlets.

The share of privatization elements in the English commercial broadcast ITV (27%) is significantly higher than in the Spanish commercial broadcasts (7% on average), while the commercial news outlet in Denmark, TV2, did not include any privatization aspects in its entire coverage of national politics. By and large, privatization is more used in Britain than in Denmark or Spain. This finding supports our expectation is this respect.

![Figure 1. Share of personalization (black) and privatization (grey) content in news stories about national politics (per outlet).](image)

Note: Entries are percentages of stories containing privatization and personalization elements. The base is the entire news coverage of national politics (numbers are in brackets).
and it further implies that country differences are consistently related to the presence of personalization as well as privatization features, much more so than medium or outlet differences.

Effects of exposure to privatization vs personalization on political cynicism

Table 1 reports the results of three multiple OLS regressions investigating change in political cynicism (controlling for cynicism at t1). The first model shows that news exposure measures alone do not have a significant effect on the dynamics of political cynicism. Education and political interest were negatively related to change in political cynicism. Cynicism increased among elderly individuals and as a function of interpersonal communication. Model 2 demonstrates the main effects of exposure to privatization vs personalization elements on political cynicism. It shows that exposure to privatization content contributes to political cynicism whereas exposure to personalization elements decreases cynical attitudes in both waves of the survey. This supports Hypotheses 1 and 2. Figure 2 illustrates the differential effects of exposure to privatization vs personalization on political cynicism by holding all variables constant at their mean. The slopes for privatization and personalization are not significantly different from each other with regard to steepness, suggesting that the payoff of an additional standard deviation of exposure to privatization vs personalization has opposite directional, though relatively similar strength-wise, effects on political cynicism.

Model 3 shows that the level of political interest moderates the relationship between exposure to personalization content and change in political cynicism. Since the interaction between high political interest and personalization exposure is significant we can conclude that exposure to personalization has a negative effect on political cynicism only among those with lower levels of political interest, implying that they became less cynical. No moderation effect is present as far as privatization is concerned. These findings support Hypotheses 3 and 4: privatization has across-the-board positive effects on political cynicism (Model 2), and political interest moderates the relationship between exposure to personalized news and political cynicism (Model 3). Finally, the three models show that respondents in Spain and Britain became more cynical compared to the Danish respondents (reference category).13

Discussion

This study investigates the effects of exposure to infotainment news on political cynicism. The relationship is examined via two-wave panel surveys and a content analysis of national politics coverage in Denmark, Britain and Spain. We distinguish between privatization and personalization features of infotainment coverage. Privatization refers to the coverage of scandals and non-political traits of politicians, while personalization puts a human face on political issues by focusing on human interest stories and emotionalization. Our findings demonstrate that exposure to infotainment has both positive and negative effects on political cynicism depending on the nature of infotainment content and public interest in politics. Specifically, we found that exposure to privatized
Table 1. Predicting change in political cynicism.

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Notes: OLS regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors and betas.

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

News generates cynicism among the general public whereas exposure to personalized coverage has the reverse effect, especially among those who are less interested in politics.

The across-the-board positive effects of privatization on political cynicism are consistent with studies suggesting that the extensive coverage of scandals can increase the general disillusionment with public life (e.g. Esser, 1999). It also dovetails with some of the research on strategic framing showing that exposure to news which shies away from public issues and focuses on politicians’ personalities induces public cynicism towards
politics (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), though this has been particularly the case for low political sophisticates in the European context (Albæk et al., forthcoming; de Vreese, 2005). Our findings indicate that privatization in news fails to play a positive role in a democratic system despite its potential to attract people’s attention to politics. On the contrary, the effects of personalization on political cynicism imply that infotainment is not necessarily a downgrading of journalistic standards. The results show that focusing on human interest stories and adding an emotional angle to the presentation of a political issue can have positive effects on attitudes towards politics, especially for those with low interest in politics. Such evidence supports researchers arguing for positive influences of infotainment on citizenship and democracy (Brants, 1998; Norris, 2000). We specify that these influences are limited to personalization coverage and the effect is particularly evident among the less engaged individuals. The differential effects of infotainment on political cynicism contribute to the ongoing discussion in the literature regarding the potential benefit of soft news to the public. The evidence we present suggests that soft news, despite its disputed effects on public knowledge about politics (Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003), does have the potential to contribute to the democratic discourse by making the politically less engaged audience less cynical.

Our study has shown that the differential presence of infotainment elements is more consistent among countries than between media or news outlets. This indicates that the organizational influences on news content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) should be seen in the light of macro-level factors related to the political and national media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Van Dalen et al., 2012). No stark differences in infotainment coverage are found between commercial and public service television, suggesting that the latter may intersperse news with entertainment to increase the size of the inadvertent audience (see Curran et al., 2009). The same pattern is observed between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers indicating that the tabloid press may indeed support the spread of infotainment to all other outlets (see also Esser, 1999). The highest percentage of infotainment coverage appeared in Britain. This may be because it combines a classic majoritarian democracy in which a two-party system allows focusing on two leaders only and a highly commercialized and competitive media system that prioritizes a more dramatized, personalized and popularized style of reporting (Adam and Maier, 2010).

In contrast, soft news values seem to be least ‘newsworthy’ in Spain. While our findings also demonstrate that country characteristics can matter for political cynicism change, it would be interesting for future researchers to utilize aggregate-level analysis

![Figure 2. Cynicism change by SD increase in exposure to privatization vs personalization features.](image-url)
in order to investigate the relationship between different media systems and political cynicism. Finally, the content analysis demonstrates that far more personalization than privatization features are present across all news outlets. This is illustrative of the ‘media logic’ thesis, which entails a shift from news that identifies with politics and parties to news that identifies with people (Brants and Van Praag, 2006).

Some concerns can be raised about our research. We measured cynicism towards politicians as individuals and not towards the political system as an institution, and the study showed minimal variation at the aggregate levels of cynicism. Previous research has shown that trust in institutions depends largely on trust in persons (Min, 2004), and that individual-level variations are likely to shape variations at the aggregate level in the long term (e.g. Blendon et al., 1997). We have also collected news content in a non-election period and that may have affected the relative presence of privatization features compared to personalization features. The analyses of election coverage have typically found that news tends to focus on candidates’ strategies and personalities (e.g. Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). This may only affect interpretation of the content data since we have used weighted exposure measures per respondent. We further limit our content analysis and exposure measures to infotainment features within different types of news media. Ideally, future studies may consider other infotainment sources to capture the range of this concept (see Van Zoonen, 2005). Finally, relying on panel survey data makes it difficult to disentangle some of the effects. Although weighting news exposure by the share of personalized and privatized news frames produces significant main and interaction effects, the additional explanatory power in the model is modest. Future research may rely on experiments to understand what it means when someone, for example, is exposed to five personalization or privatization stories compared to 10, and how that differs for people with high and low political interest.

The debate about the implications of infotainment and soft news for the public is widely referred to in the literature and in the journalistic profession. For the latter, the good news is that focusing on examples and emotionalizing the human interest angle can actually help reduce political cynicism, especially for those not very interested in politics. Thus far, scholars hardly had any empirical evidence regarding the consequences of soft news for the political process. Our study is a step in this direction. We have investigated the effects of infotainment news on public cynicism with politics and showed that it has both positive and negative effects. We thus question and suggest a revision of common one-sided negative evaluations of infotainment, and propose a deconstruction of the concept in subsequent studies addressing this debate.

Funding
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Notes
1. The content analysis was conducted in 2008 between 10 October and 4 November for Denmark and Britain, and between 13 October and 4 November for Spain since the first wave of the panel survey was fielded on the 13 October there.
2. Special sections focusing on irrelevant topics were not analysed, e.g. sports and advertisement sections.
3. National politics is the main subject of the news item if it gets the most attention in terms of duration or space devoted to the topic and/or national politicians are the most prominent actors.

4. Each article in a newspaper is a news item (weather forecast, advertisements, captions under pictures, single quotes, single headlines, jokes/caricature are not news items). Each item in a broadcast is a news item (weather forecast, commercials, summaries, headlines, sports, announcement of other programmes are not news items). A news item is defined by its topic.

5. The inter-coder reliability test was performed over a random sample of 201 news items about national politics (three newspaper issues/news shows per outlet – two news shows per outlet in Spain). Kappa score in Britain was relatively low compared to Spain and Denmark which affected the overall inter-coder reliability score, but we decided to include news content from Britain because it was part of the overall design of the study.

6. A scandal story involves allegations of wrongdoing, disgrace, or moral outrage. A politician may be accused of engaging in various illegal, corrupt, or unethical practices. A political scandal can involve breaking the nation’s laws or plotting to do so.

7. Examples of explicit references to feelings or sentiments is use of words such as confused, excited, guilty, anxious, angry, sad, confident, embarrassed, etc.


9. The first wave of the survey took place from 10 to 20 October 2008, the second wave from 7 to 14 November 2008. The panel surveys were conducted by TNS opinion; www.tns-opinion.com/home/.

10. Exposure to privatization: an additive scale of exposure to news weighted by the average presence of moral or political scandal and focus on the private life of the politicians. Exposure to personalization: an additive scale of exposure to news weighted by the average presence of human interest and emotions.

11. Respondents’ level of education was recoded due to differences in the education systems across the three countries (see Appendix).

12. Including country dummies serves as a comparative control. The system level is not hypothesized to affect the relationship between exposure to infotainment news and political cynicism. In an additional analysis we included a six-item index of political efficacy (Cronbach’s α = .60) (see de Vreese, 2005). Including this control variable does not affect the key relationships hypothesized and the substantive conclusions remain identical.

13. Exposure to personalization and privatization elements (combined) does not have significant effects on political cynicism. However, such exposure increases cynicism among the high political sophistication group. The effects of exposure to privatization and personalization frames on political cynicism are not significantly moderated by country dummies.

References


Appendix: Overview of control variables

Gender: Female = 1; Male = 0

Age: In years

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

Political interest: One item scale response from 1 (not interested at all) to 7 (very interested).

Denmark $M = 4.96$, SD = 1.46; Britain $M = 4.30$, SD = 1.65; Spain $M = 4.36$, SD = 1.68.

Interpersonal communication: A seven-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often). Question wording: How often did you discuss domestic politics in the last three weeks? Denmark $M = 3.92$, SD = 1.64; Britain $M = 3.52$, SD = 1.82; Spain $M = 4.49$, SD = 1.70.

Attention to national politics coverage: A seven-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often). Denmark $M = 4.64$, SD = 1.41; Britain $M = 4.35$, SD = 1.62; Spain $M = 4.77$, SD = 1.54.

Efficacy: Six standard items. (1) Politics can be so complex that people like me don’t understand what is going on (r). (2) People like me don’t have a say in what the government does (r). (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 (r). (6) The political parties are so similar that it does not matter who is in government (r). Items marked by (r) are recoded to form an index of political efficacy (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .60$). Denmark $M = 3.95$, SD = .99; Britain $M = 3.51$, SD = .92; Spain $M = 3.49$, SD = .97