

the generalizability of findings from experimental research. The results indicate that “strategic reporting is not per se cynicism-invoking”; rather the effects appeared to be contingent upon the level of strategic reporting in news coverage (De Vreese, 2005, p. 284).

2.1.4. Summary and Conclusion

Regarding the effects of *routine media use*, the videomalaise theory has been particularly influential. The empirical evidence for the videomalaise assumption, however, is thin and videomalaise research has been subject of intense criticism. Besides methodological concerns, the primary point of criticism refers to the underlying assumption that there is a homogeneous critical and negative character of media content. This assumption is not tested empirically in most studies. Furthermore, studies in the tradition of videomalaise theory are not able to provide answers to the crucial question of which precise characteristics of news media coverage have an impact on political attitudes (Wolling, 1999). Critics of the videomalaise assumption argue that it is not so much the intensity of news consumption; instead, the explanation of political attitudes lies in characteristics of the news (Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006, p. 89).

Studies that investigate the effects of *specific aspects of news content* on political attitudes provide answers to the question of which aspects of news coverage may contribute to a decrease of political support. Whereas negative media content is found to weaken approval, positive media content does not necessarily strengthen support (Maurer, 2003b). Likewise, research shows that the effect of negative information on political attitudes is larger than the effect of positive information (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Lau, 1982). In general, the literature review shows that media content aspects such as negative statements in the media, media cynicism, and a negative tone of news coverage impact on the audience’s political attitudes. With regard to this study’s research interest in the effects of media presentations of political processes, negative media information on political processes will be considered as a predictor of political support. Previous research on the impact of news coverage of political processes suggests that attention to political discord or conflicts (Durr, et al., 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and the presentation of legislative maneuverings (Morris & Clawson, 2007) decrease political support. Thus, the impact of media information about political processes will be investigated in the present work by focusing on the role of media attention to political conflicts and legislative maneuverings.

Other studies provide evidence for the assumption that *media strategy frames* shape political attitudes. The majority of studies on strategy framing effects are experimental studies that focus on short-term effects (Bertram Scheufele, 2004a, 2004b). The posttests were conducted directly after the stimulus treatment, a scenario that does not reflect realistic decision-making situations. “The high internal validity of experimentation comes at the price of unnatural viewing environments

and forced exposure” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 287). In general, it seems rather less applicable to consider strategy frames as an independent variable in the present work, because the impact of strategy frames on political attitudes results from their influence on the perceptions of motivations and strategies of political actors (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Thus, strategy frames appear to be less relevant for the analysis of media presentations of political decision-making processes. Moreover, strategy frames were found to be characteristic for election campaign coverage (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996), but are less dominant in public policy news (Lawrence, 2000). It seems warranted to suggest that strategy frames are also less characteristic for media presentations of day-to-day political decision-making processes.

In general, the literature review shows that the mass media’s impact on political attitudes is investigated by using a variety of different *conceptualizations of political attitudes*. For instance, studies investigate the impact of media information on political trust, political cynicism, political malaise, or political alienation. For a recent and comprehensive overview of these concepts see Wolling (1999). In the present study, conceptualizations of political support will not include references to benchmarks of political evaluations other than yardsticks referring to aspects of political decision-making processes, so that this study’s participants are not “distracted” from the role of political processes when forming attitudes of political support. Such benchmarks of evaluation are included in many measures, however. For instance, items of the political efficacy scale imply the expectation that public officials should care about what people think. The cynicism scale implies benchmarks of evaluation, such as politicians’ honesty, their conscientiousness and issue orientation. Similarly, the trust in government scale includes yardsticks for assessment, such as considering the interests of all the people and being smart. The same refers to measures of political alienation, which refer to politicians’ honesty, for instance. Because the concept of political culture is very diverse and in general encompasses behavioural components as well as evaluative attitudes, it is also considered somewhat less appropriate for the purpose of this study. This study, then, will focus on the media’s impact on confidence in political institutions and the evaluation of their performance. Different objects of evaluation are distinguished in the literature and will be considered in this study. Wolling (1999) for instance differentiated between authorities, regime, and political community. Pickel & Walz (1997) distinguished between parties, political authorities, political institutions, and democracy. Easton (1975, p. 437) argues that the distinction between people running institutions, that is the “incumbents of offices”, and the political institutions as such is useful. In this study government, parliament, democracy, and political actors are distinguished as objects of political support.

Three points of criticism apply to all three strands of the research, i.e. studies on the impact of media use, media content aspects and media strategy frames on political support. First, the *majority of studies focus on the effects of election and campaign coverage* (Benoit, et al., 2002; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2004, 2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Pfau, 1987; Rhee, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001). Thus, little

is known about the impact of strategy frames outside the election context, for instance (De Vreese, 2004, p. 191). Second, research interested in the direct relationship between media negativity and political attitudes focuses on outcomes and neglects the investigation of *effect mechanisms and processes*. For instance, there is a need for future studies to gain an “improved theoretical understanding of why strategy-oriented media coverage is associated with negative civic outcomes” (Besley & McComas, 2005, p. 429f.). In order to inform the conceptualization of effect mechanisms in this study, research that considers effect mechanisms is presented in Section 2.2. Third, research neglects to consider the *conditions* under which political attitudes are particularly susceptible to media effects. In order to inform the choice of possible conditions, an overview of studies exploring the conditionality of media effects is given in Section 2.3.

2.2. Mechanisms by which Media Information has an Impact on Political Attitudes

This section provides an overview of studies that examine the effect mechanisms in order to explain how media information alters political attitudes. The investigation of process mechanisms is an important aim in research:

“Establishing relationships between variables is important, because correlation is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for claiming that two variables are causally related. Of even greater scientific interest is explaining how or by what means a causal effect occurs” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 879).

In order to investigate how the media affect political attitudes, research considers variables that mediate the relationship between media information and political attitudes. “Questions about cause–effect relations invoke the idea of mediation, the process by which some variables exert influences on others through intervening or mediator variables” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 879). Despite potential non-significant direct associations between media and political support, there might be a significant indirect effect. Such a significant indirect effect, then, would describe the effect of media information on political support via the influence on a third variable. The overview of variables that mediate the relationship between media information and political attitudes in this section will inform the choice of possible mediators in the present study. More precisely, plausible explanations for the way in which media depictions of political decision-making processes may evoke a decrease in political support will be developed. Because only a few studies on the media’s impact on political support consider mediating variables, the present section expands the focus on studies that investigate the media’s impact on attitudes of political support and also includes studies on the relationship between media and attitudes towards policy issues, in order to provide a rather broad overview of possible mediators.

Research, for instance, suggests that the mass media may decrease political support by shaping the perception of political realities (Section 2.2.1). Other studies propose that simple media attention to certain political issues may shape presidential evaluations, because these issues then serve as a benchmark for the evaluation (Sec-