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Marc Hooghe


*Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 2002; 7; 84

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# Watching Television and Civic Engagement

## Disentangling the Effects of Time, Programs, and Stations

*Marc Hooghe*

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In the debate on the alleged erosion of social cohesion in Western societies, some authors have stressed the negative role of television. Others have argued that some programs like news and current affairs programs could strengthen civic engagement and political participation. In this article, the author uses cross-sectional survey data in an effort to disentangle the possible causal mechanisms between television and political behavior and attitudes. No evidence is found for a time-replacement effect on the individual level, but robust relations are found between television and attitudinal components of social capital. While news programs are positively related with some of these attitudes, consistent negative relations are found with the time spent on television and a preference for entertainment programs and commercial stations. This could imply that commercial stations, especially, cultivate a less civic-minded value pattern among their viewers. The analysis demonstrates that television effects are dependent not only on the time people spend but also on the kind of programs they watch and (at least in countries with a public broadcasting system) on the station they tune in to.

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When the television set first made its appearance in American households during the 1950s, some authors expected that the new medium would provide a major boost to civic engagement and political awareness. After all, for the first time in history, all citizens would get the opportunity to witness important public events and to follow the debates in parliament. Half a century later, the tide has clearly turned for television. Some authors now argue that the spread of

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*Author's Note:* A previous version of this article was presented at the 97th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30 through September 2, 2001, in San Francisco; and at the 1st General Meeting of the European Consortium for Political Research, September 6 through 8, 2001, in Canterbury.

Press/Politics 7(2):84-104

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television is one of the major causes for the decline of public life and social cohesion. Putnam (2000) considers television to be a key culprit for the gradual erosion of social capital within American society. In other research, it is stated that watching television cultivates feelings of insecurity and leads to the spread of distrust, while television is also accused of strengthening a more cynical outlook toward politics and society in what has been labeled a "video-malaise" diagnosis (Postman 1985; Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Putnam 2000; Bok 2001:70–81). Proponents of the video-malaise argument, however, differ with regard to the causal mechanism they invoke to explain the negative effects of television. In his study on the decline of civic engagement in the United States, Robert Putnam (2000:283) relies on a time-replacement effect by suggesting that the spread of television, by itself, could be responsible for as much as a quarter of the observed decline: the time spent on television is no longer available for other, more civic activities and for political participation. Other authors invoke attitudinal effects: maybe television does not affect behavior, but it could lead to the development of specific value patterns among its audience. Opinions differ on the question of whether a more negative and cynical style of covering political news is to be blamed for this effect (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) or whether the increasing amount of entertainment programs on commercial television is to blame (Postman 1985).

Other authors have argued against this pessimistic assessment of the influence of television (Norris 2000a). Several arguments are put forward to counter the video-malaise claim. First, empirical evidence about the alleged negative effects of watching television is not unequivocal: most studies do not reveal significant or strong effects (Uslaner 1998; Newton 1999; Bennett et al. 1999). Other studies show that television can also have positive effects: watching the television news is positively associated with political interest and with a more positive outlook toward the political system (Shah 1998; Newton 1999; Graber 2001). The basic argument here is that one should not only look at how many hours people spend in front of their television set; one should also consider the kind of programs they are watching: while amusement programs may have negative effects, a more positive outcome is expected from news and current affairs programs (Holtz-Bacha 1990; Norris 1996). Still other authors have argued that not only the content of the programs, but also the channel people prefer, is important.<sup>1</sup> While public broadcasting could or should stimulate civic attitudes, commercial stations will show a tendency to broadcast a totally different kind of programs, resulting in less civic-minded value patterns among its audience (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Tracey 1998; Holtz-Bacha and Norris 2001). Swedish and Belgian studies, at least, show marked differences in the value patterns of people preferring public broadcasting versus those who prefer commercial stations (Holmberg 1999:120; Elchardus, Huyse, and Hooghe 2001).

These different arguments have resulted in an animated debate between, on one hand, authors like Robert Putnam who stress the negative effects of prolonged television watching, and, on the other, authors like Pippa Norris or Kenneth Newton who claim that watching the television news is positively associated with political interest and political participation. Bringing empirical evidence into this debate is notoriously difficult. The first and major problem is that it is almost impossible to rely on longitudinal research to detect television effects. Communication research therefore routinely relies on laboratory experiments, raising the question of whether the results of this kind of experiment can be generalized into real-world circumstances. A second problem is that thus far, researchers do not have access to survey data in which all three possible factors (time, content, and station) were questioned simultaneously. In fact, only in a few Western societies is the audience reached by public broadcasting large enough to be represented in a satisfactory manner in a general population survey.

In a representative survey conducted in 1998 by Elchardus, Hooghe, and Smits, we questioned not only the time people spend in front of their television sets and the kind of programs they prefer but also the station they tune in regularly. This survey also included various questions on participation in voluntary associations, which allowed us to test Putnam's (2000) claim that the medium exerts a negative influence on social capital by reducing civic participation, thus diminishing the time people are exposed to the experience of these "learning schools of democracy." Furthermore, Belgian society offers an ideal setting to test the thesis on the importance of commercial versus public broadcasting: the television market in the country is divided almost evenly between the public broadcasting service and various commercial stations. The survey therefore offered all the necessary material for trying to disentangle the causal mechanisms between watching television and civic attitudes and behavior. The survey was based on official population records, resulting in 1,341 face-to-face interviews, and it proved to be representative for the Dutch-speaking population of Belgium. Using the survey's results, I test in this article the alleged causal mechanisms between television and civic attitudes, focusing first on Putnam's claim that prolonged television watching reduces civic participation. Second, I address the claim that television has a direct impact on civic attitudes. Then I go on to analyze the impact of the programs respondents preferred and its relationship with the kind of station they preferred.

### **Time Replacement**

A first, rather straightforward relation between watching television and civic engagement indicators could be dependent on time replacement. The suggestion is that every hour that is spent before the television set is no longer available for social activities (Putnam 2000:216–46). Speaking intuitively, the argument

makes sense: in Belgium and the Netherlands, adults on average now spend something like twenty hours a week watching television, and this figure is even higher in the United States. This implies that somewhere between 1950 and 2000, other activities, whether professional or leisure, have lost a significant portion of the time budget of ordinary citizens. For example, a Dutch study has shown that between 1955 and 1995, the time spent on reading books has declined by 50 percent among Dutch adults, and to a large extent this is due to the increased competition from television and other electronic media (Knulst and Kraaykamp 1997). The empirical evidence that such a time-replacement effect also occurs between civic engagement and watching television is, at best, rather scanty (Norris 2000a:257; Ray 1999). Norris (2000b:249) detects a modest but consistent negative relation between civic engagement indicators and the time spent watching television, but she goes on to suggest that "this pattern often washed out once we included a battery of standard social controls associated with television use and civic engagement."

My first analysis, therefore, is based on the thesis of a time-replacement effect: is there a negative relation between the time spent on television and the time spent in voluntary associations? In this analysis, I also include various control variables, most of them based on the results of previous research on participation. In most of this research, it has been shown that variables like gender, education, length of residence in the same community, and religious practice influence participation levels (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman 1995), and therefore all of these elements were included in the model. All the variables used in this article are briefly presented in Table 1.

A time-replacement effect between television and participation in voluntary associations would imply a negative relation between these two kinds of behavior. In the survey (Elchardus, Hooghe, and Smits 1998), respondents were asked about the time they spend on television and the time they spend on various voluntary associations.<sup>2</sup> If both indicators are included in a regression analysis, with the time spent in associations as a dependent variable, the results are negative: the relationship is indeed negative, but the relation is very modest ( $-.03$ ) and proves to be insignificant (see Table 2). The analysis confirms previous results: education and involvement are shown to boost civic engagement, while women and respondents living together with their partner participate less intensely.<sup>3</sup>

If one takes a closer look at the survey data, it becomes clear why no significant relation is found: the relation between watching television and being active in voluntary associations shows to be curvilinear and therefore is not picked up in this kind of regression analysis. The figures show that the linearity of the relation is spoiled by one group: those watching less than an hour a day (almost 20 percent of respondents) are significantly less engaged than those watching one to two hours a day (see Table 3).

**Table 1**

Variables used in this article

Gender	0 = male, 1 = female
Age	Continuous, from 18 to 75 years
Education	Continuous, in years of finished school education
Income	Family income in 17 categories
Living with partner	0 = living alone, 1 = living with spouse or partner
Children	Number of children in the household
Subjective time pressure	Scale of five Likert items stressing feeling of being overworked, such as, "I never get all my work done." Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .84; one-factor eigenvalue = 3.1; 61.2 percent explained variance
Religious practice	0 = none or less than once a month, 1 = at least once a month
Length of residence	Continuous: How long have you lived in this community?
Membership	Continuous: Sum of current and previous memberships of voluntary associations
Individualism	Scale of four Likert items supporting a utilitarian conception of individualism, such as, "Because one always has to make compromises in dealing with others, it is better to avoid too much contact with other people." Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .75; one-factor eigenvalue = 2.3; 57.5 percent explained variance
Political powerlessness	Scale of six Likert items expressing a feeling of individual political powerlessness, such as, "As soon as they are elected, most politicians no longer pay attention to people like me." Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .80; one-factor eigenvalue = 3.0; 50.7 percent explained variance
Insecurity	Scale of eight Likert items stressing the fear of crime, such as, "During the last decades our streets have become more and more unsafe." Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .82; one-factor eigenvalue = 3.6; 45.5 percent explained variance.

The characteristics of this first group are rather puzzling: they are highly educated, have a high average income, and have all the other characteristics that are usually associated with high participation levels. The normal expectation would therefore be that this group would be among the most active part of the population. Nevertheless, one can observe that on average, they spend half an hour a week less on associational life than those watching television one to two hours a day. Although this question should be looked into more deeply, a possible explanation could be that for this group, social life is restrained because of competing time pressures (van Deth 2000). Not only does this group contain a high proportion of dual-income families, its members also spend more time on their jobs than members of other groups do. Furthermore, members of this group on average have 1.6 children still living within the family, and that figure is much higher than in the other four groups. It takes little imagination to conclude that this group, with an intense professional and family life, would have little time left for

**Table 2**

Time replacement between television and civic engagement

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Gender	-67.93	22.24	-.09**
Age	1.01	0.95	.04
Income	0.61	4.48	.01
Length of residence	55.36	32.17	.05
Living with partner	-67.56	29.25	-.08*
Children	-6.42	8.23	-.03
Education	17.68	4.48	.15***
Subjective time pressure	-0.44	0.57	-.02
Religious practice	93.83	27.39	.11***
Time on television	-0.02	0.01	-.03
Constant	66.11	88.93	
Adjusted $R^2 = .05$			

*Note:* Dependent variable: time spent in voluntary associations. Ordinary least squares regression unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients.

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

either watching television or for engagement in civic life. The finding that such a group of "overworked" citizens exists is important because authors like Norris (2000b:237) lump together those who do not watch any television at all with those who watch little television. These two groups show a different participation pattern, and by lumping them together, the differences are lost. There seems to be an important distinction between those who do not watch television at all (not even the evening news) and those who watch at least some programs.

Although no evidence was found for the existence of a time-replacement effect, a word of caution must be added to this analysis. With this kind of survey material, it is possible only to detect relations on an individual level; but the possibility cannot be excluded that a time-replacement effect could exist on a macro level. During the participatory observation part of this research project, several leaders of voluntary associations told me that they no longer organize any activities at night because people do not show up anymore; they prefer to watch their favorite television programs. This was mentioned more often in organizations catering for a blue-collar audience (Hooghe 2001). If this phenomenon were indeed to occur on a large scale, it would imply that differences would no longer be observed at the individual level. Even for the respondents who do not watch television, the fact that associations no longer offer any activities at night deprives them of the possibility of participating in evening activities. The end result of the entire process would be that the entire village stays home at night because nobody bothers to organize events anymore. If such a mechanism were present, differences could not be detected on an individual level; but on a societal level, television would indeed have smothered associational life.

**Table 3**  
 Television time and participation behavior

	<i>n</i>	Time in Associations (hours/week)	Family Income (euros/month)	Education (completed years)	Work Week (whole sample)	Work Week (only dual earners)	Children in the Family ( <i>n</i> )
<8 hours per week	261	2h22m	2,350	12.78	38h06m	82h19m	1.64
8 to 14 hours per week	310	2h58m	2,212	12.50	36h26m	79h55m	1.31
14 to 20 hours per week	251	2h10m	1,886	11.51	26h19m	67h43m	1.30
20 to 28 hours per week	294	1h43m	1,822	10.33	24h49m	72h46m	0.90
>28 hours per week	211	1h52m	1,474	9.62	15h38m	60h35m	0.80
Total	1,327	2h15m	1,957	11.43	28h59m	74h44m	1.18

*Note:* Average figures for five groups of respondents. Work week = sum of the time spent on work and commuting by both the respondent and his or her partner, respectively, for the whole sample and for couples in which both partners have a paid job.



### Dimensions of Watching Television

This first step of the analysis does not support the case for the existence of a time-replacement effect on the individual level. However, this does not imply that the entire video-malaise argument can simply be dismissed: television could have an influence not just on participation levels but also on civic attitudes (Putnam 2000:238). Within the concept of social capital, one can distinguish structural and attitudinal components, with *structural* referring to the participation in organizations like voluntary associations or other networks and *attitudinal* referring to generalized trust and other civic attitudes (Stolle 2000). In the first analysis, no evidence was encountered for the claim that television would erode the structural components of social capital, and therefore I now turn to the attitudinal components. Earlier research has shown a significant relation between watching television and attitudes like social trust (Moy and Scheufele 2000) or authoritarianism (Shanahan 1998).

If one is to ascertain the attitudinal effects of television, it is not sufficient to focus on the time intensity of watching television; one must also include the other dimensions of television mentioned in the literature as having a possible effect on viewers' attitudes. First, it is necessary to know what kind of programs people are watching. Contrary to what the proponents of the video-malaise argument state, Norris (2000b:232) and Wilkins (2000) argue for the existence of a positive relation between watching the news and civic engagement or political interest. To test this hypothesis, survey respondents were offered a list of fifteen different programs and asked what kind of programs they watched most.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to what was initially expected, it was not possible to rank the programs on one continuum ranging from easy entertainment to the more difficult news programs. A principal components factor analysis showed that these fifteen programs could be regrouped into three separate factors (see Table 4).

These three factors were labeled according to the most characteristic program loading on the factor. The Soaps factor can be identified as the one most closely related to easy entertainment, with such elements as soap series, quiz programs, and comedy shows. It is interesting to note that this factor is dominated by women: in the group composed of the 12.5 percent of respondents with the lowest scores on this factor, women make up 35 percent; but they outnumber men at 65 to 35 percent in the group with the highest score on this factor.<sup>5</sup> This distribution is in line with earlier research on the gendered nature of soap audiences (Modleski 1982). A second factor refers to more high-brow entertainment and has been labeled the Movies factor. Typical programs here are movies, crime series, and science fiction. It may come as a surprise that crime series are so strongly associated with this factor, but one should bear in mind that most crime series aired in Belgium are British, showing very little or no violence.<sup>6</sup> Although this type of viewer is better educated than those preferring soaps, these viewers do not show any affinity for the news or other current affairs

**Table 4**  
Factor analysis for programs

	Factor 1 (Soaps)	Factor 2 (Movies)	Factor 3 (News)
Shows	.68	-.03	.20
Sport	-.04	.18	.32
News, current affairs	.03	-.06	.79
Talk shows	.33	-.03	.63
Movies	.07	.74	.04
Soaps	.79	.11	-.05
Quizzes	.68	.10	.28
Dating programs	.78	.02	.00
Comedy	.68	.33	-.02
Hospital series	.58	.33	-.02
Crime	.16	.68	.19
Science fiction	.05	.75	-.02
Cartoons	.14	.63	.02
Modern music	.35	.38	.19
Classical music	.04	.09	.59

*Note:* Principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Eigenvalues for Factors 1, 2, and 3 are, respectively, 4.08, 1.79, and 1.46. The explained variance is 48.9 percent.

programs. A third factor mainly refers to the use of television as a means for providing information and therefore has been labeled the News factor. Typical programs here are news, current affairs, talk shows (which tend to be more politically orientated than in the United States), and also classical music. Sport programs show but a weak affinity with this third factor.

The third element to bring into the analysis is the preference for a specific television station. Before 1989, the public broadcasting corporation enjoyed a television monopoly in Belgium, but partly because of European rules with regard to the free exchange of goods and services, the market was liberated for commercial stations. Although initially the commercial newcomers aggressively conquered a large market share, positions seem to have stabilized in recent years, with the audience split almost evenly between the public broadcasting corporation (with one chain for a large audience that serves almost 40 percent of the market and a small, more elitist chain that serves 5 percent of the market) and commercial stations (with one family-oriented chain that serves 35 percent of the market and several smaller chains serving various niche audiences). This means that Belgian society in this respect differs substantially from American society, wherein public broadcasting reaches no more than 3 percent of the audience (Tracey 1998:251). In the survey, respondents were offered a list of all television stations and asked to indicate which station they enjoy most. The stations were subsequently regrouped depending on whether they belong to the public broadcasting corporation (46 percent of the respondents) or whether they are operated by a commercial organization (54 percent).

**Table 5**  
Zero-order correlations between television indicators

	Time on Television	Soaps Factor	Movie Factor	News Factor	Commercial Station
Time	—				
Soaps factor	.36***	—			
Movie factor	.15***	-.05	—		
News factor	.03	-.07*	-.05	—	
Commercial station	.18***	.48***	-.01	-.23***	—

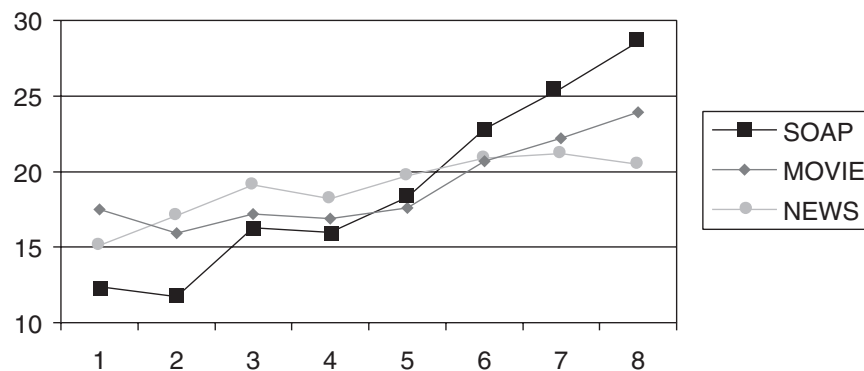
\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

### Television Variables

As a result, there are five variables that can be used to cover the various dimensions of television watching behavior.<sup>7</sup> Before using these variables in the analysis, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at the interrelatedness of the five dimensions (see Table 5).

A first observation is that correlations never rise above .50, which allows the variables to be entered simultaneously in a regression analysis without too much risk of multicollinearity. Second, negative but insignificant correlations can be seen among the three program factors, as would be expected from the results of a factor analysis. Third, strong and positive relations can be observed among a preference for commercial stations, watching soaps, and spending a lot of time watching television.

This correlation pattern could already be a first indication of the fact that the debate on the possible negative effects of television is to some extent misdirected. One of the basic arguments is that maybe television by itself is not supportive of the maintenance of civic culture and political involvement, but that watching the news is. The correlation pattern indicates that if people in Western societies watch more and more television, this does not mean that they have become more avid news freaks: there is no correlation at all between the score on the news factor and the time spent in front of the television set. Spending a lot of time in front of the television is strongly related to a preference for soaps and for commercial stations. This simple correlation already supports the observation that television is not used primarily for watching news programs, but rather, and to an increasing extent, for all kinds of entertainment programs (Putnam 2000:221). In the survey, the respondents on average spent some nineteen hours a week watching television. No data are available on how much time is spent watching the news. However, a typical news broadcast is limited to half an hour, which implies that even for people watching two full news broadcasts every day, no more than seven hours a week could possibly be spent on the television news. For most people, and for most of the time, watching television means watching entertainment programs.

**Figure 1**

Hours a Week Spent Watching Television, per Score on Factors, in Eight Equal Groups

Note: Scores on soaps, movie, and news factors divided into eight equal groups ( $ns = 159$  to  $162$ ).

This relation can be illustrated in a different way. For each of the three program factors, I have divided the respondents into eight equal groups ( $ns = 159$  to  $162$ ), going from the group with the lowest score on the factor to the group with the highest score. For each group, I verify how much time on average is spent watching television (see Figure 1). For all three factors, the relation is clearly positive, but the relation is less outspoken for the news factor while it is very strong for the soap factor. Again, the image is confirmed: if people watch television for longer and longer periods of time, this is not because they watch the news more intensely but because they increasingly tune in to light entertainment programs. In most Western societies, the proportion of broadcasting time devoted to news and current affairs programs has diminished during the past decades, while an increasing proportion is spent on entertainment programs (Norris 2000a:106–8). Therefore, it would be erroneous to limit the debate on media effects to research on the effects of news media, as has been done in some recent studies on this topic.

### Effect on Attitudes

Although in much of the recent research, the attitudinal components of social capital are reduced to a single-item question on generalized trust, the notion of trust remains highly problematic (e.g., Hardin 2001). It could be argued that a society high on social capital is not necessarily one with high-generalized trust levels, but rather a society in which a lot of individuals are trustworthy (Putnam 2000). There is no indication of how trustworthiness could be included in a population survey, and therefore it was preferred to perform the analysis with some robust attitudinal scales indicating a lack of social integration, civic attitudes, or norms of reciprocity. My ambition is not to develop a valid operationalization of

the social capital concept but rather to study some attitudinal and behavioral variables that are closely related to the social capital concept, each deserving to be studied in its own right, given the current concern about the viability of a democratic political culture in Western societies. A first scale was designed to detect a utilitarian conception of individualism, stressing the need to defend one's own interests and dismissing the need for solidarity or cooperation. This scale can therefore be considered as running counter to the norm of reciprocity, which is one of the core elements of the social capital complex. A typical item for this scale is the statement, "It is more important to take care of your own personal success, than to try to have a good relationship with other people." If it is assumed that social capital allows individuals to cooperate and to overcome collective action problems, it is clear that supporting this conception of individualism will make it more difficult to establish cooperative ties with other citizens. The rise of this utilitarian conception of individualism can be considered an important cause for, or at least a symptom of, a decline in social capital in Western societies (Bellah et al. 1985). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that if television really has these alleged negative effects on the attitudes associated with the presence of social capital, a positive relation would be found between watching television and the adherence to a utilitarian conception of individualism.

In the first step, I do not yet include the television indicators, but I try to explain the score on the individualism scale with other background and behavioral variables (see Table 6, Model 1). The regression demonstrates that while education and membership of voluntary associations show a strong negative relation to individualism, age is positively related. Men show consistently higher scores on this scale than women. Overall, these variables account for 24 percent explained variance. This percentage rises to 27 when I include the five television variables (Model 2): all of the television indicators in some way or another seem to be related to the scale on individualism, although not all of them are significant. While very little evidence was found for a relation between television and the structural components of social capital, there seems to be more evidence for a relation with the attitudinal components. The relation with the television indicators runs both ways: a negative relation is seen with the movies and news factors, but a positive one is seen with the time spent on television and a preference for soaps and for commercial stations. The relation with the preference for commercial stations just barely fails to take the .05 significance hurdle.

These results show that none of the five television indicators included in the analysis can be dismissed: none of them is clearly unrelated to individualism. The most striking difference between Model 1 and Model 2 is that the impact of education diminishes dramatically if the television variables are introduced; this suggests that television serves as an intermediary variable: although respondents with little formal education typically score high on the individualism scale, at least some of this result could be attributed to the fact that this part of the

**Table 6**  
Television indicators and individualism

	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Gender	-5.24	1.11	-.13***	-5.10	1.24	-.13***
Age	0.25	0.05	.18***	0.22	0.06	.17***
Education	-1.45	0.25	-.22***	-0.90	0.25	-.14***
Income	-0.30	0.22	-.05	-0.05	0.24	-.01
Living with partner	-0.32	1.46	-.01	0.08	1.61	.00
Children	0.47	0.41	.04	-0.09	0.46	-.01
Religious practice	-2.61	1.39	-.05	-3.24	1.49	-.07*
Length of residence	0.07	1.61	.00	0.27	1.70	.00
Membership	-1.84	0.25	-.22***	-1.65	0.27	-.20***
Time on television	—	—	—	2.57	0.84	.10**
Prefer commercial stations	—	—	—	2.79	1.43	.07
Soaps factor	—	—	—	1.82	0.74	.09*
Movie factor	—	—	—	-2.00	0.68	-.10**
News factor	—	—	—	-1.38	0.69	-.06*
Constant	57.38	4.14		48.21	4.99	
Adjusted $R^2$	.24			.27		

Note: Ordinary least squares regression, unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients.

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

population spends more time on watching television, with a specific preference for commercial stations and entertainment programs. This pattern responds to the *mainstreaming* concept as it has been developed within communication research. The underlying assumption of this concept is that the attitudinal differentiation, caused by various background variables like education, will be weakened by the strong uniformization influence of television: "mainstreaming means that heavy viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behavior which ordinarily stem from other factors and influences" (Shanahan and Morgan 1999:73).

### Political Efficacy

Authors stressing the positive role of television news could argue that the previous analysis misses the point: they do not expect news and current affairs programs to have a strong impact on basic attitudes like individualism, but they do expect that television news could strengthen political mobilization. Norris (2000b:232) argues that watching news and current affairs programs is associated "with strengthened political engagement." Therefore, the analysis was repeated, this time with the traditional scale on political powerlessness or lack of political efficacy (see Table 7).

The results of this analysis show the same pattern: while the time spent on watching television and a preference for commercial stations are positively

**Table 7**  
Television indicators and political powerlessness

	Political Powerlessness		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Gender	2.55	1.17	.07*
Age	0.16	0.05	.13**
Education	-0.29	0.24	-.05
Income	-0.17	0.23	-.03
Living with partner	0.63	1.53	.01
Children	0.29	0.44	.02
Religious practice	-6.26	1.40	-.15***
Length of residence	-0.18	1.60	-.00
Membership	-1.14	0.25	-.16***
Time on television	0.26	0.08	.12***
Commercial station	2.82	1.35	.08*
Soaps factor	-0.53	0.69	-.03
Movies factor	0.65	0.64	.04
News factor	-2.44	0.66	-.13***
Constant	60.64	4.67	
Adjusted $R^2 = .15$			

*Note:* Ordinary least squares regression, unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients.

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

associated with political powerlessness, the relation with the news factor is clearly negative. It is interesting to compare the results of this analysis with an analysis by Pippa Norris (2000a:289) of the 1998 National Election Study in the United States. In both the Belgian and the American analysis, no evidence is found for a negative relation between using the media to seek political information and political efficacy. And although the results are not always significant, the relation rather tends to be positive.

### The "Mean World Syndrome"

With a final analysis, I try to ascertain whether the mean world syndrome could be a possible explanation for the alleged negative effects of television. The mean world syndrome refers to the suggestion that "television viewing cultivates a complex of outlooks which includes an exaggerated sense of victimization, gloom, apprehension, insecurity, anxiety and mistrust" (Shanahan and Morgan 1999:55). Gerbner et al. (1986) make the argument that because of the fact that viewers are flooded with information on and images of violence and crime, they will feel more insecure and threatened in their daily lives. Subsequently, this feeling could erode their willingness to enter into all kinds of collective action settings (Uslaner 1998). To ascertain this claim, I include a scale on the feeling of insecurity and threat. When the regression results reported in Table 8 are

**Table 8**

Television indicators and feelings of insecurity in daily life

	Whole Sample			Public Broadcasting	Commercial Stations
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
Gender	3.22	1.08	.09**	.11*	.08
Age	0.22	0.05	.19***	.20**	.18**
Education	-0.21	0.22	-.04	-.08	.01
Income	-0.48	0.21	-.08*	-.06	-.10*
Living with partner	1.35	1.40	.03	.07	.00
Children	-0.63	0.40	-.05	.00	-.10*
Religious practice	1.78	1.31	.04	.08	.01
Length of residence	-0.76	1.48	-.02	.01	-.05
Membership	-0.99	0.23	-.14***	-.19***	-.11*
Time on television	0.03	0.04	.02	-.04	.10*
Prefer commercial stations	5.56	1.25	.16***	—	—
Soaps factor	2.76	0.64	.16***	.17**	.15**
Movies factor	-0.17	0.59	-.01	.03	-.05
News factor	0.61	0.60	.03	.00	.07
Constant	57.77	4.34			
Adjusted $R^2$		.25		.18	.17

Note: Ordinary least squares regression, unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients.

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

observed, the results do not unequivocally support the mean world hypothesis: there is no relation whatsoever between watching the news or watching movies (and crime series, too, load on this factor) on one hand and feelings of insecurity on the other hand. What does come as a surprise is that soaps, which offer very few representations of violence, are so strongly associated with feelings of insecurity.

This is in line with an earlier finding by Uslaner (1998) showing that family series, especially, are most strongly associated with feelings of insecurity. These results would suggest that the relation between television content and feelings of insecurity is not as straightforward as the Gerbner et al. (1986) thesis assumes: it is not because people see violence in drama series or news programs that they will actually feel threatened in their daily lives. Given the fact that watching soaps tends to be time consuming, I can only speculate that people with a preference for this kind of programs will spend so much time in their living rooms that they lose a feeling of familiarity with what goes on in the streets of their community, giving rise to speculations about the rising criminality in their towns. This would imply that television effects do not depend on a social learning process: I find no evidence that viewers apply and generalize the information they retrieve from television news into what goes on in their own neighborhood. The effect rather seems to depend on an isolation mechanism: because some viewers spend so



much time on television entertainment, they increasingly become alienated from social life, and this lack of real observations is compensated for by speculations on the current state of community life. The opposite relation might of course hold just as well: because people are afraid of criminality in their neighborhoods, they prefer to stay at home and simply go on watching soaps. But even when reversing the causal order, the observed affinity between soaps and feelings of insecurity needs to be explained. If the treatment of crime in their cities forced people to stay home to watch television, they might as well watch sports, news, or movies, but it is clear from the figures in Table 8 that instead they prefer soaps and quizzes. So even assuming this causal logic, it is still necessary to explain why people with these personality characteristics specifically choose to watch these kinds of easy entertainment programs.

If a distinction is made between the respondents preferring public broadcasting and those preferring commercial stations, my assumption, that the relation between program content and feelings of insecurity is not as simple as is often stated, receives confirmation. In recent years, commercial stations in Belgium have been accused of fuelling feelings of insecurity by devoting a lot of time in their news broadcasts to news about crime and violence. However, even among the audience of the commercial stations, there is no significant relation between watching the news and feelings of insecurity. While it might be true that the relation is more outspoken among the commercial audience than among the viewers of the public broadcasting system, clearly the news is not the main culprit in this case.

In most of the research on the relation between television and political attitudes, attention is focused almost exclusively on news and current affairs programs, while these figures rather suggest that it could be a more fruitful strategy to take the entire program content of stations into account, including and maybe even focusing on entertainment programs. As Patterson (1999:193) already stated, research on television effects should not remain limited to news broadcasts: "television's corrosive and very strong role is indirect rather than direct. Television promotes voter apathy among the masses not in its direct political newscasts but in the way it socializes those who watch it frequently—whatever it is they watch—into a state of generalized distrust." In this analysis, for both the audience of public broadcasting and commercial stations alike, soaps are the most strongly related to feelings of insecurity. What exactly is the relation between soaps, quiz programs, and comedy (all with very few depictions of violence) on one hand, and feelings of insecurity, on the other hand, remains to be more thoroughly investigated. However, it is clear that my figures do not support Patterson's claim about the role of the media coverage on crime: "There can be no doubt that the greatly increased level of insecurity over crime and violence among Americans has its source in the unrelenting focus of the media on them" (1999:194).

## Conclusion

The analyses reported in this article clearly convey the message that there is not yet sufficient information available about the causal mechanism that could be responsible for the relation between television and the alleged decline of social cohesion and social capital. Maybe even on the contrary: to some extent, the causal puzzle only becomes more complicated because of these findings. First, there is little or no evidence for a time-replacement effect: a moderate amount of television watching does not seem to be negatively associated with participation levels, contrary to what some critics of television suggest. Second, a consistent negative relation has been found between the time spent on watching television and civic attitudes: television seems to have a stronger effect on the attitudinal components of social capital than on the structural components. It is clear, however, that one should not treat television as a one-dimensional phenomenon; at least three different dimensions should be taken into account. First, while the time spent on watching television does not seem to reduce participation levels, it does seem to have a negative effect on the attitudinal components of social capital. Second, as Norris (2000b) has pointed out, it is also important to know what kind of programs people are watching. The specific factors used in this analysis might be idiosyncratic for Belgian society, but in general, the relation would be that light entertainment programs are especially erosive for civic attitudes. News programs, on the contrary, are positively associated, especially with political attitudes. A third element, which has not, thus far, been included systematically in the debate, is the station people tune in to. It has been shown that at least for some attitudinal scales, a preference for commercial broadcasting is negatively associated with civic attitudes. In an effort to develop strong and durable ties with their viewing audience, several commercial stations have tried to boost the identification of viewers with their favorite television chain. This has been done by developing special magazines, by spreading car stickers, by offering Web sites and chat rooms, and (in the Belgian case) even by opening special cafes devoted to a particular program or station. It would seem that in some cases, at least, this effort has succeeded, giving rise to the formation of a specific subculture centered on the programs of a television station. It would of course be absurd to accuse commercial stations of being the main cause for the spread of a more cynical outlook toward society and politics in particular. Before 1989, Belgium did not have commercial television, and yet surveys from the pre-1989 period indicate that feelings of individualism or political powerlessness were just as widespread then as they are now. Nevertheless, one could assume that commercial stations at least cultivate not only identification with the station but also with the value patterns that seem to be consistent with the specific kind of programs the station offers. My analysis does not support simple stimulus-response models: it is not by showing crime and violence in the news that viewers start to

feel more insecure in the streets of their communities. The results rather suggest that by providing easy entertainment and offering simple formulas, commercial stations contribute to the cultivation of a culture of political cynicism, insecurity, and isolation.

It is important to note that the three dimensions of watching television seem to have an autonomous effect: the effects of time, content, and station do not necessarily run in the same direction. My analysis suggests that the Norris argument is right: it is not just important to look at how many hours people watch, but to look at the content of what they are watching. I could even take the argument a step further: it is important to know on what station people are watching their favorite programs. This does not mean, however, that the effects of television watching behavior as a whole disappear. The fact that news programs and the length of watching television do not even correlate is indicative of the fact that news is becoming increasingly marginalized in contemporary television watching behavior. If the time spent on television is going up in Western societies, this is not because people are watching more and more news, but because more commercial stations are active and offer more entertainment programs. My analysis also suggests that the effects of public television should be taken into account more explicitly. I find no evidence that public broadcasting actually strengthens civic attitudes, but at least it seems to have a mitigating effect. In that respect, a strong public broadcasting corporation could be a crucial policy instrument for any effort to strengthen or maintain social cohesion in Western societies.

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Ken Newton, Dietlind Stolle, Robert Putnam, Anton Derks, and Jan van Deth for their comments.

### Notes

1. It could be argued that in countries without a large public broadcasting audience, making a distinction between habitual and selective viewers would lead to similar results (Campbell, Yonish, and Putnam 1999). Because advertisement rates are based on the audience reached, commercial stations have every reason to promote habitual viewing, while public stations are not exposed to this incentive.
2. These questions did not follow one another to avoid contamination effects; each of them was embedded in a specific module on respective media use and participation. With regard to television, the survey asked for "a typical" day in the week, a typical Saturday, and a typical Sunday. With regard to voluntary associations, respondents were asked to estimate how much time they spend on participation in a typical week, or, if they could not answer that question, a typical month. For details, see Hooghe (2000).
3. At first sight, the finding that respondents living together with their partner participate less intensely runs counter to the claim that married people are more strongly involved in civic

- life. However, when one looks at the time spent on participation, it can be observed that young, unmarried respondents tend to spend a lot of time on associations, much more than people living together with their spouse or partner. Time involvement is indeed lower for the divorced or widowed respondents, but this drop in participation levels does not alter the general relation. One of the reasons for the difference between American and Belgian figures could be that divorce rates are lower in Belgium, resulting in a lower proportion of divorced singles in the sample than would be the case in American surveys.
4. Answering possibilities were *never, seldom, sometimes, often, and very often*.
  5. To some degree, this gender pattern can also explain why sports, which in some studies is also considered a form of "light entertainment," does not load on this factor. In Belgium, sport broadcasts mainly deal with soccer and cycling, sports attracting a largely male audience.
  6. For example, at the time the survey was conducted, the British serial *Inspector Morse* about a Wagner-loving police inspector in Oxford was being aired and enjoying a huge success. The serial depicts a lot of discussions and questions, but hardly any violence. It is my hunch that a lot of people had this serial in mind when they answered the question on crime series.
  7. Applying this full model with time in voluntary associations as a dependent variable does not produce new results: not a single television indicator proved to be significantly related to involvement in voluntary associations.

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### **Biographical Note**

Marc Hooghe received his Ph.D. in political science from the Free University of Brussels in 1997. He teaches at the universities of Antwerp and Brussels in Belgium, and he is a research fellow for the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research.

Address: Marc Hooghe, Political Science Department, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium; e-mail: Marc.Hooghe@vub.ac.be.