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*Media Coverage of Government Policies and Citizen Satisfaction with Information Provision and Policy Results*

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Media Coverage of Government Policies and Citizen Satisfaction with Information Provision and Policy Results

Jan Kleinnijenhuis / Anita M. J. van Hoof

1. Introduction

This study poses the question of how public information contributes to citizen satisfaction or dissatisfaction with government policies. Public information efforts, “irrespective of their importance for the public’s welfare, do not make it onto the radar screens of social science researchers”, according to a recent review of Graber (2005: 482, 497). Remarkably enough, satisfaction with government policies is nevertheless believed to be one of the key determinants not only of electoral choices but also of public participation (Mueller 2003).

Governments in Western democracies use the Internet, public libraries, press releases, and parliamentary debates to disclose policy information. To further specific policy aims, governments occasionally use advertisements (e.g. reducing cigarette smoking, firework risks, energy consumption) or direct mail (e.g. information pamphlets about the EU constitutional treaty referendum). Since most citizens obtain their information on policies from the news media, however, most public information efforts are targeted directly or indirectly at the media. Politicians and public information officials spend time and effort to influence citizen perceptions and citizen satisfaction by framing the issues for journalists (Jacobs/Shapiro 2000). Hence, our study investigates how the news on government policies influences satisfaction with government policies.

2. “Voorlichting”: public information in the Netherlands

From the point of view of the government, public information provision is the key to opening the gateways to the general public. Governments ‘subsidize’ the news industry with all types of facilities (press rooms, press meetings, interviews, press releases, leaking of confidential information) to get their information in the press (Cook 1998). Without such facilities, daily news gathering would become far less efficient, which

* The authors would like to thank the Dutch Governmental Information Office RVD, which commissioned the data collection on which this paper is based. The authors are much indebted to Dr. Dirk Oegema (Dept. of Communication Science Vrije Universiteit) and Dr. Jan A. de Ridder (University of Amsterdam, Dept. of Communication Science) who participated in the research project on which this paper is based, as well as to Wouter van Atteveldt MSc and Dr. Nel Ruigrok, whose contributions to the research project were also invaluable. And last but not least, our thanks go to the coders in the research project.
means that even critical news outlets will use the government as a major information source. Journalists will even restrict the range of alternative views expressed in the news to the range of views expressed in mainstream political debates (Bennett 1990). “Regular press conferences, briefings and social events provide fertile ground for stabilizing the ‘working relationship’, even if both groups have a critical relationship as regards their professional norms and political objectives” (Pfetsch 2007: 74). New information technologies – the Blackberry, blogs, social networking sites, videoconferencing – serve to shorten the information channels between politicians and journalists even further.

In addition to general news subsidies to steer the range of alternative views expressed in the news, government information may attempt to manage the news pro-actively. News management attempts, conceived as a strategic variant of public information provision by governments, have been studied in a number of Western democracies. On the basis of a comparative study of emerging press-state relationships in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, Pfetsch (2007) observes that in all three countries functionally equivalent news management practices emerged during recent decades, despite variations in national constitutions, media systems and media cultures. In all three countries, the same kinds of experts were hired to frame the issues, to deal with the press so as to set the media agenda. UK prime ministers from Margaret Thatcher to Tony Blair, for example, enlarged the Government Information and Communication Services to about twelve hundred civil servants, with an advertisement budget rising from about $40 to about $295 million pound.

In this article we will concentrate on the Netherlands, a country that has enjoyed freedom of expression since the sixteenth century. In the Dutch language, the old word “voorlichting” – to be translated as “enlightenment before you”, – is used to denote government information, as opposed to business information, which is denoted with the US term “public relations”. The word “voorlichting” captures the promise of the familiar biblical sentence “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalms 119: 105), which emphasizes the notion that “voorlichting” highlights the range of feasible options to the benefit of autonomous pathfinders. “Voorlichting” clearly excludes selective information provision, political marketing, and public relations massaging. When the first Dutch government after World War II wanted to use the radio to communicate directly with citizens, following the examples of Theodore Roosevelt’s radio speeches, and Queen Wilhelmina’s Free Orange radio messages from London during the German occupation, a government committee headed by Van Heuven Goedhart was installed which set out the lines for the next decades: public information should just aim at the proliferation of policy knowledge, and not at political persuasion. Political judgments should be left to the coalition parties and the opposition parties in Parliament and to the Press (cf. Vogelaar 1955). Nevertheless, the converging tendencies observed by Pfetsch (2007) could be observed in the Netherlands as well. A government committee, which was based on a number of studies by publication administration and communication scholars, paved the way in the early 2000s for a greater use of the new means of the information society to reach citizens directly as well as for a much more pro-active relationship with the press. “The media are not only a channel through which policy information reaches citizens, but actually also a platform to gain or lose credits for government policy” (Commissie Toekomst Over-
heidscommunicatie 12). However, attempts to centralize the information of the various ministries were never quite successful (Wagenaar 1997), at least not hardly as successful as in the US or the UK (cf. Pfetsch 2007). In addition to the Dutch Governmental Information Office (Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst), the various ministries empowered their own communication departments.

Pfetsch (2007) makes a broad distinction between news management attempts to arrive at a more favorable news coverage of persons (e.g. the Prime Minister, ministers) and attempts to arrive at a more favorable news coverage of policy issues (Pfetsch 2007). Here we will concentrate on the latter, since effects on citizen satisfaction of policy-oriented news is one of the least studied topics in political communication research. Our point of departure is the policy information about 55 policy issues that were prioritized by the coalition government of CDA, VVD and D66 headed by CDA prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende, which governed the country from May 2003 until the following elections of November 2006. We will focus on the midterm policy news from the year 2004, plus some attention for the news during the end game in the election campaign preceding the 2006 elections.

2.1 The political communication cycle

Representative democracy with periodic elections assumes that citizens will judge the performance of the government (or the coalition parties that make up the government) on the basis of public information. Numerous studies from the Public Choice literature show indeed that citizens will reward or punish the incumbent parties, depending on the state of the economy in the election year (Mueller 2003). Many authors have suggested the existence of a political business cycle. After years of scrimping and saving, governments tend to increase expenditures during election years (Alesina et al. 1997). Scholarly attention for economic cycles in real-world phenomena appears to have somewhat distracted the attention from a far more obvious political communication cycle, however.

The columns of Table 1 below refer to the definition of the real-world situation towards which government policies are directed. A fresh government typically starts out from the promises of the parties during the previous election campaign. Fresh governments typically start with ambition communication. The first column in Table 1 below shows that the essence of ambition communication is the proposition that the real-world situation is negative. Citizens have every reason to believe that there is much room for improvement.

However, at some point in their midterm governments have to shift towards success communication, thus towards the last column of Table 1. The essence of success communication is the proposition that real-world conditions are actually fairly good. It is unwise to merge ambition communication with success communication for a single issue, since claims that the real-world meets the standards of citizens while it actually falls short of the standards will typically result in citizen dissatisfaction with the quality of government information. It is also unwise for a government to miss out the phase of ambition communication. If a government misses out the ambition communication
phase, then citizens will easily become politically indifferent, but if a government fails to shift toward success communication, then the incumbent parties will probably lose at the following elections.

The rows of Table 1 refer to the distinction between a positive promotion focus and a prevention focus (Higgins et al. 1997). Whereas promotion communication is concerned with non-gains versus gains, prevention communication is concerned with losses as compared to non-losses. The bottom row of Table 1 indicates that governments may make the shift from ambition communication towards success communication not only through a promotion focus, but also by means of a more subtle double-negative prevention focus. A government which adopts a prevention focus will claim during its last year that the government prevented a variety of imaginable problems from occurring. The burden of proof for opposition parties and a critical press that such problems could not have occurred at all is usually harder than the enumeration of a few problems that still remain in the real-world in spite of government achievements. Here we will not concentrate on the choice of focus but rather on the shift from ambition communication towards success communication.

The switch from ambition communication to success communication may be rather difficult as a result of the omnipresence of media in public information provision. Since citizens have got acquainted to the daily appearance of politicians on their television screens, it is not easy to step away for a while, without losing political momentum. Without a period of silence in between statements that real-world conditions are poor and statements that real-world conditions have improved, a government easily becomes implausible, however. When ministries do not coordinate their periods of silence, or their timing of success communication, mistrust of the government rather than increased citizen satisfaction may result.

In our study, we aim to link midterm satisfaction with governmental policy with the two rivaling approaches to communication strategies in our model. But first we will present a model of news effects on policy satisfaction and government trust.

### 2.2 Policy news and policy satisfaction: towards hypotheses

A number of reasons may explain why hypotheses with regard to news effects on policy satisfaction have not often been put to a test before. Typically, midterm government information, midterm news and midterm public opinion are considered to be

### Table 1: A fourfold typology of communication strategies

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<th>Regulatory focus</th>
<th>Direction of real-world conditions</th>
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<td>Positive: promotion focus targeted at the Good</td>
<td>Negative (ambition communication) (\rightarrow) Positive (success communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double negative: prevention focus targeted at the Bad</td>
<td>Strive for improvement (1) (\rightarrow) Claim the positive results that were achieved (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Strive for nullification of evil practices and dangers (3) (\rightarrow) Claim that evil practices were prevented from occurring (4)</td>
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less spectacular and less important than news during election campaigns (Graber/Smith 2005; Walgrave/van Aelst 2006). Data gathered by marketing research companies for the sake of government communication efforts more often deal with the popularity of the president, the chancellor or prime minister and their ministers than with the precise ins and outs of government policy. The fear experienced by journalists and media organizations of being held accountable for their negative effects on citizen satisfaction typically enhances their eagerness to attribute shifts in public opinion post hoc to whims of the public, to exogenous dramatic events, or to mysterious “spin doctors” behind the political stage, rather than to their own news coverage. Assessments of average news effects are typically clouded also by differential effects on a variety of news consumers. Some will only retain the endlessly repeated highlights of the news, whereas others will develop a detailed cognitive map of the political landscape. Satisfaction with government policies may be based on a superficial impression of government policy or on detailed knowledge about it. Nevertheless, average citizen satisfaction or dissatisfaction with government policies is an important variable because it will eventually influence the overall evaluation of the government.

Furthermore, the measurement of policy satisfaction is not straightforward since it is not a one-dimensional concept. We propose a threefold distinction that differentiates between (a) awareness of the importance of the issues addressed by government policies, (b) satisfaction with the information provided by the government in the news, and (c) satisfaction with the outcomes of government policies according to the news. In the next sections, hypotheses will be derived about news effects on these aspects of satisfaction.

2.2.1 Perceived issue importance as a precondition for satisfaction

Before citizens will evaluate the government policy regarding an issue as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, they have to start thinking about the issue. They have to be provided with information which enables them to put the issue on their agenda. Thus, a policy issue has to attract news attention in order to enable policy satisfaction – or policy dissatisfaction.

Agenda setting theory in its elementary form simply states that objects or issues that appear frequently in the news tend to become the objects or issues which voters deem important (McCombs/Shaw 1972).

H1 Agenda setting: The more attention an issue receives in the news, the more citizens will deem that issue important.

Numerous later studies add to the basic ‘first order’ agenda setting hypothesis that agenda setting holds also at a second level when sub-issues, attributes and specific perspectives (or ‘frames’) of more general issues are at stake (McCombs 2004; Rogers et al. 1993). Issues that attract only marginal news attention will only play a role in the opinion of highly aware, well-informed citizens (Zaller 1992). Since a political game which is played for empty galleries will in the long run give rise to public apathy and indifference, even non-democratic governments feel obliged to raise attention for prioritized issues to ensure political legitimacy.
2.2.2 Satisfaction with government information

From the point of view of public information provision, satisfaction with government information is an important dependent variable. Even in the traditional conception of public information as “voorlichting”, public information officers should be held accountable for a lack of satisfaction with government information, albeit not for a lack of policy satisfaction.

Satisfaction with government information is contingent on the availability of such information through easily accessible mass media. In longer campaigns, voters typically arrive at a better understanding of real-world conditions (Stevenson/Vavreck 2000). We assume that voters themselves will be aware of the beneficial effects of available information on their personal knowledge.

**H2 News learning: The more attention an issue receives in the news, the more satisfied citizens will be with the government information regarding that issue.**

Attention for an issue will be the sine qua non for citizens to become satisfied with government’s information, even if the news media did not base the news on government information. Conversely, citizens will remain dissatisfied with government information if the mass media do not pick up on an issue, in spite of an abundance of available government information. Citizens will blame the government, rather than their personal media for their lack of knowledge.

The dark side of much attention for a policy issue is that citizens will easily get irritated when the information provided by the government is pointless or ambiguous, for example when the policy is contingent upon future events or on the policy of other actors, which occurs easily with risk prevention communication, or with compromises in coalition governments in multi-party systems. Ongoing negotiations and negotiation outcomes often result in ambiguous and contradictory statements from the parties involved. News consumers will be aware that they know nothing more, in spite of the time which was spent to learn more. Politicians that can be labeled as charismatic politicians typically distinguish themselves from backbenchers by their ability to express outspoken issue positions in an unambiguous language (Sheafer 2001).

**H3 Ambiguity: The less ambiguous the news regarding policy plans of the government with respect to an issue is, the more satisfied citizens will be with the government information regarding that issue.**

The basic idea behind the ambiguity hypothesis, is that citizens – and journalists alike – will get irritated by a Prime Minister or minister who appears often in the news as a talking head, but who nevertheless only gives neutral, ambiguous or contradictory signals or even no signals at all of his/her policy direction regarding an issue. News consumers want distinctive policy ambitions. The reason for the latter is not only that voters prefer rather extreme viewpoints instead of almost neutral issue positions (Rabinowitz/McDonald 1989), but also that it is very hard to assess one's personal proximity to governmental issue positions when the latter are expressed ambiguously or inconsistently.
2.2.3 Satisfaction with the results of government policies

Policy satisfaction is related to the political ideology of individual citizens, but also to the attention for the viewpoints of mainstream and opposition viewpoints in the news (Zaller 1992). According to Zaller, many issues start as issues that are of interest only to the political elite. When the amount of publicity regarding such an issue is fairly low, most citizens will not care about the issue (agenda setting hypothesis H1). With low profile issues, the press is not inclined to lend the microphone to possible opponents of government policies (Bennett 1990; Zaller 1992). Increasing the amount of one-sided news typically increases policy satisfaction, since such news does not give enough fuel for thoughts and reflection. Therefore, citizens usually will be satisfied with the direction of government policy.

H4 Direction: The more attention is paid in the news to the direction of the government's position on policy issues, the more satisfied citizens will be with the results of the government policy regarding that issue.

In the long run, prolonged attention in the news for an issue will however result in more space for the viewpoints of possible opponents of the government policy. Journalists will devote part of the space and the time devoted to the issue by seeking actively for both sides of a story. They will pay attention to criticasters and criticisms that were invisible earlier on. Since citizens did not have very deep thoughts about the issue, these opposing viewpoints will also be greeted with approval. Hypothesis H5 implies that news about a lack of a social base will diminish satisfaction with the government policy. Therefore we will refer to H5 as the Social Base Hypothesis.

H5 Social base: The more attention is paid in the news to issue positions of other actors that are in line with government policy, the more satisfied citizens will be satisfied with the government policy regarding that issue.

Taken together, hypotheses H4 and H5 imply that satisfaction with government policies increases when other actors endorse the policy plans of the government, but decreases when newsworthy actors oppose the direction of the policy plans of the government. The awareness of hypothesis H5 will lead public information officers to engage in networking efforts to bring about contacts between journalists and ‘experts’ or ‘stakeholders’ who deliver relatively friendly comments on government policies.

Recent studies show that not only may economic states of affairs (Mueller, 2003), or the news about economic affairs (Hetherington 1996) play an important role, but also the news about real-world developments with respect to other issues such as immigration, health care, and numbers of visible body bags in foreign intervention (Johnston/Pattie 2001; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007a).

H6 Success: The more the direction of news about real-world developments with respect to an issue corresponds with the direction of the policy aims of the government in the news, the higher citizen satisfaction with the results of government policy will be
Hypothesis H6 assumes that government popularity depends on the communication of successes. Ambition hypothesis H6’ is simply a reversal of the ‘success’ hypothesis H6.

H6’ Ambition: The more the direction of news about real-world developments with respect to an issue contradicts the direction of the policy aims of the government in the news, the higher citizen satisfaction with the results of government policy will be.

Hypotheses H6 and H6’ are mutually exclusive. We will let the data speak for itself to answer the question of whether satisfaction with midterm government policy actually depends on H6 or on H6’.

2.2.4 Satisfaction with government and trust in government

The impact of the news on satisfaction with government policies – i.e. satisfaction with perceived issue importance, satisfaction with government information, and satisfaction with government results – will ultimately influence the overall evaluation of the government. We regard the overall evaluation of the government as trust (Putnam 2000; Norris 2002). Here we will test the hypothesis that trust depends in a predictable way on policy satisfaction, rather than in ‘charismatic’ qualities of the Prime Minister or the ministers.

H7 Trust. Trust in government depends on satisfaction with government policies.

Not every single issue will bear an equal impact on government trust. Because of the media attention for the Iranagate issue, voters tended to evaluate President Reagan with respect to his Iranagate policy rather than with regard to his social policies (Krosnick/Kinder 1990). In the literature, this is known as priming (Iyengar/Kinder 1987). Priming in the context of news effects research entails that news consumers base the criteria that guide their evaluations and decisions on the relative media attention for various issues in the recent past. In the context of satisfaction with government policies, priming entails that trust in government will especially be based on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of citizens with the issues that attracted the highest amount of media attention.

H8 Priming: The higher the media attention for an issue, the greater the impact will be of the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the government policy regarding that issue upon trust in the government.

It should be noted that from a methodological point of view the priming effect entails an interaction effect between the amount of news for each issue and a respondent’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with government policy regarding these issues.
2.3 An overview of hypotheses to be tested

*Figure 1* presents an overview of the hypotheses to be tested in this paper.

*Figure 1: Overview*

The figure shows a model with three dependent policy perception variables as mediators between the news and trust in government: perceived issue importance, satisfaction with government information, and satisfaction with the results of government policy. Perceived issue importance is expected to be dependent on the amount of news (H1, agenda setting). Satisfaction with government information is expected to be dependent on the amount of news as well (H2, learning), but also on the unambiguity of the news about government ambitions (H3, ambiguity). Satisfaction with the outcomes of government policies is expected to be dependent on news about the direction of government policy (H4 direction) and on its social base according to the news (H5). Satisfaction may increase when real-world conditions correspond with the direction of issue positions (H6, success communication), but also when real-world conditions have to be improved to match government intentions (H6', ambition communication). Trust in government is expected to increase when the issues prioritized by the government are deemed important, and also when satisfaction with information provision and with the actual results increases (H7). The weight of the satisfaction with regard to a specific issue to explain trust in government increases when that issue is deemed more important (H8 priming).
3. Method

Testing the hypotheses demands a content analysis of news content on the one hand and survey data about satisfaction with government policies on the other hand. The Dutch Governmental Information Office RVD commissioned the collection of such data for the year 2004, the midterm year of the coalition government of CDA, VVD and D66. In the proportional Dutch multiparty system with an electoral threshold of only 0.667 percent to get a seat in the 150-seat Parliament, the government is always a coalition of two or more parties. In May 2003 a coalition government of Christian Democrats (CDA), right-wing liberals (VVD) and left-wing liberals (D66) took office. In addition to the data to test the hypotheses, content analysis data will be presented to show how the news changed when elections approached. The content analysis data were collected at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. The survey data for 2004 were collected by MarketResponse Inc.

3.1 Surveys to Measure Public Opinion

Commissioned by the Dutch Governmental Information Office, MarketResponse Inc. conducted a random sample survey every three months in 2004, to measure public satisfaction for prioritized policy issues of the government. Each survey had somewhat more or less than a thousand respondents \( n = 910, n = 1093, n = 1035, n = 1039 \) respondents respectively. The policy issues were related to eleven policy domains: economic affairs, financial affairs, social welfare, health care, agriculture and environment, Europe and foreign affairs, traffic and transportation, crime, (im)migration and integration, public safety, and education. These policy domains correspond roughly, but not completely, with demarcation lines between the ministries in the Netherlands. For each policy domain, five issues were distinguished that were designated as policy priorities by the Dutch coalition government. To reduce the length of the interviews, only five policy domains were addressed in the first and third waves, whereas the other six policy domains were included in the second and fourth waves, thus giving rise to two measurements for each policy issue within one year. For each of the eleven policy domains, the respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with government policy.

3.1.1 Operationalization

Five-point scales (completely unimportant – unimportant – neutral, do not know – important – very unimportant) were used throughout to measure the dependent variables satisfaction with government policy and trust in government.

To operationalise the perceived (satisfaction with) issue importance, three questions were asked. "How important is <this issue> for you personally?", "How important is <this issue> for the country?" and "Should the government pay more or less attention to <this issue>?". These three issues build up a weak scale (Cronbach's alpha = .65, \( n = 57,887 \) respondent-issue combinations). The weakness of the issue importance scale...
can be explained in part by question wordings that also tap satisfaction with the direction of government policy.  

Satisfaction with the information regarding the government policy with respect to an issue was measured with one direct question: “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the information from the government with respect to <this issue>?”.  

Three questions were used to operationalise satisfaction with results of government policy regarding an issue for most of the issues. One broad question asked “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the government policy with respect to <this issue>?”. In addition, two more specific questions were asked. “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the decisiveness of the government with respect to <this issue>?“ and “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the results of government policy with respect to <this issue>?”. The three issues built a strong scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .85, \( n = 49,442 \) issue-respondent pairs). Unfortunately, the third item, which is most suited to test the hypothesis regarding the influence of the news on government satisfaction with policy results, was not posed in every wave for every issue. Cronbach’s alpha justifies the computation of an unweighted mean from the three items. The respondent-specific mean of the measured indicators was substituted in the case of missing values on the three indicators.  

To operationalize trust in government, one question was used to assess trust in government directly.

3.2 Content Analysis to Measure News Variables

All Dutch newspapers that were electronically available at the Vrije Universiteit on April 1, 2004 were included in the research. The 24 newspapers that were analyzed include most national newspapers and all regional newspapers that are distributed in eight of the twelve provinces of the Netherlands. Regional newspapers were included in the research because of their focus on specific issues such as local crime or regional traffic jams. Television news was excluded from the research on the basis of the assumption that most television news will appear also in newspapers (Kleinnijenhuis et
al. 2007b), although television news may have a larger impact. For the same reason, websites were not included in the content analysis.

An article was selected if it referred to the government in its headline or lead or to one of the 55 prioritized issues. A stratified sample of articles was drawn from this population of relevant newspaper articles for each of the eleven policy domains. 12,987 articles were coded in total.

A relational content analysis using the NET method (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 1997; Kriesi et al. 2006; Popping 2000; van Cuilenburg et al. 1986), a method for ‘semantic network analysis’ (Krippendorff 2004; van Atteveldt 2008) was used to record the attention and the direction devoted to the policy issues in the news. Semantic Network Analysis starts with a hierarchically structured ‘ontology’ of actors and issues to tap the attention and the direction devoted to the policy issues in the news (van Atteveldt 2008). Actors were divided into seven groups: the government, parliament and political parties, the judiciary, public administration, the media, societal actors, and foreign actors. Each group of actors was subdivided into a more detailed list of actors in order to facilitate the coding procedure. For instance, governmental actors were subdivided into the ministries from the Netherlands and the royal family. The ministers and assistant Secretaries of State were classified according to their ministry. All Members of Parliament (first and second Chamber in the Netherlands) were listed, as well as other party politicians such as former leaders and party chairmen. The complete list of actors consisted of 314 governmental actors and about 500 other actors.

Issues were subdivided into the eleven policy domains that were used in the survey. For each policy domain, five issues were distinguished that were designated as policy priorities by the Dutch government. These 55 issues were split up further in concrete (sub)topics, and aspects. For each policy domain, many more issues appeared in the news than those designated by the government as policy priorities. A few issues, such as terrorism prevention, which actually received quite a lot of government attention according to the news, were not included in the official list of 55 issues that were prioritized by the government. Some prioritized issues were very broad (e.g. decreasing the gap between the government and its citizens), whereas other issues were very specific to the degree of receiving almost no media attention (e.g. the promotion of volunteer work). The complete list of issues consisted of 1,553 sub-issues.

This ontology of issues and actors was used in an automated content analysis, but here we will focus on a manual content analysis. Coders used this detailed list of (sub-)issues and (sub)actors to extract statements – protocol statements, or ‘nuclear sentences’ from the headlines and leads from the newspaper articles that were characterized by a subject / predicate / direction of the predicate / object-relationships, either or not attributed to quoted or paraphrased news sources. Each sentence from a newspaper article could contain one or more nuclear sentences. Coders extracted 53,978 statements in total.

Two types of statements are especially interesting for the purpose of this article: statements regarding policy positions of actors with respect to issues (e.g. "Minister Peijs / wants to increase (+1) / traffic safety") and factual statements in the news regarding the actual developments of these issues, (e.g. "Increase in 2003 of (+) / traffic safety"). The (+)-sign in both sentences denotes that ‘increase’ is an instance of a posi-
tive predicate. A ‘decrease’ would have resulted in a negative sign. In the first type of statement, an actor takes a position in a certain policy issue or policy plan. For the purpose of this article, we simply divided actors into governmental actors from the Netherlands and in other actors. We will refer to these sentences as news on policy positions. We distinguish between news on policy positions by the government, and news on policy positions by other actors. In the second type of statement, a ‘factual’ statement about a policy issue is made, without specifying who or what holds this position. These kinds of sentences present real-world developments with regard to issues as bare facts, without an attribution of their development to a specific cause or a specific causator. We will refer to them as news on real-world developments.

3.2.1 Operationalization

The fine-grained content analysis enables us to distinguish between the amount of news regarding an issue and the direction of the news toward an issue. The direction of issue positions was measured per issue position statement on a –1 ... +1 scale. The direction of issue positions would correspond to the direction of government plans, which corresponded in every instance with the ‘valence’ of issues according to (the majority of) Dutch voters. +1 would indicate that an actor succeeded in presenting a newsworthy statement indicating that the actor strives for what the Dutch government – and the majority of the Dutch population – wanted to achieve also (e.g. employment rather than unemployment). For issues on which the public is divided (e.g. whether asylum seekers should be sent back to their former countries) the majority opinion was considered to be +1. The value –1 would indicate that an actor strives for something which is negatively evaluated by Dutch citizens.

The amount of news regarding an issue is the independent variable in hypotheses 1 and 2. The amount of news regarding an issue was measured as the square root of the number of nuclear sentences with regard to a policy issue. The nuclear sentences that deal with a policy issue can either be sentences with news on policy positions by the government or by other actors, or sentences regarding real-world developments. The square root was taken both on the basis of common sense (whether 0 or 2 stories deal with an issue makes more of a difference than whether 90 or 92 stories deal with it) and on the basis of statistical tests (preventing outliers, but not throwing away interesting variations to a similar degree as with a log transformation (van Noije 2007).

Unambiguous news regarding policy issues is the independent variable in hypothesis 3. The amount of unambiguous news regarding policy issues was measured as the square of the direction of a policy. Taking the square from a –1 ... +1 scale implies that both negative and positive statements will lead to values near one, whereas neutral statements as well as ambiguous and contradictory statements (that amount to near-zero values on the average), will give rise to a value near zero. So the closer the square of the direction of the amount of news approaches one, the more unambiguous the direction of the news is.

The direction of the government’s position on policy issues is the independent variable in hypothesis 4. The amount of news regarding the direction of policy plans toward an issue is measured as the sum of the directions from separate statements.
The direction of other actors’ positions on policy issues is the independent variable in hypothesis 5. The amount of news about other actors supporting the policy plans of the government was measured as the square root of the number of nuclear sentences with regard to news on policy positions held by actors other than the government. Since the direction of policy positions of other actors was coded equivalently as the direction of government policy positions, we can infer support for the government policy by other actors simply from a positive sign of the policy positions of other actors.

The direction of real-world developments, is the dependent variable in hypothesis 6. The amount of news regarding the direction of real-world developments was measured as the sum of the directions from separate statements about real-world developments, which were measured also on a −1 ... +1 scale. The positive or negative sign of the news on real-world developments was coded in the same direction as the news on issue positions, which enables us to infer the results of government policy according to the press from the direction of the news about real-world developments. This operationalization discounts the possibility that real-world developments could be attributed to something other than government policy.

3.3 Data analysis

Media content about an issue and a respondent’s satisfaction with the government policy regarding that issue were connected at the level of individual respondents so as to take into account the personal news in the newspapers consumed by each single respondent. Thus, content variables with respect to the content of the media used by a single respondent were assigned as values on contextual variables to that respondent. It should be noticed that this is a major step forward as compared to the majority of studies that do not take into account the selective exposure to specific media by single respondents. It should be noted that most newspaper readers use the Internet and watch television also. Since television news and even Internet discussions reflect newspapers to a large extent, we assumed that respondents who did not read a newspaper would nevertheless be surrounded by the news climate as defined by the average newspaper. Therefore, respondents who did not read a newspaper were assigned the average values of the various newspapers, weighted with their circulation.

The hypotheses to be tested in this article center on issues and citizens, thus raising the question of whether citizens, issues, or citizen-issue combinations should be used as the units of analysis, or whether a multilevel analysis should be employed. Aggregation to the level of citizens is impractical because we would then have to test the hypotheses for each of the 55 issues involved. Aggregation to the level of issues would result in high correlations, but would completely neglect the jerkiness in individual responses to the news. For the purpose of this article, a pooled analysis with citizen-issue combinations as the units of analysis is presented.
4. Results

Table 2 gives a description of media coverage and public satisfaction at the level of eleven policy domains that were included in the research.

4.1 The news about government policy

The first column displays the amount of news the eleven different policy domains received in the news. The amount of news attention that is presented here does not show the total attention in the news for this policy domains, but rather the news attention of a policy domain as far as it deals with the five policy priorities as defined by the government.

The second column displays the amount of unambiguous news regarding policy plans of the government. In general, the news presents a rather ambiguous image of the policy plans of the government (on average 0.31 on a 0 ... 1 scale). The reason simply is that newsworthy politicians will remain newsworthy by allowing a great number of exceptions to policy principles. The policy domain of Social Welfare may serve as an example. On average, the minister of social affairs succeeded in presenting fairly unambiguous policy proposals (+0.42), but negotiations about the issues of pensions for the elderly and the issue of minimum wages inspired the minister to present contradictory statements with regard to his policy ambitions in successive phases of the negotiations.

The third and fourth columns present the mean direction of the position of the government and other actors on policy issues. In general, the position of government on policy issues as presented in the news is positive (0.17). In general, the statements of others are almost neutral (0.07). Thus, the social base of the policy plans of the government is not very solid, according to the news in 2004, but only in the case of Financial Affairs support is it more often lacking. The mean direction of the real-world developments is even less positive (0.02 last row column five). In the midterm year, the direction of real-world developments corresponded only weakly with the ambitions of the government.

All in all, the news is not expected to shape a very favorable overall image of government performance. The government’s intention toward policy plans or their ability to claim success is rather modest, leading to a rather ambiguous overall image of the policy plans of the government. The social base for the policy plans of the government and the real-world developments are not very helpful either in clarifying this diffuse overall image of the policy issues. In line with this overall image, the public opinion variables show dissatisfaction with information provided by the government and with results of the government policy regarding issues (~0.10 and ~0.19 respectively).

Most of the policy domains follow this overall pattern, with some notable characteristics. The policy domain ‘economic affairs’ does not receive too much attention in the news. The government tries to improve economic affairs in a modest way (0.19), but lacks a clear social base in this respect (0.05). However, the real-world conditions are developing clearly in the desired direction. According to the news, the economy is
Table 2: Media coverage and public satisfaction per policy domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Domain</th>
<th>News variables</th>
<th>Public opinion variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amount of news on issue</td>
<td>Amount of unambiguous news policy issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic affairs</td>
<td>(0 .. ∞)</td>
<td>(0 .. 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial affairs</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social welfare</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and environment</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European/foreign affairs</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic and transportation</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice (no crime)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration and integration</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public safety</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recovering from the recession (+0.17). Moreover, the news indicates that the minister, Laurens-Jan Brinkhorst, really succeeded in implementing his privatization plans.

For the policy domain ‘justice (no crime)’ and ‘(im)migration and integration’, the ambiguity of the policy plans in the news is very high (0.14 for immigration and integration and 0.20 for justice). To the indignation of Parliamentarians and the press, Minister of Justice Mr. Donner continued to present nuanced statements on the rights of criminals and the impossibility to rule out crime and the risk of terrorist attacks completely. The real-world developments for these policy domains – somewhat less crime, a somewhat more tough policy on immigrants – are much in line with Mr. Donner’s ambition level of policy plans. A prevention approach was adopted, rather than ambitious policy plans.

4.2 Public opinion

The last columns in Table 2 refer to the public opinion variables that measure perceived issue performance, information satisfaction, and policy satisfaction.

As is known from previous research, citizens will usually say that many things are important when specifically asked about (they will be much more selective with free recall). This expected pattern can be observed here also: European and foreign affairs are deemed the least important (+0.63) and financial affairs the most important (+0.76).

The most remarkable finding from Table 2 is presumably that the Dutch citizens of 2004 are quite dissatisfied, without a clear origin of this dissatisfaction in real-world indicators of the Dutch economy or the crime rate in the Netherlands. In 2004 Dutch citizens thought that the information from their government was poor, especially with respect to justice and crime (–0.16). But also in the realm of socio-economic policy (financial affairs –0.17, economic affairs –0.13 and social welfare –0.11) citizens are far from confident that the information presented to them is satisfactory.

Citizens are dissatisfied with the results of government policy also. The Dutch were especially displeased with the results of the financial policy of the Dutch government (especially with respect to the purchasing power of ordinary citizens). In the aftermath of the murders of politician Pim Fortuyn, school teacher Hans van Wieren and film-maker Theo van Gogh, the Dutch are seriously dissatisfied with the actual results of the policies with respect to immigration and integration also (–0.30).

4.3 Tests of the hypothesis

Table 3 presents standardized regression coefficients, their significance levels, and the $R^2$ to test the hypotheses. For each hypothesis, the independent variable and dependent variable are listed, followed by the standardized regression coefficient, and an indication of the level of significance of the latter.

The table shows that most of the hypotheses are confirmed. By and large, the news does have the expected effects on policy satisfaction and trust. Standardized regression
### Table 3: Tests of the hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>beta</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1 (agenda setting)</td>
<td>Amount of news regarding an issue</td>
<td>Perceived issue importance</td>
<td>0.05***</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2 (learning)</td>
<td>Amount of news regarding an issue</td>
<td>Satisfaction with government information</td>
<td>–Ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3 (ambiguity)</td>
<td>Amount of unambiguous news of policy issues of the government</td>
<td>Satisfaction with government information</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4 (direction)</td>
<td>Amount of news for direction of the government's position on policy issues</td>
<td>Satisfaction with the results of government policy</td>
<td>–Ns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5 (social base)</td>
<td>Amount of news for direction of other actors' position on policy issues</td>
<td>Satisfaction with perceived issue importance</td>
<td>0.05***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6 (results)</td>
<td>Amount of news for direction of real-world developments corresponding with direction of policy plans (interaction effect)</td>
<td>Satisfaction with results of government policy</td>
<td>-0.03***</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7 (trust)</td>
<td>Satisfaction with government information</td>
<td>Trust in the government</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8 (priming)</td>
<td>Interaction perceived issue importance * satisfaction with results of government policy</td>
<td>Trust in the government</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 57,887 issue-respondent combinations. Some tests at other levels of aggregation give confidence in the results (cf. Table 4).  
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05, ns non-significant.
coefficients and explained variances are low, however. This means that it is impossible to predict whether specific citizens will be influenced by the news in the expected direction. It is also impossible to predict for each specific issue whether citizens will be influenced, which may not come as a surprise, since the model did not include sociodemographic variables and predispositions as additional variables at the level of citizens.3

4.3.1 Issue importance and satisfaction with government information

Media attention indeed has an agenda setting effect on public attention (H1). Citizens tend to regard issues as important when these issues attract much attention in the news. The small size of the regression coefficient, although highly significant at the aggregate level, comes down to an almost negligible R², which means that the predictive power of the agenda setting hypothesis is low at the level of separate issues and individual respondents.

The amount of news does not play a significant role in subjective learning about government policies. Hypothesis H2, which states that satisfaction with government information will increase already if the media provide more news about an issue, is rejected (H2 rejected). Neither did the data support hypothesis H4, which states that satisfaction with government information will increase systematically with the amount of news specifically dealing with the direction of government policy regarding that issue. Satisfaction with government information will decrease, however, when the ambiguity of government proposals as reported in the news increases. Thus, hypothesis H4 is accepted. Media attention for unambiguous statements about government policy may influence the satisfaction with the information provision. The sheer amount of statements in the news from the Minister of Social Affairs about minimum wages may serve as an example: according to the news in July 2004, the minister wanted to enable working below the statutory minimum wage, but in October 2004 he wanted to maintain the minimum wage, and in December 2004 the news was once more that the minister wanted to enable working below the minimum.

4.3.2 Satisfaction with policy results

News about the direction of government policy plans did not increase by itself either the satisfaction with policy results, but attention for statements of actors who endorsed the government plans did increase satisfaction with results. Thus, hypothesis H4 was rejected, whereas hypothesis H5 was accepted. The likelihood that citizens will be satisfied with the results of government policy increases when other actors have the same policy direction as the government (interaction effect of policy direction of the government and policy direction of others). The opposite side of the coin of hypothesis H5

3 The significant results of Table 3 remain significant in a random intercept multilevel model which assumes, in addition to the model assumptions from Table 3, that the levels of perceived issue importance, satisfaction with information, and satisfaction with results vary randomly between respondents.
is that news about actors who disagreed with the government on the direction of policy plans will diminish satisfaction with the results of government policy.

Hypothesis H6 relates most directly to the question of whether citizens were satisfied or dissatisfied due to the communication of ambitions, or due to the communication of results. Hypothesis H6 maintains that news in the media about real-world developments that correspond to the policy plans of the government will lead to satisfaction about policy results. Hypothesis H6 assumes that satisfaction is due to success communication, whereas the reverse hypothesis H6’ maintains that satisfaction with results is highest if the news indicates that there are still many problems to solve. H6’ reflects ambition communication. By and large, hypothesis H6’ rather than H6 is confirmed, as indicated by the negative regression coefficient. The negative sign of the standardized regression coefficient of the direction of real-world developments according to the news indicates that citizens will be more satisfied with government policy, when the discrepancy increases between government plans and government results. A large discrepancy between plans and results is to be expected when the government sticks to the communication of ambitions (the country is a mess, but we want to do something about it), rather than to the communication of results (the country is in a good shape, due to us). The negative regression coefficient for hypothesis H6 means that citizens were more satisfied with results, when actually the real-world situation differed strongly from the policy plans of the government.

We will elaborate further on the sign of the regression coefficient for hypothesis H6, thus on the remarkable outcome that policy satisfaction with policy results during the midterm of the coalition government rested more on the communication of ambitions than on the communication of success. Table 4 presents the correlation coefficient between the direction of real-world conditions according to the news with citizens’ satisfaction for each of the eleven policy domains separately. To interpret the results, one should be aware that the direction of real-world developments was coded as positive when this direction corresponded with the direction of the policy positions of the government. A negative correlation coefficient means therefore that news about real-world developments that is not in line with what the government wants coincides with satisfaction about the results of government policy. A significantly negative correlation coefficient can be interpreted as a sign that policy satisfaction is high because the government demonstrates the ambition to cure the real-world problems. A significantly positive correlation coefficient can be interpreted as a sign that the government is approved because the news indicates that the policy goals have been realized already. The left-hand side of Table 4 lists the policy areas for which citizen satisfaction and dissatisfaction was apparently brought about by ambition communication or a lack of it. The right-hand side of Table 4 lists the policy areas for which citizen satisfaction and dissatisfaction was apparently brought about by success communication or a lack of it. Not included in the table are policy domains that did not raise satisfaction with either of these two communication strategies.

The right-hand side of the table shows that results communication is only the rule in the policy domains of financial affairs and economic affairs. Citizen satisfaction increases when news reports indicate that the economy is indeed improving.
The left-hand side of the table shows that the communication of ambitions was most strongly represented in the domain of health care. For this policy domain, this is a logical choice, since the Minister for Health Care, Hans Hoogervorst, strove for a system change in health from 2006 onward, which included the privatization of all health care insurance. For health care, the point at which to switch from the communication of ambitions to the communication of results was only possible after January 2006. Until January 2006, the government had every reason to create news about problems in the old health care system. Citizen satisfaction appears to rely on ambition communication not only for health care, but also for five out of eleven other policy fields.

### 4.3.3 Trust in government as a result of policy satisfaction

Next, we turn to the explanation of trust in the government as a function of policy satisfaction. Although trust in government may also be explained in part by trust in government leaders – e.g. by crisis performance – this study shows that trust in the government is also a matter of satisfaction with government policy. Trust in government depends on the perception that the issues addressed by the government are important ones (beta = 0.03), on satisfaction with government information (beta = 0.15), on satisfaction with the results of government policy (beta = 0.17). The results of government policy play an even bigger role in the case of issues that are perceived as important (beta interaction effect 0.04; priming hypothesis H8). The original hypothesis, stating that the amount of news rather than perceived importance was responsible for the priming effect, was weakly confirmed as well, but the priming effect of perceived issue importance is somewhat stronger. Ten percent of the variance of trust is accounted for by these variables.

### 4.4 Epilogue: the shift towards success communication

Did the Dutch coalition government that took office in 2003 eventually succeed in making the shift in communication strategy from the communication of ambitions to-
wards the communication of success? In November 2006, parliamentary elections were held in the Netherlands. As this case study has shown, the point of departure for the coalition government in 2004 was not very positive for winning an election. When, in September 2005, the government parties announced in their State of the Union for the Parliamentary Year 2005-2006 that the government’s plans had turned out to be successful and that the economy had improved greatly, scepticism and disbelief dominated the media.

However, the government still managed to successfully negotiate the shift from communication of ambition to communication of success, albeit only six months before the elections. According to the press, real-world conditions in every domain had improved, or at least not deteriorated, with the exception of the policy domain of education (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2007b). The Christian Democrats (CDA) managed to claim these positive economic conditions as policy results. They succeeded in bringing all their ministers into the top-30 of newsworthy politicians, except for two ministers who could be considered a risk because of their political vulnerability. The other coalition party (the VVD, right-wing Liberals) did not succeed in claiming their share of this result. Actually two VVD-ministers held the ministries of Health Care and Financial Affairs, which showed extreme ambition communication and extreme success communication in 2004, but in the VVD election campaign of 2006 these two ministers – Hoogervorst and Zalm – did not play a significant role. Both had decided already to put an end to their political career. Their successes could easily be claimed by the CDA as the party of Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende. The third coalition party (D66, left-wing Liberals) had caused the fall of the coalition government in June 2006 and subsequently became an opposition party. D66 were unable to claim results either and the party lost half its seats. The Labour Party PvdA, which was the largest opposition party, could bring only three politicians into the top-30. All three turned out to be vulnerable for the focused and persistent attacks launched by the Christian-Democrats especially. Both the VVD, the PvdA and D66 lost enormously at the elections, whereas the CDA, as the largest incumbent party, was able to remain the largest party in the Netherlands.

5. Discussion

In this study, seven interrelated hypotheses were tested with respect to the effects of public information on policy satisfaction. Public information has not gained much attention in the literature on political communication, although its importance is beyond discussion (Graber/Smith 2005). The study showed that well-known hypotheses of agenda setting and priming apply to public information also. A number of specific hypotheses withstood a test also. Ambiguous government policies, at the least ambiguous news about these policies, will lead to a decreased satisfaction with the information provision by the government. A solid social base for a policy, that is to say, stakeholders who endorse the policy in the news, increases the satisfaction with the outcomes of government policies. Remarkable results were found with respect to the question of whether news on real-world conditions that are evaluated negatively by the ma-
majority of the population (e.g. unemployment, more serial criminals, high health care costs) is always detrimental for the satisfaction with results. That is not the case. Policy satisfaction during the midterm year of the government was much more consistent with satisfaction due to the communication of ambitions (i.e. it’s a mess, and we want to do something about it) than with the communication of results (i.e. everything under control, due to us). In their midterm, the government continued to rely on the type of ambition communication that is used by a new government to increase societal support for its new policies.

This exploratory study clearly has limits. Presumably some effects of the news on policy satisfaction would have shown to be stronger if television news had been taken into account also. In this study we used only issue news to explain trust in the government, whereas trust in government is also dependent on conflict news and horserace news (Patterson 1993). In the present study, the effects of personality and charisma on trust were neglected. Even more importantly, we did not include citizen characteristics in the model to see how different categories of citizens react to the news about government policies.

Nevertheless, the research results show a consistent pattern. From the point of view of communication research, the encouraging finding is that almost all hypotheses – which were derived from theories that were developed outside the context of public information provision – appeared to apply to public information as well.

From the point of view of democratic theory, the research results are both encouraging and worrying. The research results are encouraging, because they show that citizens’ trust in government is not merely a whim of fashion, but based on the news that citizens were able to obtain from the media about the issues, the policy plans of the government, the social base for it, as well as on the results of government policies. The research results give evidence for the existence of a ‘rational public’. The research results show that citizens fulfill the role they are expected to fulfill from the point of view of democratic theories: they evaluate the government on the basis of its policy performance. Whereas pessimists like Schumpeter (1944) and Downs (1957) assumed that voters would only look retrospectively at the state of the economy, this study shows that citizens take a much broader range of issues into account (Johnston/Pattie 2001). Moreover, citizens appear to look also prospectively, for example to see whether government plans are unambiguous.

However, the research results are worrying also. Satisfaction with government policy is not simply a plaything for governments and political parties, but an end in itself. The data show citizens who are dissatisfied with government policy on most of the 55 issues addressed in this study. Emphasizing real-world problems to increase the social base for ambitious plans is not a viable strategy in the longer run. Uneasiness about real-world problems and doubts about government policy may enhance a lack of trust in other areas, such as xenophobia and a lack of consumer trust, thereby contributing to ethnic tensions and a faltering economy. The research results show that attention in the press for negative real-world developments combined with attention for ambiguous, contradictory, complex, and extremely vague and contingent government plans shaped dissatisfaction with government policies.
Widespread dissatisfaction with government policies raises the question of how dissatisfaction can occur notwithstanding the growing number of communication advisers in government offices and the growing number of television stations and political journalists. One clue is given in an essay by Roderick Hart (1996). Governments have to shift from an emphasis on socio-economic problems that are supposed to increase the social base for newly-developed, but painful, government plans, toward an emphasis on socio-economic successes, which are usually attributed to the government in office. Whereas in the age of newspapers, ministries and ministers could easily escape from the news in the years in between election campaigns, a media silence is no real option with communication advisers and journalists omnipresent. In the age of publicity, governments seem to have forgotten when “speech is silver, but silence is gold”. Journalists immediately hunt for scandals when the honeymoon weeks of a new government have passed. The result is often an abrupt and uncoordinated shift from the message that serious problems exist that need to be cured by future government policy, toward the message that the problems have been solved already.

References
