The notion of democracy can be conceived differently. However, all notions of democracy concur that assigning independent mass media a key role is one of the vital traits of a system of government where leaders are ultimately accountable to the people (Scammell 2000). Without a free press, it would be impossible for citizens to gain the ‘enlightened understanding’ that Dahl considers one of the key requirements of genuinely democratic decision-making, and the foundation of elected leaders’ legitimacy (Dahl 1998). It is no small paradox then, that, as Kepplinger (1998: 225–6) notes, the freedom of the press might also become dysfunctional for democracy, bearing—while nonetheless remaining one of its key components—a potential to undermine its support in society.

For three decades now, the mass media in Western democracies have continuously been criticized for being potentially harmful to democracy. This chapter explores the most recent contribution to this debate; the hypothesis, put forward by Putnam (1995, 2000), that television erodes modern democracies’ social capital. Putnam argues that television-watching is detrimental to social capital because it absorbs time that citizens no longer have available for civic engagement, and because it has psychological consequences that are harmful for people’s motivation to participate in collaborative activities. Although less prominently, Putnam also considers the role of the printed press for social capital. His view concerning newspapers is far more sanguine. While television, especially televised entertainment, is clearly assigned the role of the ‘bad guy’ in Putnam’s narrative of civics and its blessings for modern societies, newspapers are unequivocally seen as the ‘good guy’.

1 The author is indebted to Martin Elf for methodological advice at an early stage of this research.
The purpose of this paper is to test these claims’ validity for 19 European countries. In contrast to previous research on this topic, my analysis applies a wider scope. It not only focuses on micro level effects of individual media usage on media users’ stocks of social capital. Rather, the present explorations expand this rather limited perspective by inquiring the individual-level consequences of country-specific macro patterns of media consumption, which may be seen as indicative for the operation of processes of indirect, socially mediated effects of mass media on social capital.

Starting from a pure individual-level model like those typical of existing research in this field, it will be tested whether social capital is also responsive to styles of media usage that characterize societies as a whole. It is hypothesized that, regardless of any possible individual-level effects of media usage, individuals’ social capital is, to some degree, also dependent on the media consumption habits of the respective societies in which they are embedded. Hence, members of societies where television consumption is high, and where televised entertainment has a strong attendance, are expected to display lower levels of social capital than members of societies that pay less attention to the audiovisual medium and its entertainment programs. In contrast, people belonging to societies where many citizens read the papers are expected to display higher levels of social capital than others, again independently of their own reading habits. Whether such phenomena play a role with regard to the relationship between media usage and social capital cannot be decided by means of pure individual-level analysis. Only by comparing individuals as members of specific societies that differ in their aggregate television and newspaper consumption, can such macro-micro relationships be decided. This requires the application of techniques of multilevel analysis (Hox 2002; Rosar 2003; Luke 2004).

Locating Putnam’s propositions in the context of the more general theme of ‘media malaise’ in subsection 1.1, the chapter starts with a detailed discussion of Putnam’s propositions about media effects on social capital in subsection 1.2. The related evidence that has been accumulated so far is then reviewed in subsection 1.3. Subsequently, the main hypothesis of the present paper, depicting media effects on social capital in terms of contextual effects, is developed in subsection 1.4. The remainder of the paper is devoted to a test of this hypothesis with regard to both television and the printed press, using data from the 2002 ESS, supplemented with data from television broadcasters’ audience research and from press statistics. Subsection 2.1 describes