

What Politicians Look for in the News and How That Affects Their Behavior: A Uses and Gratifications Approach to Political Agenda Setting

JUHO VESA¹

HELENA BLOMBERG

CHRISTIAN KROLL

University of Helsinki, Finland

PETER VAN AELST

University of Antwerp, Belgium

Studies have shown that politicians follow the news media closely and react to news through their parliamentary activities. However, we know little about what kinds of information politicians look for in the media and actively use when being responsive to the media. Inspired by the uses and gratifications tradition, we ask what kinds of information politicians look for in the news and how these “informational media use motives” explain their media responsiveness. A survey of Finnish parliamentarians shows that most politicians use the news to learn about society and societal problems. Politicians also use the news to look for information about public opinion, and younger politicians especially search information about other political actors. Politicians who look for information about public opinion from the media are more reactive to media regarding symbolic agendas. Politicians who use the media to learn about other political actors are more responsive to media regarding substantial agendas.

Keywords: political agenda-setting, uses and gratifications, mediatization, politicians, survey, Finland

The news media has an information function in politics: Studies show that politicians get politically relevant information from news media coverage (e.g., Sevenans, 2017). At the same time, a growing body of research shows that politicians are responsive to media coverage in their parliamentary activities—for

Juho Vesa: juho.vesa@helsinki.fi

Helena Blomberg: helena.blomberg@helsinki.fi

Christian Kroll: christian.kroll@helsinki.fi

Peter Van Aelst: peter.vanaelst@uantwerpen.be

Date submitted: 2017–05–02

¹ This research was supported by the Academy of Finland (Grant Number 132031) and the Kone Foundation (grant for Vesa). We would like to thank Reijo Sund and Laszlo Vincze for their advice with the statistical analyses and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

Copyright © 2018 (Juho Vesa, Helena Blomberg, Christian Kroll, and Peter Van Aelst). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

instance, they may use news stories as inspiration for their parliamentary questions (for a recent overview, see Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016a). First, time-series studies have shown that the saliency of issues on the media agenda predicts issue saliency on political agendas in parliaments and governments (e.g., Soroka 2002; Vliegenhart et al., 2016; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Second, surveyed politicians have also acknowledged that the news media has this power to set political agendas (e.g., Lengauer, Donges, & Plasser, 2014; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Recently, scholars have started to pay a growing amount of attention to the *mechanisms* of the media's political agenda-setting power, investigating why politicians, from time to time, react to media coverage (e.g., Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Sevenans, Walgrave, & Epping 2016; Thesen, 2013). Studies have suggested that part of politicians' media responsiveness can be explained by the media's information function: Media gives politicians information that they can actively use in their parliamentary work (Sevenans, 2017; see also Van Aelst & Walgrave 2016b).

Two research gaps exist in the mentioned studies. First, although we know, on a general level, that the media gives information to politicians, "we know little about what they learn from it" (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b, p. 502). There is scattered evidence that politicians, for instance, learn from the media about public opinion (e.g., F. L. Cook et al., 1983; Herbst, 1998) or other political actors' views and actions (cf. T. Cook, 1998), but no studies have systematically examined how important the media is as a source of different types of information. Second, although we know that the information function of media explains part of politicians' responsiveness to media coverage (Sevenans, 2017), we do not know what kinds of information they respond to when responding to media coverage. Do they react to media because media gives information on societal problems, public opinion, or other political actors (cf. Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b)?

In this article, we aim at beginning to fill these research gaps by asking, first, (1) what kinds of information do politicians look for in the news media? We call the tendencies of politicians to look for certain types of information their "informational media use motives." Next, we study (2) how politicians' institutional positions, roles, and demographic characteristics explain their informational media use motives, and, finally, (3) how the informational media use motives explain politicians' responsiveness to the media. We take inspiration from the classic uses and gratifications (U&G) tradition that focuses on citizens' motives for using media. Using a survey of Finnish parliamentarians, we apply central ideas of this tradition to elite studies. The U&G approach assumes that it is meaningful to analyze self-reported motivations for media use (e.g., Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In our survey, we asked members of parliament (MPs) what kinds of information they look for in the news media, and we go on to analyze how these informational media use motives predict MPs' reactivity to media. Hence, our main contribution to the political agenda-setting studies is that we test several previously untested assumptions in the literature—for instance, that politicians react to media coverage because the media reports about public opinion.

Media's Information Function and Politicians' Media Responsiveness

News media has a dual function in politics: It gives information to politicians and acts as an arena of political competition (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b). The information function can be further divided into two subfunctions (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b). First, just like ordinary citizens, politicians use the media passively to get information and learn about what is going on in the world (see also Sevenans, 2017). Second, politicians

may actively use the information they get from the media, that is, they may respond to media coverage through their (parliamentary) activities. This active use of information—politicians' *media responsiveness*—has been documented by numerous studies, some of which we mentioned in the introduction. Politicians' motives for media responsiveness may vary; for instance, they may react to media to advance their interests on particular issues (cf. van der Pas, 2014) or to rhetorically attack their political rivals (cf. Thesen, 2013).²

What types of information might politicians, then, get from the media and actively use in their parliamentary work? Although we know little about this empirically, scholars have theoretically separated three main types of information. Politicians might use the media to learn about (1) societal problems, (2) public opinion, and (3) other political actors (e.g., Sevenans, 2017; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b; Vliegenhart et al., 2016; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

First, politicians might use the mass media to find out about societal problems that deserve political action. This means that they use news media coverage in the same way as the public (cf. McCombs & Shaw, 1972): The media is a source of information about important problems in society. We call this the *societal problems motive* for using media. Although this explanation for politicians' media responsiveness is often at least implicitly present in earlier research, no studies have directly tested this proposition. We do not know to what extent politicians learn about societal problems from the news media and whether this information triggers political action.

Second, politicians might use the media to learn about public opinion, and the fact that media coverage "is associated with public opinion" (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, p. 100) might also explain MPs' reactivity to media. We call this the *public opinion motive* for using media. Walgrave and Van Aelst argued that this is the most important reason for politicians to react to media coverage. As they noted, some studies (e.g., F. L. Cook et al., 1983; Herbst, 1998) show that politicians do in fact "read" public opinion from media coverage. Therefore, it can be assumed that "politicians tend to adopt media issues, if not by solving the issue with real measures then, at least, by showing their commitment and displaying their responsiveness" (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, p. 101). However, even if we know that politicians may use the media to learn about public opinion, no studies have directly tested whether this kind of information acquisition leads to media responsiveness: We do not know whether a cognitive acquisition of information is related to behavioral media reactions. Many studies, however, assume the public opinion motive as an explanation for the observed contingencies of media's political agenda-setting power.³ For instance, Sevenans et al. (2016) empirically showed that politicians were more reactive to issues that were prominent in the media and assumed that this was because politicians infer from the prominence that citizens also care about the issue. Walgrave (2008, p. 455) found that MPs who believed that

² It is important to note that often the media is not a neutral transmitter of information in these processes (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b). The mere fact that a piece of information is in the media might make it more usable for politicians (Sevenans, 2018), and the way that the media frames issues may also trigger politicians' reactions (e.g., van der Pas, 2014).

³ Often it is argued that politicians react to media also because they believe that the media affects (not just reports about) public opinion (e.g., Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). This mechanism is not covered by our focus on the informational media use motives, but to take this alternative explanation into account, we use a control variable measuring politicians' beliefs that the news media affects citizens' issue priorities.

“politicians take polls into account in electoral strategy” make parliamentary initiatives more often as a reaction to media coverage than do other MPs. He explained this with a third-person effect—in which media effects are caused by an anticipation of the effects on other politicians—and discussed this finding as evidence of the public opinion motive (Walgrave, 2008). However, another study provided contradictory (yet again indirect) evidence by showing that the media agendas and political agendas overlap less in the early stages of the policy process, when politicians’ responsiveness to public opinion should arguably be stronger (Tresch, Sciarini, & Varone, 2013).

Third, politicians might use the media to learn about what other political actors are saying and doing. Politicians’ reactions to media coverage can thus be reactions to other political actors’ statements and actions communicated via the news media (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). We call this the *intra-elite communication motive* for using media. For instance, T. Cook (1998) argued that political elites use the news media as a means of governing. Strömbäck and Van Aelst (2013) also argued that parties use the media not only for electoral reasons but also to coordinate political decision making in the parliamentary arena (see also Cobb & Elder, 1983). Again, we only have indirect evidence of this media use motive, although it is often at least implicitly assumed in studies on politicians’ media responsiveness. For instance, a study showed that MPs often reacted to media stories that included information on other political actors’ statements and actions (Van Aelst & Vliegenhart, 2014). Another study provided indirect evidence by showing that MPs remembered and discussed news stories more often if the stories contained information about political events (Sevenans et al., 2016).

In sum, we have only scattered evidence of what politicians learn from the media: Earlier research has not systematically compared the importance of different informational media use motives. In addition, we do not know what kinds of information politicians react to when being responsive to the media even though many assumptions about this exist in the literature. As a small first step in filling these research gaps, we propose a research design inspired by the U&G tradition in communication research.

A U&G Approach to Politicians’ Media Responsiveness

The U&G tradition seeks to understand what needs the use of media satisfies: Why do individuals use different media? This research tradition dates back to the 1940s, to the classic studies of Paul Lazarsfeld, Frank Stanton, Herta Herzog, and Bernard Berelson, who studied the gratifications that people sought and obtained from mass media use (for a review of more recent research, see Ruggiero, 2000). Although citizens’ media use motives have been studied extensively within the U&G tradition, it has, to our knowledge, not been used in elite studies. We borrow U&G’s main assumptions and use them to study politicians’ media responsiveness.

First, in line with the basic idea of the tradition, we believe that it is important to study politicians’ self-reported reasons for their news media use. While U&G research has found such diverse media use motives as entertainment, relaxation, and maintaining social relations, we only focus on politicians’ information-related media use motives. Research has shown that the news media is generally consumed heavily by parliamentarians (e.g., Davis, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2008). Also in line with the U&G tradition, we assume that politicians are aware of their motives for using the news media, and therefore self-reported data on these motives are reliable

(e.g., Katz et al., 1973).⁴ Thus, to study what politicians learn from the media, we can simply ask them about this in surveys. This leads us to our first research question:

RQ1: What kinds of information do politicians look for in the news media?

Second, we aim to explain the variation in MPs' informational media use motives. The U&G tradition assumes that media use is goal directed (e.g., Katz et al., 1973). These goals are "derived from interests and externally imposed constraints" (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 10 [referring to Windahl, 1981]). Thus, it might be that politicians' interests and external constraints (e.g., those that are related to their institutional positions or demographic characteristics) cause them to use the media selectively to seek certain kinds of information from the media. For instance, it might be that the media is a more important source of information for younger politicians because, unlike older politicians, they have not yet established personal networks of information (cf. Sevenans, Walgrave, & Vos, 2015). In U&G terms, their *media dependency* would be stronger (cf. Rubin, 2002). Thus, to explore the possible variation in the MPs' media use motives, we pose the following question:

RQ2: How do politicians' institutional positions, roles, and demographic characteristics explain their informational media use motives?

Finally, we study whether and how informational media use motives explain politicians' responsiveness to the media. We argue that politicians' selective (informational) use of media might explain their reactivity to media. More specifically, we suggest that politicians' selectivity toward certain kinds of information accounts for variation in their media responsiveness at an individual level. Thus, this selectivity, or what we call informational media use motives, could explain why some politicians are more reactive to media than others. We already know from earlier studies that politicians' media responsiveness varies at the individual level (e.g., Midtbø, Walgrave, Van Aelst, & Christensen, 2014). Thus, our third research question is:

RQ3: How do politicians' informational media use motives explain their responsiveness to the media?

We have a few expectations regarding the linkages between the informational media use motives and media responsiveness. First, we distinguish between symbolic and substantial political agendas, and expect that different media use motives might explain politicians' activities related to these agendas in a different way. Political agendas form a continuum ranging from symbolic to substantial agendas (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Symbolic agendas are largely rhetorical agendas, where politicians' behavior is mostly aimed at influencing public opinion. Political action on symbolic agendas only rarely affects "hard" policy decisions, such as bills and budget allocations. For instance, oral question hours are, in many parliaments, mostly publicity shows where parties rhetorically attack each other. Substantial agendas, on the other hand, "have a direct impact on, or *are*, policy" (Thesen, Van Aelst, Vliegthart, & Walgrave, 2013, p. 10; emphasis in original). One example is the parliamentary standing committees, which handle bills and budget proposals. Earlier research has shown that the media usually has stronger agenda-setting effects on symbolic agendas than it does on substantial agendas

⁴ This assumption of U&G has been criticized (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997; see also Ruggiero, 2000, p. 12). However, we think that politicians should be more aware of their work-related media use motives than ordinary citizens are aware of the motives for their non-work-related media use.

(Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016a; Vesa, Blomberg, & Kroll, 2015). We expect that the mechanisms of the media's agenda-setting effects might also vary regarding different types of agendas.

Starting with the public opinion motive, we expect that it predicts MPs' media reactivity more strongly regarding symbolic agendas than substantial agendas. As Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) argued, it is often enough for politicians to merely display responsiveness by reacting rhetorically to topics salient in the news media. It is also often usually faster to make a symbolic reaction, and politicians should react quickly to media coverage if they want to show that they care about the issues that citizens consider to be important (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Further, the distinction between symbolic and substantial agendas partly overlaps with the stages of the policy process; agendas at the early policy-making stages (initiation, agenda setting) are usually by definition more symbolic than agendas at later stages (preparation, decision making) (Tresch et al., 2013). Politicians' responsiveness to public opinion is generally stronger in the early stages of the policy process, as institutional friction increases toward the later stages (Chaqué & Palau, 2011).

In contrast, we expect that the intra-elite communication motive predicts MPs' media responsiveness more strongly regarding substantial agendas than symbolic agendas. Although information about political actors may also be used to, for instance, symbolically attack rival parties (cf. Thesen, 2013), we think that information on other political actors is more important in actual, substantial policy-making processes. There, the media may play a coordinating function between political parties (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013) by, for instance, acting as a mediator between parties negotiating policy issues (Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski, 2010).

Data and Methods

We conducted a survey of MPs in Finland between November 2013 and January 2014. We invited all 200 MPs to participate in the survey and used multiple reminders by paper mail, e-mail, and phone. As a result, 96 MPs filled in the survey, leading to a response rate of 48%. Although we received responses from all parties, MPs of the Social Democratic Party are overrepresented, and the National Coalition Party and Centre Party are slightly underrepresented (see the appendix). However, the Pearson's r between the share of parties responding the survey and in the parliament is 0.867 ($p < .01$), which is satisfactory. Younger MPs are also slightly underrepresented. Overall, however, the respondents are fairly representative of the actual parliament.

To answer RQ1, we simply asked the MPs to what extent they look for information on (1) public opinion, (2) society and societal problems, and (3) other decision makers in the news media (scale 1–5; from *very much* to *very little or not at all* [reversed]; see descriptive statistics in Table 1 and full wording in Table 2). We use the responses to these items as three separate informational media use motives and label them accordingly (Table 2).

When studying RQ2, we use linear ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with the media use motives as dependent variables.⁵ Independent variables indicate various institutional positions, roles, and demographic characteristics (Table 1). No earlier research has attempted to explain MPs' informational media use motives;

⁵ In addition, because using ordinal variables as dependent variables in OLS violates its assumption, we also conducted binary logistic regressions as robustness checks.

therefore, we selected variables based on the literature explaining MPs' media responsiveness. Here, our assumption is that the same factors that explain MPs' media reactivity might also explain their media use motives. Earlier research shows that opposition MPs (e.g., Vliegenhart & Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave, 2008), generalists (Midtbø et al., 2014; however, see Sevenans et al., 2016), males (Walgrave, 2008; however, see Midtbø et al., 2014), and more experienced as well as younger MPs (Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008) are more reactive to media, and we added each variable to our models. We also use two indicators of MPs' high profile (cf. Midtbø et al., 2014)—whether MPs are chairs of parliamentary committees and whether they have been ministers in earlier governments.

To answer RQ3, we used linear OLS regression, where two dependent variables measure MPs' reactivity to news media on (1) symbolic agendas and (2) substantial agendas. The variable measuring reactivity on symbolic agendas is a mean of responses to three questions (Cronbach's alpha = .743). The first question measured to what extent the MPs perceive that the visibility of issues on the news media affects their decisions when they decide "about what issues they would make initiatives, or oral or written questions" (1–5; from *very much* to *not at all*). The other two questions asked how large a share of written questions and oral questions the MPs had made "as a reaction to media coverage" during the ongoing term (1–5; from a *very large share* to *none*). These questions were not posed to MPs who were ministers at the time of the survey because ministers cannot be expected to react to media coverage by such means. We reversed the scales so that higher scores indicate higher responsiveness. The other dependent variable measures MPs' reactivity on substantial agendas, and it is a mean of two questions asking how large a share of speeches in plenary sessions (excluding oral questions)⁶ and standing committee meetings the MPs had made "as a reaction to media coverage" during the ongoing term (1–5; from a *very large share* to *none* [reversed]) (Cronbach's alpha = .580).⁷

Thus, on the continuum ranging from symbolic to substantial agendas, we place parliamentary questions and MPs' initiatives more on the symbolic side and speeches in committees and plenary handlings more on the substantial side. In Finland, MPs' initiatives for legislative changes or budget allocations are mostly symbolic actions, given that only a very minimal fraction of these initiatives get passed (Pajala, 2013). Written and oral questions have many political functions (e.g., Wiberg, 1994), but we argue that, in Finland, they are mostly symbolic activities. Political power is heavily concentrated in the majority coalitions, and bills and budget proposals are quite rarely modified substantially in the parliament. When changes to bills are made in the parliamentary phase, this almost always happens in the standing committees (Pekonen, 2011), not through parliamentary questions. Consequently, the standing committees have the most substantial agendas in the Finnish parliament. Further, plenary speeches about "hard" policy issues such as bills and budget proposals can

⁶ Plenary discussions other than oral questions are mostly plenary handlings of bills and budget proposals, and only occasionally are there other types of plenary handlings, such as those related to interpellations or so-called discussion initiatives. Therefore, we believe that this survey item mostly indicates MPs' media reactivity in plenary speeches related to bills and budget proposals.

⁷ Thus, we use self-reported measures of media responsiveness. Although we acknowledge that self-reported data are not as accurate as observational data (see Bundi, Varone, Gava, & Widmer, 2016), we believe they are reliable enough given that earlier research has produced similar results with self-reported and objective methods. For instance, the findings that MPs with certain positions (e.g., in opposition) are more reactive to media have been confirmed by both types of data (Midtbø et al., 2014; Vliegenhart et al., 2016).

be defined as more substantial than questions and initiatives. We argue that speeches that take place in these forums are not “just talk” to show that politicians care about some issue, but talk related to concrete policy proposals that may have substantial consequences. The most effective way that individual MPs can try to make changes to bills is to *speak* when bills are being handled. Also, the surveyed MPs report being more responsive to media regarding questions and initiatives than regarding speeches in committees and plenary sessions. This supports our categorization of the agendas, because earlier research has found that MPs are more responsive to media regarding symbolic than substantial agendas (e.g., Vesa et al., 2015; Walgrave et al., 2008).

When answering RQ3, our main independent variables are MPs’ informational media use motives (see Tables 1 and 2). Several variables indicating institutional positions, roles, and demographics (Table 1) are used as controls. Moreover, we also controlled for the belief that the media affects which issues citizens consider to be important, because this is a mechanism that is often argued to be behind politicians’ media responsiveness. We asked, “How much does the news media’s behavior affect . . . which issues citizens consider to be important?” (1–5; from *very much* to *very little or not at all* [reversed]).

Table 1. Variables with Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Mean	Frequency (%)	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Reactions on symbolic agendas	2.69		0.93	1	4.67
Reactions on substantial agendas	2.42		0.57	1	3.50
Public opinion motive	3.54		0.92	1	5
Intra-elite communication motive	3.42		0.97	1	5
Societal problems motive	3.93		0.88	1	5
Experience (in years)	9.28		8.20	2	-
Age	52.01		9.35	- ^a	-
“Media affects citizens’ issue priorities”	3.93		0.87	2	5
Opposition party		35.2			
Committee chair		12.7			
Current or ex-minister		16.9			
Generalist		38.0			
Male		56.3			

Note: The table presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in regressions reported in Table 4. Some statistics are slightly different for the regressions in Table 3, because of the listwise deletion of missing data.

^a We do not present the minimum and maximum values of experience and age in order to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

Outliers can have a significant effect on results, especially with small data such as ours. Therefore, we performed outlier tests (Bonferroni with "car"-package in *R* and Cook's distance), which showed that when explaining reactions on substantial agendas, a single MP was a very influential outlier in the linear regression models. A closer look at this outlier MP showed that she/he had very extreme views regarding the main variables used in the model. Because we want to be able to generalize the findings to the "general population" of Finnish MPs, we filtered out this outlier case from the models used to answer RQ3.

Results

Informational Media Use Motives

The results show that many politicians consider the news media as an important source of many different kinds of information (Table 2). Regarding all three kinds of information, only 7%–22% of respondents use the media to a very small or quite small extent. This is in line with earlier research showing that the news media is generally an important source of information for politicians (Davis, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2008).

The societal problems motive is the most important informational media use motive for Finnish MPs (Table 2). Sixty-seven percent of MPs report that they use the news media *quite a lot* or *very much* to look for information about the functioning of society and societal problems. This means that a majority of MPs use the news media, just like ordinary citizens, to learn about society and its problems. The public opinion motive and intra-elite communication motive are slightly less popular among MPs. Fifty-five percent of MPs use the media *quite a lot* or *very much* to look for information on citizens' issue priorities and 43% for information on other decision makers' behavior and opinions.

Why is the societal problems motive the most important for politicians? The explanation might be that the news media's tendency to summarize and highlight societal problems and trends makes it a useful tool for constantly overloaded MPs navigating in the midst of overwhelming streams of information (see also Kenamer, 1992). The availability of alternative information channels might partly explain why the other two motives are less important. Some MPs might prefer direct contact with citizens over the media to gauge public sentiments. The same might be true regarding communication with other decision makers: direct contact with other decision makers is important (see, e.g., Koch-Baumgartner & Voltmer, 2010), especially in a country with a consensual political culture such as Finland (Reunanen, Kunelius, & Noppari, 2010).

Table 2. Finnish MPs' Informational Media Use Motives.

"To what extent do you look for the following kinds of information from the news media?"	Very little or not at all	Quite little	To some extent	Quite a lot	Very much	Total %	<i>N</i>
"Information about the functioning of society and societal problems" (the <i>societal problems</i> motive)	1.1	5.4	26.1	42.4	25.0	100	92
"Information about what issues citizens consider to be important" (the <i>public opinion</i> motive)	2.2	12.9	30.1	46.2	8.6	100	93
"Information about other decision makers' behavior and opinions" (the <i>intra-elite communication</i> motive)	6.5	15.1	35.5	34.4	8.6	100	93

The public opinion motive correlates strongly with the societal problems motive ($r = 0.53$; $p < 0.001$). The intra-elite communication motive, in contrast, correlates only weakly with the public opinion motive ($r = 0.18$; $p < 0.1$) and the societal problems motive ($r = 0.21$; $p < 0.1$). This suggests that the motives might capture two dimensions: Some politicians might be more "inward looking," more interested in what goes on behind the scenes of the political system, whereas others might be more "outward looking" and oriented to gauging public sentiments and learning about societal problems that people are concerned about. However, confirming the existence of these politician types would require a more elaborate research design and method (i.e., more variables and confirmatory factor analysis); thus, it remains a task for future research.

To explain the informational media use motives, we ran linear OLS regressions with the motives as dependent variables (Table 3).

Table 3. Linear OLS Regressions Predicting MPs' Informational Media Use Motives.

	Public opinion motive	Intra-elite communication motive	Societal problems motive
Opposition party	-0.14 (0.22)	-0.16 (0.22)	-0.35 (0.22)
Committee chair	0.47 (0.33)	0.08 (0.34)	0.42 (0.33)
Ex-minister	-0.24 (0.29)	0.28 (0.30)	-0.15 (0.29)
Generalist	0.27 (0.20)	0.04 (0.21)	0.21 (0.20)
Male	-0.38* (0.21)	0.29 (0.21)	-0.21 (0.21)
Experience (in years)	0.01 (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Constant	2.96*** (0.58)	5.25*** (0.59)	4.72*** (0.58)
Adjusted R^2	0.04	0.14	0.03
N	82	82	82

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

The main finding is that the younger the MP, the more important the intra-elite communication motive is. This is shown by the negative and significant coefficient for age in the model predicting the intra-elite communication motive. Why are younger MPs more inclined to use the news to look for information about other decision makers? We think this might be related to the process of the mediatization of politics (e.g., Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). The mediatization of politics literature suggests that the media has become a more central arena for elite-level political debate. Younger politicians have presumably adapted more strongly to this new situation, whereas older politicians might still think that closed-door cabinet meetings and personal networks are more important communication channels among political actors (cf. Midtbø et al., 2014).

Table 3 also shows a few other effects; however, these are only statistically significant at the 10% level.⁸ The public opinion motive is slightly more important for female MPs, and the intra-elite communication motive is more important for more experienced MPs.

⁸ We also conducted as robustness checks binary logistic regressions estimating the likelihood of reporting to have used the news media *quite a lot* or *very much* to look for different types of information (results not shown). All the significant findings reported in Table 3 have similar significance levels with the logistic regressions. In addition, the logistic regressions show a weak positive effect of being a committee chair on the public opinion motive.

How Do Informational Media Use Motives Explain Media Responsiveness?

To study how politicians' informational media use motives explain their media responsiveness, we ran two models regarding both dependent variables (Table 4). Model 1 includes only the informational media use motives, and in Model 2, we add the control variables.

The results show, first, that the public opinion motive is the only media use motive that predicts MPs' media reactivity regarding symbolic agendas (Table 4). This means that the more the MPs use the news to look for information about public opinion, the more reactive they are to the news media regarding symbolic political agendas, such as the oral question hour. This finding is robust across both models. In the full model, a 1-point increase in the variable measuring the public opinion motive increases the predicted value of symbolic reaction by 0.46. Thus, the effect is not particularly strong.

However, the public opinion motive does not have an effect on media reactivity regarding substantial agendas. This is in line with our expectation that the public opinion motive predicts responsiveness more strongly regarding symbolic agendas than substantial agendas. As a formal test of this expectation, we ran multivariate regression analyses where we included both dependent variables in the same analyses. Thus, we were able to compare the effects of the independent variables by looking at contrast estimates. The results support our expectation because the contrast estimates are significant regarding both Model 1 ($p = 0.088$) and Model 2 ($p = 0.007$). This means that the positive coefficient for the public opinion motive is significantly higher in the models explaining reactions on symbolic agendas.

We also expected that the intra-elite communication motive would predict media responsiveness more strongly regarding substantial agendas than symbolic agendas. In line with this expectation, the intra-elite communication motive has a positive and significant effect on substantial reactivity but not on symbolic reactivity. The contrast estimates are slightly significant for Model 2 ($p = 0.074$) but not for Model 1 ($p = 0.353$). However, we argue that Model 2 is more reliable because it includes control variables; therefore, we conclude that, as expected, the effect of the intra-elite motive is slightly stronger regarding substantial agendas. This means that the more the MPs use the news to look for information about other political decision makers, the more responsive they are to the news media on political agendas that can be classified as substantial (e.g., parliamentary committees).

The societal problems motive does not predict MPs' media reactivity on any type of agenda (Table 4), except for the small negative effect on substantial reactivity in Model 1 without control variables.⁹ We did not have any expectations regarding the effect of the societal problems motive on different types of agendas.

⁹ Because the public opinion and societal problem motives correlate strongly with each other, we ran additional models as robustness checks, including only one of the media use motives at a time (results not shown). These additional models are not significantly different from the models shown in Table 4. The only notable differences are that the coefficients for the societal problems motive turn positive in the additional models predicting reactions on symbolic agendas (but they remain statistically nonsignificant), and the small negative effect on substantial agendas in Model 1 disappears completely.

Table 4. Linear OLS Regressions Predicting Finnish MPs' Reactivity to News Media.

	Reactions on symbolic agendas		Reactions on substantial agendas	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Public opinion motive	0.34** (0.13)	0.46*** (0.14)	0.13 (0.08)	0.11 (0.08)
Intra-elite communication motive	0.11 (0.12)	0.05 (0.13)	0.21*** (0.07)	0.26*** (0.08)
Societal problems motive	-0.20 (0.14)	-0.21 (0.15)	-0.17* (0.09)	-0.11 (0.09)
<i>Controls</i>				
Opposition party		0.51** (0.23)		0.29** (0.14)
Committee chair		-0.44 (0.34)		0.17 (0.20)
Ex-minister		0.13 (0.33)		0.23 (0.20)
Generalist		-0.07 (0.23)		-0.03 (0.13)
Male		0.34 (0.23)		0.07 (0.14)
Age		-0.02 (0.01)		0.02** (0.01)
Experience (in years)		0.00 (0.02)		-0.02* (0.01)
"Media affects citizens' issue priorities"		0.20 (0.13)		0.02 (0.07)
Constant	1.90*** (0.58)	1.42 (1.04)	1.90*** (0.35)	0.60 (0.61)
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.13	0.12	0.21
N	71	71	71	71

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Moving on to the control variables, as expected, the MPs of opposition parties (e.g., Vliegenhart & Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave, 2008) are more reactive to media than government MPs, regarding both symbolic and substantial agendas. Moreover, older and less experienced MPs are more reactive on substantial agendas. This contrasts with earlier studies (Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008), which found that younger and more experienced MPs are more reactive. This difference might be because the earlier studies mostly looked at more symbolic agendas. Other control variables have no effect. Interestingly, a belief about the media's effect on citizens' issue priorities does not predict media responsiveness. This might be because so many MPs hold this belief (mean = 3.93, on a scale from 1 to 5), and thus it does not explain the variation in MPs' media responsiveness. However, because this belief is so widespread, it might still explain why the media is important for MPs in the first place.

Conclusion and Discussion

It has become common knowledge that the news media is an important source of information for politicians and that politicians may react to this information through their parliamentary activities. However, we know relatively little about what kinds of information politicians look for in the news media and what kinds of information they react to when being responsive to the media. Therefore, we have used a survey of Finnish MPs to provide more insight into their media perceptions and parliamentary activities. Using the media to find information on societal problems is the most important informational media use motive for Finnish parliamentarians. To a lesser extent, MPs also use the media to find information about public opinion and other political actors. Thus, we find evidence for all three informational media use motives assumed in earlier research (e.g., Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b). In short, politicians look for information on problems in society, how the public thinks about them, and what other political actors plan to do about them.

Inspired by the U&G tradition, we studied whether these informational media use motives explain why some MPs are more responsive to the news media than others. Our study shows that the public opinion motive and the intra-elite communication motive for using the media explain the MPs' responsiveness to media, but in different ways. Politicians who use the news media to look for information on how the public thinks about certain topics are more reactive to media, but only regarding more symbolic political agendas, such as parliamentary questions. This supports the proposition that MPs might often react to media in order to merely display responsiveness to public opinion (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). In contrast, politicians who use the news to learn about other political actors are more responsive regarding substantial agendas, such as the handling of bills in parliamentary committees. This suggests that mediated information about other political actors becomes more important in actual policy-making processes where, for instance, bills are discussed and negotiated. These findings add to our understanding of the contingencies of the media's agenda-setting power. It seems that not only the magnitude (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016a; Vesa et al., 2015) but also the mechanisms of the media's agenda-setting power vary regarding different types of political agendas.

Perhaps surprisingly, we found that MPs' tendency to use the media to look for information about societal problems does not explain their reactivity to media. This might be partly explained by the lack of variation among respondents: Almost all the MPs use the media to learn about problems in society. In addition, the reason may be that looking for information about societal problems is both a passive (cf. Van

Aelst & Walgrave, 2016b) and a long-term informational media use motive and therefore does not explain the short-term media reactivity that our survey questions tapped into.

Another relevant finding is that younger politicians use the media more than older politicians to learn about other political decision makers. We suggest that this might be a generational effect where, because of the mediatization of politics, younger MPs attribute more importance to mediated discussion among elite-level political actors (cf. Midtbø et al., 2014). Other than that, we were not able to explain much variation in the media use motives, except for a few weak effects regarding gender and parliamentary experience. A task for future research thus is to better account for the variation in MPs' media use motives. One possibility would be to investigate whether they are related to MPs' representational roles (cf. Zoizner, Sheaffer, & Walgrave, 2017).

This study has been limited to Finland, which is a consensus democracy (Lijphart, 2012) with a democratic corporatist media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). We suggest that findings might be different in two ways in other types of systems. First, the public opinion motive might explain MPs' media responsiveness regarding substantial agendas more strongly in two-party systems, where the government has more incentive and fewer constraints to reacting to changes in public opinion (Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). Second, the relatively small size of the Finnish parliament (200 seats), together with a consensus democracy in which the government can be formed among many combinations of parties in the absence of bloc politics, might result in tight communication networks that could downplay the need to learn about other political actors from the news media. Thus, the intra-elite communication motive for media use might be more important in more polarized two-party systems and in bigger parliaments.

Overall, we conclude that the predictive power of the informational media use motives on media responsiveness is rather limited. This might be due to our research design. Even though we believe that self-reported measures of media responsiveness are usable, time-series data or experimental designs might give stronger results. It also might be that the information needs of politicians change by topic and circumstances, and require more specific survey questions or a case study approach. That said, we believe that this study demonstrates that a classic U&G approach is helpful in understanding the mechanisms of the media's political agenda-setting power. The findings suggest that politicians are able to analyze their own informational motives for media use and that these motives in turn help to explain part of their tendency to react to media coverage.

References

- Bundi, P., Varone, F., Gava, R., & Widmer, T. (2016). Self-selection and misreporting in legislative surveys. *Political Science Research and Methods*. doi:10.1017/psrm.2016.35
- Chaqués, L., & Palau, A. (2011). Assessing the responsiveness of Spanish policymakers to the priorities of their citizens. *West European Politics*, 34(4), 706–730.

- Cobb, R., & Elder, C. (1983). *Participation in American politics: The dynamics of agenda-building* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cook, F. L., Tyler, T., Goetz, E., Gordon, M., Protess, D., Leff, D., & Molotch, H. (1983). Media and agenda setting: Effects on the public, interest group leaders, policy makers, and policy. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 716–735.
- Cook, T. (1998). *Governing with news: The news media as a political institution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, A. (2007). *Mediation of power*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Esser, F., & Strömbäck, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Mediatization of politics: Understanding the transformation of Western democracies*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Green-Pedersen, C., & Stubager, R. (2010). The political conditionality of mass media influence: When do parties follow mass media attention? *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 663–677.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Herbst, S. (1998). *Reading public opinion: Political actors view the democratic process*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509–523.
- Kennerly, D. (Ed.). (1992). *Public opinion, the press and public policy*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Koch-Baumgarten, S., & Voltmer, K. (2010). Conclusion: The interplay of mass communication and political decision making—Policy matters! In S. Koch-Baumgarten & K. Voltmer (Eds.), *Public policy and mass media: The interplay of mass communication and political decision making* (pp. 215–227). London, UK: Routledge.
- Lengauer, G., Donges, P., & Plasser, F. (2014). Media power in politics. In B. Pfetsch (Ed.), *Political communication cultures in Europe: Attitudes of political actors and journalists in nine countries* (pp. 171–195). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries* (2nd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.

- Midtbø, T., Walgrave, S., Van Aelst, P., & Christensen, D. A. (2014). Do the media set the agenda of parliament or is it the other way around? Agenda interactions between MPs and mass media. In K. Deschouwer & S. Depauw (Eds.), *Representing the people: A survey among members of statewide and sub-state parliaments* (pp. 188–209). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pajala, A. (2013). Yksinäisiä ratsastajia ja monenlaisia yhteistyöverkostoja: Kansanedustajien eduskuntaaloitteet 1999–2010 valtiopäivillä [Lonely riders and networks of cooperation: Members of parliaments' private bills and other initiatives in the Finnish parliament 1999–2010]. *Politiikka*, 55(1), 21–35.
- Pekonen, K. (2011). *Puhe eduskunnassa* [Speech in the parliament]. Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino.
- Reunanen, E., Kunelius, R., & Noppari, E. (2010). Mediatization in context: Consensus culture, media and decision making in the 21st century, the case of Finland. *Communications*, 35(3), 287–307.
- Rosenstein, A., & Grant, A. (1997). Reconceptualizing the role of habit: A new model of television audience activity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41(3), 324–344.
- Rubin, A. (2002). The uses-and-gratifications perspective of media effects. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 525–548). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ruggiero, T. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication and Society*, 3(1), 3–37.
- Sevenans, J. (2017). The media's informational function in political agenda-setting processes. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(2), 223–243.
- Sevenans, J. (2018). How mass media attract political elites' attention. *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(1), 153–170.
- Sevenans, J., Walgrave, S., & Epping, G. J. (2016). How political elites process information from the news: The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects. *Political Communication*, 33(4), 605–627.
- Sevenans, J., Walgrave, S., & Vos, D. (2015). Political elites' media responsiveness and their individual political goals: A study of national politicians in Belgium. *Research & Politics*, 2(3), 1–7.
- Soroka, S. (2002). Issue attributes and agenda-setting by media, the public, and policymakers in Canada. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 14(3), 264–285.
- Spörer-Wagner, D., & Marcinkowski, F. (2010). Is talk always silver and silence golden? The mediatization of political bargaining. *Javnost—The Public*, 17(2), 5–26.

- Strömbäck, J., & Van Aelst, P. (2013). Why political parties adapt to the media: Exploring the fourth dimension of mediatization. *International Communication Gazette*, 75(4), 341–358.
- Thesen, G. (2013). When good news is scarce and bad news is good: Government responsibilities and opposition possibilities in political agenda-setting. *European Journal of Political Research*, 52(3), 364–389.
- Thesen, G., Van Aelst, P., Vliegenthart, R., & Walgrave, S. (2013, June). *So what, why not and what now? Agenda-setting and the concept of media influence on politics*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), Antwerp, Belgium.
- Tresch, A., Sciarini, P., & Varone, F. (2013). The relationship between media and political agendas: Variations across decision-making phases. *West European Politics*, 36(5), 879–918.
- Van Aelst, P., Brants, K., Van Praag, P., De Vreese, C., Nuytemans, M., & Van Dalen, A. (2008). The fourth estate as superpower? An empirical study of perceptions of media power in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Journalism Studies*, 9(4), 494–511.
- Van Aelst, P., & Vliegenthart, R. (2014). Studying the tango: An analysis of parliamentary questions and press coverage in the Netherlands. *Journalism Studies*, 15(4), 392–410.
- Van Aelst, P., & Walgrave, S. (2011). Minimal or massive? The political agenda-setting power of the mass media according to different methods. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16(3), 295–313.
- Van Aelst, P., & Walgrave, S. (2016a). Political agenda setting by the mass media: Ten years of research, 2005–2015. In N. Zahariadis (Ed.), *Handbook of public policy agenda setting* (pp. 157–179). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Van Aelst, P., & Walgrave, S. (2016b). Information and arena: The dual function of the news media for political elites. *Journal of Communication*, 66(3), 496–518.
- van der Pas, D. (2014). Making hay while the sun shines: Do parties only respond to media attention when the framing is right? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 19(1), 42–65.
- Vesa, J., Blomberg, H., & Kroll, C. (2015). Minimal and massive! Politicians' views on the media's political agenda-setting power revisited. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 20(3), 279–296.
- Vliegenthart, R., & Walgrave, S. (2011). When the media matter for politics: Partisan moderators of the mass media's agenda-setting influence on parliament in Belgium. *Party Politics*, 17(3), 321–342.

- Vliegenthart, R., Walgrave, S., Baumgartner, F. R., Bevan, S., Breunig, C., Brouard, S. . . . Tresch, A. (2016). Do the media set the parliamentary agenda? A comparative study in seven countries. *European Journal of Political Research, 55*(2), 283–301.
- Walgrave, S. (2008). Again the almighty mass media: A subjective assessment of the media's political agenda-setting power by politicians and journalists in Belgium. *Political Communication, 25*(4), 445–459.
- Walgrave, S., Soroka, S., & Nuytemans, M. (2008). The mass media's political agenda-setting power: A longitudinal analysis of media, parliament and government in Belgium (1993–2000). *Comparative Political Studies, 41*(6), 814–836.
- Walgrave, S., & Van Aelst, P. (2006). The contingency of the mass media's political agenda-setting power: Towards a preliminary theory. *Journal of Communication, 56*(1), 88–109.
- Wiberg, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Parliamentary control in the Nordic countries: Forms of questioning and behavioural trends*. Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Political Science Association.
- Wlezien, C., & Soroka, S. N. (2012). Political institutions and the opinion–policy link. *West European Politics, 35*(6), 1407–1432.
- Zoizner, A., Sheaffer, T., & Walgrave, S. (2017). How politicians' attitudes and goals moderate political agenda setting by the media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 22*(4), 431–449.

Appendix***Background Information on the Respondents.***

	Survey respondents (%)	Population (%)
<i>Parties with most seats^a</i>		
National Coalition Party	12.5	22.0
Social Democratic Party	27.1	21.0
Finns Party	19.8	19.0
Centre Party	13.5	17.5
Left Alliance	5.2	6.0
Government	63.5	60.8
Opposition	36.5	39.2
Female	40.6	42.5
Male	59.4	57.5
<i>Age</i>		
43 or younger	16.3	25.6
44–53	38.0	35.7
54–63	30.4	25.1
64–73	15.2	13.6

^a We do not present the response rates of the three smallest parties to protect the anonymity of respondents.