

Why Political Elites Respond to the Media

The Micro-Level Mechanisms underlying Political Agenda-Setting Effects

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van doctor in de sociale wetenschappen aan de Universiteit Antwerpen te verdedigen door

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Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen
Politieke Wetenschappen
Antwerpen 2017



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Cover design: Natacha Hoevenaegel

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PREFACE

Ik ben een gelukzak, *ne chançard*, gelijk ze zeggen. Niet één van het toevallige soort—type lottowinnaar—maar eentje van het structurele soort. Die het goed getroffen heeft. Eentje die al 27 jaar lang alle kansen krijgt om van elke dag iets moois te maken. Eentje met geweldige familie, vrienden en collega's, die altijd klaarstaan om mee plezier te maken, om te supporteren, om te helpen of te troosten als het nodig is. Een gelukzak die enkele jaren geleden in een doctoraat rolde en nu fier mag verkondigen: 't is af!

Dat doctoraat was er niet geweest zonder die geweldige familie, vrienden en collega's. Die mee data verzamelden, advies gaven bij het schrijven, duimden dat 't vlot vooruit ging, of gewoon zorgden voor leuke momenten van ontspanning, waardoor ik daarna dubbel zo veel goesting had om er weer in te vliegen. Een uitgebreid woord van dank is op zijn plaats. Here we go.

Eerst en vooral, bedankt **Stefaan**. Zowel binnen de UA als erbuiten sta je bekend als een hele goeie promotor. Geregeld kreeg ik van collega's te horen hoeveel geluk wij toch wel niet hebben met zo'n vriendelijke baas. Die collega's beseffen nog niet half hoe leuk ik het vond om bij jou te doctoreren. Ten eerste, om de inhoudelijke bijdrage die je leverde aan mijn werk. De allereerste paper schreven we samen. Van mijn eerste versie overleefde slechts hier en daar een zin—van de rest had je met 'track changes' een kleurboek gemaakt—maar het was heel leerrijk. Op latere papers gaf je uitgebreid feedback. Die was stevast goed, snel, constructief en totaal onleesbaar. Bedankt daarvoor. Je bent niet enkel een succesvolle wetenschapper, maar ook een goeie human resource manager. Als het bij M²P plezant werken is, komt dat enerzijds doordat je er steeds weer in slaagt om mensen aan te werven die slim, maar vooral ook tof zijn. En anderzijds doordat je als geen ander beseft dat de productiviteit van een onderzoeksgroep een gevolg is van de leuke sfeer die er hangt, en niet omgekeerd. Ik heb ongelofelijk hard genoten van alle M²P-weekends, etentjes en conferentietripjes,

van Konstanz tot Puerto Rico. Vaak komt het er niet van om te zeggen hoe dankbaar ik je daar eigenlijk wel niet voor ben. Merci. Wie je op die momenten leert kennen—bijvoorbeeld als Pablo de Puertoricaan met het snorretje (was het Pablo?)—weet dat je, meer nog dan goeie wetenschapper of manager, gewoon een hele fijne mens bent. Ik bewonder je onuitputtelijke enthousiasme, je gulheid, je vertrouwen in mensen, je eerlijkheid op professioneel en persoonlijk vlak. Bedankt voor alle kansen die je me gegeven hebt.

Ik wil ook mijn commissie bedanken. Stuk voor stuk mensen die me jaarlijks niet enkel kritische commentaar gaven, maar ook zelfvertrouwen en goeie tips om dat doctoraat beter te maken. **Gunnar**, thanks for taking the time to read my work and give useful, well-considered comments—and also for the nice conversations on the yearly CAP meetings. Dank ook aan **Rens** voor de feedback op mijn doctoraat, en voor de fijne samenwerking daarbuiten die onder andere leidde tot mijn eerste echte publicatie! Heel erg bedankt **Knut**, voor de goede en uitdagende commentaar op mijn doctoraat en om me de kans te geven voor 't eerst les te geven, tijdens een gastcollege in Amsterdam. Ik kreeg er de lesgeefkriebels te pakken! Many thanks as well to **Frédéric** and **Jan** for being part of the jury.

Als ik mijn job geweldig vond, dan kwam dat in de eerste plaats door de collega's met wie het alle dagen dikke fun was. Bedankt, **M²P!** Elke M²P'er heeft mijn doctoraat op één of andere manier beter of leuker gemaakt. Of die bijdrage nu inhoudelijk was—als co-auteur of *discussant*—of iets minder inhoudelijk—op het voetbalveld of in de escape room—, de positieve en constructieve sfeer die er hangt in M²P is uniek en zorgt ervoor dat er beter werk geleverd wordt.

Enkele M²P'ers verdienen een speciaal dankwoordje. **Debby** en **Kirsten**, met jullie spendeerde ik de afgelopen jaren het meeste tijd. Jullie waren de beste bureaugenootjes die ik me had kunnen wensen. Ik koester mijn herinneringen aan de droge mopjes van Kirsten, de flauwe mopjes en de geluidjes van Debby, de vele daaropvolgende slappe-lachbuien. Er was altijd tijd voor een theetje en een gezellige babbel. Als ik worstelde met een paper waren jullie er gelukkig met goeie raad, bemoedigende woorden, of op zijn minst een chocolade handje, dat eigenlijk bedoeld was om als bedanking aan de parlamentsleden te geven. We hebben samen bergen werk projectwerk verzet, maar met jullie erbij stak dat nooit tegen. Jullie zijn schatten en ik hoop dat we nog heel lang vriendinnen blijven.

Ook de andere collega's van het INFOPOL-project wil ik bedanken. **Jonas**, in de eerste jaren van mijn doctoraat heb ik ontzettend veel van jou geleerd: je advies over data & Stata was goud waard. Merci. **Yves**, een jaar geleden hebben we even moeten vechten om de beste bureau in ons nieuw kantoor. Bedankt om mij te laten winnen en—belangrijker nog—bedankt voor de vele fijne babbels op de bureau. Ik kan oprecht zeggen dat dagen waarop jij er ook bent, nóg gezelliger zijn. **Karolin**, ik ben superblij met jou als nieuw kantoorgenootje. Al laten Kirsten en Yves ons binnenkort misschien in de

steek, ik heb er vertrouwen in dat de gezelligheid er op kantoor er niet op achteruit zal gaan. Bedankt ook **Lynn, Tal** en **Eran** voor de fijne samenwerking de eerste jaren van het project.

Mijn job heb ik eigenlijk te danken aan twee M²P-anciens. Merci **Ruud** om mij binnen te loodsen in M²P, met studentenjobs als enquêteur op betogingen en als codeur op het agendasettingproject. Ik vond het tof om iemand met gedeelde Wijnegem-roots in de buurt te hebben, bij wie ik eigenlijk altijd terecht kon voor goeie raad. Dankjewel ook **Anne** om eerst een gulle baas en daarna een toffe collega te zijn. Ik ga je missen op de CAP-conferentie dit jaar.

In M²P staat iedereen klaar om te helpen, maar toch val je sommige mensen vaker lastig dan andere. Bedankt **Patrick** om tijdens mijn doctoraat steevast klankbord te zijn bij lastige statistische modellen, of inhoudelijke keuzes. Bedankt ook aan alle **First Ladies** voor de gezellige koffiepauzes en het supportereren tot aan de eindstreep.

Bedankt ten slotte aan alle andere collega's van de left- én de right-wing, voor de toffe lunchpauzes, sportieve volleybal- en looptrainingen en voor de vele leuke feestjes. Een bijzondere merci aan de **bende van Flachau** voor de memorabele skireis. Die kwam net op het goeie moment en gaf me energie om de eindspurt van mijn doctoraat in te zetten.

Ik kan niet de collega's bedanken die mijn doctoraat hebben zien en doen groeien, zonder te bedanken wie in eerste instantie het zaadje heeft geplant. Bedankt **papa** en **mama**. Om me het wiskundig inzicht van de ene en de werkdiscipline van de andere door te geven, en niet andersom. Om mij als kind te laten zien dat vragen stellen, en nadenken over hoe ze te beantwoorden, leuker is dan het beantwoorden van de vraag op zich. Die houding komt goed van pas als je plezier wil hebben in een job als onderzoeker. En bedankt om mij, bijvoorbeeld door jarenlange wekelijkse bibliotheekbezoekjes, te leren spelen met taal. Schrijven heb ik eigenlijk écht niet op school, maar wel van jullie geleerd. Jullie zijn de trouwste supporters die ik heb en ik zie jullie doodgraag.

Bedankt ook aan **Anton**, aan al mijn **vrienden**, en in het bijzonder aan **Kris**. Om mij duizend-en-één geweldige momenten te bezorgen en vooral om me te doen beseffen dat er in 't leven zoveel belangrijker dingen zijn dan een doctoraat. Extra dikke merci aan **Lien**, voor het in sneltempo uittypen van tientallen interviews en om gewoon áltijd klaar te staan op leuke en minder leuke momenten.

En ten slotte... dankjewel **Pauline**. Afgelopen jaar was niet gemakkelijk—niet voor mij, en zeker niet voor jou. Toch vond je steeds tijd om me bij te staan met professioneel postdoc-advies, waarvoor heel erg bedankt. Nog veel meer bedankt om mij zo ongelofelijk gelukkig te maken. Bij jou kan ik mezelf zijn, je weet me altijd op te beuren, en je geeft me zin om uit elke dag het allerbeste te halen. Ik ben

dankbaar dat dit doctoraat me bij jou heeft gebracht: het heeft al zoveel mooie momenten opgeleverd. Maar ik ben ook blij dat 't achter de rug is: nóg meer tijd om samen leuke dingen te doen!

Iedereen, ne welgemeende merci. Tijd om te klinken en dan op naar 't volgende!

Antwerpen, 12 april 2017

FUNDING

This work was supported by the European Research Council [Advanced Grant 'INFOPOL', N° 295735] and the Research Fund of the University of Antwerp [Grant N° 26827]. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) is principal investigator of the INFOPOL project, which has additional teams in Israel (led by Tamir Sheaffer) and Canada (led by Stuart Soroka and Peter Loewen).

INTRODUCTION

“The mass media may be powerful agenda-setters. Media choices about which stories to emphasize and how to treat them may have a substantial impact on the determination of which issues will be seriously considered and which will not.” (Kingdon, 1973)

More than forty years ago, Kingdon (1973) observed that while the mass media are not important in congressmen’s decisions on *how* to vote, they play a crucial role in their decisions on which issues to vote *about*. Policymakers—just like any other audience (B. C. Cohen, 1963)—take media salience into account when considering which issues to prioritize, and which ones to ignore. Numerous political agenda-setting scholars in Europe and the US have since then provided empirical proof of the relationship between media and political agendas (Baumgartner, Jones, & Leech, 1997; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). When media attention for an issue goes up, the likelihood that the issue will make it onto the political agenda increases.

The goal of this dissertation is to *enhance our understanding of the mechanisms that underlie political agenda-setting effects*. The strong empirical finding that the media agenda influences the political agenda, elicits questions about how these effects come about. Why are policymakers responsive to the media in their political work, given that they have their own political agenda they hope to implement? What kind of information can the media offer them—knowing that many other non-news sources (e.g. interest groups, cabinets) provide them with information on a daily basis too? And, as a consequence, what role do the media precisely play in those processes where they are ‘setting the agenda’? While scholars have amply theorized about these puzzling questions, the many different

possible answers have seldom been systematically *integrated* and many of the mechanisms have not been put to the *empirical test*. The current study tries to start and fill these two scientific gaps.

This introductory chapter serves as an umbrella chapter, in which I connect the six scientific articles that make up the dissertation. In what follows, I first make a case for studying political agenda-setting mechanisms. By means of some concrete examples, I illustrate that very diverse mechanisms may underlie seemingly homogenous aggregate-level agenda-setting findings, and that insight into these mechanisms is important for a correct interpretation of the findings. Next, I provide an overview of the dissertation's results. I go over the articles one by one and I draw some overarching conclusions. I then briefly discuss the data and methods used in the various articles. After that, I elaborate on the scientific contributions of the dissertation, before moving on to a discussion of its limitations and opportunities for future research. Finally, I take a step back and consider the broader, societal relevance of the dissertation.

Why study the mechanisms?

The point of departure of this dissertation is the following: (1) we know *that* the media influence political agendas; (2) we have good insight into the *manifest conditions* under which they do so most—that is, we know *who* reacts most to *which* kind of news and *how* under given circumstances; (3) but to date, I contend, not enough attention has been paid to the *latent mechanisms* of what politicians *learn* from the news media and *why* they react to it. In this section, I give a brief overview of what the agenda-setting literature has mostly focused on so far (for a more elaborate overview, see Article 1), and—subsequently—I discuss why I think looking at these latent mechanisms is important. By means of four concrete examples, I try to show that understanding the mechanisms is necessary to more adequately interpret existing agenda-setting findings.

Scholars discovered decades ago that there is a pattern between media attention for issues and subsequent political attention for these issues. The basic idea that only some issues and alternatives are considered as legitimate concerns on the political agenda—and that the mass media may play a role in this decisive process—was raised for the first time in the sixties (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Schattschneider, 1960; Walker, 1977). From then onwards, scholars have tried to empirically demonstrate the media's ability to set the political agenda. The first empirical studies, mostly conducted in the United States, investigated whether a correspondence between media attention for issues, and subsequent political action upon these issues, existed at all (Baumgartner et al., 1997; e.g. Cook et al., 1983; Wanta & Foote, 1994). Many of them confirmed the existence of the effect.

In the past decades, the body of political agenda-setting work has expanded. In addition to studying *whether* the media influence political priorities, scholars have attempted to explain *who* reacts to *what kind of* news coverage and *how*. Building on the work of Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), the political-agenda setting literature has shifted its focus from demonstrating that media effects exist, to laying bare the conditions under which these effects are strong, weak, or even non-existing. It has been shown, for instance, that some parties are more responsive to the media than others (e.g. opposition parties more than government parties); that some news outlets have more impact than others (e.g. newspapers more than television); and that some political agendas correspond more to the media agenda than others (e.g. parliamentary questions more than legislation) (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). In short, a framework has emerged which has provided us with insight into the contingency of political agenda-setting effects.

Our increasingly sophisticated insight into the contingency of political agenda-setting, has allowed to come up with better theories of how and why the media impact political agendas. For instance, we can deduct a lot from the finding that opposition parties react more to negative news for which they can hold the government responsible, while government parties prefer to react to positive news, but are sometimes forced to react to news for which they are held responsible (Thesen, 2013). Apparently, parties use news coverage strategically in the parliamentary attack-and-defense game. Or at least, that is the assumption we make about their motivations, based upon a behavioral pattern on the party level.

These theories about what motivates politicians to respond to the media, and what they learn from it, have not been integrated systematically, nor have they been tested empirically. Yet tapping more directly into the learning and motivational processes is important for the interpretation of extant agenda-setting findings. To illustrate this claim, I will briefly discuss four parliamentary questions asked by members of parliament (MPs) from the N-VA (government party) regarding different newspaper articles published between February and May 2015. While the observable conditions are identical—an MP from the N-VA (*who*-condition) used a newspaper article from De Tijd (*what kind of news*-condition) to ask a parliamentary question in the plenary meeting of the federal parliament (*how*-condition)—the underlying mechanisms (what the politician *learned* from the media message and *why* (s)he reacted) are different, as I will show by means of quotes from interviews with the respective parliamentarians.¹

The first and most significant example of a media story triggering parliamentary action, is the fuss about the Belgian State security. On the 23rd of April 2015, a headline in newspaper De Tijd read: “*The secrets of the State security uncovered*”. One year long, journalist Lars Bové did a thorough

investigation of the State security, laying bare some remarkable facts. An N-VA parliamentarian, surprised by the facts he learned from this investigative report, interrogated the minister about the matter in the plenary meeting. In an interview with us, he explained that *“I interrogated the minister of Justice on the day of the first newspaper article in De Tijd. The moment of publication offered a reason to ask the question. The topical value could be demonstrated”*. In other words, not only did the media reveal the insider information to the MP (*learning-condition*); by making the information public they also created an ‘ideal moment’ which motivated the politician to react (*motivation-condition*). In this first example, the media were a *necessary condition* for political action. Without the mass media offering both the information and the motivation to ask a question, the MP would have done nothing about the matter.

Second, there was the issue of e-commerce. *“Belgium misses 8.300 jobs by prohibiting night work”* was the title of an article in De Tijd on 30 January 2015. The article raised the problem that Belgians order their online products on foreign websites, because Belgian websites are slower due to the ban on night work. The packages cannot be prepared during the night. The MP who asked the minister to change the regulations on night work, explained that he really learned about this issue from the media: *“I got the idea for this initiative by accident, because it was in the newspaper. Otherwise, it would not have come to mind”*. Without news coverage, he could thus not have taken the initiative. However, if he had had an alternative information source, he would have taken the same action, he says. He is the person who needs to follow up this issue for his party, and his reaction was policy-driven. The media were in that sense less crucial than in the first example. The MP was informed about the matter by the news media (*learning*), but he would have been motivated to act irrespective of the news coverage (*no motivation*). The media were definitely a *facilitator* of political action, but not necessarily indispensable.

A third parliamentary question was asked after a news article (De Tijd) reported that *“two N-VA ministers made a complaint against PS-politician Kir because he intervened on a plane during the deportation of a Nigerian woman”* (21 May 2015). An interview with the MP who asked the question reveals that she did not learn about this news fact from the media at all. By contrast, she explains: *“I knew that this happened before the story broke. I had seen the police report and then I arranged with the ministerial cabinet that they would bring it in the media on Thursday morning, so that I could ask a topical question in the afternoon”*. In contrast to the two previous examples, the MP did not need the media to be informed: she brought the information into the media herself, on purpose. But, the media did matter motivationally speaking: the goal of the MP was exactly to *“generate public attention for the matter”*. The question served to publicly compete against a politician from an opposing party. The media were used as a key tool for party competition reasons. Like in the second example, the

media *facilitated* the question, but it is not sure that the question would not have been asked without media coverage on the topic. The media motivated the MP to undertake action, yet there was no learning.

Fourth, on the 13th of May 2015, a parliamentarian from the N-VA asked a question in response to a news article in De Tijd about commotion in Burundi “*after the Constitutional Court decided that president Nkurunziza can run for election for a third tenure*”. At least, it seemed as if the parliamentary question was a response to the news. In fact, the MP explains, “*I knew this before it appeared in the media, from people on the site. From my network I knew that the problem was going to pose itself*”. And he would have been motivated to ask the question anyway, whether or not the story was brought in the news. It seems as if the media *did not play a significant role* at all here. While the MP’s question seemed to be a response to news coverage about the matter at first glance, neither his information (no learning), nor his motivation to ask the question were fueled by the mass media.

These four examples are not unique in their kind. On a day-to-day basis, parliamentarians select the most relevant, actual news facts in order to interrogate the ministers. These examples are specifically chosen to illustrate, however, that one straightforward finding on the macro (or even: meso) level—namely: members from a specific political party ask parliamentary questions about news articles in De Tijd—may be the consequence of very different individual cases. The cases harbor a lot of diversity in learning and motivation processes. As a consequence, the role of the media in the four examples was truly different. A summary is given in Table 0.1.

TABLE 0.1 OVERVIEW OF EXAMPLES

		Media offer <i>motivation</i> for action	
		Yes	No
Politicians learn about information from the media	Yes	Investigative report on State Security (media = necessary condition)	Problem with e-commerce due to ban on night work (media = facilitating role)
	No	Intervention by MP during deportation of Nigerian woman (media = facilitating role)	President in Burundi will run for election for the third time (media = not consequential)

In reality, many different mechanisms may be at play when political-agenda-setting effects occur—a full overview will be discussed in Article 1. The goal here is just to illustrate that diverse mechanisms exist and that this strongly impacts our interpretation of seemingly uniform ‘political agenda-setting effects’. In an aggregate study, the examples above would look exactly the same and scholars would

conclude that the media exert influence in each of the four cases. By disaggregating them, we see that the examples are actually different. Concluding that the media influenced the parliamentary question is even not always justified. As suggested by some authors in the field, media effects on politics are sometimes spurious or endogenous (see e.g. Wolfsfeld, 2013) and studying the mechanisms is a way to deal with these problems. That is why it is in my view an effort worth undertaking.

A priori considerations

The dissertation studies the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting effects. To be clear, the focus lies not just on (exceptional) instances of strong and substantial media impact—such as when news coverage on an issue influences big legislative processes. Rather, it looks at politicians’ day-to-day use of the media as a source of inspiration for their actions. These actions can for instance be simple parliamentary questions, like in the examples above, or bills. I want to understand what drives elites’ everyday media responsiveness.

In the next section I will give an overview of the results. In this section, I elaborate on two important a priori considerations: (1) how I define ‘a mechanism’ and (2) why a cognitive, micro-level approach to studying political agenda-setting, as I take in this dissertation, is meaningful.

What’s in a mechanism?

A mechanism can be defined as “*a natural or established process by which something takes place or is brought about*”.² I use this definition and apply it to the topic at hand here. Political agenda-setting implies that heightened media attention for an issue *brings about* political action upon the topic. The dissertation aims to gain insight into the *process* by which this effect is brought about. More precisely, it identifies and unravels the different potential processes that may underlie political elites’ responsiveness to information from the mass media.

In order to make a mechanism tangible, I disaggregate it into five analytically distinct elements. The idea is that there are five sub-questions which, each individually, help to better understand how a media effect can come about. These questions are the following: (1) *Who?* (2) *Learns what?* (3) *From which news?* (4) *Reacts how?* (5) *Why?*

Three out of the five questions are directly observable: *Which* news is reacted to by *whom* and *how?* These elements refer to the input side (which news), the person ‘converting’ the news into political action (who) and the output side (how does (s)he act). Political agenda-setting scholars have amply

studied these three elements on the macro (and meso) level, for instance finding that members from opposition parties are responsive to newspaper coverage by asking parliamentary questions. They conclude that this is an indication of news media influence.

The two other questions are harder to observe because they take place in the mind of a politician. The first concerns the transition of information from the input side to the actor; the question is *what* the actor actually learned from the news media. The second refers to the bridge between actor and political action; and asks *why* the actor takes action upon the information. Scholars have amply theorized about these questions, but due to the cognitive (invisible) nature of these elements, they have seldom been directly tackled. And yet, as I will argue further below, it is exactly these two elements which largely determine the media's role in a political agenda-setting case.

The idea is that the mechanism underlying an individual case of political agenda-setting can be understood by answering these five questions. The answers to the five questions are of course not independent from each other. By contrast, they are strongly linked. A politician's function (*who*) impacts the types of action (s)he can take (*how*), the motivational incentive structure (*why*), and this is related to how a politician uses the news media (*which news* and *learning*). As a result, it is likely that there are some 'prototypical' micro-level mechanisms driving the largest part of the macro-level agenda-setting results. The goal of this dissertation is to gain insight into these mechanisms.

A cognitive, micro-level approach to political agenda-setting

As noted above, most extant research has studied political agenda-setting effects from a *behavioral, macro-level* perspective. The question has been whether the actions taken by political institutions—e.g. by 'parliament' or 'the government'—are influenced by the issues covered by the media in their totality (see e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008). So, in contrast to public agenda-setting studies—which investigate how the media influence what individuals *think*—research into media and policy has focused on what politicians in the aggregate *do* (Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Vliegenthart & Mena Montes, 2014; for a similar argument see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Both on the media and on the political side, actors are lumped together and their agendas are studied as a whole. As an exception, some studies have shifted from a macro to a meso-level focus, for example differentiating between parties, yet still focusing on behavior (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b).

In line with Yanovitzky (2002), I argue that taking a step back, and looking at what politicians think before they act, is useful. Studying the *existence* or *contingency* of agenda-setting effects can be done

by looking at political action, but grasping the *mechanisms* behind them requires insight into the decisional processes that take place in the mind of politicians. We cannot know what politicians learn from the media or why they respond to it by looking at mere behavior. Directly addressing the cognitive processes is necessary to fully understand policymakers' (un)responsiveness to media cues.

The consequence of such a cognitive approach towards agenda-setting, is that the measurement level should be individual politicians. The elements of a 'mechanism' we are talking about here—in particular learning and motivations—are cognitive phenomena that take place in the mind of individual politicians (Wood & Vedlitz, 2007; for a similar argument, see Yanovitzky, 2002). Individuals consume mass media information, potentially learn something from it, and become motivated to react to it. These psychological mechanisms can simply not be measured on the partisan or institutional level: we cannot observe 'what parties learn' or 'what motivates institutions'. That is why studying individual politicians' media responsiveness (micro) is important to understand how political agenda-setting effects of the media on parties (meso) or institutions (macro) come about. Indeed, political agenda-setting is the sum of individual actors' cognitive decisions to be responsive to news coverage.

The micro level approach may be criticized. Structuralist or institutionalist thinkers could argue, for instance, that political behavior is largely constrained by partisan and institutional rules and dynamics—and that it therefore makes no sense to study individuals, because only aggregate political output is consequential.

I disagree with this criticism. To be clear, my claim is not that meso- or macro-level studies are inferior to micro-level studies, or that the latter should replace the former. Yet to develop a good understanding of political agenda-setting effects, I argue, we need multilevel reasoning. The existing aggregate-level studies are valuable because they demonstrate the connection between media agendas and political output. Micro-level research can complement the literature, because it allows to get a grip on psychological decision-making considerations which are only measurable on the individual level. By focusing on individuals—while taking their partisan and institutional context into account, of course—we can gain a better understanding of what it actually means when 'the media agenda sets the political agenda'.

I shift to micro-level analyses not only with regards to political action—the dependent variable in this study—but also with respect to news coverage—the independent variable. Instead of looking at 'the media' as a whole, or at all coverage from a certain outlet about a given issue, I take concrete news stories as the unit of analysis (for a similar approach, see Thesen, 2013). I look at how concrete news facts, and not broad issue categories, attract politicians' attention and trigger them to act. This is a

more fine-grained way of measuring political agenda-setting. By capturing more details, I can be more confident that news coverage and subsequent political action are effectively linked. And, it allows me to investigate in a more detailed way which characteristics of news coverage trigger political action.

Dissertation overview

I will now give an overview of the main findings of the dissertation, which consists of six scientific articles (or, more precisely, five articles and one book chapter). Article 1 is theoretical in nature. It integrates the existing literature on political agenda-setting mechanisms, and provides a research agenda for the empirical part of the dissertation. The other five articles (Article 2 to Article 6) are empirical studies. I will first go over each article individually, and then draw some overarching conclusions. A schematic overview of the topic, method, scope and result of all articles is provided in Table 0.2.

Summary of the findings per article

Article 1 is titled *“One concept, many interpretations. The media’s causal roles in political agenda-setting processes”*. It is a purely theoretical article. In this paper, I first make a case for studying the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting effects. I argue that this can help to interpret the causal roles the media actually play in agenda-setting processes—as explained above. In particular, the media’s role depends on the two latent elements of a mechanism—*learning* and *motivations*. Therefore, the paper reviews the existing literature, with a focus on what politicians may learn from the media, and why they react to it. The various learning and motivational processes are integrated in a theoretical model, of which a schematic overview is given in Figure 0.1.

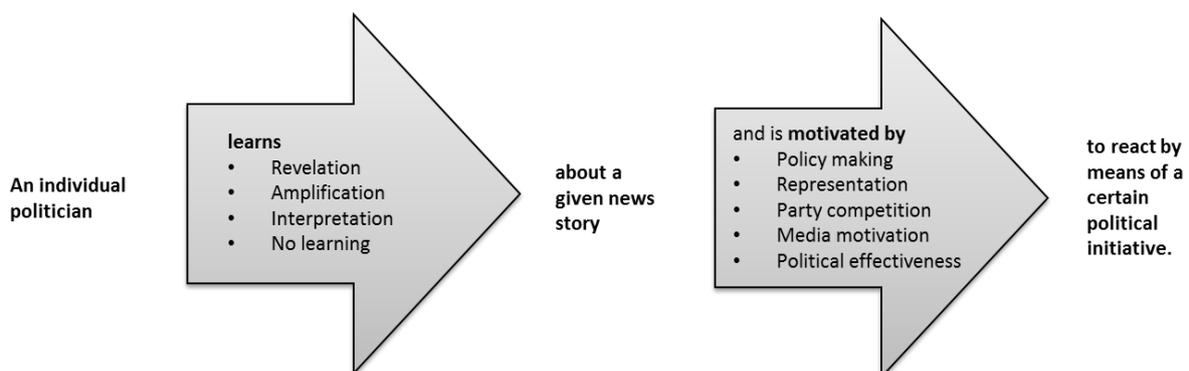


FIGURE 0.1 SCHEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL MODEL

TABLE 0.2 OVERVIEW OF SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES

Title	Elements of mechanism studied					Method	Countries	Key finding
	Who	Which news	How	Learning	Why			
1 One concept, many interpretations. The media's causal roles in political agenda-setting processes				X	X	Theoretical overview		Theoretical model of the varying learning and motivational processes that may underlie political elites' media responsiveness.
2 The media's informational function in political agenda-setting processes	X		X	X		Media poll design	Belgium, Canada, Israel	The larger part of political elites' media responsiveness appears not to be driven by learning.
3 Political elites' media responsiveness and their individual political goals. A study of national politicians in Belgium	X				X	Survey	Belgium	Political elites who focus on party competition goals ('party warriors') are more responsive to media than those who focus on policy-making goals.
4 How political elites process information from the news. The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects		X			X	Media poll design	Belgium	Political elites take action upon the news only when it is useful for their job.
5 Policymakers' responsiveness to information from the mass media. A survey-embedded experiment with politicians in Belgium, Canada and Israel					X	Survey-embedded experiment	Belgium, Canada, Israel	By covering a piece of information, the mass media can motivate political elites to undertake action, irrespective of the concrete information itself.
6 What politicians learn from the mass media and why they react to it. Evidence from elite interviews				X	X	In-depth interviews	Belgium	Political elites themselves confirm the validity of the learning and motivational processes listed in the theoretical model.

With regards to learning, the model asserts that the media may in some instances reveal information to politicians, in other instances they may amplify or interpret it, and in still other instances politicians may learn nothing from the media. Depending on the type of learning, the media should be considered as a necessary condition for a political initiative, as a facilitator of it, or they appear not to matter at all. In this process, the precise role of the media depends on the different motivations that are at play and that drive a politician's responsiveness. In addition to being useful for policy-making (media as an information source), the media may serve representational goals (being a mediator of the public opinion), they may be used as a tool to fight the party competition, and/or they may offer an opportunity to gain media access or to be politically effective. For a thorough elaboration on all concepts, I refer to Article 1. For now, it is important to know that this theoretical model will guide the empirical part of the dissertation. Various parts of the model will be tested in the various papers.

Article 2 deals with the *learning part* of the model (left-hand arrow of Figure 0.1). Titled "*The media's informational function in political agenda-setting processes*", the paper studies the extent to which politicians, when reacting to media information, really learn about the information from the media. This is what is labeled 'revelation' in Article 1. The paper uses data from a 'media poll' with political elites in Belgium, Canada and Israel. I use the term 'media poll' to refer to a design where politicians are confronted with news stories that have recently been in the media, asking them all kinds of questions about their dealing with these news stories. In this particular poll, MPs were asked whether they undertook *political action* upon various news stories, and whether they knew about these news story *before* they appeared in the media. I show that politicians who take action upon a news story, mostly knew about it before it was covered in the news. Revelation is thus rare. However, learning does occur in about one third of all instances of politicians' media responsiveness, and it is mostly associated with party political motivations. Politicians from opposition parties, and those who focus on the party competition (in this dissertation called 'party warriors'), when asking parliamentary questions about a news story, regularly learned about this news story from the mass media.

In the next three papers (Articles 3 to 5), I test the *motivational part* of the model (right-hand arrow of Figure 0.1). The title of Article 3 is "*Political elites' media responsiveness and their individual political goals. A study of national politicians in Belgium*".³ It focuses on how political elites differ in terms of media responsiveness, answering the question: who reacts to the media most? More specifically, it tries to explain individual-level differences in media responsiveness by comparing party warriors with politicians who focus on policy-making goals ('policy advocates'). The assumption is that politicians' motivations determine the extent to which they base their initiatives on information from the media. Using data from a survey with politicians, it shows that politicians who are focused on party political goals are more responsive to the mass media than politicians who mostly deal with policy-making

goals. This pattern manifests itself not only on the individual level but also on the party level, with opposition parties being most responsive towards the media. The results suggest that ‘fighting the party competition’ is a key motivation driving political agenda-setting effects.

Article 4—*“How political elites process information from the news. The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects”*—relies on data from a ‘media poll’, just like Article 2.⁴ Its goal is to flesh out which kind of news stories get noticed by political elites, which ones lead to conversation amongst elites, and which ones lead to political action by elites. The underlying idea is that by gaining very detailed insight into which kind of news coverage attracts politicians’ attention and which coverage does not, we can discover what politicians are looking for in news coverage—and why they ultimately react to it. Data analysis shows that MPs are highly selective in exploiting media cues. They pay more attention to both prominent and useful news stories, but a story’s usefulness is more important for cognitive processes that are closely linked to MPs’ real behavior in Parliament. News must be useful for MPs’ individual policy-making tasks (in terms of competences and specialization) in order for them to respond to it by means of a political initiative.

“Policymakers’ responsiveness to information from the mass media. A survey-embedded experiment with politicians in Belgium, Canada and Israel” is the title of Article 5. The goal is to test whether politicians react to media coverage purely because of the information it contains (information effect), or whether the effect is driven not by what the media say but by the fact that certain information is in the media (media channel effect), which is valued for its own sake. As such it tests the importance of motivations like ‘representation’ or ‘media motivation’, which are based on the premise that elites respond to news stories purely because these stories are in the media. By means of a survey-embedded experiment with Belgian, Canadian and Israeli political elites, the paper tests whether the mere fact that an issue is covered by the news media causes politicians to pay attention to this issue. It shows that a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media than an *identical* piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This effect occurs largely across the board: it is not dependent on individual politician characteristics. At least part of politicians’ media responsiveness seems to be driven by ‘media channel effects’.

Finally, Article 6—which is actually a book chapter—brings the various components of the theoretical model together. It is titled *“What politicians learn from the media and why they react to it. Evidence from elite interviews”*. The book chapter tests to what extent each component of the model is valid in the eyes of politicians themselves. The chapter serves as a validity check: it is good to know whether politicians—the subjects of this dissertation—at least in a general sense confirm the existence of the mechanisms that I propose to be at play. Using data from in-depth interviews with Belgian, Dutch-

speaking politicians, I show that many of the mechanisms described in the model occur in the real world. The learning mechanism brought up most by politicians is amplification. Politicians learn from the media that an issue is important. The motivation mentioned most frequently is media motivation: they respond because they hope their reaction will on its turn make it into the media. Media motivation most of the time goes hand in hand with other motivations, such as representational or party competition goals. The findings are illustrated by means of actual quotes from the interview transcripts.

Overarching conclusions

Which overarching conclusions can be drawn from combining the results of the different articles of this dissertation? The findings of the various papers show some consistency and I propose to classify them here into three distinct, 'prototypical' mechanisms that underlie political agenda-setting effects. It should be noted that the evidence for these mechanisms offered by the dissertation is partial, and scattered. Each article tackled just one small part of a much broader theoretical model. Yet, as the in-depth interviews with political elites (Article 6) give us some confidence that the theoretical model sketched in Article 1 is valid, here follows the typology I would propose.

The first mechanism could be called the '*attack-and-defense game mechanism*'. I borrow the term from Gunnar Thesen (2011) who in his dissertation shows how parties strategically exploit news coverage to their advantage. They aim to gain the upper hand in the partisan battle that is fought out in the parliamentary arena. In several articles of this dissertation I find the mechanism to be an important driver of media responsiveness. However, the dissertation makes clear that not all politicians engage in this kind of media responsiveness. It is typical for those politicians—from opposition and coalition parties alike—who I call 'party warriors' (*who*). As demonstrated in Article 3, these politicians are more media responsive than their colleagues who are rather 'policy advocates'. Like all MPs, party warriors only react to news that is relevant (*which news*). Concrete indicators of party competition relevance are, for instance, that the news is political in nature and that it is about an owned issue, as shown in Article 4. Other possible indicators—which were not tested in this dissertation, but can be deduced from work done outside the framework of this dissertation—are negativity, conflict and responsibility attributions (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016; Walgrave, Sevenans, Van Camp, & Loewen, forthcoming). Most of the actions taken by party warriors are symbolic: MPs for instance ask parliamentary questions (*how*). In Article 2, I offered evidence, for the first time, that party warriors not seldom really learn about the news they react to from the media (*learning*). They respond to actual events as these happen. Motivationally speaking, these MPs are

more than their colleagues focused on party competition goals, such as ‘generating negative attention for other parties’ (*motivation*). As attacking another party only proves effective when the attack gains some visibility towards the public, these MPs also seek media attention with their initiatives—as becomes apparent from the in-depth interviews described in Article 6. Therefore, whether or not something is in the media, matters to those MPs (see Article 5). One is more easily allowed to ask a question about a mediatized issue; and the chances to attract subsequent public attention to the initiative are higher. In instances where the ‘attack-and defense game mechanism’ is at play, the media have a key role: they are the *driving force* behind many of the initiatives taken. They provide *information* to politicians, and *motivate* these politicians to effectively take action. The actions are taken in the political arena, but with the media arena in mind.

I label the second mechanism the ‘*issue-specialist reactive mechanism*’. The political actors here are MPs who are specialized in a given issue (*who*), and respond to media coverage about this issue (*which news*). Indeed, Article 4 demonstrates that specialization is a key determinant of relevance, and thus of intended political action. This kind of media responsiveness happens on a frequent, ‘routinized’ basis. Parliamentarians constantly scrutinize the media for coverage that has to do with the topic they follow, and every time something related to the topic pops up, they wonder whether there is an opportunity to do something with it (as explained in Article 6). Depending on the precise circumstances, this manifests itself in symbolic as well as substantive types of action (*how*). Politicians told me how the media sometimes reveal information to them, especially given the current 24/7 news cycle: the media are simply the ‘quickest’ source of information. As demonstrated in Article 2, however, it happens even more often that specialist MPs know about the information before it appears in the media (*learning*). Indeed, they get a lot of information from their specialized networks (experts in the field, interest groups and organizations, citizens involved in the matter,...). Even if the information was not revealed to politicians by the media, chances are large that it would reach them anyway at some point, due to these alternative contacts. The media do, however, amplify the information. They enhance the perceived importance of the issue for the specialized politician as well as for his or her colleagues. Hence they create an ideal moment—a ‘window of opportunity’ (Kingdon, 1995)—to take action. Indeed, while these politicians’ motivations are often primarily policy-oriented, other motivations may simultaneously be at play (*motivations*). Political effectiveness plays a role, for instance. Specialists realize they have to exploit moments of heightened attention for ‘their issue’ to convince their colleagues of the importance of this issue, and to push their plans effectively onto the political agenda (see Article 6). This is similar to what we have found in work on media storms: politicians seize the moment to put their work in the picture (Hardy & Sevenans, 2015; see also Kingdon, 1995). Media motivation is again important here: specialized politicians want to show to the

public that, when something happens with regards to ‘their’ issue, they are involved in the debate. They want to demonstrate that they care and represent the voters well. As a consequence, the media’s role in instances driven by the ‘issue-specialist reactive mechanism’ is foremost a *facilitating or accelerating* one.

Finally, part of the instances underlying aggregate political agenda-setting effects are driven by a ‘*issue-specialist proactive mechanism*’. This mechanism is very much in line with the theory Wolfsfeld has developed and called the ‘Politics-Media-Politics cycle’ (Wolfsfeld, 2013). The difference with the *reactive* mechanism is that politicians actually do not respond to media coverage here. While the order of events may suggest responsiveness at first sight—political action on an issue comes after news coverage on the issue—this impression is false. Instead, politicians take action that is not related to the news coverage at all (suggesting that the effect of media on politics is spurious). Or, they take action upon something they brought in the media themselves (indicating an endogeneity problem). This mechanism is probably typical for ministers (*who*) making governmental decisions (*how*) on their own domain (*which news*)—although this is not proven in the dissertation. Ministers operate in a highly specialized field—their portfolio—where they execute the government agreement, mostly according to a long-term plan. Their ministerial power makes them among the most newsworthy news sources. Therefore, their actions are generally more proactive than those of parliamentarians. This does not mean that ministers never react to the media; nor does it mean that the proactive strategy does not occur among parliamentarians. Obviously, the mechanism implies that there is no learning from the media (*learning*). Media motivation can be at play, but it does not cause the media to set the political agenda (*motivations*)—rather, the inverse mechanism is at play. In those instances, the media have no agenda-setting impact unless the communicative actions of a political actor affect the agendas of *other* political actors in the system.

Summarizing these findings, we could say that political agenda-setting studies harbor three types of effects:

- In *politics*, media take the lead: they are a necessary condition for many of the initiatives that are taken on a daily basis. Party warriors ask questions about news that is relevant for partisan strife. They learn about this news from the media, and act instantly. In addition to party competition goals, media motivation and political effectiveness play a role.
- With regards to *reactive* policy decisions, the media facilitate political action. Policy advocates constantly monitor the news for coverage about their issue. They may react by means of symbolic and substantive actions. Often, they do not need the media to have information; yet the media offer a ‘window of opportunity’ to take effective action.

- With regards to *proactive* policy decisions, the media have no agenda-setting impact. This does not mean that elites do not take the media into account when acting politically. They may, for instance, be concerned about how well something will play in the media. But there is no ‘agenda responsiveness’ in the sense political agenda-setting scholars generally study it.

Data and methods

Having discussed the substantive findings of the dissertation, I will now briefly touch upon the methodological innovations and data-gathering efforts that were done to conduct the study. I will not go into detail about the data and methods of each individual article; that will be done in the respective articles themselves. I merely discuss the broader project and the main data collection efforts here.

New ways of studying political agenda-setting

In order to realize the abovementioned contributions—studying *individual* politicians’ *cognitive* information processing of news coverage—it was required to develop new methods that were not often used in the context of agenda-setting research before. Indeed, the common traditional time-series design does not allow to study political agenda setting in such a detailed, insightful way. Other previously used methods such as surveys and interviews have proven useful to explore the mechanisms underlying agenda setting; however, the disadvantage of these methods is their reliance on politicians’ subjective estimations of their media responsiveness. It may be that politicians are not well able to estimate the media’s impact, or are not aware of what really drives their behavior (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). I make use of the existing research methods (interviews, surveys), but complement them with new methods. It is the combination of various methods that allows me to study the different pieces of the theoretical model.

The first new method is called the ‘*media poll design*’ and is used in Article 2 and Article 4. As briefly explained above, the method combines a detailed content analysis of news stories with a survey with political elites. Concretely, the survey presents politicians with a number of concrete news stories that were in the media in the period preceding the completion of the survey. A variety of questions about politicians’ dealing with these concrete news stories are asked. The idea is that—all news stories included in the survey being recent and concrete—politicians are well able to reconstruct how they cognitively and behaviorally dealt with the news stories. This is an easier task than having to generalize one’s own behavior, which probably leads to more error.

A second innovative method that I use is a *survey-embedded experiment with political elites* of which the results are discussed in Article 5. By confronting policymakers with fictional pieces of information, alternately coming from the media or from another source, it can be tested to what extent their attention for information goes up when it is covered in the media (as compared to an identical piece of information coming from another source). Again, the main benefit is that we measure individual politicians' cognitive reactions in such a way that we do not require them to make abstraction of their own behavior. The experimental method is better suited than most other designs to make claims about the media's causal role, which is exactly one of the goals of this dissertation.

The INFOPOL-project

In addition to using data from two media polls and from a survey-embedded experiment, the dissertation relies on data from an 'ordinary' survey with political elites, and from in-depth interviews with political elites. All these data were gathered in the framework of the INFOPOL-project.⁵ The INFOPOL-project investigates in three countries—Belgium, Canada, and Israel—how political elites deal with information coming from society. While an endless stream of information about problems reaches politicians on a daily basis, their time and resources to deal with these problems are highly scarce. How do politicians survive this paradoxical situation of information overload on the one hand, and cognitive constraints on the other hand? How do they process and select information; how do they decide what to pay attention to, and which information to ignore? Those are the questions that are central to the INFOPOL-project (for the full project proposal, see www.infopol-project.org). As policymakers consider the media to be an important source of information (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016)—amongst many other crucial information sources of course—the media effects literature constitutes one of the theoretical cornerstones of the project. Politicians' dealing with mass media information is therefore a topic that received a lot of attention in the different data collection phases that were conducted by the INFOPOL-team. The team consists of Belgian (including myself), Canadian and Israeli colleagues. For this dissertation, I gratefully make use of these data. There is no way I could have done this data gathering effort by my own.

Three big data collection efforts are worth mentioning here. First, Article 4 is based on a survey that was conducted in the Flemish parliament (Belgium only) in May 2013. On one afternoon, during the plenary parliamentary session, 93 out of 124 MPs (response rate: 75%) were surveyed about their attention for news stories that had been in the media in the preceding week. This was the first application of the 'media poll design'. A second data gathering effort was done between June and November 2013. In the three countries participating in the project—Belgium, Canada and Israel—we

held a survey and in-depth interview with 166 national MPs, ministers and party leaders (overall response rate: 45%). We asked many different questions about politicians' information gathering behavior, including questions about the extent to which their initiatives are based on mass media coverage. These data are on the basis of Article 3. Finally, the largest data collection was carried out in the spring and summer of 2015. Again, we surveyed and interviewed MPs, ministers and party leaders in the three countries—this time not only from the federal but also from the regional parliaments (in Belgium and Canada). A total of 410 politicians participated in the research (overall response rate: 48%). The survey contained an extended version of the 'media poll design' (used in Article 2) as well as a survey-embedded experiment (Article 5). Afterwards, in-depth interviews with politicians were conducted (Article 6).

All further information about the data collection can be found in the corresponding technical reports (see www.infopol-project.org). Details on the specific data and questions used, will be thoroughly discussed in each of the respective articles separately.

Scientific contributions

How does this dissertation contribute to the extant literature? What do the findings, and also the methodological innovations, mean for the political agenda-setting research field? And how are they of interest to other, closely related scientific literatures, such as mediatization theory? These are the questions I will try to answer in this section.

Taking an insider perspective: contributions to political agenda-setting theory

A good point to start thinking about the implications of this dissertation is the political agenda-setting literature review written by Walgrave and Van Aelst in the *Journal of Communication*, titled "*The Contingency of the Mass Media's Political Agenda-Setting Power. Toward a Preliminary Theory*". In this paper, published in 2006, the authors brought together three decades of work on political agenda-setting. They showed that agenda-setting studies, up to then, had produced mixed results. The available evidence had sometimes pointed towards very strong media effects on politics, sometimes towards little or no media impact, and sometimes the results lied somewhere in between. Walgrave and Van Aelst attributed these differences to differences in research designs. In their contingency theory, they explained how the strength of the mass media's agenda impact depends for instance on

the media outlet, partisan system, political agenda, and time period under study. In their footsteps, many have further refined our knowledge of the contingency of political agenda-setting.

This dissertation builds on this work and, in some respects, adds to it. Basically, it challenges the assumption that an unambiguous notion like ‘mass media agenda-setting *power*’—also called *influence, impact, or effect*—exists. It shows that the interpretation of what ‘media influence’ itself means is variable. The mechanisms underlying seemingly similar cases of media influence may actually be very different. This determines what ‘influence’ actually entails, and whether we can speak of ‘influence’ at all.

To be clear, the individual mechanisms discussed and tested in the dissertation are not new. Almost all of them have been discussed by other authors in the field. These authors are amply referred to throughout the dissertation—I will not go into detail here. What is new, however, is the systematic *integration* of these ideas into one theoretical framework that takes explicit stance with regards to the role of the media, and the *empirical test* of some of these mechanisms. I hope that these new insights will be useful for future work on political agenda-setting.

Furthermore, the dissertation makes a methodological contribution to the political agenda-setting literature. It develops new methods to directly tackle the cognitive processes that are at play when political elites respond to news coverage. As far as I know, the media poll design and the experimental design had not been used in political agenda-setting research before. The dissertation shows that they may be useful to explore the cognitive processes underlying elite behavior. Again, future agenda-setting work may consider to use these methods or develop them further.

Taking an outsider perspective: contributions to mediatization theory

It may be valuable to briefly take an outsider perspective, and discuss the findings in light of mediatization theory—which is nowadays one of the most prominent theories to study media-politics interactions. Although the two literatures are not often seen in connection, mediatization and political-agenda setting theory are closely related. Both literatures share an interest in how mass media influence politics. However, if political agenda-setting has an empirical focus on how media affect political agendas in a narrow sense, mediatization has a broader, theoretical focus on how political actors have gradually adapted their behavior to be in line with a media logic (Strömbäck, 2008; Thesen, 2014).

That is why I could borrow a lot from mediatization theory when developing the theoretical part of this dissertation. In particular when thinking about the motivations underlying politicians’ media

responsive behavior, I relied on mediatization theory which has placed the question ‘why political actors adapt to the media’ center stage (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). In line with mediatization scholars, I argue how agenda-setting effects may not only be direct reactions to media content—as described in the ‘learning part’ of the model—but also indirect reactions. The mere existence of media coverage on a topic—which influences the audience, other politicians, or journalists—may encourage politicians to act upon the topic (Kepplinger, 2007; Meyen, Thieroff, & Strenger, 2014; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a). These ideas are not new; I have been able to rely on an extensive mediatization literature to develop these thoughts.

In turn this dissertation might contribute to mediatization theory. It offers some ideas about how to measure different aspects of media influence empirically and, by doing so, makes a substantive contribution as well. Prominent scholars in the field of mediatization have noted that “*there are still too few empirical studies on the mediatization of politics*” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014a, p. 248). In response, they have strongly encouraged the development of mediatization concepts that are empirically measurable. Most effort has been put in measuring journalists’ and politicians’ *perceptions* of mediatization (Isotalus & Almonkari, 2014; Landerer, 2014; Maurer & Pfetsch, 2014). In this dissertation I show that it is possible to develop *behavioral* indicators of mediatization concepts as well. The experiment outlined in Article 5, for instance, allows to study whether politicians’ behavior is influenced by the mere fact that a piece of information is in the media. This is what mediatization scholars have tried to prove as well. The findings of the article, showing that MPs do indeed react more strongly to information when it is in the media, have as such substantive value for the mediatization research field.

Limitations and opportunities

In this section I discuss the limitations of the dissertation and the implications they may have for the results. I will discuss four topics: (1) the countries under study; (2) suboptimal research designs; (3) the downsides of the micro-level approach; and (4) the lack of attention for social media. I also make some suggestions about how to deal with these limitations in future research. Note that I will not go into detail here about the limitations of particular research designs—the limitations of my experiment, for instance, will be amply discussed in the respective article (Article 5). The problems and challenges discussed here are those that apply to the dissertation in general.

Countries under study

The countries studied in the comparative articles of the dissertation are Belgium, Canada and Israel. These are the three countries that participated in the INFOPOL-project. Studying the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting in these three countries makes sense because they are so different from each other with regards to their political and media system, and therefore constitute a most-different systems design. The main difference is the electoral system: Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. Belgium and Israel are proportional systems causing the link between MP and voter to be weaker. Israel, which has only one national district, is probably most different from Canada. The countries differ also in terms of the degree of federalism: Canada is a strongly federalized system where issue competences are spread across different levels of government, in Belgium the level of federalism is moderate, Israel has no federalism. Other differences are the level of control of political parties over their MPs and ministers (higher in Belgium and Israel than in Canada), the size of the national parliament (smallest in Israel, largest in Canada), and the possibility of combining a national with a local mandate (exists in Belgium only). And according to the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004) the countries are characterized by different types of media systems, in which political parties have varying degrees of control over media outlets. In line with the most-different-system logic, it is expected that findings which apply to all three countries are generalizable towards many other western countries as well. That is the assumption made throughout the various articles: I expect agenda-setting mechanisms to be similar in each of the three countries under study—and most of the time, this appears to be the case indeed. These high levels of generalizability are a big advantage of the country selection—about which I am generally positive.

However, the country choice has drawbacks as well. I discuss three difficulties here: (1) explaining why findings differ between countries; (2) dealing with diverging response rates; and (3) generalizing towards countries that are different from all three countries. First, not all results of the dissertation apply to all three countries. In Article 2, I found that Israeli MPs, in general, are much *more* responsive to the media than their Canadian or Belgian colleagues. That is, a much larger share of the Israeli news leads to parliamentary questioning by MPs. Surprisingly, the experiment I did to test whether MPs are sensitive to media channel effects (Article 5) worked *less* well in Israel than in Belgium or Canada. Apparently, Israeli MPs respond to the media more, but not because of the mere fact that something is in the media. Rather, the information itself covered by the media appears to be more useful for Israeli MPs than for the others—especially than for the Canadians.

It is not necessarily problematic that these results differ between countries. However, it is a pity that I cannot explain what causes these differences to occur—because I only studied three countries which

are so different from each other. That is a first limitation of the country selection. Several explanations are possible. First, the reason could be the electoral system. Israel has a national electoral district, which may explain why information from the national news media is considered most useful. The Canadians, with their small, single-member districts, focus more on regional issues (Soroka, Penner, & Blidook, 2009), which could explain why information from the national media is deemed less newsworthy. Belgium has multi-member districts and is thus somewhere in the middle. This explanation actually fits the findings from Article 2 and Article 5. Second, it is possible that differences in practical rules or customs explain the findings. In Belgium⁶ and Israel⁷, there is no limit on the number of private member bills an MP can propose—although not all bills are brought up for a vote. This is different in Canada.⁸ Before the Canadian Parliament first convenes, a lottery randomly assigns all MPs to an order list, and one gets a 'turn' at proposing a private member bill according to one's position in that ordering. This makes MPs introduce less bills. With regards to parliamentary questioning regulation, there are no such differences between the three countries. These regulations do not fully explain the country differences I observe in Article 2, however, as Canadian MPs do not take significantly less action. Rather, Israelis are more active. Third, it could be that the differences are caused by factors that are hard to grasp empirically, such as the personality of elected MPs, or the nature of media coverage in the three countries. Finally, and even worse, the differences could be a methodological artifact, as our country samples differ in response rates and representativeness (see below). I can only speculate about this. I believe the first explanation makes sense, but we would need data from a lot more different countries to prove that the electoral system actually accounts for the country differences.

A second disadvantage is the differential response rate and representativeness of the sample in the three countries. The response rate was much higher in Belgium (around 75%) than in Canada and Israel (around 40%) and the sample is therefore also more representative in Belgium (more high-ranked politicians, more MPs from government parties). I suspect this has to do, on the one hand, with MPs' high willingness to participate in the research project in Belgium, which is exceptional (Richards, 1996). On the other hand, the Belgian team may have been more persisting in their efforts to arrange meetings with the elites. Anyways, as a result, I cannot exclude that this slight bias amongst Canadian and Israeli respondents may have influenced the results. It could be for instance, that the Israeli respondents are those politicians who are least busy, and who therefore have more time to consume mass media coverage. Furthermore, some of the findings were not very robust in all three countries (see Article 2), and I have difficulties determining whether this is due to the reduced N, or due to the fact that the effects are simply weak. This is a severe drawback of the data.

A third and final limitation of the country selection, is that all three countries—although different in many respects—are still ‘similar’ in the sense that they are all multiparty, western, democratic countries. It would be interesting to extend the research scope to a country that is really different—for instance, the United States which has a true two-party system. Prolonging findings from a comparative study of European countries, I would expect a politician’s party membership to be even more decisive with respect to political agenda-setting mechanisms in a country like the U.S. (Vliegenthart et al., 2016). In two-party systems, the media are truly fundamental for the opposition to learn about what is happening and to use it to attack the government (party competition goals). Politicians from government parties are, in those countries, less influenced by media coverage and will themselves set the media agenda even more (issue-specialist proactive mechanism). Alternatively, it would be valuable to extend the scope of the dissertation to non-western countries where press freedom is less self-evident. In such countries, it is likely that totally different elite-media dynamics are at play.

Wrapping up, if I could do this project all over again—hypothetically, of course—would I change the country selection? In an ideal world, I would include *more* countries in the study. This would allow me to include explanatory factors on the country-level in the analyses, and hence to test whether and how institutional features moderate political agenda-setting mechanisms. I would include *other* countries as well. The United States, for instance, seem an interesting case.

In practice, however, this would probably cause problems in terms of feasibility. Indeed, getting cooperation from political elites is a necessary requirement to turn a project like this one into a success. It is hard to get access to elites in a country that is not your own. In other words, cooperation with scientists abroad is crucial. It is only because of the good contacts between my supervisor and the Canadian and Israeli team leaders that we could successfully run the project in three countries. For me personally, it would be impossible to run such a project. In short, due to the practical advantages as well as the substantive suitability of the country selection, I believe it can—despite its limitations—overall be judged positively.

Suboptimal research designs

In addition to low response rates, there are a number of other methodological and operational difficulties involved in doing elite research (Richards, 1996). One is of particular relevance here: time constraints. Political elites are extremely busy. Even in Belgium, where elites were exceptionally willing to participate in our surveys and interviews, it was impossible to ask more than an hour of time from

the elites. That hour had to be well-spent. The goal of the INFOPOL-project was to ask questions not only about politicians' media responsiveness, but also about their dealing with all kinds of other information sources. Many of the questions we originally wanted to ask, had to be shortened or were even not selected at all for the survey or the interview.

As a consequence, some of the designs used in this dissertation are suboptimal. The experiment I describe in Article 5, for instance, uses only one survey item to grasp politicians' response to the experimental manipulation. In a similar vein, to measure a politician's focus on 'party warrior goals'—one of the key moderators of media responsiveness—I rely on one survey item only. A more elaborate measurement would without a doubt have been better, and more reliable.

To have at least some idea of the validity of my party warrior measure, I compared it with behavioral data we have about the MPs. More specifically, I calculated the correlation between politicians' response to the party warrior survey item, and the *diversity of the issues* they talk about in parliament.⁹ In line with ideas developed in the dissertation, I expect party warriors to be more generalist and talk about a more diverse range of issues. Policy advocates should, on the other hand, be more specialist and focused on one or a few issues (see Article 3). The correlation should not necessarily be high—ultimately the concepts are measuring different things—but I assume there should be some kind of relationship. This assumption is confirmed by the data. The correlation between the *Party warrior* variable (survey), and the *Issue diversity* variable (real behavior), is .22 and significant ($p < .001$; $N = 375$).

The results of this small—and admittedly 'ad hoc'—test are reassuring: the survey measurement, although not optimal, seems to correspond with MPs real behavior in parliament, in a way we would expect them to do based on theoretical assumptions. I cannot do such a test for every measure used in this dissertation, however. I therefore hope future research projects with elites will focus on similar topics and as such, step by step, increase our confidence in the validity of the findings.

Agenda-setting on the micro level

I approached the political agenda-setting question from the micro-level. As explained at the beginning of this introductory chapter, I do so because it is the only level on which the topic of interest of the dissertation—namely the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting effects—can be measured. I could not have investigated whether a politician had prior knowledge about a news story, without asking the question to individual politicians who actually went through this learning process (Article 2). It would have been impossible to ask parties or institutions about their 'recall' of news stories

(Article 4). Motivations to take action upon a news story are inherently individual and may differ between members from the same party (see Article 6, or the examples in the introduction of this chapter). In this sense, the micro-level study was an effort worth undertaking.

That said, the dissertation also shows that when it comes to *explaining* media responsiveness by political elites, the contribution of the individual-level variables in the models is actually limited. Some of them exert significant effects. Younger politicians, for instance, appear to be more responsive to the media than older politicians. Interestingly, ‘party warriors’ are more media responsive than ‘policy advocates’ and the mechanisms underlying their responsiveness are fundamentally different: they learn more from the media and they care more about party competition goals. However, the explanatory power of these variables is generally small. Scrutinizing the explained variance of the models, we see that characteristics of parties, and characteristics of news stories, generally outweigh individual politician characteristics. Apparently, politicians within a party have similar profiles, and professional routines matter more to what a politician does than his or her individual preferences. It is important to keep this in mind when reading the articles of the dissertation—it puts the findings into perspective.

With regards to the micro-level variables that *did* appear to matter, an interesting but unanswered question—one that could maybe be taken into consideration in future research on the topic—is *to what extent the particular constellation of political actors in parliament (or the government) matters for aggregate political agenda-setting effects*. More specifically, is media responsiveness something that comes with a political *position*, no matter who occupies the position; or is it something that is dependent on the *specific individual representative* holding the position? Consider, for instance, the ‘party warrior’ measure. On the one hand, it is possible that being party warrior is the consequence of a division of labor in each party, whereby some MPs are expected to focus on the party competition whereas others take a policy-oriented role. If every party by definition has a number of party warriors and a number of policy advocates, the party’s total level of ‘media responsiveness’ is always the same, no matter who is in parliament. On the other hand, it could be that being party warrior is (partly) related to personality, or to the issues one is specialized in. This would mean that the political agenda of a party with a lot of ‘media-oriented party warriors’ differs from that of a party where the majority of politicians are ‘specialized policy advocates’. Our data do not allow to determine which of the two explanations is valid. The questionnaire from the INFOPOL-project contained questions about MPs’ personality (TIPI: Ten Item Personality Inventory). A quick look at the data teaches us that being party warrior is negatively correlated to being ‘agreeable’ ($r = -.30$; $p < .001$) and to being ‘open to experiences’ ($r = -.20$; $p < .01$). In other words, party warriors are the most critical, quarrelsome MPs, and those who are most conventional. But we do not know whether these MPs are asked to fulfill the

‘party warrior role’ in the party, or whether it is their natural inclination to fight the partisan battle. The latter interpretation would imply that it *does* matter who we elect.

An individual characteristic that is less ambiguous in this sense is a politician’s age. We find young politicians to be more responsive to the media than older ones. As an older MP told me during the interviews, he is “*not the type of politician anymore*” who tries to gain quick wins by responding to media coverage. This suggests that, if *all* politicians were young, the aggregate level of media responsiveness would go up. In this case, the individual constellation matters for the institutional output.

Note that the existing meso-level literature has to deal with similar questions. A key variable—maybe *the* key variable—in the extant political agenda-setting literature is the government-opposition divide. Opposition parties react to the media more, and they do so in a different way, compared to coalition parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). This is also confirmed in the empirical studies in this dissertation. While this is a relevant meso-level finding, it does not change the aggregate, institutional level of media responsiveness: there are always *some* parties in the government, and *some* in the opposition. A follow-up question would therefore be: does it matter *which* parties we elect? Does the government behavior from a left-wing party, with respect to media responsiveness, differ from that of a right-wing party? Is media use by an opposition of centrist parties different from that of an opposition of extreme parties? We know that it matters with regards to the issues that they act upon: parties respond to news about issues they own, when they have an interest in politicizing these issues in the first place (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). Yet whether the mechanisms are different as well, and thus whether the level of media responsiveness and the role of the media depend on the particular constellation, remains to be investigated.

As noted above, the differences we are talking about here, are relatively small. This means that political agenda-setting will never drastically change, depending on which parties or individuals occupy parliament. But to a certain extent, this may have an effect; and further investigating that effect could be an avenue for further research.

Social media

Like most agenda-setting work, this paper focused on the role of the ‘traditional’ news media as a political agenda-setter—including online news websites, which can be seen as ‘extensions’ of the traditional newspapers and television channels. We live in an era where the importance of these traditional news media seems to be diminishing in favor of increasingly important social media,

though. What is the role of social media, such as Twitter or Facebook, in the political agenda-setting process? Do these social media impact the results of this dissertation? These questions are often brought up in response to the research done in this dissertation.

As research on the political agenda-setting effect of social media is still in its infancy, answering these questions is hard. Based on scarce evidence from the mobilization literature (see e.g. Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011), my hunch would be that social media actually do not make that big a difference for the concept of political agenda-setting because social media need the traditional mass media as ‘information intermediaries’ in order to have impact. Either an issue is ‘big’ on social media and it affects traditional media, which on their turn reach politicians; or an issue remains small on social media, but then it does not raise the public attention that makes a media message worth reacting to. I will briefly elaborate on both scenarios.

When an issue becomes ‘big’ on social media, it surely has the capacity of making it onto the political agenda, like ‘traditional’ media messages do. Politicians may learn about an issue via social media—or about its importance—and they may, for all reasons listed in this dissertation, be motivated to react to it. However, such social media stories generally get attention from the ‘traditional media’ as well (Rogstad, 2016). Intermedia agenda-setting studies show that social media are an increasingly important news source for journalists (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Hardly any ‘big’ social media fuss goes by unnoticed. As a consequence, these social media do not change the agenda-setting process. At best, the joint attention from traditional and social media may reinforce agenda-setting effects, just like when many different media outlets at the same time focus on an issue (Eilders, 2000).

Politicians may also be responsive to ‘small’ messages on social media. For instance, citizens may post a message on their Facebook wall complaining about a particular issue. In those instances, however, a social media message cannot really be compared to a traditional media message because its scope is much more limited. Social media fulfil another function here; they for instance facilitate interpersonal communication between citizen and politician. That is another topic of study—I would not consider this as a case of ‘mass media impact’.

Politicians use social media a lot, of course. The INFOPOL-survey data from 2013 reveal that 48% of the politicians check Twitter at least on a daily basis, and 70% of them check Facebook every day. These numbers have likely gone up since then. Social media have thus become an important link in the political communication process. They may serve as an alternative way to learn about traditional journalistic messages, for instance. And politicians can use them to get their own message in the media, as illustrated by the high number of elite tweets that are turned into a news report (Squires & Iorio, 2014). However, this indicates a change in the way news is created and disseminated, rather

than a change in the ways in which the media set the political agenda. That is why I think the results of the research field—and of this dissertation—hold in an era of increasingly important social media.

Societal relevance

So far, this umbrella chapter has very much focused on the *scientific* relevance of this dissertation. I have demonstrated the gap in the agenda-setting literature, I went over the main findings of the dissertation, I elaborated on the used data and methods, and I discussed the scientific contributions and limitations of the research. Let me in this final section take a step back, and approach the topic from a broader, *societal* perspective. Why is studying political-agenda setting important—not only for scientists but also for citizens, politicians and societal organizations? In what sense are the findings of this dissertation relevant for these societal actors? And, can they serve as the scientific basis for a broader, societal debate about the normative implications of the media's agenda-setting impact?

Examining *which issues get attention by political actors and which issues, conversely, do not get attention*, the agenda-setting paradigm deals with a question that is key for democracy (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). On any given day, policymakers face a multitude of problems that ask for a solution. Industry groups require them to do something about the worsening economic situation with urgency. At the same time, citizens demand educational reforms; urgent investments in the healthcare sector; or measures to fight crime and terrorism. Meanwhile, organizations ask for solutions to problems in the cultural sector, the agricultural sector, with regards to housing, or human rights, and so on. In short, the number of issues begging for politicians' attention is infinite, yet they cannot all simultaneously be dealt with. How political actors decide which societal issues to prioritize—and which ones to ignore—matters to anyone in society who is affected when these problems are (not) being tackled (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015).

In a society so thoroughly mediatized as ours, it is not surprising that people believe the media to be a key player in this process. Citizens ascribe great agenda-setting power to the mass media—90% of Swedish citizens, for instance, thinks that *'journalists have great power when it comes to influencing politics and society'* (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). The same is true for journalists and politicians themselves: many of them agree with the statement that *'it is the media rather than politicians that decide what issues are considered most important'* (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Apparently, many people have the impression that the media are pervasive in many aspects of political life, including in determining which issues make it onto the political agenda.

As media influence on the political agenda seems to be taken for granted, the societal debate goes a step further, focusing on how *desirable* the media's agenda-setting impact is. It seems as if most opinion pieces portray the media's interference in politics as a negative evolution. Jan Peter Balkenende, Dutch minister-president from 2002 to 2010, expressed his critique on the system as follows: *"to keep following the road of 'the issue of the day' and 'hasty debates', is not the road that leads to recovery of political authority and political trust"* (NRC, 2005). Belgian politician Marianne Thyssen voices a similar complaint: *"Is it really necessary that we all spend our days running behind the discussion-of-the-day?"* (HLN, 2012). These quotes are illustrations of a general trend: a large majority of politicians in different countries think that the media have too much political power, and that the media determine which issues are important while politics have little impact on this matter (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

In scientific circles the normative debate is more balanced: there are opponents, but also proponents of political agenda-setting. Some argue that political responsiveness to the media is undesirable and dangerous, since the mass media are short-sighted and unstable, while policy needs long-term vision (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). The cooperation between commercially oriented media and audience-oriented politicians would lead to success for populist parties, leaders, and policies (Landerer, 2014). Others' point of view regarding media impact is more positive. They see the issue transfer from well-functioning media to political agendas as something that makes political priorities correspond to public priorities; as something that ensures responsiveness vis-à-vis public concerns (Herbst, 1998).

This whole debate about the desirability of media impact cannot properly be conducted, however, without looking at the facts. The political agenda-setting literature has done a good job in informing the debate by nuancing the media's role in determining the political agenda. It appears that legislation for instance—often considered the most consequential type of political action—most of the time totally stays off the media's radar (Melenhorst, 2015). Legislative actions are not very much influenced by the media, nor do they make it into the media. And, research has shown that politicians do not 'jump on' every news report unconditionally: for example, they only react when the framing of the news story is beneficial to them (van der Pas, 2014). This does not mean that the media do *not* impact the political agenda, of course—they certainly do, and their effects are substantial (Vliegenthart et al., 2016). Nor does it mean that the media do not exert other types of influence: they may force politicians to communicate differently (Esser, 2013), for instance; or they can 'make and break' politicians' careers (Van Aelst et al., 2008). But it stresses the importance of being precise about the type of influence discussed. The media matter, but not for every political decision, and definitely not unconditionally.

This dissertation contributes to this important societal debate about ‘the almighty media’ by offering an additional layer of nuance to it. For instance, consider the finding that learning effects are limited, and that the media are thus a source of *inspiration* for politicians rather than a source of *information*, especially when it comes to substantive types of action (Article 2). This finding counters the idea that the media make politicians design hasty and premature bills purely based on media coverage, without gathering the necessary expertise first. Or, think about the fact that politicians, when asked about a recent instance of media responsiveness, claim in the majority of the cases that they would have taken the initiative anyways, whether or not the issue had been covered by the media (Article 6). Apparently, politicians sometimes *seem* to care more about the media than they actually do, especially when it comes to ‘routinely’ following up issues they are specialized in. Again, this does not disregard the influence that the media do have in politics; but it is important to think about media influence in a more nuanced way than is generally done. Our intuition about media impact may be misleading. Research is needed to conduct the debate on solid ground.

Does this then mean that we should be worried about the media’s impact, or not? Are the findings of this dissertation alarming, or reassuring? That is a matter of perspective—one that is dependent not only on the state of political agenda-setting but also on one’s assessment of the quality of the news, which is on its turn dependent upon one’s normative expectations about democracy (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). Consider someone who is in favor of a participatory democracy, where all citizens engage as actively as possible in politics. On the one hand, this person may believe that the media are doing a good job in representing the interests of different groups in society. The recent surge of the popularity of online media, which facilitates citizen participation in news making, may even broaden the number of issues and perspectives included in the news (Baden & Springer, 2014). In this line of thinking, political agenda-setting does more good than bad: it makes media responsive politicians better representatives, who are aligned with the preferences of an actively involved public. On the other hand, this person may think that the media fail to provide access for all citizens, and that the interests and viewpoints included in news coverage are largely homogenous (Van Cuilenburg, 1999). In that case, the media do not fulfill their role as a facilitator of participation. As a consequence, political agenda-setting does not lead to representational benefits here, but rather reproduces the status quo.

Personally, I tend to adhere the former, optimistic point of view—yet cautiously. Research shows that, in Belgium at least, journalists’ aim is to provide information that is reliable and objective (Raeymaeckers et al., 2013)—to the extent that this is possible, of course. They try to fulfill their ‘watchdog role’ and ring the alarm bell when an issue requires urgent action (Boydston, 2013). The resulting news content is not always in line with these ambitions and ideals (Mellado & Dalen, 2014)—

but what alternative information source exists that allows so easily to monitor what is happening in society? Ultimately—this dissertation shows—that is what politicians use the media for most: to keep their finger on the pulse of any developments they are expected to react to. In itself, that is not a bad thing—especially not when journalists and politicians aim to cover news, and design policies, of the best quality possible. In any case, the recent election of president Trump in the United States, who distrusts the media and does not want to take political cues from them, seems no attractive alternative...

Anyway, the goal of this dissertation is not to take stance with regards to this debate. Rather it tries to provide arguments that can help conduct the debate in an informed manner. I hope it does. Enjoy reading!

Endnotes

¹ Done in the framework of the INFOPOL-project. More information about the interviews will be given in the data and methods section of this chapter, and in Article 6 which is based on these interview data.

² Definition from Oxford dictionaries, see en.oxforddictionaries.com

³ This article is co-authored by my supervisor Stefaan Walgrave and my colleague Debby Vos.

⁴ This article is co-authored by my supervisor Stefaan Walgrave and my colleague Gwendolyn J. Epping.

⁵ This work was supported by the European Research Council [Advanced Grant 'INFOPOL', N° 295735] and the Research Fund of the University of Antwerp [Grant N° 26827]. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) is principal investigator of the INFOPOL project, which has additional teams in Israel (led by Tamir Sheafer) and Canada (led by Stuart Soroka and Peter Loewen).

⁶ See http://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/reglement/reglementNL.pdf

⁷ See <https://www.knesset.gov.il/rules>.

⁸ See <http://www.parl.gc.ca/MarleauMontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?Sec=Ch21&Seq=3&Language=E>

⁹ To calculate MPs' issue diversity, we collected all parliamentary speeches given by MPs in the plenary parliamentary meetings in the three countries. The speeches were automatically issue-coded (dictionary-based approach, for all details see Sevenans, Albaugh, Shahaf, Soroka, & Walgrave, 2014). The issue diversity measure used here is an inverse Herfindahl index, based on each MP's distribution of attention over issues.

ONE CONCEPT, MANY INTERPRETATIONS. The media's causal roles in political agenda- setting processes

ABSTRACT

While political agenda-setting scholars agree that the news media matter when it comes to agenda setting, surprisingly, there is no consensus on the exact role these media play in the agenda-setting process. In particular, causal interpretations of the media's role are diverse. This contribution focuses on this ambiguity in the agenda-setting field. First, it outlines the main reasons for the disagreement, both on a theoretical and on an empirical level. Second, it develops a theoretical model that helps to specify what role the news media play under various circumstances. Overall, the paper strongly encourages scholars to reflect more on causal mechanisms in political agenda-setting work, and makes a first attempt at facilitating the interpretation of extant and future findings.

REFERENCE

Sevenans, J. (2017). One concept, many interpretations. The media's causal roles in political agenda-setting processes. *Accepted for publication in European Political Science Review.*

ONE CONCEPT, MANY INTERPRETATIONS.

The media's causal roles in political agenda-setting processes

To what extent, and under which circumstances, are political agendas responsive to media agendas? For more than four decades, this question has attracted attention from political and communication scholars. Early studies, mostly conducted in the US, focused on *whether* there is an influence of the media agenda on the political agenda. These studies brought about contradictory results: some scholars found evidence of strong media impact (e.g. Bartels, 1996; Protess et al., 1987; Wood & Peake, 1998), others studies revealed that there is no agenda impact of media on politics at all (e.g. Walker, 1977; Wanta & Foote, 1994). In an effort to integrate the literature, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) attributed these inconsistencies to differences in research designs. They hypothesized the role of the news media in politics to be dependent on various circumstances such as the concrete media agenda, political agenda, issue type, country, and time period under study. In their footsteps, scholars in Europe and the US started laying bare the *contingency* of the mass media's political agenda-setting power (see e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Vliegenthart et al., 2016). There are now plentiful studies addressing how the news media may shift politicians' attention from one issue to another. Recently, the traditional common time-series approach has been complemented with studies relying on surveys (e.g. Maurer, 2011; Vesa, Blomberg, & Kroll, 2015), interviews (e.g. Davis, 2007, 2009), experiments (e.g. Helfer, 2016), and micro-level content analyses (e.g. Thesen, 2013; Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2013)—which has largely enhanced our understanding of how various political actors, depending on the conditions, are to different degrees responsive to information from the news media.

Surprisingly, while the majority of authors discussed above agree that the news media (hereafter simply referred to as 'media') matter when it comes to agenda setting, consensus on what 'media impact' actually implies, is lacking (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014). In particular, the research field is struggling with causal interpretations of the media's role in agenda-setting processes. This manifests itself both on a theoretical and on an empirical level. Theoretically speaking, some scholars try to find out 'who leads and who follows', making claims about whether the media are the true *driving force* behind shifts in political attention to issues (Jenner, 2012; Van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). Others are less interested in determining whether it is media or politics that is the 'first-mover' of political action; they assume that most action starts in the political sphere, but that the media *reinforce* political processes by providing positive feedback to the system (Wolfe, Jones, &

Baumgartner, 2013; Wolfsfeld, 2013). Still others think the media have no role in this process at all (Delshad, 2012; Liu, Lindquist, & Vedlitz, 2011). On an empirical level, the problem is that the methodological techniques used in some agenda-setting studies are not well suited to test the causal claims that are theoretically being made. For instance, some scholars make causal inferences about media effects on politics without controlling for spurious relationships or endogeneity (as discussed in Soroka, 2002b).

The goal of this paper is to address the ambiguous causal role of the media in political agenda-setting processes. To that end, we do two things. First, we discuss the complexity related to establishing causality in the media-politics relationship. After briefly outlining where the political agenda-setting literature currently stands, we identify the *main reasons* for the lack of causal clarity in the field. Three problems make it hard to prove that media attention for issues really causes those issues to gain importance on the political agenda: 1) the risk of spurious relationships; 2) possible endogeneity problems; and 3) the lack of an integrated theory explaining why the media influence political agendas.

Second, we offer a *theoretical response* to those problems, by developing an analytical framework that clarifies the various roles the media may play under various circumstances. Our micro-level model lists 1) what politicians can learn from the media, and 2) why politicians react to it. By understanding where politicians' information on issues comes from—and what part of it they get from the media—we can reduce the risk of spurious relationships and endogeneity. It allows us to determine whether the media are a necessary condition for a certain political initiative; a facilitator of political action; or whether they have no impact at all. Insight into politicians' motivations to react to news, on its turn, helps to fulfil the theoretical criterion of causality. Their motivations explain why the media exert influence: because they provide policy-related information; because they are a mediator of the public opinion; because politicians use them as a tool to fight the party competition; or because they offer opportunities to gain media access or political success. Taking both components into account would thus enable agenda-setting scholars to get a better understanding of what 'media impact' actually means.

While most agenda-setting research focuses on institutions (macro) or on parties (meso), our theoretical model departs thus from the individual politician (micro). The reason is not that we think individuals are more important than institutions—on the contrary, one could say that in politics, it is the ultimate aggregate output that counts. Yet, to understand the causal mechanisms behind agenda-setting, we argue, our measurement level needs to be the individual politician because learning and motivations are cognitive phenomena that take place in the mind of politicians (Wood & Vedlitz, 2007; for a similar argument see Yanovitzky, 2002). We simply cannot observe 'what parties learn', or 'what

motivates parliament', without looking at the individuals who consume news with certain goals in mind. That is why the model tries to shed light on these micro-level mechanisms in the first place.

In the concluding section, we summarize our argument and we link it with existing agenda-setting theory. We explicate how our model builds on previous research, and forms the next step in unraveling the contingency of political agenda-setting processes. And, as our theoretical model has methodological implications as well, we make some suggestions about how to put those ideas into practice in empirical terms. In sum, we hope that our paper may stimulate a thorough theoretical and empirical discussion about the precise causal function of the news media in agenda-setting theory.

Political agenda setting: a matter of information

Political agenda-setting scholars generally agree that media effects on political agendas are a consequence of how politicians process information (Brown, 2010; Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). Early agenda-building studies have pointed to the importance of information in advancing issues on the political agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995). Indeed, politicians need to be informed about problems that exist in society before they can address them (Light, 1982). Various types of information can signal a problem and as such attract political attention. There is a lot of 'objective' information that originates from what happens in the *real world*. Real-world events, such as accidents or natural disasters, happen and may call for political action (Birkland, 1998, 2006). Real-world indicators or figures, such as the number of deaths due to car accidents, are regularly published and may trigger politicians to act as well (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). On top of that, a broad range of actors in society constantly filter, alter and frame this information to fit with their goals and world-views. Interest groups or individual citizens, for example, constantly send signals about their opinions and actions which go beyond the 'objective' facts (Kingdon, 1973, 1995).

In contemporary societies, some of the information does not reach politicians directly—or via its original source—but comes via the media instead. As Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976) pointed out forty years ago, there is so much information floating around that it is simply impossible to observe all signals directly. And the amount of available information has only grown since then. The news media play a key mediating role because they collect and summarize lots of information and make it accessible and manageable. As such they have started to play an important role in politicians' information gathering behavior. In addition to the many other sources they have, politicians follow the media closely to learn about problems in society, potential solutions for these problems, and the public opinion regarding these problems and solutions (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). Even if politicians

do not personally spend a lot of time consuming media coverage, they have a lot of contacts to inform them about what’s in the news; for instance, many political parties send around press reviews daily.

The fact that politicians, using the news media as a source of information for their political work, sometimes display responsiveness vis-à-vis these media in their political initiatives, has attracted scholarly attention. Researchers in the field of political agenda setting focus on the observable agenda relationship between media and politics (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). They study whether and under which circumstances political action upon issues follows media attention for those issues. In Figure 1.1, this is represented by path (A): the thick arrow represents how media coverage may lead to political initiatives.

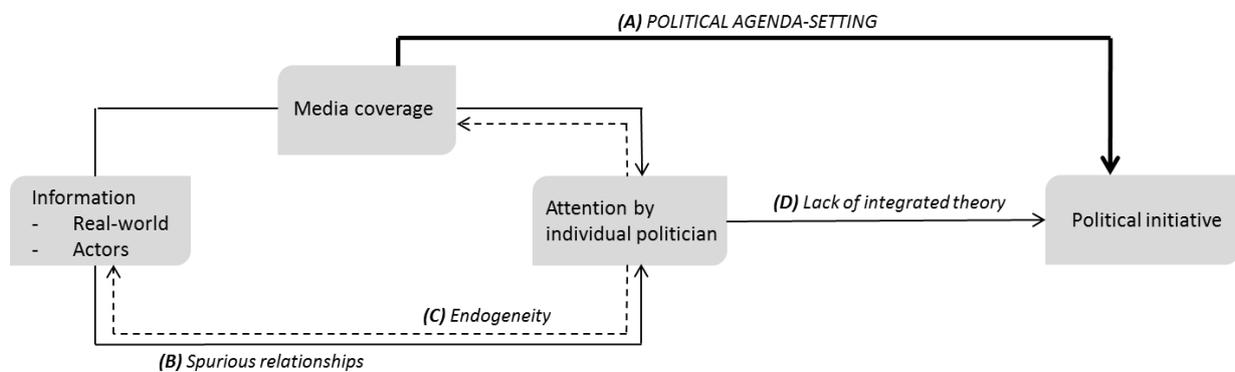


FIGURE 1.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INFORMATION, MEDIA COVERAGE, AND POLITICAL INITIATIVES

Two types of agenda-setting research exist. A large part of the political agenda-setting literature has studied the matter from a broad *issue* perspective, demonstrating that political institutions respond to changes in the media’s distribution of attention over issues (e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Van Noije et al., 2008). Those scholars conceive agenda setting as a process of issue prioritization: the mass media convey information about the relative importance of issues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). A smaller number of studies has taken a more specific *news story* approach, showing how concrete news cues transfer to the political agenda (e.g. Thesen, 2013; Van Aelst & Vliegthart, 2013). Here, the idea is that politicians use media coverage as a concrete source of inspiration for their work.

Irrespective of the specific type of research conducted, the basic premise behind it is the same: agenda-setting effects are considered to occur when media attention for an issue—be it a broad policy domain or a concrete news story—*temporally precedes* political action upon this issue, while

controlling for previous political attention for the issue. The large majority of agenda-setting studies establishes such effects and concludes that the media matter when it comes to setting the political agenda.

Criteria for causality

The common procedure to establish agenda-setting impact as described above fulfils some, but not all of the criteria for causality. In order to establish causality, basically, three conditions need to be satisfied: (1) cause and effect need to be *correlated*; (2) the cause needs to be *causally prior* to the effect, which implies that the cause must *temporally* precede the effect, that *no external factor* may drive cause and effect simultaneously (pointing to spurious relationships), and that the effect may not drive the cause (pointing to endogeneity); and (3) a *theory* is needed that links the cause to the effect (see the classic work of Hume, 1738; see also Marini & Singer, 1988 who apply those criteria to the social sciences specifically).

The condition of correlation is clearly accomplished: agenda-setting research investigates exactly whether an increase in media attention for an issue goes hand in hand with an increase in political attention for the issue. The second criterion—causal priority—is partly met. Political agenda-setting scholars meet the *temporal succession* criterion by ‘lagging’ the media agenda to be sure that changes in media attention for issues precede political action upon those issues. However, they have difficulties (1) to rule out the possibility that the relationship is *spurious*, that is, that an external factor causes both X and Y; and (2) to rule out that Y (invisibly) causes X, which would be an indicator of *endogeneity*. Thirdly, the *theoretical criterion* needed to explain why X causes Y is not entirely fulfilled either. Scholars have of course amply theorized about why a politician would respond to the media, but the theory is still scattered and speculative, rather than integrated and empirically tested. We will now consecutively discuss those three problems.

Spurious relationships

The problem of spurious relationships stems from the fact that the media are often just a mediator—transmitting information that is created elsewhere and that may also have reached politicians via other channels, as can be seen in Figure 1.1, path (B). Agenda-setting studies that do not sufficiently take path (B) into account, may consider as a media effect what would actually better be viewed as a simple ‘information effect’. It may be that politicians are not reacting to media information, but that

politicians and the media are simultaneously reacting to external information (Soroka, 2003; Wanta & Foote, 1994). It is a challenge to disentangle this ‘information effect’ from those ‘media effects’ whereby the media are the true cause of a politician’s political initiative.

Although many agenda-setting scholars agree that this is a valid concern, mismatches occur between causal claims that are being made, and the methods that are used to substantiate these claims. Most studies that test effects across a broad range of issues, do not control for any kind of real-world information, although sometimes acknowledging that this is a limitation of the research (e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Tan & Weaver, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2008). It is simply difficult to control for the full stream of ‘raw’ information reaching politicians independent of media coverage (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). In-depth studies, focusing on just one or a few issues, do often control for real-world information. Indeed, in many of those studies—both on political and on public agenda setting—efforts were made to include real-world events or indicators in the agenda-setting models (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; e.g. Delshad, 2012; Soroka, 2002a; Van Noije et al., 2008; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004; Wood & Peake, 1998). These studies often, but not always (see e.g. Delshad, 2012; Liu et al., 2011), show that the media matter in addition to real-world cues. Unfortunately, what almost all research overlooks, is that not only ‘objective’ real-world information underlies media coverage and political action; as said above, many exogenous actors continuously send out information about their opinions, goals and actions, and this information as well may simultaneously drive media and political attention. In other words, the real-world control variables used in agenda-setting research are necessarily partial indicators of the full exogenous information stream, making it hard to prove that media attention for certain matters causes political attention for those matters.

Endogeneity

Second, critics think that agenda-setting research has an endogeneity problem. In line with indexing theory (Bennett, 1990), policymakers are an important news source themselves and many news facts have their origins in politics. Politicians may ‘go public’ with their plans—via the media—before taking formal political action (Kernell, 1997). In Figure 1.1, this is represented by the dotted lines, see path (C). The consequence is that political reactions to news may thus often be reactions to things that were actually put on the media agenda by politicians. In other words, agenda-setting effects may be largely endogenous (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). It is not the news, but the political evolutions underlying the news, that truly cause the subsequent political action.

Again, agenda-setting studies may falsely interpret their findings as causal effects from media on politics, while what they actually observe is how politicians first make media attention for an issue go up, and then undertake action upon this issue. We know from scholars doing interviews with politicians that this happens: what seems to be a political reaction to the media, is sometimes the consequence of an a priori collaboration between politicians and journalists (Cook et al., 1983; Davis, 2007).

Generally, political agenda-setting studies have not been able to take this process into account because it is hard to trace the origins of media stories. News making is indeed a non-transparent process. Instead of studying political elites, one would have to interview journalists about who was the source for a certain news story. But the problem is that journalists are often unwilling to reveal their news sources. As an exception, a few recent studies do try to control for whether a news story was initiated by a political actor or not (Thesen, 2013; Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2013).

Lack of theory

The third regularly voiced criticism concerns the lack of a coherent theory that explains why the media have impact on the political agenda. Going back to Figure 1.1, scholars have not systematically addressed path (D), reflecting why a politician decides to effectively take action. Of course, political agenda-setting scholars did theorize about why politicians are influenced by media cues. And the theoretical approach of the mediatization literature—a related research field—offers valuable insights as well (Van Aelst, Thesen, Walgrave, & Vliegenthart, 2014). However, political agenda-setting theory is scattered, rather than integrated; and many aspects of it have not empirically been tested. A better and more integrated understanding of the motivations at play—one which can be transformed into verifiable hypotheses—would strengthen the basis for causal inference.

In particular, critics claim that political agenda-setting scholars have long ascribed a too passive role to politicians in the agenda-setting process. They did not sufficiently take into account that politicians are strategic actors who deliberately respond to media coverage in those instances where it fits their personal interests (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). Agenda-setting effects are not necessarily 'direct', first-order effects that follow from content; irrespective of the content, politicians can also react to media coverage simply because they know that this coverage impacts other politicians, journalists, and the audience at large (second-order effect or 'influence of presumed influence') (J. Cohen, Tsfaty, & Sheaffer, 2008; Meyen et al., 2014). Agenda-setting scholars are emphasizing these strategic motivations more and more—see, for instance, the work by Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008) who showed that Danish politicians used a media hype merely strategically as a 'policy window'

to present their ideas about the issue. But, these motivations are not systematically addressed, while they strongly nuance the ‘impact’ that the media really have.

Causal interpretations of agenda-setting effects

Due to the abovementioned reasons, diverging views exist on how to interpret the causal role the media play in this process. Some scholars perceive true media effects as instances where the media are the *necessary condition* for certain political initiatives. Van Aelst and Vliegenthart (2013), for instance, in a study on how news coverage leads to political initiatives, test whether the media “created” the coverage that led to the initiative or not; in other words, whether or not they were the “real initiator” of the initiative. The assumption is that an initiative would or could not have been taken, had the media not covered the matter in the first place. This is not often the case, as most of the time alternative sources actually initiated the news coverage.

This causal requirement that media coverage is a true necessity for political action to be taken, is quite demanding. Most authors take a more relaxing probabilistic view on causality. That is, they make inferences *with probability* about the effect of media attention on political attention for issues. Within this view, one line of research interprets agenda-setting effects as effects whereby media come first, and politics follows. In the words of Gans (1979), the goal of this tradition is to find out ‘*who leads the tango?*’, politicians or the media. Those authors try to investigate which of the two agendas has the strongest impact on the other agenda (Bartels, 1996; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Soroka, 2003). They are looking for ‘autonomous’ media effects, whereby the media are the first-mover of certain changes on the political agenda. Others are not so much interested in who leads and who follows. They rather view media and political agendas as mutually reinforcing each other and investigate the simple ‘correspondence’ between the two (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Tresch, Sciarini, & Varone, 2013; Wolfe et al., 2013). These authors speak in terms of how the media provide *positive feedback* to the political system, thereby reinforcing existing political processes—or negative feedback, slowing down policy making, as shown by Wolfe (2012). Wolfsfeld (2013), who developed the Politics-Media-Politics principle, argues that most changes originate in politics, leading to change in the media environment, which on its turn further changes the political environment. A third group claims that, when adequately controlling for real-world phenomena, the media do not cause changes in political agendas at all (Delshad, 2012; Liu et al., 2011). In any case, the idea behind the probabilistic line of thinking is not that the media are absolutely necessary for a certain political initiative to be taken; rather, the

media boost the likelihood that political initiatives about a certain issue are taken at a certain moment in time.

In the next section, we introduce a model that integrates the existing theoretical views, and that—we hope—may serve as a tool to interpret extant and future empirical agenda-setting results. To be clear, we do not choose sides between the perspectives discussed above. There are good reasons to believe that the media may play various roles in agenda-setting processes: at times being a true necessary condition for a change on the political agenda; at times just being a facilitator of political action; and at times having no causal impact whatsoever. Our goal is to state precisely under what circumstances they adopt which role.

A model of the media's role in agenda-setting processes

In order to solve the abovementioned ambiguity about the causal role of the media, this model holds, it is useful to consider (1) *what politicians learn from the media*, and also (2) *why politicians react to media coverage*.

The basic problem of spurious relationships and endogeneity is similar: there is uncertainty about what politicians get from the media. When agenda-setting studies establish media impact—based on the temporal succession of media and political attention for an issue—it may be that politicians are actually not reacting to media coverage but to exogenous information streams (leading to spurious relationships) or to information that they brought in the media themselves (leading to endogeneity). So, to decide what role the media precisely play in a given instance, we need to know about these alternative ways of learning. If politicians exclusively use other information sources, the media cannot impact their actions. Yet we know that politicians follow the media closely. They may as such learn about the salience or interpretation of an issue—because the media *amplify* and *interpret* it—or the media may even *reveal* information to the politician, about which (s)he would otherwise not be informed at all. It is in such instances that the media have the potential to exert influence on politicians.

Our response to the scattered theoretical foundations of agenda-setting research is situated on another level. We argue that—regardless of what politicians learn from the media—it is crucial to look at their motivations to take political initiatives, because our interpretation of the media's role in agenda-setting processes is dependent on those motivations. To make a list of motivations, we not only look at the agenda-setting literature, but we also borrow from the mediatization literature, which

has addressed how politicians adapt to the media logic in a broader sense (see e.g. Landerer, 2014; or Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013 who theorize on “why political parties adapt to the media”). In addition to *policy-making goals*, politicians may react to the media because of *representational motives*, in response to *party competition*, out of *media motivation*, or simply because they want to be *politically effective*, and insight into these motivations helps to understand how the media actually exert influence.

Our model is presented in Figure 1.2. The grey part of the model displays the basic relationship between information, media coverage, politicians’ attention, and their political initiatives, as discussed in the theoretical review above (identical to Figure 1.1). On the left-hand side of the panel, we have added the various ways via which politicians may learn from the media. On the right hand side, various reasons why politicians take action are shown.

What politicians learn from the media

No learning. When media coverage upon an issue is followed by a political initiative upon the issue, political agenda-setting scholars tend to conclude that the media ‘influenced’ the initiative-taking politician. As the model shows, this is not necessarily true, because it is possible that the politician actually got all information elsewhere and that the media did not play any role at all. Politicians often have large, specialized information networks at their disposal, making it likely that they get to know about issues via alternative channels (Kingdon, 1995). This is at least true for the ‘raw’ facts. Note that this does not automatically mean that the media do not matter: as we will discuss now, they transform the reality in various ways, and irrespective of that, they may motivate politicians take action.

Amplification. On a daily basis, the media transform the reality by choosing what is newsworthy and what is not. First, they select which events or facts make it into the news and which ones do not. Gatekeeping theory focuses on which factors are at play in this process of news selection (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), showing that it is not necessarily the information that is ‘objectively speaking’ most important that becomes news. Second, the media determine daily how much attention they pay to various matters. Boydston (2013) explains how the amount of media attention for an issue is often disproportionate vis-à-vis its inherent severity as well. Media attention is not evenly spread across issues; instead it is explosive and skewed and lurches from one issue to the other. This means that every day, the media amplify some issues, while—due to the limited media attention available—they minimize or even totally ignore others.

By acting as a ‘megaphone’—giving disproportionately much (or little) attention to a certain real-world condition, compared to the objective seriousness of it—the media influence the perceived importance

of the issue in the mind of the audience, including policymakers. It is here that agenda-setting effects occur. The media make it much more likely that politicians react to a certain piece of information, by giving priority to it. Politicians, who are daily confronted with an overwhelming amount of information, use the media to quickly assess what is most important. When media coverage takes extraordinary proportions—scholars speak of media ‘storms’, ‘hypes’, or ‘waves’ to describe those instances where an event or issue suddenly gets extremely high attention in the media (Boydston, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014; Vasterman, 2005)—politicians may even feel forced to respond (Walgrave, Boydston, Vliegthart, & Hardy, 2017).

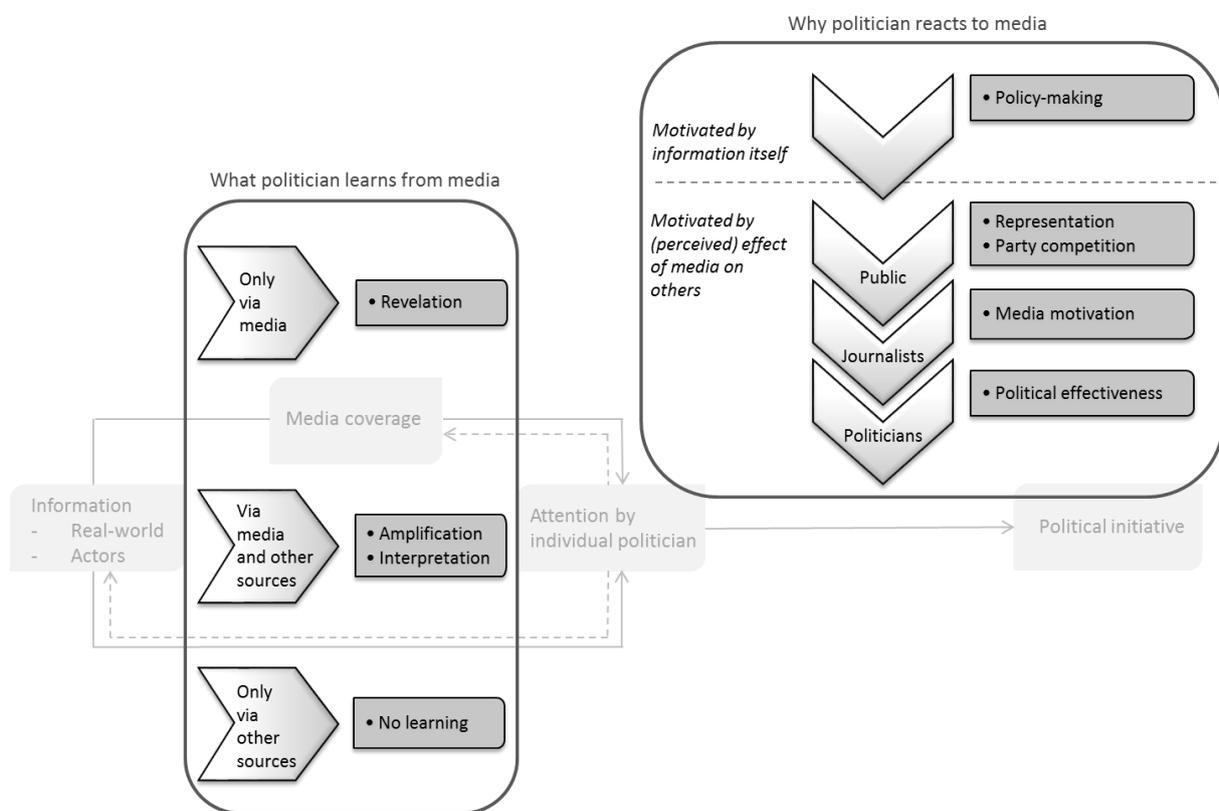


FIGURE 1.2 THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES

Interpretation. When transmitting information, the media may not only take an interventionist stance by manipulating the amount of attention for an issue (amplification); they may also add a certain interpretation to the basic real-world facts they transmit. Many scholars have studied how the media ‘frame’ information by presenting and defining it in a certain way (de Vreese, 2005; Scheufele, 1999). Various studies have demonstrated how media coverage, compared to what happens in reality, for

instance stresses negativity (Soroka, 2012) or conflict (Bartholomé, Lecheler, & De Vreese, 2015; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), or emphasizes certain aspects of a specific issue while ignoring others.

On top of the effects framing may have on people's cognitions, attitudes, and behavior, news frames may moderate agenda-setting effects. Research has shown that agenda-setting effects are for instance stronger when news contains a conflict frame (Sevenans & Vliegenthart, 2016), responsibility attributions (Thesen, 2013), or when the frame is in line with the frame of the respective political actor (van der Pas, 2014). In other words, when a news fact is framed in a certain way, it seems to be judged as more (or less) relevant by certain political actors, which increases (or decreases) the chance that they take action upon it. In this sense, the media's tendency to interpret information has the same effect as amplification, namely: it facilitates, or reinforces, political reaction upon an issue.

Revelation. When considering a political reaction upon a news story, the media are the necessary condition for the political initiative if the media truly reveal information to the politician. That is, the politician would not have been informed about the matter otherwise. Effectively, in those instances where media are the only channel via which politicians learn about a certain problem, they would not have been able to take action upon it, if the media had not spread the information in the first place.

Empirical research has not paid much attention to the concept of revelation, because it is hard to empirically determine whether politicians are dependent on the media for bringing an issues under their attention (but we know that citizens are: see Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The pure informative function of the media has so far been understudied (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). At least, surveys and interviews have shown that policymakers themselves consider the media to be an important source of information. Journalists who have been working on a topic for a long time, are viewed as experts and what they write is valued by politicians due to its informative quality (Davis, 2009).

Moreover, the media do not only reveal information coming from elsewhere; they sometimes also spread information that would otherwise not be produced at all. A typical example is 'investigative journalism', whereby the news outlet denounces a certain practice or problem (Protess et al., 1987). Potential political effects of such coverage are truly caused by the media. And we know that such effects occur. A series of case studies conducted by Cook, Protess and colleagues demonstrates how various investigative reports altered politicians' attitudes and led to political actions (see Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1987). For instance, symbolic and substantial initiatives were taken in response to investigative reporting on home health care fraud and abuse, police brutality, or toxic waste disposal. And more recent study by Elmelund-Praestekaer and Wien (2008) shows how a piece of

investigative journalism, in this case about elderly care fraud, can become a real media hype that generates immediate (yet in this case merely symbolic) reactions from politicians.

Classifying media coverage according to what a politician learns from it is, we argue, a first step in dealing with the problems of spurious relationships and endogeneity as discussed above. We solved the former problem, at least theoretically. By dividing information based on its availability through alternative sources, as we did, we theoretically define which effects are spurious (*no learning*) and in which instances the media facilitate action (*amplification, interpretation*) or even uncover the information to politicians (*revelation*).

Regarding the latter problem, endogeneity, we have not yet specified how information coming from political sources themselves should be classified. If one assumes that politicians know about such news anyway, and they do not need the media at all to learn about it, media effects are purely endogenous, as some scholars presume. But for politically initiated information as well, the media can ‘intervene’ by amplifying or interpreting the information, hence creating a favorable environment with heightened attention for the issue the politician wanted to take action upon (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). And, journalists may even ‘reveal’ political information. For instance, they regularly produce polls. Or, they publish statements made by politicians, which those politicians would not have given if the journalist had not approached the politician to ask for the statement, made up ‘on the spot’, in the first place. Indeed, contacts between journalists and parliamentarians are often initiated by journalists, who are looking for a source with a certain viewpoint, instead of by MPs themselves (Bartholomé et al., 2015; Van Aelst, Sehata, & Dalen, 2010). Furthermore, the media may contain concealed information for a politician about the strategies or plans of *other* politicians (Brown, 2010). To the extent that political action following this kind of news coverage would not happen if the media had not provoked an actor to make a statement in the first place, media impact is real—and not endogenous—even if the news itself is political in nature.

Why politicians take action

We have specified various ways via which politicians may learn from the media. We think this helps in better understanding the causal role of the media in political agenda-setting processes. However, learning alone does not explain why politicians take *action* based on media coverage. In this section, as a second crucial step towards a better understanding of agenda-setting, we describe the motivations explaining why politicians to react to media coverage.

Policy-making. The first motivation, policy-making, is very straightforward. Policymakers try to make society better by solving problems—this is their core task. And the media *convey information* about such problems (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). Fulfilling a ‘watchdog function’ in society, the media actually deal with problems all the time: they particularly focus on negative developments in society, on conflictuous situations, on crises, etc. Such information is useful for politicians who aim at solving problems in a certain policy domain.

Representation. Politicians are not only ‘policymakers’; they are also ‘representatives’ in the sense that they view it as their task to represent the preferences of the public, or more specifically, their voters (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Many scholars in the field of media and politics refer to the idea that the media’s agenda-setting impact is driven by the media’s relationship with the public opinion. Indeed, politicians’ motivation to react to news stories may be: representing what the public deems important.

Some see the media as a reflection of the public opinion. In the words of Pritchard (1994), the media fulfil the function of being a ‘surrogate for the public opinion’. In increasingly complex societies, politicians may use the media as a proxy for the priorities and preferences of the public (Herbst, 1998). If a politician reacts upon media information with the underlying motivation to represent public priorities, the media matter because they are valued as representative of the public opinion by the politician. In other words, the media are not just an information provider for policy related tasks; they can also be sort of a *mediator* between public opinion and politicians’ actions.

However, the causal relationship suggested here—whereby public opinion comes first and media respond to public preferences—is one that many scholars contradict. Rather, they believe that the inverse is true: that the media, by prioritizing some issues and ignoring others, *affect* public opinion, just like the public agenda-setting literature shows (McCombs & Shaw, 1972a). Politicians’ media responsiveness represents in this case an indirect relationship: politicians are responsive to the media because these media influence the public opinion—or because politicians assume they do (Meyen et al., 2014; Van Aelst, 2014). Cohen and colleagues (2008), in Gunther and Storey’s (2003) footsteps, speak of the media’s ‘influence of presumed influence’ to describe this third-person-effect whereby politicians are influenced by the idea that the media influence the public. Many political agenda-setting scholars cite this as a crucial motivation explaining the media’s impact (see e.g. Delshad, 2012; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Jenner, 2012; Wood & Peake, 1998).

Party competition. A variety of political agenda-setting studies builds upon the idea that reactions to media coverage can also be driven by motivations related to party competition. In parliament, there is a constant ‘attack and defense game’ between politicians going on. Politicians’ goal here is not to

solve problems, or to represent the public, but to increase the salience of issues on which their party has an advantageous position, while trying to thwart attention for issues on which the party has a detrimental position. For instance, parties react more to media coverage about issues they are issue-owner of (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Helfer, 2016), especially when the tone of the coverage is beneficial to them and when responsibility for problems is attributed towards other parties (Thesen, 2013), because they (think they) will receive electoral benefits when such issues become politicized. The specificities of the electoral system determine which strategy works best for a party (Vliegenthart et al., 2016).

Reacting to news coverage for party competition reasons—just like reacting to media for representational reasons—rests upon the idea that the media have influence on the cognitions of the public. It is the media which, according to politicians, (co)determine what people think about political parties and how important they deem various issues to be. But, in contrast to the representational motivation, the goal of politicians here is not to represent the people, but to *send* signals to the public about which issues are important and how the work of various political parties should be evaluated (Landerer, 2014). The media are in this sense also a *tool* used by politicians to fight the party political game.

Media motivation. As policymakers consider media access to be crucial to generate popularity and public support, media motivation likely impacts their behavior (J. Cohen et al., 2008; Vos, 2014). Gaining media access is not only an ‘intermediary’ motivation for politicians—one that is crucial to, for instance, fight the partisan competition and win votes (see above). It is often considered to be a motivation in itself as well, that exists regardless of other goals (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). Politicians simply aim to gain positive publicity in the media. The motivation is thus both separate and interwoven with the other motivations addressed above.

Reacting to media coverage out of media motivation is based on the assumption that the news agenda displays stability. Many news stories continue over several days and yesterday’s media agenda is a good predictor of today’s media agenda. This creates what scholars have called the possibility to ‘surf the news waves’: gaining media exposure by reacting to a story that is already in the media (Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer, 2006). Politicians may be responsive to media coverage because they believe that getting media access is easier if you react to something that gets media attention already (Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). This is sort of a third-person effect as well, which goes via journalists: politicians think that a journalist will more easily grant them media access if they are responsive to current coverage. Van Santen and colleagues (2013) find that political

initiatives indeed have a larger chance of being picked up in the newspapers if the amount of preceding media attention for the topic was larger.

Political effectiveness. Just like media motivation, the motivation to be politically effective is one that serves other goals—such as policy-making goals—but is a free-standing motivation as well. The idea here is that politicians are responsive to media information not because of its (perceived) effect on the public, or on future media coverage, but due to its (perceived) influence on their colleague-politicians. Due to the fact that many politicians are for a variety of reasons very responsive to news coverage, they get the idea that their chances to get something on the political agenda increase if they react to something that is in the media (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). In other words, they experience that an efficient way to be successful in parliament is reacting on current events, as their colleagues will easily support such initiatives.

By listing politicians' motivations to react to news coverage, we hope to have strengthened the theoretical basis underlying agenda-setting theory. In the eyes of politicians, the media can fulfill the role of information source (policy-making goals), mediator of public opinion (representational goals), tool for fighting the partisan game (party competition goals), or they can increase the chances on media access or political effectiveness. This actor-centered approach suggests thus, in line with recent research, that politicians are no passive victims of media coverage. While the media may exert causal influence on politicians—due to a variety of learning processes they can influence whether politicians take certain actions, or at least the timing of those actions—the effects are conditional upon politicians' decision to effectively act upon the media coverage.

Applying the model

The model listed three ways in which politicians may learn from the media, and gave five reasons why politicians may react to news. Taking these processes into account seems crucial to accurately interpret agenda-setting findings. Indeed, insight in the mechanism behind a certain agenda-setting case—and with 'mechanism' we mean the whole of learning processes and motivations involved in it—is necessary to understand what the 'agenda-setting influence' really implies. Imagine, for instance, an MP who introduces a bill to deal with a fraud scandal in the healthcare sector, in response to a report on the matter published by the newspaper. If (s)he learned about the scandal through the media (revelation), and is motivated to react because his/her voters are touched by the coverage on the matter (representational motivation), the media are crucial in fighting the fraud. If, however, the MP knew that the problem existed for years—due to insider contacts in a healthcare organization (no learning)—and was already looking for solutions, but now speeds up his work because of the ideal

momentum created by the media (political effectiveness), the media's role in fighting the fraud is more modest.

We acknowledge that the reality is often more complex, in the sense that a politician taking an initiative based upon a news story may have more than one motivation at the same time. For instance, policy-making motivations, representational goals and media motivation can easily go hand in hand—and one motivation is not necessarily equally decisive as the other. This makes it hard to pinpoint how crucial the media's role really is in a specific situation. Still, identifying the motivations that may be at play in a systematic manner—as our model does—is a necessary first step in determining the media's causal role in an agenda-setting process.

Conclusion and discussion

Political agenda-setting scholars are divided on what the exact causal role of the media is in agenda-setting processes. Some authors, when speaking of 'media influence', mean that the media are the necessary condition for changes on the political agenda. Due to a variety of reasons—including methodological difficulties like spurious relationships and endogeneity, and the too passive role that has long been ascribed to politicians in this process—others disagree with this kind of causal interpretations. They assume instead that the relationship between media and political agendas is reciprocal and that the media reinforce political processes. Still others think that no causal effects occur and that the media do not exert any agenda-setting power at all.

The model presented in this paper tries to solve this ambiguity by listing the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting processes, and by classifying them according to the various roles the media may play in these processes. The main argument is that the media's agenda-setting role is best approached from a micro-level perspective, because it is dependent on what exactly a politician learns from the media; as well as on the motivations why a politician reacts to information that is the media. The media are viewed as a necessary condition for an initiative if the media truly revealed the information that led to the initiative to the politician. Alternatively, the media are considered to be a facilitator of political initiatives if they amplified or interpreted information that was alternatively available to the politician as well. The media exert no impact if the politician does not learn anything from the media. In this process, the precise role of the media depends on the motivations of the politician. In addition to a policy-related information source, the media may be a mediator of the public opinion, they may be used as a tool to fight the party competition, or they may be seen as an opportunity to gain media access or political success.

A challenge for the political agenda-setting literature, we think, lies in measuring these mechanisms empirically. At least, scholars would benefit from choosing appropriate methods to empirically substantiate the theoretical claims they make in agenda-setting research. On the one hand, we think ‘traditional’ agenda-setting methods (time-series) could be improved as to better control for spurious relationships and endogeneity. A first step in the good direction is for instance made by authors as Liu (2011), Delshad (2012) and Olds (2013), who look for detailed measurements of ‘alternative’ information streams available to politicians; or by Thesen (2013) and Van Aelst and Vliegenthart (2013), who try to distinguish exogenous from endogenous news by means of detailed content analyses. On the other hand, we advocate the use of political elite research to study agenda setting, both in quantitative (surveys, experiments) and qualitative (interviews) ways. Designs like that of Sevenans and colleagues (2017b), who surveyed politicians about how they dealt with concrete news stories that had recently been in the media, allow to investigate in a very detailed manner what politicians learn from media coverage. And, the in-depth interviews conducted by Melenhorst (2015) and Davis (2007) gave us a very good understanding of what exactly politicians learn from the media and why they are motivated to react to it in the first place. In our view, studies like these have the potential to fundamentally improve our understanding of complex causal relationships between media and politics.

Note that—although we advocate conducting individual level research—we do not intend to disregard the importance of political institutions. Individual politicians are embedded in political parties, factions, parliaments, and so on; and those institutions probably largely determine how they learn and what motivates them to do what they do. Moreover, decision-making processes are aggregate, institutional processes in which many different actors are involved, and so in which many different learning and motivational processes may simultaneously be at play. We definitely acknowledge that those institutional processes are important; yet, we argue that only by looking at individuals we are able to get grip on the mechanisms that are driving institutional agenda-setting processes. While the mechanisms that are at play in aggregate processes are probably the same as those that matter on the individual level, it remains a challenge to get grip on how the combination of various mechanisms plays out when multiple actors are involved.

The model presented in this paper primarily tries to classify positive, observable cases of political agenda-setting, whereby media coverage for an issue seems to lead political attention for the issue. However, the motivations listed in the model may explain other, more ‘hidden’ adaptations of politicians’ agendas—or behavior more generally—in response to the media as well. Central to the mediatization literature, for instance, is the idea that politicians may display anticipatory behavior (Davis, 2007; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014b): their decision about whether or not to take a certain

initiative in the political arena depends on how well they think it will play in the media. Or, politicians ‘go public’ with their plans before acting in parliament, because they know this can help them to reach their goals (reciprocal relationship). The motivations behind this unobservable, strategic behavior—for example media motivation or political effectiveness—are probably identical to the motivations in our model that drive ‘observable’ agenda-setting effects.

Like most agenda-setting work, this paper focused on the role of the ‘traditional’ news media as a political agenda-setter. Which role do other types of media, such as social media, play in this process? Is the theoretical model applicable to social media as well? Due to the limited evidence on the political agenda-setting effect of social media, we can only speculate about that question. Two scenarios are worth discussing here. First, when an issue is ‘big’ on social media, it often gets attention from the ‘traditional media’ as well. Intermedia agenda-setting studies show that social media are an increasingly important news source for journalists (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Hardly any ‘big’ social media fuzz goes by unnoticed. The theoretical model set out in this paper clearly applies in these instances: ‘traditional’ and social media may even reinforce each other. Second, politicians may be responsive to ‘small’ messages on social media that do not receive much attention. In those instances, however, social media function not really as a ‘news medium’. Rather, they offer a channel for individuals or smaller groups of people to inform politicians—which is subject for another study.

Our paper builds upon the work of Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) and many other authors who study the contingency of political agenda-setting effects, and—we hope—takes the next step. While the extant literature did a good job in describing how the strength of the mass media’s agenda impact depends for instance on the media outlet, partisan system, political agenda, and time period under study, we now try to show that the interpretation of what ‘media impact’ itself means is variable as well. When a politician acts upon media coverage, the necessity of the media information for the politician to act, as well as the reason why the media actually mattered, are contingent themselves upon learning and motivational processes.

THE MEDIA'S INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION IN POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES

ABSTRACT

The political agenda-setting literature has extensively demonstrated that issues receiving more media attention rank higher on the political agenda as well. Scholars now try to get grip on the mechanisms underlying these findings. This paper focuses on the media's *informational function* as a driver of political agenda-setting processes. It studies the extent to which politicians, when reacting to media information, really learn about the information from the media—as opposed to instances where the media function as an amplifier rather than as the true source of policy-relevant information. The matter is investigated by means of a survey with Members of Parliament (MPs) in Belgium, Canada and Israel (N = 376). We confronted the MPs with news stories that had recently been in the media, asking them whether they undertook *political action* upon the news story and whether they knew about the news story *before* it appeared in the media. We show that politicians mostly knew about the information before it appeared in the media—but that there is variation between politicians and types of action in this respect.

REFERENCE

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THE MEDIA'S INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION IN POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES

In the past few decades, political communication scholars have gained insight into the relationship between media and political agendas. Many different studies in a variety of countries have confirmed the basic finding that issues receiving more media attention rank higher on the political agenda (see e.g. the recent comparative study of Vliegenthart et al., 2016). We also have a good understanding of the contingency of this effect upon the concrete media outlet, issue, and political agenda under study (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). We know, for instance, that the media's potential to play a significant role is larger in early than in late stages of the policy cycle (Melenhorst, 2015; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010).

Our extensive knowledge about *when* media agendas correspond to political agendas is in sharp contrast to our ignorance about *how* the media matter. Little empirical work exists on the mechanisms behind aggregate political agenda-setting effects; on the precise role the media play in processes whereby politicians are responsive to media cues (Eissler et al., 2014). Do the media disclose new information to policymakers, or do they merely reinforce signals available elsewhere as well? Do they initiate new topics for debate—as many political agenda-setting studies implicitly assume—or do they just reflect the arguments of political actors themselves (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010)?

Insight into these mechanisms is important, we argue, both scientifically and normatively speaking. The massive body of evidence on how the media influence the political agenda can only correctly be interpreted if we understand what this 'influence' precisely entails. Scholars have done a very good job in describing media effects on political agendas, but the challenge lies now in developing a sophisticated understanding of how these effects are brought about. Such a theoretical understanding of the media's role in politics can help, on its turn, to assess its normative implications for democracy.

This paper aims to make a small, but significant contribution to the development of a political agenda-setting theory, by empirically investigating one potential role the media may play in political agenda-setting: that of *information provider* for political elites. It studies *to what extent politicians' media responsiveness is the consequence of the informational function of the media* (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). On the one hand, politicians have many information sources at their disposal to inform them about what is happening in the world and which societal problems need to be solved (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015). In that sense, one may think that politicians do not need the media to be informed. According to this logic, political agenda-setting is rather driven by, for instance, politicians' use of

media crises as a ‘window of opportunity’ to act upon issues they knew about long before (Kingdon, 1995; Wolfsfeld, 2013). The media are merely an amplifier of information available elsewhere as well. On the other hand, there are also reasons to believe that politicians, in an era of information overload, *do* sometimes turn to the media to learn which problems need to be solved. Indeed, the media have access to many actors in the system and they are generally quicker than other sources to disseminate information (Brown, 2010). In that respect, political agenda-setting may be the consequence of politicians’ learning from the media about which topics need to be acted upon—which would mean that the media really have the potential to initiate policy debates.

In addition to looking at whether ‘information provision’ is a driver of political agenda-setting, the study considers the *differential importance of this mechanism for various types of politicians and for different sorts of political action*. Probably, the informative value of the media is larger in some contexts than in others. For instance, it may be that MPs from government parties, who have access to insider information from the cabinets and strictly carry out the government agreement, do not spontaneously react to things they just learned from the media, in contrast to opposition MPs who lack insider information and can pick and choose any news report to attack the government (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). Hypotheses about this contextual variation will be developed and tested in the paper.

The matter is investigated by means of a survey with MPs in Belgium, Canada and Israel (N = 376). We confronted the MPs with news stories that had recently been in the media, asking them whether they undertook different types of political action upon the news story, and whether they knew about the news story before it appeared in the media. These data allow to describe the extent to which different types of politicians, when reacting to media information in different ways, actually acquired this information via the media.

Analyses reveal that political agenda-setting, in general, does not involve much learning. Politicians mostly take action upon news stories they actually knew about before these news stories appeared in the mass media—this is true for symbolic as well as substantive types of action. Other mechanisms, such as the amplifying effect of media coverage, explain in the first place why political elites are responsive to the media. This does not mean that learning from the media does not exist at all as a basis for political action, though. Especially MPs from opposition parties, or party warriors, sometimes take symbolic action in response to information that was revealed by the mass media. This type of politicians, for this kind of action, ‘picks and chooses’ media crises as they happen.

The informational function of the media for political elites

A variety of political as well as communication scholars have theorized about the media's informational function in politicians' work. The idea is that politicians need to process enormous amounts of information for their work every day, but that their time and resources to do so are scarce. Being in a constant state of information overload (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017), the media may function as a heuristic for elites to quickly be informed about the most important facts of the day. Indeed, the media contain many different types of information that are valuable to politicians (Van Aelst, 2014). First and foremost, they signal problems politicians may need to respond to—it is the media's core task to exert social control by reporting about what goes wrong in society. Especially in fields where the density of alternative information sources is low, such as foreign affairs, the news media may be an important source of factual information for politicians (B. C. Cohen, 1963). Second, they may also contain information about public opinion (Herbst, 1998). Polling results, for instance, are covered on a daily basis. And third, the media closely monitor what happens in politics itself (Sellers, 2009). They report about the actions and strategies of all political actors, potentially triggering other actors to get involved in the decision-making about a certain topic as well.

Pieces of investigative journalism provide a special type of information for politicians in this respect. Instead of just transferring information coming from society, the media take a more active stance here, by 'producing' information that would otherwise remain unknown or uncovered. For instance, journalists may dig up scandals politicians were previously not aware of. A handful of studies have demonstrated politicians' responsiveness vis-à-vis investigative media reports, showing that the media may in this sense really initiate political action and policy change (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Protesse et al., 1987).

Politicians themselves confirm the existence of this 'information acquisition mechanism'. They acknowledge that the media have a signaling function, informing them about the most important problems of the day. Elite survey research, gauging the importance of the news media as a source of inspiration for politicians, shows that a substantial share of many MPs' initiatives is inspired by media coverage (Sevenans, Walgrave, & Vos, 2015). The media have even become 'information intermediaries' for political information, notifying politicians of the daily developments within their own political arena (Davis, 2009).

In their recent theoretical account of the mass media's functions in political elites' work, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) note that all this work on how politicians vie for information about prevailing problems in society *"suggests that the media are a provider of sheer information for politicians.*

However, actual empirical work directly investigating the purely informational subfunction of the media for politicians is as good as entirely missing. (...) There are hardly studies on the “media dependency” of political actors” (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016, 7). That is the gap this study aims to fill. It looks into whether politicians, when using news stories as the inspiration for their parliamentary initiatives, really got to know about the underlying information through the media; or whether they, conversely, had prior, alternative knowledge about the information. The research question is:

RQ: To what extent do politicians take action upon news stories they had *no prior knowledge* about?

The question implies that the informational value of the mass media for political elites is not self-evident. Indeed, some scholars argue that the media do not do much more than reporting about what is going on in the real world. Politicians learn about these events as well via their extended alternative information networks. The relationship between media and politics may in that sense be spurious and it is a challenge to find out to what extent the media really contribute to politicians’ actions (Delshad, 2012; Liu et al., 2011; Soroka, 2002b). Moreover, the political agenda-setting literature potentially struggles with an endogeneity problem. Politicians are an important news source themselves, who actively try to get their ideas and plans covered by the media. An increase in media attention for an issue is often the consequence of heightened attention for the issue by political elite sources. What may seem to be a reaction to media coverage, may in this sense be nothing more than a reaction to processes that started in politics itself (Wolfsfeld 2013).

Which mechanisms may explain why political elites display responsiveness to the news media if these media appear *not* to offer them ‘new’ information? The literature offers a large number of potential reasons. The main idea is that—even if they do not really *reveal* factual information to politicians—the media *trigger* politicians to take initiatives upon this information at a certain point in time. They create a ‘window of opportunity’ for successful political action (Kingdon 1995). Note that these triggering mechanisms are not exclusive and may also be at play when the media *do* reveal information to politicians. Politicians may prefer to seize the moment of heightened media attention because of different reasons. Most importantly, they may think that media attention is a proxy of public attention and respond in an attempt to be responsive to public priorities (Arceneaux, Johnson, Lindstädt, & Vander Wielen, 2016; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; J. Cohen et al., 2008; Wood & Peake, 1998). Alternatively, they may think that ‘riding’ or ‘surfing’ the news waves helps to get a political initiative covered by the media (van Santen et al., 2013; Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer, 2006). Since gaining public exposure is one of politicians’ main concerns—as they think it is necessary to secure reelection—it may cause them to react to news stories (Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Green-Pedersen &

Stubager, 2010). In particular, they may want to go public on issues beneficial to their party, or detrimental to other parties (Helfer, 2016; van der Pas, 2014). Or, they may be convinced that the chance to get an issue on the political agenda, for all abovementioned reasons, is larger when the issue is hot topic in the media.

In sum, it is not self-evident that the media really provide information to political elites. A large part of the literature comes up with alternative explanations, which share the idea that the media *trigger* politicians to take actions at a certain moment in time, rather than that they *inform* politicians about topics to take action upon in the first place (Edwards & Wood, 1999). The ambition of this paper is to tease out to what extent the media *do* matter as an information provider for political elites.

Variation between politicians

The political agenda-setting literature has demonstrated that the media do not influence all politicians to the same extent. On the party level as well as on the individual level, there are notable differences in the level of media responsiveness (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012). Members from opposition parties are more responsive to media cues than members from government parties (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Thesen 2013; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Within parties, ‘party warriors’—those politicians who are focused on the partisan attack-and-defense game—react more often to the media than politicians who deal mainly with policy making goals (Sevenans, Walgrave, and Vos 2015).

It is assumed that this variation can be explained by the differential relevance of media coverage as a source of information for different types of politicians. News coverage—typically general, conflict-rich, negative in tone, and containing blame attributions (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000)—is highly useful for those who play the partisan game, trying to attack other parties while defending their own party (Thesen 2013). Those politicians can exploit media crises as they occur, with the intention to generate negative attention for other parties. And this is precisely the aim of opposition parties, whose task it is to control the government, and more precisely of those politicians in the party who take up the ‘party warrior’ role. Policy-oriented MPs, and government parties more broadly, are probably less impulsive in their political actions and turn to more specialized information sources.

So, the idea behind these studies is not only that some politicians react to media coverage *more* than other politicians, but also that *another* mechanism underlies their reactions. Some politicians are looking for information that is useful in the partisan battle, and spontaneously respond to anything

they learn from the media that is useful in that sense. Others focus more on policy-oriented goals, have therefore more interest in expert information beyond media coverage, and probably react because of strategic timing reasons at best. These assumptions have never directly been tested, though. We have two hypotheses:

- H1:** MPs from *opposition parties* have a higher chance of taking action upon news stories about which they had no prior knowledge, than MPs from government parties.
- H2:** *Party warriors*, who are more than others focused on fighting the partisan game, have a higher chance of taking action upon news stories about which they had no prior knowledge, than MPs who are not focused on this goal.

Variation between types of action

Presumably, there is a link with the type of political action as well. Political agenda-setting studies have demonstrated that symbolic political agendas, such as hearings, are more influenced by news coverage than substantive agendas such as legislation or the budget (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006; Yanovitzky 2002). Politicians themselves experience the agenda impact on symbolic agendas as massive, while they think its influence on substantive agendas is much smaller (Vesa et al., 2015).

Again, it is assumed that the difference in effect size can be explained by the various mechanisms underlying politicians' different types of reactions to media coverage. As Yanovitzky (2002) describes in his study on the issue of drunk driving, new information that enters the media arena attracts political attention mostly in a symbolic way. Politicians take public stance or organize hearings to come up with short-term solutions. It is only when media attention for the issue wanes, that long-term solutions for the new problem are generated and transmitted into substantive policy. Similar results are found by several scholars who look at the agenda-setting effect of (investigative) media storms or hypes. When politicians learn about new issues from the media, they often feel forced to react, but their reactions are most of the time highly symbolic (Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien 2008; and see a series of studies by Protess et al. 1987).

This does not mean that substantive political actions are never taken in response to media coverage. Studies like that by Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008) show that media storms regularly lead to substantive actions such as the initiation of new bills. However, they emphasize that in those instances, the information was seldom new to politicians. Often, political action on the matter was planned long before the media storm. The heightened attention for the issue did as such not initiate

the action; rather it offered a ‘window of opportunity’ to get new legislation quickly and effectively approved (Kingdon 1995). That is why our hypothesis goes as follows:

H3: Politicians have a larger change of taking *symbolic types of action* upon news stories they had no prior knowledge about, than of taking substantive types of action upon these news stories.

Data and methods

To test the hypotheses, we rely on data from a face-to-face survey with political elites in Belgium, Canada and Israel. These countries differ a lot in terms of their political system. The main difference is the electoral system: Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. Belgium (with its multi-member districts) and Israel (which has one national district) are proportional systems causing the link between MP and voter to be weaker. Due to these differences, we expect the national mass media to be a source of inspiration for Belgian and Israeli politicians more than for Canadian politicians; that is, we think that *in absolute terms* the Canadians are less responsive to national media because they deal more with regional issues (Soroka et al., 2009)—which is why we will include MPs’ country in all models as a control variable. With regards to our research question and hypotheses, however, we do not anticipate any country differences. We think that the media’s informational function should work in Canada just like it does in Belgium or Israel. That is why—for the hypotheses studied in this paper—our country selection constitutes a most different systems design: if our expectations are confirmed in all three countries, we expect them to apply to most other western countries as well.

In the framework of an international research project carried out in these three countries, we surveyed and interviewed 376 MPs. The broader topic of the interviews, which normally took approximately one hour, was ‘information processing by political elites’. Each interview was conducted in a face-to-face setting and consisted of two parts. First, the politician was asked to fill in a survey on a laptop. The survey contained many different questions and survey-embedded experiments related to how politicians deal with societal information. Second, there was a follow-up in-depth interview where we asked politicians to give us some more detailed insight in how they deal with different types of information on a daily basis. Information about the respondents and the response rates per country is provided in Table 2.1.¹

TABLE 2.1 NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS AND RESPONSE RATE IN THREE COUNTRIES

	Belgium	Canada	Israel
Competence level of interviewed MPs	National and regional (Flanders and Wallonia)	National and regional (Ontario)	National
Number of MPs contacted for survey (out of total population)	370 (out of 370 MPs)	286 (out of 425 MPs)	120 (out of 120 MPs)
Number of MPs that participated	256 (of which 166 are government MPs)	76 (of which 19 are government MPs)	44 (of which 15 are government MPs)
Response rate	69%	27%	37%

The battery of questions that we use in this paper was included in the first, survey part of the interview. Concretely, we confronted politicians with seven news stories. The seven news stories were actual, single-most important news stories that had appeared on the front page of the main quality newspaper in the five weeks preceding the interview (weekend edition not included). Just a short, summarizing title of the story was shown to the elites. As the interviews took place over a period of several months, the design had a ‘rolling’ structure: for every interview a new random sample of seven stories was drawn from the (rolling) population of all stories from the five weeks before the interview. Stories all dealt with domestic issues; foreign news and editorials were excluded. We coded one newspaper in each competency/language region of each country—namely the main quality newspaper of the region. We used *De Standaard* (Flanders, Dutch) and *Le Soir* (Wallonia, French) in Belgium; *The Globe and Mail* (national, English), *Toronto Star* (Ontario, English) and *La Presse* (national, French) in Canada, and *Ha’aretz* (national, Hebrew) in Israel. For more details about the coding procedure, see below.

A number of questions were asked about each news story. We started by asking whether a politician had noticed the respective news story. If not, no further questions were asked; if yes, we continued by gauging whether or not the media were the *initial* source of information for the politician to learn about a certain news fact. This is the main independent variable in our analyses. The concrete survey question was as follows: “*Were you informed about this news fact before it appeared in the mass media?*” The resulting dummy variable *Prior knowledge* gets value 1 if the politician indicated that (s)he was indeed informed about the news story before it appeared in the mass media. Overall, politicians had prior knowledge about a news story in 40% of the instances—meaning that in the

majority of the cases, politicians do not know about news stories beforehand; instead they learn about front page news only after it appears in the mass media.

After that, we asked whether or not the politician undertook different types of political action upon the news story in parliament. The resulting variables are the dependent variables in our study. Out of an initial list of seven types of action, including informal action such as ‘talking about the news story with a colleague’, we use the following two indicators of formal parliamentary action:

“Did you undertake, or consider undertaking, action based upon the news fact?”

- a) Asking a parliamentary question or interpellation or participating in a debate in Parliament*
- b) Writing, co-sponsoring or amending a bill”*

The politicians had to choose between three options: *‘I did not take action’*; *‘I considered to take action, but did not’*; *‘I took action’*. We transformed their answers into dummy variables that get value 1 when the politician effectively undertook the respective type of action. Quite a lot of news appears to generate parliamentary action. In total, politicians asked parliamentary questions (which we call *Symbolic action*) in 15% of all instances. Contributing to a bill (dummy called *Substantive action*) happened in 6% of the cases.

Before moving on to the description of other variables used in our analyses, let us briefly acknowledge and tackle a number of concerns that may be raised with regards to the validity of the variables explained so far. Critics could argue that politicians’ response to the survey questions may be prone to social desirability bias; especially if politicians feel that they ‘should’ act upon the news or that they ‘should’ know about the news before it breaks. In a similar vein, there may be a recall bias—policymakers may simply not remember well where they learned about a news fact. And, it is possible that error occurs due to survey fatigue, if politicians do not take the time to thoughtfully complete all survey questions about the seven news stories.

Although we cannot prove that these biases do not occur, we are confident that the error is limited—and that the data are thus meaningful—for a number of reasons. First, in a previous, highly similar survey design we included fake but highly realistic news stories, invented by the researchers, to test the validity of the survey data. There appeared to be almost no error: politicians correctly and honestly filled out not to have seen the fake news stories. Second, we can check the ‘face validity’ of the data by, for example, looking at the concrete news stories that were known beforehand by everyone, or no one, confronted with the news story. As one would expect, political news stories like *“The Prime Minister asked Parliament to expand Canada's involvement in fighting ISIS/ISIL to Syria; both the NDP and Liberals are refusing to support the motion”* (Canada, rated by 2 politicians) were known

beforehand by both MPs rating the story, while nobody had prior knowledge about unexpected events like “A train carrying crude oil near Gogama Ontario derailed, calling safety standards passed after the Lac Megantic disaster into question” (Canada, rated by three politicians)—even if both news stories led to a lot of political action. Due to the specificity of all news stories, politicians seem to have good recall and they do not confuse the concrete news facts at hand with the broader, continuously ongoing discussion about a policy issue. Third, the in-depth interviews with policymakers (following up on the survey) gave the impression that politicians did not feel the need to impress us, researchers, about their information, or that they did not take the time to thoughtfully answer all questions. We informed them beforehand that we would like to get an hour of their time, so they were mostly not in a hurry. They were happy to clarify any answer they had given during the survey.

Our second main independent variable of interest, *Party warrior*, was gathered in the framework of the elite survey as well; but the specific question was included in another battery of questions about politicians’ political and representational goals. Unfortunately, this question was only included in the Belgian survey, meaning that Hypothesis 2 can only be tested for the Belgian MPs. Specifically, we asked them to respond to the following question: “Parties have different goals. Within a faction, a division of labor may occur, whereby some members of the faction are focused more on one goal, whereas others deal more with another goal. Can you indicate the extent to which you, compared to your colleague faction members, focus on the following goal: Demonstrating the weaknesses of other parties”. The variable is measured on a slider (scale from 0 to 100) whereby 0 stands for ‘Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very little’ and 100 means ‘Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very much’. There is a lot of variation of this variable, with scores ranging between 0 and 96 (M = 40.71; SD = 22.90).

The third independent variable, *Opposition party*, was coded from the parliamentary websites of the respective parliaments. In total, 47% of the politicians in our dataset are members of an opposition party.

Finally, our models includes three control variables that are expected to be crucial determinants of whether or not a politician takes action upon a news story. First, *Prominence* gauges the size of a news story. We simply expect larger (thus probably more important) news stories to be reacted upon more by politicians. *Prominence* was created by coding all other news articles dealing with the same news story as the front page article that we used for the survey. Two news articles belong to the same news story when (1) they cover the same time and place specific event and (2) they deal with the exact same topic. We did this additional coding for the newspaper that we coded the main articles for (*De Standaard*, *Le Soir*, *the Globe and Mail*, *La Presse*, *Toronto Star*, *Ha’aretz*), as well as for an additional,

more popular newspaper (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, *La Libre Belgique* in Belgium, *National Post*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Citizen* in Canada, and *Yedioth* in Israel), from the newspaper edition before until the newspaper edition after the publication of the main article. *Prominence* refers to the number of articles that appeared about the particular news story (M = 4.74; SD = 4.27).

Second, we expect political news to be more relevant and therefore to generate more political action. To create the variable *Political news*, we again used the full coding of all news articles related to a news story. For each article coded, we recorded whether or not at least one political actor was mentioned in the article. We then aggregated this variable to the story level. *Political news* represents the proportion of articles regarding a given news story that contains at least one political actor (M = .64; SD = .40).

Third, to create a measure of specialization, we first classified all stories according to the codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project as originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) in the US.² The stories were classified into major topic codes such as 'Macro-Economy' or 'Health'. We then collected all MPs' committee memberships and classified the committees into CAP issue codes as well (procedure identical to coding of news stories). The dummy variable *Specialization* gets value 1 if the issue of (one of) a politician's committee(s) matches the issue of the news story (s)he is presented with (M = .23; SD = .42).

After exclusion of missing cases, our dataset contains 376 MPs, who normally rated 7 out of 376 news stories (but with 83 missings), leading to a total dataset of 2,549 cases. As explained above, we first asked them: "Have you seen or heard about this news fact in the past month?". A positive answer to this question was a precondition for all further follow-up questions. Overall, the politician noticed the news story in 1,914 cases (or 75% of all ratings). Some further missings on the variables *Symbolic action* (70 missings), *Substantive action* (109 missings) and *Prior Knowledge* (51 missings) reduce the N of our study a little further—to 1,776 (for the symbolic action model) and 1,755 (for the substantive action model) respectively.

The hypotheses will be formally tested by means of multilevel crossed-effects logistic regression analyses with the two types of political action as the dependent variables (separate models). We opted for crossed-effects models because the data are nonhierarchical (politicians are not nested in news stories or vice versa); instead every observation is cross-classified by the factors 'politicians' and 'news story'. The random effects on the level of the news story and politician control for the fact that some news stories systematically lead to more action than others; or that some MPs structurally take more action than others. Country dummies (fixed effects) account for the variation between countries.

Results

To what extent do politicians act upon news stories they had no prior knowledge about? Based on Figure 2.1, we can give a nuanced descriptive answer to our research question. Politicians do sometimes take action upon information that was new to them, but the likelihood of action it is much larger when they did know about the news story beforehand.

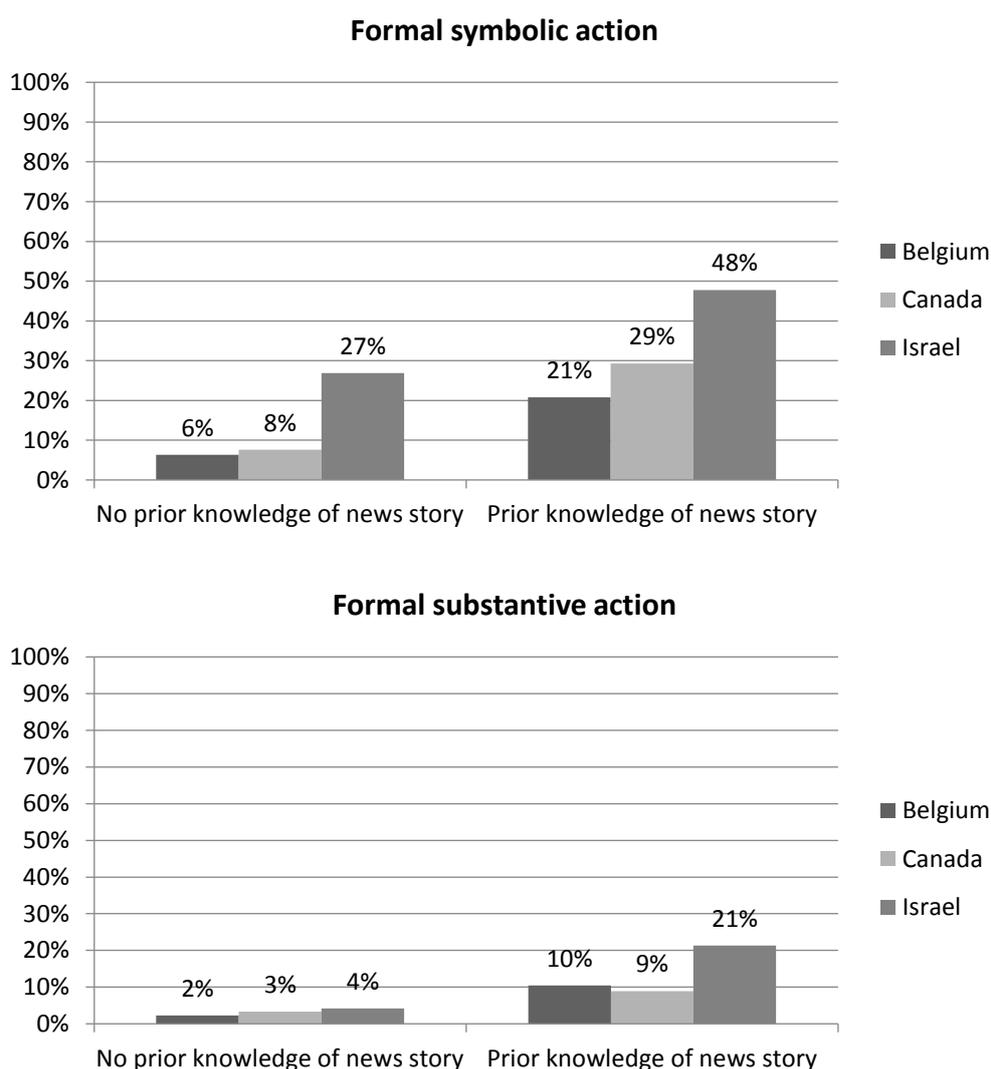


FIGURE 2.1 SYMBOLIC AND SUBSTANTIVE POLITICAL ACTION BY PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND BY COUNTRY

More precisely, in Belgium and Canada, the share of stories, known in advance, leading to a parliamentary question is more than three times as high as the share of unknown stories generating

questions (6% to 21% in Belgium, 8% to 29% in Canada). In Israel, many more news stories led to questions by MPs even when not known beforehand (27%)—a pattern that is not surprising given Israel’s electoral system which encourages media responsiveness as explained above—and this proportion increases to 48% with prior knowledge. With regards to substantive action, the pattern is similar. Politicians initiate three (Canada) to five (Belgium, Israel) times more bills about news stories that were known beforehand.

The inverse relationship can be read from Figure 2.2. The figure shows what percentage of all news stories that lead to a specific type of political action was known beforehand by the politician who took the action. Substantive action is least often based on news stories that were not known beforehand. Politicians had prior knowledge for almost three quarters (73%) of the bills taken in response to the media. This is a little lower for symbolic action (66%). Stories that do not lead to political action were only in 35% of the cases known by politicians before they appeared in the media.

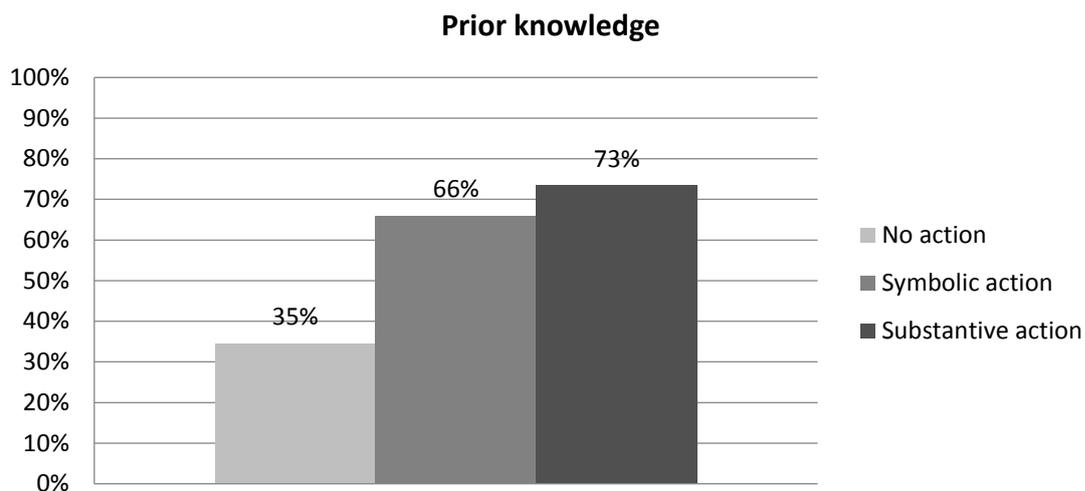


FIGURE 2.2 PROPORTION OF NEWS STORIES THAT WERE KNOWN BEFOREHAND BY TYPE OF POLITICAL ACTION (ALL COUNTRIES)

Table 2.2 and Table 2.3 show the models that formally test our hypotheses about how the media’s role as information provider depends on types of politicians and actions. While the models in Table 2.2 contain data from all countries (testing all hypotheses except H2), the models in Table 2.3 are ran on Belgian data only, including the variable *Party warrior*, needed to test H2.

We start by looking at Table 2.2. In line with the results of Figure 2.1 above, we see that the main effect of *Prior knowledge* is, for both types of political action, positive and significant (Model 1,

Model 3). A news story has a larger chance of leading to political action when the politician knew about the news story before it appeared in the mass media. The size of the effect does not significantly differ, however, between the symbolic and the substantive action model.³ Hypothesis 3 must be rejected.

TABLE 2.2 CROSSED-EFFECTS LOGISTIC REGRESSION PREDICTING POLITICAL ACTION ON NEWS STORIES (ALL COUNTRIES)

	Symbolic action				Substantive action			
	Model 1: Main effects		Model 2: Interaction effects		Model 3: Main effects		Model 4: Interaction effects	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
CONTROLS								
News prominence	.03	.02	.03	.02	.05†	.03	.05†	.03
Political news	.55*	.25	.55*	.25	.13	.36	.13	.36
Specialization	.67**	.22	.67**	.22	.42	.32	.42	.32
MAIN EFFECTS								
Prior knowledge	1.52***	.19	1.93***	.30	1.79***	.29	1.59***	.45
Opposition party	.96***	.24	1.36***	.33	1.23**	.36	1.01†	.52
Country (ref.: Canada)								
Belgium	-.18	.30	-.17	.30	.34	.46	.34	.46
Israel	1.26**	.40	1.28**	.40	.77	.61	.76	.61
INTERACTION EFFECTS								
Prior knowledge * Opposition party	—		-.67†	.37	—		.32	.55
Constant	-4.28***	.42	-4.56***	.46	-6.39***	.76	-6.27***	.79
N								
	1,776		1,776		1,755		1,755	
Variance (politician)								
	1.25		1.25		1.73		1.74	
Variance (story)								
	.58		.59		.66		.67	

Note. † p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

The main effect of *Opposition party* is positive and significant in all models, confirming the standard finding in agenda-setting research that the opposition's media responsiveness is higher than that of the government. Hypothesis 1 posited that MPs from opposition parties more often take action upon a news story they did not know about beforehand, than MPs from government parties. The negative

and significant interaction effect of *Prior knowledge* * *Opposition party* in Model 2 demonstrates that the hypothesis is confirmed with respect to symbolic action, although we must admit that it is only marginally significant ($p = .07$). For a member from the opposition, in order to ask a parliamentary question about a news story, it is less important that (s)he knew about the story before it appeared in the media than for a government MP. The effect does not apply to substantive action, where opposition parties apparently do not differ from government parties (see Model 4).

Furthermore, we see in Table 2.2 that many of the control variables matter as well. Prominent news has a (marginally) higher chance of leading to substantive action. *Political news* and *Specialization* are crucial determinants of symbolic action. And as anticipated, and visualized in Figure 2.1, Israeli MPs ask parliamentary questions in response to media coverage more often than their Belgian or Canadian colleagues.

Moving on to Table 2.3, we see that the main effect of *Party Warrior* is positive and significant; this finding is in line with previous agenda-setting work. Media responsiveness is higher for politicians who engage more in partisan strife. On top of that, we show here that politicians with *Party warrior* goals are more likely to respond to news that was previously unknown to them than politicians who are not focused on fighting the partisan battle. That is, they ask more questions about such news, as indicated by the negative and significant interaction coefficient in Model 6. The effect does not apply to substantive action (Model 8). Like the first hypothesis, Hypothesis 2 is corroborated for symbolic types of action only. The effects of the other independent variables and control variables do not substantially change; they are highly similar to those in the models in Table 2.2, where all countries are included.

To facilitate interpretation of the most relevant results, we calculate the predicted probabilities of the key independent variables on *Symbolic action* (Models 1 and 2; and Models 5 and 6 respectively). The main effect of *Prior knowledge* appears to be substantial: the chance that a politician asks a parliamentary question about a news story, increases from 4% to 16% when (s)he knew about the story before it appeared in the mass media. For an opposition MP, the chance of action is 'only' three times smaller when (s)he did not have prior knowledge about the news story: predicted values decrease from 23% to 8%. For government MPs, the chance is six times smaller (decrease from 12% to 2%). A similar distinction emerges for politicians who are more, or less, focused on the partisan strife. Party warriors (value 60 on the party warrior scale) take symbolic action on 13% of the stories they had prior knowledge about, and on 4% of the stories they did not know beforehand. Politicians who do not focus on party warrior goals, by contrast, go from 11% for previously known stories to only 1% for previously unknown stories. In other words, politicians do not differ so much from each

other in terms of behavior vis-à-vis known stories; they *do* significantly differ from each other with regards to stories they just got informed about from the mass media.

TABLE 2.3 CROSSED-EFFECTS LOGISTIC REGRESSION PREDICTING POLITICAL ACTION ON NEWS STORIES (BELGIUM ONLY)

	Symbolic action				Substantive action			
	Model 5: Main effects		Model 6: Interaction effects		Model 7: Main effects		Model 8: Interaction effects	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
CONTROLS								
News prominence	.06†	.04	.06†	.04	.07	.06	.07	.06
Political news	.05	.32	.04	.32	-.20	.48	-.19	.47
Specialization	.80**	.27	.81**	.27	.54	.38	.53	.38
MAIN EFFECTS								
Prior knowledge	1.62***	.25	2.69***	.61	1.93***	.39	2.22**	.80
Opposition party	.88**	.34	.92**	.34	1.06*	.45	1.06*	.45
Party warrior	.01†	.01	.03*	.01	.00	.01	.01	.01
INTERACTION EFFECTS								
Prior knowledge * Party warrior	—		-.02*	.01	—		-.01	.02
Constant	-5.02***	.53	-5.76***	.69	-6.13***	.87	-6.32***	1.00
N	1,095		1,095		1,080		1,080	
Variance (politician)	1.47		1.51		1.68		1.67	
Variance (story)	.07		1.17e ⁻⁷		.57		.56	

Note. † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

As a robustness check, we ran Model 1 to 4 for all countries separately. The effects found above basically apply to all countries. Previously known stories systematically have a significantly larger chance of being acted upon, both in symbolic and substantive ways. The interaction effect between *Prior Knowledge* and *Opposition party* remains negative in Belgium ($b = -.72$; $SE = .47$; $p = .125$) and Canada ($b = -1.39$; $SE = 1.19$; $p = .242$), as well as in Israel ($b = -.11$; $SE = 1.05$; $p = .914$), yet the effect—which was previously only marginally significant—is with this reduced N not significant anymore and appears thus not to be particularly strong, especially not in Israel.

Conclusion and discussion

Is policymakers' media responsiveness the consequence of the informational function of the mass media? That is, do politicians react to media coverage because it informs them about problems that exist in society and that call for action? Or do the media provide only little new information to political elites, and is political agenda-setting mainly a matter of other mechanisms?

The empirical evidence provided in this paper is more supportive of the latter than of the former proposition. Information acquisition does not appear to be a mechanism underlying the majority of agenda-setting processes. By contrast, the chance that a news story leads to action by an MP is much larger when the MP knew about the story before it appeared in the media. This is the case for symbolic as well as for substantive types of political action (disproving H3). In about two third of all individual cases of political agenda-setting, politicians actually get their information elsewhere but, for a variety of potential reasons, prefer to use the momentum of heightened media attention to take political initiatives. This is even more true if we consider that we operationalized the concept 'news story' relatively narrow. It may be that MPs react to news stories the media informed them about—for instance, about the derailment of a train carrying oil (see above)—but that they were actually already aware of the underlying societal problem beforehand—for instance inadequate train safety standards. Our design is in that sense conservative: the informational function of the media may even be more limited than we conclude here.

This does not mean, however, that information provision is never part of the media's role in political agenda-setting processes. We can safely assume that in a small, but substantial share of politicians' responses to media cues, the media really fulfilled an informational function, being the first provider of the information leading to the initiative. Approximately one third of the parliamentary questions, and one quarter of the bills about news stories, were taken by politicians who had no prior knowledge about the respective news stories.

Some politicians engage more with this kind of spontaneous reactions to 'new' media information than others. It is more typical of MPs from opposition parties than of those from government parties (H1 confirmed). And the more a politician is focused on party warrior goals, the more (s)he reacts to previously unknown media stories (H2 confirmed). This pattern emerges only with regards to symbolic action, though; the effects do not apply to substantive action. As previous work on agenda-setting has presumed, the information typically provided by the news media—general, conflict-rich and focused on what goes wrong in society—has more instant utility value for aspects related to politics rather than policy.

Furthermore, our research shows that politicians do learn a lot from the media when it comes to stories they do not take action upon. Politicians have prior knowledge about only one third of such stories. In other words, while politicians are not so dependent on the media for information about what they do in Parliament, they use the media to be informed more generally speaking. It is in that sense possible that the media—while not necessarily revealing the specific information that was needed for a specific political action—raised politicians’ awareness for the problem in a broader and longer-term sense.

Our research covers three countries, which are very different in terms of their political and media system. The fact that our findings apply across countries, make us confident that they are generalizable towards many other western countries. The findings of our paper, as well as political agenda-setting theory more generally, probably work differently in countries outside the western world where, for instance, freedom of the press is not always guaranteed; yet elaborating on that is beyond the scope of this paper.

It may be interesting to briefly discuss our results against the backdrop of their normative implications for contemporary (western) democracies. Some people see media influence on politics as a good thing, as something that guarantees responsiveness of the political elites vis-à-vis what the public deems important. For many people, however, media interference is undesirable, because it makes politicians take bad, short-term decisions about ‘the issue of the day’, rather than look for long-term, sustainable solutions to more invisible problems. In this paper we show how political systems manage to balance between the two perspectives. Some politicians—mainly those in opposition or dealing with partisan competition—‘jump’ on everything that appears in the mass media, signaling problems and encouraging policymakers to be responsive to public priorities. Substantive action however, even when seemingly taken in response to media coverage, is seldom really initiated by the media and policymakers were mostly already dealing with the content of the initiatives beforehand. And this is without a doubt even more the case for all initiatives that remain totally outside the media realm. As a consequence, we adhere to those who are not too worried about the media’s impact on political agendas. This does not mean, of course, that the media’s impact on other aspects of politics (e.g. candidate selection) may not be problematic. This is a topic for another debate.

We advocate that understanding the mechanisms underlying political agenda-setting is important to correctly and confidently interpret the many studies that were conducted in the field. The current study, we hope, makes a relevant step in that direction. In addition to confirming what we knew already—that political elites *are* responsive to the media, but that parties and individuals *vary* in the degree to which they are—we show here that the underlying *mechanisms* differ as well. The role of

the media is dependent on the particular case at hand. We empirically scrutinize one potential role the media may play—that of information provider—and hope that future research can complement our findings by reflecting on, and empirically measuring, other agenda-setting mechanisms. We demonstrate that about one third of all cases of media responsiveness, in particular symbolic actions taken in the context of party politics, are driven by the mass media's informational function for political elites.

Endnotes

¹ The response rate differs significantly between countries. Belgian politicians appeared to be much more accessible than their Canadian and Israeli colleagues. Furthermore, in Canada and Israel, the response is systematically higher among members from opposition parties (29% in Canada, 51% in Israel) than among members from government parties (8% in Canada, 30% in Israel) ($t=5.72$; $p<0.001$). Besides that, there is no response bias: other features (gender, age, experience, member of government party) are no significant predictors of participation in our survey.

² See www.comparativeagendas.net

³ Tested by means of a stacked model (interaction term between type of action and Prior knowledge not significant).

POLITICAL ELITES' MEDIA RESPONSIVENESS AND THEIR INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL GOALS. A study of national politicians in Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the micro level variation in media responsiveness by political elites. It hypothesizes that individual political goals, in addition to party position, affect the extent to which MPs' parliamentary initiatives are inspired by media cues. Regression analysis on data from a survey with Belgian national parliamentarians confirms this assumption. Opposition MPs react more to the media than coalition MPs. Within parties, MPs who are focused on party political goals display higher levels of media responsiveness than MPs who are not. The findings are explained by the differential usefulness of news coverage for various political actors.

REFERENCE

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).

POLITICAL ELITES' MEDIA RESPONSIVENESS AND THEIR INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL GOALS.

A study of national politicians in Belgium

The mass media hold a central role in the politics of many contemporary democratic systems. Scholars have frequently studied the political agenda setting effect of the media (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), and have found that the media agenda systematically influences political agendas: an increase in media attention for an issue leads to an increase in political attention for the issue (see e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Van Noije et al., 2008; Walgrave et al., 2008). Politicians thus adopt media issues in their political activities. However, the media do not influence all political actors to the same extent. Researchers investigating the conditionality of political agenda setting—a research agenda proposed by Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006)—demonstrate that there are notable differences in levels of media responsiveness, both between parties, and between individual politicians within parties (Midtbø, Walgrave, Van Aelst, & Christensen, 2014). Some parties in parliament are more cued by the media agenda than other parties, and some MPs are more often inspired by the media than other MPs.

While the variation between parties has been extensively addressed and has been accounted for (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b), the heterogeneity on the *individual* level has not satisfactorily been explained. In particular, the relationship between politicians' political motivations and their media responsiveness has never been studied. This research note takes up this question, asking: *Do politicians' individual political goals affect the degree to which their personal initiatives are inspired by the media?*

The paper contributes to the growing political agenda-setting literature by (partly) explaining the micro level heterogeneity that existing scholarship has so far left unexplained. Focusing on the individual level, and particularly on the motives and goals of individual politicians, helps us to better define and understand the exact mechanism connecting the media agenda with the political agenda. It is individuals, not institutions or parties, who attend to information and issues. By analyzing in detail *who* reacts to the media we can better understand *why* they do so and how the existing, consistent macro level findings about the media's agenda setting power are generated. Additionally, by focusing specifically on the goals of individual politicians, we avoid the mechanistic approach that considers the mass media as a powerful actor in its own right which imposes its agenda on politics. Instead, we

show that individual politicians, and some more than others, strategically *employ* the media to realize their goals.

Empirical analyses are based on data from a survey with national Dutch-speaking MPs in Belgium. The results show that politicians' individual political goals matter in addition to their partisan environment.. Concretely, the more an MP is focused on party political goals, the higher the usefulness of media coverage to realize his/her goals, and hence the higher his/her media responsiveness.

Party level variation in media responsiveness

In contemporary politics, the media play an important agenda setting role. We define the media as the 'traditional' mass media, both in their old forms (newspapers, television and radio) and in new derivatives (such as websites from newspapers).¹ Large-scale studies in different countries have shown that the aggregate-level political agenda is influenced by the media agenda (see e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). Those studies have addressed the variation in media responsiveness between parties. Most importantly, they have shown that opposition parties are more inspired by media coverage than coalition parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). The reason lies in the *usefulness* of the information that the media provide. Political actors do not passively respond to all kinds of information sources; on the contrary, they actively follow those sources that provide information they can *employ* to realize their political goals (Kingdon, 1973). The literature mentions various, typical coverage characteristics that enhance the usability of media coverage for opposition parties, while decreasing it for coalition parties.

In terms of content, the mass media cover a large variety of policy topics. Editors strive for a balanced composition, trying to appeal to a large and diverse audience (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Consequently, media information is rather general than specialized. Concerning style, the news tends to be negative in tone (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), especially news about politics (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006; Kepplinger, 2002). Furthermore, media coverage often focuses on conflict and controversy (de Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and takes a 'responsibility attribution frame', indicating which political actors are to blame or to reward for problems in society (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). And finally, the media regularly focus on the business of politics itself, rather than on substantive issues (Davis, 2009).

These particular characteristics of news coverage—general, negative, conflict-rich, responsibility-attributing and focused on the political game—make the coverage especially useful for opposition parties. Their role in parliament is to control the government, often via interpellations and parliamentary questions. News coverage gives them potential ammunition to attack the government (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Coalition parties also engage in party politics, but must be careful in this respect because attacking other politicians, especially those from the government, could threaten the stability of the coalition (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Accordingly, they often avoid negative, conflict-rich and responsibility attributing media cues. This assumption is confirmed by studies that examine the type of news that politicians react to most (see e.g. Thesen, 2013), and which find that political actors react most to those messages that they can use in the ‘attack and defense game’ between parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010).

Individual level variation in media responsiveness

Whereas differences in media responsiveness between parties are well documented, research into individual level variation is still in its infancy. Only two studies, which both rely on elite surveys, specifically asked politicians about the extent to which they personally act upon media cues in their parliamentary work (see Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008). These studies explain micro level variation by looking at *structural* features of MPs. Much like the studies of aggregate political agenda setting, these micro level studies find that opposition MPs are more responsive to the media than coalition MPs are. Men, more than women, are inspired by the mass media when taking parliamentary initiatives. Some authors think that women are less ‘media-oriented’ in general (Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011). Finally, the media are used less by older politicians, who have built up networks and have other sources of information beyond the media to nurture their activities (Midtbø et al., 2014; Walgrave, 2008). Accordingly, we include party position (government/opposition), sex, and age as control variables in our analysis.

In this article, we go beyond the well-known structural features of elites and argue that their different *goals* affect their varying degrees of media responsiveness. Inspired by the literature stating that the usefulness of media coverage is key to explain media responsiveness, our argument deals with two individual goals that MPs may have: fighting the *party political competition* and making *public policy*. These goals are not exclusive: many politicians probably have both foci simultaneously. We measure the degree to which each politician attributes importance to each of the two goals.

We call the MPs who focus mainly on the first goal—engaging in party politics—‘party warriors’. In a recent study about legislative roles, Van Vonno (2012) describes these MPs as being in ‘interparty mode’, viewing politics as an ideological struggle between parties. Party warriors play the ‘attack and defense game’. They are eager to publicly confront political rivals with their incompetence and mistakes. They are not proactively selective: they “*wait and see what crises appear in the media and then select their topic on this basis*” (Searing, 1987, p. 442). We expect that the average usefulness of media coverage for these MPs is high. The media cover many issues from which a party warrior can pick the one that is most suitable in the competition. Features such as negativity, conflict and responsibility attributions are useful for attacking other parties. The news has become an important means for these politicians to gauge the ‘political mood’ (Sellers, 2009).

MPs who consider policy making to be their priority are different from ‘party warriors’. In line with Searing (1987) and Van Vonno (2012), we call them ‘policy advocates’ here. These MPs take up governing-related tasks in their parties: realizing policy goals is crucial to them. Since developing bills and amendments is a technical and often slow process, we expect the quick, general and thematically diverse nature of media coverage to be less usable for these MPs. Davis, who interviewed British MPs about the role of the media in their work, found indeed that “*although many MPs listed the news media as an important source of information for their jobs, it was not usually regarded as a source of information on specific policy matters*” (Davis, 2007, p. 187). At first sight, however, this assumption may seem to contradict the literature demonstrating that policy makers strategically use the news media to promote their ideas and put their policy initiatives on the agenda of their colleagues (Davis, 2009), or that policy makers consciously launch initiatives when there is a lot of media attention for the issue, because it creates a ‘window of opportunity’ to change existing policy (Kingdon, 1973; Yanovitzky, 2002). But, in those instances, the media determine the *timing* of an initiative taken by a policy maker, or they serve as a *tool* for promotion, rather than as a source of inspiration. Whereas party warriors can be more re-active—since strategic political discussions are volatile and can follow the quick, daily rhythm of the news production—and can thus be inspired by media coverage, the information-seeking behavior of policy advocates is more long-term, pro-active, and topic-focused. It is likely that policy advocates typically use other sources to determine their issue agenda.

Individual MPs probably do not define their political goals fully autonomously. Their goals are determined by their own preferences, but also by the broader context in which they operate. It is likely that MPs from the opposition are generally more focused on party politics, while MPs from the majority attribute greater importance to policy making. Parties may also impose a division of labor on their MPs, assigning some the task to engage in war with the other parties, while asking others to focus on policy. The party and individual level are thus interwoven. We claim that individuals adapt

their media responsive behavior contingent on their goals, their roles, and how they are embedded in the partisan structure. We test two hypotheses:

H1: The more an MP is focused on party political goals, the more he or she will be responsive to the media.

H2: The more an MP is focused on policy making goals, the less he or she will be responsive to the media.

Data and methods

We test our hypotheses using data from a survey with Belgian, Dutch-speaking national MPs. The survey, administered on iPads, is part of a series of face-to-face MP interviews conducted by the authors and their collaborators between June and November 2013. In total, 75 out of 87 MPs participated, leading to a response rate of 86%, which is exceptionally high for elite research. Each interview took approximately one hour and was scheduled beforehand. Most interviews took place in the MP's office in Parliament or in his/her hometown.

The dependent variable (media responsiveness) is based on item (a) of the following survey question:

Of the initiatives you personally raised in Parliament last year (e.g. bills, written and oral questions), roughly what percentage were inspired by the following?

- (a) the media;*
- (b) interest and action groups;*
- (c) meeting with individual citizens;*
- (d) personal experience;*
- (e) within the party (e.g. leadership, research center);*
- (f) other.*

The six items add up to 100% for each politician, so our dependent variable is a proportional measure. Using a proportion—and not an absolute number of initiatives inspired by the media—allows us to directly compare MPs with different parliamentary activity levels. Moreover, we believe that MPs are better able to estimate the relative importance of the media in their work, than they are able to precisely count their media-based initiatives in absolute terms, which would require they recall each individual initiative. Our measure is limited, as it does not take the importance of the initiatives into account—some are more consequential and require more resources than others. However, our main

interest here lies neither in the type of initiative nor in its importance, but in the source of inspiration, regardless of other factors.

The independent variables measuring MPs’ political goals are constructed based on measures in the same survey. The question used is the following:

What features of information make you take action (e.g. ask a staff member to follow up on it, write a press release, and so on)? Please indicate for the following features how much they matter to you (on a scale from 0 to 10; 0 = does not matter at all; 10 = matters very much):

(a) Can help me realize my policy goals;

(b) Can be used to generate negative attention for another party.

Item (a) measures the extent to which an MP is focused on policy making goals—we think it is a straightforward indicator of the concept. Item (b) is used to assess the degree to which an MP focuses on party political goals. It is only a partial indicator. For instance, having party political goals could also imply promoting one’s own party. Yet, we think our indicator captures the underlying concept of the party warrior reasonably well, especially in the light of our theoretical conceptualization, which characterizes party warriors primarily as MPs playing the ‘attack and defense game’.

Based on the official website of the Belgian federal Parliament² we further retrieved additional features of each MP: sex, age and party membership (government/opposition). Descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Table 3.1.

TABLE 3.1 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
DEPENDENT VARIABLE					
Media responsiveness	73	22,93	11,61	4,39	55
POLITICAL GOALS					
Policy making goals	75	8,25	1,49	3	10
Party political goals	75	4,19	2,56	0	10
CONTROLS					
Female	75	0,39	0,49	0	1
Age	75	45,79	9,34	26	64
Opposition party	75	0,51	0,50	0	1

The data suggest that the media are, on average, the most important source of inspiration for MPs: 23 per cent of their parliamentary initiatives is inspired by the media, MPs say. As we expected, the share of initiatives inspired by the media is larger for opposition MPs (26%) than for coalition MPs (19%). The standard deviation of 11 in both groups, however, shows that there are considerable differences between MPs within parties. There is a good deal of individual level variation that we will try to account for by looking at the goals of individual politicians.

As discussed above, we anticipate that politicians' goals are partly determined by the context in which they operate, namely their party. A t-test shows that opposition MPs focus slightly more on party politics than coalition MPs, though not significantly so ($t = -1.45$; $p = 0.15$). The relationship between being a coalition MP and focusing on policy goals is not significant ($t = -0.06$; $p = 0.95$). It is clear that party membership does not fully explain the individual goals of politicians; there is plenty of variation within parties.

To test our hypotheses, we perform a linear regression analysis. Some may consider this to be problematic—our dependent variable, media responsiveness, refers to percentages (always between 0 and 100), while the predictions of a linear model could go beyond those bounds. Therefore, we also run an alternative model following the procedure for proportional dependent variables as suggested by Papke and Wooldridge (1993).³ The results are highly similar and the predictions of the two models are nearly identical. To simplify interpretation, we report the results of the simple linear regression model below.

Results

The results of the analyses are shown in Table 3.2. In spite of the small N (73), different variables appear to have a significant effect on media responsiveness. Most interestingly, MPs' goals matter. The importance an MP attributes to 'party political goals' has a positive and significant effect on media responsiveness, corroborating H1: party warriors use the media more often. The effect of 'policy making goals' goes in the expected direction, as well, but the negative coefficient is not significant ($p = 0.71$). H2 cannot be confirmed.

With respect to the control variables, the effect of party position is significant. Parliamentarians from opposition parties are more responsive to media than MPs from the majority. It is interesting to compare models 1 and 2 in this respect. The coefficient of being in an opposition party decreases when adding political goals, indicating that the individual political goals partly soak up the effect of party position, though not entirely. Individual goals matter *on top of* party membership. Media

responsiveness is significantly higher for younger compared to older MPs. The third control variable (Female) does not yield significant results: male MPs are not more responsive to media than female MPs. These results confirm what we already know about variation in media responsiveness, but they add an important new factor: politicians' individual political goals.

TABLE 3.2 OLS REGRESSION PREDICTING MEDIA RESPONSIVENESS

	Model 1	Model 2
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
CONTROLS:		
Female	-4.48 (2.65)	-3.39 (2.57)
Age	-0.30* (0.14)	-0.30* (0.13)
Opposition party	6.82** (2.53)	5.94* (2.46)
POLITICAL GOALS:		
Party political goals	-	1.32** (0.49)
Policy making goals	-	-0.31 (0.83)
Constant	34.76*** (6.86)	31.84** (9.58)
N	73	73
R ² (adjusted)	0.14	0.21

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Adding goals to the model leads to a substantial increase of the adjusted R², from 0.14 to 0.21. Political goals clearly matter. They account for an additional part of the variation that could not be explained by previous studies.

Figure 3.1 visualizes the size of the effect of the importance of party political goals on media responsiveness. The predicted probabilities show that, keeping all other variables in the model at their means, MPs who state that generating negative attention for other parties is very important (score for 'Party political goals' is 10), base almost twice as much of their parliamentary initiatives (31 per cent vs. 17 per cent) on the media compared to MPs who attribute no importance at all to these party competition-related aspects of politics (score for 'Party political goals' is 0).

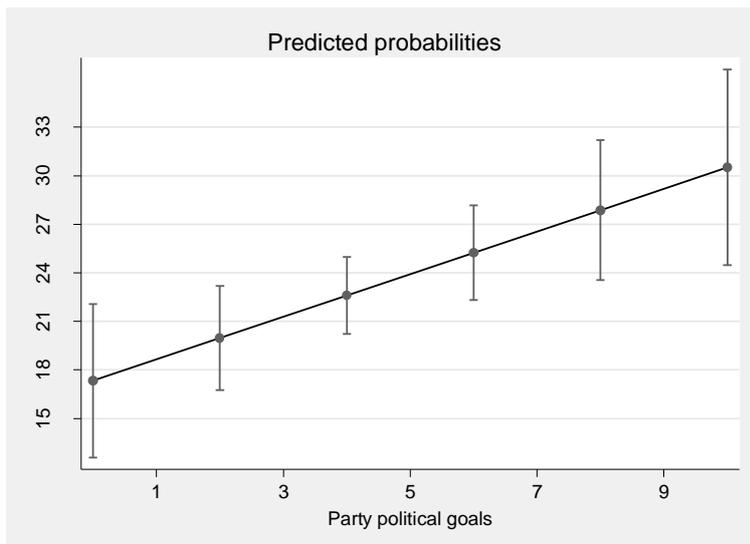


FIGURE 3.1 PREDICTED PROBABILITIES

Conclusion and discussion

This paper investigated individual level variation in media responsiveness by Belgian political elites. Descriptive analyses showed that the media provide MPs with important information—on average, 23 per cent of all parliamentary initiatives is inspired by the news—but that not all MPs are equally reactive to media. Most importantly, politicians’ individual political goals matter. While MPs who focus more on policy making goals do not use the media significantly less, focusing on party politics does make MPs substantially more reactive to the media. Furthermore, as we know from previous studies, the context in which parliamentarians operate is crucial as well. Opposition MPs are inspired by the media more often than coalition MPs. Individual goals matter *on top of* the party context.

The differential usefulness of media coverage for various political actors explains our findings. On the party level, the typically general, negative, conflict-rich and responsibility-attributing media coverage is much more relevant for opposition parties than for coalition parties. As we have shown, this is not merely a consequence of the underlying differences in individual goals. Opposition party members—even those who are not focused on party politics—are more reactive to media than government MPs. An explanation could be that they have fewer alternative sources for information. Compared with government MPs, who for instance can get inside information from the cabinet and from ‘their’ ministers, opposition members are ‘information poor’ and have to rely on the media to be informed and to get inspired. Within parties, there is a division of labor as well, leading to differences in media responsiveness on the individual level. The more MPs consider engaging in the party political game to

be important, the higher the usefulness of media coverage, and the higher their media responsiveness.

In this study, we assumed that motivations and position are largely stable and affect MPs' information seeking behavior, rather than vice versa (for a similar argument see Searing, 1991). Technically speaking, however, our cross-sectional design only demonstrates the co-occurrence of the two phenomena and we cannot show a causal relationship. It is interesting to reflect on the inverse mechanism as well. It is possible that politicians partly define their goals based on what the incoming media information is suited for, and that their goals and their media responsiveness reinforce each other. Panel data—which are difficult to collect since we are dealing with political elites here—would be interesting to further investigate the exact causal mechanism.

In any case, our findings have implications for the relationship between media and politics: we observe that the party-political rather than the policy-making aspects of politics are sensitive to agenda influences from the mass media. This is good news for those who think media influence on policy-making is undesirable because policy decisions need to be based on a long-term vision rather than on the news of the day. Alternatively, we might view media responsiveness in politicians as a good thing, as it ensures that the topics politicians care and develop policies about are relevant to what happens in society. We see that especially party warriors guarantee this responsiveness vis-à-vis media priorities.

Using a survey design has limitations—though it certainly has advantages as well. The main drawback is the possibility of misperception: politicians may not be able to adequately assess the contribution of the media to their political initiatives (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). On the other hand, perceptions are relevant: it is how politicians perceive reality, and not reality itself, that structures politicians' behavior (Maurer, 2011). A second disadvantage of surveys is the influence of social desirability on the answers. In our study, the item gauging MPs' use of information 'that can be used to generate negative attention for other parties' may to a certain extent be prone to biased answers. Despite these limitations, we think our survey is an appropriate method—it is simply impossible to directly observe political goals, for instance—and produces valid results.

The current study deals with one country only: Belgium. Future research should examine whether the same results are obtained elsewhere. Since our findings largely resemble the results of Midtbø et al. (2014), who conducted a similar study with MPs of fifteen European countries, we can likely consider Belgium to be a representative case for European countries. Media responsiveness appears to be, at least partly, a function of individual politicians' goals.

Endnotes

¹ Our conceptualization thus excludes social media and specialized media outlets.

² See www.dekamer.be.

³ Generalized linear model with family(binomial), link(logit) and robust standard errors.

HOW POLITICAL ELITES PROCESS INFORMATION FROM THE NEWS.

The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects

ABSTRACT

Political agenda-setting studies have shown that political agendas are influenced by the media agenda. Researchers in the field of media and politics are now focusing on the mechanisms underlying this pattern. This paper contributes to the literature by focusing not on aggregate, behavioral political attention for issues (e.g. parliamentary questions or legislation), but on MPs' individual, cognitive attention for specific news stories. Drawing upon a survey of Belgian MPs administered shortly after exposure to news stories, the study shows that MPs are highly selective in exploiting media cues. They pay more attention to both prominent and useful news stories, but a story's usefulness is more important for cognitive processes that are closely linked to MPs' real behavior in Parliament. In other words, aggregate political agenda-setting effects are a consequence of the way in which individual MPs process media information that matches their task-related needs.

REFERENCE

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.

HOW POLITICAL ELITES PROCESS INFORMATION FROM THE NEWS.

The cognitive mechanisms behind behavioral political agenda-setting effects

News media play an important role in the work of policymakers. Research in the field of political communication has shown that politicians consider media access to be crucial to gain popularity and public support (J. Cohen et al., 2008; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Mediatization scholars argue that politicians have adapted their behavior to match the media logic, being constantly aware of how something will play out in the media (Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopmann, & Nørgaard, 2011; Strömbäck, 2008). Political agenda-setting scholars, on their turn, have focused on the agenda interactions between the media and politicians. They have demonstrated that after issues get more media attention, they get more political attention as well (for an overview see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Politicians are somehow influenced by media cues. This is the basic finding this paper aims to explore further.

Most extant research has studied political agenda-setting effects from a macro-level perspective. Concretely, the focus has been on the *issues* politicians together take *action* upon in the *aggregate*—e.g. when asking questions, initiating bills, or giving speeches (see e.g. Edwards & Wood, 1999; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Heightened media attention for an issue, followed by an increase in political institutional action upon the issue, has been regarded as an indicator of media impact. Extant studies have done a good job describing the circumstances under which the media influence the political agenda. They have, for instance, found that some political actors are more responsive to the media (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b) or that some news coverage has a larger chance to make it onto the political agenda (Soroka, 2002b; Thesen, 2013).

However, little work has been devoted to providing insight into the mechanisms underlying the macro level findings: What mechanisms explain the political agenda-setting effect? Which concrete news stories attract politicians' attention? Which rules-of-thumb do politicians use to decide whether or not to devote attention to a news story and to take action upon it afterwards? And, why do they adopt media cues in the first place? While agenda-setting scholars did theorize and speculate about these questions (see e.g. Van Aelst, 2014; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010), they have had difficulties

tackling them empirically because the cognitive considerations that politicians make inevitably precede the recorded public action and are hard to capture directly. Attentional and decisional processes cannot be measured by looking at parliamentary output or behavioral records. In particular, it is impossible to tap them on an aggregate, institutional level—we cannot study what institutions think or decide. It is individuals within institutions who read the news and make decisions. Micro level research on individual politicians is needed to get beyond what we know so far (for a similar argument see Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). Yet, studying individual political elites in a rigorous and systematic way is hard and, as a consequence, rare.

Some scholars tried to overcome these problems by surveying or interviewing politicians about their *perceptions* of political agenda-setting effects (see e.g. Davis, 2007, 2009; Maurer, 2011; Midtbø et al., 2014; Sevenans et al., 2015; Walgrave, 2008). While such research is valuable to get a better understanding of politicians' media responsiveness, the main drawback is that politicians have difficulties with judging the media's agenda influence because they are not well able to distinguish agenda power from other forms of media power. This causes the survey- or interview-based studies to generally find much larger media effects than those demonstrated by 'objective' designs tapping actual behavior (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011).

This paper proposes a novel method that overcomes some of the limitations of previous approaches. It studies *individual* politicians' *cognitive* attention for *specific* news stories. Concretely, during a week we analyze the universe of media information in the small country of Belgium (Flanders) and, immediately after that week, via a face-to-face survey of legislative branch members, test whether MPs recall, have talked about, and have considered to take action upon a random sample of media stories. This way we try to lay bare the cognitive, attentional process between exposure to news stories and formal, institutional action upon news stories, as to gain a better understanding of how media effects actually come about.

Conceptualizing politicians' media responsiveness from an information-processing perspective, we find that behavioral, aggregate political agenda-setting effects most likely stem from a process of selective adoption on the cognitive, individual level. On the one hand, politicians consume the news much like other people do, paying more attention to the most *prominent* news stories. On the other hand, they are selective in the sense that they pay more attention to news that is already political in nature and news that matches their interests. In other words, news must be *useful* for their job as a politician in order to draw their attention. Interestingly, cognitive processes that are closer connected to politicians' real behavior are less driven by sheer cue-taking (prominence) and more by strategic selectivity (usefulness). Politicians have the best recall of the most prominent stories; they talk more

with colleagues about news stories that are useful from a partisan point of view; and they intend to take action upon stories that have institutional usefulness. In sum, when political elites react to news coverage it is mostly because this coverage fits their cognitive and task-related needs.

Attention to news from an information-processing perspective

Both in Europe and the US, political agenda-setting scholars have found that media coverage has an influence on political issue attention (see e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Edwards & Wood, 1999). They speak of media influence when an increase (or decrease) in media attention for an issue is followed by a similar increase (or decrease) in political action about the issue and mostly use time-series analyses to search for such a temporal precedence. The majority of recent studies agrees that the media exert influence on the political agenda, yet that the impact size depends on the circumstances (for an overview see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

But, which mechanisms produce this effect? How does media responsiveness work on the individual level? Not only the political agenda-setting literature itself has shown interest in such micro level questions. Scholars within the broader media and politics research field have called for studying agenda-setting in a more insightful way, for instance by disentangling individual policy makers' cognitive attention patterns from their aggregate, behavioral attention (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014; Yanovitzky, 2002).

A fruitful way to think about the micro level link between media and political elites is taking an information-processing perspective (Brown, 2010; Wolfe et al., 2013; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). Such an approach avoids viewing the media as an actor that actively influences politics; rather, the decisions made by political actors are put central stage. The idea is that the news media—amongst many other sources of information—are one possible source of information that politicians can use in their daily work (Kingdon, 1973). Politicians themselves decide whether or not to pay attention to, and actively use, information from the news for various reasons.

From this point of view, the relevant question is not *whether* politicians pay attention to the media; we know they do, at least sometimes. The question is rather *when* they do so, and *why*. Indeed, one thing we can be sure about, is that politicians cannot pay attention to all information that appears in the media. There is simply too much of it. Politicians—just like ordinary people—have to use heuristics, i.e. mental shortcuts, to select only relevant bits of information out of the full spectrum (cf. bounded rationality theory, see e.g. Jones, 1999). If we can lay bare the heuristics they employ when deciding

what news to pay attention to, and what news to eventually act upon, we will better understand what role the media actually play in politicians' work.

While there is not much work on political elites' cognitive attention allocation to news, journalism scholars—relying on theories about the psychology of selective attention—have examined 'ordinary' citizens' attention to news (Eilders, 1996). Citizens use two types of heuristics to quickly judge what is relevant. First and foremost, they pay attention to the most *prominent* news. Assuming that journalists decide on the prominence of a news story based on how relevant they think it is for the public—a practice that is institutionalized in news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965)—prominence is an easy rule of thumb for a citizen to determine what is worth looking at. Additionally, people take into account specific news factors, such as the issue of a story or the degree of controversy in an article, to judge its potential impact on their lives. This perceived applicability of a news story is the second indicator of relevance.

Our theory of attention by political actors is related to this cognitive psychological framework, but we apply it to political elites specifically. Since our ultimate interest is better understanding how politicians *behave* in parliament—whereas for citizens it is merely what they *think* that matters (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006)—we make some changes compared to studies focusing on 'ordinary' citizens. First, we conceptualize 'individual attention for news stories' more broadly than is usually done. We develop three indicators of attention that form the full link between exposure to news stories and potential real action on the underlying issues. Second, we use existing media and politics literature to hypothesize about what news factors make a news story applicable for political elites specifically. We think that for politicians, who are in the position to do something about certain news stories, news must be concretely *useful* in the political arena. Third, since we have three different indicators of attention for which various mechanisms may be at play, we theorize about how some determinants of political attention may matter more for some indicators of attention than for others.

Conceptualizing individual political attention for news

We first clarify how we define the concept of 'individual attention for news stories'—the phenomenon we try to explain in this paper. Cognitive psychology defines attention as "... *the cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things*" (Anderson, 2009, p. 519). This makes attention hard to measure directly except by actually observing people while they are exposed to signals. This study deals with *political* attention of elites and we employ a broader definition. We conceptualize it here as the cognitive process *following* exposure to a news story and

preceding (potential) formal political action upon the news story—the independent and dependent variable of aggregate agenda-setting studies respectively. We present three concrete, empirically measurable indicators of attention that tap different aspects of politicians’ processing of media information.

First, attention for news leads to the storage into memory of the information that was in the news. Being exposed to loads of news, only a small part really gets through and sticks in politicians’ minds. It is a recurring finding in cognitive psychology that higher levels of attention lead to more retention (Johnson & Proctor, 2004). Therefore, our first indicator of attention for news stories is *recall* of these news stories. We label the second indicator of individual political attention *conversation with colleagues*. Of all the stories a politician recalls, due to scarcity of time, he can only talk with colleagues about a fraction. Politicians’ conversational behavior, even informal, is more constrained than their recall. Talking about news with colleagues signals a broader political interest for the news story and indicates higher levels of political attention. Attention is in this case actual, yet still informal, behavior. Third, attention for a news story may materialize in plans for formal action, we label this *intended action*. Planning action, and definitely saying that one plans formal action, is entirely costless. But, it is the form of attention measured here that probably comes closest to actual formal action. One needs to plan to take action before one can effectively act. Planned action, in cognitive psychology also called ‘planned behavior’, forms the link between beliefs and action (Ajzen, 1991).

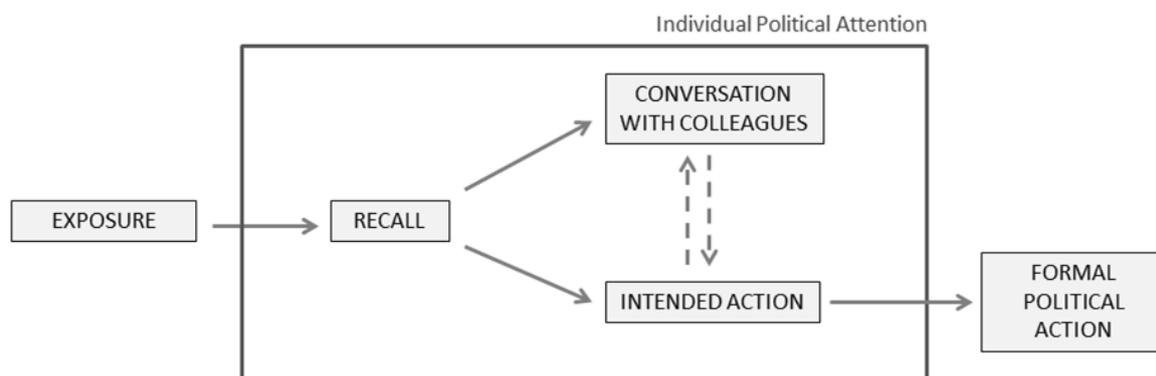


FIGURE 4.1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDICATORS OF INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL ATTENTION

Including a cognitive (recall), a behavioral (conversation with colleagues) and an intentional aspect (intended action) of attention, our three indicators present an encompassing measure of individual political attention for the news. The relationships between the indicators of attention are summarized

in Figure 4.1. We consider *recall* as the necessary first stage of the attention process: it is a precondition to know about a story before one can talk about it or intend to act upon it. Recall is, however, not only caused by direct exposure to the news (e.g. by reading a newspaper); it can also be produced by indirect exposure, for instance via inter-personal communication (e.g. a friend mentioning the story during a conversation). Even then recall occurs before the politician starts conversing about the story himself. Recall can lead to *conversation* and/or to *intended action*. Conversation and intended action are not preconditions for each other, but they may affect each other: informal conversation can inspire a politician to undertake formal action; and vice versa, a politician intending to take action may want to discuss it first with colleagues. Yet, intended action always is a precondition for real, formal political action.

Determinants of individual political attention

Which heuristics do political elites employ to evaluate the relevance of a news story? As touched upon above, the prominence of a news story probably plays a crucial role. From a cognitive psychology point of view, stronger media signals should draw more attention, not only from politicians, but from all news consumers (Wood & Vedlitz, 2007). The more news coverage about an issue or event, the larger the chance that political elites are being (multiple times) exposed to it: the story becomes ‘top of mind’. In a sense, prominence refers to the passive role of the information receiver—in our case: the politician—who cannot help but attend to an ubiquitous story.

Prominence is probably not only a trigger of political attention from a ‘passive’ point of view. Politicians may deliberately aim to be informed about prominent news as they consider it to be important. This is the basic premise of agenda-setting research: the more media attention an issue gets, the higher the presumed importance, and the more it is prioritized by the audience (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Moreover, politicians may view media attention for topics as a proxy of how important the public considers these issues to be (Veltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). This works in two directions: some politicians may think that media coverage reflects public opinion (Pritchard, 1994); others may think that the media affect what the public deems important (J. Cohen et al., 2008; Gunther & Storey, 2003). In both cases, politicians presume that the public cares most about the big news stories of the day. So, they have good reasons to be attentive to prominent news themselves if they want to show they are responsive to public concerns. Our first hypothesis is:

H1: Politicians pay more attention to news that is more prominent.

We know from psychology that a second crucial heuristic, next to prominence, is the perceived applicability of information (Higgins, 1996). Citizens, for instance, pay more attention to news that is conflictual because conflict may result in changes in the status quo, which could have an impact on their lives (Eilders, 1996). Politicians, who attend to large chunks of information from society—their job is to represent society—need an even more efficient selection procedure to deal with the constant information influx (see Zaller, 1992 for a similar account of how citizens process information). As politicians are in the position to take action upon information, we argue that the perceived applicability of information is determined by its concrete *usefulness*. For example, elites' staffers predigest information and consciously filter out what is not concretely usable. Kingdon (1973), in his seminal study about congressmen's voting decisions, extensively elaborates on how information should be 'politically relevant' to be used by politicians. Similarly, recent aggregate agenda-setting studies, though implicitly, focus on information usefulness as well when they find that politicians mostly use those bits of media information that fit their political task and strategy (see e.g. Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011b). Usefulness, thus, refers to the active role the information's recipient plays by deliberately filtering what comes in.

The literature mentions two types of information, provided by the media, that may be relevant for politicians: (1) substantial information about policy issues; and (2) information about politics (Van Aelst, 2014; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). With respect to the former, we can safely assume that politicians can use information about issues they have an interest in. Daily, the media report about problems in society—and possible solutions for these problems—related to different policy domains. Moreover, journalists may have been covering a topic for a long time, making their expertise and opinions valued by MPs (Davis, 2009). We expect such issue-related news to be useful for politicians dealing with the topic in their daily work.

We identify three ways in which information can match politicians' issue interests. First, many countries in the world are federal states with multiple competence levels. Different parliaments exercise their authority within a specific geographic region (in our case: Flanders in Belgium) and within certain policy domains. Politicians probably devote more attention to news about the region their Parliament is responsible for as they can actually do something with this information.

H2: Politicians pay more attention to news about the region their Parliament is responsible for.

Second, politicians belong to political parties with certain partisan issue preferences. Issue competition is an important aspect of the party competition in many countries (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Parties profile themselves on certain issues in order to gain a strategic advantage over other parties on these issues; they deliberately ignore issues on which they have a detrimental position. For instance, parties

may focus on issues they are the 'issue owner' of, which means that voters consider the party to be the best able to handle the issue, or on issues that currently concern voters (Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Extant work found that MPs react more on news about issues that are salient for their party, such as owned issues (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011a). In short, we expect MPs to pay more attention to news about issues with high partisan salience.

H3: Politicians pay more attention to news about issues that are salient for their party.

Third, there is a division of labor within parties and MPs specialize in a few specific policy domains, often being member of the parliamentary committees corresponding to these domains. They are in constant need for information about the issues they are specialized in. Accordingly, the more a news story's issue content fits the specialization of an MP, the higher its usefulness for this MP's institutional task.

H4: Politicians pay more attention to news about issues they are personally specialized in.

In addition to news about policy issues, the media provide a second type of information useful for politicians: information about politics itself. Indeed, the news is not only an exogenous source of information for politicians; it is simultaneously a channel via which politicians themselves communicate (Wolfe et al., 2013). Politicians are an exceptionally important source of information for journalists and a lot of news is political in nature (Bennett, 1990). Politicians sometimes 'go public' with their plans before they announce them in Parliament in order to create support amongst their colleagues (Kernell, 1997). Consequently, politicians can also learn from the media about other political actors' plans, priorities, and tactics (Davis, 2007). The news is a means to gauge the political 'mood' (Sellers, 2009). Whether a news story provides information about politics is a criterion for its usefulness.

H5: Politicians pay more attention to news about politics.

An important consideration worth mentioning here is the possible endogeneity of the media's political agenda-setting effect. If politicians simply react on news that was produced in the political sphere itself, this would confirm Wolfsfeld's (2013) argument that there is a 'PMP-cycle' whereby "*politics comes first*" and influences the media sphere which, on its turn, influences politics again. This does not mean that politicians know about all political news before it appears in the media: it is likely that the media mostly offer them new information coming from *other* political actors. But it could mean that some stories, apparently affecting the political agenda, already received political attention from some political actors before. We will come back to this later.

Drawing on an information-processing perspective, we formulated five general hypotheses about which news draws politicians' attention. We did not differentiate between indicators of attention. The next section contains expectations about how the five determinants of attention influence the various indicators of attention (recall, conversation and intended action) to a different extent.

Recall, conversation, and intended action

Our hypotheses so far are based on two mechanisms we claim to drive political attention effects: prominence and usefulness. Due to the interrelatedness of our three indicators of political attention—recall, conversation, and intended action—we believe that all determinants specified above may influence all three indicators of attention. For instance, if prominence affects recall, we expect it to also affect conversation and intended action, as recall is a precondition for the latter two. And, if politicians intend to act more upon news about issues they are specialized in, they probably also notice this kind of news more, leading to better recall. Still, we theorize that the strength of the effect of the various determinants of attention differs across our indicators of attention.

The prominence of a news story should matter most when it comes to recall, as recall simply is a matter of storage in memory. When a politician frequently encounters the same news fact, the chance increases that he or she has noticed it and remembers it. For conversation and intended action, prominence may still matter but we think it will be less important because other factors, related to the usefulness of the information, take the upper hand.

H6: The prominence of a news story matters more for recall than for conversation and intended action.

Conversation and especially intended action are attentional processes connected more closely to real behavior and we expect politicians to deliberately pick, in a selective way, which news stories to talk about or act upon. The usefulness of news stories should become more important here. Politicians are strategic actors who will probably only spend time on a news story if they have an interest in doing so.

Two factors discussed above signal the relevance of a story for a politician's task generally: whether the news is about politics, and whether it is about an issue that is salient for the party. These factors define the *partisan* usefulness of a story. We anticipate them to be particularly important when it comes to conversation about news stories, because this is where the shared interest in a news story between a politician and his colleagues matters most. The two factors of partisan usefulness may also have an influence on recall or intended action, but less so.

H7: The partisan usefulness of a story matters more for conversation than for recall and intended action.

The two final determinants of attention, an individual's specialization and a matching competence level, signal the *institutional* usefulness of a news story. While MPs are probably interested in a broad range of news stories not directly matching their institutional position—which they may recall, and about which they may even talk—they cannot, and are not supposed to, turn those stories into action in Parliament. Concretely, we theorize that individual specialization and parliamentary competence are particularly important determinants when it comes to intended action upon a news story.

H8: The institutional usefulness of a news story matters more for intended action than for recall and conversation.

Data and methods

Media content analysis

During one week (8-14) in May 2013, Belgian (Flemish) mass media coverage was content analyzed. Every day, eight news outlets were fully coded: five newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*, all broadsheets, and *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Metro*, popular papers), two television news broadcasts (7 p.m. news from *VRT*, the public channel, and *VTM*, the commercial channel) and one radio news broadcast (7 a.m. news from *Radio 1*, the public radio). One week fits the weekly parliamentary cycle—committee and plenary meetings take place once a week. We expect recall, conversation and intended action to occur quickly after media exposure (see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). With about 6 million inhabitants, the Belgian (Flemish) media market is relatively small and not very fragmented making it possible to content-analyze almost all news during a week.¹ We chose this particular week in May mainly for pragmatic reasons; we took a 'routine' week that was long enough after the Easter recess and before the summer break so that enough MPs would attend the plenary session. Without coding a lot of additional media stories, we cannot prove that the week we picked is representative for Belgian (Flemish) media coverage in general, but it appeared to us as a normal week far from any election campaign with a small number of large stories and a great deal of minor stories.

In a first phase, all individual news items (e.g. each newspaper article) were attributed to 'news stories'.² Two news items belong to the same news story when (1) they deal with exactly the same topic and when (2) the event they cover, is set on the same geographical location (see Thesen, 2013 who followed a similar procedure). The reason for grouping news items into broader news stories is

that humans process different bits of information about the same news fact as a whole. For example, different outlets, over different days, covered a news story about two boys who went missing. When asked about their attention for the disappearance, people do not distinguish between different details of the story, but consider the different aspects as one larger news fact. Our units of analysis are thus news stories. The 1,847 individual news items that appeared in the eight outlets, were grouped into 769 separate news stories. This is the universe of news during that one week in May 2013.

Then, from these 769 stories, a stratified random sample of 150 news stories was taken. News stories appearing in one outlet only, foreign news stories, and soft news stories were undersampled (Table 4.1). Non-prominent and politically irrelevant news stories would otherwise take a disproportional share of the news agenda compared to their agenda-setting potential. A Belgian politician would never intend to act upon, for instance, a transfer of a soccer player or to the fact that the fire alarm in the White House went off.

TABLE 4.1 STRATIFIED RANDOM SAMPLE OF STORIES (NUMBER OF STORIES IN POPULATION BETWEEN BRACKETS)

	Hard news		Soft news
	Domestic	Foreign	
Prominent (> one news outlet)	100 (135)	20 (42)	5 (85)
Not prominent (one news outlet only)	15 (188)	5 (113)	5 (206)

Third, to construct our independent variables, every news item belonging to one of the 150 selected news stories was coded in-depth.³ The individual news items' codings were then aggregated on the news story level. *Media wideness* indicates how many different news outlets covered the story. *Story size* is the average number of individual news items these outlets spent on the story. *Political news* gives the share of news items per news story that are political, i.e. that mention an action or statement by a Belgian political actor. The variables assessing an MP's party's issue salience and matching specialization were constructed by coding the main topic of each news story according to the topic codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). We calculated *Party issue salience* via the party manifestos of the last Flemish elections of 2009, by measuring the proportion of each party manifesto devoted to each issue. The issue salience variable represents, for each MP-story combination, the proportion of the manifesto of the MP's party devoted to the issue the story was about. Such a measure of issue salience has been used before in agenda-setting research (see e.g. Vlieninghart &

Walgrave, 2011a; Wagner & Meyer, 2014). Two independent MPs were excluded from the analyses as they did not belong to a party. *Matching specialization* is a dummy variable indicating '1' when the issue the news story is about, matches one of the parliamentary committees the MP is member of. We retrieved committee membership from the official website of the Flemish Parliament. *Regional setting* gives the share of news items per news story playing in the Flemish region (and not exclusively on the national, local or European level).⁴

Survey of Flemish MPs

The face-to-face MP survey (administered on iPads and laptops) took place on 15 May 2013 in the Flemish Parliament during the plenary session. In total, 93 out of 124 MPs participated in the survey. A response rate of 75 per cent is exceptionally high for elite research.⁵ All MPs were informed beforehand. We received support from the chairman of the Flemish Parliament, who encouraged all members to participate. Parliament ushers helped us to target the MPs that had not participated yet. MPs were surveyed in the hall and the lobby when they left or entered the plenary meeting.

Belgium is a strongly federalized state with large competences (education, environment, culture, foreign trade...) situated at the regional level (Deschouwer, 2009). The Belgian regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) manage about half of the total government's budget and the Flemish Parliament deals with more than half of the Belgian population. There is a lot of mobility from national to regional parliaments in Belgium, and regional elections are by no means second order elections but are as 'national' as the general elections, with media devoting equal levels of attention. In a sense, Belgium is a two-nation country and studying one of the regions comes very close to studying a state-wide, national system.

Thirty news stories were presented to every MP. Our dependent variables—*recall*, *conversation with colleagues*, and *intended action*—were assessed by asking them three questions for every story: (1) *Have you seen or heard about this story during the last week, yes or no?* If yes, (2) *Have you talked about this story with colleagues, yes or no?* (3) *Have you considered to undertake action about this story, yes or no?* For each MP, the thirty stories were randomly selected out of 160 news stories: the sample of 150 real news stories plus ten *fake* news stories, made up by the researchers. The fake stories were included to test for recall error and reliability. The respondents were informed about the inclusion of these fake stories at the beginning of the interview which may have made them complete the survey more attentively. They did not know how many stories would be fake; on average, 2.1 out of the thirty stories presented to an MP were fake.

Controls

Apart from the independent variables of interest—gauging prominence (media wideness and story size), partisan usefulness (political news and party issue salience) and institutional usefulness (regional setting and matching specialization)—we use five control variables. Since the information-gathering behavior of specialist and generalist MPs may differ (Tetlock, 2005), we control for degree of specialization by asking: *Some politicians specialize in one or a few policy domains, while others focus on a lot of different domains. Where would you place yourself on a range from 0 (I focus on one domain) to 10 (I focus on a lot of different domains)?* Second, we include a dummy for whether a story is foreign or domestic. The Flemish Parliament has both domestic and international competences so we expect Flemish MPs to attend to all types of news. Third, we include a dummy for soft news. Fourth, there is a measure of the recency of the story—the number of days between the last news item on a news story and the MP survey—to test whether a decay effect occurs. Finally, to control for possible party effects, we incorporate party dummies in all analyses. For all descriptives, we refer to Table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Mean (S.D.)	Freq. (%)	N	Level of measurement
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Recall	0.51 (0.50)		2,448	MP-story combination
Conversation	0.18 (0.39)		2,448	MP-story combination
Intended action	0.06 (0.24)		2,448	MP-story combination
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Story size	1.41 (0.87)		150	Story
Media wideness	3.01 (1.70)		150	Story
Political news	0.14 (0.29)		150	Story
Issue-ownership party	0.04 (0.04)		2,448	MP-story combination
Matching specialization	0.13 (0.34)		2,448	MP-story combination
Regional setting	0.16 (0.34)		150	Story
<i>Controls</i>				
Generalist MP	4.25 (2.23)		89	MP
Broadsheet coverage	0.07 (0.25)		150	Story
Foreign news	0.19 (0.40)		150	Story
Recency	4.23 (2.11)		150	Story
Party:				
Christian Democrats		21 (23.60)	89	MP
Liberals		19 (21.35)	89	MP
Socialists		10 (11.24)	89	MP
Far-right		14 (15.73)	89	MP
Flemish Regionalists		13 (14.61)	89	MP
Right-wing Liberals		6 (6.74)	89	MP
Greens		6 (6.74)	89	MP

Analyses

We run three separate models with recall, conversation and intended action as dependent variables (N = 2,448).⁶ The models are crossed random-effects logistic models⁷ because the data are nonhierarchical (news stories are not nested in MPs or vice versa): every unit is cross-classified by the factors 'MP' and 'news story'. Since our three dependent variables are binary, we estimate logistic models. All three models include the same independent variables.⁸ Because the number of observations and the independent variables in the models are identical, we can compare the strength of effects across models.

Before moving on to the results we briefly discuss the issue of causality in our models. Political agenda-setting research typically encounters two causality problems. First, as noted above, politicians are prominent news sources themselves and they attempt to get their preferred issue agenda in the news. Considering political attention for such politically produced news as a pure media effect is wrong when the news has its origin in the political sphere itself. We try to explicitly model this by including the variable *Political news* in our models.⁹ Interestingly, the political news stories in our dataset are almost always exogenous to the specific MPs rating the story: they refer to *other* political actors. In our dataset, there are only two instances where an MP was confronted with a news story in which he himself was mentioned.

Second and relatedly, it is hard to distinguish the 'net' effect of media coverage from the direct effect of underlying events in the real world. When politicians react to a news story, such as for instance a train accident or a statement by another politician, we cannot be sure whether the media coverage is responsible for this reaction or whether the politician reacts to the event or statement itself. He or she may even have known about the story before it appeared in the media. This could lead to an overestimation of the role of the media. We cannot empirically solve this issue in this study. We are confident, however, that the media have at least some 'net' effect on top of the real world effect, as one-issue media studies controlling for real-world indicators generally show (see e.g. Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Vliegenthart & Mena Montes, 2014). Also, we account for this problem theoretically, by not making assumptions about the 'influence' of the mass media (attributing a passive role to politicians) but rather viewing news stories as bits of information that 'are around', that one can often also learn about in other ways, and that politicians—dependent on the conditions—deliberately pick up or ignore.

Results

We first discuss the relationships between the dependent variables. In 49 per cent of all 2,448 cases a story was not recognized by the MP: (s)he indicated that (s)he had not heard or read about it. Of the stories that were recalled, 63 per cent did not lead to conversation nor to intended action; 26 per cent sparked conversation (but did not lead to intended action); 2 per cent led to intended action (but not to conversation); and 10 per cent led to conversation and intended action. Apparently, when MPs consider to undertake action upon a story, they mostly discuss it with their colleagues as well. Note that MPs seldom claimed to have paid attention to fake stories; this reinforces confidence in the reliability of our measures.¹⁰

A cursory look at Table 4.3 shows that almost all independent variables seem to matter for some type of attention; but there are differences between models. In any case, all three full models perform better than the empty models: the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) decreases when adding independent variables. The empty models show that there is more variance on the level of the news story than on the MP-level. When explaining attention for stories, the difference between stories is larger than the difference between MPs. Our models, focusing mostly on features of the *message*, succeed in considerably reducing this unexplained variance.

Prominence

Two of the three dependent variables are significantly affected by both indicators of prominence. *Story size* and *Media wideness* are crucial variables in explaining recall and conversation with colleagues. When stories are covered by more news outlets, and when they are covered more prominently, they are recalled by more MPs and MPs talk more about them. Prominence matters less for intended action: only *Story size* has a significant effect and the size of the coefficient is much smaller than in the other two models. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed: more prominent signals draw more attention. It is not the case, however, that the effect is stronger for recall than for conversation: the size of the coefficients is comparable in the two models. Hypothesis 6 is therefore not corroborated: prominence does not primarily matter for mere recall; it equally affects MPs' conversational behavior.

Partisan usefulness

All four indicators of usefulness matter as well, at least at some point during the attentional process. First, the issue interests of a politician's party (*Party issue salience*) play a role. The effect is positive and significant for the model explaining conversation. If a story deals with an issue prioritized by their party, MPs tend to talk more about it. Hypothesis 3 gets confirmation for one indicator of attention. For recall and intended action, party issue salience does not have a significant effect. Second, the *Political news* variable matters, confirming Hypothesis 5. Political news sparks chatting with colleagues and it is also a significant predictor of recall, but it does not determine whether a politician intends to take action upon a story. The indicators of the partisan usefulness of a news story, *Political news* and *Party issue salience*, matter most for explaining conversation with colleagues, confirming Hypothesis 7.

Institutional usefulness

The variable tapping politicians' individual specialization, *Matching specialization*, proves to be crucial to explain politicians' attention for news stories. It is the only variable with a positive and significant coefficient in all three models. We can confirm Hypothesis 4. Whether or not a news story plays in Flanders or not—an indicator of whether the Flemish Parliament is responsible for the matter—also plays a role both for conversation and for intended action (confirming Hypothesis 2). Recall is not affected by the geographical setting of a story: Flemish MPs pay attention to news stories about the federal level as well. But their (intended) behavior, taking place largely within one specific parliament, is constrained by the formal jurisdiction of this parliament. The effects of the two indicators tapping institutional usefulness, *Regional setting* and *Matching specialization*, on intended action are both significant and the size of the coefficients exceeds those of the other models, confirming Hypothesis 8. Institutional usefulness is most important for intended action.

Controls

Some control variables exert influence on recall as well. Generalist MPs recall more stories. Domestic news leads to better recall and to more conversation and intended action, than foreign news. Soft news has no effect. There also is no decay effect: the most recent stories are not more recalled than then slightly less recent stories. Finally, there is no effect from parties.

TABLE 4.3 CROSSED RANDOM EFFECTS LOGISTIC MODELS EXPLAINING RECALL, CONVERSATION WITH COLLEAGUES AND INTENDED ACTION

	Recall				Conversation with colleagues				Intended action			
	(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model		(1) Empty		(2) Full model	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Story size			0.60**	(0.17)			0.61**	(0.18)			0.43*	(0.20)
Media wideness			0.43***	(0.06)			0.49***	(0.10)			0.19	(0.12)
Political news			0.78*	(0.31)			1.87***	(0.44)			0.59	(0.54)
Party issue salience			2.19	(1.72)			6.70**	(2.33)			2.24	(3.31)
Regional setting			0.49	(0.27)			0.81*	(0.38)			1.27**	(0.44)
Matching specialization			0.74***	(0.16)			0.67**	(0.20)			1.39***	(0.25)
Generalist MP			0.09**	(0.04)			0.08	(0.05)			0.09	(0.07)
Soft news			-0.31	(0.35)			-1.36	(0.75)			-1.28	(1.17)
Foreign news			-0.61**	(0.23)			-0.96*	(0.41)			-1.24*	(0.61)
Recency			-0.06	(0.05)			0.04	(0.07)			0.10	(0.09)
Party (ref.: Christian Democrats)												
Liberals			0.17	(0.23)			-0.27	(0.35)			-0.91*	(0.46)
Socialists			0.29	(0.28)			-0.17	(0.42)			0.03	(0.49)
Far-right			0.36	(0.25)			0.25	(0.38)			0.10	(0.44)
Flemish Regionalists			-0.27	(0.26)			0.27	(0.39)			0.15	(0.46)
Right-wing Liberals			0.02	(0.34)			0.08	(0.51)			-0.75	(0.66)
Greens			-0.51	(0.34)			0.23	(0.51)			-0.63	(0.67)
Constant	0.09	(0.14)	-2.42***	(0.47)	-2.69*	(0.24)	-5.95***	(0.71)	-4.28*	(0.32)	-6.28***	(0.88)
Number of stories	150		150		150		150		150		150	
Number of MPs	89		89		89		89		89		89	
Number of observations	2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448		2,448	
Variance parameter (MP)	0.65		0.55		0.87		0.87		0.96		0.88	
Variance parameter (story)	1.42		0.82		2.14		1.20		1.76		1.23	
AIC	2,913		2,776		1,780		1,677		952		899	

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

Interactions

The theoretical model we tested in Table 4.3 is a simple, direct effects model. One may wonder whether reality is really that straightforward or whether prominence and usefulness *interactively* determine recall, conversation and intended action. For example, the effect of usefulness may be multiplied by prominence. Therefore, we tested models including interaction effects of the two prominence indicators with the four usefulness indicators.¹¹ Only two of the interaction effects reached significance (only on .05 level; results not shown in table). First, we found a positive interaction effect between *Story size* and *Party issue salience* on recall, indicating that issue salience does matter for recall when a story is big enough. Second, there is a negative interaction effect between *Story size* and *Matching specialization* on intended action: apparently, when a news story is really big, the role of specialization decreases and a larger group of politicians plans to undertake action. However, because most tested interaction effects are insignificant and the two found effects are small¹², we conclude that our straightforward, additive model grasps the underlying reality relatively well.

The empirical results mostly match our theory. The prominence of a news story (H1), the extent to which it matches a politician's issue interests on different levels (H2-4), and whether or not it is about politics (H5), all matter to explain at least one indicator of a politician's individual cognitive attentional process. Prominence matters for recall but also for conversation (H6 not confirmed), partisan usefulness plays a crucial role for conversation only (H7), and institutional usefulness is most important for intended action (H8). A politician's individual specialization in particular appears to be a key determinant of all three attention indicators.

Predicted probabilities

The models in Table 4.3 only inform us about significance and give no indication of effect sizes. What does our theory mean in real numbers? To get a better sense of what the effects actually mean, we calculate predicted probabilities of the three dependent variables (for the fixed part of the model), for different values of the most relevant independent variables, keeping all other independent variables at their mean.

Figure 4.2 presents the results. The effect of story size, our first indicator of prominence, on recall is huge. When outlets reporting a story spend on average six items on the story instead of one, the chance of recall increases from 48 per cent to 95 per cent—approximating almost perfect recall. Figure 4.2 (upper left pane) shows how the marginal effect of one additional news item about a story

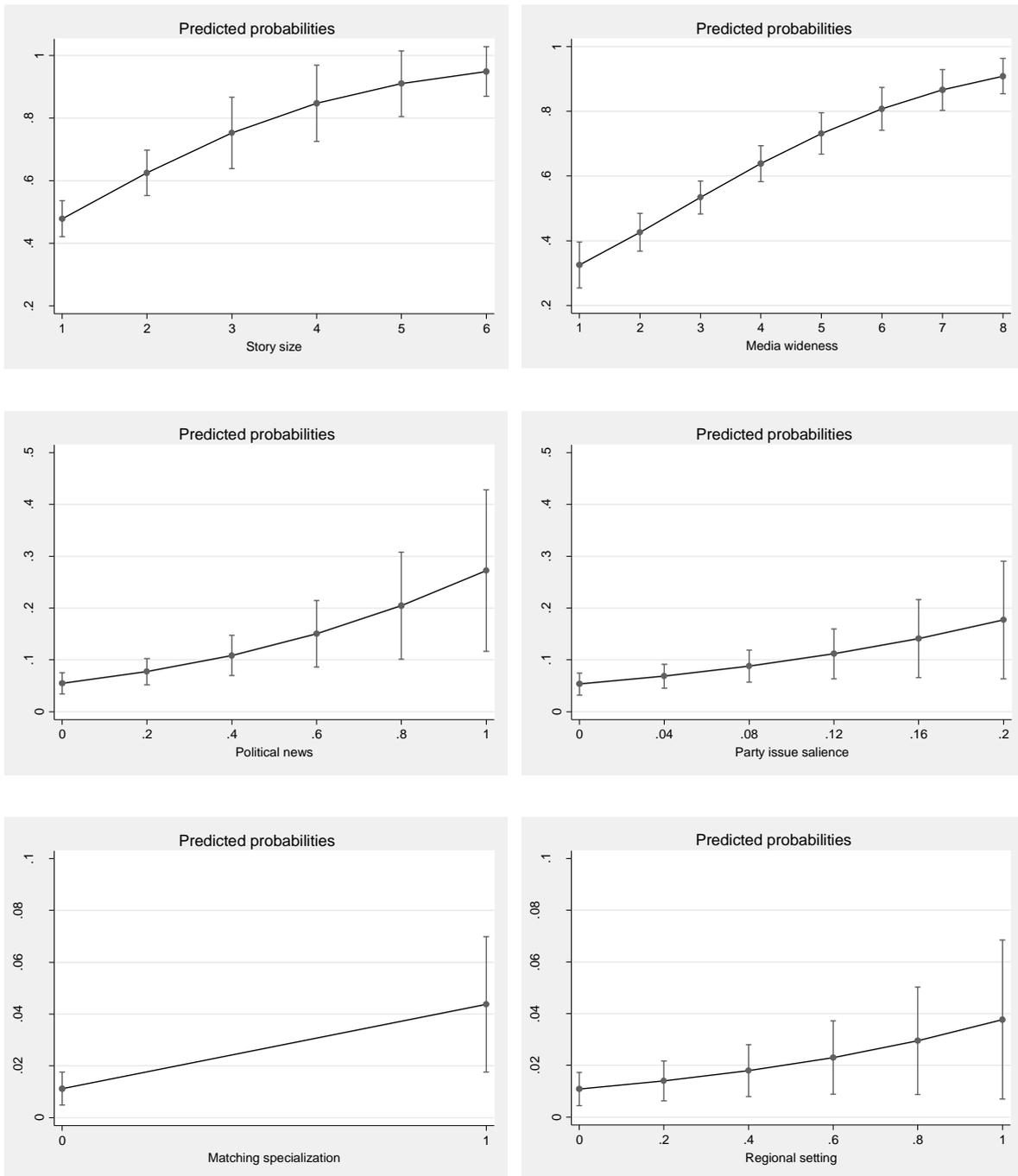


FIGURE 4.2 PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF RECALL (FOR INDICATORS OF PROMINENCE), CONVERSATION WITH COLLEAGUES (FOR INDICATORS OF PARTISAN USEFULNESS) AND INTENDED ACTION (FOR INDICATORS OF INSTITUTIONAL USEFULNESS) WITH 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS

decreases as the total number of items increases. A similar logic applies to media wideness: a story appearing in all eight news outlets has a chance of 91 per cent of being picked up (recalled) by an MP; for a story mentioned in only one outlet this chance is only 32 per cent. The predicted probabilities

underscore the fact that prominence is crucial for recall, especially because size and wideness may often go hand in hand, possibly resulting in a real ‘media storm’ that is as good as impossible for MPs to ignore.

The middle part of Figure 4.2 displays the effect of the two partisan usefulness indicators on conversation. MPs talk a lot more about political news. When every news item that covers a story contains statements and/or actions by political actors, the chance that an MP talks about the story with his/her colleagues is 27 per cent, which is much higher than the 5 per cent chance when not a single news item mentions a politician. The salience of an issue for the MP’s party also leads to increases of conversations by this MP, from 5 per cent to 18 per cent, but this effect appears to be weaker, as the confidence intervals slightly overlap.

For intended action (lower panes of Figure 4.2), the indicators of institutional usefulness seem to exert smaller effects. This is especially true for *Regional setting* where the confidence intervals of the probabilities also overlap—which is partly due to the fact that there are not so much news stories about which MPs intend to take action. Matching specialization is a substantive predictor of intended action (1 per cent to 5 per cent).

All in all, the predicted probabilities suggest that four out of six of the key effects found in the models are substantial and represent considerable shifts in MPs’ attention allocation. In terms of effect sizes, the independent variables used in this study perform particularly strong with regards to recall; whereas their explanatory power is somewhat weaker with regards to conversation and intended action.

Conclusion and discussion

The paper examined the cognitive mechanisms underlying behavioral political agenda-setting effects. Drawing upon a broad conceptualization of individual political attention—with recall, conversation with colleagues and intended action as indicators—we tried to disentangle the determinants of political attention for news stories. We argued that the prominence and usefulness of a news story—to varying degrees—affect whether a news story is noticed, whether it is informally talked about by elites, and whether elites plan to follow-up by undertaking formal action.

By and large, our theory gets support from the evidence. Prominent news gets more attention (H1 confirmed): the more news there is about a story, the more it is remembered and the more it leads to conversation among elites. The partisan usefulness of a news story matters as well (H3 and H5

confirmed). When stories are about politics and inform MPs about what other parties are doing, and when they address issues on which a party has a strategic advantage, elites especially tend to talk more about them. Finally, institutional usefulness plays a role (H2 and H4 confirmed). News stories that are situated in the specialized field of an MP and that are related to the parliament's geographic region are more easy to transform into formal action; they lead to more plans to act. Whereas partisan usefulness has the largest effect when it comes to conversation (confirming H7) and institutional usefulness is most important for intended action (confirming H8), the effect of prominence is not stronger for recall than for conversation (rejecting H6). One factor plays a role throughout the entire cognitive political attention process: individual specialization. This strongly suggests that politicians selectively pick information that they perceive to be relevant for their specialized task.

We know from existing political agenda-setting studies that political agendas tend to be responsive to media agendas, but that this effect is highly contingent upon a whole range of factors. Our study confirms this basic finding—political elites indeed adopt media cues—and makes a beginning with uncovering how this contingency of media effects comes about. It shows that the adoption of news stories is a selective process whereby elites' political attention allocation is partly determined by the specific partisan/institutional environment in which they operate. In particular, intended action is restricted to stories that are useful for a specific MP. This may explain, for instance, why on the aggregate level some agendas are influenced more by media than others: in general, the usefulness of news coverage for these agendas is probably higher.

For less consequential attentional processes like recall, however, usefulness matters less. Politicians pay attention to many remarkably different news stories; about half of *everything* that appears in the mass media is noticed by politicians, and almost *every* politician pays attention to the 'big' stories of the day. They also use the media to be informed about political developments, and talk about these stories with their colleagues. This may explain why studies asking politicians about their perception of media impact often show much larger media effects than 'objective' studies based on content analysis. Politicians pay lots of attention to the media (cognitive aspect), even if not all news stories appear to be useful for everyone in parliament (behavioral aspect).

Note that this study did not look into formal political action, only into attention (potentially) preceding action. We expect that the usefulness filter would even be stronger, due to more constraints and costs, had we assessed actual behavior and not just intended behavior. Taking a step back and looking not at action but at preceding political attention has helped us to unravel the process leading to political action and partly opening the black box of political agenda-setting. We do not claim that our approach does any better than the aggregate level research studying formal action, but we do believe that our

approach explains better, both theoretically and empirically, why previous studies found what they found.

Interestingly, the regularly voiced concern that political agenda-setting effects are the consequence of politicians only reacting to the news they themselves initiated, proves to be untrue. While political news draws indeed special attention from politicians—they recall and talk about it more than non-political news—it is no determinant of their (intended) actions in Parliament. ‘Exogenous’ news that is not political in nature also triggers reactions from politicians.

The study only draws on one country and one level of government. The Belgian state structure is special and there is no doubt that some factors studied here are of no importance in other political systems. Though many states have some sort of multi-level structure in place with competences dispersed over different levels, the regional competence level effect we found, for instance, may be an idiosyncratic Belgian phenomenon. Having comparative data of elites in different countries would be useful. However, we hold that our results are generalizable in the sense that our broader theory about prominence and usefulness applies comparatively. The precise features making information relevant and applicable differ between political contexts but we believe the mechanisms to be generic. Politicians, just like all information-processors, are boundedly rational in what they let come through. They pay attention to the most important developments in their environment (prominence) but they attend more actively when information is relevant for their party and for their own political position (usefulness).

Endnotes

¹ There are some more national newspapers (*Het Belang van Limburg, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Nieuwsblad*) and news websites, but their agenda largely overlaps with that of the outlets covered.

² A random subset of news items was coded by two coders to test the reliability of the attribution of individual news items to news stories. The overlap was 93 per cent, indicating sufficient intercoder reliability.

³ To test the intercoder reliability of the in-depth codings, 50 items were coded by two coders. All Krippendorff's alphas exceeded .70, indicating sufficient reliability.

⁴ In Belgium, the jurisdictional division is complex, causing many policy topics to potentially lead to action on various competence levels. This is not only problematic theoretically, also practically it

makes reliable coding of jurisdiction difficult. That is why we opt for the geographic location of an event as a good and clear-cut proxy of jurisdiction, that often goes hand in hand with 'real' jurisdiction.

⁵ Moreover, there is no selection bias. Sixteen MPs were abroad during the plenary meeting and could therefore not complete the survey. Respondents do not significantly differ from non-respondents in terms of gender, age, years of experience in Parliament, standing (chairs of committees and caucuses), and party.

⁶ From all 2,790 cases (93 MPs x 30 stories), there are 83 cases where the answer on one of the survey questions (dependent variables) is missing; 193 cases are about fake stories; there are 56 cases of independent MPs for whom we do not have party issue salience data; and 10 cases for which the generalist-specialist measure is missing. Thus: $2,790 - 83 - 193 - 56 - 10 = 2,448$ cases.

⁷ These models include random components both on the level of the respondent and on the level of the news story. We run the models in STATA, using the 'xtmelogit' command as described by Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2012). For the estimation of the parameters, Laplace approximation is used.

⁸ There is no problem of multicollinearity in the models. The highest correlation between two independent variables (Media wideness and Story size) is 0.51.

⁹ Although this variable is based on mentions of political actors in the news, while political actors are not necessarily mentioned in all news they are involved in (often journalists do not mention their sources), we think the variable does a reasonable job in distinguishing politically inspired news from non-political news.

¹⁰ Of the 193 fake stories presented to MPs, recall occurred in 15 cases (8 per cent), conversation occurred twice (1 per cent) and intended action only once (0.5 per cent). A considerable number of these incorrect answers were related to one specific fake story that, unfortunately, was very similar to a news fact that had truly happened. The fake story said 'Referee assaulted a soccer player, who was brought to hospital', while two weeks before, a soccer player had attacked a referee. The confusion caused by this mix-up explained almost half of the incorrect answers: 6/15 for recall, 1/2 for conversation, and 1/1 for intended action.

¹¹ We tested the interaction effects one by one, in separate models.

¹² Note as well that the likelihood of finding effects 'by chance' increases because we test so many different models.

POLICYMAKERS' RESPONSIVENESS TO INFORMATION FROM THE MASS MEDIA. A survey-embedded experiment with politicians in Belgium, Canada and Israel

ABSTRACT

Political agenda-setting research has shown that policymakers are responsive vis-à-vis media priorities. The mechanisms behind this effect have remained understudied so far, though. In particular, agenda-setting scholars have difficulties determining to what extent politicians react to media coverage purely because of the information it contains (*information effect*), and to what extent the effect is driven not by *what* the media say but by *the fact that* certain information is in the media (*media channel effect*), which is valued for its own sake—for instance because media coverage is considered to be a reflection of public opinion. By means of a survey-embedded experiment with Belgian, Canadian and Israeli political elites (N = 410), this paper tests whether the mere fact that an issue is covered by the news media causes politicians to pay attention to this issue. It shows that a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media than an *identical* piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This effect occurs largely across the board: it is not dependent on individual politician characteristics.

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Sevenans, J. (2017). Policymakers' responsiveness to information from the mass media. A survey-embedded experiment with politicians in Belgium, Canada and Israel. *Accepted for publication in European Journal of Political Research.*

POLICYMAKERS' RESPONSIVENESS TO INFORMATION FROM THE MASS MEDIA.

A survey-embedded experiment with politicians in Belgium, Canada and Israel

When issues receive more media attention, they are likely to rank higher on the political agenda afterwards as well. In the field of political communication, *political agenda-setting theory* describes this influence of the media agenda on the political agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Scholars from a variety of countries have demonstrated that political agenda-setting effects indeed occur and that the strength of these effects is contingent upon the concrete media agenda, issue, political agenda and time period under study (Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Studies relying on surveys and interviews with policymakers and journalists confirm the conclusions of agenda studies (Davis, 2007; Maurer, 2011). Politicians are, to varying degrees, responsive towards media priorities.

Explanations of why politicians react to media cues—and what role the media play exactly in this process—are diverse. In particular, one difficulty political agenda-setting scholars typically encounter is distinguishing between *information effects* and *media channel effects* (Soroka, 2003; Wanta & Foote, 1994). For one, it is possible that politicians undertake action in response to media coverage because they have an interest in the information provided by the media—which may or may not be available to them via other channels as well. In those instances, media effects are actually information effects. Political reaction is triggered by the information itself, and, on the condition that the politician is informed about it somehow, would thus occur irrespective of whether the media covered the information (Delshad, 2012; Liu et al., 2011). Alternatively, it is possible that the effect is driven not by *what* the media say, but by *the fact that* the information is transmitted by the media, which is valued for its own sake. Some agenda-setting scholars argue, for instance, that politicians react to the media because they presume things that are covered by the media to be important in the eyes of the public (Herbst, 1998; Pritchard, 1994). In other words, politicians' attention is attracted here not by the information *an sich*, but by the fact that the information is covered by the media, which they believe to be related to public opinion (J. Cohen et al., 2008). We call this media channel effects.

While scholars have convincingly argued and demonstrated that the first mechanism exists—and that agenda setting effects are in part simply information effects—the second mechanism is more

contested. The goal of this paper is therefore to put the second mechanism to the empirical test. We study *whether and to what extent—irrespective of the information itself—politicians pay more attention to information when it is in the media than when it is not in the media*. In other words, we try to find out whether the media matter in addition to what they do as a mere information provider; whether media channel effects exists. Additionally, we explore *whether there are differences between politicians in this respect*. Indeed, we know that some politicians are more responsive towards media coverage than others and that this is dependent on their partisan and individual political characteristics (Sevenans et al., 2015; Thesen, 2013). It may be that the informative value of news coverage is simply higher for these politicians; but it is also possible that they are more responsive because they care more about the mere publicness of the information.

The question is relevant from a scientific point of view. Not only the political agenda-setting literature, but also the broader media effects (communication science) and policy agendas (political science) subfields, struggle to prove that effects are not merely spurious—in this case, that the media and their audience are not simply simultaneously influenced by external factors such as real-world information (for a general discussion, see Marini & Singer, 1988). This paper tackles the matter by using a new methodology to study political agenda setting—namely an experiment—hence improving our understanding of which part of the relationship is spurious, and which part is not. This helps to gain insight into the precise role the media play in politics (Eissler et al., 2014). Our results have normative implications for democracy as well. The media's daily selection of which news to cover and which to ignore, may be more influential than we thought if it appears that information gets valued by policymakers purely because of it 'being in the media'.

Concretely, we rely on data from a survey-embedded experiment with Belgian, Canadian and Israeli political elites (N = 410). An experiment, we argue, is best suited to distinguish media channel effects from information effects, because it allows to manipulate the information channel while keeping the underlying information constant. As a consequence of this methodological choice, we do not study political agenda setting on the aggregate, behavioral level—as it is generally done—but we take an individual, cognitive approach. We look at how individual political elites' attention for a piece of information is dependent on the channel sending this information. This approach, we contend, is useful to strengthen the micro-level theoretical foundations of the existing macro-level empirical agenda-setting findings.

The paper shows that a piece of information coming via the media gets more attention from politicians than an identical piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This basic effect applies across countries and issues. And, the experiment works the same way for different types of politicians.

Politicians from the government as well as from the opposition; policy advocates as well as party warriors; older as well as younger politicians are sensitive to the experimental manipulation. In the concluding section, we discuss the consequences of our results for agenda-setting theory, and we elaborate on the normative implications of our findings.

Information effect vs. media channel effect

The idea that politicians are responsive to the saliency of issues in the media, is widely accepted. Both in the US and in Europe, political agenda-setting scholars have shown that issues, after receiving more media coverage, rank higher on the political agenda as well (see e.g. Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Van Noije et al., 2008; Wood & Peake, 1998). Policymakers themselves acknowledge that the media have impact on what they do in Parliament. In survey-based research, for instance, many of them agree that the media exert a substantial influence over the political agenda (Maurer, 2011; Sevenans et al., 2015).

While the empirical results of these studies are unambiguous—scholars generally agree that the media matter, at least to some extent—the interpretation of the results is less clear-cut. As Eissler and colleagues (2014) point out, the literature tends to remain superficial on the issue of how and why exactly the media influence policy processes. Different papers come up with various potential mechanisms (Votmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010)—which we classify into two categories here: (1) media responsiveness can be driven by the *information* provided by the media (information effect); and/or (2) politicians may respond to media information *because of the fact that it is reported by a media outlet* (media channel effect).

In the case of ‘information effects’, politicians react to the media because the media provide them with information about what is going on in society (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). Politicians’ need for information is high: they must be informed about problems in society before they can deal with these problems. In a world where so much information is around that it is almost impossible to follow everything yourself, politicians—just like citizens (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976)—may rely on media coverage to quickly and efficiently learn what’s important—among other sources of information of course. Indeed, politicians consume news for several hours a day in order to be informed about what happens in the world around them (Van Aelst et al., 2008). When policymakers are confronted with issues they feel responsible for, problem-solving motivations may cause them to react.

'Media channel effects' imply that political agenda-setting is driven not by information in itself, but by the fact that the information is in the media, which increases its newsworthiness for politicians. According to this line of thinking, media effects on politicians are third-person effects (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Politicians know that other people in society follow the news closely. As a consequence they think that there is a link between media attention for an issue and the public's perceptions about the issue. This perceived link causes them to react to the coverage. Different motivations may underlie media channel effects. While we cannot analytically distinguish between these different motivations in this paper, we think it is helpful to briefly discuss the two that are most prominent in the political agenda-setting literature.

First, a lot of authors suggest that media channel effects are a consequence of representational motivations (Edwards & Wood, 1999; Jenner, 2012; Soroka, 2002a; Van Noije et al., 2008; Wood & Peake, 1998). On the one hand, some politicians consider the media to be a reflection of public opinion (Herbst, 1998). On the other hand, we know from public agenda-setting studies that the media also influence what the public deems important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972b). Either way, the consequence is that politicians think that there is a connection between media attention for issues and the importance the public attributes to those issues. So the media may not only give factual information about an issue, they may also be an indicator of the importance of an issue according to voters. Since one of politicians' main tasks is to represent their voters, they may therefore be inclined to react to media coverage. It does not matter whether there is an actual relationship between public opinion and media content: it is politicians' perception of the relationship that counts (J. Cohen et al., 2008; Gunther & Storey, 2003).

Second, media channel effects may be driven by goals related to party competition (Thesen, 2013). Politicians play a constant 'attack and defense game', trying to generate positive attention for themselves and their party, while blaming and shaming their political opponents. When policymakers react to news issues in this context, their goal is to increase the salience of issues on which their party has an advantageous position, while trying to thwart attention for issues on which the party has a detrimental position. For instance, parties react more to media coverage about issues they are issue-owner of (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). They do this especially when the tone of the coverage is beneficial to them and when responsibility for problems is attributed towards other parties (Thesen, 2013), because they (think they) will receive electoral benefits when such issues become politicized. And, they know that the chances that their political actions will be covered in the media are higher when they react to a topic that already gets media attention (van Santen et al., 2013). Reacting to news coverage for party competition reasons—just like reacting to media for representational reasons—rests upon the idea that the media have influence on the

cognitions of the public. It is the media which, according to politicians, (co)determine what people think about political parties and how important they deem various issues to be. But, in contrast to the representational motivation, the goal of politicians here is not to represent the people, but to *send* signals to the public about which issues are important and how the work of various political parties should be evaluated. The media are in this sense also a *tool* used by politicians to fight the party political game.

Going back to the more general distinction between ‘information effects’ and ‘media channel effects’, some authors think that political agenda-setting effects are mainly driven by the former mechanism: politicians learn from the media about problems in society and they respond because problem-solving is what they are supposed to do as politicians (Delshad, 2012; Liu et al., 2011). These scholars argue that the role the media actually play in politics tends to be overestimated, because much of the information provided by the media is available elsewhere as well. Especially politicians, who generally get assistance to stay informed (staff, partisan research center,...) and who have large alternative information networks at their disposal, are often informed about issues via many different channels.¹ If this is the case, what seems to be an effect of media on political agendas, could better be interpreted as an effect of (real-world) information on media and politics simultaneously (Soroka, 2003; Wanta & Foote, 1994). In other words, the relationship between the media agenda and the political agenda would be spurious; and the actual role of the media in agenda-setting processes would be limited.

The challenge lies in identifying to what extent other mechanisms—such as the media’s relationship with public opinion, or their relevance in the party competition—drive political agenda-setting effects. If these alternative mechanisms matter, this means that whether or not the media cover an issue is fundamental in politicians’ decision whether or not to react. It is not (only) the content, but the *publicness* of the information that is triggering politicians to react. The importance of the issue is amplified in the mind of the politician because of the perceived impact of the media on others. Politicians are motivated to react exactly because something is in the media. In this view, the media exert substantial impact on political agendas *on top of* what they do as mere information transmitters.

With our first hypothesis, we test whether the latter argument holds. Can the media indeed be decisive in whether or not a politician pays attention to an issue—irrespective of the information itself? And, is it thus correct to say that agenda setting effects are not only information effects but also (partly) media channel effects? We formulate the hypothesis as follows:

H: Politicians pay more attention to a piece of information that is covered by the media, than to an identical piece of information that is sent to them privately.

The moderating effect of individual politician characteristics

Not all politicians are equally responsive to media priorities. The literature has found that both party and individual level factors explain variation in individual policymakers' susceptibility to agenda-setting influences. On the party level, the distinction between government and opposition is crucial. Opposition parties are more reactive to media cues than government parties (see e.g. Thesen, 2013). On the individual level, both structural factors, for example a politician's age, and attitudinal factors, such as political goals, play a role (see e.g. Midtbø et al., 2014). Younger politicians, and politicians with party warrior goals, are more responsive towards media coverage than their older and policy-oriented colleagues (Sevenans et al., 2015).

The assumption behind most of these studies on micro-level variation in political agenda setting is that the *informative value* of media coverage is larger for some MPs than for others. In other words, the differences are ascribed to the first mechanism described above; they are considered to be a consequence of information effects. First, some politicians—for example opposition MPs, or young parliamentarians—simply have less alternative information sources at their disposal: they do not have access to inside information from the cabinets, or they cannot rely on an extensive network they built throughout the years. This would explain why they look more to the media for information in general. Second, the type of information that is in the news is probably more relevant for some politicians than for others. News reports are typically general and negative in tone—focused on *problems* rather than on solutions. They contain a lot of conflict and responsibility attributions, and are focused on the political horse race (de Vreese, 2005; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The inherent usefulness of this kind of information is for instance higher for opposition members, who can use it as ammunition to attack the government, than for members from government parties who are often more conflict-avoiding and focused on policy making (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). Within parties, similarly, 'party warriors' who focus on the attack-and-defense game between parties view media information as more useful than 'policy advocates' who prefer other specialized, detailed information sources (Sevenans et al., 2015).

The question in this paper is whether these differences in media responsiveness between MPs are driven not only by the differential *informative value* of news coverage (information effect), but also by differential *motivations* (media channel effect). In other words, if we *disregard* the concrete content of the information, is it still the case that policymakers differ with regards to their inclination to pay attention to the media? On the one hand, it seems plausible that party warriors, for instance, care more about the mere publicness of information than policy advocates. Party warriors have a high need for constant interaction with the media; raising public attention for their own merits and the

opponent's weaknesses is exactly their goal. Policy advocates benefit less from this media-politics ping-pong game. On the other hand, we can imagine that simply all politicians are more sensitive to information that comes from the media. Indeed, they almost unanimously state that the media have lots of political power and require their attention multiple hours per day (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

In short, certain features of individual politicians (age, party position, political goals) play a central role in explaining the conditionality of political agenda-setting. In the first place, this seems to be a consequence of differential *information* effects. We are ignorant as to whether it is also a consequence of differential media *channel* effects. Our goal is to explore the following research question:

RQ: Is the strength of media channel effects moderated by individual characteristics of politicians?

Country selection

The three countries studied in this paper—Belgium, Canada and Israel—differ a lot in terms of their media and political system. The main difference is the electoral system: Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. Belgium and Israel are proportional systems causing the link between MP and voter to be weaker. Israel, which has only one national district, is probably most different from Canada. The countries differ also in terms of the degree of federalism, the strength of political parties, and so on. And according to the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004) the countries are characterized by different types of media systems, in which political parties have varying degrees of control over media outlets.

Although the information and institutional contexts are very different, which is likely to affect the way in which politicians deal with information, we expect our findings to be applicable in all three countries. Our country choice constitutes a most-different-system-design in this respect: if we find media channel effects to exist in very different countries such as Belgium, Canada and Israel, they probably occur in many other countries in the (Western) world as well.

Data and methods

To answer the research questions, this paper relies on data from a survey-embedded experiment with political elites in three countries. Experimental research on political elites is rare (but see for instance

Wouters & Walgrave, 2017), mainly because elites are very busy and often not interested in participating (Bailer, 2014). Still, experiments have great potential when it comes to testing causality, and disentangling the mechanisms underlying a causal effect (McDermott, 2002). For this paper we managed to successfully conduct a survey-embedded experiment with political elites in three countries. The experiment is part of a larger series of surveys/interviews with politicians about their information-processing behavior, conducted by the author and colleagues in Belgium, Canada and Israel between March and August 2015. All respondents were member of parliament, minister, and/or party leader at the federal or the regional competence level in one of the three countries. Information about the respondents and the response rate per country is provided in Table 5.1. The response rates vary between the countries, from 27% (Canada) over 41% (Israel) to 65% (Belgium)—which is moderate to high for elite research (for an overview see Bailer, 2014). We elaborate on the implications of the differential response rates in the results section below.

TABLE 5.1 RESPONDENT INFORMATION PER COUNTRY

	Belgium	Canada	Israel
Competence level of politicians interviewed	Federal competence level and regional competence level (Flanders and Wallonia)	Federal competence level and regional competence level (Ontario)	Federal competence level
Position of politicians interviewed	MPs, ministers and party leaders	MPs, ministers and party leaders	MPs, ministers, party leaders and some ex-MPs (right after 2015 election)
Number of politicians in total research population	413	416	159
Number of politicians contacted for interview⁵	413 (full population)	278 (sample of 171 federal politicians and 107 regional politicians)	159 (full population)
Number of politicians interviewed	269	76	65
Response rate⁶	65%	27%	41%

Each interview lasted about an hour in total. In the first part of the interview, which took approximately 35 minutes, the politician completed a survey on a laptop brought by the interviewer. The interviewer did not observe the answers given by the politician and did not intervene unless the politician asked clarification questions. The second part of the interview consisted of open questions.

The experiment presented in this paper was a component of the first, survey part of the interview. Concretely, politicians got to rate three fictional pieces of information—consisting of an *information channel* and a *subject line*—that were presented to them in random order.² The Canadian (English) stimuli are shown in Table 5.2 (for stimuli in other languages, see Appendix).

The three pieces of information that needed to be rated by politicians, are the experimental *trials*. As shown in Table 5.2, every trial consists of two *treatments*. Politicians are, in each trial, confronted with only one treatment (between-subjects design), which is randomly drawn. The treatments differ with respect to the *channel* of the information. One treatment says that the information is transferred via the media—it is an article in a newspaper—whereas the other says that the information is sent to the politician personally by e-mail. The treatments do not differ regarding the information given itself: the subject line is exactly the same in both treatments.

TABLE 5.2 CANADIAN (ENGLISH) STIMULI

	Treatment 1 (e-mail as information channel)	Treatment 2 (media as information channel)
Trial 1 (Issue: Housing)	<u>Report sent to you personally by e-mail</u> – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'	<u>Article in The Globe and Mail</u> – 'Research (UBC) shows that stricter downpayment requirements prevent many families from buying property'
Trial 2 (Issue: Education)	<u>Report sent to you personally by e-mail</u> – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'	<u>Article in The Globe and Mail</u> – '14% of youngsters do not obtain high school degrees (source: Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education)'
Trial 3 (Issue: Diversity)	<u>Report sent to you personally by e-mail</u> – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'	<u>Article in The Globe and Mail</u> – 'The GMMP national report registers a further decline in gender and cultural diversity on CBC'

Politicians are first informed that they could encounter these short, fictional³ pieces of information while surfing the internet, reading the newspaper, going through their inbox, and so forth. They are then asked to indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how likely it is that they would take a look at the full information attached to this source and subject line. So, we measure *the extent to which politicians are inclined to pay attention to a piece of information*. The goal is to test whether information provided by the media elicits more attention from politicians than information provided in a personal e-mail.

The three trials differ from each other with regards to the issue domain. Each politician rates each issue once. We opted for including three issues, instead of one, in order to increase the generalizability of our results. We want to test whether media channel effects exist *irrespective* of the underlying issue.

Before moving on, a few methodological choices may require some further consideration. First, media information is in our experiment juxtaposed with *information by e-mail* because we think that a personal e-mail—just like the media—is a credible potential channel of much of the information, coming from a variety of sources, that reaches politicians every day. One limitation of the design is that media and personal e-mails do not only differ from each other in terms of the ‘publicness’ of information—which is the reasoning behind our hypotheses—but potentially also on other dimensions. For instance, one could argue that source credibility between media and personal e-mail is unequal. We solved this problem as follows: each of the three subject lines, in addition to containing real-world information, specifies who produced the information as well. The ‘producer’ of the information is some sort of expert institute (e.g. a university, a research center). The goal of reporting these ‘original sources’ is to keep source credibility constant over the two treatments. While we tried to deal with these drawbacks as well as possible, we cannot prove that there are no other differences between media and personal e-mails driving the effect of our experiment.

Second, our stimuli and the accompanying question (the dependent variable) have their limitations. We give politicians just one subject line and then ask them about their intention to pay attention to the information. Ideally, the information presented to them would be more elaborate; we would have asked about their attention for the information in more than one survey item; and we would not only have measured their attention for the information but also their inclination to act upon it (which comes closer to the behavioral approach generally taken in political agenda-setting research). Unfortunately, we were unable to do so because of politicians’ severe time constraints. We chose the current item to minimize the required time investment, but maximize the external validity of the set-up. Our experiment resembles how politicians process information in real life. Some of them actually told us spontaneously when they started the experiment that this is indeed how they do it: scan a summary or subject line and then decide to consume the full information or not. We think the item suffices to test politicians’ cognitive reflex to pay more attention to media information.

Third, we did not do a formal manipulation check. However, we think that our manipulation is obvious: the information channel is totally different. Furthermore, a pre-test of the survey with some colleagues of our research group (outsiders to this project) showed that they did notice the sender manipulations.

Finally, our issue choice may have implications. Although we tried to pick issues that apply to all countries—we think Belgium, Canada, and Israel are faced with similar housing, education and diversity problems—we cannot guarantee that the stimuli are equally newsworthy in all countries, or for all individual politicians. Still, we believe that this is no problem for the purpose of this paper. Country differences can be controlled for, and politicians (with potentially different interests) are randomly divided across treatment groups. We think the issues allow to test whether—across the board and irrespective of country or issue peculiarities—media channel effects occur.

One of the *independent variables* used to test whether media channel effects are moderated by individual politician features—see our research question—was assessed in the same survey (other battery of questions). We measured the extent to which a politician is a *Party warrior* by means of the following question: “Parties have different goals. Within a faction, a division of labor may occur, whereby some members of the faction are focused more on one goal, whereas others deal more with another goal. Can you indicate the extent to which you, compared to your colleague faction members, focus on the following goal: Demonstrating the weaknesses of other parties”. The variable is measured on a slider (scale from 0 to 100) whereby 0 stands for ‘Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very little’ and 100 means ‘Compared to my colleagues, I focus on this goal very much’. Unfortunately, this question was only included in the Belgian survey, meaning that the moderating effect of being party warrior can only be tested for the Belgian MPs.

The other independent variables, namely a politicians’ age and political party (for the government-opposition distinction) were retrieved from the parliamentary websites in the three countries.

TABLE 5.3 OCCURRENCE OF THE VARIOUS EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

	Frequency	N
Experimental condition		
1 – Personal e-mail as mediator	52%	1,206
2 – Media as mediator	48%	
Issue		
1 – Housing	33%	1,206
2 – Education	33%	
3 – Diversity	33%	
Country		
1 – Belgium	66%	406
2 – Canada	19%	
3 – Israel	16%	

Our final dataset is a stacked dataset with issues nested in politicians. As explained above, every politician was confronted with all three different issues. The total N is 1,206.⁴ A dummy variable

indicates which of the two experimental conditions the politician got to rate. Table 5.3 shows that both conditions are more or less equally well represented in the final dataset (52% vs. 48%). Balance tests further confirm that, for each of the three issues, the distribution of politicians over experimental conditions was random. Indeed, regression analyses explaining the experimental condition based on country, gender, age, function (MP/minister/party leader) and government party were not significant in their totality.

TABLE 5.4 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Description	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	N
Politicians' attention (DV)	On a scale from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely), how likely is it that you would take a look at the full information?	6.01	2.80	0	10	1,206
Age	Age of politician	49.26	10.81	25	84	404
Government party	Dummy variable with value 1 for members from government parties and value 0 for members from opposition parties	.53	.50	0	1	406
Party warrior	Focus on party political goals from 0 (very little, compared to colleagues) to 100 (very much, compared to colleagues)	38.77	23.03	0	96	244

Descriptive statistics of our main variables are displayed in Table 5.4. Irrespective of the particular issue or experimental condition, politicians indicated that, on a scale from 0 to 10, the likelihood that they would take a look at the full information attached to source/title was 6.01.

To test our hypotheses, we perform multilevel regression analyses. The models include a random factor on the respondent level to control for the fact that the three ratings by one and the same politician are interdependent. And, country and issue dummies (fixed effects) are included as control variables to account for the variation on those levels.

Results

The basic results of the experiment are shown in Table 5.5. Model 1 includes the main effects. We see that our main hypothesis proves right: the coefficient of 'Media as channel' (shaded gray) is positive

and significant. On a scale from zero to ten, politicians pay 0.59 more attention to information when it comes from the media than when it is sent to them personally by e-mail. Our independent variables explain about 15% of the unexplained variance in the model (R^2 of .1506). When we leave our main independent variable, ‘Media as mediator’, out, the adjusted R^2 declines to .1377 (not shown in table). Our experimental condition explains thus a rather small, yet substantive, share of a politician’s attention for a piece of information.

TABLE 5.5 REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING THE LIKELIHOOD THAT A POLITICIAN WOULD READ THE FULL INFORMATION

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Main effect	Interaction effects	Interaction effects
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Media as channel (vs. personal e-mail as channel)	.59*** (.14)	.61*** (.17)	.36 (.24)
Issue (ref.: issue 1)			
Issue 2	-.04 (.16)	-.05 (.16)	-.11 (.22)
Issue 3	-2.05*** (.16)	-2.04*** (.16)	-2.33*** (.23)
Country (ref.: Belgium)			
Canada	-1.13*** (.24)	-1.29*** (.30)	-1.13*** (.24)
Israel	-.40 (.26)	-.17 (.32)	-.41 (.26)
Media as mediator * Canada	-	.31 (.37)	-
Media as mediator * Israel	-	-.50 (.40)	-
Media as mediator * Issue 2	-	-	.11 (.34)
Media as mediator * Issue 3	-	-	.57 (.34)
Constant	6.71*** (.16)	6.70*** (.17)	6.82*** (.19)
Variance (politician)	1.36	1.35	1.36
Variance (residual)	2.20	2.19	2.20
N (observations)	1,206	1,206	1,206
N (politicians)	406	406	406
R^2 (overall)	.1506	.1501	.1512

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The issue dummies matter as well, though. Our third stimulus, on the issue of gender diversity, is considered to be less newsworthy than the other two stimuli on housing and education (irrespective of the experimental treatment): the information receives significantly less attention from politicians. The effect of the issue dummy is larger than that of our experimental stimulus. This is a clear indication

that information effects also explain a substantial part of political agenda-setting effects. Apparently, the content of the information matters more than the sender. Media do not draw attention unconditionally: the information must foremost be deemed relevant.

With respect to the control variables, we see furthermore that—compared with Belgians and Israelis—Canadian politicians pay significantly less attention to all information in general. Although this does not affect the main findings of the paper, it is interesting to reflect on why this is the case. We think it has to do with the electoral system. As explained above, Canada has a single member plurality system with one elected MP per small district, which creates a close link between a representative and his/her geographic constituency. That is why ‘national’ issues, like those in the experimental stimuli, may *in absolute terms* be deemed less newsworthy than ‘regional’ issues (Soroka et al., 2009). In Belgium (with its multi-member districts) or Israel (which has one national district), the proportional system causes the link between MP and voter to be weaker, which increases the relevance of national issues.

The interaction models (Model 2 and 3) serve as tests to check whether the effect of ‘Media as mediator’ applies for all three countries (Model 2) and for all three issues (Model 3), or whether there are differences between countries or issues. None of the interaction effects is significant, indicating that the effect is generalizable across the three countries and the three issues. This is confirmed when we run the analyses with case-wise deletion of issues/countries as an extra robustness check: the effect of the experimental condition remains significant on the .05 level in all models.

The effect sizes of ‘Media as mediator’ for the three countries (predicted probabilities from OLS regression in Model 2) are visualized in Figure 5.1. We see that in Belgium, the chance that a politician would read the full information increases from 6.03 to 6.57 (on a scale from 0 to 10) when the information is covered by a newspaper article instead of sent to the politician personally. In Canada, the global level of attention for all pieces of information is about one point lower, but the increase between the two treatments is similar. Canadian politicians’ attention for real-world information, when it is in the media, is 0.85 higher than their attention for exactly the same information that is not in the media. In Israel, the increase in attention is smallest, from 5.86 to 5.90. Apparently, Israeli politicians are not less responsive to media in general (Midtbø et al., 2014), but their responsiveness is more often caused by information effects and less often by media channel effects. We can only speculate about why this is the case. It could be, for instance, that Israeli politicians do not perceive the media to be a reflection of public opinion so much—which would take away the motivation to scrutinize media coverage for that reason. In any case, the confidence intervals for Canada and Israel are bigger, due to the lower N.

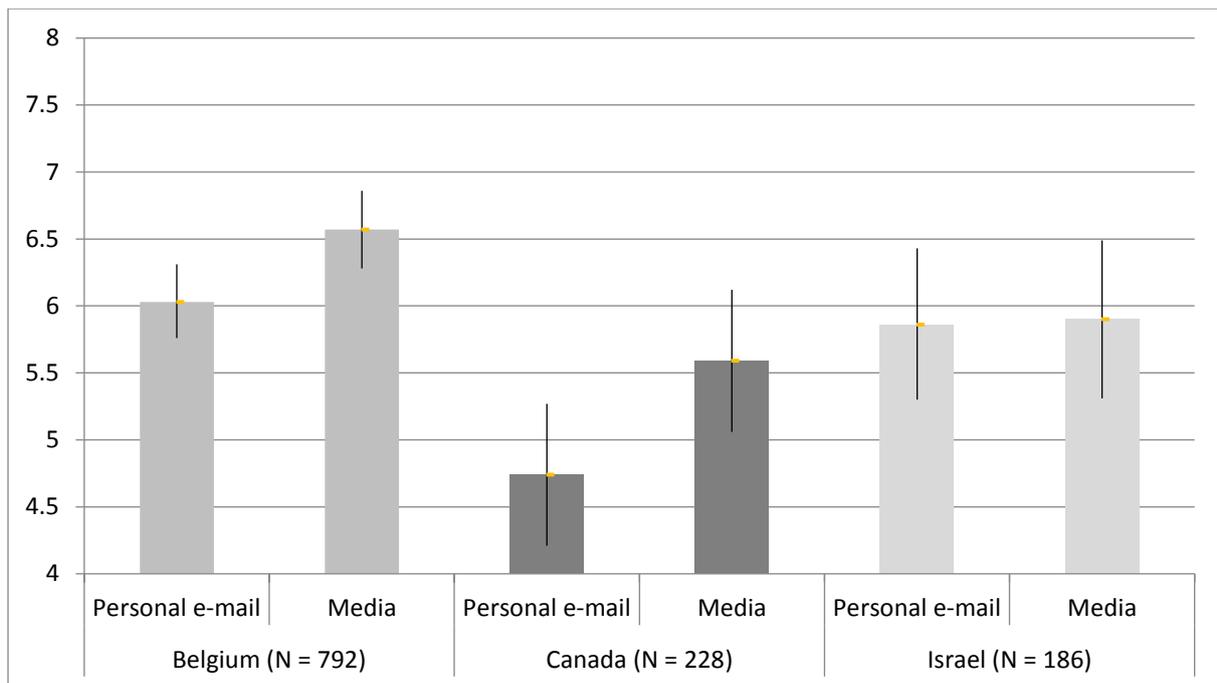


FIGURE 5.1 LIKELIHOOD THAT POLITICIAN WOULD READ THE FULL INFORMATION. PREDICTED PROBABILITIES FROM AN OLS REGRESSION (MODEL 2).

Is the main effect of our experimental manipulation moderated by the characteristics of individual politicians that are known to moderate political agenda-effects more generally? The answer to our research question is no. As demonstrated in the grey-shaded areas in Table 5.6, the interaction effects between the media treatment (*Media as channel*) and politicians' age (Model 4), party position (Model 5) or focus on party warrior goals (Model 6; Belgian politicians only) respectively, are not significant. The finding that younger, opposition, party warrior MPs are generally more responsive towards the media can apparently not be explained by media channel effects. The pure effect of information 'being in the media' is equally strong for all types of politicians. This makes us confident that the lower response rates in Canada and Israel—with a slight bias in favor of opposition participation—do not impact the results.

Interestingly, the assumption that these differences are instead due to differential *information* effects seems to find confirmation. The main effect of *Government party* in a model without interaction (not shown in table) is significant and goes in the expected direction ($b = -.60$; S.E. = .20; $p = .003$). Opposition politicians, in general, pay more attention to the kind of information provided in our experiment (short, diverse cues) than politicians from government parties. Similarly, the party warrior coefficient (main effect) in a model without interaction is positive—as one would expect—and just not significant ($b = .01$; S.E. = .00; $p = .152$).

TABLE 5.6 REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING THE LIKELIHOOD THAT A POLITICIAN WOULD READ THE FULL INFORMATION

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Media as channel (vs. personal e-mail)	1.65* (.67)	.43* (.20)	.70* (.35)
Issue (ref.: issue 1)			
Issue 2	-.07 (.16)	-.05 (.16)	-.29 (.20)
Issue 3	-2.07*** (.16)	-2.05*** (.16)	-2.06*** (.20)
Country (ref.: Belgium)			
Canada	-1.06*** (.25)	-1.37*** (.25)	—
Israel	-.39 (.27)	-.60* (.27)	—
Age	.01 (.01)	—	—
Government party	—	-.72** (.24)	—
Party warrior	—	—	.01 (.01)
Media as channel * Age	-.02 (.01)	—	—
Media as channel * Government party	—	.25 (.28)	—
Media as channel * Party warrior	—	—	-.00 (.01)
Constant	6.38*** (.54)	7.18*** (.22)	6.43*** (.30)
Variance (politician)	1.36	1.33	1.19
Variance (residual)	2.20	2.20	2.18
N (observations)	1,200	1,206	723
N (politicians)	404	406	244
R ² (adjusted)	.1519	.1610	.1310

Note: † p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, we tested whether a piece of information gets more attention from politicians when it comes via the media as opposed to an *identical* piece of information coming via a personal e-mail. This appeared to be true: the mere publicness of information causes politician to pay more attention to it,

confirming our hypothesis. Media channel effects exist. Additionally, we explored whether these effects are moderated by the characteristics of individual MPs that are generally found to moderate political-agenda setting effects: age, party position and party warrior goals. We demonstrated that there is no moderation. Apparently, media channel effects occur across the board. All types of politicians are more inclined to pay attention to information when it is in the media than when it is sent to them privately. The fact that some politicians are more media responsive than others, seems to be a consequence of the kind of information provided by the media (information effect) rather than that it is a consequence of the mere publicness of this information (media channel effect).

The effects we found may seem small at first sight. When a piece of information is covered by the media, an average politician pays just a little bit more attention to it (about .6 on a ten-point scale) than when the information had not been in the media. Still, we think the implications for agenda-setting are substantive. The political agenda is the result of the actions and decisions taken by many different politicians. Each of these politicians is confronted with tens, maybe hundreds of pieces of information on a daily basis. As a result, it is likely that on an aggregate level, the media are a decisive factor for at least certain pieces of information, regarding whether they get attention or not. And political attention is an absolute precondition for any further political action.

This does not mean that content does not matter. 'Information effects' exist too, and they explain a significant part of politicians' attention to incoming information. The inherent newsworthiness of two of our stimuli (issues: housing and education) was larger than that of the third stimulus (issue: diversity) and the latter stimulus hence received less attention. Our experiment has shown that on top of this information effect—and irrespective of content—the mere fact that information is transmitted by the media matters too. For a variety of potential reasons—such as the relationship between media attention for issues and the public salience of these issues; or the usefulness of media information as a tool to fight the party competition—politicians are motivated to pay attention to information simply because it is in the media. The combination of information and media channel effects explains how political agenda-setting effects come about.

This means that news selection processes are consequential: they affect which information gets political attention, and even more importantly, which information does not. This is not new, of course. The media provide a filtered, simplified summary of the information landscape every day and often there is no alternative 'non-media' information available to politicians—they cannot receive all information by e-mail. But sometimes alternative information *is* available. For instance, interest groups send e-mails to politicians regularly, trying to attract politicians' attention to problems in society. When they manage to get this information in the media, we show here, the chance that the

information will be noticed by politicians increases. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If journalists have a good sense of which problems are most pressing for the public, and if the media fulfil their role of ‘watchdog’ well, the media may actually help increasing political elites’ responsiveness to voters. However, if the media’s representation of reality is biased—for instance because they prefer covering sensational issues over ‘boring’, technical issues—our political system runs the risk of over-attending to issues that play well in the media, while ignoring potentially important topics that receive less media attention.

As touched upon in the methodological section, due to political elites’ time constraints, our design was necessarily limited. We only measured their intention to pay attention to an issue, not their inclination to take action upon it. The base of comparison was private e-mail only. The issues we chose, may have peculiarities we are not aware of. And, we only studied one media channel (a quality newspaper), while the media are diverse and quality newspapers may, for instance, trigger other reactions than popular newspapers. Still we think our new approach has some clear advantages and brings insight we could not gain via behavioral analysis. Extending the experiment is a query for future research.

The countries under study differ a lot in terms of media and political system. We are confident that our results can be generalized towards many other countries in the Western world. Still, it would be valuable to repeat the design, for instance, in non-Western countries. We would anticipate that media channel effects are much more limited in countries where political actors have more control over media outlets. Future research will have to point this out.

In summary, we have shown that whether or not an issue gets covered by the media, matters. We hope that our attempt to unravel the mechanisms behind political agenda-setting effects will be followed by other scholars in the field.

Endnotes

¹ Exceptions are pieces of investigative journalism, whereby the information is produced by the media. These can indeed have impact on politics (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Protess et al., 1987), but are rare.

² The whole module consisted of 15 randomly ordered pieces of information that needed to be rated. The 12 other stimuli are irrelevant for this paper (they contained other experimental manipulations), yet they made it harder for politicians to see through the manipulation of this experiment.

³ There is no deception: politicians know that the information is fictional and that we are interested in their attention for this information. They do not know what the experimental manipulations are, of course.

⁴ We asked all 410 respondents to rate 3 stimuli each. The expected N is thus 1,230. But 4 politicians had missings on all three experiments, and some other politicians rated only 1 or 2 out of 3 experiments. In total, there were 24 missings, reducing the final N to 1,206.

⁵ In Canada, the research population is smaller than the total population, because politicians who refused to collaborate in an earlier round of interviews in 2013 were not contacted again. In the Israeli case, the interview period started right after the national elections of the 17th of March 2015. That is why we decided to contact ex-MKs (who just left the Knesset a few weeks before) as well, assuming they would respond to our questions as if they were still seated in the Knesset. As a result, 18 of the 65 respondents are actually ex-MKs.

⁶ The response rate differs significantly between countries. Belgian politicians appeared to be much more accessible than their Canadian and Israeli colleagues. Furthermore, in Canada and Israel, the response is systematically higher among members from opposition parties (29% in Canada, 51% in Israel) than among members from government parties (8% in Canada, 30% in Israel) ($t=5.72$; $p<0.001$). Since our experiment does not appear to work differently for different countries/party positions, this response bias does not seem to be problematic. Besides that, there is no response bias: other features (gender, age, experience, member of government party) are no significant predictors of participation in our survey.

WHAT POLITICIANS LEARN FROM THE MASS MEDIA AND WHY THEY REACT TO IT.

Evidence from elite interviews

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the informational function of the mass media in politicians' work. More precisely, it focuses on instances where political elites *actively use* media coverage in their political work—called 'political agenda-setting processes'. It tries to understand what role the media precisely play in these instances. The central claim is that the interpretation of media effects on political agendas is dependent on two factors: (1) what politicians *learn* from the media when they react to it, and (2) which *motivations* underlie politicians' reactions to media information. The author develops a theoretical model that integrates the various possible learning and motivational mechanisms. By means of in-depth interviews, she tests whether political elites themselves confirm the existence of these mechanisms.

REFERENCE

Sevenans, J. (2017). What politicians learn from the mass media and why they react to it. Evidence from elite interviews. In: P. Van Aelst & S. Walgrave (Eds.), *How political actors use the media*. Londen: Palgrave Macmillan.

WHAT POLITICIANS LEARN FROM THE MASS MEDIA AND WHY THEY REACT TO IT.

Evidence from elite interviews

As outlined in Van Aelst and Walgrave's (2016) paper titled '*Information and Arena: The Dual Function of the News Media for Political Elites*', the mass media fulfil an informational function in policymakers' work. This manifests itself in two ways. For a start, political elites are—just like ordinary citizens—*passive consumers* of the information provided by the mass media. They learn about problems that exist in society and solutions for these problems; about the public opinion; and about the strategies and tactics of other political actors. In addition to that, politicians can *actively use* this information in their daily work. They take formal, political action upon issues that are high on the media agenda.

What drives the latter subfunction—namely political elites' media responsive *behavior*? In part, it is a direct consequence of the first subfunction; that is, politicians simply learn from the media which topics deserve attention and how urgent problems are (Baumgartner et al., 1997). Besides that, politicians may have strategic motivations to respond to the media. They seize instances of heightened media attention as an ideal moment to take action on an issue. For instance, they may think that their chance of gaining sufficient support for a legislative proposal is larger when they can 'surf the news waves' to put this proposal in the spotlight (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006).

The precise learning and motivational processes underlying politicians' media responsiveness differ from one case to another. Imagine, for instance, two MPs who interrogate the minister about a fraud scandal in the healthcare sector, in response to a report on the matter published by the newspaper. One MP may take action simply because he got informed about the scandal through the media and thinks policy measures need to be taken. The other MP may have known that the problem existed for years—due to insider contacts in a healthcare organization—but may now use the momentum created by the media to attract public attention to the fact that the minister from a competing party has failed to take timely measures. The former MP reacted to the media because they informed him about the problem. The second MP reacted because the increased public attention motivated her to do so. And this is not a simple dichotomy of course: different learning and motivational processes may be simultaneously at play.

I argue that understanding these underlying learning and motivational processes is important, because they determine what precise role the news media play in politicians' agenda choices (Eissler

et al., 2014). Do the media sometimes offer a necessary and indispensable stimulus for a politician to take action—that is, do they really reveal information the politician would otherwise not be aware of (e.g. Cook et al., 1983)? Do they merely fulfil a reinforcing role, encouraging the politician to take action at a specific point in time (e.g. Tan & Weaver, 2007)? Or is the relationship coincidental, and would many politicians take action regardless of the news coverage on the topic (e.g. Delshad, 2012)?

This chapter aims to answer these questions *from the viewpoint of politicians themselves*. The aim is to explore which learning and motivational processes drive political elites' media responsiveness—and so what precise role the media play in their behavior—according to these elites themselves. In other words, I want to understand how the media's second informational subfunction for elites (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016)—whereby elites take action upon information covered by the mass media—comes about. More precisely, I (1) depart from a literature review that integrates the various theoretical accounts about what politicians learn from the media and why they are motivated to react (Sevenans, 2017a). I (2) test to what extent political elites themselves confirm the existence of these processes, by means of in-depth interviews. And, I (3) specify the various roles the media may adopt in the work of politicians, which are dependent on these learning and motivational processes.

In what follows, I will briefly summarize the literature review and explain the data gathering, before moving straight ahead to answer the core questions of the chapter: how do politicians (assert to) respond to the media? What do they (say they) learn from the media? Why do they (say they) respond to it? And, what (do they think) are the implications for the role of the media in politicians' work?

Learning and motivations as drivers of agenda-setting

The learning and motivational processes proposed in this chapter are based on a thorough review of the literature on (1) *political agenda-setting*, studying the correspondence between media and political agendas in the aggregate (see e.g. the recent comparative study of Vliegenthart et al., 2016); and (2) *media responsiveness*, focusing on how individual legislators respond to the media in their work (see e.g. Davis, 2007, 2009). For the full-fledged literature review and integration of the existing mechanisms, I refer to Sevenans (2017a). Here, I give a brief summary.

When reacting to news coverage politically, politicians may—according to the literature—learn in at least four ways. These learning processes partly correspond to what Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) call the 'passive informational subfunction' of the media; however, here I focus on types of learning that are at play when politicians *do* act upon it (active informational subfunction). First, and most

significantly, the media may really *reveal* information to politicians, which they would otherwise not (yet) be aware of. The media are quick in covering what happens in the world; they have access to many different sources; and journalists are not seldom experts on certain policy domains (Davis, 2009). Hence not only pieces of investigative journalism (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008), but also ‘ordinary’ news coverage may deliver new information to politicians. Second, the media may *amplify* information. They constantly select some news facts while ignoring others; sometimes giving disproportionately much (or little attention) to a news fact, compared to its ‘objective’ seriousness (Boydston, 2013). As such politicians may learn from the media about the importance of a news fact; about whether it should be prioritized or not. Third, the media *interpret* or frame the ‘raw’ information signals they convey to politicians, and to the public at large (de Vreese, 2005). This interpretation may affect whether politicians judge the news story as something they should act upon. Finally, it is possible that politicians respond to news coverage, but that they actually *learned nothing* from the media at all. The mechanisms are listed in the left-hand side arrow of Figure 6.1.

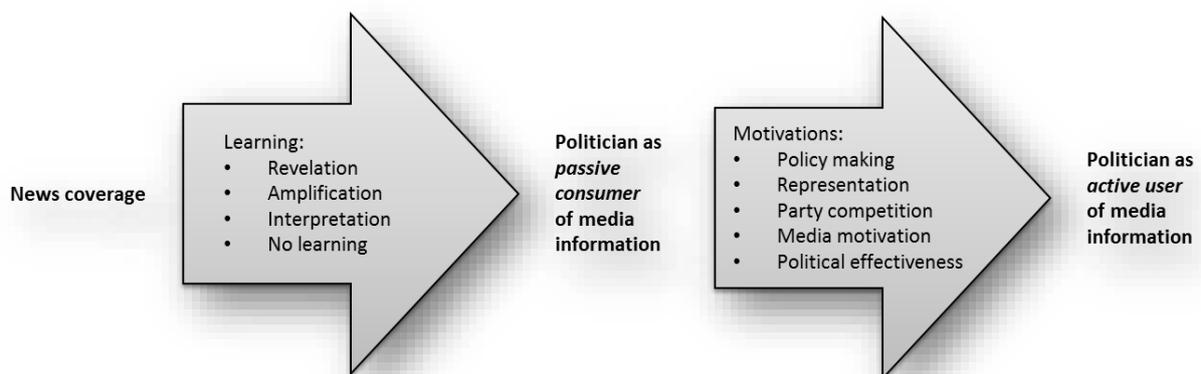


FIGURE 6.1 OVERVIEW OF LEARNING AND MOTIVATION PROCESSES

Regardless of what a politician learned from the media, (s)he may decide to take political action upon a news story—this is what Van Aelst and Walgrave label the ‘active information function’ of the mass media. I explore the motivations underlying this function in depth. I identify five motivations that may drive media responsiveness; they are listed in the right-hand side arrow in Figure 6.1. The upper three motivations reflect key goals that politicians may have in general and about which extensive literatures exist. First, many politicians—and political parties more broadly—may respond to a news story because they aim to have *policy* impact on the respective issue domain (Strøm, 1990). Second, their reaction may be driven by *representational* motives: they may think their voters want them to undertake action upon a news story (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Third, politicians may use information

from news coverage as a means to fight the *party competition* and attack their political opponents (Green-Pedersen, 2010). The lower two motivations, then, can be seen as ‘intermediary goals’ to reach the three abovementioned motivations; however, as I will argue later in this chapter, they have become free-standing goals as well. *Media motivation* refers to the simple idea that politicians undertake a certain action to elicit media coverage about themselves. Media access is seen as crucial for electoral success (Vos, 2014); and it is thought that ‘surfing the news waves’ is a good strategy to get in the media yourself (Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer, 2006). *Political effectiveness*, finally, may be a motivation as well. Just like any human being, politicians like to be successful, irrespective of how precisely. They may think that media coverage, for all abovementioned reasons, increases the chances that they will manage to get an issue on the political agenda.

Different combinations of learning and motivational processes underlie different instances of active media use by political actors. As a consequence, the media may play different roles in politicians’ daily work. They may be the *necessary condition* for a political initiative—that is, the politician would not take the initiative upon the issue, if the media did not cover the issue in the first place. They may create a *favorable circumstance* for the initiative to be taken, reinforcing or accelerating politicians’ plans for action. Or, they may actually *not matter at all*; even if it seems as if the politician responds directly to the news coverage. In what follows, I will elaborate on these roles and how they are, according to politicians, linked to the various learning and motivational processes. Before that, I will briefly discuss the data collection.

In-depth elite interviews

To explore the perceived occurrence of the abovementioned mechanisms, the chapter relies on data from interviews with Belgian, Dutch-speaking members of parliament (MPs), party leaders and ministers.¹ Between March and September 2015, my colleagues and I interviewed politicians in a face-to-face setting.² The broader topic of the interviews, which took on average one hour, was ‘information processing by political elites’.³ For this chapter, I analyze the transcripts of one specific question dealing with media responsiveness (for this question, n = 136):

“Can you give an example of a news fact that recently triggered you to undertake action? And, following up on that,

- *in what way did you react? (Did you send a Tweet, did you talk to colleagues, did you introduce a bill?)*
- *what was the goal of your reaction, and have you reached it?*

- *imagine the news story had not been in the media. Would you probably still have undertaken the action? Why, or why not?"*

In other words, we asked politicians to give a ‘top of mind’ example of an instance where they were responsive to the media; and we requested them to reflect upon how and why they acted in a rather abstract manner. I analyzed the interview transcripts carefully, looking for confirmation or disproof of the various mechanisms listed in the theoretical model. In the results section, I report *counts* of how many times a mechanism came up. In almost all instances, the mechanism was spontaneously mentioned by the interviewee; the interviewer did not ask about specific mechanisms (and if this occurred, I will explicitly say so). In addition to reporting counts, I will cite the most interesting *quotes* to illustrate the various learning and motivational mechanisms.

Before moving on to the results, I briefly want to consider the type of conclusions that can be drawn from these data. First, it is possible to say something about the mere *existence* of the various mechanisms thought to underlie politicians’ media responsiveness—or more specifically about elites’ *perception* of that existence. Second, we get an impression of the *importance* of various mechanisms, in the sense that some mechanisms are mentioned more often, and more spontaneously, than other mechanisms. We get to know what politicians’ ‘top of mind’ considerations are when being responsive to the media. And third, there is a lot of material to *illustrate* how these mechanisms work, under what circumstances they occur, and so on—we thereby try to select illustrative quotes that seem to reflect broader trends.

However, this is not a systematic test of the mechanisms. There was a lot of variation between interviews (different interviewers, slightly different question wordings, different duration), so not every conversation led to equal opportunities to discuss each mechanism. Maybe most importantly, we asked politicians to talk about *one specific instance* where they took action upon something that was in the media—although the politicians sometimes try to generalize beyond their own example as well. Their reflections made with regards to this particular example may not be applicable to any given context. I can in that sense not conclude, for instance, that a mechanism does not exist. At best, I can say that it was not mentioned as a main ‘top of mind’ consideration. The counts are only indicative of the underlying patterns; they do not offer ‘hard proof’ of what is going on. Wrapping up, I clearly face a number of limitations. Even when bearing these in mind, I think the data are valuable and can provide new insight into what politicians learn from the media and why they react to it.

How politicians respond to the media

The basic assumption underlying this chapter is that most policymakers are responsive towards the media now and then. The interview data confirm this assumption. Almost all politicians interviewed could give an example of a recent situation where they reacted to something that was in the media. The examples were diverse. Many politicians referred to a news fact about an issue they are specialized in—often, they are member of the parliamentary committee dealing with the specific topic. They told us that they asked a parliamentary question about a news report; a few even introduced a bill. Some politicians chose an example where they merely took public stance with regards to a news story, for instance by giving an interview about it for the newspaper.

Only 10 out of 136 respondents explained that they had not taken recent action upon the media, either because the topic they are working on does not often get media attention; or because they have a lot of political experience and are *'not the type of politician anymore'* who tries to gain quick wins by responding to media coverage. Some of these politicians explain how media attention for an issue can even be discouraging to take action upon the issue. They say a policy field quickly becomes *'too occupied'* after it has received media attention. Politicians have to be proactive and make the news, instead of being reactive and follow the news. A few politicians who did give an example of their own media responsiveness, voiced a similar idea:

“[If the information would not have been in the media] *I would certainly have taken the action, and it would have been even more interesting, because then you are the one who can make the news*” (id 196)

Yet, even those 10 politicians who claim they are not responsive to media, acknowledge that *other* politicians are; and that political initiatives are not seldom a simple response to news coverage. I will now take a look at the mechanisms driving this responsiveness.

What politicians learn from the mass media

Revelation

Revelation is the term I use to address the most fundamental way in which a politician can learn from the media. The idea is that the media were the first source for politician regarding a particular piece of information; the politician might otherwise not be informed about the matter.

The mechanism is brought up by no less than 39 respondents. Three ‘types’ of information revelation seem to exist. First, the media appear to simply provide a good ‘summary’ of an otherwise uncontrollable information stream. Some politicians doubt whether they would have been informed about the facts they were acting upon, if these facts had not been in the media.

“Of course, it’s information from a report, called the ‘Health survey’, that is simply made public by the media. But I did not know that this survey was published now, that it was available; and it [the news coverage about the report] is a good summary. ... This signal function. That’s what really interests me about the media. I use the media mostly because of that: not for opinions, but I think they are very effective in quickly passing on the right information: reports, facts, the real information stream” (id 8)

“I was informed by the media, of course, and I cannot estimate, would the information eventually have reached me as well, in the next days, or weeks?” (id 5)

Second, a special type of information passed on by the mass media is information coming from other (political) actors. It is not seldom the case that statements, made by certain actors in the media, provoke parliamentary action by other actors. In line with this idea, Davis (2009) speaks of the media as ‘information intermediaries’ in the political sphere. Not only *what* others say, but also *the way* they say it, publicly, in the media, may trigger reaction. A lot of the respondents, when asked about a recent initiative taken upon a news story, refer to a story that was actually ‘created’ by other politicians:

“[I took action upon] the federal budget control. Unfortunately, we were obliged to await the press conference and to receive most information from the press, not because we like to base ourselves on the press, but because the government has chosen to announce this via the press” (id 63)

“In this case I wouldn’t [have taken the actions if they had not been in the media], no, because my viewpoint was exactly a reaction to others’ reactions. To counter them, to nuance it. So I reacted, not so much to the news fact itself ... but to the [media] reactions of certain people on that fact.” (id 65)

Finally, the media sometimes spread information that would otherwise not be produced at all. A typical example is ‘investigative journalism’—whereby news outlets denounce a certain practice or problem—which has been shown to potentially alter politicians’ attitudes and lead to substantive policy change (see Cook et al., 1983; Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008). The respondents, however, indicate that this is rare in the Flemish context. Only two politicians refer to an example where they

responded to investigative journalism. Five politicians complain that so little thorough investigative journalism is published these days:

“I have the impression that many of the initiatives taken in response to media coverage, are already going on. So that it is some sort of repetition effect. Real, original investigative journalism is rare.” (id 14)

Amplification

Amplification is the learning mechanism that is most often mentioned by politicians. In total, 44 respondents explicitly refer to the idea that the media did not necessarily provide the ‘raw’ information that triggered their reaction, but that they were a crucial indicator of the *importance* of the information; of what is a priority and what is not (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). In addition to that, the mechanism is implicitly present in much of what politicians say about media use. Although not every MP’s example of media responsiveness was driven by amplification, they almost all confirm that this is what the media often do:

“The press is important, not in the sense that it makes the dossiers, because they often already exist, but because it digs them up again.” (id 106)

“You always need the media some way or the other. Either they directly offer you [the information about] the topic; or they are a sort of spark that sets things on fire. They always do something. I cannot believe that anything happens in politics without the media being involved.” (id 144)

Interestingly in this regard, politicians use the media as a ‘thermostat’ that indicates the ideal moment to take action upon the issues they are specialized in. Many specialists deal with ‘their’ topic on a daily basis, but it is when the topic attracts media attention, that they seize the moment to take action. They use coverage to substantiate the need for their initiatives (Melenhorst, 2015).

“Most of the time I would act the same way [even if the information was not in the media], but I can say that I give priority to something that is made more actual, seemingly more actual, because it is in the media.” (id 153)

As such, the media can really accelerate the realization of substantive types of political action—such as legislation—because they increase the urgency of doing so. As Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008) demonstrate, the media’s power here lies not so much in them delivering new information, but rather in changing what is prioritized and what is not.

“I think that the news stories we heard about asylum seekers ... led to action; that the time period within which their dossier needs to be processed is now shorter. I think this shakes politicians awake. ... Or for instance, the [media] dossier about the railroads, about the strikes during the autumn, caused us to be already dealing with the bill about guaranteed service which is in the government agreement [but with which we would otherwise not be dealing yet]. ... It [the media] accelerates things, which are actually already planned or in an agreement.” (id 119)

Interpretation

Behavioral studies have shown that the media frame information, and that this framing moderates the likelihood of politicians being responsive to the media. (see e.g. Sevenans & Vliegthart, 2016; van der Pas, 2014) For instance, politicians are more responsive to news coverage that contains a conflict frame (Sevenans & Vliegthart, 2016).

This idea does not really find support in the data, though. No politician explicitly says that they took action because of the way the media interpreted the information. I am not sure why this is the case. Maybe this mechanism requires reflection from politicians in a too abstract way. Politicians take news coverage for granted as it is. Probably, they do distinguish between ‘raw’ information and the media’s framing of it. For instance, they perceive conflict as being inherent to a given news fact; rather than that the media ‘created’ the conflict frame. Another possibility is that it has to do with the Belgian media system, where media outlets are not clearly linked to political parties. It could be that in countries where the media landscape is more fragmented or polarized—such as in the United States—reactions to the media’s (more explicit) interpretations of events are more outspoken (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

This does not mean that interpretation does not occur as a learning process underlying media responsiveness. But politicians themselves apparently do not analytically distinguish it from the other mechanisms. The other learning processes, such as ‘revelation’ and ‘amplification’, probably *imply* an interpretation effect which I could not grasp here.

No learning

Finally, 20 politicians say that—with regards to their example of a news fact upon which they took action—they did not learn anything from the media. That is, they knew about the information beforehand, and the media also did not amplify the information.

“In this case, I knew everything before it appeared in the media. From people in the field. And via my network, I knew that the debate, or the problem, was going to occur.” (id 133)

“These are dossiers that exist. It is not the case that I waited for ‘the’ news to react.” (id 155)

In particular, politicians themselves bring a lot into the media, sometimes already before they take action in parliament. While this may, on its turn, affect *others* to take action as well; one cannot say that they themselves learned anything from the media here.

“Actually, I had this information a few days beforehand. So I would have done exactly the same [if the information had not been in the media]. The only difference is that I would probably have contacted a journalist myself. That I would have brought it in the media myself.” (id 56)

“Most of the things with which I was in the newspapers in the past few months, were things from here, from debates, or parliamentary questions, or numbers... I don’t have the impression that we were very reactive, but actually, we were making the news ourselves.” (id 36)

Why politicians react to the mass media

Policy-making

A first core goal behind politicians’ actions is pure policy making. Many politicians explicitly refer to it as the goal behind their exemplar action (24 politicians); even more of them implicitly say that changing policy was one of their objectives. The examples are straightforward. Some ‘make’ policy themselves in response to a media story, by writing or co-sponsoring a bill, for instance. Others try to further the policy-making process by urging the responsible minister to take action upon the topic, for instance by asking a parliamentary question.

“... I mainly want the minister to take action about this.” (id 6)

“I have written ... a bill, and I know that this will take time, it is now being circulated amongst the two other coalition parties, who will check whether they want to add or change something.” (id 69)

Representation

Second, politicians confirm that representational motivations are a key driver of their media responsiveness. The motivation is spontaneously named in 20 interviews. Politicians respond to issues that attract much media attention because they think the public deems these issues important as well. The media are used as a reflection of the public opinion (Herbst, 1998); and politicians also think they make the public opinion (J. Cohen et al., 2008). Either way, it encourages politicians to use the media in their political work:

“[Reacting to the media happens] mostly in the policy domains ... which the public deems really important. Safety, justice, police, then education, labor. Of which they recognize its importance. Those are the policy issues where people act, react, via the media and which, as a politician, you cannot put aside.” (id 70)

“I think that most MPs rely on media reports, well, because those have the largest impact on society. It sounds cliché, but we are elected by the population, so they talk to us on the street and ask ‘But this is not right?’ and ‘Will you do something about it?’. The man on the street reads the news as well, and if you as a parliamentarian don’t do anything about it, then why did they elect you?” (id 15)

Interestingly, some MPs indicate that the media can really fortify public opinion, forcing politicians to respond. A minister told us about a peculiar situation he had experienced in this regard. After he announced his decision to stop subsidizing a public radio broadcaster, some people were very unhappy with the decision and they managed to get a lot of attention for their discontent in the media. The minister explained how he used the media to get an idea of the public opinion: *“You try to gauge the atmosphere: how many people are they, and how angry are they?”* (id 172) After several days, he felt forced to reverse his decision, and the floor was open for debate again. He said that *“whether or not we wanted it, the emotion was so strong that we had to take it into account”*.

Party competition

Reactions to media coverage can also be driven by motivations related to party competition (Green-Pedersen, 2010). The parliamentary arena hosts a continuous ‘attack and defense game’ between the government and the opposition; between parties with different views on how problems should be solved. News coverage, amply reporting about this party competition on a daily basis, is used as ammunition by politicians to fight the partisan game. The motivation is named by 17 respondents:

“To defend the policy of my party, and to alert to the slogan-wise language of the opponent. That was the objective.” (id 25)

“A reason to react [to the media] is of course, that you see a political advantage in doing so ... because you feel personally attacked” (id 149)

Media motivation

Many of the politicians, when giving an example of media reactivity, refer to their related attempt to get into the media themselves. In other words, the media’s *arena* function may serve as a direct motivation for politicians to exploit its information function (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016)—the two functions are closely linked. This is actually the motivation that comes up most often (confirmed in 36 interviews; whereby the interviewer specifically asked about it in 5 cases). Only 5 politicians denied that they cared about whether or not their initiative would make it into the media. Politicians feel that it is really important that their efforts—be it to improve policy, represent the public or fight the party competition—are communicated towards the public at large.

“For me, this was the moment to write a press release myself, with the minister’s answer [to the parliamentary question], and launch this again, to put myself in the picture, to show that I take these issues on board. So that people know that I am dealing with it.” (id 69)

“As a politician, you want to attract some attention for your political story, especially on the local level, in your constituency. It is important that you can show it to people ... that they see you in the newspaper. And so we do this and we provide feedback [to society]” (id 103)

In particular, they feel that it is easier to gain media access when you react to something that is already in the media, than when you have to introduce a whole new topic.

“The media are a self-feeding system. ... It is much less evident, when you react to something that has so far not gained media attention ... to have the same effect. On Wednesday [day of Flemish plenary meeting] you mainly look for media attention, all parties do that. And you are led by what was already in the media.” (id 167)

“The media make things actual, so that, when you do something with it, the chances are largest that you are noticed and that you can bring yourself into the debate. And, as a politician, you need to focus your efforts, and the goal is often to become more widely known.” (id 81)

As the latter example shows, media motivation is not only an intermediary motivation—one that serves more fundamental policy-making, representational or party competition (or personal re-election) goals. It is, or has become, a motivation for action on itself as well (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). An MP explains:

“Most politicians are a little media savvy, they want to be in the spotlight as much as possible. ... I think, especially now with ‘Villa Politica’ [broadcasting of the plenary meeting] in Flanders, that this is actually more important for them, than the content of their message. And this is normal, because people ... say that they saw you on TV last week. When you ask them what it was about, they are wrong or they don’t remember; but yes, they saw you on TV. ... They see that you are busy and that is in many cases more important than the content of your message.”
(id 224)

This situation leads to frustrations among some politicians. If they work on topics that are, for instance, considered to be less newsworthy by journalists, they have a hard time attracting media attention. Politicians complain about the fact that in-depth work is not valued, is less appreciated.

Political effectiveness

Simply being politically effective is a final motivation why politicians respond to the news. The idea—referred to by 18 politicians—is that in order to turn his or her initiative into a success, a politician is inclined to react to the media. They experience that initiatives taken in response to the media, for all abovementioned reasons, are more often successful than other initiatives. They make it easier to get something on the political agenda.

“Sometimes, there are things that we already discussed in parliament, for which there was no media-attention. But if they suddenly appear in the newspaper, the effect duplicates. You look for such instances because they offer leverage, to make things move politically speaking.” (id 167)

“Very often we get information about which we say: ‘I should do something with that’. But you can’t do everything, so what do you choose? Well, those things that will get broader attention of course” (id 77)

The observation that the chances to succeed politically increase when reacting to the news of the day is partly the consequence of institutionalized practices as well. Some politicians, complaining about

the short-term thinking of many politicians, explain how some parliamentary instruments have become media-oriented by definition:

“Parliamentary questions are mostly about things that were in the newspaper. But you are only allowed to ask a question if you can demonstrate that they are topical. You intend to ask a question, you have to motivate why it is topical, and the only way you can do that is by saying that it was in the newspaper” (id 202)

“The parliamentary chairman is strict in this respect. He requires you to demonstrate the topical value of your initiative” (id 205)

The media’s role

In 91 out of the 136 interviews, we asked the following sub-question: *“Imagine the news story had not been in the media. Would you probably still have undertaken the action? Why, or why not?”* With this sub-question, we tried to gauge how fundamental the role of the media in politicians’ work is. Do they use the media as an *indispensable* source of information; as a *thermostat* of the importance of things; or not at all? Or framed from the media’s perspective: are the media a *necessary condition* for certain political actions to be taken; do they merely offer a *favorable circumstance* to do so; or don’t they play any role? While some politicians’ answers to this sub-question were already shown above—to illustrate various mechanisms—I report counts for this question specifically here. I look at which mechanisms are mainly connected to which media role.

The response to the sub-question was negative in one out of four instances (26%). The politician said (s)he would not have taken action if the information had not been in the media. Their response is relatively often driven by ‘revelation’: the politicians say that they would not have been informed at all, if they had not learned about the information via the media. A politician’s answer:

“No, because I didn’t know it. In this example, the information delivered by the media was really new” (id 43)

It does not always need to be revelation, though. Some politicians would simply not take their initiative if the issue was not made so newsworthy by the media (amplification). Or, it can be that a politician did not learn, but that his or her motivation (e.g. representation) needed media attention to be triggered.

“It is the topicality of the issue that makes me take action. I did not think it was newsworthy enough to ask a question about. But then I was convinced that other parties were also going to react, so my question was included...” (id 52)

“The fact that it came in the media [was crucial]. Because emotions are important. To make something work in politics, in particular when you are from the opposition, you need to be able to arouse emotions. ... Especially when it touches the public opinion, when it is in the media, on television, it is followed up.” (id 57)

Another 12% of the politicians doubted about whether or not they would have taken action. They are unsure whether they would have learned about the issue elsewhere. Or, they say that their motivation to act depends, for instance, on who would alternatively inform them about the issue. When something is in the media, it is ‘automatically’ deemed important (representation). A particular individual or group does not necessarily have the credibility to indicate that something is important. They would need to demonstrate that the issue has broader relevance.

“It might be difficult to get to know this via another source. ... But imagine someone would call me, my reaction would be the same.” (id 216)

“It depends. On which interest group would contact me, and what it would be about. If it is a topic about which I have a full-fledged dossier, yes. But if it is something about which I know only this interest group cares about, which is not supported by society ... then I will be less inclined to follow.” (id 139)

The majority of politicians (62%) say that the media did not change a thing. There was no learning—the politician had alternative information sources at his or her disposal—and they were motivated regardless of the media coverage on the issue.

“I would have reacted anyway, because this is a topic that I follow” (id 96)

Some politicians, however, explain that while the media may not have determined *whether* they took action, they did impact *how* they took action. For instance, some politicians took action sooner than they had planned; the media determined the *timing* of their initiative. Or, they took a different *type* of action. The media open the way for quick actions in the plenary meeting. Without preceding news coverage, they would wait and ask, for example, a less visible question in a specialized committee:

“Things would go differently ... On the day of the publication of the first newspaper article in De Tijd [Financial newspaper] I interpellated the minister about this. The momentum of publication is an argument to ask a parliamentary question. The topical value could clearly be

demonstrated. This would have been different, if I just had the information. They I would maybe have brought it up in a conversation ... and the question had maybe been treated in the committee” (id 167)

Conclusion

This chapter shows that political elites confirm the theoretical assumptions about whether and how political elites respond to news coverage. Politicians acknowledge to be responsive to the media. During in-depth interviews, almost all Flemish politicians (MPs, ministers, party leaders) were able to give an example of a recent initiative taken upon news coverage: they ask parliamentary questions, submit bills, etc. Furthermore, they offer anecdotal evidence of many of the learning and motivational mechanisms addressed in the literature.

With regards to learning, most politicians indicated that—for their exemplar case of media responsiveness—they learned something from the media. Either, the media *revealed* the information upon which they reacted, or they *amplified* the information—indicating its importance. The number of instances where politicians indicated they did not learn anything from the media, was significantly smaller.

Motivationally speaking, ‘getting into the media’ was the most important driver for media reactions. Often *media motivation* existed in function of other goals, such as *policy-making*, *representation* or *party competition*. But it was discussed as a goal on itself as well. And, for certain types of political action, politicians responded to the media in order to maximize their *political effectiveness*.

What are the implications for the role of the media in politicians’ work? Most politicians (62%) would have taken their initiative—that is, the example of media responsiveness they gave—even if the underlying topic had not been covered by the media. Next, 12% of the politicians doubted whether they would have taken their initiative. Finally, for no less than 26% of the politicians to whom we asked the question, the media were decisive for their initiative, because they delivered the necessary information or because they were a crucial motivational trigger for action.

Endnotes

¹ The interviews were conducted by the author and colleagues in the framework of the INFOPOL-project. This work was supported by the European Research Council [Advanced Grant ‘INFOPOL’, N°

295735] and the Research Fund of the University of Antwerp [Grant N° 26827]. Stefaan Walgrave (University of Antwerp) is principal investigator of the INFOPOL project, which has additional teams in Israel (led by Tamir Sheafer) and Canada (led by Stuart Soroka and Peter Loewen).

² All Belgian Dutch-speaking federal and regional politicians (N = 231) were contacted and asked to participate. In total, 182 politicians agreed to participate (response rate: 79%).

³ An interview typically consisted of a survey of about 35 minutes—which the politician completed on a laptop brought by the interviewer—followed-up by a conversation of about 20 minutes, in which the interviewer asked in-depth questions to the politician (structured list of questions and follow-up questions; permission to deviate from questionnaire if the interviewer saw fit to do so). The duration of the interviews varied a lot, though; some politicians spared more than half an hour for the interview; others had barely time for one question. As there was no time for all in-depth questions to be asked in each interview, we randomized the question order so that all questions would frequently be asked. For the full interview protocol, see the technical report on www.infopol-project.org.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A2 CANADIAN (FRENCH) STIMULI

Stimulus 1	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "Une étude (UdeM) démontre que des exigences plus strictes en matière de mise de fonds empêchent de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."	Article dans Le Devoir – "Une étude (UdeM) démontre que des exigences plus strictes en matière de mise de fonds empêchent de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."
Stimulus 2	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme d'enseignement secondaire (source: Le Centre d'intervention pédagogique en contexte de diversité)."	Article dans La Presse – "14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme d'enseignement secondaire (source: Le Centre d'intervention pédagogique en contexte de diversité)."
Stimulus 3	Un rapport envoyé personnellement à votre courriel – "Un rapport national du GMMP enregistre un nouveau recul de la diversité culturelle et de genre sur radio Canada."	Article dans La Presse – "Un rapport national du GMMP enregistre un nouveau recul de la diversité culturelle et de genre sur radio Canada."

TABLE A3 BELGIAN (DUTCH) STIMULI

Stimulus 1	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – 'Onderzoek (KULeuven) toont aan dat de verminderde woonbonus veel families belet om een eigen huis te kopen.'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'Onderzoek (KULeuven) toont aan dat de verminderde woonbonus veel families belet een eigen huis te kopen.'
Stimulus 2	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – "CLB stelt vast dat 14% van de jongeren geen diploma secundair onderwijs behaalt'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'CLB stelt vast dat 14% van de jongeren geen diploma secundair onderwijs behaalt'
Stimulus 3	Rapport, persoonlijk naar u gestuurd via e-mail – 'Diversiteitsmonitor registreert opnieuw een daling in gender- en culturele diversiteit bij het federale overheidsperoneel'	Artikel in De Standaard – 'Diversiteitsmonitor registreert opnieuw een daling in gender- en culturele diversiteit bij het federale overheidsperoneel'

TABLE A4 BELGIAN (FRENCH) STIMULI

Stimulus 1	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement à votre adresse mail – "Une étude (UCL) démontre que la diminution du bonus logement empêche de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."	Article dans Le Soir – "Une étude (UCL) démontre que la diminution du bonus logement empêche de nombreuses familles d'acheter leur propre maison."
Stimulus 2	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement sur votre mail – "Le centre PMS constate que 14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme de l'enseignement secondaire"	Article dans Le Soir – "Le centre PMS constate que 14 % des jeunes n'obtiennent pas de diplôme de l'enseignement secondaire"
Stimulus 3	Un rapport, envoyé personnellement sur votre adresse mail – "L'analyseur de diversité enregistre à nouveau une baisse dans la diversité du genre et culturelle parmi les employés du gouvernement fédéral."	Article dans Le Soir – "L'analyseur de diversité enregistre à nouveau une baisse dans la diversité du genre et culturelle parmi les employés du gouvernement fédéral."

TABLE A5 ISRAELI (HEBREW) STIMULI

Stimulus 1	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל - 'מחקר של בנק ישראל מגלה: דרישות מחמירות להון עצמי על לוקחי משכנתאות מונעות ממשפחות רבות לרכוש דירה'	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'מחקר של בנק ישראל מגלה: דרישות מחמירות להון עצמי על לוקחי משכנתאות מונעות ממשפחות רבות לרכוש דירה'
Stimulus 2	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל - 'שיעור נמוך מאוד בזכאות לבגרות בקרב בוגרי תיכון בישראל' (מקור: המכון הישראלי למחקרי מדיניות)	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'שיעור נמוך מאוד בזכאות לבגרות בקרב בוגרי תיכון בישראל' (מקור: המכון הישראלי למחקרי מדיניות)
Stimulus 3	דו"ח שנשלח אליך לתיבת הדוא"ל - 'המכון לתקשורת פוליטית: ירידה בהשתתפות נשים בתוכניות אקטואליה בערוצים המסחריים'	כתבה ב"הארץ" - 'דו"ח המכון לתקשורת פוליטית מגלה: ירידה בהשתתפות נשים בתוכניות אקטואליה בערוצים המסחריים'

ABSTRACT

Anyone who follows politics must have noticed that political attention for topics is often preceded by media attention for these topics. Politicians' initiatives seem to be inspired by news coverage. Different scientific studies in a variety of countries have confirmed this idea. The media influence which issues are prioritized by political elites and, conversely, which ones are ignored.

But what does this 'media influence' precisely entail? This dissertation scrutinizes instances where politicians take action in response to news coverage. It shows that the media—in *seemingly* similar cases of media responsiveness—may actually fulfill a variety of roles:

- In the *political game*, the media truly take the lead. They are an important source of information. By covering problems and conflicts in society, they offer ammunition for 'party warriors' to attack their political opponents. These politicians pick and choose any news report that is well-suited to fight the partisan battle. The media also fulfill a motivational function. The high visibility of news coverage—among the public at large, journalists, and their colleague-politicians—stimulates party warriors to take action.
- With regards to *reactive policy decisions*, the media play a facilitating role. Policy specialists constantly monitor the media for news about 'their' issue, yet they often receive the information via alternative contacts (interest groups, organizations,...) as well. The informational function of the media is therefore limited. The media do matter motivationally speaking. By paying attention to an issue, the media open a 'window of opportunity' for political reaction. Policy specialists seize the moment to put their issue in the spotlight and to push their political plans onto the agenda.
- With regards to *proactive policy decisions*, the media's role is even more limited. While it may seem as if policy specialists respond to the media here, this impression is false. Political elites—motivated to undertake action anyway—proactively bring information into the media themselves as to fuel the debate. The media fulfill neither an informational, nor a motivational function. They

can matter in other ways of course: politicians may, for instance, take into account how well a policy decision will play in the media. Yet concluding that the media in those instances 'set the agenda' is not justified.

This means that the question whether or not 'the media have too much political power' deserves a nuanced answer. At least with respect to agenda-setting, media influence is variable and often smaller than it seems to be at first sight.