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The Media Agenda

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28.1 Introduction

The media agenda has a prominent place in the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). The number of countries that include some kind of media coverage as an agenda to investigate is substantial—in most instances (national) newspaper coverage, but also, for example, radio news (in Denmark) has been coded. Interestingly enough, the media agenda as a separate entity has received little attention in the published work that comes from the data collection efforts (as, for example, the government agenda). In most instances, it is discussed in connection to the political agenda, and the notion of political agenda-setting *by* the media is central in many of those publications. In the second instance, this might not be so surprising, since the fact that agenda-setting—as a theory that relates to the effect media attention has on public and political attention—is already known and has been widely applied in the field of (political) communication since the early 1970s (see McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Additionally, comparative studies that look at cross-national similarities and differences in media coverage—both issue attention, as well as more detailed characteristics such as frames and valence (tone)—are widely available (e.g., Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010), which makes the study of the media agenda in isolation in many instances not very innovative.

In this chapter, we discuss the few studies that focus on the structure and properties of the media agenda, with a particular interest in the dynamics that might be at play across different outlets (so-called intermedia agenda-setting), and we also discuss the findings from the various political agenda-setting studies that focus on the impact of media on politics. The empirical part of this chapter will discuss the media agendas in a variety of countries, and looks into similarities and differences between them.

28.2 The Media Agenda: One of a Kind?

Media arguably play an important role in modern societies: they form the most important resource for most citizens to be informed about politics, current affairs, and a wide variety of specific issues. The media agenda can be argued to be the most responsive to external signals compared to other policy agendas such as the parliamentary one. Journalists can decide on a day-to-day basis (or even much quicker) to change their topical focus when (unexpected) external events warrant this. We can see that this reflected in the (statistical) properties of the media agenda. Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2010) demonstrate that the media agenda is—more than for example the parliamentary agenda—strongly affected by a cascading process. Cascading refers to the imitation by one actor of other actors, which—in the case of large numbers of actors—results in explosive adjustments. On the one hand, mass-media outlets are autonomous actors that do not formally depend on each other and outlets can decide independently whether or not they pay attention to a specific issue or event. On the other hand, those outlets do not act in a vacuum—they compete heavily with other outlets for the same readers and viewers in a market that is inherently bounded. Furthermore, sanctions are immediate. Viewer rates and readership are monitored at short intervals. Because of the highly visible nature of media, they are by definition communicating actors. Finally, the news media game is relatively low cost, at least compared to many other institutions. Newspapers are published daily, television stations broadcast several newscasts per day, and online news is constantly updated. All those characteristics do not hinder media from undergoing strong cascading processes. And indeed, Walgrave and Vliegenthart's study on Belgian policy agendas shows that this is reflected in the statistical properties of the media agenda: its skewed distribution is more driven by cascading processes than is the distribution of the parliamentary agenda.

Also Boydstun and colleagues (2014) make the observation that the media agenda is a volatile one: media can go into "storm" mode from one moment to the other and devote large proportions of attention to the same event. Imitation plays an important role in the occurrence of a media storm. These storms are not without consequences: the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda is larger when media go into storm mode (Walgrave et al., 2017).

The strong mimicking behavior of separate media outlets also becomes apparent in the intermedia agenda-setting study by Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008). Again using Belgian data, they demonstrate that intermedia agenda-setting is a highly contingent process, depending on issue, outlet, and time characteristics. Overall, however, the general influence of various outlets on

each other is considerable and larger than, for example, the influence of political parties on each other in the parliamentary realm (Vliegenthart et al., 2011).

Overall, the studies on the characteristics of the media agenda demonstrate that, compared to other agendas, the media agenda is characterized by high levels of responsiveness and volatility and that various outlets that jointly constitute the agenda strongly influence each other. The next question is then how this media agenda might influence other agendas, and this is what most media work in the CAP is devoted to: the political agenda-setting power of the media.

28.3 Political Agenda-Setting by the media

The interaction between politicians and journalists is one that intrigues many scholars in the fields of both political science and communication science. In general, two types of approaches are used to study this relationship. First, surveys among both politicians and (political) journalists have been conducted, asking, for example, questions about their subjective assessment of media power in the political realm. These studies show that throughout Western Europe, politicians attribute a lot of influence to the media, while journalists are more reluctant to assign to themselves a determining influence (Van Dalen and Van Aelst, 2014). The second approach looks at actual political behavioral "content," such as parliamentary debates and questions and legislation on the one hand, and media coverage on the other hand. Here, at least in the European context, an agenda-setting perspective is dominant and many of the recent studies rely on CAP data. The main question that is addressed is to what extent the media are able to influence the political agenda. In other words, the influence of the media on politics is most often investigated, while the reversed relationship is a lot less often considered. The basic concept that is focused upon is thus issue *attention* or *salience*. The idea of political agenda-setting can be considered as an extension of public agenda-setting that focuses on the impact of media attention on public attention (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and demonstrates that media can to a considerable extent determine what people think about.

In political agenda-setting research, often quantitative content analysis of both media outlets and political documents is used to assess attention to a certain issue, or to a whole range of issues. Per item researchers determine what the main issue is and in most instances data are aggregated to weekly or monthly levels and absolute or relative issue attention measures are constructed for both realms. In the final analyses, time-series techniques are applied to investigate to what extent changes in attention for issues in the

political realm are preceded by changes in attention for the same issues in media coverage.

Following the widely cited article by Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst (2006), recent years have seen a plethora of studies that discuss possible "contingent" factors that determine the presence and/or strength of the political agenda-setting power of the media. A wide range of moderators is considered, ranging from institutional factors such as the type of government (Vliegenthart et al., 2016), time (for example mediatization, see Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011a), media and content characteristics (such as tone, Thesen, 2013; or frames, Sevenans and Vliegenthart, 2016).

The results found in political agenda-setting research are not univocal: while most studies find some effect of media on politics, not all of them do (see e.g., Vliegenthart and Mena Montes, 2014). Furthermore, there also turn out to be significant differences in the size of the impact. In their overview article, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) discuss the then available empirical studies and provide a set of seven "contingent" factors: characteristics that might moderate the agenda-setting impact of the media on politics. Since then, multiple studies have increased our insight and knowledge about those contingent factors, many of them using CAP data, or data that are comparable.

First, they consider variation in the operationalization of the independent variable: the issue type under consideration, as well as which media are considered. Regarding the first, different issues might witness different levels of agenda-setting impact. As Soroka (2002) shows for Canada, unobtrusive issues—those issues that are not directly experienced by politicians or citizens are most susceptible to media effects. Different outlets might also have different consequences. When asking parliamentary questions, Van Aelst and Vliegenthart (2014) show that Dutch parliamentarians rely heavily on printed media, and especially on the most widely read popular newspaper *De Telegraaf*. Recently, content characteristics other than attention are considered as possible moderators. For the Danish context, Thesen (2013) shows that especially negative news has an impact on issue priorities of political (opposition) parties. Sevenans and Vliegenthart (2016) show that conflict framing moderates agenda-setting effects: if an issue is more often discussed in terms of conflict, politicians are more likely to respond. Finally, Van der Pas (2014) shows that a political party basically only responds to coverage that is framed in line with its own preferences.

Second, temporal characteristics are of importance. Walgrave and Van Aelst discuss the distinction between election times and normal times. In the first instance, the impact of media is more limited, since media act less as autonomous and their coverage needs to be more balanced, because the fairness and balance of the coverage is more clearly monitored by politicians and voters.

An additional temporal effect is mediatization: this theory suggests an increasing dominance of the media on politics. In line with this, Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011a) find that during the period 1990–2000 the media's agenda-setting impact on Belgian MPs increases.

Third, institutional rules are argued to moderate agenda-setting effects. For example, the mere fact that in Switzerland parliament only meets four times a year, the direct effect of media on politics will be relatively limited (Tresch et al., 2013).

Fourth, the internal functioning of political actors is a possible moderating factor. If, for example, political parties or the government includes multiple individuals that have to agree on a response to media coverage, it might well delay such a response.

Fifth, and maybe most importantly, the political configuration matters. One of the most obvious examples is the distinction between governing parties and opposition parties. Several studies have shown that opposition parties report more strongly to media coverage, since they do not face any constraints to use media content in their attempts to challenge the government (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011a; 2011b; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010). In a cross-national perspective the electoral and political system might also matter. Vliegenthart et al. (2016) show that in countries with a single-party government, the effect of the media on opposition parties is larger than in countries with a multiparty government. In the latter instance, opposition parties might feel more constrained in using media content, since co-operation with government parties is likely in the future. For government parties, they find the reverse effect: in single-party situations these parties have the luxury to ignore media content. Using media content as input for parliamentary questions in that context means inherently addressing their own party, while in a multi-party system, other coalition parties can be addressed or even attacked as well.

Finally, the operationalization of the dependent variable matters. Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) distinguish between what they label "symbolic" political agendas and "substantial" political agendas. Symbolic political agendas often have little impact on actual policy, but are also more responsive. The most often used example is parliamentary questions, which can either be submitted continuously (written) or weekly (oral). They offer good opportunities for politicians and parties to signal their responsiveness and issue priorities, but are very often without "real" consequences. Researchers do find that particular symbolic agendas are responsive to media coverage, while more substantial ones (legislation for example) are less so. Substantial agendas are usually slow—it takes a long time to draft a bill—and are, as a consequence, more path-dependent and less prone to surges in media attention for issues. This is not to say that the media cannot, for example, have an impact on

legislation, but that it is less likely to happen (Van Aelst et al., 2015), or may be less easy to establish.

Overall, CAP studies have been influential in identifying the circumstances under which the media agenda affects the political agenda. Efforts to compare cross-nationally have been especially fruitful in increasing our understanding of the interaction between the media and politics.

28.4 Empirical Example

28.4.1 *Data*

For this study, we rely on the dataset that has been used in the study by Vliegenthart et al. (2016) on the agenda-setting impact of the media on parliament in six Western European countries. The following countries and periods are included in our analyses below: the Netherlands (1995–2011), Spain (1996–2011), the United Kingdom (1997–2008), Switzerland (1995–2003), France (1995–2005) and Belgium (1999–2010). Here, we pose the question to what extent media agendas are similar across the various Western European countries and whether we can identify any intermedia agenda-setting effects that transcend national borders.

The data encompass country-level codings of front-page coverage of one or two newspapers, and in the case of Denmark, national radio broadcasts—also following the methodology of CAP. All newspapers included in the analyses are widely read quality broadsheets. For the United Kingdom *The Times* was coded (only the Wednesday front page), for Spain *El Pais* and *El Mundo*, for Belgium *De Standaard*, for the Netherlands *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant* (13 percent sample stratified by year), for Switzerland *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, and for France *Le Monde*. A total number of 63,482 articles are coded for this analysis, relying on the CAP codings, in which nineteen major categories are included. For more descriptive information on each of the topics, Table 28.1 provides information. We only use the years that are available and limit our analysis to the period 1999–2003.

The main variable is the monthly share of newspaper coverage for an issue from the total newspaper coverage that month. First of all, we look at the correlation in attention between the various countries to test the overlap between the various national media agendas. Second, we test for each country's media agenda the effect of other countries' agendas. We do so in a country-level pooled time-series model, using ordinary least squares regressions with panel-corrected standard errors and a lagged dependent variable. Additionally, we lag the values for the independent agendas, in order to guarantee correct causal ordering.

Table 28.1. Presence of major topics (shares) per country

Topic	NL	BE	ES	UK	CH	FR
Macroeconomics	0.035	0.044	0.030	0.025	0.077	0.067
Civil rights and liberties	0.014	0.027	0.066	0.015	0.070	0.072
Health	0.042	0.044	0.039	0.045	0.028	0.039
Agriculture and fishery	0.017	0.023	0.011	0.018	0.018	0.012
Labor and employment	0.021	0.034	0.017	0.048	0.026	0.046
Education	0.020	0.027	0.025	0.030	0.030	0.020
Environment	0.007	0.013	0.013	0.011	0.012	0.017
Energy	0.006	0.010	0.016	0.007	0.017	0.004
Transportation	0.038	0.027	0.027	0.046	0.062	0.011
Law, crime, and family issues	0.119	0.097	0.162	0.100	0.035	0.070
Social welfare	0.004	0.010	0.009	0.009	0.012	0.006
Community development, planning, and housing	0.006	0.007	0.008	0.012	0.011	0.010
Banking, finance, and domestic commerce	0.070	0.082	0.039	0.031	0.039	0.055
Defense	0.032	0.072	0.084	0.130	0.121	0.074
Space, science, technology, and communications Foreign trade	0.019	0.018	0.038	0.037	0.019	0.025
International affairs and foreign aid	0.000	0.010	0.006	0.002	0.013	0.020
Foreign trade	0.146	0.079	0.058	0.049	0.157	0.091
Government operations	0.138	0.170	0.169	0.045	0.209	0.140
Public lands and water management	0.000	0.004	0.002	0.026	0.002	0.001

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

28.4.2 Results

We first look at the distribution over the various categories. There is consider-able overlap in the "large" categories across countries. Law, crime, and family issues is such a large category, receiving considerable attention in each of the six countries. The same goes for government operations, with the exception of the United Kingdom, which seems to be slightly distinct from the other countries in several other respects as well. The United Kingdom, for example, scores substantially higher on "defense."

Table 28.2 reports the overall correlations between the various countries. Indeed we can see that these correlations are substantial—with an average r of 0.717. All countries have similar agendas, again with the exception of the United Kingdom, which only correlates moderately (in most instances between 0.4 and 0.5) with the other countries.

A very similar picture arises when we look at the correlations that use monthly-level scores instead of scores aggregated over the whole period (see Table 28.3). The overall correlation is slightly lower ($r = 0.553$), but still sub-stantial. Again, we find the United Kingdom to be deviating most from other countries, while the highest correlation is between the neighboring, same-language countries Belgium and the Netherlands.

Table 28.2. Correlation between countries (aggregated agendas)

	BE	ES	UK	CH	FR
NL	0.882	0.784	0.475	0.751	0.800
BE		0.884	0.540	0.815	0.902
ES			0.631	0.680	0.821
UK				0.429	0.480
CH					0.884

Note: N = 19.
Source Comparative Agendas Project

Table 28.3. Correlation between countries (monthly-level data)

	BE	ES	UK	CH	FR
NL	0.737	0.638	0.259	0.610	0.645
BE		0.714	0.332	0.652	0.706
ES			0.447	0.592	0.670
UK				0.267	0.349
CH					0.682

Note: N = 1,140 (19 major topics x 60 months).
Source: Comparative Agendas Project

Table 28.4. Explaining issue attention

	NL	BE	ES	UK	CH	FR
NL_{t-1}	0.794***	0.146***	0.037	−0.037	0.074	0.046
BE_{t-1}	0.279	0.472***	0.072*	−0.040	0.051	0.037
ES_{t-1}	0.032	0.126**	0.800***	0.252***	0.041	0.103**
UK_{t-1}	−0.001	−0.002	0.009	0.393***	−0.013	0.013
CH_{t-1}	0.028	0.080**	0.029	0.050	0.687***	0.124***
FR_{t-1}	0.058+	0.074+	0.014	0.025	0.134**	0.532***
Constant	0.002+	0.004**	0.002+	0.011***	0.004**	0.005***
R-squared	0.800	0.685	0.821	0.316	0.707	0.685

Note: Results from an OLS regression with panel corrected standard errors. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. + $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.
Source: Comparative Agendas Project

Table 28.4 focuses on the question of whether any causal relationships exist between the various national media agendas. The table summarizes the results from regression models with each of the countries' agendas being the dependent variable once. The results demonstrate that in various instances, other national agendas have an intermedia agenda-setting impact—though to a limited extent. For all countries, we find that attention for an issue predicts the current attention for that issue, though to varying degrees: regression coefficients range from 0.800 (Spain) to 0.393 (United Kingdom). In some

countries, we find that international media have little influence on the media agenda, most notably in the Netherlands, where we see that only the Swiss media agenda marginally affects the media agenda. In other countries, for example in France and Belgium, we see considerable effects from various other countries. Overall, the results are mixed, but results point to especially large influences from neighboring countries (Netherlands for Belgium, France for Switzerland, Spain and Switzerland for France).

28.5 Conclusion

The media agenda has become a central one in the study of policy agendas and CAP. In the past, it has been especially used in the study of the media's influence on politics. This research field that focuses on political agenda-setting is strongly empirically driven and has expanded rapidly in the last decade. This is not surprising for several reasons. First of all, while research into the media effects on public opinion and behavior has received ample attention since the early 1970s (and before), the focus on how media also impact the behavior of politicians has remained until recently less often investigated, while the conviction that this impact might be considerable has grown. This is, for example, reflected in the rise of the *mediatization* literature (Strömbäck, 2008) that focuses on the fundamental changes politics has undergone due to the increased dominance of the media in society. But while mediatization scholars have been strong in theorizing, empirical research has remained relatively scarce in this research tradition. For political agenda-setting, the reversed seems to be the case: the proposed mechanism is straightforward (issue attention in one realm affects issue attention in the other realm) and empirically relatively easy to investigate and the CAP framework offers an excellent starting point to do so. Thus, researchers willing to capture at least some of this type of media effects empirically are likely to turn to an analysis of political agenda-setting. Second, the increased digital availability and accessibility of both parliamentary records and media content for longer periods of time have made it possible to track the relationship between media content and parliamentary content in a longitudinal perspective, making it possible to systematically compare periods with, for example, different political constellations. Third, also the tools with which the available data can be analyzed have developed quickly. Computer-assisted topic-classification software makes the coding task—so far done by human coders—less laborious and expensive. The application of time-series analysis tools, now easily accessible in standard statistical packages, allows for a robust estimation of effects.

As the overview presented in this chapter shows, there is cumulating evidence suggesting that a multitude of factors have an impact on the size of

the impact of the media on politics. The empirical example given shows that with a sole focus on media agendas, interesting insights can be obtained as well. The considerable overlap in media agendas across various Western European countries reflects the importance of the international context in the construction of news. Results from the effect analyses, though preliminary, hint at existing patterns of influence, where the media do follow issue attention in foreign outlets. These findings are relevant in the larger context of international news-flow research (Wu, 2000) that explicitly addresses when news from other countries is reported, and when it is not.

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