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It's a Matter of Timing. How the Timing of Politicians' Information Subsidies Affects What Becomes News

Pauline Ketelaars and Julie Sevenans

Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

From all information subsidies that politicians send out on a given day, only a few make it into the news media. The literature on news selection tries to understand which factors enhance the chance that a message gets covered. This paper contributes to that literature by studying one specific factor: the timing of the dissemination of the message. Between July 2017 and July 2018 we gathered all press releases, press conferences, and tweets of more than 200 Belgian politicians. During the same period, we collected all articles of 15 print and online news media. Via a combination of automated and manual content analysis, we measured to what extent politicians' information subsidies were covered in the news and investigate whether success can be explained by their timing. The results show that timing matters, and that different information subsidies face different timing opportunities. Press releases and press conferences are most successful when they are disseminated at times when the journalistic demand for "new" information is high (e.g., in the absence of big events or during political recess). This sometimes works for Twitter as well, but tweets receive especially more coverage when they are published at times when journalists need additional viewpoints about existing stories (e.g., when they deal with an ongoing big event or when they are sent out in the middle of the day). All in all, this paper puts "timing" on the map as a non-negligible factor of the news selection process.

KEYWORDS

timing; media attention; politicians; information subsidies; content analysis

Introduction

Which political messages pass the news gates and get covered by the mass media? And which messages, on the other hand, fail to make it into the news? It is important to answer these questions, as the news media are the main source for citizens to get to know politicians and to be informed about politics (Strömbäck, 2008). Moreover, appearing in the news is a powerful resource for politicians themselves (Boydstun, 2013). This makes a high-quality news selection process a crucial feature of any well-functioning democracy and it is, therefore, a key task for political and communication scientists to gain a detailed understanding of this process. It is in this context that the current paper sets out to clarify the role of one specific factor in the news selection process: the timing of politicians' communicative efforts.

CONTACT Julie Sevenans julie.sevenans@uantwerpen.be Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, Antwerpen 2000, Belgium

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In particular, we look at the timing of three information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) that politicians use: press releases, press conferences, and – more recently – messages on social media. Various studies have shown that actively releasing such information subsidies (as opposed to, for instance, being called by a journalist) is one common way for political actors to get covered in the news (see, e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Kiousis et al., 2015; Sweetser & Brown, 2008) and that information subsidies with particular characteristics have a higher chance to be selected by journalists (see Zoch & Molleda, 2006 for an overview). Indeed, scholars have demonstrated that *what* is being said by politicians, *how* the information is communicated and by *whom*, affects the effectiveness of information subsidies.

One potential key aspect has been given little attention in the literature: *when* the information is disseminated. Whether an item is covered by journalists, however, may be highly dependent on the media dynamics at a certain moment, no matter what the message is, who sends it, or how it is communicated. At least, that is what is often assumed, as is illustrated by the plethora of anecdotal evidence in both journalistic pieces and academic articles (see, e.g., Franklin, 1994; Gaber, 2000; Shea, 1996). A few studies in the United States, for example, found that politicians and their communication experts think that timing is important, and therefore send press releases or organize press conferences at specific times during the week or during newsworthy events (Haynes & Flowers, 2002; Walsh, 2014). In a pilot study, we were able to confirm the perceived importance of strategic timing in Belgium. We presented more than 100 Belgian members of parliament with four timing strategies that we study (see below) and asked them to indicate whether or not they apply these tactics when trying to get media attention. The politicians overwhelmingly said that they do (see the results in Figure 1) because they believe it helps to get more coverage.[1]

Building on this evidence about the *presumed* importance of timing in news selection processes, we set out to investigate the much less-studied question of its *actual* effect: does timing affect what becomes news? And, if yes, what makes a message well-timed? Indeed, it is not because politicians say they apply timing strategies (e.g., by "considering working moments of journalists"), that they actually apply the best strategies or know which moments are most ideal. We theorize that a message should have a higher chance to be

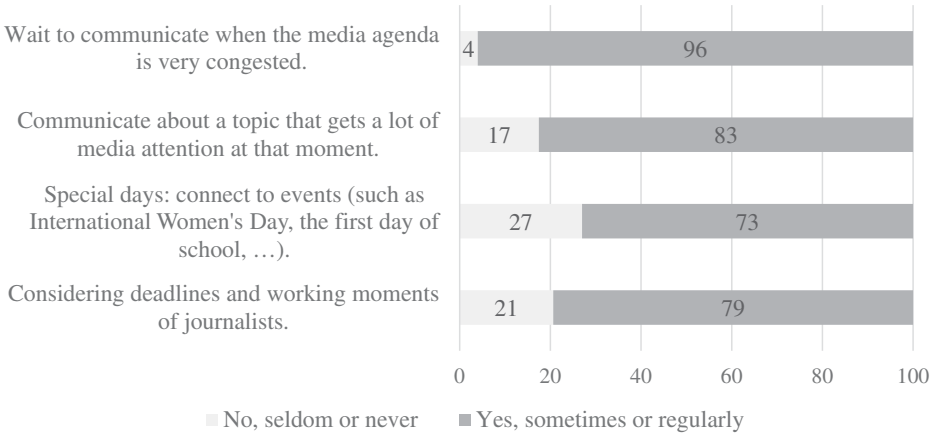

Figure 1. To what extent (%) do Belgian politicians (N = 126) apply timing strategies?

selected by journalists if it is disseminated when the media access threshold for that message is low. We consider three types of temporal dynamics that may be predictive of how high the media access threshold is – big events, special days, and news cycles – and we test whether they contribute to our understanding of how much media attention information subsidies get.

Specifically, we collected all press releases, press conferences, and tweets of more than 200 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians – party leaders, ministers, state secretaries, and members of parliament – between July 2017 and July 2018. During the same period, articles of 15 print and online news media were gathered as well. Using a combination of automatic and manual coding, every information subsidy got a score counting the number of times it appeared in the various media. This allows to test whether well-timed information subsidies get more media attention than others.

The results of our study suggest that timing matters. Ideal moments of timing are, however, dependent on the specific information subsidy and news outlet under scrutiny. Proactive communication through press releases or press conferences is generally most successful at moments when the journalistic demand for "new" political information subsidies is high (early in the week, during weekends, or during the political recess, and in the absence of big events occupying the media agenda). For print newspaper coverage, the specific moment of the day matters too (with evening and early morning releases working best). Twitter is partly comparable – for example, tweets generate more media attention during political recess – but in addition to that, it seems successful as a reactive communication tool, as suggested by the effectiveness of tweeting about ongoing big events or in the middle of the day. Contrary to common wisdom, connecting messages to special days is not particularly effective. All in all, our results demonstrate that timing is a relevant factor of the news selection process which can help scholars understand why some political messages get more (or less) media attention than would be expected based on their source and content. Additionally, the findings may have practical value for politicians who wonder which timing strategies work best.

Determinants of Media Access

Politicians have important reasons for trying to get covered in the news media. Media attention helps them to set the political agenda (Sellers, 2000), to boost their position within the party (Davis, 2010), and – perhaps most importantly – it increases the chance that citizens will vote for them (Van Erkel et al., 2020). Some might argue that the influence of traditional news media on the public has decreased because people increasingly get their information from social media and alternative outlets. Yet, as Bennett (2012, p. 144) remarks: "The mainstream media continues to play a key role in shaping public perceptions simply because it still sends out the loudest signal." Since media attention is such a powerful resource for politicians, the media efforts they take are increasingly professionalized (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017).

An important way for political actors to influence the news is through the dissemination of information subsidies (Gandy, 1982). These means of communication reduce the costs of gathering information for journalists (hence "subsidies"), and – if produced well – they meet journalistic standards and can be used rapidly without much editing. The most extensively researched political information subsidies are press releases (see, e.g.,

Hopmann et al., 2012; Jacobs, 1999; Kaid, 1976; Meyer et al., 2020), but studies have been done on other types as well, such as press conferences (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013). In addition to press releases and conferences, we also look at tweets in this study. Tweets are included because social media seem to have gained considerable agenda-setting power, and especially Twitter is widely used by political journalists as a new type of information subsidy (Metag & Rauchfleisch, 2017; Parmelee, 2014). Importantly, however, whereas politicians use press releases and press conferences primarily to attract media attention, they use tweets for all kinds of other purposes as well (e.g., communicating with peers or directly communicating with constituents) (Jungherr, 2016). As a consequence, we expect the average tweet to elicit less media attention than the average press release or conference. We control for this as we study how timing affects success among subsidies from the same type.

To explain the success of information subsidies, news selection studies have primarily focused on *what* sources say and *how* the information is communicated. Research has shown that information subsidies with particular characteristics are more successful than others. Press releases are for instance more often selected when they are negative or critical (Haselmayer et al., 2019) and self-quotations make press releases seem more objective (Jacobs, 1999). From studies on newsworthiness, we know that messages that contain particular news values – such as surprise, magnitude, and drama – have a higher chance to get into the media (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Additionally, we know that *who* communicates is crucial to explain media attention. For instance, people with high functions generally receive more exposure than regular members of parliament (see, e.g., Bennett, 1990; Tresch, 2009), physically attractive politicians get more attention on television (Waismel-Manor & Tsfati, 2011) and their personality has been found to matter as well (Amsalem et al., 2018).

There seems to be general agreement that *when* a message is send, is a key aspect of news selection too, and that a good timing makes information subsidies more effective (see, e.g., Kiousis et al., 2006). However, to what extent this is true, is a question that is not often empirically tackled.[2] Most accounts on communication planning focus merely on the practice of it – studying whether politicians strategically time their messages at all – and are anecdotal (Franklin, 1994; Gaber, 2000; Shea, 1996) or descriptive (Dionisopoulos, 2009; Gibson, 1999; Walsh, 2014) rather than explanatory (but see Haynes & Flowers, 2002). The few empirical studies that, either explicitly or more implicitly, deal with the role of timing in news selection processes mainly discuss whether political hypes or events can facilitate easier media access (see Flowers et al., 2003; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Building on this pioneering work, our goal is to address the role of timing in a more systematic way by theorizing on how temporal patterns in the media arena affect news access and by testing the effect of various timing variables in a single model.

Identifying Temporal Opportunities

So what makes a certain message well-timed? The literature suggests that temporal opportunities – moments of good timing – are foremost determined by variations in the *journalistic demand* for information subsidies (Boydstun, 2013; Sheafer & Wolfsfeld, 2004). Assuming that news outlets foresee a certain amount of space for political news, and that this space is to a varying extent taken up by political events (e.g., reports on

parliamentary sessions, ministerial councils, discussions about legislative initiatives, …), the remaining space that can be spent on politicians' proactive communication efforts is not constant. Moreover, the journalistic capacity to process incoming information subsidies is variable as well and depends, for example, on working routines. The higher the demand for information subsidies – i.e. the time and space available to journalists to process and publish such subsidies – the lower the threshold becomes for politicians to have their message picked up in the news.

However, things are a bit more complex in the sense that the threshold may not be the same for each message. Media access may sometimes be easy for messages on a particular issue, but not for information subsidies speaking to other issues. Our first three expectations (H1 to H3) tap into this. They deal with how certain moments of timing – more specifically: big events and special days – lower the threshold for certain messages while heightening it for others.

First, we think that the occurrence of an important event drastically lowers the demand for information subsidies that are not related to the event. Journalists generally cover big events extensively and little space remains for any type of other news. Sometimes the media even go into "hype" or "storm" mode, allocating a disproportionally large amount of resources to covering the single event (Boydstun et al., 2014; Vasterman, 2005). A study of Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) shows for instance that natural disasters – which, of course, cannot be planned like information subsidies – are less likely to receive relief if they occur when news congestion is high, like during the Olympic Games. All in all, we can expect that when the media agenda is highly congested due to a mega-event, journalists' remaining attention for politicians' information subsidies is smaller than when the media agenda is less packed.

As an exception, what might be beneficial during a big event is "piggybacking" or "riding the wave." Politicians can hook onto the issue that is clogging the media agenda, benefitting from the fact that journalists are actively looking for new material on the trending topic (see Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006 on the competition for media attention between politicians during political waves). As Harcup and O'Neill (2017) show in their study on news values, stories about topics that are already in the news have a higher chance to be selected by journalists. Flowers et al. (2003) tested in their study whether politicians' press releases that are sent during important media events get more newspaper coverage. They did not check, however, whether the press releases actually were about the event topic or not, which might explain why they find no significant effects. Our first two hypotheses therefore are:

H1: Information subsidies that are issued during big events, on topics not related to the event, get less media attention.

H2: Information subsidies that are issued during big events, on the topic of the event, get more media attention.

A second timing strategy that is often assumed to work is paying attention to special days and planned events. News outlets want to bring stories that are of interest to their consumers. Journalists select messages they think will resonate with the public and which seem to be the most important at a certain moment – what is newsworthy *today*? A large

part of the news is only publishable when a certain hook has been found, a hook to show the reader that the news item is topical.And events, commemorations, or happenings make for an easy hook (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; also see Van Ginneken, 1998 on "calendar journalism"). Examples are International Women's Day, an important trial, EU events, or the first day of school. These events can be expected to open up media space for politicians willing to communicate on related issues.

H3: Information subsidies that are linked to special events of the day get more media attention.

Beyond these three content-specific expectations, the literature offers some ideas about moments when the media threshold is lower in *general* – and thus irrespective of the content of the information subsidy. More specifically, time-bound journalistic and political routines like deadlines, working days, and holidays probably affect how much time and space there is available for politicians' proactive communications (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). We can identify annual and weekly, as well as daily news patterns.

Before elaborating on these patterns, however, it is important to consider that not all information subsidies are proactive communication efforts in the sense that politicians aim to initiate coverage on a new topic. This is especially true for tweets. In contrast to press releases and conferences – which are primarily used to *proactively* communicate about *new* topics – Twitter is used a lot by politicians to *react* to *ongoing* political stories – in an attempt to get their viewpoint about the story in the media (Jungherr, 2016). These reactive tweets perfectly meet journalists' demand for additional input about events that are being covered already. Hence, the journalistic demand for (reactive) tweets, at times when the media agenda is relatively congested already, probably remains as high as the demand for (proactive) tweets when the media agenda is empty. This is why the hypotheses below only apply to press releases and conferences.

Within the *annual* news cycle, temporal opportunities (for proactive communications) are likely to arise during political recess. When parliament is not sitting, media access is easier because there is little competition from other political news (Sheafer & Wolfsfeld, 2004). There are for example no weekly plenary sessions or ministerial councils to report on – increasing the demand for other information subsidies. In the run up to the British elections in spring 2017, for instance, the Labor party strategically launched a bunch of policy goals during the Easter break. A senior member of the party's media team mentioned the following on that in The Guardian: "It was recess, and our plan for that was: the government will recede; they don't have a domestic policy agenda, so they won't be briefing any stories" (Stewart, 2017).

H4: Press releases and press conferences that are issued during political recess get more media attention.

Furthermore, during the *weekly* cycle, certain days are probably better to release news than others. During the weekend, just like during political recess, there is generally less political news and therefore messages sent on Saturday or Sunday should experience a lower media access threshold. Additionally, we follow Haynes and Flowers (2002, p. 6) in the expectation that sending information subsidies in the beginning of the week is

effective as well: "The media's demand for news follows a weekly cycle–peaking on Monday and diminishing across the week." As the week proceeds, plenty of political events happen that gradually occupy the available news space. While their study shows that politicians disseminate more (substantive) messages early in the week, they do not test whether this actually is an effective strategy to gain media attention.

H5: Press releases and press conferences that are issued during the weekend get more media attention.

H6: Press releases and press conferences that are issued in the beginning of the week get more media attention.

All hypotheses that we formulated so far rest on mechanisms that we expect to apply to print and online news media alike. Online media faces fewer space limitations than print newspapers, but they do face clear limitations in terms of journalistic capacity and so we expect to see the same patterns – even though the timing may matter more (stronger effects) for print newspapers than for online news. This is not the case for our expectations regarding the daily news cycle, however. With regard to "old" media, the closer the communication of information is to a medium's deadline, the more timely and interesting it generally is for journalists because they attach great importance to bringing scoops (Wilkinson et al., 2009). Press conferences are therefore regularly planned just before or during the evening television newscast. For print newspapers, this means that information subsidies sent out in the evening are probably most newsworthy: they contain information that did not get extensive attention during the day yet and that is still of interest to the reading audience the next morning. For online media, however, "the notion of time has obtained a different connotation" since making news is much less dependent on deadlines and fixed schedules (Harder et al., 2017, p. 278). News websites are under pressure to update hourly or even on a minute-by-minute basis and they follow more unpredictable patterns than offline news (Boydstun, 2013). For that reason, we do not expect daily news cycles to matter so much for online news.

H7: Press releases and press conferences that are issued in the evening get more attention in print news media.

Taking the varying journalistic demand for information subsidies as the generic mechanism behind our hypotheses, we have ignored so far that the *supply* of information subsidies by politicians may also vary and influence the height of the media threshold. The intensity of the internal competition – amongst politicians' information subsidies – can affect the chance for a message to get covered as well (Boydstun, 2013). If politicians were fully rational actors who had complete information about the effect of timing on their chances of success to make it into the news media, we would expect to see a lot of information subsidies being sent out when the demand is high. This would then ultimately nullify the benefits of these moments of easy media access. But, of course, politicians do not possess such information – they often cannot predict when a big event will happen, for instance. As Boydstun (2013, p. 56) nicely puts it, "trying to predict the selection of stories for tomorrow's front page is like trying to predict which genetic mutations will

shape the next generation of flamingos." And ironically, timing opportunities that are predictable – such as annual cycles – are likely to be underutilized by politicians. Circumstances may force them to communicate at a non-ideal moment, for instance. Or during "silly season" (also called "cucumber time") many politicians are on holidays themselves and therefore communicate less. In the analyses below, we will take the role of fluctuations in the internal competition into account.

Data and Methods

Information Subsidies

Between July 2017 and July 2018, three types of information subsidies were collected: press releases, press conferences, and tweets. These were gathered for all 232 Dutch-speaking Belgian politicians at the regional (Flemish) and federal level: members of parliament, ministers, state secretaries, and party leaders. Five of them did not send a press release or tweet, nor did they organize a press event during the research period.

In order to collect press releases, we asked to be included in the press mailing lists of all Flemish political parties and of all ministers and state secretaries as well – since cabinet members usually do not use the press lists of their party. All parties and 14 out of 20 cabinet members agreed to this. For the six remaining cabinet members we collected all the press releases they published on their websites. Furthermore, we gathered press releases published on the website of the International Press Center in Brussels, which is part of the federal government service (www.presscentre.be). In total, this resulted in 2,208 unique press releases. Press conferences were collected via Belga, the Belgian press agency. On its "agenda" Belga announces all press events, media happenings, and public appearances that take place every day. Every event in which a politician of the sample was mentioned, was incorporated in the dataset. Events that were announced via politicians' press mailing lists were coded as press conferences as well. During the research period, 1,508 media events or press conferences were held. Finally, Python was used to automatically gather politicians' tweets. Two hundred and twelve of the politicians tweeted at least once during the research period and in total, they tweeted 76,787 times. Retweets are not included in this dataset.

Media Coverage

During the same period of 1 year – July 1,st 2017 until June 30,th 2018 – we gathered print newspaper articles and online news articles. All print articles from the seven most important Flemish newspapers were collected: De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, Gazet van Antwerpen, and Het Belang van Limburg. Online news was gathered by scraping four times a day all the articles that appeared on the relevant RSS-feeds of the online versions of these newspapers, except for De Tijd, which only allows people with a subscription to read their online news.[3] We also gathered the articles from vrt.be/vrtnws (VRT is the public television broadcaster) and knack.be (Knack is a popular news magazine), which are important providers of online news in Flanders as well. Online articles behind a paywall (only available with a subscription for the outlet)

were not included, but they are often copies from in-depth articles published in the print newspaper.

Dependent Variables: Measuring Media Attention

In total, the data collection resulted in 80,503 information subsidies and 64,530 news items in which one or more politicians in the sample were mentioned. Together, these produce more than 5 billion dyads of information subsidies and news items. In order to answer our research question, we needed to know precisely which information subsidies were picked up in which news media. Hence, the goal of the coding process was to identify for which of these dyads there was a match between the information subsidy and the media article. Coding choices were carefully made with one rationale in mind: identifying, as accurately as possible, all instances where the communicating politician would experience the news coverage to be the successful result of his/her communicative attempt.

We reduced the number of dyads, first of all, by only matching information subsidies with online news published later on the same day and on the following day. For print newspaper articles, information subsidies were matched with articles of the following day and the day after. For example, a press release that was sent on Monday at 16h00 was compared with online news articles published between Monday 16h01 and Tuesday 23h59, and with print newspaper articles that were published on Tuesday and Wednesday. Furthermore, we only retained dyads where the politician who produced the information subsidy was mentioned in the news article.

Next, following studies of Grimmer (2010) and Haselmayer et al. (2019), we used the freely available cheating detection software Copyfind, developed by Lou Bloomfield, to automatically reduce the number of dyads further.[4] Copyfind looks for matching language amongst collections of documents and this way the program can help to filter out dyads that have little or no overlapping text. The specific settings of the software can be found in Online Appendix A, together with the results from a validation test showing that the settings work equally well to find overlap for tweets (even if these are typically shorter and more informal in nature) as for press releases. The automatic coding resulted in 11,407 matches of information subsidies and news articles. Thanks to the cheating detection software, we knew that there was at least some text overlap for these dyads.

Then, these combinations of information subsidies and news articles were manually coded by two coders. The coders read the information subsidy and the news item side by side in order to determine whether the information subsidy was indeed covered by the journalist in that article. The coding was done in two steps. First, coders checked whether the information subsidy and the news item were on the same specific topic. Having broadly the same topic (such as "health care" or "tourism") was not enough: the texts had to deal with the same specific situation, case, or issue. Additionally, the sender of the information subsidy (the politician) had to play an active role in the story.

If this was the case, coders went on to decide whether the specific information subsidy was actually covered in the news item. This part of the coding differed depending on the type of information subsidy. For tweets to be coded as "covered," it had to be clear form the article that the journalist got the information attributed to the politician from Twitter. This means that the journalist either had to mention "Twitter" (or "tweet," "tweeted," etc.) or that the tweet was fully incorporated in the article, including hashtags (#), websites, or

at-signs (@). Press conferences were coded as successfully picked up when the journalist mentioned the particular event in the article or when it was clear from the text that the journalist was referring to the event that was held (e.g., "Today, the minister of Health visited … " or " … said the minister of Health yesterday when she officially presented … "). Contrary to tweets and press conferences – which are generally literally referred to when picked up by journalists – press releases are not so recognizable as a news source. When journalists use information from press releases to write an article, they seldom mention that the information actually came from a press release – at least in Belgium. It would, therefore, be inadequate to code press releases in the same "strict" way. Press releases were therefore coded as "covered" when at least one sentence of the news article was directly taken from the press release. This means that a sentence from the press release was literally quoted or that the journalist clearly paraphrased a sentence from the press release. Copyfind was helpful at this stage because the program highlights the words that overlap for each dyad of texts, making it easy to locate overlapping sentences. Ten percent of the dyads was double coded and Krippendorff's alpha was calculated to estimate inter-coder reliability: .97 for tweets, .93 for press conferences, and .84 for press releases. In the end 3,053 of the 11,407 automatically found matches were identified as real matches by the manual coding.

With this information, a dataset was assembled with information subsidies as the units of analysis. Two dependent variables were created. *Newspaper articles* refers to the number of print newspaper articles in which an information subsidy was covered. Similarly, *online news* adds up all articles from online news media in which an information subsidy was covered. Descriptive statistics show that press conferences generate the most media attention: one in five is covered by online media and about 13% is covered in newspapers. Press releases yield almost equally well: almost 15% get attention in newspapers and about 7% appears in online media. Unsurprisingly, the large majority of tweets do not reach the mainstream media: more than 99% do not get any attention. The full frequency distributions of the two dependent variables for each of the three types of information subsidies can be found in Online Appendix B.

Independent Variables

The first independent variable of this study is whether an information subsidy was sent on a day where a *big event* occupied the media agenda. This was measured using data of Flemish television news, available via the Electronic News Archive (ENA). For both the Flemish public broadcaster (VRT) and the primary commercial broadcaster (VTM), the ENA stores information about all news items in the evening newscasts, including the duration of the various items. This allows to identify those days when the first news story (which may consist of various news items on the same topic), across broadcasters, took up a large share of the broadcasting time – indicating that a big event happened and was covered extensively. The dummy variable *big event* is coded 1 for the top 5% information subsidies disseminated on the most congested days.[5] On these days (17 in total), the first story took more than 37% of the total broadcasting time. Online Appendix C contains a description of the specific big events happening on these days, as well as a robustness test showing that the significant effect of the *big event* variable (see below) is robust across different cut-off points.

The second independent variable measures whether an information subsidy was about the same topic as the big event. All press releases, press conferences, and tweets that were sent on the day of a big event were searched for specific keywords about the event. When the information subsidy was on the same topic, the variable *big event – on the topic* was coded 1, for all other cases 0. Only one press conference and two press releases were about a big event topic, it is therefore not sensible to include the variable *big event – on topic* in analyses on these information subsidies. Nevertheless, in analyses with tweets, this variable will be included, as 197 tweets were sent on a big event topic, confirming the reactive use of Twitter (see Online Appendix C for a list of the hype keywords).

The third independent variable records whether the information subsidy was linked to a special day or event. In order to code this variable, a calendar with the special happenings on each day was created, using all kinds of sources. For 332 days of the year, special events or happenings were marked on the calendar, with multiple events on some days. Next, keywords were formulated for each special event and information subsidies were searched for these keywords. All "hits" were then manually checked in order to make sure that these messages indeed were related to a special event. In sum, every information subsidy was coded as 1 if it was sent in the context of a *special day* and 0 if it was not (see the supplementary material for an overview of the keywords related to the special days).

Furthermore, for each information subsidy, we coded whether it was sent during *political recess* (0/1) or during the *weekend* (0/1). An *early week* variable was created covering Monday and Tuesday (0/1). After these relatively quiet days at the beginning of the week – politically speaking at least – the regional, Flemish parliamentary plenary meeting (on Wednesday), the federal, Belgian one (on Thursday) and the weekly government council (on Friday) structurally fill a part of the political news agenda. To test whether the daily news cycle matters, the variable *time of day* was created: before 10 am (0), between 10 am and 2 pm (1), between 2 pm and 6 pm (2), and after 6 pm (3). News taking place before 6 pm is often still included in the 7 pm television news broadcast. Information disseminated later typically moves to the next day's news agenda; making this classification well suited to test H7.

Having established these independent variables, it is possible to take a look at their relationship with politicians' communicating behavior. In Online Appendix D, we explain the total number of press releases, press conferences, and tweets released on each day (N = 365) by the independent variables (only those that vary on the daily level). The analyses confirm our assumption that, even if politicians *think* timing is important and *say* they apply timing strategies, politicians' *actual* communications are not particularly well-timed. Politicians appear to communicate less during weekends, early in the week (except for press conferences which are organized throughout the week) and during political recess. In addition to that, big events make politicians use Twitter more. As we suggested above, this means that politicians actually communicate *less* on moments that we suspect to be beneficial in terms of timing and vice versa. In the analyses below, we will include *internal competition* as a control variable. It measures how many other press releases, press conferences, or tweets were disseminated on the same day. This way, we can differentiate between timing effects originating from the decreased internal competition and timing effects originating from increased space on the media agenda.

Finally, some control variables are included in the analyses to control for the newsworthiness of the information subsidy in terms of source and content. We control for the

position of the politician linked to the information subsidy – whether he or she is a regular member of parliament (0) or a *top politician* like speaker, party leader, party floor leader, or cabinet member (1). Occasionally, press releases and press conferences are sent out or held by multiple politicians. In these cases this variable was coded 1 if at least one politician with a higher function was involved in the press release or press conference. We control for the length of the information subsidy, or more specifically, the number of *words* (divided by 100). We include a variable that taps the number of *political parties* mentioned in a press release – this could be considered a proxy for the level of conflict as politicians who mention other parties in their communications often do so to criticize these parties. When analyzing press releases, we include a dummy for press releases produced by the *governmental press center*. These releases are systematically disseminated after every decision (often technical) and do not contain quotes; in contrast to the releases coming from individual politicians, that cover actions they deem newsworthy and that almost always contain quotes. When analyzing tweets, we control for the number of *retweets*.[6] Finally, we also control for *a political party*. Descriptive statistics of all variables are in Online Appendix B.

Results

In order to test the hypotheses, we run negative binomial regressions because we are dealing with count data with overdispersion. We use random effects models to account for the multilevel structure of the data: information subsidies are nested within politicians. We control for the political party level by adding party dummies in the regressions (coefficients not shown in the results table). Table 1 presents two regressions (one for each dependent variable) for each of the three information subsidies: press releases, press conferences, and tweets.

Our first hypothesis stated that messages sent on days when a *big event* takes place – yet not on the topic of the event – get less media attention. Looking at Table 1, we can see that this hypothesis gets support in one of the six regression analyses: press releases disseminated on media hype days are less often covered in newspaper articles (B = −1.462; p = .004). Predicted values indicate that they are on average covered in .04 news articles whereas releases disseminated on other days receive .16 articles (keeping all other variables at their respective means). These numbers are small because the largest bulk of press releases are not covered at all, but the effect is substantive: the amount of coverage on a day without big event is four times higher. We do not find the same effect for online news. Furthermore, press conferences held on media hype days – not on the topic of the media hype – are not significantly less covered, and we find no significant results either regarding tweets. In sum, press releases generate less attention in newspapers when there is a media hype but for press conferences and tweets this is not the case.

Furthermore, we expected that hooking onto the topic of a media hype would be a good strategy to generate media attention for information subsidies. As mentioned above, the politicians in our sample did not use press releases and press conferences in this respect. Nevertheless, regression model 6 (Table 1) shows that sending tweets on the topic of a media hype is a successful strategy (B = 1.189; p < .000). These tweets get four times more coverage (.008 items instead of .002) in online news than tweets that are not linked to a hype. For print newspapers – only published the next day and not in the heat of the

Table 1. Random effects negative binomial regressions explaining media attention for press releases, press conferences, and tweets.

	PRESS RELEASES				PRESS CONFERENCES				TWEETS			
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		(6)	
	Newspapers		Online news		Newspapers		Online news		Newspapers		Online news	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Timing variables												
Big event	**−1.462****	**.506**	−.735	.513	.475	.321	.256	.253	.301	.316	−.099	.245
Big event – on topic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	−.005	.677	**1.189****	**.404**
Special day	−.943	.578	−.236	.586	−.088	.393	.111	.284	.345	.508	−.081	.413
Political recess	**.271†**	**.140**	.189	.208	**.715*****	**.180**	**.269†**	**.156**	**.442***	**.202**	**.480*****	**.134**
Weekly cycle (ref. = Wed-Fri)												
Early in week (Mon-Tue)	**.444****	**.133**	**.424***	**.197**	−.127	.164	.059	.130	**.282†**	**.162**	**.231***	**.116**
Weekend	**.500****	**.192**	**.718****	**.269**	−.107	.246	**.454****	**.167**	**−.630***	**.262**	−.004	.163
Daily cycle (ref. = before 10am)												
Between 10am-2pm	**−.244†**	**.143**	−.053	.208	−.167	.178	.217	.141	**.342†**	**.193**	−.029	.128
Between 2pm-6pm	**−.292†**	**.152**	−.315	.230	−.123	.211	**.272†**	**.163**	**.533****	**.188**	−.111	.136
After 6pm	−.340	.230	.060	.309	.089	.329	.307	.268	.095	.239	−.106	.153
Control variables												
Top politician	.093	.143	.175	.218	.229	.414	.231	.279	**1.277*****	**.256**	**1.364*****	**.159**
# Parties mentioned	−.200	.155	.090	.172	−.344	.455	.036	.218	-	-	-	-
# Words	.040	.025	−.023	.040	**.157†**	**.091**	**.337*****	**.061**	**5.100*****	**.649**	**3.329*****	**.464**
Internal competition	.002	.013	.024	.019	.010	.019	−.014	.015	.002	.001	**.003****	**.001**
Governmental press center	**−3.548*****	**1.006**	**−1.433****	**.530**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
# Retweeted	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	**.038*****	**.002**	**.034*****	**.002**
Party dummies: not reported												
Constant	−1.104**	.363	−2.589***	.483	−2.219**	.700	−2.260***	.424	−8.124***	.595	−7.664***	.377
Wald chi^2 (df)	68.68 (18)		29.52 (18)		41.10 (18)		56.85 (18)		503.61 (19)		819.80 (19)	
Prob > chi^2	.000		.042		.002		.000		.000		.000	
AIC (empty model)	2386 (2462)		1560 (1556)		1596 (1599)		2453 (2465)		2471 (2834)		5464 (6004)	
Δ AIC	−76		4		−3		−12		−363		−540	
Log likelihood (empty model)	−1172 (−1228)		−759 (−775)		−777 (−796)		−1206 (−1230)		−1213 (−1414)		−2710 (−2999)	
Δ Log likelihood	56		16		19		24		201		289	
N	2,208				1,508				76,787			
N politicians	174				82				212			

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

moment – this is not the case: journalists working for print media are not more likely to select tweets on the theme of a media hype.

The third hypothesis was that messages that are linked to special events of the day are more often picked up by journalists. Table 1 shows that this is not the case at all. Press releases, nor press events, nor tweets have a higher chance to gain media attention when they are in some way linked to a special event or happening. Maybe, as a few politicians also suggested themselves during our pilot study, journalists are a bit fed up with politicians trying to gain media attention this way. It is a rather "old trick" that might not work anymore, also because it is used by so many people and organizations.

The fourth hypothesis stated that press releases and conferences would receive more media attention during political recess. We find that this is true: print newspapers pay more attention to releases *and* conferences disseminated during recess than to those held outside of the recess. Press conferences during recess are also more successful in online media. Unexpectedly, the coefficients for tweets are also significant: tweets sent during the holidays are picked up more often both offline and online. These results seem to point to a very robust pattern whereby media, in time of political recess, face a scarcity of political news and allot more space to the information subsidies of individual politicians. Substantially, the effect is strongest for print newspapers' coverage of press conferences: the amount of coverage during political recess doubles (predicted value: .18 to .36).

Next, we expected that politicians' press releases and conferences are more successful during the weekends. This expectation is again clearly confirmed. Press releases have a higher chance to gain media output when they are sent during the weekend, both in online news (B = .500; .p = 009) and newspapers (B = .718; p = .007). Weekends are a good moment to organize press events as well. Online media spend more articles on events or public appearances that are held during the weekend (B = .445; p = .006). The results are – as we expected – different for tweets. In fact, not only are weekend tweets *not more* effective than week tweets; tweets that are sent during the weekend are even *less* covered in print newspapers than tweets that are written during the week (B = −.630; p = .016). Our assumption is that the "reactive" nature of tweets kicks in here, and that there are less political news stories during the weekend to be enriched with tweets. A related explanation is that newspapers in Belgium do not have Sunday editions, and tweets that are sent on Saturday are not newsworthy anymore to put in print on Monday. Extra analyses (not reported) indeed show that the negative weekend effect is mostly driven by Saturday tweets. In sum, tweeting in the weekend does not help politicians to gain media attention, but sending out press releases and organizing press conferences on Saturday or Sunday is a successful strategy.

The sixth hypothesis was that releasing a press release or conference early in the working week is better than on Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. The regression analyses provide partial proof for this. Press releases are selected by journalists from both print newspapers (B = .444; p = .001) and online media significantly more when they are issued in the beginning of the week (B = 424; p = .031). For press conferences, however, this is not the case. But tweets appear to be more successful early in the week as well: tweets sent on Monday or Tuesday are picked up more often, both in print newspapers (B = .282; p = .082) and online (B = .231; p = .046). Predicted values help to interpret the effect size of the weekly variables: the predicted number of items covering a press release, for example, goes up from .13 (Wed-Fri) to .21 (early week) or .22 (weekend).

Finally, confirming our seventh and last hypothesis, the timing during the day especially seems to matter for the amount of attention of press releases in print newspapers. Press releases communicated in the evening (after 6 pm) are picked up significantly more than press releases issued during the day (between 10 am and 6 pm). The morning (before 10 am) is a successful moment to send out press releases to print newspapers as well, which is surprising because the deadline for print newspapers is late in the evening, and morning press releases are likely to be picked up already in other media. It could be that political journalists early in the morning have more time to process incoming press releases, whereas later in the day they are busy with attending other kinds of political events. The success of tweets also to some extent depends on the hour of the day. Tweets are covered more in print newspapers when they are sent during the day (between 10 am and 6 pm) compared to when they are written early in the morning or in the evening. The explanation for this is probably again that these tweets might give them a welcome interpretation of ongoing events that day.

The control variables that were included in the regression analyses also provide some interesting results. First of all, being a *top politician* does not mean that your press releases or conferences produce more media attention. This may seem surprising – because we know that top politicians get a lot more media attention than ordinary MPs (Bennett, 1990) – but it is explainable. First, top politicians simply communicate a lot more: only 19% of all the political actors included in our database are top politicians, but they send out 72% of the press releases and they organize 93% of all the press conferences (see Online Appendix B). They thus communicate a lot more, probably also about things that are less newsworthy. Second, an experimental study by Helfer and Van Aelst (2016) confirms that the mere fact that a top politician sends out a press release, does not make journalists more inclined to cover this press release. The overwhelming bonus that top politicians get in the news is probably established through personal contacts with journalists rather than via press releases or conferences. On Twitter, however, political power is important. Both online and offline news media have a higher interest in tweets from powerful politicians than from backbenchers – even when controlling for the number of retweets. Some indicators of the newsworthiness of a message exert effects as well. Press releases produced by the press center attract less coverage; tweets that are retweeted more often receive more media attention. Longer messages that contain more information also get picked up more often – especially for tweets. The number of parties mentioned in a message does not matter. Finally, the competition of other press releases and press conferences from colleagues on the same day does not seem to matter: it does not reduce media attention. So, the beneficial effects of good timing that we discussed above occur because there is an increased demand for information subsidies (more space on the media agenda), rather than because the supply (internal competition) decreases – the latter effect is negligible. Interestingly, if many colleagues are tweeting on the same day the chance to get media attention online even increases (Model 6). These results confirm the idea that journalists especially use tweets in their reporting of ongoing stories about which there is a lot of political activity on Twitter. They typically use multiple tweets to cover a story, which means that an increasing number of tweets – unlike press releases and conferences – does not always imply increasing "competition."

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper shows that timing is a non-negligible factor in the news selection process. Besides the content of an information subsidy – it remains of course crucial *what* is said and *how* it is said – the *moment* when it is disseminated helps to explain the amount of subsequent news coverage. The pattern is quite straightforward for press releases. This information subsidy benefits from moments when the media threshold is low. Sending out press releases on quiet moments during the week – such as on Monday, Tuesday, or in the weekend – or during yearly holidays, substantially heightens the chance of being picked up by journalists. When aiming for print newspaper coverage, daily cycles matter as well, with the evening and the early morning press releases generating most success. Not communicating when the media agenda is very congested – such as when there is a media hype – is an effective strategy too. The success of press conferences seems to be a bit less timing-sensitive, although news lulls (political recess or the weekend) can offer advantages here as well. A different logic applies to Twitter as an information subsidy. Tweets can also benefit from low media thresholds – as shown by the heightened media coverage of tweets sent out during political recess or early in the week – but they additionally seem to be picked up more often when they are reactive to ongoing events, as is illustrated by the increased media attention for tweets sent out in the middle of the day, on the topic of an ongoing media hype, and when colleagues are tweeting a lot as well. Finally, contrary to common wisdom, there is one timing strategy that does not seem to work for any type of subsidy or outlet: connecting a message to special days or events does not lead to more media attention.

Our findings speak directly to research on news selection processes. Scholars in this field show that it is possible to explain political news coverage relatively well by looking at who a politician is, what (s)he communicates, and how (Vos, 2014). Yet still, certain messages get surprisingly much or little attention. This remaining unexplained variance, we show, can partially be accounted for by looking at the timing of the communication. The reason why, for example, seemingly little newsworthy information subsidies from backbenchers can be successful anyway, has partly to do with the exploitation of moments when the media threshold is low.

That fact that timing matters, is not in itself a bad (or a good) thing. It is unavoidable that the media's attention span is limited and it is hence logical that this affects the success rate of politicians' communicative efforts. Things become problematic, however, when insignificant stories receive attention while important stories go unnoticed – for instance, because top politicians manage to strategically bury negative news, or because backbenchers with very newsworthy information fail to meet the media's timing requirements as they lack the staff to help them with their communications. This is why critics of the "packaging of politics" (Franklin, 1994) warn that strategic choices should never dominate ideological considerations. More specifically, it is important that journalists recognize the media strategies of politicians and their spin doctors (De Vreese & Elenbaas, 2011) and, if necessary, go against them by revisiting information subsidies that are older, but relevant – rather than publishing well-timed yet insignificant stories without much thinking. We hope our systematic investigation of timing effects is in that sense informative and can raise awareness about the dynamics that are at play.

Next to the scientific contribution, our results may have direct practical value for politicians who aim to attract a lot of media attention for their information subsidies. We are well aware

that this is not the only thing that counts for politicians. Some politicians may not care so much about quantity as about quality: they may prefer a single, in-depth article over many superficial ones. Moreover, they may not want to let their communication timing depend on the space on the media agenda. For instance, it is difficult to pass the media gates during a hype, but if more people watch the news when a big event has happened (Althaus, 2002), then the return may ultimately be higher. Indeed, smart timing tactics not only take into account temporal patterns in the media, they pay attention to variation in public attention as well. Furthermore, politicians may use other strategies to attract media attention as well – for example, building personal ties with journalists and giving them exclusive scoops – and we cannot tell to what extent timing matters for such communications. Finally, top politicians who take unpopular decisions may want to avoid harmful or negative reporting by timing information subsidies as to "bury" bad news (Gaber, 2000) – which we also do not account for here. Still, a large majority of ordinary MPs admit that politicians "would do anything to get attention from the media" (Van Aelst et al., 2008) and that they are highly dependent on traditional information subsidies. Our results may be interesting for them.

A limitation of our research design is that we studied timing in isolation from other factors influencing media access such as the content of the information subsidies. The amount of data simply did not permit us to code every information subsidy in detail and control for content characteristics. This would be problematic if content and timing were related. Imagine that politicians systematically released their most newsworthy information during the weekends and holidays. Then, our results might not be driven by timing but by content. Fortunately, we think that this is unlikely and that the opposite is rather true: "silly season" is often used to release information that is not so newsworthy at all. In that sense, our test of the effect of timing is conservative and the effects might even be larger, should we be able to control for content characteristics. Moreover, we were able to include some basic controls (e.g., politicians' position, the length of a subsidy, the number of retweets, or the number of parties mentioned), which should partly be indicative for newsworthiness as well. Including these controls did not change any of the results about timing.

Finally, we studied only one country, Belgium. This might raise questions about the generalizability of our results. While we acknowledge that timing likely plays no role in systems where journalists are not free and where politicians dictate the media agenda, we are optimistic that our findings apply to many Western, mediatized societies. Even if specific moments of ideal timing may differ between countries – with Belgian specificities like the absence of a Sunday newspaper affecting certain specific findings, for instance, – the generic mechanism underlying our findings should hold, namely that variations in the demand for information affect the success of politicians' communication efforts. Still, we would be excited to see our results being replicated and extended elsewhere, confirming that timing is a small but indispensable factor to explain the media success of politicians.

Notes

1. These data were gathered in the framework of the POLPOP-project in Flanders, led by Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), with funding from the national science foundation FWO (grant number G012517N). Together with our colleagues Karolin Soontjens, Kirsten Van Camp, and Stefaan Walgrave, we interviewed 164 MPs (March–June 2018), of which 126 were asked about timing strategies.

2. There is considerably more research about the timing of earnings announcements by companies, often trying to *avoid* the attention of investors (see, e.g., Dellavigna & Pollet, 2009).
3. As relevant RSS-feeds were considered: "headlines," "internal affairs," "economy," "culture/media," and "politics."
4. Copyfind is available from http://plagiarism.bloomfieldmedia.com/wordpress/software/copyfind/.
5. ENA information was missing for 8 (out of 365) days. These days are not included in the calculation of the 5%-threshold and for these days the "big event" variable is set to 0.
6. We used a ceiling of 100 retweets (higher values recoded to 100), otherwise the models have difficulties to converge.

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Data Availability Statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/M4EYFO.

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data and materials are openly accessible at https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/M4EYFO.

Notes on contributors

Pauline Ketelaars is a postdoctoral researcher financed by the FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen; grantee number 12P5717N). She works at the research unit Media, Movements & Politics (M2P) in the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp.

Julie Sevenans is a postdoctoral researcher financed by the FWO (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen; grantee number 12X6218N). She works at the research unit Media, Movements & Politics (M2P) in the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp.

ORCID

Pauline Ketelaars http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9123-2939

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