Chapter 14. Elaborating and specifying the information & arena framework

Much of the existing literature on media and politics focuses on the power struggle between journalists and political actors. That is understandable as their intense relationship is an essential aspect of the daily work of both political journalists and elected politicians. Furthermore, as chapter 5 by Vliegenthart and Skovsgaard shows, politicians and journalists clearly have a different take on their mutual 'power' relationship. However, to better understand what the media actually mean for the struggle over 'who gets what, when and how', we argue that a focus on how and why political actors *use* the media is a more useful way to analyze the relationship between media and politics (see also chapter 2 by Thesen). Relying on different methods—from interviews over surveys to content analyses—drawing on empirical evidence from a broad variety of a dozen different countries and looking at very different activities politicians undertake—from taking position in press releases over asking parliamentary questions to legislating—this book examines how political actors use the news media. Overall, the basic idea that the mass media have a double function for elected political actors gets ample support from the evidence. The mass media provide information to politicians, and they form an arena that politicians need to access.

Indeed, the book presents several important cases of how politicians use the media arena to further their political goals, such as the unexpected rise of David Cameron as the leader of the Conservative party in the UK (chapter 9) and the nomination of Donald Trump as the presidential candidate of the Republican party in the US (chapter 3). Also, the chapters of this book make clear that 'ordinary' politicians in diverse democracies such as Belgium, Canada and Israel use the media to learn what is going on in society (chapter 6 and 7), and actively use this information in their parliamentary work (Chapter 8 and 12). Taken together, the chapters in this book make a strong case that the mass media indeed fulfill different (sub)functions for political actors and that the media perform the mixed role of provider of information and forming an arena for political struggle.

Simply establishing that these functions exist and that politicians use the media for their own goals was not the main aim of this book, though. Rather, our main goal is to elaborate the arena and information framework by doing two things. First, we set out to

theoretically deepen and broaden the model by thinking through its scope and applicability, by specifying how we can conceptualize 'political actors' and the media 'arena' more precisely. Second, the book also has an *empirical* ambition. In particular, we look for differences and variation among political actors in how they use the media. Which politicians employ the mass media to perform which function? In which political context does this happen more or less often? In a sense, we want to know whether a functional approach to mass media influence on politics tells us something about the distribution of power *among* political actors. In that respect we also aim to dig deeper in the precise information politicians use and the motives that lay behind their use of the media as a tool to reach political goals. Many chapters contribute to this goal as they find systematic differences between different politicians or provide more insight in why exactly politicians consume and interact with news media. In addressing the four questions we put forward in the introduction, we highlight some of the book's theoretical and empirical contributions to the information & arena framework.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL LESSONS

   1. Should the information and arena model be broadened and/or refined?

Several chapters in this book address the fundamental or conceptual aspects of the information and arena model. In particular two central concepts of our model, 'media arena' and 'political actors', have received in-depth attention.

First, related to the media arena, several chapters provide alternative, more developed conceptualizations of the *media arena*. In chapter 4, Strömbäck and Esser discuss the functional role of the media for political parties in different political arenas. Following the classic work of Sjöblom (1968), they distinguish between an internal arena, a parliamentary arena and an electoral arena. In all these arena the strategic use of the news media by parties and their leaders is seen as important to reach their political goals. In particular in the electoral arena, where the main goal is to maximize votes, the media are seen as the crucial channels to build public support. However, next to this electoral (or public) arena, the authors suggest there is a partly overlapping media arena, in which parties want to "*maximize positive publicity, while the members are journalists and editors, i.e., those who have an influence over the news media coverage*". In other words, in the media arena parties try to influence the news makers, and build long term relationships with journalists, rather than directly target the public at large.

Although using a different terminology, Davis makes a similar distinction in chapter 9. He argues that we should distinguish between the large *public arena*, where popular topics

and politicians are discussed broadly and where widely read tabloids play a central role, from a much smaller *political arena*, where the main interactions are between political elites and political journalists and only a small higher-educated part of the public is watching. In addition, Davis identifies a third, *policy arena*, where policy makers operate largely outside the public eye, and journalists play a modest role as observers.

If we translate these insights to our notion of a single media arena, we acknowledge that it is probably useful to distinguish between a more 'popular' and a more 'elite' side of the media arena. Politicians want to be both active in the elite side of the arena, trying to impress or convince the opinion makers and their colleagues. At the same time, they need, mainly for electoral reasons, to reach a larger audience in the popular or public side of the media arena. So, the media arena is not one, single arena but consists of a number of more or less segmented sub-arenas. We agree with Lawrence and Boydstun (chapter 3) that the boundaries between especially the popular side of the (news) media arena and the entertainment sector have become increasingly porous; it has become harder to distinguish news from entertainment. For the US case, they argue that politically relevant information is increasingly provided in talk shows, infotainment programs and late-night comedy. Their implicit claim is that similar things are bound to happen in other media systems as well, and that in other countries as well the underlying end goal of all media—attracting public attention—and the pressure of social media will lead to similar evolutions where news and entertainment are becoming indistinguishable.

In addition, Lawrence and Boydstun suggest to include celebrities and entertainers as *political actors* since they often also use the media to promote specific social issues or political views. This raises the question whether also political journalists can or should be conceived as a sort of political actors. Thesen (chapter 2), extensively argues that the media are clearly distinct from other political actors such as political parties, politicians or interest groups. "*Unlike for other political actors, political goals are not the primary goals of news organizations. The primary goal is professional and commercial: they make and sell news.*" Still Thesen labels journalists and news outlets as a specific sort of political actor. Not so much because they have ideological or partisan objectives (but see Brexit case; chapter 9), but rather because they constantly intervene in the political sphere and have an impact on political processes and the behavior of other political actors.

Although we largely agree we the nuanced discussion by Thesen, we believe that for conceptual clarity it make more sense *not* to label the media as a political actor. Political actors in our view have explicit political goals, something the large majority of the news

media in Western democracies have not. That being said, we acknowledge that the media is a (political) institution that works according to specific values and routines, and this institutionalized behavior has indeed a profound influence on how political actors operate. This view is supported by the interviewed journalists in chapter 5 by Vliegenthart & Skovsgaard. Journalists are well aware that they have a significant influence on politics, but clearly defuse the idea that this is the result of their own political agenda. The authors conclude that journalists are aware of their impact, but might underestimate their invisible, 'omnipresent' influence on how politicians operate. That politicians perceive so much media influence, however, might not only be a consequence of an almighty press that forces them to react, but be as much a responsibility of pro-active, ambitious politicians that are constantly exploring the opportunities to use the media to their advantage.

2. What motivates politicians to use the media?
The arena and information model suggests that politicians use the media for different reasons and goes beyond the idea that politicians are only interested in news exposure for electoral reasons. What drives politicians need to use the news media? Sevenans, in chapter 6, specifies the information function of the mass media and more in particular the active information function of the mass media. Based on a series of interviews with Belgian MPs, she shows that political actors use the media information because they want to affect policy, because they want to represent public opinion, to weaken an adversary, to elicit attention for their own person, and to increase their own policy effectiveness. Interestingly, getting into the media themselves is the reason politicians themselves mention most when asked why they reacted on media information. This shows how the information and arena functions of mass media are tightly connected. Active media information use, may lead to arena access. Sevenans also nicely disentangles the precise informative function of the mass media. The mass media can reveal new information to political actors, information they did not have before. More often, though, news media amplify existing information by making it more important and making actors act at a certain point in time. This 'amplification effect' is also a core finding of Melenhorst & Van Aelst's chapter 12 regarding legislative processes in the Netherlands. Legislators mainly *use* the information in the media to make their case stronger and to unarm adversaries. Using media information in external communication mostly signals the urgency and relevance of a problem. Both chapters also stress that politicians' motivation to do

something politically with the information from the media varies considerably. This will be further discussed when tackling questions 4 below.

3. What types of information matter most ?

The information and arena model suggests that the mass media function as an important source of information for political elites, but the current literature provides little knowledge on how pervasive the information function of the media really is, and what types of information matter most. Chapter 7 by Walgrave and colleagues clearly documents the *passive information* function of the mass media. When it comes to current affairs, politicians in three very different countries (Belgium, Canada and Israel) largely depend on the mass media to find out what is going on in society. When digging deeper in the types of information, a somewhat unexpected finding emerging from many of the chapters is that actors find the media more useful to learn about the political process itself than about societal problems and public opinion. It is remarkable to see to what extent political actors use the media to learn about themselves or, more precise, about the actions, plans or statements of competing political actors. Especially chapter 12 zooming in on the Dutch legislative process is rife with examples of how politicians say they use the media mainly to see what others are doing. Also Fawzi (chapter 13) clearly illustrates that most policy-making elites she interviewed on the issue of energy policy find the mass media most useful when it comes to information about the policy process itself. Sevenans found the same in her interviews with Belgian legislators in chapter 6. Of course, the media represents as well a measure of public opinion, but it is foremost a warning device that alerts elites about what other elites are up to. In a sense, the major role of the political information disseminated by the media leads to a kind of merger of the information and arena functions. Actor A wants to promote himself and his issue position towards the public and tries to enter the media *arena*. For actor B, the other actor's media performance represents a piece of *information*. So, in the sequential game of political actors entering and observing the media arena, the media present information to the receivers of political information while it is an arena for the senders of political information. For politicians, the most important reason to attend to and to enter the media is the political game itself.

4. How do politicians differ in their use of the information and arena function?

Although both the information and arena functions matter to some degree for all elected politicians, talking about *the* functions of the media for *the* politicians may not be a good idea.

Based on previous studies, we suggested in chapter 1 that the government-opposition divide might function as a crucial distinction. Several chapters confirm this. What gives a politician power more than anything else is being part of a government party and, even more, being a member of the cabinet itself. The media dependency study of Walgrave and colleagues (chapter 7) shows that politicians belonging to government parties and occupying powerful positions are less dependent on the mass media. High-raking politicians have other sources of information besides the media, the government apparatus is working for them and is collecting information on their behalf. This is also confirmed for the UK case were Davis (chapter 9) shows that none of the interviewed government ministers considers the media as a priority information source, and rather get their policy input from experts, officials, and all kind of lobbyists. Walgrave et al. also show that opposition actors depend more on the media than government actors which implies that the opposition uses media information more often.

The Dutch legislation study (chapter 12) adds by establishing that, by the fact that media information is mainly negative and conflictual, it is more useful for opposition actors. But not only with regard to the information encapsulated in coverage but also with regard to the use of the media as an arena for political struggle, opposition actors seem to be more keen on gaining access to the media, the interviews with Dutch legislators suggest. The reason is that government MPs are bound by inter-party agreements. They are more powerful and have a bigger impact on the eventual law than opposition actors but they are not as free as opposition members are to use the media as they see fit by entering it and clarifying their own position and attacking that of the opponents. So, powerful actors, although more *capable* of entering the media due to their higher news value—any medium would be happy to give the floor to top politicians (see also chapter 5)—are deliberately *restricting* their own use of the media arena. They consider media appearances as a risk that may imperil the successful passing of the law. It may jeopardize the delicate balance they have struck with other government parties and backfire.

That the power or government and opposition role of politicians is a relevant distinguisher of which politicians use the media for what, is also the main message of the Danish parliamentary question chapter 11. Based on a longitudinal design including several government terms, Green-Pedersen and colleagues suggest that government actors are more or less 'forced' to enter the media arena to counter the negative news (planted in the media, or at least highlighted, by the opposition). The sequence they sketch goes as follows: bad news leads to the opposition reacting in the media using the media information to attack the government; as a consequence, members of the government enter the media to correct the

negatively biased tone and trying, and succeeding, to temporarily reestablish a more neutral tone towards them and putting policy success and good performance in the spotlight. This finding is compatible with that in the Dutch legislation chapter in the sense that government actors, although capable of entering the media at any time, do not always wish to dominate the media arena unless they feel obliged to do so rebalance a negative news situation. Both chapters emphasize that government actors enter the media arena selectively, when they feel they have to correct a negative image.

In sum, several chapters confirm that the opposition-government divide, and the related power position of politician is a key factor explaining variation in media use. But it is not the only factor. First, multiple studies in this book refer to the notion of *specialization,* as an important mediator of media use by politicians. Chapter 7 of Walgrave and colleagues show that not only powerful politicians, but also specialized politicians, are less in need of media information. Due to their specialized network of information, media messages about their topic of specialization are less informative for them, and do not contain a lot new information. That *specialization* limits politicians' use of the media as a source of information, also strongly comes to the fore in chapter 12 regarding legislative processes in the Netherlands. Based on an extensive and fine-grained reconstruction of the coming about of three laws in the Netherlands, this study makes it very clear that, with regard to the content of the bill and the problem it tackles, the mass media do hardly contain any new information for the specialized politicians who are working on a specific law or who are trying to prevent it from being passed. Other sources provide information that is much more tailored to the actual legislative process. There is some new information encapsulated in media coverage, though, with regard to public opinion and with regard to what other politicians are saying. That is why even specialized politicians do still monitor the media closely. Most importantly, even if the degree of new substantive information they get from the media is very limited, these specialists do *use* the information in the media to make their case stronger and to unarm adversaries. Using media information in external communication mostly signals the urgency and relevance of a problem.

The comparative chapter 10 by Dalmus, Hänggli & Bernhard as well further reinforces the idea that specialization may fundamentally affect a political actor's relationship with the media. In contrast to the previous two chapters that underpinned the role of specialization for *individual* actors, the study of Dalmus et al. does address the matter of specialization at the level of *collective* actors, in this case: political parties. They investigate what the topics are that are addressed by parties in their press releases. Press releases are attempts to gain access

to the media agenda, they highlight the exact issues the parties want to promote their position on in the media arena. Drawing on evidence from four countries, the chapter finds that issues ownership is a significant driver of issue attention in press releases. In a sense, issue ownership is the party-level equivalent of specialization on the level of individual politicians. Parties own an issue if they consider this issue to be particularly important and are committed to it. In other words, when parties are owners of an issue they are 'specialized' in that issue. Dalmus and colleagues thus establish that the specialization of an actor in an issue, makes this actor more willing to enter the media arena with regard to that issue. The actor in question may not be learning a lot from the media, there may not be much information in the media coverage of the issue one is specialized in, but that does not prevent the political actor to be especially keen on talking about the issue in the media.

Apart from specialization and power, the functional use of the mass media appears to be influenced by *personal characteristics*. In chapter 3 Lawrence and Boydstun argue that the media might be more important for the electoral success of celebrity politicians than of ordinary politicians. The exceptional case of Donald Trump suggests that this kind of politicians not only uses the arena function of the media more, but also the information function. Even as a president Trump appears to frequently use the media as a source of information, as is shown by his many references to specific news outlets and programs. With regard to the active information function, Chapter 8 by Zoizner and colleagues must be mentioned. In an original study in Israel bringing in individual-level variables that moderate the agenda-setting effect of the media—the effect of media information on the topics Israeli politicians address in parliament—this chapter examines whether individual factors such as personal attitudes have an impact on responsiveness to media information. The strictly individual *role definitions* politicians adopt, in this case: whether they think of themselves as representing their party or public opinion, has a significant effect on whether media information is actively used in parliament.

So, media use is not only a matter of structural factors such as specialization and power but also of subjective and personal attributes of individual politicians. Finally, we find some prove that the *real world* matters as well. The comparative press release chapter 10 by Dalmus et al. underpins the importance of what happens in reality. If something dramatic happens—a scandal, a disaster, a terrorist attack—political actors react and want to show the public that they care, and that they have the best solution to fix the problem. They vie to enter the media arena to do so. In operational terms, the study shows that focusing events significantly trigger attempts of parties to address the issue in the media. In other words, the

way political actors use the mass media does not only differ across actors structural features and their personal features, it also varies *over time* depending on real world events.

Looking at politicians' differential use of the mass media as a source of information or as a political arena shows that the mass media do indeed perform both functions but that the contingency of the process is enormous. Yes, information and arena matter for politicians but not always or for every political actor to the same extend. Using a functional approach to dig deeper into the role of the media for political actors as most chapters in this book have done, leads to a complex picture of how political elites use the media. There is variation at different levels and there are a lot of moving parts. It seems too early to formulate generic claims about which actors use the mass media with what purpose at what time. The functional framework seems promising; the chapters in this book show that it can produce a nuanced and rich account of the relationship between politics and media.

A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR MEDIA & POLITICS

In discussing the answers to the four questions put forward in the introduction it is clear this book made a significant contribution to the literature. However, at the same time many other issues have been hardly toughed upon or the insights so far are very premature. Therefore in this last part we suggest four additional questions that require additional scholarly attention. We believe all four can be seen as paths or challenges for further study that could contribute to the media and politics literature and improve the usefulness of the information and arena model.

1. How do system characteristics influence the role the media plays for politicians?

In line with a more general complaint often heard with regard to the state of the discipline of political communication more broadly, studies that deal with the relationship between media and politics at the elite level are seldom truly comparative (but see Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014; Vliegenthart & Mena Montes, 2014). Also this book does not tell us a lot about how political system differences affect how politicians go about using the media to pursue their goals. Sure, there were chapters that presented comparative evidence. Vliegenthart & Skovsgaard's chapter 5 on politicians and journalists' perceptions of media power, for instance, drew on evidence from Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Chapter 7 on media dependency presented evidence from Belgium, Canada and Israel. And, Dalmus and colleagues' chapter 10 presented comparative evidence about France, Germany, UK and Switzerland. But none of these chapters really examined country differences. Even on

the contrary, in these three chapters the countries were just used to generate more observations and to test the robustness of the findings. In that sense, although presenting comparative evidence, the logic of these chapters was not really comparative. So, what is severely lacking is an account of how political system differences affect the way political actors use the news.

Still, some of the non-comparative chapters in the book implicitly suggest that specific country characteristics are at play. For instance, chapter 12 about Dutch legislation emphasized how government MPs' freedom to engage with the media and to enter the media arena to promote themselves and especially their or their party's point of view with regard to a piece of legislation under scrutiny was severely hampered by inter-party agreements in the coalition government. This opens the floor to opposition MPs to fill the void and to use the media as a forum to convey their anti-government stances. Obviously, such constraints on government MPs to use the media arena are much less in place in countries with majoritarian systems and one-party governments.

Chapter 3 about the shifting borders between entertainment and news in the US, draws attention to the differences across media systems. Maybe more than anywhere else, the US offer an example of blurring boundaries between news and entertainment media, for example testified by an increasing predominance of entertainment values in news programs and a decreasing and fragmented news market. Such a situation offers plenty of opportunities for entertaining politicians or for political entertainers to leverage the media arena, be it in news or in pure entertainment shows, to gain political popularity. In many European countries, the borders between entertainment and news have not become so porous (yet), and it is still harder to imagine that a person mainly known from entertainment TV would use the media to make it to being the leading politician. So, not only the political system affects how political actors use the media, also the media system is a country may deeply influence the opportunities (would be) politicians get to sell themselves and their points of view.

A similar, implicitly comparative lesson may be drawn from chapter 12 about Danish questioning. These authors conclusion that the government enters the media arena to counteract negative news (fueled by the opposition) is conditioned by the type of media at stake. The chapter is based on data from the Danish public radio, a media outlet known for its objective and non-biased reporting and for the absence of partisan bias. The possibility of political actors to enter the media arena essentially depends on media outlets willing to let a certain actors pass the gates. In systems in which news media tend to become more biased along partisan lines, access to the news media may not only be determined by the power of

the actors at stake, but also by the match between a political actor's ideological leaning and the partisan preferences of the medium in question.

In sum, we believe that there two ways forward: truly comparative studies that compare how politicians use the media in different systems, or country studies that more explicitly discuss their findings in a broader perspective.

2. Are politicians different than other political actors in using the media?

The chapters in this book corroborate the idea that politicians use the media for information and as an arena and there are differences between politicians and through time in how intense and for what politicians make use of the media. The question arises whether politicians are any different from other elites in their interaction with the media. Maybe the chapters just point to how elites more *generally* use the media and there is no difference between elected politicians and other public officials. Fawzi's chapter 13 directly contradict this idea. Based on a survey among policy elites involved in German energy policy making, she highlights that elected politicians are more intense and different users of the media. Compared to, for instance, civil servants, NGO leaders, and interest group representatives, elected politicians are more keen media users, they are more active social media users, they spent more time on media work (e.g. writing press releases), they use the media more as a source of information about public opinion, and they use the media more as a way to promote their solution to problems and to affect the political agenda. Fawzi concludes that for elected politicians, the arena function of the mass media is more important than their information function, while the opposite applies to outsider political actors such as NGO personnel and interest group leaders; for them the information function prevails.

Clearly there seem to be something special to the relationship between elected politicians and the news media that does not apply to other actors that are involved in policy making process. We believe future studies could use the information and arena framework to study how other political actors use the media to reach their goals, and if possible, compare their behavior with elected politicians.

3. How do new media affect the information and arena function of the mass media?

This book focused exclusively on the role of the mass media, and the traditional news media in particular. This raises of course the question whether these insights hold in an ever more digital media environment where social media play an ever more central role in how people

consume news. Although, we lack a clear answer at this point, we strongly believe that the social media boom can be studied from an information and arena perspective. Although many studies show that new media are to a large extent an echo-chamber of the classic news media (e.g. Boczkowski, 2010), and that in most Western democracies a majority of the public still consumes most of its political news via the traditional media (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014), it is stimulating to think about how the new media might fit into the information and arena model proposed in this book. Social media form a source of information for politicians, for example because experts and opinion leaders are active on Twitter. This may make the traditional news media less vital as a source of information for politicians. Problems, public opinion, and information about other actors directly reach politicians, without mediation by the traditional news media. The arena function of the traditional news media as well may be affected by the social media revolution (e.g. Jungherr, 2014). Politicians may be able to bypass the traditional news and to communicate with the public, or at least with the most engaged and niche segments of it, in a more direct way without having to compete with their adversaries or negotiate with news makers. In sum, we argue that social media can be studied from the same integrated perspective and, maybe more interestingly, that the social media boom has affected political actors' dependency on the traditional media for information and arena purposes.

4. How does the information and arena model relate to existing media and politics theories
We believe there is a possibility to connect the information and arena framework of how politicians use the media more explicitly with existing theories on media and politics. Multiple chapters in this book linked their study with the literature on the mediatization of politics and political agenda-setting. Although both theories focus initially on the influence of the media on political actors, the evidence presented in this book pushes scholars to devote more attention to the opposite side of the relationship. If politicians follow the issues in the news (agenda-setting), or adapt to the rules of the media logic (mediatization), the following question should be how and why do they do so? And what are the consequences for the distribution of power among different political players? (see also Chapter 2 by Thesen). We hope that the information and arena model can serve as a source of inspiration for scholars that use medialization and political agenda-setting and provide a more complete view on the media-politics relationship. At the same time, our model on how political actors use the media

might benefit from insights from literature on political public relations and strategic news management as suggested by Strömbäck and Esser (chapter 4).

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