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Media Storms:
Mechanisms, Conducive Factors, and Effects

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VOORWOORD

Na meer dan acht jaren trek ik binnenkort de deur van de Meerminne achter mij dicht. In 2008 wandelde ik binnen om het ENA te depanneren. Twee maanden werden acht leuke, leerrijke en inspirerende jaren. Doctoreren is nooit helemaal de bedoeling geweest en toegegeven,… het was ook niet helemaal mijn ding: te traag, te weinig dynamiek, te veel schrijven en herschrijven, in het Engels dan nog bovendien. Mijn parcours was vaak hobbelig en het feit dat dit doctoraat af is heb ik alleen maar te danken aan de mensen die langs mijn parcours stonden: begeleiders en supporters van het eerste uur.

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Gentbrugge, november 2016

INTRODUCTION

Media attention typically goes up and down as issues come and go. At a given point in time, some topics might be on the media agenda, just a little later these same topics may have edged out of the limelight until, after a while, they attract renewed attention. Yet, in some instances, media seem to give disproportionately high attention to an issue, and do so quite suddenly. Many people in Europe will remember some of last year's stories, such as the refugee crisis or the Paris Attacks, that dominated the news for days or even weeks. In cases like these, an issue attracts an enormous amount of news coverage, blowing away most other issues from the front page. Most news outlets pour attention upon the problem or event, devoting several news items to it, and coverage tends to be ubiquitous across media outlets. Sometimes the attention makes perfect sense, given the nature of the issue or event. In other cases, the event or issue at the centre of the buzz is very similar to other events/issues that somehow do not receive the same attention. In any case, news outlets often become suddenly and strongly riveted to an issue or event. This phenomenon of sudden high media attention to an issue or event is called a media storm.

This thesis aims to investigate media storms in depth. In the first part, I define and operationalize them. In the second part, I look at the mechanisms, conducive factors and effects of media storms. What connects both parts is the overall research question: "*in what ways do media storms differ from non-storm coverage*?" In each chapter, the goal is to systematically compare storms with non-storms. Such a comparison between media storms and non-storms is the best way to make valid claims about media storms. Are media storms really a different kind of animal? I argue that they are, and I use a systematic comparison between storms and non-storms, both in terms of content and in terms of effects, to support my argument.

WHY MEDIA STORMS MATTER

For most people, and for many political actors, mass media coverage is the most important source of information about what goes on in the world. Via the media, citizens and elites alike learn what the current problems are and how severe and pressing they are. To a large extent, news consumers operate under a "correspondence assumption": they assume that the amount of media coverage devoted to a problem corresponds with the importance of that problem (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995, p. 372). Agenda-setting studies show that when media outlets increase their attention to an

issue, public and politics follow suit: citizens care more about the issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and political elites jump on the bandwagon (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

Why should we care about media storms? Beyond the general importance of levels of news coverage regarding the information the audience gets, these explosive and high-level surges in news coverage have the potential to be even more influential. Surges in media attention can prompt important changes in public perceptions and governmental actions toward underlying policy issues, such as capital punishment (Baumgartner, De Boef, & Boydstun, 2008), AIDS research (Pollock, 1994) or police reform (Walgrave & Varone, 2008). Peak media attention also provides opportunities for political actors to highlight their stances while 'riding the wave' (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006).

Beyond these specific cases, media storms hold a broader significance for public policy and public opinion. Policy and opinion do not evolve in a linear fashion. Policies tend to be fairly stable until, for varying reasons, a sudden spike in political attention leads to dramatic policy shifts (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Public opinion, specifically the issues given priority by the public, evolve explosively as well, with periods of stability broken by sudden strong fluctuations in what people care about (see for example: Wlezien, 2005). These patterns can be traced back to general theories of human information-processing. Most people, both citizens and elites, tend to neglect most incoming information about issues most of the time, until a threshold is overcome and they abruptly turn to the problem and devote a lot of attention to it for a brief period, before turning to another pressing issue.

Media storms do not only affect the public and politics, but also the media itself. Media attention is a zero sum game (Zhu, 1992). So, when a media storm is going on, there simply is not enough space for another storm or even for low-level coverage of as many policy problems as usual. Media storms thus push other issues aside. This also has implications for the information citizens receive from the news, particularly when a storm about a less policy relevant issue is raging. A storm surrounding the Royal wedding of Kate and William, for example, means that the public gets less information about policy-relevant issues.

But are media storms then bad for society? On one hand, as explained in the latter paragraph, media storms push other issues aside. But on the other hand, this also means that media storms are elaborated extensively by the news media. For a substantial period, the public gets a lot of information about a particular new story. Because media outlets cannot bring an identical news item twice, the story will be explained based on different viewpoints or angles, and by different sources. The result is that the public is better informed. Besides, often the public demands more news

coverage about the storm. During the interviews I conducted for this thesis, several news editors indicated that they bring the news story as long as they have the feeling that they have to feed the "news hunger" of the public. Several news editors indicated that they bring the news story as long as they have the feeling that they have to feed the "news hunger" of the public. So, what is the best? Being informed superficially about a wide range of issues and events or knowing a limited amount of stories in depth? I will come back to these normative questions in the concluding chapter.

Studying Media Storms: Concept and Operationalization

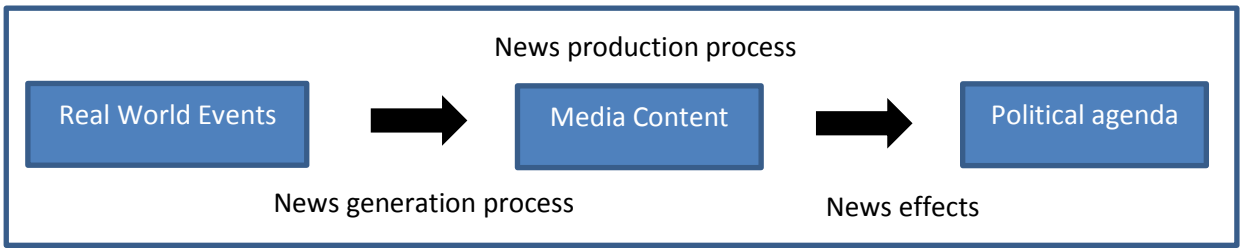
So far, media storms have received little scholarly attention. Previous authors have laid the groundwork for thinking about the media storm phenomenon, but there is room for advancement. Scholars have used different terms—media-hype, news wave, political wave and media tsunami—to talk about similar but not identical phenomena. All these previous conceptualizations share a common core, and they all have their merit and help to isolate the distinctive properties of surges in media attention. Nevertheless, I will develop a more generic concept based on the common parts of the previous definitions. On top of that, I will attempt to do this in a much more systematic way than previous research has done. I will create a definition based on four measurable criteria (size, duration, explosiveness and "multi-medianess"). Contrary to previous studies that relied on case-studies (Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Praesteker, 2009), I will develop an operationalization, based on these criteria, to systematically detect media storms over an eight-year period.

In sum, previous studies have focussed on defining the concept but have not done it a systematic way. The first goal of this dissertation to change our understanding of media storms from a "you know it when you see it" phenomenon to a clearly defined process. The second goal is to develop a systematic operationalization to measure media storms.

The Mechanisms, Conducive Factors and Effects of Media Storms

While the first part of this thesis focuses on the conceptualization and the operationalization of media storms, the second part aims to get a full understanding of the phenomenon. This leads me to investigate three additional questions: (1) What are the mechanisms at play? (2) Why do some stories trigger a media storm while others do not? And (3), what effects do media storms have on the political agenda? In fact, each of these questions relates to the key questions in (political) communication research. Figure 0.1 shows the classic scheme of communication research.

FIGURE 0.1: CLASSIC SCHEME OF COMMUNICATION RESEARCH



CONDUCIVE FACTORS

The first box represents the real world where events constantly occur. The news generation process ascertains that some of these real world events are picked up by the media. Applied to my thesis, the "news generation process arrow" helps to explain why some stories attract high-level and explosive attention for a certain period, while other stories are ignored. In other words, which conducive factors trigger media storms?

Every day, journalists have to make a selection of hundreds of events happening in the world and decide what gets reported. A newscast only lasts for thirty minutes and a front page only holds a handful of news items. So, there is not enough space to report every story. This means that some stories are picked up by the media, while others are neglected. There are two useful theories to explain the news generation process: gatekeeping on the one hand, and news values theory on the other (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016; Shoemaker, 1991).

Gatekeeping finds its origin in the work of psychologist Kurt Lewin, who proposed the concept to his post-World War II research on social change. Shoemaker et al. (2001, p. 233) state that 'although this research was originally not applied to the study of communication, Lewin suggested that his theory of how items are selected or not could be applied to news.' The first gatekeeping study ("Mr. Gatekeeper") applied to news was of David Manning White (1950) who investigated the reasons expressed by a news editor for accepting or rejecting a list of potential news items (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). The gatekeeping process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). To select news stories, journalists rely on routines—a set of conventions or standard operating procedures—for uncovering and reporting the news (Boydstun, 2013; Gans, 1979; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). These routines are created in response to the limited resources of the news organization and the vast amount of raw material that has to be turned into news. The job of these routines is to deliver, within time and space limitations, the most acceptable product to the consumer in the most efficient manner (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Through these procedures, countless messages are reduced to

the few that are offered in the news. Journalists and editors thus handle their gatekeeping responsibilities by relying on professionally ingrained instincts (Berkowitz, 1990).

News value theory, on the other hand, focuses on the characteristics of events or on the values attributed to those events by journalists (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). These news factors are potentially helpful in explaining which characteristics an initiating event and the subsequent news coverage should exhibit in order to trigger a media storm. In their 1965 study, Galtung & Ruge were the first to provide a systematic list of news values. To this day it is still a very influential study on news making. Ironically, Galtung and Ruge were not primarily concerned with identifying news values. As O'Neill and Harcup (2009, p. 164) argue: 'their study critiqued the reporting of three major foreign crises in the Norwegian press, and proposed some alternative approaches to reporting conflict. As part of this process they asked, "How do events become news?" It was in an effort to answer this question that Galtung and Ruge presented 12 factors that they intuitively identified as being important in the selection of news.' Since then, other scholars, such as Golding and Elliott (1979), Schulz (1982) and Harcup and O'Neill (2001) have developed similar taxonomies of news values. The basic idea behind all taxonomies is that events that score high on any number of news factors are more likely to elicit media attention. Examples of news values are unexpectedness, continuity, proximity, negativity and conflict. Although news values theory is widely cited, it is also often criticized. For example, Donsbach (2004) argues that one should also account for the psychology of news decisions made by journalists. Other scholars such as Westerståhl and Johansson (1994) state that the role of ideology cannot be underestimated (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009).

MECHANISMS

The mechanisms of media storms refer to two processes: the internal processes that cause media storms and the processes that are responsible for keeping media storms going. It is complex to exactly situate these underlying mechanisms in Figure 0.1 The first part (the process that causes storms, lowering news thresholds) is covered by the first arrow and can be explained by the literature about news production, news organization and routines (Becker & Vlad, 2009; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1973). The second part (the process that ensures the storms stay on the agenda) is situated within the media content box.

EFFECTS

The effects arrow between media content and the political agenda, in Figure 0.1, can be explained by political agenda-setting theory. This theory tries to describe and explain how political actors (government, parliament, political parties, etc.) determine their priorities, give attention to, or ignore

issues (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1971; Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Generally, issues that are more salient on the media agenda also rank higher on the political agenda. The existence of the political agenda-setting impact of the mass media has been confirmed by different scholars in a variety of countries (see e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). Media coverage can and sometimes does lead to parliamentary action. However, the extent to which the media agenda affects the political agenda depends on the circumstances. In recent years, different studies have addressed the "contingency" of the political agenda-setting effect (for an overview see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). They have shown that, for instance, the type of media outlet matters: newspapers have more influence on parliament than television news (Walgrave et al., 2008). The news content plays a role as well: bad news has a larger chance of generating political reaction than good news (Baumgartner, Jones, & Leech, 1997; Thesen, 2013). And some political actors and agendas are more sensitive to media influences than others. For example, opposition parties react more to the media than government parties (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011). In this thesis, I investigate whether media storms are also a factor determining the political agenda.

CONTRIBUTIONS

SYSTEMATIC COMPARISON BETWEEN STORMS AND NON-STORMS

The main goal of this thesis is to systematically compare media storms with non-storms/non-storm coverage. This is the only way to really get a full understanding of the phenomenon. There is some literature about media storms and similar concepts available. But all of these studies fail to make the comparison between storms and, despite this being so crucial. For example, Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien (2008; 2009) study five media-hypes about scandals in elderly care in Denmark. They develop an analytical framework to find possible effects where they distinguish between the national vs. local level and immediate vs. diffuse influence. Then this framework is tested for five hypes, finding an effect on the local level only. But are we sure these findings are specific to media-hypes? Maybe, a similar story—one which did not generate as much attention as to be qualified as a media-hype—would generate similar findings? I argue that it is not possible to talk about the effects of media-hypes if you do not compare a positive case (media-hype) with a negative case (ordinary story) about the same topic. Another example is the work of Wolfsfeld & Shaefer(2006) who study political waves in Israel from an actor-perspective. They find that individual traits, such as charismatic communication skills, help politicians to initiate a wave. But maybe these individual traits are important in general and not a specific conducive factor to initiate political waves.

Studies that claim to teach us something about media storms without offering a systematic comparison with non-storms, might generate wrong—or at the very least—incomplete findings. In the next chapters, I systematically compare media storms with non-storms regarding mechanisms, conducive factors and effects. In doing so, I find support for the claim that media storms differ from non-storm coverage.

TURN A "YOU KNOW IT WHEN YOU SEE IT" PHENOMENON INTO A CLEARLY DEFINED AND OPERATIONALIZED CONCEPT

Most people are able to recognize a media storm when they see one. In popular parlance the term "media storm" is used mostly to express the exaggerated attention that media outlets pay to an issue or event or, when a person gets "into the eye of a storm", to indicate a smear campaign against someone. News media themselves also often talk about media storms and use the same connotation. In 2015, 147 news items appeared in Flemish newspapers with the key word "media storm".[1] An example of a such a news item, that can illustrate the way the term is used by the news media, is a story about a primary school principal who "got into the eye of a media storm" because he refused to register children with parents who were active in the Flemish-nationalist political party N-VA. Accordingly, previous research has dealt with media storms or related concepts in an intuitive way. The term "media-hype"—as used by Vasterman (2005) and Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009)—suggests that the media are somehow responsible for the "exaggerated" coverage; the word hype bears the connotation that media attention is out of sync with reality. Moreover, these scholars identified their cases (about senseless violence and elderly care) simply as media-hypes, as if they are some kind of self-evident phenomena, without identifying criteria to clearly define and operationalize them first.

Therefore, my first aim is to systematically conceptualize media storms as a distinct process. Previous authors, such as Vasterman (2005) and Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009), have laid the groundwork for thinking about the media storm phenomenon, but there is room for advancement. Second, little effort has been made to examine their empirical operationalization nor to test whether media storm coverage differs from other coverage. In order to make headway toward explaining the mechanisms, conducive factors and effects of media storms, it needs to be made clear exactly how the concept is defined and measured in the first place. I therefore aim to turn media storms from an intuitive phenomenon into a clearly operationalized media process. Third, extant studies have focused on single issues (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995;

[1] Key word search was done in Go Press. Newspapers: De Standaard, De Morgen, De Gazet Van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, De Krant Van West Vlaanderen, Metro NL en De Tijd. Date range: 1/01/2015 to 1/01/2016. Key word: "mediastorm"

Vasterman, 2005). Scholars have not yet investigated whether the storms they identified are generic phenomena applicable to other issues. I test this by analysing media storms in three different news outlets, taking account of all issues over an eight-year period.

GETTING A FULL UNDERSTANDING OF MEDIA STORMS: MECHANISMS, CONDUCIVE FACTORS AND EFFECTS

Not much is known about the mechanisms, conducive factors and effects of media storms. The mechanisms of media storms were only addressed by authors such as Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) and Vasterman (2005). With mechanisms, I refer to the internal processes that lead to media storms and that cause them to remain on the agenda. Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) found that key events lower the media gatekeeping thresholds for similar later events and for "after" events. In other words, news outlets temporarily employ less strict criteria for newsworthiness. Imitation is also identified as a mechanism of media storms. Scholars refer to self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005); in other words, imitation. Both mechanisms—lowering thresholds and imitation—have been theoretically elaborated, but previous research did not empirically address them.

Some authors define characteristics of media storms. In fact, these are the conducive factors that determine their presence in the first place. These factors might help to explain why some stories trigger a media storm. According to Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009), a story that can be framed in multiple ways is more likely to trigger a storm. They also point out that the story should be suitable for public debate. Other authors write about the importance of news values. Since agenda space is scarce, a story should be very newsworthy to push other issues aside (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006).

Research on the effects of media storms is also scarce. Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009) address the influence of media-hypes on politics with a case study about elderly care in Denmark. Together with Stefaan Walgrave, Rens Vliegenthart and Amber Boydstun, I look at the effect of media storms on congressional hearings in the US, for multiple issues and over a longer period of time (1996-2006). In this study we argue that media storms function as a kind of key threshold for catching political attention (Walgrave et. al, 2016).

Wrapping up, empirical evidence about the mechanisms, conducive factors and effects of media storms is limited. Besides, most studies did not systematically compare media storms and non-storms. To tackle my main research question (in what ways do media storms differ from non-storms)

I systematically investigate the differences between storms and non-storms regarding the conducive factors, mechanisms and effects.

Mixed design

I chose to address the research question with a mixed method design, combining quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell (2013, p. 203), using a mixed method design has several advantages since it combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. More insight is to be gained from the combination of both than by either by itself.

I use a quantitative approach to operationalize media storms, relying on three large datasets of newspaper and television news coded according to issue codes. The key idea is to develop a procedure to detect media storms in three different media outlets based on an operationalization of four criteria (size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess", see Chapter 1 and 2).

Two of the three empirical chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) are based on quantitative analyses using the identified media storms. The other empirical chapter (Chapter 3, on mechanisms) is based on a qualitative approach. Specifically, I use semi-structured interviews with general news editors and news managers in Belgium. These interviews add value to the thesis, in particular because they allow to disentangle the mechanisms more precisely than a large N-dataset would. These underlying dynamics are hard to grasp via a quantitative analysis. Throughout the thesis I also use quotes from these interviews to support my theoretical arguments and to illustrate quantitative findings. Sometimes a quote says more than three stars.

Data Collection

In this thesis, I examine media storms in three different news outlets in Belgium: *De Standaard*, a leading quality newspaper, and the newscasts of the two main Flemish broadcasters: *VRT* (public broadcaster) and *VTM* (commercial broadcaster). The data span 2001 to 2008. The front page of *De Standaar*d was gathered and coded according to the CAP (Comparative Agendas Project) codebook. The CAP codebook is based on the American Policy Agendas Codebook developed by Baumgartner and Jones and contains 24 major topic categories (e.g., education, health, defence) and several sub-topics or issues within each major category. For television, I had two datasets at my disposal: the newscasts of *VRT/VTM* (2001-2008) gathered and coded by the CAP project and the newscasts coded by the Steunpunt Media, former Electronic News Archive, which started in 2003 and are up to date, but are coded according to a different codebook. My choice was a trade-off between comparable data (coded using the same codebook) or more recent data. In order to compare between news outlets, it is necessary to code the three outlets by the same codebook. For this reason I chose to

work with CAP data. So, this procedure identifies media storms in three media outlets (*De Standaard, VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS*) that are coded with the same CAP codebook and range from 2001-2008.

Table 0.1 gives an overview of the different datasets and methods that are used. In Chapter 2, I use the front page of *De Standaard* and the newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM* to identify media storms, and throughout this book I use these media storms in the analyses. However, in Chapter 4 (conducive factors) I only use the media storms identified in *De Standaard*; and in Chapter 5 (effects) the media storms of the three outlets are used but I exclude the storms about Government Operations. The detailed explanation can be found in the corresponding chapters.

For some chapters additional data work and coding is done. Chapter 4 (conducive factors) and Chapter 5 (effects) make use of an analysis on the story-level. In both chapters I randomly select a sample of non-storms, in order to compare media storms with non-storms. Chapter 4, which examines the conducive factors that trigger media storms, also requires in-depth media coding of news items. In order to test the political effects of media storms (Chapter 5), I use an additional dataset with parliamentary data (coded according the same codebook as the media media).

TABLE 0.1: OVERVIEW OF THE DATA AND THE EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS

Chapter	Approach	Data
Ch. 2: Operationalization	Quantitative	Three news outlets (2001-2008): • Front page – Front Section of *De Standaard* (N= 17,390 news items) • Newscasts of *VRT* (N= 55,274 news items) • Newscasts of *VTM* (N= 57,474 news items)
Ch. 3: Mechanisms	Qualitative	Sixteen semi-structured interviews with chief editors and news managers in two waves: • Nine interviews with chief editors (summer 2013) • Seven interviews with general editors and news managers (March 2016, after the Brussels Bombings that took place on 22 March 2016)
Ch. 4 Conducive factors	Quantitative	Front page – Front Section of *De Standaard* (2001-2008) 28 storms vs. 28 randomly selected non-storms
Ch. 5 Effects	Quantitative	*De Standaard, VRT, VTM* 36 storms vs. 36 randomly selected non-storms Parliamentary Data (mentions and actions during plenary meeting of De Kamer, Federal Parliament)

GETTING THINGS CLEAR: DEFINING MEDIA STORMS, NON-STORMS AND STORIES

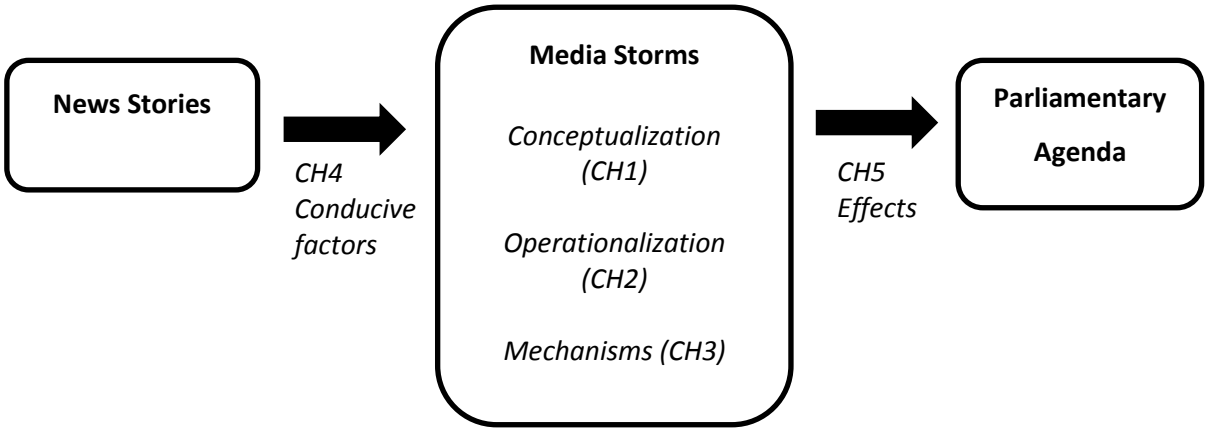
It is important to clearly define the key concepts that will be used throughout the thesis. The most important concept of course, is a "media storm". A media storm can be defined as an explosive increase in news coverage of a specific issue or event constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple news outlets. Crucial in this definition are four criteria: size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess". In the next chapter I carefully explain how I came to this definition and to these criteria. In Chapter 2, I operationalize media storms and then compare media storm with non-storm coverage. Non-storm coverage contains all news items of the total news agenda except for the items that belong to media storms. I thus make use of a simple dichotomy: media storm (coverage) vs non-storm (coverage).

In the empirical chapters (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) I analyse media coverage on the story-level. A "news story" is the total number of individual news articles/items covering one time- and place-specific event. For example, on June 24th 2016,*De Standaard* had two different stories on the front page: a story about "Brexit"—containing three different news items about the results of the referendum—and a story about the number of road fatalities in Flanders covering just one news item. The story about Brexit probably was covered on the next day's front page as well. In that case, the news items about Brexit in that newspaper would be considered to be part of the same story. A news story can be a media storm—if the news story meets the storm criteria—or a non-storm, meaning that the amount of news coverage that is devoted to the story does not meet the criteria to be classified as a storm. The Brexit story is an example of a media storm, the story of road fatalities in Flanders an example of a non-storm.

The difference between non-storm coverage (used in Chapter 2) and non-storms (used in the empirical chapters) is that non-storm coverage refers to all news items of the total agenda minus the news items that are part of a media storm, while non-storms are non-storm news stories—small groups of news items that belong together (e.g. all news items about road fatalities in Flanders). All non-storms together form non-storm coverage.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

FIGURE 0.2: OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION



Chapter 1 is a theoretical chapter and discusses *what media storms are and in what ways they differ from non-storms*. First, media storms will be conceptualized. For this purpose, I use the available literature on media storms and related concepts such as media-hypes, news waves, political waves and media tsunamis (Giasson, Brin, & Sauvageau, 2010; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995; Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Praesteker, 2009; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Based on my review of the literature, I derive four criteria (size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess") to define media storms.

Chapter 2 deals with the *operationalization of media storms*. I first discuss the research setting, which is the Flemish media landscape. Second, I give more information about the datasets that are used to operationalize media storms. Third, I develop an operationalization based on three criteria: (1) duration, (2) size and (3) explosiveness and apply this operationalization to three different news outlets ("multi-medianess"). I thus offer a new, systematic method of operationalizing media storms. Fourth, I systematically compare the thematic distribution across issues for storms and non-storm coverage. Finally, I take a closer look at the identified media storms and I describe their characteristics.

Chapter 3 investigates *the underlying mechanisms of media storms and whether these mechanisms are different for media storms compared to non-storm coverage*. In other words, what happens exactly on the level of the news making process when a storm breaks? And, is this process different compared to the news making process for non-storms? From the literature, two complementary mechanisms are derived: lower gatekeeping thresholds and imitation. To illustrate these mechanisms, I rely on a qualitative dataset of sixteen semi-structured interviews with senior editors and news managers. I find evidence for the first mechanism. Lowering thresholds do explain why

media storms come about. Also regarding the second mechanism, imitation, evidence is found. News outlets look at each other, also during non-storm days. But the process of gets intensified by the presence of a media storm. Imitation explains why media storms stay on the agenda for multiple days. However, the level of imitation varies. If the event is exceptionally big, journalists tend to be focused on their own outlet and do not imitate others. The reason for this is that news editors have difficulties in estimating how "big" they should bring the story.

Chapter 4 aims to explain why some stories attract an enormous amount of explosive news coverage and stay on the media agenda for weeks, while others hit the front page for a day but disappear quickly afterwards. More specifically, I look at *conducive factors* on three levels: (1) event characteristics (2) characteristics of the news coverage and (3) agenda congestion. For the analysis, I use the media storms that I identified in Chapter 2 and I select a sample of non-storms—using the same operationalization on a lower level. I find that the "ideal story" to trigger media storm coverage is initiated by a key event, and has the potential to be framed in different ways and in a broader context.

Chapter 5 addresses the *political agenda setting effects* of media storms. While many scholars studying the phenomenon of media storms indeed speculate about the political effects of such storms, few studies have tackled the subject empirically. Moreover, studies that do address the political reactions provoked by media storms, either take a very narrow approach, focusing on one or a few cases only, or they turn to large-scale analyses. In this chapter I question whether media storms elicit more and/or different (re)action from politicians than non-storms. I hypothesize and show that media storms evoke more and different kinds of political reaction than non-storm coverage. Storms more frequently than non-storms lead to a (re)action in Parliament. Furthermore, they particularly trigger more consequential types of parliamentary reaction such as bills and mentions by the Prime Minister.

In **the concluding chapter**, I first summarize my main findings with a diagram showing an overview of all the results. Further, I reflect on the implications of media storms. I then look at media storms from both a liberal and a critical point of view, arguing that media storms are a positive phenomenon no matter which perspective you take. Then, I address the limitations of this dissertation and formulate recommendations for future research. Doing research is making choices, and I therefore also give account of the decisions I made. Specifically, I discuss the fact that I only work with three news outlets, that I do not take online and alternative media into account, the way I operationalize media storms, and the fact that I only study media storms in Belgium. I conclude with a short personal reflection on media storms.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTUALIZING MEDIA STORMS

1.1. WHAT ARE MEDIA STORMS?[2]

Most people are able to identify a media storm when they see one. They are a kind of "you know it when you see it" phenomenon. Several news editors told me that they found it very difficult to describe when exactly a media storm pops up, but all argued that they simply had a gut feeling in the news room when a media storm was breaking.[3] When media consumers cannot avoid an issue wherever they look, a media storm has occurred. Yet, to date, scholars have not agreed upon a generic conceptualization of media storms (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008, pp. 248-249). Previous work employs different terms to refer to similar but not identical phenomena. In the following section, I will briefly discuss the previous work on related concepts and outline why the term 'media storm' is more appropriate to use.

A good deal of previous work focuses on "feeding frenzies" or "media scandals". Sabato (1991, p. 6) defines a feeding frenzy as 'press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably.' Tumber & Waisbord (2004, p. 1036) call scandals an example of the personalization of politics that reveal that specific individuals have committed acts that break legal and/or moral codes. This work helps to explain why sudden spikes in media attention develop around one type of issue, but has a very narrow focus. These studies only take personalized, political stories into account, and do not account for non-personalized and/or globally interesting stories, such as 9/11 or the 2004 Tsunami (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008, pp. 248-249).

In his study about senseless street violence in the Netherlands, Vasterman (2005, p. 511) uses the concept of "media-hype", which—he says—is often used in the popular debate to condemn a kind of

[2] Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 are to a large extent based on the article "Two faces of Media Attention: Media Storm vs. Non-Storm Coverage" (Boydstun, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014) and were elaborated within a larger project about media storms and their effects with Amber Boydstun and Stefaan Walgrave.

[3] More information on the interviews (list of interviewees) can be found in Chapter 3

self-inflating media coverage, driven by sensation seeking. In his attempt to define a media-hype, he excludes criteria such as exaggeration and distortion because they are subjective. Further, he defines a media-hype as 'a media generated, wall-to-wall news wave triggered by one specific event and enlarged by a self-reinforcing process within the news production of the media.' By "media-generated", Vasterman means that the media are making the news instead of reporting it by covering similar incidents and linking them to the key events, and by reporting about thematically related news. To be considered as a media-hype, he identifies three criteria: (1) a key event, (2) a consonant news wave and (3) a sudden increase in reports on comparable cases.

Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) adopt the term "media-hype" but do not fully agree with Vasterman's definition. They argue that the difference between news "making" and news "reporting", so crucial in Vasterman's conceptualization, is empirically problematic. From a theoretical standpoint they understand that the difference between stories that are initiated by journalists and stories that are based on the reporting is theoretically clear, but argue that this difference is very hard to make in practice. These scholars believe that news-reporting stories can be easily converted to news-making stories and vice versa. That is why they opt to consider media-hypes simply as instances of very intense media coverage on a single issue. Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær show that not every event has the potential to trigger a media-hype; it must satisfy the general news values, but also contain some violation of norms, be suitable for public debate, and it must be possible for the media to cover the event from a variety of perspectives. They conclude that regarding the structure and dynamics, a media-hype should begin with a trigger event and last approximately three weeks.

Wolfsfeld and Shaefer (2006) start from an actor instead of case/issue-approach. Their main question is 'who drives the news?' They use the term 'political waves' and look at the role of political actors during such a wave. These political waves, defined as 'sudden and significant changes in the political environment characterized by a substantial increase in the amount of public attention' (p.335)—are rather operationalized as media waves, measured and driven by media attention—centred on a political issue or event. Wolfsfeld & Shaefer do not start from a case study but from a content analysis in order to identify their political waves. Their operationalization manually checks for story prominence (the wave should be front-page news), "media-wideness" (the story should appear in several newspapers), duration, and the existence of a triggering event.

Kepplinger and Habermeier (1995, p. 372) study the impact of key events in the news and discuss "news waves", referring to a short-term accumulation of reports concerning events that are similar to an initial key event. In their case studies about traffic accidents, earthquakes and AIDS, they do not

find an increase of genuine events (so, no increase in the number of HIV infections) but do register an increase of media attention (about the key events themselves, about similar and thematically related events) about these topics. So, the mass media create the impression that events accumulate—although nothing much has really changed.

Giasson and colleagues (2010, p. 380) coin the concept of a "media tsunami" referring to a succession of several waves of increasing coverage of an underlying issue. In their study about the public debate of cultural and religious diversity in Québec, they identify four conditions for a 'media tsunami': (1) the existence of a key event, (2) followed by a wave of media attention causing a public debate; (3) a period of calmness which allows the population to get used the media frame of the debate and (4) new surges of attention which are more important than the first one. They link their concept to Vasterman's media-hype, but make clear that a media tsunami needs a succession of several waves (of increasing coverage).

1.2. Criteria to Define Media Storms

All of these terms have their merit and help to isolate the distinctive properties of surges in media attention. But I think a more generic concept is needed. The term "media scandal" only refers to personalized political stories and is definitely not broad enough as a concept. Vasterman's "media-hype" suggests that the media is somehow responsible for the "exaggerated" coverage; the word "hype" bears with it the connotation that the media attention is out of sync with reality (Vasterman, 2005, p. 509). He speaks about a 'mismatch between these news waves and the real world the media are supposed to cover'. Although I argue that the driving forces of media-hypes are competition and imitation (see below), I think this should be a matter of empirical investigation rather than of definition. Some increases of attention are warranted by the facts (e.g. war) and do not constitute excessive coverage per se. Wolfsfeld and Schaefer's (2006) "political waves" are conceptually helpful, but potentially misleading in the sense that these are not in the first place *political* waves but rather *media* waves. It is the media that display heightened attention and not (always) political actors. The distinctive feature of these storms is that media, for whatever reason, devote a large amount of attention to a given issue. Kepplinger and Habermeier's (1995) concept of "news wave" does not just refer to the phenomenon of heightened media attention but more to the mechanism driving this media attention—key events affecting the subsequent news selection process—which is, again, a matter of empirical investigation rather than of definition. And Giasson et al.'s (2010) "media tsunamis" constitute, in my view, a succession of separate media surges rather than a media surge as such.

So far, scholars have not agreed upon a common term and definition. Table 1.1 gives an overview of all the studies on media storms and related concepts so far. All of these studies make use of different definitions, yet all previous conceptualizations share a common core from which I derive a definition.

TABLE 1.1: OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON MEDIA STORMS AND RELATED CONCEPTS

	Definition	Criteria (derived from definition)
Sabato (1991) *Feeding frenzy*	Press coverage attending any political *event or circumstance* where a critical *mass of journalists* leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it *intensely, often excessively*, and sometimes uncontrollably.	Event or circumstance (explosiveness) Intensity (size) Mass of journalists (multi-medianess)
Tumber & Waisbord (2004) *Political Scandal*	An example of the personalization of politics that reveal that specific individuals have committed acts that break legal or/and moral codes.	/
Vasterman (2005) *Media-hype*	A media generated, wall-to-wall *news wave* triggered by one specific event and enlarged by a self-reinforcing process within the news production of the media.	Wall-to-wall (multi-medianess) News wave (size) Key event (explosiveness)
Wien & Elmelund (2008) *Media-hype*	A wall-to-wall *news wave* triggered by one specific event and enlarged by a self-reinforcing process within the news production of the media.	Wall-to-wall (multi-medianess) News wave (size) Trigger event (explosiveness)
Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) *Political wave*	Sudden and significant changes in the political environment characterized by a substantial increase in the amount of public attention	Key event and dramatic increase in attention (explosiveness) Wave should at front page of each newspaper + in each newspaper for some days (multimedia-ness) Three days (duration)
Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) *News wave*	A short-term accumulation of reports concerning events that are similar to an initial key event	Short-term (duration) Accumulation (size) Key Event (explosiveness)
Giasson et al. (2010) *Media Tsunami*	A succession of several waves of increasing coverage of an underlying issue.	Succession of several waves (duration) Increasing coverage/Key Event (explosiveness)

(1) Size

To qualify as a media storm, the *size* of the media attention is a crucial characteristic. In a case of a media storm, a newspaper does not write just one news item about the event/issue, but several pages. Newscasts might even decide to organize an additional newscast. Table 1.1 demonstrates that several authors argue that the size of the media attention is important. Sabato (1997) states that the subject should be covered intensively, Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) talk about an accumulation of news reports and Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) note that there should be a significant change in the amount of attention. Wien & Elmelund (2008) even state that the intensity of media coverage should be the only criterion identifying media-hypes. So, media storms should take up a substantial share of the total news agenda.

(2) Explosiveness

Also, as one can see in Table 1.1, previous studies all explicitly or implicitly take the suddenness of, or the rise in, attention into account. This surge in attention is the result of the occurrence of a particular event. Previous work by Birkland (1998) and Livingston (1997) already argued that major events, especially sudden and harmful focusing events, can send news outlets into a frenzy. Authors such as Vasterman talk about a key event that is created by a new issue that did not exist before. Key events are by definition unexpected events, such as a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. Wien & Elmelund (2007) use the term "trigger event", which originally stems from Cobb & Elder (1972). Trigger events draw attention to an existing problem (e.g. increase in violent attacks in Iraq). Also forecasted events or routine events (Molotch & Lester, 1974), such as elections can lead to a sudden surge in attention because media anticipate an important event. This generates a surge in attention because of the relevance of the event; but media might also cover the event extensively because they expect that others will do the same thing. So, media storms are preceded by an initiating event that is the direct cause of the *explosive* surge of attention.[4]

(3) Duration

A media storm cannot be just a one-day blip. As can be found in Table 1.1, many definitions refer to the *duration* of the heightened attention. For example, Kepplinger and Habermeier (1995) refer to a short term peak in attention but with an implicit understanding that it will at least last a short duration (e.g. longer than a day). In the study of Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006), a political wave is only identified if it lasts for more than three days. Vasterman (2005) and Wien &

[4] A more elaborate discussion about "events" can be found in Chapter 4 where I discuss the characteristics of the initiating event as a conducive factor to triggering media storms

Elmelund (2009) demonstrate that media-hypes last for three weeks. Giasson and colleagues (2010) speak about a succession of waves, which implicitly means that their media tsunami lasts for a long period. So, media storms should stay on the agenda for a considerable amount of time.

(4) "Multi-medianess"

Finally, Table 1.1 also refers the "multi-medianess", which means that the heightened and explosive attention to an issue or event should be present in various news outlets. Sabato (1991, p. 7) writes about 'a mass of journalists' covering the same issue. Vasterman (2005, p. 511) defines a media-hype as 'a wall-to-wall news wave', by which he means that the wave should be media-wide. Some authors do not refer explicitly to the "multi-medianess" in their definition but do use it as a criterion in their operationalization. For example, in order to be identified as a political wave, Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) argue that a story should appear in various news outlets. Also Giasson et al. (2010) use simultaneous coverage in all media as one of their operationalization criteria. So, media storms should play out through multiple outlets at the same time.

Taking these four criteria (size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess") together, I thus define a media storm as *an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (issue or event) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple news outlets*.

1.3. CONCLUSION

This chapter reviewed the literature on media storms and related concepts such as media-hypes, news waves and political waves. Based on the literature, I derived four criteria. A media storm should be substantial in size; be the cause of an explosive surge in attention; should last for a considerable period; and should play out in different outlets. Putting these criteria together, I thus define a media storm as *an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (issue or event) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple news outlets.* This definition remains general, and still needs to be operationalized. In the next chapter, I will further specify the exact size, the precise degree of explosiveness, and the concrete duration and apply this to three different outlets.

CHAPTER 2: OPERATIONALIZING MEDIA STORMS

In this chapter, I firstly discuss the research setting of this thesis. This thesis is being conducted in Belgium. Specifically, I use three Flemish news outlets: the newspaper *De Standaard* and the newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM*. Secondly, I give more details about the datasets being used. I provide information on how the data were gathered and coded. Thirdly, I develop a systematic operationalization based on three criteria: size, explosiveness, and duration, and apply this operationalization to the three outlets. While I consider "multi-medianess" a full criterion of media storms, I use *all* identified storms in the empirical chapters, and not only multi-media storms (identified in at least two outlets). In other words, in the empirical chapters, I do not make a distinction between single-outlet (storms identified in only one of the three outlets) and multi-media storms (identified at least two outlets).[5] Finally, I take a closer look into the data and present a descriptive overview of the identified media storms.

2.1. RESEARCH SETTING: BELGIUM (FLANDERS)

In this thesis, I investigate media storms in Belgium. Belgium is a small, bilingual consociational democracy. The Belgian media landscape is segmented along linguistic lines; there does not exist any "Belgian" media outlet. Besides that, Flemish-speaking citizens do not consume French-speaking media and vice versa. The media landscape is thus divided into two regions: Flanders and Wallonia. In this thesis, I will focus on only Flemish media outlets. According to the media system typology of Hallin & Mancini (2004), Belgium is a "democratic corporatist country" characterized by a high newspaper circulation and strong state intervention, but with protection for press freedom. Only investigating media storms in Flanders has implications for the generalizability of this study. The results of this thesis might be comparable to other countries with a similar media system such as

[5] Taking only multi-media storms into account would drop the N significantly (from 28 storms to 13 storms in Chapter 4, and from 36 storms to 27 storms in Chapter 5). This means I would have to run regression models with a very small number of storms. I acknowledge that this decision might have an influence on my results. In the conclusion, I reflect on my results regarding the "multi-medianess" aspect.

Denmark, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. In the concluding chapter I reflect on the generalizability to other media systems.

This study focuses on two types of news outlets: newspapers and TV newscasts. In the following paragraph I first give some information on newspapers and TV outlets in Belgium and then discuss the newspaper *De Standaard* and the newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM* in more detail. When looking at the general and outlet-specific picture, I discuss them from a 2008 perspective since the data span from 2001 until 2008. Furthermore, I give a justification of my decision to study *De Standaard* only and no other newspapers.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers in Belgium were always partisan. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, media outlets and parties grew apart. The Flemish newspaper market is controlled by three big companies. In 2008, the biggest group was De Persgroep (*Het Laatste Nieuws, De Morgen* and *De Tijd*) and had a market share of 37%. The second group was Corelio (*De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad/De Gentenaar*) with a share of 34%. The third group was Concentra with a share of 29%.[6] Additionally, there are two big local newspapers (*Het Belang van Limburg* and *De Gazet van Antwerpen*) and the free daily *Metro* (CIM, 2008).

In 2008, *De Standaard* had a market share of eight percent and was only the fifth paid daily in Flanders (after *Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, De Gazet Van Antwerpen* and *Het Belang Van Limburg*). Nevertheless, it is regarded as the biggest quality newspaper in Flanders with an average daily circulation of 107,000 readers. Vliegenthart & Walgrave (2008) found that *De Standaard* has an issue agenda which is in line with the other Flemish newspapers (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*, two other "quality papers", have a much smaller market share. During the pillarization period, *De Standaard* was a Christian Democratic newspaper, linked with the Christian and the Flemish Party. Only in 1999 did *De Standaard* remove the AVV-VVK slogan from the front page. AVV-VVK means "Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christus". Removing the slogan was quite controversial and can be regarded as a symbolic action towards neutrality. In 2004, *De Standaard* changed its format from broadsheet to tabloid, which means that there is now only one news item on the front page. In the data section below, I discuss what this means for my research, since I want to identify media storms on the front page of *De Standaard*. The average reader of *De Standaard* is male, highly educated (about 60% have a college or university degree) and lives in the city. Nearly 20% of the readers are younger than 25, 63% are between 25 and 65 years old, seventeen percent of the readers are older than 65 (CIM, 2012).

[6] In 2013, Corelio and Concentra merged into one big media company Het Mediahuis.

Due to time and budget limitations, I was only able to investigate one newspaper. I acknowledge that this is a limitation, especially since "multi-medianess" is one of the criteria I specified in the definition of media storms. I would like to give a couple of considerations that led me to choose *De Standaard* over any other newspaper. *De Standaard* is one of three quality newspapers in Flanders (along with *De Morgen* and *De Tijd*) and has the largest market share of the three. Why it is relevant to select a quality newspaper (with less readers) over a more tabloid-style newspaper (with many more readers)? Looking at my three empirical chapters, the choice for *De Standaard* did not play a role in the results of the mechanisms chapter, since I relied on interviews (with news managers of different newspapers) in that section. For the political effects chapter, it is an added value that *De Standaard* is part of my dataset. This newspaper is focused on policy-relevant issues, and therefore, in my view, more appropriately placed to tackle the political effects than a more popular newspaper. For the chapter on the conducive factors of media storms, the choice of *De Standaard* could produce a bias in the results, as these factors could play out differently in other types of outlets.

TV

In 1960, the national public broadcaster (*INR/NIR*) was divided into two broadcasters: *BRT* for the Dutch speaking viewers, and *RTB* for the French speaking viewers. Although this split was a first step to regionalization, *BRT* still stood for Belgian Radio and Television. In 1991, the Flemish broadcaster changed to a more explicitly 'Flemish' name: *VRT*, short for Flemish Radio and Television (Sinardet, De Swert, & Dandoy, 2004). Shortly before that, the first commercial broadcaster, *VTM*, had entered the market. Up until the arrival of *VTM*, the television market was dominated by the public broadcaster. After the introduction of *VTM*, more commercial broadcasters such as *VT4, Kanaal 2,* and *Vitaya* were created. There are only two strong players on the duopolistic television news market: the newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM*.

The newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM* are the only newscasts on the Flemish TV market. The 7 o'clock newscast of *VRT* had an average of 900,000 viewers; *VTM* had 730,000 viewers (CIM, 2008).[7] The structural similarities, such as the total duration of the newscast, the number of news items, the structure of the newscast and the use of interviews and reporters are remarkable. An average newscast contains 22 items of on average 95 seconds; more than 90% of the items are classic TV reports (De Swert et al., 2008). The news content, in other words the distribution of attention across issues, also overlaps to a great extent. However, *VTM NEWS* spends systematically more attention to sensational issues such as crime; while *VRT NEWS* covers more hard news about issues such as

[7] These numbers are the average amount of viewers in 2008. Since then, viewer ratings have gone up.

government operations and international affairs. *VRT NEWS* also brings more foreign news; *VTM NEWS* more "soft" news such as celebrity, royalty, human interest and culture. (De Swert et al, 2008).

2.2. DATA

In this study, I examine media storms, identifying them on the front section of the leading quality newspaper *De Standaard* and in the flagship newscasts of the two most important Flemish broadcasters, *VRT* (public broadcaster) and *VTM* (commercial broadcaster). All data are part of the Belgian agenda-setting project which gathered and coded various media (newspaper and TV) and political agendas.[8] Both the *De Standaard* dataset and the *TV* dataset were coded based on the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding scheme. The original codebook was developed by Baumgartner & Jones to code policy agendas. It contains 233 hierarchically-organized subtopics or "issues" (e.g. prescription drugs, freedom of speech, alternative energy) within nineteen major policy topic codes (e.g. health, civil rights, energy). The major policy code "macro economics" (category one), for example, has subtopics such as "inflation, prices & interest rates (subcategory 101)" or "unemployment rate (subcategory 102)". For media coding the original CAP codebook was expanded to 24 major issue codes (adding fires & accidents, weather etc.). Using established CAP guidelines, each story was attributed a single issue code based on the *primary* issue under discussion. Inter-coder reliability was sufficient, even at the fine-grained subtopic level. The reliability estimates are based on the double coding of a set of news items (75 for *De Standaard*, 540 for TV) coded by the master coder on the one hand and by one of the six main coders of the database on the other hand. On major topic level, the Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.78 for *De Standaard*, 0.77 for TV. On minor topic level: the Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.64 for De Standaard and 0.66 for TV.[9]

For *De Standaard*, I only take the front page into account. In March 2004, the *De Standaard* shifted to tabloid format. Since then, *De Standaard* has only one formal front-page news item. After this point I use the entire 'front section', which consists of the first three pages containing the main news items of the day and short intros of main news items in the other sections. On average, *De Standaard* front section features six to seven news items. For television news, I take the full newscast into account. The television news contains on average 22 items and has a particular structure. It starts with the headlines of the news, then covers domestic and international news and ends invariably with the

[8] The data was gathered and coded by the Belgian agenda setting team (Jeroen Joly, Tobias Van Asssche, Brandon Zicha, Stefaan Walgrave and myself) supported by a team of ten student coders. The datasets are publicly available and can be downloaded from the website of the Comparative Agendas Project. www.comparativeagendasproject.net

[9] On major topic level; for *De Standaard*: percent agreement = 79.5%, for TV: percent agreement = 78.1%, On minor topic level; for *De Standaard*: percent agreement = 65%, for TV: percent agreement = 66.9%.

large block of sports news (nearly 15% agenda share). Since I am mainly interested in policy relevant storms, I decided to remove sports from both datasets. I thus use two datasets: the front page section of the *De Standaard* (N= 17,139) and the complete seven o'clock news of the two main Flemish broadcasters *VRT NEWS* (N=55,275) and *VTM NEWS* (N= 57,475).

For *De Standaard*, only the two first paragraphs of each news item were coded. For TV, every news item is coded based upon one sentence that summarizes the news item.[10] Coders have thus not watched the news broadcasts themselves – codes are based on the brief summary of the item only.

For example:

> *"ENERGY – CONSUMPTION: Belgian families have consumed 10% more energy during the past week."*
>
> *"PHILIPPINES – HOSTAGE: An attempted coup d'état, including a hostage-taking in a luxurious hotel, has been committed in Manila, the capital of the Philippines. The offenders were mutinous soldiers demanding the resignation of president Arroyo."*

For *De Standaard*, all news items were manually coded. The TV coding was partly manually and partly automatically coded. For TV, first, around half of the items were manually coded. Those news items were used as input for the supervised machine learning (SML) procedure. The basic idea behind SML is that the computer learns from the manually coded news items to predict the issue categories for other news items. In this technique the computer determines the mapping of textual features in classes by building a statistical model on manually coded data.[11] Based on a learning set of human coded items, the computer was trained to perform automatic coding on a set of items. From those items, the 20% least reliably coded items (as indicated by the computer) were recoded manually and added as training to the computer algorithm. This procedure was repeated until all items had been coded. From the final dataset, 62% of all items were coded by humans – leaving 38% to be coded automatically.

This dataset fits perfectly with the aim of my study: to systematically operationalize and detect media storms. Since the data spans an eight-year period (2001-2008) and are coded on a very

[10] The company Auxipress, which is a media agency that mainly works for companies that want to track what is being said and written about them in the media, delivered us a one sentence-summary of all news items (2001-2008). Based on this summary we coded the TV news items.

[11] In concrete terms, we made use of a combination of Maximum Entropy and Support Vector Machine models. More technical information on the specific approach we used can be found in the doctoral thesis of Van Atteveldt (2008) and in a specific memo on this approach applied to our data (van Atteveldt & Van Assche, 2010).

detailed level (the data are coded by minor topic), I am able overcome the limitations of previous studies. I do not need to scan all news items in order to identify media storms. Applying the three operationalization criteria on this dataset automatically generates a list of subtopic/week combinations in which a media storm took place. The only thing to be done after applying the operationalization is to identify the real stories behind the subtopic/week combinations. I will give more descriptive information about the data in the section below.

2.3. Operationalizing Media Storms

Previous work has given little effort to develop a systematic operationalization of the phenomenon of media storms. Table 2.1 gives an overview of the studies about media storms and related concepts and presents the method and data they use. As the table indicates, most are based on a case study of a particular issue, such as senseless violence (Vasterman, 2005), elderly care (Wien & Elmelund, 2009), or the debate on religious and cultural diversity (Giasson et al. 2010). These studies consider these cases to be a media-hype or media-tsunami without specifying *a priori* criteria that need to be satisfied before labelling it as such. In other words, they take for granted that their cases are media storms, while I argue that this should be a matter of empirical investigation. Besides, none of these studies investigated whether the storms they identified are generic phenomena also applicable to other issues. Only one study develops a systematic operationalization: the study by Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006). As indicated in Table 2.1, the authors employ a systematic operationalization to identify political waves using five criteria such as story prominence (the story had to appear on the front page) and "multi-medianess" (the story had to appear in several newspapers). Applying this operationalization, Wolfsfeld & Shaefer find 39 political waves that they then investigate in more detail. Following this model, and in contrast to previous studies, my aim is to systematically measure media storms across time and across issues. I take a comparative stance and compare media storms as they play out in different media outlets (*VRT NEWS*, *VTM NEWS* and *De Standaard*). As such, headway can be made in assessing the generality of the media storm phenomenon.

This study earlier defined a media storm as an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific news item constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple outlets. This generic definition leaves many questions open. What is a "certain" time, what is an "explosive" increase, and what is a "substantial" share? My argument is that media storms differ from non-storm coverage. This argument implies that media storms are not only infrequent, but also quite distinct phenomena. Setting the thresholds too low waters down their distinctiveness. Setting it too high misses many compelling instances that would pass the "you know it when you see it" test. A useful operationalization must enable me to identify most of these special media phenomena.

As indicated in the previous chapter, I will produce an operationalization based on four criteria: size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess". These criteria were identified based on the definitions used in previous work (see Chapter 1); in their operationalization, previous authors are less consistent applying these criteria (see the column "operationalization criteria" in Table 2.1). In terms of *size* of media coverage toward an issue or event, previous work is rather unclear since it so often starts with case studies. However, Wien & Elmelund (2009) argue that the intensity of coverage should be the only criterion when identifying media storms. How *explosive* must an increase in attention be to qualify as a media storm? Previous studies theoretically addressed explosiveness, but none used it as a criterion in their operationalization. I argue that the audience should easily be able to perceive that the issue has moved up considerably among the media's priorities. Thus, I need to be able to separate sudden bursts of attention that characterize storms from high but relatively unchanging levels of attention for some issues. A media storm is more than just a one-day blip in media attention; a certain *duration* is needed. Both Vasterman (2005) and Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) take it that a media-hype normally takes about three weeks to reach its high-point and withers afterwards. Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) state that a story should appear in multiple newspapers for only three days. Finally, the media storm should play out in different outlets at the same time. Both Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) and Giasson et al. (2010) address the "*multi-medianess*" in their operationalization of political waves/media tsunamis.

TABLE 2.1: OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE METHOD AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF MEDIA STORMS AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Study/Concept	**Data/Method**	**Criteria for operationalization**
Sabato (1991) *Feeding frenzy*	Start from 38 cases (1952-1992)	Sabato selects 38 cases without specifying operationalization criteria
Tumber & Waisbord (2004) *Political Scandal*	Purely descriptive, they do not measure scandals	/
Vasterman (2005) *Media-hype*	Start from a case Key word search in five newspapers	Vasterman selects the issue of 'senseless violence' without specifying operationalization criteria.
Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009) *Media-hype*	Start from five cases Key word search in five newspapers	Elmelund-Praesteker & Wien select the issue on 'elderly scandals', but take intensity of coverage as a criterion' to qualify the specific cases as a media-hype
Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006) *Political wave*	Systematic content analysis with five search criteria Time frame: one year	Wave should: - be at front page of each newspaper + in each newspaper for some days (multi-medianess) - last at least three days (duration)
Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) *News wave*	Start from three key events Key word search four weeks preceding and following the key event Six newspapers	Kepplinger & Habermeier select three key events without specifying operationalization criteria
Giasson et al. (2010) *Media Tsunami*	Start from a case Key word search in eleven newspapers Content analysis on selected articles Time frame: one year	Giasson et al. select a specific case, but take simultaneous coverage in all media as a criterion into account (multi-medianess)

The datasets of *De Standaard, VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS* are my starting point. The key idea is to detect media storms based on a systematic operationalization of three criteria (size, explosives and duration) in three different outlets ("multi-medianess"). The aim is to delineate a sufficiently distinct set of storms in the outlets under study. The newspaper agenda consists of the front page/front section which gives an overview of the most important news items of that day. Since I am interested in identifying media storms, which I expect to be prominent on the news agenda, I expect that it is valid to identify media storms using the front page only and not the complete newspaper. For the TV data, I rely on the full news cast since I do not have information regarding which news items the highlights were of that particular newscast. Does the choice of investigating the front page vs the full newscast have implications? Yes, it is easier to become a media storm when you only take the front page into account than when accounting for the full newscast. That is the reason I chose different thresholds (size of 20% vs 25%), because I am convinced that this leads to a better comparison. Dependent on the type of news outlet, it may be appropriate to apply different cut-off points for different outlets in order to capture media storms that represent large surges of attention. Table 2.2 shows the differential results and the descriptive statistics in the case of the *De Standaard*, *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS* with regard to using different threshold criteria: explosiveness (+150% or +200% compared to the previous week) and size (15% to 25% compared to the previous week). I set the criterion duration at a minimum of one week. After the initial week, the storm lasts for as many days as the issue sustains the established criterion of daily attention (in Table 2.2 this is 15, 20 or 25 percent). In other words, I look at each issue on a rolling seven-day cycle to see if it continues to meet the storm criteria. Concerning the duration, a storm can stop after seven, eight, nine, or any higher number of days—as soon as the rolling week average falls below the threshold.

TABLE 2.2: NUMBER AND STATISTICAL FEATURES OF MEDIA STORMS IN DE STANDAARD, VRT NEWS AND VTM NEWS (2001-2008 DEPENDING ON DIFFERENT CUT-OFF POINTS (EXPLOSIVENESS AND SIZE).

De Standaard

Storm Criteria						
Explosiveness>=	150%	150%	150%	200%	200%	200%
Size >=	15%	20%	25%	15%	20%	25%
Storms Detected						
# Storms	109	48	33	99	43	32
# Storms at Day 14	19	12	9	21	21	9
# Storms at Day 21	3	1	1	4	3	1
Storm Attention						
Average Duration (in days)	11.38	12.56	12.12	11.76	12.74	11.78
Total # News Items	1498	899	683	1417	856	608
Total # Storm/Day Obs.	1241	603	400	1165	548	377
Descriptives (based on daily proportions of attention)						
Mean Proportion	0.176	0.22	0.26	0.18	0.229	0.26
Standard Deviation	0.20	0.25	0.27	0.21	0.257	0.27
Minimum Proportion	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum Proportion	1	1	1	1	1	1

Total number of coded *De Standaard* front-page news items, 2001-2008 = 17.390

VRT NEWS

Storm Criteria						
Explosiveness >=	150%	150%	150%	200%	200%	200%
Size >=	15%	20%	25%	15%	20%	25%
Storms Detected						
# Storms	74	35	24	69	33	21
# Storms at Day 14	22	9	11	21	9	4
# Storms at Day 21	9	4	3	8	4	3
Storm Attention						
Average Duration (in days)	13.87	14.05	13.70	13.85	14.27	13.66
Total # News Items	3828	2411	504	3662	2289	1642
Total # Storm/Day Obs.	1027	492	329	956	471	287
Descriptives (based on daily proportions of attention)						
Mean Proportion	0.182	0.240	0.28	0.185	0.24	0.286
Standard Deviation	0.164	0.191	0.20	0.168	0.19	0.20
Minimum Proportion	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum Proportion	1	1	1	1	1	1

Total number of coded *VRT NEWS* items, 2001-2008 = 55.274

VTM NEWS

Storm Criteria						
Explosiveness >=	150%	150%	150%	200%	200%	200%
Size >=	15%	20%	25%	15%	20%	25%
Storms Detected						
# Storms	102	36	20	80	33	18
# Storms at Day 14	24	13	4	21	11	4
# Storms at Day 21	8	4	3	8	3	3
Storm Attention						
Average Duration (in days)	12.75	13.83	14.95	13.12	13.84	15.5
Total # News Items	5289	2639	1843	4295	2366	1733
Total # Storm/Day Obs.	1301	498	299	1050	457	279
Descriptives (based on daily proportions of attention)						
Mean Proportion	0.177	0.238	0.296	0.184	0.23	0.30
Standard Deviation	0.147	0.189	0.213	0.156	0.19	0.21
Minimum Proportion	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum Proportion	1	1	1	1	1	1

Total number of coded *VTM NEWS* items, 2001-2008 = 57.474.
Note: Table 2.2 shows descriptive statistics for the media storms identified under different cut-off points for two criteria: explosives and size.

The lower the criteria, the more media storms. If I set the explosiveness criterion at 150% and the level criterion at 15%, I get 109 storms in eight years of *De Standaard* front pages, 74 for *VRT NEWS* and 102 for *VTM NEWS*. If the strictest criteria (200% increase/25% of attention) are used, I only get 32 storms for *De Standaard*, 21 for *VRT NEWS* and *18* for *VTM NEWS*. In general, a smaller news agenda leads to more storms. For example, I also tested the usage of the 150%/20% threshold on the first seven news items of *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS*, because the agenda of *De Standaard* consists on average of seven news items (in order to have more comparable datasets to work with). This leads to 163 storms for *VRT NEWS* (compared to 35 if I use the full newscasts) and 248 storms for *VTM NEWS* (compared to 36 if I use the full newscast). *De Standaard* with an agenda of on average seven news items, gets consequently more storms for every threshold than *VRT NEWS/VTM NEWS* (with an average agenda of twenty news items per newscast). This means that a smaller agenda is more storm-sensitive. One more news item on the front page will more quickly lead to a storm for a smaller than for a bigger agenda. Therefore, it may be appropriate to choose a higher threshold for *De Standaard* than for *VRT NEWS/VTM NEWS*.

Taking the 150%/20% criterion for TV and the 150%/20% criterion for *De Standaard* leads to a similar amount of media storms. 150% explosiveness means that there is a 150 percent increase in attention to an issue—so more than doubling—from one week to the next. 20%/25% level means that the issue should get as least 20%/25% of the agenda space for at least a week. For the *De Standaard*

(25%) this means that of an average 42 front-page news items printed in a week, at least 10 are devoted to the storm. For *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS*, this means at least 28 news items out of an average 140 weekly news items. These thresholds generate a sufficiently large amount of media storms to support statistical analysis—I identify 33 media storms in *De Standaard*, 35 for the *VRT NEWS* and 36 for *VTM NEWS*. This corresponds to 683 storm news items in *De Standaard*, 2,411 for *VRT NEWS* and 2,639 for *VTM NEWS*. For all three outlets, this means a proportion of four percent of all the news items. So, picking a higher threshold for *De Standaard* leads to exactly the same proportion of news items as for television. I thus impose a similar frequency of media storms in both outlets in order to make them as comparable as possible. Picking this higher threshold leads thus to a better comparison between TV and newspapers.

In summary, media storms are operationalized as instances of a strong increase (+150%) in attention to an issue/event that last at least one week *and* that attain a high size of the total agenda (+20%/+25%) during at least that week. After the initial week, the storm lasts for as many days as the issue sustains twenty percent of daily attention. This method examines each issue on a rolling seven-day cycle to see if it continues to meet the storm criteria; a storm can stop after seven, eight, nine, or any higher number of days—as soon as the rolling week average falls below the threshold when we include the next day. Explosive surges *within* an ongoing storm are not counted, while storms that "re-start" after attention for the issue/event has dropped below the twenty percent level for at least one day are counted as separate storms.

2.4. Media Storms Compared to Non-Storms

In the previous section, I operationalized media storms and tested different thresholds for *size*, *explosiveness* and *duration*. In the next chapters, I want to get a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, conducive factors and political effects of media storms. It is therefore necessary to identify the stories behind the numbers. According to Table 2.2 where I looked for the appropriate thresholds, I statistically identified 33 storms for *De Standaard*, 35 for *VRT NEWS* and 36 for *VTM NEWS*. However, the number of statistically identified storms does not correspond perfectly with the number of "real storms". Sometimes a media storm is statistically identified but there is no single story behind that storm. This happens because storms are identified on subcategory level and not on event level. So, sometimes two events occur at the same time within the same subcategory (e.g. a severe car crash in Spain and a gas explosion in Belgium, both coded in the same subcategory "fires and accidents"). In this section, I will first compare media storm coverage with non-storm coverage. More specifically, I will investigate the thematic distribution across topics and systematically

compare storms with non-storms. Then, I will take a closer look at the concrete stories behind the numbers and discuss them in detail.

When scanning through the list of storms, one of the things that emerges immediately is that the media storms are not equally spread across topics. It seems that they are restricted to just a few key issues. For example, more than 60 percent of the storms in *De Standaard* are about government operations (elections, party politics), whereas no single storm deals with housing. It seems that some issues (e.g. crime, government operations, and defence) are in general more probable to be affected by sudden key events compared to other issues (e.g. foreign trade, housing or energy). This fact implies that some issues in general, irrespective of the media outlet, are more prone to be "media stormed".

Added to this is the expectation that not each news outlet will mimic other media coverage to the same extent across all issues. Media outlets have their own distinct issue profile and readership. When other news outlets go into "storm mode" regarding an issue that a specific medium considers to be its own, the chances increase that this outlet will pick it up and take cues from other news outlets, as they dislike to be overtaken on their own turf. The three outlets under study here differ from each other. They have distinct profiles, especially if you compare between TV and newspapers. The point is that the stories that trigger an outlet to go into storm mode are not random. This is especially the case for issues at the core of an outlet's "identity", which are disproportionately covered in storm mode. *De Standaard*, for example, mainly went into storm mode on stories about government operations (which is also their most important topic in the non-storm coverage distribution), whereas the top three topics of *VTM NEWS* (crime, government operations and fires & accidents) is extensively covered in storm mode.

In Table 2.3, I list the top five issues for non-storm coverage versus media storm coverage. This top five is compiled according to the number of news items that fall within a major topic category for non-storm coverage and for storm coverage respectively. Corresponding with the argument above, the issue categories largely overlap for non-storm coverage and storm coverage. This confirms the idea that media outlets go into storm mode on their priority issues, in accordance with their profile.

TABLE 2.3: TOP FIVE ISSUES: NON-STORM COVERAGE VS. MEDIA STORM COVERAGE

	Non-Storm Coverage	Storm Coverage
Top 5	*De Standaard*	
1	Government Operations	Government Operations
2	Crime	International Affairs
3	Banking & Finance	Banking & Finance
4	International Affairs	Defence
5	Arts & Entertainment	Crime
	VRT NEWS	
1	Crime	Defence
2	Government Operations	Government Operations
3	Fires & Accidents	Weather & Natural Disasters
4	Defence	International Affairs
5	Arts & Entertainment	Crime
	VTM NEWS	
1	Crime	Government Operations
2	Government Operations	Crime
3	Fires & Accidents	Fires & Accidents
4	Arts & Entertainment	Weather & Natural Disasters
5	Transportation	Defence

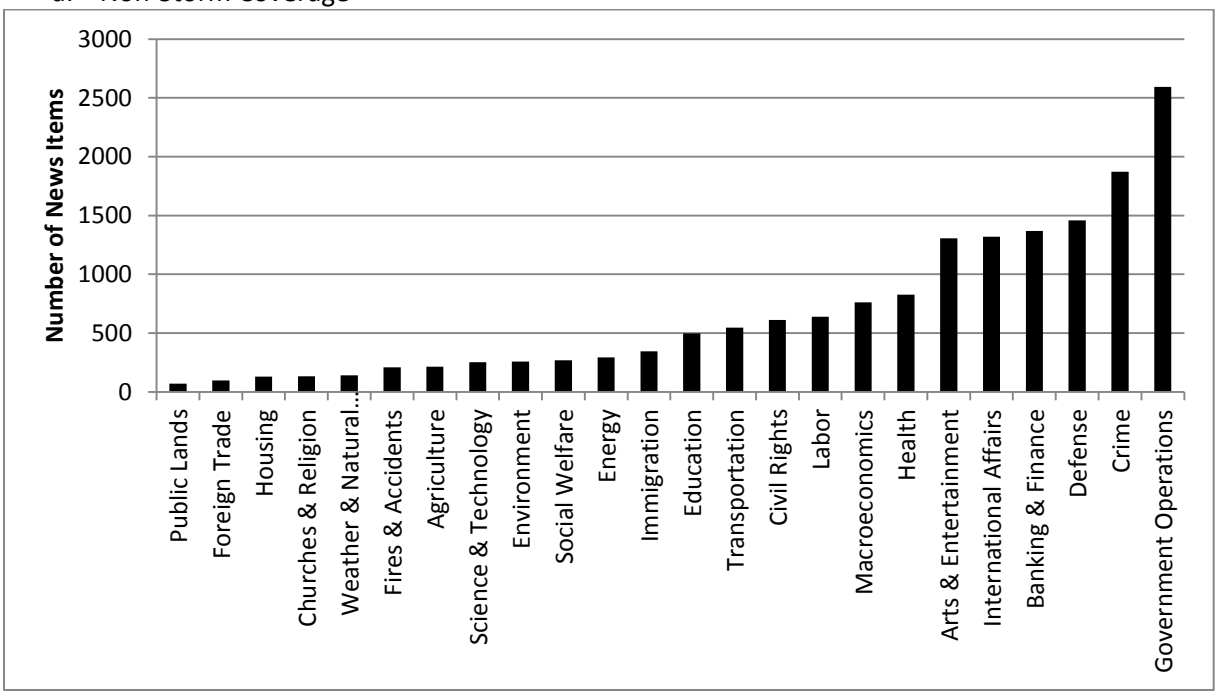
To illustrate the skew in topic distribution for media storm coverage compared to non-storm coverage, I plotted the thematic distribution across issues for the three outlets. Figure 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 show the distribution of storm coverage vs. non-storm coverage at the major topic level. It is important to note that the figures display the number of news items for storm coverage and non-storm coverage (and thus not the number of storms that fall under a specific topic). For non-storm coverage, the figures demonstrate a concentrated pattern of news items. Some issue categories, such as government operations, defence, and crime, generate many more news stories than other issue categories such as housing and energy. Non-storm news coverage is thus unevenly spread across the 24 major categories. This general issue-coverage pattern reflects what I earlier called the "issue profile" or "identity" of a news outlet.

Yet, the spread of storms over issues is more unevenly distributed still. For storm coverage, the figures are more skewed than they are for non-storm coverage. The same issue categories come out on top (crime, government operations, weather & natural disasters), but the other issues are hardly ever covered in storm mode. The pattern of *De Standaard* is, by far, the most skewed: the total number of news items on government operations is more than the number of all other storm news items together. This can be due to three possible reasons: (1) there is a front page effect (analysing a front page leads to a greater skew compared to the full newscast), (2) there is a newspaper effect (the thematic storm distribution is more skewed than the TV storm distribution), (3) there exists a profile effect; *De Standaard* has such a concrete and clear profile that it will very quickly go into

storm mode on its core issues as compared to more general outlets with a less specific profile. It is an acknowledged limitation that no other newspaper with a different profile has been taken into account in this study. With another newspaper I would have been able to exclude a number of the abovementioned reasons for the extreme skew in *De Standaard.* I further discuss the lack of other (types of) news sources in the limitations section of the conclusion.

FIGURE 2.1: COMPARING NON-STORM VS. STORM COVERAGE OF ISSUES IN *DE STANDAARD*

a. Non-Storm Coverage



b. Storm Coverage

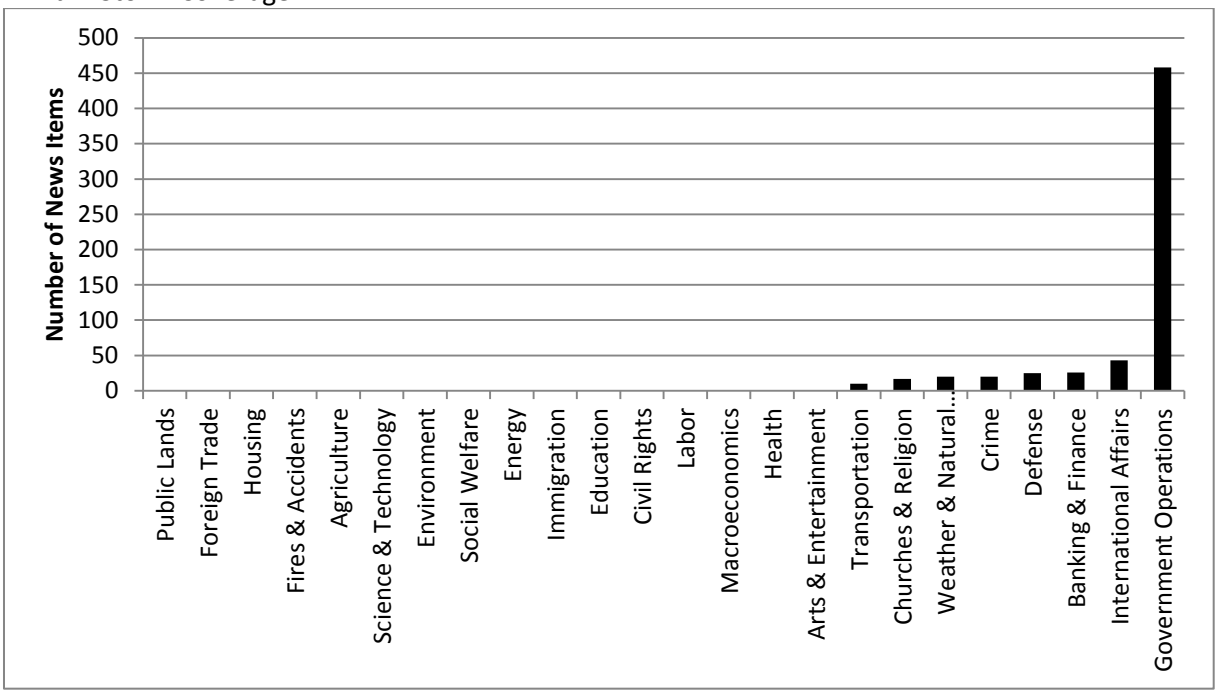
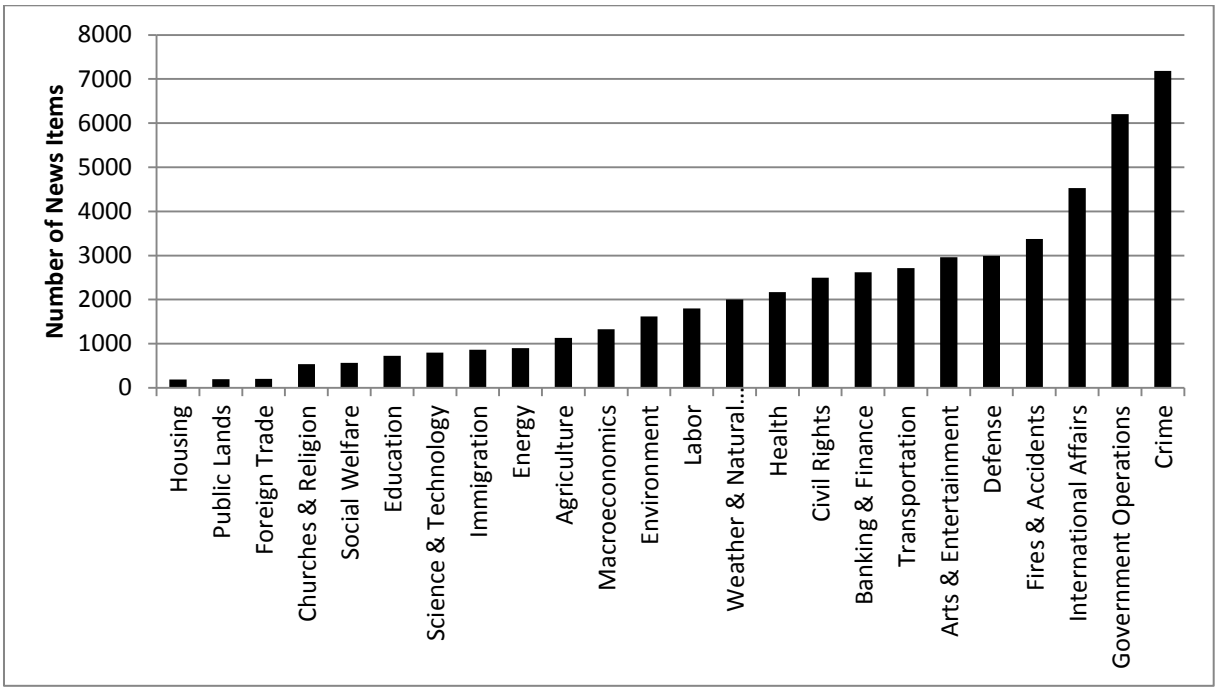


FIGURE 2.2: COMPARING NON-STORM VS. STORM COVERAGE OF ISSUES IN *VRT NEWS*

a. Non-Storm Coverage



b. Storm Coverage

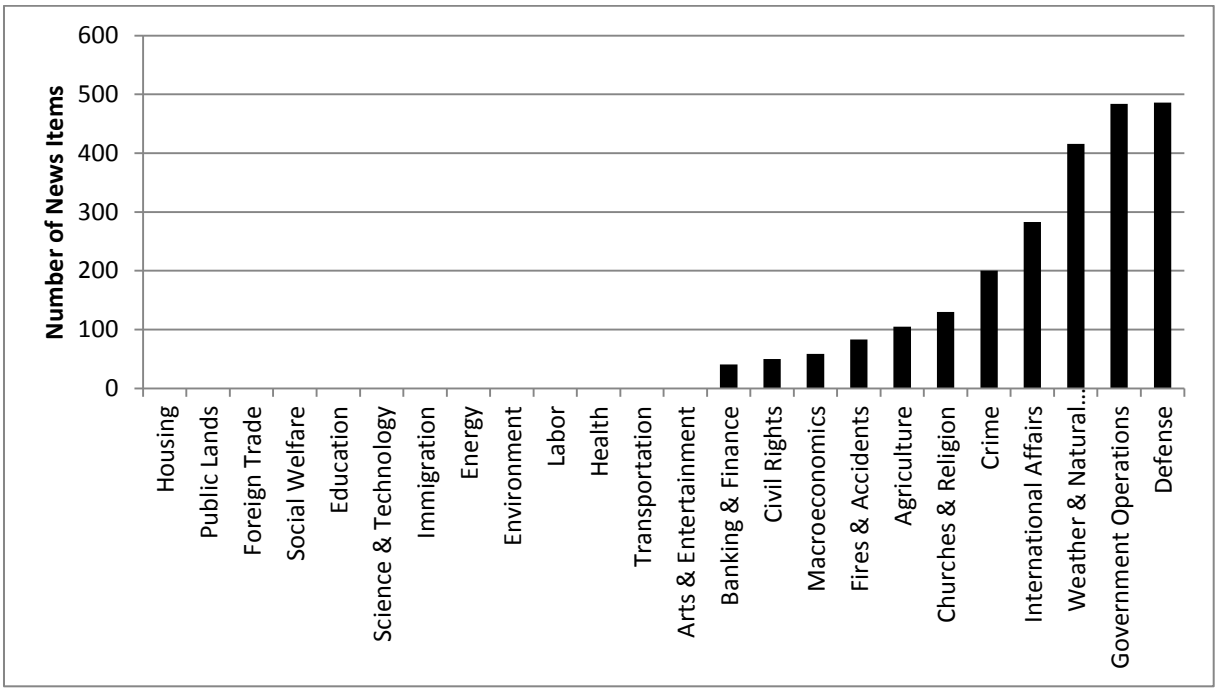
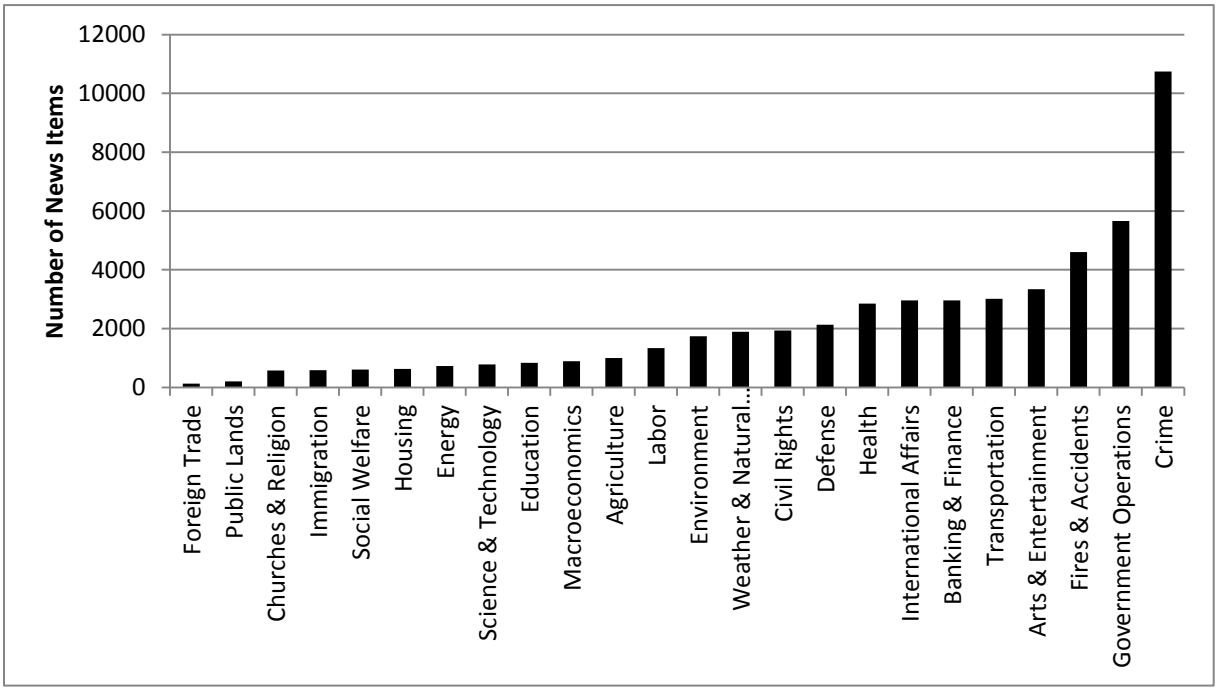
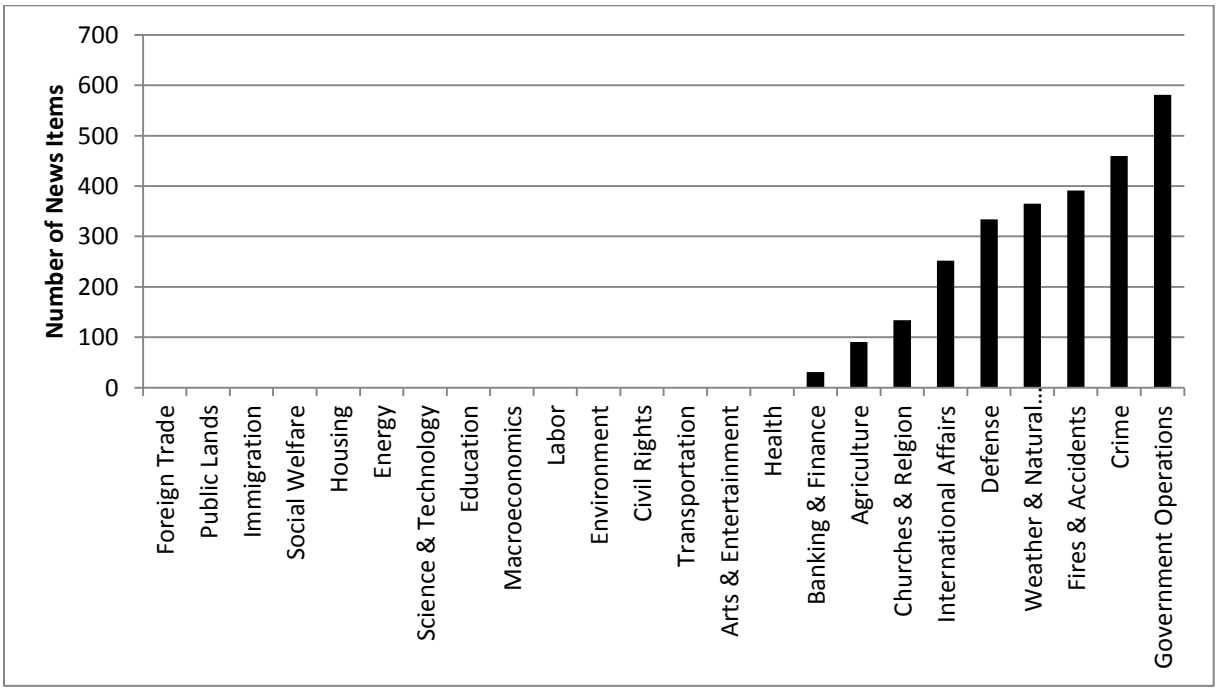


FIGURE 2.3: COMPARING NON-STORM VS. STORM COVERAGE OF ISSUES IN *VTM NEWS*

a. Non-Storm Coverage



b. Storm Coverage

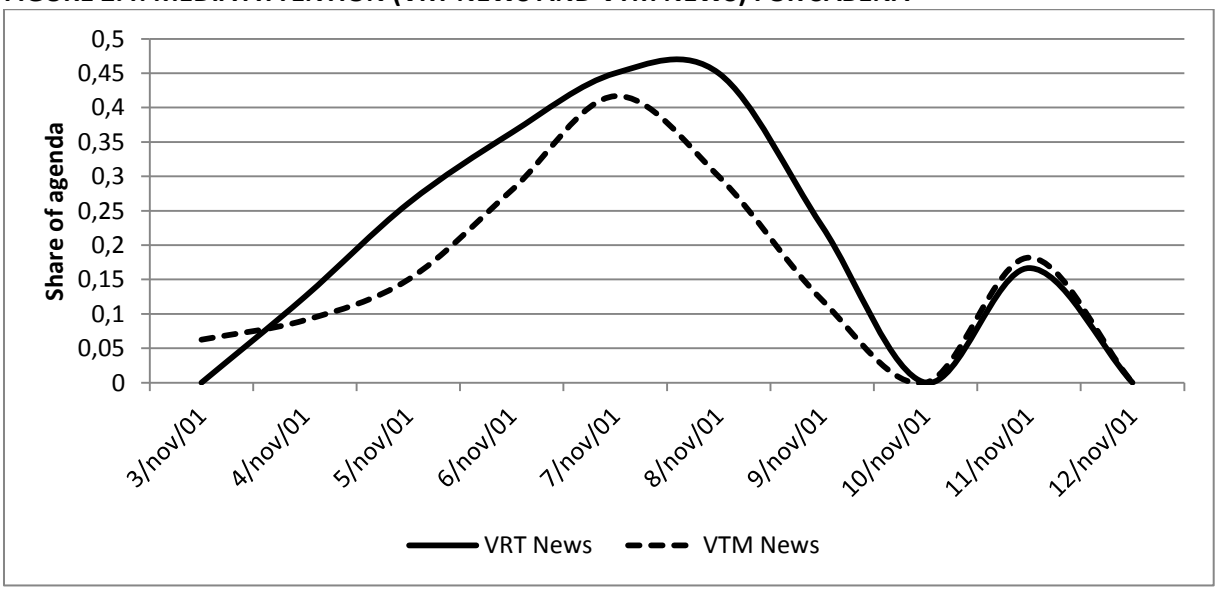


The final dataset consists of 29 storms for *De Standaard*, 34 for *VRT NEWS* and 33 for *VTM NEWS*. It leads to a dataset of 56 different storms. The storms are presented in Table 2.4, where one can see a series of well-known stories such as the collapse of the national airline SABENA (2001), the tsunami in South-East Asia in 2004, the MP3 murder (2005) or the Belgian banking crisis in 2008. To give a more concrete idea of how a (the course of a) storm might look like, I will elaborate two storms in more detail: the collapse of SABENA and the Tsunami in South-East Asia.

The collapse of SABENA did not come by surprise. At the end of October 2001, more than ten days before the official bankruptcy, the media report about the cry for help to find investors in order to save to SABENA. In the days that follow, news outlets cover the possible acquisition by Virgin Air. But in the first week of November, it becomes clear that there is no other option than bankruptcy. November 7 is the last days of operations for SABENA. Thousands of SABENA workers come to the airport to wait for the crew members of the last official SABENA flight coming from Benin. Also the days afterwards the media keep on reporting about SABENA. There appear news items about the history of the company, about the 400 "Sabena couples" losing their job and about the (economic) consequences of the collapse. Also the option about the creation of a new Belgian airline company is discussed extensively by the media.

The story about SABENA is picked up by both TV outlets, *VRT* and *VTM NEWS*. The storm empirically starts on the third of November and ends ten days later, on November 12. The storm generated the most coverage on the 7th of November, the last day of operations. But also the days before and after this historical day the story gets a lot of attention. On Figure 2.4, one can notice that the course of media attention is very similar for both news outlets.

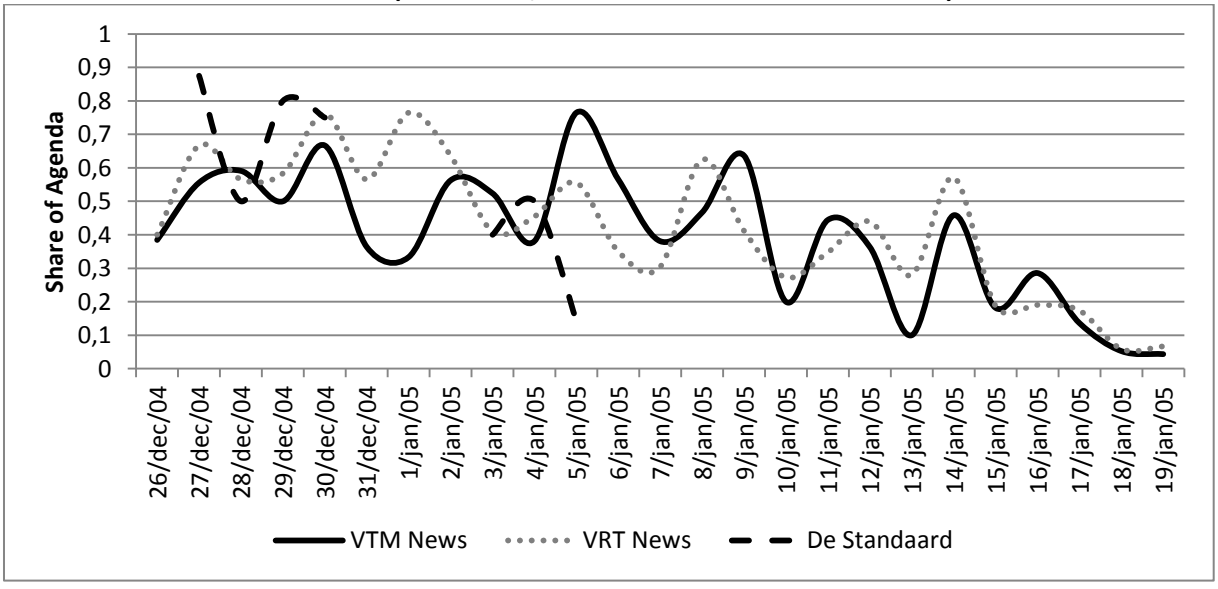
FIGURE 2.4: MEDIA ATTENTION (VRT NEWS AND VTM NEWS) FOR SABENA



The 2004 Tsunami in South-Asia occurred on 26 December. Killing more than 230,000 people, it is of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. The tsunami generates a lot of media attention. Although the epicenter is in Sumatra (Indonesia); the greatest share of media attention goes to the situation in Phuket, a touristic place in the South of Thailand. A lot of tourists, also Belgians did not survive the disaster. The Belgian news outlets give daily updates about the number of causalities and about the situation of compatriots. Also the organization of the emergency aid by international organizations such as the Red Cross, UNICEF or Caritas and the evacuation of the victims to their home countries get a lot attention. In the beginning of January, *VRT* and *VTM* start a fundraising initiative accompanied by a big TV show on both broadcasters. Even weeks after the fatal day, the story about the tsunami keeps on generating a lot of news coverage.

The tsunami was identified as a media storm all three outlets. The storm starts on December 26 in *VRT* and *VTM NEWS* and one day later in *De Standaard* . Figure 2.5 shows the course of the media attention for the tsunami in all three outlets. In De Standaard, the first day is the most important day, covering about 87 percent of the front page. On TV, the tsunami generates on the fifth day more attention than one the first day, probably because the magnitude of the disaster was not clear yet on day one. The gap in the line of *De Standaard* is simply due to the fact that there are no newspapers during the weekend and on holidays (New Year). The media storm lasts much longer on TV (25 days) than in *De Standaard* (10 days). The pattern of news coverage for *VRT* and *VTM NEWS* is very similar.

FIGURE 2.5: MEDIA ATTENTION (VRT NEWS, VTM NEWS AND DE STANDAARD) FOR THE TSUNAMI



I already discussed that media coverage is unevenly distributed across topics. But even this skewed sample of media storms still has a much wider range of topics/issues than previous studies. Where Vasterman (2005) only investigated senseless violence and Wien & Elmelund (2009) elderly scandals,

this sample contains storms on different topics. In twelve out of 28 major topic categories, media storms show up. The most striking finding is that more than 60 percent of the storms in *De Standaard* are about government operations. These storms are mainly about elections (federal elections of 2003 and 2007, regional elections of 2004, local elections of 2006) but also several national political crises such as the BHV crisis, the end of the cartel between CD&V and N-VA and the discussion in the government and political party VLD about the voting right of migrants, are part of the sample. One can say that *De Standaard*, which presents itself as a quality newspaper, spends a lot of attention on "hard news" and thus goes into storm mode according to its profile.

The storms in both TV outlets play out in a comparable way. Both outlets, for example, went into storm mode on the foot and mouth disease outbreak (agriculture), the "MP3 murder" (crime) and the gas explosion in Gellingen (fires & accidents). In general, TV outlets have more storms about crime, natural disasters, and fires & accidents than the newspaper *De Standaard* has. *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS* differ slightly; *VTM NEWS*, for example, has more storms on fires & accidents. Examples of such storms are a severe train crash in the Belgian town of Pécrot (2001), a car crash with a Belgian coach in Germany (2003), and the collapse of an exhibition hall in Poland (2006). *VRT NEWS* has more storms about defence; only the public broadcaster covered the conflicts in the Middle East (severe suicide bombing carried out by Hamas followed by the Arab Peace Initiative, 2002; the start of the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006) in a way that can be categorized as a storm.

Looking at the overlap between outlets, one can see that there are thirteen storms that show up in all three news outlets. Examples are the war in Iraq (2003), the Madrid terrorist attacks (2004), the tsunami in South East Asia (2004) or the Federal elections (2007)[12]. The overlap of media storms is much larger between TV outlets (eleven storms only overlapping storms between *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS*) than between the newspaper and one of the TV outlets (two storms only overlapping between *De Standaard* and *VRT NEWS* or *VTM NEWS*). This again confirms the idea that directly competing outlets tend to go into storm mode together.

But not all storms overlap: only half of the storms identified in the De Standaard also showed up in other outlets. This means that fifty percent of the storms in *De Standaard* do not show up in the other two outlets. For television these numbers are smaller; only one quarter (*VTM NEWS*) and one third (*VRT NEWS*) of the storms in these outlets do not show up in other outlets. The number of non-

[12] The storms that are present in all outlets are: 9/11, the war in Iraq, the federal elections of 2003, the Madrid terrorist attacks, the regional elections in 2004, the Fourniret murders in 2004, the 2004 American elections, the tsunami in South-East Asia, the death of the Pope, the London terrorist attacks in 2005, the local elections in 2006, the federal elections in 2007 and the American elections in 2008.

overlapping storms is the highest for the commercial broadcaster *VTM*. This could indicate that they are more sensitive to media storms and tend to follow other outlets more quickly.

TABLE 2.4: OVERVIEW OF STORMS IN *DE STANDAARD, VRT NEWS* AND *VTM NEWS* (2001-2008)

Date	Topic	Title	DS	VRT NEWS	VTM NEWS
February 2001	Agriculture	Foot and Mouth Outbreak Europe		X	X
February2001	Agriculture	Foot and Mouth Outbreak Belgium		X	X
March2001	Fires & Accidents	Train Crash Pécrot			X
May 2001	Government Operations	Crisis of Political Party Volksunie	X		
September 2001	International Affairs	9/11	X	X	X
October 2001	Defence	Start of War on Terror		X	X
November 2001	Banking & Finance	Collapse of Sabena		X	X
November 2001	Defence	War in Afghanistan		X	
December 2001	Macro Economics	Introduction of Euro		X	
April 2002	Defence	Conflict in Middle-East		X	
April 2002	Crime	Shooting in Erfurt, Germany			X
May 2002	Government Operations	Dutch Elections	X		
September 2002	International Affairs	Anniversary of 9/11		X	
December 2002	Weather & Natural Disasters	Flooding in Belgium		X	X
January 2003	Fires & Accidents	Crash with Belgian Coach in Germany			X
March 2003	Defence	War in Iraq	X	X	X
April 2003	Government Operations	Wedding Prince Laurent			X
May 2003	Government Operations	Federal Elections 2003	X	X	X
February 2004	Government Operations	Reassignment of Karel De Gucht	X		
March 2004	International Affairs	Madrid Terrorist Attacks	X	X	X
April 2004	Government Operations	VB Convicted for Racism—Political Consequences	X		
June 2004	Government Operations	Regional Elections 2004	X	X	X
June 2004	Crime	Fourniret Murders	X	X	X
July 2004	Government Operations	Regional Elections 2004—Formation of Government	X		
July 2004	Fires & Accidents	Gas explosion in Gellingen		X	X
August 2004	International Affairs	Beslan Hostage Crisis	X		X

September 2004	Transportation	DHL Crisis	X		
October 2004	Government Operations	Opinion Poll TNS	X		
November 2004	Government Operations	American Elections 2004	X	X	X
November 2004	Government Operations	New President for Political Party VLD	X		
December 2004	Weather & Natural Disasters	Tsunami	X	X	X
April 2005	Churches & Religion	Death of Pope John Paul II	X	X	X
April 2005	Churches & Religion	College of Cardinals Choosing New Pope		X	X
May 2005	International Affairs	EU Referendum	X		
July 2005	International Affairs	London Terrorist Attacks	X	X	X
July 2005	International Affairs	Egypt Terrorist Attacks		X	X
August 2005	Weather & Natural Disasters	Hurricane Katrina		X	X
October 2005	Weather & Natural Disasters	Earthquake in Pakistan		X	
November 2005	Civil Rights, Minorities Issues and Civil Liberties	Riots in France		X	
January 2006	Fires & Accidents	Collapse of Exhibition Hall in Poland			X
February 2006	Crime	Murder of Bart Bonroy			X
April 2006	Crime	Murder of Joe Van Holsbeek		X	X
May 2006	Crime	Murder of Luna Drowart and her black babysitter		X	X
June 2006	Crime	Murders of Stacy & Nathalie in Liege		X	X
July 2006	Defence	Conflict in Middle East		X	
October 2006	Government Operations	Local Elections 2006	X	X	X
January 2007	Weather & Natural Disasters	Storm in Belgium			X
June 2007	Government Operations	Federal Elections 2007	X	X	X
August 2007	Government Operations	Federal Elections Formation Crisis I	X		
November 2007	Government Operations	Federal Elections Formation Crisis II	X		
November 2007	Government Operations	Federal Elections Formation Crisis III	X		
September 2008	Government Operations	Break-Up of Cartel CD&V/NV-A	X		
September 2008	Banking & Finance	Belgian Banking Crisis	X	X	
November 2008	Government Operations	American Elections 2008	X	X	X

2.5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I first presented the research setting and the data. In concrete practice, I investigate media storms in three Flemish outlets: *De Standaard, VRT and VTM.* The data cover an eight-year period and are coded according the CAP codebook. A media storm is identified using a systematic operation based on three criteria: size, explosiveness and duration. I ran a set of threshold tests in multiple outlets in order to select the cut-off points. Arguing that it is important to have a comparable sample of storms, I chose the 25%/150% threshold for *De Standaard* and a lower 20%/150% threshold for the TV outlets *VRT* and *VTM*. Subsequently, I compared the thematic distribution of issues for media storms and non-storm coverage. Both distributions are quite skewed, especially the thematic distribution of media storms. The reasons behind this skew are twofold: (1) some issues in general are more prone to attract media storm coverage, and (2) outlets are more likely to go into storm mode on issues that are at the heart of the outlet's identity. The clearest example to illustrate this is that 60% of the media storms in *De Standaard* are about government operations (these are storms mainly about elections, party politics). In the final part, I presented an overview of the identified media storms. In the next chapters I will rely on a dataset of 29 *De Standaard* storms, 34 *VRT* storms and 33 *VTM* storms. As indicated before, I take all storms into account, also the storms that are only identified in one outlet.

CHAPTER 3: THE MECHANISMS UNDERLYING MEDIA STORMS

For 125 days, Salah Abdeslam, one of the ten men suspected of carrying out the November 13, 2015 attacks in Paris, was the most wanted man in Europe. He handled the logistics for the Paris attacks: he was the fixer, renting cars, finding apartments, picking people up and dropping them off. Abdeslam was supposed to die on November 13 but instead fled to Brussels just hours after the Paris attacks (Rubin, 2016). For 125 days, Belgian authorities failed to find him. On 18 March 2016 in the afternoon, he was arrested in Molenbeek after a four-month international manhunt.

On the morning of that day, a group of senior news editors of the commercial broadcaster *VTM* gathers for a team-building seminar. At lunch, a couple of hours before the arrest, they are notified that Salah Abdeslam is to be arrested. The group of editors decides to interrupt their seminar and to return together to the newsroom to cover the arrest in a live broadcast. On the other side of Brussels, also the public channel *VRT* follows the latest developments on the possible arrest. Forty five minutes after *VTM NEWS* starts their live broadcast, VRT NEWS also interrupts their regular broadcasting schedule for an extra newscast. Both broadcasters spend a lot of attention on latest developments about the arrest.

Only a few days later, on 22 March, Brussels is startled by several bomb blasts at the national airport and at the Maalbeek subway station. At 8 am, the editorial news office of *VTM NEWS* hears that there has been an explosion at Brussels Airport. The senior editor of *VTM NEWS* says: 'It only took us four seconds to link the explosion to possible attacks. […] And after eight seconds you realize that this will be something heavy: a big disaster or an attack. Since Charlie Hebdo, we are in a permanent "it is possible that an attack will happen"-mode'.

What follows in the hours after the first explosion at Brussels Airport is unprecedented. Both broadcasters *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS* go live for fourteen hours straight to bring the latest updates on the attacks. Even journalists who are not supposed to be working that day come to the news office to help. Nearly everyone is reassigned to cover the bombings. Newspapers also man their online offices with extra personnel. The newsrooms stay in storm mode for many days. Not just on

the day of the bombings but also on the days afterwards media outlets generate multiple news updates and follow-up stories about the bombings.

The March 22 Brussels bombings constitute one of the biggest news events and subsequent media storms that has ever taken place in Belgium, and illustrates what happens when a media storm breaks. Media outlets' decisions to bring extra newscasts are influenced by the decisions their competitors take. Regardless of this influence, media outlets bring high exposure to the event and produce many more news items than they normally do. The aim of this chapter is to find out how exactly media storms come about, and to investigate how this process differs from non-storm coverage ("a routine day"). In other words, *what are the mechanisms of media storms and are these mechanisms different compared to non-storm coverage*?

3.1. Illustrating the Mechanisms of Media Storms

Investigating what drives media storms contributes to a recent and growing body of work dealing with media dynamics. Previous work has already speculated on the drivers of media storms, but no study has investigated it in a systematic and empirical way. Scholars have distinguished two possible mechanisms. First, Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995) identify a change of selection criteria after a key event happens. They specifically mean that a key event triggers an increase in coverage of that event, and of similar and thematically related events. Wolfsfeld & Shaefer (2006, p. 336) make a similar argument: 'Once a wave materializes, media will link events with the overall story and search for sources, information, events'. Events that in different circumstances would not have been salient enough to make it into the news *do* now pass the media gates and get coverage. This first mechanism explains why media storms are not one-day phenomena but instead go on for a few days as a minimum.

The first mechanism mentioned above refers to an intra-medium phenomenon: a single news outlet can increase its coverage irrespective of what other media are doing, as it temporarily implies less strict criteria for newsworthiness. The second is a multi-media one: news outlets imitate one another's news coverage. Scholars have often referred to such self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005). Combined, these emulating micro-decisions may lead to a storm on the aggregate level. The second media-storm-generating process especially affects the explosiveness of a storm: imitation on a large scale leads to quickly peaking media attention. Media storms happen because different media simultaneously pick up a news item, which creates a collective dynamic of increasing coverage. In what is truly a self-reinforcing process, this collective dynamic further fuels individual news outlets' incentives to stay locked on the storm.

The theory has probably not been tested so far because it is quite complex to really disentangle these mechanisms in a quantitative way. This would require very detailed data on the micro-level, such as hourly news updates from news websites. This would be a very time-intensive process. That is why I chose for a qualitative approach. Contrary to the other chapters in this thesis, where detailed statistical analyses were employed, I will use interviews to extract the data needed to disentangle these mechanisms. The benefits of using a qualitative approach are demonstrated here, because they bypass some of the problems mentioned above while delivering insightful evidence. It is important to note here that this approach will not really *test* the mechanisms of media storms, but rather illustrate them based on the *perception* of journalists. This chapter explains how journalists experience a media storm and *what they think* happens during a storm. Journalists, especially chief/senior editors and news managers, are valid sources since they possess the expertise, authority and responsibility to decide. They know what a media storm is by hands-on experience and not by study.

Two series of interviews were conducted. In the first round, in the summer of 2013, I held nine semi-structured interviews with general editors of newspapers and newscasts of the public broadcaster *VRT* and the commercial broadcaster *VTM*. In the beginning of each interview, I sketched my research design and explained how I conceptualized and measured media storms. This was to avoid a situation where editors might talk intuitively about big disasters only, such as the Sierre crash.[13] Of course, people always refer to what is at the front of their minds. In the summer of 2013 the accession to the throne of King Filip took place. Many interviewees referred to this example because it was a big event that summer. After the Brussels bombings in 2016, a second round of semi-structured telephone interviews was conducted. For these interviews, I looked for journalists who really operate in the newsroom.[14] Whereas most general editors mainly deal with the general policy of their news service, news managers and senior editors actually create the news. No general questions about media storms were asked this time. I briefly introduced the topic of my thesis to the interviewees, and the questions explicitly dealt with the Brussels bombings. The journalists were, for example, asked to describe exactly what happened in the newsroom on the day of the bombings.

[13]On March 13, 2013 a Belgian coach crashed into a wall in Switzerland. Of the 52 people on board, 28 did not survive the accident.

[14] The reason Dimitri Antonissen, chef news of the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* was interviewed twice is that the general editor of this newspaper Margot Moeseke preferred not to do the interview. She suggested I interview Antonissen (chief news) instead of her.

TABLE 3.1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH GENERAL EDITORS (2013)

Name	Function	Date	Duration
Tim Pauwels	Chief Deontology VRT	13/02/2013	45 min
Emmanuel Rottey	Chief Social Media VRT NEWS	30/07/2013	68 min
Wim Willems	General Editor TV VRT NEWS	30/07/2013	53 min
Liesbeth Van Impe	General Editor Het Nieuwblad	31/07/2013	60 min
Karin De Ruyter	General Editor De Standaard	1/08/2013	63 min
Pascal Kerkhove	General Editor De Gazet van Antwerpen	13/08/2013	50 min
Dimitri Antonissen	Senior Editor Het Laatste Nieuws	16/08/2013	51 min
Kris Hoflack	General Editor VTM NEWS	23/08/2013	47 min
Yves Desmet	General Editor De Morgen	5/03/2014	50 min

TABLE 3.2: LIST OF INTERVIEWS WITH NEWS MANAGERS (2016, AFTER BRUSSELS BOMBINGS)

Name	Function	Date	Duration
Jo Buggenhoudt	Senior Editor VTM NEWS	31/03/2016	30 min
Peter Goris	News Manager De Gazet van Antwerpen	31/03/2016	17 min
Wouter Carton	Senior Editor VRT NEWS	1/04/2016	19 min
Inge Ghijs	Senior Editor Domestic News De Standaard	4/04/2016	15 min
Steven De Bock	Senior Editor Het Nieuwsblad	4/04/2016	19 min
Griet De Craen	News Manager VRT NEWS/Chef VRT Radio	11/04/2016	17 min
Dimitri Antonissen	Senior Editor Het Laatste Nieuws	12/04/2016	20 min

3.2 JUST AN ORDINARY NEWS DAY

To understand what happens exactly when media outlets go into storm mode, it is useful to illustrate first how news is made on an "ordinary", routine news day. In other words, which procedures are used on a daily basis? After doing this, I will shed light on the motivations behind these ordinary news decisions. More specifically, I will look at imitation as a motivation for certain news decisions.

NEWS PROCEDURES: HOW NEWS IS MADE

Journalists depend on a set of routines to do their job (Boydstun, 2013; Gans, 1979; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). The purpose of these routines is to deliver, within limited time and space, the most acceptable product in the most efficient manner to the consumer (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). All media outlets have a fixed format in which they work. The particular events that occur change daily, but the process of news-making does not. In most newspapers' newsrooms, the senior editor starts the day with a "news watch". He or she gets information about events that happened during the night, makes a summary of the interesting news items in other newspapers (also in Walloon and foreign newspapers), reads his or her own newspaper again and listens to the radio to hear what the

radio news picked up from the newspapers. Then, there is a morning meeting lead by the general editor or news manager. Here the "news watch" is presented, and journalists can present their new ideas. Those attending the meeting depends on the newspaper, with only the head of departments present at *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, and any journalist from the publication invited at *Het Laatste Nieuws*. At *Het Nieuwsblad* journalists can choose if they come to the morning meeting but when they come, they should introduce an idea. After this meeting, the process of news-making can start. At *De Standaard* for example, the head of each department has another meeting with their individual team(s), while *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad* opt for more centralization; all news selection decisions are made by the chief editor. So, at some newspapers decision-making is more centralized than at others.

For television, a similar process takes place. A selection is made based on what journalists read in the newspapers, what radio news has already taken from the newspapers and the news calendar. This calendar bundles all scheduled events and media outlets—especially TV—anticipate it keenly. A weekly/daily plan is made that appoints specific journalists and camera crews in advance to specific events and news items. The 1pm newscast serves as a framework for the rest of the day. After this, the newscasts of both *VRT* and *VTM* evaluate both their own and each other's newscasts and make only a few adjustments for the next newscasts.

Motivations behind news decisions: imitation

News outlets thus follow a 24-hour news cycle. Imitation is key in their daily routine: every morning news editors read the newspapers of their competitors. Radio news uses the newspapers as the starting point of their daily news selection; consequently television takes over the most important facts of the newspapers and the radio news. A study on inter-media agenda-setting in Flanders has shown that radio is a key player. Radio news—more specifically *De Ochtend*, a daily news show on Radio 1 which is broadcasted from 6 to 9am—selects the news of the day from the newspapers and sets the agenda for television news later on that day (Hardy, 2008). Liesbeth Van Impe (*Het Nieuwsblad*) indicates that this can be frustrating for newspapers: 'You often wonder', she says, 'why do media outlets take over that particular news fact?!'

Scholars of inter-media agenda-setting showed that directly competing outlets in particular take notice of each other's news selection decisions and tend to embrace issues that the competition has covered before (e.g. Boyle, 2001; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). This is illustrated by Dimitri Antonissen of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, who, when describing the start of his working day, said that 'one of the very first things I do in the morning is skim very fast our main competitor's newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad.*' News editors constantly want to know if they have missed something. Steven De Bock

of *Het Nieuwsblad* also confirms this: 'Of course we look at our competitors. We assess our newspaper based on what our competitors have shown us. It's not possible to make a good newspaper if theirs is better.' Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) adds: 'We look at our peers. For example, what was the first item of the *VRT NEWS*cast? If *VRT NEWS* starts with this story, then it is by definition important, isn't it?'

Imitation is thus a sort of daily routine for journalists. Liesbeth Van Impe of *Het Nieuwsblad* explains: 'Media look at each other constantly. It is a kind of reflex. In this way, news gets defined. If two newspapers cover the same issue then it is per definition newsworthy and other outlets will cover it as well.' Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) adds: 'Media *influence* each other. Newspapers influence television and radio and vice versa. *VTM* influences *VRT* and *VRT VTM*. As a news editor you have to read newspapers and listen to the radio to know what the competitors are doing. If other news outlets are bringing a story that you haven't covered yet, you immediately think "why haven't we covered this yet?" and start thinking about which aspect is not covered yet to elaborate on the story. This only has advantages for the media consumer. Media are incentivized to perform as well as possible.'

3.3. What a Difference a Day Makes: Media Storm Alert

In the previous section, we looked at an "ordinary news day". In this section, I try to systematically compare non-storm news coverage with media storms coverage.

Lowering news thresholds

Let's go back to the moment when, on March 22, 2016, the first bomb exploded in Brussels airport and reconstruct how this explosion changed the entire news production process on that day (and the days afterwards). Griet De Craen (*VRT NEWS*) described what staff at *VRT NEWS* did when the first information about the bombings came in: 'We immediately started by calling the police, the airport… to verify if our information is correct and what's going on […] Only after a few minutes we knew that this was really serious.' What follows is a significant organizational change; the newsroom is operating in a different mode: storm mode. Concretely, (1) coordination becomes extremely important and (2) nearly all journalists are re-assigned to cover the story of the day.

When a storm breaks, coordination is extremely important. Due to the fact that in storm mode decisions are now mostly made top-down, there is less room for individual journalists to come up with ideas about other issues/events that they want to cover. The chief editor and news managers have to clarify decisions about how the event will be covered and about the division of labour. Griet De Craen (*VRT NEWS*) explains: 'On the day of the Brussels bombings, we had an hourly meeting with

general editors and senior editors of the different outlets (radio, website, TV).' Emmanuel Rottey (Chief Editor Social Media *VRT NEWS*) adds: 'At that moment, it is important to coordinate between different channels and between different outlets. You have to make sure radio and television do not call the same people twice and that *Het Journaal* and *TerZake* cooperate on how they are going to cover the event'. The newspapers *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*, for example, both normally working 'bottom-up' with an editorial meeting with all journalists, cancelled this meeting the day of the Brussels attacks. Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) is more nuanced; he confirms that news managers take editorial decisions but that all journalists can come up with ideas, even on very busy news days such as the day the Brussels bombings happened.

In storm mode, almost all journalists cover the same issue, as Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) describes: 'When a storm breaks, the newsroom is divided in two teams. One news manager gathers a big team and they deal with the storm, the other news manager and a couple of other journalists take care of the rest of the news.' Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) explains that on the day of the Brussels bombings they worked with a team of three news managers instead of one: 'We have a rotating system with three news managers that alternately are responsible for the newspaper. When something really big happens, all three of us work. One news manager is coordinating the logistical stuff, the other one the journalists and the third one all the other news.'

Specialists on the topic are important, but also so-called "generalists" are asked to report on the issue. All interviewees indicated that on the day of the Brussels bombings all journalists—even those who were not supposed to work that day—were mobilized. Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) confirms that this is true at all levels of expertise: 'At one hand, the specialist on a skiing holiday is told to put his Glühwein aside and come up with a hundred lines in print, on the other hand people who know bugger-all about the topic are told to make some phone calls. This way, the newsroom is a mixture of generalists and specialists.' Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) adds: 'A bunch of journalists will work on the same issue; also non-specialists. For example, Peter Verlinden, the Africa expert of the *VRT NEWS*, covered the succession of the throne in the summer of 2013. A lot of people were on vacation and we needed a big group of journalists to cover the event.' Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) describes how this played out for the Brussels bombings: 'The decision to cover only the terrorist attacks was taken quite rapidly. The people working on other projects were re-assigned to the bombings. Even the people of *NINA.be*, our website for women, were brought in to cover the story.'

As a result of these organizational changes (more centralised coordination and reassignment of journalists), the newsroom will be super-focused on just one thing: covering the issue of the storm. When the entire newsroom is working on just one story, this simply leads to a bulk of news items

about that story. The story is everywhere. The fact that the news organization is working top-down also contributes to this. The coordinating news manager has a clear task, organizing all input and output about the story. Just because someone is managing the story, this leads to more news, follow-up stories, and stories with different angles. Even events that would in other circumstances not have been salient enough to make it into the news do pass the media gates now and get covered. This is what is called “lowering thresholds”: the media lower gatekeeping thresholds for similar later events and for “after”-events (Brosius & Eps, 1995; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). The logic of lowering news thresholds goes back to the “continuity effect” already identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965, p. 82), who state that ‘once an event has “made it” the news channel will be more readily open for the follow-up events, at a lower threshold value.’ After an initiating event, journalists even start to cover similar past events that occurred before the key event took place. Journalists and editors know that such events can elicit high levels of public attention, leading to a demand for more information. Mass media try to satisfy this hunger by providing more news about the same issue.

If multiple significant events occur about the same topic, news outlets are more likely to go into storm mode. Jo Buggenhout of *VTM NEWS* explains: 'Since the beginning of last year, since Charlie Hebdo, we’re in a kind of “attack modus”.’ This means that events on terrorisms happening the weeks or months after Charlie Hebdo were heavily reported upon. Downs (1972) explains this by the “issue attention cycle argument”. 'Once an issue has forcefully caught the attention of the media', says Downs, 'it stays there for a while until, inevitably, it fades away again as journalists start looking for other, fresh news.' The key element in Downs’ account is that spectacularly heightened news attention for an issue is temporary. The public and the media will get bored and turn away. As long as the public stays tuned, the media will keep on covering the storm issue. Added to that, if news events connected to the media storm issue continue to unfold, journalists will continue covering them (and the threshold for covering events linked to the storm will remain low). In this sense, the duration of a storm probably critically depends on how political or other relevant actors deal with it. If elites keep talking and especially disagreeing about the issue and keep producing events that are worth covering, the storm continues.

IMITATION

In this paragraph I develop the argument that when a storm breaks, it is important to react quickly. Because news editors have to react fast, this leads to uncertainty. News editors are uncertain about how much attention they must devote to an event and find it hard to estimate what their main competitors will do. This causes imitation.

When a media storm occurs, it is important that news managers immediately undertake action. They make phone calls to inform other journalists and to gather extra information. Often an *ad hoc* "news cell" is established. This team meets as soon as possible to see what and how the event is going to be covered, as Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) describes: 'We put everything we've collected for tomorrow's newspaper with the garbage and start all over again. We immediately meet with all the specialists of that issue and ask ourselves: "these are the facts… what shall we do? What can we add to the story? What do we want to accomplish?"'

For television news, procedures are more rigid than for newspapers. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) explains that they have fixed procedures when something big happens: 'It is important to make fast decisions about an extra newscast. If we decide that the event can be categorized as "a big bang", all relevant actors simply have to open a script on their computer with a step-by-step plan about who needs to be contacted (for example, to interrupt the "regular" broadcasting schedule of broadcaster, to order extra camera crews).' Newspapers have to decide if they produce an extra edition or extra pages. Also the website is important, as Steven De Bock (*Het Nieuwblad*) confirms: 'We have to work at two different paces. The newspaper for the next day is important, but the website as well. On the day of the Brussels bombings I immediately reassigned some journalists for the "paper version" of the newspaper to produce articles for the website.'

Technology has influenced the speed of news-making. Newspapers are now able to produce an extra edition because it is technically possible to do this within a limited time frame. TV stations don't need a satellite wagon to go live but instead use a "WNT system" that works with 4G. This gives a broadcaster the flexibility and mobility to cover the event faster.

All interviewees indicated that it is important for things to happen fast. Sometimes this leads to uncertainty. It is not always easy to make a correct estimation on how "big" one should bring a particular story. At these moments news outlets look at each other. What's the assessment of our main competitor? Has *VTM* made an extra newscast? Looking back at March 18, 2016, the day that Salah Abdeslam was arrested, a *VRT NEWS* journalist argues: 'We were in doubt whether we had enough information to bring an extra newscast […] At such moments, you really look at the others.' Stories that are reported in different media at the same time create a kind of collective dynamic of increasing coverage. Scholars have often referred to such self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005). Together, these emulating micro-decisions may lead to a storm on the aggregate level. This second media-storm-generating process especially affects the explosiveness of a storm: imitation on a large scale leads to quickly peaking media attention.

Whereas lowering news thresholds causes media storms, imitation is responsible that a media storm keeps on going. Most news editors believe that imitation feeds the storm and makes them stronger. Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) and Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) attribute this to the increased level of competition. Antonissen: 'News editors ask themselves at the end of a big news day who was the best and who had the most viewers/readers'. Willems adds: 'The competition is brought to a higher level. We will look more closely what is in the newspapers and what they exactly write about. This might give us ideas how to cover the news ourselves'. Kris Hoflack (*VTM NEWS*) adds: 'Media reinforce each other during a storm. You know that if you decide to take over a news fact, it only gets bigger. In this way you end in an irreversible news flow where you cannot step out anymore.' Tim Pauwels (VRT NEWS) argues that 'a news editor is restrained by fear. 'The only thing a news editor asks himself at the end of the day is "have I missed something?" These people are constantly asked: why does competitor A or B cover this or that and we don't ? It really takes a lot of courage to step out of the box. And it will only be done when the news editor feels sure that the mainstream choices are more or less covered. Given the shrinking resources of many redactions, at the end of the day, for many news outlets, the mainstream choices are all they end up doing'. Desmet (*De Morgen*) explains his view: 'It's two-fold. For certain issues, you can see that we all go simultaneously in the same direction. But at other moments, you see that, call it a self-regulation mechanism, we don't because we make another estimation of the story or we do not begrudge our competitor to follow him.'

Let's illustrate this imitation process with an example. The first round of interviews took place in August 2013, only a few weeks after the accession to the throne of King Filip on July 21st. Most news editors indicate that they covered it extensively because they knew other media would do the same. Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*): 'Yes, we spent a lot of attention on the abdication of King Albert; it was a big historical event and more importantly we didn't want to do less than the others, although we knew that probably a significant part of our readers didn't care about it.' Liesbeth Van Impe (*Het Nieuwsblad*) adds: 'I really was in doubt on how to cover it. Maybe our readers wouldn't mind if we'd brought only four pages. But as a news editor you make the consideration: every outlet is going to get big, so let's do it too.' This is an excellent example of a media storm that is initiated by a forecasted event. Outlets anticipate this event and they all cover it extensively because they expect the others to do so as well. In other words, anticipated imitation also often leads to explosive attention, triggering a media storm.

Yet, imitation does not always drive media storms. News managers were asked whether they closely watched their competitors on the day of the Brussels bombings. Most interviewees indicated that imitation did not play a role on this occasion. The reason is that the event was so obviously important

that it was clear for each outlet that they had to cover it extensively. Jo Buggenhout (*VTM NEWS*) confirms that under these circumstances, there is no need to look at others because 'you're just so focused on your own news'. Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) adds: 'Honestly, imitation did not play a role. Well, of course, you're in the flow. You look at the planning of *De Standaard*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Het Belang van Limburg* [all of these newspapers are in the same media group] and you know that they all focus on one thing. So, automatically, you go with them. But on the other side, this is just so evident.'

Wrapping up, it seems that imitation is a daily practice. During routine periods there is always some level of imitation. A majority of the interviewees indicated that imitation gets stronger during a media storm compared to imitation during a 'routine day'. In other words, imitation is driving media storms. Imitation especially takes place when news editors are unsure about making a correct estimation of "how big" they should bring a story and how much attention they should pay to the topic. In a race against the time, news editors are supposed to make fast decisions. At such a moment, media outlets will look at each other, especially at their direct competitors.

FIGURE 3.1: LEVEL OF IMITATION DURING (NON) ROUTINE PERIODS

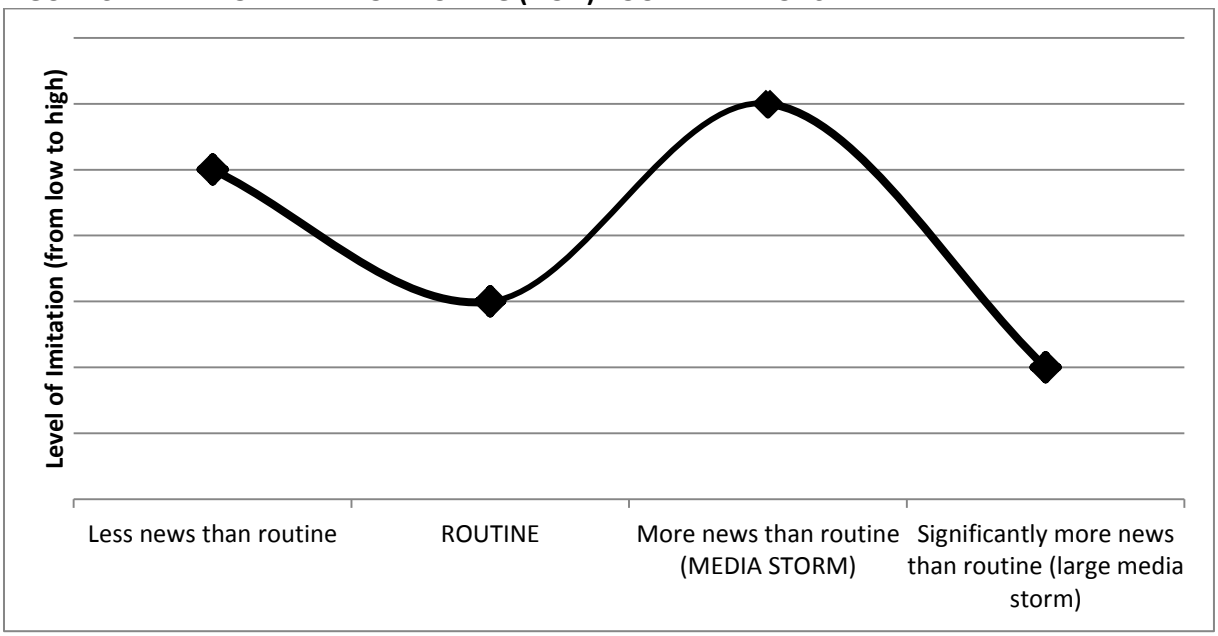


Figure 3.1 visually shows the level of imitation during routine and media storm periods, despite it appears somehow arbitrary to draw a line to indicate this. Based on the interviews, it is safe to say that imitation goes up during a media storm period (but also on a routine day there will always be some level of imitation). Two comments need to be formulated at the extreme left and extreme right side of the graph. On one hand, I learned during the interviews that imitation also takes place on a very slow news day, when there is nothing interesting to report on. Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*)

explains his view: 'I think the slower the news day, the more competition. If you have sufficient own "exciting" material, you look less at your competitors. But at the moment you think "we don't have enough good stories for our newspaper" you will look at others more easily.' On the other hand, imitation becomes less important If the event is exceptionally large (e.g. the Brussels bombings) and a correspondingly large media storm breaks, as things are so obvious (and there is so much to be done on the news floor) that imitation becomes less important.

3.5. Conclusion and Discussion

The main goal of this chapter was to illustrate the mechanisms of media storms and to systematically compare them with non-storm coverage. Previous literature has already identified two mechanisms at play: (1) lowering news thresholds (as a result of a spectacular event or development, news outlets temporarily change their news selection process and lower the thresholds of newsworthiness for similar issues and events) and (2) imitation: once a storm breaks, news outlets imitate one another's news selection decisions.

I believe I have found clear-cut evidence for the first mechanism. When a storm breaks, virtually the whole newsroom will be reassigned to the news story. Specialists will be asked to cover the core story; generalists cover similar events and follow-up stories. The newsroom is more centrally coordinated. The news manager assigned has one clear task: coordinating the complete story. He or she is responsible for ensuring that all angles are elaborated, all sources are interviewed and all follow-up stories are covered. Because of the coordination involved, it becomes an intensively reported story. The story will be high on the agenda, not only on the day it breaks, but also in the days following. A kind of sensitivity for the issue is created for a certain period. Lowering thresholds explains why media storms take a large share of the agenda for multiple days.

Secondly, regarding imitation, the picture is a little less clear. Imitation is daily practice but becomes stronger when a media storm takes place. Imitation explains why media storms keep on going. News editors confirm this. Media outlets look at each other because news editors have difficulties estimating how intensively they should report on a story. But it appears that there is no linear relationship between the size of a story and the level of imitation. If the event is exceptionally big, journalists are focused on their own outlet alone, and do not imitate others. In the case of the Brussels bombings, journalists were not unsure about the amount of news they had to bring. It was abundantly clear that they should put all of their efforts into covering this hugely important story. So, especially in the case of uncertainty, media outlets will look more closely at each other and imitation is more likely to occur.

This is the first study that aims to systematically investigate the mechanisms of media storms. This is why it was so important to use a qualitative approach. Interviews allowed me to explore the processes that cause media storms. Without doubt, this approach has advantages in this context. Had I conducted a quantitative analysis to investigate for example the level of imitation for storms versus non-storms, I would never have found that the level of imitation fluctuates, because exceptionally big stories also count as media storms and really slow news days are part of the non-storm coverage. My qualitative approach also allowed me to disentangle the process more precisely, something that is much more difficult with a quantitative approach. Of course, this approach also holds some limitations. It is difficult to claim that lowering news thresholds and imitations are *the* main mechanism of media storms; rather, I illustrated how they play a role in the perception of journalists, news managers and chief editors.

CHAPTER 4: THE CONDUCIVE FACTORS OF MEDIA STORMS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the conducive factors of media storms. In other words, which characteristics determine that some stories attract an enormous amount of attention and stay on the media agenda for weeks, while others make the front pages for a day but disappear quickly afterwards? If you ask this question to news editors, their answer is simple: it is a "gut feeling". They find it very hard to come up with a list of determinants. Previous work on this topic does not provide a clear answer either. Scholars on media storms and related concepts speculate about *when* media storms come about but do not address this question empirically.

In my search for possible clues, I presented two similar stories to my interviewees[15]. On Christmas Eve 2012, a seventeen-year-old was killed near Brussels Central railway station. The story was barely picked up by the media. The fact that this case did not get any media attention is somewhat surprising. Six years earlier a very similar murder took place: a boy of the same age was murdered in the exact same location. This story received an enormous amount of media attention, was the subject of political debate, and lead to a huge demonstration against senseless violence. Why did the 2006 case get a substantial amount of media attention while the highly similar 2012 case was not picked up at all by the media? Most editors were not able to give a clear-cut answer. In fact, most of them did not even remember the 2012 story.

The aim of this chapter is to operationalise the "gut feeling" of news editors into concrete explanations. What are the conducive factors that determine media storms? I searched for explanations in the transcripts of my interviews—and in the scarce literature—and came up with conducive factors on three levels: (1) characteristics of the initiating event, (2) characteristics of news coverage, and (3) agenda congestion. Characteristics of the initiating event are characteristics that relate to the real-world circumstances of the event itself. The media can decide whether to cover them or not, but cannot change them. Furthermore, there are the characteristics of news coverage.

[15] More information about the interviews can be found in Chapter 3.

While the characteristics of the initiating event are rather fixed, the media can decide how to portray the news story. This level thus relates to the framing of the individual news items. Crucially, it is my intention to predict which stories develop into a storm. For this reason, I only look at the first five news items of each story. A news item at the end of the storm cannot predict why the storm started. In other words, I only look at the origin of the news coverage. A third explanatory level is agenda congestion. Maybe it is not a matter of the event or the characteristics of the news coverage but does the fact that there are (no) other stories play a role. In the theory section, later in this chapter, I will further develop these three possible conducive factors.

I look at a particular sample of stories. A story can become a media storm or can become a non-storm. Non-storms are stories that made it onto the agenda but did not meet my criteria to qualify as a full media storm. For the analysis, I use the same media storms that I identified in Chapter 2 and, I use a similar operationalization on a lower level to identify a random sample of non-storms. To begin the following section, I elaborate upon the three explanatory levels of the characteristics of media storms. Then, I briefly present the data and methods. The analysis is structured in the same way as the theory; presenting predictor by predictor and then an integrated model. My results show that it *is* possible to predict the so-called "gut feeling" of news editors. Characteristics on the level of the news coverage in particular seem a conducive factor of media storms.

4.2. Forecasting a Storm

The objective of this chapter is to operationalize the gut feeling of news editors into concrete conducive factors. The journalists I interviewed were not able to come up with a list of conducive factors. Also, previous research has not systematically tackled the question. For these reasons this chapter is more of an explorative search than a formal test. Therefore I will not formulate formal hypotheses. In the following section I search for conducive factors on three levels: (1) the level of the initiating event, (2) the level of the news coverage and (3) agenda congestion.

Characteristics of the initiating event

The characteristics of the initiating event itself might trigger a media storm. In this paragraph I distinguish between the type (key event) and the nature (proximity) of the initiating event.

I expect that the type of event themselves, which initiate and feed a storm, affect whether an increase in media attention escalates into an actual media storm. Extensive work has shown that events play a strong role in determining the media agenda (Boydstun, 2013). Previous research on media storms and related concepts indicate that there should be a kind of event to initiate a storm. Kepplinger & Habermeier (1995), for instance, argue that news waves are initiated by a key event

which they define as a genuine event independent of news coverage, such as accidents or earthquakes. Also Vasterman (1995) and Giasson et al. (2010) use this interpretation of a key event. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that a natural disaster like the Tsunami in South-East Asia received massive coverage and triggered a media storm. Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009) prefer the term "trigger event" coined by Cobb and Elder (1972) because it denotes the beginning of something and because it also does not imply that the event starting the media-hype is the most important part. Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) bundle the two terms by simply stating that most political waves begin with key or triggering event, defined as an event which is considered sufficiently important to warrant extensive media coverage. Here, I will test if key events, defined as unexpected events, are more likely to trigger storms than other types of events (such as forecasted events).

Also the nature of the initiating event could be important. In the past, several scholars have formulated a list of news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Stanyer (2014, p. 155) states that news values are an important factor in explaining the amount of coverage an event receives. Proximity is also often formulated as a news value. O'Neill and Harcup (2009, p. 166) describe the value of proximity as when 'nearby events take precedence over similar events at a distance'. For the audience, domestic news is more accessible and easier to consume. Also, the media themselves have an incentive to cover domestic news more extensively than foreign news. Biltereyst & Desmet (2010, p. 198) argue that in a competitive media environment foreign news is too complex and too expensive to cover. News media therefore tend to treat the audience as local or national consumers. Boydstun (2013, p. 38) shows that the US media gave much more attention to Hurricane Katrina than to the Tsunami in South-East Asia or the Haiti Earthquake, despite the latter two disasters killing many more people. She concludes that proximity affects the perceived newsworthiness of an event. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) makes a similar argument: 'Between a coach crash where ten Belgians die or a similar crash where ten Indians die, the difference is quite obvious. It has all to do with proximity. Belgians are more interested in news about compatriots than in news about people they do not feel connected to'. People identify more easily with domestic news stories and therefore will show more interest. All things considered, I expect that stories initiated by a domestic event are more likely to trigger a media storm than stories initiated by foreign events.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEWS COVERAGE

As discussed in the previous section, I expect that the characteristics of the initiating event determine the likelihood of a news story triggering a storm. But as Dearing & Rogers (1996) argue, real-world indicators are a necessary but insufficient explanation. Since the media agenda is not a perfect mirror of the real world, I predict that the characteristics of the news coverage itself also

matter. In order to investigate characteristics at the level of the news coverage, I look at the very beginning of a story; the first five news items. I argue that the way these first news items of a news story are portrayed is crucial in determining whether the subsequent media coverage turns into a storm. In this section I propose three predictors on the level of the news coverage: diversity of discussion, thematic news coverage, and negative tone.

A first predictor on the level of the news coverage is the diversity of the discussion. This term refers to the number of dimensions or angles a story possesses. For example, a story about the tsunami can be reported upon in terms of the event itself, but other angles can also be covered, such as the economic consequences for the victims of the tsunami, the international fundraising and the effectiveness of the support system after the disaster. Boydstun (2013, p. 42) describes this diversity, arguing that 'the more angles of an issue/topic are at play, the more interesting the issue/topic becomes and the more attention it attracts'. Dimitri Anthonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws)* confirms this idea: 'When an interesting story happens, we don't even have to search for different angles, they are very easy to find'. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) adds: 'If the pope resigns, then you know that this has never happened before. Such a story transcends the daily routine. There are so many angles to cover; you cannot squeeze them into one broadcast. You need different days to tell the whole story. Besides, you also have to cover the reactions to the story and the further development of the story'.[16] A "rich" story leads thus to more news coverage. Wien and Elmelund-Praesteker (2009) develop an additional argument for why diverse stories are important for journalists. Because of the competition between media outlets, a journalist cannot simply present the same stories as his competitor. One way of avoiding this happening is to cover the same story but from a different angle. 'During the media-hype journalists are caught on the horns of a dilemma: on the one hand, the competing paper has a good story, yet, on the other hand they cannot just copy the story. To ensure the exclusivity and still be able to cover the story, it is necessary that the story can be pursued in different ways' (Wien & Elmelund-Praesteker, 2009, p. 195). Based on the arguments of Boydstun, Wien & Elmelund-Praesteker, I expect that the more diverse the first news items about the story are, the more likely the story is to trigger a media storm.

A second predictor on the level of news coverage is thematic news coverage. Thematic coverage places events into context, pays attention to trends, and presents general evidence. In contrast, episodic news treats events as particular cases in the form of event-oriented reports (Wouters, 2015, p. 477). This theoretical distinction comes from Iyengar (1994) who found a dominance of episodic coverage in American TV news. For example, a story about the Belgian banking crisis in 2008 could

[16] This interview took place on 30 July 2013, a few months after the reassignment of Pope Benedictus XVI on 28 February 2013

just report on the events themselves (Belgian banks going bankrupt and the intervention of the government) but could also frame this event as a part of the worldwide financial crisis. I believe that if the story is covered in a thematic way from the very beginning, the story can potentially develop into a storm because this means that the story can be told as a more general event, as a case of a more general phenomenon.

In the previous section about the characteristics of the event, we discussed news values. On the level of the news coverage they might also play a role. Galtung & Ruge (1965) and Harcup & O' Neill (2001; 2016) identify negativity (the third predictor) as an important news factor. Over the past decades, a considerable body of work has been developed that suggests that news tends to be more negative than positive. Media coverage is often skewed towards bad news rather than good. Events involving conflict or crisis, for instance, receive a greater amount of media attention (Bagdikian, 2004). I predict that the more a news item contains negative tone, the more likely it is that the news coverage will turn into a media storm.

AGENDA CONGESTION

The third conducive factor is agenda congestion. This level does not look at the initiating event or the characteristics of the news coverage, but focuses on the broader context. The term agenda congestion refers to how open or "clogged" the news agenda is (Boydstun, 2013, p. 44). An open agenda means that the agenda space is equally distributed over different issues, whereas a clogged agenda refers to a situation where one issue takes up the whole agenda. The exact same event may receive different amounts of front-page attention depending on whether it occurs during periods of low or high agenda congestion. Pascal Kerkhove, senior editor of the *Gazet Van Antwerpen* gives a hypothetical example: 'If the day after the tsunami—a news story that probably ran for a week—the Cathedral of Antwerp had exploded, the tsunami would never have triggered as much coverage as it did without the explosion. On one day a murder will get two pages, on a day that three murders happen, it will only get 40 lines'. Let me give another real-world example. In May 2014, three people were murdered at the Jewish Museum in Belgium. The story was picked up in the international press, but it did not get much attention in the Belgian press. A possible explanation might be that the agenda was already too "clogged" for another big story. The murders happened the day before the federal, regional and European elections. At that time the elections were already taking up a large proportion of the agenda space. If the murder had happened on another day, it might have turned into a media storm. If a story happens when the agenda is diverse, the mechanisms causing media storms are triggered faster. This is because when the agenda is diverse, there are no other big news stories. This gives editors the possibility to assign several journalists to the same story (and thus producing more news items than when only one journalist is assigned to a story). Whereas, if a story

happens when the agenda is clogged with several other big stories, it is not possible to assign an army of journalists to that story. I thus expect that the less congested the agenda is, the more likely it is for the story to trigger a media storm.

4.3. Data and Methods

Analyses at the level of the news story

Analogous with the work of Thesen (2013), a research design on the level of the *news story* is being developed. As explained in the first chapter, a news story is the whole of individual news items covering one time- and place-specific event (e.g. a protest march or a murder). A news story can be a storm when it surpasses a certain threshold of media attention (for the precise operationalization see below), or a non-storm, meaning that the amount of coverage spent on the story does not meet the storm criteria.

Identification of (storms) and non-storms

For the analysis, I rely on the sample of media storms identified in Chapter 2. Since I do not have the transcripts of TV items—which are necessary to code the characteristics of news items—only the media storms of *De Standaard* are taken into account (N=28). The procedure I use to identify non-storms is similar to the one used to identify media storms. A non-storm should have occupied at least four percent of the media agenda for a given week (and less than 20%, otherwise it would have been a storm), and it should have been accompanied by an increase in attention of 150% relative to the preceding week. Running the operationalization (size: min. four %, max. 15%; explosiveness: 150% increase compared to previous week; duration: min. one week), I get 1477 non-storms.[17] Then, I take a random sample of 15 percent. In other words, 221 non-storms. For those 221 stories, I subsequently conducted a manual re-verification of the potential non-storms. If the increase in attention could be attributed to a single event and if the non-storm consists of at least three news items, I identified it as a non-storm.[18] If a potential non-storm was based on multiple minor events, such that it did not involve a single coherent news story, the non-storm was no longer eligible for inclusion in the analysis (e.g. a murder in Belgium and a murder in the United States that were covered in the same week on the front-page of *De Standaard*). Only 37 of the 221 stories were verified as a non-storm. From those 37 stories I randomly selected 28 non-storms. In all, the

[17] It is somehow arbitrary to use four percent as a minimum size in order to identify a non-storm. The reason I used four percent as a minimum and not zero is that I needed stories that were big enough (with several news items). Otherwise it would not be possible to identify a story behind the news item.

[18] This 'double-procedure' was used because there is a lot of noise on the data on this level. On this level only about 15-20% of the stories contains coherent news story of min. three news items.

complete sample of news stories includes 28 storms and 28 non-storms. The complete list of stories is listed in the appendix at the end of the chapter.

VARIABLES DETERMINING MEDIA STORMS

On the level of the initiating event, two variables are taken into account: key event and proximity. For each story, storm or non-storm, an initiating event is identified and for each event, these variables were coded. Key event is a dummy variables. Proximity is an ordinal variable, ranging from zero to two (zero means "pure" domestic, one is mixed, two "pure" foreign news). After coding the characteristics of the initiating event, I look at the level of the news coverage. To avoid causality problems, only the first five news items of a story are taken into account. A news item at the end of the storm cannot predict why the storm started. Sometimes (in the case of non-storms) a story generates less than five news items. In total, 248 news items were coded and then aggregated on story level, by calculating an average score for each variable. The variables thematic news and negative tone are thus variables that were initially coded on news item level and later aggregated on story level (taking the mean score of the news items). The descriptives show that stories are on average framed in an episodic way and that they are not, by definition, very negative. The variable diversity of discussion indicates the number of ways a story can be portrayed. For this calculation, I looked at how many different issue codes were assigned to each story across the different news items. This variable is thus a sum of the amount of issues per story. For agenda congestion, the normalized Shannon's H for each story was calculated. [19] There are several ways to measure agenda congestion (for an overview see: Boydstun, Bevan, & Thomas, 2014). The normalized Shannon's H measure varies between zero and one, with zero indicating perfect congestion (and one perfect diversity)**.** Concretely, I calculated the agenda congestion of the news coverage of the two days before the story starts. This way I could see whether there was room on the agenda for a storm to develop. Table 4.1 provides an overview of all coded variables and describes the way they were coded. In this table, I first give a brief description of the operationalization, and I then give several coding examples.

[19] The formula used to calculated the normalized Shannon's H

$$Shannon's\ H^* = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^{n}(p(x_i))^* \ln p(x_i)}{\ln(N)}$$

TABLE 4.1: LIST OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

LEVEL OF THE INITIATING EVENT	
Key Event (0/1)	Dummy variable. Coded as one if the initiating event is an unexpected, disruptive event, zero if the story is initiated by another type of event (such as a forecasted or a triggering event). *Examples:* Madrid Terrorist Attacks (storm) = 1 WTO summit in Doha (non-storm) = 0
Domestic (0/1/2)	Ordinal variable. Coded as two if the story/event is 'pure domestic'. One if mixed (foreign news with Belgians involved) and zero for 'pure' foreign. *Examples:* Violence in Gaza (non-storm)= 0 Hostage of Belgian couple in Iran (non-storm) = 1 Federal Elections in Belgium (storm) = 2
LEVEL OF NEWS COVERAGE	
Thematic news (0/1)	Episodic frame = 1 Thematic frame = 2 Balanced = 3 Recoded as a dummy variable. Coded as zero if the news item was portrayed in an episodic way, one if the story contained thematic elements (=balanced) or was framed in a thematic way. Based on the NEPOCS codebook Aggregated on story-level, taking the mean score of all items *Examples:* - *Episodic*: Regional Elections 2004 (storm): news item looking ahead to the upcoming elections, just focusing on the elections - *Thematic:* Ford Genk (non-storm): news items about the loss of 9000 jobs and the consequences for Belgian economic growth
Diversity of Discussion	Sum of the number of different issues the story portrayed. The coders were asked to assign maximum three issue codes to each news item (using the CAP codebook). Per story I calculated the amount of different issue codes. *Examples:* - War in Iraq (storm): the story mainly coded under 1619 (Defence, topics directly to war and military operations). But, for example, one of the news items is about the impact of the war on the economy (coded in 100, Macro-Economics). - Escape from Dendermonde prison (non-storm): the story was mainly coded under 1205 (Prisons). But one of the news items was coded under 2012 (party politics) It dealt with the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice returning from their holidays to gather for a special meeting about the issue.

Negative tone	What is the tone of the news item? ○ Neutral ○ (Mainly) positive ○ Balanced ○ (Mainly) negative Indications of *negative tonality* are references to political failure, fiasco, disaster, crisis, frustration, collapse, flop, denial, rejection, neglect, default, deterioration, resignation, scepticism, threats, cynicism, defeatism or disappointment. Indications of *positive tonality* are references to political success, problem solutions, achievement, improvement, advance, prosperity, accomplishment, enthusiasm, hope, benefit, gain, sustainability, gratification or accomplishment. Recoded into dummy variable: 1 =negative 0 = positive/balanced/neutral Based on the NEPOCS codebook[20] Aggregated on story-level, taking the mean score of all items. *Examples*: - Escape from Dendermonde prison (storm): news item criticising the prison system after the escape of 28 prisoners and framing it as a political failure of the Minister of Justice. - Reassignment of party president Karel De Gucht (non-storm): news item describing the decline of De Gucht and the political crisis within his political party, the Open VLD.
LEVEL OF AGENDA CONGESTION	
Agenda Congestion	Normalized Shannon's H (ranges from zero to one). The higher the number, the more diverse the agenda. More specifically, I calculated the congestion of the agenda the two days before the start of the media storm.

In Table 4.2, the descriptive data on all 56 news stories (28 storms and 28 non-storms) are presented. For each news story, the characteristics of the initiating event and the characteristics of the news coverage were coded. In addition, I calculated the agenda congestion of the story.

[20] http://www.nepocs.eu/

TABLE 4.2: DESCRIPTIVES (LIST OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES, N=56)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Krippendorff's α	% Agreement
Key Event	0.20	0.40	0	1	0.94	98,2%
Proximate Event	2.1	0.9	1	3	0.77	84%
Diversity of Discussion	1.8	0.98	1	4	0.64	84%
Thematic News	0.13	0.16	0	0.6	0.63	93,3%
Negative Tone	0.27	0.25	0	1	0.66	84%
Agenda Congestion	0.61	0.08	0.35	0.76	/	/

For all variables (except for the variable agenda congestion which is calculated with a formula) the inter-coder reliability was calculated. For the variables on the level of the initiating event, all stories (N=56) were double coded. For the variables on the event of the news coverage, I took a random sample of 45 news items (=17% of the total sample) to double code. The results in the last two columns of Table 4.3 show the Krippendorff's Alpha per variable and the percentage agreement between two coders. The alpha scores range between 0.63 and 0.94. Scores above 0.60 indicate a sufficient reliability score. Because of the low N and the fact that some variables are skewed (e.g. thematic news has mean score of 0.13, indicating that the majority of the items are coded as episodic news), also the percentage of agreement between the two coders is worth taking into account. One can see, for example, that the variable thematic news has a percentage of agreement of 93%, while the alpha score is much lower (0.63). Because the variable is quite skewed, a deviation weighs in proportion much more than a variable with a normal distribution.

4.4. RESULTS

What are the conducive factors that trigger media storms? Three blocks of conducive factors were distinguished: event characteristics, news coverage characteristics and agenda congestion. In the following section I first test each block separately (the first three columns of Table 4.4) and then present an integrated model (Model D), taking the three levels into account. In all models the dependent variable stays the same, specifically whether the story is a media storm (1) or a non-storm (0). All results can be found in Table 4.3.

The first level of conducive factors were the predictors on the level of the initiating event (key event and proximity). Both variables appear to be insignificant. The model only explains one percent of the total variance. So, proximate events are not more likely to trigger media storm coverage. Foreign events that appear in our national media are not always trivial stories. Often they are major or spectacular events of some importance such as the terrorist attacks in London or Madrid, or the American elections. Foreign events might be as likely as domestic events to trigger media storm

coverage, on the condition that they combine a couple of other characteristics (such as unexpectedness or sensational topic). The result for the variable *key event* might be explained by the fact that not only unexpected events are expected to trigger heightened and explosive media attention. Events that news outlets can anticipate, such as the elections, might also trigger a media storm. Under these circumstances, they will try to estimate what their main competitors will do, often causing an explosive increase in attention for that issue. Karin De Ruyter, Senior Editor at *De Standaard* confirms: 'On the one hand, there are major events that happen unexpectedly. King Boudewijn died unexpectedly and Sierre…that was…boom, 25 children dead. That's really gigantic news. But on the other hand', De Ruyter continues, 'there are major events that you can anticipate. For example, the past weeks and months we worked on stories about Mandela's life and death. His health condition was critical a number of times before, so we had already prepared the articles.'[21] The reason the type of event is insignificant is that both unexpected events (such as the tsunami or terrorist attacks) and forecasted events (such as elections) trigger media attention that turns into a media storm. For this conducive factor (predictors on the level of the initiating event), I conclude that neither variables have an effect.

Model B (Table 4.3) shows the results on the level of the news coverage. I looked at the first fives news items of a story to see if they contain certain characteristics that are more likely to trigger a media storm. The strongest predictor on this level is *diversity of discussion*. This means that stories in which initial coverage already displays different 'angles' (measured as subtopics) are more likely it is to turn into a media storm. For example, within the first five news items about the war in Iraq, three news items are coded under the subtopic *foreign operations* (subtopic code 1619, in which media storm is indicated), but also one news item on the protest against government participating in the war in Iraq (subtopic code 209); another news item tackles economic indicators showing a negative trend because of the war (subtopic code 100 macro-economics). Thematic news is close to significant. Yet, since the total N is only 56, a p-value of 0.103 is worth taking into account. Thematic news means that the story is portrayed in a broader context, linking the individual event to more general phenomenon. So, if the first five news items already portray the story in a thematic way, the story is more likely to trigger a media storm. The descriptives have already shown that this variable is skewed; the majority of the news items are framed in an episodic way. An example of a media storm showing a thematic news item in the first five news items is the storm around the Madrid Terrorist Attacks. Besides news items that explicitly dealt with the attack, one of the news items framed the attack in a broader context, detailing the history of terrorist attacks in Spain and their relationship to

[21] The interview with Karin De Ruyter took place on 1 August 2013, Nelson Mandela died a couple months afterwards on 5 December 2013

ETA. The variables negative tone is not significant at all. Maybe this can be explained by the fact that general news is already quite negative. It is notable that negative tone has a negative coefficient. This means that positive news items are more likely to lead to media storms than negative news items. However, this result is not significant. The model explains nineteen percent of the total variance.

TABLE 4.3: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON THE CONDUCIVE FACTORS OF MEDIA STORMS

	A. Event			B. News Coverage			C. Agenda Congestion			D. Full Model		
	B (S.E.)	Odds	Sign. (p)	B (S.E.)	Odds	Sign (p)	B (S.E.)	Odds	Sign. (p)	B (S.E.)	Odds	Sign. (p)
Characteristics of the initiating event												
Key Event	0.78 (0.76)	2.18	NS (0.30)							1.33 (0.84)	3.79	NS (0.11)
Proximity	.09 (0.33)	1.01	NS (0.77)									
Characteristics of news coverage												
Thematic news				3.96 (2.47)	0.02	+ (0.109)				4.48 (2.76)	89.02	+ (0.10)
Diversity of Discussion				0.91 (0.38)	2.48	* (0.02)				0.80 (.38)	2.24	* (0.04)
Negative Tone				-.42 (1.29	065	NS (0.74)						
Agenda Congestion												
Agenda Congestion							- 6,258 (3,62)	0.01	+ (0.08)	-8.46 (4.59)	0.00	+ (0.06)
Constant	-.36 (0.84)			1.96 (2.46)			3,807 (2,23)			2.9 (2.8)		
Pseudo R^2	0.01			0.19			0.04			0.26		

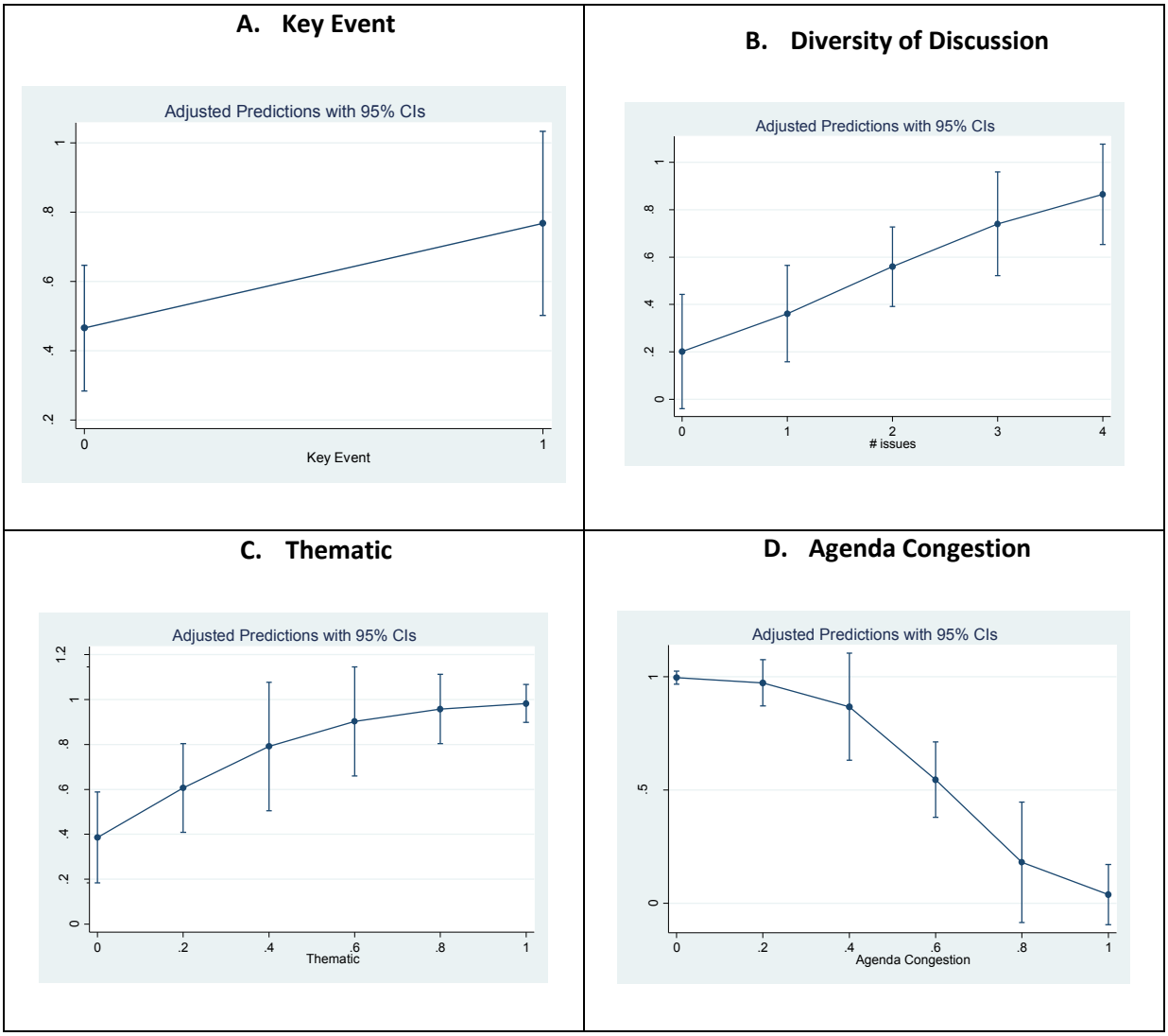
Logistic Regression with Story (0/1) as dependent variable. Table entries are the B with S.E., and the Odds. += p _ .10 *= p _ .05 ** = p _ .01 *** = p _ .001. N = 56 stories

The third conducive factor is agenda congestion (Model C, Table 4.3) The value for this variable varies between 0 and 1, with 0 indicating total congestion. Total congestion means that the agenda is "clogged", in other words there is only one to a few issues on the agenda. The opposite of a congested agenda is an open agenda, meaning there are a lot of different issues on the agenda. The beta coefficient is negative; this means that the more congested the agenda is (the two days before the storm breaks), the more likely the story triggers subsequent coverage that turns into a storm. So, agenda congestion is a conducive factor of media storms. This goes against my expectations. I expected that that an open agenda would be more likely to trigger media storms, since there are no big stories yet on the agenda. This model explains almost 4% of the total variance.

Finally, an integrated model (Table 4.3, Model D), takes only the significant variables from the previous models into account. Since I want to account for predictors on the three identified levels (characteristics of the initiating event, news coverage and agenda congestion), I also take the variable key event into account. Although the variable was not significant in Model A, it becomes nearly significant in Model D (especially worth mentioning if you take the low N into account). Variables on the level of the news coverage in particular seem to be the strongest conducive factor of media storms. The model explains 26% of the total variance.

The predicted probabilities are calculated for the full model. Since the sample of non-storms is not representative (from 2001-2008 I only identified 28 non-storms in *De Standaard*, but in the real world there are much more than 28 non-storms), only statements can be made about this sample. Figure 4.1A clearly shows that the predicted probability of triggering a storm is 0.77 for a key event and 0.46 for a non-key event. Figure 4.1B shows that for each extra issue (angle), the probability of triggering a storm significantly increases. Figure 4.1C shows the predicted probabilities of triggering a storm for thematic news. From the descriptives, we know that news coverage is mainly episodic. The graph shows that from the moment there is just a small amount of thematic coverage (0.2, meaning one in five coded news items being thematic) the predicted probabilities are already 0.38. For an additional news item with a thematic frame (40%, meaning two of the five news items) the predicted probabilities increase to 0.60. The last independent variable is agenda congestion. The graph of the predicted probabilities (Figure 4.1D) shows, in line with the regression results, that agenda congestion has the opposite effect than I expected. The predicted probabilities are higher for a congested agenda than for diverse agenda.

FIGURE 4.1: PREDICTED PROBABILITIES FOR MEDIA STORMS



Notes. Predicted probabilities; keeping other variables at their means. 95% confidence intervals.

4.5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Previous work on media storms and related concepts tried to define the phenomenon, described the anatomy and investigated the political effects (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Vasterman, 2005). No study, however, has empirically investigated why some stories get "hot" and others do not. That was the aim of this chapter: to measure the gut feeling of news editors and to operationalize it into conducive factors that trigger media storms. Therefore, I identified conducive factors at three levels: (1) characteristics of the initiating event, (2) characteristics of news coverage and (3) agenda congestion.

On the first level (level of the initiating event), I find limited evidence. Both key event and proximity are not significant. In the integrated model, however, key event gains more predictive power and seemed to matter. On the second level (level of news coverage), I find that if a story is covered in a

thematic way it is more likely to trigger a storm. This is interesting because one would expect that thematic coverage only happens after a certain time after the story breaks. The size of the effect is rather small. The diversity of discussion has more predicting power. If the story has different 'angles', it is more likely to generate more news coverage and become a storm.

On the third level, agenda congestion, I find that the more congested the agenda is, the more likely it is that a storm will break. This result goes against my expectations. As indicated before, there are several ways to measure agenda congestion. Besides the Shannon's H measure, one could also use the Herfindahl-index. Using the HH-index gives exactly the same result. Also calculating agenda congestion based on the week (instead of two days) before the start of the storm gives the same result. I calculated the agenda congestion based on the two days before the storm empirically started. Maybe it is worth trying in future research to take the two days before the most important event, rather than the two days before the empirical start of the storm. In some cases the storm starts with an unexpected event (such as the tsunami), in other cases the storm starts gradually and the most import event is not necessarily the empirical start of the storm (e.g. elections, the war in Iraq).

What are the conducive factors that determine media storms? Although I started from the idea that it would be difficult to predict the news editors' gut feeling, I succeeded in doing so. I was able to identify some strong predictors and explain a substantial proportion of the variance, in particular on the level of the news coverage. A story with thematic coverage at the beginning, and with more angles, has more potential to trigger media storm coverage.

APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF STORIES: STORMS AND NON-STORMS (CONDUCIVE FACTORS)

Storms

Start Date	End Date	Topic Code	Storm Name	Event Date	Initiating Event
7/05/01	25/06/2001	2012	Crisis Volksunie	9/05/2000	Minister Sauwens attends an event of an extreme right organization
7/09/01	20/11/2001	1927	Nine Eleven	11/09/2001	September 11 Attacks
13/05/02	24/05/2002	2012	Dutch Elections	15/05/2002	Election Day
28/03/03	15/04/2003	1619	War Iraq	20/03/2003	Opening of attacks: start of invasion
7/05/03	30/05/2003	2012	Federal Elections 2003	18/05/2003	Election Day
6/02/04	25/02/2004	2012	Discussion about Voting Right of Migrants/Crisis VLD	8/02/2004	Discussion about the voting right of migrants in Parliament
8/03/04	20/03/2004	1927	Madrid Terrorist Attacks	11/03/2004	March 11 Attacks
16/04/04	3/05/2004	2012	VB convicted for Racism	21/04/2004	Court convicts VB for racism
7/06/04	21/06/2004	2012	Regional Elections 2004	13/06/2004	Election Day
24/06/04	9/07/2004	1214	Fourniret Murders	26/06/2004	Press conference Police/Court Liège
13/07/04	29/07/2004	2012	Regional Elections Formation	19/07/2004	Formation of Regional Government
2/09/04	10/09/2004	209	Beslan Hostage Crisis	1/09/2004	Hostage in Beslan
21/09/04	29/09/2004	1003	DHL	15/09/2004	Negotiations about the expanse of the company DHL are completely blocked
2/10/04	18/10/2004	2012	Opinion Poll TNS	8/10/2004	Release of study about the past elections
25/10/04	13/11/2004	2012	American Elections 2004	2/11/2004	Election Day
26/11/04	10/12/2004	2012	New President for Political Party VLD	4/12/2006	Election Day
21/12/04	10/01/2004	2700	Tsunami	26/12/2004	Tsunami
2/04/05	18/04/2005	3100	Death of Pope John Paul II	2/04/2005	Death of the Pope
26/05/05	10/10/2005	1910	EU Referendum	29/05/2005	Referendum day
7/07/05	16/07/2004	1927	London Terrorist Attacks	7/07/2005	London Attacks

3/10/06	17/10/2006	2012	Local Elections 2006	8/10/2006	Election Day
2/06/07	22/06/2007	2012	Federal Elections 2007	10/06/2007	Election Day
10/08/07	1/09/2007	2012	Formation Crisis I	24/08/2007	First formation attempt has failed
2/11/07	23/11/2007	2012	Formation Crisis II	5/11/2007	New record 149 days of formation/negotiations
26/11/07	18/12/2007	2012	Formation Crisis III	1/12/2007	The second formation attempt has failed
16/09/08	1/10/2008	2012	Split CD&V/NV-A	22/09/2008	Split cartel CD&V – N-VA
23/09/08	14/10/2008	1501	Belgian Banking Crisis	29/09/2008	Announcement of government to support Belgian Banks
29/10/08	14/11/2008	2012	American Elections 2008	4/11/2008	Election Day

Non-Storms

Start Date	End Date	Topic Code	Storm Name	Event Date	Event
30/04/2001	8/05/2001	2033	Lambermont	29/04/2001	Agreement about institutions in Brussels
26/10/2001	28/10/2001	2031	Birth of Princess Elisabeth	25/10/2001	Birth Princes Elisabeth
2/05/2002	10/05/2002	1619	Conflict in the Middle-East	2/05/2002	Withdrawal Israeli Army
14/08/2002	19/08/2002	27	Flooding of the Elbe	13/08/2002	Evacuation because of high water level in Prague
26/08/2002	4/09/2002	2012	Flooding of the Elbe	26/08/2002	Announcement Aelvoet to reassign
5/10/2002	9/10/2002	105	Discussion about the budget	5/10/2002	Deadline of budget negotiations
29/10/2002	31/10/2002	1910	EU-summit	28/10/2002	Proposal European Constitution Giscard
8/11/2002	14/11/2002	1605	Discussion between Iraq and the UN	8/11/2002	Resolution UN Security Council about weapons
15/04/2003	24/04/2003	405	Avian Flue	10/04/2003	Outbreak bird flu in Belgium
11/09/2003	18/09/2003	1213	Discussion about Laundering Money	12/09/2003	Reynders appeals banks to transfer information about laundering money
25/09/2003	20/10/2003	1520	Collapse of Ford Genk	1/10/2003	Announcement to shutdown Ford Genk
17/10/2003	30/10/2003	1214	Court Case about Andre Cools	17/10/2003	Start course case Cools
6/08/2004	6/08/2004	1000	Discussion about Mobility Policy	6/08/2004	Agreement on mobility policy
13/07/2005	13/07/2005	1701	Air Launch Discovery	26/07/2005	Air launch Discovery
16/08/2005	18/08/2005	1619	Violence in Gaza	16/08/2005	Riots evacuation settlements

21/09/2005	24/09/2005	503	End-of-Career Debate	21/09/2005	Negations about end-of-career debate
14/10/2005	22/10/2008	405	Avian Flu	14/10/2005	Outbreak in Turkey
8/07/2006	14/07/2006	504	Iberia Strike	8/07/2006	Announcement strike Iberia
21/08/2006	24/08/2006	1205	Escape from Prison in Dendermonde	19/08/2006	Escape from prison in Dendermonde
22/09/2006	30/09/2006	2012	Crisis Verhofstadt II: Dispute between Onckelinckx and Verhofstadt	18/09/2002	Dispute about release Hoxha
9/05/2007	18/05/2007	504	Opel Crisis	24/05/2007	Strike at Opel Antwerpen
14/08/2007	28/08/2007	1214	Hostage-taking of Belgian Couple in Iran	13/08/2007	Hostage-taking of Belgian couple in Iran
3/01/2008	16/01/2008	2012	Primaries in the USA (Elections 2008)	3/01/2008	Start of primaries in the USA
3/06/2008	11/06/2008	504	Negotiations between Trade Unions and NMBS	2/06/2008	Agreement on discussion
4/07/2008	10/07/2008	2000	Crisis Leterme I	3/07/2008	Press release of Yves Leterme with alarming message
28/07/2008	30/07/2008	1802	WTO Summit Doha	27/07/2008	Start summit in Geneva
1/09/2008	9/09/2008	27	Hurricane Gustav	30/08/2008	Hurricane Gustav approaches New Orleans
4/12/2008	11/12/2008	504	Wage Negotiations	3/12/2008	Start of annual wage negotiations

CHAPTER 5: THE POLITICAL AGENDA-SETTING EFFECT OF MEDIA STORMS

5.1. INTRODUCTION[22]

In early January 2015, France was shocked by an attack on the editors of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Two armed men forced their way into the editorial building and opened fire on members of the editorial staff. The media reported extensively on this tragic event in the days and weeks that followed. They provided background details on the journalists who were killed, about the attempted escape of the perpetrators, and on the consequences of the occurrence. Immediately after the attack, the political world also reacted. President François Hollande gave a speech in which he strongly condemned the attack. Several days later, a "March for the Republic" was held, with various national and international leaders in attendance. With their presence, they expressed their sympathy and demonstrated their involvement.

The reporting on the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* is but one example of a media storm that invoked massive political reaction. There are many other examples of storms to which politicians react, in some cases not just with a speech, but with substantive promises concerning policy changes. This creates the impression that when the media go into storm mode and *en masse* devote extensive attention to a certain event, they have an influence upon the political realm. Although previous studies on media storms have theorised about the possible political effects of storms (see e.g. Eilders, 2000; Vasterman, 2005; Walgrave, Vliegenthart, Boydstun, & Hardy, 2016; Wien & Elmelund-Praesteker, 2009; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006), few studies investigated this subject empirically, and particularly not across a range of issues or news categories.

[22] I wrote this chapter together with Julie Sevenans. It is published in Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap.
Hardy, A., & Sevenans, J. (2015). Het politieke agendasettingeffect van mediastormen. *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap, 43*(4).

The aim of this chapter is to conduct a systematic exploration of the possible effects of media storms on the political agenda. The research question is as follows: "Do media storms lead to more political reactions than non-storms doe, and are such political reactions more likely to have far-reaching consequences?" I use the parliamentary documents the effects of 36 media storms on the agenda of the Belgian Federal Parliament. I then compare them to 36 randomly selected non-storms. The results confirm the hypothesis that politicians use media storms in a strategic manner. In general, media storms lead to more political reactions than non-storms do. Moreover, they are more likely to lead to reactions with far-reaching consequences (e.g. a statement from the prime minister or a bill). Nevertheless, media storms alone seldom change the course of the legislative process. They are more likely to serve as catalysts for political action that has already been planned.

5.2. Political Agenda-Setting: Why Politicians Respond to Media Storms

Media storms are an extraordinary phenomenon. When a storm arises, news editors enter storm mode. The day-to-day journalistic routines disappear, and the editorial staff is applied almost in its entirety to handle the storm (see Chapter 3 on the mechanisms of storms). The newsroom transforms, as it were, into a sort of crisis unit in which current developments are followed closely (Vasterman, 2005). The fact that media storms generate a massive stream of reporting on the same event also has an effect on citizens. They also perceive media storms as exceptional, and they follow them closely (Neuman, 1990). Do politicians also regard media storms as special? Do media storms lead to more political reactions than non-storms do?

At present, there is academic consensus regarding the proposition that the media play a role in determining the political agenda. The existence of the "political agenda-setting effect" of the mass media has been established by a variety of scholars in many different countries (see e.g. Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008; Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008). The magnitude of this effect, however, depends upon the circumstances (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). It has been demonstrated, for instance, that the type of medium makes a difference: newspapers have more influence on the parliamentary agenda than television news broadcasts. News content plays a role as well, with "bad news" being more likely to receive political attention than "good news" (Baumgartner et al., 1997; Thesen, 2013). Furthermore, some political actors are more sensitive to being influenced by the media than others are. For example, opposition parties are more likely than governing parties to react to the media (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011).

Is the "storminess" of media coverage also a condition that can strengthen the political agenda-setting effect, and can this lead to disproportionate political reactions? To date, only two studies

have conducted empirical investigations on the political agenda-setting effect of media storms. Together with Stefaan Walgrave, Rens Vliegenthart and Amber Boydstun, I examined the effect of media storms on Congressional hearings in the United States, analyzing a variety of topics over a ten-year period (Walgrave et al., 2016). The study argues that media storms operate as a kind of threshold for political attention. More specifically, that media storms do not generate any direct effects, although they do indirectly strengthen the media's agenda-setting effect on the political realm. In the other study, Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008) examine five media storms, all of which revolve around the same topic: care for the elderly in Denmark. The authors develop a typology of various forms of action in which they distinguish between action at the national or local level, and between diffuse (long-term) and immediate (short-term) action. Finding only minimal evidence of direct political influence, Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien conclude that politicians use media storms strategically as a way to profile themselves in the public debate.

Building on these previous studies, I expect that politicians have strategic reasons for being responsive to media storms, more so than to general news coverage. Why? First, the amount of news coverage that a given event generates is a good indicator of the importance of that event. In particular, it indicates the importance with which the event is perceived in the eyes of the public (Van Aelst, 2014). By paying a substantial amount of attention to a storm, the media demonstrate that they regard the event as important. For this reason, politicians also feel the need to react—to be responsive to their constituents. When the media report on the storm itself, as well as the political actions that are undertaken in reaction to the storm, they also provide "positive feedback" to the political system. This reinforces the notion that something important is going on and that political action would be desirable (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013). Second, in an era of mediatization, politicians tend to regard the media as an important actor with the potential to bestow a positive image (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Media storms can create opportunities for politicians to appear in the media *themselves*. Due to the special dynamics that emerge during such a storm (e.g. journalists are highly focused on the storm, reporting on even the smallest detail) political reactions are more likely to be picked up than are reactions to other, less "hot" topics. A politician can ride the wave of the storm, thereby gaining access to the media (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). In extreme cases, storms even have the potential to make or break political careers. Previous research on the Dutroux case (late 1990s) and the Dioxin Affair (1999) demonstrated that these storms had serious electoral consequences (Baudewyns & Dumont, 2003; Walgrave, Varone, & Dumont, 2006). Third, in line with the work of Kingdon (1995), storms can create a "window of opportunity" for politicians to push through their existing plans. In some cases, politicians have policy plans that simply do not make it onto the political agenda, because they are in no urgent need of being addressed. Storms can be

exactly what politicians need in order to advance their existing ideas as the solution to a problem, thus moving their plans to a higher position on the political agenda.

5.3. Hypotheses: How Politicians React to Media Storms

Media storms can thus be of strategic importance to politicians, and I therefore expect that they will react to media storms. Nevertheless not all reactions should be regarded as equal: giving an address expressing condolences for disaster victims on behalf of the government is not the same as deciding to allocate a million euros to provide assistance to the victims of the disaster. Parliament also offers a variety of "instruments" for taking action. For this reason, it is important to create a typology of various forms of political reaction before formulating any hypotheses.

Two types of reactions that can be taken within the parliament are distinguished: "statements" and "actions". For each type, a distinction is drawn according to how far-reaching the consequences of the reactions could be. Figure 5.1 provides a summary of the four types of political reaction that I identify.

FIGURE 5.1: TYPES OF POLITICAL REACTION

		Extent to which reactions are consequential →	
Types of reaction	**Statement**	Statement by a member of parliament	Statement by a First Minister
	Action	Parliamentary question	Bill

First, a politician can make a statement about a news story. This can be important, as it is a pre-requisite for further action: making a statement about the story can be the first step towards placing it on the political agenda. During a plenary session, a member of parliament can mention the story during a debate. The First Minister could also respond by making an official statement, paying homage or citing the story during an annual policy statement. Because most legislation in Belgium emerges from the government and not through individual members of parliament (Deschouwer & Hooghe, 2005), I think that the reaction of a prime minister is likely to have more weight than a statement by a member of parliament . Second, members of parliament can take action by asking a parliamentary question. This provides the topic with a formal place on the agenda, thus forcing the minister to pay attention to it. Of even greater impact than parliamentary questions are bills—which can be placed on the agenda by the government or by members of parliament—given their effective potential to lead to concrete changes in legislation.

The first hypothesis is derived directly from the literature I have discussed above. I examine whether media storms in general, regardless of the specific type of reaction, generate more political reaction than non-storms do. In this analysis I measure the amount of media attention that a news story received, as it is interesting to know whether storm coverage has an amplifying effect *in addition to* its previously established linear agenda-setting effect. It is known that news stories that receive more media attention are also more likely to spark political reactions. For this reason, I check the presence of an additional "storm-effect" that further increases the likelihood of political reaction once a certain threshold of media attention has been crossed.

H1: Media storms are more likely to elicit political reactions in Parliament than non-storms are.

Next I distinguish between the various types of political reaction. I think media storms are particularly likely to generate types of reactions that could have more consequential effects (e.g. statements by the First Minister or bills). When a storm occurs, politicians are unlikely to want to limit their reactions to the news of the day to parliamentary questions (which they also use as reactions on ordinary news days). Instead, they are likely to seek to demonstrate that they are truly concerned with the storm. Because storms are much more perceptible and because they are perceived as being more important, they possess more potential to significantly influence policy. The following hypotheses are formulated:

H2: The difference between storms and non-storms, in terms of the number of statements in the parliament, is greater for statements by the prime minister than it is for statements by members of parliament.

H3: The difference between storms and non-storms, in terms of the number of actions in the parliament, is greater for bills than it is for parliamentary questions.

Although it is expected that media storms are more likely to lead to bills (H3), Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008) argue that the influence of storms on the legislative process is actually a "pseudo-causality," simply due to the difficulty of pushing new legislative initiatives through the parliamentary machinery in the space of one month. They state that a media storm primarily offers political actors the opportunity to propose existing solutions to problems they perceive as playing a central role in the storm. This argument is consistent with the statements of Kingdon (1995), which are discussed above. Instead of making any true legislative changes, a media storm is more likely to generate a "window of opportunity" for politicians to secure a place on the political agenda for ideas they already had. For this reason, simply testing whether media storms lead to more bills than non-storms

might be somewhat short-sighted. I am interested in knowing whether media storms also act as independent agenda-setters, or whether they are more likely to serve as "accelerators" for the existing legislative process. The following research question is formulated:

> *RQ:* *Do media storms lead to the introduction of new bills, or are they more likely to accelerate or promote existing legislative processes?*

5.4. Data and Methods

Analyses at the level of the news story

Analogous to the previous chapter, I perform an analysis on the level of the news story. For each news story (whether it is a storm or a non-storm), I aim to examine whether it led to political reactions and, subsequently, to investigate the political reactions to several news stories in greater substantive detail. In this manner, I hope to combine the advantages of aggregated agenda-setting analysis (these are highly systematic and span a variety of topics; see e.g. Walgrave et al. (2016)) with those of case studies (providing detail and insight; see e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien (2008)). This procedure will allow me to create a nuanced image of the political effects of media storms.

Identification of news stories (storms and non-storms)

For this analysis, the sample of media storms (of *De Standaard*, *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS*) identified in Chapter 2 is used. One category of topics is explicitly excluded from the analysis: "Government Operations". This category explicitly concerns politics (e.g. election news or state reforms). Media storms in this category are political in and of themselves. If I was to examine whether these storms generate political attention, this would raise problems of endogeneity. Excluding this category from consideration, I identify a total of 36 media storms (2001-2008).

In the analysis, a sample of non-storms—news stories that did *not* meet the storm criteria—is also included. The procedure used to identify non-storms is identical to the procedure used in Chapter 4 (conducive factors). But instead of 28 non-storms in Chapter 4, I now use a random sample of 36 non-storms (in order to compare them with the 36 media storms).

In all, the complete sample of news stories includes 36 storms and 36 non-storms. For all news stories, it is known how many news items concerning the event that appeared on the front page of the newspaper *De Standaard*. This allows us to measure linear agenda-setting effects, in addition to examining the added effect of storm coverage. An overview of the news stories is provided in the appendix at the end of the chapter.

Political reaction

The dependent variable, political reaction, is operationalized as attention to a given news story (storm or non-storm) during the plenary session of the federal parliament. More specifically, a keyword search was conducted for each story in the integrated reports of the weekly sessions, from the beginning of the storm until one month after the end of the storm. The reports are available on the website of the Belgian government.[23] If the news story occurred during the summer recess, also the first three plenary sessions after the recess were examined. If the event at the center of the news story occurred before the empirical beginning of the media storm (e.g. if a media storm about a murder did not start until three days after the actual murder), I began the search on the date of the actual event. The keywords used are listed in Appendix I.

For each news story, I distinguished between different types of political reaction. I started by looking at statements. A statement occurs when a news story is mentioned during a plenary session, outside the context of a concrete initiative concerning the news story. In the coding, I distinguished between statements made by members of parliament and statements made by the prime minister. I subsequently looked at effective actions. I noted a member of parliament as having taken action if the news story was the explicit topic of a parliamentary initiative. More specifically, I distinguished between two types of initiatives: oral questions and bills. The coding was mutually exclusive: a given reaction was either a statement or an action. Nevertheless, a news story could lead to multiple types of reactions if it was addressed multiple times during a parliamentary session.

TABLE 5.1: DESCRIPTIVE DATA ON POLITICAL REACTIONS (N=72, STORMS AND NON-STORMS)

	Description	Average	s.d.
Statement			
By an MP	At least one statement by an MP	0.31	0.46
By the prime minister	At least one statement by the prime minister	0.21	0.41
Action			
Parliamentary question	At least one parliamentary question	0.38	0.49
Bill	At least one bill	0.07	0.26
Political reaction	At least one type of political reaction	0.58	0.50

In Table 5.1, descriptive data on all 72 news stories (storms and non-storms) are presented. For each news story, four dummy variables that indicate whether the story had generated particular types of political reaction are coded. For example, 31% of all news stories led to at least one statement by a member of parliament, while only seven percent of all news stories led to bills. A fifth variable, political reaction, was created indicating whether the news story led to any political reactions,

[23] See http://www.dekamer.be.

regardless of the types of reaction. In all, 58% of all news stories had led to a given form of political reaction.

For the purpose of testing the first three hypotheses, I present descriptive statistics (cross-tables) demonstrating the difference between storms and non-storms. In addition, I conducted a multivariate logistic regression analysis that allowed me to test for the existence of a storm effect as well as the linear effect of the amount of media attention a news story received. Finally, to answer the research question on the causal mechanisms underlying the relationship between media and politics, a detailed examination of the news stories that had led to the introduction of bills (qualitative approach) is conducted.

5.5. RESULTS

First and foremost, I examine the difference between storms and non-storms with regard to the general amount of political reactions they generated (regardless of the specific type of political reaction). Table 5.2 shows that in general many of the news stories in the sample (about 58%) led to political reactions. I had assumed that storms would cause more reactions than non-storms would. This expectation was confirmed: 78% of the storms caused some form of political reaction, while this was the case for only 39% of the non-storms. The significance of this difference was confirmed by the results of a chi-square test, and the phi value of 0.394 indicates a positive association.

TABLE 5.2: CROSS-TABLE OF POLITICAL REACTIONS OF STORMS VS. NON-STORMS

	Non-storm (N=36)	X^2 ↔	Storm (N=36)
No political reaction	61%	**	22%
Political reaction	39%		78%

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001, Phi: 0.394

Before I can confirm Hypothesis 1, however, I need to know whether storms have an effect in addition to the amount of media attention an ordinary news story receives, and for which a "basic" agenda-setting effect is expected. This is because, in general, twice as many news items tend to appear about storms than about non-storms (ten news items for storms, as compared to five news items for non-storms). The results of the logistic regression are displayed in Table 5.3. Model 1 includes only the control variable (i.e. the number of items about a news story in *De Standaard*) as the independent variable. I identified a significant political agenda-setting effect, with an explained variance (pseudo R^2) of 21%. In Model 2, the dummy variable storm was added. The results indicate that this variable has a significant additional effect and the explained variance increases to 25%.

These results confirm Hypothesis 1, which proposes that media storms are significantly more likely to lead to political reactions.

TABLE 5.3: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON POLITICAL REACTION

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Number of items in De Standaard	0.35**	0.11	0.32**	0.11
Storm	-		1.07†	0.59
Constant	-1.67**	0.61	-1.90**	0.63
N	72		72	
Pseudo R^2	0.21		0.25	

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

Storms thus generate more reactions than non-storms do. The next step focuses more closely on the various types of reactions that are possible. This is because I formulated hypotheses concerning the various ways in which politicians could react to news stories (Hypotheses 2 and 3). As indicated in Table 5.4, each type of political reaction examined occurred more often in response to storms than in response to non-storms, although the difference between storms and non-storms was greater for some types of reactions than for other types. With regard to statements by members of parliament, the chi-square test indicates that the difference between storms and non-storms (39% vs. 22%) is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.356$, p value: 0.125). I observe a much greater difference for statements by the prime minister (3% vs. 39%; $\chi^2 = 14.232$, p value: 0.000). The prime minister reacted substantially more often to storms than to non-storms. Moreover, the effect of storm coverage remains significant when controlling for the amount of media attention that a news story received in *De Standaard* (see Table 5.6). Closer examination of the data reveals that statements by the prime minister can take a variety of forms. Some are official announcements of news stories (e.g. when a gas explosion occurred in the town of Gellingen on the day of the plenary session, the First Minister of Belgium at that time, Guy Verhofstadt, reported on the disaster) or tributes to victims (as was the case with the death of the Pope). In other cases, news stories could be part of the annual policy statement (e.g. the Belgian banking crisis was discussed extensively in 2008). The prime minister is aware that media storms are meaningful and that the public expects a reaction. Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

TABLE 5.4: CROSS-TABLE OF VARIOUS TYPES OF POLITICAL REACTION FOR STORMS VS. NON-STORMS

	Non-storm (N=36)	X^2 ↔	Storm (N=36)
Statement			
By a member of parliament	22 % (8)	NS	39% (14)
By the First Minister	3% (1)	***	39% (14)
Action			
Parliamentary question	25% (9)	*	50% (18)
Bill	0% (0)	*	14% (5)

NS = not significant; † p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Phi values: Statement by a member of parliament: 0.181; Statement by prime minister: 0.445; parliamentary question: 0.258; Bill: 0.273

With regard to actions, the results clearly indicate that storms are more likely than non-storms to lead to action, and this applies to both types of action (25% vs. 50% for parliamentary questions and 0% vs. 14% for bills; χ^2 value for parliamentary questions: 4.8, p value: 0.028; χ^2 value for bills: 5.373, p value: 0.020). When controlling for the amount of media attention concerning a news story, however, the additional effect of storm coverage on parliamentary questions is not significant (see Table 5.7). In contrast, for actions with more substantial consequences (i.e. bills), storm coverage does appear to play a decisive role. Of the 36 non-storms addressed in this study, none led to the initiation of bills, while five of the 36 storms did. In the sample, a storm is a necessary condition for the initiation of bills. Logistic regression cannot be used to test the effect of storms in addition to the amount of media attention, as the storm variable is a perfect predictor of the dependent variable. Within this sample of storms, the amount of media attention alone is not a significant predictor of bills (see Table 5.8). It is not necessarily the most prominent storms that lead to bills. Storms have influence beyond the ordinary linear agenda-setting effect and Hypothesis 3 can be confirmed.

TABLE 5.5: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON STATEMENT BY A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Number of items in *De Standaard*	0.14**	0.05	0.13*	0.06
Storm	-		0.06	0.62
Constant	-1.86***	0.46	-1.87***	0.48
N	72		72	
Pseudo R^2	0.12		0.12	

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

TABLE 5.6: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Number of items in *De Standaard*	0.18**	0.06	0.12*	0.05
Storm	-		2.45*	1.12
Constant	-2.87***	0.59	-4.12***	1.05
N	72		72	
Pseudo R^2	0.21		0.31	

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

TABLE 5.7: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON THE ACTION PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Number of items in *De Standaard*	0.11*	0.05	0.08†	0.05
Storm	-		0.67	0.57
Constant	-1.30**	0.42	-1.48**	0.45
N	72		72	
Pseudo R^2	0.07		0.09	

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

TABLE 5.8: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ON THE ACTION BILL (ONLY STORMS INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS)

	Model 1	
	Coeff.	S.E.
Number of items in *De Standaard*	0.07	0.05
Constant	-2.60**	0.84
N	36	
Pseudo R^2	0.06	

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

The findings reported above are based on dummy variables: they demonstrate the presence or absence of particular types of reactions in response to news stories. In some cases, however, news stories can lead to more than one reaction of the same type (e.g. multiple parliamentary questions or multiple statements by a member of parliament).[24] In a second step, therefore, I examined whether the number of questions or statements in response to storms is greater than the number of

[24] The news stories in the sample led to a maximum of one statement by the First Minister and to a maximum of one bill.

questions or statements in response to non-storms (on the condition that they have led to at least one question/statement). The results indicate that the number of reactions in response to storms is not significantly greater. Non-storms that generated at least one statement by a member of parliament generated an average of seven; storms generated an average of only six (results of a t-test: t = 0.230; p-value = 0.820). On average, 3.8 questions were submitted with regard to non-storms leading to at least one question, with storms leading to 5.3 questions (t = -0.856; p value = 0.400). In other words, storm coverage facilitates the presence of a topic on the political agenda, but it does not determine the number of initiatives that are subsequently taken by members of parliament.

Finally, Table 5.9 provides an overview of the five media storms that led to the introduction of bills. These storms concern the following events (in chronological order): 1) the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Belgium in 2001; 2) the bankruptcy of the Belgian airline Sabena in 2001; 3) the "MP3 murder" in Brussels in 2006; 4) the racist "Luna murder" in Antwerp in 2006; and 5) the Belgian banking crisis in 2008.

TABLE 5.9: OVERVIEW OF MEDIA STORMS LEADING TO A BILL

Storm	Date of storm
Outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Belgium	March 2001
Bankruptcy of Belgian airline Sabena	November 2001
MP3 murder	April–May 2006
Murder of Luna Drowart and babysitter Oulematou	May 2006
Belgian banking crisis	September–October 2008

What exactly did the bills concern? More specifically, what was the causal dynamic? Were they a result of the media storm, or did they already exist at the time the storm broke? That are the questions I want to answer with the last research question.

Firstly, only some of the bills resulted from media storms. In these cases, storms appeared to have had a true influence on the policy process. Following the bankruptcy of the Belgian airline Sabena in 2001, the Program Act (a law that was submitted along with the budget, containing provisions that were necessary to realise its objectives) included a section on the establishment of a special fund to compensate Sabena employees who had lost their jobs. The Belgian banking crisis also led to a bill containing various measures for guaranteeing financial stability. Both of these cases are examples of media storms that directly and autonomously led to the introduction of new bills.

In other cases, the media storms only *appear* to have been the cause of bills. Closer examination of the initiation of the bills reveals that they had in fact been drafted earlier. In these cases, media

storms did accelerate or promote the existing legislative process, but they were not the source of inspiration that had initially led to the formulation of the bills. The racist “Luna murder” in Antwerp is a clear example of a storm that led to the submission of a bill that had actually been planned for some time. The proposal addressed the tightening of the Weapons Act, and it was introduced shortly after the murder. The tightening of the Weapons Act had already been conceived in the coalition agreement of 2003. On the day of the murder, on 10 May, the Justice Committee happened to be meeting to discuss the initiation of the new law. Immediately following the murder, a decision was made to organize hearings (on 16 May), in order to provide a clear answer to the public, which expected quick and effective action from the government. The storm thus provided a good opportunity to push the issue through the legislative machinery quickly and efficiently. Two days later, on 18 May, a vote on the bill was held in the plenary session. The bill was voted in, and in practice this made it much more difficult for minors to obtain firearms. In this example, the storm did not serve as an independent agenda setter, but it did play a role in that it was able to accelerate the process of placing the amendment on the agenda and having it approved.

The “MP3 murder” (a seventeen-year-old boy was killed because he refused to hand over his MP3-player to his attackers; the murder occurred in Brussels one month before the Luna murder) also led to the submission of a bill. The bill concerned child protection and the financial support of minors who have committed crimes. Following the MP3 murder, the government announced that it would take immediate action by introducing the bill, although the bill was actually fully developed at the time of the murder. The storm concerning the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease 2001, which led to a bill concerning the establishment of the Federal Food Agency, is a similar example. The notion of establishing such an agency was the result of an event that had occurred two years earlier, in 1999: the “Dioxin Affair”. The new crisis in the agricultural sector in 2001 provided politicians with an excellent opportunity to draw attention to the legislative efforts they had been making in the area of food safety since 1999. The MP3 murder and the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease are two cases in which politicians used media storms strategically in order to promote their ongoing parliamentary efforts. By linking them to the storm, they were able to demonstrate the relevance of the bill and ensure that the issue gained a higher position on the political agenda.

In short, only two of the five media storms that led to the submission of bills in the 2001–2008 period involved new bills. In the other cases, the media storms accelerated a previously existing legislative process. In some cases, politicians strategically made the topic a priority in response to the storm. In other cases, they highlighted their fully (or nearly fully) elaborated parliamentary efforts in order to demonstrate their relevance to the broader public and their colleagues. The answer to my last research question thus requires qualification. Although storms can lead to completely new legislative

initiatives, they are just as likely to serve as accelerators of or catalysts for political action, instead of being the initiators of such action.

5.6. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, I investigated whether media storms lead to more—or different—political reactions than non-storms do. More specifically, I examined the various types of statements (by members of parliament and by the prime minister) and actions (parliamentary questions and bills) that politicians in the Belgian federal parliament (plenary session) took in response to a media storm between 2001 and 2008. Overall, the findings indicate that many storms cause some form of political reaction. They are significantly more likely to do so than non-storms are. In particular, they are more likely to lead to types of reactions that have more far-reaching consequences, as is the case with bills and statements by the prime minister.

According to the results, media storms constitute an important phenomenon not only from the perspective of journalists or the public, but also from the perspective of political actors. Politicians regard media storms as special and as something that merits their attention. However, politicians are not obliged to react to media storms to which they would prefer not to react. On the contrary, they also *use* media storms to their advantage. Storms offer politicians the opportunity to demonstrate to the public that they are involved with the news of the day or to gain access to the media themselves. Moreover, closer examination of the bills reveals that many storms are not independent agenda setters for legislative initiatives, but that they can present ideal opportunities for accelerating or promoting the existing legislative process.

It is interesting to take a moment to consider precisely what role the media play in this story. In this thesis, I consistently refer to the effect of media storms. Nevertheless, it is known that many media storms result from events in the "real world" that have a major impact (cf. the literature on the concept of media storms). When politicians react to media storms, it is thus likely to be partly the result of the actual event which simply calls for political attention (e.g. the media serve as the *bearers* of information), and partly the result of the exceptional amount of media attention, and the associated public attention, to the topic (e.g. the media serve as amplifiers of the information). Those who would like to make precise distinctions between these mechanisms could compare each storm with the most similar non-storm (instead of selecting non-storms at random, as I have done in this study). I also realize that, despite my attempt to avoid endogeneity in the models by excluding inherently political news stories from consideration, the relationship between media and politics is always characterized by some level of reciprocity. Given the tendency of the media to report on every detail when they are in storm mode, political reactions to storms often become subjects of

media reporting as well, thereby eliciting new political reactions. The interrelatedness of media, public and political attention to issues is a likely cause of the frequently observed “peaks” in attention, with little or no attention being paid to the topic for a long time, followed by a sudden burst of attention that generates reactions that are disproportionate relative to the scope of the event.

I am also aware that my sample of storms and non-storms is relatively small. It is simply a fact that only a few media storms occur during any given year. Future studies could address this problem by examining media storms in several different countries at the same time, thereby increasing the size of the sample. Finally, I approach the difference between storms and non-storms in a relatively simplistic manner, identifying a given news story as either a storm or a non-storm. Nevertheless, I know that storms also differ from general news coverage in ways other than the amount of media attention, including the topic (e.g. some topics are more likely to trigger storm coverage), the impact of the event on which the story is based (e.g. the number of deaths can determine whether a news story is likely to become a storm). In the analysis, these differences are treated as an abstraction. Future investigations could distinguish between all of these characteristics of news coverage and examining the likelihood of each aspect separately to instigate (or not instigate) political reaction.

APPENDIX : OVERVIEW OF STORIES: STORMS AND NON-STORMS (EFFECTS CHAPTER)

Storms

# DS	# TV	Storm	Start Date	End Date	Attention	Key Words	Major Topic Code
8	120	Mouth and Foot Outbreak Europe	25/02/2001	11/03/2001	1	klauwzeer, besmetting	Agriculture
9	92	Mouth and Foot Outbreak Belgium	15/03/2001	31/03/2001	1	klauwzeer, besmetting	Agriculture
2	45	Train Crash Pécrot	26/03/2001	2/04/2001	1	Pécrot	Fires & Accidents
24	269	Nine Eleven	7/09/2001	20/09/2001	1	aanslagen, terror*	International Affairs
13	163	Start War on Terror	3/10/2001	15/10/2001	1	Afghanistan, Taliban	Defence
9	97	Collapse Sabena	4/11/2001	13/11/2001	1	Sabena	Banking & Finance
7	67	War Afghanistan	12/11/2001	20/11/2001	1	Afghanistan, Taliban	Defence
8	63	Introduction Euro	27/12/2001	8/01/2002	1	invoering, munt	Macro Economics
11	134	Conflict in Middle-East	1/04/2002	9/04/2002	1	midden-oosten, Israël, Palestina	Defence
2	13	Schooting in Erfurt, Germany	22/04/2002	29/04/2002	0	erfurt, school	Crime
4	54	Anniversary 9/11	5/09/2002	15/09/2002	1	Aanslagen	International Affairs
5	126	Flooding in Belgium	28/12/2002	11/01/2003	1	Water	Weather & Natural Disasters
0	9	Crash with Belgian Coach in Germany	9/01/2003	16/01/2003	0	bus, ongeluk	Crime
29	737	War in Iraq	2/03/2003	21/04/2003	1	Irak	Defence
15	77	Madrid Terrorist Attacks	8/03/2004	20/03/2004	1	Madrid	International Affairs
9	64	Fourniret Murders	24/06/2004	9/07/2004	1	Fourniret	Crime
5	109	Gas Explosion in Gellingen	24/07/2004	14/08/2004	1	Gellingen	Fires & Accidents
8	51	Beslan Hostage Crisis	2/09/2004	10/09/2004	0	Beslan	Civil Rights & Minorities Issues
12	76	DHL Crisis	16/09/2004	30/09/2004	1	DHL	Transportation

25	344	Tsunami	21/12/2004	10/01/2005	1	Tsunami	Weather & Natural Disasters
19	171	Death of Pope John Paul II	2/04/2005	18/04/2005	1	Paus	Churches & Religion
7	78	College of Cardinals have to choose new Pope	15/04/2005	25/04/2005	1	Paus	Churches & Religion
19	48	EU Referendum	26/05/2005	10/06/2005	1	Referendum	International Affairs
15	89	London Terrorist Attacks	7/07/2005	16/07/2004	1	Aanslagen	International Affairs
7	31	Egypt Terrorist Attacks	19/07/2005	30/07/2005	0	Aanslagen	International Affairs
6	87	Hurricane Katrina	28/08/2005	11/09/2005	0	Orkaan	Weather & Natural Disasters
2	34	Earthquake in Pakistan	8/10/2005	15/10/2005	0	Pakistan	Weather & Natural Disasters
12	73	Riots in France	2/11/2005	12/11/2005	1	Rellen	Civil Rights & Minorities Issues
1	14	Collapse Exhibition Hall in Poland	27/01/2006	5/02/2006	0	Polen	Fires & Accidents
13	119	Murder Joe Van Holsbeek	15/04/2006	2/05/2006	1	moord, Joe, mp3	Crime
6	62	Murder Luna	6/05/2006	19/05/2006	1	Moord	Crime
3	65	Murder Stacy & Nathalie	20/06/2006	6/07/2006	1	Stacy	Crime
9	73	War in Lebanon	15/07/2006	26/07/2006	1	midden-oosten, Libanon	Defence
1	44	Storm in Belgium	18/01/2007	25/01/2007	0	weer, storm, water	Weather & Natural Disasters
2	30	Murder Bart Bonroy	31/01/2007	15/02/2007	1	Moord	Crime
37	197	Belgian Banking Crisis	23/09/2008	14/10/2008	1	Crisis, bank	Banking & Finance

Non-Storms

# DS	# TV	Non Storm Description	Start Date	End Date	Attention	Key Words	Major Topic Code
5	43	Death of Kabila	18/01/2001	24/01/2001	1	Kabila	Death Notices

T	6	Riots in Macedonia	8/08/2001	11/08/2001	0	Macedonië	Civil Rights & Minorities Issues
3	0	Debate about decrease of taxes	22/08/2001	28/08/2001	1	Lastenverlaging	Macro-Economics
4	14	Strike pilots Sabena	30/08/2001	8/09/2001	1	Sabena	Labor & Employment
4	5	Financial problems for Telenet	12/03/2002	18/03/2002	0	Telenet	Space, Science & Communications
11	14	Stock Market Crash	20/07/2002	6/08/2002	0	Beurs	Banking & Finance
3	4	Wage Negotiations	16/11/2002	25/11/2002	0	Loonoverleg	Labor & Employment
4	61	Avian Flue	15/04/2003	24/04/2003	0	Vogelpest	Agriculture
3	2	Case about Laundering Money	11/09/2003	18/09/2003	1	witwas, amnestie	Crime
3	4	Discussion about 'Night Flights'	3/12/2003	8/12/2003	1	Nachtvluchten	Transportation
3	16	Earthquake Iran	27/12/2003	30/12/2003	0	Aardbeving	Weather & Natural Disasters
4	13	Collapse of Sobelair	20/01/2004	28/01/2004	1	Sobelair	Banking & Finance
4	0	Discussion about 'Night Flights'	16/03/2004	18/03/2004	1	Nachtvluchten	Transportation
4	6	Case of Anti-Semitism in Antwerp	28/06/2004	3/07/2004	1	Semitisme	Civil Rights & Minorities Issues
4	0	Discussion about 'Mobility Policy'	6/08/2004	6/08/2004	0	Mobiliteit	Transportation
3	5	Evolution Oil Prices	13/08/2004	21/08/2004	1	Olie	Energy
3	5	Attack of Rwandese army in Congo	27/11/2004	3/12/2004	1	Congo	Defence
7	29	Terri Shiavo	18/03/2005	29/03/2005	0	Terri Shiavo, levens*	Health
3	0	Revolt in Congo	1/07/2005	12/07/2005	0		Civil Rights & Minorities Issues
7	30	Discovery Space Shuttle	29/07/2005	13/08/2005	0	Discovery	Space, Science & Communications
6	11	Discussion about 'Night Flights'	14/10/2005	24/10/2005	1	Nachtvluchten	Transportation
3	1	War in Congo	23/01/2006	28/01/2006	0	Congo	Defence
6	35	Corruption in Belgian Soccer	18/02/2006	28/02/2006	1	Voetbal	Crime
4	13	Death Milosevic	13/03/2006	16/03/2006	0	Milosevic	Death Notices
5	8	Terror Alarm in Airport	10/08/2006	14/08/2006	0	luchthaven, terreur	Transportation

3	6	Strike VW Vorst	6/01/2007	10/01/2007	1	Vorst	Labor & Employment
5	11	Smog Alarm	14/03/2007	16/03/2007	1	Smog	Environment
6	18	Trial Case Lernout & Hauspie	12/05/2007	22/05/2007	0	Hauspie	Crime
4	4	Discussion about Asylum Policy	17/07/2007	19/07/2007	0	asielbeleid gemeenten	Immigration
3	6	Suspended Dutch doctor works in Belgium	11/01/2008	15/01/2008	0	Arts	Health
8	7	Legislation about Euthanasia	18/03/2008	31/03/2008	1	Euthanasie	Health
5	15	Trial Case Fourniret	26/03/2008	31/03/2008	0	Fourniret	Crime
4	1	Oil Prices	7/05/2008	15/05/2008	1	Olie	Energy
6	10	Arrest of Karadzic	23/07/2008	1/08/2008	1	Karadzic	International Affairs
3	16	Economic Crisis	2/12/2008	8/12/2008	1	Crisis economie	Macro Economics
7	16	Wage Negotiations	4/12/2008	11/12/2008	1	Loonoverleg	Labor & Employment

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the ways in which media storms differ from non-storms. To tackle this question I had two goals. Firstly, I tried to change the understanding of media storms from a "you know it when you see it" phenomenon into a clearly defined and conceptualized process. I came up with a definition with measurable criteria to operationalize media storms in a systematic way. Secondly, I wanted to get a deeper understanding of media storms and looked at the mechanisms, conducive factors and political effects.

This study started from the idea that media storms should be approached in a systematic way. Contrary to previous studies that relied solely on case studies, I developed an operationalization to systematically detect media storms over an eight-year period. In the empirical chapters, I took a multi-method approach. The mechanisms were investigated based on a set of sixteen interviews with news managers and chief editors. For the other two chapters, I departed from a quantitative approach to measure the conducive factors and political effects of media storms.

In this concluding chapter, I first present an overview of the key findings of each chapter. Next, I discuss the implications of media storms. Finally, I elaborate on the limitations of my study and speculate on avenues for further research.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Chapter 1 reviewed the existing literature and discussed concepts such as news waves, media-hypes and political waves. I argued that all of these terms have their merit and help to isolate the distinctive properties of surges in media attention, but that a more generic concept is needed. Based on the review of the literature, I derived four measurable criteria (size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess") to define media storms. A media storm was defined as an *explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (issue or event) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple outlets at the same time*.

Whereas I developed a general definition in Chapter 1, media storms were operationalized in **Chapter 2** based on three criteria (explosiveness, size and duration) in three different outlets. In this chapter, I also provided more information about the research setting and the data used. Then, I searched for the appropriate thresholds to systematically detect media storms (150% explosiveness, 20/25% size and duration of minimum one week). After approaching media storms in a purely

statistical way, I identified the stories behind the media storms, leading to a set of 56 different storms, and compared the thematic distribution of media storms and general coverage. In the subsequent chapters, I used these storms to investigate the conducive factors and effects of media storms.

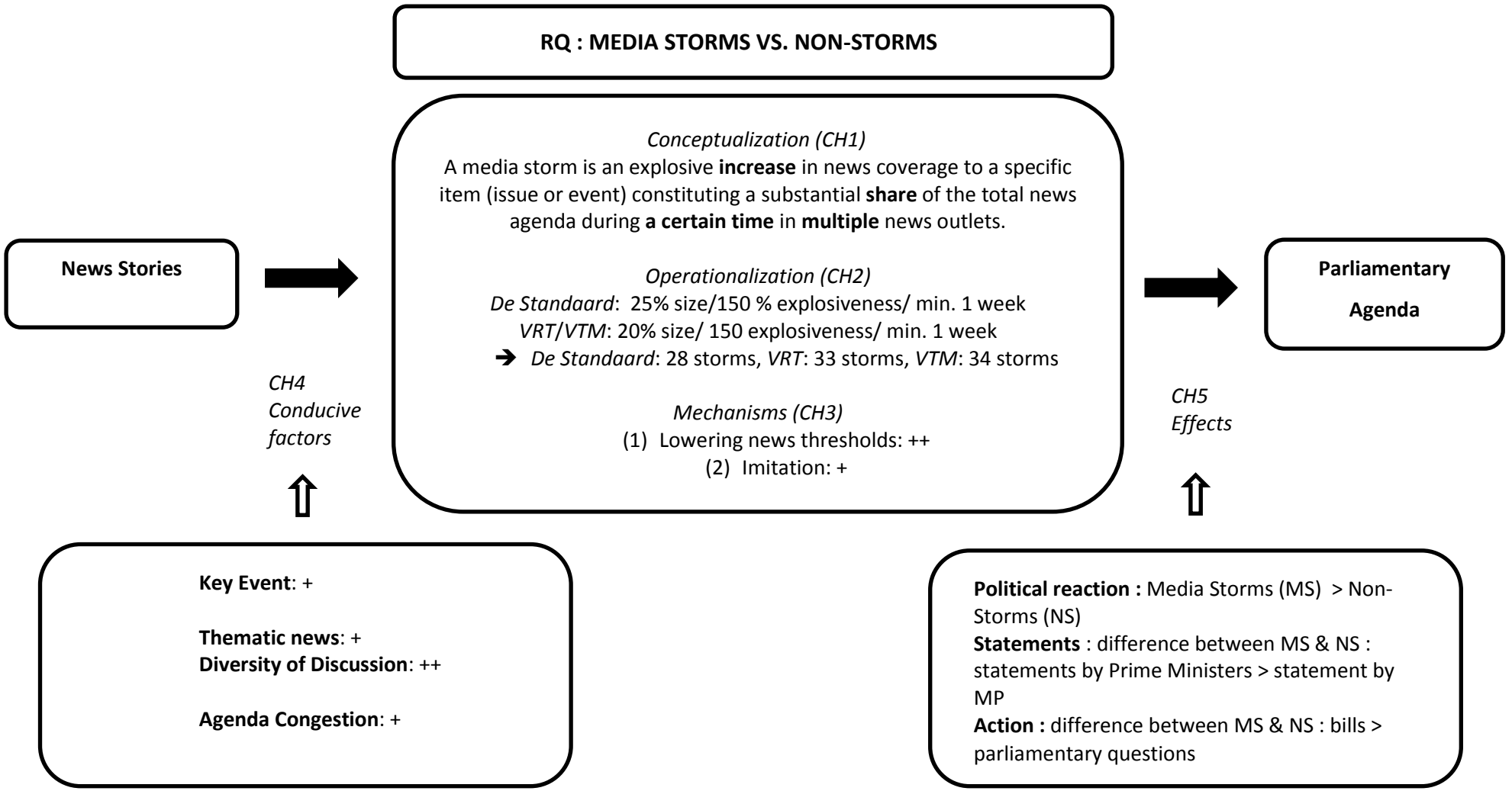
Before looking at conducive factors and effects, I studied, in **Chapter 3**, the mechanisms underlying media storms. Therefore, I relied on a series of interviews with news managers of the most important newspapers and television stations in Flanders. Concretely, I studied two mechanisms that I identified in the literature: lowering thresholds and imitation. For the first, I found convincing evidence. When a storm breaks, virtually the whole newsroom will be reassigned to the news story. Media storms create a kind of "news sensitivity" for the issue for a certain period. A good current example is the sensitivity for terrorism news in today's news media. After the terrorist attacks in Paris (November 2015) and in Brussels (March 2016) the thresholds for similar news have drastically lowered. Also regarding the second mechanism, imitation, evidence is found. Imitation is daily routine. The imitation process between news outlets is reinforced by the presence of a media storm, especially between directly competing outlets such as *Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* or *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS.* Only when the event is exceptionally significant or when there is no important news at all do journalists tend to focus on their own outlet and not imitate others.

In **Chapter 4**, I looked at the conducive factors. I wanted to know which characteristics determine that some stories attract an enormous amount of attention and stay on the media agenda for weeks, while others make the front pages for a day but disappear quickly afterwards. Three levels of conducive factors were identified: (1) characteristics of the initiating event, (2) characteristics of news coverage and (3) agenda congestion. I found that a story initiated by a key event, or a story that has the potential to be framed from different angles (diversity of discussion) into a broader context (thematic frame), is more likely to trigger media storm coverage. The other stories on the agenda also matter; a story that takes place during a "quiet" moment (when no other big stories are on the agenda) is more likely to turn into a media storm. Whereas media storms were my dependent variable in Chapter 4, they became an independent variable in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 looked at the political effects of media storms. More specifically, I examined the various types of statements and actions that politicians in the Belgian federal parliament took in response to a media storm. Overall, my findings indicated that many storms cause political reaction (such as a statement by an MP, a statement by the First Minister, a parliamentary question and a bill), much more than non-storms do. Furthermore, politicians use media storms as a "window of opportunity" for accelerating or promoting existing legislative initiatives.

Taken together (see Figure 6.1 for a visual summary), a media storm is defined as *an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (issue or event) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time in multiple news outlets.* I built this definition based on four criteria that I identified in the literature: size, explosiveness, duration and "multi-medianess". These criteria were used to establish concrete thresholds. Examples of media storms are the "MP3 murder" or the 2004 tsunami in South-East Asia. Examples of non-storms are the collapse of Sobelair or the 2003 earthquake in Iran. The storms were compared with a sample of non-storms. I compared them regarding the mechanisms, conducive factors and political effects. In sum, I can conclude that media storms differ from non-storms. They stem from a news-generation process that is distinct from non-storm coverage, and have stronger effects on the political agenda.

FIGURE 6.1: OVERVIEW OF RESULTS



THE IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA STORMS

At the beginning of this thesis, I briefly touched upon the implications of media storms. Media storms raise questions about the broader role of the media in society and the commercial logic they operate within. Is a phenomenon such as the media storm problematic? The answer depends on the expectations one has regarding the role of the mass media in society. Raeijmaekers and Maeseele (2015, p. 219) argue that 'too often a single aspect of media theory (such as media storms in this study) is discussed in the absence of a greater social-theoretical framework'. That is why I try to place media storms in a broader picture in this section. Media storms can be approached from a liberal or a critical perspective in terms of the role of the media in society.

From a liberal point of view, the principal democratic role of the media is to check on the state, acting as a mediator between the citizen and the politician (Curran, 2002). In this way, the news media have a watchdog role vis-à-vis the government. Bennett & Serrin (2005) define watchdog journalism as '(1) independent scrutiny by the press of the activities of government, business, and other public institutions, with an aim toward (2) documenting, questioning, and investigating those activities, in order to (3) provide publics and officials with timely information on issues of public concern.' The journalist becomes, in this context, part of what is called the Fourth Estate. In a democracy, journalists are thus charged with monitoring the exercise of power. This function is undertaken on behalf of the citizenry (Mc Nair, 2009). Schudson (1998) calls good journalism, 'journalism that enables citizens to form their own opinion about politics.'

Curran (2002) argues that this watchdog role is the principal role of the media according to traditional liberal theory; critical surveillance of the state is clearly an important aspect of the democratic functioning of the media. He gives well-known examples, such as Watergate (1973), to illustrate the way in which media served society by investigating the abuse of authority by public officials. 'But this conventional view', says Curran, 'derives from the eighteenth century when the principal media were public affairs-oriented newspapers.' By contrast, Curran further argues, 'media systems in the early twenty-first century are given over largely to entertainment. Even many so-called "news media" allocate only a small part of their content to public affairs. In effect, the liberal orthodoxy defines the main democratic purpose and organizational principle of the media in terms of what they do *not* do most of the time (Curran, 2002, p. 219).'

Zaller (2003) also argues that news media cannot operate as an ideal watchdog and he therefore proposes a new, less demanding standard of quality. This means that journalists and news outlets should not even try to monitor politics and society for all important information to convey to the

public (this is what he calls the "full news standard"). Not only is doing so unfeasible, he says, but in addition the public does not require such detailed information on so many issues. Instead, 'as with a real burglar alarm, the idea is to call attention to matters requiring urgent attention, and to do so in excited and noisy tones.' In her book "Making the News", Boydstun claims that Zaller is arguing that the role of media as a watchdog alarm system means that they should attend only to those events/issues that trigger the social or political equivalent of an alarm, usually by nature of the size and type of event at hand (Boydstun, 2013, p. 6).[25] In fact, Zaller sees media storms—which he calls "frenzies"—as an essential component of the burglar alarm standard.

Both Curran and Zaller share the view that the watchdog role of the media has narrowed over the years. Media outlets, according to them both, only devote a small amount of attention to public affairs (Curran, 2002), and when they do so they selectively devote attention to specific issues in a kind of burglar alarm mode (Zaller, 2003). Firstly, I do not agree with Curran. Looking at the attention distribution across topics (see Chapter 2), one can argue that this distribution is quite skewed, but also that the majority of attention goes to public affairs issues and not to entertainment (at least in the Flemish news outlets). Secondly, and following up on the argument of Zaller, by giving temporal and explosive attention to a specific issue, I agree that the watchdog role of the media has weakened. Since all media outlets are paying a lot of attention to this one storm, they are temporally unable to 'monitor' other issues that are surfacing or ongoing. For example, the storm surrounding the federal elections of June 2014 meant that there was not much agenda space left to cover the murder in the Jewish museum in Brussels, which took place the day before the elections. Citizens were fully informed about the federal elections, but only learned marginally about this murder.

But Zaller (2003, p. 121) argues that this also has positive value:

> *'An intense, dramatic story that keeps up a "critical mass" over one or several news cycles in all information media…breaks through the fog of disjointed news and engages the attention of the Monitorial Citizen. People talk, think, learn, see the big picture, and form opinions…In many news contexts, frenzies are wonderful devices for focusing public attention on issues of importance.'*

There are a several interesting elements in the quote above. Citizens learn from media storms and, since such a high proportion of media report on the same issue during a storm, citizens learn a lot about the issue and a popular debate develops.

[25] Boydstun's work (2014) challenges Zaller's alarm model, arguing that it is not a complete account of the news-generation process. She argues that news outlets do not operate strictly as patrol watchdogs; neither do they operate strictly through an alarm system of news generation. She elaborates on these models to explain what she calls the alarm/patrol model.

Contrary to the argument that media storms weaken the watchdog role of the media, one could also argue that this role is actually reinforced by the presence of media storms because news media go into storm mode on issues that matter, such as the collapse of the Belgian national airline company SABENA, the war in Lebanon or the EU referendum. None of the 56 media storms in this study is a pure 'entertainment' storm about trivial things such as celebrity news. However, some of the storms are on what Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes (2005) define as sensational topics. For example, eight storms (fifteen percent) are about crime. But even these kinds of storms can be policy-relevant. As discussed in Chapter 5, the storms around the MP3 murder led to the submission of a bill regarding crimes committed by minors; the murder of Luna Drowart and her black babysitter led to the tightening of the Weapons Act. Taken together, the data show that, in Flanders at least, media go into storm mode about policy-relevant topics. Policy-relevant media storms have the potential to act as a catalyst for changes in governmental actions toward underlying policy-issues. This further reinforces the watchdog function of media storms.

Whereas liberal scholars depart from a media-centric approach and take society for granted, critical scholars adopt a society-centric approach and consider every social order the result of hegemonic practices. This view finds its origins in the 1970s and originated from the Marxist view on media and society, which assert that "freedom of press" is essentially an ideological hoax.[26] According to Raeijmaekers & Maeseele (2015, p. 1048),

> '*critical media theories explicitly start from a perception of society as inevitably marked by conflict and asymmetries of power, every social order is considered as the result of hegemonic practices, dominance, and exclusion*. *Media is seen as a field of ideological contestation to stimulate public and essentially political debate.'*

According to this view, media rarely provide "objective" coverage. The aspirations of objectivity, and independence from the state, are masks for the production of dominant ideology by the media (Mc Nair, 2009). When approaching media storms from a critical perspective, they can be considered as a kind of ritual that reinforces already existing, pre-set norms.

The idea of imitation as a mechanism driving media storms confirms this critical view. It means that media outlets mechanically go into storm mode precisely because they are looking to each other. Scholars often cite self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005). But my

[26] For an extensive overview of how the radical Marxist perspective of the 1970s evolved to a more contemporary interpretation of the critical perspective, see the book "Media and Power" of James Curran (2002).

results contradict this view. I find *some* evidence for imitation but not to the extent that the existing literature suggests (Vasterman, 2005). During a media storm, news outlets do look at each other, but this is also the case during non-storm periods.

My findings on the conducive factors contributing to media storms also contradict the idea that they can be considered a kind of ritual that reinforces pre-set norms. This argument carries with it the assumption of media hegemony. Following this argument, one would expect that media storms lead to monotone coverage, with media outlets only representing the ruling class ideas. The opposite is true; I find that the more angles of a story are portrayed, the more likely it is that the subsequent news coverage turns into a media storm. So diverse stories, which can be regarded from different angles or frames, lead more often to media storms. The same is true for stories that can be framed in a thematic way; this means a broader context. But I acknowledge that one can question if the way I approach media diversity ("more viewpoints", "news items also placed into a broader context") is the most appropriate way to measure media diversity. My interpretation does not tell me enough about the diversity in standpoints. I do not check if different standpoints in society (those of the ruling class, for example, or the standpoints of minorities) were displayed. To really tackle media diversity (in the way critical scholars approach the concept); one needs to perform a qualitative analysis.

Above, I discussed the implications of media storms from two different perspectives: the liberal and the critical viewpoints of the role of the media in society. If one takes the liberal perspective, both the argument that media storms *reinforce* the watchdog role of the media, as well as *weaken* it, could be made. But even this weakening role has a positive value; media storms are wonderful devices for focusing public attention on issues of importance (Zaller, 2003, p. 121) and because of this, citizens learn from them. From a critical perspective, it can also be argued that media storms have their merits. More diverse stories (with more angles and more thematic framing) are more likely to turn into a storm. In short, it does not matter from which perspective you approach media storms; their implications seem to be rather positive.

Limitations & Avenues for Further Research

Types of news outlets

This study only investigated traditional news outlets, and there are good reasons for this. Traditional news outlets reach a high number of viewers/readers and are, as such, important. The flagship newscasts of *VRT* and *VTM* together reach more than 1.6 million viewers and *De Standaard* can be regarded as the leading quality newspaper in Flanders.[27] The choice of studying only the newscasts

[27] Source : CIM (2016). http://www.cim.be/nl/televisie/openbare-resultaten

of *VRT* and *VTM* and the newspaper *De Standaard* brings with it three limitations; I do not study other newspapers besides *De Standaard*, nor online media (the news websites of traditional media outlets), nor alternative media. During recent years, the latter two have become more and more important.

The first important shortcoming is that I only took one newspaper into account. If I had to choose only one newspaper, I would opt again for *De Standaard* (see argumentation in Chapter 2). But this study would have benefited from extra newspapers such as another quality newspaper (*De Morgen* or *De Tijd*), popular newspapers (*Het Laatste Nieuws* or *Het Nieuwsblad*) or a regional title (such as *De Gazet van Antwerpen*). A promising avenue for further research is to replicate this study with multiple newspapers.

Secondly, I did not account for online media (news websites). Dimitri Antonissen, news manager at *Het Laatste Nieuws*, told me that on the day of the Brussels Attacks, 3.5 million unique visitors consulted the online website of the outlet. When a media storm occurs, people search actively for "new" news about the issue in question. This leads to an acceleration of the traditional news cycle. Traditional news outlets are now expected not only to deliver a newspaper in print form every day; they also have to maintain a news website. The first concern of news outlets when something big happens is not tomorrow's newspaper or the traditional seven p.m. newscast, but providing updates on their website or organizing an extra newscast. Studying online news websites may have allowed me to disentangle the mechanisms of media storms more precisely. By investigating the newsfeeds of websites, for example, it may have been possible to obtain causal insights about imitation.

This takes nothing away from my findings, however. Media storms are phenomena that play out over multiple days. Stories are required to be on the news agenda for several days before they count as a media storm. Data from news websites would track the same instances of explosive and peaking attention. It is therefore unlikely that accounting for news websites would have changed my general results, but it would have provided richer data and led to deeper insights, especially in the chapter on mechanisms. With the hourly data that could be obtained from websites it would be possible to investigate the causality of the imitation process. Do media influence each other? Who leads, who follows? A time series analyses of news websites with a time lag of an hour could answer these questions.

Another interesting avenue for further research is to look at the evolution of media storms over a period of time. As argued above, the 24-hour news cycle has accelerated. News outlets have to give online news updates, bring an extra newscast and write an extra evening newspaper edition. But does this cause more media storms? I would argue it does not. Because news reporting now goes

faster, the news consumer receives information about the story with several possible news angles and interpretations of the issue/event, and in a shorter time interval. But *because* everything goes so fast, the news consumer also becomes tired of a story more quickly. One of the crucial criteria to qualify a storm is precisely that the story should last for a week. Owing to the trend described above, news goes faster but also fades away faster. In other words, I suspect that the rise of online media does not correlate positively with the occurrence of media storms. But of course, this should be a matter of empirical research. In the eight year period I investigated this phenomenon, I did not encounter a significant rise in media storms.

Thirdly, this thesis did not account for "alternative media". According to Couldry & Curran (2003, p. 7), alternative media can be defined as 'media production that challenges at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations'. Alternative media do not operate within the same commercial logic as traditional media outlets, where news is simply what sells. Most mass communication scholars (e.g. Bagdikian, 2004; McQuail, 1992; McManus, 1994) argue that increasing competition—and media storms could be regarded as a symbol of this competition—puts pressure on news producers and owners. For better or worse, news outlets need to attract and retain readers, viewers and advertisers. So producers are under pressure to make their programs more appealing.

Alternative media do not step into this commercial logic; rather they operate within a non-commercial, ideological logic. This is precisely the reason why I did not take alternative news sources into account, opting to measure media storms in two traditional news outlets alone (newspaper and television news). I expect that alternative news sources, such as *De Wereld Morgen* and *Apache*, two examples of alternative news websites in Flanders, are not involved in media storms. Instead of being part of a media storm, they are more likely to be on the sidelines. Interviewing these sources would not have provided me detailed insights about what exactly happens on the news floor during a news day.

Operationalizing media storms

This study tried to measure media storms in a systematic way. For this reason I developed a definition based on measurable criteria such as *size*, *duration* and *explosiveness*. I argued that it is the interplay between these criteria that turns news coverage into a storm. To pick the right threshold is to make a trade-off between strictness and frequency. Setting the thresholds too low waters-down their distinctiveness. Setting it too high misses many compelling instances that would pass the "you know it when you see it" test. A useful operationalization must enable the identification of most of these special media phenomena in order to compare them with non-storm coverage. This

operationalization led to a binary categorization: if news coverage meets the three criteria, it can be regarded as a media storm (1), if not, as a non-storm (0).

Would it be more useful to use a scale instead of a dummy? I believe that a storm is exactly the result of the interplay between these criteria. If one simply constructed a scale based only on the share of attention, for example, one does not account for explosiveness or duration. The binary classification (storm/non-storm) did sometimes lead to confusion, however. In the chapter on the mechanisms of media storms I discussed the concept of a large storm (e.g. the Brussels Bombings). By using this kind of terminology, I *de facto* make use of a classification within the media storms category. So, it might be useful to take the criterion of "multi-medianess" (in this study theoretically, but not empirically addressed) to construct a scale *within* the media storms.

"Multi-medianess" was, in fact, identified as a component of the definition of media storms. Although I stressed "multi-medianess" as being an important criterion, I did not take this criterion into account empirically. In concrete terms, this means that all media storms identified in one of the three outlets were taken into account and not only the media storms identified in at least two outlets. Nevertheless, all identified media storms did show an explosive increase in attention for a considerable period in at least one outlet. This could be considered a conservative test of the difference between non-storms and storms: if one finds results with all identified storms, one will certainly find effects accounting for only the multi-media ones.

Coming back to the main research question, I found that media storms and non-storms differ. If I had only accounted for the multi-media storms (such as the war in Iraq, the elections of 2003, 2004 and 2007, the MP3 murder, the Belgian banking crisis) and compared these storms with non-storms, my results would only have been stronger. An illustration to support this argument can be found in chapter 5, where I found that media storms elicit more political reaction than non-storms. When looking at the in-depth analysis (I looked in-depth at the media storms that led to a bill, which is the most consequential type of political action), I see that all storms that lead to a bill are multi-media storms.

I do acknowledge that not addressing "multi-medianess" sometimes leads to confusion. In the mechanisms chapter, for instance, I found that imitation does not always drive media storms. In the case of mega-storms, news outlets do not look at each other. Are mega-storms multi-media storms? Probably, they are. But they are not synonymous: all mega-storms are multi-media storms, but not vice versa. In a future study, it is essential that multiple outlets are taken into account in order to address media storms. As indicated in the section above, it might be an interesting avenue to build a typology or scale to measure the level of "storminess" based on the criterion of "multi-medianess".

STUDYING MEDIA STORMS IN DIFFERENT MEDIA SYSTEMS

This study was conducted in only one country. This raises questions regarding the extent to which the results can be generalized. I found, for example, that news outlets go into storm mode mainly on policy-relevant topics in Flanders. Can I generalize this finding to other countries? According to the typology of media systems devised by Hallin & Mancini (2004), Flanders (or Belgium) can be classified in the democratic corporatist system, characterized by external pluralism, strong professionalization, high newspaper circulation and strong state intervention (but with protection of press freedom). It is possible that media outlets in other media systems operate differently. In countries with the liberal model such as the United Kingdom or the USA, which are much more market-oriented, aiming to maximize their market share, things might work differently. Maybe, in the liberal media system, outlets more often go into storm mode on soft and sensational issues (instead of policy-relevant topics). The mechanisms of media storms might also work differently depending on the conditions of news production, degree of political parallelism and journalistic professionalization. In this study, I found limited evidence for the mechanism of imitation. It is conceivable that imitation particularly applies to countries of the liberal system, in which the media are much more market-oriented.

It would be an interesting avenue for further research to investigate the extent to which my findings hold in different countries with different media systems. I am curious to find out whether the same type of media storms (policy relevant news vs. soft/sensational news) would be found and whether my findings regarding the conducive factors and mechanisms would hold. Regarding the effects of media storms, previous studies have demonstrated that political agenda-setting effects occur in the United States, as well as in various European countries.[28] I think that politicians in these countries—in which freedom of the press is guaranteed—feel obliged to react to matters of great general interest (as is the case with most media storms). They are expected to be responsive whenever such important events occur. So, I think that my results for the effects chapter are much more generalizable to other countries than the other results of this study.

FINAL WORDS

A "media storm" is an emotionally charged term that often bears negative connotations. With this study, I hope to adjust existing ideas about media storms. After years of analyses and interviews, I am not pessimistic about media storms and journalism in general.

[28] For a recent comparative study showing evidence for political agenda-setting in different political systems, see Vliegenthart et al. (2016).

My results show that media outlets do not imitate each other blindly. Further, it is often important stories that trigger storm coverage; stories that are politically relevant. In July 2016, an attack took place on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, and only a day afterwards Turkey was startled by a coup d'état, a story with significant political consequences and many questions to be answered.

As Nice generated extra news casts the day before, it was then chased away, off of the news agenda, by the coup in Turkey. The events in Turkey remained on the agenda for much longer, and more prominently, in the days afterwards.[29] Precisely because there were more relevant follow-up stories to be told, I argue based on the results of my study.

The interviews I conducted with journalists taught me that their primary motive is to 'make good news', and not to be better or faster than their main competitor. I agree: of course news outlets look at each other. But not everything a competitor does is by definition newsworthy. News outlets bear in mind what their audience wants to read, but the number of clicks on an article (on the news website) does not determine the front page of the newspaper. Thankfully, because otherwise we might wake up every day to stories such as the breakup of "Brangelina" on the front page. No, things aren't that bad.

[29] From 15 July to 22 July, 21 news items appeared in the front section of De Standaard. Only four of them (20%) were about the Nice attack (of which three appeared on the day after the attack). Nearly half of the articles (10/21) were about the coup in Turkey. 15/7: not yet in the newspaper (Nice happened 14/7 in the evening), 16/7: four news items (three about Nice, one about Turkey), 18/7: four news items (three about Turkey), 19/7: five news items (one about Nice, three about Turkey), 20/7= four news items (two about Turkey), 22/7: four news items (1 about Turkey)

APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF MEDIA STORMS

Start Date	End Date	Topic	Storm Name	DS	VRT	VTM	Event Date	Initiating Event
25/02/2001	11/03/2001	405	Mouth and Foot Outbreak Europe		1	1	22/02/2001	First FMD case in Europe
15/03/2001	31/03/2001	405	Mouth and Foot Outbreak Belgium		1	1	15/03/2001	First FMD case in the Netherlands/Belgium
26/03/2001	2/04/2001	28	Train Crash Pécrot			1	27/03/2001	Train Crash
7/05/2001	25/06/2001	2012	Crisis political party Volksunie	1			9/05/2001	Minister Sauwens attends an event of an extreme right organization
7/09/2001	20/11/2011	1927	Nine Eleven	1	1	1	11/09/2001	September 11 Attacks
3/10/2001	15/10/2001	1619	Start War on Terror		1	1	7/10/2001	Start War on Terror
4/11/2001	13/11/2001	1507	Collapse Sabena		1	1	7/11/2001	Final day of operations for Sabena
12/11/2001	20/11/2001	1619	War Afghanistan		1		9/11/2001	First major offensive of the Afghanistan War after American intervention
20/12/2001	20/11/2001	104	Introduction Euro		1		1/01/2002	Introduction of Euro
1/04/2002	9/04/2002	1619	Conflict in Middle-East		1		27/03/2002	Passover massacre: suicide bombing carried out by Hamas
22/04/2002	29/04/2002	1214	Shooting in Erfurt, Germany			1	26/04/2002	School shooting in Erfurt
13/05/2001	24/05/2001	2012	Dutch Elections	1			15/05/2002	Election Day
5/09/2002	15/09/2002	1927	Anniversary 9/11		1		11/09/2002	One year after 9/11
28/12/2002	11/01/2003	27	Flooding in Belgium		1	1	1/01/2003	Flooding in Belgium
9/01/2003	16/01/2003	28	Crash with Belgian coach in Germany			1	10/01/2003	Car crash with Belgian Coach
28/03/2003	19/04/2003	1619	War in Iraq	1	1	1	20/03/2003	Opening of attacks: start of invasion
7/04/2003	17/04/2003	2031	Wedding Prince Laurent			1	12/04/2003	Wedding day of Prince Laurent
23/04/2003	30/04/2003	2012	Federal Elections 2003pre coverage		1		18/05/2003	Election Day
7/05/2003	30/05/2003	2012	Federal Elections 2003	1	1	1	18/05/2003	Election Day
6/02/2004	25/02/2004	2012	Discussion about voting right of	1			8/02/2004	Vote about the voting right of migrants in

			migrants/Crisis VLD					Parliament
8/03/2004	20/03/2004	1927	Madrid Terrorist Attacks	1	1	1	11/03/2004	March 11 Terrorist Attacks
16/04/2004	3/05/2004	2012	VB convicted for racism – political consequences	1			21/04/2004	Court convicts VB for racism
7/06/2004	21/06/2004	2012	Regional Elections 2004	1	1	1	13/06/2004	Election Day
24/06/2004	9/07/2004	1214	Fourniret Murders	1	1	1	26/06/2004	Press conference Police/Court Liège
13/07/2004	29/07/2004	2012	Regional Elections 2004 - Formation of Government	1			20/07/2004	Start Government Leterme I
24/07/2004	14/08/2004	28	Gas explosion in Gellingen		1	1	30/07/2004	Gas Explosion
2/09/2004	10/09/2004	209	Beslan Hostage Crisis	1		1	1/09/2004	Beslan Hostage Crisis
16/09/2004	30/09/2004	1003	DHL crisis	1			15/09/2004	Negotiations about the expanse of the company DHL are completely blocked
2/10/2004	18/10/2004	2012	Opinion Poll TNS	1			8/10/2004	Release of study about the past elections
25/10/2004	13/11/2004	2012	American Elections 2004	1	1	1	2/11/2004	Election Day
26/11/2004	10/12/2004	2012	New president for political party VLD	1			4/12/2004	Election Day
21/12/2004	10/01/2004	27	Tsunami	1	1	1	26/12/2004	Tsunami
2/04/2005	18/04/2005	31	Death of Pope John Paul II	1	1	1	2/04/2005	Death of Pope John Paul II
15/04/2005	25/04/2005	31	College of Cardinals have to choose new Pope		1	1	19/04/2005	Start papal conclave
21/05/2005	6/06/2005	2012	BHV	1			21/05/2005	Discussion about BHV put on hold
26/05/2005	10/06/2005	1910	EU Referendum	1			29/05/2005	Referendum day
7/07/2005	16/07/2004	1927	London Terrorist Attacks	1	1	1	7/07/2005	London Attacks
19/07/2005	30/07/2005	1927	Egypt Terrorist Attacks		1	1	23/07/2005	Egypt Terrorist Attacks
28/08/2005	11/09/2005	27	Hurricane Katrina		1	1	29/08/2005	Katrina reaches the coast line of New Orleans
8/10/2005	15/10/2005	27	Earthquake in Pakistan		1		8/10/2005	Earthquake in Kashmir
2/11/2005	12/11/2005	209	Riots in France		1		9/11/2005	Also riots in Brussels, riots in France continue
27/01/2006	5/02/2006	28	Collapse Exhibition Hall in Poland			1	28/01/2006	Collapse of exhibition hall
31/01/2006	15/02/2006	1214	Murder Bart Bonroy			1	3/02/2006	Murder of Bart Bonroy
15/04/2006	2/05/2006	1214	Murder Joe Van Holsbeek		1	1	12/04/2006	Murder of Joe Van Holsbeek
6/05/2006	19/05/2006	1214	Murder Luna		1	1	9/05/2006	Murder of Luna Drowart and her black babysitter

20/06/2006	6/07/2006	1214	Murder Stacy & Nathalie		1	1	28/06/2006	Nathalie & Stacy found dead
15/07/2006	26/07/2006	1619	Conflict in Middle-East		1		12/07/2006	Start war Lebanon
3/10/2006	17/10/2006	2012	Local Elections 2006	1	1	1	8/10/2006	Election Day
18/09/2007	25/01/2007	27	Storm in Belgium			1	17/01/2007	Heavy storm in Belgium
2/06/2007	22/06/2007	2012	Federal Elections 2007	1	1	1	10/06/2007	Election Day
10/08/2007	1/09/2007	2012	Federal Elections Formation Crisis I	1			24/08/2007	First formation attempt has failed
2/11/2007	23/11/2007	2012	Federal Elections Formation Crisis II	1			5/11/2007	New record 149 days of formation/negotiation)
26/11/2007	18/12/2007	2012	Federal Elections Formation Crisis III	1			1/12/2007	The second formation attempt has failed
16/09/2008	1/01/2008	2012	Break up cartel CD&V/NV-A	1			22/09/2008	Split kartel CD&V – N-VA
23/09/2008	14/10/2008	1501	Belgian Banking Crisis	1	1		29/09/2008	Announcement of government to support Belgian Banks
29/10/2008	14/11/2008	2012	American Elections 2008	1	1	1	4/11/2008	Election Day

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