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What Makes Party Messages Fit for Reporting? An Experimental Study of Journalistic News Selection

LUZIA HELFER and PETER VAN AELST

Studies on news values have provided many insights into what gets reported in the media. In this study we use the concept of news values to examine how journalists perceive the newsworthiness of party messages. Taking an innovative approach, fictional party press releases are used to test for the influence of five important news values in the context of political news in a factorial survey experiment. This allows us to study those news values in relation to one another in a controlled experimental setting, an advantage over traditional gatekeeping studies. Political journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands were asked to indicate whether they would consider these press releases for reporting or not. Findings show that the power status of the party, unexpectedness, and the magnitude of the political action announced influence journalists' perception of newsworthiness. Messages from parties that were part of government were more likely to be selected for coverage in the Netherlands, whereas the party did not matter in Switzerland, where power is distributed more evenly. This shows that political system characteristics influence the work of journalists. Opposed to results from content analyses of news output, some news values (personal status, conflict) did not prove to be relevant. In the conclusion section we elaborate on potential explanations.

Keywords news selection, experiment

Introduction

Politicians need the news media to get their message across and to reach out to voters and colleagues. Although political actors can also communicate with citizens directly or via new media, the most effective way to reach a larger audience is via mediated mass communication. Therefore political actors have professionalized their communications strategies and bombard journalists with messages on a daily basis. Only a limited number of these messages, however, will make it into the news (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990), not only because news media have a restricted “carrying capacity,” but also because journalists want to inform (and entertain) their audience rather than please their political sources. This leads to the question of why some political messages make it into the news, while others are neglected.

The concept of news values or news factors is often used to explain why some events are reported more prominently than others. The central idea is that specific characteristics

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of the event determine its newsworthiness and influence the decision of the journalist (Staab, 1990). In this study, we apply the concept of news values to examine how political journalists judge the news potential of communications by political parties. Do universal news values such as conflict and unexpectedness have comparable influence on selection, or are some more important than others? Furthermore, what about the role of the political context in which political actors and journalists interact? To address these questions we zoom in on the selection of political messages by journalists as an important starting point in the broader news production process. We use an experimental design embedded in a survey among political journalists in two multiparty democracies, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Although experimental methods are getting more common in the field of political communication, they have not yet been widely applied in the study of news selection (for an exception see Kerrick, Anderson, & Swales, 1964; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996).

Based on content analyses, vast knowledge has been gained on how news values are reported; the explanatory value of such studies on the causal mechanism behind the selection of news, however, is limited as we can only study what *does* make it into the news. At the same time, we know that those news values do not just occur in isolation, but in various combinations, making it challenging for researchers to relate them to one another while at the same time isolating their relative influence (Donsbach & Rentsch, 2011). And although gatekeeping studies starting with White's (1950) seminal study on "Mr. Gates" have also studied news selection, experimental approaches that allow to discern the influence of each factor individually are rare (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In our factorial survey, we present political journalists with fictional press releases (vignettes) within which we have manipulated several news values. Press releases can be seen as a classical example of an "information subsidy" (Gandy, 1982) that sources provide to journalists and are still considered important for information gathering (Gershon, 2012). Although political actors often attempt to get their messages into the media via the backstage by building up informal relationships with journalists or leaking information, studies in multiple European countries have shown that parties are able to influence the media agenda with their daily press releases, in particular in campaign periods (Brandenburg, 2002; Hänggli, 2012; Hopmann, Elmelund-Præstekær, Albæk, Vliëgenthart, & de Vreese, 2012).

Next, we also investigate whether and in what way the political system might affect how these news values are applied in different countries. More concretely, we compare how political journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands deal with political messages. Both countries are multiparty systems with a tradition as consociational democracies. The journalistic culture and historical ties between media and politics evolved in a similar way and outlets can no longer be attributed a specific political orientation in both countries (Blum, 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2012). Although thus very similar in many respects, the two countries differ in one important aspect of the political system, which we expect to influence political news selection by journalists. The Netherlands has a tradition of coalition governments, whereas in Switzerland, all major parties across the political spectrum are represented in government. This means that Dutch parties that are part of the coalition have substantially more power over the policy process than opposition parties (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009). In the Swiss case, however, the composition of "coalitions" changes depending on the issue at stake and power is fairly evenly distributed among the major parties (Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008).¹ We will elaborate in our theoretical section how we expect country differences influence the perceived newsworthiness of party messages by political journalists.

Theory and Hypotheses

Most citizens learn about what is going on in the world via the media. The simple question of what is reported in the news has thus attracted the attention of scholars for many years. One of the most successful concepts in this regard is the concept of news values, sometimes also called news factors (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Since Walter Lippmann (1922) almost a century ago introduced the idea of news values, these have been seen as the key features that make an event worth reporting (Donsbach, 2004). News values refer to common views, particularly among journalists, about what is believed to be intrinsically relevant and interesting for the public. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991, p. 90) state, "news values provide yardsticks of newsworthiness and constitute an audience-oriented routine." This means that news values concern collective routines and criteria grounded in an organizational journalistic context that determine the news production (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Tuchman, 2003).

The seminal study of Galtung and Ruge (1965) was one of the first to give the notion of news value an empirical basis. They identified 12 "news factors" that explained why certain international news events got more attention than others. Several scholars improved this approach and adjusted the list of relevant news factors for other types of news (e.g., Buckalew, 1969; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Over the years some news values have awarded the status of being "universal" or at least found ample confirmation across contexts. For instance, events that happen closer to home have a higher chance of getting reported. Geographic proximity affects news coverage in both domestic (e.g., Martin, 1988) and international news stories (e.g., Jones, Van Aelst, & Vliegthart, 2013). Few news values, however, can be objectively measured as easily as geographic distance (Staab, 1990). Therefore, the operationalization of most news values includes more subjective aspects and needs to be adjusted to the specific type of events under study (see further).

Although studies on news values have improved our insights on why and how certain events get reported, the approach has certain drawbacks that problematize its validity. For example, news value studies are mainly based on content analyses. By studying characteristics of news stories scholars can show that the presence of certain news values increases the prominence of those stories (e.g., Schulz, 1982) or determines which news values make it into the final news product (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009). These findings might be more informative about the aspects journalists choose to emphasize when producing a story and tells us less about why they were selected in the first place (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Scholars have tried to overcome this limitation by so-called input-output analyses (Buckalew, 1969; Gant & Dimmick, 2000; White, 1950), meaning that one compares the characteristics of real-world events with the reports about them. It implies that one can define and ideally create an exhaustive list of all events. Van Belle (2000), for instance, compared the coverage of natural disasters with official statistics on these types of events in his study on foreign news coverage. This assumption is, however, rarely met in the political arena where it is difficult to identify a true population of news stories (Staab, 1990). This "unobserved population problem" is particularly present when studying communication of political actors (Groeling, 2013). Should a comment or statement from the Prime Minister to a journalist be considered as an event? Or does it only become one when other people react to it? Even when one focuses on official party communication, it remains unclear what the role is of other forms of communication and informal contacts between journalists and politicians in determining the news agenda (Hopmann et al., 2012). With our experimental approach we hope to overcome both limitations. First, we focus explicitly on the role of news values in the selection process and not on how journalists might use these messages

to create news stories. Second, by presenting the journalists with several fictional press releases within which we carefully manipulated variables, we ensure perfect comparability between the events.

In most newsrooms, political journalists are highly independent in their first selection of what their political sources offer them (Reich, 2009). Although they have to present those to the editor(s) afterward, we know that a majority of stories are “killed” in this very first phase by the journalist on the frontline (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990; Gant & Dimmick, 2000). In our study, we expect the chance for political messages to survive this first phase of selection is influenced by the presence of a selection of four prominent news values: the (power) status of the sender, the potential level of conflict, the unexpectedness in the communication, and the perceived impact of the message. We develop these news values into concrete hypotheses that specifically apply to political news.

Power Elite

Most studies on news values indicate the importance of what has been broadly labeled as “elite status” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1982) or “power elite” (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001). We argue that elite status can be an attribute of an individual political actor, but also of the party. Across countries and outlets, government parties have been found to receive more media attention than opposition parties. Scholars refer to political impact as the key explanation: Government parties determine policymaking, while opposition parties are mostly restricted to the role of criticizing government (Hopmann et al., 2012). The two countries included in this study allow us to test whether this assumption indeed holds. In the Netherlands, policymaking is strongly determined by political parties in government (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009).² This is quite in contrast to the Swiss case where the four biggest parties in parliament across the political spectrum are represented in government. These parties hold different positions on most issues which means they hardly ever vote in one line and being represented in government as a party does not mean holding a majority in the Swiss parliament. Rather, “coalitions” are formed on the spot between Swiss parties depending on the issue at stake (Linder et al., 2006). Consequentially, quite opposed to the Netherlands where government parties have more political power than those in opposition, in Switzerland, no clear distinction can be made in terms of political power between the parties represented in government and those who are not. Thus, we expect the following:

H1a: In the Dutch case, messages coming from government parties have a higher chance of getting selected than messages coming from opposition parties.

H1b: In the Swiss case, journalists do not make a distinction between parties when selecting messages.

The political standing or power position of a politician is one of the most tested effects on presence in political news and has been found to hold across countries and media outlets (Vos, 2014). High political standing translates to presence in the media as journalists follow the “trail of power” (Bennett, 1996; Gans, 1979). Many studies have focused on the advantage of the prime minister post over other political actors in the amount and favorability of the media coverage (Hopmann, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2011; Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer, 2006). On a lower level in the political hierarchy, there is evidence that parliamentary party leaders get covered more often than ordinary members of parliament (MPs) (Tresch, 2009). Although content analyses can tell us how much coverage an actor gets, the position of the actor might be confounded with other news values. For instance, cabinet members can

announce measures with a direct impact on the public more often than the average MP. If higher political power indeed means an actor is more attractive for media, the mechanism should hold when we control for all other aspects of the message. We therefore expect that:

H2: A message from the parliamentary party leader has a higher chance of getting selected than a message coming from an ordinary MP.

Conflict

Another news value that is often identified in news, and political news in particular, is conflict content analyses have shown. It is one of the most widely used frames in political coverage in the United States (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992) and Europe (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Besides being part of the general political process with checks and balances, there is strong evidence that voicing criticism and attributing responsibility for certain outcomes to specific actors plays an important role in news selection (Eilders, 2002; Groeling, 2010). In the present study, we want to investigate how actor-related negativity (Lengauer, Esser, & Berganza, 2011), in the form of criticism being directed at the government, affects news selection by journalists. We expect the following:

H3: A message containing criticism of government has a higher chance of getting selected than a message not containing criticism.

Unexpectedness

Events that are rare and do not fit with their view of the world are more likely to trigger the interest of journalists and to be selected for coverage. This mechanism has made this news value, which Galtung and Ruge (1965) referred to as “unexpectedness” in their seminal study, a classic one that found confirmation in multiple studies (O’Neill & Harcup, 2009). While politics is often perceived as being predictable, with parties usually communicating and siding with the already known, when something out of the ordinary happens we can expect the journalists to report on it. This relates to the audience-oriented dimension of news values: the unexpected is likely to trigger the attention of the public. In the present study, we look at the surprise element of the issue a party communicates on. In recent years, the theory of issue ownership has been used to explain parties’ reaction to news coverage (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Thesen, 2012) and the amount of coverage parties obtain (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003) which in turn affects voters and their voting choices (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009). In sum, parties prefer to focus the political debate on their core issue. However, from a journalistic perspective issue-ownership might have the opposite effect. Parties that communicate on the issue they own might be considered less newsworthy because people mostly already know this position. Therefore, we expect the following:

H4: If a party communicates on an “unexpected” (not owned) issue the message has a higher chance of getting selected than if the party communicates on one of its core (owned) issues.

Magnitude

As a final news value, we also test whether there are differences in the importance journalists attribute to specific political instruments based on their “magnitude” or potential impact (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001, p. 279). Political parties have various legislative and non-legislative parliamentary instruments that they can use to influence the political agenda and ultimately the decision-making process (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Russo & Wiberg, 2010). To our knowledge, no study has compared the newsworthiness or amount of news coverage of various political instruments. Parliamentary questions are a relatively easy, but not always very successful, tool for politicians to attract media attention (Kepplinger, 2002). In many countries, such as the Netherlands (Van Aelst & Vliegthart, 2014), the number of questions asked in parliaments and initiatives taken by members of parliament have increased rapidly over the past years. Only about one-fifth of parliamentary questions were covered in the newspapers and if they were, the topic was mostly already at stake in the media (Van Santen, Helfer, & Van Aelst, 2015). In our study, we contrast asking a parliamentary question with submitting a bill, which requires both more time investment and commitment by the politician(s) or party submitting it (Schiller, 1995) and we expect the following:

H5: A message announcing a bill proposal has a higher chance of getting selected than a message announcing a parliamentary question.

Although different actors in a news organization are involved in selecting news, there is no doubt that the individual journalist plays an important role in this process (Reich, 2009). This role has raised many questions on the influence of individual-level journalist characteristics on news selection (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Firstly, a journalist’s political orientation could potentially influence which parties get reported. Many studies have focused on the aggregate level and compared characteristics of the journalist population with media coverage (e.g., D’Alessio & Allen, 2000); experimental settings are less commonly applied (for one of the exceptions see Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Second, we control for the perceived political relevance of the issue which is also one of the key news values. In this way we exclude the journalists’ personal judgment on the specific topic of the message. Our third and last control variable takes into account the level of professional socialization (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2011) with the number of years a journalist already is working in the profession. In sum, controlling for political orientation, perceived issue relevance, and experience allows us to correctly compare the influence of message characteristic on selection of political messages by political journalists.

Research Design

In order to disentangle if and to what extent each of the news values influence news selection, we present a quasi-experimental design. So-called vignette studies using short descriptions of situations or persons have been occasionally used in political science (Hopkins & King, 2010) and journalism studies (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991). Our factorial survey approach differs from those in the simultaneous manipulation of multiple variables and the procedure applied to the sampling of conditions. Next, we describe the applied procedure in more detail. Factorial surveys have more commonly been used in social sciences, for example to study complex decision-making processes among elites such as judges (Jasso, 2006) or with representative population samples (Wallander, 2009). In an

Table 1

Overview of news values associated with experimentally manipulated variables and their operationalization

News value	Variable(s)	Values
Power status	Party Status position in party	Government – Opposition Political leader – MP
Conflict	Criticism of government	Present – Not present
Unexpectedness	Issue	Not owned – Owned ^a
Magnitude	Political action	Bill – Question

^aA total of four parties and four issues were included.

online survey, we presented political journalists several short, fictional, but realistically formulated press releases from political parties. Within those press releases, we manipulated the variables that we expected to influence the likelihood that a message would be selected (for an overview see Table 1). To draw up the press releases, feedback from several former political journalists and a pre-test with a total of 40 journalism students in both countries were used. In the following excerpt, one of the fictional press releases is shown (experimental manipulations underlined).

The Liberal Party wants to reduce the fees small- and middle-sized enterprises have to pay. Today the party leader of the Liberals will submit a question to government to ask for clarifications on whether innovative entrepreneurship is eligible for tax reduction. “The government completely abandoned the SMEs. These companies are the backbone of our economy and therefore need to be supported during those hard times,” motivates the party leader the demand.

The fictional press release starts with a mention of the party sending out the press release and an opening statement on the issue. To test for the influence of the news value *power elites* we used actual party names to keep our fictional press releases as realistic as possible. The three parties with the most seats in the lower house of parliament were chosen next to the biggest party with a clear profile on environmental issues. In the Netherlands, the Liberals (“VVD”) and the Socialists (“PvdA”) formed the government at the time of data collection and the Greens (“GroenLinks”) and Populist Right (“PVV”) were two of the opposition parties. In Switzerland, the Liberals (“FDP”), Socialists (“SP”), and the Populist Right (“SVP”) were part of government, together with the Christian Democrats (“CVP”). The Green party (“Grüne”) did not have a minister in the government (“Bundesrat”). To test for the influence of power status of the political actor, we compared the political leader position with an ordinary MP. For Switzerland, the political party leader (“Parteipräsident”) is considered the political leader, whereas, in the Netherlands, it is the leader of the parliamentary party group (“fractievoorzitter”). In the respective countries, these actors are members of parliament. Only the positions were described in the press releases; no names were used.

Next, criticism was included in the quote from the principal actor of the press release. Where no criticism was present, the sentence containing criticism was omitted to provide a neutral reference category. To make the press releases as realistic as possible we focus on criticism on the government, as responsibility for policy outcomes can mostly only be attributed to the politicians in charge. It is highly unlikely that a government party would,

for example, criticize the opposition for a specific (negative) outcome in their country (Thesen, 2012). To test for the effect of issue ownership on news selection, we included one owned issue per party; asylum seekers (Right), taxation of small- and middle-sized enterprises (Liberals), unemployment (Socialists), and sustainable energy (Greens). Those were included as dummy variables. To test whether this relationship held, we had asked journalists to indicate for each issue party combination how strong the link was on a 7-point scale. Scores for the hypothesized combinations (e.g., social Democrats and unemployment) were significantly higher than those for other combinations (e.g., social Democrats and migration). In our analyses, we included this variable as a dummy indicating presence of issue ownership or not. To test for whether the news value of magnitude influences selection, in half of the vignettes a parliamentary question was announced. To ensure functional equivalence between the countries, this was contrasted with the most consequential political action an individual MP can take; an interpellation (“Motion”) in Switzerland and a private member bill (“initiatiefvoorstel”) in the Netherlands. In the press releases, only the form of action but not the description was changed.

Of all 128 combinations of the experimental stimuli just described, we sampled half of the conditions based on criteria of statistical efficiency using SAS (Dülmer, 2007). Sampling of experimental conditions is one key characteristic that distinguishes the factorial survey approach from other experimental designs using scenarios. Our sampling resulted in a half fraction factorial sample of 64 conditions, which is superior to random sampling as it makes sure that all conditions are represented equally. This orthogonal and balanced sample of conditions allows for statistically efficient estimations of all effects and first- and second-order interactions. As our main goals were to draw inferences about the political journalist population as a whole and to reduce the burden for every single respondent, the 64 press releases were randomly distributed into 10 decks. Each respondent was presented with only one of these decks, consisting of six or seven press releases presented in randomized order. After each press release, we asked the political journalists to rate on a 7-point slider scale whether they would consider the press release as the basis for a news item or not.³ In this way we stay close to what journalists would do with incoming information and avoid more normative considerations about what journalists think should be reported, which often differ (Strömbäck, Karlsson, & Hopmann, 2012). This personal judgment of the press release forms the dependent variable of this study.

Measures for control variables were obtained in a survey part after the experimental stimuli had been judged.⁴ The variable measuring the influence of a journalist’s political orientation was operationalized as the absolute distance between a journalist political orientation (0–10 Likert scale) and the score of the party from which the press release originated. Party scores were obtained from the most recent Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2012). We made sure not to include an issue that would be considered systematically more *relevant* by journalists (e.g., crime) in our experimental stimuli as we wanted to keep differences across types of issues as minimal as possible. To control for the political relevance of the issues, we asked journalists to indicate for a number of issues, among which the ones we used in our experiment, what their momentary political importance was (scale 1–7). Finally, journalists were also asked to indicate how many years they had been working in the profession.

Data collection took place in June and July 2013 in both countries simultaneously. Political journalists were first contacted via a personalized e-mail that contained a link to the survey. Contact information of political journalists had either been obtained from publicly available official lists (Switzerland) or by contacting newsrooms (Netherlands). Besides e-mail, potential participants were also reminded personally at parliamentary

buildings (Switzerland) or by phone (Netherlands). A total of 130 (Swiss) and 102 (Dutch) journalists accessed the survey, which is just over 55% and 45% of all journalists contacted, respectively. More than 85% of those completed the experimental part, with the total survey, which included some additional questions on political actors, taking respondents around 12 minutes to complete. Only journalists who reported that at least 3 of their 10 latest news items contained a national politician or party were included for analyses, with the average being 8.1 and 7.4 articles, respectively, in Switzerland and the Netherlands. Six journalists of each country were excluded based on this criterion. For analyses, we regard each evaluation that a journalist has given on a single press release as one case. As each respondent had rated more than one press release, observations in our data set were not independent. We accounted for this clustering in our analyses with multilevel regression models with random intercepts using the `xtmixed` command in Stata Version 13.1. A total of 962 different cases from 151 respondents, of which 84 from Switzerland (CH) and 67 from the Netherlands (NL), were analyzed.⁵

Of the Swiss journalists, 26% ($n = 22$) were female, which is equal to the population contacted (24%). In the Netherlands, only 16% ($n = 11$) of the respondents were female, which is lower than the population contacted (26%). The average age of our political journalists (CH: 43, $SD = 10.97$; NL: 46, $SD = 9.45$) matched those of other studies of the journalist population in Switzerland (Bonfadelli, Keel, Marr, & Wyss, 2012) and the Netherlands (Pleijter, Hermans, & Vergeer, 2012). The years of experience in journalism are comparable to those of political journalists in other Western European countries (Van Dalen, 2012) with 16 (CH: $SD = 8.78$) and 20 (NL: $SD = 8.94$) years.

Results

Including several news values in one single experimental setup allows us to gauge the influence of the factors in isolation, while controlling for the presence of all other variables that we included in our study. First, we expect that journalists make a difference between messages coming from government and opposition parties, but that this effect depends on the political power of parties within a political system. As hypothesized (H1a), we find that, in the Dutch case, messages coming from government parties have a significantly higher chance to be selected ($b = 1.01$, $p < .001$) than those from opposition parties. The effect is the largest one in each of the separate country models. The dependent variable is measured on a 7-point scale. By just switching the name of the party from an opposition to a government party, thus holding the remainder of the content of a press release constant, chances of selection increases by more than one point. In contrast, we expect that, in Switzerland, journalists do not show “preferences” for specific parties (H1b), because being in government does not automatically come with more say over the policymaking process. This hypothesis is confirmed. Being represented in government does not increase chance of selection ($b = -.01$, $p = .964$). Also, when we run models that included the individual parties, we do not find a difference. When it comes to selecting news from specific parties, Swiss journalists apparently attribute more importance to other aspects of the message and there is no systematic preference for some parties over others.

Second, when it comes to the individual actor cited in a press release, we assume that the higher the status of a politician cited, the more likely this press release is selected (H2). However, this hypothesis is not confirmed (see Table 2, Model 2). There is no significant difference between actor positions in Switzerland ($b = -.041$, $p = .691$) or the Netherlands ($b = .17$, $p = .232$). This is surprising as previous studies based on content analyses have repeatedly shown that political status is crucial for media attention. One

Table 2
 Hierarchical linear regression of factors influencing news selection by political journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands

	Switzerland			Netherlands		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Random effects						
Intercept	3.180*** (0.15)	2.569*** (0.22)	2.606*** (0.40)	4.025*** (0.13)	2.913*** (0.23)	2.142*** (0.45)
<i>Level 1 (experimental stimuli)</i>						
Power elite						
Government party		0.019 (0.12)	-0.005 (0.12)		1.025*** (0.14)	1.012*** (0.15)
Political leader		-0.031 (0.10)	-0.041 (0.10)		0.182 (0.14)	0.169 (0.14)
Conflict (criticism)		0.017 (0.10)	0.008 (0.10)		0.033 (0.14)	0.052 (0.14)
Unexpectedness (Issue ownership)		0.596*** (0.12)	0.637*** (0.12)		0.390* (0.17)	0.351* (0.17)
Magnitude (Political action)		0.297** (0.10)	0.299** (0.10)		0.380** (0.14)	0.392** (0.14)

<i>Level 2 (journalist)</i>				
Issue importance		0.109**		0.170***
		(0.04)		(0.05)
Political standing		-0.052		0.005
		(0.03)		(0.05)
Experience (in years)		-0.024		-0.002
		(0.02)		(0.01)
<hr/>				
Fixed effects				
<hr/>				
Residual variance				
Level press release	1.22	1.18	1.59	1.47
Level journalist	1.25	1.26	0.82	0.86
Rho	0.51	0.53	0.22	0.26

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. All dummy variables on level 1. All models Switzerland $N = 533$, Netherlands $N = 429$.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

possible explanation can be that our experimental setup, which emphasizes the party as sender of the message, renders the politician in this specific case less important for journalists. We elaborate on this finding and alternative potential explanations in the conclusion. Combining the findings from the two countries, we conclude that we find evidence that political power translates into better media access for parties, but not for the politicians representing the parties.

From political power we turn to another widely studied news value, that of conflict. In our experiment, we test whether voicing criticism toward the government increases chances of selection (H3). This hypothesis should be rejected as there is no significant difference in Switzerland ($b = -.01, p = .937$) or the Netherlands ($b = .05, p = .715$) for messages that do or do not criticize the government. As underlined in our theoretical section, attribution of responsibility for certain outcomes is part of the political process and a way for opposition parties to challenge government policy. On the other hand, actors from government parties criticizing actions of the government are less common and might indicate internal conflict, which some scholars refer to as “costly talk” (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Thus, we can expect a different effect for criticism toward the government depending on the party it originates from. The interaction effect between the government and criticism dummies is, however, not significant in either country (CH: $b = .19, p = .481$; NL: $b = .19, p = .529$; results not in tables) and it does not affect the main effects either. A possible explanation for the discrepancy of our finding with the results of content analyses might be that all press releases announce a political action from a single party and, in that sense, can be seen as implicitly criticizing the government for not doing its job.

Next, we hypothesize that a party taking a stance on an issue which it does not own increased chance of selection (H4) as parties usually stick to a specific set of issues they are known for. Indeed, we find a highly positive influence on the likelihood of selection in the Netherlands ($b = -.35, p = .036$) and this is even the biggest effect we measure in the Swiss case ($b = -.64, p < .001$).⁶ This confirms that journalists prefer messages from parties that go beyond their usual topics. Or, put the other way around, communicating on owned issues decreases the likelihood that a message will be selected. This brings us to our final hypothesis dealing with the specific political action that is announced. We expect that submitting a bill is considered more newsworthy than asking a parliamentary question (H5). Our data indeed show a highly significant positive effect in both countries; there is a difference between the two compared political instruments of .30 ($p = .003$) in Switzerland and .39 ($p = .006$) in the Netherlands. A bill proposal is more likely to get selected by journalists than a parliamentary question.

Finally, we control for the potential influence of the variables on the journalist level. Results show that perceived political relevance, not surprisingly, does play an important role across countries. Journalists consider messages that deal with issues they judge as more politically relevant as more newsworthy. A journalist’s political orientation, on the other hand, does not show a significant overall effect. There are no indications that journalists’ ideological self-placement influences their perceptions of newsworthiness for party messages. This might be related to the lack of outspoken partisan media in both countries which is in clear contrast with, for example, the U.S. media landscape (Baum & Groeling, 2009). Journalistic experience finally also did not influence selection (CH: $b = -.02, p = .154$; NL: $b = -.002, p = .876$). This seems to suggest that socialization among political journalists is quite strong and divergent individual views on news selection limited.

Conclusion

A long tradition of studies in journalism and communication has given us valuable insights on how and why some events are reported and others ignored. By focusing more in-depth on how political journalists judge the communication of political parties, we contribute to this literature. The innovative experimental setup has allowed us to put effects of various news values into relation with one another and examine a complex decision-making mechanism within a relatively small population of Swiss and Dutch political journalists.

We distinguished among four central news values that are often present in the messages coming from political parties. On the level of the sender, political power is found to profoundly influence news selection by political journalists. Press releases from parties in a powerful government position, which is the case in the Netherlands, are more likely to be selected for coverage (H1a), whereas the party does not matter in the Swiss case where power is distributed more evenly across parties (H1b). This shows that journalists take into account that parties in government in the Netherlands have a higher impact on actual policymaking than opposition parties. We found a similar effect when taking the potential power or magnitude of the political action into account. The announcement of a bill proposal is more likely to be selected than a parliamentary question (H5). Bill proposals require more investment from politicians than questioning a minister in office. Furthermore, a bill can become a law and have a real policy impact, whereas parliamentary questions can only try to signal certain aspects of governmental politics and seldom have tangible consequences for policymakers. In their comments, journalists emphasized that in their evaluation of whether or not to publish a press release on a political action, they would think about whether or not a specific action actually had any chance of success in the political process.

Also, our hypothesis on the unexpectedness of the message is confirmed (H4). When testing how issue ownership affected journalists' perceptions, our analyses show that the party communicating on a "not owned" issue is more likely to be selected. For journalists, the unexpected turns out to be more newsworthy than the expected. Focusing on issues on which the party has built a reputation might be a successful strategy to win voters (Norpoth & Buchanan, 1992), but it does not seem to be a fruitful strategy to catch journalists' attention. This means that parties, in particular smaller ones that are not guaranteed media access, need to balance their communication on their core issues with more unexpected issue messages that can persuade the gatekeepers.

Not all news values turned out to be relevant for how newsworthy journalists perceived party messages, however. Selection was not affected by the formal position of the individual politician cited in a press release (H2). This contradicts with findings from content analyses that show that the status of political actors is crucial to explain why some people are more in the news than others (Sheafer, 2001). Power of the politician featured in the message probably gets canceled out by the power of the party sending the press release. This is, after all, the actor we present as the sender of the message. An alternative explanation might be that content studies focus on the actual news product and not so much on the selection process. This argument is in line with the distinction Reich (2006) made between a news discovery phase and a news-gathering phase. During the very brief first phase, journalists decide whether a certain message or story has potential to become an actual news story. But only during the second phase do the journalists become really active by requiring further information from sources, cross-checking information, including reactions from other actors, etc. Put differently, there might be a "spillover effect" from one politician who sends out the press release to colleagues of the same party that are considered more newsworthy and then included in the news (Hopmann et al., 2012).

Besides the superiority of powerful political actors in the news, content analyses have also shown that voicing criticism and conflict are among the most important characteristics of news (H3). Our findings indicate that this news value might not be that essential when it comes to selection. Criticizing the government is probably too much business as usual for journalists and so it might not catch their attention. Conflict might also be inherent to party politics and not something journalists need to highlight in their coverage (see also Donsbach & Wenzel, 2002). More surprisingly, not even press releases coming from a government party criticizing government sparked journalists' interest. One of the reasons might be that in coalition government criticism and conflict, also among coalition parties, is all too common. Internal critique might be more newsworthy in single-party governments. Potentially, also more direct personal attacks or a more extremely formulated statement containing harsh criticism might have a significant influence on selection. This is clearly a limitation of the experimental approach of this study. Our design contrasts one variable with a neutral one and different operationalization of those values; for example, contrasting criticism with praise might have produced different results. The same might apply to the status difference of the political actors, as opting for a comparison of ordinary MPs with ministers would have more likely produced differences, which the comparison with party leaders did not. As with any new approach, only replications of our study using an experimental approach but with different operationalizations will be able to give us a more founded understanding of political news selection.

To sum up, this study demonstrates the importance of several news values in the selection of news. The facts that these news values were hardly affected by journalistic characteristics (experience, political orientation) and consistent across countries proves their universal nature. These values should, however, not be understood as merely commercially driven yardsticks. Political journalists use them to judge and select relevant stories. They take into account what political parties say and (intend to) do and whether this has a potential effect on the political process. As expected, the fact that Swiss journalists operate in a different political system with all large parties in government influences their judgments on the power position of these parties. It seems fruitful for further research to include a wider range of countries to study this influence of systemic political characteristics on news selection. In addition, this would also allow us to study the effects of media system characteristics in more detail. For instance, in the U.S. context with more prominent (old and new) partisan media outlets (Baum & Groeling, 2009) the political leaning of journalists could play a more important role than in the two European countries in this study, among others, due to journalists self-selecting to outlets that are in line with their own political views (see Sigelman, 1973). It seems that in both the Netherlands and Switzerland the former partisan leanings of newspaper journalists are no longer in play.⁷ Connected to this is another suggestion to advance this research agenda: Results of this experimental study of news selection have in a few cases contradicted expectations formulated on the basis of content analyses of political news (for example, the importance of the status of individual politicians). A logical next step is to study other stages in the political news-making process to see whether other mechanisms are at play. In addition to existing methods, we are convinced that an experimental approach to study political news production could improve our understanding of how political and media forces shape the coverage of politics.

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Notes

1. Another important difference between the two countries is the level of federalization. Switzerland is a highly federalized country with the 26 cantons having influence on spending and all law-making that is not explicitly attributed to national government (Vatter, 2008). In contrast, the Netherlands is a highly centralized country where seats in parliament are allocated according to vote shares on the national level (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009). Although different in that respect, we believe this country difference to be less relevant as this study focuses on national political issues and actors.

2. An exception to this rule was the PVV who supported as an opposition party the minority cabinet of VVD and CDA in the period 2010–2012.

3. Journalists were asked, “Would you create a news report based on this press release?” The exact formulation in the Swiss version (German) was “Würden Sie auf Basis dieser Medienmitteilung einen Bericht verfassen?” and in the Dutch version “Zou u op basis van dit persbericht een nieuwsbericht maken?”

4. Answers to our control variables were potentially influenced by the experimental stimuli. As we are interested in the variation between journalists and not the absolute score of these control variables or in the size of their effect, we are convinced this does not provide a severe limitation to our findings.

5. Mean scores and standard deviation for each experimental stimuli can be found in the Appendix.

6. Findings were corroborated when we introduced the individual score the individual journalist had attributed to the strength of the link between an issue and a party into the model. Scoring higher on issue ownership decreased chances of selection of a press release by .17 ($p < .001$) in the Swiss case and the Netherlands ($b = -.09$, $p = .049$) (results not in tables).

7. We also did not find any significant differences between broadcast and print journalists, or those from public or private broadcasters, in either country.

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Appendix

Table A1

Mean scores and standard deviations per experimental stimuli in party press releases presented to journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands

	Switzerland	Netherlands
	Mean(<i>SD</i>)	Mean(<i>SD</i>)
Status		
MP	3.19 (1.76)	3.98 (1.78)
Political leader	3.16 (1.74)	4.09 (1.8)
Party		
Opposition	3.19 (1.74)	3.54 (1.63)
Government	3.17 (1.75)	4.52 (1.81)
Issue		
Not owned	3.30 (1.79)	4.12 (1.79)
Owned	2.76 (1.55)	3.77 (1.76)
Criticism		
Not present	3.17 (1.74)	4.00 (1.78)
Present	3.17 (1.76)	4.06 (1.8)
Action		
Symbolic	3.03 (1.71)	3.83 (1.78)
Substantive	3.32 (1.78)	4.22 (1.78)

Note. Significant differences in bold ($p < .05$). The dependent variable "Would you create a news report based on this press release?" measured from 1 (absolutely no) to 7 (absolutely yes). $df = 960$. MP = member of parliament.