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Do the Media Set the Agenda of Parliament or Is It the Other Way Around? Agenda Interactions between MPs and Mass Media

Tor Midtbø, Stefaan Walgrave, Peter Van Aelst, and Dag Arne Christensen

9.1 INTRODUCTION

How do European Members of Parliament (MPs) interact with the media? Scholars agree that the mass media have become some kind of political institution (Cook 2005). Longitudinal studies show that there is an ongoing process of mediatization of politics. Political institutions and actors are increasingly affected by mass media coverage, mass media formats, and mass media rules (Altheide and Snow 1979; Strömback 2008). Over time, the impact of the mass media on politics seems to have increased in a measurable way (see, for example, Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008). Starting from the idea that for many MPs the mass media have become a significant actor, this chapter zooms in on just one aspect of the conjoint dealings of MPs and the media: how they mutually affect each other's agenda. Are MPs' parliamentary actions inspired by the media or is media coverage driven by MPs' activities in parliament?

Our goal in this chapter is not only to offer a systematic description of the agenda interactions—the mutual influences regarding their priorities—between MPs and the media but also to provide some explanation. In fact, as we will see, there are significant differences amongst MPs in the fifteen countries under study here. Some MPs' work is largely inspired by media coverage, other MPs manage to exert influence on the media agenda, still other MPs are both inspired by and actively driving media coverage, while yet another group appears to be entirely disconnected from media as they are not affected by nor actively affect media coverage. These differences between MPs in their dealings with the media are patterned, not random. The second aim of this chapter therefore is to account for the differences in agenda interactions amongst MPs in the fifteen countries under scrutiny. Which features

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of individual MPs, of their party, of the assembly they are member of, and of the country in which they are elected affect MPs' agenda interactions with the media?

In fact, in line with the main thrust of this book, we expect that MPs' representational behaviour—here, their behaviour vis-à-vis the media—is determined not only by their own personal features, but also by the institutions in which they operate. With institutions we refer here to the type of parliament the MPs are member of, the party they represent, and the country (and its political system) in which they are elected. The PARTIREP survey contains two questions on the perceptions of MPs on their own agenda interactions with the media: one about the extent to which MPs' actions react on preceding media coverage; the other about how successful they are in gaining media attention for their parliamentary work. The information gathered via our survey does certainly not reflect the entire reality (for a discussion about the relative value of survey data compared to behavioural data see: Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). But our survey produced unique data that are especially suited for comparing among MPs, parties, parliaments, and countries.

9.2 AGENDA INTERACTIONS BETWEEN MPS AND MASS MEDIA

In any democratic system, political elites and mass media interact. Not only do elites and media exchange information, they are often entangled in an uneasy struggle to gain the upper hand. Extant work has analysed this give-and-take relationship (see for example, Althaus 2003; Brants, de Vreese, Möller, and van Praag 2010; Cook 2005; Entman 2003; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, and Semetko 1999). This chapter focuses on what we call the 'agenda interactions' between political elites and the media. We adopt the perspective of an individual MP: how does he/she describe his/her dealings with the media and how do these descriptions vary amongst MPs? We are interested in how MPs give information to the media and use information from the media. The former interaction we label *media access*; the latter denotes *media reaction.* We build on the simple notion that MPs prefer and seek media coverage since this is one—perhaps *the*—way to heighten their public visibility and to get their stories out. In fact, there is evidence suggesting that the more MPs get into the news, the more votes they get (Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, and Fiers 2008). Similarly, Cook (2005: 124) observes that making the news is instrumental to policymaking, as it is a way for MPs to get the issues they care about on the agenda, to build a reputation, and to persuade others to support their point of view (see also Sellers 2010). Therefore,

for both electoral and policy reasons, attracting journalists' attention is a major challenge for any modern politician. MPs respond to media issues and surf on highly mediatized issues so as to demonstrate that they care and are on top of things (Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006). Dealing with issues that are already high on the media agenda is therefore a preferred strategy politicians use to connect to the public (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006).

Agenda interactions between political actors and journalists are hardly a new topic in political science. A substantial body of literature analyses the political agenda-setting power of the mass media, scrutinizing the interrelation between media attention and political attention. Drawing on behavioural data—mostly parliamentary questions but sometimes also other governmental outputs—this research finds that political elites tend to adopt mediatized issues on a regular basis (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Soroka 2002a; Thesen 2011; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, and Oegema 2008; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008). With only a few exceptions (see, for example, Van Noije et al. 2008), this work deals with single countries. As a consequence, we do not really know whether, agenda-wise, media matter more for political elites in some countries than in others. Nor is there much systematic evidence as to the moderating role played by institutions—parties and parliaments—on agenda interactions.

In an attempt to deal with these shortcomings, some students of media and politics have recently started gathering survey data among politicians and journalists in several countries (see, for example, Maurer 2011). Typically, these surveys ask MPs about their general perception of the mass media's political agenda-setting power without asking specific questions with regard to their actual behaviour. The results of extant studies suggest that the general agenda-setting influence of the mass media is perceived to be high by MPs and varies across nations (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011; Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2013).

Building on these recent developments, the present study deals with the challenge of using comparative designs to gauge agenda interactions. It contributes in several ways. First, the evidence we use is not based on unchecked questions regarding the agenda power of the media in general but results from constraining and precise questions about MPs own quantifiable behaviour. Second, the evidence relates to both directions of influence: from media to MPs but also from MPs to the media. This yields a more complete and realistic picture of how political elites and media interact. Third, and most importantly, the scope of our evidence largely exceeds that of previous work. We present evidence for fifteen countries, seventy-three assemblies, 162 parties, and 1,898 MPs. This is by far the largest comparative effort to date. This allows us to deal with determinants on higher levels of aggregation (parties, assemblies, and countries) which, as we will show, effectively shape the agenda interactions between MPs and the media.

9.3 MODERATING AGENDA INTERACTIONS: THE IMPACT OF MPS, PARTIES, AND ASSEMBLIES

We first focus on the level of the *individual* MPs. Which of MPs' personal features affect how they deal with the media? The literature on the newsworthiness of politicians has clearly identified political status as the key explanatory variable. The more political power an actor has the higher the chance (s)he will receive frequent media coverage (Midtbø 2011; Sellers and Schaffner 2007; Tresch 2009). In the case of MPs we can identify two key status indicators that explain why journalists are attracted to particular MPs: their political experience and their parliamentary position (Van Aelst, Shehata, and Van Dalen 2010: 314–15). Position is perhaps the most obvious factor. Not all MPs are of interest to the media. Not only politicians but also journalists seek power: high-ranking politicians are seen as holders of exclusive information as well as having the authority to act upon that information. As for experienced MPs, they may be seen by journalists as particularly good sources for inside information leading to more media access. Long service could also provide politicians with a better understanding of how journalists think and operate (see, for example, Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopman, and Nørgaard 2011: 387–8) leading to behaviour that is more tailored to the media's needs. Added to that, experienced politicians have also learned that surfing on the media waves is a good strategy to become part of the story. Therefore, we expect them to display higher levels of media reactivity as well. In sum, position and experience should strengthen media interactions, both media access and reactivity.

Media interactions could be affected by the behaviour of MPs as well. According to the famous distinction made by Tetlock (2005), some MPs can be defined as 'hedgehogs' while others are 'foxes'. Foxes eclectically utilize a broad range of sources of information; they know a little about a lot. Hedgehogs, by contrast, are devoted to a few sources of information; they know a lot about the issues they specialize in. Foxes rely more on the general media as a source of information than hedgehogs. And, thus, we expect them to be more reactive to media stories than hedgehogs. So, we expect specialized MPs to be less reactive to media cues. Since foxes try to please the general public while hedgehogs are only catering to specific segments of the public, we also anticipate specialized politicians to undertake less effort to get into the general media and, as a consequence, to have less access to the media. A similar logic of specialization and using the media as a source of inspiration has been suggested by Kingdon (1984: 64).

While every MP's primary goal probably is re-election (Carey and Shugart 1995), the ways in which this goal is pursued, may differ. Some MPs mainly target their existing constituency and primarily want to keep these voters on board, they preach to the (previously) converted. Other MPs, in contrast, try

to reach out beyond their supporters and connect to a larger audience. These two different strategies, we expect, have a bearing on how MPs interact with the mass media. Since the mass media are the chief channel to connect to the population at large, we expect the 'expansionist' MPs who seek out voters that have not voted for them in the past to be more reactive to media stories than their colleagues who target a more confined and well-defined audience. Also, going beyond the more narrow preferences of their existing voters, expansionist MPs are on the lookout for new issues and policies. To compensate for insufficient information these MPs use the media more as a source of information than their colleagues. We do not expect expansionists to be per se more successful in getting coverage in the media (media access) but to try harder by displaying more responsiveness (media reaction).

To what extent could the ideological position of an MP be affecting his/her media access and media reactivity? Here we expect there to be differences between access and reactivity. In terms of access, getting covered by the media, we expect journalists to prefer to give airplay to those politicians who share their ideological position. We know from surveys among journalists that most of them place themselves on the left side of the ideological left-right spectrum (while they consider their medium to be more right-wing) (Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2012). This leads to the expectation that left-of-centre MPs would be met with more frequent coverage. Added to that, in many European countries there is an ongoing debate of how the media deals and should deal with the radical-right populist parties (see, for example, Walgrave and De Swert 2002). There is some evidence that radical-right populist parties have less frequent contacts with journalists and are treated differently in the media compared to other parties (Van Aelst et al. 2010; Viegenthart, Boomgaarden, and Van Spanje 2012). So this literature suggests that radical right-wing parties are covered less (less media access) than the other, more left-wing parties. For the media reactivity, we do not have firm expectations about differences between left- and right-wing MPs. We do not see why they would be differently inspired by media coverage.

Still on the level of individual MPs, two control variables are worth including in the models. There have been reports of an 'anti-feminist' element in the media (Gidengil and Everitt 2003: 214) which makes it useful to control for gender. As for age, it can be argued that older MPs have been brought up in a time with strong party organizations and a media situation quite different from the present. This may cause both media reactivity and media access to decline with age.

A second level of explanation is the *party* an MP belongs to. Some parties are more attractive sources for the media; they have higher media access. Other parties' MPs may on average react more to media coverage—having higher media reactivity. The key variable on the party level is the incumbency of the party the MP belongs to. Recent studies suggest that opposition MPs

are more prone to follow media cues than government MPs (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). This is really not that surprising, considering that both the media and the opposition share a common goal, namely to control the government (Midtbø 2011). This often implies criticizing government actions. Negativity is an essential part of journalistic framing (Soroka 2006) and it certainly plays a key role for an effective and critical opposition too (Thesen 2011). Added to that, opposition parties are not bound by any agreements made in government and can use media coverage as ammunition to attack the government. In sum, we think government MPs display a higher level of media reactivity.

The story regarding media access of incumbents and challengers is less straightforward, though. On the one hand, considering journalists' aforementioned attraction to power, we expect MPs representing the government to get media access more easily. After all, these MPs are in a position to actually influence policies and impact the daily lives of media consumers and voters. On the other hand, increased media access may only hold for politicians actually having a cabinet position and not for government backbenchers. Previous studies show that government backbenchers receive even less media attention than MPs from major opposition parties (De Swert and Walgrave 2002; Van Aelst et al. 2008). Hence, we cannot formulate a clear expectation as to the media access of incumbents versus the opposition.

On the party level we control for the ideology of the party of the MP. As mentioned above, we think there are reasons to expect that individual right-wing MPs are less successful in gaining access to the media. To make sure that we are dealing with an effect on the level of the individual politician, we control for the party family the surveyed MPs are a member of.

Shifting focus to a possible third explanatory level, the *assembly* MPs are members of, we introduce two explanatory variables. The first simply is the size of the parliament at stake. Individual MPs, purely statistically speaking, play on average a less prominent role in large parliaments. Therefore they are expected to have less media access compared to MPs of small parliaments. For instance, Van Aelst and colleagues (2010) showed that members of larger parliaments (e.g. Sweden) have less contact with journalists than MPs that operate in smaller parliaments (e.g. Norway). We do not expect parliamentary size to affect media reactivity. The second explanation at this level—and a quite obvious one given the structure of our data—builds on the distinction between regional and national parliaments. The dataset includes seventy-three parliaments— fifty-eight of which are regional. Given the larger attention in the general media for the activities of the national as compared to those of the regional parliaments (for the Belgian case, see, for example: De Swert and Walgrave 2002) we expect the average media access for national MPs to be higher than for regional MPs. Added to that, research has shown that the media are a more important political agenda-setter for some issues than for others (Soroka 2002b). Crime

and justice and foreign affairs are amongst the issues for which earlier work has indicated a particularly large media effect (Van Noije et al. 2008; Walgrave et al. 2008; Wood and Peake 1998). Knowing that these two issues, in most countries, are dealt with at the national level, we also expect that media reactivity amongst national MPs is on average higher than amongst regional MPs.

There is, of course, yet another, fourth, explanatory level—the *country* level. As already pointed out, with only a limited number of countries (fifteen) and a large number of potential explanations at this level, it would be unwise to attempt to test country-level hypotheses in this chapter. Such a model would definitely be underspecified and contain biased estimates. So, for the time being, we leave the country level aside and we will just control for cross-national variation by including country dummies.

9.4 DATA AND METHODS

Details about the survey are provided in the introductory chapter of this volume. Note again, though, that we only study MPs' perception of media reactivity and media access as opposed to objective, direct behavioural measures (see Midtbø 2011). The dependent variables are based on the following two questions in the survey:

(1) Of the initiatives (e.g. bills, written and oral questions) which you personally raised in Parliament in the last year, roughly what proportions of these did you respectively derive from the media, from interest groups, from within the party, from meeting with individual citizens, and from your personal experience? Could you please give a rough estimate in percentages?
(2) And how often have these initiatives that you raised actually been covered by the media? Again a rough estimate in percentages is sufficient.

As we will see momentarily, the two dependent variables, which are defined by scales from 0 to 100, are anything but normally distributed. Nevertheless, we have chosen to work with standard linear models, compensating for non-normality by $\log(Y+1)$-transforming the dependent variables.[1] Table 9.1 presents the independent variables together with their operationalizations.[2]

Since we expect variation in media interaction at more than one level, we adopt a multilevel modelling (MLM) approach which accounts for variation at the MP, party, assembly, and country level (the latter only in terms of dummies). We include both national and regional assemblies, wherever the latter exist. Note that parties and assembly levels are not nested. MPs from the same party can belong to different parliaments. For example, the German CDU appears in five parliaments one of which is national, the other regional.

TABLE 9.1 *Independent variables and description*

Independent variable	Description
MP level	
Female	Man = 0, Woman = 1
Age	2011 minus year of birth
Elite	Party leader, speaker, mayor or committee chair = 1, others = 0
Experience	2011 minus year first elected
Generalist	MP deals with a wide range of issues = 1, only one or two issues = 0
Expansionist	MP seeks out groups in society that have (=0) / have not (=1) supported them in the past
Right wing	Self-placement on an 11 point left-right scale
Right wing^2	Self-placement on an 11 point left-right scale, squared
Party level	
Party family	Parties divided into 13 ideological families
Incumbent	MP from the opposition = 0; MP representing government = 1
Assembly level	
Size	Number of representatives in assembly
Regional	MP member of national parliament = 0, of regional parliament = 1

Inasmuch as parties can appear in several assemblies, the structure of our model will be cross-classified. After having distinguished between variation at the various levels, the next step is to estimate models that include explanatory variables at the MP level. We then add explanatory variables from higher levels. Throughout the analysis we include country dummies to see if there is any leftover cross-national variation.

We employ a Bayesian modelling approach—an approach that since the advent of Markov Chain Monte Carlo methods and modern computers, has become increasingly more popular in statistical modelling in general and multilevel modelling in particular (e.g. Gelman and Hill 2007; Hamaker and Klugist 2011; Jackman 2007). This popularity stems from, among other things, a tremendous flexibility in handling complex multilevel structures even with a small number of groups, the ability to cope with data missing at random through the Gibbs sampler, and also not having to rely on normality assumptions and asymptotic results as in the classical setting.[3]

9.5 DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

We start by looking at our original dependent variables (before transformation). Although Figure 9.1 is simple, it is still informative: the mean value on the scales from 0 to 100 is much lower for media reaction than for media access. The relationship with the media is clearly portrayed by the MPs as

Representing the People
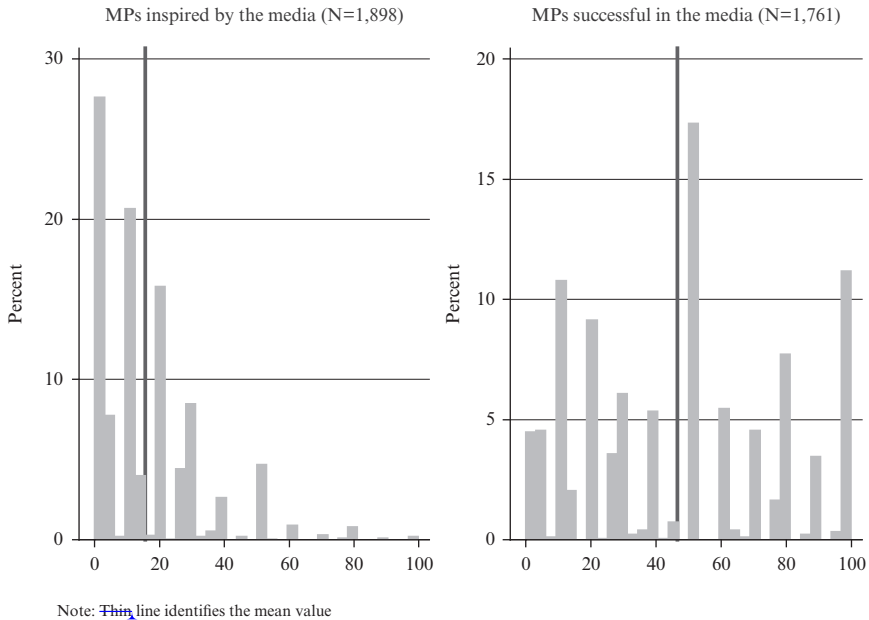

Note: Thin line identifies the mean value

FIGURE 9.1 Frequency (%) of agenda interactions: media reaction and media access

being asymmetric. According to the MPs themselves, they get their actions much more often in the media than that the media inspire their own actions. The average legislator estimates that 47 per cent of their initiatives are covered by the media, whereas 16 per cent of these initiatives had been inspired by media stories. Agendas emanate from politics, not from the media, the results suggest. Note also that media reaction and media access are only weakly correlated, with a Pearsons R of 0.06.[4] This may indicate that the two types of agenda interaction are not mutually reinforcing.

The fact that MPs indicate that they are mastering their own agendas and that they are successful in attracting media attention for their actions, directly contradicts the already mentioned extant research—although based on similar evidence—in which MPs were asked about their assessment of the political agenda-setting power of the mass media in general. In these studies, the mass media's political agenda-setting power was invariably estimated as being exceedingly high and stronger than their own agenda-setting power (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011; Walgrave 2008). It appears that if MPs are asked very concretely about their own concrete legislative behaviour and not just about media and politics in general, and if they are given the chance to ascribe their activities not just to the media but to a whole series of alternative sources of inspiration (e.g. interest groups, party, citizens), that they come to a maybe more realistic assessment of the role of the media in their daily activities. The media obviously matter, but they are not all-powerful agenda-setters.
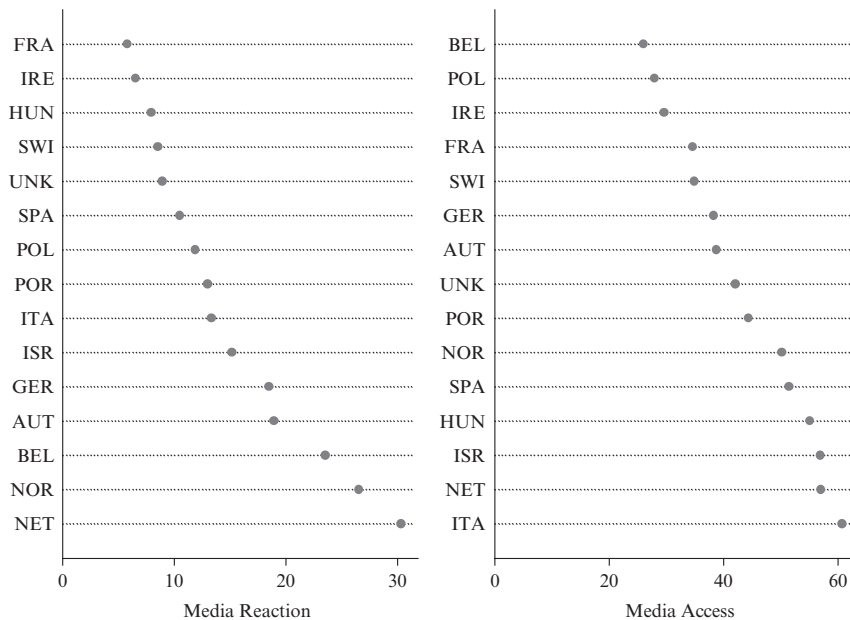
FIGURE 9.2 Cross-national differences in agenda interactions

Despite the global picture of low media reaction and high media access, cross-national divergences can still be detected. Figure 9.2 shows that the mean value for media reaction varies from less than 6 to more than 30 between the fifteen countries, the range for media access goes from 26 to 57. We see that countries such as the Netherlands, score high on both reactivity and access while others—such as France, Ireland, and Poland—appear to have only a modest number of media interactions (both reaction and access are low). Media reaction and media access are positively related on the country level (Pearson's R is 0.29), implying that in countries where MPs, in their legislative activities, take more media issues into account they also display higher success rates in getting coverage for their initiatives. That said, we also find countries such as Belgium that score comparatively highly on one variable (in this case media reaction) but low on the other (in this case media access).

9.6 EXPLANATORY ANALYSES

The next step is to find out whether these cross-national differences can be attributed to country characteristics as such, or whether they reflect differences located at lower levels (MP, party, and assembly). We first identify the

sources of variation for our two dependent variables across the multiple lev-
els. This amounts to comparing so-called empty models (i.e. models without
explanatory variables) in a sequential manner, starting out with a single-level
model with an intercept only, proceeding to a pair of two-level models (one
with parties and another with parliament at the second level), before intro-
ducing models with crossed effects with and without country dummies.

Tables 9.2 and 9.3 contain the mean of the MCMC results for all param-
eters, the standard deviation, and their 95 per cent posterior interval. As is
usual for such data, most of the variation appears to be located at the lowest
level, that is, at the MP level. The MP-level variance in the single-level model
for media reaction in the first column is 1.95, while the corresponding figures
are 1.67 in a two-level assembly model and 1.71 in a two-level party model
(the second and third column). To get an idea of how much of the overall
variance can be attributed to the different levels, intraclass correlations (ICC)
are calculated. The ICC measures the distribution of the variance for the
dependent variables between MPs, parties, and assemblies. By moving on to
models with varying intercepts at both the party and assembly levels in the
last two columns, we find sizeable intra-class correlations (and variance com-
ponents) for both variables, especially for media reaction. The proportion of
the variance in MPs' reaction to the media is around 6 per cent at the party
level in the two cross-classified models, while the ICC scores at the assem-
bly level is affected by introducing the country dummies (the ICC has been
reduced from 27 to 11 per cent). In other words, agenda interactions do vary
systematically between parties and across assemblies. However, both parties
and assemblies seem to be more important for media reaction than for media
access. The size of the Bayesian DIC's at the bottom of the tables suggest
that models with crossed effects provide a better fit to the data in both cases.
For media reaction we see that these figures are getting lower at each stage of
the modelling process. Finally, according to the country dummies, even after
including party and assembly variables, some additional national source of
variation remains for media reaction, but not for media access (DIC 5009
with country dummies and 5007 without).

Having identified variation at the different levels, we now move on to
explain this variation. Table 9.4 contains two columns for each dependent var-
iable, one with explanatory variables at the MP level only; the other including
explanatory variables at all levels (party, assembly, and country). Starting with
the level of the individual MPs and both control variables, we do not see an
effect from sex. There is a slight tendency for *female* MPs to feel less successful
in getting access to the media than their male colleagues. The posterior density
is centred near 13 per cent in the final model (see the '-0.13' in the final column
of the age line), and has a 95 per cent interval that does not overlap zero. This
means that women MPs, all other things being equal, report that their legisla-
tive actions were covered 13 per cent less than male MPs.[5]

TABLE 9.2 *Empty Bayesian models: media reaction (posterior mean, standard deviations in parentheses, 95% credibility intervals in square brackets)*

	Single level	Two level, assembly	Two level, party	Cross-classified	Cross-classified + country dummies
Constant	2.10 (0.32) [2.05, 2.17]	2.07 (0.07) [1.92, 2.21]	2.18 (0.06) [2.05, 2.31]	2.11 (0.08) [1.95, 2.26]	2.53 (0.18) [2.18, 2.89]
Variance, MP level	1.95 (0.06) [1.83, 2.08]	1.67 (0.06) [1.57, 1.78]	1.71 (0.06) [1.61, 1.83]	1.63 (0.05) [1.44, 1.66]	1.63 (0.06) [1.53, 1.74]
Variance, party level	—	—	0.27 (0.06) [0.17, 0.42]	0.06 (0.03) [0.02, 0.13]	0.06 (0.03) [0.02, 0.12]
Variance, assembly level	—	0.29 (0.06) [0.18, 0.44]	—	0.27 (0.06) [0.16, 0.41]	0.11 (0.04) [0.04–0.20]
ICC, party	—		0.14 (0.03) [0.08, 0.20]	0.03 (0.01) [0.01, 0.06]	0.03 (0.01) [0.00, 0.04]
ICC, assembly	—	0.15 (0.03) [0.10, 0.20]		0.13 (0.03) [0.08, 0.20]	0.06 (0.02) [0.01, 0.07]
Bayesian DIC	6657	6416	6483	6392	6386
N	1,898	1,898	1,898	1,898	1,898

TABLE 9.3 *Empty Bayesian models: media access (posterior mean, standard deviations in parentheses, 95% credibility intervals in square brackets)*

	Single level	Two level, assembly	Two level, party	Cross-classified	Cross-classified + country dummies
Constant	3.50 (0.02) [3.45, 3.55]	3.52 (0.05) [3.43, 3.61]	3.46 (0.05) [3.37, 3.55]	3.48 (0.05) [3.38, 3.59]	3.38 (0.12) [3.13, 3.61]
Variance, MP level	1.07 (0.03) [1.00, 1.15]	0.98 (0.03) [0.92, 1.06]	0.99 (0.03) [0.92, 1.05]	0.97 (0.03) [0.90, 1.03]	0.97 (0.03) [0.91, 1.05]
Variance, party level			0.09 (0.03) [0.05, 0.15]	0.04 (0.02) [0.01, 0.10]	0.02 (0.02) [0.00, 0.07]
Variance, assembly level		0.09 (0.03) [0.05, 0.15]		0.07 (0.02) [0.03, 0.13]	0.04 (0.02) [0.01, 0.08]
ICC, party			0.11 (0.03) [0.06, 0.17]	0.04 (0.02) [0.01, 0.09]	0.02 (0.02) [0.00, 0.07]
ICC, assembly		0.09 (0.02) [0.05, 0.13]		0.07 (0.02) [0.03, 0.11]	0.04 (0.02) [0.01, 0.08]
Bayesian DIC	5123	5019	5031	5007	5009
N	1,761	1,761	1,761	1,761	1,761

TABLE 9.4 *Explaining media reaction and media access (posterior mean, standard deviations in parentheses, 95% credibility intervals in square brackets. Changes in DIC with and without the variable in question in bold letters (a decline by more than 10 marked by *). Right-position, right-position—squared, and the country dummies are tested collectively)*

	Media reaction		Media access	
	MP variables only	Party and assembly variables added	MP variables only	Party and assembly variables added
Constant	2.55 (0.18) [2.20, 2.91]	2.43 (0.66) [1.14, 3.74]	3.42 (0.11) [3.21, 3.64]	2.83 (0.48) [1.90, 3.76]
Female MP	–0.10 (0.07) [–0.24, 0.04] 0.4	–0.10 (0.07) [–0.24, 0.05] 0.2	–0.11 (0.06) [–0.22, 0.01] 1.6	–0.13 (0.06) [–0.24, –0.01] 2.6
Age MP	–0.02 (0.00) [–0.02, –0.01] 298.2*	–0.02 (0.00) [–0.03, –0.01] 296.8*	–0.01 (0.00) [–0.01, –0.00] 256.0*	–0.01 (0.00) [–0.01, –0.00] 257.2*
Experience MP	0.01 (0.01) [0.00, 0.02] 72.8*	0.01 (0.01) [0.00, 0.02] 69.3*	0.01 (0.00) [–0.00, 0.01] 43.1*	0.01 (0.00) [–0.00, 0.02] 43.3*
Elite MP	0.11 (0.10) [–0.09, 0.30] –0.7	0.10 (0.10) [–0.09, 0.29] –0.8	0.21 (0.08) [0.06, 0.35] 5.4	0.18 (0.08) [0.03, 0.33] 3.7
Generalist MP	0.14 (0.06) [0.01, 0.26] 71.0*	0.14 (0.06) [0.02, 0.27] 71.8*	0.08 (0.05) [–0.03, 0.18] 54.6*	0.08 (0.05) [–0.02, 0.19] 53.0*
Expansionist MP	0.02 (0.03) [–0.04, 0.08] 105.0*	0.01 (0.03) [–0.05, 0.07] 102.4*	–0.03 (0.02) [–0.08 –0.01] 91.8*	–0.03 (0.03) [–0.08, 0.02] 90.1*
Right-wing MP	0.01 (0.02) [–0.02, 0.05] 125.9*	–0.01 (0.02) [–0.05, 0.04] 125.6*	–0.02 (0.01) [–0.04, 0.00] 76.9*	–0.04 (0.02) [–0.07, –0.01] 74.9*
Right-wing MP²	–0.01 (0.01) [–0.02, –0.00]	–0.01 (0.01) [–0.02, –0.00]	–0.01 (0.00) [–0.01, 0.00]	–0.00 (0.00) [–0.00, 0.00]
Incumbent party	—	–0.31 (0.08) [–0.47, –0.14] 12.5*	—	0.08 (0.06) [–0.04, 0.20] –0.5
Party family (dummies)	—	66.9*	—	65.8*
Size assembly	—	0.0 (0.00) [–0.00, 0.00] –0.4	—	0.00 (0.00) [-0.00, 0.00] -0.8
Regional assembly	—	0.14 (0.22) [–0.31, 0.57] –1.01	—	0.17 (0.13) [-0.09, 0.43] -0.2
Country dummies	9.4	7.6	0.0	0.0
Variance, MP level	1.59 (0.06) [1.48, 1.71]	1.58 (0.06) [1.47, 1.70]	0.98 (0.04) [0.89, 1.02]	0.95 (0.04) [0.88, 1.01]
Variance, assembly level	0.06 (0.03) [0.01, 0.14]	0.06 (0.04) [0.01, –0.15]	0.02 (0.01) [0.00, 0.05]	0.01 (0.01) [0.00, 0.04]
Variance, party level	0.06 (0.03) [0.01, 0.13]	0.04 (0.03) [0.01, 0.10]	0.00 (0.01) [0.00, 0.04]	0.01 (0.01) [0.00, 0.03]
Bayesian DIC	5639	5557	4382	4318

The second control variable, *age*, does generate consistent effects for both media reaction and media access. Younger MPs report that they look more to the media to inspire them than older MPs and they report higher success rates in getting coverage. Controlling for the other variables (including experience) the predicted media interactions decline by 1 (media reaction) to 2 (media access) per cent on average as the MPs get one year older.

As we can see from the table, more *experienced* MPs report stronger interaction with the media than their newer colleagues. One year of experience is expected to increase both media reaction as media access by roughly 1 per cent. This is entirely in line with our expectation.

The same applies to the agenda interactions of the *high profile* MPs (being party leaders, committee chairs, speakers, or mayors). We expected them to be more successful in getting into the media (access) but not to be particularly more reactive to media coverage. And this is what we find. The frontbenchers do not appear particularly interested in media information (media reaction), but they do seem to have some persuasive powers over the gatekeepers in the media (media access). The expected increase in media success lies roughly between 3 and 33 per cent with a mean value of 18 per cent in the final analysis.

According to Table 9.4, MPs who are dealing with numerous issues—*generalists*—tend to be more interested in getting information from the media (media reaction) than single-issue MPs. That, too, is according to our expectation. The coefficient has a posterior mean of 0.14 in both models and a marginal posterior 95 per cent credibility interval between 0.1 and 0.26. Generalists also seem, again in line with our expectation, to be more successful in conveying their initiatives to the media. At 8 per cent in both models the difference is smaller.

As for MPs who are looking for new voters via acquiring new issues— we dubbed them *expansionists*—they appear strongly interested in information from the media (reaction). Being an expansionist increases the amount of reactivity with 1 or 2 per cent. We did not expect expansionism to have an effect on media access. Yet, we do find such an effect, and it is negative. Expansionists are less successful in persuading the media of the importance of their policy initiatives; they report on average 3 per cent less media access. This might indicate that MPs that need to enlarge their electorate are in a weaker political position. Perhaps they try to get their initiatives covered more indiscriminately which leads to more failures.

The *ideological* left-right position of an MP has an effect on his or her agenda interactions with the media as well. For media access, the evidence supports our expectation. We thought right-wing MPs would have less media access, and they do. In the elaborate model, a one-point shift to the right leads to a 4 per cent decrease in access. MPs at the far-right seem to struggle extra hard to get access to the media. Journalists and far-right MPs do not

mingle. In terms of reactivity, we did not formulate any expectation about an ideology effect. Still, we see that, in the model with explanatory variables at higher levels, the effect of a right-wing position is negative. A one-point shift to the right on the eleven-point scale leads to 1 per cent fewer initiatives inspired by the media. That we control for squared ideology implies that the finding does not relate just to the extremity of the placement.

Turning to the party-level explanations, there is a strong tendency for opposition MPs to rely more on information from the media than government MPs. The effect is very substantial: MPs from the opposition report on average 31 per cent more media inspiration compared to government MPs. This finding supports earlier work, as well as our expectation, showing that there is a strong negative effect of incumbency on taking on media cues. The opposition uses the media, and the negative news in the media, as ammunition to tackle government.

Above we said that we would control for *party ideology*. We do so by using party family dummies. These show that party ideology, on top of MP ideology, affects media interaction. We did not expect to find such effects. Though not shown here, a more careful scrutiny of the dummy variables, shows that especially ethnic and regionalist parties stand out with larger values on both dependent variables. Ethnic and regionalist parties are more often inspired by the media and more often covered by the media.

On the assembly level, none of the two suggested characteristics receives support. We fail to find any visible effects of either the *size* or the type of the assembly (*regional* or national). It is not the case that smaller parliaments on average lead to more media reaction or more media access for individual members. And, regional MPs and national MPs report similar levels of agenda interactions with the media.

Finally, the variables on the lower levels of MP, party, and assembly soak up all *country* effects. While we still found considerable differences between the countries in Figure 9.2, inter-country variation no longer matters when all lower-level variables are taken into account; the country dummies do not yield effects. The initial country differences, hence, were due to composition effects and not to true differences between the countries.

9.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has dealt with the agenda relationship between MPs and the media seen through the lens of the MPs themselves. We have studied how they describe their own and the media's role as agenda-setters. MPs provide both a short and long answer to the question 'Who is leading the parliamentary

agenda interactions?' Their short answer, as reflected in Figure 9.1, simply is 'We do, not the media'. A high number of MPs deny any media reactivity whatsoever, even though many of them claim to succeed in presenting their own initiatives to the media. The longer answer, which we have focused on here, starts with 'It depends'. Our empirical analysis has identified divergences not only between MPs but also between parties, assemblies, and countries.

In accordance with most of the literature, we find that generalist MPs interact more with the media than specialist MPs; the young more than the old; and the experienced more than the inexperienced. The former get more *from* the media and they get more *in* the media. It is interesting to see that these three key predictors on the individual level—age, experience, and specialization—affect reactivity and access in the same way. Although the individual-level correlation between reaction and access is low, the data suggest the existence of two distinct types of MPs. Media savvy MPs who play according to the media rules, draw ideas from the media and are prominently present in the media, on the one hand. On the other hand, there are MPs who are isolated from the media: they ignore the media as a source of information and are ignored by the media in return. Apart from that, backbenchers, right-wing, and female MPs seem to have a harder time getting past the media gates. Expansionist MPs who look beyond single issues and their loyal group of voters, take more cues from the media but they feel less successful in gaining access to the media.

Moving to higher-level explanations, we find that parties make a difference. Our study strongly supports previous studies which find that government responsibility impairs media reaction. Much of the variation at the assembly level—just like the variation at the country level—tends to vaporize when taking into account variation at the MP level. Again, variation at the higher levels seems to be caused mainly by variation in composition at the lower levels.

Finally, what do our findings imply for the quality of representation? The evidence suggests that there are MPs who are at least a bit responsive to media cues. If we simply accept what MPs are saying, around one seventh of the things that happen in the fifteen countries' parliaments—or at least that what happens there as a consequence of private member initiatives—is related to the issues of the day. A good deal of MPs, though not always, regularly legislate and debate about current issues and search for a connection with the public debate outside of parliament. We are not claiming that trying to be responsive by following the media is always a good thing—it may also lead to shallow and populist policies—but some degree of overlap between what the people in the street talk about (which is what is in the media) and what happens in parliament is definitely healthy for democracy. But the best news sits probably at the other side of the equation. Unless MPs largely overestimate their own success, which is not entirely impossible, media

are quite receptive to MPs' parliamentary action. About half of the things MPs personally undertake in parliament get some kind of media coverage. This is a remarkable finding. It implies that much action of legislators does get reported and conveyed to the public. It counters the many pessimistic accounts of the democratic quality and adequacy of media coverage. In contrast to most media critics' interpretations institutional politics still scores high on the media agenda.

NOTES

1. A supplementary analysis revealed problems with overdispersion in Poisson models. We know that the advantages of binomial regression models in single-level analyses are not directly transferrable to multilevel models (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal, 2012: 712). Negative binominal models, which can be used in single-level analyses in case of overdispersion, cannot be used automatically in a multilevel model.
2. In the analysis all the continuous variables are grand-mean centered.
3. Bayesian statistics assumes a prior distribution which describes information and uncertainty before considering the data. The posterior distribution expresses our new knowledge after having considered the information in the data. The updating, which occurs by means of Bayes' theorem, ensures that the posterior distribution is a combination of our initial belief contained in the prior and the new information provided by the data. An informative prior, that is, a peaked distribution with a small variance, will strongly influence the posterior. However, when the priors are vague and uninformative and sample size is large, the posterior will be dominated by the data. MLwiN, which is the statistical software we use here, assumes uninformative priors by default (see Brown 2012). In deriving the posterior we employ MCMC methods (more specifically the Gibbs sampler), which represent a class of algorithms for sampling from complex posterior distributions, approximating their true shape. The simulated distribution can then be used to produce point estimates, the latter called central credibility intervals. The intervals are determined from the 2.5th to the 97.5th percentile of the observed estimates. We also obtain standard deviations which can be interpreted as standard errors (Hox 2012: 277). To compare models and to guide the variable selection we use the Deviance Information Criterion (DIC), which is a generalization of the more familiar Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC). Finding the DIC in MCMC is trivial since it does not, in contrast to the AIC and BIC, require maximization over the parameter space. DIC reflects the trade-off between model fit and model complexity. Smaller values indicate better models. Apart from increasing the number of chains from 5,000 (after the burn-in) to 50,000, the settings are those used by MLwiN as default, including the burn-in-period (500 iterations) and the prior distributions. Starting values have been taken from preceding IGLS analyses. Finally, since an

accepted practice for how to use scaling weights in MLM models with more than two levels is not advanced yet, we follow the advice given by Carle (2009: 8) and fit the different models using unweighted data.

4. The correlation between the natural logarithms of these variables, which are used in the regression analysis below, is even lower: 0.05.

5. Note that, since the results in this case are not very strong as the 95 per cent interval is close to overlapping with zero, we have tried to specify the gender effect in terms of a varying slope to account for causal heterogeneity. This did not, however, improve model fit.

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