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Politieke Communicatie

# **The Influence of Issue Ownership Perceptions on Behavior of Journalists**

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# Preface

Toen ik 4,5 jaar geleden plaats nam op de M<sup>2</sup>P-doctoraatsachtbaan besepte ik nog niet goed wat de attractie inhield waarvoor ik een ticketje had gekocht. Wat aanvankelijk begon als een eerder rustige tocht is de voorbije maanden ontaard in een wilde rit met een driedubbele looping als grote finale. Het werd allesbehalve een saaie rit! Onderweg beleefde ik heel wat mooie momenten en leerde ik vaardigheden bij de me nog een leven lang van pas zullen komen. Heel af en toe vergat ik tijdens de rit mijn Touristil-pilletje te nemen, waardoor ik me op dat moment niet helemaal in mijn sas voelde. Die momenten waren echter schaars en belemmerde me niet in het bereiken van het eindstation. Daar was ik echter niet in geslaagd zonder de hulp van enkele supporters van het eerste uur. Deze mensen verdienen dan ook een woordje van dank!

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M<sup>2</sup>P wordt vormgegeven door vele warme, kleurrijke persoonlijkheden. Elk van hen heeft een plaatsje in mijn hart veroverd, maar enkelen onder hen verdienen een speciaal dankwoordje. Met **Julie en Debby** vormde ik tijdens mijn eerste M<sup>2</sup>P-jaren een olijk bureaugenoten-trio. Enkele vaste ingrediënten kenmerkten ons dagelijkse bureauleven: het vertellen van flauwe moppen over het nemen van de Thalys, het onderbreken van het werk voor de vaste 'thee-met-handjes'-momenten, het uitwisselen van Stata-syntaxen, het geven van advies over doctoraatspapers en het in lachen uitbarsten tot de tranen over onze wangen rolden zijn er daar slechts enkelen van. Ik ben de laatste van ons trio dat het tot doctor heeft geschopt en jullie successen hebben me daarbij vaak gemotiveerd. Merci voor alles, dames!

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# Umbrella Chapter

## Introduction

In the minds of people, policy issues and political parties are connected to each other. For example, when people are asked which party they think about when they think about the environment, many will respond with 'the Green Party'; likewise 'the Extreme Right Party' is most likely the answer when asked which party first comes to mind when thinking about the topic of immigration. These *associations* between parties and topics are called *issue ownerships*. Parties that are seen as issue owner of a certain topic are not only spontaneously connected to this topic (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012) – these connections follow directly from the past commitment parties have shown towards issues – but are often also regarded as better able to handle problems concerning this issue (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). It is important to consider the intrinsic nature of the concept: issue ownerships are not facts or truisms, they are *perceptions* that can differ from one person to another. On the aggregate level, however, these perceptions represent the public sentiment about what political parties stand for and which issues they attach importance to.

The relevance of the concept lies in its consequences: issue ownership has a considerable influence on the political behavior of individuals and groups. More precisely, issue ownership affects both the public and political actors. Regarding the public, previous studies have shown that voters are more likely to cast their ballot for the party they perceive to be issue owner of the topic they consider to be the most important problem for society at that moment. While some scholars have found the

effect of issue ownership on voting behavior to be a direct one (Green & Jennings, 2012), others claim it is conditioned by issue salience (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Walgrave, et al., 2012). Aside from the relationship with voting behavior, a parallel research line has developed, scrutinizing the effect of issue ownership on party behavior. Research has demonstrated that parties communicate especially about their own(ed) issues (see e.g. Brazeal & Benoit, 2008), although issue-trespassing – talking about issues owned by other parties – is also a much used strategy (Damore, 2004; Holian, 2004; Tresch, Lefevere & Walgrave, 2015). In sum, previous work has shown that issue ownership has an effect on both the electorate and political actors.

When placing the abovementioned research tradition within the broader political communication field, one can conclude that it leaves us with a gap. After all, in this field there are three and not two main actors: public, politics and *media*. When it comes to issue ownership research, too little attention is given to this latter actor. In the current era of mediated politics, however, mass media have become the most important channel for information exchange between political actors and the general public (Strömbäck, 2008). Media play a vital role in the contemporary society and their importance for both public and politics should not be underestimated. Not only do media take on a bridging function between the public and the political world – by providing a platform for public discussion – they also deliver to both actors information they need to make informed decisions (for citizens: in the voting booth; for politicians: in parliament). For issue ownership specifically, media coverage might play an intermediary role in transmitting political parties' issue emphases to the public. In other words, the fact that political parties emphasize their owned issues might have an effect on how the public thinks about party-issue linkages, through the media's coverage of these party-issue linkages<sup>1</sup>. However, little is known about this intermediary role of the media with regard to issue ownership and about how issue ownership perceptions might affect journalists and the news production process. In sum, media content can be consequential and thus merits a thorough investigation into how precisely it comes about. The main goal of the current PhD dissertation is to examine what the role of issue ownership is in the news production process. More precisely, it sets out to answer the following research question: *Which role does **issue ownership** play in the selection of **political actors as news sources** during the journalistic **news production process**?* This question is relevant when evaluating the role of the media in a democratic society and can also nourish the debates concerning the role of political parties in the coming about of news content and the influence of this content on the news audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous studies have already found that media content plays a role in creating and/or maintaining issue ownership perceptions in citizens' minds (see e.g. Walgrave, Lefevere & Nuytemans, 2009).



Three key elements can be distinguished in the abovementioned research question: (1) issue ownership, (2) the news production process and (3) news sources. Before bringing all parts together, I will discuss each of these three key elements in the following paragraphs. When finally putting all pieces together, the relevance of a possible issue ownership effect on journalists' source selection will be discussed as well as the mechanisms behind this effect. Next, an overview is given of the different steps that have been taken in the research project to come to a final, overarching conclusion: which studies are incorporated into the dissertation, what does each of them contribute and what can be learned from each of them? Finally, implications of the findings for each of the actors involved (media, politics and public) will be discussed and suggestions for further research are formulated based on some of the implications and limitations of this study.

### **Issue ownership**

In their work that proposed a salience model of voting, Budge and Farlie (1983) were the first to introduce both the concept and the term issue ownership. Their salience model was suggested as an alternative for the spatial model of voting (see e.g. Downs, 1957), which claimed that voters are most likely to vote for the party that is nearest to them in the 'ideological space'. This ideological space is constructed by the different policy positions and preferences one can have on all policy domains. In sum, the spatial model expects voters to vote for the party that is most similar to them and agrees most with their vision of what direction society should evolve into on the different policy domains.

Echoing previous criticism that was formulated towards the spatial model (mainly by Stokes, 1963), Budge and Farlie (1983) suggested that this model did not fully fit the political reality. First, many issues are valence issues instead of position issues and only one position can be taken on these issues (after all, which party is for corruption or against a cleaner environment?). Second, in their external communication, political parties do not seem to engage in a dialogue with other parties by emphasizing where they stand on certain issues. Instead, parties are much more likely to talk next to each other, by each discussing certain issues more than others. In sum, parties do not seem to distinguish themselves from their competitors by emphasizing their positions on issues, but by emphasizing certain issues more than others. The issues that they make more salient in their party communications are the issues on which they believe they have a reputational advantage on, i.e. their owned issues<sup>2</sup> (Budge & Farlie, 1983).

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<sup>2</sup> There are different ways in which political parties can build these issue ownerships in the first place, e.g. through their external communication, media coverage and constituencies (see e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Stubager & Slothuus, 2013, Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

In the salience model of voting suggested by Budge and Farlie (1983), voters no longer base their decision in the voting booth on their policy positions and preferences, but on their issue ownership perceptions, i.e. on their perceptions of which party is most committed to a certain issue. This model claims that voters are more likely to vote for the party they believe is issue owner of the issue they find most important (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Walgrave, et al., 2012). For example, if a voter believes climate change and global warming are the most pressing challenges threatening our contemporary society, there is a good chance that this person will vote for the Green Party during the next elections (assuming that this particular voter believes the Green Party to be the owner of the environment issue).

Although the issue ownership concept finds its origin in this salience thinking, both the theory and the conceptualization of issue ownership have afterwards shifted from an approach based on saliency to an approach based on competence. This shift especially took place under the influence of the work of Petrocik (1996) who is, together with Budge and Farlie, often referred to as another founding father of the concept. Petrocik (1996) borrowed the concept of issue ownership from Budge and Farlie and was the first one to apply it to the American political context. To measure the concept in this context, Petrocik (1996) made use of the existing question wording 'which party is better able to handle a problem concerning issue x or y?'. Since then, scholars have been increasingly relying on this operationalization of issue ownership and the corresponding conceptualization, that defines issue ownership by perceptions of competence rather than salience.

Recently, however, the competence approach of issue ownership has become more and more under siege. The two main criticisms towards the concept are that it is endogenous with party preference (many voters have indicated they see their preferred party to be the most competent to handle almost all issues, see Therriault, 2014) and that it is not independent of issues (how can a party have the right qualities to handle problems related to issue x, but not to issue y?) (van der Brug, 2017; Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2016). As a consequence, some scholars have developed a preference for the use of what Walgrave and his colleagues (2012) have labelled associative issue ownership. While Walgrave and his colleagues (2012) suggested to use both concepts – competence and associative ownership – next to each other and see them as two different dimensions of issue ownership, other scholars have been more radical in their aversion of competence ownership and have advocated to no longer use competence ownership in research, but only associative ownership (van der Brug, 2017).

In this dissertation, issue ownership will be predominantly operationalized as associative ownership, because (1) it leads back to the original idea of saliency and (2) is a better measurement of this salience approach (see arguments in the previous paragraph). However, although I maintain the use of the term associative ownership (this expression has successfully gained access into the broader research field thanks to the study of Walgrave and colleagues (2012)), I do not fully agree with the semantic interpretation that is covered by the term ‘associative’. This word describes how issue ownership can be measured (which political party do voters spontaneously associate with a certain issue?) rather than what it conceptually refers to (i.e. the commitment and attention parties show for certain issues)<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, it is important to note that although political parties can be seen as entities on their own, they are often represented by the individual politicians that are part of that party. This fact has consequences for the issue ownership concept, which is in itself a party characteristic. In addition to party ownership, some authors have explored the concept of individual ownership (see e.g. Vos, 2016). Individual ownerships can be in line with party ownerships (people’s perceptions of parties can radiate from the party level to the individual level, see Petrocik, 1996, but also Chapter 4 in this dissertation), but can also deviate from these party ownerships (e.g. when they are based on own experiences or interests). Usually, the literature uses the term specialization to refer to these individual ownerships (Searing, 1987).

## **The news production process**

### *Hierarchy of Influences Model*

News is not the product of one (wo)man’s work at one point in time. According to the Hierarchy of Influences Model introduced by Shoemaker & Reese (1996; 2014) there are five different levels that can shape the news production process: individuals, routine practices, media organizations, social institutions and social systems. Although news is produced by individual reporters, these individuals do not operate in a vacuum. The way they do their jobs is predefined by certain norms and best practices that have been shaped by the organizations they work for, the political and media system they are part of and other influential forces that are at work in the society they work in. News is thus “both an individual product and an organizational product” (Becker & Vlad, 2009, p.59).

In this PhD dissertation, the focus will be on the first two levels of Shoemaker and Reese’s model: individuals and their routine practices. As mentioned above, issue ownership is about perceptions in

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Walgrave and colleagues (2012) have made the same mistake as Petrocik (1996) sixteen years earlier: they let the operationalization of issue ownership lead the conceptualization instead of vice versa.

the minds of people. Hence, it seems only logical that it should be studied on the individual level – that of individual journalists – and the routine practices that these individuals employ in their daily work. Added to that, individual news workers also have a large impact on the news production process, especially in Belgium, where the bulk of the studies that are presented in this PhD are conducted. According to recent studies, Belgian reporters are highly influential in determining the topic and precise content of the news items they produce. “Autonomy is understood as the freedom of reporters to choose what to cover. International surveys revealed that Belgian journalists are among those who enjoy the highest perceived autonomy” (Raeymaeckers, Paulussen & De Keyser, 2012).

Despite the fact that this dissertation is focused on the first two levels of the Shoemaker and Reese model, the other three levels are not completely absent in this work. It is important to realize that overarching organizations and systems can never be filtered out in a study about news production processes. Media channels are always embedded in media organizations and organizations always have their place in social systems. The choice of Belgium as a main study case comes along with certain media system characteristics (Belgium has independent media, is part of the democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and so forth) and political system characteristics (Belgium is a parliamentary democracy, has a multi-party system, and so forth). These characteristics influence the news production processes that will be studied in this dissertation and studying other countries, with other media and/or political systems, might have altered some of the findings (e.g. in countries with strong partisan media organizations (e.g. Fox News in the USA), journalists might use different source selection techniques). It is important to take this into account and to realize that the Belgian case might be useful to say something about similar countries (such as The Netherlands or Germany), but not about dissimilar countries.

Taking the abovementioned limitation into account, comparisons with other systems will be sporadically included throughout this dissertation, allowing to test the generalizability of some of the findings. The data that is used in Chapter 3, e.g., is collected in both Belgium and Canada. In Chapter 2, findings of our Belgian study did not confirm earlier findings from an American-based study and possible reasons for this discrepancy are suggested. Both Canada and the USA diverge in some ways from the Belgian case (e.g. they both have a liberal media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the USA has a two-party system) which might lead to differences with regard to how journalists go about their work, but also with regard to issue ownership perceptions (van der Brug, 2017, for example, has indicated that issue ownership perceptions can have much more straightforward consequences

in the USA because only two parties are involved in the political battlefield). In sum, although this dissertation especially focusses on studying how issue ownership perceptions influence individual journalists' source selection, the political and media systems behind these journalists also receive some attention.

### *Gatekeeping and news values*

In its base, this dissertation leans on gatekeeping theory, which studies the criteria journalists use in their decisions about inclusion and exclusion (of topics and sources) in the news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Although gatekeeping studies are sometimes criticized for being too descriptive, the theoretical starting point of gatekeeping theory is a very useful one. In its essence, this research field tries to investigate "how does news turn out the way it does?" (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2009, p.4). Seeing that the focus in this dissertation is on individual journalists, it is imperative to give some thought to what is already known about how these journalists go about their work. In essence, a lot of what reporters do on a daily base serves one main goal: managing the work overload<sup>4</sup>. Every day, journalists are bombarded with incoming information reaching them via different channels (personal contact via telephone or e-mail, face-to-face meeting, the Internet, and so forth) and coming from different senders (political actors, companies, universities, expert sources, other media, social organizations, own investigations, and so forth). It is thus necessary for journalists to find ways to deal with this information overload. Seeing that journalists often live from one deadline to another, it would be too time-consuming for them to rethink every day how to deal with this overload situation. In order to make their workload manageable, they rely on *routines* (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), which are "patterned, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.100).

The routines that are used by journalists are active on two different levels. First, they help them in determining the newsworthiness of *events*. Research exploring which criteria are used to determine whether a story is suitable to become news has accumulated since the seminal work of White (1950). The most prominent approach in this regard has been the subfield of news value research, which has led to a detailed and structured list of the kind of events that are more likely to receive media attention (see e.g. Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; 2016). Second, routines are also in place on the level of *sources*. Sources are essential in the coming about of a news item, seeing

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<sup>4</sup> This sentence does not imply that providing citizens/the audience with information about events and issues that are at play in the world is not the main goal of journalism. However, it suggests that the daily fight with the stream of incoming information is an important part on the route to fulfilling that goal.

that they provide detailed information to journalists and help contextualize certain news events<sup>5</sup>. Sources are of course not selected at random but must meet a number of conditions in order to be evaluated as good sources. Research has indicated that suitability (e.g. productivity and expertise) is the most important element journalists consider when selecting sources, but that practical considerations (accessibility and time pressure) also weigh on the selection process (Gans, 1979; Powers & Fico 1994).

When it comes down to the sourcing of political actors, which is the main focus of the current dissertation, previous studies have already laid bare some of the routines that are in use to select these actors. The most important determinant of politicians' news coverage has been found to be power (e.g. Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009; Vos, 2015). Added to that, other predictors have been identified, such as government status, charisma and gender. More concretely, members of government parties have been found to receive more media coverage than their oppositional counterparts (Bennett, 1990); charismatic politicians receive more attention (Sheafer, 2001) and male politicians get more covered than female politicians (Armstrong, 2004), even when controlling for their political status (Vos, 2013). The goal of this dissertation is to investigate in a very profound manner whether issue ownership can be added to this list.

### **News sources**

This dissertation studies political journalists' source selection, which is only one part of the entire news production process. The concept of news sources is ambiguous in the sense that it can refer to actors, but also to documents, statistics, audio materials, and so forth (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). In this dissertation, the focus is on political parties and politicians (as representatives of these parties) as news sources. Although, with regard to issue ownership, political parties are the most relevant sources to be studied, it is not always feasible to only focus on parties in media studies. In reality, journalists deal with individual politicians more often than they deal with political parties, because the potential of the latter to undertake action is more limited than that of the former (seeing that parties in itself are institutions and cannot speak to, react to or interact with journalists). Journalists can receive press releases that are sent out in the name of a party and can use party labels in their newspaper articles, but cannot, e.g., call a party for more information or interview a party live on television. For these latter instances, journalists need to rely on individual politicians, who take up the responsibility of representing their parties (often speaking under the

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, news sources have additional functions, other than being informative: they add authority and credibility to a news item, journalists can use them to convey an opinion, and so forth.

party label and not for themselves). Taking into account this representative function of individual politicians for their parties, both parties and politicians will be studied in this dissertation.

Additionally, news sources can have a different function for journalists, depending on when in the news production process these sources come into play. Reich (2011) distinguishes three phases in the news production process: the news discovery phase, the news gathering phase and the news reporting phase. During the first phase, journalists are at the receiving end of the information flow, while the news sources take the initiative to provide journalists with new information. During the second phase, journalists are in control of the information chain and actively seek out sources from which they hope to get more insights and background information about the topic at hand. In the final third phase of the news production process, journalists have to decide which sources to include in the news item. These sources do not necessarily have to be the same as the ones who provided the journalists with background information (although they often are) and are the only sources that are visible to the news consumers (De Swert, 2011).

The focus in this dissertation is on the sources from the two latter phases of the news production process, since these are the sources that journalists actively need to make decisions about (for the news gathering phase: which actors do I want to contact to get more background information?; for the news reporting phase: which actors do I want to include in the news item?). The sources that provide journalists with the initial information in the news discovery phase often find their way to journalists instead of the other way around (Reich, 2011) and are thus often not selected by journalists. Seeing that this dissertation studies source selection among journalists, this first phase is thus left out of the investigation.

### **Issue ownership as source selection criterion during the news production process**

In the previous paragraphs, all key elements of this dissertation (issue ownership, the news production process and news sources) have been discussed separately and for each of the elements it was made clear how they are conceptualized in the dissertation. Below, all pieces of the puzzle will be put together and the research question as a whole will be discussed. More concretely, I will describe the relevance of the topic (why is it important to study this?), the mechanism behind a possible effect (how does issue ownership fit into the news production process?) and the subjective opinions of political journalist about it (how do journalists see the role of issue ownership in the news production process?).

### *Relevance*

All decisions that are taken during the news production process are important, because they have an influence on how the final end product, the news item, will take form. These news items are for many citizens the most important source to learn about the political world (Bennett & Entman, 2001). A whole range of possible audience effects (such as agenda-setting, priming and framing) ensure that these news items greatly affect the perceptions and behavior of voters and so their precise content, how they are shaped and by whom, matters a lot.

In the *News production process*-section above, I have enumerated what is already known about how journalists go about in selecting political sources for their news items. Although the list is already quite extensive (powerful, male, charismatic politicians from government parties are more likely to be in the news), there is still room for additions. What's more, all the aforementioned characteristics can be fitted within the same category: that of issue-independent predictors. Regardless of the concrete topic of a news item, they always have the same impact on the newsworthiness of politicians. However, as indicated by the work on thematic relevance by Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006), it is also important to look at issue-dependent predictors. The idea behind these predictors is that newsworthiness of politicians is also dependent upon characteristics that vary across issues, making politicians more suitable as sources on certain issues than on other issues. For political parties, for which size of the party (Vos, 2016) and government status (Bennett, 1990) have been proven to be issue-independent predictors of newsworthiness, I test in this dissertation whether *issue ownership* can be added as issue-dependent predictor of newsworthiness.

This dissertation is also relevant for issue ownership research. As described in the *Introduction*-section, previous studies about issue ownership have predominantly focused on either political actors or the public, but little is known about the intermediary role of media. However, in these times of mediated politics (Strömbäck, 2008), a lot of the communication between the public and the political world goes via the media. Understanding the intermediary role of media in this process, i.e. understanding how the media help convey party issue emphasis strategies to the public, is important. This dissertation helps to gain more insight into this process and investigates more in depth how issue ownership perceptions affect journalists and the news production process.

### *Mechanisms*

To understand why issue owners can be seen as good sources by reporters – which is the base of newsworthiness – it is necessary to consider the general criteria journalists take into account when



selecting sources. According to the sourcing literature, two criteria are important for the selection of sources: suitability and availability (Berkowitz, 2009; Reich, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As Gans (1979, p.128) puts it: “Reporters who have only a short time to gather information must therefore attempt to obtain the most *suitable* news from the fewest number of sources as *quickly and easily* as possible”. Issue owners meet both of these criteria.

Gans (1979) identified six sub criteria as main determinants of source suitability: 1) authoritativeness, 2) past suitability, 3) productivity, 4) articulateness, 5) reliability and 6) trustworthiness. Issue owners score well on a number of these criteria. First, authoritativeness is key in explaining why issue owners can be seen as good news sources (see also Tresch, 2009). Issue owners are authoritative sources in the sense that they are very knowledgeable about their owned issues. Due to the attention parties have given and are giving to a certain issue, they continually gather the most up-to-date information about this issue, which allows them to analyze a problem regarding the issue in a very insightful manner. This interest in and attention for issues leads to an accumulative expertise on the topic (Holian, 2004; Sides, 2006). Expertise, in turn, is an important determinant for source credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004) and credibility is the number one priority for journalists when selecting news sources (Reich, 2011).

Second, issue owners also meet the criterion of past suitability. Political parties do not gain ownership of an issue overnight. It takes a history of repeatedly giving attention to an issue and prioritizing problems about this issue, to become perceived as most committed party to these issues (Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave, et al., 2012). Third, research has shown that parties are more likely to emphasize their own(ed) issues in their external communication (see e.g. Brazeal & Benoit, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), so they also tick the box of being productive on the issues. Fourth, due to their profound knowledge of the topic, it can be assumed that issue owners are capable of explaining matters on their owned issues in layman’s term. Finally, the two last sub criteria of suitability are least applicable to issue owners, because political actors in general are less likely to be seen as reliable and trustworthy sources (they always have their own partisan agenda in mind).

Added to this, issue owners are also available as sources. Again, this general criterion can be divided into sub criteria: capability and willingness. Issue owners score high on both sub criteria. On the one hand, they are very capable of delivering information and comments about their owned issues in a short time span. They have a large interest for these matters and can be expected to be

knowledgeable about the most recent developments and updates concerning these matters, allowing them to have a statement or comment ready very rapidly (Riker, 1983). On the other hand, they also want to communicate about these issues. After all, it gives the parties the opportunity to prove to their voters that they are still committed to the issues and, at the same time, to introduce their preferred framing about the issues to the public (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

#### *How journalists evaluate issue ownership*

In the previous paragraphs, I have discussed how issue ownership can be fitted within the broader source selection literature. However, it is not because issue ownership can be, theoretically, seen as a sourcing mechanism, that it is also evaluated as such by journalists. Added to that, it leaves the question of how this concept relates to other, established, predictors of political actors' newsworthiness. In order to get a first idea of how issue ownership compares to other source selection criteria, 261 Belgian political journalists were surveyed about this matter between November 2015 and January 2016 (more information about the contact procedure, the response rate and representativeness of the respondents can be found in the *Data & Methodology*-sections of Chapters 3 and 5). In this survey, journalists were asked to evaluate the importance of issue ownership and four other source characteristics during their source selection process. The question was repeated for both phases of the news production process that are studied in this dissertation: the news gathering phase (where decisions are made about which sources to contact to gather more background information about a topic) and the news reporting phase (where decision are made about which sources to include in the final news item). More concretely, journalists were asked the following question: *'Below, a number of characteristics of politicians are shown. These characteristics can be of importance when selecting political sources. Can you indicate, for each of the characteristics, how important they are for you when you are searching for (1) a political source to give you more background information about a certain topic or (2) a political source that you will give speaking time/quote in a news item?'* The journalists had to evaluate the following five characteristics: (1) the politician has good media skills (media skills), (2) the politician holds a high political office (political position), (3) the politician belongs to the party that thinks the topic is most important (issue ownership), (4) the politician thinks the topic is important (personal interest) and (5) the politician has expertise on the topic (personal expertise). Each of the characteristics was evaluated on a scale from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important). Results are shown in Table 0.1 below.

Table 0.1: Relative importance of issue ownership according to journalists (n = 261)

	Background information (news gathering phase)		In news item (news reporting phase)	
	Average	SD	Average	SD
Media skills	2.66*	1.11	3.78*	0.89
Political position	3.28	1.00	3.81*	0.82
Issue Ownership	3.38	0.89	3.56	0.82
Personal interest	3.65*	0.91	3.59	0.91
Personal expertise	4.69*	0.50	4.48*	0.59

Note: \*the value for this characteristic differs significantly from that of issue ownership (based on t-tests).

The results indicate that while issue ownership is not the main characteristic journalists take into account when selecting political sources, it is neither evaluated as unimportant by journalists. Both in the news gathering phase ( $t(260)=6.80$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and in the news reporting phase ( $t(260)=10.90$ ,  $p<.001$ ) the average value of issue ownership is significantly higher than the midpoint on the 1-5 scale. During the news gathering phase, issue ownership is of mediocre importance and matters more than whether the politician has good media skills. This makes sense, seeing that journalists are in this phase looking for information and not for someone who looks good on television. During the news reporting phase, issue ownership is evaluated as one of the least important of the five characteristics, but the absolute value of the effect of issue ownership on source selection is higher in this phase (3.56) as compared to the news gathering phase (3.38) ( $t(260)=3.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ). In sum, party issue ownership is something journalists take into account in their source selection.

I take the results in Table 0.1 as a starting point in this dissertation. According to political journalists, their issue ownership perceptions play a role during the source selection process. These opinions of journalists will be put to the test in this dissertation: are the perceptions of journalists about the importance of issue ownership also reflected in the decisions they make during the source selection process in the news gathering phase and the news reporting phase of the news production process? What is the role of issue ownership during the source selection process and how does it affect the eventual end product, i.e. the news item?

### Overview of the dissertation

The goal of this dissertation is to lay bare which role issue ownership plays in the selection of political actors as news sources. In the paragraphs below, an overview will be given of all studies that have been conducted in light of this dissertation. Taken together, these studies provide us with a comprehensive picture of the role issue ownership plays in the source selection process. The overview shows the systematic approach that has been taken in the dissertation. Each study is

conducted to answer a specific part of the research puzzle and builds both on some of the theoretical elements that were discussed above (such as the distinction between sourcing during the news gathering phase and the news reporting phase) and on the findings of previous studies. For each study, I discuss the concrete reasons for conducting it and highlight the most important results. The full studies can be consulted in Chapters 1 through 5.

#### *Sources in the news: the role of issue ownership during the news reporting phase*

The most important reason to conduct research about the journalistic news production process is that each decision taken during this process can influence the content of the news item, which in turn can have a large impact on both the perceptions and behavior of citizens. The most logical starting point of this dissertation is thus to investigate whether the content of the news item is influenced by issue ownership: are parties more present in news items about their owned issues? In other words, is there any reason to believe that issue ownership is used as a source selection criterion by journalists or is there no evidence of this found in the eventual news product? If this would not be the case, it would be less likely that an effect would be found in earlier phases of the news production process (such as the news gathering phase), seeing that journalists indicate issue ownership to be less important then (see evidence in Table 0.1).

To investigate whether political parties are more present in news items about their owned issues, a survey-based issue ownership measurement among journalists (which parties do journalists see as owner of certain issues?) was combined with a content analysis of television news broadcasts (which parties are being covered on those issues?). The results of this study indicate that issue ownership is a determinant of parties' news coverage: parties receive more media attention on their owned issues. These results demonstrate that issue ownership matters for journalists when they are selecting political news sources during the news reporting phase.

Study two tests whether there is also an effect of issue ownership on the *sort* of attention parties receive. More concretely, the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage is central in the second study. Prominence is seen in this study as a near synonym for saliency and says something about whether parties are placed 'in the spotlights' in a news item (are they mentioned in the title, is a visual (photo, party logo) of them added in the article, do they receive more attention than other parties, and so forth). Tone refers to whether parties are portrayed in a positive, negative or neutral manner. The main research question of this study is whether parties are presented more prominently and more positively in news items about their own(ed) topics. To study this, 1,756

newspaper articles from two Flemish newspapers were collected and subjected to a content analysis. No empirical evidence was found to indicate that parties are covered either more prominently or more positively on their owned issues.

These first two studies form the base of the dissertation. Together they form a clear indication of the effect of issue ownership on the sourcing of political parties during the news reporting phase. In sum, although issue ownership helps parties to gain *more* media coverage on their owned issues, it does not seem to have any effect on *how* they are portrayed on these core issues.

#### *Exploring the effect of issue ownership on source selection more in-depth*

Now that it is established that there is an effect of issue ownership on sourcing during the news reporting phase, it is important to fully understand where this effect comes from. Does it only kick in during the news reporting phase (results in Table 0.1 indicate that it is a more important selection criterion during this phase) or is it already present during the news gathering phase? In other words, do journalists collect information from all (or many) political parties during the news gathering phase and especially report the opinion of the issue owner in the news item (= issue ownership only matters in the news reporting phase) or are issue owners more likely to be contacted for information during the news gathering phase and does this early selection later on influences the content of the news (= issue ownership already matters in the news gathering phase)?

The third study of this dissertation investigated whether issue ownership is already used as an heuristic by journalists during the news gathering phase. This was studied by means of a survey embedded experiment conducted among 285 political journalists in three political systems (Flanders, Wallonia and Canada). Each of these journalists was confronted with the titles of fictional press releases and asked which political parties (s)he would likely contact to gather more information about the topics of the press releases. Results of the experimental study indicated that parties are rated as more likely to be contacted by journalists when the topic of the press release is about an owned issue. These results indicate that issue ownership is already active as a source selection criterion during the news gathering phase.

As discussed earlier, parties do not only appear in the news under their party label. Parties are the ideological umbrellas under which individual politicians unite themselves and, more so than not, it is these politicians that gain media attention. The issue ownership perceptions journalists have of parties can radiate upon the politicians of these parties. For example, Petrocik (1996) claims that “it

[issue ownership] is a reputation [...] which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (*and its candidates*) is more sincere and committed" (p. 826, emphasis added). A logical next question then becomes whether issue ownership also plays a role in the selection of *individual politicians* as news sources. To investigate this, a second experimental study was conducted. In this experiment, 174 Flemish political journalists were confronted with a short hypothetical scenario and the names of two politicians. After reading the scenario, they were asked which of the two presented politicians they would prefer to use as a news source. The results of this experiment indicated that issue ownership plays a role in the selection of politicians as news sources, but that its effect is mediated by specialization. In other words, parties' issue ownerships have an effect on the reputations of politicians (more concretely, politicians are more likely to be seen as specialists on issues that are owned by the party they are a member of), which in turn influences the politicians' chances of being selected as a news source.

The finding of this fourth study nicely fits within the *Mechanism*-section above. In that section, I have argued that issue owners are seen by journalists as both suitable and available sources with expertise (which is an important sub element of suitability) being the key characteristic that drives issue owners' newsworthiness. The results presented above support this vision, at least as far as individual politicians are concerned. Politicians seem to be evaluated by journalists as more knowledgeable about their parties' owned issues and this makes them more newsworthy as news sources.

#### *Further exploring the intermediary role of the media*

In the final study, I come back to the general claim behind this dissertation that media are, in the contemporary era of mediated politics, crucial intermediaries to convey parties' strategic issue emphasis strategies to the public. Seeing that social media are becoming more and more relevant in our society, I test this claim by identifying the issue emphases of parties in tweets and Facebook messages and comparing them to party-issue linkages in newspaper coverage. Results of this comparative content analysis of parties' social media messages on the one hand and newspaper coverage on the other hand indicate that parties succeed in passing on their issue priorities to political journalists. During the period under research, the general issues parties communicate about are also the issues they receive media attention on. These findings indicate that media are indeed important tools for political parties to get across their issue priorities to the public at large.

### *Methodological scope*

In Table 0.2 below, an overview is given of the different methodological aspects of all five studies included in this dissertation. As can be seen, this dissertation combines different methodological elements to investigate the central research question. Taken together, this forms a good base to study the relationship between issue ownership and the media. First, although the focus of this dissertation is not on the social systems in which news workers are embedded, one study is conducted in two different countries, making it possible to compare the effect of issue ownership on source selection in two different systems. Second, with regard to the level of analysis, not only did I investigate the end product of the news production process, I also focused on individual journalists as the level of analysis and, by doing so, was able to contribute to the knowledge of how journalists go about in their daily working routine of selecting political sources. Seeing that political parties are at the heart of this study, also their external communication was taken into account. Third, this dissertation makes use of different methodologies. While experiments and content analyses are the two main research methods used for and reported on in this dissertation, the project also used other methods (e.g. survey questions were used to measure issue ownership perceptions of journalists and structured interviews with three journalists were used to advance the general ideas behind this dissertation). Finally, the studies that relied on content analyses focused on different sorts of content, typical for the whole of contents that are available in today's society: television news broadcasts, newspaper articles and social media messages.

Table 0.2: Methodological scope of the PhD project

		Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4	Study 5
<b>Country selection</b>	<b>Single country study</b>	X	X		X	X
	<b>Multiple country study</b>			X		
<b>Level of analysis</b>	<b>Individual journalists</b>			X	X	
	<b>News coverage</b>	X	X			X
	<b>Parties' communication</b>					X
<b>Used methodology</b>	<b>Experimental study</b>			X	X	
	<b>Content analysis</b>	X	X			X
<b>Content</b>	<b>Television news broadcasts</b>	X				
	<b>Newspaper articles</b>		X			X
	<b>Social media messages</b>					X

### **Implications**

The goal of this dissertation was to investigate the role of issue ownership in the source selection process. More precisely, the following research question was formulated: *Which role does issue ownership play in the selection of political actors as news sources during the journalistic news production process?* This dissertation has shown that issue ownership plays a role in the

considerations of political journalists during the source selection process. Political actors – both parties and individual politicians – are more likely to be selected as a news source – both for background information and for inclusion in news items – when they are (part of) the party that owns the topic of the news item. The findings that are presented here have important implications for all actors involved. First of all, they tell us more about the media and how they fulfil their role in a democratic society. Added to that, there are also conclusions to be drawn for political parties and the news audience. The implications for each of these groups will be discussed in the paragraphs below.

### *Implications for journalism*

In the contemporary society, journalism has an important role as watchdog against the abuse of power in politics (McNair, 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). Added to that, it has an important informative function towards its audience: “journalists provide the information on which citizens will be able to judge between competing parties and candidates” (McNair, 2009, p.238; Strömbäck, 2005). In sum, the way in which journalists report about the politicians and political parties in power is of crucial importance for the well-functioning of a democracy. What conclusions can be drawn about the functioning of the media based on this dissertation?

One of the journalistic principles that news workers most strongly need to safeguard is that of objectivity (Tuchman, 1978; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). Applying this principle to the selection of political actors as news sources entails that journalists should ideally strive for a balanced reporting in their news items. Any deviation from this balanced reporting can be seen as a form of bias. However, a clear and unanimously agreed upon definition of what bias precisely is seems to be lacking in the literature (for an overview and discussion of this matter, see De Swert, 2011) and whether coverage is found to be balanced or biased depends on which benchmark is used to evaluate this (Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante, 2012b). In a multi-party system, there are different benchmarks that can be used to define what a balanced news item is (Hopmann, et al., 2012b): in the strictest sense of the word, balance can only be achieved when all parties are consulted for a news item; in other cases other benchmarks (such as party size or government-opposition status) are taken into account. In the former case, when bias is seen as any deviation from a totally balanced news item in which all political parties get the chance to have their say, balanced reporting is very hard to achieve in a multi-party system (for example, in Belgium, it would imply consulting six or seven different parties for each news item, which is not compatible with the fact that news has to be made quickly (Gans, 1979)). By default, then, journalists have to make a selection of political



actors they want to contact for information and/or include in their news items. In this regard, selecting these actors based on issue ownership perceptions is not a bad option, seeing that journalists' issue ownership heuristics related to perceptions of expertise. However, strict equality is not always seen as a necessary precondition for balance (Hopmann, et al., 2012). Within this line of thinking, giving more attention to issue owners can be regarded as objective news reporting in the sense that it mirrors existing differences between parties' issue emphasis strategies.

### *Implications for political parties*

Traditional mass media are important intermediaries between political parties and the public. Via the media, political parties can convey their issue priorities to their voters. Political parties are aware of the fact that they can have an impact on the media via their external communication. Earlier research has shown that political parties are very strategic actors and try to maximize their influence on the media by adjusting their messages to the news production routines and requirements of the media (Strömbäck, 2008). In sum, parties seem to have internalized what has been called the media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979).

Why do political parties try to influence media content? What do they gain from being used as news sources in news items about certain issues? The most important consequence of media attention is that political parties can reach a large part of the audience. Receiving coverage on their issues helps political parties to maintain their ownership over the issues they find important, which might lead to electoral success (see e.g. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012). Added to that, it might be the case that issue ownership does not only secure political parties of their place in the news item, it might even help them to frame the issue in a for them beneficial manner. As Riker (1983) indicates, political parties that have the advantage on an issue (i.e. issue owners) also have the 'dominant argument' on this issue. This touches upon what Hall (1978) has identified as 'primary definers' of the news. These primary definers have a lot of influence on the content of the news seeing that they "set the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place" (Hall, 1978, p.58). Afterwards, it becomes difficult for other actors to fundamentally alter the dominant frame that is being used in an ongoing discussion about a topic and each attempt at doing so involves 'a change from the inside' (meaning that other actors can only present their view on the matter by contrasting this view against the existing dominant frame). Framing was not part of this dissertation, so it remains to be determined to what extent the increased chance of being selected as news sources allows issue owners to also become primary definers. Do parties have a strategic

advantage as issue owners, in the sense that they are more likely to be the primary definers of a debate? This is certainly an interesting avenue for future research.

### *Implications for the news audience*

For the average citizen, news media are the most important source of information about politics (Bennett & Entman, 2001), so the topic of this dissertation also substantially impacts this group of people. First, it implies that the information they receive via the media is biased towards a certain political party (see above for a more detailed discussion of the bias/balance argument) and this is consequential for both people's perceptions and behavior concerning politics. These consequences, which come about by means of processes such as agenda-setting and priming, have already been well studied in previous research. The most important ones are (1) that issue ownership perceptions of citizens can be claimed and maintained by parties through their media appearances (e.g. Walgrave, Lefevere & Nuytemans, 2009) and (2) that these issue ownership perceptions influence the voting behavior of citizens (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012). In the following paragraph, I will go deeper into this first consequence, based upon the findings of this dissertation.

As mentioned in the *Issue ownership*-section above, issue ownership is seen in recent times as two-dimensional. On the one hand, there is associative issue ownership, which refers to a spontaneous connection that is made between parties and issues (a connection that is based on a lifelong commitment parties have shown towards these issues; Walgrave, et al., 2012). On the other hand, competence issue ownership is regarded as a measurement of which parties are more competent, i.e. better able to handle problems, regarding an issue (Petrocik, 1996). This dissertation has found an issue ownership effect for the amount of news attention parties receive on issues. In other words, parties are more in the news on their owned issues. This effect can be connected to the associative ownership perceptions of citizens. Apparently, citizens are exposed to news content in which parties are more linked to certain issues. As a consequence, this might strengthen the spontaneous connection between parties and issues in the heads of citizens; they are repeatedly reminded of the fact that these parties have an interest in those issues. On the other hand, no evidence was found to support the idea that issue ownership also influences the prominence and tone of parties in the news. In other words, parties are not portrayed as better or more capable to handle their owned issues in the media. This would thus lead us to conclude that media coverage helps in maintaining associative ownership perceptions, but not competence ownership perceptions. However, existing research does not support this line of thinking, seeing that an experimental study based upon the mere presence and absence of political actors in the news has found this to have an

effect on competence issue ownership perceptions of citizens (Walgrave, et al., 2009). Future research could further address this matter.

### **Limitations**

Although this dissertation made a valuable contribution to our knowledge about the journalistic source selection process, the results have to be framed in the broader, already existing knowledge about this topic. Although the influence of issue ownership during the news production process has been proven in this dissertation, this influence is comparatively limited compared to classic explanations of source selection such as power or expertise. Powerful elite politicians, such as presidents, prime-ministers and ministers receive the bulk of the media attention, but power does not explain 100 per cent of the variance in political actors' presence in the news. It remains useful to look for all other predictors of political actors' news coverage, until the puzzle is complete and all the missing pieces are found. In this dissertation, I have proven issue ownership to be one of the puzzle pieces, but I acknowledge its role might be rather small as compared to other pieces.

One of the most important limitations of this dissertation is that it focuses primarily on the first two levels of the Hierarchy of Influences Model of Shoemaker and Reese (1996; 2014). It investigates how (perceived) characteristics of political actors influence the individual decision making process and source selection routines of journalists. This dissertation focuses on the individual and routine levels only and does not take into account the other three levels: those of media organizations, social institutions and social systems. In other words, the broader professional and societal context in which individual journalists' choices are embedded is neglected in this dissertation.

Finally, and relating to the previous remark, it was mentioned earlier on in this chapter that four of the five studies that were conducted in this dissertation were based on a single-case study. This leaves the question of whether the findings are generalizable to other countries. Although this remains pure speculation until the moment that more research is conducted, I feel confident that the results are applicable to more than the Belgian case only. Three arguments can be made to support this claim. First, the base of this PhD dissertation is the first study, which empirically shows that parties are more in the news on their owned issues. This result indicates that issue ownership is used as a selection criterion during the news reporting phase. Previous studies have already found this same effect in other countries, such as the USA (Petrocik, Benoit & Hanssen., 2003), Denmark (Hopmann et al., 2012a) and Ireland (Brandenburg, 2005). If, in these countries, parties are also found more in the media on their owned issues (indicating a source selection effect during the news

reporting phase), this is a good indication of the fact that issue ownership might also be used as a source selection criterion during the news gathering phase. Second, in the one study of this dissertation that was not confined to a single-country study (see Chapter 3), a robustness check was run to investigate whether the effect of issue ownership was driven by the results of one case or not. The results indicated that this was not the case, the effect of issue ownership proved to be robust across the three political systems. Finally, time pressure and information overload can be seen as a basic journalistic premise across the globe. Consequently, all journalists working in these conditions are in need of routines and heuristics to guide them through their work. Previous research has indicated that a lot of the journalistic standards and working procedures are more or less standardized across countries (Esser, 2008; Hanitzsch, 2007), so it might not be illogical to assume that using issue ownership as a source selection criterion can be added to this list. In sum, at least for countries with a similar media system, we might expect to find the same issue ownership effect on source selection as in Belgium.

### **Avenues for future research**

In the mind of political journalists, political parties are connected to policy issues. These associations are likely, similar as for other people, the consequence of the history of attention parties have given these issues (Walgrave, et al., 2012). Journalists sometimes rely on these associations during the source selection process: when they are producing a news item about a certain topic, journalists are more likely to select the party they associate with this topic as a news source. By doing so, the media play an important intermediary role in transferring political parties' issue emphasis strategies to the broader public.

Although this dissertation has already thoroughly investigated the effect of issue ownership on source selection, there are many possible avenues for future research (some of which have already been mentioned above), that can even further our understanding of this effect. First, the effect can be studied even more in depth on the levels that already have been taken into account in this dissertation: those of the individual journalists and their routines. There are many differences between journalists that might affect the way they interact with political actors and, consequently, the way they perceive these political actors. On the one hand, journalists can be differentiated in terms of whether they are reporters or editors (Becker & Vlad, 2009). Roughly speaking, the former are in charge of producing original news items, while the latter review and revise the content that is delivered to them by these reporters. Consequently, it seems more likely that reporters have more direct contact with politicians, while editors only rarely meet politicians. On the other hand,

journalists can be divided into those working for online media and those working for offline media. The former might work more in the office, while the latter might have more personal contact with politicians. Future research could investigate whether the effect of issue ownership on source selection is different for these different types of journalists.

Second, the effect can be studied more broadly on the levels that have not been taken into account in this dissertation. As mentioned above, it remains unsure what the effect is of the broader professional and societal context in which individual journalists make decisions about source selection. Are different source selection criteria used by journalists working in a partisan media landscape? How do issue ownership perceptions of journalists working in two-party systems affect their source selection? Future research might address these and similar questions.

Third, further research could investigate whether issue owners are not only more likely to gain media coverage for themselves, but also for their preferred framings of an issue. As explained above, issue owners often have the dominant argument on their owned issues (Riker, 1983), and it could be researched whether the issue owner's perspective is more likely to dominate media coverage about an issue. Whichever actor can – content wise – dominate the debate about an issue, has a very strategic advantage: “how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p.11). In sum, issue ownership might have a more profound effect on the news production process than the one studied in this dissertation, making future research about the topic needed and interesting.



# Chapter 1

## Issue ownership as a determinant of political parties' media coverage

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# Issue ownership as a determinant of political parties' media coverage

## Introduction

In most democratic societies, news media are an important tool for citizens to learn about societal issues and political parties (Gerschon, 2012; Strömbäck, 2008; van Hoof, Jacobi, Ruigrok & van Atteveldt, 2014). One of the media's most important tasks – besides providing an arena for public discussion and functioning as a watchdog against the abuse of (political) power – is thus to be *informative* (Strömbäck, 2005). It is via the media most of us learn which societal problems we are faced with, what the political stances of all political actors are and how the political decision-making process concerning the issue develops. News media provide a platform where different voices in society are offered the chance to express their opinion on the most prominent topics. In this regard, sourcing practices can be largely equated to framing strategies: “whom the reporter selects as sources of information powerfully influences how that story is told” (Kasoma & Maier, 2005, p.1).

As a consequence of the media's important function in society, investigating which political actors gain media attention<sup>6</sup> and why becomes crucial. Previous research has already devoted attention to this topic and has found powerful politicians, such as presidents or ministers, to receive the bulk of the media attention (e.g. Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009). Added to that, members of government parties are more often in the news than politicians from opposition parties (Bennett, 1990), male politicians are more often in the news than female politicians (Armstrong, 2004) – even when controlling for their political status (Vos, 2013) – and politicians that are seen as being more charismatic receive more media coverage than less charismatic politicians (Sheafer, 2001). The current research adds to this literature by taking a party-centered approach and by focusing on the theory of *issue ownership*.

According to the issue ownership thesis people connect policy issues to political parties based on the parties' past attention for a topic and their perceived ability to handle problems concerning that topic. Issue ownership is important to study, because it differs from the above discussed

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<sup>6</sup> In this paper the words (*news*) *coverage*, *attention* and *presence* are all used as synonyms. The terms are used to describe political actors that are given *speaking time* in the news.

determinants of political actors' news coverage on one crucial aspect: it fluctuates across issues. As a consequence, while power or charisma tell us something about the overall chances of politicians to be covered in the news, issue ownership tells us something about the chances of politicians to be covered on specific topics. By leaning on the two sourcing criteria put forward by Shoemaker & Reese (2014), we argue that issue owning parties are potentially *suitable* and *credible* sources and therefore fit to pass the media gates.

If issue ownership is a determinant of parties' media attention, this would result in parties being more present in news items about topics they are more associated with than in news items about topics they are less associated with. Although some research has already been devoted to this topic (see e.g. Petrocik, Benoit & Hanssen, 2003; van der Brug & Berkhout, 2015; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), previous studies have been primarily confined to measuring the contents of news coverage, without examining whether the found patterns actually matched the issue ownership perceptions of journalists. Instead, results are often compared to issue ownership perceptions of citizens. However, political journalists might think differently about connections between political parties and policy issues. Not only are they more educated than the general public (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; van Dalen, 2012), they are submerged into the topic of politics on a daily base: they receive external communication of political parties, they are constantly working on political pieces, and so forth. These aspects might influence how they believe issues are connected to parties.

In the current study, the results of a journalist survey – to obtain a direct measurement of issue ownership among journalists – are combined with those from a content analysis of television news in order to investigate whether issue ownership is a determinant of political parties' news coverage. The findings demonstrate that issue ownership is indeed a determinant of parties' presence in the news.

### **Issue ownership**

According to the issues ownership theory, political parties and policy issues are related to one another in the mind of people. The concept, first put forward by Budge & Farlie (1983) and later by Petrocik (1996), has been useful in explaining both voting behavior (the chance that voters will vote for the party they believe is owner of what they see as (one of) the most important problem(s) of society, is high, e.g. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012) and party behavior (parties communicate especially about their own(ed) issues, Brazeal & Benoit, 2008).

In recent years, the idea has been put forth that issue ownership has two dimensions: associative and competence issue ownership. While associative issue ownership refers to the past attention parties have given topics, resulting in spontaneous connections between parties and issues (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012); competence issue ownership is about the belief that some parties are better able to handle problems concerning an issue than other parties (Budge & Farlie, 1983). In this paper, the focus lies on associative issue ownership, which is shown to be a more pure measurement of issue ownership than its competence counterpart (Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2015).

### **Journalistic sourcing practices**

The goal of this paper is to investigate whether parties are systematically more used as sources in news items about topics they are associated with than in news items about other topics. Although the journalist-source relationship is a very symbiotic one (Palmer, 2000; see Gans, 1979 for the well-known reference to the dancing of a tango), journalists most definitely take the lead when it comes to the decision of who is in the news and who is not (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Leaning on the literature about journalistic source selection techniques, there are good theoretical reasons to expect issue ownership to be a determinant of parties' media presence. According to the sourcing literature, whether or not actors are covered as news sources is mostly dependent on two criteria: (1) availability and (2) suitability (Reich, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The criterion of availability indicates that source selection is subjected to practical considerations (Allgaier, 2011). As news has to be produced rather quickly (Gans, 1979), actors are unfit to be used as news sources if they are not available to comment on an issue rapidly. We claim here that due to the past and current expertise on an issue, issue owners are more likely to have a comprehensive interpretation of a concrete matter ready more rapidly than other parties, making them highly available sources. It might take other parties a few hours to construct their opinion on the matter – e.g. extreme right parties do not always take an active interest in environmental issues and therefore might need some time to determine their stance on these issues. Taking into account the time pressure journalists experience, these are precious hours in the news production process, leading them to the source that is ready to comment on a topic immediately.

Source suitability, on the other hand, is, according to Gans (1979) determined by six distinct criteria: (1) past suitability, (2) productivity, (3) reliability, (4) trustworthiness, (5) authoritativeness and (6) articulateness. Firstly, past suitability refers to the fact that certain actors have been useful in the past and have already proven to be knowledgeable about a topic (Gans, 1979). Seeing that issue

ownership is based on a party's history of attention for a certain topic (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012), issue owners meet this criterion. Next, sources ideally supply journalists with a lot of information concerning the topic of the news item (Gans, 1979). As indicated earlier in this paper, ample work from previous studies has indicated this to be true for issue owners: parties have a tendency to communicate more about their owned issues (Brazeal & Benoit, 2008; Petrocik, 1996; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Although the third and fourth criteria are of lesser importance with regard to issue ownership – can political actors ever really be seen as trustworthy sources? – the fifth criterion, authoritativeness, is key in explaining issue owners' appeal as news sources (see also Tresch, 2009). However, contrary to the original meaning of Gans (1979), the term is not used in this study to refer to the possession of an official position of authority, but to the possession of a high level of knowledge in a field. In this regard, a good source must be knowledgeable about the topic at hand and dispose of correct, up-to-date information which allows him to analyze a problem regarding the topic in an insightful manner. Due to the (history of) attention for and interest in a certain issue, parties continually gather the most up-to-date information about the issue, which leads to an accumulative expertise on the topic (Holian, 2004; Sides, 2006). Expertise, in turn, has been found to be one of the core dimensions of source credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004), which is what journalists are looking for in news sources (Reich, 2011). Finally, a good source must be able to explain an issue in layman's terms.

### **Issue ownership and the news**

The previous paragraphs describe why issue owners are good news sources, according to the traditional sourcing techniques of suitability and availability. Do issue owners live up to their potentiality in actual practice? In other words, do parties have more chance to get covered on owned issues? A handful of studies already researched this and most studies suggest that media indeed systematically link parties to issues. In their research on news coverage during American presidential election campaigns, Petrocik and colleagues (2003-2004) found that articles in the New York Times about Democratic candidates were systematically about different topics than those about Republican candidates, with a bias towards owned issues. Walgrave & De Swert (2007) found similar results in Belgium. After content analyzing both parties' manifestos and parliamentary questions on the one hand and media coverage on the other hand, they conclude that both can be related to issue ownership. More concretely, the study shows that parties are likely to emphasize their owned issues in their external communication and that these party-issue combinations are also prevalent in media coverage. Some studies found that it is especially larger, more relevant parties who are more likely to get covered on their owned issues (Brandenburg, 2005; Hopmann, Elmelund-

Præstekær, Albæk, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, 2012a). Finally, Hayes (2008) demonstrated that parties are not only mentioned more in news items about owned issues, but are also depicted more favorably in those news items.

Contrary to the mainstream finding that issue ownership determines parties' presences in the media, a recent study of Helfer & Van Aelst (2016) points to the contrary. The study uses a factorial survey experiment in which journalists from the Netherlands and Switzerland are presented with fictional party press releases. When asked whether they would consider these press releases for publication, issue ownership even had a negative effect, indicating that press releases were evaluated as less newsworthy when they were about a party owned issue.

### **Significance of the study**

Although some research has been done concerning issue ownership in the news, there is room for improvement. Previous research has been primarily confined to measuring the contents of news coverage, without examining whether the patterns found in the news actually match the issue ownership perceptions of journalists. Instead, results are often compared to issue ownership perceptions of citizens. The authors of these studies thus assume that issue ownership perceptions of journalists match those of citizens. However, we claim that journalists differ from the general public in some ways, and these differences might influence how journalists think about party-issue combinations.

More than thirty years ago, Hess already stated that "in terms of demographics, if there is an average Washington reporter and an average American, they do not look much like each other" (Hess, 1981, p. 117). More recent work confirms that journalists are not like the average citizen. More concretely, journalists are often more educated and more liberal than the general population. This has been found to be true for journalists in general (Weaver & Willnat, 2012) and political journalists in particular (van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2012). While being more educated than the average citizen leads to "more knowledge, skills and political familiarity that help in navigating the political world" (Hillygus, 2005, p.27), being more liberal than the general public is an indication of the fact that journalists' perceptions with regard to politics and political aspects can indeed differ from those of the public.

Besides demographic characteristics, two aspects of journalists' daily work might also influence their perceptions concerning issue ownership. Firstly, journalists are preoccupied with the topic of politics

on a daily base. They actively investigate which parties are up-to-date about certain issues and, thus, best placed to discuss a topic. Secondly, political journalists are frequently in contact with politicians and political parties. According to a recent study among journalists from eight different European countries – amongst with Belgium – 75% of the journalists indicate that they are in contact with politicians a few times a week or more (van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2012). During and next to those interactions, journalists are at the receiving end of the unfiltered flow of external communication send by parties. This way, they get an understanding of which topics parties are working on and find important. The public is not aware of this, seeing that this flow is first filtered by the media before it reaches the audience.

All of this might lead to journalists taking a different view on issue ownership than citizens. Consequently, one cannot simply equate the perceptions of journalists to those of the public. It is thus best to have a direct measurement of journalists' issue ownership perceptions. In the current study this gap is tackled by surveying journalists. Afterwards, news coverage is evaluated using this data. Echoing previous studies, we hypothesize that political parties are included more in news items about owned issues than in news items about non-owned issues.

*H1: The more parties are associated with an issue (by the whole group of journalists), the more these parties will be present in news items about that issue.*

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, there are other factors besides issue ownership that can explain which political actors receive news coverage. When it comes to political parties, three are of importance: party size, whether a party is in government or opposition and whether the party delivers the minister on a certain topic. While the former two aspects will be merely taken into account as control variables, the latter deserves to be elaborated on. After all, when researching whether issue ownership perceptions of journalists lead to connections between parties and issues in news items, it is important to control for other variables that can create such party-issue linkages. We claim here that ministerial positions is the most important variable to control for due to a combination of two reasons: (1) ministers are often in the news and (2) of all high political positions, ministers are most connected to issues.

Firstly, it is known from previous studies that members of government parties are more often found in the news than sources from opposition parties (Bennett, 1990). Within those government parties higher ranked politicians more easily gain news attention than unknown backbenchers. Ministers

take up a considerable part of the news coverage given to politicians, and an additional “chancellor’s bonus” is given to the prime minister (De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Schoenbach, De Ridder & Lauf, 2001; Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994). Secondly, of all highly ranked politicians that gain frequent news attention, ministers are the only sources that can be linked to a specific topic. Presidents, prime ministers and party leaders on the other hand have to be knowledgeable about a broad range of topics and defend their government’s/party’s stance on all matters. This is different for ministers, who are appointed to a very specific topic and who can be on top of that issue for the duration of their legislation. As a consequence, they become the number one authority concerning their competence.

Following the argumentation provided in the previous paragraph, it can be argued that if party-issue connections are found in the news, this might be the consequence of the frequent use of ministers as news sources. If ministers – who are of course affiliated with a certain party – are often included in news items – talking almost exclusively about their field of competence – this also creates a connection between parties and issues. These connections between parties and issues are not a direct consequence of those parties’ issue ownership, but of the fact that they deliver the minister on those issues. However, to make matters even more complicated, it might be an *indirect* consequence of issue ownership, as ministerial competences are not randomly distributed over parties. Upon forming a government with others, parties negotiate and try to claim the competences of issues they care about and are knowledgeable of. Put differently, they try to gain ministerial positions in policy domains that they own. In sum, ministerial competences and issue ownerships are often intertwined. It is thus important to unravel the effect of both variables and to investigate whether the issue ownership effect on parties’ news presence still holds when controlling for ministers. Although crucial in research concerning issue ownership, it is rarely taken into account (for exceptions, see van der Brug & Berkhout, 2015; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

*H2: Issue ownership holds as a determinant of parties’ news coverage, even when controlling for ministerial positions.*

We will thus try to decouple the effects of ministerial competences and issue ownership. A key question that remains unanswered is which of both variables is the best determinant of political parties’ presence in news media.

*RQ1: Which is the strongest determinant of parties' news coverage: issue ownership or government participation?*

## **Data and methods**

In order to investigate whether or not issue ownership is a determinant of parties' news presence, two types of data are necessary. Firstly, a measurement of issue ownership amongst journalists is required: which parties do they consider to own which issues? As it is journalists who make the news<sup>7</sup>, it is their issue ownership perceptions that we are interested in. Consequently, a journalist survey was used to collect the necessary data. Added to the journalist survey, a content analysis of television news broadcasts was conducted to measure the presence of parties in the news.

Both data from the journalist survey and from the content analysis were collected in Belgium, a small West-European country. The data that was used in this study was collected in Flanders, the largest region of Belgium, where about 60% of the population lives. Having a proportional electoral system and a fragmented party system, the Flemish political system is not that different from other smaller European countries (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). Added to that, the Belgian media landscape is similar to that of other countries of Western Europe such as The Netherlands, Germany or Scandinavian countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Flanders is thus a good case to study, with both a political and media system that is representative for other countries of the European main land. Furthermore, Belgium is a good case to study issue ownership. Contrary to the US, where the bulk of the research regarding issue ownership is conducted, Flanders knows a multi-party system, with five to seven Flemish parties in parliament during each term. Many parties thus have to compete for voters' support and issue ownership has become one of the main mechanisms parties use to attract floating voters. Seeing that floating voters are far less common in more polarized two-party systems, we can assume issue ownership to play a smaller role in those countries (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

### *Journalist survey*

In March 2014, an online survey was organized to question Flemish political journalists. Based on a database that contained specialization and contact information of more than 5000 Belgian journalists, a list of Dutch speaking editorial journalists specialized in politics was drafted (technical news makers such as photographers were not taken into account for this study). Afterwards,

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the news is not made by journalists alone. They cooperate with editors and sources and are influenced by journalistic routines, organizational influences and system characteristics (see Hierarchy of Influences Model in Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).



newspapers, television news broadcasts and websites of news platforms were searched to complete the list with names of political journalists who were not yet on it. The journalists, active in the newspaper, television and online news industry, were contacted by a first e-mail, were later reminded twice via follow-up e-mails and were finally contacted via telephone. No incentives were offered to them, so participation in the study was purely on a voluntary basis. Of the 293 journalists that were contacted, 167 did not participate (57%), 26 indicated that they no longer worked as (political) journalist (9%), 38 started the survey but did not finish (13%) and 62 finished the survey (21%). Although the response rate is rather low, we do not consider this to be problematic because the journalists that participated in our survey resemble the average Belgian journalist, as measured by Raeymaeckers, Paulussen & De Keyser (2012) in a general study of the Belgian journalistic field. Most of the respondents in the current study are male (77.4% versus 72.2% in the study of Raeymaeckers et al.) and have completed higher education (86.9% vs. 90.4%). The average journalist in our study is 42.5 years of age (vs. 42 years) and has 17.3 years of journalistic experience (vs. 15.1 years). The political journalists that participated in our study also resemble the political journalists in the study of van Dalen & Van Aelst<sup>8</sup> (2012), who were predominantly male (77%) and on average 41 years.

Issue ownership was measured in this survey by asking respondents the following question: *When you think about issue x, which party do you spontaneously think about?* This question, first put forward by Walgrave et al. (2012), was open-ended, leaving a blank field for participants to fill out the party that first came to mind. Seeing that it would be too demanding, both with regard to cognitive capabilities and with regard to time, to ask journalists to rate all possible issues that are present in our society, the question was repeated for only eight issues (defense, employment, environment, family, immigration, justice, state reform and taxes). These issues were not chosen randomly out of the total pool of issues, but were selected to form a good sample of all issues. The issues were chosen so that there would be enough variability on number of important issue characteristics, in order to prevent these characteristics to have an effect on the results. The choice for the issues was thus based on a most dissimilar strategy, with ample variety in issue salience (salient versus non-salient issues), competence level (federal versus regional issues), strength of issue ownership (strong ownerships versus weak ownerships) and type of issue (valence versus position issues). Finally, issues were present from different fields of society, ranging from the economy (taxes) to social affairs (family). An overview of the answers can be found in Table 1.1. For

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<sup>8</sup> The study of Raeymaeckers, Paulussen & De Keyser (2012) reached a comparable response rate of 30.6% and researched a total of 682 journalists. van Dalen & Van Aelst (2012) on the other hand surveyed 147 political journalists, reaching a response rate of 66%.

each policy issue, the table shows the highest percentage of journalists that named the same party as owner of that issue. On the first row, for instance, we can read that 98.4% of all journalists wrote *the Green party* as answer to the question *When you think about the environment, which party do you spontaneously think about?* For all but one issue ownerships are very strong with at least two out of three journalists indicating the same party as owner of an issue.

Table 1.1: Issue ownership perceptions of journalists (n=62)<sup>9</sup> and citizens

	Party	Percentage Journalists	Percentage Citizens
<b>Environment</b>	Greens	98.4	89.0
<b>State Reform</b>	Flemish nationalists	93.6	54.3
<b>Family</b>	Christian democrats	93.6	-
<b>Justice</b>	Liberals	88.5	-
<b>Employment</b>	Socialists	79.0	34.2
<b>Defense</b>	Christian democrats	78.7	55.4
<b>Taxes</b>	Liberals	67.7	32.7
<b>Immigration</b>	Liberals	50.0	17.5

Note: Issue ownership was measured in this survey by asking respondents the following question: *When you think about issue x, which party do you spontaneously think about?*

Three remarks have to be taken into account with regard to this data. Firstly, as we focus only on television news items (see ‘*Media data*’-section below), it is important to investigate whether the perceptions of television journalists deviate from those of journalists working for newspapers or online news outlets. No significant differences were found between these groups, so we can safely use the data without controlling for media outlets. Secondly, journalist data was collected in March 2014 while the media content that was scrutinized appeared on television before that point in time (see ‘*Media data*’-section below). While this might raise concerns about direction of causality, these concerns would only be valid if issue ownership would not be a stable perception. However, research has indicated that issue ownership is stable (see, amongst others, the original work of Petrocik, 1996), especially on the aggregated level (Walgrave et al., 2015), which is the level on which the data will be used in this study. Finally, data from a public opinion survey<sup>10</sup> were added to the table to illustrate that journalists’ perceptions about issue ownership can differ from those of citizens. Placing both measurements next to each other, two aspects stand out. Firstly, for some issues, citizens and journalists disagree about which political party is associated with it. For example, while citizens predominantly think about the extreme-right party when thinking about the topic of

<sup>9</sup> No differences were found between issue ownership perceptions of newspaper journalists versus journalists working for television or online news outlets.

<sup>10</sup> Data was collected via the Partirep project ([www.partirep.eu](http://www.partirep.eu)) during spring of 2014. Data was collected via a face-to-face interview (CAPI) among 1001 respondents, which formed a representative sample of the Flemish population (based on the National Register; respondents were between 18 and 85 years old).

immigration, the liberal party comes most to mind when journalists think about that topic (results not in table). Secondly, in cases where the same party is named most by both citizens and journalists, journalists' perceptions are most of the time more clustered towards that party. Because it is unclear what the effect of these differences might be, caution is needed when using issue ownership perceptions of the general public as a proxy for those of journalists. In this paper, this problem is solved by using a direct measurement of journalists' issue ownership perceptions.

### *Media data*

Although the majority of the research concerning issue ownership in the news is based on analyses of newspaper articles, television news items are at the heart of the current study. The reason for this is two-folded. Firstly, television news is more consequential than other types of media. Research indicates that television is "still the primary source of audience information in most advanced democracies" (Blumler & Cushion, 2014, p.262; see Iyengar & Kinder, 2010 for the same argument) and is even more used to obtain political news than online media (Schulz, 2014). In Flanders, the 7pm news broadcast of the public broadcaster VRT is a prime example of how important television news can be. During the period 2010-2013, the period under study in this paper, this broadcast was the 8<sup>th</sup> most watched program across all Flemish television networks, with an average of 1.45 million viewers, reaching a market share of 54.4% ([www.cim.be](http://www.cim.be)). Secondly, television news makes for an interesting case to study. Fewer sources are present in television news items compared to e.g. newspaper articles, because it takes more effort to include sources and because space is more limited. Journalists of television news are thus more forced to choose between different political actors, which makes it interesting to see whether that choice will be influenced by issue ownership.

In this study, the evening news broadcasts from the largest public broadcasting channel and the largest commercial television station in Flanders<sup>11</sup> were analyzed during the period of 2010-2013. This period is sufficiently long to draw substantial conclusions, but not too long so that issue ownership perceptions would have changed (as said before, issue ownership perceptions are relatively stable (Petrocik, 1996) but can of course alter over a larger period in time). Seeing that the journalist survey only provides data for eight different issues, only news items about each of these issues are taken into account. Added to that, seeing that this study is about *which* political actors are actively present in the news, only news items in which at minimum one Flemish politician is speaking are retained. The analyses are thus restricted to politicians that actually get a say in the news items, thereby excluding political actors that are merely mentioned by a news anchor, a journalist or

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<sup>11</sup> Data was collected via the Steunpunt Media, a Flemish center of expertise for news and media. For more information, see <http://www.steunpuntmedia.be/>.

another source. The reason behind this choice is that direct quotes are far more consequential than merely being mentioned in the news. A direct consequence of this choice is that we will be measuring the presence of political parties in the news via the presence of politicians in the news – after all, parties as an institution cannot speak. We do not, however, regard this as problematic, seeing that individual politicians are always affiliated with a party and can be considered as representing their party and their party's stances.

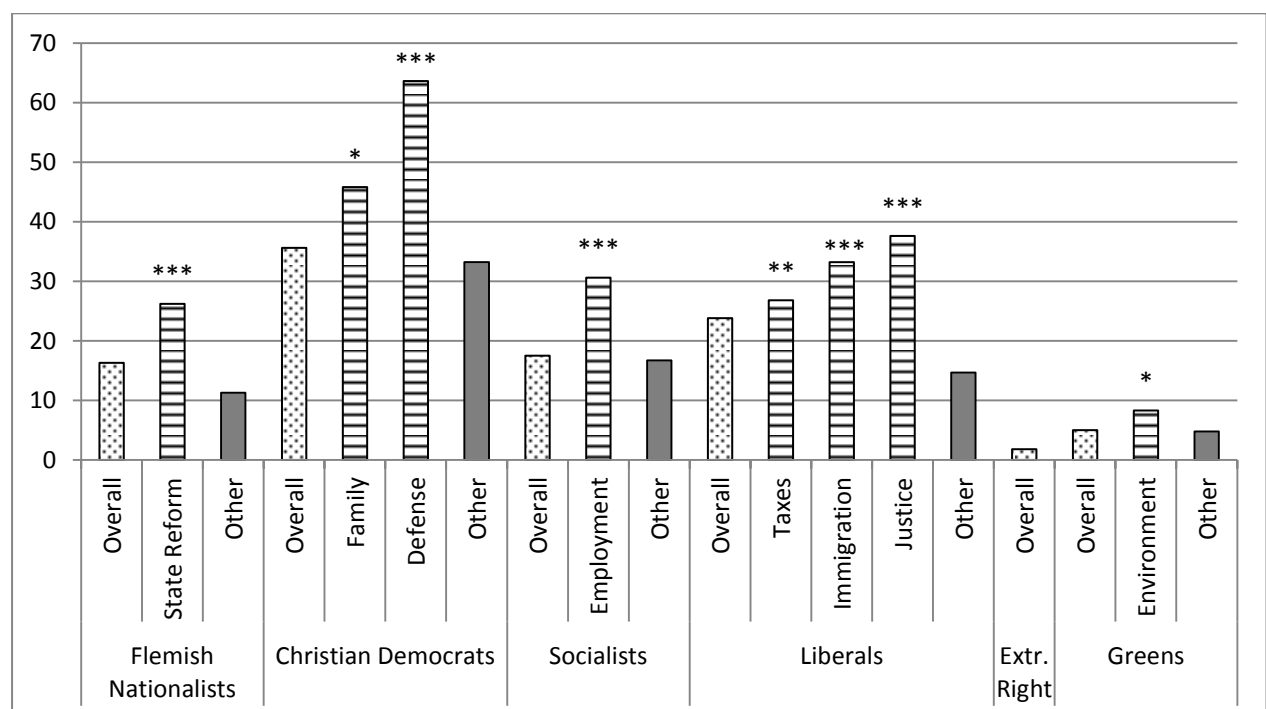
A total of 1370 television news items were analyzed, in which the six main Flemish political parties were covered 1906 times. The content analysis was carried out on the collected data by a handful of coders. These coders were recruited among university students and were first emerged in training sessions before being involved in the training team. For each news item, a number of variables were coded, among which the issue the news item was about and the actors that were included – with their name, function, sex, and so forth. Inter coder reliability has satisfactory Krippendorff's alphas of .78 for issue coding and .82 for actor coding (for a detailed overview see De Smedt, Wouters & De Swert, 2013). Although data was collected by content analyzing news items, we do not treat each news item as an individual case for the analyses. Instead, in line with the theoretical structure we presented, each combination of a political party and issue will be the focus of the analyses. Therefore, we convert the database so that there are only 48 cases (6 political parties multiplied by 8 policy issues). The dependent variable – parties' news presence – was included in the dataset as a continuous variable, representing the percentage of news items about the same topic in which the party received speaking time. So, if a score of 36 was reached for the combination Green party - environment, this would mean that the Green party was present in 36 per cent of all news items about the environment. The two independent variables, issue ownership and ministerial competences, were also included in the dataset. Issue ownership was coded as the proportion of journalists that attributed the issue to the party; ranging from 0 (none of the journalists associate the issue with the party) to 1 (all of the journalists associate the issue with the party). For ministerial competences it was coded whether the party provided the minister (1) on the issue or not (0). Finally, the dataset was completed with the control variables discussed in the theoretical section, i.e. party size and whether parties are in government or in opposition.

## **Analyses and results**

To get a good grasp on the data, we first present the data graphically, looking only at issue ownership (see Appendix 1.1 for detailed descriptives of the appearances of all parties across all issues). The results, presented in Figure 1.1, show the proportional presence of parties in the news,

separately for all six parties in our dataset. For each party, results are shown for owned issues (separately for each issue, bars with striped pattern), for non-owned issues (aggregated over all issues, full bars) and overall (bars with dotted pattern, average of all issues). For each party-issue(s) combination, it shows the percentage of all news sources in items about that issue (or combination of issues) belonging to that party. For all bars percentages are calculated based upon the issue(s). For instance, the first bar of the graph indicates that, over all eight issues in the dataset, 16.3% of all politicians included were affiliated with the Flemish Nationalistic Party. This number increases to 26.2% when looking only at the issue of state reform, an issue owned by the Flemish Nationalists (see Table 1.1), while decreasing to 11.3% for the remaining seven issues. The asterisks above each bar with striped pattern indicate whether the difference between that bar – indicating the percentage for *owned* issues – and the accompanying full bar – indicating the percentage for *non-owned* issues – is statistically significant (based on an independent samples t-test).

Figure 1.1: Presence of political parties in the news (in percentage)



Note: Bars are percentages, calculated departing from the issue. E.g. the second bar (with striped pattern) indicates that 26.2% of all politicians included in news items about state reform are affiliated with the Flemish Nationalistic Party.

Note: The asterisks above the bars with striped pattern indicate whether the difference between that bar (% on owned issues) and the accompanying full bar (% on non-owned issues) – within the same party – is significant (with \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ) based on an independent samples t-test.

A first observation based on Figure 1.1 is that parties are significantly more included in news items about issues they own than in news items about issues they do not own. All bars with striped

patterns are larger than the accompanying full bars, and all differences are significant. Next to this across-the-board effect, a lot of variation can be found between parties. Comparing the Christian Democratic Party to the Liberal Party, for example, we see that the former receives 90% more coverage in news items about defense –its owned issues with the most proportional coverage – than in news items about all non-owned issues. For the latter party, this number increases to 150% for justice compared to all non-owned issues. Finally, for some issues, the presence of issue owners is overwhelming: the Christian-Democrats, for instance, take up more than 60% of all news coverage on the defense topic.

Figure 1.1 gives a good indication of the effect issue ownership might have on parties' presence in the news. To formally test this and to add ministerial competences to the equation, a linear regression with news presence as dependent variable and issue ownership and ministerial competence as main independent variables was conducted. The results of this regression are presented in Table 1.2. In the left part of the table the results of a first model are shown, with issue ownership and ministerial competences as independent variables. Results in the table show that both hypotheses 1 and 2 can be confirmed. We see that issue ownership indeed is a predictor of parties' news presences *and* that this effect holds even when ministerial competences are added to the equation, and are thus controlled for. The explained variance of the model, expressed via the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> measurement, is relatively good.

Table 1.2: Linear regression predicting parties' news presence

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef	SE	$\beta$	Coef	SE	$\beta$
<b>Issue Ownership</b>	.18**	.07	.30	.19***	.05	.31
<b>Minister (ref.: 0)</b>	23.82***	4.85	.55	11.63*	4.53	.27
<b>Party size</b>	-	-	-	.69**	.24	.25
<b>Government (ref.: 0)</b>	-	-	-	14.50***	3.47	.40
<b>Const</b>	12.62	2.24	-	-3.67	4.01	
<b>N</b>		48			48	
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>		.51			.69	

Note: Both models present a linear regression with parties' news presences as independent variable, but Model 1 is without control variables while Model 2 controls for certain party characteristics.

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Of course, as referred to in the theoretical section of this paper, political parties have other characteristics that could also explain their presence in the news. In order to take these variables into account, the regression analysis is rerun while adding control variables. The results in Model 2 (Table 1.2) show that party size and government participation both have a positive effect on parties' news coverage. These results confirm findings from earlier studies that larger parties (i.e. parties

that have more seats in parliament) and government parties (as opposed to parties from opposition) are more likely to be in the news (see amongst others Bennett, 1990; Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe & Fiers, 2008). Consequently, the explained variance of the model increases. Important for the current study is to notice that even when controlling for these two variables, the effect of issue ownership holds. In a final model (results not in table), party- and issue dummies were added to the model. While the effects of party size and government participations no longer remained significant, the issue ownership and ministerial competence effect proved to be robust, again confirming hypotheses 1 and 2.

Finally, to be able to give an answer to the formulated research questions – which of the two main independent variables, issue ownership or ministerial competences, is the strongest determinant of parties' news coverage – standardized beta-coefficients were calculated and added to the table. In Model 1 – with only issue ownership and ministerial competences added to the analyses – the coefficients indicate that the effect of ministerial competences on parties' news presence is almost twice as large as that of issue ownership (.55 versus .30). However, when adding control variables to the equation, the main effect of ministerial competences decreases, making issue ownership a more predictive party characteristic.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The goal of this study was to investigate the effect of issue ownership on political parties' news coverage. The study presented here differs from previous studies in the field in two key ways. First, a journalist survey was conducted to obtain a direct measurement of journalists' issue ownership perceptions. Such measurement is needed; perceptions of journalists cannot be equated to those of the general public without any consideration. Second, we investigated the role of issue ownership in the news while controlling for ministerial competence. Political power, of which ministerial competence is an important part, has been repeatedly proven to be a strong determinant of news coverage of political actors. Previous studies on issue ownership in the news, however, have often neglected to incorporate this variable, making the results of these studies less elaborate.

The results of this study support the view that issue ownership is a determinant of parties' news coverage. The results are consistent with most of the previous studies: the more a party is associated with a certain topic, the more this party will be included as an actor in news items about this topic. Added to that, evidence is found this to be a robust effect: even when controlling for ministerial competence, the effect of issue ownership on parties' news coverage holds. The findings

of this study do however run counter the findings of Helfer & Van Aelst (2016), who find that issue ownership has no effect on parties' news presence. A possible explanation for this discrepancy might be the use of a different unit of analysis. The study of Helfer & Van Aelst (2016) only took into account party press releases and asked journalists whether they would consider the press release for publication. It could be the case that press releases are less newsworthy when they handle an owned issue – because journalists are looking for unexpected news. However, when something happens in the real world news reporting should not cover unexpected sources but rather expected, knowledgeable sources – such as issue owners.

The results of this study indicate that journalists evaluate certain parties as more newsworthy to say something about certain topics. The finding that parties' presence in the news is driven by issue ownership is an important one. In the introduction of this paper, the importance of news media for providing the necessary information to citizens in contemporary democratic societies was stressed. Systematically combining policy issues with political parties will undoubtedly have an effect on the political worldview of the news audience (as also shown by Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2009).

Despite the study's contribution to the field, there might be some concerns about the generalizability of the results. In some cases, these concerns are unfounded. The issues we selected are a good sample of all issues that are present in society, because we made sure that they varied sufficiently on a number of core characteristics. Additionally, our case study, Flanders, is comparable to other European countries in both its political and media system. Of course, our findings cannot be generalized to too diverging countries that have e.g. a two-party system (such as the USA). It is, nevertheless, important to study multi-party systems, because studying only two-party systems gives us crucial, but only partial information about how political parties are covered in the news. The same argument is relevant with regard to the specific medium we choose to analyze in this paper, television news. Results are most likely not generalizable to other news media such as newspapers, because both media know a very different dynamic of news making with different news making routines and practices. However, due to television's wide reach of news consumers, it makes for a very crucial case to study.

Finally, different theoretical reasons were suggested in the literature overview to argue why issue ownership might have an effect on political parties' news presences. Based on the current study, no conclusive judgement can be made about which mechanism is most at play. This is something that



cannot be teased out by means of a content analysis. Future research is thus imperative to improve our understanding of the mechanism(s) behind the issue ownership effect found in this paper. Different avenues are possible for doing so, such as asking journalists directly how they select their news sources or measuring the news selection process of journalists via experimental studies.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1.1: Political parties in the news

Table A1.1: Presence of Flemish political parties in television news (%) – based on 1906 appearances in 1370 television news items

	<b>Green Party</b>	<b>Socialist Party</b>	<b>Christian Democra tic Party</b>	<b>Liberal Party</b>	<b>Flemish Nationali sts Party</b>	<b>Extreme Right Party</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Defense</b>	9	15.4	79.5	10.3	15.4	1.3	5.7
<b>Employment</b>	0	37.5	45.5	18.2	19.3	0	6.4
<b>Environment</b>	8.9	27.4	46	17.7	5.3	0	8.3
<b>Family</b>	3.9	37.2	52.6	18	3.9	1.3	5.7
<b>Fiscality</b>	2.9	33.8	47.1	35.3	17.7	0	5
<b>Immigration</b>	4.2	21.1	26.1	43	28.2	3.5	10.4
<b>Justice</b>	4	18.1	37.7	44.3	10.8	2	33.1
<b>State reform</b>	14	23.8	53.9	26.1	39.8	4.9	25.5
<b>Total</b>	6.9	23.6	45.5	31.8	20.3	2.4	

Note: issue ownerships are indicated in italics.

# **Chapter 2**

**The effect of issue ownership on prominence  
and tone of political parties' news coverage**



# The effect of issue ownership on prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage

## Introduction

One of the main elements of the social contract that defines the relationship between journalism and democracy is that media have to take up a watchdog function in society and provide citizens with the information they need to evaluate the political representatives that are in power (Strömbäck, 2005). In practice, this means that news makers working for newspapers, radio or television stations, online news websites, and so forth, report daily about the ins and outs of the political world. With this coverage come along the decisions of not only which political actors to include in which story, but also *how* to include them. This latter aspect of news coverage, how political parties are covered in news items, is at the heart of the current study.

Concretely, this study focuses on two specific elements of parties' news coverage: prominence (i.e. the saliency of parties in news items) and tone (i.e. the negative and/or positive coverage of parties in news items). Research on the effects of the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage demonstrates the importance of investigating the variance in both concepts and how this variance comes about. Following the large dependency of most citizens on news media to inform them about political parties and their representatives (Bennett & Entman, 2001), how parties are presented in the news "can be crucial in how citizens perceive a political party" (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016, p.505). For example, research indicates that a positive tone towards a party leads to a more positive evaluation of that party (Norris et al., 1999), especially among people who have no strong pre-existing party identifications (Fournier et al., 2004). Consequently, a party's election result – which is a direct consequence of voters' perceptions of that party – has been found to be dependent on how positively or negatively a party is covered in the media (see e.g. Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese & Albæk, 2010; Shaw, 1999) as well as on the tone of the coverage of challenger parties (Smith & Searles, 2014). In sum, political parties benefit from favorable media coverage of themselves and unfavorable coverage of other parties. This makes scrutinizing how this coverage comes about of crucial importance.

To date, there already exists a number of studies on how parties are portrayed in the news. While some studies investigate the prominence of parties in the news (see e.g. Brandenburg, 2005; Zeldes, Fico, Carpenter & Diddi, 2008), most of them focus on the tone of news coverage or on how (un)favorable parties are portrayed (favorability is often seen as a near synonym for tone, see Lengauer, Esser & Berganza, 2011). The claim most common under research is that parties' news coverage is influenced by the editorial ideology of the news outlet, with leftwing leaning outlets favoring leftwing parties and rightwing leaning outlets favoring rightwing parties. Empirical evidence regarding this claim is inconclusive, with some studies confirming this hypothesis (Groeling, 2008; Kahn & Kenney, 2002), and others rejecting it (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Niven, 2001). However, a partisan bias, regardless of whether it exists or not, cannot explain why political parties are sometimes portrayed positively and sometimes negatively within coverage of the same outlet. Prominence and tone do not only vary on the level of the medium but also within coverage of the same medium, at the level of the concrete news item. It is important to look into variables that can explain this variance and to investigate what is leading to a more prominent and/or positive coverage of political parties in a more detailed manner.

The main hypothesis of the current paper is that the concept of issue ownership – which holds that parties are connected to policy issues in the mind of people – can help explain the prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage. The concepts of credibility and availability, which are important in the journalistic source selection process (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), will be used to account for these expectations. Contrary to the abovementioned work on partisan bias, using issue ownership to explain variations in parties' news coverage allows for a more fine grained investigation of how parties are covered in the news. More concretely, it can help explain the variance in prominence and tone on the lowest level (that of the concrete news item) by taking into account what that news item is about. The current study tests whether parties are covered more prominently and more positively on their owned topics, i.e. on topics parties are connected to in the minds of people (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996), than on non-owned issues. The idea that issue ownership might affect the way parties are portrayed in the new is already tested once before. Hayes (2008) found that the coverage of American presidential candidates during elections was biased towards issue ownership. However, this study was conducted in a very specific context and, seeing that it is the only study about this topic, it remains unsure whether the findings of this study are generalizable outside the specific context in which the study was conducted, most notably to countries with a different political system (e.g. multi-party systems) and media system (e.g. democratic corporatist model).

To investigate whether issue ownership is a determinant of how parties are portrayed in the news, a content analysis of newspaper articles was conducted in Belgium during the period of June 2015 to November 2015. In total, 1,756 newspaper articles coming from one Flemish quality newspaper (*De Standaard*) and one popular newspaper (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) were scrutinized. Different indicators of the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage were measured and compared with issue ownership. Contrary to our expectations, results did not confirm the hypotheses stating that issue ownership has an effect on the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage. In the concluding section of this paper, attention is paid to possible explanations and implications of these results.

### **Prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage**

The two dependent variables of this study are the concepts of prominence and tone. First, this study looks at how prominently political parties are presented in the news. The term prominence is used here as a near synonym for saliency and describes how likely parties' coverage is to attract the audience's attention (Kiousis, 2004). There are different ways in which parties can be placed 'in the spotlights': by making them very visible (e.g. by mentioning their name in the title of an item, by adding a visual (photo, cartoon, ...) of a party or one of its members, ...), by placing them at the heart of a news item (giving them the most airtime or article space), by placing them at the front of an article, and so forth (Kiousis, 2004). Notice that in the current study prominence is not regarded as a part of visibility – as it has been in some previous studies (see e.g. Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante, 2012b) – but as a different concept. In this understanding, visibility is regarded as the mere presence of parties in a news item (*whether* parties are covered in a news item), while prominence is seen as an indicator of saliency (*how salient* parties are portrayed in a news item). Our operationalization of prominence goes beyond the number of times an actor is covered, but includes a more profound operationalization with different indicators (see e.g. Zeldes et al., 2008, who have used a similar operationalization of prominence). This more profound operationalization of prominence is interesting to study, because it is more consequential than parties' visibility in the news. For example, people remember more from visuals than from text and their recall of information on the front page news has been shown to be better than their recall for information that was presented in the middle of the newspaper (Booth, 1970).

Previous research regarding the prominence of parties in the news has already indicated that there are indeed differences to be found. Brandenburg (2005), for example, found a bias towards government parties in his research about how the Irish newspaper media reported about political actors during the 2002 general elections. In his study, he included elements such as whether the

story appeared on the front page of the newspapers and whether a visual of the party was included. In the USA, Zeldes and colleagues (2008) concluded, based on a content analysis of television news, that some parties were covered more prominently in news items on certain networks (e.g. *CBS* seem to favor Democratic candidates). The authors included different elements of prominence, such as the rank order of actors in the news item, the presence of visuals and the total time that was given to each actor. In sum, there are some previous studies indicating that parties are indeed sometimes portrayed more prominent than on other occasions.

Second, the tone of parties' news coverage is under investigation in this study. This concept already received quite some attention from previous studies, but as Lengauer, Esser and Berganza (2011) have indicated, there is a lot of inconsistency in how the concept is labeled and operationalized. While they themselves rely on the term 'actor-related negativity' (Lengauer et al., 2011), they point out that various 'synonyms' have been used in other research, such as 'slant', 'bias', 'favorability' and 'tone'. Although these words are all closely related to each other, they entail slightly different semantic interpretations. In the current study, the term tone is chosen above the other alternatives and is defined as the manifest (positive, negative or neutral) evaluation of political parties in the news. Empirical evidence regarding the tone of parties' news coverage has indicated that parties are sometimes indeed presented more favorable than others (e.g. Groeling, 2008; Kahn & Kenney, 2002).

### **The role of issue ownership in explaining parties' news coverage**

Originally put forward by Budge and Farlie (1983) and, later on, by Petrocik (1996), issue ownership refers to the linkages between political parties and policy issues in the minds of people. A party that is seen as owning an issue is not only spontaneously associated with this issue (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012), but is often also regarded as better able to handle problems with regard to that issue (Petrocik, 1996). The concept has been predominantly used to explain the behavior of both parties (parties communicate especially about owned issues, e.g. Brazeal & Benoit, 2008) and the electorate (if voters perceive a party as owning an issue of importance to them, they are more likely to vote for that party, e.g. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012).

This study researches whether issue ownership can be used to help explain the prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage. There are good theoretical reasons to expect such an effect. There are two concepts that are key in explaining the effect issue ownership can have on the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage: credibility (see also Hayes, 2008; Tresch, 2009) and



availability. First, issue-party connections are often the result of a history of attention for and commitment to an issue of that party (Petrocik, 1996) and it is exactly this commitment that makes issue owning parties credible as news sources (Sides, 2006). According to Reich (2011), credibility is the number one characteristic journalists are looking for in a news source, which explains why issue owners might be more prominent in the news (journalists want their most credible sources to be the most salient) and why they might receive more positive coverage/less negative coverage (for scientific sources, Yoon (2005) demonstrated that sources who are considered by journalists as more credible systematically receive more positive coverage). Second, journalistic routines are also strongly dominated by practical considerations (Allgaier, 2011). For journalists to be able to compete in the rapid news cycle (Gans, 1979), they have to rely on sources that are quickly available to them. According to the Dominance Principle of Riker (1983), parties are always available to comment on their dominant issues and less to comment on other issues: *“when one side successfully wins the argument on an issue, the other side ceases to discuss it, while the winner continues to exploit it”* (p.81-82). Sides (2006) argues that it is exactly issue ownership that can give parties this advantage on an issue. If parties were to follow this principle to its limit, this would imply that they would only discuss their owned issues and nothing else, leaving journalists with no other option than to give a platform to the party with the most dominant opinion on the matter. Even if other options are available, when considering which sources to include on a specific issue, journalists may tend to favor the (more easily available) issue owner to comment.

Previous research has already proven that issue ownership is a good predictor for another aspect of parties' news coverage, namely their visibility in the news. These studies focus on whether parties are given more coverage on issues they own than on other issues. Most studies, conducted both in the US and Europe, made use of content analyses and found that there are systematic linkages between parties and issues in the news (for an exception with regard to both methodology and results, see Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016). While Petrocik, Benoit & Hanssen (2003) found that US presidential candidates are systematically linked to different topics in articles of the *New York Times* depending on whether they belong to the Democratic or Republican party, Walgrave and De Swert (2007) and Van Camp (2017) found evidence of an issue ownership effect in Belgian news media. Other scholars added to this baseline effect and found an interaction effect with type of party: especially larger, more relevant parties have been found more likely to receive coverage on their owned issues (Brandenburg, 2005; Hopmann, et al., 2012a). Taken together, these studies leave us wondering whether issue ownership might also have an influence on other aspects of parties' news coverage, such as the prominence and tone.

As described above, there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to assume that how parties are covered in the news can be explained by issue ownership. To our knowledge, there has been only one study that has empirically tackled this matter before. By analyzing newspaper coverage during different American presidential election campaigns, Hayes (2008) investigated whether candidates received more favorable coverage on their party-owned issues. The results of the study show that news coverage of American presidential election campaigns is indeed biased towards issue ownership. More concretely, candidates from the Democratic party receive more favorable coverage in news items about issues that are generally associated with the Democratic party, such as social welfare topics, and Republican candidates are covered more favorably on typical Republican domains, such as defense and tax stories. However, seeing that Hayes (2008) is the first and only to have studied this topic, it remains unsure whether his findings are generalizable outside the specific context in which he conducted his research. First, the USA has a two-party system which differs in many ways from European multi-party systems. Not only are there more parties included in this latter system, most European political systems also include smaller parties (unlike the USA, where both the Democratic and Republican party can be regarded as large, mainstream parties). These smaller parties often are very closely related to one or two topics (e.g. the Green Party to environment or the Extreme Right Party to immigration) and, consequently, the topic of issue ownership might work differently in these multi-party systems. Added to that, a different journalistic culture has developed in the USA as compared to Europe (Hallin, 2005), so it is possible that journalists may deal with issue ownership in a different way in both countries. In sum, it is unsure whether the findings hold in other (non-US) countries. Added to that, the study of Hayes (2008) only focuses on favorability and not on prominence, so little is known about the effect of issue ownership on this latter concept.

In sum, the previous paragraphs have described both theoretical reasons (issue owners are credible and available sources) and empirical reasons (issue ownership has been found to influence parties' news coverage in previous studies) to expect issue ownership to have an effect on the prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage. Consequently, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

*H1: Political parties are more prominently present in news items about issues they own than in news items about issues they do not own.*

*H2: Political parties are more positively portrayed in news items about issues they own than in news items about issues they do not own.*

Finally, in multi-party systems, there are differences between parties with regard to their size, their ideological position, their place in parliament (government or opposition) and so forth. This makes it interesting to investigate whether (possible) effects differ for different types of parties. First, parties can be seen as either established or new parties. Established parties have been around for a long time in the political landscape and their ownerships over issues is not always that strong. New parties, on the other hand, often entered the political landscape a little later and when they did, they often focused on only one or two issues (such as environment for Green parties or immigration for Extreme Right parties), with which they are oftentimes still strongly connected to in the present day. It might be the case that these new parties are treated differently than established parties. The idea behind this expectation is that the two mechanisms that were discussed above as underlying the effect of issue ownership on the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage might be even more at play for newer parties. It seems plausible that the Green Party will be even more available, e.g. to comment on the environment, than the Christian-Democratic Party is on education, due to its stronger connection to the topic.

*RQ1: Are different effects found for new versus established parties?*

Second, parties can be seen as left or right with regard to their ideological position. As described in the theoretical section above, research regarding how parties are portrayed in the news has been predominantly directed towards a (possible) partisan media bias. In light of this research line, it is interesting to investigate whether there is perhaps an interaction effect between issue ownership and ideology of the parties: are left issue owners (compared to non-owners) treated differently than right issue owners (compared to non-owners)?

*RQ2: Are different effects found for left versus right parties?*

Finally, in multi-party systems, some parties belong to the government, while others are part of the opposition. It is sometimes claimed that the former type of parties have more political relevance, because they are the ones in power, and therefore are more newsworthy (Hopmann et al., 2012a). Therefore, it might be the case that these parties are treated differently than parties from opposition. A final research question is formulated:

*RQ3: Are different effects found for government versus opposition parties?*

## Data and methods

### *Content analysis*

In order to test whether issue ownership affects how parties are covered in the news, a content analysis of newspaper articles was conducted in Belgium. Belgium, a small West-European country, is divided in two regions: Flanders (Dutch-speaking) and Wallonia (French-speaking). The data that are used for this study are collected in Flanders, which is the largest region of Belgium where about 60% of the population lives. With five to seven Flemish parties in parliament during each term, Flanders has a fragmented party system, making it a good case to study (seeing that many party-issue combinations can be made). Added to that, Flanders has a non-partisan media landscape (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

For the study, the articles of two Flemish newspapers were coded during a period of five months (June 2015 – November 2015). The two newspapers were not chosen at random but represented the most read popular newspaper in Flanders (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) and largest elite newspaper (*De Standaard*). The content analysis of the newspaper articles was performed by three coders who first received a training to get familiarized with the codebook. Afterwards, all coders had to code the same subset of articles and results were compared. Based on this test coding, the codebook was revised and improved. Finally, the rest of the coding was done. Seeing that the goal of the study is to investigate *how* political parties are portrayed in the news (and not *when*), coders were instructed to only select newspaper articles where at least one of the six main political parties (i.e. one of the parties that during the time of coding had representatives in both the Flemish and national parliament) or a politician of those parties was present. Added to that, only articles discussing a policy-related topic were coded, so articles containing e.g. interviews with politicians about their personal life were not incorporated in the study. In line with this guideline, the following newspaper sections were also not coded: showbiz news, obituaries, television section, puzzles, sports results (policy related sports news did get coded) and regional news. In total 1,756 articles were coded, containing 2,887 references to any of the six main political parties in Flanders.

The articles that were coded were collected during the second half of 2015, a non-election time in Belgium. When studying how political actors are presented in the news, previous work tended to focus on campaign periods, but it is important to also look at routine periods (examples of studies that do this: De Swert, 2011; Niven, 2001; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Regardless of the importance of campaign periods, it is difficult to imagine that people in the voting booth are only influenced by campaign periods and not by routine periods. After all, parties' reputations – which lie

at the base of voting behavior – cannot be altered by news coverage from one day to the next: it takes a series of day-to-day messages to have a substantial impact. In this regard, it makes sense to study news coverage in routine periods – oftentimes periods of 3.5 years or longer. It is not likely that coverage during the short election campaign period – of approximately three months – that follows this routine period can completely override these years of media coverage (for a similar argument, see De Swert, 2011).

### *Coding of variables*

The two dependent variables in this study are prominence and tone. The first concept, prominence, is composed out of the following components: (1) rank order (the order in which parties appeared in the news article); (2) title (whether a party was mentioned in the title of an article or not); (3) visualization (whether a party was presented visually in the article – by means of a photograph, a cartoon, a logo – or not) and (4) centrality (how central a party was in the article) (see Table 2.1 below for the precise operationalization of each of the variables). Krippendorff's alpha for these variables ranged between .79 and .92. The second variable, tone, was, in accordance with previous studies (e.g. Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Hopmann, de Vreese & Albæk, 2011; Kahn & Kenney, 2002) operationalized as parties being manifestly covered in a positive, negative or mixed/neutral manner taking into account the perspective of the party itself (cfr. Hopmann et al., 2010; Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, Van Aelst & de Vreese, 2010). The coding of the tone variable proved to be highly reliable with a Krippendorff's alpha of .91. In Table 2.2 below, descriptive statistics are shown for each of the main variables of this study (prominence, tone and issue ownership). Full distributions can be found in Appendix 2.1.

The main independent variable is issue ownership. Two things are needed in order to determine which party is owner of the topic of an article. Firstly, every article needs to have an issue assigned to it. Only after defining which issue is discussed in an article, can an issue owner be defined. Issue coding was based on the CAP-codebook<sup>12</sup>, which classifies issues into 27 broader topic categories (such as environment, work, social affairs, and so forth; see Appendix 2.2 for the full list) and provides guidelines for how to assign a topic to an article. Coders were instructed to detect the main topic of an article and, consequently, to assign one and only one topic of the codebook to each article. Intercoder reliability was borderline sufficient with Krippendorff's alpha reaching .65. Secondly, information is needed about which political party owns each of these CAP-topics. Ideally, issue ownership information would be coming from political journalists, but surveys among political

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about the Comparative Agendas Project, visit [www.comparativeagendas.info](http://www.comparativeagendas.info).

journalists never contain issue ownership questions for all 27 CAP-topics (this would be too demanding for respondents both in terms of time and in terms of cognitive capacities). Therefore, a panel of political communication scholars (n=12) was consulted about this matter. We asked them the following question: ‘Which political party do you spontaneously think about when you think about issue x?’<sup>13</sup> (question wording introduced by Walgrave et al., 2012), whereby x was replaced by each of the 27 CAP-topics. To classify parties as issue owners or not on a certain issue, the classification guidelines introduced by Tresch, Lefevere and Walgrave (2017) were used. If a party is seen as the issue owner of an issue by at least 20% of the panel members and it has a 10% lead on the second party, it is seen as the single owner of that issue. If at least 20% of the panel members designated the party as owner, but its lead is less than 10%, this party is considered to be a partial owner. Lastly, for all other party-issue combinations, the party was seen as not owning the issue (see Appendix 2.2 for the complete data about issue ownership). Because the n of our expert panel was rather low, the answers of the panel were compared to the most recent (but partial) issue ownership data, collected via an online survey among 168 Flemish political journalists. There was a large overlap: on 7 out of the 8 issues that were measured among journalists, the experts identified the same parties as (partial or single) issue owners as the journalists.

Table 2.1: Operationalization of variables

Variable	Operationalization
<b>Dependent variable: prominence</b>	
<b>Rank order</b>	The order in which parties were mentioned in the article. If parties were listed one after the other, whereby their positions were interchangeable, all parties were given the same number (e.g. ‘Groen and Sp.a reacted together to the proposal of the Liberal Party’: Groen and Sp.a were both coded as 1, Open VLD as 2). Afterwards, it was recoded whether parties appeared first in the article (1) or later on (0).
<b>Title</b>	Coded as 1 if a party or a politician of that party was mentioned in the title of the article (otherwise 0).
<b>Visualization</b>	Coded as 1 if a party or a politician of that party was visualized in the article (a photograph of a politician, the party logo, and so forth) (otherwise 0).
<b>Centrality</b>	Coded as 1 if the party was at the center of the article, receiving the bulk of the attention and as 0 if a party was on the other hand only shortly mentioned.

<sup>13</sup> This question is a measurement of associative issue ownership. In recent years, the idea has been put forth that issue ownership has two dimensions: associative and competence issue ownership. The former was introduced in the work of Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch (2012) and refers to the past attention parties have given topics, resulting in a spontaneous connection between parties and issues. The latter, on the other hand, is about the believe that some parties are better able to handle problems concerning an issue than other parties (Petrocik, 1996). Although associative ownership is only recently introduced in the field, studies have proven this concept to be less endogenous with that of party preference as compared to competence ownership (Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2016), leading others to claim that this operationalization should be used as the default in research (van der Brug, 2017).

<b>Dependent variable: tone</b>	
<b>Tone</b>	The tone of the article was coded as either negative (-1), positive (1) or mixed/neutral (0). Coders were instructed to imagine whether parties would be happy or not with the overall tone of the article towards the party. Tone was negatively coded if parties were criticized for poor governance, for not taking into account citizens' preferences, and so forth. Tone was coded positively when parties were praised for good governance, for having done something good in spite of difficult circumstances, and so forth. When both or neither aspects were present in the article, it was coded as mixed/neutral.
<b>Independent variable: issue ownership</b>	
<b>Issue</b>	CAP topic codebook (see Appendix 2.2)
<b>Political parties</b>	For each of the six main political parties of Flanders, it was coded whether the party (or a politician of that party) was present in the news article or not. The party had to be named explicitly, but not necessarily by their official party label (in other words, if an article mentioned 'the Flemish socialist party', it was coded as Sp.a). Coders were instructed to code parties based on what was present in the articles and not based on own knowledge (so if a politician was mentioned in an article, without party label, the party was not coded as present in the article).
<b>Issue ownership</b>	An expert panel was asked 'Which political party do you spontaneously think about when you think about issue x?' for each of the 27 CAP-codes. Based on these evaluations, parties were coded as being the single owner (1), a partial owner (0.5) or no owner (0) of an issue.
<b>Political party types</b>	
<b>New – Established</b>	Three of the six Flemish political parties (the Socialist Party, the Liberal Party and the Christian-Democratic Party) have been founded in the middle or the end of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century. These parties are seen as the established parties. The new parties (the Green Party, the Extreme Right Party and the Flemish Nationalists Party) have entered the political landscape much later, in the second half of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century.
<b>Left – Right</b>	All six parties in the Flemish landscape were placed on a left-right axis and the three parties that were placed most to the left on this axis (the Green Party, the Socialist Party and the Christian-Democratic Party) were then separated from the three parties that were placed most to the right on this axis (the Liberal Party, the Flemish Nationalist Party and the Extreme Right Party).
<b>Government – Opposition</b>	During the time of data collection, there were three parties that belonged to the government (both the Federal government and the Flemish regional government) (the Christian Democratic Party, the Liberal Party and the Flemish Nationalist Party), and three parties that were part of the opposition (the Green Party, the Socialist Party and the Extreme Right Party).

Table 2.2: Descriptive statistics

	<b>Variables</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mode</b>
<b>Dependent</b>	<b>Prominence</b>	0	4	1.39	1.18	1 (34%)
	<b>Tone</b>	-1	1	-.002	.45	0 (80%)
<b>Independent</b>	<b>Issue ownership</b>	0	1	.18	.37	0 (80%)

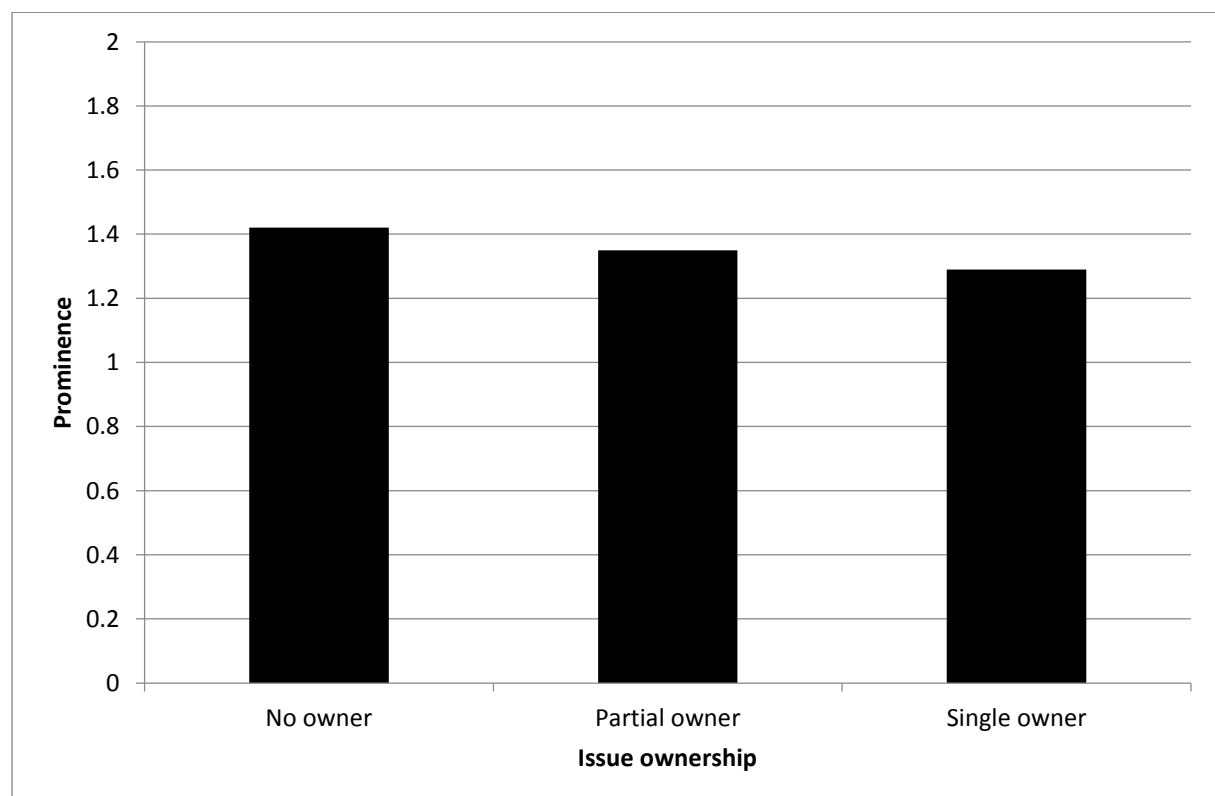
## Results

### *General results*

The aim of this study is to investigate whether or not parties are more prominently present and more positively portrayed in news items about issues they own. Our dataset contains 2,887 datalines, each representing an article-party combination. For each of these combinations, it was coded: (1) how prominently the party was present in the article, (2) whether the party was portrayed in a negative, positive or neutral/mixed manner and (3) whether the party was seen as (single or partial) issue owner of the topic that was discussed in the article or not.

In Figure 2.1, the average prominence score is shown for each of the three groups of (non-)owners. On an overall scale ranging from 0 to 4, all averages are situated very close to each other, with only small differences between the three groups. Counter to our expectations, it is the group of non-owners who receives the highest score, directly followed by the partial owners and finally by the single owners. However, an ANOVA test indicated that the differences between the groups is not significant ( $F(2,2883) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .09$ ). In sum, H1 is not supported by the data and is consequently rejected.

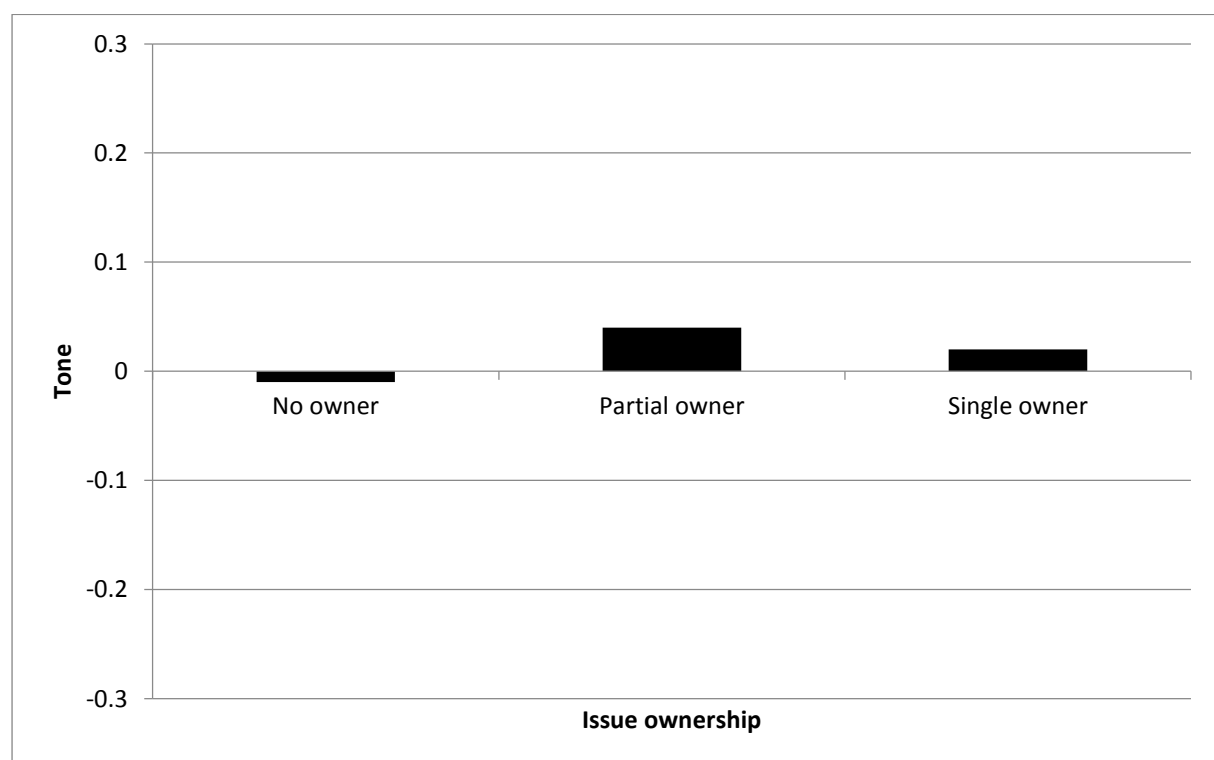
Figure 2.1: Average prominence score for groups of issue owners





The average tone scores for non-owners, partial issue owners and single issues owners are shown in Figure 2.2 below. As could already be seen in Table 2 above (see also Appendix 2.2), there was not much variance coded in this variable, with 80% of the parties receiving a neutral/mixed label. Only in 20% of the cases was a party clearly portrayed in a positive or negative manner. While the results in Figure 2.2 below indeed indicate a different treatment for non-owners (who are, on average, portrayed slightly negative) than for (partial and single) issue owners (who receive, on average, a slight positive coverage), the differences between these groups were found to be not significant ( $F(2,2884) = 1.19, p = .30$ ). Similar as to H1, H2 needs to be rejected based on the empirical evidence.

Figure 2.2: Average tone score for groups of issue owners

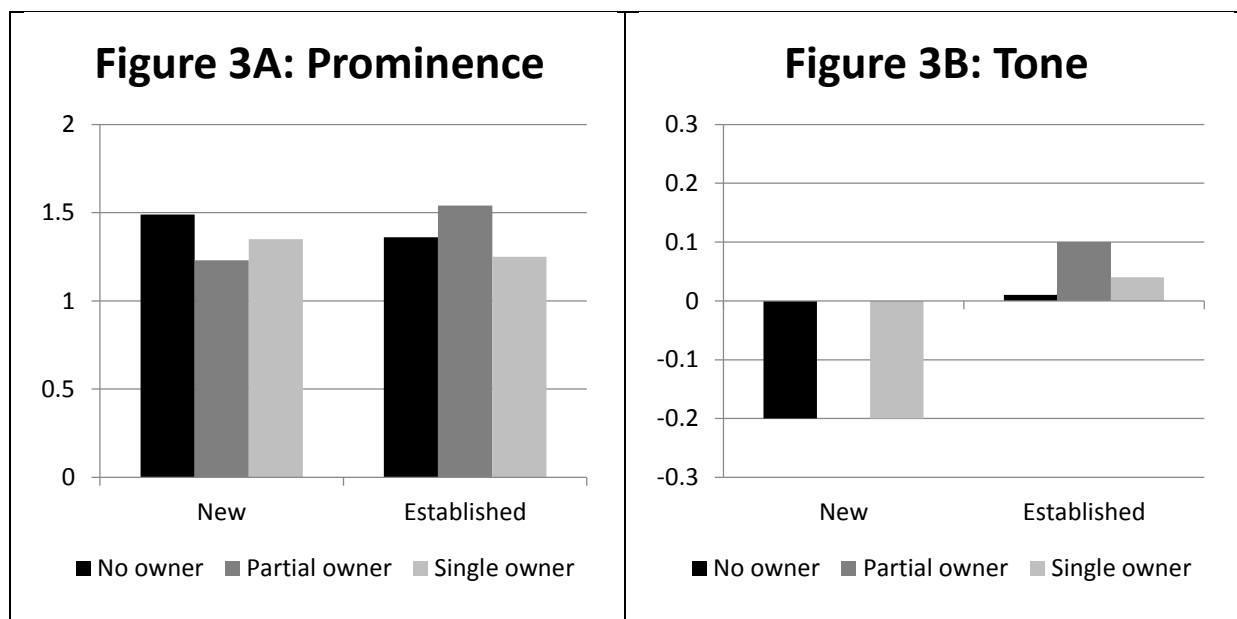


### *Party types*

The data for this study was collected in Flanders with, at the time of the data collection, six parties in parliament. As in all multi-party systems, there are differences between these parties with regard to their size, their ideological position and their place in parliament (government or opposition). Therefore, although no general across-the-board effect is found that indicates that there is an effect of issue ownership on the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage, this study investigates whether there is perhaps an effect for certain types of parties.

Results for prominence and tone are repeated three times, thereby each time comparing two types of parties (results are presented in Figures 2.3 to 2.5 below). First, in Figure 2.3, the three established parties (Sp.a, CD&V and Open VLD) are compared to the three ‘new kids on the block’ (Groen, N-VA and Vlaams Belang). The latter parties all originated by focusing on one single issue (environment, state reform and immigration) and are up to this day still very closely connected to these issues. The three parties are also indicated by our expert panel as the single owners of these topics. Of course the more established parties are also connected to certain topics, but these ownerships might not be as deeply rooted as those of the newer parties. In this regard, although no across-the-board effect was found of issue ownership on the prominence and tone of parties’ coverage, one could wonder whether such an effect can be found for the group of new parties only. However, as can be seen in Figure 2.3, both for prominence and for tone, no evidence is found of issue ownership having an effect on it; neither for new, nor for established parties. For established parties, the bars of the issue-owning groups are higher for tone than for the non-issue owning group, but this difference was not found significant.

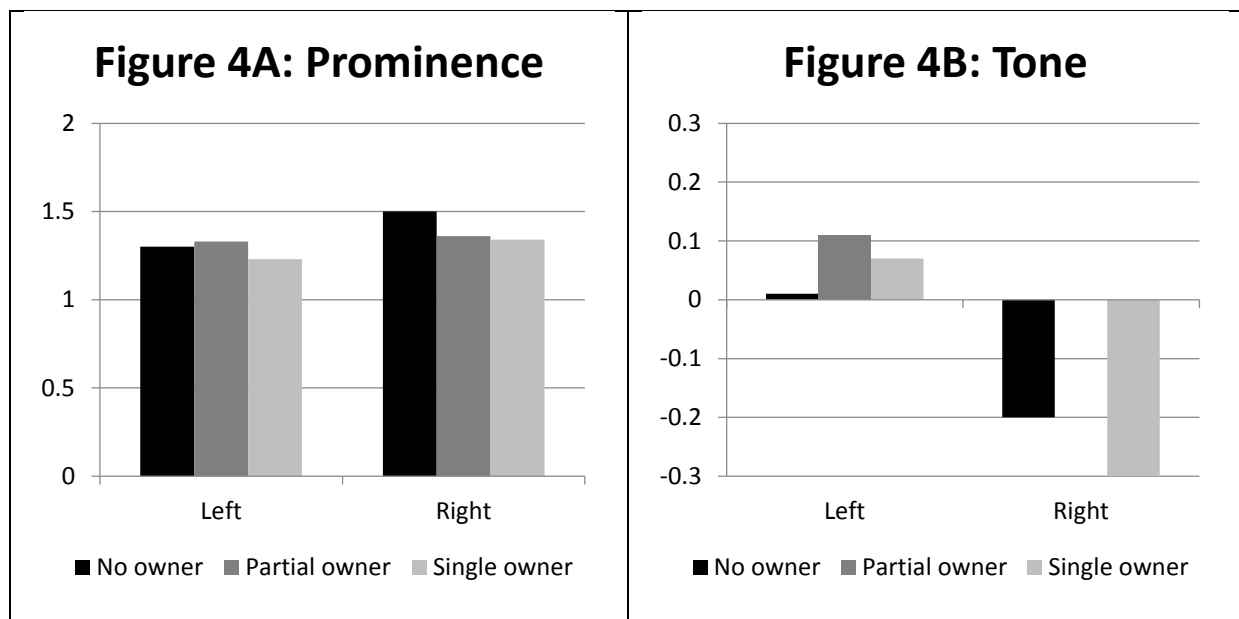
Figure 2.3: Average prominence and tone score for new and established parties, by issue owner



Second, the three most left parties in the Flemish landscape (Groen, Sp.a and CD&V) are compared to the three most right parties (Open VLD, N-VA and Vlaams Belang) (results are shown in Figure 2.4). As described in the theoretical section above, research regarding how parties are portrayed in the news has been predominantly directed towards a (possible) partisan media bias. In light of this research line, it is interesting to investigate whether there is perhaps an interaction effect between issue ownership and ideology of the parties: are left issue owners (compared to non-owners) treated

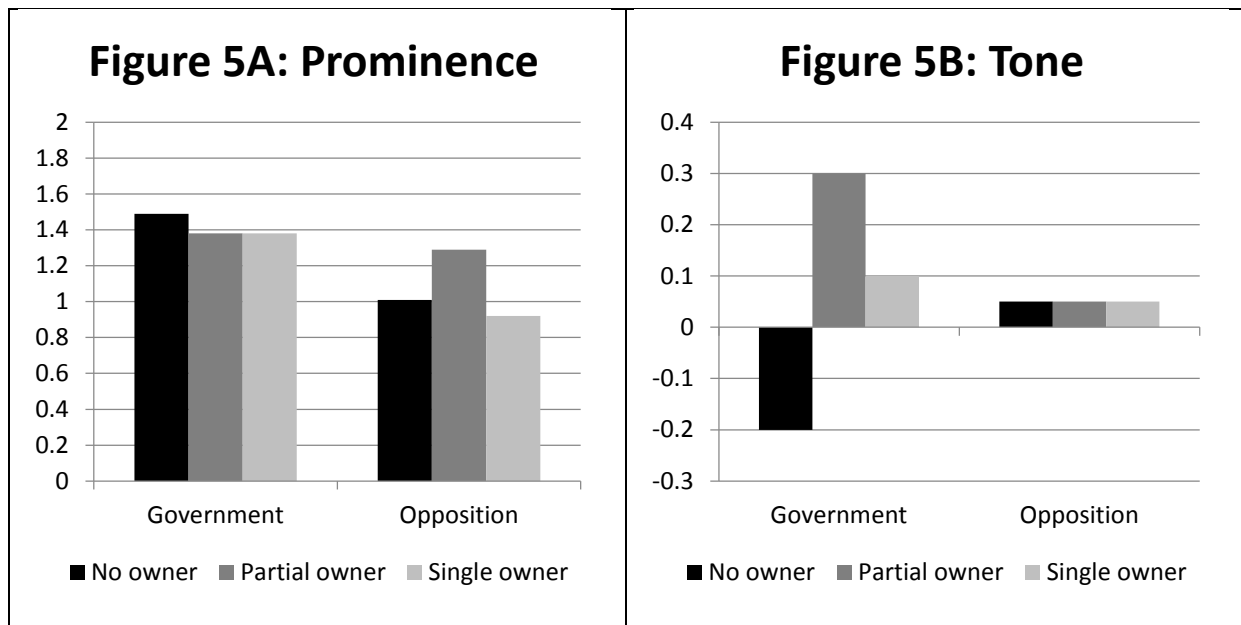
differently than right issue owners (compared to non-owners)? Results in Figure 2.4 indicate that this is not the case. Only for the tone-left parties combination it can be seen that the bars of the (single and partial) owners are larger than that of the non-owners. Although the differences between these groups were originally found to be significant ( $F(2,1238) = 3.08, p < .05$ ), Bonferroni post hoc test did not indicate any bilateral significant differences. In sum, it is concluded that no effect of issue ownership on parties' news coverage can be found, neither for left parties, nor for right parties.

Figure 2.4: Average prominence and tone score for left and right parties, by issue owner



Finally, government parties are placed across oppositional parties. It is sometimes claimed that the former type of parties have more political relevance, because they are the ones in power, and therefore are more newsworthy (Hopmann et al., 2012a). Consequently, while an overall-effect of issue ownership on prominence and tone has not been found, it might be that this effect exists only for government parties. Results can be found in Figure 2.5 but do not provide any evidence for an issue ownership effect to exist. For government parties, the bars of the issue-owning groups are higher for tone than for the non-issue owning group, but this difference was again not found to be significant.

Figure 2.5: Average prominence and tone score for government and opposition parties, by issue owner



Overall, the main conclusion seems to be that issue ownership does not have an effect on how prominent or positive/negative parties are being portrayed in the news: neither an across-the-board effect, nor effects for specific types of parties are found.

### Discussion and conclusion

The goal of the work presented here was to investigate whether issue ownership could help explain the prominence and tone of political parties' news coverage. Taking issue ownership into account as a possible predictor variable allows for a very fine grained analysis of the subject, at the level of the concrete news item. Specifically, the study was designed to test whether parties are covered more prominently and more positively in news items about their owned issues (i.e. on issues they are associated with) than in news items about non-owned issues.

To this end, a content analysis of 1,756 articles coming from two Flemish newspapers was conducted. In total, the six main parties were included 2,887 times in these articles. Each time it was coded (1) how prominent the parties were presented in the articles (based on their rank order, whether they appeared in the title, whether they were accompanied by a visualization and whether they were central in the article), (2) whether they were portrayed in a negative, positive or neutral/mixed manner and (3) whether they were the (single or partial) issue owner of the issue of the article or not. However, based on the analyses that were presented in this paper, neither of the two hypotheses that were formulated could be confirmed. The results from this study clearly

indicate that issue ownership does not have an effect on the prominence, nor on the tone of parties' news coverage (neither across the board, nor for certain types of parties).

The results presented in this study have important implications, both societal (for the group of media workers and political actors) and scientific. First, in an ideal democratic society (based on normative journalistic models that are dominant in the West, Nerone, 2013), news media are independent from politics and are not influenced in their work by predispositions about political parties. Although the findings from the current study do not imply that parties are merely judged based on their actions/policy, it can still be regarded as a good case that journalists do not 'bias' their news coverage towards parties' reputations. For political actors, these findings bear meaning in light of their external communication. While previous studies have indicated before that parties are likely to communicate especially about their owned issues (e.g. Brazeal & Benoit, 2008), parties should fully be aware of the consequences of this communication. While it might help them to gain media visibility (see e.g. Van Camp, 2017), it does not help the parties to receive more prominent or more positive coverage. In this respect, there is thus no incentive for parties to focus on their own(ed) issues.

Also scientifically, the results found in the current study are important. In previous studies, news coverage has been identified as a tool that can help maintain issue ownership perceptions among the public (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). However, seeing that no effect has been found between issue ownership and how prominent/positive parties are covered in the news, this might imply that media might not help maintain competence ownership perceptions (which are about how competent parties are to handle issues on a certain topic), but only associative ownership perceptions (which is merely about the association between parties and issue).

Moreover, our results suggest that the results from Hayes (2008) cannot just be generalized to other contexts, with other media and political systems. We believe the element that can most probably best explain the different results of both studies to be the different party system. While Belgium is a parliamentary democracy with a multi-party system, the USA is a presidential democracy with a two-party system. That latter aspect, namely the fact that there are only two parties present in the American political system, might lead to more polarization and more outspoken identities and reputations for the two main political parties. Added to that, while the Republican and Democratic parties have about an equal vote share in the USA, the six parties in Belgium do not. There are smaller parties and larger parties (vote shares during the time of coding ranged between 3 and 38%)

and journalists can use this aspect as a way to attach e.g. prominence to parties. Although the results are not shown above (because party size was not a variable of interest in this study), when calculating the correlation between prominence and party size, this correlation is very high (.93). This means that in Belgium, party size is taken as the most important proxy for political relevance (which is an important variable to explain parties' news coverage according to Hopmann et al., 2011). In the USA, where the party size of the two main parties is about equal, journalists might look for another proxy to determine political relevance of parties and might find this in the variable of issue ownership.

Future research is needed to investigate the relationship between issue ownership and the prominence and tone of parties' news coverage (1) in other countries and (2) for other media outlets. Firstly, research in other countries is needed. This will help to determine how generalizable a possible effect of issue ownership is. However, based on the political and media systems, the findings presented in the current study, rather than those presented in Hayes' study, are more likely to be generalizable, at least to other Western countries. The fragmented party system that is in place in Flanders, is similar to that of other European countries (Walgrave & De Swert, 2007) and also the Flemish media landscape, characterized by non-partisan media, is similar to other European countries, such as The Netherlands, Germany or Scandinavia (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Secondly, research should be broadened to include other media outlets. While the current study focused on newspaper coverage, other media outlets (such as television news and certainly online/social media) have become important for citizens. Despite these limitations, the here presented research could still be considered as useful, since it has broadened our understanding of how news coverage of political parties (does not) come(s) about.

## Appendices

### Appendix 2.1: Distribution of the main variables

Table A2.1.1: Distribution of prominence

Value	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
<b>0 (lowest prominence)</b>	755	26.2
<b>1</b>	972	33.7
<b>2</b>	594	20.6
<b>3</b>	399	13.8
<b>4 (highest prominence)</b>	166	5.8

Table A2.1.2: Distribution of tone

Value	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
<b>Negative</b>	292	10.1
<b>Neutral/mixed</b>	2309	80.0
<b>Positive</b>	286	9.9

Table A2.1.3: Distribution of issue ownership

Value	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
<b>No owner</b>	2312	80.1
<b>Partial owner</b>	132	4.6
<b>Single owner</b>	443	15.3

## Appendix 2.2: Issues and issue ownerships

Table A2.2 : List of all issues of the CAP-topic codebook, their presence in the dataset and the parties that are owner of the issues

Topic	Presence in data (%)	Issue ownership	
		Single owner	Partial owner
Foreign Trade	0.17	Open VLD	-
Religion	0.23	CD&V	-
Public Lands	0.42	Groen	-
Sports and Recreation	0.51	-	-
Technology	0.86	-	-
Regional Government	1.08	-	-
Housing	1.20	-	Sp.a, CD&V
Culture	1.82	Sp.a	-
Other	2.57	-	-
Agriculture	2.74	CD&V	-
Domestic Commerce	2.74	Open VLD	-
Defense	2.91	N-VA	-
International Affairs	3.08	Groen	-
Social Welfare	3.48	Sp.a	-
Energy	3.59	Groen	-
Environment	3.59	Groen	-
Civil Rights	3.65	-	Open VLD
Government Operations	4.85	N-VA	-
Education	5.59	CD&V	-
Health	5.70	CD&V	-
Transportation	6.39	-	Groen, Sp.a
Labor	6.50	Sp.a	-
Law and Crime	9.75	-	N-VA, VB
Macroeconomics	10.43	Open VLD	-
Immigration	15.85	VB	-
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.00</b>		

Note: party labels: Groen = the Green Party; Sp.a = the Socialist Party; CD&V = the Christian Democratic Party; Open VLD = the Liberal Party; N-VA = the Flemish Nationalist Party; VB = the Extreme Right Party



# Chapter 3

## **Issue ownership as a journalistic source selection criterion**

An experimental study in three political systems



# Issue ownership as a journalistic source selection criterion

## An experimental study in three political systems

### Introduction

News media are vital for the well-functioning of a democracy because they are indispensable for both citizens and political parties. For citizens, news media are often the most important channels via which they learn about politics and political representatives (Bennett & Entman, 2001). News informs people about important issues in society and about how political parties orient themselves around these issues. For political parties, traditional news media are still the main channel via which they can communicate with citizens. The news media are an arena in which politicians can promote both themselves and their preferred frames to citizens, but also in which they can also learn about public opinion (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

Taking into account the importance of news coverage, it is vital to understand how the precise content of the news comes about. Seeing that the total news production process, with its many aspects and actors, is too substantial to be studied in one single study, research often focuses on one aspect of that process. In the current study, the goal is to investigate the role of issue ownership as a journalistic source selection criterion during the news gathering phase. The contribution this study makes to the research field lies in its unique focus on the news gathering phase. While previous research has already studied whether issue owners are more likely to be present as news sources in news items (see e.g. Petrocik, Benoit & Hanssen, 2003; Van Camp, 2017), this study takes a step back and investigates whether issue ownership is already important as a source selection criterion during the news gathering phase. The topic of this study is relevant, because the sources that journalists contact during this news gathering phase have an effect on the content of news, which in turn affects the news audience (i.e. citizens). This research will lead to better insights into how political journalists collect information on politically and societally relevant topics and why they choose to obtain this information from a certain political party rather than another.

Issue ownership refers to the connections that are made between political parties and policy issues in the mind of people (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). The concept plays an important role in

the broader field of political communication. Most importantly, it predicts both party behavior (political parties are more likely to focus on owned issues in their communication, see e.g. Brazeal & Benoit, 2008; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007) and voting behavior (voters are more likely to cast their vote for a party they see as owner of the most important problem of society, see e.g. Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Jennings, 2012). Added to that, there are good reasons to expect that issue ownership also affects journalistic decisions: issue owners are credible and available sources, and prior research has found parties to be more likely to receive news attention on their owned issues (Brandenburg, 2005; Hopmann et al., 2012a; Petrocik et al., 2003; Van Camp, 2017; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007).

The current study investigates whether political parties are more likely to be contacted by journalists who are in search of information about a certain topic, when that topic is about an issue they own. Data for this study was collected in three political systems, namely Flanders and Wallonia (both part of Belgium) and Canada. In those three regions, political journalists were contacted and asked to participate in an online survey, in which an experimental stimulus was embedded. In the experiment, journalists ( $n = 285$ ) were presented with fictional titles of press releases and asked to indicate how likely they were to contact each of the political parties of that political system. The findings demonstrate that issue ownership is used as a source selection criterion by journalists: parties were significantly more likely to be contacted when the press release was about a topic they own. The findings of this study indicate that journalists' individual judgements about the suitability of political parties as news sources seem to play a role in the news gathering phase of the news production process.

### **News gathering phase**

The news production process is a substantive one and within it, different phases can be distinguished. According to Reich (2006; 2009) the process starts in the news discovery phase, which is followed by the news gathering phase. After that, the process is completed by the news reporting phase, in which the final end product is produced. During the news discovery phase, journalists for the first time acquire knowledge about a certain (potentially newsworthy) issue or event (see also McManus, 1994). During this phase, journalists are at the receiving end of the information transmission and are greatly dependent on what their sources are able to offer them. In the second phase, the news gathering phase, "the reporter obtains further data from sources, cross-checks information, receives comments, etc. It is this phase which supplies the building blocks of the news item, since discovering information itself is often too brief to suffice and too premature to be

reliable.” (Reich, 2006, p. 499). During this phase, journalists thus take control of the information flow and determine whether they need further information about the topic and whom they should best contact to gain this information.

Given that the source selection made by journalists is central in the current paper, it is logical that the focus will be on the news gathering phase. By focusing on this phase, the choices and preferences of journalists can be studied most purely. In this phase, journalists are the leading actors and they are in control of whom they ask for further information. This stands in contrast with the phases before and after the news gathering phase. In the preceding phase, the news discovery phase, journalists are very dependent on the input of their sources. In the succeeding phase, the news reporting phase, journalists are also too dependent on the input from others (e.g. the sources they choose have to be willing to cooperate, their editors have to approve the article, etc.). In sum, the current study will focus on the news gathering phase in the news production process because it is the most appropriate phase to study journalists’ behavior regarding source selection.

Although the current study will thus focus on the news gathering phase, it is difficult to disconnect this phase from its context. Even though the news gathering phase is the phase where decisions are made concerning source selection, these decisions might be dependent on who delivers the information to the journalists in the news discovery phase – proceeding the news gathering phase. Political parties are at the heart of the current study and they are often the initiator of stories concerning policy issues or other political relevant topics (they do this e.g. by sending out a press release or making a statement in parliament (Berkowitz, 1992; Hopmann et al., 2012a)). This element, i.e. the initiator of a story, will therefore also be taken into account in the current study.

### **Issue ownership as source selection criterion during the news gathering phase**

The concept of issue ownership, first introduced by Budge and Farlie (1983) and later coined by Petrocik (1996), refers to the fact that, due to a history of attention for and commitment to an issue, political parties are associated with specific issues by the public at large (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012) and are perceived as more competent to handle problems regarding those issues (Petrocik, 1996).

Before explaining how issue ownership can influence source selection, it should be made clear what is meant with the term sources in this study. During the news gathering phase, the phase of the news production process that is studied here, sources can be seen as all elements that provide

information to journalists. These 'elements' are not confined to actors only, but can also be documents or artefacts, such as press releases, statistics, reports, and so forth (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Reich, 2009). In this study, the focus is on political parties as new sources. The power structure that is behind the relationship between journalists and their political sources has been well researched in previous studies (Berkowitz, 2008). Due to the mutual dependency between journalists and political parties – journalists need political parties to provide them with information about current affairs and political parties need journalists to gain media attention for themselves and their preferred framings – the relationship has often been described as being symbiotic (Gans, 1979; Palmer, 2000). However, studies have shown that journalists mostly take the upper hand in this relationship (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006), especially during the news gathering phase (Reich, 2006): the journalists decide where they get their information from.

How can the concept of issue ownership play a role in the journalistic source selection process? It is claimed here that issue owning parties are seen as good sources by journalists, because they meet two important source characteristics: credibility and availability. Firstly, parties can be seen as very credible to provide information about their owned issues. According to Sides (2006) sources gain credibility because they have shown a concern for an issue and are committed to that issue. As described above, this is precisely what is often the base on which issue ownership perceptions are built: the past attention parties have given to a particular issue in their external communication, in their policy, in their bill proposals, and so forth, show that they are committed to the issue and that they believe the issue is worth to be prioritized. Given the fact that credibility is a key criterion for source selection (Powers & Fico, 1994; Reich, 2011), it is this credibility that turns issue owning parties into good sources. Added to that, due to the long history parties have in dealing with their owned issues, they will have the 'dominant argument' on these issues (Riker, 1983) and are, simply put, more likely able to put well-informed arguments on the table.

Secondly, scholars have pointed out that source selection is also subjected to practical considerations (Allgaier, 2011), indicating that actors have to be willing to comment on a topic and be able to do this rather rapidly (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). A consequence of holding the 'dominant argument' on an issue, according to the Dominance Principle of Riker (1983) is not only that parties are always available to comment on their dominant issues, but also that they are less willing to comment on other issues: *"when one side successfully wins the argument on an issue, the other side ceases to discuss it, while the winner continues to exploit it"* (p.81-82). It might thus be the case that parties are more willing to talk to journalists about the topics that matter to them, and less

willing to discuss topics that are not high on their priority list. Journalists pick up on this systematic (un)willingness to talk about certain issues and use that knowledge to directly target cooperative parties the next time they need background information about a topic. Additionally, taking into account parties' expertise on their owned issues, issue owners are more likely to have their comments on a concrete topic ready rather quickly, while it may take other parties some time to construct their opinion on the matter. However, in the always high-speed news cycle (Gans, 1979) this might be time journalists do not have, resulting again in the strategic consulting of parties of which they know can provide them with information in a short amount of time. In sum, these theoretical arguments provide a good reason as to why issue ownership might play a role in the selection of political parties as news sources.

Although previous research has not yet investigated whether issue ownership indeed plays a role in the source selection process during the news gathering phase, a handful of studies already assessed whether issue owning parties are more used as news sources in news items (Brandenburg, 2005; Hopmann et al., 2012a; Petrocik et al., 2003; Van Camp, 2017; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007). This line of research can certainly be informative for the current study, seeing that parties cannot end up as a source in the news, without having been selected first as a news source during the news gathering phase. Most of these studies rely on content analyses and found that parties and issues are indeed connected to each other. The effect has been found both in the USA – where Petrocik and colleagues (2003) showed that presidential candidates of the Democratic party receive more coverage on democratic issues and Republican candidates are more connected to republican issues – and Europe – where evidence of an issue ownership effect is found in e.g. Belgian media (Van Camp, 2017; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007), Danish media (Hopmann et al., 2012a) and Irish media (Brandenburg, 2005). The study of Helfer & Van Aelst (2016) is the exception in this literature field: based on an experimental design they were not able to confirm an issue ownership effect.

Although research has thus found parties to be more present in the news on their owned issues, it remains unclear whether this selection towards issue owners already starts in the news gathering phase (i.e. issue owners are more likely to be contacted for information and are later on also included in the news items) or only kicks in during the final news production phase (i.e. several parties are contacted for more information about an issue, but only issue owners are later on included in the news). Whereas the investigation of when precisely issue ownership starts working as a source selector might seem trivial at first, it is, in fact, important. Whatever a political actor, who is contacted by a journalist to provide him with more information about a certain topic, says,

has an impact on the overall image the journalist has about this topic. This image, in turn, will influence both the content and framing of the news item about the topic. The content of a news item is thus not only affected by the sources that are present in the item, but also by the sources providing background information about the topic of the item. As a consequence, by only looking at the sources that are included in the news item, the overall picture of who might have influenced the content of that news item remains hidden. The current study contributes to the research field by laying bare this latter pattern.

### **Data and methods**

Almost 70 years ago, White (1950) was one of the first to ask journalists on very concrete matters how they select between what is newsworthy and what is not. Although reconstruction studies – such as the one conducted by White (1950), i.e. he asked a newspaper editor to ‘reconstruct’ how he decided which stories were newsworthy and which were not – have been proven valuable in the past – more recently, this methodology has been thoroughly refined via the work of Reich (2009) – experimental studies are on the rise when it comes to studying journalistic news decisions (see e.g. Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016; Vos, 2016). Although the idea behind experiments and reconstruction studies is the same – namely that only by studying journalists directly valid conclusions can be drawn about which decision criteria they use – experiments have two important advantages compared to reconstruction studies. First, the results they produce are not dependent on any post-hoc rationalizations. Second, experimental studies allow researchers to determine causality in their study. For the current study, this concretely means that it will allow us to determine whether issue owners are in the news because they are selected in it by journalists, irrespective of the efforts made by political parties, who also try to push their own topics on the agenda.

The current study relies on an experimental design to study whether issue ownership is used as a source selection criterion by journalists. The experiment was conducted among political journalists and embedded in an online journalist survey in Belgium (both Flanders and Wallonia) and Canada. These two countries are part of two different media systems (according to Hallin & Mancini (2004) Canada has a liberal media system whereas Belgium is a democratic-corporatist country), which allows to test whether the results found in this study are robust. Despite the fact that some journalistic standards have become widespread across the globe due to globalization, research has demonstrated that countries often still have their own journalistic culture, with their own orientations, practices and routines (see Hanitzsch, 2009, for an overview). As one of those journalistic practices is under investigation in this study, it is thus not self-evident that the same



effects will be found for both countries, making them good cases to test the robustness of the findings. In the following paragraphs, the journalist survey will be briefly elaborated on, before explaining the experimental setup in greater detail.

### *Journalist survey*

The survey, which targeted political journalists only, was fielded between November 2015 and January 2016 in Flanders and Wallonia (Belgium) and between March 2016 and April 2016 in Canada. For Belgium, a list of political journalists was provided by the Flemish Association of Journalists (VVJ) and the Walloon Association of Professional Journalists (APJ) and completed with contact details found on websites of Flemish and Walloon news outlets. Journalists were first contacted twice via email. Afterwards, journalists who had not yet participated in the survey were contacted by telephone. In a last attempt to convince journalists to participate, a final email was sent out. For Canada, a list of (national, English-speaking) accredited journalists was provided by the Canadian parliament. Contact details of all journalists on the list were then collected online. Afterwards, journalists were asked via email to participate in the survey. When they did not respond to this first request, up to two reminder emails were sent to them. However, no follow-up telephone calls were made in Canada.

In Flanders, 397 journalists were part of the initial database. Of these 397, 168 journalist have completed the survey (42.3%) while the remainder started the survey but did not finish it or did not participate at all (57.7%). In Wallonia, the initial database included the names and contact information of 203 journalists. While 85 fully completed the survey (41.9%), the majority either did not participate at all or started the survey without finishing it (58.1%). Finally, in Canada, 298 journalist were part of the initial database. With only 86 journalists to have completed the survey (28.9%) the response rate was slightly lower than for the other two political systems. In all three regions, some of the respondents did not fill in all of the questions used in this study or were not seen as political journalists (based on a question that asked how many of their ten most recent news items included a political actor as news source – the minimum was set at two out of ten). For the analyses, a total of 285 respondents (149 from Flanders, 74 from Wallonia and 62 from Canada) were used.

Although coming from three different regions, the journalists that were included in the final dataset resembled each other: they were predominantly male (67% in Canada, 71% in Flanders and 85% in Wallonia), higher educated (97% in Canada enjoyed higher education, 97% in Flanders and 96% in

Wallonia), middle aged (on average 44.2 years in Canada, 39.7 in Flanders and 43.5 in Wallonia) and high in years of experience (on average 20.1 years in Canada, 15.1 in Flanders and 21.2 in Wallonia). These parameters do not only characterize our specific sample of journalists, they are typical for the average journalist. For Belgium, they match the characteristics that were measured by Raeymaeckers, Paulussen and De Keyser (2012) and Raeymaeckers et al. (2013) in a general study of the Belgian journalistic field. For Canada, they are similar to the demographics of Canadian news workers measured among 626 journalists working for press, television and radio (Miljan & Cooper, 2003).

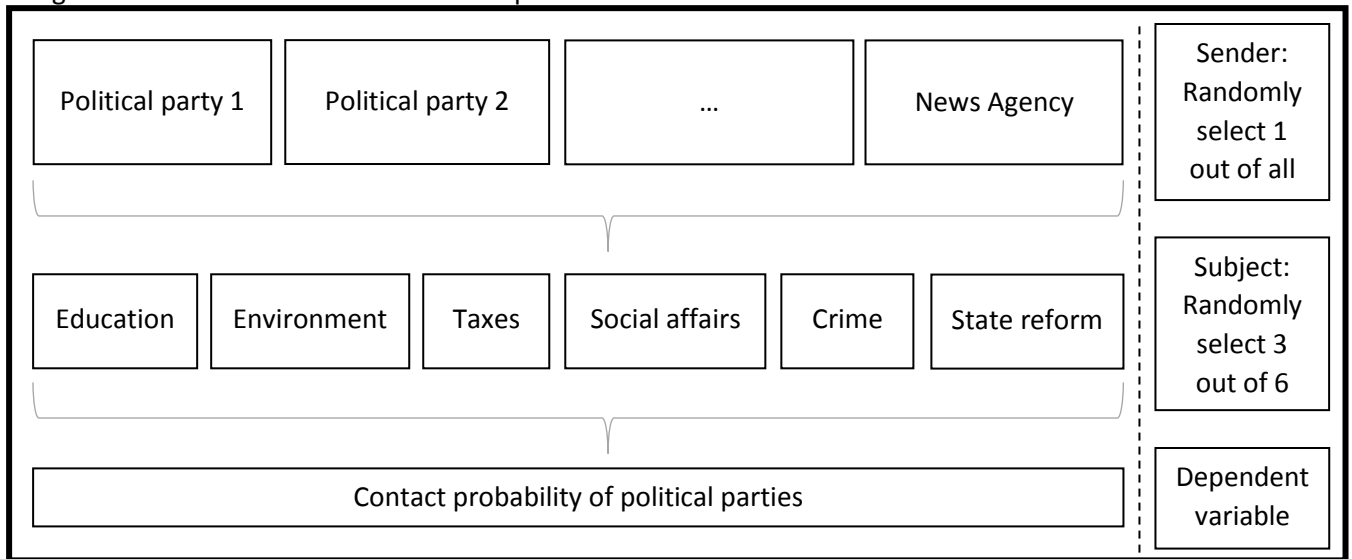
### *Experiment*

In the survey, journalists were presented with the following task:

*‘On the following pages you will find three titles of fictional press releases sent by x. Can you indicate, for each of them, how likely you would be to contact a politician from each political party? Contacting someone can have different purposes: gaining information, obtaining an official position of the party, getting a response, etc.’*

Two aspects of this task differed across respondents. Firstly, the three titles that were shown to the journalists were randomly drawn from a set of six. The main goal of not showing journalists all six subjects was to avoid respondent fatigue. Although the precise content of these six titles was sometimes modified to better match the context of a political system (see Appendix 3.1 for an overview), the general topics of these titles were the same in both Belgium and Canada (i.e. one about each of the following subjects: education, environment, taxes, social affairs, crime and state reform). For example, the title about taxes in Belgium (‘Income taxes in Belgium are in conflict with European rules’) could not be used verbatim in Canada and was thus slightly altered (‘Changes to Canada’s income tax act are unconstitutional’). Secondly, the sender was also manipulated. The press releases were said to be sent by either a political party or a news agency. This resulted in seven possible senders for Flanders (six political parties and Belga (news agency)), eight for Wallonia (seven political parties and Belga) and six for Canada (five political parties and Canada Newswire). This additional manipulation allows for a more fine-grained investigation of the role of issue ownership as possible source selection criterion, by taking into account a possible interaction effect between sender and issue ownership. An overview of how the experiment was constructed, can be found in Figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1: Schematic overview of the experiment



The dependent variable in this study was the likelihood of each political party to be contacted about the press release, which will further be referred to as the variable *contact probability*. It was measured via a Likert scale. Journalists were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely), how likely they would be to contact a politician from each of the political parties. For the three topics they were presented with, they had to rate all the political parties, so the total number of ratings given by journalists ranged from 15 (three topics \* five parties for Canada) to 21 (three topics \* seven parties for Wallonia). This operationalization strongly resembles the journalistic source selection process during the news gathering phase, which increases the external validity of the experiment. If a press release is sent to them, they will first evaluate the subject as newsworthy or not (if not, they would probably contact none of the parties, which can be indicated in the research design by giving all parties the lowest score on the contact probability scale). If the subject is rated as newsworthy, reporters then start wondering about which political parties – besides other actors – best to contact, and their decision regarding this matter is represented by the scores given to each party on the contact probability scale.

The main independent variable, issue ownership, was measured by a question that was placed at the end of the survey. This was done so that it would not have an effect on the experiment. To avoid the experimental stimulus to have an effect on issue ownership perceptions, other questions (about many different topics, such as Twitter, vox pop, the quality of MPs, the relationship between politicians and journalists, and so forth), were added between the experiment and the measurement of issue ownership. To measure issue ownership, journalists were asked the following question: ‘When you think about issue x, which political party do you spontaneously think about?’ (introduced

by Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012)<sup>14</sup>. This question was repeated for eight different topics (the three topics journalists were presented with, the three other topics from the experiment and two additional topics) and the order of the topics was randomized across respondents. The question was a closed-ended one and respondents were able to choose between all political parties and three other answer categories (none of the parties, all parties equally or don't know). In the analysis, the variable was included as a dummy variable (taking the value 0 if a party was not seen by the journalist as owner of the topic of the press release and 1 if a party was indicated by the journalist as owner of the topic of the press release).

## Results

On average, parties score 3.90 (SD = 2.14) on a scale ranging from very unlikely to be contacted (1) to very likely to be contacted (7). This seems to be a general trend, with differences between the three political systems being small; parties in Wallonia score the lowest ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.65, SD = 1.02), followed by parties in Canada ( $\bar{x}$  = 3.85, SD = 1.32) and finally Flanders ( $\bar{x}$  = 4.10, SD = 1.20). The main interest of this paper, however, are party differences (and not country differences): are parties rated as more likely to be contacted when the topic of the press release is one they are associated with? For the results presented in the following paragraphs, the dataset was restructured to a stacked dataset so that each line in the new dataset represented a journalist-rating combination. This means that each of the respondents could be present up to 21 times (3 issues \* (up to) 7 political parties) in our dataset. In total, the dataset includes 4,785 ratings.

In Table 3.1 below, average scores on the dependent variable (contact probability) are shown in a 2x2-design, separated by issue ownership and sender. The overall scores of both issue ownership and sender of the party show that there are differences between (1) owned issues and non-owned issues and (2) the party being the sender of the press release or not. First, the results indicate that parties are indeed rated higher on owned issues as compared to non-owned issues. When a press release is about an issue that is owned by a party, this party has a higher chance of being contacted by journalists than when the message is about an issue that is not owned by the party ( $\bar{x}$  = 5.03 vs.  $\bar{x}$

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<sup>14</sup> This question is a measurement of associative ownership. In recent years, the idea has been put forth that issue ownership has two dimensions: associative issue ownership (AIO) and competence issue ownership (CIO). While AIO refers to the past attention parties have given topics, resulting in spontaneous connections between parties and issues (Walgrave, Lefevere and Tresch, 2012); CIO is about the belief that some parties are better able to handle problems concerning an issue than other parties (Budge & Farlie, 1983). Recent studies however show that the concept of CIO is endogenous with that of party preference (Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2016) and started doubting the usefulness of the concept (e.g. van der Brug, 2017). Therefore, the focus in this paper lies on AIO.

= 3.70,  $t(4783) = -15.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Added to that, a party is also more likely to be contacted when it sends out the press release itself, regardless of the topic ( $\bar{x} = 4.87$  vs.  $\bar{x} = 3.74$ ,  $t(4783) = -13.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

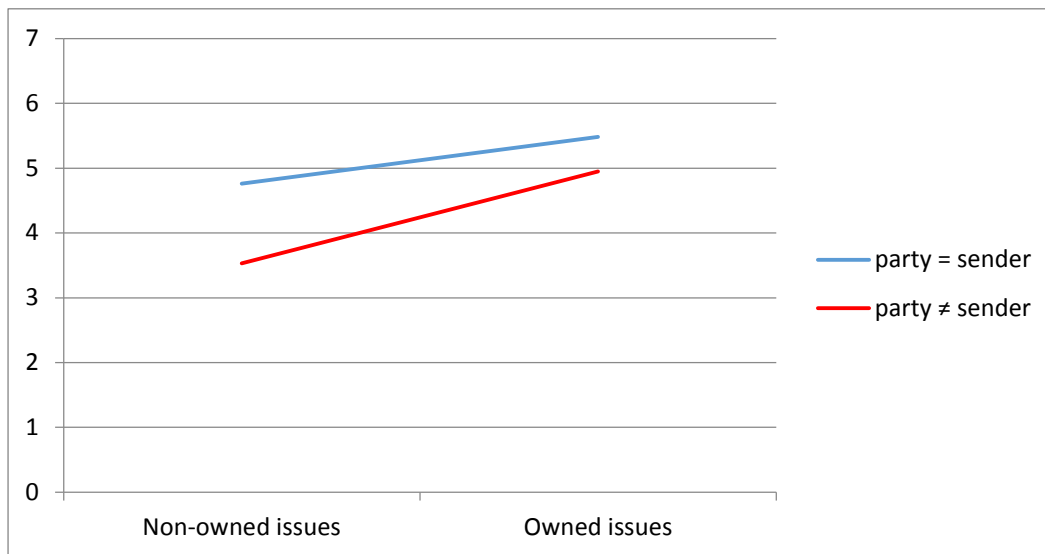
Table 3.1: Average contact probability (with standard deviation)

		Sender of the press release		
		The party itself	Another party or press agency	Overall
Topic of the press release	Owned issues	5.48 (1.84)	4.95 (1.96)	5.03 (1.95)
	Non-owned issues	4.76 (2.14)	3.53 (2.06)	3.70 (2.11)
	Overall	4.87 (2.11)	3.74 (2.10)	3.90 (2.14)

Note: Total  $n = 4,785$ .  $n$  for owned issues – party as sender = 106;  $n$  for owned issues – another party or press agency as sender = 602;  $n$  for non-owned issues – party as sender = 580;  $n$  for non-owned issues – another party or press agency as sender = 3,497.

Is there a positive interaction effect between issue ownership and sender? In other words, is the positive effect of issue ownership even more present when the issue owning party is also the one who sent out the press release? To get a better understanding of the numbers in Table 3.1, the average scores for each of the four cells in the 2x2-design are plotted in a line chart (see Graph 3.1). The visualization of the scores suggests a positive interaction to be unlikely. On the contrary, the issue ownership effect seems to be stronger if the press release was not sent out by the party. The same conclusion can be made based on the scores in Table 3.1. When a party sends out a press release, the chance that it is contacted increases from 4.76 (on non-owned issues) to 5.48 (on owned issues), which is an increase of 15%. However, when another actor sent the press release, the likelihood of a party being contacted increases from 3.53 (for non-owned issues) to 4.95 (for owned issues), which is an increase of 40%. It thus seems unlikely that there is a positive interaction effect between issue ownership and sender. Although the largest absolute value is located on the crossing of owned issue – sent by the party itself (likelihood of 5.48 on a 7 point scale to be contacted), this high score is probably the consequence of the main effect of issue ownership and the main effect of sender, but not of an interaction effect between both.

Graph 3.1: Average contact probability



Although the results in Table 3.1 seem to suggest that 1) issue ownership plays a role in the source selection journalists make, 2) who sends out a message plays a role in source selection and 3) both effects do not seem to strengthen one another, a formal test is needed to confirm these suspicions. Consequently, a regression analysis is conducted, which simultaneously provides the chance to control for a number of other aspects that might be suspected to play a role in the source selection of parties (such as party size and whether the party belongs to government or opposition). To control for the interdependencies that were created in our dataset by restacking based on journalist-rating combinations, a multilevel linear regression is conducted. Results are shown in Table 3.2.

Model 1 in Table 3.2 shows the results of a basic model, including only issue ownership as a predictor variable. According to the AIC/BIC, this model is an improvement when compared to a model without predictor variables (in the empty model, AIC equals 20066 and BIC equals 20085), thus indicating issue ownership is a useful variable to explain the variance in the dependent variable, contact probability. The results presented in this model confirm what was already suggested in Table 3.1: parties are more likely to be contacted by journalists about issues they own than about issues they do not own.

Model 2 in Table 3.2 presents the more complete model, in which several control variables were added. Again, this second model is an improvement when compared to Model 1 (AIC/BIC have decreased). Although the size of the effect of issue ownership has decreased compared to Model 1, it is still highly significant. Added to this, the results in the model confirm the positive effect of sending a message: parties are more likely to be contacted when they themselves were the sender

of the press release (regardless of its topic). Finally, weak effects are found for some of the other (control) variables: news agency (when a news agency sends out the press release, all parties are more likely to be contacted), minister (the party of the minister that is responsible for the topic of the press release, is more likely to be contacted) and party size (the more seats the party has in parliament, the more likely it is to be contacted, regardless of the issue of the press release). To test whether these findings are robust, the analysis was rerun separately for each of the three political systems in which the study was conducted (results can be found in Appendix 3.2). The results from these analyses suggest that both the effect of issue ownership and the effect of sender are robust; they have been shown to be positively significant for each of the three political systems. However, results for all other variables are different in the three systems: sometimes negative, sometimes positive; sometimes significant, sometimes not.

Table 3.2: Explaining contact probability as judged by political journalists

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
<b>Issue ownership (Ref: no)</b>	1.28***	.07	.80***	.06	.93***	.06
<b>Sender (Ref: send by other)</b>			1.25***	.06	1.38***	.06
<b>IO*Sender</b>			-	-	-.85***	.17
<b>News Agency (Ref: no)</b>			.46*	.20	.46*	.20
<b>Minister (Ref: no)</b>			.18*	.08	.18*	.08
<b>Government (Ref: opposition)</b>	-	-	-5.12	2.95	-5.04	2.94
<b>Party size</b>	-	-	.14*	.06	.14*	.06
<b>Constant</b>	3.74***	.07	1.18***	.22	1.17***	.22
<b>N</b>						
<b>Journalists</b>		282		282		282
<b>Ratings</b>		4785		4785		4785
<b>Residual variance</b>						
<b>Journalists</b>		1.07		1.09		1.08
<b>Ratings</b>		1.80		1.42		1.41
<b>IC</b>						
<b>AIC</b>		19778		17639		17615
<b>BIC</b>		19804		17794		17777

Note: Multilevel linear regression (random effects) with contact probability by journalists as dependent variables. \*\*\* p<.001, \* p<.01, \* p <.05. Both Model 2 and Model 3 included dummy variables for political parties and regions, but these numbers are left out of the table for purposes of clarity.

Finally, Model 3 in Table 3.2 also adds the interaction effect between issue ownership and sender. The effect is found to be significantly negative. This finding corresponds with what is visually represented in Graph 1 above. The positive effect of issue ownership is more strongly present when parties are not the sender of the press release than when they are, leading to a negative interaction effect. In other words, the baseline probability of being contacted is higher when parties are the

sender of the press release. The negative interaction term indicates that issue ownership partially neutralizes this effect, i.e. on owned issues this baseline effect of sender is smaller than on non-owned issues. However, in absolute terms, it is the combination of sending out a press release about an owned issue that will give parties the highest chance of being contacted by journalists.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The goal of the study presented in this paper was to investigate whether journalists use issue ownership as a source selection criterion during the news gathering phase. In order to investigate this, an experimental study, embedded in an online journalists survey, was conducted. In total 285 political journalists from three political systems (Flanders, Wallonia and Canada) participated in the survey. The results of the experiment confirm that issue ownership plays a role in the source selection process of journalists. Journalists indicate that they are more likely to contact (a politician from) a political party regarding a topic with which the party is associated as compared to other topics. Although the study was conducted in three political systems, the goal was not to tease out any differences between these cases. In fact, the different systems were included as a robustness check. By running the analyses separately for the three cases, it was shown that the main effect of issue ownership on parties contact probability was significant in all three political systems. In other words, the results found here are not specific to one certain context, but are more broadly applicable.

The results that are found in this paper indicate that journalists use issue ownership as a sort of heuristic when they are deciding which political actor best to contact for more information. The design of the experiment did not allow to investigate whether the sources that were more likely to be contacted are also more likely to end up in the final news item. However, research based on content analysis has already proven that parties are more likely to appear in news items about owned issues. In that regard, the results of the current study fit in nicely with the already existing literature. It adds to this literature by proving that issue ownership is not a source selection criterion that only comes into play during the news reporting phase, but is already active during the news gathering phase (which proceeds the news reporting phase).

One could wonder whether the effect that was found here, namely that of issue ownership on the source selection process of political journalists, should lead to any concern about the quality of the journalistic work. However, we do not believe this selection criterion to be a problem. Although the study shows that journalists are more likely to contact parties they spontaneously associate with an



issue, this spontaneous association is not where journalists base their decision on. After all, what is at the base of this spontaneous association is a history of attention for and commitment to an issue. It is these elements that give issue owners the reputation of being credible and experienced on the issue, which is what we believe journalists base their decision on.

The choices journalists make concerning source selection are not without consequences. Whoever is contacted by journalists with the request to provide them with more information about a topic, can influence (by emphasizing certain aspects of the story or framing the information in a certain way) the way journalists perceive the issue at hand, which, in turn, is very likely to influence the precise content and framing of the news item about that topic. How journalists frame a certain news item, and which elements of a story they decide to include or exclude, finally, has an influence on the audience. It will influence not only how the audience perceives the topic of the news item, but also the actors in it.

As is the case with all experiments, which almost always come with a trade-off between increased internal validity and less external validity, special attention should be given to the external validity of the findings. Although it should be noticed that the stimuli incorporated in the design do not resemble actual newsroom stimuli – in real life, journalists are never confronted with only the title of a press release, without seeing the content of the press release – this is not expected to have any consequences on the found results. After all, we believe that the thinking process that was activated by these stimuli was the same as in a real-life situation, where journalists, after coming across a certain piece of information, also have to ask themselves which source would best be contacted to gather more information about a topic.

Finally, future research is needed to explore the found effect more in depth. This would allow for a better understanding of, for example, generalizability of the findings to other countries, with other media and/or political systems. Added to that, it could contribute to understanding whether the effect differs for journalists working for different channels (television, print, radio, online).

## Appendices

### Appendix 3.1: Press releases

In Table A3.1 below, an overview is given of the precise topic lines that were used in the experiment. In Belgium, the same topic lines were used for both Flanders and Wallonia. For Canada, some of the topic lines were slightly altered, so that they fitted more into the social and political context of the country. Topic lines of other issues (e.g. social affairs and crime) were identical to those used in Belgium.

Table A3.1: Overview of press releases' titles

	<b>Belgian version</b>	<b>Canadian version</b>
<b>Education</b>	Growing conflict about the reform of the first degree of secondary education.	Growing conflict over reform of post-secondary education funding.
<b>Environment</b>	Renewable energy through organic waste fermentation underutilized in Belgium.	Renewable energy through organic waste fermentation underutilized in Canada.
<b>Taxes</b>	Income taxes in Belgium conflict with European rules.	Changes to Canada's income tax act are unconstitutional.
<b>Social affairs</b>	Ageing population increases long waiting lists for nursing homes.	Ageing population increases long waiting lists for nursing homes.
<b>Crime</b>	Crime in prisons often go unpunished because of lack of evidence.	Crime in prisons often go unpunished because of lack of evidence.
<b>State reform</b>	Still restlessness in municipalities with linguistic facilities, four years after the sixth state reform.	Two decades after the Quebec Referendum, demands for sovereignty are still very present.

### Appendix 3.2: Robustness check

In Table A3.2 below, the analyses that were reported in Table 2 – Model 2 are repeated for each of the three political systems separately.

Table A3.2: Explaining contact probability as judged by political journalists – per political system

	<b>Model 1: Canada</b>		<b>Model 2: Wallonia</b>		<b>Model 3: Flanders</b>	
	<b>Coef</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Coef</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Coef</b>	<b>SE</b>
<b>Issue ownership (Ref: no)</b>	.78***	.15	.76***	.12	.81***	.08
<b>Sender (Ref: send by other)</b>	1.62***	.14	.72***	.11	1.38***	.08
<b>News Agency (Ref: no)</b>	.03	.45	-.05	.37	.86***	.26
<b>Minister (Ref: no)</b>	-4.79	3.21	.09	.14	.21*	.09
<b>Government (Ref: opposition)</b>	-	-	.99***	.18	-.52***	.14
<b>Party size</b>	.14*	.06	.01	.01	.20***	.01
<b>Constant</b>	2.07***	.21	3.1***	.15	.90***	.14
<b>N</b>						
<b>Journalists</b>	61		73		148	
<b>Ratings</b>	905		1483		2397	
<b>Residual variance</b>						
<b>Journalists</b>	1.19		.94		1.08	
<b>Ratings</b>	1.54		1.40		1.37	
<b>IC</b>						
<b>AIC</b>	3505		5403		8694	
<b>BIC</b>	3553		5472		8763	

Note: Multilevel linear regression (random effects) with contact probability by journalists as dependent variables. \*\*\* p<.001, \* p<.01, \* p <.05. All models included dummy variables for political parties, but these numbers are left out of the table for purposes of clarity.



# Chapter 4

## **Issue-specific newsworthiness**

The impact of individual specialization and party issue ownership on news coverage of MPs



# Issue-specific newsworthiness

## The impact of individual specialization and party issue ownership on news coverage of MPs

### Introduction

Each day, hundreds of politicians compete very eagerly for their place in the media spotlight. This is not surprising, seeing that media attention increases their visibility among a large audience, enhances their reputation and has an important impact on electoral success (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese & Albæk, 2010; Maddens, Wauters, Noppe & Fiers, 2006). Media form a well-valued platform for politicians via which they can promote both themselves and their preferred framings (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). However, politicians are not the ones who decide if and when they are included in the news; it is the group of media workers (reporters, editors, and so forth) that decide about inclusion and exclusion. They do this based on a number of routines and practices, which guide them through this decision making process (Gans, 1979).

The puzzle of which politicians make it into the news media and why has received much attention in the political communication literature. One of the most prominent approaches to study these news selection processes has been news value research. Inspired by the seminal work of Galtung and Ruge (1965) about the newsworthiness of events<sup>15</sup>, a parallel literature has developed concerning newsworthiness of people in general and politicians in particular. These latter studies have not only focused on studying which characteristics make people worth talking about in the news, but also on investigating the newsworthiness of people to be included as sources in the news (which is the conceptualization of newsworthiness that is used in the current study). Among the group of politicians, the most prominent indicator of newsworthiness has been repeatedly found to be political power (e.g. Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009). Furthermore, researchers are increasingly interested in additional factors that determine the newsworthiness of politicians, beyond power (see e.g. Vos, 2015). While previous research has been mainly devoted to researching politicians' general

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<sup>15</sup> Although Galtung and Ruge (1965) also mention 'elite people' as a news value in their research, they also relate this to events. The idea behind this news value is then that events become more newsworthy if elite people are involved. Galtung and Ruge do not focus on what makes people newsworthy in the eyes of journalists.

newsworthiness, these general characteristics are *issue-independent* determinants of newsworthiness and only explain part of the variation in politicians' visibility in the news. This study moves beyond general determinants of newsworthiness and builds on the concept of news values to examine politicians' *issue-specific* newsworthiness.

Issue-specific newsworthiness refers to the fact that certain characteristics of politicians make them more valuable as a news source in news items about certain topics than in other news items. When it comes to MPs, the politicians under scrutiny in this study, we claim that two aspects are important in determining their issue-specific newsworthiness: individual specialization and party issue ownership. We will argue that both aspects enhance politicians' credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Sides, 2006), which is the number one characteristic journalists are looking for when trying to find a good news source (Powers & Fico, 1994; Reich, 2011). Added to that, we claim that both variables are connected to each other and that the effect of issue ownership on politicians' news visibility is mediated by specialization.

To investigate whether individual specialization and party issue ownership function as news values for journalists, it is imperative to conduct research on the level of the individual journalist. Research on journalistic decision making increasingly relies on experimental designs (see e.g. Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016; Vos, 2016). In the current study, a paired-comparison experiment was conducted. The experiment was embedded in an online survey among political journalists in Flanders (Belgium). In the experiment, journalists were confronted with three hypothetical scenarios and were asked, for each scenario, to indicate which of two given MPs they would contact when making a news item about the topic of the scenario. As expected, the results of the study demonstrate a main effect of specialization: journalists are most likely to opt for the MP that is seen as having most topical expertise. Added to that, an issue ownership effect is found, with specialization as mediator.

### **News value research**

Ever since the day that White (1950) observed "Mr. Gates" and asked him about his decision criteria to select which stories became news, research concerning gatekeeping and journalistic decision criteria has accumulated (for an overview, see e.g. Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The main research question in the field is not confined to *what* is able to pass the media gates, but also *who* (see amongst others: Tresch, 2009; Vos, 2015) and *why*. These last two questions are of utmost importance with regard to politicians, because media attention is vital for them. Although countless politicians try to earn their place in the media spotlight every day, it is ultimately the group of news



makers – reporters, editors, and so forth – that decides who succeeds and who does not. If we want to gain insight into that process, it is important to uncover the decision making criteria journalists employ. This can best be done by researching inclusion and exclusion, similar to the original “Mr. Gates” study.

The most prominent approach used to conduct research regarding journalistic decision making is news value research. News values are the whole of judgement criteria that are used by journalists to evaluate whether events and people are important and interesting enough to be reported on; they provide “yardsticks of newsworthiness” (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p.170). They are collective criteria, passed on by one generation of journalists to the next by means of training and socialization (Harrison, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). News values predict inclusion or exclusion in the news: events or actors that do not score well on these news values will receive a low newsworthiness score and will not be able to acquire media attention (Palmer, 2000).

While earlier work predominantly concentrated on uncovering news values with regard to events (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; 2016), subsequent work has applied the concept to investigate newsworthy characteristics of individuals, such as politicians. The seminal work of Galtung and Ruge (1965) – who speak of news *factors* instead of values – already puts forward what would time and again be confirmed to be the most important determinant of politicians’ news coverage: their elite character. Powerful politicians, such as presidents, receive the bulk of the media attention (e.g. Midtbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009). Results of studies researching additional determinants of politicians’ newsworthiness have shown, amongst others, that members of government parties receive more media attention than politicians from opposition parties (Bennett, 1990), that charismatic politicians get more coverage (Sheafer, 2001) and that male politicians are more in the news than their female counterparts (Armstrong, 2004), even when controlling for their political status (Vos, 2013).

All aspects enumerated in the previous paragraph can be classified as issue-independent characteristics; they always have the same impact on the newsworthiness of politicians, regardless of what a news item is about. However, if these would be the only elements of importance in determining the newsworthiness of politicians, the same politicians would appear in all news items. This is not the case, different politicians can be found in news items about different topics. We claim here that this is due to the fact that the total newsworthiness of politicians is determined by two parts. Not only is there a fixed part caused by issue-independent characteristics, there is also a

variable part caused by issue-specific characteristics. As a consequence, politicians can be deemed newsworthy for some news items, but not for others (for a similar argument see Tresch, 2009). The most clear-cut illustration of this can be found among ministers; while ministers are one of the most valuable sources of information with regard to their own competences, they are far less newsworthy with regard to other policy issues. In this study, we will focus on the issue-specific newsworthiness of MPs, which we claim is driven by two main aspects: individual specialization and party issue ownership.

### **Issue-specific newsworthiness**

Accounting for issue-specific factors to explain politicians' visibility in the news is not a new idea. In their study about Israeli news waves, Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) introduce the concept of *thematic relevance*. They argue that some politicians can be linked to the topic of a news item and they enumerate five ways how this can be done, from personal involvement with the action itself over expertise to ethnic background. The authors show that politicians with thematic relevance are twice as likely to get media attention compared to politicians without thematic relevance. Unfortunately, their methodology does not allow for a fine-grained investigation of which of the five factors precisely does the work. Therefore, the current study focuses on only two of these five elements and singles out the two elements that are most substantive in nature: individual specialization and party issue ownership. This study will determine which of these two variables has most impact on politicians' news coverage.

#### *Individual specialization*

By dedicating the majority of his time to studying a certain topic, by current or previous job experiences, by participating in parliamentary committees, and so forth, an MP can familiarize himself with all the ins and outs of an issue and can work on keeping up-to-date with the latest information and developments on the topic. For those politicians that specialize in a certain topic (some politicians are generalists rather than specialists, Searing, 1987), specialization leads to *expertise*. Political specialists have the same main quality as all other experts: they are highly knowledgeable about a certain topic (Albæk, 2011; Steele, 1995). Consequently, they can serve the same purpose as other expert sources: giving background information concerning a certain news item and indicating its societal implications (Conrad, 1999). The newsworthiness of specialists is driven by this expertise, which is found to be a core dimension of source credibility (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Credibility in turn is indispensable for news sources; it is the number one characteristic journalists are looking for in a news source (Powers & Fico, 1994; Reich, 2011).

To our knowledge, only one study has researched the newsworthiness of specialized politicians by means of an experimental vignette survey among journalists. In her study, Vos (2016) did not find any significant effects, but indicated herself that this could be a consequence of the operationalization of the concept. Specialization was determined based on politicians own indication of their area(s) of expertise. However, the study did not control for whether journalists are able to recognize these specializations. In other words, it is unclear whether journalists' perceptions about politicians' expertise deviate from what politicians indicate themselves as their field of specialization. In sum, we agree with the hypothesis that was put forward by Vos (2016), namely that specialized politicians are more newsworthy to journalists, but believe that the operationalization of this concept should be based on specialization as it is perceived by journalists.

*H1: Politicians who are perceived by journalists as being issue specialists are selected more as news source in news items about that issue.*

#### *Party issue ownership*

Originally put forward by Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik (1996), the concept of issue ownership refers to the linkage between political parties and policy issues. The current study focuses on associative issue ownership as put forward by Walgrave, Lefevere and Tresch (2012)<sup>16</sup>, who define issue ownership as a spontaneous connection between parties and issues, based on a party's history of attention for and commitment to an issue. Similar to specialization, issue ownership increases credibility. According to Sides (2006) credible news sources are concerned about an issue and committed to that issue, which matches almost verbatim the definition of issue ownership as put forward by Walgrave and his colleagues (2012). And as stated above, source credibility turns politicians in highly newsworthy sources (Reich, 2011).

Although issue ownership is a party feature, we argue here that party ownership reputations can radiate on individual politicians. This same fact has been implied by Petrocik when stating: "It [issue ownership] is a reputation [...] which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (*and its candidates*) is more sincere and committed" (Petrocik, 1996, p.826; emphasis added). This resonates

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<sup>16</sup> In recent years, the idea has been put forth that issue ownership has two dimensions: associative issue ownership (AIO) and competence issue ownership (CIO). While AIO refers to the past attention parties have given topics, resulting in spontaneous connections between parties and issues (Walgrave, Lefevere & Tresch, 2012), CIO is about the belief that some parties are better able to handle problems concerning an issue than other parties (Budge & Farlie, 1983). Recent studies however show that the concept of CIO is endogenous with that of party preference and started doubting the usefulness of the concept (e.g. van der Brug, 2017). Therefore, the focus in this paper lies on AIO, which is shown to be a more pure measurement of issue ownership (Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2016).

with the work of Egan (2013) who, in his book about the influence of issue ownership on American politics, wrote that *party* labels present people with meaningful information about which problems in society will be prioritized by *individual politicians*. Parties' reputations can thus influence the images journalists have of individual politicians belonging to this party. For example, when a journalist thinks about a member of the Green party, he will consider this politician to be knowledgeable about the core issue of this party, namely the environment. This might not necessarily be the case as political parties often employ a certain division of labor, whereby some issues are allocated to certain politicians and other issues to other politicians. However, the point is that, according to the aforementioned studies, journalists nevertheless make this link between individual politicians and their party owned issues. Similar as with personal specialization, we argue that it is journalists' *perceived* issue ownership that acts as a determinant of politicians' news coverage.

Previous research about issue ownership in the news has mainly focused on issue ownership as a determinant of parties' media coverage. Most of those studies, conducted both in the US and in Europe, rely on content analysis and conclude that parties receive more media attention on owned issues than on other issues (e.g. Petrocik, Benoit & Hanssen, 2003; Walgrave & De Swert, 2007; for an exception both with concerning to methodology and findings see Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016) and are even depicted more favorably in news items about owned issues (Hayes, 2008). To our knowledge, no experimental research has ever investigated whether journalists' issue ownership perceptions about political parties are also predictive for the media attention individual politicians from that party receive. We formulated the following hypothesis:

*H2: Politicians who are a member of the political party that is perceived by journalists as issue owner of a topic are selected more as news source in news items about that issue.*

### *Mediation*

Although specialization and issue ownership were discussed independently from each other in the paragraphs above, we already touched upon the fact that we do not believe both characteristics to be unrelated. We claim that, in the heads of journalists, issue ownership is a determinant of specialization and that the effect of issue ownership on news coverage is mediated by specialization. This mediation-path has been touched upon when discussing the effect of issue ownership on the newsworthiness of politicians above. It is argued here that the perceptions that journalists have of issue ownership are not only applicable to parties, but also to the individual politicians representing

that party. When politicians decide to join a certain party, journalists can expect them to have made their choice based on shared interests (e.g. a politician joins the Green Party because he carries the environmental issue close to the heart). Politicians are an intrinsic part of parties and any issue ownership perceptions journalists have will therefore also affect how they see all politicians of a party. As a consequence, journalists might expect, e.g., politicians from the Extreme Right Party to know more about immigration than the average politician and politicians from the Socialist Party to be more knowledgeable than their peers about social affair issues<sup>1718</sup>.

*H3: The effect of party issue ownership on news coverage is mediated by individual specialization.*

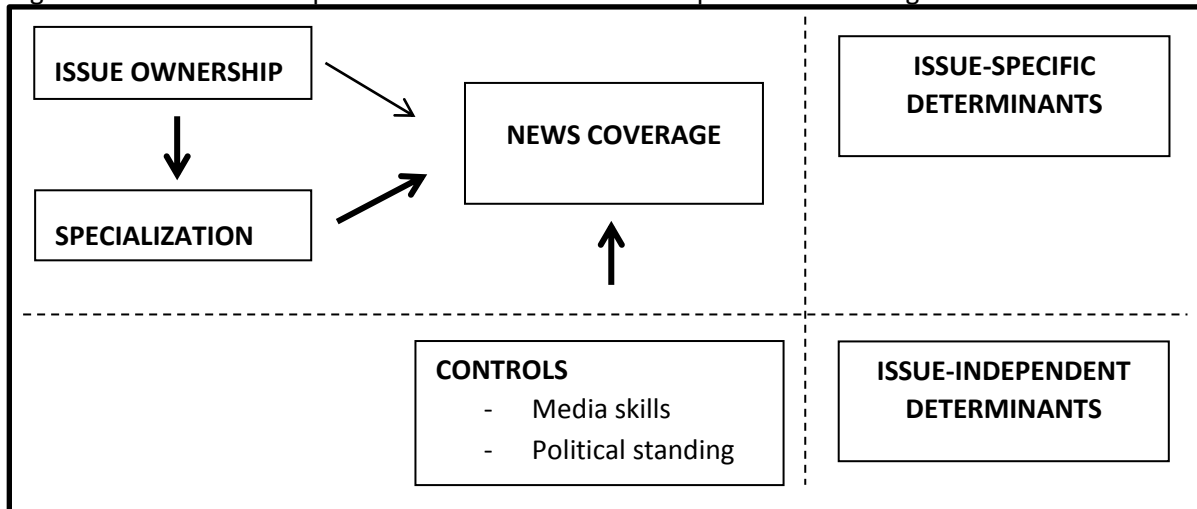
In Figure 4.1, our expectations are illustrated in a schematic overview. We hypothesize that specialization and issue ownership have an effect on the news coverage of politicians and that the effect of the latter is mediated by the former. As mentioned above, it is also important to take into account certain issue-independent determinants when researching politicians' news coverage. In line with previous research (see e.g. Mitbø, 2011; Tresch, 2009; Scheafer, 2001) we will therefore control for both politicians' political standing and media skills in this study.

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<sup>17</sup> We do not claim here that journalists think politicians are only specialized in issues that are owned by their party. These issue ownership-specializations come on top of any other specializations politicians might have.

<sup>18</sup> This does not imply that journalists see all politicians of a certain party as top specialists of party owned issues, but they do expect a certain baseline expertise from these politicians in the sense that all politicians from the Extreme Right Party should be knowledgeable about the topic of immigration (and should be able to give journalists a baseline level of information about this topic), while this is not expected from politicians from the Green Party for example. However, this expected baseline level of specialization on party owned issues might be comparatively low compared to how journalists perceive the level of specialization of politicians who actively work on the issue, have experience on the issue, and so forth.

Figure 4.1: The effect of specialization and issue ownership on news coverage



### Data and methods

To evaluate our hypotheses, an experiment among political journalists was conducted. Only by studying journalists directly can we deepen our understanding of the decision criteria journalists use in their news selection process. Although news value research also uses reconstruction research – e.g. the seminal study of White (1950) about ‘Mr. Gates’: the author asked a newspaper editor to *reconstruct* his train of thoughts concerning the news selection process – the main advantage of an experiment is that results are not dependent on any post-hoc rationalizations. The experiment conducted in this study was embedded in an online journalist survey, which will be briefly clarified below, before explaining the experimental setup in greater detail.

#### Journalist survey

The survey, which targeted political journalists only, was fielded between November 2015 and January 2016 in Flanders (Belgium). A list of journalists was provided by the Flemish Association of Journalists (*Vlaamse Vereniging voor Journalisten*) and completed with contact details found on websites of news outlets. Journalists were first contacted twice via email. Afterwards, journalists who had not yet participated in the survey were contacted by telephone by one of the two professors leading the research team. In a last attempt to convince journalists to participate, a final email was sent out.

In total 397 journalists were contacted by the researchers: 168 of them completed the survey (42.3%), 52 started the survey but did not finish it (13.1%) and 23 people refused to participate (5.8%). The remaining 154 journalists were not reached (38.8%). The journalists that participated in our survey resemble the average journalist, as measured by Raeymaeckers, Paulussen and De Keyser

(2012) in a general study of the Belgian journalistic field. Most of them are male (70.2% vs. 72.2% as measured by Raeymaeckers and colleagues (2012)), and have completed higher education (96.7% vs. 90.4%); the average journalist is 39,7 years of age (vs. 42 years) and has 14,5 years of journalistic experience (vs. 15,1 years). The journalists worked for different platforms: print, television, radio and online. As a control question, the journalists in our study were asked how many of the last ten news items they made featured a political actor. If 0 or 1 was indicated, journalists were not considered to be political journalists and were left out of the analyses. Some of the 52 journalists who started the survey without finishing it, completed the experiments and filled out all other relevant questions (e.g. issue ownership questions). These journalists were included in the analyses, bringing the total n of journalists whose data is usable for analyses to 174.

### *Paired-comparison experiment*

#### Procedure and dependent variable

The experiment conducted among journalists was a paired-comparison exercise. Journalists were confronted with a short hypothetical scenario and the names of two politicians. After reading the scenario, journalists were asked which of the two politicians they would prefer as a news source. This question formed the measurement of our dependent variable, news coverage, and was operationalized as follows: “If you had to make a news item about the following scenario where you could include only one politician, which of the two politicians would you contact?”. This question does not directly measure news coverage but, by measuring the contact probability of politicians, can be seen as a close proxy of the probability to be included in news coverage. This process was repeated three times, each time with a scenario about a different topic (i.e. environment, education and employment; for the full scenarios see Appendix 4.1). The order of the topics was randomly generated. As can be seen in the appendix, each topic had two scenario variants – one about the topic in general and one about a very specific (sub)topic – which was part of another manipulation outside the scope of the current study. Consequently, we will pool the results for both scenario variants together for this study. Finally, after the last scenario, an open-ended follow-up question was included where politicians could indicate why they had chosen politician A instead of politician B in the last scenario (see Figure 4.2 for a schematic overview of the experiment). This was done to contrast the objective data collected by the experiment with more subjective data coming from journalists: do they spontaneously mention specialization or issue ownership as a reason to select a certain politician?

## Manipulation

The names of the two politicians were not the same for all journalists, but randomly drawn from a set of four politicians – with a different set of politicians for each of the three topics. The names of the in total twelve politicians (three sets of four) were not selected at random, but based on a number of criteria. The manipulation included, on the one hand, trying to vary the independent variables (i.c. specialization and issue ownership) while, on the other hand, keeping the control variables (i.c. political standing and media skills) constant. The criteria, and how we attempted to vary them or keep them constant, will be described one by one below.

When investigating the role of specialization and issue ownership on news coverage, variation on these variables is needed. For specialization this meant including both specialists and non-specialists in the experiments. Specialization was decided based on the politicians' own indication of their specialization. In the spring of 2015, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 181 Dutch-speaking politicians from the Flemish and Federal parliaments<sup>19</sup>. During the interviews each participant filled out an online survey which, among other things, asked for (up to) three topics the politician was most actively working on. If the topic of a scenario (i.e. education, employment or environment) was named by a politician, (s)he was considered to be specialized in it; if it was not named, the politician was considered not to be specialized in it. Within each set of four politicians, one specialist was included, while the other three were non-specialist. Secondly, we also strived for variation in terms of issue ownership, by including politicians from four different political parties in each set of four politicians, among which the party that is generally seen as the issue owner. Issue ownerships were decided based on a combination of the results of issue ownership surveys among Flemish journalists and the general public<sup>20</sup>. For each set of four politicians, only one belonged to the issue owning party. The strength of the ownership was different for each of the topics – with a strong ownership of the Green Party over the environment (about 90%), a mediocre ownership of the Christian Democratic Party over education (about 40-50%) and a weak ownership of the Socialist Party over employment (20-30%).

Media skills and political standing were used in this experiment as control variables so, by design, we attempted to include politicians with a similar score on these two variables. For media skills, due to the lack of a more accurate measurement of this variable, we used the number of media

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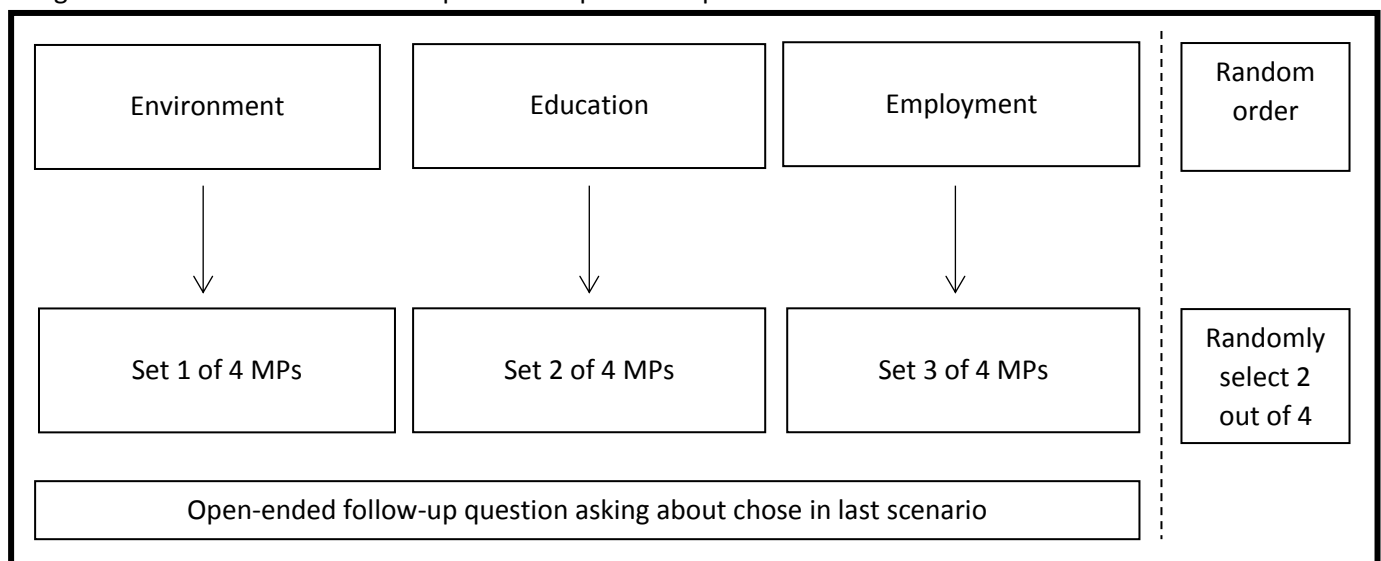
<sup>19</sup> For more information about the research and the project, see <http://www.infopol-project.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Journalist data was collected in 2013, 62 journalists participated. Data from the general public was collected in 2014, 1000 people participated ([www.partirep.eu](http://www.partirep.eu)).



appearances<sup>21</sup> in four prominent Flemish newspapers as a proxy. Politicians in the same set all had a similar number of media appearances. Likewise, we selected politicians with a similar level of political standing. Concretely, this means that for one of the three sets we chose all leaders of parliamentary groups. The two remaining sets were filled with regular MPs who had no previous experience in high profile political positions (such as ministers or party leaders). Finally, the four politicians from one set always belonged to the same parliament (either the Federal parliament or the Flemish parliament).

Figure 4.2: Schematic overview of paired-comparison experiment



### Independent variables

it is uncertain whether our operationalizations of specialization, issue ownership, media skills and standing match journalists' perceptions of these variables. Therefore, we included questions for the two main independent variables (issue ownership and specialization) and the two control variables (media skills and standing), which allowed us to compare the objective operationalizations used in the design phase of this study (see paragraph *Manipulation* above) to the subjective perceptions of journalists. For example, were the politicians we included as specialists in the experiments also the politicians that received the highest expert ratings from journalists? Seeing that the goal of this study, as stated above, is to measure the effect of *perceived* specialization and *perceived* issue ownership on news coverage, it is these latter measurements that will be used as predictive variables in the analyses below.

<sup>21</sup> The numbers of media appearances were collected for the period of 01/01/2015-30/09/2015 via GoPress Academic, an online newspaper consultation platform. The full name of the politician was used as the search term.

First, for issue ownership, we included the question of Walgrave and colleagues (2012) that asks for spontaneous connections between parties and issues ('When you think about *topic Y*, which political party do you spontaneously think about?'). Regarding the other three variables, data was collected for each of the twelve politicians in the experiment (3 topics x 4 sets of politicians). For specialization, journalists were asked to indicate how much expertise a politician had according to them on the topic of the scenario ('On a scale from 0 to 10, how much expertise does *politician X* have according to you with regard to *topic Y*?'). With regard to media skills, journalists had to evaluate how mediagenic politicians are ('On a scale from 0 to 10, how mediagenic is *politician X* according to you?'). Finally, seeing that only politicians with the same formal political standing – i.e. political position – were included in one set, perceived standing was operationalized by a measure of name recognition ('Do you know who *politician x* is?' (0 = No; 1 = Yes)). Only if journalists answered yes on this question, and thus indicated that they knew of a certain politician, they were asked to evaluate his/her specialization and media skills.

To avoid the questions about specialization, issue ownership, media skills or standing to have any effect on the experiment (or vice versa), other questions (on different topics, such as Twitter, vox pop, and so forth) were added between the experiment and the questions. Added to that, each journalist only had to assess the politicians (s)he did not have to evaluate during the experiment. As we described above, for each scenario, journalists were only shown the names of two politicians, randomly drawn from a set of four. Consequently, there are two politicians in each set that were not presented to the journalist; it is these politicians journalists had to evaluate regarding specialization, media skills and standing.

Results indicate that there is a mismatch between the more objective criteria we used to design the experiment and the subjective perceptions of journalists for the same variables. While for issue ownership the differences are small, for specialization they are substantive. For two out of the three topics, journalists indicated a different politician as having most expertise concerning the topic than we expected based on our criterion (i.e. the politicians' own indication of their areas of expertise). Added to that, results indicated that journalists did not perceive all politicians within one set of MPs to have the same level of media skills or the same political standing (media skills: min = 3.2, max = 6.4,  $\bar{x}$  = 5.3, SD = 8.3; standing: min = .54, max = 1,  $\bar{x}$  = .87, SD = .14). These results underline the relevance of using journalists' perceptions as predicting variables in the analyses, as they show that these perceptions cannot automatically be equated to politicians' self-declared field of specialization for example. The questions that were included in the survey much better tap into the real

perceptions of journalists about issue ownership, specialization, media skills and standing as compared to our original manipulations.

## Results

### *Ranking politicians*

For each topic in the paired-comparison experiment conducted in this study, journalists had to indicate which of two politicians they preferred as a source. These two politicians were randomly drawn out of a set of four politicians, with a different set used for each scenario. As a consequence, the results for one scenario are clustered in six paired comparisons – between politicians A-B, A-C, A-D, B-C, B-D and C-D. The four politicians within one set are thus being compared to each other by means of paired contests.

In this paper, the Bradley-Terry method is used to analyze the data. The Bradley-Terry model is a probability model that can be used to compose a ranking of the analyzed politicians and to predict the outcome of paired comparisons. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4.1. As the politicians would not be known outside of Belgium, it was decided to refer to them as politicians A, B, C and D. For each issue, the ranking of the politicians is displayed, together with their value for the two independent variables, perceived specialization and issue ownership. Specialization is the average value of all journalists' scores, while issue ownership is a percentage at the party level. A reading example: politician 1A scored an average of 7.56 on a 0-10 scale of specialization. The party he belongs to, the Green Party, is seen as the issue owner of the environment topic by 97 per cent of the respondents. When comparing the ranking of the politicians with the values of specialization and issue ownership, it can be noticed that politicians are ranked almost perfectly according to their perceived specialization. The politicians that are rated as having the highest expertise on a certain issue are also chosen more often. For issue ownership, on the contrary, there does not seem to be any relationship with the ranking of the politicians at first sight.

The coefficients generated by the model are difficult to interpret on their own, but based on them we can calculate how probable it is that one politician will be chosen over another in a paired contest<sup>22</sup>. For example, if we apply the formula to politicians 1A and 1B we can calculate that the chance that politician 1A is chosen in a paired-comparison with politician 1B is .80, compared to .20 for the second ranked politician<sup>23</sup>. These rankings are a good way to get a general overview of the

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<sup>22</sup> Calculations are made by applying this formula: 
$$\frac{\text{Exp}(\text{coefficientPOLITICIAN1} - \text{coefficientPOLITICIAN2})}{1 + \text{exp}(\text{coefficientPOLITICIAN1} - \text{coefficientPOLITICIAN2})}$$

<sup>23</sup> 
$$\frac{\text{exp}(1.79 - 0.38)}{1 + \text{exp}(1.79 - 0.38)} = 0.80$$

outcome of the paired-comparisons and they imply that a politician with a higher ascribed level of specialization will be chosen more often. In the following section, a logistic regression will be run in an attempt to formally test this suspicion.

Table 4.1: Ranking of politicians (based on Bradley-Terry model, n = 174)

	Ranking	Coefficient <sup>24</sup>	Political Party	Issue Ownership	Specialization
<b>Environment</b>	Politician 1A	1.79	Greens	.97	7.56 (1.24)
	Politician 1B	0.38	Socialists	.01	5.23 (1.71)
	Politician 1C	0	Liberals	.00	4.38 (1.64)
	Politician 1D	-0.37	Christ Demo	.01	4.36 (1.69)
<b>Employment</b>	Politician 2A	0.19	Christ Demo	.26	6.41 (2.32)
	Politician 2B	0	Nationalists	.11	5.25 (1.79)
	Politician 2C	-0.38	Greens	.00	5.41 (1.54)
	Politician 2D	-0.43	Socialists	.36	5.52 (1.84)
<b>Education</b>	Politician 3A	2.32	Greens	.03	7.71 (1.58)
	Politician 3B	1.47	Liberals	.01	5.05 (1.82)
	Politician 3C	0.69	Christ Demo	.67	4.51 (1.73)
	Politician 3D	0	Nationalists	.03	4.29 (1.82)

#### *Logistic regression*

To formally test whether specialization and issue ownership have an effect on news coverage of politicians, a logistic regression was run. The dependent variable of the regression was news coverage (measured via contact probability as a near proxy). The results of the logistic regression that are shown below are calculated independently from the results of the Bradley-Terry model. In order to calculate them, the original data structure was restacked to a multilevel data structure. In the new dataset, each journalist is represented by twelve lines, representing each of the twelve politicians in the experiments (three issues x four politicians). The distribution of the dependent variable is not a surprise: 50 per cent is missing (i.e. the two politicians that were not shown to the politician), 25 per cent is 0 (i.e. the politician that was not chosen) and 25 per cent is 1 (i.e. the politician that was chosen)<sup>25</sup>.

Firstly, univariate models are run, testing the main effects of specialization and issue ownership. Results are shown in Model 1 (specialization) and Model 2 (issue ownership) in Table 4.2. The results confirm that there is a significant, positive effect of specialization on news coverage of politicians. The more politicians are being perceived as specialized in a certain topic, the more likely they are included in news coverage. These results are consistent with the results from the open-ended

<sup>24</sup> Coefficients are maximum likelihood estimates  $\lambda$  (Firth, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> We ran all analyses twice: once as a regular logistic regression – not controlling for the multilevel structure of the data – and once as a multilevel logistic regression – controlling for this structure. Results were however identical so, for ease of interpretation, only the results of the regular logistic regression are reported below.

question at the end of the experiment – asking journalists why they had preferred one politician over the other. The data from this open-ended question illustrate perfectly what journalists are thinking when they select the more specialized politician: *‘he has more expertise on the matter’*, *‘this topic belongs to the core business of the politician’*, *‘he is specialized in the topic’*, *‘she is the education specialist of her party’*, are just a few examples of the reasons journalists state for choosing a more specialized politician. In total, journalists explicitly refer to specialization as being (one of) the reason(s) why they choose a politician in 34.6 per cent of the cases.

Also for issue ownership, a significant, positive effect on politicians’ news coverage is found (Model 2). Journalists are more likely to choose the politician that belongs to the party they believe is owner of the topic. Again, this effect can be illustrated with data collected from the open-ended question. Answers exemplifying that issue ownership is sometimes used as a decision criterion are: *‘he belongs to the Green Party, a party that gives high priority to the topic’*, *‘environment is a topic that his party carries close to the heart’*, *‘environment is an important topic for his party’*, *‘because he belongs to the Green Party, which places environmental issues high on the agenda’*. The amount of journalists explicitly referring to this variable is 11.5 per cent – about one third of the 34.6 per cent referring to specialization. Furthermore, there is a large bias towards issues, with 17 out of the 18 references to issue ownership made to explain the choice of politician in the environment-scenario. This is not surprisingly, seeing the strong ownership over this topic: 97% of the journalists indicate that they associate the environmental issue with the Green Party.

Secondly, the logistic regression was rerun with the two independent variables in the same model (Model 3) and while controlling for media skills and standing (Model 4). Joining the two independent variables in the same model, we see that the effect of issue ownership on news coverage is no longer significant. This suggests, as we hypothesized, that the effect of issue ownership on politicians’ news coverage is mediated by specialization (see below for a formal test of this suggestion via the Sobel Goodman Mediation Test). This implies that while specialization is an important factor in the decision making process of journalists, issue ownership does not play a direct role in that process. Results in Model 4 confirm the literature about newsworthiness of politicians: politicians with more political standing and more media skills are more likely to receive media attention. More interestingly, the effect of specialization is persistent: even when controlling for media skills and standing, the effect remains significant.

Table 4.2: Explaining the effect of specialization and issue ownership on news coverage of politicians

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Odds Ratios	SE	Odds Ratios	SE	Odds Ratios	SE	Odds Ratios	SE
<b>Expertise</b>								
Issue ownership (Ref: not owner)	-	-	2.05***	.34	1.28	.23	1.40	.26
Specialization	1.07***	.01	-	-	1.07***	.01	1.07***	.01
<b>Controls</b>								
Media skills	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.05***	.01
Standing	-	-	-	-	-	-	.23*	.15
Constant	.02***	.01	.88	.06	.02***	.01	.01***	.01
N								
Journalists	174		174		174		174	
Judgements	1044		1044		1044		1044	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.09		.01		.09		.10	

Note: Logistic regression with news coverage of politicians as dependent variable. Significance levels: \* .05, \*\* .01, \*\*\* .001

To test whether the results are robust and not dependent on any of the three issues included in the experiment, the analysis of Model 4 was rerun three times, each time leaving out one of the three issues (results can be found in Appendix 4.2). Based on these models, the main conclusions, namely that there is an effect of specialization, but not of issue ownership, remain. However, in the model without the employment experiments, the effect of issue ownership remains significant, even when controlling for specialization (it does however, gets smaller).

#### *Sobel Goodman mediation test*

The results from the logistic regression analyses described above suggest that there is an effect of issue ownership on politicians' news coverage, but that this effect is mediated by specialization. In order to be able to regard specialization as a mediator, four conditions have to be met<sup>26</sup>: (1) there has to be a significant effect of issue ownership on news coverage (see Model 2), (2) there has to be a significant effect of specialization on news coverage (see Model 1), there has to be a significant effect of issue ownership on specialization (coef: 8.40; SE: .86;  $p < .001$ ) and (4) the effect of issue ownership on news coverage has to disappear (or become smaller) when specialization is added to the model (see Model 3). All of these conditions are met, so a Sobel Goodman Mediation Test is conducted to formally test whether specialization carries the influence of issue ownership on news coverage. Results confirm that there is a mediation effect; the proportion of the total effect of issue

<sup>26</sup> How to perform Sobel-Goodman mediation tests in Stata? UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group. <http://www.ats.ucla.edu/stat/stata/faq/sgmediation.htm> (accessed October 17, 2016).

ownership on news coverage that is mediated by specialization amounts to .72. In the discussion section below, this result will be discussed more in detail.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The puzzle of which politicians make it into the news media and why has received much attention in the political communication literature. Under the influence of the news value research tradition, scholars have been investigating which characteristics of politicians are used by journalists as '*yardsticks of newsworthiness*' (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014, p.170). Based on these past studies, a list of determinants of politicians' news coverage has been established: powerful, male politicians with charisma and good media skills have found to be more in the news. These determinants are all issue-independent and by themselves, they only partly explain the newsworthiness of politicians. Therefore, it is also worth looking into issue-specific determinants of news coverage. Such variables take a different value for different issues, implying that politicians are more suitable as sources about certain topics than about others. In this study, the focus has been on investigating two potential issue-specific variables. More concretely, we have researched whether individual specialization and party issue ownership are such issue-specific determinants of politicians' news coverage. To empirically test whether both variables are used as selection criteria by journalists, we conducted a paired-comparison experiment among political journalists. In the result section, analyses used the perceptions of journalists about individual specialization and party issue ownership, rather than the more objective manipulation of these two variables.

Firstly, a significant effect of specialization was found: the more politicians are being perceived as experts on a certain topic, the higher the odds they are included in news coverage. This effect is strong, prevailing on top of effects of media skills and political standing. It is important to note that we researched this among the group of MPs. Among all types of politicians, MPs are mostly not that present in the news, seeing that the largest part of the news attention goes to politicians with more standing, such as ministers or party leaders. However, when MPs do appear in the news, specialists are more likely to be covered than non-specialists. The results found in this study complete the literature in two ways. On the one hand, they are in line with research showing that expert sources have become increasingly important in contemporary journalism (see e.g. Albæk, Christiansen & Togeby, 2003). On the other hand, the results enhance our understanding of why some studies did not find an effect of specialization (Vos, 2015): it is important to base the operationalization of the concept on the perceptions of journalists and not on more objective indicators. Only when

journalists believe a politician is an expert on a topic will this increase the politicians' likelihood of inclusion in news items about that topic.

From a normative point of view, this result can be reviewed positively in light of the functioning of the contemporary democracy. As mentioned earlier, for many people, the media are the main or even the only source of information about politics and representatives (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Political sources in the news should thus be knowledgeable about the subject they are talking about, so that the news audience can retract useful information from the message. It is thus good news that journalists tend to select politicians who they believe have something useful to say about the topic of the news item. However, it remains to be studied whether the effect of specialization still holds when controlling for other determinants of news coverage such as charisma or appearance and, thus, whether content is always preferred above form.

Secondly, a significant effect of issue ownership was found, although a mediation test revealed this effect to be mediated by specialization. This outcome implies that party issue ownership influences politicians' field of specialization (at least in the head of journalists), a fact that lines up with the literature. In his book about the influence of issue ownership on American politics, Egan (2013) for example argues that party labels present us with meaningful information about which problems in society individual politicians will prioritize. When journalists are looking for an expert source, they are thus more likely to select a politician from the issue owning party, simply because they believe there are more experts present in that party than in any other party. Consequently, this leads to certain party-issue connections in the news, which is in line with the results of content analysis research about issue ownership as a determinant of parties' news coverage (see e.g. Petrocik et al., 2003).

The current study originated in a news value tradition and also made a valuable contribution to this tradition. While earlier research regarding the determinants of politicians' news coverage has shed a rather pessimistic view on the source selection process (i.e. journalists use non-substantive characteristics of politicians to validate their source choice, such as gender or charisma), this research has shown that specialization and issue ownership (two characteristics that are substantive in nature) are also top of mind when journalists are selecting political sources for their news items. Some of the journalists even spontaneously mention these criteria, indicating that it is indeed a conscious effort to include specialized politicians in their reporting.



Future research is essential to improve our understanding of the strength of the found effects. As mentioned above, a host of other characteristics determining politicians' news coverage have been established by previous studies (charisma, gender, and so forth). While we have controlled for the two most important aspects, it remains to be determined whether the impact of specialization still holds when controlling for these other factors. Added to that, future research could address possible differences between political parties. Researching whether all effects found apply to all parties was outside the scope of the current study. However, we can imagine that issue ownership is a stronger determinant of both specialization and news coverage for smaller parties. Those parties, such as the Green Party or the Extreme Right Party, strongly focus on one or two topics and build their societal discourse around these topics. Such hypothesis finds initial confirmation in the answers given to the open-ended question in this study, where references made to issue ownership applied largely to the Green Party. Whether smaller parties indeed benefit more on their owned issues requires further research. Finally, the research conducted is a one country study, making it uncertain to claim generalizability of the results outside the case of Belgium. However, there are no reasons to assume that the findings would not hold in certain Western countries with a similar party- and media system, such as The Netherlands or Germany. The task of future research will be to test the generalizability of the findings presented in this study.

## Appendices

### Appendix 4.1: Scenarios

Table A4.1: Overview of all scenarios

	General	Specific
Environment	<b>Environment performing worse in Belgium than in other countries.</b> A new environmental report of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), including a ranking of different countries, was presented today. Belgium is ranked 30 <sup>th</sup> on this ranking (of 58 countries), thus performing below average.	<b>The quality of the seawater is in danger after the sinking of a cargo ship.</b> The Flemish Environmental Association (VMM) expresses concern about the consequences for the quality of the seawater, after the sinking of the ship Amicitia before the coast of Oostende earlier this week.
Education	<b>Education reforms evaluated.</b> Two years after the approval of the reforms for secondary education, still a lot of work has to be done to further optimize the education in Flanders, according to education authorities.	<b>Shortage primary school places.</b> Despite the large efforts that have been made the past years to create additional places in primary education, the shortage continues to be acute. In large and medium-sized cities, the shortage still reaches 7 places per 100 children.
Employment	<b>Employment levels decreased once again.</b> The Belgian employment level has decreased for the third year in a row. In 2015, only 62 per cent of the 20-64 year-olds were working in our country.	<b>Activation policy 60+ insufficient.</b> According to the VDAB, too little effort is put into activating the unemployment above 60 years old, in our country.

## Appendix 4.2: Robustness check

Table A4.2: Explaining the effect of specialization and issue ownership on news coverage of politicians

	Without environment		Without employment		Without education	
	Odds Ratios	SE	Odds Ratios	SE	Odds Ratios	SE
<b>Expertise</b>						
Issue ownership (Ref: not owner)	1.32	.30	1.82*	.50	1.39	.37
Specialization	1.07***	.01	1.06***	.01	1.07***	.01
<b>Controls</b>						
Media skills	1.06***	.02	1.06**	.02	1.03*	.01
Standing	.09**	.08	.47	.46	.29	.24
Constant	.01***	.01	.01***	.01	.01***	.01
N						
Journalists	174		174		174	
Judgements	696		696		696	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.08		.15		.08	

Note: Logistic regressions with news coverage of politicians as dependent variable. Significance levels: \* .05, \*\* .01, \*\*\* .001



# **Chapter 5**

**The agenda-setting effect of political parties'  
social media messages on newspaper  
coverage**



# The agenda-setting effect of political parties' social media messages on newspaper coverage

## Introduction

Media agenda-setting studies investigate how (groups of) actors try to influence the issues being discussed in traditional news media coverage (Cobb, Ross & Ross, 1976). In politics, this means that politicians and political parties (but also other actors, such as interest groups or political think tanks) actively try to get certain issues into the media. They employ different forms of external communication – ranging from press releases and press conferences over advertisements and brochures to online communication – to succeed in that goal. These actors are eager to get a finger in the (media) pie because they are aware of the significance of (the precise contents of) news media. Not only does media content influences the issues citizens attach importance to (according to the agenda-setting theory introduced by McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it also has an impact on how the public understands these issues (framing, Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) and even on how political actors are evaluated by the audience (priming, Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) (for an overview on these audience effects, see Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

The current study investigates the media agenda-setting capacities of political parties. Traditionally, efforts to investigate this matter have focused primarily on traditional forms of parties' external communication, such as press releases (e.g. Brandenburg, 2002; Hopmann et al., 2012a; Kioussis, Mitrook, Wu & Seltzer, 2006). However, social media such as the microblogging website Twitter and the social networking website Facebook, have increasingly claimed their place in the contemporary society. On the one hand, political parties have incorporated the use of social media in their daily routines (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010). On the other hand, social media are increasingly used as a journalistic source (Lecheler & Kruijemeier, 2016). The combination of the steep rise of these social media in recent years and their unique character in comparison to other communication tools (e.g. the interactive nature of these platforms) makes research about the possible media agenda-setting function of these social media messages much needed.

The current paper studies the effect of parties' social media messages on newspaper coverage and uses two different datasets to do so. First, 2,236 messages from Facebook and Twitter, coming from the six main Flemish political parties were collected in June 2016. Second, during that same period, 1,061 newspaper articles – coming from the main elite newspaper and the largest popular newspaper in Flanders – were also collected. A content analysis was conducted on both types of contents: social media messages and newspaper articles. First, the analysis included the coding of what the social media messages and newspaper articles were about. This was coded on two levels: the general issue-level (e.g. the general issue of a newspaper article can be environment or education) and the specific news story-level (e.g. the news story of a newspaper article can be a new solution to remove all plastic litter from the North Sea or an increase in the number of students that succeeds in graduating high school). Added to that, the involvement of political parties was coded: for each social media message it was coded which political party sent out the message; for each newspaper article it was coded which political parties were included in the article. The results indicate that the concrete news stories parties discuss on social media are not often taken over in newspaper coverage. However, parties did succeed in getting their preferred issue-party linkages in the media: the same party-issue combinations were found in both agenda's. This indicates that the general issues that are emphasized more by parties in their social media messages are the same general issues on which they receive more traditional media coverage. These findings indicate that the media agenda-setting power of parties' social media messages is an indirect issue-level influence rather than a direct news story-level influence. The implications of these findings are discussed in the concluding paragraphs of this study.

### **The influence of parties' external communication on news coverage**

To ensure society-wide visibility for their preferred issues, political parties are constantly trying to influence the content of traditional mass media, such as television news and newspapers. Parties do this by sending out ready-to-use newsworthy pieces of information, called information subsidies (Gandy, 1982). By doing so, they adjust their communication efforts to the needs of the journalistic news production process. Already more than 30 years ago, Gans (1979) pointed out that the news production process is subjected to a high-speed pace, putting a lot of stress on journalists to produce news items fast. Deadlines, quickly succeeding one after the other, do not leave much time to work out original ideas or to submerge oneself into the time-consuming process of investigative journalism. 21<sup>st</sup> century developments, such as the rise of online news media and social media websites, have only added to this pressure (e.g. Van Leuven, Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2015). In light of the context described here, it is easy to understand that "a very large proportion of news



originates from sources' efforts, and sources who can provide reporters with easily assembled news have a greater chance of making their voice heard" (Berkowitz, 2009, p.104). By sending out information subsidies, such as ready-to-use press releases, political parties play into the hands of journalists and increase the likelihood of seeing their issues in the media (Turk, 1985).

The above described effect of party communication on the media agenda has been labeled agenda-building by some (e.g. Parmelee, 2014) and (party) media agenda-setting by others (e.g. Hopmann et al., 2012a). Traditionally, these studies have focused on investigating the effect of more traditional forms of parties' external communication, such as press releases, press conferences or campaign ads. These studies, mostly focusing on campaign periods, have found that "political parties have substantial influence on which issues the news media cover during election campaigns, while the media have limited influence on the party agenda" (Hopmann et al., 2012a, p.173; see also e.g. Brandenburg, 2002; Kioussis, et al., 2006). Research has also indicated that some parties are more successful than others in determining which issues are covered in the media (Harris, Fury & Lock, 2005) and in arranging coverage for themselves in combination with their preferred issues (Hopmann et al., 2012a). In sum, journalists seem somehow led, in one way or another, by these incoming messages from political parties in their coverage. However, little is known about whether these findings hold when investigating the influence of parties' social media messages on news coverage.

### **The influence of parties' social media messages on news coverage**

The emergence of social media such as the microblogging website Twitter and the social networking website Facebook have broadened political parties' range of possible tools to use for their external communication. Especially Twitter is very popular amongst politicians, with research indicating that they make more use of the website than the average citizen (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010). Although social media have been found to be useful for the mobilization of and interaction with citizens (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), neither individual politicians nor political parties seem to use social media often for those purposes. Both politicians and parties seem to use social media especially for reputational ends. Politicians, on the one hand, use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so forth as a PR tool (Frame & Brachotte, 2015; Golbeck, Grimes & Rogers, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Kruikemeier, 2014) to construct their preferred identity (Coeseemans & De Cock, 2017; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). For them, it is a way to brand themselves in a more personalized manner (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). On the other hand, also political parties use social media for marketing reasons. Jackson & Lilleker (2009) have shown that, rather than using social media as a tool to interact with their audience, they

prefer to use it to inform others. Like politicians, parties see these websites as 'perception-building tools' (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009, p.247).

How do journalists deal with these social media messages of parties? First, let's have a look at how social media messages in general are integrated into the daily work routine of journalists. Based on a review of all available research on the topic, Lecheler & Kruikemeier (2016) found that using social media messages has become commonplace for journalists. However, although journalists sometimes explicitly refer to social media content in their news items (Paulussen & Harder, 2014), it seems that, in general, they are hesitant to use information from social media as a direct source into their news items (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016; see also Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser & Howes, 2009). How are social media messages used by journalists then, if not as direct sources of information? Studies have indicated that journalists especially use social media to keep up with what is going on in society (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013). Hermida (2013, p.297) speaks in this regard of a 'social awareness system': journalists use social media to monitor the information environment and to keep track of trending topics and breaking events. In other words, they scan social media and use it for inspiration and as a way to keep the finger on society's pulse. However, once they start working on a story, they return to their routinized (offline) news sources for information. In sum, social media messages by no means replace offline sources, but rather complement them (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016).

This general picture of how journalists use social media is consistent with studies that focus on political journalists and political messages in particular. Political journalists indicate themselves that following the messages politicians post on Twitter has become an intrinsic part of their daily routine (Parmelee, 2014; see also Broersma & Graham, 2012, who call social media a new beat). Parmelee (2014) interviewed a dozen political journalists in-depth about how they use tweets in their daily news production process. Although the participants in the study indicated that they regularly use political tweets as part of their reporting process, they also said that these tweets do not directly influence their coverage much. These findings make sense when taking into account the information subsidy logic that helped explain the agenda-setting effect of traditional forms of party communication. Social media messages are often not good information subsidies. Twitter messages, e.g., cannot exceed a 140 character limit, and consequently often offer only chunks of information instead of ready-to-use pieces of information.

The current study investigates the media agenda-setting capacities of parties' social media messages and does this by focusing on the concrete news stories of these messages on the one hand and the

general issues of these messages on the other hand. While the latter approach is more in line with traditional media agenda-setting studies, the former approach has proven, in more recent studies, to be a valuable way to study agenda-setting processes more in detail (see e.g. Harder, Sevenans, & Van Aelst, 2017; Thesen, 2013). Based on the abovementioned findings of previous studies, that indicate that political journalists are reluctant to use the information in social media messages directly in their news items, we hypothesize that social media messages of parties do not lead to a direct, news story-level agenda-setting effect:

*H1: The concrete news stories that are discussed in political parties' social media messages do not gain coverage in traditional media.*

However, journalists indicate that following the messages political parties post on social media has become an important part of their daily routines (Parmelee, 2014) with studies suggesting they do this to keep up with what is going on (Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013). Consequently, it is argued here that, instead of having a direct (news story-level) agenda-setting effect, the messages political parties send out on social media have an indirect (issue-level) agenda-setting effect. By following parties online, journalists get a good idea of the general issues political parties are concerned about. When a party devotes a large part of its external communication to a certain policy issue, this shows that it is committed to this issue. On the other hand, if a party never communicates about a certain issue, this means that issue does not belong to the core priorities of that party. All party messages taken together, the whole of parties' external communication can have an impact on how political journalists, who are exposed to this flow of communication on a daily base, see political parties. This image journalists have of parties can, in turn, affect news reporting. During the news production process, journalists have to decide which parties to include as a news source (if any). The images journalists have of political parties, and that are shaped by the external communication of these parties, then come into play. A party that is known to be most interested in and committed to an issue, will be more likely to be preferred by journalists as a news source. After all, this commitment leads the party to be more credible on the topic (Sides, 2006), which is what journalists are looking for in a source (Reich, 2011). In sum, parties' social media messages might affect journalists and the journalistic news production process on a more aggregated level.

On the level of individual politicians, one study has already investigated whether the messages politicians post on social media can affect traditional mass media content. Shapiro and Hemphill (2016) studied this by means of a comparative content analysis of tweets sent by politicians (i.c.

members of U.S. Congress) and of traditional media coverage (i.c. the *New York Times*)<sup>27</sup> and find a certain congruence between Twitter posts and articles in the NYT. In this study, we focus on the level of political parties instead of politicians and investigate whether the social media messages of parties can also influence mass media coverage. We hypothesize that these messages can have an indirect (issue-level) agenda-setting effect.

*H2: Party-issue combinations that are more prevalent in social media messages are also more prevalent in traditional media messages compared to party-issue combinations that are less prevalent in social media messages.*

## **Data and methods**

### *Data collection and coding*

In order to investigate the impact of parties' social media messages on news coverage, it is necessary to combine two different datasets: one collecting social media messages of political parties and one collecting news items of traditional mass media. The data that was used in the current study was collected in Flanders, which is part of Belgium, a small West-European country. Flanders is the largest, Dutch-speaking, part of Belgium where about 60% of the population lives. It makes for a good case to study the effect of parties' social media messages on news coverage because it is characterized by a multi-party system, with six parties represented in parliament. This means there are a good number of cases that can be studied (compared to two-party systems). Added to that, Flanders has a non-partisan media landscape. Data, both for parties' social media communication and for news content, were collected during June 2016. During this period, no unusual spikes of attention were observed for any of the items in the news, nor in the social media messages of political parties. We can thus assume that this month was a typical month both for how parties communicate and for how journalists report. Below, the data collection will be described in more detail for both datasets.

### *Parties' social media messages*

Firstly, information is needed about the messages parties send out via their social media accounts. In the current study, social media messages are operationalized by using tweets and Facebook-messages, seeing that these are two of the most popular social media platforms. As mentioned above, data was collected in June 2016. During this month, both Facebook and Twitter messages of

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<sup>27</sup> Broersma and Graham (2012) have also investigated (during campaign periods) how tweets of politicians influence newspaper coverage, but their interest was more anecdotal (finding e.g. that scandalous incidents on Twitter lead to coverage about what the candidates had done wrong).

the six main Flemish political parties (i.e. parties that have representatives in both the Flemish and national parliament) were collected. In total, messages from 22 accounts were collected: added to the general party accounts on Facebook and Twitter (six parties \* two social media websites = 12 accounts), accounts of party leaders were also taken into account, as main representatives of the parties (six party leaders \* two social media websites = 12 accounts; however 2 of the 6 party leaders did not have a Facebook page). In total, 4,100 messages were collected. However, only messages that met certain criteria were withheld in the final dataset, reducing this original number. Messages that were not about policy issues (e.g. 'Our party leader sings a song on a local radio news channel', 'Join us for our national family day next Sunday', 'We support our national football team in tonight's game against France'), that were about local activities (e.g. 'Our local politician opens a new swimming pool in Haacht') or that were responses to other people's messages (@-messages on Twitter) were left out of the final dataset. In the end, the dataset still contained 2,236 social media messages. Most of these messages were tweets (1960 or 87.66%), while Facebook-messages were less present in our dataset (276 or 12.34%). Most of the messages came from party accounts (1,859 or 83.14%), the remainder from accounts from party leaders (377 or 16.86%). While all parties proved to be active on Twitter and Facebook, some parties are represented more in the dataset than others: 540 messages came from the Socialist Party (24.15%), 479 from the Green Party (21.42%), 420 from the Flemish Nationalist Party (18.78%), 386 from the Liberal Party (17.26%), 226 from the Extreme Right Party (10.11%) and 185 from the Christian Democratic Party (8.27%).

For each of the Twitter and Facebook messages, it was coded by which party the message was sent. Messages that were sent by party leaders were attributed to the party the politician belonged to. Added to that, for each message the general issue of the message was coded. This coding was based on the CAP-codebook<sup>28</sup>, which classifies issues into 27 broad issue categories (such as environment, social affairs or health; see Appendix 5.1 for the full list of categories) and provides guidelines on how to assign an issue to a message. Only one issue was assigned to each message. Next, for each message it was coded which concrete news story the message was about. These news stories were very specific (e.g. 'Minister of Internal Affairs visits New York to learn about the fight against terrorism', 'In 2015 foster care increased with 6%', '1,241 Belgians are waiting for a new organ'). Although media agenda-setting studies have traditionally focused predominantly on comparing agendas on the general issue level, recent studies (e.g. Harder et al., 2017; Thesen, 2013) have shown that taking the more concrete news story level into account helps to investigate agenda-setting processes more in detail. In order to assign news stories to social media messages, a large file

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<sup>28</sup> For more information about the Comparative Agendas Project, visit [www.comparativeagendas.info](http://www.comparativeagendas.info).

was created in which all news stories were listed. For each new message, it was checked whether the news story was already in the list or not (based on a key word search). If the message could not be fitted within an existing news story, a new news story was added to the list. A news story is thereby characterized by a specific time, place and focus. If the place or time changed, a new news story was created (e.g. two traffic accidents happening on two different places, would lead to two different news stories). Added to that, if the main event that was discussed was the same, but the locus of attention switched to another aspect of the event, a new news story was created (e.g. if a train disaster happened, all messages about the accident itself would form one news story; messages about the broader discussion on the safety of the entire railway network would form a different news story, even though that specific accident might be the direct cause of that discussion). In sum, two social media messages were only attributed to the same news story if they were about “the exact same event, action or statement defining the news story” (Thesen, 2013, p. 375). In all 2,236 social media messages a total of 684 news stories were identified. Finally, all tweets and Facebook messages were also timestamped, which means that the precise date and time they appeared on Twitter or Facebook was coded. This allows us to determine for each specific news story (1) which party sent the first message about the news story and (2) whether the news story appeared first on social media or first in traditional news coverage.

#### News coverage

The data that is collected by analyzing social media messages from political parties, need to be compared to the content of traditional news coverage. Many channels of news media are present within a media landscape: radio news, television news, print news, online news website. In the current study, only newspaper articles are analyzed. This medium was chosen due to its possibility to report in a more elaborate way about the events of the day: in newspapers more news stories can be given a place than in e.g. a television news broadcast and more political actors can be present than in e.g. a radio news broadcast.

Data were collected simultaneously with the data collection of parties’ Twitter and Facebook messages, i.e. June 2016. All newspaper articles appearing during that time in either the most read popular newspaper (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) or the largest elite newspaper (*De Standaard*) were collected. Again, only policy related articles were retained for the final dataset: articles about showbiz news, results from sport matches, television news, puzzles, obituaries, and so forth, were not taken into account. In total, 1,061 newspaper articles were part of the final dataset, of which a small majority came from the elite newspaper (54% versus 46% coming from the popular

newspaper). For all 1,061 articles, it was coded which general issue the article was about (based on the same coding categories used for social media, namely the CAP-codebook) and which specific news story the article was about (based on the same news story list and identification procedure used for the social media messages). In the 1,061 articles that were analyzed, 735 news stories were identified. Added to that, it was coded whether each of the six political parties (or a politician belonging to that party) was present as a news source in the article. Parties did not have to be mentioned by their official party name to be coded as present (so if the article read ‘the Flemish Socialist Party’ instead of Sp.a, it was coded that Sp.a was present in the article). Finally, for each article it was coded on which day it had appeared.

### *Variable overview*

The previous paragraphs gave an overview of how the data that was used for this study were collected. In the following paragraphs, more information is given about the specific variables that will be used in the analyses. The first part of the analyses focuses on the news story-level. For each of the 684 stories that were identified in the 2236 tweets and Facebook messages of parties, it will be researched whether they succeed in gaining coverage in newspaper articles. In order to do so, every tweet/Facebook message and every newspaper article needs to be assigned to a news story. As mentioned above, a news story comprises all tweets/Facebook messages and newspaper items that deal with the same place-specific and time-specific event (Harder, et al., 2017).

The second part of the analyses looks at the general issues covered in social media messages and newspaper articles. As hypothesized above, it is expected that journalists use social media mainly as an awareness system. Via social media messages, they pick up which issues are most important to political parties and use this information in the news production process. In both datasets, social media messages and newspaper articles, the prominence of issue-party combinations was calculated. By comparing these numbers to each other, the study investigates whether the general issues parties devote more attention to in their social media messages are also the issues on which they receive more newspaper coverage. In Table 5.1, the concrete operationalization and descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variable for this analysis are shown.

Table 5.1: Variable overview

	Variable	Description	$\bar{x}$	SD	Min	Max
<b>DV</b>	News attention	Percentage of all mentions of party x that are about issue y (scale variable)	.04	.07	0	.38
<b>IV</b>	Social media attention	Percentage of all social media messages of party x that are about issue y (scale variable)	.04	.05	0	.25

## Results

### *Direct news story-level effect*

How do messages of political parties that are sent via Twitter and Facebook influence news coverage? In the theoretical sections above, it was hypothesized that they are not likely to have a direct effect, i.e. on the level of the concrete news story. In order to research whether this indeed is the case, a comparison between the parties' social media messages and newspaper coverage is needed on the level of the news stories. In the total of 2,236 tweets and Facebook messages, 684 concrete stories were identified. Of these 684, only 172 were also identified in the newspaper articles. By relying on the timestamps that were coded for both social media messages and newspaper articles, it was determined that from these 172 messages, 99 appeared first in the newspaper (and were only later on picked up by parties on Twitter or Facebook). The remaining 73 first appeared in social media messages of political parties and were covered in the newspapers at least one day later. So in total, only 73 stories out of the 585 (684 minus 99) that originated in social media messages of political parties were later on covered by newspapers. This is only a small percentage of the total number of news stories that originated on social media (about 12.5 per cent), indicating that traditional newspaper coverage is not that likely to report on the specific news stories parties tweet or send Facebook-messages about. However, H1 suggested that the news stories that are discussed by political parties in their social media messages would not gain coverage, so based on the findings that 12.5 per cent does receive coverage, this hypothesis has to be rejected. Occasionally, it does happen that journalists directly take over a news story that was launched via social media.

Counter to the expectations formulated in the theoretical section above, there are news stories identified that jump from online platforms to traditional newspaper coverage. It might be interesting to research which news stories are able to gain newspaper coverage. Based on traditional agenda-setting research (see e.g. Hopmann et al., 2012a), two variables are identified that might predict whether or not an online news story also gains offline coverage: news story salience and news story convergence. News story salience refers to the total amount of attention a news story receives (i.c. the total number of tweets and Facebook messages that was sent out by all political parties together about a news story), while news story convergence is an indicator of the number of voices involved in the debate about a news story (i.c. the total number of parties posting at least one message about the news story). To test whether these two variables have an effect on whether social media initiated news stories are taken over in newspaper coverage, a comparison is made between the 73 news stories that initiated in social media and were taken over by newspapers and the 512 stories



that initiated in social media but were not taken over by newspapers (the 99 news stories that originated in newspaper coverage and were later on also discussed by political parties on social media are left out of this analysis). Results of the t-tests indicate that more social media messages were posted about the 73 news stories that were taken over than about the remaining 512 stories and that this was done by more political parties (see Table 5.2). For news stories to be taken over in traditional newspaper coverage, it thus seems to play a role how many social media messages are sent out about the story and by how many political parties.

Table 5.2: Differences with regard to news story salience and news story convergence

	Average	SD	T-Test
News story salience			
News stories taken over (n = 73)	6.32	9.79	t(583) = -5.59, p<.001
News stories not taken over (n = 512)	2.64	4.25	
News story convergence			
News stories taken over (n = 73)	1.54	0.76	t(583) = -6.17, p<.001
News stories not taken over (n = 512)	1.16	0.45	

#### *Indirect issue-level effect*

The central claim of this study is that social media messages of political parties especially have an indirect agenda-setting effect on traditional media coverage, on the more general issue level. In this part of the results, this claim is put to the test. In order for it to be true, results should indicate that there is a large overlap between the issues parties talk about on their social media accounts and the issues they are covered on in traditional newspaper coverage. In other words, if the Green Party talks a lot about energy, the environment and social affairs, but not so much about defense and foreign affairs, this issue emphasis pattern should also be found in newspaper articles. The underlying mechanism, that political journalists pick up where the priorities of parties lay and use this knowledge in their news reporting, cannot be directly teased out via a content analysis; only the end results of this journalistic news production process can be analyzed.

In Table 5.3 below, the results are shown of the regression model that was used to research this matter. For this analysis, the dataset is restacked to one with 144 datalines, one for each issue – party combination (24 issues<sup>29</sup> \* 6 parties). The dependent variable in this analysis was the proportion of newspaper attention for each party on that specific issue. In other words: how many of the total mentions the party received in all articles were about a certain issue? The independent variable was the proportion of social media messages of each party for that specific issue. In other

<sup>29</sup> 3 issues of the 27 CAP-codes were not present in the datasets.

words: of all the tweets and Facebook messages that were sent by a party, how many handled about that issue? In line with previous research investigating the prevalence of issue-party linkages in media coverage (see e.g. Van Camp, 2017) two control variables were taken into account: issue ownership and ministerships<sup>30</sup>.

The model that is presented in Table 5.3 proves to be a better fit of the data than the empty model, based on the AIC/BIC scores (originally -408.69 and -399.78). The result of the analysis is very clear: there is a very strong effect of social media messages on newspaper coverage. This indicates that the emphases parties place in their tweets and Facebook messages on certain issues is mirrored in the coverage they receive in newspaper articles. Based on the results in Table 5.3, hypothesis 2 is confirmed. The non-significant effect of the control variables runs counter to findings of previous studies, but might be explained by the fact that only one month is studied in this paper, while previous studies took larger periods (several months or even years) into account.

Table 5.3: Regression with newspaper attention as dependent variable.

	Coef	S.E.
<i>Independent variable</i>		
Social media attention	.78***	.08
<i>Control variables</i>		
Issue ownership	-.01	.01
Ministership	.01	.01
Constant	.01	.01
N		
Party-issue combinations	144	
Issues	24	
Model Fit		
AIC	-477.77	
BIC	-459.96	

Note: Multilevel regression with news attention as dependent variable. Significance level: \*\*\* 001

## Discussion and conclusion

Previous studies investigating the effect of parties' external communication have found that these communications often result in media agenda-setting: what is discussed in these messages is later on covered in traditional news media. This way, political parties succeed in influencing the media's

<sup>30</sup> Both issue ownership and ministership have been proven to be a significant predictor of the issue-party linkages that are found in traditional mass media, with parties being more covered on issues they own and on issues on which they deliver the minister (Van Camp, 2017). Issue ownership was operationalized in this study by asking a panel of political communication experts (n=12) 'Which party do you spontaneously think about when you think about issue x?' for each of the 24 CAP-codes. Based on their evaluations, it was calculated which percentage of the panel associated a certain party with a certain topic. Ministership was operationalized by taking both the Flemish and the Federal government portfolios into account.

audience what to think about. This line of research, however, has traditionally focused on more traditional, offline forms of external communication, especially press releases. However, the increasing presence of the internet in the contemporary society and the rise of social media platforms, such as the microblogging website Twitter and the social networking website Facebook, has made research into (the effects of) these latter types of communication tools essential. The current study has researched the media agenda-setting effects parties' social media messages can have on traditional newspaper coverage. Based on the existing literature about how journalists have incorporated online communication in their daily work routines, two hypotheses were formulated in this study. On the one hand, it was expected that social media messages of parties would not lead to a direct agenda-setting effect on the news story level. On the other hand, it was hypothesized that an indirect agenda-setting effect on the general issue level would be found.

The two main hypotheses formulated in this study were investigated based on a content analysis of both Facebook messages/tweets and newspaper articles. First, hypothesis 1, stating that social media messages of political parties would not have a direct news story-level agenda-setting effect, was rejected. Results indicated that about 1 out of 8 stories that are introduced on social media are later on also covered in traditional newspaper coverage. Although the direct triggering effect of social media messages is limited, it does exist. Additional analyses have shown that news stories that are taken over in newspaper coverage have a higher level of saliency (i.e. more social media messages were sent out about these news stories) and convergence (i.e. more parties discussed the news stories) than news stories that are not taken over by newspaper coverage. Second, results indicate that parties' social media messages have a high indirect issue-level agenda-setting effect. The prevalence of party-issue linkages in social media messages was found to be a strong predictor of the prevalence of party-issue linkages in newspaper coverage.

The results found in this paper are in line with previous research discussed in the theoretical sections above. The small direct influence that was found, underpins the finding of Lecheler & Kruikemeier (2016) that, although journalists have fitted online news sources into their daily work routines, they are still hesitant to use them directly into their news items. As Hermida (2013) has described, journalists are more likely to use social media platforms as a sort of 'social awareness system', to inform them about what is going on in the world and which issues actors are mainly concerned about. Political journalists follow the online communication of parties closely and, as a result, are confronted daily with the issue emphases parties put forth via this communication. This in turn affects news coverage, where the same party-issue combinations are prevalent as in parties' social

media messages. The current study fits in with traditional media agenda-setting studies. These studies have also mostly focused on the general issue-level and have found an agenda-setting effect of traditional forms of party communication on this level.

There are, however, two limitations with regard to the conclusions that are drawn about the indirect issue-level agenda-setting effect. First, the data that are used to test this effect indicate a correlation, rather than causality. Although causality is a problem here – the results do not prove that journalists actually build up party images in their heads based on the social media messages of parties – we believe this to be the most probable explanation for the found results. After all, the reverse effect would imply that political parties match their external communication to media coverage and emphasize those issues on which they receive most news coverage, which seems less likely. The second problem with the data is a temporality issue. The idea behind the indirect agenda-setting mechanism is that journalists pick up from parties' social media messages what the issue priorities of these parties are and that they use this knowledge when selecting sources for subsequent news items. However, the data for this study were collected simultaneously for parties' social media messages and their media coverage, which potentially causes a problem of temporal causality. We do not believe this to be a problem, since there is no reason to consider the month studied here to be an exceptional case. If issue emphasis patterns of parties are quite stable through time, which we believe to be the case, the issues that are salient in the studied month would, consequently, also be the salient issues of the month before (and the month before that and so on). That issue emphases of parties are quite stable can be seen when comparing the messages sent out during the first half of the studied month with those sent out during the second half: there is a positive, significant correlation between both periods ( $r=.48$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Finally, it is necessary to address the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the question rises of whether the findings of this study are generalizable to other contents. Both the selection of parties' social media messages (which was operationalized as messages from Facebook and Twitter) and the selection of mass media (which was measured through the articles from two Flemish newspapers) are most likely not representative for the entire range of ways via which parties can communicate online and news can be covered. There are some differences between the different types of social media platforms (YouTube, e.g., is a more visual platform) and traditional media channels (television news broadcast, e.g., cannot cover as much topics as newspapers can) and so it is unsure whether the results that were found here are transferable to other contents. However, this does not mean that the effects found here are not useful. On the contrary, seeing that the study for the first time

investigates the media agenda-setting potential of social media messages, the results are an important starting point for follow-up research. Secondly, the study was based on data collected in one country, Belgium. Although findings can be expected to hold in other Western democracies, with a similar media and political system (seeing that a lot of journalistic routines, values and working procedures are shared across the globe), additional research is needed to research the precise generalizability of the current findings to other countries. Finally, more research is needed to investigate the generalizability of the findings to other time periods. More specifically, the current study focuses on a routine period. Future research should investigate whether the findings also apply to campaign periods, which would be more in line with the interest of traditional media agenda-setting research. In sum, there are many promising avenues for future research.

## Appendices

### Appendix 5.1: Issue codebook

Table A5.1 : List of all (major) issues of the CAP-topic codebook

1	Macroeconomics and taxes	15	Defense
2	Civil Rights	16	Scientific research, technology and communication
3	Health	17	Foreign trade
4	Agriculture	18	Foreign affairs and development
5	Labor	19	Government operations and public administration
6	Education	20	Spatial planning and public lands
7	Environment	21	Arts, culture and entertainment
8	Energy	22	Regional government
9	Immigration and integration	23	Weather and natural disasters
10	Traffic and transportation	24	Fires and accidents
11	Law and crime	25	Sports and recreation
12	Social Welfare	26	Obituaries
13	Housing and urban planning	27	Churches and religion
14	Businesses, banking and domestic trade		

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