

The International Journal of Press/Politics

<http://hij.sagepub.com/>

Exploring Some Antecedents of the Media's Framing of Election News: A Comparison of Swedish and Belgian Election News

Jesper Strömbäck and Peter van Aelst

The International Journal of Press/Politics 2010 15: 41 originally published online 29
October 2009

DOI: 10.1177/1940161209351004

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://hij.sagepub.com/content/15/1/41>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *The International Journal of Press/Politics* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://hij.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://hij.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://hij.sagepub.com/content/15/1/41.refs.html>

Exploring Some Antecedents of the Media's Framing of Election News: A Comparison of Swedish and Belgian Election News

International Journal of Press/Politics
15(1) 41–59
© 2010 SAGE Publications
Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>
DOI: 10.1177/1940161209351004
<http://ijpp.sagepub.com>



Jesper Strömbäck¹ and Peter van Aelst²

Abstract

Despite the major importance of the news media's election news coverage, there are still only a few cross-national studies on how the media cover elections. There are even fewer that include both newspapers and TV news and that probe possible antecedents of how the media frame politics in their election news. Against this background, this article compares the media framing of election news in two countries—Belgium and Sweden—that constitute highly similar cases and both belong to the democratic corporatist model of media and politics. The study focuses on the importance of media channels, media types, and commercialism as antecedents of the media's framing of election news.

Keywords

television news, comparative research, election news, media framing, newspapers

It is now more than eighty years since Lippman (1922/1997) concluded that the media constitute the most important bridge between the world “out there” and the “pictures in our heads.” This still holds true. However, the media do not transmit political messages neutrally; rather, they actively intervene in political communication processes (Esser 2008; Strömbäck 2008) and frame the news in certain ways, although in interaction with external actors trying to influence the news.

While it is well known that the media frame politics in particular ways, less is known about the antecedents of the media's framing of election news. One reason is that most research does not probe the possible antecedents of election news. Another

¹Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden

²Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Jesper Strömbäck, Mid Sweden University, Demokratiinstitutet, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden
E-mail: jesper.stromback@miun.se

reason is that most research in this area has been carried out in the United States, which is hardly a typical case. A third reason is that there are still rather few comparative studies on the media coverage of national elections.

Thus, more cross-national research on election news is needed for a better understanding of the antecedents of the media's framing of election news. Against this background, the purpose of this study is to explore the importance of media channels and media types as antecedents of the media's framing of election news. This is done through an investigation of election news in Belgium and Sweden, two countries that constitute very similar cases.

The Need for Comparative Research

While there are many reasons why comparative research is needed (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Pfetsch and Esser 2004), one of the most important is that comparative research can increase the variance with respect to the dependent and/or the independent variables of interest. For example, research has shown that the media in a number of democracies around the world have a tendency to frame politics as a game rather than as issues (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). When trying to explain why, Patterson (2000b: 252–53) suggests that there is a causal connection between media commercialism and this particular way of framing politics: “Of the many effects of commercialism on news content, none is more consequential than the media’s tendency to report politics not as an issue but as a game in which individual politicians vie for power.” While this might be true, the United States is arguably not the best case to study. The main reason is that public service media are virtually nonexistent in the United States, which at least with respect to television precludes an investigation of the importance of commercialism as the driving force behind the framing of politics as a game. By including countries with more variation with respect to media commercialism, it is, however, possible to test whether there is a correlation between media commercialism and, in this example, the framing of politics as a game. This is one of the major reasons why we have chosen to include Belgium and Sweden in this study.

Comparing Election News: The Belgian and the Swedish Cases

While there are only few frameworks for comparing election news across countries, research strongly suggests that political systems and media systems are of major importance (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Esser 2008; Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). The framework for comparing media systems suggested by Hallin and Mancini (2004) has thus served as an important springboard for several recent comparative studies on election news.

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), three different models of media and politics can be identified within the family of Western democracies: the *liberal*, the *democratic corporatist*, and the *polarized pluralist* models. Although these should be understood as ideal types, they capture significant characteristics of media systems and

political systems in different countries, and they enable classifications of individual systems. With reference to political system characteristics, the three models differ with regard to patterns of conflict or consensus, majoritarian or consensus government, individual versus organized pluralism, the role of the state, and the importance of rational legal authority (69). They also display different media system characteristics with regard to the degree of political parallelism, the strength and importance of newspapers as opposed to broadcasting media, the degree of journalistic professionalization, and the role of the state in the media system (67).

In the context of this study, it is important to note that both Belgium and Sweden form part of the democratic corporatist model, although Sweden is a more pure example of this model whereas Belgium tends toward the polarized pluralist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 70). Some of the reasons for the mixed character of the Belgian case are related to the division between the Dutch-speaking (Flanders) and the French-speaking parts of the country, reflected in numerous ways and contributing to the fragmentation of the party system and the low level of government stability (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 145, 169). Hence, in this study we focus only on the Flemish media, thereby transforming the Belgian case into a more pure example of the democratic corporatist model.¹

More importantly, both Belgium and Sweden offer variation with respect to the major media. In both countries public service broadcasting (PBS) is strong while simultaneously competing with commercial broadcasting (see table 1). Broadcasting journalism in both countries is furthermore characterized by objectivity and impartiality as guiding norms (Pettersson et al. 2006; Van Aelst 2007). With respect to newspapers, both countries have quality newspapers as well as newsstand tabloids—although newspapers are particularly important in Sweden (see table 1). While Sweden has more than eighty daily newspapers, there are only eight daily newspapers in Flanders (Ward 2004).

With respect to political systems, Sweden is a unitary state while Belgium is a federal state. However, both countries have parliamentary systems and proportional elections. This has led to a fragmented party landscape with seven parties in parliament and, at present, coalition governments. As a consequence, in both countries the debate on who will govern with whom is usually part of the campaign coverage. In Sweden, the Social Democrats are the most important party in terms of size and for having been the governing party for most of the time since the 1930s. In Belgium, government formation has always been complex because of the need to form a compromise between the election outcomes on both sides of the language border. In Flanders, the Christian democrats have been the dominant party for most of the time during the past decades.

As for the interrelationships between the political system and the media system, both countries used to have strong party–press parallelism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Nowadays, the media in both countries are however politically independent and guided by norms of journalistic objectivity and impartiality (De Bens 2003; Pettersson et al. 2006; Van Praag et al. 2006). In both countries, the evolution of journalistic attitudes can be described as changing from reporting in the party's interest, via journalism in the public interest, to eventually what the public might be interested in (Brants and Neijens 2001; Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008).

Table 1. Comparing the Political and Media Systems in Sweden and Belgium

Characteristics	Sweden	Belgium (Flanders)
Political system	Unitary state with parliamentary system	Federal state with parliamentary system
Electoral system	Proportional representation (multimember constituencies)	Proportional representation (multimember constituencies)
Party fragmentation ^a	Highly fragmented (seven parties in parliament)	Highly fragmented (seven Flemish parties in parliament)
Turnout (national elections)	High (average 80 percent)	High (compulsory voting; average 91 percent)
Government ^a	Coalition government (four parties)	Coalition government (five parties)
Media system	Dual public–private broadcasting system, private newspaper business	Dual public–private broadcasting system, private newspaper business
Public service broadcasting audience share of TV news, 2007	High (38 percent), with one strong domestic commercial competitor (22 percent)	High (42 percent), with one strong domestic commercial competitor (36 percent)
Newspaper reading (readers per 1,000 inhabitants, 2002)	High (509), in a strong and diverse market with many local newspapers	Low (204), in a small market with a small number of regionwide newspapers
Journalistic norms and values of broadcasting	Objectivity and impartiality	Objectivity and impartiality
Journalistic norms and values of the press	Nonpartisan press (internal pluralism)	Nonpartisan press (internal pluralism)

a. Refers to the situation in 2008.

To sum up, Sweden and Belgium can be considered as highly similar cases with respect to a number of structural and semistructural characteristics that are important for the interrelationships between media and politics and the media's political news coverage (for a summary, see table 1).

While Sweden and Belgium constitute similar cases, they also offer variation with respect to several important independent variables. Both countries have public service as well as commercial TV news, which allows us to investigate the importance of commercialism as an antecedent of the media's, in this case television's, election news coverage. Both countries have quality newspapers as well as newsstand tabloids, which allows us to study the importance of newspaper type as an antecedent of the election news coverage. By including all these media, we can also investigate the importance of TV versus newspaper news. Furthermore, we can study if country characteristics trump commercialism and media type characteristics as an antecedent of

the media's election news coverage. With respect to the dependent variable, we focus on the framing of politics.

Framing Politics

One of the most central concepts of contemporary political communication research is framing. Although it still constitutes a somewhat "fractured paradigm" (Entman 1993), there is agreement that at its core framing is concerned with how events, issues, or social actors are organized in communicative messages and the thinking of individuals (Tankard 2001).

An important distinction should be made, however, between issue-specific and generic frames (de Vreese 2003), the former being about how particular issues are framed, whereas the latter occur across issues. From the perspective of comparative research, generic frames are particularly important as they can appear across issues or countries (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Generic frames have consequently been at the center of several cross-national studies on election news. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2006), for example, investigated the use of metaframes such as game frame versus issue frame in the election coverage of U.S. and Swedish newspapers as well as the presence of frames such as the news management and conflict frames.

Most comparative studies of election news coverage are limited, however, in that they seldom include both newspapers and TV news. Therefore, they have not been able to probe the importance of media channels and media types as antecedents of the media's framing of election news.

Against this background, this study investigates the Belgian and the Swedish media's use of different frames. In contrast to other studies (Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008; Strömbäck and Shehata 2007), it includes both newspapers and TV news. This allows us to investigate the extent to which the media's use of different frames in their election coverage can be explained by country (used as a proxy for overall political communication system), media channels, and media type. It also allows us to investigate the importance of commercialism as a driving force behind the media's framing of politics. As the study focuses on two highly similar countries, we expect to see similar results in both countries. If the hypotheses below are corroborated in both countries, the support for them would be arguably stronger than if they were confirmed in one country only. To the extent that the results are not similar across the two countries, this would suggest that some structural or environmental factors are of more importance than media types or media channels.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

As noted above, the tendency to frame politics as a game rather than as issues is rather widespread in democracies around the world (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). According to Patterson (1993, 2000b), the main force behind this way of framing politics is commercialism. If this is the case, then commercial TV news should display a

stronger tendency than public service TV news to apply a game metaframe, regardless of country. The same should basically be true of newsstand tabloids in comparison to quality newspapers. Granted, both newsstand tabloids and quality newspapers are commercially run, but where quality newspapers largely rely on advertisements for their revenue and through subscriptions have, comparatively speaking, a stable base of readers, tabloids rely mostly on newsstand sales for their revenue and have to compete for readers on an everyday basis (Thompson 1989). Compared to quality newspapers, tabloids thus have stronger incentives to focus on stories and use frames that are believed to be effective in the battle for people's attention. Hence, our first hypotheses are,

Hypothesis 1 (H1): In both countries, the metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): In both countries, the metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers.

With respect to differences and similarities between media channels in their metaframing of politics, there is virtually no research that has addressed this question. However, if commercialism is the driving force behind the metaframing of politics as a game, then this metaframing should be more common in commercial TV news and the tabloids than in public service TV news and quality newspapers, regardless of country. If *media type* (commercial vs. public service TV news, tabloids vs. quality newspapers) matters most, we should consequently expect to see the same rank order of the various media types with respect to the frequency with which they apply the metaframing of politics as a game. If *media channels* matters most, we should however expect that in both countries either TV news or newspapers will be most prone to apply the game metaframe. As previous research is silent on this point, we have chosen to ask the following research question instead of posing a hypothesis:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Is the rank order of the various media types with respect to the frequency with which they apply the metaframing of politics as a game the same in both countries?

If metaframing of politics is treated as a mutually exclusive category where the dominant frame is either an issue frame or a game frame, another approach might be to investigate the use of various frames on a presence-absence basis. As suggested by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), in many cases a particular frame consists of different subframes. Thus, a horse race frame, where the focus is on winners and losers in the battle for people's votes, might be considered a subframe of the metaframing of politics as a game. The same is true of frames such as the news management frame, the governing frame, and the political strategy frame. Based on the same logic as above, we thus pose two hypotheses and ask one research question, as follows:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): In both countries, strategic subframes will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): In both countries, strategic subframes will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Is the rank order of the various media types with respect to the presence of strategic subframes the same in both countries?

While the metaframing of politics as a game and the use of different strategic subframes can be considered as means to sell the news, another means might be to apply human interest and politicians as individuals frames. By applying these kinds of personalized subframes, the media can soften the otherwise hard political news. Patterson (2000a) has also shown that in the U.S. case the share of news stories with a human interest element increased substantially between 1980 and 1998. While research on media personalization has not reached a consensus on whether it has decreased or increased (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007), most observers agree that one of the most important driving forces is “the values embedded in television and in the privately owned media organizations” (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007: 70; also see Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Other scholars have also pointed out that TV is particularly inclined to focus on personalities and human interest elements (Hart 1999). Commercialism and the logic of audiovisual media thus appear to be two prominent driving forces behind media personalization. Hence, so called personalized subframes can be expected to be more common the more commercialized different media are, regardless of country, and more common in TV news than in newspaper news. Thus, our final hypotheses are,

Hypothesis 5 (H5): In both countries, the personalized subframes will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): In both countries, personalized subframes will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): In both countries, personalized subframes will be more common in TV news than in newspaper news.

Method and Data

To test the hypotheses and investigate the research questions above, this study used quantitative content analysis. In both countries, the aim was to include the most important newspapers and TV news sources, in essence, the newspapers and TV news shows that have the largest audiences and a national reach. In Sweden, the study includes the two PBS news shows, *Rapport* and *Aktuellt*, and the most important commercial TV news show, *TV4 Nyheterna*. In Belgium, the study includes the only two broadcasters with evening news, the PBS news show *Het Journaal* and the commercial news show *Het Nieuws*, broadcast on VRT and VTM, respectively. With respect to newspapers, the study includes the quality morning newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* in Sweden and *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* in Belgium. The study also includes the tabloids *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* in Sweden and *Het Laatste Nieuws* in Belgium.

The time period includes the last three weeks before the 2006 Swedish election, held on September 17, and the 2007 Belgian election, held on June 10. The unit of analysis was the individual news article and, with respect to TV news, thematic news items. Manual selection was used to identify all news stories that explicitly referred to domestic political actors or institutions or the elections. For newspapers, the study includes all articles (of more than ten sentences) published in the main section (excluding editorials or op-eds), while for TV news the study includes all news stories that met the selection criteria above. In all, the study includes 1,187 news stories from the Swedish and 828 news stories from the Belgian media.

The code sheet included a number of variables identified and used in prior research. With respect to the framing variables, the metaframe of politics was coded on a *dominant frame basis*. Coders could choose between either *game metaframe* or *issue metaframe*. The *game metaframe* was dominant if the news story focused on the tactics or strategy of political campaigning, on the horse race and battle for voters, on the images of politicians, on political power as a goal in and of itself, or on politicians as persons rather than as spokespersons for certain policies. The *issue metaframe*, on the other hand, was dominant if the news stories focused on issues and issue positions, on real-life conditions with relevance for issue positions, or on what had happened or what someone had said and done with respect to issues and issue positions. When deciding the dominant frame, coders were instructed to give extra weight to headlines and lead paragraphs.

The other frames used in this study were investigated on a *presence-absence basis*. Briefly, the *horse race frame* was defined as stories focused on winning and losing in the battle for voters, including stories on polls and poll reports; the *news management frame* was defined as stories focused on how parties or candidates act to achieve extensive or positive news coverage or downplay negative stories; the *governing frame* was defined as stories focused on opportunities for governing cooperation and negotiations related to the forming of governing coalitions; the *political strategy frame* was defined as stories focused on why the parties or candidates act as they do with regard to electoral or opinion gains, for example, stories on targeting of different voter groups; the *human interest frame* was defined as stories focused on individuals—their feelings, experiences, traits—that provide a human face to the topic of the stories; and, finally, the *politicians as individuals frame* was defined as news stories focusing on politicians as individuals, that is, persons with different attributes, characters, and behaviors rather than as spokespersons for certain policies or ideologies. The three first of these we conceptualize as strategic subframes and the last two as personalized subframes.²

To test for intercoder reliability, 10 percent of the Swedish news stories were randomly selected to include news stories from all media. Two coders independently coded these stories. The intercoder reliability (Holsti) across the variables used in this study was .92. With respect to Belgium, 5 percent of the news stories were likewise randomly selected to include all news media and were coded independently by two coders. The intercoder reliability was .78.

Table 2. Comparing the Metaframe in Belgian and Swedish Election Coverage

		Issue (%)	Game (%)	<i>n</i>
Public TV	Belgium			
	<i>Het Journaal</i>	70	30 _a	119
Commercial	Belgium			
	<i>Het Nieuws</i>	49	51 _b	82
Public TV	Sweden			
	<i>Rapport</i>	66	34 _a	116
Commercial	Sweden			
	<i>Aktuellt</i>	55	45 _a	97
Quality papers	Sweden			
	<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i>	37	63 _b	86
Tabloids	Belgium			
	<i>De Standaard</i>	35	65 _a	205
Quality papers	Belgium			
	<i>De Morgen</i>	34	66 _a	194
Tabloids	Belgium			
	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	26	74 _a	87
Quality papers	Sweden			
	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	58	42 _a	288
Tabloids	Sweden			
	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	55	45 _a	224
Quality papers	Sweden			
	<i>Aftonbladet</i>	37	63 _b	182
Tabloids	Sweden			
	<i>Expressen</i>	42	58 _b	194

Note: Shared subscripts do not differ at $p < .05$, and different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ (ANOVA tests). Reading example: The Swedish newspapers *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* do not differ significantly from each other (a). However, they both differ from *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, whereas the latter two newspapers do not differ from each other (b).

Results

Game versus Issue Metaframes

H1 predicted that the metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues would be more common in commercial than in public service TV news, while H2 predicted that the game metaframe would be more common in tabloids than in quality newspapers. The main rationale for these hypotheses is the claim that commercialism is the driving force behind the framing of politics as a game. These hypotheses are addressed in table 2.

The results show significant support for both hypotheses, suggesting that media type does matter with respect to the metaframing of politics as a game. To start with H1, in Belgium the game metaframe was significantly more common in the commercial news show *Het Nieuws* (52 percent) than in the PBS news show *Het Journaal* (30 percent). In Sweden, the game metaframe was similarly significantly more common in the commercial news show *TV4 Nyheterna* (63 percent) than in the PBS news shows *Rapport* (34 percent) and *Aktuellt* (45 percent). Thus, while *Aktuellt* had a stronger propensity than *Rapport* to apply the game metaframe, it was still significantly more common on the commercial TV news than on the PBS news.

H2 is also supported, particularly in the Swedish case. The tabloids *Aftonbladet* (63 percent) and *Expressen* (58 percent) clearly applied the game metaframe significantly

more often than did the quality papers *Dagens Nyheter* (42 percent) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (45 percent). In the Belgian case, the tabloid *Het Laatste Nieuws* similarly applied the game metaframe more often (74 percent) than the quality papers *De Standaard* (65 percent) and *De Morgen* (66 percent), although the difference is not significant. Nevertheless, the difference is in the direction of the hypothesis. Interesting to note, though, is that the Belgian newspapers had a stronger overall tendency to apply the game metaframe than the Swedish newspapers, while the pattern is the opposite, although less pronounced, with respect to the TV news. This suggests that while media type is an important antecedent of the media's use of the game metaframe, the media are still positioning themselves mainly in relation to other media in the same national setting. Hence, public service TV news in one country might be more prone to apply the game metaframe than public service TV news in another country, while in both cases they are less likely to apply this metaframe than commercial TV news.

To further probe the importance of media channels and media types with respect to the use of the game metaframe, RQ1 asks about the rank order of the various media and media types with respect to the metaframing of politics as a game. This research question is addressed by table 3, which shows that the rank orders of the different media and media types are similar although not identical in Belgium and Sweden. In both countries, the game metaframe was most frequently applied in a tabloid. The main difference is that this metaframe was more common in the Belgian quality papers than in both the commercial and the PBS news shows, whereas in the Swedish case the game metaframe was more common in the tabloids and the commercial TV news than in the quality papers and the PBS news shows. One reason for this might be that the Belgian newspaper market is smaller than the Swedish market and that there is less differentiation between the Belgian newspapers than between the Swedish newspapers (Biltereyst and Van Gompel 1999).

These observations notwithstanding, the results clearly suggest that media type is a more important antecedent than media channels with respect to the metaframing of politics as a game.

Comparing Strategic Subframes

As noted earlier, while the metaframing of politics works as a mutually exclusive category, it is possible to identify a number of subframes that can be investigated on a presence-absence basis. Although the sum (the metaframing) is greater than the parts (the subframes) and this investigation does not cover all strategic subframes that are conceivable, an investigation into the use of subframes in different media across different countries might yield a more nuanced depiction of the media's framing of politics. In this study, we thus included four frames, investigated on a presence-absence basis, that we conceived of as strategic subframes. They form part of the metaframing of politics as a game, but any news story could include one or several of these (or other) subframes. If commercialism and the need to compete for people's attention on an everyday basis indeed are the driving forces behind the media's tendency to frame

Table 3. Rank Order of Belgian and Swedish Media: Game Metaframe

Belgium	%	Sweden	%
Tabloid 1	74	Tabloid 1	62
Quality paper 1	66	Commercial TV	60
Quality paper 2	65	Tabloid 2	58
Commercial TV	51	Quality paper 1	45
Public TV	30	Public TV 2	43
		Quality paper 2	42
		Public TV 1	34

politics as a game or as a horse race, then the use of strategic subframes should be more common in commercial TV news than in PBS news (H3) and more common in tabloids than in quality papers (H4). To test these hypotheses, we mainly focus on the overall presence of at least one of the four different strategic subframes in the news.

As can be seen in table 4, H3 received only mixed support. In the Belgian case, the commercial news show did apply at least one of the strategic subframes more often than the PBS news show, but the difference is not significant and there is variance across the subframes. The commercial TV news applied the governing frame and the news management frame more often than the PBS news show, which, in turn, applied the horse race and the political strategy frames more often than did the commercial TV news. It is interesting to note that the governing subframe was the most common subframe in both news broadcasts, signifying that the discussion about which parties could form the government was the most common way for the Belgian broadcasters to introduce a strategic frame in their coverage.

With respect to Sweden, H3 is, however, supported. The difference is particularly striking if we compare the commercial TV news to the PBS news show *Rapport*; in the former case, at least one strategic subframe was present in 52 percent of the news stories, as compared to 28 percent in *Rapport*. The difference between the two PBS news shows is, however, also striking, as *Aktuellt* applied at least one subframe in almost half of its news stories. This shows that the two Swedish PBS news shows had different approaches with respect to their use of strategic subframes. Once again, there is also variation across the subframes, with the horse race frame being most common in *Aktuellt*, the governing frame being most common in *Rapport*, and the political strategy and news management frames being most common in commercial *TV4 Nyheterna*.

Turning to H4, this hypothesis must be rejected. In Belgium, the quality papers applied at least one strategic subframe more often than the tabloid, whereas in the Swedish case at least one strategic subframe was about as common in the quality papers as in the tabloids. Once again, there is, however, variation across the subframes. In Belgium, the horse race frame was most common in *De Standaard*, mainly because of the higher number of polls reported in this paper as compared to the other newspapers, whereas the other subframes were most common in *De Morgen*. In Sweden, all

Table 4. Comparing Strategic Subframes in Belgian and Swedish Election Coverage

		Horse Race Frame (%)	Governing Frame (%)	Political Strategy Frame (%)	News Management Frame (%)	One of the Strategic Frames (%)
	Belgium					
Public TV	<i>Het Journaal</i>	9	18	18	8	40 _a
Commercial	<i>Het Nieuws</i>	6	23	12	16	45 _a
	Sweden					
Public TV	<i>Rapport</i>	11	5	19	6	28 _a
	<i>Aktuellt</i>	30	26	32	8	46 _b
Commercial	<i>TV4</i>	28	8	43	13	52 _b
	Nyheterna					
	Belgium					
Quality papers	<i>De Standaard</i>	32	7	21	4	47 _a
	<i>De Morgen</i>	17	8	30	9	49 _a
Tabloid	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	13	5	11	6	28 _b
	Sweden					
Quality papers	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	21	6	20	8	35 _a
	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	20	5	19	15	38 _a
Tabloids	<i>Aftonbladet Expressen</i>	19	6	15	9	34 _a
		20	7	18	6	36 _a

Note: Shared subscripts do not differ at $p < .05$, and different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ (ANOVA tests).

frames, with the exception of the news management frame, were approximately equally common across the newspapers.

These results seem to contrast with the idea that commercial and audience competition logic leads to a higher use of strategic subframes. This interpretation receives further support from table 5, showing the rank order of the media with respect to their use of at least one of the strategic subframes. As can be seen, the rank orders of the Belgian and Swedish media differ substantially, although the relation is complex in both cases. In Belgium, the rank order of the media ranges from quality papers to tabloids, with television news in the middle. In Sweden, the different TV news shows are both at the top and at the bottom of the list, with quality newspapers and tabloids in the middle. If we regroup all media according to media channel, there is no significant difference between television and newspapers in either of the countries.

The fact that this rank order differs from the rank order with respect to the use of the game metaframe might appear paradoxical. We believe however that the main reason is that the sum, that is, the game metaframe, is greater than the parts investigated here, that is, the strategic subframes. In other words, the strategic subframes investigated here do not cover all conceivable aspects of the game metaframe. Another reason

Table 5. Rank Order of Belgian and Swedish Media: Presence of At Least One of the Strategic Subframes

Belgium	%	Sweden	%
Quality paper 1	49	Commercial TV	52
Quality paper 2	47	Public TV 2	46
Commercial TV	45	Quality paper 1	38
Public TV	40	Tabloid 1	36
Tabloid 1	27	Quality paper 2	35
		Tabloid 2	34
		Public TV 1	28

might be that some media choose to sell their election news by applying personalized subframes rather than strategic subframes. This is further investigated below.

Comparing Personalized Subframes

As discussed above, the metaframing of politics as a game and the use of different strategic subframes can be considered as means to attract a broader audience. Another means to achieve the same goal might be to soften the election news by applying personalized subframes, that is, frames that focus on politicians as individuals or on human interest elements. Based on this logic, commercialism should create incentives for commercial TV news and tabloids to apply personalized subframes more often than PBS news and quality newspapers. Hence, H5 predicted that personalized subframes would be more common in commercial than in PBS news, while H6 predicted that these frames would be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers. Table 6 addresses these hypotheses.

To start with H5, in Belgium this hypothesis is supported, as the personalized subframes were significantly more common in the commercial *Het Nieuws* than in the PBS news show *Het Journaal*. Sweden presents a more mixed situation: While the personalized subframes were significantly more common on the commercial *TV4 Nyheterna* (52 percent) than on the PBS news show *Aktuellt* (29 percent), the other PBS news show—*Rapport* (51 percent)—actually resembles the commercial news more than *Aktuellt*. Looking closer at the results in tables 5 and 6, it appears as if *Aktuellt* tried to “sell” its election news by applying strategic subframes, whereas *Rapport* tried to “sell” its election news by opting for personalized subframes. This suggests that different PBS news shows might apply different strategies to reach the same goal, thus in some cases diverging from and in other cases converging with commercial TV news.

H6 receives strong support, however, as the tabloids in both countries applied the personalized subframes significantly more often than did the quality newspapers. This suggests that in both countries the tabloids are far more eager than the quality newspapers are to approach the election contest in a personalized way.

Table 6. Comparing Personalized Subframes in Belgian and Swedish Election Coverage

	Belgium (%)	Politicians as Individual Frame (%)	Human Interest Frame (%)	At Least One of the Personalized Subframes (%)
Public TV	<i>Het Journaal</i>	5	14	18 _a
Commercial	<i>Het Nieuws</i>	11	35	44 _b
	Sweden			
Public TV	<i>Rapport</i>	22	36	51 _a
	<i>Aktuellt</i>	8	19	26 _b
Commercial	<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i>	29	33	52 _a
	Belgium			
Quality papers	<i>De Standaard</i>	28	20	33 _a
	<i>De Morgen</i>	37	21	43 _b
Tabloid	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	60	41	61 _c
	Sweden			
Quality papers	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	12	20	27 _a
	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	12	27	31 _a
Tabloid	<i>Aftonbladet</i>	33	28	44 _b
	<i>Expressen</i>	36	58	70 _c

Note: Shared subscripts do not differ at $p < .05$, and different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ (ANOVA tests).

Table 7. Rank Order of the Belgian and Swedish Media: The Presence of At Least One of the Personalized Subframes

Belgium	%	Sweden	%
Tabloid 1	61	Tabloid 1	70
Commercial TV	44	Commercial TV	52
Quality paper 1	43	Public TV 2	51
Quality paper 2	33	Tabloid 2	44
Public TV	18	Quality paper 1	31
		Quality paper 2	27
		Public TV 1	26

To explore the importance of media channels, and based on the notion that TV as a medium is particularly inclined to focus on personalities and human interest elements, H7 predicted that personalized subframes would be more common in TV news than in the newspapers. This hypothesis must, however, be rejected (see table 7). Overall, in both countries, the tabloids used the personalized subframes more often than or as often as the commercial news shows, while the quality newspapers used them more often than or as often as PBS news shows. This suggests that media type matters more than media channels and does not lend support to the idea that television leads to a more

personalized way of covering politics compared to print media. It should, however, be noted that the coding did not include visuals. Thus, it might be the case that the television news shows left a more personalized impression than the newspapers did.

Discussion and Conclusion

In his work on the U.S. media's coverage of election campaigns, Patterson saw two "threats" against the substantive coverage of issues and policy matters. In his earlier work (Patterson 1980, 1993) he stressed the shifting focus from substance toward strategic horse race coverage dominating election news, while in his later work (Patterson 2000a, 2000b) he also expressed concerns regarding an increasing focus on "soft news," that is, news that are more sensational, personality centered, and human interest oriented than traditional "hard news." In both cases, Patterson perceives commercialization as the driving force, depicting a causal relationship between media commercialism and the tendency to frame politics as a strategic game in which individual politicians compete in universal terms. Mainly because of a lack of variation with respect to the independent variable, that is, media commercialism, in the U.S. case Patterson was, however, never able to convincingly demonstrate support for this causal relationship.

We believe the European context is better suited to test the impact of media commercialism because of the significant presence of public service media and stronger as well as more varied newspaper markets. Hence, the purpose of this article was to compare the media framing of election news in Belgium and Sweden, with a focus on the importance of media channels and media types as antecedents of the media's framing of politics. To this end, we tested seven hypotheses, derived from previous research, and asked two research questions. The hypotheses and results are summarized in table 8.

If hypotheses regarding the importance of commercialism and audience competition on a daily basis hold true, H1 to H6 should have received support. The overall picture is more mixed, however. Both hypotheses about the metaframing of politics were supported: The game metaframe was significantly more common in commercial TV news than in PBS news and in tabloids as compared to quality newspapers. Overall, H5 and H6 were also mainly supported: Personalized subframes were significantly more common in tabloids than in quality newspapers and in commercial TV news as compared to PBS news—although, in the latter case, the result was ambiguous with respect to Sweden.

The results with respect to the use of strategic subframes were more mixed. PBS news did not differ significantly from commercial TV news (Belgium) or on just one of the two news broadcasts (Sweden), and the quality papers used these frames as often as (Sweden) or more often than (Belgium) the tabloids did. As our data do not offer clear answers for this lack of support, we can only speculate briefly about possible explanations. In the case of television news there might be a process of convergence at play, where the competition among broadcasters leads to mutual imitation and similar news programs (McQuail 1998). This seems unlikely, however, as the use of personalized subframes remains different on both commercial and PBS news. Another explanation for the lack of support for the hypotheses regarding the use of strategic subframes

Table 8. Overview of the Hypotheses and Results

	Belgium	Sweden
H1: The metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.	++	++
H2: The metaframing of politics as a game rather than as issues will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers	+	++
H3: Strategic subframes will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.	+	+/-
H4: Strategic subframes will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers.	-	-
H5: Personalized subframes will be more common in commercial than in public service TV news.	++	+/-
H6: Personalized subframes will be more common in newsstand tabloids than in quality newspapers.	++	++
H7: Personalized subframes will be more common in TV news than in newspaper news.	-	-

Note: ++ = confirmed and significant; + = confirmed but not significant; +/- = confirmed in one case but not in the other; - = not confirmed.

might be related to the notion that there are different ways for journalists to engage in a more active way of news reporting. For example, research has shown that an interpretive journalistic style has become more common (Patterson 1993), although there are cross-national differences (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2006). This can be perceived as one reaction to politicians' growing use of political public relations, as a consequence of journalistic professionalization or as a consequence of greater political independence. In either case, it is something more than just a consequence of commercialism.

Notwithstanding this, one of the major conclusions of this study is that media type—commercial versus public service TV news and tabloids versus quality newspapers—is one important antecedent of the media's framing of politics. Most hypotheses related to differences between media types did, in fact, show rather consistent differences between media types in both countries. As argued above, if the hypotheses were corroborated in both countries, this would lend stronger support for them than if they were confirmed in one country only. Thus, that media type matters is one important conclusion of this study.

Media type furthermore appears to trump media channel as an antecedent of the media's framing of politics. There were also differences across countries, suggesting the conditionality of the impact of media types: Regardless of country, commercial as well as public service news, and tabloids as well as quality newspapers, operate in a context that is largely nation specific. Thus, there can be similarities across countries with respect to which media are most likely to frame politics in particular ways, although the share of news stories framing politics in different ways differs significantly, even across similar countries. What is considered "tabloid," "commercial," or "public service" news journalism thus depends on the national context. A second conclusion thus is that country—or

political communication system—matters. Media systems also matter, in the sense that the competition between different media mainly takes place between different media of the same type within the national context, that is, tabloids compete with each other rather than with quality newspapers or TV news, whereas public service TV news sources compete with commercial TV news sources rather than with tabloids or quality newspapers, and so on.

Aside from this, the results suggest that strategic framing and personalized framing are two different ways that the media can sell their election news to audiences that are (perceived to be) less interested in news about politics and elections. To some extent, these strategies are complementary, but not necessarily. Intentionally or not, the media can choose to put more emphasis on one strategy rather than the other, leading to differences in the use of different strategic and personalized subframes. A third conclusion thus is that the effects of commercialism on election news might vary across both countries and media.

Although these results and conclusions provide a first insight, more research is needed for a more comprehensive understanding of the antecedents of the media's framing of politics in various countries. This calls for more cross-national studies of the media's election news, covering more countries that constitute both highly similar and highly different cases and, to transcend campaign-specific contexts, including several elections in each investigated country. More work is also needed to refine our understanding and conceptualization of metaframes versus subframes and to identify other subframes than those investigated here. It is thus hoped that this study can serve as a springboard for further cross-national research on the media's election news coverage and its antecedents.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. Flanders is the largest region in Belgium, containing 60 percent of the Belgian population.
2. In both cases, we believe that the sum is greater than its part, and it might very well be the case that more and other strategic or personalized subframes could be identified. For example, the subframes do not cover situations where the story focuses on why political actors act as they do with respect to issues and issue positions, as opposed to electoral and opinion gains, which are covered by the political strategy frame. As the metaframes were coded on a dominant frame basis whereas the subframes were coded on a presence or absence basis, a story where the dominant metaframe was an issue frame could nevertheless include one or more strategic subframes. For detailed coding instructions, please contact the authors.

References

- De Bens, Els. 2003. "Belgium." In *The media in Europe*, ed. Mary Kelly, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, and Denis McQuail. London: Sage.
- Biltereyst, Daniel, and Roland Van Gompel. 1999. "De vierde macht in transitie. Theorie en toetsing aan de hand van de Vlaamse pers." *Mediagids* 3:61-86.
- Blumler, Jay G., and Michael Gurevitch. 1995. *The Crisis of Public Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Blumler, Jay G., and Dennis Kavanagh. 1999. "The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features." *Political Communication* 16(3):209-30.
- Brants, Kees, and Peter Neijens. 1998. "The Infotainment of Politics." *Political Communication* 15(2):149-64.
- Djerf-Pierre, Monika, and Lennart Weibull. 2008. "From Public Educator to Interpreting Ombudsman. Regimes of Political Journalism in Swedish Public Service Broadcasting 1925-2005." In *Communicating Politics. Political Communication in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Jesper Strömbäck, Mark Ørsten, and Toril Aalberg. Gothenburg, Sweden: Nordicom.
- Entman, Robert. M. 1993. "Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43(4):51-58.
- Esser, Frank. 2008. "Dimensions of Political News Cultures: Sound Bite and Image Bite News in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(4):401-28.
- Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hart, Roderick P. 1999. *Seducing America. How Television Charms the Modern Voter*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lippman, Walter. 1922/1997. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press.
- McQuail, Denis. 1998. "Commercialization and Beyond." In *The Media Policy. Convergence, Concentration and Commerce*, ed. Denis McQuail and Karen Siune. London: Sage.
- Papacharissi, Zizi, and Maria de Fatima Oliveira. 2008. "News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(1):52-74.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1980. *The Mass Media Election. How Americans Choose Their President*. New York: Praeger.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 2000a. *Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 2000b. "The United States: News in a Free-Market Society." In *Democracy and the Media. A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Petersson, Olof, Monika Djerf-Pierre, Sören Holmberg, Jesper Strömbäck, and Lennart Weibull. 2006. *Media and Elections in Sweden*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

- Pfetsch, Barbara, and Frank Esser. 2004. "Comparing Political Communication: Reorientations in a Changing World." In *Comparing Political Communication. Theories, Cases, Challenges*, ed. Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rahat, Gideon, and Tamir Sheafer. 2007. "The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel, 1949–2003." *Political Communication* 24(1):65–80.
- Semetko, Holli A., and Patti M. Valkenburg. 2000. "Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News." *Journal of Communication* 50(2):93–109.
- Strömbäck, Jesper. 2008. "Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3):228–46.
- Strömbäck, Jesper, and Toril Aalberg. 2008. "Election News Coverage in Democratic Corporatist Countries: A Comparative Study of Sweden and Norway." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 31(1):91–106.
- Strömbäck, Jesper, and Daniela V. Dimitrova. 2006. "Political and Media Systems Matter. A Comparison of Election News Coverage in Sweden and the United States." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(4):131–47.
- Strömbäck, Jesper, and Lynda Lee Kaid, eds. 2008. *The Handbook of Election News Coverage around the World*. New York: Routledge.
- Strömbäck, Jesper, and Adam Shehata. 2007. "Structural Biases in British and Swedish Election News Coverage." *Journalism Studies* 8(5):798–812.
- Tankard, James W., Jr. 2001. "The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing." In *Framing Public Life. Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, ed. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy Jr., and August E. Grant. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Thompson, R. Stephen. 1989. "Circulation versus Advertiser Appeal in the Newspaper Industry: An Empirical Investigation." *Journal of Industrial Economics* 37(3):259–71.
- Van Aelst, Peter. 2007. *Toeschouwer, speler of scheidsrechter? Een studie naar de rol van de media in de verkiezingscampagne van 2003*. Bruges, Belgium: Vanden Broele.
- Van Praag, Philip, Peter van Aelst, and Kees Brants. 2006. "Types and Shifts of Media Power. A Conceptual Analysis Illustrated by 50 Years of Political Communication in the Lowlands." Presented at annual meeting of American Political Science Association, Philadelphia.
- de Vreese, Claes H. 2003. *Framing Europe. Television News and European Integration*. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Ward, David. 2004. *A Mapping Study of Media Concentration and Ownership in Ten European Countries*. Hilversum, Netherlands: Commissariaat voor de Media.

Bios

Jesper Strömbäck is Lubbe Nordström Professor and Chair in Journalism at Mid Sweden University, and Research Director at the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University.

Peter van Aelst is assistant professor specializing in political communication at the Institute of Political Science, Leiden University.