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Members of Parliament: Equal Competitors for Media Attention? An Analysis of Personal Contacts Between MPs and Political Journalists in Five European Countries

PETER VAN AELST, ADAM SEHATA, and ARJEN VAN DALEN

Power relations between politicians and journalists are often depicted as an ongoing tango with one actor leading the other. This study analyzes interactions between politicians and journalists not by posing the question of who leads whom, but rather by investigating which politicians are invited to dance in the first place, and which are better positioned to take the lead. Building upon theories and past research into press–government relations, comparative politics, and an economic perspective on journalist–source relations, three groups of hypotheses on a personal, party, and political system level are derived and tested using a unique survey with members of parliament (MPs) in five democratic corporatist countries (Belgium, The Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark). The results display a similar pattern in all five countries where parliamentary experience and institutional position increase the frequency of contacts that MPs have with journalists. While these party variables have a more modest influence on the frequency of contacts, it is also shown that there are clear differences between countries attributed to parliament size in general and higher inter-MP competition in particular.

Keywords press-politics relations, media power, members of parliament

The relationship between politicians and journalists is often portrayed as a dance in which both partners try to take the upper hand (Gans, 1979; Bartels, 1996). Although the question of just who is leading whom is both interesting and relevant, it is also somewhat misleading. It is not only that news-making and policy-making have become so intertwined that it has become extremely difficult to differentiate between them (Cook, 2006). As important is the fact that for many politicians, the question is irrelevant as they are not in a position to lead and never will be. A president or prime minister will often have the upper hand, but this is hardly ever the case for a back-bencher in parliament, at least not with the national news media. The academic debate on the power relations between media and politics has widely acknowledged that politicians with executive power are in a better position to negotiate with the media (Gans, 2003; Bennett, 1990). Yet it has devoted less attention to

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the more subtle differences between similar, “ordinary” politicians that might affect their relationship with the news media (Wolfsfeld & Shaefer, 2006).

The central question of this article has less to do with “who leads the dance” and more to do with “which politicians are invited to dance” and “which ones are better able to take the lead.” Stated differently: Does a political system and the status of an actor in that system influence the politician’s (power) relationship with political journalists? We will attempt to answer this question by comparing the amount and type of contacts members of parliament (MPs) have with political journalists in five European countries. We will not discuss the effects of these interactions on the actual news-making or law-making process, but consider this study on interactions between both groups as a first step to better understanding these effects (Cook, 1998, p. 13).

As most research has been conducted in the United States, and comparative research is absent, very little is known about the role of the political system in this debate. The five countries in this study, namely Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, are all located in the central-northern part of Europe and all have parliamentary systems. In their standard work on political media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) consider all five as belonging to the democratic corporatist model, which differs from the liberal model and the polarized pluralist model. The media systems in the five countries show similar historical developments and relationships with political systems, including early development of the mass press, strong professionalization, extensive state intervention, and well-developed protections of press freedom (Hallin & Mancini; Kelly et al., 2004). To a large extent, the structure of the contemporary media and the current work conditions for journalists are also comparable across the five countries, with competitive, dual broadcasting systems; high but declining paid newspaper circulations; and an elevated level of press freedom.¹ Thus, we will compare *similar* politicians (MPs) within *similar* political media systems. Although the five countries have a similar political system, the parliamentary settings are not identical (see below). Following the experimental similar systems design (Wirth & Kolb, 2004), we will first identify the major and most relevant differences between the parliaments in the five countries and then use these country differences to explain the frequency of personal contacts MPs have with political journalists.

In addition to the frequency of contacts, we will also look at who initiates these contacts. This should provide us with greater insight into the (power) relationship between MPs and journalists (Reich, 2006). The data were gathered via a survey of MPs in the five countries. Before explaining the research design and presenting our results, concrete hypotheses will be formulated regarding why some MPs interact more with political journalists than others. We begin by developing a theoretical framework that shows the mutual benefits of the interaction process.

Toward an Economic Perspective on Journalist–Politician Interactions

The relationship between politicians and journalists is characterized by mutual dependence (Mancini, 1993; Neveu & Kuhn, 2002) and reciprocity (Kepplinger, 2007). Both partners need each other and therefore frequently interact. Following the work of Fengler and Ruß-Mohl (2008) and Niven (2005), we look at this process from an economic perspective where journalists and politicians possess scarce goods and services that are being traded to mutual benefit. In these “market exchanges,” both groups try to maximize their rewards.

The modern politician is dependent upon the news media to get his or her message across and to reach out to voters in order to survive in a competitive political landscape.

This need for attention from the broader public is the most vital reason for a political actor to engage with journalists. However, it is not the only reason. Literature has shown that political journalists possess additional resources and that exchanges with journalists serve (at least) four additional purposes. First, politicians can use interaction with journalists to influence peers. Although the policy process often takes place behind closed doors, a political actor might “go public” in order to convince his or her colleagues. By doing so the broader public becomes involved in the process, even though it is not generally the main target (Herbst, 1998). Leading politicians are especially likely to go public in order to influence other political actors (Hefferman, 2006). For many of the lower ranked politicians, their media strategy is more focused on impressing the leading politicians of their party, which has been shown to be crucial for their position on the electoral list and their reelection (Van Aelst, Maddens, Noppe, & Fiers, 2008). Second, politicians are also motivated to interact with journalists in order to attain access to the politically relevant information they possess. Meeting with journalists is a means of remaining up to date. Most political journalists move constantly between politicians of all parties and take bits of information with them. This makes journalists a valuable source of information, especially for MPs who are often not involved in the internal party decision-making process (Davis, 2007).

Third, politicians also interact with journalists because they value their “expert” advice. Many political journalists are considered experts, having been part of the inner circle of parliamentary politics for longer than many MPs. This makes them especially suitable for advising politicians regarding how to frame a certain policy or present themselves (Davis, 2009). Furthermore, by discussing their ideas with political journalists, politicians also hope to learn something about how the public might react to a certain idea or proposal (Herbst, 1998). Finally, politicians instrumentalize contacts with journalists in order to attack or damage political opponents. In contrast to attacks in parliamentary debates or press releases, journalists provide an anonymous avenue for critiquing one another. By leaking information, a politician can destabilize an opponent or a competitor within his or her own party (Jones, 2006).

Seen from an economic theory perspective, political journalists are rational actors who try to minimize costs in return for maximal benefit (Niven, 2005, p. 250). They will only exchange these resources if they get something of value in return. Political journalists need to know what is going on in the world of politics, they need this information continuously, and they prefer to have it firsthand. Journalists also like to be involved and be seen as an important player in the political process (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). While not all politicians can offer the same resources and time for interaction is limited, journalists will direct their attention to some sources more than to others. We expect that these resources are related to both the personal qualities of MPs and their party affiliations. Furthermore, we believe that the national context influences the “inter-MP competition” over media contacts. We will develop these expectations in the next section.

Hypotheses

From the perspective that attention from journalists is as a scarce good that MPs compete for, we formulate hypotheses on three levels regarding why some MPs might have more contacts with political journalists than others. The first two hypotheses refer to differences between MPs in the five countries, the following two hypotheses are posed at the party level, and the last three refer to expected intra-country differences between MPs on the individual level.

Countries Matter

The five countries under study belong to the democratic corporatist model in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of political media systems. The authors admit that their typology refers to ideal types and that differences between countries of the same type are not exceptional. With reference to the political system, Hallin and Mancini used general characteristics to construct their typology concerning, for instance, levels of conflict versus consensus, majoritarian versus consensus government, and individual versus organized pluralism. According to these characteristics, it makes sense to include Belgium, Sweden, The Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway within the same model (see also Lijphart, 1999). They are all small parliamentary democracies with coalition governments and fragmented party landscapes populated by seven to nine parties in parliament. A more detailed analysis focused on the position of individual MPs within the parliaments of the five countries shows still greater similarities than differences. For instance, in all five countries there is a tradition of strong parties and little room for individual MPs to go against the party line (Laver & Schofield, 1998). However, a few country differences may provide relevant points of comparison, including the number of seats in parliament and the strength of the parliament.

A noteworthy dissimilarity between the countries is the number of seats in the parliament. Sweden, with 349 elected MPs, has almost twice the number of MPs as The Netherlands (150), Norway (165), and Denmark (179). Membership in the national parliament in Belgium is comparable to these nations, but, because of the federal system, the number of MPs is higher. In Flanders, the largest part of Belgium, politicians are active in the national parliament (113), the Flemish parliament (124), and the Brussels parliament (17).² The MPs of the first two parliaments, elected in the same constituencies, can be seen as competitors for the same media attention. This idea of inter-politician competition is supported by earlier research showing that a high number of MPs in a country reduces the power of the individual MP in parliament (Esaïasson & Heidar, 2000). Therefore, our first hypothesis was as follows.

H1: MPs in larger parliaments will have less contact with the press than MPs in smaller parliaments.

In addition to the number of parliamentary seats, the strength or power of a parliament is another characteristic of the political system that could influence the value of attention for MPs and thereby the contacts MPs have with journalists. Members of strong parliaments are more interesting for journalists to cover, since they have more power to influence the workings of cabinet and policy outcomes. Although there is some variation with regard to parliamentary power, it is usually seen in relation to the strength of the cabinet (Woldendorp et al., 2000; see also Pennings, 2003). For the countries in our study, a Belgian parliament dominated by the cabinet stands in contrast to a more balanced relationship in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and The Netherlands.³ This means that the Belgian MPs have a weaker formal position vis-à-vis the cabinet than their colleagues in the other four countries.

A different approach classifies parliaments more on their actual workings, such as the role of committees and opposition parties. According to this classification, Belgium is again the weakest parliament, with The Netherlands occupying an intermediate position below stronger Nordic parliaments (Shugart, 1997; see also Damgaard, 1994). Finally, a small distinction can be made between the three Scandinavian countries regarding the presence or absence of minority governments. Minority governments are more dependent on

support from parliamentary groups and often give parliamentary committees an important role in policy decisions (Shugart, 1997, p. 252, see also Aalberg & Brekken, 2006). In all three Nordic countries minority governments are not uncommon, but Denmark was the only country with a minority government at the time of the survey. Therefore, at this stage, the Danish parliament can be considered to be in the strongest position of all five countries. If we relate this to our own research, we expect the following.

H2: MPs of powerful parliaments will have more contacts with political journalists than MPs of less powerful parliaments.

If we combine H1 and H2, we can expect that MPs in Denmark, followed by those in Norway, will have the most frequent contacts with journalists and Belgian MPs will have the least. The exact position of Swedish and Dutch MPs will depend on whether or not the strength of the parliament (H2) can outweigh the larger inter-MP competition (H1).

Parties Matter

As parties play a central role in all five countries, we can expect party affiliation to have an influence on the relationship with political journalists. First, a major difference might be whether one belongs to a party in government or a party in opposition. As previously stated, one would expect a party in government to be of more interest to journalists because it can actually “do” things and has a larger impact on citizens’ lives. However, this might not count for the party as a whole but only for those politicians who hold government positions. A Belgian campaign study demonstrated that candidates of the government party who have been ordinary MPs receive less media attention as compared to their colleagues in the major opposition parties (Van Aelst, Maddens, et al., 2008). Other research has shown that questioning procedures in parliament are mainly used by opposition parties rather than parties supporting the government (Wiberg, 1995). This means that it is more difficult for MPs from governing parties to play distinctive roles and attract the attention of journalists. Therefore, we expect the following in all countries.

H3: MPs from governing parties will have fewer contacts with the press than MPs from opposition parties.

In addition to the government versus opposition division, parties also differ in their “distance” to the political center. Most European countries have in recent decades witnessed a rise of so-called extreme right or populist right-wing parties (Ignazi, 2003). We expect that MPs of these parties will have fewer contacts with journalists, mainly because their ideas are less in line with political journalists who usually have a more center-left leaning (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Also, in our own survey of political journalists conducted in the same five countries, this finding was confirmed.⁴ This leads us to the following hypothesis.

H4: MPs of extreme right parties⁵ will have fewer contacts with political journalists than MPs from more moderate or left-wing parties.

Individual Position Matters

With most scholarly attention focused on press–government relations (Bennett & Livingston, 2003; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), the relationship between “ordinary” politicians and the media has received far more limited attention. The general idea is that these

members of Congress or MPs have far less negotiating power than politicians with national executive power. However, this weaker standing does not mean that all politicians within a parliament are of the same interest for journalists. Previous research in different political systems, such as the United States (Sellers & Schaffner, 2007), Israel (Wolfsfeld & Shaefer, 2006), and Switzerland (Tresch, 2009), has shown that journalistic attention to MPs is related to their parliamentary standing. Therefore, we expect that political experience, measured by years in parliament, and institutional position, measured by whether or not an MP is the chairperson of a parliamentary committee, lead to a stronger position toward journalists. Hence, our hypotheses regarding political standing are as follows.

H5: The more parliamentary experience MPs have, the more contacts they will have with political journalists.

H6: MPs with a higher institutional position in parliament (chairperson) will have more contacts with journalists.

As politicians have become aware of the importance of the media in politics, they have started to professionalize their public communications. In the United States, this process of professionalization has also influenced the work of Congress members.⁶ In most European countries, professionalization started at a later stage, and the development has been much slower (Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Our survey shows that on average barely 20% of MPs have a personal spokesperson to take care of media relations and that another 18% have another employee for whom press relations form part of his or her job. Thus, having professional support to help in dealing with the media is hardly the norm for the European MPs in our survey. In all five countries, there is variation between MPs in relation to their degree of media professionalization. While, in general, spokespersons facilitate the relationship between journalists and politicians, we expect that MPs who have professional support are better able to attract attention from journalists and will have more frequent contacts with journalists. Again, we expect the following hypothesis to be confirmed in all countries.

H7: MPs who can rely on professional support in their relationship with the media will have more contacts with political journalists.

Data and Methods

To study the interaction process between politicians and journalists, we organized a survey among politicians and journalists in Belgium,⁷ The Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. While the focus of this article is on the frequency and nature of the contacts that MPs have with journalists, we will mainly rely on the MP survey, and will only refer to the survey among political journalists as an additional source. Surveys of MPs have become quite common in most European countries (Esaiasson & Heidar, 2000; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004). However, these surveys devote hardly any attention to the relationship and perceptions of MPs toward political journalists and the news media. Only a limited number of studies have surveyed politicians about their contacts with journalists (Kepplinger & Fritsch, 1981; Larsson, 2002; Strömback & Nord, 2006; Davis, 2007; Van Aelst, Brants, et al., 2008).

In all five countries, a comparable although not completely identical procedure of data gathering was followed.⁸ In the five countries, all MPs were surveyed using a written questionnaire that could be filled out on paper or online (Sweden relied on paper only). Each questionnaire was adapted slightly to the national context, but the core questions

Table 1
Survey and method information

	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Time of survey	February 2006– March 2006	September 2006– January 2007	December 2007– January 2008	February 2007– April 2007	November 2007– March 2008
Closest national election	June 2007	November 2006	November 2007	September 2009	September 2006
Total response rate (%)	85	50	45	51	45
Representativeness of parties in parliament ^a	.988**	.981**	.988**	.983**	.987**
Response rate among chairpersons (%)	79	46	51	40	60

^aBivariate Pearson correlations between the relative presence of parties in parliament compared to the relative presence of parties in the survey.

** $p < .01$.

remained identical. Special care was given to obtaining perfect translations of the survey questions. Several reminders were used to increase response rates. This resulted in a satisfactory response rate of almost 50% in every country (Table 1). The higher response rate in Belgium was mainly a consequence of the fact that researchers visited both the national and the Flemish regional parliament and personally contacted the MPs who had not yet responded. In the other countries, the researchers were not granted such access.

It is important to note that for all countries, the response among parties reflected to a (very) large extent their strength in the parliament(s). This is shown by the correlation between the response rate per party and their presence in parliament. No party refused to cooperate with our research. Furthermore, we believe that our survey satisfactorily reflects variations in political standing. The percentage of chairpersons who participated is always in line with the overall response rate in all five countries. Finally, additional sample-population tests revealed an excellent match in terms of age and gender in the five cases (not shown in Table 1). It proved to be slightly more problematical in Denmark and The Netherlands,⁹ as the data gathering took place close to an election period. Although we made it explicit that our questions referred to routine political periods, this might have led to overreporting of contacts.

The survey among the MPs contained several questions concerning the degree of contact with journalists in general and particular kinds of contact. They were asked how frequently they had each of the following six types of contact with journalists: over the telephone, in the corridors of parliament, over lunch, during press conferences, receptions, or interviews. On the basis of these questions, we constructed a personal contact index that includes the overall frequency of contacts in combination with the frequency of the three most important types of contacts (see below). The index, created on the basis of a principal component analysis, can be considered as a more solid indicator of the contacts MPs have with journalists. The index variable has an average inter-item correlation of .61 and a high

reliability (Cronbach alpha = .86); it also proved to be quite consistent in each country.¹⁰ This index of contacts between MPs and political journalists is our dependent variable of main interest. The independent variables are on a country, party, and individual MP level, as explained above.

Results

The results of this study will be presented and discussed in the order of our hypotheses. This will be done by comparing the frequency of contacts of MPs and political journalists both between and within countries. Additionally, we will explore who, in general, initiates these contacts.

Describing the Contacts of MPs in Comparative Perspective

Table 2 presents the frequency of politicians' contacts with journalists in each country. As can be seen, the frequencies of contacts appear to vary greatly between the countries. These differences are in line with our first hypothesis: Politicians in countries with small parliaments, and hence less inter-MP competition, have more frequent access to journalists. Only 24% of the Belgian politicians and 52% of MPs in Sweden have personal contacts with journalists almost every day or a few times a week, compared to 63% in The Netherlands, 74% in Norway, and 92% in Denmark. The differences between these last three countries are also in line with our second hypothesis. Recall that we expected the frequency of contact in Norway and, particularly, Denmark to be higher as a result of their more powerful parliaments. The data also show that in a country such as Denmark, the variation between MPs is limited, with almost all of them having several contacts a week. In Sweden, The Netherlands, and certainly Belgium, the variation between MPs is much higher, and we expect that our independent variables will have more explanatory power.

This same pattern is present when looking specifically at the six different ways that these contacts have taken place. Three of these forms—receptions, lunches, and press

Table 2
Percentages of MPs per country with at least a few (different types of) contacts per week with political journalists

	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Contact in general	23.5	62.5	92.4	74.1	51.6
Contact by telephone	15.6	52.7	60.5	60.8	17.0
Contact in corridors	13.9	41.8	44.0	46.8	8.3
Interviews	4.0	18.1	30.7	34.6	7.9
Lunches	0.0	2.2	0.0	5.5	0.0
Press conferences	0.6	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.7
Receptions	0.6	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.7
Personal contact index (0–1)	0.51	0.66	0.74	0.71	0.54
<i>N</i> (minimum)	176	91	75	77	144

Note. Percentages are based on the following question: "Since the start of the parliamentary year, how often have you had personal contact with a political journalist?" (5 response categories). The specific types of interaction were asked as a follow-up question. The personal contact index (see methodology section) values are means.

conferences—are not common in any of the countries. For the other three forms of contact with journalists—interviews, meetings in the corridors of parliament, and contact over the telephone—Belgian and Swedish MPs report far less interaction compared to Norwegian, Dutch, and Danish MPs. These three measures of contact are not mutually exclusive. But taken together they strengthen the overall finding that personal contacts between politicians and news media personnel vary systematically between countries. This is also reflected in the mean values of the personal contact index described above and presented in Table 2. It should be noted as well that the MPs' self-reports regarding their contacts with journalists are reflected in the answers of the political journalists in the same countries.¹¹

Explaining the Contacts of MPs

To explain the factors influencing the frequency of contacts with journalists, we use the personal contact index as the dependent variable. Table 3 shows the results of a test of all of the hypotheses via a regression analysis on the integrated and weighted data file, while Table 4 shows the results of a test of the impact of party and individual characteristics of MPs in each country separately while controlling for gender and age.

Our two hypotheses regarding country differences find support in the integrated multivariate analysis. Politicians in Denmark have as many contacts with journalists as their Norwegian counterparts, while Dutch MPs have slightly less. But compared to Sweden and Belgium, the differences become more profound. MPs from these two countries—which have more seats in their respective legislatures than the other three—have less personal contacts with journalists, and these effects persist irrespective of the political standing

Table 3
Explaining the frequency of contacts MPs have with journalists

	Coefficient	SE
Country (reference = Norway)		
Denmark	.003	.021
Netherlands	-.067**	.021
Sweden	-.210***	.023
Belgium	-.218***	.021
Government party (0 = opposition party, 1 = government party)	-.033*	.015
Extreme party (0 = not extreme right wing, 1 = extreme right wing)	-.063**	.022
Years in parliament (0–35)	.006***	.001
Chairperson (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.074***	.019
Spokesperson (0 = no, 1 = yes)	.039**	.016
Intercept	.701***	.020
Adjusted R^2	.333	
N	527	

Note. The coefficients represent unstandardized betas in an OLS regression analysis model predicting the frequency index of personal contacts between MPs and journalists as the dependent variable. The data have been weighted so that MPs from all countries have the same number of respondents.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Explaining the frequency of contacts MPs have with journalists in five countries

	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
Government party	-.017 (.025)	-.034 (.039)	-.043 (.043)	-.069 (.050)	-.043 [#] (.022)
Extreme party	-.115 ^{***} (.031)	-.018 (.073)	.004 (.055)	-.092 (.056)	—
Years in parliament	.003 (.002)	.014 ^{**} (.005)	.010 ^{**} (.003)	.008 [#] (.004)	.011 ^{***} (.003)
Chairperson	.080 ^{***} (.020)	.118 [*] (.058)	.026 (.046)	.129 [#] (.077)	.100 [*] (.049)
Spokesperson	.049 [*] (.022)	.066 [#] (.038)	.038 (.049)	.017 (.049)	.009 (.027)
Male	.051 ^{**} (.019)	.086 [*] (.038)	.082 [*] (.037)	—	.036 (.023)
Age	.001 (.001)	.003 [#] (.002)	.005 ^{**} (.002)	—	.003 ^{**} (.001)
Adjusted R^2	.266	.182	.133	.096	.226
N	162	87	71	76	124

Note. The coefficients represent unstandardized betas and their significance and standard errors in five separate OLS regression models predicting the frequency index of personal contacts between MPs and journalists. See Table 3 for coding details of the independent variables. As there was no extreme right party in Sweden during data collection, this effect could not be calculated.

[#] $p < .10$; ^{*} $p < .05$; ^{**} $p < .01$; ^{***} $p < .001$.

and party of the MPs. This lends support to our hypothesis concerning the higher inter-politician competition faced by MPs of the larger parliaments (H1). The significantly fewer contacts reported by the Dutch MPs in comparison to the Norwegian and Danish MPs indicates that the strength of parliaments might play an additional role (H2). However, the fact that Swedish and Belgian MPs differ to the same degree from their Norwegian colleagues leads us to conclude that H2 is a weaker explanation of interaction with journalists than H1. We will elaborate on the differences between the countries, but will first discuss the inter-country hypotheses.

At the party level, we expected MPs who belong to a party in government to be of less interest to journalists than opposition MPs (H3), the exception being those opposition MPs of the extreme right who are more likely to be avoided by political journalists (H4). The government versus opposition hypothesis finds some support, although the effect is rather modest. MPs of opposition parties appear to interact more with journalists, but the difference between them and government MPs is limited. The negative effect of belonging to an extreme right party appears to be somewhat stronger. In addition to these party effects, it seems as though individual characteristics of MPs matter as well. In particular, our hypotheses regarding political standing find strong and significant support. The more experience an MP has, measured by years in parliament (H5), the more contacts he or she has with journalists. The same is true in relation to being a chairperson in a parliamentary commission (H6). Finally, having professional support in relations with the media (H7) does appear to matter, but not to the same extent as political standing.¹²

If the impact of these variables is investigated in each country separately, the same overall pattern is found, even though not all variables prove to be significant. Although this

is partly explained by the lower N value, which makes significant relations less likely, it is striking that the model performs better in the Belgian than in the Danish case, for example. Do larger parliaments perhaps show greater variation than smaller ones? The data lend some support to this conclusion, even though the evidence is not clear-cut.

Overall, the hypotheses regarding political standing find the most consistent support in the separate countries. Parliamentary experience and being a chairperson of a parliamentary commission are significant (or come close to significance; $p < .10$) in four of the five countries. The party variables are hardly ever significant, but the effects always go in the same direction. As expected, belonging to the extreme right has proved to be a very powerful variable within the Belgian context. The isolated political position of the Vlaams Belang, a consequence of the *cordon sanitaire*, an agreement among the other parties not to work with the VB, also isolated its MPs from the news media. Most political journalists in Belgium not only differ from this party ideologically, but also consider the party less relevant politically. Finally, men generally appear to have more frequent contacts than their female colleagues in parliament. Age has a negative impact on the frequency of contacts—but only in Sweden and Denmark. Younger MPs in those countries appear to have more personal contacts with journalists than older MPs. Due to privacy regulations, gender and age effects could not be tested on the Norwegian data and were therefore left out of the overall analysis presented in Table 4.

Who Initiates the Contacts?

The frequency of contacts is our first and most important indicator of which MPs are in a better position to attract attention from journalists and thus to benefit more from the goods journalists carry with them. This being said, the frequency of interactions provides us with little information concerning their relevance. For instance, a politician can call a journalist to offer his or her version of the story, but the journalist might consider it to be irrelevant. One way to address this issue is to investigate the extent to which personal contacts are initiated by the MPs or by journalists. Whether an MP is the initiator of the contacts or not can be viewed as an indicator of his or her respective power in the relationship with journalists (Reich, 2006). Thus, a politician with a strong position is more often contacted by a journalist than a weaker one. Politicians with a weaker position, on the other hand, probably must take more initiatives by themselves.

As can be seen in Table 5,¹³ the number of MPs who either do not have personal contacts with journalists or initiate those contacts on their own appears to be largest in Belgium, in which 35% belong to this category. It seems that in the Belgian market for journalistic attention, MPs have to make a larger effort to sell themselves to journalists than in the other countries studied. On the other hand, the percentage of MPs who say that journalists most often initiate the contacts is not very low in Belgium compared to the other countries. Again this confirms the fact that the population of Belgian MPs is the most internally diverse, with some of them in a very isolated position, while others have frequent interactions with political journalists. Overall, journalistic initiatives are least frequent in Norway and most common in The Netherlands.

It was shown previously that both the Belgian and Swedish MPs had (to the same extent) fewer contacts compared to the MPs of Norway and Denmark. If we also take into account who initiates those contacts, Sweden and Belgium become somewhat more distinct. In the Swedish case only 13% of MPs, compared to more than a third in Belgium, indicated that they generally had to initiate the contacts (or had none at all). The initiative variable can also adjust our finding that there is no difference between Danish and

Table 5
Extent to which personal contacts are initiated by MPs or journalists (%)

	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Norway	Sweden
MP or staff member most of the time/no contact with journalists	35.2	5.3	2.6	16.1	12.7
Equally divided between MP and journalist	23.5	25.3	50.7	54.3	38.2
Journalist most of the time	41.3	69.5	46.8	29.6	49.0
<i>N</i>	196	95	77	81	157

Note. MPs were asked “Who usually initiates these personal contacts? You or a staff member, or the journalist?”

Norwegian MPs, as clearly more MPs in Norway take the initiative in contacting journalists. This is in line with H2 concerning the strength of parliament. However, the fact that a large majority of Dutch MPs state that the initiative is mostly taken by journalists goes against this hypothesis. These findings could be traced back to what Pfetsch (2001) called the political communication culture of a country, where certain informal rules and practices guide the process of interaction. But the findings likely also reflect the prevailing power relationship between journalists and politicians, as the more these contacts are initiated by politicians themselves, the less likely they will lead to actual results such as (favorable) news coverage.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to render more transparent the “hardly visible social arena” in which journalists and politicians exchange information (Reich, 2006, p. 504). As a point of departure, we argued that all politicians, and in particular “ordinary” politicians without executive power such as MPs, rely on contacts with journalists in order to survive in a highly competitive political marketplace. On the basis of survey data from MPs in five countries, we have attempted to explain why some politicians are better able than others to engage in frequent exchanges with journalists on a regular basis. As we discuss in this concluding section, these findings have implications for the careers of individual politicians as well as for power structures within political parties.

Overall, our analysis showed a similar pattern in all five countries. In line with previous research, the importance of political standing as a factor that strengthens a politician’s position toward the media is confirmed. Politicians with more experience and a higher institutional position interact more with journalists. Additionally, professional support in media relations can increase the frequency of contacts. The effects of belonging to a particular party proved to be more modest, although still significant. It should be stated that not all of these factors were as strong in every single country, but that the direction of all effects was always identical. Therefore, we believe they can be confidently generalized to democratic corporatist countries, and likely further.

The preference of journalists for experienced politicians with a prominent position in parliament means that many less experienced and less influential MPs have greater difficulties benefiting from interactions with journalists and, thus, have more trouble getting their parliamentary work visible to the public. The leverage an MP has vis-à-vis the media is to a large extent a structural given rather than something amenable to change through efforts such as active networking with journalists. More experienced politicians with more prominent positions in the parliament have more resources to offer and are better able to build and maintain intense contacts with journalists. The young eye-catching newcomer in parliament who easily and frequently attracts the journalistic spotlight is the exception rather than the rule. Overall, journalistic attention appears to be a consequence rather than a cause of political power.

This conclusion is at least true for day-to-day interactions. We should, however, not exclude the possibility that in the long run journalistic attention might also have an impact on political power by influencing which politicians have the best chance of remaining in parliament for a longer time or which politicians have the best chance of being selected as the chairperson of a committee. Politicians who generate a great deal of positive publicity for their party might have a better chance of obtaining important positions within their party. Knowing how to sell oneself and one's party in the media might be important qualifications, with party headquarters looking for candidates who possess such knowledge and skills. Kepplinger and Fritsch (1981) see this as one of the few opportunities for individual MPs to make a political career outside of the traditional party power structures. Similarly, Sellers and Schaffner (2007) see opportunities for MPs who are willing to engage in less controlled press events that can offer journalists more "unexpected" information.

These career opportunities are different for politicians in different political contexts. In line with our expectations, we found that MPs of a larger parliament (Sweden), or of a federal state with many MPs in a comparable position (Belgium), had significantly fewer contacts with journalists than MPs in smaller parliaments (Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark). From an economic perspective, this can be seen as a price they pay for the more competitive "market" in which they find themselves. Because of the fierce competition for media attention, young and less powerful MPs in countries with large parliaments such as Belgium and Sweden have to make an even greater effort to obtain frequent and valuable contacts with journalists. This gives them less chance to present themselves in the media and makes them more dependent on party headquarters for reelection, since it is harder for them to make a career outside the traditional party power structures. From this perspective, large parliaments appear to enforce party discipline and the power of party leaders rather than leading to a broader and a more democratic form of representation.

These findings contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the power struggle between media and politics by stressing the importance of differentiating between politicians within and between countries and underscoring the dangers of considering politicians as monolithic unified actors within national contexts. However, more in-depth research is required in order to fully comprehend how these interactions work and what their consequences are for both the law-making and news-making processes. In this article, the focus has been on the influence of the political context on the "market exchanges" between politicians and journalists, but further research should include more detailed comparative analyses of media systems and journalistic cultures. Finally, we also need a theoretically broader, integrated framework to make sense of the negotiating process between media and politics. We believe that the "economic viewpoint" is worth pursuing and can become a useful model to describe and analyze the relationship between journalists and politicians.

Notes

1. See European Journalism Centre (ejc.net/media_landscape) and Freedomhouse (<http://www.freedomhouse.org>).

2. The responses of the MPs of these three parliaments were not significantly different on the questions on their contacts with journalists.

3. If one mainly looks, as Lijphart (1999) does, at the duration of the cabinet as an indication of power of the parliament, then the Belgian parliament receives a higher score, but in combination with the powers of government over parliament (such as the possibility of governments dissolving parliament and ignoring the loss of a vote of confidence) they hold a weaker position than the other four parliaments.

4. The political journalists in the five countries were asked to place themselves on a 10-point left–right scale. The average score in all countries ranged from 3.9 (Belgium) to 4.9 (Denmark). In none of the countries did more than 5% of the journalists place themselves on the far right of the political spectrum (score of 8–10).

5. We included Vlaams Belang (Belgium), Lijst Pim Fortuyn (Netherlands), Fremskrittspartiet (Norway), and Dansk Folkeparti (Denmark). In Sweden no extreme right party existed at the time of the survey.

6. By the mid-1980s, 75% of U.S. Congress members were already reliant on a full-time press secretary (Cook, 1989, p. 72).

7. The Belgian survey was only conducted in the Dutch-speaking part of the country (Flanders), containing 60% of the population.

8. The surveys in the five countries were coordinated by Michiel Nuytemans, Stefaan Walgrave, and Peter Van Aelst (University of Antwerp) in Belgium; Kees Brants, Philip van Praag, and Claes de Vreese (University of Amsterdam) in The Netherlands; Arjen van Dalen, Erik Albæk, and Claes de Vreese (University of Southern Denmark) in Denmark; Toril Aalberg and Ann Iren Jamtøy (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) in Norway; and Jesper Strömbäck and Adam Shehata (Mid Sweden University) in Sweden.

9. In The Netherlands, the data gathering was disrupted by the unexpected fall of the government at the end of June and the subsequent elections in November. Consequently, the data file consists of both “old” and new MPs. Their answers were compared and were not significantly different for the variables used in this study.

10. The principal components analysis produced a two-factor solution (using varimax rotation). Both factors explained 67% of the total variance. Four items showed high factor loadings on the first dimension: overall frequency of contacts, interviews, meetings in the corridors of parliament, and contact over the telephone. Three items showed high factor loadings on the second dimension: contacts during press conferences, receptions, and lunches. The eigenvalues were 3.23 for factor 1 and 1.46 for factor 2. This factor solution proved almost identical within each country apart from two points of difference. First, lunch meetings loaded highly on the first factor in the Belgian case while showing moderate loadings on both factors for Denmark and Norway. Second, meetings in the corridors of parliament loaded much higher on the second factor in the Swedish case. The final “personal contacts” index, based on the first dimension, had the following Cronbach alpha values: Belgium, .82; Netherlands, .86; Norway, .87; Sweden, .82; and Denmark, .80.

11. For instance, in Sweden political journalists confirm that they hardly meet with politicians in the corridors of parliament; on the other hand, they report a much higher frequency of contact with politicians over the telephone than is reported by Swedish MPs. This may indicate that journalists mainly interact with a limited number of top politicians and not with the large number of MPs in their country.

12. Additional tests of potential interaction effects revealed no interactions between political standing (i.e., parliamentary experience and being a chairperson) and whether the MP belongs to a governing or opposition party.

13. The information on initiatives is based on self-reported measures and might, therefore, be biased. However, there are no obvious reasons to believe a tendency to over- or underestimate initiatives varies systematically between the five countries. Furthermore, we also asked the same question

to political journalists in the five countries and their answers largely confirm the answers of the MPs. This was especially the case in The Netherlands, where journalists indicate that politicians hardly ever take the initiative, and in Belgium, where one out of four journalists indicate that in most cases politicians contact them more than the other way around.

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