

Minimal or Massive? The Political Agenda- Setting Power of the Mass Media According to Different Methods

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Abstract

The debate on the media's agenda-setting power is not settled yet. Most empirical agenda-setting studies using time-series analyses found that the media matter for the political agenda, but the size of the found media effects remains often modest. This nuanced view on media impact seems to contradict with the perceptions of politicians. Our comparative survey of members of parliament in four small parliamentary democracies—Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark—shows that they consider the mass media to be one of the key political agenda setters directly competing with the Prime Minister and the powerful political parties. This article further explores the inconsistency between “objective” and “subjective” findings. We develop six possible explanations for the contradicting findings produced by both methods and formulate concrete suggestions to improve both methods and diminish the gap between them.

Keywords

MP survey, Political Agenda-setting, Time-series

Introduction

Both in communication as in political science scholars have examined to what extent the mass media set the political agenda. In communication science, agenda-setting is probably the single most used approach to grasp media effects (Graber 2005). The overwhelming majority of these studies investigated the effect media coverage has on

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the issue priorities of the *public*. A much smaller, and more recent, stream of research by both communication and political scientists has been devoted to scrutinizing the effect of mass media coverage on the *political* agenda (for an overview, see Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Most of these studies drew on sophisticated quantitative time-series analysis assessing the time sequence between media attention and consequent attention, in words or deeds, by politicians. By and large, these studies confirm that the media matter for the political agenda: when media cover certain issues, chances increase that these issues will also pop up on the political agenda afterwards.

Whereas most time-series studies did record media effects on politics, the *size* of the found media effects remained modest or limited to specific issues or agendas. Media measurably matter for the political agenda but scholars agree that the media certainly are not the main driver dominating what goes on in politics. Political parties, interest groups, the cabinet, real-world events, etc. are most likely responsible for the bulk of the issues politics cares about and pays attention to.

This nuanced view on media impact has recently been challenged. Relying on a survey of members of parliament (MPs) in Belgium, Walgrave (2008) found that politicians think the media's agenda-setting impact is *very* high; they consider the mass media to be one of the key political agenda setters directly competing with the Prime Minister and the powerful political parties. In-depth interviews of Davis (2007) among MPs in the United Kingdom seem to confirm these findings on the large agenda-setting power of the media, although in a less straightforward sense. Thus, "objective" time-series studies based on records of behavior of political actors and subjective studies based on the perceptions of the political actors appear to be in discord regarding the size of the media's impact on politics. Objective studies conclude that there is measurable impact but that it is modest or even small, while the available subjective studies contradict this and suggest that the media have a very large impact on the topics that get political priority.

This article, first, further explores the inconsistency between objective and subjective findings. Second, the study suggests explanations for the contradicting results. We start with briefly discussing the results of the available objective time-series studies. Then, we present new data replicating the Belgian subjective agenda-setting study in three similar, small European countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Netherlands); in each country, MPs were surveyed. This new evidence strongly supports the Belgian findings: in all countries politicians reckon the media to be a very powerful agenda-determining actor. This "consistent inconsistency" according to the method employed, is further discussed in the next part of this article. We develop six possible explanations for the contradicting findings produced by both methods. In the conclusion, we formulate some concrete suggestions to improve both methods and diminish the gap between them.

Time-Series Analyses: Modest Media Impact

Many students including media coverage as independent variable in their political agenda-setting¹ studies found that mass media coverage affects the political agenda

to some extent. Most of this work relied on a time-series design testing to what extent the actual behavior of political actors regarding specific issues—for example, the actions of MPs in parliament—is preceded in time by media coverage about the same issues. Causality is deduced from the fact that media coverage precedes political action while controlling for preceding political action (autoregression: the effects of past attention on present attention). These studies rely on hard behavioral data: official parliamentary records coding all oral questions, the minutes of ministerial meetings, or the speeches given by the president. The mass media's impact is inferred indirectly based on the observable behavior of individual actors and measurements of media coverage.

The political agendas these studies investigated were diverse: parliament or Congress (Trumbo 1995; Soroka 2002a, 2002b; Vlienghart and Roggeband 2007; Van Noije et al. 2008), government (Walgrave et al. 2008), the President (Gilberg et al. 1980; Wanta and Foote 1994; Wood and Peake 1998; Edwards and Wood 1999), political parties (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), or public spending (Cook and Skogan 1991; Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993). Findings of these studies are mitigated. Of the nineteen empirical studies discussed by Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), eight studies found considerable impact of one or more outlets on a political agenda, four found impact, and seven concluded there was weak or no media impact.

The time series-based research agenda especially highlighted the conditionality of the media's influence on the political agenda. The influence of the mass media varies considerably across issues (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), with for instance a larger agenda-setting role for the media on foreign policy (e.g., Wood and Peake 1998; Soroka 2003). A crucial distinction is that between symbolic and substantial political agendas. Most studies finding relatively strong media effects focused on parliamentary debates or politician's public communications and less on real policy measures with tangible consequences (e.g., Edwards and Wood 1999; Van Noije et al. 2008). Recently, Vlienghart and Walgrave (2010) further examined the contingency of the media's effects on parliamentary questions. They found that media have a larger impact on opposition than on government party MPs, that small parties are more affected than large parties, that MPs tend to adopt media coverage when it regards issues their party "owns," and that the media's agenda-setting power increases over time.

In sum, the mass media matter for the political agenda most objective studies suggest. The effects are *contingent*, though, not on the entire system or all political agendas are affected to the same extent and, most importantly, the effects are *modest*—the explained variance of the models is most of the time limited. This conclusion should be put in perspective. Time-series studies take the inertia (autoregression) of both the media agenda and the political agenda into account: media tend to keep covering issues they covered before while political actors tend to keep the things high on their agenda that they prioritized before. Thus, the additional media effect size may seem small *in comparison* to the large autoregressive effect. Also, the studies that explicitly incorporated both the media-to-politics as the politics-to-media effects and that focused

on reciprocal effects concluded most of the time that the political agenda codetermines the media agenda, but that the media matter more for politics than vice versa (e.g., Van Noije et al. 2008; Walgrave et al. 2008). So in comparison with the opposite causal effect, media effects on politics may not be that modest. Still, the result remains that the media can only explain a small part of the variance in political attention over time and that part of the media agenda is determined by politics. The explained variance of most models is small, which means that there are a lot of (unmeasured) exogenous shocks or innovations that seem to end up on the political agenda without the media's intervention (although these shocks too could be the result of coverage of still other media outlets that are not measured in these studies). So we believe it is fair to state that, by and large, time-series studies concluded that the media matter for politics but certainly are not the primary political agenda setter.

MP Surveys: Powerful Mass Media

The succinct summary of the political agenda-setting literature shows that there is a modest effects consensus. However, these objective findings contrast with how politicians themselves perceive the media's impact. An earlier survey of MPs in Belgium (Flanders)² showed that these actors consider the mass media to be one of the most dominant political agenda setters (Walgrave 2008). To be able to generalize these findings, the Belgian survey was replicated among MPs in Denmark, Netherlands, and Sweden. These countries are all comparatively small, European democracies with a proportional electoral system, a fragmented party system, and coalition governments. In their standard work on political media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) consider these four countries as belonging to the "democratic-corporatist model" with similar historical developments and relationships with political systems, including early development of the mass press, strong professionalization, and strong state intervention with protection of press freedom.

In the four countries, an analogous procedure of data gathering was followed, resulting in a satisfactory response rate of almost 50% in each country. For more details on design and data gathering, see the appendix. The survey contained a broad range of questions related to MPs' perception of media coverage and media power. Regarding the media's agenda-setting power, we first confronted the MPs with the general statement "It's the media who decide which issues are important, politics have little impact on this matter" (*totally disagree* to *totally agree*; 1–5).³ The results in Table 1 show that in all four countries MPs consider the mass media to be an important political agenda setter. Only a handful of politicians totally disagree and consider the media's agenda-setting power to be small. Taken together, almost two thirds of the MPs in our sample (totally) agree with the proposition that the media set the political agenda more than politics itself. There are significant differences between countries, though (see analysis of variance in Table 1). Media are perceived to be most powerful in Sweden and Belgium while in the Netherlands and Denmark somewhat more politicians doubt the media to have a large agenda-setting impact.

Table 1. “It’s the Media Who Decide Which Issues Are Important, Politics Have Little Impact on This Matter”: Percentage Agree and Disagree among MPs in Four Countries

	Sweden	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark
Totally agree	21.3	21.7	14.6	8.3
Agree	54.2	50.3	36.0	38.9
Agree nor disagree	11.6	15.3	28.1	33.3
Disagree	10.3	11.1	18.0	19.4
Totally disagree	2.6	1.6	3.4	0.0
Average (1-5)	3.81	3.79	3.40	3.36
N	155	189	89	72

Note: A one-way analysis of variance showed significant differences across the countries, $F(3, 487) = 7.79, p < .000$. Tukey’s post hoc comparisons of the four groups indicate that Sweden differs significantly from the Netherlands ($p = .006$) and Denmark ($p = .001$) but not from Belgium. The Netherlands differs from Belgium ($p = .011$) and Sweden ($p = .006$) but not from Denmark.

Second, we use a series of specific questions referring to the power of different actors to initiate a new political issue: “How often do the following actors succeed in setting a new problem on top of the political agenda?” (*never to very often*; 1–5). Respondents were asked to answer this question not only for radio and TV and the written press but also for the prime minister, ministers, political parties, interest groups, and MPs. Again, the media are attributed great agenda-setting powers. An overwhelming majority of MPs (80%) indicate that radio and TV often manage to set new issues on top of the political agenda, and two thirds believe the written press has this power (results not shown in table). The perception that the audiovisual media are more powerful than newspapers and magazines is a general tendency and applies to all four countries. This perception challenges earlier findings from objective studies that newspapers affect the political more than the audiovisual media (Walgrave et al. 2008). Regarding other “power indicators” in the same survey, not specifically related to political agenda setting, MPs tend to attribute more power to especially TV than to newspapers as well. TV is largely considered to be the most important medium in general and this effect appears to spill over to the specific questions about agenda setting.

That MPs believe specific media to set the political agenda frequently is revealing but should be put in perspective. In fact, the media’s agenda-setting power can only be really evaluated when *compared* with the power of other political actors. Therefore, Table 2 compares the average score of both media types with the power of five alternative agenda setters: Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, political parties, interest groups, and the MPs themselves. The table contains the results of subtractions of the mean score (on scale of 1–5: *never to very often*) of the media minus the score of the alternative agenda setter. A negative score refers to the fact that the alternative agenda setter is considered to have more power than the mass media, a positive score means that the

Table 2. Political Agenda-Setting Power Attributed to Radio and TV and to the Written Press as Compared to the Political Agenda-Setting Power of Other Political Actors in Four Countries

	Sweden	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark
Radio and TV				
Prime minister	0.23a	-0.07b	0.18a	-0.19b
Ministers	0.62a	0.08b	0.14b	0.26b
Political parties	0.71a	0.23b	0.63a	1.04c
Interest groups	0.73a	0.65a	0.58a	0.91b
MPs	1.34a	1.26a	0.52b	1.23a
Average (1-5)	0.73	0.44	0.41	0.65
<i>n</i>	154	185	87	69
Written press				
Prime minister	-0.03a	-0.34b	-0.11a	-0.56b
Ministers	0.37a	-0.19b	-0.16b	-0.10b
Political parties	0.46a	-0.05b	0.33a	0.67a
Interest groups	0.48a	0.38a	0.29a	0.54a
MPs	1.09a	0.98a	0.22b	0.86a
Average (1-5)	0.47	0.16	0.11	0.28
<i>n</i>	152	185	87	69

Note: Table entries are mean score (1-5) for media subtracted of mean score (1-5) for alternative agenda setter; higher score = more powerful mass media. Shared subscripts do not differ at $p < .05$ and different subscripts differ at $p < .05$ (analysis of variance). Reading example: The perception of Swedish and Dutch MPs of the agenda-setting power of the prime minister compared to radio and TV does not differ (a). But their perception does differ from Belgian and Danish MPs (b).

media prevail over the alternative agenda setter. For instance, Swedish MPs on average believe radio and TV to set the political agenda more often than the prime minister. The difference between both actors (0.23) is small but significant.⁴

Table 2 indicates that the media matter a lot even in comparison with the traditional political powers. Only one actor seems to outweigh the media: the prime minister (PM). In all countries, the PM sets the agenda more frequently than the written press and in two countries the PM also overshadows radio and TV. But even the PM's agenda-setting power does not systematically prevail over the impact of radio and TV—in Sweden and in the Netherlands the media are considered more powerful (or the PM as weaker). Cabinet ministers also are frequent agenda setters but compared to radio and TV they are overpowered in all countries while in three of the four countries they are able to defeat the print press. All other actors are dominated by the mass media—except in Belgium where MPs think political parties still stand up to the written press, not surprising since Belgium is considered as a prime example of a partitocracy (De Winter et al. 1996). Interest groups and especially the MPs themselves are, in all countries, largely surpassed by both media types.

Comparing the four countries in more detail reveals intercountry differences. In relative terms, Swedish MPs perceive the mass media to be the most important and consider themselves to be the weakest agenda setters of all actors in all countries. On average, the Dutch MPs attribute the least agenda-setting weight to the mass media, and they perceive their own position as less “deprived” compared to the media than the MPs in the other countries. The Belgian and Danish MPs score in the middle; they have very similar perceptions of the mass media, certainly compared to their own agenda-setting power.

Further analyses of both the general and the more specific measures of perceptions of the media’s agenda-setting power (results not shown in table) revealed that there hardly are systematic differences in media power attribution among MPs in the same country. Across the board, all types of MPs consider the media to affect the political agenda to a very large extent. For example, it is not the case that more powerful MPs—committee chairs or more experienced MPs—have a different perception nor do we find that the frequency of media contacts is related to media power perceptions, and the same applies to whether an MP belongs to a government or an opposition party.⁵

Although we found there to be some differences between countries, the overall picture is exceedingly clear: MPs in our sample of four democratic-corporatist countries do consider the media to be a very important, sometimes even the single most important, political agenda setter.

Why These Diverging Results?

Triangulation is a classic research strategy in which scholars tackle a phenomenon from different angles and with different designs and, by combining the evidence gathered with different techniques, attempt to increase knowledge and the robustness of their findings. In the case of the political agenda-setting power of the mass media, though, triangulation by relying on time-series studies and on elite surveys does not appear to lead to complementary but rather to contradictory results. The data from subjective MP surveys in four democratic-corporatist countries (according to Hallin and Mancini’s well-known typology) seem to directly challenge the findings from earlier objective time-series studies: the media’s impact on the political agenda is not modest, the elite respondents claim, but very substantial. These different findings cannot be attributed to the specific countries under study because time-series studies in democratic-corporatist countries (e.g., Walgrave et al. 2008; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010) also came to the conclusion that media influence is significant, but limited and contingent. How can we make sense of this? How should we evaluate these apparently contradicting findings and what can we learn from them? Is it the objective studies that miss a part of the picture or are political actors exaggerating the media’s power? At this stage we believe probably both are true. We see six possible explanations for the apparent mismatch.

1

If the media set an issue on the agenda is this then proof of autonomous media power or rather of effective news management by political actors? The surveyed elites seem convinced that the media set the agenda on their own, without interference of politicians. This is hard to believe. Plenty of research has shown that politicians, and governments in particular, have become ever more sophisticated in “guiding” media coverage (Davis 2000; Heffernan 2006; Bennett et al. 2007; Pfetsch 2007). Our survey among political journalists in the same four countries⁶ shows that more than four of five political journalists, and two thirds of the MPs, agree with the statement that politicians (frequently) use journalists by leaking information to them.

Hence, it may often be the case that journalists do set the agenda but are not the real initiators or advocates of a certain issue (Davis 2007). We believe MPs attribute agenda-setting power to the media even when the real initiators are not journalists but *other* politicians who affected the media agenda at a previous point in time. This may even be the case when the respondents know for a fact that the issue has been initiated by another politician; individual politicians nevertheless experience the initiative as if it was driven by media coverage or at least believe that to become a successful agenda setter a politician has to go through the media to influence the political agenda. For example, governments and ministers to some extent steer the media agenda—they certainly do so more than individual MPs—and MPs then have to react on these media stories and take a position. As time-series studies most of the time include only a part of the political agenda, they focus on questions in parliament, for example, and ignore the governments’ actions; they most of the time cannot tease out this politics-to-media and subsequent media-to-politics causal chain. Surveys cannot either, but they do tend to conflate both effects and may overestimate the media’s autonomous power. Time-series studies mostly ignore these indirect effects and consider the initial political trigger of media attention as an external shock or innovation of the media agenda.

Similarly, the “real” initial agenda setters may not only be other political actors but also the general public. Although the debate on whether politicians have become more or less responsive to the public agenda has not been settled (Manza and Cook 2002), there is little discussion about the fact that political actors nowadays have much more and better information about the issues the public is concerned about (Geer 1996). The same applies to journalists. For example, in the four countries under study public opinion polls are ever more present, often on request from media companies. As a consequence, journalists are aware of the issues that are on top of the public’s mind, devote attention to those issues, and, by doing so, appear to set the political agenda autonomously.

2

Another explanation of the diverging outcome in both types of studies is related to the strong tendency of the media to stick to its own agenda. Especially when the media start devoting attention to an issue, a sort of self-propelling mechanism can start up

and mass media imitate other media in a spiral of attention and mutual reaction (Vasterman 2005). This strong intermedia agenda-setting effect (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008) makes it difficult for individual politicians, and certainly for relative powerless MPs (see below), to get access to the media and to resist to the wave of media attention. It is very likely that individual MPs think about these processes of media “autoregression” when they attribute power to the media. While individual media outlets may not be very influential as such, the mass media as a whole certainly are a tremendous force for individual MPs especially when the coverage is consonant across outlets and when the mass media are in “stampede mode.” Just as mentioned in the previous point, the reason the media rush toward a hot topic in the first place may be that, initially, a relevant political actor deliberately triggered the media storm. But this does not matter for an individual politician. Even when the entire media agenda would ultimately have been caused by preceding political attention, the mass media agenda and its inertia would still present an impressive force for individual politicians. This effect probably strengthens the overarching belief of MPs that they, as individuals, have to compete with the media as a unified actor rather than with an individual journalist (see also Cook 2006).

3

MPs might overestimate or misjudge the agenda-setting power of the media because they do not distinguish between different forms of media power. Our survey contained several other statements about media power, and the answers to those questions strongly correlated with the agenda-setting questions. For instance, many MPs who are strong believers in the agenda-setting power of the media also agreed with the statement that “media can make and break politicians.” A similar correlation was found with more general statements about media power such as “the media have too much political power.”⁷ This suggests that politicians consider the media’s role as agenda setter to be part of a more general media power “syndrome.” They do not make a clear distinction between the media’s different effects on different dimensions of politics.

However, there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that the influence of the media on the personnel career of an MP is quite different from their influence on the issue priorities on the governmental agenda. The fact that media attention in election times does contribute to their own, personal electoral success (Van Aelst et al. 2008) might bias their perception of whether the media are able to set the agenda. Another distinction that politicians may not make is that between agenda setting and framing. For instance, Reich (2006) showed that political actors set the agenda by initiating certain issues but that journalists become more important in the second phase when those issues are discussed and defined. Wolfsfeld and Sheaffer (2006) make a similar point when concluding that the media rarely initiate the coverage of political stories but do play a role in amplifying and structuring them. To sum up, we believe politicians may fail to make the necessary analytic distinctions that scholars make and

just consider media power in general to be large and, consequently, also the media's agenda-setting power.

4

Perhaps the most important explanation for the possible misperception of media power by politicians is the weak individual position of these elites. Note that MPs considered themselves to be among the least powerful agenda setters in each of the four countries (Table 2). In the context of agenda setting, this perceived lack of power may be related to the issue specialization of individual MPs. Most MPs have specialized in only a few issues. MPs try to get "their" pet issues on top of the agenda in parliament and government. In that sense, even their fellow MPs from the same party are competitors for attention. In their attempts to get their issue up the agenda, MPs are confronted with two problems. First, the attention capacity of the political agenda is limited, at a certain moment in time only a few issues receive substantial attention. MPs experience that their extensive and systematic individual efforts to generate political attention for their issue is much less effective than media attention, wherever it comes from. Second, on those rare occasions when one of their issues *is* high on the political agenda and media attention is guaranteed, journalists often ignore ordinary MPs and choose to get a reaction from the people in power or they prefer a more charismatic MP (Sheafer 2001) instead of the less communicative "issue specialist." Furthermore, MPs mostly lack relevant and exclusive information that would increase their personal newsworthiness and the professional support to communicate their message. Cabinet ministers, for example, do possess these assets more often.

In relation to assessing the agenda-setting power of the media, this weak position leads to a form of "self-serving attribution."⁸ Because MPs are frustrated about their limited personal influence on the political agenda, they look for a "scapegoat" and engage in blame avoidance strategies (Edelman 1977). They try to shift the responsibility for their own political shortcomings—their limited power—to a third party: the media. The omnipresent media provide an easy explanation for one's own failure to influence the political agenda. As a consequence, MPs are not forced to question their own capacities or to look for more complex political explanations. This misattribution or bias in the perceptions of politicians is not limited to the agenda-setting influence of the media but also relates to other aspects of media power. For instance, when a politician loses an election, the causes are frequently sought in relation to the media (Schudson 1995: 121). Also when something goes wrong in society, politicians are not to blame; it is the fault of the almighty media whose coverage affects society negatively (Newton 2006).

Entirely in line with the idea that a negative view on media power is linked with a large power attribution, our survey shows a significant correlation between the perception of the general agenda-setting influence of the media and statements on the quality of political coverage.⁹ Politicians who are less satisfied with the way the media covers politics in general consider the media's agenda-setting power to be larger. The perception of

media power and of media quality go hand in hand. MPs perceive the media as almighty political players whose coverage has mainly negative effects on the public.

5

The fact that so many politicians identify the media as an extremely powerful agenda setter not only raises doubts about the biases in the perception of these MPs—we spelled them out above—but it also challenges the outcomes of many objective, quantitative time-series analyses. Behavioral studies are not able to measure to what extent politicians take the media into account when selecting the issues they put forward. When a political actor decides to stress the importance of climate change instead of social welfare, for example, chances are high that he or she is aware of the fact that the first issue may or may not more easily pass through the gates of media selection than the second. According to Davis (2009), this “media reflexivity” has become part of every decision a politician takes. Politicians are not just influenced by specific media content, but rather adapt to the way the media operates (Strömbäck 2008). Again, this does not make the media the real agenda setter but rather an important part of the strategic decisions politicians take to put forward certain issues and not others. The media, in a sense, act as a kind of anticipatory constraint limiting political actors’ maneuvering space.

This “self-censorship”—not devoting attention to an issue because you know it will not generate media attention—cannot be picked up directly by behavioral studies as the measured political actors do not act anticipating on the media’s disinterest for the issue. It may be the case that the surveyed MPs do take that constraining agenda-setting power of the media into account when they evaluate the media’s agenda-setting impact. This anticipative, negative agenda-setting process is hard to track empirically for behavioral studies. By controlling for the media attractiveness of different issues, time-series studies can indirectly and partially assess negative agenda-setting. Time-series studies found indeed that for some issues the media’s power is larger than for others. Yet these studies cannot substantiate to what extent these differences are to be attributed to anticipation mechanisms.

6

So far we did not deal with differences among politicians regarding their media power perceptions. In all four countries, a large majority of MPs believe the media are a very influential agenda setter. However, as mentioned before, there are small but significant differences between the MPs of the different countries. The Swedish MPs seem most convinced of the media’s agenda-setting power both in general (Table 1) as more specific and compared to their own impact (Table 2). Why are Swedish MPs even more than other MPs convinced that the media are powerful? For one thing, the Swedish MPs do not seem to be completely out of sync with reality: Swedish political journalists, questioned in the same survey and through the same questionnaire, come

to similar conclusions and judge the agenda-setting power of Swedish MPs as almost nonexistent. Hardly 8 percent of the Swedish political journalists believe MPs often succeed to get a new problem on the political agenda (see also Strömbäck 2010). In the other countries, three (Belgium, Netherlands) to five (Denmark) times more journalists believe MPs matter for the agenda-setting process.

An earlier study showed that the weak position of Swedish MPs toward journalists is partly explained by the *number* of seats in the Swedish parliament (Van Aelst et al. 2010; see also Esaiasson and Heidar 2000). Sweden, with 349 elected MPs (for 9.2 million inhabitants), has more than twice the number of elected MPs than for instance the Netherlands (150 MPs for 16.4 million inhabitants). This means that the “inter-MP competition” for both political power and media attention is much more intense in Sweden than it is in the Netherlands. This more competitive context might explain why Swedish MPs rightfully attribute higher influence to the media compared to their colleagues in the Netherlands. The Swedish case shows that MPs’ judgments may not be entirely erroneous. Differences between the Swedish and the other MPs are validated by external evidence and seem to make sense. MPs’ perceptions are perhaps more accurate than expected, at least when comparing across countries.

Conclusion: How Both Approaches Could Be Improved

Are the mass media powerful political agenda setters? The answer to this question depends on the methods employed. A majority of objective and behavioral designs tapping media coverage and subsequent political behavior by political actors shows that the mass media do set the political agenda to some extent. Studies found significant, though modest in size, effects of mass media coverage on political priorities, mainly in parliament. Against the objective assessment of previous studies, recent studies posited new findings on the subjective evaluations of politicians. The present work found that most MPs in Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands are convinced that the mass media do set the political agenda to a very large extent. Even compared to powerful rival actors such as the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers, and political parties, the media do not fail and are considered to be among the most important determinants of what politicians do and care about. The finding was strong and unambiguous in the four democratic corporatist countries under scrutiny. It directly challenges the standing modest effects conclusions. If one can believe what politicians are saying—arguably a leap of faith—the mass media are much more important determinants of the political agenda than research so far has shown. We suggested several reasons for the possible misperception by MPs and identified some limitations of the dominant longitudinal research approach. At this stage, we are not able to identify which of those tentative explanations is most relevant. Yet the direct confrontation between both types of studies suggests a number of potential improvements of each of the methods.

The main strength of time-series studies is that they directly tackle the chicken and egg problem by assessing the chronological sequence between media coverage and

political action. The reciprocal and indirect effects have technically been part of most time-series studies but they have most of the time not been spelled out explicitly. Agenda-setting scholars should more explicitly acknowledge the reciprocal character of the power relationship between media and politics. In his recent work, “cycles of spin,” Sellers (2010) argues that strategic communication (by Congress members) and agenda setting (by the media) should be studied together as both processes form an integrated whole. Also, in the interpretation of the findings, longitudinal scholars have mainly focused on the share of the explained variance of the political agenda that can be traced back to preceding media coverage. The survey data suggest that perhaps also the autoregressive part of the media agenda contributes to the media’s agenda-setting power. The fact that the media react to themselves and that their agenda seems to be self-propelling, even when the initial trigger might have been an action by politicians, makes media coverage to some extent “immune” for political intrusion. This first point relates to the interpretation of time-series evidence and not to the design as such.

A second potential improvement of the longitudinal designs is drawing on more specific media data. To make headway with isolating the media’s autonomous agenda-setting power, that is, that part of the media’s attention for an issue that has not been triggered by previous actions by political actors, time-series students should attempt to tease out the media coverage that was not initiated by political actors. Hence, we need more detailed content analyses of media coverage not only coding the issue but also assessing the origin of media coverage.

Third, the problem of anticipation and media reflexivity—political actors focusing his or her actions on issues that are expected to attract media attention—is hard to solve. One way to start tackling the problem, though, would be to vary across issues and test whether media power differs systematically between frequently and less frequently covered issues. If the anticipation argument is valid, we expect political actors to undertake more activities regarding popular issues that get a lot of media attention. Consequently, we expect the media’s power to be larger on issues that receive a lot of attention than on issues that get much less attention. The opposite would then be true regarding less covered issues: here we expect the causal chain from the political agenda to the media agenda to be stronger.

Apart from suggesting refinements in the longitudinal approach, our findings mostly challenged the validity of the survey approach. The strength of this design is that the data requirements are relatively low. It takes much less effort and resources to collect MP survey data than to gather longitudinal behavioral data. Consequently, it is relatively easy to set up comparative research in different countries. We showed that the conclusions one can draw from these comparison make sense—the fact that Swedish MPs thought the mass media’s power was very high seemed to reflect reality.

A first improvement would be to draw more on measures of concrete behavior instead of on perception questions. The measurements in surveys could be more precise when political actors are asked to reflect on their personal behavior rather than

react to very general questions about their perception about politics and the mass media. For example, it could be an idea to confront politicians with a number of specific cases of increased political attention and then ask them about the role of the media in those cases. This strategy avoids the conflation of influences and the social desirability of the answers. Also, it could be wise to try to get more precise answers about different types of media impact on politics distinguishing agenda-setting effects from potential other effects of the media such as framing and electoral (personal popularity) effects.

Second, survey designs could benefit from broadening the scope of the surveyed politicians. We found that in the four countries under study, MPs across the board consider the media to be very powerful. There were hardly any differences between MPs and thus little variation to be explained. We think, though, that including political actors occupying other positions, especially cabinet ministers, may increase the variation and give us a better grasp on why some political actors attribute so much power to the press. We anticipate that the power relationship between a minister and the media is of a totally different kind than what we found here regarding MPs and the media.

Both types of work have their strengths and flaws. We showed in this study that they lead to diverging results but the confrontation proved to be fruitful. It highlighted the weaknesses of both designs, showed to what extent they are complementary, and, especially, how both designs could be improved so that the contradiction between the results they generate may partially be overcome. We hope future research takes up this challenge.

Appendix

Research Design of the MP-Survey in Four Countries

To study how politicians think about the agenda-setting power of the media, a survey was organized among members of parliament in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Netherlands, and Sweden. In all four countries, a comparable procedure of data gathering was followed. The Belgian survey, which can be considered as the pilot study, was initiated at the beginning of 2006 and inspired research teams in the other three countries to undertake a similar effort.¹⁰ In the four countries, 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 remained identical. Special care was given to a perfect translation of the questions. In all countries, several reminders were used to increase the response rate. This resulted in a satisfactory response rate of almost 50% in every country. The higher response rate in Belgium is mainly a consequence of the fact that researchers visited the parliament and personally contacted the MPs who had not yet responded. In the other countries, the researchers were not granted such access to parliament. In Table A1, the basic facts and figures are summarized.

Table A1. Survey and Method Info

	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Sweden
Time of survey	February– March 2006	September 2006–January 2007	December 2007–January 2008	November 2007– March 2008
Closest national election	June 2007	November 2006	November 2007	September 2006
Response rate (%)	85	50	45	45
Representativity of parties	.988**	.981**	.988**	.987**
<i>n</i>	191	103	79	158

Note. Bivariate Pearsons' correlations between the relative presence of parties in parliament compared to the relative presence of parties in the survey. (Sig. **<.01)

It is important to note that in 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 the variation in political standing among its members. The percentage of chairpersons that participated is always in line with the overall response rate in all four countries. Finally, additional sample-population tests revealed an excellent match in terms of age and gender in the four cases (not in table). The surveys were organized in routine parliamentary sessions. However, in Denmark and the Netherlands, data gathering took place close to an election period. We believe the impact of these events to be limited as our questions were not related to the past or upcoming campaign coverage. Occasionally, we refer to the answers of a survey among political journalists in the same four countries containing the same questions. (For more information on this survey, we refer to Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2011.)

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Notes

1. Note that some authors (e.g., Dearing and Rogers 1996) rather use the term *agenda building* to refer to the process by which mass media coverage contributes to the political agenda. Yet the concept political agenda setting is used more frequently and consistently and it

allows political media effect studies to connect with the large political agenda-setting research tradition in political science.

2. The Belgian survey was conducted only among the Dutch-speaking MPs (Flanders: containing 60% of the population).
3. We acknowledge that the exact formulation of this statement may lead to an overestimating of the media's agenda-setting power as the opposite statement—the fact that politics would set the media agenda—may for some MPs have an unwanted normative implication (politicians limiting the freedom of the press). Therefore, it may have been the case that some MPs have agreed with the statement because of normative instead of cognitive reasons (their actual knowledge of and experience with the process). Yet the fact that we find similar results drawing on more concrete and less normative statements increases confidence that the question measures real perceptions and not just attitudes of how it should be.
4. *t*-tests showed that in most cases the mean scores that were subtracted from each other differed significantly ($p < .05$). Except for the nine subtracted scores presented in Table 2 that are lower than 0.19, in those cases the media did not differ significantly from the alternative agenda setter.
5. The variation among MPs was tested by two separate ordinary least squares regression analyses predicting the absolute and the relative agenda-setting power by the media. The complete analyses can be provided on request.
6. For more information about this survey, we refer to Van Dalen and Van Aelst 2011.
7. The bivariate Pearson's correlations between the different items ranged between .312 and .349 (significant at the .01 level). These correlations were significant in the separate countries too.
8. Attribution theory is often used in social psychology (Harvey and Weary 1984) and political psychology (Cottam et al. 2004) to explain how people perceive the behavior of others. Research in this domain has given special attention to cognitive errors and self-serving biases in those perceptions. The concept of a "self-serving attributional bias" refers to strategies that people use to protect their own self-esteem or in-group identity, and is also used in studies of perceived media impact (Eveland and McLeod 1999; Shamir and Shikaki 2002).
9. The Pearson correlation between the general statement on the agenda-setting power of the media (see Table 1) and the statement on media quality ("Are you satisfied with the way the media portray politics in general?"; 1 = *completely satisfied* to 5 = *completely dissatisfied*) was significant, .244 ($p < .001$).
10. The surveys in the four 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; and Jesper Strömbäck and Adam Shehata (Mid Sweden University) in Sweden.

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