Original Article

When politics becomes news: An analysis of parliamentary questions and press coverage in three West European countries

Rosa van Santen[a,*], Luzia Helfer[a] and Peter van Aelst[a,b]
[a]Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Wassenaoseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, the Netherlands.
[b]Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Lange Nieuwstraat 55, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract   This study addresses two questions that are part of the larger debate on mediatized politics. First, we want to know to what extent the work of members of parliament is mediatized. Second, we want to know how the interaction between media and parliamentary politics is determined by the institutional context. To address these questions we present a content analysis of oral parliamentary questions (PQs) and press coverage in three West European countries: the Netherlands, France and Germany. This way we improve the insight in when and why specific political initiatives receive media attention, and if specific characteristics of these initiatives and the institutional context in which they are used increase the chance and amount thereof. Results from the regression analysis show that the most important factor in determining newsworthiness is the amount of media attention for a certain topic preceding the PQ. In addition, the analysis has shown that in the Netherlands and France voicing criticism towards a member of government in a PQ slightly increases the chances of getting covered by a newspaper. Finally, as expected, in the Netherlands the oral PQs are the most newsworthy, and in Germany the least, with France taking a middle position.

Introduction

The relationship between media and politics is often characterized by a so-called mediatization of politics. Although there is no consensus on what this concept

exactly means, most scholars refer to it as a long-term process through which political actors and institutions have become increasingly dependent on the media (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Kepplinger, 2002; Hjarvard, 2003; Strömbäck, 2008). Politicians have come under increasing pressure to adapt to the logic of the media (Altheide and Snow, 1979), and it has been theorized that this might affect not only their communication efforts, but also their actual political behavior and output (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2013). In particular this last aspect of mediatized politics has not been studied systematically. In this study we thus focus not on over-time developments, but on present-day politics and the work of parliamentarians in different countries. We address two specific questions that are part of the larger debate on mediatized politics. First, we want to know to what extent the work of members of parliament (MPs) is mediatized. There is little discussion that the fight for political power, in particular in election time, is highly determined by the media and adaptation to a media logic. But it is less clear whether this also permeates through the daily work of parliamentarians. Are their activities guided by day to day news coverage? And when do journalists consider their initiatives newsworthy? Second, we want to know how this interaction between media and parliamentary politics is determined by the institutional context. Do rules and procedures in different countries influence the 'negotiation of news-worthiness' between politicians and journalists? The dominance of US studies and the almost complete absence of comparative work in this field have given us little insight in this matter.

To address these questions we study the relationship between media and politics by a detailed investigation of oral parliamentary questions (PQs) and press coverage in three West European countries: the Netherlands, France and Germany. This design allows for generalizable conclusions that go beyond the scope of many existing single-country studies. Many studies use single-country data and argue that results of one Western parliamentary democracy are likely to be true for similar countries/ systems. Our comparative design with three similar representative democracies but varying questioning procedures enables to incorporate parliamentary system variables that might influence the media-politics dynamic. This way we want to improve our insight in when and why specific political initiatives receive media attention, and if specific characteristics of these initiatives (micro-level) and the institutional context in which they are used (macro-level) increase the chance and amount thereof. Are politicians able, by adjusting their questions to the rules and values of the media, to receive press coverage? Or is the media logic so strong that politicians only get attention when they adapt to an already existing media agenda and 'surf the wave'? As mediatization remains a concept referred to more often than it is used to guide systematic research, we mainly rely on insights from studies on news values and political agenda-setting to formulate concrete hypotheses. But we start with elaborating on PQs as an instrument to receive media attention in Western democracies.

Theory and hypotheses

PQs and the press

There is little discussion that nowadays media coverage is crucial for a politician to get his/her message across and to reach out to voters. Furthermore, politicians need media attention to obtain their political goals by influencing peers and eventually the policy process. PQs, particularly the oral questions discussed in the weekly question hour, are in this respect a pivotal instrument for parliamentarians to voice their concerns and get media attention (Martin, 2011). Also, parliamentary questioning is an instrument that exists in all parliamentary democracies (Russo and Wiberg, 2010). Although motions, interpellations and PQs do not have any direct legislative consequences and mostly limited political consequences (Franklin and Norton, 1993; Wiberg, 1994), they are nevertheless attractive for MPs. A study on the motivations of Swiss MPs for submitting oral questions found that parliamentarians mainly asked questions to demonstrate their activity, gain attention and prepare legislative acts (Bailer, 2011). Those findings fit within the framework proposed by Wiberg (1995) who identified three sets of electoral-oriented activities MPs can engage in: advertising, credit claiming and position taking. Oral PQ hours in particular provide MPs with an instrument that helps gain visibility, both among their fellow politicians and their (potential) voters. In many countries the motivation for holding oral question hours is indeed to increase approachability and openness of the political process, but its exact nature differs between Western parliamentary democracies (see the next section for a more elaborate discussion of the differences between the countries under study).

For journalists, the value of PQs is less clear. On the one hand they offer a steady diet of political events that are planned well in advance and can be easily linked to the most recent political debates. They are thus an easy source when selecting political news. On the other hand, the media are bombarded with political messages and need to make a selection. Not only because the 'carrying capacity' of the media is too limited to report everything politicians do and say (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), but also because the media are mainly concerned with telling political stories that interest the public at large, or at least their particular audience (Wolfsfeld, 2011). As PQs often have limited direct impact on policy and not always involve high status political actors, their newsworthiness is limited and coverage certainly not guaranteed. These divergent interests of politicians on the one hand and practices of journalists on the other, make the struggle for media-attention a very competitive one. We expect that certain characteristics of the questions, the actors involved and the preceding media agenda can improve the chance that a PQ gets covered. But before we develop these expectations into concrete micro-level hypotheses on the characteristic(s) of PQs that lead to media attention, we will first discuss the institutional context of the three countries under study.

Media and PQs in three West European countries

Existing studies on the relationship between parliament and media coverage often are single-country studies (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Although those studies have provided valuable knowledge on how media and parliament interact, the validity of their findings can only be assessed in a comparative context. In general, the three countries under study offer similar cases to study the relationships between oral PQs and media coverage. The Netherlands, Germany and France have been selected because they are all West European representative parliamentary democracies with majority governments, a multi-party system and comparable opposition-government-dynamics. In these three countries MPs have the opportunity to question the government in regular question hours that focus mainly on national politics.[1] Therefore, we expect that in general the dynamic between the characteristics of PQs and their newsworthiness will be similar in each country. However, although most countries based their organization of the question hour on the British House of Commons (Korpershoek and Oostlander, 2006), the same instrument has different occurrences in the countries studied (Russo and Wiberg, 2010, Rozenberg *et al*, 2011). The specific procedures and the nature of the question hour vary between the three countries (see Table 1), which is why we think that in some countries under study PQs in general get more attention than in the other countries. We expect five aspects to influence this variance in newsworthiness of PQs between the three countries. As our number of cases is limited, and comparative research in this field is almost absent, we will combine several country-level characteristics to rank the countries from most likely to least likely case below (see Table 1).

First, in the Netherlands and France, the question hour is aired live on television, where it is not in Germany. Live broadcasts on the one hand induce parliamentarians to behave and talk in a manner attractive for the media and the audience at home. On the other hand, the availability of live footage increases the visibility of parliament

Table 1: Question hour characteristics influencing media coverage of PQs, per country

Macro-level	The Netherlands	France	Germany
Question hour on TV	Yes	Yes	No
Spontaneous PQs	Yes	Yes	No
Follow-up questions+debate after the PQ	Yes	No	Yes
Number of questions	4	8	19
per week (year)	(150)	(900)	(340)
Response by ministers versus state secretaries	Both	Both	Mainly state secretaries
Conclusion: media attention for PQ	Most likely	Likely	Least likely

and helps to attain media, and particularly television's interest (Cook, 1986; Negrine, 1999). Broadcasting the weekly question hour(s) thus strengthens the significance of the instrument and the chance of press coverage.

Second, for the newsworthiness of the questions themselves it matters that in some countries like Germany, questions have to be submitted well in advance, while in the Netherlands and France the members of government (MoG) are not given time to prepare their answers to the oral questions (Russo and Wiberg, 2010; Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg, 2011). As most of the parliamentary proceedings are anticipated by journalists, the oral question hour potentially provides an element of surprise to the debate in the latter case. Furthermore, in spontaneous question hours such as in the Netherlands and France, the minister or state secretary answering the questions might be caught off-guard (Salmond, 2011). For the same reasons, we, thirdly, also expect that if follow-up questions are allowed, also from other parties in parliament, the debate might become more attractive and chances of newspaper coverage increase. The potential confrontation between different actors in a debate feeds into the news value of conflict (see theoretical argument for Hypothesis 2).

Fourth, we also expect the total number of questions asked during a question hour to have an impact on the coverage of each single PQ. The more information competes for coverage, the less likely it is that one single question is covered. Whereas in the Netherlands only four questions are debated during question hour, in Germany an average of 19 questions are allowed per question hour. The most restrictive procedures are employed in France, where questions are distributed among parties according to their government or opposition position and their strength. Because several sessions take place per week the total number of questions is relatively high compared with the other countries under study. This might induce quite a lot of media attention for PQs in general in absolute numbers, but we think it will limit the chance of press coverage on our level of analysis, the individual PQ.

Turning, finally, to the involved actors, we expect their status to potentially influence whether a question hour is generally deemed newsworthy or not in a country. Many studies have shown that the media are biased towards high-ranking actors that dominate the decision-making process (see below). This means that in Germany, where ministers hardly attend the question hour and state secretaries almost always answer the PQs, the newsworthiness of PQs is probably less than in the Netherlands or France (see for instance Wiberg, 1995, but also our own results). However, in none of the countries the prime minister regularly attends question hours.

In all, we expect that, when taking all these characteristics on the country level into consideration:

Hypothesis 1: PQs get the most press coverage in the Netherlands and the least in Germany, with France taking a middle position.

Micro-level characteristics of PQs

At the macro, country level, we expect procedural characteristics and the nature of the question hour to determine the newsworthiness of PQs in general. In addition, within the countries, on a micro-level, we argue that there are six possible factors that determine the newsworthiness of a PQ and could lead to media attention (see Table 2 for an overview). Our hypotheses are inspired by two streams of literature. A first type of study has focused on the newsworthiness of political actors. Originating in the United States (Cook, 1989), there has been a growing interest in describing media attention for parliaments and trying to explain why some members get more attention than others (e.g. Tresch, 2009, Midtbø, 2011). Often they build upon more general theoretical insights on news values, going back to classical studies of Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Gans (1979). These studies have improved our insight in the different aspects of politicians' newsworthiness, but how their specific initiatives such as PQs contribute to that remains unclear.

From a different perspective, political agenda-setting studies have also studied the relationship between media and parliaments (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Political agenda-setting scholars focus not so much on individual actors but rather on their issue priorities as shown in their legislative initiatives. Several studies show that there is a reciprocal relationship, as the parliamentary agenda and the media agenda are influencing each other (Brandenburg, 2002; Van Noije *et al*, 2008; Walgrave *et al*, 2008; Jones and Wolfe, 2010; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011a, b). As these studies analyze the relationship between parliament and media over time at the aggregate level, the influence of particular characteristics of political initiatives on the chance of getting reported is indistinct.

We will integrate the insights of the two approaches and complement existing knowledge by including both actor types and content characteristics in the micro-level of our study, and also by taking the media agenda into account (Table 2). Because the increasing importance of mass media for the dissemination of political information in the three countries under study is similar, as are their long-established

Table 2: PQ characteristics that increase the dependent variable media attention

Theoretical origin	*Micro-level*	*Independent variables*
News value theory	Content PQ	Criticism on (member of) government Competence attribution Causal attribution
News value theory & agenda-setting	Actors	Government MP (versus opposition MP) Minister (versus state secretary)
Agenda-setting	Media	Preceding media coverage

democratic systems, we expect the media-politics dynamic on the micro-level to be similar in all three countries.

The first aspect to take into consideration is the content of the PQ itself. Not only political actors struggle for media attention, but media themselves also increasingly compete with each other over audiences. As a result, scholars argue, news media increasingly tend to bring more confrontational and negative news (for an overview see Lengauer *et al*, 2012). For political actors this means that communicating in line with these news standards should increase their chances of getting media attention. Voicing explicit criticism in a PQ (instead of merely asking for information or an explanation) is therefore likely to draw the attention of journalists. An MP can criticize certain policy outcomes, negatively evaluating government policy, but an MP can also choose to address his or her criticism specifically towards the MoG, criticizing not just the policy, but the personal failure of the MoG. The distinction between the two is a matter of 'strength', but again also a tactic for gaining media attention. On the one hand, criticism towards a minister or state secretary is more personal and shows more intent than just criticizing the government in general. On the other hand, voicing criticism towards a particular person 'tunes' in to the current trend of personalization of news coverage (Van Aelst *et al*, 2012). We thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a: Voicing criticism towards government in a PQ leads to more press coverage.

Hypothesis 2b: Criticizing the addressed MoG in a PQ leads to more press coverage.

Second, criticism, but particularly questions that show how government is incapable of handling their responsibilities, that challenge their competence or integrity offers MPs the opportunity to blame the government for the problem raised and to attack, and in return get media attention through the PQ (Thesen, 2011). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), in their study on the prevalence of news frames, present reliable measures to analyze frames in the news and show that the attribution of responsibility frame was most commonly used in the news. On the basis of existing literature they define the responsibility frame as the presentation of 'an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility to either the government or to an individual or group'. This attribution of responsibility can thus be seen as a more sophisticated form of critique, and can be applied by using causal and competence attributions (Gerhards *et al*, 2007, 2009). Building on work from Gerhards *et al* (2007, 2009), MPs can attribute responsibility either by demanding specific action (competence attribution), or by accusing the MoG or the government for being the cause of, or to blame for, an issue or problem (causal attribution). Previous research has shown that demands for action trigger newspaper articles (Kepplinger, 2002) and because these attributions are also in line with journalists'

inclination towards conflicts and negativity, and their use of responsibility framing, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3: The usage of competence attribution in a PQ leads to more press coverage.

Hypothesis 4: The usage of causal attribution in a PQ leads to more press coverage.

Apart from the content of the PQ, the specific political actors involved in each PQ could also affect the newsworthiness. Both news value and agenda-setting studies have shown that media attention is generally biased towards high-ranking state actors who get preferential access to the media (for example Gans, 1979; Danielian and Page, 1994; Sellers and Schaffner, 2007; Tresch, 2009). The very actors that dominate the decision-making process therefore seem to be the most acceptable dance partners for the media. As ministers have higher rankings than so-called junior ministers or state secretaries, media attention is thus likely higher for PQs addressed to ministers. We thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 5: PQs addressed to ministers lead to more press coverage than those addressed to state secretaries.

Following the above line of argumentation, PQs asked by MPs from government parties should carry a higher relevance for journalists then those asked by opposition MPs, as the chances are higher that these questions will actually result in policy changes. Incumbent parties 'act' and 'do' and are thus more newsworthy (see Hopmann *et al*, 2012 for more on this argument). But existing research shows that as in parliamentary democracies the 'best' MPs are recruited for government positions, the remaining incumbent MPs have a hard time getting media coverage (Van Aelst *et al*, 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær *et al*, 2011). Also, oral questions are mainly a tool for MPs to control the government and are one of the main ways in which confrontation between the opposition and government takes place (Thesen, 2011; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011a). Previous research has shown that mainly opposition MPs use this tool (Wiberg, 1995) and also that government party MPs have fewer contacts with journalists than MPs from opposition parties (Van Aelst *et al*, 2010). In a study on Denmark, Elmelund-Præstekær *et al* (2011) also find that MPs from opposition parties appear more in the media than MPs from governing parties. We thus expect that:

Hypothesis 6: PQs from government-party MPs lead to less press coverage than those of opposition-party MPs.

Finally, not related to the content of the PQ nor the actors involved, but in line with the idea of a mediatization of politics, it is important for any parliamentarian to discuss a current topic in his/her question in order to be interesting for media

coverage. More concretely, an MP linking up his or her question with the news of the day, using news coverage as a source of inspiration (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010), knows that the issue already has public attention. Intermedia agenda-setting studies have shown that news media devote attention to issues that have previously received coverage in other media outlets (for example Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008) and so it is likely that a PQ that actually taps into an existing issue attention cycle also becomes part of it. This also relates to agenda-setting research that stressed the reciprocity of the relationship between media and parliament (Kepplinger, 2007), and has concluded that mass media coverage affects the parliamentarian agenda (Van Noije *et al*, 2008; Walgrave *et al*, 2008). A recent study in the Netherlands, for instance, shows that a large majority of PQs is preceded by press coverage on the same topic (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2013). We thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 7: PQs that are linked with the preceding media agenda receive more press coverage.

To ensure the intermediating role of a PQ in media attention for a certain topic, each individual PQ is taken as a starting point to search for related newspaper coverage, both before and after the question hour. This is explained in more detail in the method section.

In sum, on a macro-level we expect differences in the newsworthiness of PQs between countries, based on procedural country-level characteristics. At the micro-level of our study we analyze each oral PQ separately and also expect that six characteristics of PQs influence the amount of newspaper coverage a PQ receives.

Method and Data

We conducted a content analysis of oral PQs and related newspaper coverage in three countries. All PQs that were asked in the most recent non-election year of each country were collected from the respective public parliament websites: for the Netherlands that was 2009, for Germany 2010 and for France 2009. As the total number of PQs amounted to over 900 in the French case owing to two sessions held per week, we constructed a sample by selecting PQs that were asked between the 1st and the 15th day of every month. For the Netherlands and Germany, all oral PQs were included. This resulted in a total sample of 957 PQs; 131 for the Netherlands, 343 for Germany and 483 for France.

Extensive instructions for collecting newspaper articles and coding all variables were given in a codebook. This codebook was first developed based on data from the Netherlands, and later adapted to characteristics of parliamentary questioning in the other two countries.[2] For the in-depth level of content coding, in the next stage, coders were recruited that had provable knowledge of the respective language. To ensure internal validity of the data all training and coding took place at Leiden University.

After a general introductory training session with all coders, training was conducted in country-specific groups with a supervising researcher that spoke the respective language. To avoid differences in interpretation of the variables, one researcher supervised all sessions. In four training sessions coders were asked to test-code both the content of PQs and newspaper articles, and to conduct examples of the search and selection of relevant newspaper articles until agreement was deemed sufficient.[3]

Dependent variable

Number of newspaper articles following a PQ
For each individual PQ a separate media search for (a) related articles (b) from the national daily newspapers of each country[4] (c) in the 2 days after the PQ was performed by the coder.[5] All articles about the exact same topic as the question, and in which either the MP asking the question or the minister or state secretary answering was mentioned, or an explicit reference was made to the question in parliament, were selected and coded.[6] For example, if a question concerned headscarves for civil servants, only press coverage in the 2 days after the question hour on headscarves, and not related articles on immigration, were taken into account. In addition, there needed to be an explicit reference to the debate in parliament or to one of the central actors (MP asking the question or MoG answering the question). The total number of newspaper articles per PQ published after the question hour (min/max: 0/8, mean $= 0.37$) is used as the dependent variable in the analysis.

Independent variables[7]

Criticism
Criticism towards the government in general was coded as present when government plans, policies, performances and so on were being criticized in the PQ. For example: 'Last week the government again caused turmoil. Why is the government so careless with this issue?' Criticism towards the government in general is coded as being present when only or mostly (synonyms of) the word 'government' is used. The presence of criticism towards the addressed MoG is present when the (junior) Ministers' plans, policies of performance are criticized in the PQ. For example: 'We won't put up with this Minister. His short term solution is crazy'. Criticism towards an MoG was coded only when the MP explicitly referred to the MoG. In 9 per cent of all the included PQs criticism towards the government was voiced, and in 11 per cent an MoG was criticized with the two variables not being significantly correlated (0.44, $P = 0.000$).

Competence and causal attribution

A competence attribution calls for specific action from an actor; causal attribution occurs when an actor is said to cause an issue or problem. On the basis of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and Gerhards *et al* (2009, 2007) competence attribution is coded as present when the PQ suggests that specific action has to be taken by (the member of) the government. Causal attribution on the other hand is coded as present when the PQ suggests that (some member of) the government is to blame for, or is the cause of the issue/problem. Both attributions were measured using dichotomies. Competence attributions were made in 28 per cent of all PQs, causal attributions in 16 per cent. Both forms of attributions are not correlated (0.21, $P = 0.000$).

Actors

For each PQ the party of the MP asking the question was coded. These party codes were recoded into a dichotomous variable government (1) or opposition (0). Thirty per cent of all included PQs were asked by coalition MPs. The addressed MoG was also recoded into a dichotomous variable, depending on whether the question was addressed to a minister (1) or not (0). About half of the questions is directed at ministers.[8]

Media agenda preceding the PQ

This variable is constructed similar to the dependent variable (media coverage after the question hour). For each PQ, the articles in the national newspapers in the 5 days before the question was handed in, were searched and coded by the coder. All articles that were about exactly the same topic of the question were coded. However, a maximum of 20 articles were coded per PQ when more than 20 relevant articles were found in the search. This occurred in only 1.6 per cent of all PQs. For the analysis the total number of newspaper articles per PQ was included. On average, 3.1 news articles (SD = 4.65) precede a PQ. Forty-two per cent of PQs concerned a topic that did not receive any media attention beforehand and in less than 2 per cent of the cases the maximum of 20 newspaper articles were coded for one PQ.

Analysis

For detangling the effects of characteristics of PQs on the amount of press coverage, we applied a negative binomial regression model because of the right-skewed distribution of the dependent variable; almost 83 per cent of the PQs did not receive any media coverage at all after the question hour. The likelihood ratio test of the model was not significant, meaning that a Poisson regression model would not be more appropriate. To test for differences in mechanisms between countries we

included country dummy variables and separate country models for the Netherlands and France (Germany could not be modeled because of too little press coverage). All analyses were conducted using Stata Version 10.1.

Results

Table 3 shows the amount of PQs that receive media attention in the various countries. In the Netherlands a PQ is most often followed by media attention: 40 per cent of the PQs received newspaper coverage after the question hour. In Germany only 16 questions led to media attention, which amounts to 5 per cent. France is in between with 18 per cent. These descriptive results provide support for our first hypothesis that *PQs get the most press coverage in the Netherlands and the least in Germany, with France taking a middle position*. It is, however, possible that these country differences can be mainly attributed to the micro-level characteristics of the PQs. The presence of the independent variables in the PQs (not in table) indicate that the questions serve different goals in the three countries under study. In Germany the content variables are hardly present – only 11 per cent of the PQs contain a competence or causal attribution and in hardly 1 per cent of PQs criticism is voiced – and the questions are almost all (98 per cent) addressed to junior ministers. On the other hand, we see that the content of the Dutch and even more so the French PQs is more critical (15 per cent in NL and 36 per cent in FR of the PQs contain criticism) and more directed to higher ranked political actors. In Germany the question hour thus seems to serve as a way to get information from the government, whereas in the Netherlands and France, where we also see that slightly more questions are asked by government MPs (51 per cent), PQs seem to be rather used as control instruments and as 'tools' in the competition for media attention and political influence. Next, in a regression analysis we test whether the country differences can be attributed to the characteristics of individual PQs.

Table 4 shows the regression analysis of the complete model with country dummies (model 1). Using Germany as reference category, the effect of the country dummies is stronger for the Netherlands ($B = 2.163$, $P = 0.000$) than for France ($B = 1.295$, $P = 0.000$), confirming again our first hypothesis about country variation. It is mainly the preceding media agenda that affects the press coverage of a PQ, and

Table 3: Descriptives of press coverage of PQs

	The Netherlands	France	Germany
N (PQs)	131	483	343
PQs with press coverage afterwards (%)	40%	18%	5%
Mean volume media after	0.90	0.35	0.08

Table 4: Regression analysis predicting amount of newspaper coverage after PQ

	Volume media after					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	All countries		The Netherlands		France	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
Content PQ						
Criticism MoG	**0.560***	**(0.283)**	0.712	(0.369)	0.552	(0.362)
Criticism government	−0.028	(0.340)	−0.042	(0.640)	−0.040	(0.412)
Competence attribution	−0.204	(0.205)	−0.126	(0.266)	−0.116	(0.273)
Causal attribution	**−0.652***	**(0.314)**	−0.391	(0.585)	−0.666	(0.397)
Actors						
Government MP	−0.155	(0.228)	−0.130	(0.294)	−0.133	(0.294)
Minister	0.185	(0.233)	0.260	(0.312)	0.207	(0.301)
Media agenda						
Volume media before	**0.100*****	**(0.020)**	**0.157*****	**(0.033)**	**0.079****	**(0.027)**
Country (Germany)						
The Netherlands	**2.163*****	**(0.359)**	—	—	—	—
France	**1.295*****	**(0.355)**	—	—	—	—
Constant	−2.776***	(0.229)	−0.960**	(0.335)	−1.432***	(0.364)
N	957		131		483	
McFadden's R^2	0.096		0.092		0.020	

* $P<0.05$, ** $P<0.01$, *** $P<0.001$. Significant variables emboldened.

the separate country models (model 2 and 3) support the outcome that in the Netherlands the positive effect of the preceding media agenda on press coverage is strongest (B = 0.157, P = 0.000). In France, the effect of preceding media coverage is less strong (B = 0.079, P = 0.004), and because in Germany only 5 per cent of the PQs get media attention, the effects cannot be modeled and a separate country model is not presented (McFaddens's R^2 = 0.062, P = 0.176). However, the descriptive results for Germany suggest a similar relationship, with PQs that receive preceding media coverage being more newsworthy (9 per cent) compared to questions without such preceding attention (2 per cent).

Turning to the micro-level characteristics of PQs, the results in model 1 clearly show that *PQs that are linked with the preceding media agenda receive more press coverage* (Hypothesis 7). The more press attention the topic of a PQ gets in the days before the question hour, the higher the chance that the PQ receives newspaper

attention afterwards. For each 1-unit (= 1 article) increase in preceding press coverage, the volume of newspaper attention afterwards is expected to be 1.105 times more ($e^{0.100}$, $P = 0.000$).[9] In the separate country models this is also the most significant result.

The analyses in Table 4 further show that the content characteristics of the PQs nor the actors involved significantly affect the press coverage of a PQ in the Netherlands and France, but in the combined model (model 1) we see that the voicing of critique towards the addressed MoG is significant (B = 0.560, $P = 0.047$). For a PQ that contains criticism towards the MoG the amount of media attention afterwards is 1.75 times more ($e^{0.560}$, $P = 0.047$) as for a PQ without criticism towards the MoG. Hypothesis 2a, about criticizing the government in general, thus needs to be rejected, but Hypothesis 2b *criticizing the addressed MoG in a PQ leads to more media attention* is cautiously supported.

Our Hypotheses 3 and 4, expecting that the usage of competence and causal attribution leads to more media attention, are also rejected. Model 1 even shows that the presence of causal attribution significantly leads to less media attention, an outcome that can be mainly attributed to France (B = -0.666, $P = 0.094$), a country where blaming the government to cause a problem is perhaps seen as a too extreme form of criticism. Although the results on Hypotheses 5 and 6, expecting that PQs addressed to ministers lead to more media attention and PQs asked by government-party MP's receive less media attention, are in the expected direction, the outcomes are not significant. In sum, it is thus not the content of the PQ nor the person asking it, but the connection with the preceding media agenda that determines the amount of press coverage for a PQ in any of the countries under study.

Conclusion and Discussion

Media coverage is crucial for a politician to get a message across, to reach out to voters, and to obtain political goals by influencing peers and eventually the policy process. Oral PQs are a pivotal instrument for parliamentarians to voice their concerns and get media attention. However, for the news media, not all that politicians say and do is equally newsworthy. In this article we studied when and why specific political initiatives such as PQs receive media attention, and if specific characteristics of these PQs increase the chance and amount of coverage, in a comparative design.

Our most prominent result is that an existing media agenda, the amount of media attention for a certain topic preceding the PQ, is the most important factor in determining its newsworthiness. It seems that linking up your question to the government with the news of the day is the best strategy for MPs in their competition for media attention. This finding is in line with agenda-setting studies that stress the reciprocity of media and political agendas. PQs that are inspired by news coverage have a higher chance of getting reported by the news media. In that sense MPs mostly

follow the already existing news, but on the other hand also legitimate and strengthen the coverage by using it in their work. This can be seen as a clear example of mediatized politics, in the sense that 'ordinary' politicians need to adjust to the media to increase the newsworthiness of their work. By 'surfing the wave' of an existing issue in the news an MP has the most chance of getting some media attention. Admittedly, this does not mean that the MP in person will get more, if any, media attention, but is does indicate that he or she, by asking the question, helps to consolidate the(ir) issue on the media agenda (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2013).

In addition, our analysis has shown that in the Netherlands and France voicing criticism towards an MoG in a PQ slightly increases the chances of getting covered by a newspaper. This relates to important characteristics of news coverage such as negativity, conflict and personalization. In addition, we expected that attributions of responsibility and the presence of high-ranking actors would further strengthen the newsworthiness of a PQ, but this was not confirmed. This means that overall MPs have few opportunities to improve the newsworthiness of their PQs, besides linking it to the existing news agenda.

Third, we showed that there are indeed significant differences between the counties under study, in terms of newspaper coverage of PQs. In the Netherlands the oral PQs are the most newsworthy, and in Germany the least, with France taking a middle position. This confirms our explorative typology of most likely and least likely cases based on how the question hour in these countries is organized and structurally influences the newsworthiness of oral questions. In the Netherlands the question hour is a weekly televised event where only a limited number of MPs can ask a question to an MoG. The questions are submitted shortly before the start of the question hour and are often closely related to current events. This makes the Dutch question hour a highly current and mediatized event that can explain why journalists often report on these parliamentary initiatives. In Germany on the other hand, the question hour is not televised and not organized weekly, but allows much more questions at a time. MoG, almost exclusively junior ministers (*Staatssekretär*), get these questions well in advance and can prepare properly. This lowers the surprise element of PQs and reduces their newsworthiness. In addition, our content analysis showed that these questions are much less confrontational and hardly ever personally attack an MoG. In sum, at least this part of the parliamentary work in Germany is not followed up closely by journalists and done largely outside the spotlight of the national press. The question hour in France shares characteristics with both other countries and takes, as expected, a middle position when it comes to the amount of media attention a PQ gets. This shows that specific aspects of the institutional context indeed influence the media-politics dynamic and partly explain why this dynamic is different in similar Western democracies. Although our comparative design confirmed our country expectations, this is a first, exploratory study in the field. More comparative research is needed to confirm our findings about the influence of question hour procedures on media coverage, and, more in

general, to deepen our insight into the newsworthiness of parliamentary work across countries.

In all, the presented study adds to existing literature on the mediatization of politics. The findings are not only relevant for MPs to get their messages out and attract attention, but also for the public at large. Representative democracies rely on means of mass communication to foster debate and enable public opinion formation and dissemination. Our study suggests that the media have a crucial role in the public debate: in all three countries MPs can only reach a broader public when they adjust to the existing media agenda and adapt to contemporary news standards. This far-reaching conclusion needs to be put in perspective in two ways.

First, based on this study, it remains unclear to what extent the news media themselves created the preceding issue agenda that inspired MPs or rather, as others have suggested (for example Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006), that the media agenda is determined by external events and by the agenda of other more important political actors. Second, we focused on one specific part of parliamentary activity: oral PQs. An example of a more symbolic activity with limited direct political consequences. It is possible that MPs are less dependent on the media when it comes to other aspects of their work, such as law making. Both aspects should be addressed in future studies. We hope this study inspires others to improve our knowledge of the mediatization of parliamentary work in comparative perspective.

About the Authors

Rosa van Santen is postdoctoral research fellow in political communication at Leiden University (The Netherlands).

Luzia Helfer is PhD candidate in political communication at Leiden University (The Netherlands).

Peter van Aelst is associate professor of political science at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and Leiden University (The Netherlands).

Notes

1 The focus on national politics is confirmed by our data on parliamentary questions. Overall, 67 per cent of the PQs focus on national issues. In Germany this is slightly lower (62 per cent) because of a higher amount of PQs that relate to international politics. In the three countries the share of questions on local issues is almost identical: in the Netherlands 15 per cent, in France 13 per cent and in Germany 12 per cent. The rules and procedures of the different parliaments can be found at: www.tweedekamer.nl, www.bundestag.de, and www.assemblee-nationale.fr.

2 The codebook can be obtained from the authors on request.

3 Intercoder-agreement was assessed on a sub-sample of the data for each country, yielding an average agreement level (percentage agreement across all relevant codes) of 80 per cent. The average agreement level for the French data is 69 per cent for the presented content variables, for the Dutch data 74 per cent and for the German data 97 per cent. To ensure comparability of coding between countries, all coders were asked to code the same fictive PQs, yielding an average agreement level of 70 per cent for the presented content variables. The reliability coefficients were calculated by PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment with Multiple Coders) (Neuendorf, 2002).

4 We selected the five biggest national newspapers of each country that were available to us. The Netherlands: NRC Handelsblad, de Telegraaf, De Volkskrant, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad. France: La Croix, Le Figaro, L'Humanité, Libération, Le Parisien-Aujourd'hui en France. Germany: Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, Der Tagesspiegel, Financial Times Deutschland, taz - Die tageszeitung.

5 Lexis Nexis was used to search newspaper articles for the Netherlands, and Factiva was used for newspaper articles for Germany and France. Coders would first determine keywords for each PQ and then search newspaper articles in the databases using these keywords. Selection of relevant articles is explained in main text.

6 The highest amount of newspaper articles found afterwards for one individual PQ was eight; this occurred only once. For a French PQ.

7 In our analysis all issues (and thus all issue types) are included. As agenda-setting research suggests that media pay more attention to certain specific issues (Soroka, 2002; Walgrave *et al*, 2008), we tried to include this in our analysis. But including specific issues or issue-type dummies proved both theoretically difficult, and did also not, after trying various categorizations, result in significant outcomes. We have therefore not included issues as independent variable(s) in our theory nor results sections.

8 If not directed at a member of government, questions were addressed to the state secretary (the Netherlands and France) or the 'Bundestag', the German second chamber.

9 With a negative binomial regression, the predicted scores presented in the table are in the form of the logarithm of counts, an unfamiliar metric. To interpret the scores in the original count metric, the equation needs to be exponentiated (see for a detailed explanation for instance Coxe *et al*, 2009).

References

Altheide, D.L. and Snow, R.P. (1979) *Media Logic*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Bailer, S. (2011) People's voice or information pool? The role of, and reasons for, parliamentary questions in the Swiss parliament. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 302–314.

Blumler, J.G. and Kavanagh, D. (1999) The third age of political communication: Influences and features. *Political Communication* 16(3): 209–230.

Brandenburg, H. (2002) Who follows whom? The impact of parties on media agenda formation in the 1997 British General Elections campaign. *Harvard Journal of Press and Politics* 7(3): 34–54.

Cook, T.E. (1986) House members as newsmakers: The effects of televising Congress. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11(2): 203–226.

Cook, T.E. (1989) *Making Laws & Making News. MediaStrategies in the US House of Representatives*. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution.

Coxe, S., West, S.G. and Aiken, L.S. (2009) The analysis of count data: A gentle introduction to Poisson regression and its alternatives. *Journal of Personality Assessment* 91(2): 121–136.

Danielian, L.H. and Page, B.I. (1994) The heavenly chorus: Interest group voices on TV news. *American Journal of Political Science* 38(4): 1056–78.

Elmelund-Præstekær, C., Hopmann, D.N. and Nørgaard, A.S. (2011) Does mediatization change MP-media interaction and MP attitudes toward the media? Evidence from a longitudinal study of Danish MPs. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16(3): 382–403.

Franklin, M.N. and Norton, P. (eds.) (1993) *Parliamentary Questions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galtung, J. and Ruge, M.H. (1965) The structure of foreign news. The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research* 2(1): 64–90.

Gans, H.J. (1979) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gerhards, J., Offerhaus, A. and Roose, J. (2007) Die öffentliche Zuschreibung von Verantwortung. Zur Entwicklung eines inhaltsanalytischen instrumentarium. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 59(1): 105–124.

Gerhards, J., Offerhaus, A. and Roose, J. (2009) Wer ist verantwortlich? Die Europäische union, ihre nationalstaaten und die massenmediale attribution von Verantwortung für Erfolge und Misserfolge. In: F. Marcinkowski and B. Pfetsch (eds.) *Politik in der Mediendemokratie*. Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Green-Pedersen, C. and Stubager, R. (2010) The political conditionality of mass media influence. When do parties follow mass media attention. *British Journal of Political Science* 40(3): 1–15.

Hilgartner, S. and Bosk, C.L. (1988) The rise and fall of social problems: A public arenas model. *American Journal of Sociology* 94(1): 53–78.

Hjarvard, S. (2003) The study of international news. In: K.B. Jensen (ed.) *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research*. London: Routledge.

Hopmann, D.N., Elmelund-Præstekær, C., Albæk, E., Vliegenthart, R. and De Vreese, C.H. (2012) Party media agenda-setting: How parties influence election news coverage. *Party Politics* 18(2): 173–191.

Jones, B.D. and Wolfe, M. (2010) Public policy and the mass media: An information processing approach. In: K. Voltmer and S. Koch-Baumgarten (eds.) *Public Policy and Mass Media: The Interplay of Mass Communication and Political Decision Making*. London: Routledge.

Kepplinger, H. M. (2002) Mediatization of politics: Theory and data. *Journal of Communication* 52(4): 972–986.

Kepplinger, H.M. (2007) Reciprocal effects: Toward a theory of mass media effects on decision makers. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12(2): 3–23.

Korpershoek, L. and Oostlander, S.J. (2006) Internationale vergelijking van het mondelinge vragenuur. Lessen voor de Tweede Kamer. Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal.

Lengauer, G., Esser, F. and Berganza, R. (2012) Negativity in political news: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism* 13(2): 179–202.

Martin, S. (2011) Parliamentary questions, the behaviour of legislators, and the function of legislatures: An introduction. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 259–270.

Mazzoleni, G. and Schulz, W. (1999) Mediatization of politics: A challenge for democracy. *Political Communication* 16(3): 247–261.

Midtbø, T. (2011) Explaining media attention for Norwegian MPs: A new modelling approach. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 34(3): 226–249.

Negrine, R. (1999) Parliaments and the media: A changing relationship? *European Journal of Communication* 14(3): 325–352.

Neuendorf, K.A. (2002) *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rozenberg, O., Chopin, O., Hoeffler, C., Irondelle, B. and Joana, J. (2011) Not only a battleground: Parliamentary oral questions concerning defence policies in four Western democracies. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 340–353.

Russo, F. and Wiberg, M. (2010) Parliamentary questioning in 17 European parliaments: Some steps towards comparison. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 16(2): 215–232.

Salmond, R. (2011) Bureaucrats in the headlights: Question times and delegation to bureaucrats. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 368–381.

Sánchez De Dios, M. and Wiberg, M. (2011) Questioning in European parliaments. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 354–367.

Sellers, P.J. and Schaffner, B.N. (2007) Winning coverage in the US senate. *Political Communication* 24(4): 377–391.

Semetko, H.A. and Valkenburg, P.M. (2000) Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication* 50(2): 93–109.

Soroka, S.N. (2002) Issue attributes and agenda-setting by media, the public, and policymakers in Canada. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 14(3): 264–285.

Strömbäck, J. (2008) Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of the mediatization of politics. *International Journal of Press Politics* 13(3): 228–246.

Strömbäck, J. and Van Aelst, P. (2013) Why political parties adapt to the media: Exploring the fourth dimension of mediatization. *International Communication Gazette* 75(4): 341–358.

Thesen, G. (2011) Attack and defend! Explaining opposition and government responses. CEE; 30 May 2011, Paris, Sciences Po.

Tresch, A. (2009) Politicians in the media: Determinants of legislators' presence and prominence in Swiss newspapers. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14(1): 67–90.

Van Aelst, P., Maddens, B., Noppe, J. and Fiers, S. (2008) Politicians in the news: Media or party logic?: Media attention and electoral success in the Belgian election campaign of 2003. *European Journal of Communication* 23(2): 193–210.

Van Aelst, P., Sehata, A. and Van Dalen, A. (2010) Members of parliament: Equal competitors for media attention? An analysis of personal contacts between MPs and political journalists in five European countries. *Political Communication* 27(3): 310–325.

Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T. and Stanyer, J. (2012) The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism* 13(2): 203–220.

Van Aelst, P. and Vliegenthart, R. (2013) Studying the tango. An analysis of parliamentary questions and press coverage in the Netherlands. *Journalism Studies*. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2013.831228.

Van Noije, L., Kleinnijenhuis, J. and Oegema, D. (2008) Loss of parliamentary control due to mediatization and Europeanization: A longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis of agenda building in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. *British Journal of Political Science* 38(3): 455–478.

Vliegenthart, R. and Walgrave, S. (2008) The contingency of intermedia agenda setting: A longitudinal study in Belgium. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 85(4): 860–877.

Vliegenthart, R. and Walgrave, S. (2011a) Content matters: The dynamics of parliamentary questioning in Belgium and Denmark. *Comparative Political Studies* 44(8): 1031–1059.

Vliegenthart, R. and Walgrave, S. (2011b) When the media matter for politics: Partisan moderators of mass media influence on parliament in Belgium, 1993–2000. *Party Politics* 17(3): 321–342.

Walgrave, S., Soroka, S. and Nuytemans, M. (2008) The mass media's political agenda-setting power: A longitudinal analysis of media, parliament, and government in Belgium (1993 to 2000). *Comparative Political Studies* 41(6): 814–836.

Walgrave, S. and Van Aelst, P. (2006) The contingency of the mass media's political agenda-setting power. Towards a preliminary theory. *Journal of Communication* 56(1): 88–109.

Wiberg, M. (ed.) (1994) *Parliamentary Control in the Nordic Countries*. Tampere, Finland: Finnish Political Science Association.

Wiberg, M. (1995) Parliamentary questioning. Control by communication? In: H. Döring (ed.) *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*. Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag.

Wolfsfeld, G. (2011) *Making Sense of Media & Politics. Five Principles of Political Communication*. New York: Routledge.

Wolfsfeld, G. and Sheafer, T. (2006) Competing actors and the construction of political news: The contest over waves in Israel. *Political Communication* 23(3): 333–354.