When the media matter for politics: Partisan moderators of the mass media's agenda-setting influence on parliament in Belgium

Rens Vliegenthart and Stefaan Walgrave

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Rens Vliegenthart
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Stefaan Walgrave
University of Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract
In this study, we investigate which factors moderate the agenda-setting influence of the mass media on the Belgian parliament during the period 1993–2000. Based on elaborate codings of the media, parliamentary questions and interpellations, party manifestos, government agreements and ministerial meetings, we employ a multi-level time-series model. The results indicate that especially party characteristics (party size, incumbent or opposition party, issue ownership) and the government agenda influence the dependency of parliament on media coverage. Furthermore, we find an increase in the extent of media influence through time, suggesting an increasing presence of 'media logic' in the behaviour of Belgian MPs. Irrespective of all those contingent factors, the mass media determine the Belgian parliamentary agenda to a considerable degree.

Keywords
Belgium, content analysis, mass media, parliament, political agenda-setting

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Corresponding author:
Rens Vliegenthart, Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: r.vliegenthart@uva.nl

Introduction

The fact that mass media coverage affects the political agenda to some extent has been substantiated in numerous previous studies. However, we know less about the contingencies of this process; the media matter more for the political agenda in some instances than in others. This study focuses on the contingencies of the media's political agenda-setting power, that is, the conditions that make the media sometimes matter and sometimes not (or less). A start has been made in earlier work to explore these conditions, but a lot remains to be done. Drawing upon an exceptionally large and broad dataset covering eight years of continuous media coverage and including the agendas of key political actors in Belgium, both government and political parties, we test a series of hypotheses about the modulators of the mass media's impact on parliament.

Our claim is that media coverage impacts on parliamentary action, but that there is a whole range of modulators playing at different levels that intermediate the mass media's effect on politics. We contend, in particular, that the government–opposition game, and the partisan strategies entwined with that central engine of parliamentary democracy, affects the extent to which and how political actors adopt media issues. Party features, issue characteristics, issue ownership, the government agenda and time period are all related to the government or opposition role parties play, and all might moderate the impact the mass media have on parliament.

We start by briefly sketching the state of the field of political agenda-setting and, more specifically, the mass media role therein, and derive eight hypotheses from the existing literature. We then present our dataset consisting of a whole range of political and media agendas in Belgium during the 1993–2000 period. Next, we proceed to analyse the data, drawing upon advanced multi-level time-series models and taking into account independent variables on different nested levels. Finally, we summarize our results, putting them in perspective and sketching avenues for further research.

Theory and hypotheses

The agenda-setting approach to politics deals with how and why political actors devote attention to certain issues. Its main claim is that political decision-making requires political attention – taking the form of resources, time, personnel and so on – and that attention shifts are a precondition for policy change. Since Baumgartner and Jones, seminal 1993 book, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993), and drawing upon earlier work by for example Kingdon (1984) and Schattschneider (1960), agenda-setting has gradually gained momentum in US political science in particular; American studies using the agenda-setting perspective have gradually become more numerous, although also European students have recently started to emulate US research (John, 2006). These agenda-setting scholars examine why some issues get more attention from parties, government, parliament, interest groups and so on than others, and they focus especially on, often sudden and strong, *changes* in political attention. Concurrently, in Europe, an entirely different stream of research emerged also using the agenda-setting metaphor as core concept. The Manifesto Research Group published widely about how political parties' preferences are encapsulated in their manifestos and translate into policies and

budget appropriations (see, among others, Budge and Hofferbert, 1990; Klingemann et al., 1994). Remarkably, the US theory of agenda-setting contends that policy change is a disorderly and stochastic process that is hard to predict, as surges in attention happen suddenly, while European scholars focusing on parties and their preferences maintain that policy change is a perfectly predictable and orderly process based on the electoral cycle and the democratic mandate (Walgrave et al., 2006).

These schools of agenda-setting research in political science rarely investigate how the agenda of one actor influences the agenda of an other. The notion that issue attention on a certain agenda can spill over to another agenda with actors mimicking each other's attention for given issues has been explored to a much greater extent in communication science. Indeed, in communications, agenda-setting is one of the main theories of political media effects (Graber, 2005). Numerous studies have examined the extent to which mass media coverage and the prioritization of issues in the media affect what people consider to be the most important issues politics should deal with (Rogers and Dearing, 1994). Results have mainly corroborated the agenda-setting impact of the mass media on the public's agenda. Strangely enough, political scientists and communication scholars rarely communicated about their respective research in agenda-setting. Both use the same concept of agenda-setting, both deal with issues as units of analysis and both often work with similar methodologies (longitudinal time-series designs), but there is hardly any cross-fertilization or collaboration.

For a few years now, a small but steadily growing stream of studies has been bridging the gap between political science and communications agenda-setting scholarship. These studies have dealt with exploring the impact of the mass media on the political agenda. Focusing on the question to what extent the mass media determine the political agenda, these studies adopted the dependent variable (the political agenda) from political science; from communications they took over the independent variable (media coverage). Their innovation lies mainly in the fact that they explicitly focus on how agendas affect each other and, thus, how issues spill over from one actor to another. Recently, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) summarized these empirical studies about media and political agenda-setting. Many students found that mass media coverage indeed, to varying extents, affects the political agenda, be it parliament or Congress (Soroka, 2002a, 2002b; Trumbo, 1995; van Noije, 2007; van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007; Walgrave et al., 2008), government (Walgrave et al., 2008), the US president (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Gilberg et al., 1980; Wanta and Foote, 1994; Wood and Peake, 1998), political parties (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg, 1995), or public spending (Cook and Skogan, 1991; Pritchard and Berkowitz, 1993). In doing so, researchers established that the mass media matter more for symbolic agendas than for substantial political agendas, that newspapers matter more than TV news, that some issues are more conducive to political agenda-setting than others, that the mass media's impact on politics is immediate and does not take a long incubation time to materialize, and that the media matter more for politics in non-election times than in election times (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Some scholars have relied on case studies with a qualitative interview design, while others have drawn on quantitative time-series analysis assessing the time sequence between media attention and consequent attention, in words or deeds, by politicians. Most recently, also, surveys among journalists and politicians have been used

to examine how the actors themselves perceive the media's impact on their own political behaviour and that of others (Walgrave, 2008).

Still, many questions remain. In particular, what has been ignored until now is the role media coverage plays in the key process in parliamentary democracies: the competition between government and opposition parties. Government versus opposition dynamics and the issue competition incumbents and challengers are engaged in form the engine of most parliamentary systems (Carmines, 1991; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2007). Yet, political agenda-setting scholars have largely neglected government and opposition dynamics and the associated partisan strategies. This is no big surprise, since, as mentioned above, the field has been strongly dominated by US studies and parties play a smaller role in the US system than in most other political systems (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). In a sense, political agenda-setting studies have been staged in an artificial, non-partisan environment (for an exception, see Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2008). As the entire political process in parliamentary democracies is permeated by the eternal contradiction and conflict between government and opposition, though, we maintain in this study that the government–opposition clash deeply affects how political actors deal with the media. The main idea buttressing this study, therefore, is that the structural position, strategy and preferences of government and opposition parties impact on the extent to which, and the way in which, they react to mass media coverage (see also Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2008). As parliament is the major institutional venue where government and opposition clash with each other, we focus here on parliamentary action. Moreover, we study a country where parties are notoriously powerful: Belgium. This small consociational democracy is considered to be one of the best examples of partitocracies, where parties not only control policies but also occupy all key positions in the state (De Winter et al., 1996; Lijphart, 1999). Concretely, we assess the extent to which Belgian Members of Parliament in their weekly oral questions and interpellations embrace issues that have previously been covered in the mass media.

What does political agenda-setting look like through a partisan government–opposition lens? We propose eight hypotheses that are all – directly or indirectly – related to parties and to the government–opposition dynamics in parliamentary politics.

(1) First, we expect opposition parties to react more directly to media coverage than government parties. Parliament controls government and the way to do this is to interpellate government and to ask questions. By asking questions in parliament, opposition parties can raise issues the government is forced to react on (Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2008). In a coalition system such as in Belgium, government MPs have to act cautiously as they might destabilize the government, while opposition MPs use whatever ammunition is at hand to attack the government. Continuously reporting about the political and societal state of affairs, media coverage delivers a lot of potential ammunition for the opposition, while government MPs cannot simply respond to the media as they have to await government reaction (see also Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). In sum, opposition MPs are much less constrained in reacting to media coverage. On top of this, government parties cannot pick and choose issues as they see fit; they have to offer credible solutions to problems and they cannot back away from an issue that could turn out to be disadvantageous (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2007). So our first hypothesis maintains: *opposition parties' parliamentary action is more affected by media coverage than government parties' actions (H1).*

(2) We assume that the size of the parliamentary party matters too. Large parties have a scientific office that fuels their parliamentary action and they have MPs that have specialized in specific policy domains. As Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) hypothesize, specialist political actors are mainly influenced by events and actors within their specialist policy network, and they are less affected by media coverage than generalist actors. The larger the party the more specialists it probably counts among its MPs and the narrower the issue focus of individual MPs will be. Therefore our second hypothesis goes as follows: *small parties' parliamentary action is more affected by media coverage than large parties' actions (H2).*

(3) In a coalition system with several parties forming a cabinet together, a formal government agreement is struck before the start of the government (De Winter et al., 2000). The government agreement contains the main policy pledges a government promises to carry out during the legislature. This is a kind of bible that government parties refer to when enacting policy and when monitoring shirking by other parties. Government parties' MPs cannot openly criticize or defect the government agreement, but when other government parties do not respect the agreement they react fiercely. Moreover, opposition parties know they can hurt the government amidships when they are able to challenge it on issues that it has solemnly announced in the government agreement. So, especially opposition parties, but to some extent also government parties, have incentives to focus their parliamentary action on topics in the government agreement, and we hypothesize that this is also the case for their picking up of issues from the media. *Parliamentary action is more affected by the media regarding issues that have been incorporated in the government agreement compared to other issues (H3).*

(4) In many countries the cabinet meets in weekly ministerial councils presided over by the prime minister; the same is the case in Belgium. After the meeting, the main decisions and plans are communicated to the public. In a sense, the government agreement is carried out week after week. So, government sets the political agenda on a weekly basis. The same logic as above applies in the case of the topics the government deals with in its meetings: we expect opposition parties, in particular, to react to the government's decisions. If the media happen to cover stories that have relevance to what the government has just decided, the chances are high that opposition MPs will draw on these stories to attack the government's most recent decisions. Hence, we hypothesize: *parliamentary action is more affected by the media regarding issues that have just been dealt with by the ministerial council compared to other issues (H4).*

(5) Not all parties are equally strongly identified with all issues and not all parties are considered by the public at large to be capable of dealing with all issues. Parties 'own' issues when they are identified with them and when they are widely considered to have the best stance and offer the best solutions for related problems (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Parties' track record of giving attention to and dealing with issues yields them issue ownership. One of the ways in which parties claim issue ownership is by devoting attention to these issues in their party manifestos (Walgrave and De Swert, 2004, 2007). We expect parties to focus on 'their' issues in parliament and to react also more on media coverage when it comes to issues they have a strong reputation on. This is what Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2008) actually found in the Danish Parliament: (opposition) MPs ask more questions when considering issues their party owns than

about other issues (Green-Pedersen, forthcoming). Extending this argument, we also expect that when parties own certain issues they are likely to respond to media coverage on those issues in parliament (see also Walgrave and De Swert, 2007). This leads to the following hypothesis: *parties' parliamentary action is more affected by the media regarding issues to which they devote a lot of attention in their party manifesto compared to other issues (H5).*

(6) Within the broad field of agenda-setting by the media, several issue typologies have been developed (see, for example, Soroka, 2002b). The most prominent of these typologies is the one by Zucker (1978), which distinguishes between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues. Obtrusive issues are directly perceivable by people; they are issues that can be 'felt' first hand (e.g. inflation, unemployment etc.). Unobtrusive issues are issues that cannot be perceived directly; they are accessible only via media coverage (e.g. foreign wars, institutional reform etc.). Although Zucker's classic distinction might be useful for public agenda-setting, it seems less evident to draw on it for political agenda-setting studies. Whether issues can be directly observed or not is probably less important for political elites, as elites have more ways of getting direct information about the state of the 'real world' than ordinary citizens have. That is why we propose an alternative issue typology that we presume to better fit the partisan government–opposition dynamic. Owing to their particular features, some issues are more conducive to being picked up by MPs from media coverage. In this article, we test a very straightforward typology based on a double criterion. First, issues can be exogenous or endogenous. Exogenous issues are those that directly come out of society; they are non-routine issues that are not produced by the main institutions but are mainly driven by external events (e.g. crime, disasters etc.) beyond the direct control of elites. Endogenous issues, in contrast, are typically produced by institutions; they are predictable and their incidence and framing are controlled by elites (e.g. defence, European Union, institutional affairs, science etc.). Since parliament is the institution monitoring society's institutions, we expect it to react more to media coverage when the media cover endogenous issues, that is, issues coming out of the political system. Second, issues can be divisive or consensual (valence). Divisive issues are issues situated within society's main cleavages; they are conflictual with clear political groups systematically fighting each other on them. In Belgium, examples of these issues are labour and employment and social questions. We expect parliamentary groups to focus on divisive rather than on consensual issues and to adopt more divisive issues covered in the media. Merging both binary classifications we built an issue type scale (0 = exogenous and consensual; 1 = endogenous or divisive; 2 = endogenous and divisive). The related hypothesis maintains that: *parties' parliamentary action is more affected by the media regarding divisive and endogenous issues compared to other issues (H6).*

(7) Earlier research has shown that the mass media have a greater impact on the political agenda in non-election times than in election times (van Noije, 2007; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). Indeed, campaign studies have found that parties set the agenda of the media during elections and not the other way round (Brandenburg, 2002, 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize: *parties' parliamentary activities are less affected by media coverage in election times than in non-election times (H7).*

(8) Our final hypothesis is not directly related to the partisan government–opposition conflict, but touches upon more profound changes in Western political systems. Scholars have argued that, due to fundamental changes among the public and in the political and media system, the mass media's impact on the political process has grown through time. Politics would follow more a so-called 'media logic' than the media would obey a 'political logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). These changes have taken place during the past few decades and we test whether traces of this evolution can be found in the Belgian media–parliament interaction in the seven-year period we cover. *Parties' parliamentary reactivity to media coverage has increased through time (H8)*.

So, we end up with eight hypotheses: two relate directly to parties' features (opposition/government position and size), two to the government agenda (government agreement and ministerial council), one deals with issue characteristics (issue type), one with party–issue combinations (issue ownership), and two are related to the aspect of time (election times and trend).

Data and methods

Our dependent variable is the weekly number of interpellations and questions raised in the Belgian parliament by each of the 12 political parties that were represented during our research period on any of 25 issues. Questions and interpellations are the most important non-legislative activities of many parliaments, and in most European countries the number of questions is clearly on the rise (Green-Pedersen, forthcoming; Wiberg, 1995). We use rough counts of the questions and interpellations rather than weekly shares for each party or issue, because this allows us to see whether we, too, find this upward trend and – if so – to assess its interaction with media coverage. To obtain the data, we coded all parliamentary records for the period 1993–2000, which contained 10,556 interpellations and parliamentary questions. Codes are based on the internationally employed hierarchical EUROVOC thesaurus, designed for coding all EU documents (http://eurovoc.europa.eu). This thesaurus contains 6075 different hierarchically structured 'descriptors'. Mainly relying on aggregate categories but sometimes adopting more detailed EUROVOC categories to grasp typical media issues (e.g. different kinds of crime), we reduced the total number of codes to 110. But, using all 110 issue categories for analyses would mean that many categories are very small and equal to zero much of the time. Therefore, the 110 issues are further combined, and our analyses consequently rely on a collapsed form of the dataset, where the 110 issues are collapsed into 25 major issue categories. We use a weekly aggregation level, for two reasons. First, it encompasses what one can call the shortest 'political cycle' with one ministerial meeting per week. Second, as Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) have demonstrated, media effects on political agendas are mainly short term, and a weekly time span seems to be appropriate. The Belgian parliament does not meet every week, and those weeks in which no parliamentary activity took place are excluded, leaving 237 weeks for the eight-year period of our analyses. This results in a total of 12 (parties) $\times$ 25 (issues) $\times$ 237 (weeks) = 71,100 units of analysis.

The independent variables are operationalized as follows.

Table 1. Correlations between different types of media

	Flemish newspapers	*Flemish television*	*French newspapers*	*French television*
Flemish newspapers	1.000	0.671	0.704	0.655
Flemish television		1.000	0.643	0.805
French newspapers			1.000	0.669
French television				1.000

Note: N = 71,100. All correlations are significant at a 0.001 level. Full fixed-effects model (Model IV, Table 2) including four separate media variables instead of one combined does not result in a better model fit (log likelihood decreases slightly).

Media

To test the effect of the media on non-legislative parliamentary actions we have to make sure that our main independent variable – media attention – is tapped satisfactorily. We have a large media database at our disposal, comprising the main evening news of the four major TV stations, two Dutch-speaking (*TV1* and *VTM*) and two French-speaking (*RTBF* and *RTL*), and five major newspapers (Dutch-speaking: *de Standaard, de Morgen* and *het Laatste Nieuws*; French-speaking: *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir*). We coded all front-page newspaper stories on a daily basis, with the exception of those that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The prime time TV news (7.00 p.m.) is coded in its entirety on a daily basis. Taken together, the Flemish and French-speaking media database contains 180,265 news items (113,658 TV items and 66,607 newspaper items). The media are coded following the same procedure as the parliamentary questions and interpellations. Although the French and Dutch media markets in Belgium are entirely separate, and hardly any Flemings read French newspapers or watch French TV, and vice versa, we decided to lump together all media outlets in one single collapsed media variable: the attention for issues as aggregated across four TV stations and five newspapers. First, our argument here does not pertain to the peculiarities of linguistically divided societies, but to how MPs react to media coverage. Distinguishing different language outlets and their differential effects on different language MPs would raise a whole range of new questions and hypotheses and would divert us from the central issue of the article. Technically, as we will see below, the number of variables, and especially interaction effects in our models, is already very high; distinguishing different language outlets would complicate things further and would increase the number of independents. Second, although media markets may be split up, this does not mean that MPs are not affected by media outlets from across the language border. We know from previous research that MPs (in Belgium) are frenetic media consumers and that they also consume media from across the language border (Walgrave, 2008). Third, we have dealt with the differences and similarities between Dutch and French media outlets before and have shown elsewhere that media outlets in Belgium are similar in their issue attention and that the media affect each other's coverage to a large extent even across the language border (Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008). Finally, Table 1 documents fairly high weekly correlations between outlets. The decision to collapse the different media outlets provided the opportunity to assess the effects of the interaction between media coverage and the other variables,

as formulated in our hypotheses, in a straightforward manner. To ensure causality, the media variable is lagged one week.[1]

Our main interest is in the contingency of the media's influence on the parliamentary agenda. Methodologically, this means that we focus on the interaction terms between media coverage and the other variables. After all, we assume that the extent (and perhaps even the presence) of the mass media's influence on parliament depends on the values those other variables take. This is precisely what interaction terms test. However, to assess their influence properly, the main effects of those other variables have to be included.

Ministerial meetings

The communications about the ministerial meetings, taking place on Fridays, are coded in a similar way as the parliamentary interpellations and questions and lagged one week in order to ensure causality.

Elections

A dummy variable is created that indicates routine time politics (value 0) or election time (three months preceding a national election; value 1).

Time trend

Weeks receive a value ranging from 1 (first week in the sample) to 237 (last week in the sample).

Issue type

A scale is constructed indicating whether an issue is exogenous and consensual (value 0), endogenous or divisive (value 1) or endogenous and divisive (value 2).[2]

Government agreement

To assess the influence of typical government issues we coded the three agreements that were relevant for the research period (drawn up after the elections in 1991, 1995 and 1999) in a similar way as the parliamentary interpellations and questions and used the values of the codings for the 25 issues for all the weeks preceding a next government agreement.

Opposition party

A dummy variable was created indicating for each political party whether in a certain week it was a member of the government (value 0) or of an opposition party (value 1).

Size party

The size of the party was measured by the number of parliamentary seats it held in a certain week.

Issue ownership

To assess issue ownership, we coded party manifestos drawn up before the elections of 1991, 1995 and 1999 for each party that gained parliamentary seats. We used the same coding scheme as for the parliamentary agenda and thus assessed the importance each party attributed to each of the 25 issues and used those values until publication of the next party manifesto. Two parties did not issue party manifestos and were therefore excluded from analyses that include the issue ownership variable.

To test our eight hypotheses for the media variable and for each of the other independent variables, an interaction term was created by multiplying the mean centred value of the media variable and of the other independent variables. We used centred values in order to avoid problems with multicollinearity that might occur when multiple interactions with one and the same variable (in this case media coverage) are included in one analysis. This transformation, however, does not alter the effect sizes and *p*-values of the interaction terms (Hayes, 2005: 466–7).

Our dataset differs from datasets in previous research in that it includes three layers: parties, issues and weeks. Previous research, for example, analyses attention for one issue separately. The over-time dependency is usually dealt with using time-series analysis, such as Granger causality and Vector Autoregression (Soroka, 2002b; van Noije et al., 2008; Vliegenthart and Roggeband, 2007). When multiple issues are considered in one analysis, a form of pooled time-series analysis is used; for example, Ordinary Least Squares Regression with panel-corrected standard errors (Walgrave et al., 2008). When clustering takes place on more than two dimensions, (pooled) time-series are no longer a viable option. Therefore, we decided to apply a multi-level analysis. This type of analysis accounts for the hierarchical dependency of observations. When one of the clustering dimensions is time, its application does not differ substantially from those in many pooled time-series (Gelman and Hill, 2007: 241), but it allows for more than one other dimension on which the observations cluster. Our dataset has a multi-level structure with three levels: time (weeks) is nested in issues that are nested in political parties. Next to a multi-level structure, the time-series character of the dataset has to be taken into account. After all, the value of a certain party–issue combination in a certain week is likely to be highly dependent on its value in the previous week. Therefore, we include a lagged dependent variable as independent variable in our analyses. Furthermore, possible time trends, which might have a substantial meaning, are modelled by our time trend variable.

The variables (and hypotheses) we draw upon in the following analyses are all (largely) situated on one of these three different levels. First, on the first and lowest level, which varies across weeks, issues and parties, we have the lagged dependent variable, media coverage and ministerial meetings. Furthermore, the time trend and elections vary on the weekly level. Second, on the issue level, we have variation in issue type and

government agreement. Though the latter changes twice during our research period, it is stable throughout the rest of the period and we consider it statistically as an issue-characteristic. On the party level, we position the opposition party and size party variables, which also fluctuate somewhat over time, but are largely stable on the party level. The same goes for the issue-ownership variable, which differs across issues and to some extent over time but is mainly used to distinguish between parties.

We present our analyses in various steps. For all analyses we conduct multi-level models using STATA (*xtmixed* command) with restricted maximum likelihood (REML) estimations and (if necessary) unstructured covariance matrices. We start by modelling the main effects and adding them to the empty model with random intercept in three steps. These steps are congruent with the positioning of the variables on three levels as described above. To model the contingency of the media variable we first allow the size of the effect of the media variable to differ across both issues and parties (random slope). In several steps, we add interaction terms to determine whether they can account for varying media effects. Remember that these interaction effects form the actual tests of our hypotheses.

Before proceeding with the results, we have to note that, in this article, we test only the impact of the media on politics and ignore the fact that there are probably also causal arrows pointing in the opposite direction: from politics (MPs) to mass media coverage. Indeed, media–politics interactions are mutually influencing relationships and, of course, the media to some extent also pick up issues that have first been raised in parliament. We decided to focus here only on the effect of the media on politics in order not to complicate things. Moreover, earlier publications based on the same dataset as the one this article draws upon, and using a similar methodology, have already explicitly dealt with the possibility of mutual causal relationships. This works explicitly to assess the impact Belgian MPs have on Belgian media coverage and, interestingly, established that the agenda-setting impact of the media on politics seems to be larger than the influence of MPs on media coverage (Walgrave et al., 2008).

Results and analysis

Testing for main effects only, Table 2 controls the main effect of media coverage on oral questions and interpellations for a whole series of other possible explanations.

The empty model (Model I) informs us that on average a party refers 0.1485 times weekly to each of the 25 issues (intercept of the empty model). This means that on average a party addresses each issue roughly every seven weeks. Furthermore, the intra-class coefficient for level 2 (issues) is 0.1751 (variance level 2 divided by total variance in the empty model), indicating that roughly 17.5 percent of the variance can be explained on the second (issue) level. The intra-class coefficient is considerably smaller for the third level: 0.0141, indicating that only 1.41 percent of the variance can be explained on the party level. However, owing to the small N on this level, this small intra-class coefficient is no big surprise.

Almost all controls affect the number of questions/interpellations regarding an issue. Model II indicates, first and foremost, that there is quite some stability in parliamentary action; the parliamentary action of the week before is the best predictor of attention in

Table 2. Main effects: explaining parliamentary questions and interpellations

	Model I: Empty model (random intercept)	*Model II: Fixed effects Level 1*	*Model III: Fixed effects Levels 1 and 2*	*Model IV: Fixed effects Levels 1–3*
Constant	0.1484669***	0.0039522***	–0.051250**	−0.0435112
	(0.0217089)	(0.0180298)	(0.0188513)	(0.0329752)
Lagged parliament		0.1779352***	0.1749265***	0.1651484***
		(0.0036925)	(0.0036934)	(0.0040569)
Media		0.0013134***	0.0011835***	0.0012094***
		(0.0001063)	(0.0001036)	(0.0001178)
Ministerial meetings		0.0091073***	0.0079797***	0.0074877***
		(0.0016197)	(0.0016136)	(0.0018839)
Elections		0.0296232**	0.02768767**	0.0563349***
		(0.0096152)	(0.0096015)	(0.0113097)
Time trend		0.0006996***	0.0005521***	0.0005706***
		(0.0000257)	(0.0000266)	(0.0000408)
Issue type			0.0397525***	0.029453**
			(0.0083186)	(0.0091834)
Government agreement			0.0019137***	0.001835***
			(0.0000955)	(0.000112)
Opposition party				0.0792749***
				(0.0068247)
Size party				–0.0034463***
				(0.0007579)
Issue ownership				0.0008015***
				(0.0000385)
Level 3 N (party)	12	12	12	10
Level 2 N (issue)	300	300	300	250
Level 1 N (week)	71100	71100	71100	59186
Variance level 3	0.0037503	0.0026642	0.0032174	0.0067013
	(0.0024168)	(0.0015966)	(0.0016080)	(0.0039217)
Variance level 2	0.0467119	0.0259729	0.0129223	0.0128207
	(0.0039687)	(0.0022771)	(0.0011994)	(0.0013011)
Variance level 1	0.2162929	0.2054441	0.2048684	0.2320992
	(0.0011496)	(0.0010921)	(0.0010891)	(0.0013523)
Deviance	94114.606	90358.962	89991.092	82323.134

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported from a multi-level model using REML estimation. Standard errors are in parentheses; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

parliament the week afterwards. Furthermore, the more media coverage an issue received in the preceding week, the more attention MPs will devote to it. Ministerial meetings matter too: MPs ask more questions regarding issues that have been dealt with by the cabinet the week before. The closer to an election, the more MPs ask questions regarding all kinds of issues. There is a general time trend towards more questioning and interpellating in parliament during the period under study. The chi-squared distributed deviance statistic allows this model to be compared with other models that have the same

random and fixed parts (Gelman and Hill, 2007: 525). It indicates that the independent variables together result in a considerable model improvement, with the deviance statistic decreasing by almost 4000 points compared to the empty model (Model I).

On the issue level (Model III), we again find two statistically significant effects. Questions/interpellations are more frequent when it comes to issues that are divisive and endogenous compared to issues that are exogenous and consensual. MPs tend to ask more questions about issues that are incorporated in the government agreement. Again, there is a considerable decrease in the deviance score. Furthermore, the unexplained variance on the second level is considerably reduced and is now only 0.0129 compared to 0.0260 in the previous model.

Model IV indicates that opposition party MPs are clearly more active questioners and interpellators than government MPs. Smaller parties are more active in the non-legislative branch of parliament than larger parties. Finally, parties tend to stick to their issue ownership when asking questions; they ask more questions about issues their party manifesto devoted ample attention to than about issues that got less attention in their manifesto. Since, in this final model, two parties that did not issue party manifestos are excluded, it is hard to compare this model with the previous ones. However, all effects that were present in Models II and III are still statistically significant, which indicates stability in our results.

The most important finding presented in Table 2 is that mass media coverage affects parliamentary behaviour in a statistically significant way, even when we control for a range of alternative sources of parliamentary action. In the final model, we find each mention of the issue in media coverage resulting in an increase in attention on the parliamentary agenda of 0.0013. This might seem marginal, but considering the fact that the media agenda has a larger scope and that issues receive much more attention in the media than in parliament, several mentions of an issue in previous weeks' media coverage can increase the likelihood of parliamentary discussion of this issue considerably.

We are not aware of a study that checks media effects against such a range of possible alternative explanations, which suggests that media effects on the Belgian parliament are robust. Preceding coverage of an issue leads to an increase in attention in parliament for that issue on top of the effect of the own week-lagged parliamentary attention for the issue, on top of the effect of the ministerial meetings, on top of the effect of elections and a time trend, on top of the effect of the features of the issue, the attention for the issue in the government agreement, the position of the party, its size, and on top of the attention this party devoted to the issue in its preceding party manifesto. Mass media coverage thus really matters in terms of the questions MPs put to government.

So far, we have not tested our hypotheses. Therefore, we run similar analyses and bring in media interaction effects with all these variables in the models. Table 3 presents the results.

The first model allows a random slope for the media variable on both the issue and the party level. Though those random effects are small, they differ statistically significantly from zero, indicating that it is useful to continue modelling media coverage as being contingent upon issue and party characteristics. In terms of the main effects, nothing really changes compared to the fixed effects model (Table 2). All main effects stay upright and pass the significance test. This also applies to the media's main effect. Even after

Table 3. Contingency models: explaining parliamentary questions and interpellations

	Model I: Empty model (random slope)	*Model II: Interaction Model 1*	*Model III: Interaction Model 2*	*Model IV: Interaction Model 3*
Constant	–0.0424491	–0.0456417	–0.0552133*	–0.0816639***
	(0.0279918)	(0.0279528)	(0.0279978)	(0.0199443)
Lagged parliament	0.156304***	0.1543755***	0.154229***	0.1503625***
	(0.0040613)	(0.0040618)	(0.0040617)	(0.0040628)
Media	0.0015227***	0.0014190**	0.0013188**	0.0016984*
	(0.0004103)	(0.0004135)	(0.000419)	(0.0006743)
Ministerial meetings	0.0071448***	0.0040884*	0.0036663	0.0046029*
	(0.0018733)	(0.0019558)	(0.0019654)	(0.0019614)
Elections	0.0552007***	0.0569452***	0.0581287***	0.059259***
	(0.0112823)	(0.0112753)	(0.0112813)	(0.0112562)
Time trend	0.0005863***	0.0005906***	0.0005955***	0.0006206***
	(0.0000406)	(0.0000406)	(0.0000406)	(0.0000395)
Issue type	0.0204356**	0.0246175**	0.0352207***	0.0374612***
	(0.0073272)	(0.0074896)	(0.0088763)	(0.008409)
Government agreement	0.0016191***	0.001580***	0.0016413***	0.0019219***
	(0.0001083)	(0.0001092)	(0.0001115)	(0.000111)
Opposition party	0.076202I***	0.0802952***	0.0804709***	0.079258***
	(0.0068411)	(0.0068445)	(0.0068438)	(0.0067118)
Size party	–0.0029558***	–0.002759***	–0.0026942***	–0.001587I*
	(0.0007487)	(0.0007481)	(0.0007478)	(0.0006943)
Issue ownership	0.0007097***	0.0006898***	0.0006758***	0.0003796***
	(0.0000397)	(0.0000398)	(0.0000400)	(0.0000459)
Media*Ministerial meetings		0.0002315***	0.0002566***	0.0002269***
		(0.0000587)	(0.0000600)	(0.0000599)
Media*Elections		0.0001166	0.0001970	0.0009875*
		(0.000379)	(0.0003796)	(0.0003828)
Media*Time trend		0.0000087***	0.0000092***	0.0000090***
		(0.0000009)	(0.0000009)	(0.0000014)
Media* Issue type			0.0009351**	0.0004627
			(0.0003337)	(0.0003296)
Media*Government agreement			–0.0000096**	–0.0000171***
			(0.0000035)	(0.0000035)
Media*Opposition party				0.0017566***
				(0.0002082)
Media*Size party				–0.000093***
				(0.0000257)
Media*Issue ownership				0.0000148***
				(0.0000012)
Level 3 N (party)	10	10	10	10
Level 2 N (issue)	250	250	250	250
Level 1 N (week)	59186	59186	59186	59186
Variance Level 3	0.0041059	0.0040623	0.0039969	0.0006582
	(0.0026123)	(0.0022432)	(0.0026025)	(0.0006519)

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

	Model I: Empty model (random slope)	*Model II: Interaction Model 1*	*Model III: Interaction Model 2*	*Model IV: Interaction Model 3*
Random slope media	0.0000009	0.0000009	0.0000009	0.0000037
	(0.0000008)	(0.0000008)	(0.0000008)	(0.0000023)
Variance Level 2	0.0065697	0.0069782	0.0067297	0.0056416
	(0.0009366)	(0.0009913)	(0.0009653)	(0.0008457)
Random slope media	0.0000087	0.0000080	0.0000086	0.0000083
	(0.0000014)	(0.0000013)	(0.0000014)	(0.0000013)
Variance Level 1	0.2300131	0.2295327	0.2294911	0.2286676
	(0.0013425)	(0.0013397)	(0.0013394)	(0.0013345)
Deviance	81878.312	81800.722	81837.75	81641.126

Note: Unstandardized coefficients are reported from a multi-level model using REML estimation. Standard errors are in parentheses; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

introducing eight different interaction effects with mass media, the main effect of the mass media remains significant. This indicates that the mass media matter for MPs' questions/interpellations irrespective of party features, government agenda, issue characteristics and time.

Model II in Table 3 demonstrates the effects of interaction of media coverage with level 1 variables. Hypotheses 4 and 7 are confirmed, while hypothesis 8 is rejected. When the mass media report on issues that the government has just dealt with in its weekly ministerial council, the chances are high that MPs will pick up on these issues and challenge the government on them (H4). So, in its weekly council, the government offers MPs a menu of possible issues to address in parliament, but it is especially those issues that also get onto the media agenda that get relayed in parliament. H7 stated that the media's impact on parliament would increase through time and this is precisely what happens. Although our time frame of eight years is fairly short to assess fundamental processes of mediatization and increasing media logic, we do find that through time the reactivity of MPs to media coverage increases. The idea that during election times the media exert less of an influence (H8) has to be rejected: the coefficient points to a greater effect during election times. In Model II this effect is not significant, but it becomes (just) significant in the final model. Overall, there is little difference in MPs' reactions to media coverage comparing election and non-election times; MPs are even more responsive to the media at election times. We get back to this finding in the conclusion. Overall, adding the first three interaction terms results in a small, but statistically significant, model improvement with a 78-point decrease in the deviance statistic, while losing only three degrees of freedom.

On the issue level, the analyses do not yield the expected results. Model III demonstrates that MPs do not pick up more media issues that got a lot of attention in the government agreement. In Model III the effect is even significant and negative. The reason might be that the government agreement is a very stable thing: it remains the same during

an entire four-year legislature. So, the topics incorporated in the government agreement are by no means new or surprising issues. MPs, already documented in Table 2, tend to devote more time to the issues of the government agreement but they do not more readily adopt mediatized government agreement issues. Probably, for these often important and eternal issues, MPs do not need a media impulse to start devoting attention to them. Therefore, we reject H3. H6 regarding the type of political issues (endogenous and divisive) receives mixed support and cannot be fully confirmed either: in Model III the interaction effect is significant and positive; in Model IV the effect remains positive but it no longer passes the significance test. MPs seem to devote more attention to issues that are covered in the media and that are divisive and endogenous as well, but the effect is not entirely robust and we can neither corroborate nor falsify the hypothesis. It is noteworthy that the third model, including cross-level interactions of the media with variables positioned on the issue level, does not yield a better model compared to Model II.

The interaction effects assessing the three hypotheses that are positioned on the third level are unambiguously confirmed by our analyses. The key notion that the susceptibility to media cues is larger among opposition MPs than among government MPs receives unambiguous support; of all media interaction effects, the media-opposition interaction effect has the strongest coefficient and this confirms H1. When the media mention an issue one single time in the previous week, opposition parties pay 0.0021 more attention to this issue than government parties. Another key hypothesis stated that parties would in particular embrace media issues that they claim to be the owner of by devoting a lot of attention to them in their party manifesto (H5). This is true. MPs will act in parliament and interpellate and question government more fiercely when their party has shown an interest in the issue before the start of the legislature. H2 contended that small parties would be more inspired by media coverage than large parties. This hypothesis too is underpinned by the data, as small parties' MPs tend to be more reactive to media cues. The final model is best in terms of its model fit and results in the lowest variance scores on all three levels.

Conclusion and discussion

This article set out to test whether the mass media have an impact on what politicians undertake in parliament. Although in previous studies some support has been found for the idea that mass media coverage of specific issues leads MPs to start asking questions and interpellating government about these issues, the main aim of the study was to take this research one step further by investigating the contingency of this process. We departed from the idea that parties, and more specifically their positions in the government–opposition nexus, moderate the impact of the media. Sometimes the media matter for MPs, sometimes they do not. Parties and their MPs are not like marionettes that are played entirely by the media and automatically react to media coverage. Rather, they use the media in their own strategic logic; they rely on the media when media coverage helps them to pursue their partisan goals. Based on an extensive dataset about the Belgian parliament and Belgian media coverage, we operationalized these ideas by interacting the Belgian media's impact on the questions Belgian MPs ask in parliament with party, government, issue and time characteristics.

Table 4. Summary of hypotheses and test results

Hypothesis type	*H*	*Media effect on parliament*	*Result*
Party	H1	opposition > government parties	+
	H2	small > large parties	+
Government	H3	government agreement issues > other issues	–
	H4	ministerial council issues > other issues	+
Party issue	H5	issue ownership > other issues	+
Issue	H6	divisive and endogenous > other issues	±
Time	H7	increases through time	+
	H8	non-election > election times	–

First, we found considerable support for our assumption about the mass media's influence on the Belgian parliament: even when controlling for a whole range of alternative explanations and taking into account the multi-level time-series feature of our dataset, the media's influence has been considerable.

Second, results demonstrated varying levels of media influence (summarized in Table 4). Results are satisfying. Five of the eight hypotheses receive unambiguous support and can be accepted. Two hypotheses must be rejected. One hypothesis gets only half-hearted support and must be put on hold. What stands out in the findings is that the effect of the mass media on parliament is heavily dependent on the partisan government–opposition game. Opposition parties are much more likely to follow mass media coverage and pick up on issues to discuss in parliament. In many cases, this coverage offers opposition MPs the ammunition to attack government action or the lack of it. Also the size of the party matters in this respect: the smaller the party and the less it is possible for MPs to specialize on one or a few issues, the more it follows journalists in deciding what to address in parliamentary intercourse.

Another important incentive to following media attention is the presence of the issue in ministerial meetings. Here, it seems that a combination of governmental and media attention for an issue makes it politically highly relevant and for MPs almost impossible to ignore. This does not go for government agreements. It might well be that, especially due to its stability, the agreement after some time does not contain anything new and the media coverage of the agreement's issues is not monitored more thoroughly by MPs. Furthermore, parties prove to be faithful to their own agendas. When they pay ample attention to an issue in their party manifestos, and can be regarded to be the owner of the issue, parties are more likely to be influenced by media attention for specifically this issue.

Additionally, we find some support for ideas on changing patterns of interaction between media, politics and the public. The increased media influence on politics through our research period (1993–2000) points to a change from 'political logic' to 'media logic'. This is remarkable, especially when considering the relatively limited time span (eight years) covered in our research.

Finally, two hypotheses were not confirmed. Pure issue characteristics matter less. It might well be that our distinction in divisive/consensual and exogenous/endogenous

issues is too crude and that we need a more refined classification at the sub-issue level. We might have to go back to smaller issue categories than the 25 we employed here, though this might yield all kinds of (statistical) difficulties originating in issues that receive very limited or almost no attention. Also, our expectation that media effects would be greater during routine politics compared to election times is not confirmed. While previous research has shown that the mass media's influence on politics is smaller during the election campaign, this effect might be limited to specific campaign activities. Though MPs become even more active in parliament when election day is approaching, the 'rules of the game' in the institutionalized parliamentary realm do not change profoundly.

Two qualifiers deserve some attention in closing: can these Belgian results be generalized and did we really tap the media's net impact on MPs' questioning behaviour? First, it is obvious that the results from our Belgian case cannot simply be generalized to other political systems. As mentioned earlier, Belgium is a polity with very strong parties dominating the entire policy cycle and in some sense even 'occupying' the state. This turns Belgium into a peculiar case. Yet, Belgium is a parliamentary democracy and is typically governed by a coalition government just like most other West-European democracies. Moreover, the main mechanisms that we found determining whether MPs embrace media issues also apply to a large extent in the case of other polities. In most polities, the government–opposition conflict is the central engine of the political system; the eternal quest of the opposition to destabilize and grill government surely remains not confined to the Belgian case. In most polities, parties specialize in particular issues and try to develop strong issue ownership. In most polities, scholars discuss the further mediatization of politics and the prevalence of the media logic. So, although the specifics of our analysis and the differential strengths of the effects certainly cannot be generalized to other political systems, we believe our results can be considered as a first step to cautiously developing some generalizations about when the media matter for politics.

Second, one can raise doubts as to whether we really tapped the media's net impact. In fact, often the media report *about* politics, they react on what happened in the political system, on what parties did, on initiatives MPs took in parliament. So, part of the media's issue coverage is generated by politics. In this study, we neglected these political origins of media attention altogether. We considered the media agenda simply to include all the issues the media covered. But some of them are not pure media issues: it was not the media that initiated them but political actors who fed the media with their issues. So, in a sense, what we consider here as being 'media impact' encompasses a part of the impact of political elites on themselves through the media. Our media agenda in this study, in fact, also incorporates newspaper articles or TV news items in which politicians make a statement about certain issues. A likely pattern would be that the government determines to some extent what the media write/speak about and that the opposition then seemingly reacts to this media coverage while in reality it directly reacts to what the government has done. Hence, part of the causal process we describe here might be due to the reverse process: politics determining the media. The problem with such an alternative cyclical explanation of what we found here is that it is very difficult to assess reliably where media coverage comes from and to what extent the media agenda is autonomous from the political system. Consequently, we cannot discard this alternative explanation.

Of course, we might have dropped articles or news items from the media agenda in which politicians are cited or even mentioned. But we could never be sure whether or not the bulk of these cut-out stories in which politicians play a role were in fact initiated by these political actors themselves or rather by the journalists. Political actors often make statements when asked to do so by the media. Hence, we challenge subsequent studies to try to tease this out and to attempt to distinguish the autonomous and the reactive part of the media's coverage of issues.

Finally, our article offers additional insight into the interaction between politics and the mass media – an issue that is receiving increasing attention in current political science research – and we hope to have contributed to this important line of investigation. We already knew that media coverage matters for politics. This article offers a first and tentative empirical answer to the next question: when does it matter more? We contend that the most important element of the answer lies in the institutional role of and interaction between political parties and we challenge other researchers to explore this line of research further.

Notes

The data used in this article were gathered within the framework of the Belgian interuniversity agenda-setting project (2001–4) granted by the 'Federale Diensten voor Wetenschappelijke, Technische en Culturele Aangelegenheden' (DWTC). It was conducted by Stefaan Walgrave, Lieven Dewinter, Benoît Rihoux, Frédéric Varone and Patrick Stouthuysen.

1. If no parliamentary activity took place in the preceding week, we still used the media coverage of that week to compute values for this independent variable, since we assume that MPs still follow the news even when not active in parliamentary meetings and that their short-term response is to that coverage rather than to the coverage during the previous week in which parliamentary activity took place.
2. More specifically, we intuitively and roughly regrouped our issues in the exogenous–endogenous and consensual–divisive categories. Here is how we classified the 25 issues. Exogenous issues: development aid, justice and law, economy and trade, social questions, leisure, communication and information, mobility, environment, and agriculture and food. Endogenous issues: political organization, executive, mobility, finances, energy, labour and employment, science, defence, the EU, industry, companies, religion and cultural identity, production, institutions, state, and education. Divisive issues: political organization, executive, justice and law, mobility, finances, environment, agriculture and food, energy, labour and employment, and social questions. Consensual issues: science, leisure, communication and information, defence, the EU, industry, companies, religion and cultural identity, production, economy and trade, institutions, state, development aid, and education.

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Author Biographies

Rens Vliegenthart is an Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam. His research interests include politics–media relations, election campaigns, media effects on public opinion, social movements and time-series analysis.

Stefaan Walgrave is Professor at the University of Antwerp. He teaches political science. His research interests range from media and politics, over elections, electoral behaviour and political parties to social movements and protest. Since 2001, he leads the Media, Movements and Politics research group in Antwerp.