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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 906018167]

Publisher Routledge

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Political Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713774515>

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Online Publication Date: 01 October 2008

To cite this Article Walgrave, Stefaan(2008)'Again, the Almighty Mass Media? The Media's Political Agenda-Setting Power According to Politicians and Journalists in Belgium',Political Communication,25:4,445 — 459

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10584600802427047

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600802427047>

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Again, the Almighty Mass Media? The Media's Political Agenda-Setting Power According to Politicians and Journalists in Belgium

STEFAAN WALGRAVE

The unsolved question of whether the media affect political agendas is tackled with an innovative research method: a survey among politicians and journalists in Belgium. This article shows that this new approach can complement existing knowledge and yield new insights. Results largely support the contention that media matter for politics; politicians and journalists state that the media are important agenda setters, even compared to more established political actors such as political parties and interest groups. Though not all issues are equally conducive to media agenda-setting, media always seem to matter to some extent. Some politicians more than others evaluate the media's agenda impact to be high. The actual parliamentary action of some MPs is affected more by prior mass media coverage than others. I account for these differences and show that it is mainly their political role (government or opposition), the negativity of their evaluation of media power, and their perception of the impact of public opinion on politics that determine politicians' perceptions and behavior regarding political agenda-setting.

Keywords political agenda-setting, media power, journalists surveys

To what extent do the mass media affect political agendas? During the last few years, this straightforward and important question has led to a small but steady stream of research in political science and communications. Results have been mixed and contradictory, with some studies proclaiming that the media (strongly) affect the political agenda, while others contest that the media do not have any political agenda-setting power at all. In contrast to *public* agenda-setting studies, the *political* agenda-setting literature has remained inconclusive. The question of what kind of media, under which precise circumstances, affect what kind of political agenda has yet to be answered.

There are several reasons for the indecisiveness of the present political agenda-setting research (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The first is that some students of media and politics have defined the political agenda as a symbolic and largely rhetorical agenda—what politicians say they will do and how they care—while others have focused on the real substantial political agendas of legislation and budgets. Not surprisingly, scholars focusing on symbolic politics have found that the media affect political discourses to a rather large extent (Wood & Peake, 1998; Edwards & Wood, 1999); scholars concentrating on real policy outputs, in contrast, have reached entirely different conclusions and found

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that the media are, at best, only tangentially associated with policy outputs (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). The media seem to affect symbolic political agendas considerably more than substantial political agendas.

Another reason for the continuing uncertainty in the field of media and political agenda-setting is the different time periods that have been examined. Studies focusing on the agenda-setting role of the media in election times and during campaigns have, in general, been much less impressed with the media's political agenda-setting power (e.g., Brandenburg, 2000) than studies dealing with non-electoral and routine times (e.g., Bartels, 1996). The media seem to affect the political agenda considerably *less* during the campaign than in normal political times.

There is a third factor that accounts for the inconsistent research results: Diverging research methods have been employed to gauge the media's agenda-setting power. Some studies have drawn on time-series analysis, carefully content analyzing media coverage and political agendas for a longer period and testing quantitatively whether media attention for a certain issue precedes or follows political attention for the same issue (e.g., in speeches, questions in parliament, government decisions). They have shown that media attention more often precedes political attention than vice versa. Most of the time, time-series studies have concluded that the media indeed significantly affect the political agenda (see, for example, Trumbo, 1995; Soroka, 2002b). A second category of studies, in contrast, has relied on qualitative in-depth interviews with policymakers and policy insiders. Considering a certain case of decision making, they have asked their respondents whether media coverage plays any role in initiating and deciding on the issue at hand (Walker, 1977; Light, 1982; Kingdon, 1984). The results of these elite-interview studies point in the opposite direction. Almost invariably, policy insiders deny that the media have a real agenda-setting impact. They contend that the media only play a marginal role and that most policy initiatives are inspired by endogenous factors and the preferences of established political actors—political parties, interest groups, parliament, or the president—and not by external pressure mounted by the mass media.

This article tackles the methodological origins of the mixed evidence with regard to the political agenda-setting power of the media. Apart from "hard" behavioral time-series analyses and "soft" case-study-centered in-depth interviewing, I propose a *third* method to tap whether the media play a significant role in setting the political agenda. This third approach consists of surveying a large sample of politicians and journalists, both privileged observers, about the media's role in setting the political agenda. Why would surveying actors contribute to solving the political agenda-setting puzzle? Surveying key participants combines aspects of both previous methods; it adopts the quantitative approach from time-series studies and borrows the subjective assessment of the media's agenda-setting power by involved actors, from case studies. The main problem with behavioral time-series studies is that they cannot observe media-politics interactions below the surface. If a politician secretly leaks information to a journalist, for example, and later publicly reacts in parliament on the media story he or she actually initiated him- or herself, behavioral time-series studies would conclude that, in this instance, the media have set the political agenda while in reality it was the other way around. Survey-based studies may solve that problem to some extent as elites, in their assessment, also take these concealed interactions into account.

The main problem with the qualitative case-study approach is the limited generalizability of the results. Cases are often high-profile policy decisions that may, indeed, be out of reach of media power. Moreover, there are doubts about whether interviewed elites would readily admit that the media played a key role in a case they have been heavily

involved in. Personally involved insiders probably take pride in their independence and autonomy vis-à-vis the media. They may not want to give the impression that they are merely reacting to external media pressure and claim that they themselves have set things in motion. This reliability problem too may be repaired to some extent by relying on surveys in which elites are asked to give their opinion about the media's political agenda-setting power *in general*, not only with regard to a specific case they have been personally engaged in.

My goal is to speak to the ongoing debate about the political agenda-setting power of the mass media by drawing on innovative survey evidence. Introducing a novel methodological perspective may contribute to solving the stalemate with both types of studies—time series and interview based—that have led to contradicting results. The survey method allows for testing previous findings as well as exploring new avenues. First, the findings of previous studies will be put to the test to see whether they hold when tackled with a different method. Do surveys of elites confirm, repudiate, or adjust what we think we know about political agenda-setting and the media? To be really able to test previous results in an identical political and media context, I draw on the case of Belgium. There is ample time-series-based evidence on Belgium, so it makes sense to confront what previous Belgian time-series studies have found with the new survey evidence (Walgrave et al., 2005, 2008).

Second, a new method offers opportunities to explore new avenues. What surveys may in particular do better than other methods is to examine which elites more than others consider the media to be powerful. I intend to make inroads into understanding why some actors estimate the media's power as being high while others believe the reverse. I assume that there will be systematic and patterned differences between different actors in their evaluations of the media's agenda-setting power depending on their position, role, and attitudes. While estimating the media's agenda-setting power in surveys may be a subjective exercise, it is not necessarily patternless or random. Finding such systematic differences would help us to specify which political actors are most affected by media coverage and follow-up on media cues in their political action.

Method and Data

Surveys among politicians and journalists are not exceptional in political communication or journalism studies (Pfetsch, 2001; Larsson, 2002; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Strömback & Nord, 2006). What is rare, though, about the present survey¹ is its high response rate, the use of an identical questionnaire to survey both politicians and journalists, and the fact that it contained an extensive battery of questions specifically tapping the media's political agenda-setting power.

In February–March 2006, a survey was conducted among the Dutch-speaking² members of Belgium's national, federal, and regional parliaments. It targeted all members of the Lower House, the Senate, and the regional Flemish and Brussels parliaments. Simultaneously contacted were all national TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, and Internet journalists covering domestic affairs and national politics in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders). For MPs, the official Web sites of the various parliaments were used. For journalists, a complete list was obtained from the *Vlaamse Vereniging van Beroepsjournalisten*, the official association of professional journalists in Flanders. Both groups were contacted via e-mail and asked to use a personalized hyperlink to go to a Web site and fill in the Web questionnaire. A day or two later, all respondents received a paper version of the questionnaire in their mail box. After a week, a first reminder was sent, and this was repeated

2 weeks later with a new paper version of the questionnaire. To increase the response rate among politicians, five researchers visited both the national and the Flemish regional parliament on the day the weekly plenary sessions were being held. Messengers from both parliaments helped us to target MPs who had not yet participated in the survey. Many MPs took a newly printed version of the questionnaire home with them; some completed the questionnaire on the spot using laptops.

These efforts were not in vain. More than three quarters of the MPs (77% response rate; $N = 202$) delivered a completed questionnaire. Response rates for national and regional MPs were similar, with an identical response rate of 81% for both major parliaments, Lower House and the Flemish parliament, and somewhat lower rates of 66% for the Senate and 65% for the Brussels parliament. MPs from all parties were more or less equally willing to collaborate and to provide their answers: Response rates varied between 59% among MPs from Vlaams Belang, the right-wing populist party, and 100% among MPs from N-VA, the Flemish nationalist party. Note that only MPs were surveyed; government ministers were not included. Taken together, the respondents formed a representative segment of the national political elites in (Dutch-speaking) Belgium.

Unlike politicians, journalists were not visited “on site,” and although response rates were slightly lower, they were still satisfactory. Two thirds of the journalists contacted yielded a useful questionnaire (66% response rate; $N = 304$). Due to the broadly defined sample, some journalists who did not often deal with domestic politics were contacted and as a result did not feel inclined to share their opinion and experiences. The response rate was considerably higher (75%) among journalists specializing in national politics. By and large, I am confident that the group of journalists yielded a reliable picture of the opinions and experiences of political journalists in (Dutch-speaking) Belgium.

The questionnaire included three types of questions tapping the media’s political agenda-setting power: (a) questions assessing the media’s *general* impact on the political agenda, (b) very precise questions concerning *specific cases* of decision making, and (c) an assessment of the *actual behavior* of MPs and the extent to which it had been inspired by media coverage. Note that participants were not only asked for entirely “subjective” attitudes about and perceptions of the media’s agenda-setting power, but also for a precise, and probably more “objective,” assessment of actual (parliamentary) behavior.

Theory and Hypotheses

The study had both testing and exploring aims. In order to avoid country differences (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), differences in media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), and institutional realm differences (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993) affecting the outcomes—if research has shown anything, it is that political agenda-setting by the media is contingent—the focus was on testing and reexamining earlier findings on Belgian MPs. As a result of a recent study by Walgrave and colleagues (2008), Belgium is one of the very few countries outside of the U.S. about which we have time-series evidence on the media’s agenda-setting impact on parliament. Drawing on a detailed assessment of 10 years (1991–2000) of parliamentary activities and mass media coverage (newspapers and TV news), Walgrave et al. established that newspaper coverage of an issue systematically precedes parliamentary activities regarding the same issue (oral questions and interpellations). They concluded that media coverage substantially impacts the parliamentary agenda in Belgium. The effects are not very large, though, as the explained variance of the models remains low (media coverage’s standardized parameters varied between .084 and .236 depending on the issue). The media are definitely not the only source of parliamentary action in Belgium.

Also, Walgrave and colleagues found that TV coverage does not seem to impact the MPs as newspapers do. In fact, they found no significant TV news effects at all. Moreover, as oral questions and interpellations are the preferred weapons of opposition parties, the study strongly suggests that opposition MPs are more affected by media coverage than government MPs. Finally, the study also shows that the media's political agenda-setting role varies across issues: Especially in terms of law and order and the environment, the media seem to set the political agenda; this is far less so when it comes to administrative policy or state reform (see also Soroka, 2002b). In this study, each of these Belgian time-series findings was tested.

Apart from testing and reexamining existing knowledge, the survey method also allows new avenues in political agenda-setting research to be explored. A first relevant question is whether subjective assessments of the media's political agenda-setting power by elites are different when it comes to a *general* assessment of the media's power compared to a *specific* assessment considering particular cases of decision making. As stated, case studies based on qualitative evidence usually show that the media does not have much impact on the specific case at hand. This suggests that insiders who are directly involved in a specific policy process often repudiate that the media affect their acts and preferences. Consequently, participants were expected to overestimate the media's power in general, as opposed to specific cases they are familiar with. When estimating the media's impact on *others*, political actors may be less reluctant to acknowledge that the media matter in setting these other political actors' agendas.

A second explorative track is examining whether there are differences among politicians in their appraisal of the media's agenda-setting power and whether some politicians' actions in parliament are more affected by media coverage than others' actions. Even tentatively answering these questions is tricky, as an answer requires a theory on how politicians judge and react to media coverage, and such a theory is lacking. Drawing on the work of Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006), three possible "reasons" for diverging media evaluations and media-cued behavior among MPs can be distinguished: (a) the intensity of contact with the mass media, (b) the negativity of the media's power evaluation, and (c) the perceived reactions of politicians to public opinion. Of course, these factors cannot really be considered as primary "causes" of the media's perceived agenda-setting impact; it is impossible to disentangle the mutual causal chains between attitudes and perceptions in a cross-sectional design. For example, negative evaluations of the media's power may be a consequence of the perception of the media's impact on the political agenda rather than a cause.

H1: Considering media contact, MPs who interact intensely with the mass media will think differently about the media and respond differently to media coverage. The effect may work both ways. On the one hand, it is to be expected that the more extensive the contact between the media and MPs, the greater the media's impact on MPs' perceptions and behavior. On the other hand, MPs with more contact with the media and journalists—weathered media politicians—may be more "immune" to media cues as they can put media coverage into perspective and are less impressed by it.

H2: Politicians who evaluate the media's power *negatively* will be more impressed by the media's agenda-setting power. In a sense, that is because politicians are often engaged in blame avoidance strategies (Edelman, 1977) and try to shift responsibility to a third party (i.e., they feel they are not to blame for what goes wrong; it is the fault of the almighty media, whose coverage affects society negatively).

H3: Politicians' perceptions of public opinion and the way other politicians take into account the public's preferences will also matter. Political actors adopt media issues

mainly because they believe the media reflect public opinion (Cook et al., 1983; Schudson, 1996). The idea is that if politicians care about public opinion and think (other) politicians take into account public opinion when devising their policy or electoral strategy, this will affect their own evaluation of the media's power and their own reactivity to media cues. This is closely related to the so-called "third-person effect": People who take action after being exposed to a media message claim their action has not been caused by the message itself but by the anticipation of the reaction of others (Paul et al., 2000). The more MPs believe that other MPs react to public opinion, the more they consider the media, as a reflection of public opinion, to have an impact on the political agenda and the more they too take the media into account.

Analyses and Findings

Assessing the Media's Agenda-Setting Power

I measured the media's impact on the political agenda in three ways: Different series of questions tapped the general power perception, the specific power perception, and the media origin of parliamentary activities. This section presents the bivariate evidence and focuses on reexamining previous findings on the media's political agenda-setting power.

Considering the media's general agenda-setting power, both Belgian politicians and journalists consider it to be extensive. This is documented in Table 1. Both groups of privileged observers agreed to a large extent with the statement that "the media determine the issues that are politically important." Almost three quarters of the politicians (entirely) agreed with the statement that the media is a powerful agenda setter and that they themselves are relatively weak; more than half of the journalists concurred with this. Among both politicians and journalists, the number of people who denied that the media have a large share in setting the political agenda formed a small minority. Yet there are notable differences between the groups: Politicians assess the media's general agenda-setting power higher than journalists; the average score on a scale from 1 to 5 is significantly higher. The perception that the media's general agenda-setting power is so high is puzzling. Previous research in Belgium has shown that the media measurably affect the political agenda, but not to such an extent as indicated here. Indeed, Walgrave and colleagues (2008) established that the media measurably affect MPs' behavior in parliament—their

Table 1
General appraisal of the agenda-setting role of the mass media
according to politicians and journalists

	Media determine what issues are politically important, politics has only limited impact	
	Politicians (%)	Journalists (%)
Agree (entirely + rather)	72.0	51.4
Mixed	15.3	18.8
Disagree (entirely + rather)	12.7	29.7
Average (1–5)	3.8	3.3
N	189	276

questions and interpellations—but the explained variance of their models was limited, and prior media coverage only accounted for 10%–20% of the variation in MPs' actions.

Of course, the variance explained in time-series studies cannot be directly compared to answers on a 5-point scale, but the contrast between the two methods' results is striking. There are two possibilities: Belgian MPs seriously overestimate the media's impact on the political agenda, or the more moderate time-series findings systematically underrate the media's impact. It cannot be determined, at this time and with the evidence at hand, what method yields the most reliable and valid results. Most time-series studies have, in contrast to interview-based studies, suggested that the media matter for setting the political agenda; the media-power side of the debate clearly gains leverage by introducing a third method. Politicians and journalists loudly confirm that the media co-determine the political agenda.

Table 2 breaks up the general agenda-setting power of the media into two types of media: radio and TV on the one hand, and the written press on the other. Respondents were asked how often a range of political actors manage to put new issues on top of the political agenda. Confirming the above, both groups considered the media to be influential. Although they considered the prime minister to be a more successful political agenda setters than the media, they estimated the power of both types of media to be larger than the agenda-setting power of established political actors such as parties and interest groups. Comparing electronic and paper print media, both groups rated electronic media significantly higher than printed media; that is, they considered radio and TV to be more influential agenda-setters than the printed press. This challenges previous Belgian findings. Based on time-series analyses, Walgrave and colleagues (2008) established that the parliamentary and governmental agendas in the 1991–2000 period were measurably affected by newspaper coverage but *not at all* by TV coverage. Why did the political actors have the opposite impression? I do not have a ready explanation, but suspect that both groups believe that TV especially affects the *public* and so, indirectly, the political agenda. This conjecture is supported by the fact that, when asked in general terms about the political power of the different media, both groups believed TV affected the *public* much more than the printed media. Differences in terms of printed media and the impact of audiovisual media on *politics* are much smaller.

Previous research has shown that the mass media's impact on the political agenda differs across issues, so respondents were asked to reflect on the role of the mass media in eight concrete and recent (non-) decision-making cases in Belgium. When asked about specific cases, a much more nuanced picture comes to the fore. The media's alleged impact on the political agenda strongly varies across issues (Table 3).

The research literature has distinguished between different types of issues, and the variable nature of the media's impact has been established in many studies (see, for example, Zucker, 1978; Soroka, 2002b). Environmental issues and law-and-order issues are considered as particularly conducive for media effects, while social issues and certainly endogenous administrative issues are well beyond the reach of media power. This was corroborated for Belgium in the time-series study referred to earlier (Walgrave et al., 2008). The answers given by journalists and MPs seem to confirm this. When confronted with environmental and law-and-order issues, both groups point more toward the media as agenda-setters than when asked about a social policy or about an administrative policy case. The variation between the issues is considerable; for some issues, the media's agenda-setting power is deemed much smaller than for others. When confronted with specific cases, key political actors are less inclined to attribute a large amount of agenda-setting power to the media. This resembles and seems to confirm the findings of previous cases studies based on

Table 2
 General appraisal of the agenda-setting role of the mass media in comparison with other political actors according to politicians and journalists

Actor succeeds in putting a new problem on top of the political agenda	Radio and television (%)		Written press (%)		Prime minister (%)		Political parties (%)		Interest groups (%)	
	Politicians	Journalists	Politicians	Journalists	Politicians	Journalists	Politicians	Journalists	Politicians	Journalists
Most of the time	25.7	16.9	15.5	10.4	36.4	29.5	13.4	10.4	5.9	0.8
Many times	52.4	40.4	48.1	39.2	42.8	48.4	56.5	49.6	34.9	26.9
Now and then	21.9	36.5	33.7	42.3	16.6	19.3	28.0	35.0	51.1	54.2
Seldom	0.0	6.2	2.7	7.7	3.7	2.0	2.2	4.6	8.1	17.7
Never	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4
Average (1-5)	4.0	3.7	3.8	3.5	4.1	4.0	3.8	3.7	3.4	3.1
N	187	260	187	260	187	254	186	260	186	260

Table 3
Specific appraisal of the agenda-setting role of the mass media in eight cases

	Type of issue	Which actor put the case at hand on the political agenda?	
		Politicians (%)	Journalists (%)
Antwerp VISA scandal (abuse of public money)	Political scandal	63.4	54.3
Dioxine crisis (food poisoning)	Environment	61.4	55.6
Head scarves (Muslim scarves in public office)	Immigration/law and order	45.0	37.5
Youth crime	Law and order	29.7	27.3
Night flights (noise pollution vs. jobs with carrier)	Environment/ economic policy	28.7	28.9
Traffic safety	Environment	23.3	29.3
Electoral district devolution	Reform of the state	23.8	19.7
End of career debate (later retirement)	Social policy	14.9	20.4
Average (0–8)		2.9	2.7
<i>N</i>		202	304

Note. More than one answer was possible.

in-depth interviews: When questioned about specific cases of policy-making, the media are often disregarded by key actors. It appears that the more one questions the power of the media *in general*, the more political actors are apt to point to the media as powerful players. In contrast, the more political actors are confronted with *specific* cases, the more they sketch a nuanced picture and put the media's power into perspective.

Studies so far have shown that the opposition's agenda is affected more by media coverage than the governmental agenda (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2008). This applies to Belgium as well (Walgrave et al., 2008). Answers to the general question about the mass media's impact on the political agenda (see Table 1) were split into answers from opposition and government MPs. Their perceptions were very similar. Belgian opposition MPs rated mass media power only slightly higher than government MPs, but the difference was not significant (data not presented). All MPs, across the board, believe that the media are key agenda setters. However, perhaps the actual *behavior* of opposition and government MPs is affected differently by media coverage. MPs were asked a series of questions about the parliamentary initiatives (e.g., oral questions, written questions, interpellations) they had personally taken since the beginning of the winter session of parliament (from October 2005 to February 2006). They were asked to provide an estimation of the total number of actions they had undertaken and the amount of parliamentary initiatives initiated by preceding media coverage. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Belgian MPs said they had taken on average about 49 parliamentary initiatives in the 5 preceding months. According to the MPs' own assessment, more than a quarter of these parliamentary initiatives sprang from preceding mass media coverage—the figures of national and regional parliaments are very similar. This corroborates the above finding that MPs (and journalists) perceive the mass media to be important agenda-setters, and it

Table 4

Effective parliamentary action and the media: average number of parliamentary initiatives taken by opposition and government MPs and percentage of initiatives taken due to prior media coverage

	Opposition	Government	Total
Average no. of parliamentary initiatives undertaken since the beginning of the session (October 2005–February 2006)	57	46	49
Average percentage of initiatives taken due to prior media coverage since the beginning of the session	33.8	21.2	25.5
<i>N</i>	67	130	197

Note. Difference in the share of media-initiated actions between government and opposition MPs were significant at the $p < .001$ level.

is strong proof of the fact that the mass media affect in particular the parliamentary agenda. Again, the survey findings seem to go further than what earlier time-series studies revealed regarding the Belgian parliament (Walgrave et al., 2008). Thus, MPs judge the media to have a larger effect than what time-series analyses have shown so far. This is not only the case for their subjective, general assessment of the mass media's agenda-setting power but also more concretely refers to their daily parliamentary behavior. Comparing government and opposition MPs' behavior corroborates previous research: Opposition MPs are more influenced by mass media coverage than government MPs. While one third of the opposition's parliamentary initiatives were inspired by media cues, only one fifth of the government MPs' actions in parliament were generated by the media. The difference between government and opposition MPs was significant at the $p < .001$ level.

The bivariate analyses both confirmed, and repudiated some of the previous findings in Belgium (and elsewhere). First, media matter for the political agenda; the survey results among MPs and journalists unmistakably confirmed earlier time-series studies and challenged interview-based case studies. Both subjective, general assessments and more concrete and "objective" assessments point in the same direction. Second, the impact of electronic media is more highly regarded than the power of the printed media; previous Belgian findings suggested that the written press was the most powerful. Third, validating existing knowledge, opposition MPs were more affected by media cues than government MPs. Fourth, perceived media power diverges considerably across issues. For some issues, media matter more than for others. Fifth, when asked about the media's specific impact on precise cases, privileged witnesses seemed to judge the media's power smaller than when asked in general.

Toward an Explanation of Assessments of the Media's Agenda-Setting Power

The previous section put earlier findings to the test. This section attempts to take one further step and check whether there is a pattern in assessments of the media's agenda-setting power among our respondents. I focus on the MPs and examine why some MPs thought differently about the media than others. Two multivariate models with two distinct dependent variables are estimated. The first dependent variable is the general assessment of the

media's political agenda-setting power. I simply add the three variables present in Tables 1 and 2, yielding a sum scale ranging from 3 (very small media impact) to 15 (very large media impact). The second dependent variable is the share of parliamentary initiatives that had been taken after media coverage. Two simple OLS regressions are run predicting the amount of subjective and behavioral agenda-setting power of the media. Opposition-government membership and basic demographics (sex and age) are introduced as controls. The results are presented in Table 5.

With regard to the model estimating MPs' assessment of the media's general agenda-setting power, few variables are significant (see also the small adjusted R^2 value). This is to be expected, as the variance among MPs is small; almost all MPs considered the media to be a key agenda setter. Two predictors turn out to be significant, corroborating two of the three hypotheses. First, the number of different media outlets an MP is recently in contact with is not significantly associated with his or her assessment of the agenda-setting power of the media. On a bivariate level (data not shown), the media contact variable *is* significant—the more a politician has been in contact with different media outlets, the less he or she considers the mass media to be a crucial agenda setter. Confirmation of the second hypothesis is shown by the fact that a negative appraisal of the mass media's power ("too much power") is associated with attributing agenda-setting power to the media.

A second variable operationalizing negative media power is also tested: the *difference* between an MP's personal issue priorities and the average journalist's issue priority.³ The variable is not significant in the regression, but bivariately it was significantly associated with the mass media's general agenda-setting power. Thus, the larger the difference—the

Table 5
OLS regression (standardized betas) predicting the media's general agenda-setting power and the share of parliamentary action initiated by the media

	Media's general agenda-setting power	Share (%) of parliamentary initiatives initiated by media
Controls		
Sex	-.014	-.170**
Age	.098	-.170 **
MP party in opposition	-.073	.244***
Media contact	-.090	-.045
Negative assesment of media power		
Mass media too much political power	.222***	-.011
Difference in personal issue priorities vs. journalist priorities	.100	.065
Public opinion and politicians		
Politicians take polls into account when making policy	.223**	-.063
Politicians take polls into account in electoral strategy	-.041	.170*
Adjusted R^2	.125	.078
N	175	175

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

more politicians notice that their personal priorities are not reflected in the media and not reflected by journalists—the more MPs tend to think highly of the media's agenda-setting power. In other words, the bivariate evidence suggests that the less politicians feel understood by the media and the more they perceive their priorities not to be present in the media, the more they think the media have a large impact.

Third, the evaluation of the way politicians take into account public opinion polls is also a significant predictor in the model. The more MPs believe that policymakers take opinion polls seriously when devising policy, the higher they gauge the media's agenda impact. This is in line with the "third-person effect" and the third hypothesis. It underpins that politicians consider media as a proxy for public opinion: When they think public opinion plays a role, they also think media are important.

In short, the first model refutes the first hypothesis and does not falsify the second and third hypotheses. The appraisal of the media's general political agenda-setting power is not affected by the intensity of contact with the mass media; it is affected by the negativity of the evaluation of the media and by the perception of how other politicians take into account public opinion.

The second model predicts the amount of parliamentary initiatives that have been inspired by prior media coverage. The explained variance of this model is small as well. The control variables are the most significant predictors: Men, more than women, are inspired by media cues when taking parliamentary initiatives; younger MPs are more inclined than older MPs to be impacted by media. The government-opposition variable plays a role too, as already show above: Opposition MPs adopted more media issues than government MPs. The first two hypotheses are not supported by the evidence—intensity of contact with media and negativity of appraisals of the media's power are not associated with the share of media-initiated parliamentary initiatives. On a bivariate level, though, just like in the first model, the difference in issue priorities is positively associated with agenda-setting by the media. If MPs experience large differences between their personal evaluations of issues and journalists' evaluations of issues, they tend to adopt more issues from the media. The third hypothesis receives unambiguous support from the data: Politicians who think other politicians do take public opinion into account when devising their electoral strategy are more impacted by mass media coverage.

By and large, neither model can really sharply distinguish between MPs who believe in and act according to the mass media's agenda-setting power and MPs who do not. Probably the homogeneity of the sample, with by far the most MPs stating that the media matter a lot, accounts for these results. Of the three hypotheses, the first must be rejected. Assessments of the mass media's impact on the political agenda do not depend on the intensity of contact one has with the media. The second and third hypotheses received some support. If MPs think the media have too much power and if their personal issue priorities are not reflected in the media, they tend to attribute a great deal of agenda-setting power to the mass media and act accordingly. MPs' appraisals also depend on how they perceive the link between the mass media and public opinion. If they believe that their colleagues follow public opinion, they tend to follow the media in their parliamentary action and to think highly of the media's impact on the political agenda in general.

Discussion and Conclusion

Political and media elites in Belgium answer the question of whether the mass media matter for the political agenda with a loud and clear "yes." This novel survey evidence clearly chooses sides in the ongoing debate and unambiguously supports previous studies

showing that the media affect the political agenda. This study was based on the same subjective assessments of involved actors as interview-based studies; however, the present respondents, in contrast with these case studies, thought very highly of the media's agenda-setting power. Even compared to "objective" and behavior-centered time-series studies that sometimes revealed quite firm media effects, this survey's results go a considerable step further and indicate that the media's grip on the political agenda is considerably higher. The study validated the findings of earlier work, especially previous work conducted in Belgium. One of the most interesting findings was that members of the opposition, just as expected, are significantly more reactive to media cues than majority members. Because the opposition's agenda is more symbolic than the incumbents' agenda, opposition MPs draw on the media as a reservoir of issues that can be used at all times to challenge the government and to display the government's incompetence or indifference. Also, the present evidence underpins the idea that the media matter more for some issues than for others. In line with my expectations and previous research, I found that law-and-order and environmental issues appear to be more conducive to media effects than social policy and state reform issues. However, one conclusion of previous research was challenged by this study's results: the difference in agenda-setting power between newspapers and TV. Respondents considered TV news to have more impact on the political agenda than newspaper coverage, while time-series studies have tended to find the opposite. Finally, MPs and journalists evaluated the media's power as smaller regarding specific cases than in general. In sum, the survey method allowed a systematic test of existing claims by approaching them through a different lens. This increased our cumulative knowledge of agenda-setting processes.

Added to that, the survey method allowed questions not tackled before to be addressed. I explored to what extent Belgian political elites differed in their opinion about the mass media's role in setting the agenda and attempted to find patterns in these beliefs. Although not overwhelming, I did find some recurring patterns in MPs' assessments and actions. If politicians assess the media as negative, chances are higher that they will attribute a great deal of agenda-setting power to the media and act in line with their belief. Political elites who suspect that other politicians follow public opinion begin to emulate the media's issue priorities themselves. Arguably, these are modest but significant steps toward a better understanding of why and how mass media matter for the political agenda. Survey evidence can not only complement the ongoing dispute about the power of the mass media; it can generate new knowledge that deepens our understanding of how mass media and politics interact.

The main weakness of the study is that it covers only one country. To what extent can the results be generalized? The power of the media depends on the political system and the media system. In some countries, media matter more than in others (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Thus, in principle, the findings cannot be generalized to other systems. Belgian politicians especially seem to overrate the power of the media in Belgium—in fact, they seem to be obsessed with it. Their claims go a great deal further than what empirical studies have shown. Indeed, media power is an often and widely debated issue in Belgium. In interviews, politicians frequently complain about media coverage and its harmful consequences (e.g., in relation to the rise of the extreme-right Vlaams Belang). Yet, Belgian journalists also think highly of the media's impact on the political agenda; this externally validates politicians' "almighty media" claim. Because both receivers *and* senders of media messages are convinced that the media matter for the political agenda, the possibility of method artifact and a biased view of prejudiced politicians is unlikely. Moreover, Belgium is by no means an exceptional country. In other political systems too,

time-series studies have tended to show robust effects of the media on the political agenda. The Belgian polity is not a very open system; it is dominated by strong political parties and corporatist interest groups. Consequently, one would expect the Belgian partitocracy (De Winter et al., 1996) not to be more but rather *less* susceptible to media cues compared to other, more open political systems such as the U.S. and the U.K. (see also Walgrave et al., 2008). In any case, this study begs for replication in other countries. More variation in political systems and media systems is needed to rule out the possibility that the present results are a Belgian idiosyncrasy.

Notes

1. The survey drawn on in this article, Medpol06, was carried out by Peter Van Aelst, Michiel Nuytemans, and Stefaan Walgrave at the University of Antwerp. The author wishes to thank the other team members for putting the data at his disposal.

2. The Dutch-speaking part of Belgium is called Flanders and is inhabited by more than 60% of the country's population.

3. To construct this variable, I first calculated the average importance given to all 20 presented issues (crime, foreign affairs, environment, unemployment, etc.) by the journalists (1 = very important, 4 = not at all important). I then subtracted the journalists' average per issue from each individual politician's assessment of the importance of the same issues. I added all absolute differences across the 20 issues, ending up with a scale ranging from 5 to 24.

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