The Mass Media's Political Agenda-Setting Power

A Longitudinal Analysis of Media, Parliament, and Government in Belgium (1993 to 2000)

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Do mass media determine or codetermine the political agenda? Available answers on this question are mixed and contradictory. Results vary in terms of the type of political agenda under scrutiny, the kind of media taken into account, and the type of issues covered. This article enhances knowledge of the media's political agenda-setting power by addressing each of these topics, drawing on extensive longitudinal measures of issue attentiveness in media, parliament, and government in Belgium in the 1990s. Relying on time-series, cross-section analyses, the authors ascertain that although Belgium is characterized by a closed political system, the media do to some extent determine the agenda of parliament and government. There is systematic variation in media effects, however. Newspapers exert more influence than does television, parliament is somewhat more likely to follow media than government, and media effects are larger for certain issues (law and order, environment) than for others (foreign policy, economic issues).

Keywords: political agenda setting; mass media; government; parliament; Belgium

Do the mass media determine or codetermine the political agenda? The question is straightforward and fundamental, but scholars have not yet succeeded in formulating a clear answer. That is, we have accumulated relatively little knowledge about the magnitude of this effect or the conditions under which this effect increases or decreases. This article focuses on

these conditions by testing the media's political agenda-setting power across (a) political institutional agendas, (b) media outlets, and (c) issues. Do we find differential media effects on different political agendas? Do different media differ in their impact on politics? Does the media's impact on the political agenda differ among issues?

A political agenda is the list of issues to which political actors pay attention; determining the agenda is a necessary precondition for almost any kind of political decision. It thus comes as no surprise that, during the past decade, political agenda setting appears to have grown into one of the major paradigmatic approaches to public policy (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 1995).

Much of this work suggests that mass media can play a critical role in setting political agendas. Nevertheless, the media's precise role in political agenda setting has received relatively little attention, and what evidence is available is mixed and often contradictory (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Some scholars claim that the media do matter; others consider the mass media to be completely tangential to the political agenda-setting process. These varying findings are no doubt related to the fact that media effects vary across political agendas, media outlets, and policy domains. Past work has tended to concentrate on a limited number of political agendas, media, and domains, however. We consequently have limited knowledge about how media effects may vary.

We also know little about political agenda-setting effects outside the United States, as very few studies have focused on other countries. As political agenda setting occurs in specific national institutional contexts and as these contexts dramatically differ across countries, we have every reason to expect that agenda-setting dynamics in general, and the media's role in it, differ across countries. This study attempts to address the three research questions in Belgium, which we argue is a particularly interesting country in which to explore political agenda setting by mass media. Belgium is a small, Western European, consociational democracy; the Belgian polity is very different from the American political system. It is less pluralistic: Alternative policy venues and issue entrepreneurs are in lesser supply. Political parties are the main political actors. Belgium is considered as a copybook example of a partitocracy (De Winter, della Porta, & Deschouwer, 1996). As a consociational democracy, where the majority does not impose its will on the minority but

resorts to negotiations, the political game is complex and pervaded with veto players (Lijphart, 1999). The executive branch of government dominates the legislative branch to a large extent. Detailed government agreements disarm parliament (De Winter & Dumont, 2000). In short, Belgium is characterized by a fairly closed political system.

As Belgian political parties have a great deal of control over the political agenda, governments are not particularly receptive to new issues that pop up in the media. Moreover, as the country is strongly decentralized along linguistic lines and thus without true "national" media, media power is further diluted. Both the Flemish and Walloon media systems often put different—and sometimes opposing—pressures on the national political agenda. Belgium thus presents a tough test for the mass media's political agenda-setting power. In short, we would expect mass media to have *less* political agenda-setting power in a more closed system such as Belgium than in a more open system such as the United States, where a much more expansive and diverse group of issue entrepreneurs can (we suspect) more effectively use media coverage to create political opportunities. Finding media impact on the national political agenda in Belgium would accordingly strongly validate the supposition that mass media can matter for political agenda setting.

In the following section, we review the existing, U.S.-dominated literature and focus on differences in media impact across political agendas, media outlets, and issues. The subsequent section introduces our design and data. Ours is a longitudinal time-series study covering a large part of the 1990s in Belgium (1993 to 2000). Dependent variables include both parliamentary activities and government decisions during these 8 years, so we can systematically compare media effects on both of these political agendas. Independent variables include media coverage in five newspapers and on four TV stations in the same period, so we can compare the varying impact of written versus audiovisual media. Our data cover all major issues, so we can also assess media and political attention to all issues and particularly across six major aggregated issue categories. Relying on a time-series, cross-sectional design, in the results section we examine the reciprocal relationships among newspapers, television, parliament, and government agendas in Belgium. A final section summarizes and discusses our findings in the context of comparative work on policy agenda setting by mass media.

Political Agenda Setting and the Media

The scholarly literature on the mass media's role in determining the political agenda is overwhelmingly dominated by U.S.-based studies. In

their literature overview of political agenda-setting studies, Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) find that 15 of 18 published studies concern the U.S. polity. Even within this U.S. context, researchers come to widely diverging conclusions. Some studies ascertain the existence of considerable media effects (Cook et al., 1983; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs, & Nicholas, 1980; Protess et al., 1987; Trumbo, 1995; Wood & Peake, 1998); other U.S. studies deny that the media have much impact at all (Kingdon, 1984; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993; Walker, 1977; Wanta & Foote, 1994). Apart from a number of (so far) unpublished papers (John, 2005; Landry, Varone, Laamary, & Pesant, 1997; Van Noije, Oegema, & Kleinnijenhuis, 2004), studies covering other countries than the United States remained limited to a handful (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995; Soroka, 2002a, 2002b). As a consequence, we know hardly anything about whether and to what extent the main political institutions—parliament and government—in nonpresidential, parliamentary democracies, such as Belgium, react to media coverage. The present study thus puts past U.S. findings into some comparative perspective. Finding media effects on political agendas in the closed Belgian political system would show that U.S. findings hitherto are not American idiosyncrasies. More importantly, however, we also tackle three pressing problems in the field of political agenda setting.

One pressing problem is the *type of political agenda* that students of media and politics take into account. As different political actors act according to different logics, we can expect their susceptibility to media cues to differ. Several authors have stressed the difference between so-called symbolic and substantive political agendas (Pritchard, 1992; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Symbolic agendas need have no real policy consequences. Political actors just show that they care and worry about an issue—by asking parliamentary questions or addressing it in a speech—but they do not propose, or do not have the competence to initiate, concrete policy measures. Substantive political agendas, in contrast, are tangible—these deal with law making, budgetary allocations, sanctioning, nominations, and so on. In political agenda-setting terms, the distinction between symbolic and substantive agendas boils down to the fact that some political agendas may be more reactive to media coverage than are others. The more substantive an agenda, the less it reacts to the media; the more symbolic a political agenda, the more it may react to media coverage.

In fact, most studies establishing strong media bearings on politics take a largely symbolic agenda as dependent variable: speeches of the president, oral questions in parliament, hearings in parliament, and so on (e.g., Edwards & Wood, 1999; Gilberg et al., 1980; Soroka, 2002a; Wood & Peake, 1998).

Studies focusing on real policy change are generally much less impressed by the media's political agenda-setting power (see Kingdon, 1984; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993; Walker, 1977). We may consequently expect mass media in Belgium to affect the activities of the Belgian Parliament more than the decisions of government. The parliamentary control activities that we take into account in this article—oral questions and interpellations—are in fact largely symbolic actions. Governmental decision making in the weekly Ministerial Council, in contrast, consists of real decision making that may be out of reach of mass media's coverage.

There is a second reason we expect stronger effects of media coverage on parliament than on government, and that is, simply, that parliament is not a unified political actor but government is, at least in a coalition government, such as in Belgium. Government consists of several parties and is engaged in a constant process of tightrope walking, reconciling different preferences and interests. Every decision requires internal negotiations to prevent internal conflicts and to avoid government ultimately tumbling. Consequently, it is much more difficult for government to quickly react on media coverage than it is for individual members of parliament (MPs), especially opposition MPs (see below). Often, it is even impossible for government to react on media cues as government parties simply do not agree on how to react (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). In contrast, it only takes one individual MP to react on media coverage; party control on interpellations and, certainly, on oral questions is rather weak.

All this leads us to our first hypothesis.

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Other things being equal, we expect the mass media to exert more influence on the priorities of parliament than on the priorities of government.

The *type of media outlet* may matter as well. The discussion among agenda-setting scholars about the impact of print media versus audiovisual media is far from settled. In terms of *public* agenda setting, some scholars claim the primacy of newspapers, whereas others believe in the power of TV (Eilders, 1997; Protess et al., 1987; Schoenbach, 1991). Some *political* agenda-setting studies claim that, ultimately, it is newspapers that lead and affect the political agenda, possibly via the intermediation of TV news (Bartels, 1996). Others yield a more nuanced picture stating that TV and newspapers have different effects (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977; Trumbo, 1995). We anticipate here that newspapers, because of their much more in-depth and complete coverage, are more able to affect

policy makers. Also, the credibility of the medium probably plays a role: Reliable and respected news outlets have more impact than do marginal and dubious news sources (Bartels, 1996). We think that newspapers, in many countries, may be considered by politicians as more respectable news outlets than TV stations (e.g., the status of *New York Times* in the United States). A third argument is that politicians themselves, because of the more flexible and easier processing of paper material, are personally more exposed to newspaper than to TV news and, hence, are more affected by newspapers than by TV (Fuchs & Pfetsch, 1996). A survey of Belgian MPs carried out in 2006 confirmed that these elites, indeed, are more exposed to newspaper coverage than to TV news.[1]

We consequently measure both newspaper and TV coverage and depart from the hypothesis that newspapers have stronger effects on the political agenda than television. We think this hypothesis is generic and applies to most postindustrial democracies, of course depending on the specific media system. Belgium is not exceptional in terms of its media system, at least not compared to European nations. Newspapers used to be partisan megaphones, but during the 1980s and the early 1990s, they quickly depoliticized. Public broadcasting, frenetically neutral until recently, got commercial competitors at the end of the 1980s. Norris (2001), in her typology of media systems, considers Belgium to be a intermediate case.

Our second hypothesis related to the media outlets is as follows.

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* All other things being equal, we expect the print media to exert more influence on parliament and government than audiovisual media.

If there is one thing the long public agenda-setting tradition in communications has clearly established, it is that *issues* matter a lot. Political agenda-setting studies comparing effects across several issues indicate that political agenda-setting dynamics may dramatically differ, conditional on the type of issue concerned (Bartels, 1996; Linsky, 1986; Soroka, 2002b; Trumbo, 1995; Zucker, 1978). In brief, for some issues media affect the political agenda; for others, they do not.

The most elaborate issue typology has been devised and tested in Canada by Soroka (2002a, pp. 15-31). He differentiates prominent, sensational, and governmental issues. Sensational issues are unobtrusive; they cannot be directly observed by the public or by politicians, they are concrete with tangible consequences for the population, and they are marked by dramatic events drawing massive media attention. In terms of sensational issues, media are expected to lead politics, not the other way around. For prominent issues

with strong real-world cues and concrete effects, media politics effects are expected to be much more modest. If people (and politicians) can rely on their own direct observation—they observe in their own environment, for example, that unemployment rises and daily perceive inflation when they go shopping—they will rely much less on the media to get their issue priorities (Zucker, 1978). For governmental issues, finally—unobtrusive, without drama, and often without concrete effects on the population—policy is expected to lead the media, not the other way around.

In the current study, we distinguish six clusters of issues and derive expectations regarding media impact based on Soroka's (2002a) threefold typology. Naturally, it is difficult to allocate whole policy domains to one of sensation, prominent, or governmental. A blatant case of criminal and dangerous pollution, for example, clearly qualifies as sensational, whereas the formation of a new environmental agency must probably be categorized as governmental. Even so, we can nevertheless have general expectations for broad issue categories. In a sense, our rough issue classification leads to a conservative test: If we would find diverging issue effects even relying on our approximate categories, this would yield strong proof that issue differences really matter. We list the six clusters of issues here in ascending order of expected media influence:

1. *Defense and foreign affairs*. An intense debate has been going on about the media and the U.S. president's foreign policy (Livingston, 1997; Mermin, 1997). In the United States, foreign policy can be considered as a sensational issue; it is unobtrusive, but it has very concrete consequences (e.g., American soldiers dying on foreign battlefields), and it is marked with dramatic events. The Belgian situation, we expect, is totally different. Belgium's foreign policy is not high profiled; for example, the country has not participated in any recent war. Foreign policy during the 1990s was an unobtrusive, uncontentious issue; there were no dramatic events nor any tangible consequences for the Belgian population. So, in Belgium, foreign policy is more of a governmental issue. We expect little media impact when it comes to foreign policy issues.

2. *Political system and government administration*. Issues related to political system and government administration are typically endogenous. That is, in the Belgian polity, they are boosted not by external pressure nor by a vocal public opinion, but they are rather mainly initiated by political actors themselves. These are thus largely governmental issues, and we expect only weak media effects.

3. *Economic policy*. This is a classic prominent issue, one that individuals experience on a daily basis. Citizens and policy makers should thus be less susceptible to media influence for this issue as they have their own

observations on which to rely. Previous studies have indeed confirmed this for the media's impact on the public agenda (Behr & Iyengar, 1985). At the same time, however, economic issues are fundamental and tangible, and we can expect actors other than policy makers (citizens, and media) to initiate increasing attentiveness to the issue. Here, we expect—on average—mild media effects.

4. *Social and welfare policy*. We characterize this domain in a similar way as we do with economic issues. This is not an issue domain that generates sensational coverage, certainly, but it is a fundamental domain with direct consequences for the population and one in which media and citizens are as likely to lead as are policy makers. Previous public agenda-setting studies, more particularly studies focusing on unemployment, found that the media's impact is limited (Mackuen & Coombs, 1981). For this prominent issue, we thus expect evidence of moderate media effects.

5. *Environment, energy, and mobility*. The environment is a classic sensational issue and has thus played a prominent role in the literature on public agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and on political agenda setting (Trumbo, 1995). Environmental issues are most of the time not obtrusive but have often (sometimes with the help of interest groups) generated sensational events. They are often sparked by spectacular focusing events or accidents attracting the attention of the public and the political elites at the same time (Birkland, 1998). These issues should thus be particularly open to media influence.

6. *Law and order*. This also is a typical sensational issue. Public agenda-setting studies have established that public opinion is sensitive to law and order coverage: The more media bring crime stories, the more the public cares about crime regardless of the real crime situation (Ghanem, 1996). Previous political agenda-setting studies have identified crime as a sensational issue and have found media effects on crime policies (Pritchard, 1992; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). Crime is often not directly observable, at least not by the majority of the political elites. It is consequential and is driven by accidents and spectacular events boosting attention. We thus expect our political agendas to be especially influenced by crime-related coverage, particularly during this time. Belgium was hit by the system-destabilizing Dutroux case in 1996 to 1997, a crime scandal featured by very negative coverage (Walgrave & Manssens, 2000).

Thus, our third hypothesis is as follows.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Other things being equal, we expect the media to clearly lead politics on the issues of law and order and the environment (sensational issues), we expect media to have much less impact on politics regarding economic and social policy (prominent issues), and we expect

media to have the least political impact for defense and foreign affairs and political system issues (governmental issues).

Data and Design

The study draws on three longitudinal data sets covering the 1993 to 2000 period in Belgium:[2]

1. *The mass media agenda*. National media do not exist in Belgium. Both media systems are completely separated, with (Dutch-speaking) Flemings reading only Flemish newspapers and watching Flemish television and French-speaking people reading French newspapers and watching French television. We therefore code both French and Flemish print and broadcast media. Our media data set contained three Flemish newspapers, tabloids, and broadsheets with different partisan leanings (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) and two Walloon newspapers (*Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*). We also covered two Flemish television channels, one public service broadcasting (TV1) and the other commercially run (VTM), and did the same for French-speaking television (RTBF and RTL). For the newspapers, we were forced to use actual newspaper copies. We code all front-page newspaper stories, with the exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on a daily basis. The main TV news shows in prime time (7:00 p.m.) are coded on a daily basis. Taken together, the Flemish- and French-speaking media data base contains 180,265 news items (to be precise, 113,658 TV items and 66,607 newspaper items).

To tap issue saliency, we weigh TV items according to the number of seconds they are covered. For newspaper articles, we use the following weight factors: very long articles (coded 10), medium articles (coded 7), very short articles (coded 1).[3] This means that television and newspaper coverage are measured on quite different scales, but as forthcoming estimations will rely on standardized coefficients, this presents no major difficulty in terms of the interpretation of results.

We have already outlined potential differences in the effects of newspapers and TV news. These differences might, of course, also be caused by different logics underlying both media outlets. The broader range of issues in newspaper coverage may lead to a better statistical fit with the very heterogeneous policy agendas. However, our study draws on more extensive media data for broadcast than for print media; we use only front-page articles for the newspapers and consider the whole main evening news broadcast for TV. Moreover, the issue

distribution of news items is similar for TV and newspapers. In short, it is not the case in our database that TV coverage is more stochastic than newspaper news and that, subsequently, data sampling procedures were conducive for preferring newspaper over TV effects or vice versa.

2. *The parliamentary agenda*. Parliament does many things. Debates on recent events are organized and bills are introduced, debated, amended, and, sometimes, voted on; government is controlled and challenged by the opposition. All these activities can to some extent be considered as separate parliamentary agendas. For the purposes of this study, we focus on oral questions and interpellations. Both activities target government and require oral answers in parliament from a cabinet minister. Questions and interpellations may criticize governmental policy or nonpolicy but can also contain simple questions for information. Government MPs are also engaged in these activities, but, as expected, opposition MPs are far more active when it comes to oral questions and interpellations. Questions and interpellations can be considered as representative for the symbolic parliamentary agenda: They often do not entail tangible consequences, but their aim is foremost to communicate with the public. Considering oral questions and interpellations as typical symbolic politics, we expect to find substantial media effects. Drawing on official parliamentary records and using the parliamentary thesaurus, we produce a data set containing 6,686 parliamentary actions for the whole period on a daily basis.

3. *The government agenda*. Just like parliament, government is engaged in different activities. One of the most important decision-making institutions for Belgian governments is the weekly Council of Ministers. All cabinet ministers meet for a sometimes lengthy gathering to take and confirm all executive-branch decisions ranging from appointing officials and top civil servants, setting up agencies, and initiating legislation to all kinds of minor executive decisions on maintenance of government buildings and so on. Neither the council's official minutes nor the preparing documents are available for scholarly research. We therefore examine the weekly press summary called *Facts* (*Feiten* or *Faits*) issued during the whole period by the Federal Information Service. *Facts* contains a short description of decisions taken by government in its weekly gathering. A comparison of a few official comprehensive minutes of the ministerial councils in 1999 and 2000 with *Facts* showed a correspondence of more than 80%. We code *Facts* in the same way as we code the parliamentary agenda: All items are equally weighted and assigned a single issue code. In total, this data set includes 6,296 items. We consider the decisions taken by government in its weekly council as real, substantive policy making and, consequently, anticipate comparatively weak media effects.

In each case, we examine the complete agenda or, at least, as complete an agenda as we can reasonably consider. We begin by coding each data set using 110 different issue codes, trying to get as near as possible to the smallest issue unit. Codes are based on the internationally employed hierarchical EUROVOC thesaurus, designed for coding all European Union documents (http://eurovoc.europa.eu). This thesaurus contains 6,075 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 number of codes to 110. We rely on a rather thin content analysis: We consider only issue saliency and do not get into the actual content, framing, direction, or tone of the issue attention on the different agendas.

Using all 110 issue categories means that some categories are very small, and equal to zero much of the time. The issues can be combined, of course, and our analyses here consequently rely on a collapsed form of the data set, where the 110 issues are collapsed into 25 major issue categories. Estimations rely on these 25 issue panels, each with 414 weekly observations from 1993 to 2000. (Some weeks are lost to missing data because of parliamentary recesses when, clearly, there can be no measurable parliamentary or government agenda.)

To be clear, our analysis examines issue attentiveness—the proportion of the total agenda dedicated to a given issue—by issue, weekly, for 25 major issues and for newspaper, television, parliament, and government agendas. Weeks are defined as starting on Monday and ending on Sunday.

The estimations themselves take the form of time-series, cross-sectional ordinary least squares estimations (random effects models) with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck & Katz, 1995). Each major issue forms a panel, then, and the resulting coefficients in our first estimations provide an indication, for instance, of the average effect of newspaper content on the parliamentary agenda across all 25 issues. (Subsequent analysis allow for different effects across issues.) Preliminary tests suggest that most effects occur within a 4-week period. We consequently estimate all models using four lags of the independent variables and four lags of the dependent variable to account for autocorrelation. For the sake of clarity, we do not present weekly coefficients here but rather show the summed coefficients (and corresponding standard errors) for lags 1 through 4 of each variable. That is, although the actual estimation models include separate coefficients for each of lags $t–1$, $t–2$, $t–3$, and $t–4$, our tables below show just the summed coefficient for all these lags (and the corresponding standard error).

More precisely, the models we estimate are as follows:

$$News_{it} = \beta_1 News_{it-1,4} + \beta_2 TV_{it-1,4} + \beta_3 Parl_{it-1,4} + \beta_4 Govt_{it-1,4} + \varepsilon_{1it}$$
$$TV_{it} = \beta_5 News_{it-1,4} + \beta_6 TV_{it-1,4} + \beta_7 Parl_{it-1,4} + \beta_8 Govt_{it-1,4} + \varepsilon_{2it}$$
$$Parl_{it} = \beta_9 News_{it-1,4} + \beta_{10} TV_{it-1,4} + \beta_{11} Parl_{it-1,4} + \beta_{12} Govt_{it-1,4} + \varepsilon_{3it}$$
$$Govt_{it} = \beta_{13} News_{it-1,4} + \beta_{14} TV_{it-1,4} + \beta_{15} Parl_{it-1,4} + \beta_{16} Govt_{it-1,4} + \varepsilon_{4it}$$

where the current values of any one agenda (at t for issue i) are a function of the past four lags ($t–1$ through $t–4$) of itself and the other three agendas.

Our assessment of causation relies on a Granger (1969) approach, where we can test, for instance, whether (a) News leads Parl, (b) Parl leads News, (c) each leads the other, or (d) there is no connection, all of this controlling for the past history of the dependent variable and the effects of the other two independent variables (in this case, TV and Govt). In the models listed above, this particular example relies on an assessment and comparison of β_9 (News's effect on Parl) and β_3 (Parl's effect on News). And we can of course pair other variables in similar ways to assess the causal relationships between any two of our four agendas.[4]

We readily admit that although strongly suggesting causation, our (broad but thin) approach does not, strictly speaking, prove causation. That is, all we can really say is that, for instance, controlling for the history of Parl, attention to issues on News precedes (or follows) attention for those issues on Parl. For the sake of clarity, we will refer to "effects" when discussing preceding rise or decline in issue attention. But we should state at the outset that all we can provide evidence for is temporal precedence. That we regard temporal precedence as an indication of causation admittedly requires a leap of faith, though in this case we regard that leap as a relatively small one.

Results

Do mass media determine or codetermine the political agenda in Belgium? Results here suggest that mass media do lead the political agenda to some extent; that is, both the parliamentary and the governmental agenda appear significantly affected by coverage. Table 1 provides the broad picture.

The table includes summed coefficients for lags $t–1$, $t–2$, $t–3$ and $t–4$ for all independent variables and shows results from models in which each of the four agendas serves as a dependent variable. Standardized coefficients in the final column allow us to directly compare the effects of the independent variables, controlling for the different variances in each series. The models

Table 1
Media–Policy Interactions

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	Coeff.	SE	Standardized Coeff.
Newspapers $_{it}$	Newspapers $_{it-1,4}$	.708***	.021	—
	Television $_{it-1,4}$	.161***	.017	.200***
	Parliament $_{it-1,4}$	.030**	.010	.035**
	Government $_{it-1,4}$	.012*	.006	.020*
Television $_{it}$	Newspapers $_{it-1,4}$	.244***	.027	.196***
	Television $_{it-1,4}$	.723***	.029	—
	Parliament $_{it-1,4}$	.032**	.013	.030**
	Government $_{it-1,4}$	−.005	.007	−.007
Parliament $_{it}$	Newspapers $_{it-1,4}$	.105**	.037	.091**
	Television $_{it-1,4}$	.046	.030	.050
	Parliament $_{it-1,4}$	.447***	.027	—
	Government $_{it-1,4}$	.063***	.013	.091***
Government $_{it}$	Newspapers $_{it-1,4}$	.166**	.049	.099**
	Television $_{it-1,4}$	.015	.039	.011
	Parliament $_{it-1,4}$	.135***	.031	.093***
	Government $_{it-1,4}$	.305***	.022	—

Note: $N = 10,350$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

indicate significant effects in almost all directions—that is, they find evidence of reciprocal links among virtually all media and political agendas. The magnitude of these effects varies considerably, however, and the models thus have much to tell us about the nature of political communications in Belgium.

Each model shows strong autocorrelation in the dependent series (reflected in the newspaper coefficient for the newspaper model, the television coefficient in the television model, etc.). If an issue receives attention at time $t–1$ on any of the four agendas under study, it is likely that the same issue will receive attention on that same agenda at time t. This is the normal process of inertia and incrementalism. Because government in particular is often depicted as being a slow and repetitious process (Lindblom, 1959), it is remarkable that continuity is highest in the media—parliament's and government's agendas appear more flexible and changing, insofar as coefficients for the lagged dependent variable are lower (unstandardized summed coefficients of .447 and .305 vs. .708 and .723 for media agendas). This apparent difference is partly a function of the fact the policy agendas necessarily deal with many issues, whereas media agendas will tend to regularly focus on a select set of issues and largely ignore others.

Coefficients for parliament and government in the newspaper and television models suggest that media partly follow both core political institutions. This of course reflects the fact that media report on what is going on in parliament and in government. Because these core institutions produce events with news value—they (can) affect the daily lives of the population—it makes perfect sense that the media cover their activities. Parliament seems to set the media's agenda more than government (e.g., for television, standardized summed coefficients of .035 vs. .020); indeed, television coverage is not even connected to government issue attention (a summed standardized coefficient of –.007). This is also to be expected: Questions and interpellations are in large part aimed at media coverage, whereas the Council of Ministers will necessarily deal with a greater proportion of more substantive but mundane issues.

Parliament and government seem to affect each other in a balanced way: Standardized coefficients are of similar magnitude (.091 and .093). The same applies for television and newspapers: They lead and follow each other to more or less the same extent.

The most important finding for our purposes here is that issue attentiveness in newspapers seems to lead issue attentiveness by policy makers, and more so than the other way around. That is, both parliament and government activities appear significantly affected by newspaper coverage of the same issues. Moreover, newspaper coverage precedes political attention much more than political attention precedes newspaper coverage. For instance, the standardized coefficients are roughly 3 times bigger from newspapers to political agendas (.091 and .099) than vice versa (.035 and .020). In sum, we do find rather strong media effects in Belgium, a striking finding, we believe, given that Belgium is a relatively closed system in which the potential for media effects seems comparatively small.

What about our three hypotheses? Our hypothesis claiming that newspapers would exert more influence than TV (H2) gets strong support in Table 1. Interestingly enough, television does not seem to have any effect on either political agenda; the effects of political agendas on television content are also comparatively small. In contrast, we find consistent and substantial effects of newspaper coverage on both political agendas. Political actors, somehow, seem to be more susceptible for newspaper cues than for TV coverage. As noted above, we think this finding might apply to most postindustrial democracies, as newspapers report more about politics, as politicians read newspapers more than they watch TV news, and as newspapers, or at least some of them, are considered to be more reliable and trustworthy news sources. As we find no significant TV effect, our subsequent models focus more attention on the newspaper data.

Differences between government and parliament in terms of responsiveness to media content appear rather modest. Although we expected that (symbolic) parliamentary politics would be more susceptible for media cues than (substantive) governmental discussion, this is not evidenced here. Both appear to be affected by media content. This challenges our hypothesis that parliament is more affected by mass media than government (H1). Yet maybe media effects on parliament and government do differ when we split up the analysis for different issues.

Do we find significant differences between types of issues (H3)? We clearly cannot examine this in a model that attributes a single average coefficient across all 25 issue domains. We accordingly test for differences across issues in a separate estimation, in which we allow for the effects of (and on) newspapers to vary across issues. Essentially, we interact each independent variable with a categorical variable representing each of our six issue categories. Doing so means that there will be, in effect, one media coefficient for defense and foreign affairs issues, another media coefficient for law and order issues, and so on. The categorization of issues is listed in the appendix. There are 10 issues categorized as *other*; these are dropped from this analysis.

For the sake of clarity, we focus here just on the reciprocal relationships between newspapers and each parliament and government. The parliament estimations are included in Tables 2a and 2b. Both tables, again, make it immediately clear that the newspaper lead on parliament is bigger than the opposite effect. All six newspaper lead coefficients are significant (in Table 2a), whereas only two Parliament coefficients pass the significance threshold (in Table 2b). Specifically, only for foreign affairs and environmental issues do effects go in both directions: Newspapers and parliament mutually affect each other. Generally speaking, it is more often the case issues appear in print media before they appear in parliament.

The most important finding in the table, however, is that media power on parliament systematically differs across issues. We predicted (H3) that sensational issues (law and order, environment) would yield more media power than prominent issues (social and economic policy), whereas prominent issues would be more steered by the media than would governmental issues (foreign policy and political system). The results in Table 2a are not entirely straightforward, but they seem to generally confirm this hypothesis. Media impact is biggest for law and order, and it is smallest for political system issues, as expected. The other issues behave more or less as expected, although we would have anticipated a smaller media effect for social policy issues and for foreign affairs.

Table 2a
Newspaper Lead on Parliament, By Issue

Issue	Newspapers		Standardized	AR	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	Coeff.	SE
Defense and foreign affairs	.084**[a]	.030	.082[a]	.327***[a]	.054
Political system and govt. admin	.155*[a]	.076	.059[a]	.554***[a]	.045
Economic policy and conditions	.120**[a]	.044	.061[a]	.343***[a]	.048
Social and welfare policy	.150**[a]	.044	.096[a]	.374***[a]	.048
Environment, energy, and mobility	.237*[a]	.107	.091[a]	.240***[a]	.062
Law and order	.156***[a]	.040	.109[a]	.528***[a]	.067

Note: $N = 6{,}210$. AR = autoregression.
a. Significant positive effect.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2b
Parliament Lead on Newspapers, By Issue

Issue	Newspapers		Standardized	AR	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	Coeff.	SE
Defense and foreign affairs	.093**[a]	.036	.095[a]	.814***[a]	.022
Political system and govt. admin	−.010	.013	—	.664***[a]	.038
Economic policy and conditions	.032	.018	—	.687***[a]	.025
Social and welfare policy	.021	.022	—	.752***[a]	.028
Environment, energy, and mobility	.050*[a]	.023	.130[a]	.444***[a]	.046
Law and order	.014	.038	—	.922***[a]	.024

Note: $N = 6{,}210$. AR = autoregression.
a. Significant positive effect.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Are the same cross-issue trends evident in the relationship between media and government agendas? The picture for government is much less clear. Tables 3a and 3b contain the evidence.

Here there is evidence of agenda setting by media in defense and foreign affairs, social and welfare policy, and law and order. The effect for law and

Table 3a
Newspaper Lead on Government, By Major Issue

| | Independent Variables (Summed Lags 1-4) | | | | |
| | Newspapers | | | AR | |
Issue	Coeff.	SE	Standardized Coeff.	Coeff.	SE
Defense and foreign affairs	.168***[a]	.044	.088[a]	.177***[a]	.044
Political system and govt. admin	−.296**	.088	—	.347***[a]	.052
Economic policy and conditions	−.225***	.063	—	.349***[a]	.046
Social and welfare policy	.226***[a]	.075	.081[a]	.227***[a]	.043
Environment, energy, and mobility	−.264	.143	—	−.034	.070
Law and order	.194***[a]	.045	.142[a]	.108***[a]	.083

Note: $N = 6{,}210$. AR = autoregression.
a. Significant positive effect.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3b
Government Lead on Newspapers, By Major Issue

| | Independent Variables (Summed Lags 1-4) | | | | |
| | Newspapers | | | AR | |
Issue	Coeff.	SE	Standardized Coeff.	Coeff.	SE
Defense and foreign affairs	.013	.014	—	.830***[a]	.020
Political system and govt. admin	−.041*	.012	—	.672***[a]	.037
Economic policy and conditions	.006	.011	—	.685***[a]	.025
Social and welfare policy	−.019	.011	—	.773***[a]	.026
Environment, energy, and mobility	.007	.021	—	.462***[a]	.045
Law and order	.099*[a]	.048	.135[a]	.883***[a]	.025

Note: $N = 6{,}210$. AR = autoregression.
a. Significant positive effect.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

order is greatest, in line with our hypothesis, though here there is evidence of a reciprocal relationship—just as media seem to lead government, so too does government lead media, and the coefficients are roughly similar. The remaining three domains show no evidence of a government lead on media and rather puzzling evidence of a negative effect of media content on government.

That is, in these domains, it appears as though rising issue attention in newspapers leads to decreasing attention in government. This is controlling for the history of the government series, of course, so it may simply be the case that government attention precedes or is concurrent with media attention on these issues. We discuss this possibility in our conclusions. For now, what we can tell from these results is that the relationship between media and government—if there is one—is not easily captured by the 4-week models used here. As a consequence, there is little evidence here of the variation across issues we predicted. That this is true is perhaps strong evidence of our first hypothesis, however, that the media–parliament relationship will be stronger than the media–government relationship (H1). This certainly appears to be borne out in these results: Parliament is, indeed, more affected by media coverage than is government.

Conclusions

Do the mass media determine or codetermine the political agenda? The answer appears to be yes, media coverage does affect the topics that receive attention by Belgian policy makers. Naturally, news media are not all determining, but their lead on the political agenda is measurable and significant. Previous studies—although far from agreeing on size, significance, and kind of media effects—come to similar conclusions, of course. What have we found that goes beyond the available knowledge?

First, we now have further evidence that mass media act as political agenda setters in parliamentary democracies. That is, not only are the American president or the U.S. Congress affected by media, but in a Western European democracy, media also politically matter. This is particularly remarkable in Belgium, characterized by a fairly closed political system, dominated by political parties that are stern gatekeepers of the political agenda. Evidence of media effects in this political setting seems to be particularly strong support for the notion that media content can matter in the setting of the political agenda.

Second, we have gone a good deal further than previous studies in specifying and integrating the particular conditions under which media coverage might affect the political agenda. Results for each of our three hypotheses are as follows:

1. Media effects are greater on symbolic than on substantive policy agendas. In Belgium, the government-control activities of MPs—questions and

interpellations—are quite clearly and strongly led by media content. The same is not so true for the weekly decisions of government. There is some evidence of media effects here, to be sure, and given Belgium's closed political system, we regard this as remarkable. This partly challenges the idea that the media matter only for the unimportant political skirmishes addressing the gallery. But media effects on parliament are clearly stronger than those on government (though note that in other political systems, where government is not coalitional and not divided as it is in Belgium, it might be that substantial government actions are more affected by media cues than what we found here; see Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

2. Newspapers, at least in Belgium in the 1990s, appear to have a larger political agenda-setting effect than TV news. This need not indicate that television does not matter, of course. But our results suggest the importance of newspaper content in the empirical study of agenda setting by mass media. Now, Belgium is not a "TV-centric" country, like the United States, for example, and newspapers are an important forum for public and political debate. In countries such as the United States, we might find stronger TV effects. We nevertheless suspect that newspapers have some intrinsic qualities that make them prone to setting the political agenda in any post-industrial democracy.

3. Finally, there are systematic and sizeable differences in media effects across issue types. These are roughly, though not perfectly, as we would expect given Soroka's (2002a) typology. The largest effects are clearly for sensational and justice- and crime-related issues. Environmental issues also show evidence of media effects, as we would expect, though not apparently more than for social issues and only marginally more than for economic issues. The lowest overall effect is for political system and government administration issues, as we expected. There is thus evidence here that the joint consideration of issue obtrusiveness, dramatism, and concreteness offers some reasonable purchase on the question of which issues should be most open to media effects. As these issue findings match previous outcomes in other countries, we believe them to be more or less generalizable.

In sum, our work demonstrates the importance of mass media in setting the political agenda. This importance is certainly not equal across all issues; it is most likely greater for more symbolic political agendas than for more substantive ones, and not all media have the same agenda-setting power. But effects nevertheless are evident across many issues, and these effects are not negligible. That this is true in a partitocracy such as Belgium makes our findings particularly significant. Mass media clearly play an independent role in determining policy makers' attentiveness to issues.

Appendix
Topics and Descriptives

	Parliament		Government		TV		Newspapers	
Macro Issue	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
1. Defense and foreign affairs	.019	.045	.046	.084	.049	.056	.049	.045
Defense and conflicts	.032	.056	.054	.071	.086	.073	.079	.049
Development aid	.003	.011	.037	.098	.010	.013	.008	.010
International	.022	.048	.046	.081	.051	.031	.059	.028
2. Political system and govt. admin	.037	.059	.035	.070	.016	.022	.021	.023
Administrative system	.044	.064	.052	.079	.005	.008	.011	.011
Political system	.030	.053	.019	.056	.026	.026	.032	.026
3. Economic policy and conditions	.020	.041	.028	.063	.022	.021	.025	.021
Agriculture	.012	.028	.012	.041	.015	.023	.008	.011
Companies	.015	.027	.003	.016	.027	.018	.039	.020
Economy	.017	.034	.036	.063	.023	.020	.024	.017
Finances	.035	.062	.059	.089	.020	.018	.031	.020
4. Social and welfare policy	.023	.043	.048	.077	.030	.032	.028	.028
Health	.033	.051	.040	.074	.028	.019	.027	.019
Social policy	.010	.023	.050	.081	.007	.011	.009	.010
Work	.025	.046	.055	.076	.055	.038	.049	.032
5. Environment, energy, mobility	.016	.036	.018	.041	.016	.018	.012	.014
Environment and energy	.009	.031	.012	.032	.008	.010	.005	.008
Mobility	.023	.039	.024	.047	.023	.020	.020	.015
6. Law and order	.068	.086	.062	.083	.164	.101	.137	.061
Law and order	.068	.086	.062	.083	.164	.101	.137	.061
7. Other	.007	.023	.013	.038	.011	.018	.013	.017
Disasters in Belgium	.003	.010	.003	.015	.014	.027	.006	.013
Ethical questions	.004	.015	.002	.012	.002	.004	.004	.006
Europe	.011	.027	.041	.066	.021	.024	.034	.025
Foreigners	.014	.037	.012	.033	.014	.022	.012	.018
Information and communications	.006	.016	.026	.055	.010	.010	.020	.014
Intercommunity conflict	.010	.033	.008	.034	.010	.019	.013	.015
Law	.006	.018	.008	.026	.003	.005	.005	.007
Population	.006	.019	.009	.026	.017	.021	.019	.016
Rights	.010	.024	.005	.020	.006	.009	.008	.010
Science and research	.002	.011	.014	.034	.008	.011	.010	.009

Note: $N = 10{,}450$.

Notes

1. Survey Medpol06 was carried out by two of the authors in February and April 2006 among 202 Belgian members of parliament (MPs). The MPs reported that they, on average, spent exactly 60 minutes a day reading newspapers, whereas they only watched TV news for 50 minutes a day. Above their personal reading of newspapers, MPs spent on average 30 additional minutes reading daily press reviews of newspapers.

2. Data were gathered within the framework of the Belgian interuniversity agenda-setting project (2001 to 2004) granted by the Federale Diensten voor Wetenschappelijke, Technische en Culturele Aangelegenheden. It was conducted by Stefaan Walgrave, Lieven Dewinter, Benoît Rihoux, Frédéric Varone, and Patrick Stouthuysen.

3. These weights were determined based on the typical differences in the length of small, medium, and long articles. Changing the weights does not alter our analyses.

4. Note that our models do not allow for concurrent effects—that is, the dependent variable at t can be caused by independent variables at t–1 to t–4, but not at t. This is perhaps not ideal because we do expect there to be some kind of concurrent—or at least next-day—relationship between media content and political agendas. To the extent that we miss concurrent relationships, then, our tests are biased against finding significant effects. That said, assessing the direction of a concurrent link is of course difficult. Methodologically speaking, allowing for only lagged effects somewhat improves our ability to talk about causation. Moreover, it avoids another methodological difficulty where concurrent effects are concerned: Council of Ministers meetings occur late in work week, whereas media data are captured by week, Monday through Sunday. Concurrent effects—in either direction—thus lead to a rather strange situation in which, for instance, a meeting on Friday determines a media story 4 days earlier. This difficulty is avoided by using only lagged values of the independent variable.

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