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Beyond agenda-setting. Towards a broader theory of agenda interactions between political actors and the mass media

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ABSTRACT - In the research field of media and politics the agenda-setting approach is one of the main accounts. It theorizes about the impact of mass media coverage on political priorities. Yet, agenda-setting offers a one-sided perspective. It only takes into account the impact of media on politics and not the other way around and it only deals with positive power and neglects negative power - that is the power to prevent other actors from devoting attention to specific issues. In this paper we develop a broader typology of media-politics interactions dealing with both direction of influence and with positive and negative impact. Depending on the context, we expect political actors or the media to dominate the interaction process. We test this theory relying on comparative data in five small European countries and drawing on a survey among MPs.

INTRODUCTION

There is an awkward segregation in the field of media and politics research. Some work and theories focus on how the media influence politics. Scholars examine the political agenda-setting power of the mass media, they investigate how the media logic compels political actors to adapt their strategies, or they look at how mass media framing affects political actors' options (Strömback, 2008; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Other work looks at the opposite relation: how political actors steer the mass media. These scholars find that political elite sources dominate the news, that framing and 'spinning' by political actors is successful, or that news media are used by political actors feeding them with news stories (Tuchman, 1978; Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004). The strange thing is that these dissimilar streams of research seem to be largely disconnected. Media-

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to-politics scholars tend to believe that media matter for politics and have little interest in the opposite relationship. Politics-to-media scholars are convinced that media content is primarily defined by political elites and have difficulties believing in an independent role of the mass media. The two paradigms do not even fight each other. There is hardly any debate or interaction.

The few studies that do take into account both directions of the relationship are mostly case studies drawing on micro data, detailed content analyses or in-depth interviews (Davis 2007). These studies show that media and political actors are engaged in a battle for issues, frames and access (see for example: Althaus 2003; Entman 2003; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, and Semetko 1999). Systematic evidence, let alone comparative work outside of the US, that deals with both directions of influence is rare. Several scholars have recently pleaded for integrating both streams of research into a single framework (see for example: Kepplinger 2007). In his recent book Cycles of Spin, Sellers (2010) argues that strategic communication (by congress members) and agenda-setting (by the media) should be studied together as both processes form an integrated whole. In short, this work suggests that "*news construction is a negotiated process*" (Bennett and Livingston 2003: 359) and that, to fully understand the interaction of media and politics, we need to take into account the agenda efforts of both sides.

In this paper, we attempt to start bridging both streams of work and try to integrate them into a single theoretical and empirical framework. Since this undertaking is both ambitious and difficult, we limit ourselves to only one dimension of the media-politics interaction. Concretely, we study how attention to issues is transferred from mass media to political actors (in this case, members of parliament in different countries), and how, vice-versa, political actors seek to impact the issues the news media cover. In other words: we theorize, and empirically assess, the multiple types of *agenda interactions* between media and individual political actors. We recognize that the interaction between the media and political actors entails much more than mutual influences regarding attention. For instance, Reich (2006) suggests that political actors set the agenda by initiating certain issues, but that journalists become more important in the second phase when those issues are discussed and defined. Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) make a similar point when concluding that the media rarely initiate the coverage of political stories but do play a role in amplifying and structuring them. In this study, though, we limit our focus to agenda interactions only. To what extent is the attention

the mass media and political actors devote to issues determined by attention by the other player?

It is important to recognize here that there are other levels of analysis at which these press-politics dynamics can be studied. For example, broad models of the norms driving press coverage in different media systems focus on ways in which news organizations track power balances between government and opposition (including decisive spits within governments) that organize the selection and emphasis of sources and frames in stories. One such model is indexing, which suggests that an overriding structuring principle in reporting is the perception by journalists of the power balances that may shape the outcomes of policy decisions (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007). Indexing seems to operate not just in the U.S. but also in other systems such as the UK, Sweden and Germany, where a diverse spectrum of news organizations seem to move their framing as the parties that anchor them shift their support or opposition to different policies (Bennett & Alexeev, 1995; Vogelsang & Fretwurst, 2005; Weiss & Weiss, 2005 ; Shehata, 2007).

Beyond the importance of power in indexing news content, other system-level perspectives suggest that other press norms are engaged by different story properties. For example, dramatic events beyond the immediate control of political actors may grab media attention and free news organizations to set the political agenda more independently (Lawrence, 2000). However, as found in a study by Livingston and Bennett (2003), these "disturbances" in normal press-politics patterns may soon be routinized again as those in power regain control over the news framing process. The next step in the formation of a general theory at this level involves looking more systematically at the interplay of how politicians in power cue the press and how they are affected both by successful opponent news framing and more independent press framing of stories. Such an investigation would require coding large data sets for the leads and lags in source selection and story framing.

In the present analysis, we propose to look at how politicians in parliaments individually attempt to shape the news agenda, and how they perceive the independent effects of that agenda on their own legislative activities. This level of analysis is clearly important for understanding the behavior of political actors who both seek election and who seek to advance legislative initiatives that reflect their political interests (Sellers, 2010; Cook 1989). Our contention is that the streams of influence work in several ways: 1) that media coverage impacts the political agenda by affecting what politicians devote

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attention to; 2) that politicians try to shape that news agenda with varying degrees of effort and success depending on the system in which they operate; and 3) that agenda power has not only positive but also a negative component, meaning that some stories or aspects of stories may be neglected in the press because political actors refuse to address them publicly, or because certain actors are ignored by the press.

From this set of influences, we can abstract two dimensions — (1) which way agenda power flows (from press to politicians or politicians to press coverage) and (2) is this power positive or negative? We first devise a two-by-two typology of agenda interactions between mass media and politics, and then theorize about the incidence of each of the four agenda interaction types, formulating expectations about when we expect to find which type of interaction. We then test whether, first, the different agenda interaction types exist in reality and, second, whether their presence or absence is determined by the characteristics of the political actors at stake and by political system features. We rely on comparative data from five small European countries (Belgium, Denmark Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden). In each of these countries a sizeable sample of Members of Parliament was questioned about their agenda interactions with journalists and the mass media.

A TYPOLOGY OF AGENDA INTERACTIONS

In the research field of media and politics, the *agenda-setting* approach has been one of the main accounts. Agenda-setting is a theory about the impact of mass media coverage on political priorities. A fast growing literature has shown that, under specific circumstances, political actors (MPs, parties...) tend to adopt issues because they received preceding media coverage (for an overview, see: Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). This literature, albeit with a few exceptions (see for example: Brandenburg 2002; van Noije 2007), focuses on media-to-politics effects only and only considers positive effects; that is: it examines whether increases and decreases in media attention are followed by similar changes in political attention for the same issues. Note that agenda-setting does not per definition imply a deliberate choice or a conscious effort by the media to exert

influence on the political agenda. Not all political coverage is driven by the desire of journalists to generate political effects[1].

The opposite effect, political actors influencing the media agenda, we call *agenda-feeding*. It does not need much argumentation, there is plenty of anecdotic and systematic empirical evidence, that political actors and especially governments are highly effective sources of media coverage (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Davis 2000; Pfetsch 2007). For example, Davis (2009: 212), based on in-depth interviews with Westminster politicians and journalists states: "*Many back-bench politicians attempted (…) to use their journalist contacts to raise issues and influence the political agenda within parliament.*" In a sense, agenda-feeding partly reflects the 'normal' role of mass media: informing citizens about what goes on in their society and the world. If political actors devote attention to relevant issues, or take decisions on issues that may affect people's lives, their actions are likely to be covered. For example, our survey among political journalists in the same five countries shows that more than $4/5^{th}$ of the journalists and $2/3^{th}$ of the MPs agree with the statement that politicians 'use' journalists by leaking information to them.

Turning to the more complex, negative agenda effects we coin the concept of *agenda-constraining*. Agenda-constraining occurs when mass media deny access to issues that are put forward by political actors. In a sense, agenda-constraining translates the well-known gatekeeping concept (Shoemaker 1991) to the political arena: only a part of the many issue messages generated by political actors gets passed the media gates and receives news coverage. Research has shown that this power to 'constrain' the political agenda might be bigger than the power to 'set' the agenda. This power '*to include or exclude information'* (Butler 1998) may have an influence on the political agenda. Or, as Van Praag and Brants (1999: 199) conclude on the basis of their campaign study: "*The agenda-setting power of journalists seems to lie more in denying access and in forcing politicians to react on issues than in actually initiating them*". Some issues favor political actors more than other issues, for example, because they 'own' them (Petrocik 1996), and so they will try to draw media attention especially to those favorable issues. When political actors select and craft the issues they want to get into the media and do not succeed in affecting the media agenda, there is a process of agenda-constraining

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[1] In similar surveys of journalists in the same five countries, we asked journalists to what extent they wanted to affect the political agenda by their coverage. Only a small minority of the interviewed journalists said they deliberately want to set the political agenda.

going on. Agenda-constraining refers to negative selection power exerted by the mass media.

Finally, negative agenda power can also be used by political actors when they decide *not* to externally communicate an issue that is politically relevant and that is on the political agenda. We call this process *agenda-exclusion*; it refers to the selection power of political actors to control or withhold information. Just as political actors have incentives to draw attention to specific issues that favor them, they have incentives to try to avoid that media devotes attention to issues that may hurt them or generate a competitive disadvantage. When political leaders need to make unpopular decisions or when a compromise between rivaling political elites is hard to establish, political actors may prefer media silence above media spotlights. Another example are policy fiascos when political actors engage in blame avoidance strategies (McGraw 1991) among which preventing the media from devoting attention to the story. Another well known practice is the 'burial' of bad news by airing it on a very busy news day (Lee 2005). As we expect agenda-exclusion to be mainly an instrument of political elites rather than of ordinary MPs, the concept of agenda-exclusion is less relevant for this study drawing on evidence about MPs and it will not be empirically tested.

Note that the four agenda interaction types are closely connected and that the expected presence of one agenda interaction effect may lead to or prevent other effects from occurring. For example, when a political actor decides to stress the importance of climate change instead of welfare, chances are high that he/she is aware of the fact that the first issue will more easily pass through the gates of media selection than the second. According to Davis (2009) this all-permeating 'media reflexivity' (politicians always think about possible media coverage when they undertake something) has become part of every single decision a politician takes. Politicians are not just influenced by specific media content, but rather adapt to the way the media operates (Strömbäck 2008). In terms of our typology, the example means that agenda-feeding by political actors is determined by the anticipated agenda-constraining by the mass media.

Table 1: Types of agenda-interaction between mass media and political actors

	Media → Politics	*Politics → Media*
Positive	Agenda-setting (AS)	Agenda-feeding (AF)
Negative	Agenda-constraining (AC)	Agenda-exclusion (AE)

Table 1 summarizes our argument. The four types are based on two variables: (1) Is the effect positive (affecting the agenda of the other actor) or is it negative (disconnecting the agendas); (2) Is it the media or the political actors who exert power?

MP SURVEY DATA IN FIVE COUNTRIES AND OPERATIONALIZATION

We draw on survey data gathered among MPs in five European countries: Belgium[2], Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. MPs were surveyed between 2006 and 2008. Questioning MPs has become quite common in most European countries (Esaiasson 2000; Thomassen and Andeweg 2004; Thomassen and Esaiasson 2006). However, earlier surveys devoted hardly any attention to MPs' interaction with the news media. The five Low and Nordic Countries in the study clearly represent a most similar system design. They are all fairly small European countries, with a proportional electoral system, with a fragmented party system and with coalition governments. Denmark is the most different case because of its frequent minority governments, but in all other four countries governments normally have a parliamentary majority. In all countries there is a tradition of strong parties and little room for individual MPs to go against the party line (Laver and Schofield 1998). The media systems in these countries are similar too. In their seminal typology, Hallin and Mancini put all these five countries into the Democrat-corporatist media system type (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The five media systems show similar historical developments and relationships with political systems, including early development of the mass press, strong professionalization and strong state intervention with protection of press freedom (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Kelly, Mazzoleni, and McQuail 2004). The structure of the media and the conditions journalists work in are also to a large extent comparable across the five countries, with competitive, dual broadcasting systems, high, but declining, paid newspaper circulations, and an elevated level of press freedom.

In the five countries, MPs were surveyed using a written questionnaire that could be filled out on paper or online (Sweden relied on paper only). Each questionnaire was adapted slightly to the national context but the core questions remained identical. In all countries several reminders were used to increase the response rate. This resulted in a satisfactory response rate of almost 50% in every country. The higher response rate in

[2] The Belgian survey was only administered among the Dutch speaking MPs (Flanders: containing 60% of the population).

Belgium is mainly a consequence of the fact that researchers visited the parliament and personally contacted the MPs who had not yet responded. In the other countries the researchers were not granted such access to parliament. Note that mainly due to item non-response or error regarding the key questions for this study, the number of useful surveys is somewhat lower. Table 2 summarizes the basic facts and figures.

Table 2: Survey facts and figures

	Belgium	Denmark	Netherlands	Norway	Sweden
Time of survey	Feb-Ma. 2006	Dec. 2007– Jan. 2008	Sept. 2006–Jan. 2007	February - April 2007	Nov. 2007–Ma. 2008
Response rate	85%	45%	50%	51%	45%
Representativity of parties[a]	.988**	.988**	.981**	.983**	.987**
N	191	79	103	87	158

Note: [a] Bivariate Pearsons' correlations between the relative presence of parties in parliament compared to the relative presence of parties in the survey (significance at 0.01 level).

In all countries the response across parties reflects to a very large extent their strength in parliament. This is shown by the correlation between the response rate per party and their presence in parliament. No party refused to cooperate. More importantly, we believe that our survey satisfactorily reflects the variation in political standing among MP members. The percentage of committee chairs that participated is always in line with the overall response rate in all five countries. Finally, additional sample-population tests revealed an excellent match in terms of age and gender in the five cases (not in table). The surveys were organized in routine parliamentary sessions. However, in Denmark and the Netherlands, data gathering took place close to an election period. We believe the impact of these events to be limited as our questions were not related to the past or upcoming campaign coverage.

This paper draws on four key questions that were asked to the Belgian, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish MPs: (1) How many parliamentary initiatives did you take since the beginning of the (parliamentary) year[3]?; (2) How many of these

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[3] More precisely we asked for the total number of oral questions, written questions, interpellations and bills. Because of the different timing of the survey and upcoming or past elections the survey question was slightly adjusted in each country. The Belgian and Norwegian politicians were asked for an estimation *since the beginning of the parliamentary year* which was in both countries on average six months. In case of the Dutch MPs we referred to the *beginning of the calendar year* which resulted in a slightly longer period (9

parliamentary initiatives where inspired by preceding media coverage?; (3) How many of these parliamentary initiatives did you try to draw the media's attention to?; (4) To how many of your parliamentary initiatives did the media devote attention? These four questions allow us to operationalize the three of the four agenda interaction types.

The level of *agenda-setting* is the relative share of parliamentary initiatives that has been inspired by preceding media coverage. Questions #1 and #2 combined directly tap agenda-setting, namely the impact of the media on the political agenda. The higher the figure, the larger the power of the media to set the political agenda (in this case: the parliamentary agenda). We define *agenda-feeding* as the efforts of political actors to influence the media agenda. Therefore, we operationalize agenda-feeding as the share of parliamentary initiatives that is explicitly communicated to the mass media by combining questions #1 and #3. The higher the figure, the larger the share of initiatives that has been communicated to the mass media, and the larger the agenda-feeding power of the mass media. *Agenda-constraining* is the process of the mass media not reacting to agenda signals from political actors. We operationalize this by calculating the ratio of the total amount of initiatives (question #1) and the number of initiatives that was covered in the mass media (question #4). The higher the figure, the more the media exert negative selection power by excluding political issues from the media agenda.

A possible problem with our data is that we rely on a subjective estimation by MPs and this perception may be far off from reality. MPs' judgment may be biased by recall problems and social desirability. Yet, we argue our survey questions clearly cue for behavior and ask MPs to report what they *did* and not what they think. We have anecdotic evidence that MPs did not answer the questions lightheartedly. Some Belgian MPs that were interviewed face-to-face, for example, said they could not immediately produce a precise answer and they asked their assistants to carefully count and calculate the exact figures. We also checked in the parliamentary proceedings the face-validity of some extreme answers — MPs reporting that they took hundreds of initiatives in half a year, for example — and found that these MPs were mostly right and had indeed taken

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months). The new elected Dutch MPs (elected in November 2006) were not taken into account. For the Swedish MPs the question covered a period of more than a year (*since last elections*). As the newly Danish Parliament was only installed for a few months at the time of our survey we asked for the number of initiatives *in an average month*. To warrant comparability we recalculated all figures to a monthly level and work with the average monthly number of initiatives per MP.

hundreds of initiatives. Finally, at the aggregate level, we looked for objective secondary evidence on the number of initiatives that were inspired by media coverage (agenda-setting). In the case of the Netherlands, a study revealed that about six out of ten written parliamentary questions (2003-2004) were inspired by media coverage (Sanders 2004). This corresponds nicely with the self-reported data in our study (see further).

Another possible problem refers to the fact that there might be some differences in interpretation of what constitutes a 'parliamentary initiative'. Although we specified initiatives in the survey question as oral questions, written questions, interpellations and bills we are not entirely sure all MPs in all countries defined parliamentary initiatives in the same way. Also, the freedom of individual MPs to engage in parliamentary initiatives may be different in the five countries. Yet, we are not so much interested in the absolute level of initiatives but rather in the *share* of initiatives that have been inspired by media coverage, that have led to a press release, or that have been covered in the media. We assume that these shares are comparable across MPs in the different countries.

HYPOTHESES

Our aim is not only to devise an agenda interaction typology but also to formulate, and test, expectations about when we would expect which type of agenda interaction to occur. More concretely and applied to MPs: which MPs are most subject of agenda-setting by the media, which engage in agenda-feeding, and which MPs' feel the constraining power of the media most? In other words: which features of individual politicians turn them into passive subjects whose agenda is set and constrained by the media or rather into active agenda-feeders affecting the media agenda. As our study is exploratory, we do not formulate formal hypotheses. Rather, we present some factors that we expect to be connected to the presence of agenda-setting, agenda-feeding, and agenda-constraining.

We expect that differences between the five political systems under scrutiny may lead to differences in agenda interaction. We argued above that the five polities we investigate are very similar. Yet, the parliamentary setting in which the MPs in the five countries operate is not identical. A notable difference that may have an impact is the total *number of seats* in parliament (Van Aelst, et al., 2010). Sweden, with 349 elected MPs, has more than twice the number of MPs than the Netherlands (150), and almost twice the number of Norway (169) and Denmark (179). Membership in the federal

parliament in Belgium is comparable to these nations, but, because of the federal system, the number of Flemish MPs is much higher. In Flanders, the largest part of Belgium, politicians are active in the national parliament (113) and the Flemish parliament (124). The MPs of the regional parliaments have a comparable status and are elected in the same constituencies; hence the number of Flemish MPs comes near to the Swedish case. Earlier research showed that a high number of MPs in a country reduces the power of an individual MP in parliament (Esaiasson and Heidar 2000). We also expect the number of MPs to have an effect on the interaction between MPs and the mass media. The more MPs are numerous, the more they do not dispose of unique information for the media and the more there deeds are vying for media attention with other MPs. Our argument is a simple scarcity argument: more supply reduces the power of the supplier. So, we expect the Swedish and Belgian MPs to be in an unfavorable position when engaging in agenda interactions with the mass media compared to their Danish, Dutch and Norwegian colleagues.

A next factor that may determine the incidence of the different agenda interaction types is the individual *power position* of an MP. Some MPs have more power than others, they are better-known, have more experience, have a stronger formal position in parliament etc. As a consequence, their undertakings in parliament may be more relevant and interesting for the mass media to cover. This is the reason students have systematically found higher coverage of government sources compared to opposition sources (see for example in Belgium: De Swert and Walgrave 2002). The relevance argument also is the cornerstone of the indexing theory stating that media coverage is weighted according to the power balances in the range of elite opinions and elite stances regarding an issue (Bennett 1990). Davis (2009), in his in-depth study of British media and politics, found that what he called, the 'professional hierarchy' directly affects the negotiation process between political actors and journalists; as a consequence, government ministers have much better access to media than ordinary back-bench MPs. However, in our survey, we only have MPs and we lack information regarding the agenda interactions of more powerful political actors of the executive branch such as ministers or presidents. Our data offer evidence for a relatively equal and relatively powerless group of political actors. Still, we explore whether three variables partially grasping an MP's media relevance affect his/her ability to influence the media agenda: belonging to an opposition or to a government party, parliamentary experience, and chairmanship of a parliamentary committee. We expect more powerful MPs to be less affected by agenda-

constraining. Also, we expect that the *personal experience and professionalization* of an MPs dealings with the mass media to have an effect on his/her agenda interactions with the mass media. We asked MPs how frequently they have personal contact with journalists and we asked them whether they have a personal spokesperson amongst their staff. Earlier research, for example by Davis, found that the hiring of media managers and professional political staff shifts the balance of power between politicians and journalists (Davis 2009). We do not expect both media interaction variables to affect the agenda-setting process, but we think they might be related to agenda-feeding and, especially, to agenda-constraining. More personal contact and professional communication should increase the amount of initiatives communicated to the mass media as it should decrease the media's negative constraining power since more initiatives are successfully steered through the media gates.

Finally, we expect an MP's *personal attitude* regarding the power of the media to play a role too (this attitude may of course also be a consequence of certain types of agenda interaction rather than a cause). Extant research has showed that MPs, by and large, consider the media to be a very powerful institution (Van Aelst et al. 2008). We asked the MPs in the five countries whether they agree with the statement that the media have 'too much power' and we also ask them to rate the political impact of newspapers and television on a 0-10 scale. We anticipate that these attitudinal variables would foremost be associated with the incidence of agenda-setting and agenda-constraining since these processes directly tap media power and less with agenda-feeding as this process refers to just the opposite, namely to political actors trying to impact the media agenda.

TESTING THE TYPOLOGY

Table 3 contains the indicators of the three types of agenda interaction we operationalized earlier.

Table 3: Agenda interactions in five countries

	Belgium N=178	Denmark N=41	Netherlands N=68	Norway N=46	Sweden N=139	Average
Average # initiatives per month	10	10	3	3	3	5.8
Agenda-setting (% inspired by media)	28.4	49.8	52.2	43.1	35.3	41.8
Agenda-feeding (% communicated)	39.7	69.0	73.5	75.7	47.3	61.0
Agenda-constraining (% not covered)	75.3	45.3	41.2	37.1	73.4	54.5

Table 3 shows several things. The average number of initiatives an average MP takes differs across countries. Belgian and Danish MPs are more active and (are allowed to) take much more personal initiatives than Dutch, Norwegian or Swedish MPs. In all five countries, agenda-setting occurs: MPs state that a number of their personal initiatives has been generated by preceding media coverage. In two countries, Belgium (28%) and Sweden (35%), the agenda-setting power of the media seems weaker with around $1/3^{th}$ of their actions being preceded by media coverage; in the Netherlands (52%), Denmark (50%), and Norway (43%) the media seem to set the parliamentary agenda considerably more. Regarding agenda-feeding – the efforts of MPs to get their issues into the media – the same differences between countries come to the fore. In Belgium (40%) and Sweden (47%) MPs are much less engaged in agenda-feeding than in the other three countries where almost $2/3^{ths}$ of the personal initiatives are explicitly communicated to the media. In all five countries, though, MPs try to set the media agenda frequently by drawing attention to the issues they embrace in their parliamentary action. Agenda-constraining too, is a common process. MPs report that a lot of their actions did not make it to the mass media and were denied access through the media gates. Media are active selectors of political messages and exert negative power. Again, we see the same two groups of countries. Belgian (75%) and Swedish MPs (73%) report their actions to be much less covered and to have much less success in getting their issues in the media. The negative power of mass media to deny access is considerably weaker in the three other countries as MPs are more successful in getting in the news; less than half of their initiatives are ignored by the media.

Because the survey questions imperfectly tap the three agenda interaction concepts, it is hard to compare the strength of the three processes. What the data show is that the three agenda interaction effects definitely occur – there is agenda-setting and agenda-constraining by the media and MPs engage in agenda-feeding. But the size of the figures does not imply that the agenda-feeding process (with an average of 61%) would be stronger than the processes of agenda-setting (42%) or agenda-constraining (54%).

The three agenda interaction effects are correlated on the individual MP-level. First, agenda-feeding and agenda-constraining are strongly negatively correlated with an overall Pearson's r of -.647 (significant at the .001 level). The more MPs engage in informing the media about their actions the less their actions are denied media attention. This makes perfectly sense: MPs who invest more in targeting the media manage to generate coverage for a larger share of their parliamentary efforts. This shows that negative media power can to some extent be countered and neutralized by political actors carefully crafting their media messages, or at least by political actors with experience in communicating their activities to the mass media. Second, agenda-feeding and agenda-setting are positively correlated (r .316; significant at the .001 level). Political actors who get their cues *from* the mass media also try to get their actions *into* the mass media. This makes sense too. MPs that react to media coverage are probably more than other MPs aware of the importance of the mass media; consequently they invest more in getting into the news. Some MPs are more than other MPs media-savvy; they not only get their information from but also give their information to the news media. Third, the association between agenda-setting and agenda-constraining is negative (r -.231; significant at the .001 level). The more MPs react to media coverage and use the media to nurture them with issues worth pursuing in parliament, the more their own actions in parliament get into the news. There is a mutually reinforcing process of politicians and media reacting to each other. The reason MPs probably react to mass media cues in the first place is that by reacting on the media they try surfing the media waves and attempt to increase their chances that they will get media attention (for similar arguments, see: Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006). This association points to second mechanism MPs can use to avoid negative media power: giving in to positive media power by following the media diminishes the power of the media to deny access in the next round. Seen from a media perspective, it makes sense to cover political actions that are the results of previous media coverage: that politicians react to news coverage validates the earlier selection of the news and proofs the relevance of the media coverage.

These logical associations between the three agenda interaction processes increase confidence in the validity of our measures. They also testify to the fact that the agenda interaction game between media and politics is a complicated and two-sided dynamic. Politicians influence the media, yet the same politicians are influenced by the media themselves both in a positive as in a negative way. Our data provide proof that the agenda interaction process is bi-directional and that this two-sided process has both a positive and a negative power facet.

So far, we have not examined which MPs are affected by agenda-setting and agenda-constraining by the media, and which MPs do engage in agenda-feeding of the media. Table 4 contains the results of simple OLS regressions estimating the size of the three agenda interactions types per MP.

Table 4: Regression models of three agenda interaction types

	Agenda-feeding	*Agenda-setting*	*Agenda-constraining*
Average number of initiatives per month	-.286***	-.129*	.280***
Country (ref.cat = Denmark)			
Netherlands	-.076	-.061	.027
Norway	-.053	-.245***	-.073
Belgium	-.303***	-.343***	.286***
Sweden	-.442***	-.313***	.420***
Power position MP			
Years in parliament (0-35 years)	.065	0.36	-.060
Committee president (0=No; 1=Yes)	-.021	-0.48	-.010
Opposition-government (0=opp.; 1=gov.)	-.061	-.017	-.024
Interaction with media			
Freq. contact journalists (1=never; 5 = daily)	.081	.074	-.231***
Personal spokesperson (0=No; 1=Yes)	.202***	.013	-.124**
Media power attitudes			
Media too much power (1-5)	-.059	.107*	.013
Impact television (0-10)	.009	-.216**	-.055
Impact newspapers (0-10)	.058	.149*	.012
Adjusted R²	.28	.13	.42

We included the average number of initiatives as a control variable. It is significantly related to the three tested agenda interaction types. The more actions an individual MP undertakes in parliament, the less he/she communicates these to the media, the less his/her actions are inspired by mass media, and the larger the share of his/her initiatives that are not covered by the media.

Let us first take a look at the differences between countries. The models confirm our expectations and the earlier presented bivariate results. There are clear and strong differences between the countries. In Belgium and Sweden, where MPs are very numerous and thus relatively irrelevant, MPs seem to be 'disconnected' from the mass media. Belgian and Swedish MPs engage significantly less than the MPs in the three other countries in agenda-feeding; their actions are also significantly less affected by the mass media (agenda-setting); their actions in parliament are also much less covered by the mass media and they strongly experience the agenda-constraining power of the news. In Denmark, the Netherlands, and (to a lesser extent) Norway, with a less crowded parliament, the process of interaction seems quite different. A possible interpretation is that MPs in these countries live more in a symbiosis with the mass media. They feed the media with stories and they get these stories effectively through the media gates, and they frequently react to incoming media messages. The fact that we, controlling for a whole series of individual-level variables and in the five countries under study, find such consistent results validates our contention that the agenda interaction types are tapping stable and real aspects of the ongoing agenda battle between media and politics and that our types of agenda interaction are strongly connected, both on the individual level as on the aggregate nation-level.

The process of agenda-feeding – political actors influencing the political agenda – is not affected by the power position of a given MP. Admittedly, the differences in political power position between the MPs in our sample are most likely small – power is concentrated in the executive in the five parliamentary systems under study. The professionalization of the political communication, though, plays a positive role, as expected. MPs with a personal spokesperson do tend to inform the media more frequently about their doings in parliament. The results considering the personal interaction with the media directly support our thinking about the complex interactions among the agenda dynamics. MPs who maintain frequent contacts with journalists and who have a personal spokesperson helping them to deal with their media contacts are

more successful in getting their stories in the news. The more, and the more professional, MPs deal with the media the less they are subject to negative media power.

For agenda-setting, we only expected the MPs' attitudes regarding the media to play a role. And they do. MPs that agree with the statement that the media have too much political power are more than other MPs impacted by media coverage and bring their attitudes into practice (or vice versa). The MPs that rate the power of newspapers high, are more affected by the media than MPs that consider the written press to be less influential, which makes sense too. Remarkably, the power perception of TV is *negatively* correlated with agenda-setting; MPs who rate TV highly are less affected by the media. This may seem odd but it makes some sense. In fact, research has shown that MPs, in their daily activities, are much more affected by newspaper than by TV coverage (Sanders 2004; Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008). For most ordinary MPs, TV is inconsequential. They hardly ever get on TV and they do not get cues from the TV news.

The story of agenda-constraining again contradicts our expectation with regard to the power position of MPs. It does not make a difference whether an MP has ample experience, whether he or she chairs a committee or belongs to a government party or to the opposition; regardless of their personal position, all MPs are more or less equally affected by negative media power. This suggests that other levels of analysis are needed to complete the theoretical picture here. For example, indexing theory would expect that both agenda feeding and agenda setting in systems with relatively high levels of party discipline will occur above the individual level of committee position or opposition standing. Framing on the larger scale is likely to occur as power blocs form in government and opposition, and these forces are likely to operate at a level above individual status.

Wrapping-up, the explanatory analyses in Table 4 demonstrate that there are significant cross-national differences and that there are differences between the MPs within the same country too. Some MPs engage more in agenda-feeding than others, some MPs' agenda is more determined by preceding news coverage, while some MPs have more difficulties gaining news coverage for their actions. The explanatory power of the models is modest, but we manage to grasp some of the variations in agenda interactions. Our agenda interaction typology seems to hold the track. The different interaction types exist and they do not occur randomly.

We started this study contending that most scholars focus only on one direction of the media-politics relation but that our knowledge of the way mass media and political actors mutually influence each other could be substantially improved by taking both directions of influence into account. Also, we claimed that the media-politics interaction not only implies positive influence, making the other actor follow your agenda, but also negative influence, preventing the other actor from devoting attention to an unwanted issue. To start dealing with those issues, we devised a simple two-by-two typology of agenda interactions between mass media and political actors, we operationalized the four agenda interaction types drawing on an MP survey in five countries, we tested whether three of the four theoretical types occur in reality, and we commenced to explore the determinants of these agenda interaction types.

The main conclusion is that in the real world of daily activities performed by MPs, agenda-setting, agenda-constraining and agenda-feeding are empirical realities. MPs' agenda is set and constrained by the media; MPs in turn fully engage in feeding the media agenda. We presented empirical evidence from five countries that the agenda game is bi-directional and that the different types of agenda interaction are closely related. MPs whose agenda is set by the media also attempt to impact the media agenda and they are successful. Although the five countries in our sample were very alike in terms of their political and media system, we found substantial differences between them. In countries where individual MPs are more powerful and more relevant mainly because the number of seats in parliament is smaller, the agenda interaction between media outlets and MPs is more intense and the mutual influence is larger. Whether a given MP is a subject of media power or whether he/she is an active player of the media depends partly on his/her political position, contacts with journalists, the professionalization of his/her external communication, and his/her perception of the power of the media.

The media exercise a certain amount of agenda control but political actors are not just puppets on a string. MPs can counter the media power and let the media sing their song by communicating a lot, by communicating professionally, and by maintaining excellent personal contacts with journalists. Playing the media game by adopting issues that have been previously covered by the media also helps to overcome the inevitable constraints imposed by the media logic. This brings us directly to the main limitation of

our study: our respondents are MPs but, in the parliamentary systems we examined, MPs are not the most powerful nor the most professional communicators of actors. We might have arrived at different conclusions when we would have surveyed a sample of cabinet ministers, for example. We suspect that ministers are much more 'in control' and exert more influence on the media agenda. They dispose of vital, relevant and exclusive information regarding their ministerial competence, they have an entire staff assisting them in communicating their message, and they have very frequent contacts with journalists. Among the questioned MPs we did not find any difference regarding their position; this is most likely due to the fact that differences among MPs are small. Subsequent research designs would be wise to try to include executive branch actors. Also incorporating more different countries with more powerful MPs from presidential polities, for example, could help answering the question whether political power affects the incidence of agenda-setting, agenda-feeding, and agenda-constraining.

While studying the individual level media perceptions of MPs has offered promising support for the idea that the media agenda does not arise out of sheer journalistic invention, and is as much the product as the producer of political agendas, this perspective is also incomplete if we are to develop more convincing models. There are clearly factors operating above the individual actor level that must be taken into account in order for a more complete model of indexing and agenda setting to be developed. For example, journalism systems have their own operating norms and procedures that filter political actions through power balances, often determined above the level of individual legislative. Moreover, individuals embedded in these complex press-politics systems are unlikely to see the big picture as they experience often emotional constraints involving the communication processes that affect their daily careers.

Our aggregate method asking MPs about their activities and media coverage *in general* probably overlooks the fact that the agenda-interaction differs from case to case. Research suggests that the power balance between politicians and journalists is changeable and alternates. For example, when news is event-driven and triggered by unexpected focusing events journalists are more in charge and control the agenda interaction process more often than in cases of routine news generated by political elites (see: Bennett and Livingston 2003: 360-361). In short, we expect there to be extreme variations in the agenda interactions across cases.

Another flaw in the present study is that we could only empirically gauge three of the four theoretical concepts. Agenda exclusion – the process by which political actors deliberately try to avoid the media from devoting attention to a politically relevant issue – was not part of our design. Obviously, agenda-exclusion is difficult to measure empirically. Moreover, we think it is not relevant for MPs but rather applies to political top elites who try to avoid blame, want to work in the dark to strike a compromise, or take unpopular measures.

Notwithstanding all these shortcomings and the many potential improvements, we hope the present study showed that focusing on the two-directional agenda game between mass media and political actors is a fruitful and valid approach that opens new discussion about the ways in which news agendas are shaped by politics even as they may, in turn, affect political processes.

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