

# The Media's Role in Lawmaking: A Case Study Analysis

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## Abstract

Despite the ongoing debate about the role the media play in democracies, there is little empirical research on its role in lawmaking. Yet studies conducted at the micro-level can provide insight into the influence journalists exert on this fundamental aspect of politics. This case study analyzes the role of media attention in the legislative process that resulted in the legal regulation of (semi)public officials' remuneration in the Netherlands. The chronological in-depth analysis of claims made in the media and in parliament shows that during the legislative process, political actors responded to media attention directly and indirectly. Incident-driven coverage served as a source for questions and was strategically used by members of parliament (MPs) in legislative debates to substantiate and illustrate their position. More indirectly, long-term trends in media coverage for specific topics contributed to the introduction of and support for amendments to the bill.

## Keywords

media, politics, legislative processes, lawmaking, agenda setting

## Introduction

Media effects on politics are a growing subject of empirical research. However, scholarly attention for media influence on the legislative process—that turns bill proposals into laws—is rare. There is a lack of studies showing the mechanisms through which the media may affect lawmaking. As a result, there is little knowledge of the role

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media attention plays in the behavior of legislators and its consequences for the content of laws.

This study focuses on the role of media in the legislative process by building on the insights of previous studies in the field of media and politics. We already know that politicians adjust to and anticipate the way journalists operate (Davis 2009; Strömbäck 2008; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). There is scholarly consensus about the fact that the contact between journalists, members of parliament (MPs), and members of government can be defined as a complex interaction (Cook 2006; Davis 2009; Sellers 2010) and that the power relationship between political and media actors turned into a reciprocal one (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). Studies on the effects of media coverage on policy usually focus on the agenda-setting phase. Politicians generally consider the media the most important political agenda setter (Lengauer, Donges, and Plasser 2013; Van Aelst et al. 2008). Over the last decades, various large-scale studies have empirically shown that the media can set and influence policy agendas (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Soroka 2002; Tan and Weaver 2009) by shifting policymakers' attention to a policy problem or a particular solution (Wolfe et al. 2013). This being the case, the question remains whether this interactive behavior ultimately has legislative consequences. What this media-politics dynamic exactly looks like when it comes to developing legislation, that is, a core activity of politics, has been largely underexplored.

On one hand, media attention may matter for lawmaking. Considering the scholarly consensus about the media's increasing power, one would expect it to play a role in all parts of the political process. Policymakers and parliamentarians closely follow what the media report about legislative processes they are involved in. Because of the importance of the topic to them, they will be susceptible to the things they read in the newspapers, hear on the radio, and see on television.

On the other hand, legislative processes are often rather lengthy and technical, and therefore incongruent with media logic. Prior research on the Netherlands, for example, shows that most legislative processes remain out of the media's spotlights: Only 10 percent of all bills debated in Dutch Parliament receive substantial media attention (Van Aelst et al., 2015). The question is of course what happens if the subject of a bill *is* covered extensively. What does the dynamic look like in the cases that are in the media's spotlights?

An example of such an issue in the Netherlands is top salaries, especially those in the (semi)public sector. There is dissatisfaction with the fact that managers and top-ranking public officials receive high salaries and bonuses, while many people face consequences of the economic crisis, for example, freezing of wages or even losing one's job. And the Netherlands are not unique: The topic of top salaries has been subject of recent public and political debate in many countries (Dekker 2013). After more than a decade of ample media attention for the issue and debate on the matter in Dutch Parliament, in January 2013, a law was enacted that regulates the remuneration of senior officials in the public and semipublic sectors. Did this media attention affect the legislative process? And if so, in what manner(s) did it play a role? I present a heuristic model to approach these questions and then study empirically whether the legislative process, including fundamental changes in the content of the bill, is inspired by media

attention. Content analyses of media coverage and parliamentary documents, as well as in-depth interviews with political actors and journalists involved in the topic, show that the media attention indeed trickled into the legislative process. However, even in this most likely case media coverage rarely had a direct effect and was mainly used to underline or reinforce political actors' existing positions.

## Theoretical Framework: Media and Lawmaking

Scholarly work on media and lawmaking is primarily focused on the United States (e.g., Cook 1989; Wolfe 2012). It shows that media strategies are part of the legislative work in Congress and that media coverage can influence the duration of lawmaking processes. We know less about the consequences for the content of bills, especially in multiparty systems. Several studies addressed aspects of the relationship, however. Agenda-setting studies show that media attention attracts policy attention to public problems and creates a sense of urgency to come up with solutions (Yanovitzky 2002). Journalists, however, do not stop covering an issue once a legislative proposal has been introduced to parliament: Media attention can influence political debates and eventually the resulting legislation. Although the media obviously have no power to pass laws, journalists may influence the behavior of legislators by paying attention to a bill (Wolfe 2012). A Norwegian study, for example, found that when framing is strong, supported in society, and accompanied by journalistic engagement, extensive media pressure can cause changes in prior decisions as well as legislation (Ihlen and Thorbjørnsrud 2014). A longitudinal study in Belgium suggests that external pressure, of which media attention is an indicator, sometimes plays a role in policy change (Walgrave et al. 2006). Also, the interaction between media and policy actors can lead to policy change because the news media are an important source of information (Brown 2010). Interviews with British political actors show that they think that legislative debates are influenced by media attention (Davis 2009), for example, by amplifying debates, forcing the speed of response, or changing policy directions. A study of Swiss legislators argues that in decision-making processes, parliamentarians, especially those in an opposition role, try to gain mass media coverage (Landerer 2014). During legislative processes, political actors may on one hand respond to media coverage and on the other anticipate the media attention their legislative behavior might receive. A study conducted in the United States argues that by drawing media attention to an issue, legislators may move related legislation through Congress more successfully (Sellers 2000).

Wolfe's (2012) study shows that the media influence the speed of lawmaking processes. By providing new information, the media can shape the contours through which policy moves as well. A media effects study of bills in the Netherlands suggests that legislative processes are influenced by the media (Melenhorst 2013). If bills receive more media attention, more amendments are introduced by both MPs and members of government. This suggests that media coverage encourages politicians to propose amendments to bills, which is in line with Wolfe's (2012) idea that policy elements may be adjusted in response to new media information. The subsequent section discusses various ways in which such media attention may be translated into lawmaking (see Figure 1) and explains which research questions guide the subsequent analysis.



**Figure 1.** Heuristic model: Media-politics dynamic regarding legislation.

## Media Attention

Media attention can be considered a prerequisite for media influence. The first research question is,

**Research Question 1:** What does the media attention related to the bill look like?

To answer this question, various characteristics of media coverage can be taken into consideration (see Figure 1). First, the amount matters: The more attention there is, the stronger the incentive for political actors to respond (similar to what saliency and agenda-setting studies show, for example, Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cook 1998). Second, the content of the coverage, that is, the claims made and arguments presented, is relevant, because media attention can provide politicians with new information and point their attention toward specific topics (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Wolfe 2012). The content can also be factual information and information on the viewpoints of other actors or the public at large. Third, what matters is which media outlets covered the subject and to what extent this coverage is congruent. Furthermore, because of “intermedia agenda setting,” radio and newspaper coverage are expected to influence television reporters (Roberts and McCombs 1994; Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008), and media effects are stronger if the various media focus on the same issue, frame it in a similar way, and cover it persistently (Eilders 2000). Congruent coverage is therefore expected to evoke a stronger response from political actors.

## Parliamentary Responses

As such, the media are not involved in the lawmaking process; actors in parliament (and government) are the ones who can respond to media reports. Their behavior may have consequences for legislation. The second research question is therefore,

**Research Question 2:** Do politicians in parliament respond to the media attention, and if so, how?

The legislative process, that is, the parliamentary deliberation about a proposed bill, in fact starts once the bill is introduced by a minister. During the following process, politicians can either refer to media attention, or respond to it more implicitly by copying or mirroring—parts of—the media content. More specifically, media effects

can be direct as well as indirect, and may be anticipatory, immediate, or corrective (Kepplinger 2007).

There are three types of action (see Figure 1) politicians can undertake. First, they can ask parliamentary questions (PQs). Although the procedures vary, in every parliamentary democracy, MPs can ask ministers questions (Russo and Wiberg 2010). Previous studies have shown that many oral and written questions, especially in the Netherlands, are a response to media coverage (Van Aelst and Vliegthart 2014; Van Santen et al. 2015). When questions concern the topic of a bill under consideration, they can be used by MPs, for example, to announce or stress their position prior to debates about the bill.

Second, politicians can respond in their contribution to legislative reports and debates. This is an informative, deliberative phase in which the opinion formation takes place. Legislative reports are a platform for MPs to ask questions about the bill; debates also serve as a platform to communicate one's standpoint concerning the bill to the minister, to other parties, and also to the general public. Politicians can use media coverage as a source of information, and as such, it may influence the topics that are discussed. They can also use it in a strategic manner to demonstrate the topicality of an issue.

Third, politicians can propose amendments during the legislative process. An amendment can be rather technical, but it can also be a proposal to more or less fundamentally change the content of a bill. Introducing a proposal to change a bill goes a step further than voicing a standpoint or asking a question. It is the most active way for political actors to show that they care about an issue and think the bill should be adjusted.

### *Media–Politics Interaction*

The various responses to media attention are not mutually exclusive and can occur at the same time or successively.<sup>1</sup> The responses potentially have consequences for the content of the bill (see below) but might also trigger attention of journalists, thereby evoking even more media attention. The third research question is,

**Research Question 3:** Do political actors try to generate or influence the legislation-related media coverage?

Politicians and journalists can influence each other positively, with political actors responding to media coverage, and journalists responding to what happens during a legislative process, which sets a spiral in motion (Sellers 2010; Wolfsfeld 2011). Because of this mechanism, the relationship between “behavior of political actors” and “media attention” is modeled as a feedback loop (see Figure 1). This model resonates with political agenda-setting studies that showed the reciprocal nature of the media–politics relationship (Kepplinger 2007; Van Noije et al. 2008).

### *Legislative Outcome*

Parliamentary initiatives such as amendments need majority support to take force. The support for the bill and amendments may be influenced by the interaction between

media coverage and legislative debates in parliament. The fourth research question therefore is,

**Research Question 4:** Does media coverage influence the legislative outcome, and if so, in what manner?

During the legislative process, especially when it comes to the eventual decision making, political actors may anticipate the potential media coverage their position can generate (Davis 2009). As a result, if journalists write univocally about a topic, politicians may accommodate toward this position.

## Case Selection

To unravel the complex interaction between media coverage and political actors, this paper focuses on lawmaking in one specific case in the Netherlands, that is, a multi-party system that is typically characterized as a consensus democracy (Lijphart 2012). The media system is classified as a democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004) with high degrees of journalistic professionalism and a non-partisan press. Parliament has a bicameral structure, and as in most parliamentary democracies, both cabinet ministers and members of the Lower House of parliament can initiate legislation (Andeweg and Irwin 2009). The vast majority of bills however originate in cabinet (Bovend'Eert and Kummeling 2010). Moreover, private members' bills hardly ever become formal laws. Because of the absence of the legislative discontinuity principle, bills do not die after a dissolution of Dutch Parliament (Van Schagen 1997).

The legislative process starts when the minister puts the bill before parliament. The bill goes to the Lower House first. In this phase, bills can be amended by members of government and by MPs. The minister involved can directly adapt the content of the bill by sending a government amendment to parliament. MPs can introduce an amendment, that is, a proposal to change the content of the bill, or a motion, that is, a request to take something into account. When the Lower House passes a bill, it is sent to the Senate. Members of the Senate can only reject or accept the bill, and are expected to focus primarily on (technical) judicial aspects, the relationship to international law, the bill's suitability, and its feasibility (Knippenberg 2002). After passing the Senate, the bill is signed by the King and the minister, and published in the official law gazette.

### Most Likely Case

Because of the extremely skewed distribution of media attention to bills, it makes sense to study a bill that has been covered extensively. In addition, the legislative process should contain potential moments of influence, such as plenary debates, motions, and amendments. Consequently, if there would be any indications of media influence on legislative processes, one should be able to find it in such a most likely case. In case of the bill "regulation of the remuneration of top-ranking officials in the public and semipublic sector" (*Wet normering bezoldiging topfunctionarissen publieke en*

*semipublieke sector*), all conditions for potential media influence are present. Therefore, it is considered to be a most likely case (but compared with other bills passed in the same period not an outlier, both in terms of media attention and proposed amendments). The bill regulates the remuneration of senior officials in the public and semipublic sector, that is, an issue that is subject to discussion in many countries (Dekker 2013). The bill was introduced into the parliament by government in January 2011, and was passed and published in the law gazette in November 2012. A total of four government amendments, seventeen parliamentary amendments, and three motions were introduced, of which eight amendments and two motions were passed. This has led to major changes concerning the bill's scope and application, its transition period, and the type of salary maximum applied to specific sectors.

## Method and Data

This in-depth case study is conducted to contribute to a preliminary theory about the media's role in lawmaking processes. It combines chronological content analyses of media coverage and parliamentary documents with semi-structured interviews with political and journalistic actors involved. Parliamentary documents (178) related to the legislative process were retrieved from a governmental website.<sup>2</sup> For studying media attention, via LexisNexis, all articles and items published in all national newspapers and magazines that discuss the remuneration of officials in the (semi)public sector in some way (not necessarily as the main topic) are taken into account. The same criteria were applied to the selection of radio and television broadcasts of the national television and radio channels. This resulted in 1,006 print articles and thirty-two broadcast items from the period the bill was debated in parliament, from the 1st of January 2011 (two weeks before the introduction of the bill) until November 2012 (two weeks after the law was published).

One codebook was used for the analysis of both parliamentary documents and media coverage, using MAXQDA. An initial codebook was developed by scanning through a sample of one hundred newspaper articles and reading the explanatory memoranda of the introduced amendments, to make sure it captured all relevant claims. In this phase, non-partisan actors who assisted in the legislative process, including employees of the legislative office and committee assistants of parliament, were consulted to develop a full understanding of the main debates and political positions. The codebook was developed inductively, and all coding was done by the author. This labor-intensive approach allowed for further refining of the codebook during the coding process, to increase the validity of the analysis through the accumulation of (contextual) knowledge about the case. By going back and forth in an iterative process and adjusting prior coding correspondingly, it was ensured that the analysis is reliable and consistent. Claims are defined (inspired by Koopmans and Statham 2010) as a verbal expression of a political opinion. The study differentiates between substantive claims and naming and shaming claims. Whereas the former contain a position on what to do (e.g., "There should be a complete ban of bonuses in the public and semi-public sector"), the latter only refer to problems with current situation (e.g., "My party



thinks it is ridiculous that directors of housing corporations receive bonuses”). Coding is done at the level of the (quasi)sentence; next to the claim, the actor(s) making the claim, parliamentary instruments referred to, and addressees of the claim are coded. Actors can be individuals, but also groups of individuals such as a political party.

Interviews were conducted, after the content analyses, to retrieve specific information from the actors involved about their motives and behavior. They are semi-structured: The topics discussed are similar, but the course of the interview and formulation of separate questions could vary. Thirty-one people were interviewed, both political actors who participated in the legislative process and journalists who reported about the topic. The interviewees include fifteen MPs who acted as spokespeople with regard to the bill in the Lower House and the Senate as well as the two former ministers who were responsible for the bill, civil servants (policy officers and legislative lawyers), and nine journalists in print media, radio, and television.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted by the author and took on average one hour.

## Results

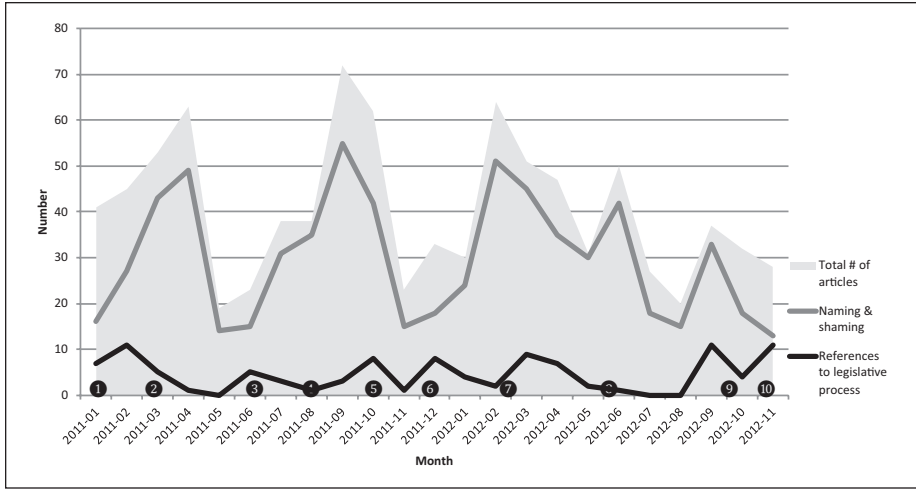
To answer the general question whether media attention played a role in this particular legislative process, the four research questions will be answered subsequently. The first section describes the media attention on the (topic of) the bill. Next, we look at the behavior of MPs to see whether—and if so, how—they respond to media attention. The third part goes into the question of reverse causality, to see whether politicians try to receive or influence media coverage. This brings us to the section on the legislative outcome, which discusses whether the media coverage influenced the support for the amendments and for the bill.

### *Media Attention*

The analysis of the media attention demonstrates that the period as a whole is dominated by congruent, incident-driven coverage that contains claims “naming and shaming” salaries paid to specific public officials (e.g., the president of a university), by a specific organization (e.g., a housing corporation) or in a sector as a whole (e.g., the health care sector). A total of 684 newspaper articles contain at least one naming and shaming claim (see Figure 2). Radio and television items contain similar claims. In addition to coverage that primarily deals with top incomes, often the salary of top-ranking officials is discussed as part of a broader story, for example, about the malfunctioning of a specific official or the effects of privatization.

There is little coverage of the legislative process: During the two-year period, 11 percent of the coverage contains a reference to the bill. Journalists only write about the bill during key moments in parliament, such as its introduction and after votes, or briefly in the context of other news. There is some coverage of the debates, yet it is focused at the outcomes and the proposals that receive majority support. There is no coverage at all of the three motions introduced with the bill and only four articles pay attention to six out of the seventeen amendments introduced, summarizing them in one or two sentences.





**Figure 2.** Media attention in newspapers per sector per month and key moments in parliament, 2011–2012.

Note. The numbers in the figure indicate key moments in the legislative process.

In sum, only a small minority of all newspaper articles contains short references to the legislative process. Figure 2 shows that the manifold incident-driven coverage continues unabated over the course of the two years, irrespective of the phase of the lawmaking process. At the moment, the bill is introduced in the Lower House (1) and the first amendments are introduced (2); some media pay attention to the legislative process. There is no attention for the bill at all during the committee phase (3–4), and only some during the first legislative debate in which most amendments were introduced (5), as well as during the second legislative debate and the vote in the Lower House (6). The peaks in the coverage with references to the legislative process after the bill was sent to the Senate in December 2011 are not related to the key moments of the legislative process (7–10). This coverage consists mainly of letters to the editor from individuals or interest groups, and short references to the fact that there is a bill under consideration in the Senate in articles presenting salary overviews or describing incidents. During the legislative debates and the vote in the Senate (10), there is a relatively large amount of media attention for the bill. This coverage is almost exclusively in relation to a passage in the coalition agreement that had just been signed and that announced a new bill regulating top salaries further.

The analysis of media claims shows that they are predominantly unidirectional, in favor of regulation. Actors opposing legal regulation as a whole are not visible; the debate only concerns the question whether *more* sectors and elements should be included in the bill. There is frequent media attention for reports on top salaries published by interest groups like employers’ organizations and by investigative journalists. Pressure groups opposing the bill as a whole are not present in the media. The media pressure is amplified by the fact that journalists refer to previous coverage denouncing

top salaries, published by their own or other mediums. By repeated naming and shaming, journalists contribute to the impression of a public opinion hostile toward high public salaries; they seem to reinforce a “spiral of silence” concerning arguments against regulation and the justification of high incomes.

In sum, there is ample and congruent media attention for top incomes in the semi-public sector during the legislative process. Most coverage contains claims condemning unacceptable salary incidents; only some of it refers briefly to the bill under consideration.

### Parliamentary Responses

To answer the second research question as to if and how MPs respond to media attention, this section discusses the ways in which the behavior of politicians during the legislative process is related to the media attention for the particular topic.

All twenty-six PQs about top incomes are an immediate reaction to media attention. Most of these questions refer explicitly to media coverage; the others concern incidents that were covered by the media. The first question is usually whether the minister has read the article, and the second what his or her response to the main claim is. As a consequence, members of government indirectly respond to claims in the media. In responding, they often refer explicitly to the bill that is under consideration. One of the departmental actors explains that “especially when there is a bill, you can say under certain circumstances in [response to] parliamentary questions, that you are working on a bill and that you will take it into consideration.” During and also prior to a legislative process, PQs are thus a way for MPs to present their position regarding a bill. Also, when such an answer is elicited from a minister, MPs can refer to this answer during legislative debates to remind ministers about their position and promises. Because ministers announced in response to PQs that there would be legal regulation of top incomes, politically it was no option to withdraw the bill, even after the bill was amended rather heavily (see below).

PQs are also used to draw attention to amendments MPs introduced. For example, in a series of questions in response to a news item about the salary of a health care director, an MP from the Socialist Party (SP) asked, “Are you willing to embrace the amendments for a remuneration maximum that have been introduced during the debate about the [bill]?” (Parliamentary Proceedings, House of Representatives 2010/2011). The social democrats of the Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid* [PvdA]) acted similarly, by asking whether one of their amendments that was passed would in the future avoid excessive salaries reported in the media (Parliamentary Proceedings, House of Representatives 2011/2012a). During the legislative debate, an MP from the populist right PVV (*Partij Voor de Vrijheid*) explicitly mentioned “the innumerable PQs that have been asked by my own and other parties” to emphasize that the level of the remuneration of interim managers is shocking (Parliamentary Proceedings, House of Representatives 2011/2012b: 85). Media-inspired PQs are thus related to and integrated into the legislative process.

*Legislative reports and debates.* There is congruence between the claims and the justifications voiced in the media and in the legislative debates.<sup>4</sup> This at least suggests that media coverage serves as a source of inspiration for MPs. However, in the media, naming and shaming claims are predominant, whereas in parliament, substantial claims dominate. Also, the chronological analysis of the data does not indicate that MPs respond to prior media coverage in legislative reports, which are produced during the committee phases in houses of parliament. During the legislative debates in both houses, media attention plays a role, although it is not the cause of the content of their contribution. Five out of eight MPs involved in the debate in the Lower House, representing both opposition and coalition parties, explicitly referred to coverage in newspapers of that day. In the interviews, they explain that they did this to underline the necessity of the bill or a change proposal, to show the topicality of the issue, and to show that public debate is translated into legislation. It is also meant to enliven the debate and make it recognizable for the public at large: "It is a nice way to underline your argument," one of the MPs explains. "You use it more rhetorically, to reinforce your words, rather than that it is the cause of the content of your plea."

In both houses of parliament, politicians refer to media coverage in a more general way. For example, MP Heijnen (PvdA) argued that his amendment will end the damage caused to the public's confidence "when they read that the managers of charities they wanted to give money to, earn excessive salaries" (Parliamentary Proceedings, House of Representatives 2011/2012b: 76). Senator Ester (ChristenUnie) referred to "stories in the media about a director of a housing corporation" (Parliamentary Proceedings, Senate 2012/2013: 9) who drove a Maserati paid by public money and received a severance pay of 3.5 million euros. The Minister also refers to "the reporting on and the images of excessive salaries" (Parliamentary Proceedings, House of Representatives 2011/2012c: 3) to argue that he understands why the debate is dominated by proposals to broaden the scope and strictness. In addition to mentioning media attention, MPs also use examples of excessive salaries at specific schools, hospitals, or housing corporations that were covered extensively in the media. This shows how incidents that became public via the media become part of the legislative process. In sum, MPs do not seem to *change* the content of their contribution in response to media coverage substantially, but various political actors do use media coverage *rhetorically* during legislative debates to strengthen the public support for their position.

*Introduction of amendments.* The amendments to the bill are not a direct response to media coverage. This is true for both government amendments and for amendments (and motions) proposed by MPs. The primary reason is that the topics of the amendments (see the appendix) are not new but essentially a continuation of existing debates about the regulation of specific sectors, such as the health care sector, or remuneration elements, such as bonuses. None of the interviewees argues that their amendment(s) were a direct response to specific media coverage, nor that those introduced by others were. By way of illustration, several politicians draw a comparison with PQs to argue that the direct relationship between PQs and media coverage does *not* exist when it comes to amendments. They emphasize that amendments have a general character,

whereas media attention often covers incidents. This makes amendments not particularly suitable to directly respond to such media attention.

There is, however, an indirect relationship between media coverage and at least some of the amendments. Being a continuation of existing debates, several amendments and motions concern topics addressed in PQs previously, not only since the legislative process started but also in earlier years. Moreover, they elaborate on standpoints that were voiced during debates and in motions about top incomes even prior to the legislative process.<sup>5</sup> In the legislative agenda-setting phase, MPs did respond to media coverage more directly and as a result media attention seems to have contributed to the increased demand for the bill. All interviewees emphasize that there has been both public and political debate about top incomes in semipublic sectors for years. Some prior parliamentary debates were ad hoc, requested in response to media coverage, for example, in 2010, about two investigative journalism broadcasts by *Zembla* and *EenVandaag*. Finally, there were annual “general debates” about top incomes, in which politicians responded to media coverage about the issue, and where frequently motions were passed that requested regulation of a specific sector.

Media attention mainly seems to address and present problems, that parliament subsequently develops solutions for. Media coverage focusing on the excessive nature of (semi) public top salaries has set the agenda and has kept the issue on the agenda, but it does not offer legal solutions. For example, not only during the legislative process but also in previous years, there has been a lot of (incident) coverage about salaries in the health care sector. This resulted in PQs, but more importantly, shortly before the introduction of the bill, a motion (Parliamentary Documents, House of Representatives 2010) is passed in the Lower House that entails the application of the strict salary maximum. The introduction of amendments is thus a logical step of the parties that were engaged with the topic earlier. In this context, one of the MPs in an interview states that “it is the rule rather than the exception that public debate leads to amendments.” In this way, politicians suggest or even confirm that amendments are no short-term responses to specific incident-driven media coverage but that some are inspired by coverage at large about the issue at stake.

In sum, politicians respond to media attention in various ways. Specific coverage is used directly during parliamentary debates and in PQs to keep the issue high on the legislative agenda. Amendments are a slower and more indirect response of MPs to the more general and overall coverage of a topic.

### *Feedback Loop: The Politics–Media Influence*

The third research question concerns the attempts of politicians to generate or influence media coverage. An important observation (see above) is that despite the ample coverage for the issue in general, journalists pay little attention to the legislative process. The coverage of incidents and the bill often result in separate articles or items, mainly because of a practical separation of labor among journalists. The former are mainly produced by investigative journalists and journalists with a specific area of expertise, such as health care or education, whereas the latter are produced by political

journalists focusing on parliament. The politicians interviewed argue that journalists are usually not interested in legislative processes, let alone specific amendments. “Legislative debates are usually very predictable and not something the average reader is interested in,” a political journalist explains. “We report very little on the discussion in the Lower House as such. It is more about, what does the reader get out of it? We are not a ‘party horn.’” According to this journalist, legislation is only potentially interesting as it is announced and when it is passed—and only if it “changes the world.”

In general, journalists argue that legislative processes are only interesting if there is conflict involved, especially when it concerns the coalition partners. This is something politicians are very aware of: MPs refer to “conflict” as an almost necessary prerequisite to attract media attention. Various MPs who introduced amendments explain that they did not even try to arouse journalistic interest for them, because this would be pointless. One of them nevertheless did: “I tried it, but they didn’t think it was interesting enough . . . . Because there was no expectation that ‘the shit’s hit the fan,’ that there would be tremendous fights or conflicts.”

This shows that traditional news values, such as conflict, impact, and unexpectedness, are important not only for media attention in general but also for the newsworthiness of legislative processes (Van Aelst et al., 2015). The mere fact that parties disagree about a bill is not enough to attract media attention. And in this case of legislation, there is no serious conflict. Newspapers and radio reports do pay attention to the fact that the right-wing party supporting the minority government (PVV) and a left-wing opposition party (PvdA) made a deal to pass two amendments, and that a majority in the Lower House supports amendments the minister strongly advised against. Journalists however indicate that in these cases, attention was not drawn to the amendments by MPs but that they themselves followed the debates and noted these newsworthy facts. Overall, most politicians hardly try to generate or influence the legislation-related media coverage.

### *Legislative Outcome*

To answer the final research question with respect to the impact of media coverage on the legislative outcome, it is helpful to distinguish between support for amendments and support for the bill as a whole.

To start with the latter, the media coverage for top incomes, at least as perceived by politicians, plays an indirect role in the unanimous support for the bill in both houses of parliament. Over the course of many years, the continuous media coverage for top salaries in the (semi)public sector contributed to the political support for legal regulation. In the words of an MP, “If there wouldn’t have been media attention for top salaries, the law would never have come about.” Media coverage revealed that in a broad range of organizations, top-ranking officials were paid salaries that exceeded the ministerial salary, which had been an unofficial salary norm for years. The ongoing media attention for incidents contributed to a process of growing support. Even liberal parties that tend to oppose government intervention with salaries became proponents of legal regulation. An MP explains, “The mechanism came into force that the media start searching for incidents; if one medium scores with a case, the others start doing the

same thing. . . . In the end there were so many cases that actually nobody was willing to defend it.” The long-term coverage changed the perception of political actors, as they argue themselves, from considering excessive salaries as incidents to seeing them as a structural phenomenon or trend.

The predominantly incident-driven attention also plays a role via the anticipatory behavior of political actors. MPs seem to anticipate media coverage mainly when it comes to the actual votes, because they know that this is the moment journalists might pay attention to the bill. Eventually, all parties supported the bill. According to a Senator, formerly critical parties also supported it because there would be a parliamentary majority for the bill anyway, but also in view of potential media coverage. This is an example of “self-mediatization” (Meyer 2002; Strömbäck and Esser 2014), pro-active adaptation of politicians to the media. Various Senators are themselves managers or members of supervisory boards of (semi)public organizations, and therefore opposing the bill could also easily be interpreted as being motivated by self-interest. Because it was not in line with public opinion, parties that were hesitant realized that not supporting the bill could lead to unfavorable media coverage and ultimately public and political damage.

A further question is whether the media attention plays a role in the decision of parties to support change proposals. A majority of the Lower House supported a number of amendments (see the appendix), which resulted in fundamental changes to the bill. Its scope and application are broadened, a transition period is introduced, and the type of remuneration regime applied to several sectors is altered. There is no clear pattern, however: Some amendments on topics that are not covered at all by the media were not passed, whereas others were, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup> There are no indications that media attention directly influenced parties’ decisions (not) to support amendments. None of the interviewees mentioned specific media coverage as something their parliamentary party took into consideration in the decision to support or reject an amendment.

In sum, media attention does not have a direct influence on the decision of politicians (not) to support amendments. Political actors feel that there is maneuvering space in opposing specific amendments, for example, because they are technical or not in the news, without obstructing the law itself. The coverage for the issue in the broader sense and on the longer term however definitely contributes to the awareness and willingness of political actors to legally regulate the salaries of top-ranking officials, and thus to the broad support for the bill.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Does the influence of media coverage go beyond simply setting issues on the political agenda? This study analyzes in depth if and how media attention plays a role in a legislative process. The most likely case under study is the process from bill to law that led to the regulation of the remuneration of senior officials in the (semi)public sector in the Netherlands.

Media attention played a role in various respects. The top incomes in the (semi) public sector had been subject of both public and political debates for years. The long-term, congruent, one-directional and primarily incident-driven coverage contributed

to the fact that the bill became a law. During the legislative process, politicians referred to media coverage to illustrate or underline arguments. They strategically used PQs to respond to media coverage and link it to the legislative process. There are no indications, however, that the media coverage caused political actors to do things they would not have done otherwise. The content of the law, with all its technical details, was not directly influenced by media coverage. Political journalists hardly reported on, let alone interfered in, the process of amending the bill proposal. Some of the changes in the content of the bill however reflected media content: They were not so much specific articles or items, but the congruent media coverage as a whole—not only during the legislative process, but also in previous years—that strengthened the awareness that top incomes needed to be strictly regulated. This is in line with Wolfe's (2012) suggestion that elements of policy are sometimes adjusted in response to new information that is provided by the media. However, this is a slow and mainly indirect process.

To be clear, this study does not suggest that media attention is a sufficient, let alone a necessary condition for changes in the content of bills during the legislative process. However, for media attention to have an impact on the legislative process, it is necessary that politicians respond to what they see, hear, and read in the media. This study shows that they do. Political actors also seem to anticipate the media coverage their behavior might generate (Davis 2009), primarily when it comes to the actual vote on the bill.

The inferences made are based on this specific case, with a unanimous public opinion and broad support of political actors across the board. It is likely that in other cases, for example, regarding an ethical subject or typical left–right socio-economic issue, there are more contrasting public and political opinions. The role interest groups play via the media may also be different if both proponents and opponents of a bill publicly defend their position, and if, for example, nongovernmental organizations and large businesses enter the debate. In the case studied here, opponents of the bill were pretty much absent in the public debate. It seems that the small group of people that benefit from public sector top salaries was not willing or able to go against a latent general consensus in the Netherlands on this issue. In the political arena, politicians, in particular members of both left-leaning and right-leaning opposition parties, have seized the opportunity of the media attention to realize their political goal: broadening the regulation of top incomes. Politicians who were more critical hardly went against it, very likely to avoid the impression that they supported “well paid managers” instead of the public good.

Because it is a most likely case of media influence, a similar analysis should be applied to other, less likely cases. If the same patterns occur in multiple cases, this would contribute to theory building and strengthen the idea that media attention affects legislative processes. It would also indicate to what extent the patterns found here are case specific. In addition, similar studies in other countries could show whether these mechanisms occur in parliamentary systems with different legislative mechanisms and conventions. This study, however, does not suggest that the dynamics between media and politics identified are typically Dutch, but of course only comparative research could provide insight into the role of political and media system characteristics.

This case study, although only a first attempt to shed light on the media's role in lawmaking, suggests that legislative processes are on one hand not immune to media



attention but on the other hand not dominated by the public debate as reported in the media either. In terms of the functioning of democracy, these might be comforting thoughts. When it comes to something as fundamental as lawmaking, political actors are (at least sometimes) visible in and responsive to the media, but legislative processes are not dominated by or confined to what is in the media.

## Appendix

Overview of the Occurrence of Claims in the Media and in Parliament, Action Undertaken, and the Presence in the Final Bill per Topic.

Topic: Regulation of	N&S claims		Substantial claims		PQs	Amendment(s) <sup>a</sup>		Motion (s)		In final bill <sup>b</sup>
	Media	Parliament	Media	Parliament		Introduced	Passed	Introduced	Passed	
(Semi)public sector as a whole	x	x	x	x	—	x	—	—	—	x
ANBI/charity organizations	x	x	x	x	—	x	x <sup>c</sup>	—	—	x
Bonuses (ban)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	x
Child care sector	—	—	—	x	x	x	—	x	x	—
Collective rights organizations	x	x	x	x	x	x <sup>d</sup>	—	—	—	—
Education sector	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	—	—	x
Employees (semi)public sector	x	x	x	x	—	—	—	x <sup>d</sup>	—	—
Health care sector	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	x
Health insurance companies	—	—	—	x	—	x	x	—	—	x
Housing corporations	x	x	x	x	x	x <sup>d</sup>	—	—	—	x
Interim managers/consultants	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	x
Non-departmental public bodies	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	—	—	x
Payment of expenses part of norm	—	—	—	x	—	x	—	—	—	—
Public broadcasting organizations	x	x	x	x	—	—	—	—	—	x
Sectors in consultation with unions	—	—	—	x	—	x	—	—	—	—
Severance pays	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	—	—	x
Subsidized organizations	x	x	x	x	—	x	x <sup>c</sup>	—	—	x
Supervisory boards	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	—	—	x
Transitional period	—	—	—	X	—	x	x	—	—	x
Umbrella organizations	—	—	—	X	—	—	—	x	x	—

Note. PQs = parliamentary questions. ANBI = Algemeen Nut Beogende Instellingen.

a. The overview includes all amendments introduced by MPs as well as the minister, except for those that are merely technical-legal and/or textual.

b. This is the bill as passed by both Houses of Parliament that came in effect January 2013. The motions passed are technically not part of the bill.

c. These amendments were passed by the Lower House, but for technical-judicial reasons, during the consideration of the bill in the Upper House a so-called "reparation bill," to not apply the bill to ANBI-organizations and to apply it to subsidized organizations only under certain conditions, was announced by the government.

d. These amendments were withdrawn by the MPs who introduced them.

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## Notes

1. For example, amendments are usually introduced or announced during legislative debates.
2. [www.officielebekendmakingen.nl](http://www.officielebekendmakingen.nl).
3. The full list of interviewees is available on request.
4. See the appendix for an overview of claims voiced in the media and in Parliament. In addition, many claims voiced during debates are not visible via media reports, mainly concerning technicalities and details.
5. The Lower House requested the development of a bill in a motion itself (Parliamentary Documents, House of Representatives 2005) in addition to a bill that enforced the publication of all top incomes in the (semi)public sector. This was the reason for the Minister of the Interior to ask a committee (commissie-Dijkstal) to advise the government on the issue (Parliamentary Documents, House of Representatives 2006). The annual publication of salaries also repeatedly directed journalistic attention to top salaries and increased societal awareness as well as dissatisfaction, and was used by proponents of regulation to continuously call for action.
6. There was, for example, no media coverage of salaries in the child care sector nor at health insurance companies, but whereas an amendment about the former was rejected, one that included the latter did pass. However, while there was media attention for lowering the norm as well as for bonuses, an amendment about the former was rejected whereas one about the latter passed.

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