

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Contingency of the Mass Media's Political Agenda Setting Power: Toward a Preliminary Theory

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Recently the study of the relationship between the media and the political agenda has received growing attention of both media and political science scholars. However, these research efforts have not led to a general discussion or a real theory on the media's political agenda setting power. This article first analytically confronts the often contradictory results of the available evidence. Then, it sketches the broad outline of a preliminary theory. Political agenda setting by the media is contingent upon a number of conditions. The input variables of the model are the kind of issues covered, the specific media outlet, and the sort of coverage. Political context variables, the features of the political actors at stake, are at the heart of the model. The model proposes five sorts of output ranging from no political adoption to fast substantial adoption of media issues.

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For three decades, the notion of agenda setting has provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and communications research (Jennings & Miron,

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2004). When mass media emphasize a topic, the audience/public receiving the message will consider this topic to be important (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Numerous studies all over the world established firm correlations between media and public priorities (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Ghanem, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981). Within political science, too, agenda setting is a frequently used model. Political scientists draw on it to describe and explain how political actors (government, parliament, political parties, etc.) determine their priorities, give attention to or ignore issues, and do, or do not, take decisions or a stance concerning these topics (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1971; Kingdon, 1984; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994; Laver & Budge, 1992). Political scientists' agenda setting research focuses mainly on endogenous political factors: The presence of issues on the agenda of a certain political actor (e.g., congress) is attributed to the influence of another political actor (e.g., the president) or to issues on the same agenda in a preceding period (incrementalism). Both agenda setting traditions, in communications and in political science, developed separately. Timidly starting in the mid-1980s, scholars began to concentrate on the media and the political agenda. They scrutinized whether and how (public and) media agendas, previously the focus only of communications researchers, interact with political agendas, formerly the exclusive playground of political scientists. During the past decade, students embarked, with increasing incidence, upon solving the media and political agenda setting puzzle.

However, the results of these studies were contradictory. Both scholars in communications and in political science seemed to stick to their core business: "If media scholars are, by and large, much taken with the agenda-setting power of the press, many scholars of traditional political institutions seem less impressed" (Bartels, 1996). Most bewildering, though, was that these mixed outcomes did not spark a scholarly debate about the reasons for these inconsistent findings. No real cumulative effort has been undertaken so far, and the field of media and political agenda setting is disparate and under theorized. We still cannot answer the basic question whether the mass media determine the political agenda or, put more precisely, under what specific circumstances the mass media are able to boost political attention for issues. In this contribution, we want to fill this void. We will analytically confront and compare the available studies, and we will sketch the broad lines of a preliminary theory. As media and political agenda setting studies are slowly burgeoning and the subfield is growing to maturity, such an integrative and theoretical effort seems timely.

Figure 1 gives an analytical overview of the available (routine times) media and political agenda setting studies and their main conclusions. Its last column shows that some studies revealed only modest or no media impact. Walker (1977), for example, pointed out that *The New York Times* simply followed the legislative process instead of leading it concerning three safety laws passed in the U.S. Senate. Kingdon (1984, pp. 61–62), based on interviews with political decision-making insiders in the United States, stated that "One can find examples of media

	Walker (1977)	Gilberg et al. (1980)	Light (1982)	Cook et al. (1983)	Kingdon (1984)	Protess et al. (1987)	Cook & Skogan (1991)	Protess et al. (1991)	Pritchard (1993)	Wanta & Foote (1994)
Issues	Car safety, coal mine health, health act	Jobs, energy, defence, Peace, human rights, taxes, Middle East, Panama canal	Not specified	Health fraud	23 cases (health + transport)	Toxicwaste	Crime against the elderly	Police violence, children rights, dialysis scandal	Crime	12 domestic and 3 international issues
Media agenda	<i>New York Times</i>	Newspapers (2), TV news (3)	Not specified	NBC news magazine	Not specified	TV5 (Chicago)	<i>New York Times</i>	Local NBC (Chicago), CBS local newspaper	Local media (7)	TV news (3)
Political agenda	Senate	President	President	Government, interest elites, senate, budget, legislation, regulatory measures	Not specified	Policy elites, budget, legislation, regulatory measures	Public spending, Congress	Policy elites, regulatory measures	Public spending	President
Method	Time series	Cross-sectional	Interviews	Field experiment	Interviews	Field experiment	Timeseries	Field experiment	Time series	Time series
Place	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States
Media's impact	No impact	Strong impact	Hardly impact	Considerable impact	Hardly impact	Considerable impact	Considerable impact	Strong impact	Weak impact	Weak impact

Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg (1995)	Trumbo (1995)	Bartels (1996)	Baumgartner et al. (1997)	Wood & Peake (1998)	Edwards & Wood (1999)	Soroka (2002)	Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2003)	Walgrave & Deswert (2004)
Taxes, inflation, income levelling, real wages, GNP, social security	Global warming	Bosnia, Medicare, NAFTA, Whitewater	Drug abuse, nuclear power, urban affairs, smoking	Soviet Union, Arab-Israeli, Bosnia	Crime, health care, education, US-Soviet, Arab-Israeli	Inflation, environment, debt/deficit	8 domestic and 1 international issue	All issues
Newspapers (3)	Newspapers (5), Magazines (3), TV news (3)	<i>New York Times</i> , local newspapers, ABC news	Magazines	TV network news (3)	TV network news (3)	Newspapers (8)	Newspapers (3), TV news (2)	Newspapers (6), TV news (4)
Party manifestoes	Congress	Congress, president	Congress	President	Congress, president	Question time, Throne speeches, House Committee reports, Introduced bills	Party agenda	Government (council), parliament (questions)
Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series	Time series
the Netherlands	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States	Canada	the Netherlands	Belgium
Hardly impact	Strong impact	Strong impact	Strong impact	Strong impact	Strong impact	Strong impact	Weak impact	Considerable impact

Figure 1 Design and conclusions of available media and political agenda setting studies.

importance ... but such examples are fairly rare The media report what is going on in government, by and large, rather than having an independent effect on government agendas.” In addition, a study in the Netherlands, Kleinnijenhuis (2003) found only very limited media impact on politics. The limited agenda setting power of the media, some of these authors speculate, is due to their short attention span, hence diluting their impact on the slower workings of democracy (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Kingdon; Protess & McCombs, 1991). Another weakness of the media, says Kingdon, is its propensity to highlight the most spectacular stories, although these stories tend to take place at the end of the policy-making process and not at the

beginning. Except for specific issues like foreign policy (Herman, 1993; Livingston, 1997; Mermin, 1997), for special kinds of journalism such as investigative (Molotch, Protess, & Gordon, 1987; Protess, Cook, & Doppelt, 1991; Protess et al., 1987), and some uncommon and nonroutine crisis situations (Eichhorn, 1996; Walker; Wood & Peake, 1998), the media's political agenda setting impact is limited, these scholars assert.

Other scholars, in contrast, claim the existence of strong media bearings on the political agenda. Figure 1 gives an overview, so we can be brief here. Among the founding fathers of the political science tradition of studying agendas, Cobb and Elder (1971, p. 909) stated more than 30 years ago that "The media can also play a very important role in elevating issues to the systemic agenda and increasing their chances of receiving consideration on institutional agendas." Edwards and Wood (1999), for example, established an independent media impact on the agenda of the U.S. president. Trumbo (1995) closely examined the rise and fall of the global warming issue from 1985 until 1992 and concluded that the media played a considerable role in the growth of policy attention for the issue. Soroka (2002) came to similar conclusions based on a time series analysis of three issues in Canada linking the media with a whole range of political agendas: especially for the environment, an unobtrusive issue, the media set the political agenda. In addition, Baumgartner, Jones, and Leech (1997) found a firm relationship between media attention and U.S. congressional attention for four domestic issues and concluded "... that the media help create situations that make increased government attention almost unavoidable." Finally, drawing upon an innovative experimental design, also Cook et al. (1983) found that policy makers were influenced by watching TV news and considered the covered topic to be more important and thought that government action was more urgent after watching the news.

Of the 19 studies given in Figure 1, almost half established a strong media impact on the political agenda, four resulted in considerable impact conclusions, three found only weak impact, and four recorded hardly any impact. How can we make sense of these widely diverging and often contradictory research outcomes? There are, of course, differences in research design: time series studies versus cross-sectional or interview-based studies. In addition, differences between polities play a role; note the overwhelming dominance of U.S.-based studies. But in this paper, we contend that four basic research design choices can account for the mixed outcomes of the present studies. Figure 1 illustrates three of these design divergences. First, there is the *media* agenda: which media are investigated and associated with the political agenda? Second, there is *issue* choice: media may matter for some issues but less for others. Third, there is *political agenda* choice and measurement since not all political agendas may react the same way on media coverage. As it only contains studies in routine political times, the fourth choice is not seen in Figure 1: Some political agenda setting studies focused on elections times and on the impact of the media during campaigns. So *time period*, electoral or nonelectoral times, determines a fourth and final design choice. Scholars' options for diverging alternatives regarding

these four choices generated the contradicting research outcomes. Together, these four choices can bring order in the apparent chaos of political agenda setting studies.

Our basic tenet is, hence, that political agenda setting by the media is contingent, and it depends on many circumstances. Not all conditions are conducive to agenda setting by the media. This assertion strongly resembles a similar claim put forward in the studies of *public* agenda setting by the media. Among many others, Hügel, Degenhardt, and Weiss (1989) and Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980) made a strong case for the contingency of public agenda setting effects. The characteristics of the consumers of media messages, in case of public agenda setting the general audience, determine whether or not media coverage affects the public's priorities. Not all population categories are as susceptible to media cues. Our claim is that the same applies to political actors.

Media agendas: All media equal political agenda setters?

By and large, measuring the media agenda has been a fairly standardized process with most researches adopting similar sampling and coding procedures (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977; Protess & McCombs, 1991). Many political agenda setting studies, Figure 1 shows, included TV and newspaper or magazine data at the same time. But does all news carry the same political agenda setting power? Among public agenda setting scholars, the debate on the power of print and electronic media is far from settled. Some scholars claim the primacy of newspapers, while others believe in the power of TV (Eilders, 1997; Protess & McCombs; Schoenbach, 1991; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Among the *political* agenda setting students, Bartels (1996) found that the political effect of a national newspaper like *The New York Times* differs from the impact of local newspapers, which, in turn, have different effects than national TV network news. Interesting enough, he demonstrates that the major institute of the American press, *The New York Times*, is not directly influencing U.S. Congress but only indirectly via intermediation of ABC news. This indirect influence of newspapers (and radio) on television reporters is confirmed in a number of other studies and labeled as intermedia agenda setting (Butler, 1998; Roberts & McCombs, 1994). Daily contact between the journalists and the competitive media environment created a high degree of convergence between different media outlets regarding issues and sources. Despite of this intermedia influence, several studies found diverging TV and newspaper political agenda setting effects on political agendas (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003; Palmgreen & Clarke; Trumbo, 1995). These different outcomes, though, did not spark a systematic debate about contingency effects of media outlets.

We can speculate that newspapers, due to their in-depth and complete coverage, might be more able to affect policy makers. Another possibility is that politicians themselves, due to the more flexible and easier processing of paper material, are personally more exposed to newspaper than to TV news and, hence, are more affected by newspapers than TV (Fuchs & Pfetsch, 1996). Yet, if politicians consider TV to have bigger an impact on the public's priorities, even if they themselves only watch

it rarely, TV's impact on politics could increase as political actors *anticipate* TV's public agenda setting effects.

Eilders states that for the media to have a strong impact on politics, a high congruence of the different media outlets is required. Only if all media are focusing on the same issue (focusing), frame it in a similar way (consonance), and if they do so with perseverance (persistence), can the media be expected to strongly impact the political agenda (Eilders, 1997, 2000, 2001). These conditions for strong media effects are hardly ever met. Most of the time, issue emphasis is scattered, issues are framed differently, and coverage is short lived and ephemeral. The most powerful media effects are, hence, probably restricted to events that can be portrayed by the media as pervasive crisis situations (Paletz, 1998). Pack journalism presses politicians to deal with an unwanted situation at once and to speed up the decision process (Sabato, 1991; Walgrave & Manssens, 2000). Of course, journalists cannot turn every event into a crisis. A spectacular closing down of a big factory is more appropriate than a general rise of unemployment figures (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992). Cobb and Elder (1971) defined such events as "focusing events" and argued that the absence of focusing events could block an issue's rise onto the political agenda. When spectacular events or crises are absent, news media do not act uniformly. In this case, the kind of medium plays a role: Reliable and respected news outlets have more impact than marginal and dubious news sources (Bartels, 1996).

Issues: Issue features matter

The few political agenda setting studies that did consider several issues and compared their dynamics indicate that political agenda setting dynamics, and the media's role in it, may differ dramatically conditional upon the type of issue (Bartels, 1996; Soroka, 2002). Although no studies at hand developed a systematic issue typology, we are forced, again, to rely on the literature of public agenda setting to suggest hypotheses for political agenda setting.

First, the distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues is a classic in public agenda setting (Zucker, 1978). Likewise, the media also have more political agenda setting power when it comes to issues that, without media, would simply be not observable. When the media act as solitary sources, for public and politicians, their impact increases (Lang & Lang, 1991; Soroka, 2002). In addition, coverage of domestic and foreign policy issues, because of the same reasons of (non)obtrusiveness, fosters different political reactions (Livingston, 1997; Mermin, 1997; Wood & Peake, 1998). Second, the institutional *ownership* of an issue can be relevant (Manheim, 1986). In the United States, for example, foreign policy is considered as being the president's exclusive fishing ground, and domestic issues are shared with U.S. Congress (Wood & Peake). The clearer a political actor's responsibility regarding an issue, the greater the chance that media coverage on that issue will urge that agency to act, while diffuse and shared responsibilities breed little political action (Pritchard, 1992). Third, new issues might have stronger bearings on the political agenda than

eternal issues. Politicians are less familiar with new issues, have not yet developed a clear stance, and are still searching for information (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992; Linsky, 1986; Molotch et al., 1987; Trumbo, 1995). Fourth, the style of issue coverage might make a difference: Unambiguous reporting clearly defining the problem and pointing toward solutions might bear more agenda setting power than ambiguous and less dramatic coverage with many ifs and mights and no self-evident solutions (Protess et al., 1987). Finally, Baumgartner et al. (1997) established that negative coverage has more political agenda setting effects. Because politics is the business of problem solving, negative news automatically turns all heads to politics expecting at least some form of policy reaction.

Political agendas: Substantial and symbolic political agendas

Agenda setting scholars, by and large, agree on how to measure the public and the media agenda. Yet, as Dearing and Rogers (1996, p. 18) state, "... measures of the policy agenda vary from study to study much more than do measures of the media agenda and the public agenda which are fairly standard." Defining and measuring the political agenda is the trickiest choice to be made by political agenda setting students. There is no such thing as the political agenda but only an archipelago of different loosely associated political agendas. All political actors have their own agenda; some even have several agendas that are more or less independent from one another. Politics, for that matter, consist of different governmental branches, each with their proper logic, dynamics, competences, procedures, and interests that affect their susceptibility for media coverage. Knowing, for example, that a state's budget only changes incrementally and that a budget is as a slowly reacting oil tanker—votes have to be found, agreements have to be struck, procedures have to be developed, and agencies have to be set up—it is hardly surprising that studies have found no link between media coverage and subsequent budgetary spending (Landry, Varone, Laamary & Pesant, 1997). A single glance at Figure 1 suffices to note that most studies were confined to one or two political agendas. Only the work of Protess (Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1987, 1991) and Soroka (2002) considered more than two political agendas simultaneously. Limiting the political agenda to the agenda of one or two political actors artificially reduces the scope of politics and, more importantly, makes it impossible to control for effects between political agendas. If political agendas are affecting each other, and we have every reason to expect them to do so, picking out one political agenda and associating it with media coverage discards important interpolitical agenda setting effects.

In particular, the distinction between symbolic and substantial political agendas is crucial here. Some studies focused on symbolic rather than on substantial political agendas, merely reflecting policy changes that are largely rhetorical rather than substantial with tangible regulatory, legislative, or administrative consequences (Baumgartner et al., 1997; Cobb, Ross, & Ross, 1976; Protess et al., 1987; Soroka, 2002). Protess et al. (1991) discern three potential political results of media reporting:

deliberative (debates, hearings), individual (sanctioning, promoting), and substantial (policy changes). Deliberation can be considered as symbolic, while individual and policy measures are situated on the substantial side of the continuum. On closer reading, Figure 1 points out that all scholars who actually found strong media bearings on political agendas defined the political agenda symbolically. They examined a political actor's public communication about an issue without having necessarily a tangible policy consequence (Bartels, 1996; Edwards & Wood, 1999; Wood & Peake, 1998). The U.S. presidential agenda, for example, was defined as containing all issues about which the president spoke in public (speeches, press briefings) or communicated about to the public (press releases, press officers' briefings), venting the president's opinion on the issue of the day. Not surprisingly those scholars found firm correlations between the presidential agenda and the media content: Those presidential outlets are explicitly targeting the media and respond to media cues in order to get the line of the day out. But a U.S. president's communication is for the most part merely symbolic, showing that he cares about an issue and that he is busy handling it. Many of his public utterances have no policy consequences whatsoever. A symbolic agenda could even be defined as those issue mentions with the only goal of getting into the media. Whenever substantial political agendas like legislation and resource allocation were considered in the research at hand, researchers were much less impressed by the media's impact. A similar point was made by Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) in their longitudinal account of crime coverage and its political responses. They assert that the media are able to influence the symbolic agenda but that media systematically fail to impact what they call the resource agenda, that is, "... those lists of issues that require substantive action."

Political agendas, hence, can be placed on a continuum ranging from substantial to symbolic. Sometimes, an actor or institution even runs a symbolic and a substantial agenda at the same time. Parliament, for example, has to control the executive branch and monitor its initiatives but, simultaneously, it holds legislative power. Grilling government and passing legislation are different things and entail different behavior from members of parliament (MPs). Most likely, media coverage affects both parliamentary tasks differently. Defining the political agenda too narrowly only considering the highest political agendas makes media impact sheer untraceable in empirical research; defining the political agenda too symbolically, on the other hand, confining it to the lowest political agendas, makes finding media effects trivial and irrelevant since they are void of any political consequences.

Time period: Elections versus nonelection times

A final research choice regards the time period in which political agenda setting takes place. Some previous studies were basically campaign studies focusing on media and political agendas during the months, mostly weeks, before the polls. Others examined routine political times often stretching out over a prolonged time period. Some authors coined the concept of the *permanent campaign* to refer to the fact that

politicians, also in routine times, incorporate campaign insights and tactics in their communication (Nimmo, 1999). However, we will demonstrate that the short campaign period of several weeks before Election Day is fundamentally different from routine periods: The behavior of political actors, their reaction on media coverage, and even the dynamics of media coverage itself follow different logics in both periods.

Following the classic public agenda setting studies, in recent years, campaign students started focusing on the relationship between the media and the political agenda (Brandenburg, 2002, 2004; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999; Roberts & McCombs, 1994; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991; Van Aelst, 2004). These studies examine to what extent media and political parties are interacting during the campaign: do the political parties manage to set the media agenda or do parties rather follow media leads? Although campaign studies, compared to routine-time studies, draw upon the same political agenda setting model, situate themselves within the same research tradition, refer to the same founding fathers of agenda setting, and largely rely on the same research design matching media content with measures of political attention, there appears to be hardly any dialogue between both strands of political agenda setting research. Only a handful of studies mention, aside, that campaign and routine times might foster different agenda setting dynamics, but these studies remain vague about how this different dynamic might be conceptualized (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998; Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977; Walgrave & Deswert, 2004). The scholarly segregation of both types of political agenda setting studies is partly explained by the fact that campaign studies tend to focus on political party agendas only and more specifically on parties' campaign communication: press briefings, party manifestoes, stump speeches, and staged events.

Contrary to the mixed results of routine-time studies, the outcomes of campaign studies are less contradictory: During campaigns, the media's impact on candidates' and parties' agendas is limited or even absent. Norris et al. (1999), for instance, concluded that in the 1997 British election campaign, the media failed to set the party agenda, and vice versa. In the U.S. presidential campaign of 1992, media and candidates were on the same track, but there was little evidence that the media were responsible for this agenda convergence (Dalton et al., 1998). According to Just et al. (1996), the role of the public agenda, with an overwhelming dominance of job creation, was crucial. This general concern was picked up by both parties and media. Some recent studies examined the interaction between media and politics during the campaign in great detail. They confirm the limited role of the media. Using the same 1997 British election campaign data as Norris et al., Brandenburg (2002) compared party and media agendas on a day-to-day basis. He concluded that political parties did influence media agendas through their daily communications but hardly responded to stimuli from the media. A similar study about the 2002 Irish election campaign confirmed that parties, in this case the major political party (Fianna Fail), are the main agenda setters and that the media follow (Brandenburg, 2004).

Kleinnijenhuis and colleagues came to similar conclusions for the 2003 Dutch elections. It was Pim Fortuyn and his populist party that set the media agenda and not the other way around. Fortuyn's fierce criticism on the incumbents, his analysis of the Netherlands as a country in severe crisis, and the focus on issues like immigrants and crime were picked up and became prominent items in the news (Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, De Ridder, Van Hoof, & Vliegthart, 2003). In addition, Roberts and McCombs (1994) substantiated the prevalence of the candidates' political agenda in a study on the 1990 Texas gubernatorial campaign. TV ads of the major candidates had a strong impact on the television news. The opposite influence, from TV news on the candidates' agenda, was absent.

How can the minimal political agenda setting power of the media in campaign periods be explained? Knowing that, during campaigns, the political agenda is merely a symbolic agenda, given that the media's impact is much larger when it comes to symbolic agendas, these limited effects are even more startling. Our claim is that the electoral context radically changes the behavior of both players, media and politicians. First, the composition of the (normally) multilayered and complex political agenda changes dramatically; central actors like government and parliament and their substantial agendas make room for political parties with their symbolic agendas. Dalton et al. (1998) say that the limited agenda setting role of the media during campaigns is due to the fact that parties and candidates are vigorously trying to influence the public agenda. Their whole behavior is aimed to dominate the public debate: Parties have daily press briefings, stage their own (pseudo) events, indefatigably flood the media with press releases, and continuously make provocative statements. Major parties and candidates become powerful sources supplying journalists with what they are looking for (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; McQuail, 1993). Butler (1998) showed that the Australian parties are so proactive in building the news agenda during campaigns that they managed to generate almost 85% of the campaign stories in the media. Although most journalists are fully aware of the strategic intentions of these events and use disdain or even cynicism commenting on them in their coverage (Semetko et al., 1991), this makes little difference to the fact that the media follow rather than lead. Besides their effort to influence the media agenda, parties and candidates in electoral times also try to bypass the media by directly targeting the public with ads, flyers, canvassing, and, in some countries, free airtime on the public broadcaster (Semetko, 1996). In sum, the electoral context makes it more difficult for the media to set the political agenda and to focus autonomously on issues that are not brought forward by parties or candidates.

Second, the media devote more attention to politics in campaign times, opening opportunity windows for political actors. Media gates are wide open for any politician with a message. Election campaign features a different structure of the news (Semetko et al., 1991). The share of political news surges on TV as well as in newspapers. Often, television news incorporates special campaign news items in the weeks before Election Day and newspapers run longer stories and extra pages (Hart, 2000). Although a lot of the surplus media attention can be labeled as horse race coverage

(Patterson, 1993), this does not mean that all issue coverage is brushed aside by who is leading and who is losing the race (Just et al., 1996). There is plenty of room for parties and candidates to get their substantial message across.

Third, media are less autonomous and their coverage is more balanced in election times. Although media have become, in general, more autonomous and less depending on politics—several scholars have asserted that the modern media are no longer driven by a political but rather by their own *media logic* (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Brants & Van Praag, 2000; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999)—this does not mean that there are not any restrictions at all. Especially in election times, certain rules, traditions, and practices regarding fairness and balance limit the media's sovereign role (Semetko, 1996). More than in routine times, both the politicians and the public are sensitive to unfair coverage or an unbalanced share of attention. This leads some media, for example, the BBC, to apply stopwatch rules. The importance of these rules of balance varies significantly cross-nationally. The U.S. media in particular seem to be more active and independent, while in Britain, like in many other European countries, the *sacerdotal* approach still prevails (Semetko et al., 1991; Van Praag & Brants, 1999). Also within countries, media attitudes toward politics vary. For example, on the basis of newsroom observations, huge differences between public and commercial television in Spain's 1996 election campaign were found; in the course of the campaign in particular, the public channel gradually relied more on stopwatch rules (Semetko & Canel, 1997).

That the media's political agenda setting role in election campaigns is limited does not imply that they do not affect the outcome at all. The media can follow the agenda of party A more closely than that of party B, give more attention to issue X than to issue Y. The agenda setting power of journalists in election times lies more in their discretion to include or exclude information of political actors than in their autonomous selection of issues (Butler, 1998; Van Praag & Brants, 1999). To be sure, besides agenda setting, the media can influence politics in many other ways during the campaign.

Political issue adoption: Incidence, type, and promptness

Studying the media's impact on the political agenda implies four basic research choices. The previous sections established that diverging options molded to a large extent the conclusions of the available studies. Political agenda setting is contingent upon a number of conditions: the kind of media and issues under study and the political agenda and the time period under investigation. Yet, ascertaining the contingency of media power is not enough to constitute a theory of the media and political agenda setting. Mirroring a complaint often vented about the kindred public agenda setting field (Kosicki, 1993), political agenda setting lacks a theory and often seems to be no more than a well-chosen metaphor. In fact, most political agenda setting studies implicitly claim that media coverage mechanically leads to political attention: Political actors adopt media issues simply because they are

covered. But this claim is not anchored in any behavioral theory of political actors. Although largely conducted by political scientists, most political agenda setting studies theoretically neglect the political side of the media–politics relationship. The basic question such a theory should primarily answer is simple: *Why do political actors embrace issues put forward by the media?* Only drawing upon such an explanatory account can precise hypotheses be developed about which political actors are, and when, most inclined to adopt which issues covered in which media. Much more than the political agenda setting studies at hand, public agenda setting students have made headway with theorizing the conditional character of media effects. The most fruitful account in that respect is to focus on the *recipient* of the media message: not all people react similarly on media coverage. Individual features make some people more susceptible for some messages about some issues by some media (Erbring et al., 1980; Hügel et al., 1989). It is exactly this line of thinking we want to pursue here and apply to political agenda setting: not all political actors react alike on media cues.

Why would political actors adopt media issues, then? To be sure, in most cases politicians do not react on media coverage at all. There simply is too much, too diverging, and too fragmented news for political actors to keep track of and to react on. But sometimes, political actors do react, and they do so for several reasons. First, to some extent they are affected by the media just like ordinary citizens: it is on TV so it must be important. This is all the more the case since politicians are true news addicts, voraciously consuming large chunks of daily news and exposed to loads of media content (Eilders, 1997; Pritchard, 1992). To some degree, hence, public and political agenda setting are overlapping.

However, this partial overlap has contributed to the theoretical deficiency of the political agenda setting field. Most political agenda setting scholars implicitly draw upon theory and hypotheses of public agenda setting research supposing that politicians and the public react the same way on news, but they do not. It is evident that there are crucial differences between public and political agenda setting. Political agenda setting is a macroprocess and not a microprocess. It involves many competing and dependent actors. Political agendas are hypercompetitive environments with actors deliberately besieging the political agenda, while the public agenda is relatively empty, were it not for the media. Although public agenda setting is to a large extent an unconscious process, political agenda setting certainly is not: Political actors decide consciously, often after lengthy pondering and strategic reflection, what to devote attention to. The most crucial difference, though, is that public agenda setting is a cognitive process, although political agenda setting is essentially a behavioral process: It is not what politicians think or believe but what they *do* that matters (Pritchard, 1992). Although it is easy for a member of the public to shift attention—it does not cost a thing because attention is just *caring about*—shifting attention is a completely different thing for political actors. It entails the laborious and conflictual reallocation of time, personnel, and resources. Precisely for that reason, we need a specific *behavioral* theory of political actors and we cannot rely on the cognitive public agenda setting model.

Second, politicians also react on media cues to communicate with each other. In advanced industrial democracies, media are part of politics, and they are the marketplace/arena in which political ideas and proposals are launched, tested, scrutinized, and contested. Cabinet ministers, heads of state, parliamentarians, civil servants, and political parties all communicate, internally as well as with each other, via the media, and consequently, they react on media's issue coverage and seem to adopt media issues. Often their messages are primarily meant for their colleague politicians, not for the public at large (Heffernan, 2004).

The most important reason for political actors to adopt media issues is, third, that media coverage is associated with public opinion. Whether the media really *affect* public opinion or not is irrelevant, what matters here is that political actors *believe* that TV and newspapers determine the public's issue priorities. Whether media coverage is considered as a *cause* of public opinion, the media leading the public, or rather a *consequence*, the public leading the media, is not important either as long as political actors consider the media's issue attention as an indicator of the public's needs and wishes. Political actors, then, do not primarily react on media coverage itself but on (presumed) public opinion. In other words, political actors anticipate the expected media impact on the public and build their political strategy on that premise (Eichhorn, 1996; Eilders, 1997). The more politicians believe in the media's political almightiness, the more they are inclined to embrace media topics ... and the mightier the media are. According to Schudson (1996), the power of the mass media lies not in the direct influence of the mass media on the general public but in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is influenced by the mass media. Studies confirm that political actors tend to equate media with public opinion. Cook et al. (1983) showed experimentally that policy makers believe that the media steer the public's issue priorities and substantiated that politicians gain their understanding of public opinion through the media (see also Linsky, 1986). Paradoxically, the less direct evidence on public opinion available via opinion polling, the more politicians will take media's influence on public opinion for granted and the more they will consider the media as a good indicator, a proxy, of what the public cares for (Kennamer, 1992; Pritchard, 1992; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). This would mean that especially in poll-free societies, and thus not in polities permeated with constant polling and public opinion navel gazing, political actors tend to consider the media as mirroring public opinion because they have no other way of finding out the public's preferences.

Once one accepts that media and public opinion are associated, it is a perfect natural reaction for politicians to adopt media issues and to follow the media in some instances. Political actors are evaluated by the public based on the issues put forward by the media, which is the well-known priming mechanism (Iyengar & Reeves, 1997). As media issues are the issues that might make a difference, politicians do their utmost best to impress the people, especially with regard to media issues. Not reacting on topics (widely) covered in the media might be considered as incapacity or, even worse, indifference. As a result, politicians tend to adopt media issues,

if not by solving the issue with real measures then, at least, by showing their commitment and displaying their responsiveness. Most often, indeed, their reaction is rather symbolical than substantial since taking substantial policy measures is a costly affair. In many instances, merely proclaiming symbolic decisions and showing commitment can be effective and might do the public reassuring job, making the strenuous development of real substantial policy measures an inefficient and unattractive alternative. If there is a media effect at all, we thus expect that the media affect especially the symbolic political agendas and only rarely more substantial political agendas.

The alleged interplay between media and public opinion not only incites political actors to take on media issues but also stimulates them to embrace these issues *as soon as possible*. When pressing problems turn up "... whether or not feasible solutions are in sight. Action of some kind, even if it is merely symbolic, must be taken as quickly as possible" (Walker, 1977, p. 426). Because the media are often their sole means to reach out to the public (Pritchard, 1992) and because the media's issue attention cycle is short (Downs, 1972), political actors tend to react almost immediately. The quicker their reaction, the higher the chance they can get the line of the day out, get their face on TV, and connect with the public. Instant issue adoption maximizes media exposure. Put otherwise, if it is not possible to react promptly on media coverage, it makes no sense to react on the media at all since public and media will have long forgotten about the issue.

Adoption incidence, adoption type, and adoption promptness are the basic elements of our prototheory of political agenda setting by the media; they form the *dependent* variables in our contingency model. In combination, they yield five possible types of political reaction on issue coverage by the mass media: (a) no reaction, (b) fast symbolic reaction, (c) slow substantial reaction, (d) fast substantial reaction, and (e) slow symbolic reaction. Because adoption incidence, type, and promptness are closely associated, we reckon some of these types are more recurrent than others. If political actors react swiftly, this will not imply much more than a symbolic gesture since elaborating substantial policies takes time. If a political actor, in contrast, takes more time to react, chances increase that this reaction will be substantial. Reacting swiftly and substantially at the same time appears, intuitively, to be rarer as few political actors have the capacities to take sweeping decisions on very short notice. The most awkward and most uncommon reaction type is the slow symbolic one. It does not make much sense for an actor to refrain from reacting immediately if his reaction is mere symbolic.

Behavioral determinants of the political adoption of media issues

What determines these five modes of (non)reaction on media coverage? We believe there to be at least four political context factors modulating political agenda setting by the media. They are a number of relevant structural, positional, and individual features of the message-receiving public who are, in the case of political agenda setting, political actors. These factors act as *independent* variables in our prototheory.

As in public agenda setting, ultimately the characteristics of the (political) actor who gets the media message determine whether he/she will think/act upon the media cue or not. In contrast to public agenda setting studies proclaiming that the *individual* features of a member of the public counts—for example, need for orientation, issue sensitivity, or integration in interpersonal communication networks (Erbring et al., 1980; Hügel et al., 1989; Weaver, 1977)—we believe that for political agenda setting especially *structural* and *positional* characteristics matter. It concerns the (a) institutional and (b) internal rules constraining the political actor at stake, (c) his/her position in the political configuration, and (d) his/her personal traits.

First, *institutional rules* codetermine the timing and thus the advantageousness of embracing media issues. If only once a year the national budget is assembled, it would be nonsense to expect a fast budgetary reaction: The budget cannot be used to send out a fast and symbolic signal and, consequently, it is unlikely that it will be influenced by the media. The functioning of government and parliament too is subject to institutional timing rules hindering immediate reaction. Parliament, in many countries, holds question time only once a week that renders it impossible for MPs to criticize or support government on the parliamentary floor with a shorter delay. In addition, a legislative reaction on media coverage would inevitably take time if only because of double voting in the two chambers of bicameral polities. In general, we expect substantial resource-allocating reactions on media coverage to be more restrained by periodization and institutional procedures than merely by rhetorical reactions. Because we argued that only fast reactions tend to reach their goal, showing that one is on top of things, we expect institutional timing rules and checks and balances to restrain political agenda setting by the media.

Second, the *internal functioning* of political actors affects their reaction on media coverage. Most political actors are restrained by, often informal, internal decision-making practices. Political parties need to make up their mind before they react and, if party leadership is bound by internal democracy, this may take a while. In particular, when it comprises several coalition partners, government must find a compromise satisfying all parties before it speaks out. This applies less to parliament, which is not really an actor as such but more an arena where majority and minority parties cross swords. Less bound by preceding internal decision-making processes, opposition MPs can pronounce themselves especially freely. Presidents in full-fledged presidential systems, directly elected and only accountable to the electorate, are less constrained by parties or other internal decision-making rules; he can adopt media issues rapidly as he sees fit. Again, substantial political reactions are more subject to internal decision-making practices than discursive reactions. Checks and balances reduce reaction speed, thereby periling reaction per se. In a sense, internal rules force political actors to discuss media cues with others before taking action. This reflects an important argument in the public agenda setting literature, namely, that interpersonal communication and integration in communication networks thwarts agenda setting by the media (Erbring et al., 1980). Talking with others, the dependency of individuals on media diminishes: They are confronted with other issues or

with diverging points of view. Because politicians are in the business of talking with others, especially those who are bound by internal decision-making rules, we expect media impact on politics in general to be diluted.

With *political configuration*, third, we refer to the government–opposition game entailing different reactions from incumbents and opposition. Not having the power to realize their claims, challenger's actions are per definition largely symbolic. While the government wants to show everything is under control, the opposition's goal is to prove exactly the opposite. Opposition MPs might rely on the media as a kind of heuristic device, a search engine constantly browsing through society and throwing up new, unattended, and gravely neglected topics. This browsing behavior of opposition members resembles the public agenda setting's notion of need for orientation. The more people have a need for orientation on an issue, the more they will rely on media and be affected by media coverage (McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1977). In contrast to oppositional actors, governmental actors can be expected to carry out their program less keen on external orientation. Moreover, the sooner oppositional actors react on media coverage, the more they might destabilize government as immediate reactions without giving government time to sort things could lead to improvisation and internal conflict in government. The government–opposition game also implies that the tone of the news matters. The opposition will react foremost on negative news trying to hammer government for not having effectively dealt with the problem earlier, while the majority also responds on positive news, giving the opportunity to highlight how good and successful a job they are doing. External pressure to react on media coverage differs too. Being in charge and responsible, government is more under pressure to react on media than parliament is. Yet, on the other hand, a strong news source, government is less dependent on temporary media windows to get its story in the news.

Finally, also *personal traits* of political actors affect their propensity to react on media coverage. The specialization of political actors, for example, might determine their susceptibility for media cues. The more generalist a political actor, the more he will be driven by the media, while specialized political actors only focus on their small policy subfield and tend to neglect general media coverage (Kingdon, 1984). Most likely, the personality of political actors also makes a difference. Some politicians, for example, are more media savvy than others: They play the media game and go along with the media logic. Other political actors may want to defeat the others in instant responsiveness and decisiveness. Just like in public agenda setting, personal issue sensitivity may also play a role (Hügel et al., 1989). According to Dearing and Rogers (1996), the personal experience of political actors affects their sensitivity for issues.

Conclusion

Figure 2 summarizes the argument developed in this paper graphically. Political agenda setting by the media is contingent upon a number of conditions. The kind of issues covered (e.g., obtrusive vs. unobtrusive), the specific media outlets (e.g.,

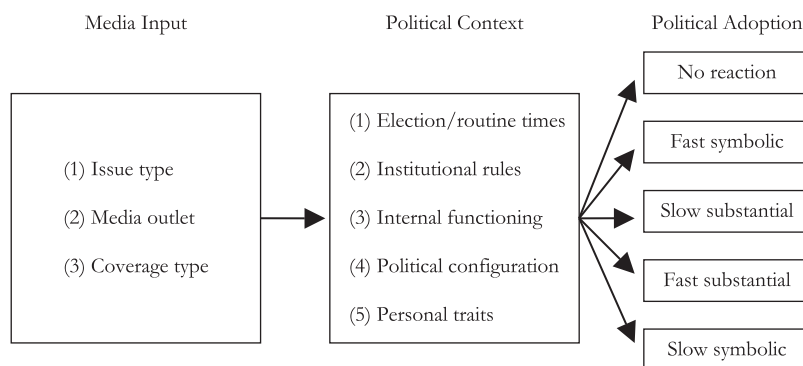


Figure 2 A contingency model of political agenda setting by the media.

television vs. newspapers), and the sort of coverage (e.g., negative vs. positive) are the input variables of the model. Political context variables, the features of the political actors at stake, are the heart of the model. For reasons of parsimony, we included the time period—elections versus nonelections—among the political context variables. The model proposes five sorts of output ranging from no political adoption to fast substantial adoption of media issues.

As a first step to generate testable hypotheses, we can associate these adoption types with specific political actors. Although some factors create counter pressures pushing in the opposite direction, we think that fast symbolic reaction is typical for parliamentary actors, that slow substantial reaction exemplifies government's reaction to media coverage, and that fast substantial reaction is confined to strong presidential systems. Most context variables drive government to react slowly but substantially on media coverage. Lingering institutional procedures associated with real policy measures, checked and balanced internal decision-making practices, government's more outspoken specialization, and its strength as inexorable political source make government react slower and (thus) more substantially. As a rule, government agendas are less flexible and more cemented by previous arrangements and meticulously balanced agreements. Especially when it comes to coalition governments built on lengthy government agreements, government's substantial policy initiatives are immunized against media impact. More or less, the opposite applies to parliament. In particular, its daily surveillance and monitoring of government is flexible and, hence, prone to media impact. Procedures are relatively short, and (opposition) MPs are free to raise whatever topic they want. The fast and substantial adoption of media issues, the apex of media impact, is restricted to systems with a strong executive branch, for example, with a directly elected president. The more presidential systems entrust the president with lots of powers and the less they contain veto players in the form of parties, government agreements, or decision-making rules, the easier and faster a president can induce policy changes. Moreover, presidents are more than any other political actor expected to react on tidings of

misfortune, to show leadership, and to reassure the nation that they are in charge. All these lead us to expect the presidential agenda to be fodder *par excellence* for media coverage.

In conclusion, we are aware of the fact that some arguments need to be further elaborated, that the hypotheses call for further specification, and that our list of variables is not exhaustive. A complete and tested theory on the mass media's role in political agenda setting is not yet established. However, we do hope that this paper is a first but useful step in that direction.

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