

Public Policy and Mass Media

The interplay of mass communication and political decision making

Edited by

**Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten and
Katrin Voltmer**



Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science

Public Policy and Mass Media

The mass media are playing an increasingly central role in modern political life that expands beyond their traditional function as mediators between the world of politics and the citizens.

This volume explores the extent and circumstances under which the media affects public policy; whether the political impact of the media is confined to the public representation of politics or whether their influence goes further to also affect the substance of political decisions. It provides an in-depth understanding of the conditions under which the media might, or might not, play a role in the policy process and what the nature of their influence is.

Bringing together conceptual and methodological approaches from both political science and communications studies, this book presents an interdisciplinary perspective. It presents empirical evidence of the processes involved in the interaction between mass communication and policy and features case studies from Western Europe and the United States and across different policy fields.

The book will be of interest to students of public policy, political communication and comparative politics.

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Edited by Thomas Poguntke

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Series editor's preface

It can hardly come as a surprise that a comparative volume investigating the policy impact of the mass media is likely to start with some references to the British example. Arguably, the media on the British Isles are characterized by a particularly assertive approach to covering political events which often transgresses the boundaries between reporting and campaigning. Some may say that the interference of the British media in policy making is only rivalled by the Italian media which are, at the time of writing, in large parts conveniently owned or controlled by the prime minister.

In principle, media influence may materialize in two different ways. First, media can have a direct impact on what people think about certain policy decisions. Media campaigns for a 'hard line on crime' – the example used by the editors in their introduction – may shift the policy preferences of the electorate towards more repressive policies. Politicians trying to secure public support for their policies will feel compelled to follow suit, at least to certain degree, if they want to avoid being exposed by their political rivals for not 'listening to the people'. Second, media make politicians believe that certain issues need to be addressed by determining the agenda of the public debate and by claiming to voice the opinions of the proverbial ordinary man. Again, politicians may react to such agenda setting even though there may be no evidence that public opinion actually shares the concerns expressed by the media.

To be sure, this dichotomy simplifies the intricate relationship between media and policy makers. The case of Italy reminds us that, by occupying a position at the end of a 'chain of influence', politicians may themselves be in a position to influence the media contents and hence the conditions under which they act. However, this simple dichotomy reminds us that some of the alleged media influence may actually happen in the minds of the politicians who may simply lack the confidence to keep faith to their principles if they come under media fire. Furthermore, our perception of media influence is largely influenced by the media discourse itself, and it can come as no surprise that journalists will lean towards exaggerating their own role in any significant policy shift. As such, many accounts of media influence contain an element of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This brief sketch clearly shows that there is sufficient scope for carefully disentangling the complex web of mutual influence. The editors have assembled a

broad range of perspectives in this volume. While the individual contributions adopt different approaches and concentrate on different aspects, they all contribute to enhancing our understanding of how the mass media can influence public policy.

However, there is no simple answer. While some high profile policy decisions are exposed to the limelight of the public debate, many policy decisions are simply too uninteresting or too complex and will therefore not attract much media attention. Furthermore, as the editors point out in their introduction, the complex policy cycle frequently exhausts media attention. In other words, media attention tends to be rather short-term and focused on specific events while policy making is slow and often driven by intricate detail.

It follows from this that the general question for the policy impact of the media is too simple. Specific types of policies are more susceptible to media influence than others. Furthermore, as the editors conclude, media influence is rarely 'the result of intentional intervention on the part of the journalists'. Rather, it works indirectly through the discursive power of the media. Yet, this discursive power is not always directed at the most important political problems of society. While individual high profile crimes regularly lead to a considerable overestimation of the relevant crime rates by mass publics, structural problems like poverty or unemployment are often underrepresented in the media. To be sure, some of these biases are simply due to the inherent media logic driven by the news value of certain policies or events. However, it would be naïve to neglect the fact that those who own or control the media owners can – and will – influence editorial policies and hence the discursive power of the media. The current volume provides a wealth of new insights on how the media influence public policy. In so doing it reminds us that the questions of media control and media ownership are highly relevant issues for the quality of democracy. Berlusconi's Italy may be the case that immediately comes to mind but it is by no means the only one.

Thomas Poguntke, Series Editor
Florence, October 2009

Preface

This book investigates the role of the media as an important force that, under certain circumstances, shapes the processes and outcomes of public policy making. Even though the media have become an important factor in politics, in particular during elections, their influence on political decision making has been largely ignored so far. The workshop ‘Public Policy and the Mass Media – Influences and Interactions’, which we organized at the 2007 European Consortium for Political Research Joint Session of Workshops in Helsinki (Finland), provided a unique opportunity to explore this emerging field of academic enquiry. Some 20 scholars from Australia, Europe and North America came together to engage in an extremely stimulating debate. Bringing in a broad spectrum of theoretical backgrounds from discourse analysis to agenda-setting to network analysis and policy field studies, and drawing on empirical sources as diverse as case studies, textual analysis and longitudinal document analysis, the workshop shed new light on the media–policy nexus in different institutional and cultural contexts.

In this volume we present a selection of the papers that were presented at the Helsinki workshop. All authors have extensively revised and updated their papers for publication and we wish to thank all of them for their enthusiasm and commitment to this project. We are also grateful to the European Consortium for Political Research, which provided the space to discuss an innovative area of research and has made this publication possible. We would also like to thank David Gregosz for his thorough and untiring assistance in editing this volume.

Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten
Katrin Voltmer
January 2010

1 Introduction

Mass media and public policy – is there a link?

Katrin Voltmer and Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten

The media have become such an indispensable part of modern democratic life that they often seem to dominate the political process. In 1997 Iyengar and Reeves published a book entitled *Do the Media Govern?* – and many observers would answer the question positively, pointing to numerous instances where media campaigns have put pressure on policymakers to revise their decisions. For example, when in summer 2006 the then British Home Secretary John Reid announced the government's new 'criminal justice package' of longer sentences and more prison places, members of independent interest groups accused him of 'letting tabloids dictate home affairs' (*Guardian* 2006). Reid's position appeared even more questionable since he had previously stated that prisons were not an effective instrument to combat crime. In the same year, a group of high-ranking former politicians and civil servants founded the Better Government Initiative that aims to develop proposals to improve the efficiency and transparency of British government institutions. According to this group, the media are one of the problems government is facing:

The context within which Britain is governed has altered almost beyond recognition. The unavoidable pressures of round the clock press and television leave government less time to take coherent legislative and administrative decisions. Our traditional structures – parliament, government, civil service, even the judiciary – have been substantially transformed and can no longer function as they used to. These changes are objective and largely irreversible. They cannot be attributed to any one government or to any one political style.

(Better Government Initiative 2008)

Given the widespread concerns of political insiders, it comes as a surprise that the academic disciplines that are mainly concerned with issues of the relationship between politics and the media – political science and communication studies – have paid relatively little attention to the role of the media in the policy process (Kennamer 1992; Spitzer 1993; for foreign policy see Nacos *et al.* 2000). So far, most research on the political impact of the media has focused on two main areas of enquiry: the media's influence on citizens' political attitudes and

political behaviour, and the professionalization of election campaigns and the emergence of political marketing (Lees-Marshment 2004; Norris *et al.* 1999; Street 2005; Zaller 1992). This volume aims to fill this gap by exploring whether, to what extent and under what circumstances the media affect public policy, i.e. the processes and outcomes of political decision making.

Making policy in the information age: why the media matter

Existing literature on the relationship between the media and public policy is patchy and provides a rather incoherent picture. Some studies suggest that policymakers respond to media coverage and public opinion (Molotch *et al.* 1987; Page and Shapiro 1992), while others emphasize their resistance to external pressure such as the media (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995). Walgrave and van Aelst (2006) review 19 studies published over the last three decades that analyse media influences on policymaking. Of these, 12 report strong or considerable media effects on policymaking, while seven find only weak or minimal impact. This meta-analysis thus indicates that the media can be a relevant force in the policy process that needs to be taken more systematically into account if we are to better understand the dynamics of public policy in modern democracies.

However, there are plausible reasons to assume that the media have little, if any, opportunity to influence policy decisions. One argument is the volatility of media coverage. The news rarely focuses on an issue over a sustained period of time, and thus generates only spotlights of attention that hardly leave any traces in the memory of the audience. In contrast, the policy agenda develops over long time spans, often involving several legislative terms. Further, the media's representation of politics is mainly concerned with personalities, whereas the policy process revolves around highly specialized fields of regulation. Finally, the substance of the media agenda differs from the policy agenda in that it is driven by newsworthy events rather than structural problems, such as the health system, economic growth or the budget. Thus, there seems to be a fundamental mismatch between the way in which the media operate and the processes of policymaking. What then are the mechanisms that could be considered to provide possible entry points for media influences?

The most obvious link between mass communication and policy making is public opinion. Policymakers have traditionally viewed the media agenda as a shortcut to public opinion because they – rightly or wrongly – assume that the general public is heavily influenced by what they read in the papers or watch on television (Herbst 1998). Adapting to the priorities of the media is therefore a strategy to respond to what are believed to be the demands and preferences of the electorate. In some cases the response will be confined to symbolic politics, in others it will be more substantial as proposals might be altered, postponed to a time when public opinion is strategically less crucial, or even aborted altogether. At the same time, policymakers are expected to demonstrate leadership and vision, which is why public announcements of policy changes are usually interpreted as giving in to the pressure of the media or the whims of public opinion –

as the example at the beginning of this chapter illustrates – rather than as the responsiveness to citizens’ concerns. Therefore, political actors routinely evaluate policy proposals in view of the reaction they might trigger in the media before pursuing them through the legislative process. Davis found extensive evidence of such ‘anticipatory news media effects’ (2007; 187–190) in his recent study based on in-depth interviews with British members of parliament.

Predicting and adapting to media response has become ever more vital because journalists seem to have given up their traditional ‘sacerdotal’ orientation toward politicians and political institutions to adopt a more adversarial, even aggressive style of political reporting (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). Thus, supportive media coverage of new policy initiatives has become less likely than in the past, which further increases the pressure on policymakers to engage in active news management. Another factor that has contributed to uncertainty in the policy process is the dramatic development of communication technologies over the past decade. In particular the Internet has opened up new opportunities to communicate directly with citizens without the interference of journalistic gatekeepers and to establish policy networks with allies that have formerly been isolated from national politics. But the Internet has also provided new actors with a forum to disseminate alternative views to large audiences, which has significantly diminished the ability of policymakers to control the communication environment in which they operate (Coleman *et al.* 1999). New communication technologies, such as satellite transmission and digital cameras, have also changed policymaking in the international realm. Here 24-hour news coverage with instant global reach and live reporting have altered the mode and pace of decision making, especially in the context of international crises, military operations and humanitarian interventions (Gilboa 2005; Livingston and Bennett 2003).

While policymakers pay attention to the media as a manifestation of public opinion, they also follow the news as a way of monitoring the political environment in which they operate. Given the growing specialization and segmentation of the policy process, it has become virtually impossible even for long-serving politicians to keep abreast of what is going on elsewhere in government, in the opposition or even within their own party. The media have a unique capacity to bridge these different spheres and to serve as the ‘nerves of government’ (Deutsch 1963) that link the divergent parts. Not only do the media cover a broad range of issues, from developments in society at large to actual government actions, but they are also consumed by everybody – which in turn creates a sphere of shared knowledge where each actor in the system knows what the others know. Unlike ordinary citizens, policymakers use the media mainly for strategic purposes. Information obtained from the media provides them with clues that help them to monitor the movements of their opponents and to gauge their own standing within an ever-shifting constellation of policy coalitions. They can then adjust their own strategies, which may include re-framing an issue or policy proposal, distracting attention from unfavourable issues to safer ones, or using the media to attack the position of opponents.

Utilizing the media may enable policymakers to gain control over the public agenda, but they can only achieve this by accepting the media's rule of the game. This in turn affects the process and, to some extent, even the outcome of policy-making. 'Mediatization' can therefore be regarded as another mechanism through which the media affect public policy. The term refers to a situation 'where political institutions [are] increasingly ... dependent on and shaped by mass media' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 247). The central role of the media in the policy process has made the political arena into an extremely unpredictable, even dangerous terrain where a slip of the tongue, a leaked email or a premature public statement can damage not only a policy proposal but also political careers (Kepplinger 2007). Even though the media rarely generate policies they have, according to Meyer (2002), 'colonized' the political process by imposing their operational logic on the institutional procedures of public policy. With regard to policymaking, mediatization involves tailoring policy decisions with a view to their communication through the media.

A further mechanism of media influence on policy making is the closeness of interaction between politicians and journalists in the day-to-day routines of politics. Although journalists like to see themselves as watchdogs and adversaries vis-à-vis political power holders, most of the time the two sets of actors – journalists and politicians – cooperate rather than work against each other. Research on media–source relationships has shown that news is a joint product emerging from frequent interactions and shared norms between journalists and political actors (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Manning 2001). Conversely – and more significant in the context of the present analysis – politicians regularly seek the exchange of ideas with journalists and form issue coalitions with those who hold similar views either to promote a particular proposal or to attack oppositional ones (Davis 2007). Hence, policymakers and journalists, especially at the top level of each elite group, can be seen as interpretative communities with each part having an impact in the formation of policy.

Conditionality and causality

So far we have presented arguments and examples that suggest a significant role for the media in public policy. However, empirical evidence is less unequivocal and the pattern arising from existing research reveals a puzzling mixture of cases where the media had a strong impact on the process and/or outcome of policy and ones where they didn't play any role (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993). Apparently, the media's role in the policy process depends on a variety of conditions that moderate the degree and the kind of influence they can exert on policymakers.

One crucial condition that sets the frame for the media–policy link is the policy field and its specific dynamic (Koch-Baumgarten and Mez 2007). Policy fields constitute complex settings of constellations of actors, legal and procedural frameworks and specific policy instruments. Policy fields that can be assumed to limit, or even exclude, media involvement are those that are charac-

terized by a high degree of path dependency and the dominance of civil servants. It is unlikely that the media will take notice of the highly specialized, often esoteric debates going on in these arenas – unless a gross policy failure occurs that has the potential for a full-blown media scandal. In contrast, less established policy fields provide plenty of opportunities for new actors to enter the arena, and they usually do this by mobilizing the media for their cause. Equally, policy fields that are closely linked to electoral politics can be assumed to be more vulnerable to media interference because politicians are highly dependent on the media to win the support of voters. A special case is policy fields that directly affect the professional or economic interests of the media because here the media enter the field as interested parties. Media policy is the obvious case where the media are both reporters of events and a lobby group, but other areas, such as economic policy and taxes could be affected too.

Within a given policy field, different stages of the policy cycle differ with regard to their link with the media. Arguably, the media are mainly involved in the early stages of problem definition and agenda-setting, and largely insignificant in the processes of policy formulation and implementation (Votmer 2007).

In order to explain the often contradicting evidence of the media's influence on policy, some scholars have suggested policy uncertainty and elite consensus as intervening variables that reduce, or enhance, the media's ability to change the course of policymaking (Robinson 2001). Policy uncertainty is assumed to make political decision makers more susceptible to the pressure of media coverage, in particular when the issue involved can be portrayed with sensational images that have the potential to mobilize public opinion up to a point of moral panic. Conversely, consensus among policymakers works like a protective shield because it reduces the interest of the media in the topic. Typically, the media's attention is drawn to a policy debate when internal splits or sharp divisions between political parties become obvious. Once the media have become involved, the dynamic and direction of a policy can change dramatically. Increased media coverage usually intensifies the conflict and invites new actors to enter the debate and to join one of the opposing camps. Policy alternatives must then be formulated in a manner that suits the media's thirst for sound bites and catchy headlines and, since the conflict is now enacted in front of the public eye, compromises and backstage deals become less likely.

Besides the complexity of the conditionality of media influences in the policy process, the attempt to systematize the media-policy nexus is further aggravated by the dubious relationship between cause and effect. Many studies in the field aim to answer the question 'who leads and who follows' (Shapiro and Jacobs 2000), i.e. to identify whether the media influence policymakers or the other way around. Research approaches that follow this logic of enquiry have frequently shed important light on the forces that shape public policy. In particular, longitudinal agenda research that compares the changes of issue salience on the media and policy agenda, often complemented by measures of public opinion, has proven extremely effective in establishing empirical evidence for the power of

the media and its limitations in public policy (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Page and Shapiro 1992).

However, this approach might miss out some of the processes that are going on. As mentioned above, policymakers and journalists are continuously engaged in an exchange of information where it becomes impossible to work out who is influencing whom. Mutual dependency has led to each side developing new strategies to respond to the attempts of influence of their counterparts – a constant ‘arms race’ to control the public agenda. As a consequence, the dynamics of media coverage of political activities and the response of external actors and public opinion does not follow a linear pattern that can be captured by common stochastic modelling.

Policy debates and policy institutions

To structure the analyses of the complex interplay between the media and public policy, this volume distinguishes between two dimensions of the policy process: the policy debate and policy institutions. In a similar vein, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) discuss cognitive processes and institutional procedures as constituent elements of the policy process. Colebatch (2002) makes a similar argument when distinguishing between choices and the structures that constrain the range of possible choices. Underlying the idea of the two dimensions is the assumption that policy outcomes are shaped by both the particular problem and how it is interpreted, on the one hand, and the institutions and constellation of actors of the policy field, on the other. In other words, whether or not a problem attracts the attention of policymakers and what kind of choices are made to solve the condition depends to a large degree on the way in which it is communicated within a particular policy arena. With regard to the role of the media in the policy process, we assume their main influence to be in the realm of the policy debate, while existing policy institutions and power constellations constrain the degree to which the media can interfere in the decision making process. Conversely, the promotion of new issues and new interpretations can bring in new actors, thereby changing the established structures of a policy field. However, while we are using the distinction between policy debates and policy institutions as an analytical device, it is important to keep in mind that both dimensions are closely interrelated, and changes in one element often lead to changes in the other. In the following paragraphs the two dimensions will be briefly outlined and discussed in the light of the existing literature.

The *policy debate* denotes the cognitive processes of identifying, selecting and prioritizing problems and linking them to particular values. Since at any given point in time the issues that demand political attention outnumber the problem-solving capacity of the policy system, the selection of problems and their integration into the existing policy agenda is a key element of the policy process (Kingdon 1995). Whether or not a problem moves up on the policy agenda depends not only on its significance, but also on how it is labelled and interpreted. The reason for the significance of agenda setting derives from the

fact that problems, rather than being objective conditions that speak for themselves, are cognitive constructs that can take on different meanings and can be attached to different interests and beliefs. For example, even though inequality can be measured (usually by means of the Gini-index), the degree to which inequality is tolerated in society, the recognized causes of inequality and what can, or should, be done about it is open to interpretation. Crime rates are another example. While they might appear as objective statistics, in reality they are based on a plethora of values and categorizations that determine what is counted as crime and eventually how crime is treated. In both cases the interpretation of the problem affects the preferred policies and the kind and amount of resources that are allocated to solve the problem. The interpretative nature of policy problems is the reason why the policy process is usually characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, which, as mentioned above, has been identified as a precondition for possible media influences.

Political communication research and political science agenda research have both been involved in exploring the crucial importance of information in human decision making, albeit from somewhat different theoretical perspectives and with different empirical instruments (see for an overview Dearing and Rogers 1996). Political communication research has developed a rich body of concepts and theories to describe and explain political news and its consequences. Agenda setting and framing are probably the most elaborated approaches that link the study of the content of political news to the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of mass audiences. This body of research has shown that the salience of issues on the media agenda not only affects which problems citizens consider most important, but also their policy preferences and how they evaluate political officials (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991; McCombs *et al.* 1997). Framing theory goes a step further by exploring the way in which political information is contextualized and how this affects the meaning of a news story and ultimately the judgement of the audience (Price and Tewksbury 1997). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) describe frames as 'interpretative packages' that include assumptions about causes and consequences of a problem, affected values and resulting policy implications. They show how shifting the discourse on nuclear power from a 'progress' frame to a 'risk' frame fundamentally altered both policy and public opinion. (And one could add that the recent discussion about climate change has been used to again re-frame this energy source as a 'clean' solution to the problem of rising global temperatures.) These observations are in line with Kahneman and Tversky's (1984) seminal experimental study that demonstrates that the framing of policy alternatives as either avoiding risks or achieving gains strongly affects individual preferences. The upshot of this research is that the rationality of decision making is limited – or 'bounded' (Simon 1982) – not only by the information available, but also by the interpretative context in which it is embedded.

Political science agenda research has used similar concepts, but most of it has ignored the media's contribution to setting the agenda and framing political issues (Klingemann *et al.* 1994; Riker 1993). Kingdon (1995) analyses how

issues enter the policy agenda and the often erratic way in which issues are linked to policy solutions. Even though this study registered only marginal media influences it provides valuable insights into the crucial role of agendas and problem definitions for the ultimate outcome of policy decisions. In their longitudinal comparison of media and policy agendas, Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 103–125) did find significant media effects, but these were inconsistent and variable. In some policy fields the media agenda triggered changes in the policy agenda, in other instances the media followed the policy agenda, or both agendas varied in parallel. Detailed analyses of three specific policy arenas – pesticides, smoking and automobile safety – however demonstrated that the tone of the media coverage changed significantly when the media shifted the focus to different aspects of the issue, for example in the case of smoking from economic to health-related aspects. Thus, policy changes could be attributed to changes in issue framing and a resulting new understanding of the problem.

The media's selection and framing of issues can be explained by two factors. One is alliance with a particular ideology, cause or political party, usually referred to as bias or news slant. The other one is 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow 1979) that denotes the professional standards and production routines that are reflected in the selection and presentation of political issues. The most prominent form of media logic is 'news values', such as personalization, conflict, drama, deviance and impact. Media logic shapes – and often distorts – the reporting of politics even when journalists strictly adhere to the rules of neutrality and objectivity (Staab 1990). Given the media's fascination with drama, conflict and scandals, they are more likely to affect the policy debate when an issue meets these criteria of media logic. By emphasizing risks and policy failures the media systematically limit the range of policy choices that can be publicly legitimated.

Policy institutions – the second dimension of the policy process – entail the structural context of public policy, that is legal and procedural frameworks and the organizational structure in which decisions are made. This dimension also includes the constellation of actors who are involved in the decision-making process, ranging from government agencies to interest groups and non-governmental organizations. While the media's influence is significantly constrained by policy institutions, under some circumstances their involvement in the policy process can also change existing institutional arrangements.

Most policy decisions are determined by the decisions that have been made before, resulting in incremental policymaking that can go on for a long time without anybody, including the media, ever taking notice. The policy arena is confined to specialists and the policy discourse too abstract and detailed to be easily communicated to a wider audience both within and outside the political system.

Another institutional aspect that has emerged in many policy fields are so-called 'iron triangles', or corporatist structures. Participants in corporatist arrangements often commit themselves to secrecy and to keeping the media out of the game in order to guarantee the balance of power within the network and to

preserve the effectiveness of bargaining. The flipside of corporatist policy arrangements is that they tend to exclude various actors who might have a stake in the issue. For these outsiders the media are an important alternative route to have their voice heard and even get a hold in the relevant policy institutions. Successful policy entrepreneurs use emerging ‘windows of opportunity’ to mobilize public opinion when their own framing of an issue merges with the dominant media discourse. As a consequence, they might be able to change the course of policy to their own advantage and implement their aim in the policy arena. Policy fields like the environment, which are now firmly established in government institutions, had their beginnings in a combination of innovative issue framing and sophisticated media strategies, such as the spectacular pseudo events that Greenpeace and other groups employed to great effect. Access points for the media into the policy process can also be opened by participants of corporatist settings themselves if commitment to the agreements of the ‘iron triangle’ fails to yield the expected gains. For example, Kernell (1997) points out that ‘going public’ has become a preferred strategy of American presidents to replace time consuming and complicated bargaining processes. However, the extent to which conventional bargaining can be circumvented or even disrupted by the strategic use of the media depends to a large extent on the structural and cultural conditions of policy systems and therefore varies across countries.

In conclusion, we expect the media to have – under certain circumstances – the capacity to bring new issues and new frames into the policy debate. This in turn may lead to a reconfiguration of policy institutions by providing opportunities for new actors to enter the arena. A redefinition of a problem that is already part of the policy agenda can also result in the reorganization of existing responsibilities and structures. We do not suggest, though, that the media’s influence in the policy process is paramount or that policymaking is dominated by the dynamic of public communication, as theories of ‘media democracy’ suggest (Meyer 2002). There are large areas of policymaking that are entirely unaffected by the media. However, we argue that *if* the media enter the policy arena they are able to change the course of decision making and the policy outcome in significant ways.

Overview of the book

The overall structure of this book follows the distinction between policy debates and policy institutions, with Part I exploring policy issues, agendas and the media and Part II focusing on policy institutions, constellations of actors and the media. Although the close interrelation of the two dimensions requires us to consider both aspects of the policy process, in the main the chapters discuss the topic from one or other of the two perspectives.

The chapters of Part I employ theoretical approaches such as agenda-setting, framing, information processing and constructivism. A recurrent theme in these chapters is the question of causality, i.e. the problem of whether the media have the capacity to initiate and shape policy debates, or whether they just adopt the arguments of policy actors.

Jones and Wolfe compare the media agenda with the agenda of US congressional hearings over a period of almost 60 years (1946–2002). The rich database makes it possible to test the causal relationship between the two agendas. While most of the time the media follow the cues provided by political elites, they also play an important role in detecting new problems and elevating them to the attention of policymakers. Walgrave and Lefevere follow a similar agenda-setting paradigm, this time comparing media coverage and party manifestos in Belgium over a period that covers five national elections. Their findings suggest that the attention political parties devote to particular issues is affected by the preceding media coverage. However, the strength of the effects varies according to a variety of conditions resulting from the structure of party competition. Gavin's study focuses on economic policy by exploring the interaction between government, media coverage and public opinion in Britain over a period of three years (1998–2001). The results suggest that widespread assumptions about the influence of excessive spin on the media agenda are exaggerated. Rather, the public representation of the policy process can be seen as a continuous loop, where the media may influence government, but the government is also constantly involved in controlling and modifying media coverage.

Maesele and Schuurman present a discourse analytical study that reconstructs the use of metaphors in the policy debate on biotechnology in Belgium. They identify three distinct 'interpretative packages', each implying different policy responses. Ecker-Ehrhardt's study turns to recent trends in international relations where the 'locus of authority' has shifted from states to a heterogeneous patchwork of international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Based on a content analysis of media coverage of the Darfur crisis in the United Kingdom and United States, the paper argues that the media have emerged as authoritative actors who allocate responsibility and promote a preferred means of interference.

Part II focuses on the structural context in which policymaking takes place. The individual chapters discuss possible media effects on the structure of policy institutions and the range of participants who have access to a policy arena. The findings presented here demonstrate the two-way relationship between the media and institutional contexts, which constrain possible media influences and at the same time are shaped by the media environment.

The second part of the book starts with a theoretical analysis by Brown that brings together network analysis and information processing. The policy process is understood as a network with limited communication and high levels of uncertainty and conflict. It is argued that the news media are playing an important part in this network by providing information about the overall state of the political system and expanding the scope of conflict.

The three chapters that follow employ the conceptual and methodological tools of policy field analysis. In her study of the genetically modified food controversy in Britain, Howarth explores the advantages and problems of Robinson's notion of elite consensus and policy ambiguity as a precondition of media influence on policy. The paper shows that routinized and embedded policy pro-

cesses and procedures were destabilized by media hostility and the resulting crisis of consumer confidence. Sauer explores how, in Germany, the new policy field of women's policy emerged in the 1970s and became finally established. She argues that the media were instrumental in elevating the issue into the public domain, thereby helping new actors to develop sustainable institutional structures and to establish themselves in the political system. However, the nature of a policy field that cuts across different government departments and the fragmentation of the key actors involved have prevented the issue from long-term representation on the media agenda. Strünck investigates the media-policy link in a comparative perspective. The chapter explores pension policies in Germany, Britain and the United States by introducing a set of context factors that explain the presence or absence of media influence on policy in the three countries. The chapter argues that increased media attention and emphasis of risk frames alongside the erosion of consensus-orientated policymaking have enabled new actors to enter the field.

Finally, Entman *et al.* explore the interaction between US foreign policy, media coverage and public opinion in the context of the Iraq war in early 2007. They provide longitudinal empirical evidence for an existing accountability gap and explore the reasons for the media's inability to act as a public watchdog. Overall, the paper supports the indexing hypothesis which states that the media reflect elite discourse rather than taking on an active role in the policy process.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the volume by discussing them from a policy-field perspective.

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Part I

Policy issues, agendas and the media

2 Public policy and the mass media

An information processing approach

Bryan D. Jones and Michelle Wolfe

We suggest that the role of the media in the public policy process can be broadly characterized by four distinct theories. These theories fundamentally focus on the interactions between the media, collectively characterized, and politicians, again collectively characterized. The theories are summarized as follows:

Influence theory: The media tell the politicians what to think.

Agenda-setting theory: The media tell the politicians what to think *about*.

Indexing theory: The politicians tell the media what to *write* about.

And, we propose a fourth characterization:

Detection theory: Politicians and the media struggle to identify, characterize, and prioritize multiple complex streams of information.

We advocate moving away from understanding the media–policymaker relationships outlined in the influence, agenda-setting and indexing theories, which imply direct, mostly linear, causal relationships, to a complex systems framework focusing on information flows, which implies nonlinear, interactive relationships.

In what follows, we first detail the first three theories, indicating the research that supports (and fails to support) each. Then we present the first research that systematically compares the media agenda-setting theory with the indexing hypothesis, showing the overall superiority of the idea of indexing.

Next we show how a misplaced emphasis on influence and direct causal effects has led to a mischaracterization of the problem. Rather than focusing on who influences whom, we suggest examining the role of information processing in the complex interaction between policymakers and the press. Finally we elaborate what we term detection theory, which is based on the theory of information processing in the public policy process detailed in Jones and Baumgartner's (2005) *The Politics of Attention*.

Influence theory: does the mass media directly influence public policy?

Most of the work here depicts the media as private businesses producing profit, increasingly conglomerate and non-competitive. These corporate interests pursue government policies that benefit the bottom line. While this may indirectly affect the flow of information, it is of less interest here than other theories of media influence because it falls more in the domain of interest group politics and can be understood through those models of policymaking. There seems to be little systematic literature on the question of the media using its communication power to influence more global aspects of public policy directly, although this would not rule out agenda-setting effects and other indirect influence paths. Political scientists though are beginning to explore the role of the media as one of several signaling sources, transmitting information about policies to policymakers, aiding them in weighting the importance of issues and issue dimensions (see Carpenter 2002).

However, what anecdotal evidence is presented on the effects of media consolidation does not seem to cut in one direction. On the one hand, surely consolidation has led to the concentration of power in the hands of fewer individuals, and the drive for profits has led to less news content, more hype and episodic frames (Patterson 2000; Iyengar 1991; and Fox *et al.* 2005). On the other hand, new media outlets, including the Internet, and the propensity of news organizations, even in oligopolies, to compete may offset this tendency, but evidence for this cuts both ways as well (Weaver and Drew 2001; Moy *et al.* 2005; and Cornfield *et al.* 2005). As far as the ‘pandering to mass tastes’ complaint, we suspect that has been part of the media mix as long as there has been media.

Does the mass media set the public agenda?

Does the mass media have the power to influence the policymaking agenda? Media models of agenda-setting have focused mostly on the relationship between public opinion and media coverage rather than on the policymaking process itself (McCombs *et al.* 1997), but clearly there is an underlying assumption in these studies that public opinion influences public policy. But, of the many stages of the policy process in which the media surely plays a role, media agenda-setting studies tend to focus on how the media influences electoral vote choice or other forms of civic participation. While these are clearly important components of the policy process, scholarly attention should shift to how the media affects other stages, especially macropolitical agenda-setting (problem prioritization), decision-making and bureaucratic behavior (Carpenter 2002).

Cohen (1963) elegantly asserted the importance of the media in agenda setting when he stated that while the media do not tell voters what to think, the public are told what issues to think about. As a consequence, the media may be able to establish boundaries or parameters of debate on policy issues. In accord with McCombs and Shaw’s 1972 seminal study of media agenda-setting effects,

Weaver and Elliott (1985) find that newspapers do not mirror political reality; rather, they filter political activities to emphasize some issues and to minimize others (*ibid.*: 88).

Moreover, the media plays an instrumental role in raising the salience of issues in the public (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Salience levels of issues in the public arena may determine whether or not issues expand or contract on the government agenda. Issue salience may determine voters' turnout and choice preferences (Becker 1977). The media educates the public with factual information about public affairs and issue attributes (Lippman 1922; Chaffee and Kanihan 1997; Downie and Kaiser 2002). But, perhaps more significantly, the media educates the public about how much importance it should place on one issue versus another (McCombs and Shaw 1977). The media might not change public attitudes, but the cognitive effects of mass communication steer attention, awareness and information (*ibid.*).

Studies of media salience effects should be brought into the arena of information processing, where variation in signals plus new information influences policymaking. This framework focuses on the effects of shifting attention and new information, where some issues and issue dimensions are amplified and others dampened, effectively reweighting issue importance and reorganizing problem prioritization. This tradition comes most directly from Simon (1946), extended by Jones (1994; 2001) and would marry nicely with second-level media agenda-setting studies. Second-level agenda-setting is the transfer of issue attribute salience from the media to the public (Becker and McCombs 1978). Again, most of this research focuses on second-level agenda effects during political campaigns, particularly candidate attributes, and follows a direct, linear path. Second-level agenda studies in an information processing framework would be an ideal move forward to study media influence on the multiple stages of the policy process beyond elections.

Citizens are not alike in their receptivity to the media or in the degree to which the media messages affect their decision making processes. The greater a person's political awareness, the more likely he or she is able to receive a message. However, the greater a person's awareness, the more likely they are able to resist that message (Zaller 1992). Weaver (1977) also finds that the degree to which a person will orient themselves to media messages is in large part influenced by the amount of political information he or she obtains from interpersonal communications (Weaver *et al.* 1992; Wanta and Wu 1992). The more information a person obtains from interpersonal communication, the less that person relies on news for gathering new political information. Interestingly, McCombs (1977) finds that while newspapers may set the public agenda in political campaign environments, the television media do not – the latter is set at times by the public agenda and newspaper agenda (Reese and Danielian 1989; Golan 2006).

In the 1930s and for three subsequent decades, scholarship on media effects was dominated by the minimal consequences school of thought that contended that the press as an institution had little direct influence on the public or policy,

besides reinforcing existing opinions or choices (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944). McCombs and Shaw (1972) challenged the perspective of minimal effects and suggested an alternative model of positive effects of media on behavior – media agenda-setting. More recent scholarship puts Cohen and McCombs and Shaw’s ‘medium consequences,’ the view that the media may not tell people what to think, but can tell people what to think *about*, into some doubt. Entman (1989) argues that not only do political messages transmitted by the media direct audience attention and awareness, but these messages also affect what people *think* (*ibid.*: 347; italics added) – not just what they think about. In the same way, Funkhouser and Shaw (1990) warn that because the media do not mirror political reality, audiences are exposed to synthetic experiences, which are used in the construction of social reality – a synthetic reality. The authors contend that this process changes public perception of political issues and thus impacts the public agenda.

There is now no dearth of findings in the literature of media agenda-setting confirming McCombs and Shaw’s contention that there is a strong relationship between the press and the political world. Many studies lend support for first- and second-level agenda-setting effects, that the media influences behavior by transferring issue and issue attribute salience to the public respectively, more support being found for traditional types of media (newspaper and radio) than new media (television and the Internet). Those following the seminal study of 1972 have typically employed correlational analyses to establish a linear relationship between the media and behavior, usually focusing on elections, which is a small, albeit important, part of the policy process. New research should move beyond this template to incorporate the information processing framework, acknowledging that the media is but one of many sources of information on political issues and attributes in the complex environment in which the press and policymakers make decisions.

Who sets the media agenda? Elite source indexing

The subject of media agenda-setting studies is currently in its fourth stage, focusing on questions of who sets the press agenda (Gandy 1982; Turk 1985, 1986; Roberts and McCombs 1994). In this section, we focus on comparing two theories of influence, indexing and media-agenda setting. While media agenda-setting scholars have spent much research capital on intermedia agenda relationships, which asks questions of which type of media is the dominate agenda setter among the rest, others give attention to the impact of external sources on the media agenda (Gans 1979; Sigal 1973). There are many studies that provide support for media influence on policy agenda-setting (Valenzuela and McCombs forthcoming), but here again evidence is contradictory. Many of these studies analyze press–state relations with one or a few political issues over a discrete time-frame. But who leads whom over time and across issues? Here, we offer a systematic study of press–state relations on many issues (19 in all) over a long period of time, approximately five decades.

Who or what sets the news media agenda? Is it a question of *who* controls the media, or rather, *what* controls the media? Government officials are preferred as sources because they have power (Gans 1979), they lend legitimacy to news stories (Sigal 1973) and because the economy of information encourages journalists to establish relationships with elite sources (Bennett 1990). These relationships are symbiotic in that all parties benefit. Government officials also 'go public' through the media in order to garner support for policies, to explain political actions, and to capitalize on 'free' publicity (Kernell 1997; Sigal 1973) – all actions that also fall in line with democratic accountability through increased transparency. News organizations benefit as well, for their predilections for conflict and economy of information are satisfied with such an arrangement.

In contradistinction to media agenda-setting models, Lance Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis asserts that official debate sets the parameters of media debate (Althaus *et al.* 1996: 408). As a consequence, official debate also sets the parameters of much public debate. Bennett (1990) finds that mass media news professionals overwhelmingly use government elites as official sources and they tend to index news to the range of official debate. The major driver of indexing is elite conflict. When disagreements between factions of political elites emerge, media issue coverage increases. The decline of issue coverage does not follow the resolution of a problem, or as an issue disappears from the formal agenda, but rather when elites stop discussing it. Coverage declines in the absence of internal institutional opposition.

Althaus *et al.* (1996; 2003) test the indexing hypothesis and find, contrary to Bennett's findings, that domestic elites are not the only or majority of official sources in news stories. They conclude that journalists sometimes abandon indexing for balanced coverage by including foreign sources as opposition voices. Similarly, Regina Lawrence (1996) tests the indexing hypothesis on news coverage of two 'dramatic events' – incidences of police brutality in Los Angeles. She finds many non-official viewpoints in news coverage and attributes them to a topic – police brutality – that officials would rather keep out of public discourse.

Zaller and Chiu (1996) confirm the indexing hypothesis, but cite subtle variations in journalists' propensity to index. Journalists' propensity to index varies depending on ideological context, stage of conflict, and prior success of existing policies. Finally, Mermin (1999) visits the indexing hypothesis and finds that news coverage of foreign affairs follows the spectrum of official debate. Furthermore, Mermin finds that the media marginalize non-official voices when there appears to be official consensus on a policy topic.

Indexing studies find that government elites exert a great deal of control in the timing and focus of debate and policy alternatives the media represent in news stories and that elites moreover are able to marginalize opposition viewpoints. In many of the aforementioned studies, researchers test the indexing hypothesis on coverage of foreign policy crises (Mermin 1999; Althaus 1996, 2003). Additional tests should include an array of domestic policy issues to determine whether news coverage is largely a portrayal of power struggles

within elite institutions (which is, after all, newsworthy) rather than critical discussion of societal conditions (Bennett 1996; Iyengar 1991).

Who leads whom? Comparing media agenda-setting with indexing

Tests of the indexing hypothesis are unable to identify causal mechanisms to explain *who is leading whom*. The problem with existing studies is that they never compare systematically the agenda-setting power of the media with the agenda-setting power of government officials. We have devised a scheme that allows for this explicit comparison. This is a natural, and at the same time crucial, extension of the existing literature comparing media agenda-setting and indexing. What cannot be overemphasized is that an overwhelming amount of scholarship to date examining press–state does so in settings that are event-driven (focusing on events or policy failures) rather than issue-driven and more on international crises or local events rather than on and in domestic (national) policy arenas.

Paramount is this move from focusing on events, or discrete periods of time, to issues over time, for events cannot be understood outside of the larger dynamic of issues. Events are not important unless they tell us something about issues (Birkland 2006). Just as elections are just one part of the policy process, events are just one component of the larger dynamic of issues, as they are part of the stream of information flowing to the media and policymakers alike, giving disproportionate weight to some issues.

Does Congress respond to issues raised in the press, or does the press most often take cues from Congress on what policy matters it should cover, as Bennett's indexing hypothesis implies? Media coverage and policymaking activity can be lagged and regressed against one another in order to determine whether the press indexes to Congress or the media by and large sets the congressional agenda. The test is whether the relative concentration of individual policy issues and overall concentration of policy issues in Congress leads to comparable concentrations in media coverage on policy issues. One should expect the media to increase coverage as a reaction to an increase in congressional debate.

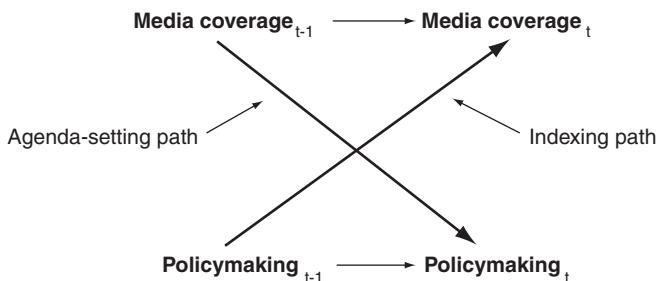


Figure 2.1 A path model of media effects.

The basic model is diagrammed in Figure 2.1. We estimate the extent to which media coverage in one time period influences policymaking activities in a subsequent period; this we term the ‘agenda-setting path.’ Simultaneously, we estimate the extent to which policymaking activities in the first period influence media coverage in the subsequent period; we term this the ‘indexing path.’

Data and measures

As a first cut at the question of indexing versus agenda-setting, we calculated entropy, a measure of the supply of information, and the Herfindahl Index, a measure of issue concentration, across the 19 policy content categories of the Policy Agendas Project (see Policy Agendas Project website www.policyagendas.org; see Jones and Baumgartner 2005 for a full description of the coding system). Entropy and Herfindahl Indices are calculated separately for both media coverage and policymaking using data from the Policy Agendas Project’s sample of the *New York Times Index* and all congressional hearings, 1946–2003, as their respective indicators.

The Policy Agendas Project collects and codes data from multiple archived sources to track over five decades of trends in the United States’ national public policy agenda and policy outcomes. Each dataset is coded according to the same policy content coding system, which consists of 19 major topic codes and over 225 subtopic codes, making the *New York Times* stories and congressional hearings datasets comparable over time. (See Table 2.1 below for a list of the major topic codes).

The Policy Agenda Project’s *New York Times* dataset is a result of a systematic random sample of stories from the *New York Times Index* from 1946 to 2003 with over 44,000 records. The *New York Times Index* dataset contains many stories that have nothing to do with public policy – like sports, deaths, or human interest stories. Fortunately, the dataset includes a filter so that researchers can distinguish between articles pertaining to public policy (or at least mentioning it)

Table 2.1 Policy content coding system 19 major topic codes

1 Macroeconomics	13 Social Welfare
2 Civil rights	14 Community development and housing
3 Health	15 Banking, Finance and Domestic
4 Agriculture	16 Commerce
5 Labor, Immigration and Employment	17 Defense
6 Education	18 Space, Science, Technology and
7 Environment	19 Communications
8 Energy	20 Foreign Trade
10 Transportation	21 International Affairs
12 Law, Crime and Family Issues	Federal Government Operations
	Public Lands and Water Management

Note

Major topics 9 and 11 were collapsed into the other major topics.

from those that do not.¹ Consequently, the *New York Times Index* dataset for this study includes only those articles pertaining to public policy. The *New York Times* study variable was further filtered to include only stories concerning national affairs (as opposed to East Coast regional or New York local affairs), foreign articles with a US angle and stories pertaining to Congress, even if Congress is not specifically mentioned.²

In contrast, the Policy Agendas Project's congressional hearings dataset remains unaltered, as every hearing can be considered in the character of public policy. The hearings dataset, derived from Congressional Information Services' *Abstracts*, contains a summary of every US congressional hearing from 1946 to 2003 with over 80,000 records. Whereas the hearings are coded using the 19 major topics and 225 subtopics, the *New York Times Index* is coded at the major topic level only.³ Consequently, this analysis restricts the congressional hearings to the major topic level as well. This presents an advantage as well as a limitation. Analyzing data at the major topic level clearly limits the researcher's ability to investigate trends on a detailed subtopic level. Specificity is sacrificed for higher inter-coder reliability scores. The inter-coder reliability scores for both datasets stay close to 95 percent since data is restricted to the major topic level.

We employ these datasets to calculate Herfindahl Indices and entropy scores. The Herfindahl Index and entropy are alternative measures of the same concept. Entropy assesses the information supply by calculating dispersion across sources for issue-messages under the assumption that dispersion of messages across sources indicates more information. The Herfindahl Index measures the concentration of attention to policy topics; the more concentration, the less will be the supply of information. The entropy measure is well-suited to capture the tails of dispersion across sources – low-intensity issue-messages – while the Herfindahl Index over-weights concentrated issues.

Economists use the Herfindahl Index as a measure of market concentration and political scientists have adapted it to examine changes in jurisdictional monopolies in congressional committees (Baumgartner *et al.* 2000; Hardin 1998, 2002). The Herfindahl Index measures unit concentration or diffusion within categories by summing the squared proportion of items in each category. Scores can range from nearly zero⁴ to 10,000 (concentration as measured by proportion multiplied by 100 (100²); see Equation 2.1 below). Scores approaching zero indicate near even unit diffusion among several units while scores approaching 10,000 indicate near domination of a category by few units. The Herfindahl Index here is used to measure a single issue's influence on the overall concentration of policymaking activity, and separately, media coverage, per year.

$$HHI = \sum_{i=0}^n (p(x_i) \times 100)^2$$

where:

x_i is an issue

$p(x_i)$ is the proportion of attention to an issue

We also employ entropy, a measure from Shannon's (1948; Shannon and Weaver 1971) communications theory of information entropy. The measure captures the span, concentration and diversity of categorical information and at its heart summarizes the uncertainty of an information environment. Entropy is calculated by summing the multiplication of the share of categorical information by the log of the inverse share of each category (see Equation 2.2 below). Scores approaching zero indicate high levels of category concentration and thus low levels of uncertainty (Jones *et al.* 2005). As entropy increases, it becomes harder to discern among issue categories in the information environment (Sheingate 2006).

$$Entropy = \sum_{i=0}^n p(x_i) \times \log_2 \left(\frac{1}{p(x_i)} \right)$$

where:

x_i is an issue

$p(x_i)$ is the proportion of attention to an issue

Entropy has been applied to many fields (Pierce 1980), and recently to political science by using it to study changes in the complexity and volatility of the political agenda (Talbert and Potoski 2002), committee jurisdiction and issue attention (Baumgartner *et al.* 2000; Sheingate 2006), and the supply of information and the size of government (Jones *et al.* 2005). The entropy measure incorporates the number of issue priority categories and the concentration or dispersion of the issue priorities in the categories. In doing so, annual entropy scores provide one score that captures the number of issues on the public agenda and the equality of their distribution (Talbert and Potoski 2002). The higher the entropy, the greater the variability in the number of issue priority categories and issue priority categorical information, and the more the supply of information.

Findings

Before we proceed to the study of media agenda-setting and indexing, we examine the trace of information supply (entropy) for media coverage (*New York Times Index*) and policymaking (congressional hearings) from 1946–2003 (see Figure 2.2). Peak supply of information for all media coverage occurred in 1973; not inconsequently, the highest proportion of media coverage devoted to public policy matters occurred the following year. Since then, editors at the *New York Times* have imposed a steady and marked decline of policy-relevant material on the paper's coverage, all the while producing an increasingly less diverse news product. In the 1970s, 40–50 percent of coverage was devoted to politics and policy; by the 1990s, this had dropped to around half of the previous level (see Figure 2.2 below).

It is worth noting that the overall size (the number of articles) of the *New York Times* also declined over this time; so there was much more news coverage in the 1970s than there is today. Since the *New York Times* is the flagship news

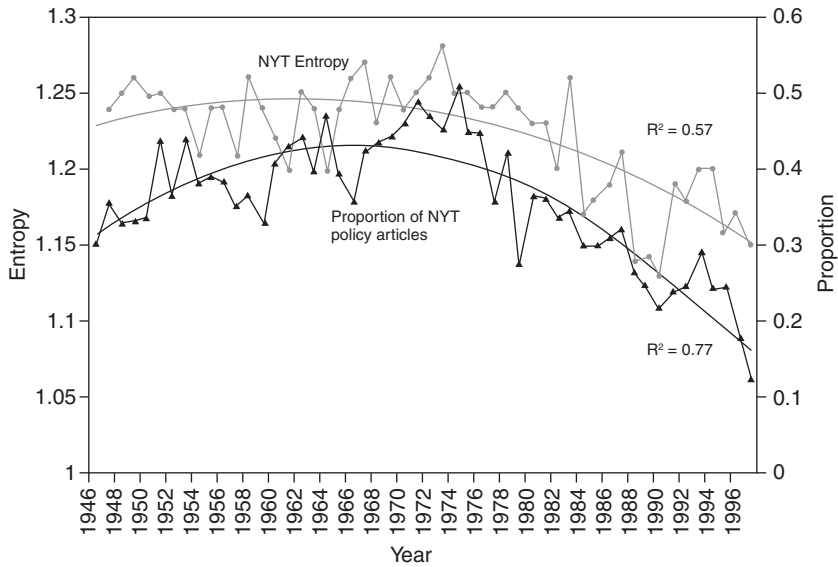


Figure 2.2 The decline of policy relevant information in the *New York Times* (source: calculated from data made available by the policy agendas project (online, available at: www.policyagendas.org)).

organization responsible for setting many others' coverage agendas, we can expect this trend to extend to traditional media coverage in general. We show that media coverage has steadily but surely moved from a strong and diverse discussion of policy and politics to a less diverse format dominated by style, arts, leisure, and sports. There has been a clear and unmistakable and marked decline in diversity and in policy content since the 1970s. The move to 'soft news' has been well-documented in media studies (Patterson 2000).

In the case of Congress, we calculate the supply of information across the committee structure, which basically tells us whether the information in hearings on a particular topic is 'bottled up' in a single committee, or whether it is broadly shared in a competition among committees. The latter is indicative of 'hot' issues, and the supply of information can be expected to increase as competition among sources of information (that is, the committees) increases⁵ (for a full discussion see Jones *et al.* 2005; and Workman *et al.* forthcoming). We are interested here in how the spread of attention in policymaking and media coverage correspond. More importantly, we are comparing the extent to which the 'hot' issues in policymaking are covered by the media (the indexing link) with the extent to which the 'hot' issues are influenced by prior media coverage. For media coverage, we calculate the measures directly across the topics, since we are assessing only one source here.

Is the decline in press coverage displayed in Figure 2.2 simply a media phenomenon or does it affect policymaking? Figure 2.3 presents the supply of

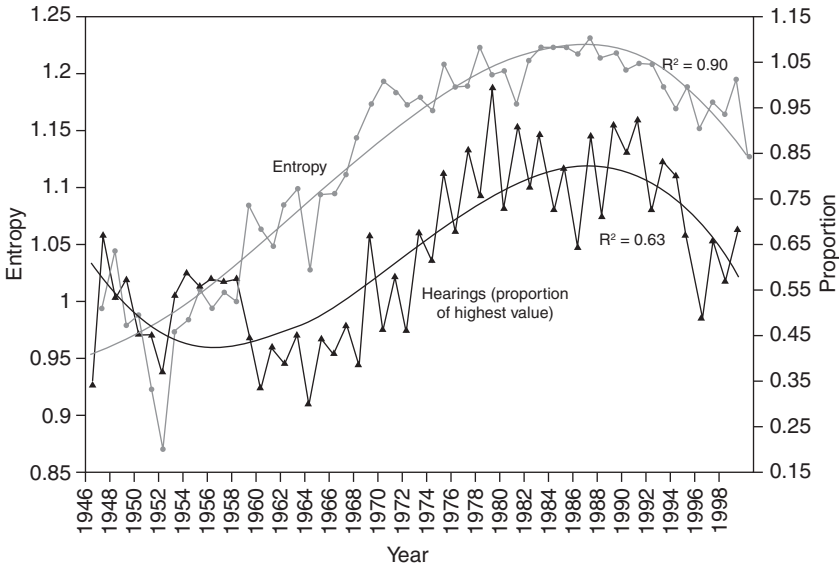


Figure 2.3 Congressional entropy and the number of hearings (source: calculated from data made available by the policy agendas project (online, available at: www.policyagendas.org)).

information for each house of Congress for all 19 major topic categories and committees. As displayed in the figure, the time path of information supply provided to Congress through its committee system traces a roughly similar pattern as media coverage. We also present the total number of hearings held, showing this number as a proportion of its peak value, 2,246 in 1979. Clearly, the capacity to hold hearings has varied substantially over time, which is fully within the control of Congress and its Members. They have both expanded and restricted the energy and resources they devote to the hearings process. As hearings expanded during the 1960s and 1970s, so the supply of information grew; as hearings have declined since 1980 or so, so has the supply of information.

Now we turn to the study of the relationship between these two series: whether indexing or media agenda-setting dominate the complex relationship between the press and policymakers. Figure 2.4 presents the results diagrammatically (presenting the appropriate standardized regression coefficients for the path coefficient estimates), and Table 2.1 presents these results in more standard tabular form, for entropy. We combined information supply scores for the House and Senate (a combined indicator of policymaking); running these measures separately on each legislative chamber did not alter the results. Results were similar for the issue concentration, as we expected.

The findings strongly support the indexing hypothesis. The path from media to policymaking activity is not significant, while the path from policymaking to media is. Moreover, the inertial path, from media coverage at one time to

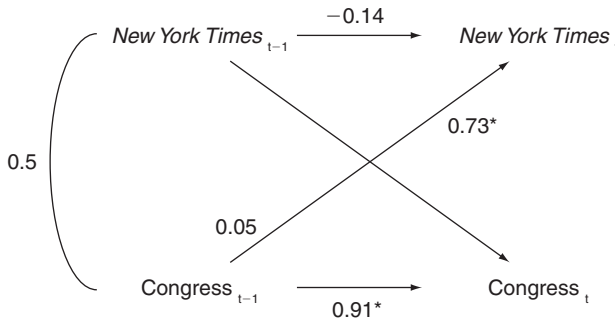


Figure 2.4 Estimates for the overall model (source: calculated from an analysis similar to Table 2.1, using standard regression coefficients for the paths).

Note

Asterisks indicate statistical significance at 0.05.

Table 2.2 Information supply in Congress and the press: OLS regression analysis for Figure 2.4

Models:	<i>Dependent variable: NYT policy entropy</i>	<i>Dependent variable: congressional entropy</i>
Constant	0.954*** (0.143)	-0.002 (0.150)
NYT policy entropy, lag 1	-0.145 (0.143)	0.124 (0.155)
House-Senate entropy, lag 1	0.324*** (0.061)	0.897*** (0.066)
R ²	0.451	0.870
Adj. R ²	0.423	0.863
DW	1.92	2.54
N	41	41

coverage at a second time, is insignificant, but the path from policymaking to media is significant. The ‘hot’ issues in Congress – those characteristic of high information supply (and hence low issue concentration) capture the attention of the media, and appear as stories subsequent to the congressional controversy. These ‘hot’ issues are pretty much similar from one time period to another, as indicated by the inertial path, but enough ‘slippage’ occurs that new issues are able to break through on occasion.

These findings tell us only that dispersion patterns across major issues follow an indexing pattern.⁶ They say nothing about issue-specific effects. Conflict among elites follows the contours of available policymaking venues (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Policymaking venues are arenas for resolving conflict, and congressional committees play a key role in this regard in the US Congress. Issue specialists tend to control issues within key congressional committees, and these committees tend to reach equilibrium on how an issue is defined. Policy solutions follow these issue definitions; so long as issue definitions remain stable, policymaking remains stable.

When, however, new aspects of issues are stressed, new committees generally get involved as legislators try to change control of the issue. This involves conflicts over which committees have jurisdiction over the issue (King 1997; Baumgartner *et al.* 2000; and Sheingate 2006). Elite conflict emerges within the committee structure of Congress. The indexing hypothesis can be extended to inter-institutional factional conflict in a straightforward manner. Where jurisdictional struggle occurs over issue definitions, increased media coverage should result.

Wolfe (2006) estimated the model depicted in Figure 2.1 above on each of the 19 topic areas, using Herfindahl scores as indicators of issue concentration in policymaking and media coverage, from 1946–2003, as an additional and more detailed test of indexing. Results of the separate regression analyses indicated support for the indexing hypothesis in ten of the 19 policy topics. Media coverage was indexed to policymaking in the policy areas of macroeconomics, health, the environment, energy, domestic commerce, defense, science and technology, international trade, international affairs and government operations. Interestingly, of the nine policy topics that do not have statistically significant lagged hearing coefficients, none is explained better by the lagged media variable. There was no support in this comparative analysis on any issue of the media agenda-setting model.

There is most likely not one simple answer behind the question of who leads whom. It may be the case that from issue to issue there is more or less interplay among the media and governing elites – and the public. Different issues may have different agenda-setting dynamics and will thus have different agenda-setting results. Soroka (2002) has shown in Canada that policymakers lead on issues, such as national debt and deficit, which the public do not experience directly, but the media do have an influence on more salient issues. Nevertheless, in a direct comparison between media agenda-setting and indexing, the indexing hypothesis performed far better.

Detection theory

A major problem with existing models of mass media effects on public policy is that they are rooted in an influence framework. The question of who has power is certainly not irrelevant, but it has led to overly simplistic models of the interaction between government officials and the media. We now turn to developing a model emphasizing information-processing rather than influence. In detection theory, actors – politicians, policy entrepreneurs, interest groups, and the media – are intertwined in a complex set of interactions focusing on the recognition and interpretation of multiple complex and interacting information signals. While the actors involved all have preferences and goals, the focus of detection theory is the processing of information.

A key aspect of an information processing approach to the public policy process is the role of attention allocation (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Attention is a scarce good, can be allocated only in pieces rather than continuously,

and is a necessary condition for policy change. As a scarce resource, actors in politics struggle to process, understand and manage it. Information processing characterizes how information from the environment is detected, organized and prioritized. To understand information dynamics is to understand policy dynamics (Workman *et al.* forthcoming).

The genesis of our approach may be found in the work of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) on policy punctuations. In their examination of the role of the media in the policy process, they wrote that ‘media attention sometimes precedes and sometimes follows changes in attention by government agencies . . . each can affect the other, reinforcing the pattern of positive feedback and punctuated equilibrium’ (*ibid.*: 125) (see also Baumgartner, Jones, and Leech 1996).

Situations alone, dire as we may view them, do not automatically generate public policy responses. Information about situations must come from somewhere, and that information must be interpreted in terms that are relevant to government action. Even more importantly, there are many situations, and many that could be improved by appropriate governmental action, but all cannot be addressed at once. They must be prioritized. Indeed, an information processing approach to the study of policy processes focuses on how a political system collects, assembles, interprets, and prioritizes signals from the environment (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 7).

The media is intimately involved in this process, but it is a mistake to think of its role in direct, causal terms. Causation implies influence; influence implies intentionality. Clearly, political leaders intend to influence the media, but it is less clear that the media intends to influence politics, once we get beyond the issue of corporate self-interest. It is even less clear that any one set of actors – be they from the media or the political elites, or from business or from ‘the public’ – in any sense ‘controls’ policymaking.

Element one: information matters

Why does the indexing hypothesis fare so well in our tests described above? It is because what policymakers do is *news*. The media covers the news, but it may be surprising how faithfully media concentration on issues follows congressional concentration on issues. There is a missing variable in our system, however, and it potentially affects the indexing path more than the agenda-setting path. Information about policy-relevant matters is not confined to media–policymaker interactions. Information is at least partially exogenous to this system, and it is therefore possible that both the media and policymakers are responding to this partially exogenous information stream. Indeed, Behr and Iyengar (1985) find that real world conditions and events affect both the selection of news stories for television broadcast and public perception of the importance of issues.

Behr and Iyengar do not, however, examine the relative effects of real world events and media on policymaking. Jones and Baumgartner (2005: chapter 8) examine policy responses to objective conditions in three policy areas: economics, crime, and social welfare. In the first two, the facts clearly played a role

(we have more to say about crime control policy below). On the other hand, social welfare policy was most responsive to political factors; objective conditions did not play a role.

Scholars have produced relatively few studies incorporating objective conditions, public policy activity, and media coverage in a single framework, but one stands out. In a study of US response to climate change using a vector autoregression framework, Liu *et al.* (2006) report that both media and congressional attention responded to climate changes (measured by CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere). Controlling for objective conditions (CO₂ concentrations), there were no direct effects from the media to Congress or from Congress to the media. Scientific publications on the matter influenced congressional attention but not the media. Figure 2.5 summarizes the basic findings.

In at least this policy arena, the evidence supports an information processing model in which the objective conditions of climate change affect media coverage of the situation, and independently influence congressional attention. Accumulating scientific evidence also independently influences policymaking attention.

What if a major event happens, such as an urban riot? Is it not to be expected that both the media and policymakers respond, at least by allocating attention? Is it not also to be expected that the media would subsequently devote attention to policymakers? Even absent a dramatic event, circumstances can change such that the media devotes attention to them, as do policymakers. This certainly seems to be true of climate change.

Element two: the media can help set a tone for subsequent policy action

For whatever reasons, the media can become preoccupied with an arena that may be ripe for policy action. By repeated muckraking and highlighting particular aspects of the information stream, the media may help to set the tone for subsequent policy action. Changes in tone surrounding an issue can presage future policy change, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) showed in the cases of nuclear power, pesticide regulation, and smoking policy.

This ‘tonal’ component may be picking up changes in the broader political ‘mood’ (Kingdon 1984), or it may have a causal effect on that mood. It may not

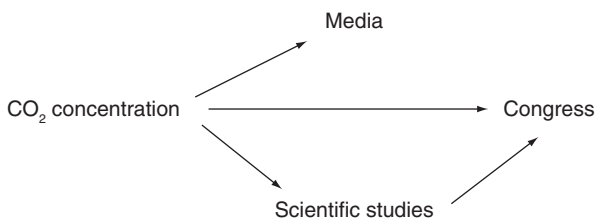


Figure 2.5 Objective conditions and media and Congressional attention (source: drawn from results presented in Liu *et al.* (2006)).

penetrate the attention of the typical member of the mass public, but it may help to mobilize parts of the attentive public. In some cases, media coverage can be associated with heightened partisan divisions. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) argued that US urban policy over time transformed from a new issue demanding fresh solutions in the 1940s and 1950s to a standard partisan one by the 1970s.

Sapotichne (2006) reproduced this basic work on US urban policy using updated Policy Agendas Project data, but his models were simpler. Media and Congress devoted attention to cities simultaneously. A burst of attention occurred in the 1960s for both policymaking and media coverage. But Sapotichne added an important new finding concerning the connection between media coverage and partisanship. He showed that during periods of low attention (1946–1962), the connection between media and Congress were similar for Democratic presidents and Republican presidents, but after the burst, media and congressional activity deviated. Media attention was much more closely associated with congressional policy attention for Democratic presidents than for Republican ones.

Peter John (2006), in a study of budgets for urban affairs in the United Kingdom between 1966 and 2003, finds that a combination of prior media coverage in *The Times* on inner city matters and urban riots combined to affect the central government's allocations for urban matters. This finding is in keeping with those of Baumgartner and Jones (1993). Prior media attention can sensitize the political system to new events in a manner that can result in major policy changes. John finds that media coverage of urban riots is not implicated causally; only more generalized inner city coverage is implicated. It is likely that policymakers and the media are reacting simultaneously to the events, but that prior media attention to the more general topic of inner city matters has set the tone for subsequent policy action.

In the path approach to the study of media agenda-setting versus indexing, we used a one-year lag, which seems long. On the other hand, if media coverage contributes to a tonal environment for policymaking, this actually can be too short. Figure 2.6 is a graph of US policymaking activity and media coverage on macroeconomic issues, again from the Policy Agendas Project. There are three periods of increases in policymaking interest in economics, peaking in 1982, 1995, and 2003. In the first period, it seems as if the media leads congressional interest, but in a tonal fashion, with large lags. In the second period, hearings again lead, but with a one-year lag, but in the third and final period, the media leads, again with about a one-year lag. This variability is consistent with the complex systems information processing framework.

It is possible that in each of these three periods a different causal relationship characterized the relationship between the media and policymakers: a media tonal effect, an indexing effect, and a media agenda-setting effect. This, however, is not the whole story here. Introducing objective conditions (the unemployment rate), and public opinion (the proportion of the public citing economics as the most important problem facing the nation in Gallup polls), Jones and Baumgartner (2005: chapter 8) developed a model in which economic

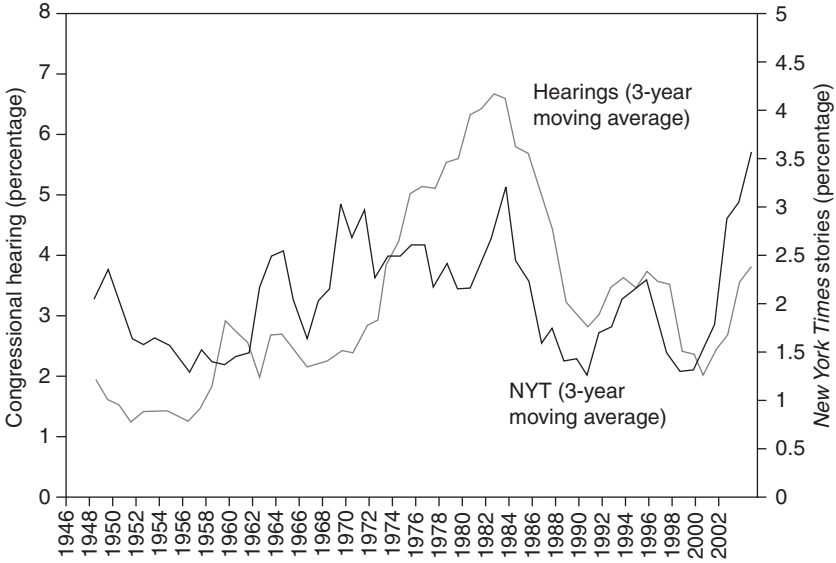


Figure 2.6 Congressional hearings and *New York Times* coverage, macroeconomic issues.

conditions led to public opinion which in turn led to policymaking interest. Media attention and concentration was not significant. This does not rule out the observation that causal complexities with temporal sensitivities can characterize the relationship between policymaking and the press, but it does indicate that we ignore the objective conditions that can underlie the process at our peril.

Element three: media attention and policymaking activities can become intertwined in positive feedback systems

In some cases, policymakers are quite happy to work behind the curtains within policy subsystems, with experts and interested parties collaborating to set the course of public policy. But in others, politicians may crave attention, seeking to advertise their political careers or their favored policy solutions – especially when they find themselves under electoral threat or when they want to change policy directions. Shifting a policy issue from a policy subsystem with its limited participation to the broader macropolitical agenda changes how politics is conducted (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). In the modern political system, the role of the media in this shift is critical.

Politicians with policy solutions need to raise the salience of the problem their solution is supposed to solve. Wolfe's study of indexing suggests that in many situations, they are successful in this. Mostly this heightened attention levels off or declines after a period of interest because other problems have bombarded the agenda, simple issue fatigue, or because solutions offered are not convincing

(Downs 1972). However, in some cases a ‘Noah effect’ (Mandelbrot 1997) kicks in. A Noah effect, which is in reference to the biblical great flood, is a large change or punctuation in a state of a system and is far larger than would be expected given the Gaussian or normal distributions social scientists typically employ to model processes (see Jones and Breunig 2007). A Noah effect is analogous to the saying ‘success begets success’ and, applied to the politics of attention, it is when the political system devotes disproportionate attention to an issue (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In such a case, an ‘arms race’ of policy solutions can occur.

In these periods, key variables – objective conditions (the exogenous information stream), media coverage, public opinion, and policymaking attention – come together, which can result in major punctuations in policy. If this occurs, it matters little whether the media leads the policy agenda or follows it by indexing the debate. When the diverse policymaking agenda collapses on a single topic, and for a time the political system becomes preoccupied with that topic, media coverage (which also tends to collapse on the single topic across the various media channels) is essential to the process.

There is a general understanding among political scientists that issue strategies involve both dominance and dispersion (Riker 1987). Dominance means countering your opponent’s policy proposal with criticism of it while simultaneously offering your own solution. Dispersion is an attempt to divert attention to other issues where your party is more favorably viewed. But it is less recognized that in cases in which positive feedback systems act to amplify attention to a single topic, the strategy of dispersion will probably not be available. One must counterattack. Consider John Kerry, the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in 2004: Try as he might to change the debate to domestic policy, where the Democratic Party held large advantages on almost all issues, he got front-page press coverage when he attacked President Bush on Iraq.

When issues ‘heat up’ and become the focus of great collective attention, the rules are different. As a consequence, the policymaking system becomes less sensitive to some variables, such as expert testimony, interest group positions, and money. It becomes more sensitive to others. Most importantly, public opinion becomes a more critical component of the process. Public opinion may be mobilized via public debate or exogenously activated through changing objective conditions and amplified by press coverage, or issue entrepreneurs can stimulate public concern. Whatever the cause of increased public concern, the results are to amplify the effect of opinion on the policymaking process.

The evidence supporting this proposition is beginning to accumulate. Mark Smith (2000) shows that when business is most unified on issues, it can suffer major setbacks, precisely because business is most unified when public opinion is mobilized on the other side. Business power is most effective in a quiescent environment. In an important quantitative study, Mortensen (2006) offers persuasive evidence that public opinion is more critical when there is more debate on an issue in the Danish Parliament. In a qualitative study, Bermejo (2007) indicates that public opinion becomes more important on immigration debates when media coverage is high.

When attention becomes concentrated, big changes can occur. An exceptionally clear example of positive feedback effects occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States in crime policy, as illustrated in Figures 2.7 and 2.8. Figure 2.7 shows the rapid rise in the violent crime rate (as assessed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and the associated rise in media coverage (as assessed by the Policy Agendas Project's sample of *New York Times* stories).

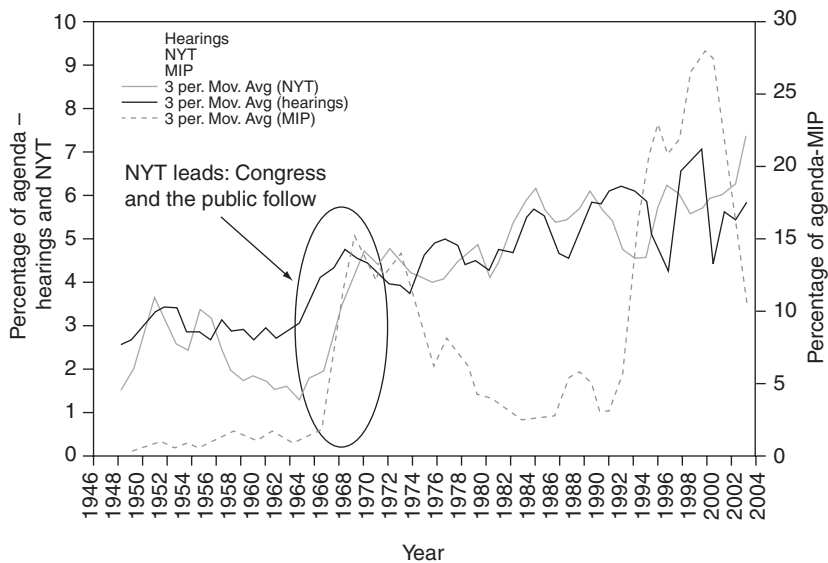
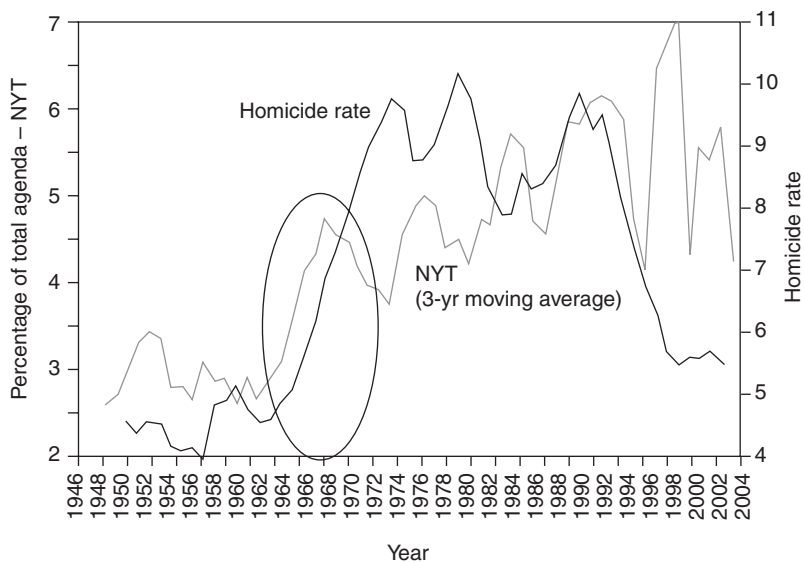


Figure 2.7 The crime policy ratchet.

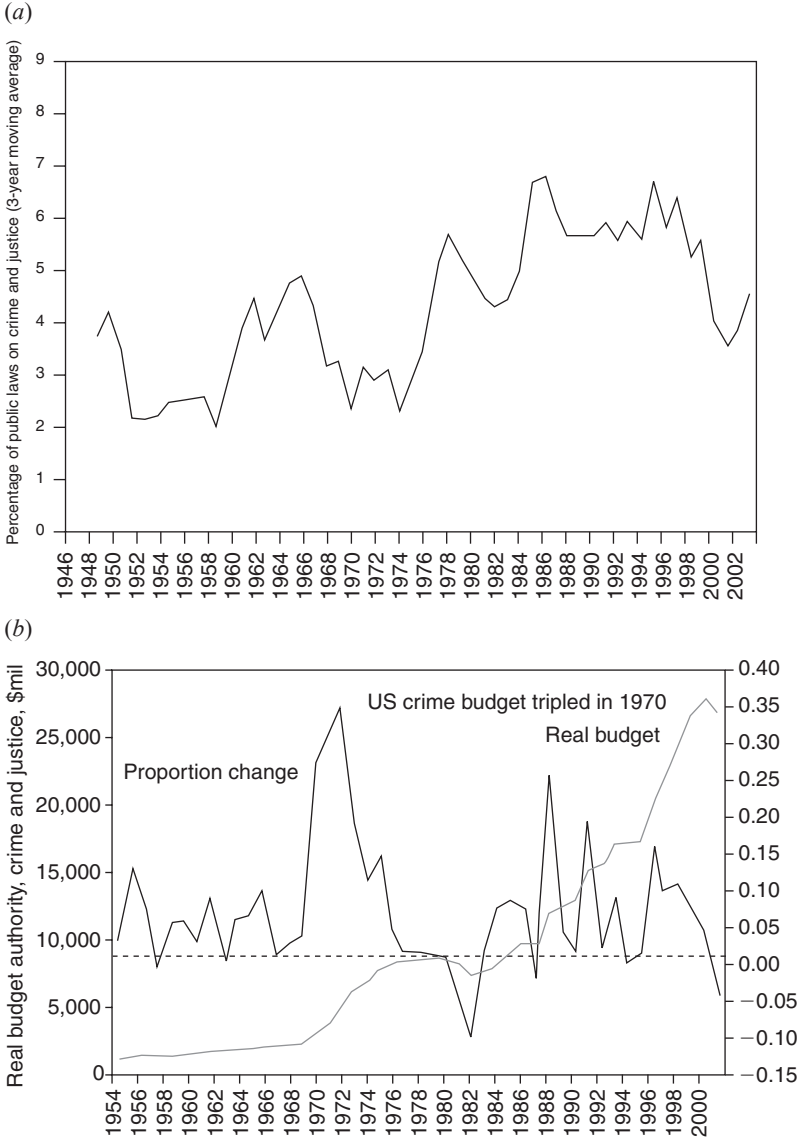


Figure 2.8 Crime and justice, (a) laws passed; (b) real budget authority, 1954–2000.

Note that the rise in *New York Times* coverage preceded by a year or so the rise in the crime rate (no causal relationship claimed!).⁷ Note that when the crime rate declined, the *New York Times* coverage did not. By 2000 the violent crime rate was about the same as it had been in 1968, just prior to the rapid rise, but the *New York Times*' coverage of crime was actually higher in 2000 than it had been at the peak of the violent crime wave in the early 1980s.

Figure 2.8 shows how the various potentially causal variables ('streams' in Kingdon's terminology) came into phase in the late 1960s. Between 1968 and 1970, the violent crime rate, media coverage, the percentage of the public who thought that crime was the most important problem facing the nation, and congressional hearings all rose rapidly. Figure 2.8 shows the rise of policy responses to the crime ratchet. The number of laws passed to address the problem increased; by the late 1970s around 5 percent of all lawmaking activity in a typical year involved crime and justice (the earlier rise in the mid-1960s involved mostly juvenile justice issues). Budgetary commitments followed lawmaking; in 1970 alone the federal budget for crime and justice tripled.

One interesting facet of the late 1960s crime ratchet is that when the crime rate declined, nothing else associated with crime policy (except public concern) followed suit. Media attention, congressional hearings, lawmaking, and budgetary commitments either continued along at the higher level or increased. In the case of budgets, the increase leveled off in the 1970s and early 1980s, but then increased spectacularly – in the absence of any rise in the violent crime rate. At this time a kind of policy hysteria broke out in Washington over the allegations of a 'crack cocaine' epidemic. A 'bidding war' for which party was tougher on criminals yielded major legislation setting new incarceration standards. Yet neither violent nor property crimes rose during the period (the homicide rate did increase somewhat, but mostly after the laws were passed). The result was draconian sentencing guidelines for drug sales and use that filled federal prisons with drug sellers and generated a virtual crime policy-prison industrial complex. States obliged by engaging in their own policy hysteria. The result was a classic self-sustaining policy subsystem with enormous spending commitments from national, state, and local governments.

This illustrates an important point. Information streams, we claimed earlier, are 'partially exogenous.' Certainly the big policy build-up in crime control in the late 1960s was associated with an increase in crime, but the secondary build-up in the 1980s was not. A final increase in the Clinton years was associated with a distinct change in crime policy – it was directed more at getting police on the street than locking up criminals. In the case of the crime policy hysteria of the 1980s, there is little evidence that increases in crime drove the policy punctuation; at a minimum the policy response was vastly disproportional to the indicators of the problem. Media coverage fed into the frenzy (note the increased coverage in the period); it was a participant but not a causal influence (Wolfe's study shows no relationship between policymaking and media coverage or between coverage and hearings, suggesting a simultaneous increase).

Concluding comments

In this chapter we have offered some thoughts about the role of the media in the policymaking process. First we have examined in some detail the primary prevailing models of press–state relations, particularly focusing on a direct comparative test of US congressional policymaking attention and media coverage of

major issues. In the simple models we test (linearly, with one-year lags), the indexing hypothesis is clearly superior.

Indexing, however, is not the end of the story. Our notion of the role of the media in the policymaking process changes when we incorporate elements of an information-processing approach to press–state dynamics. It is likely that for many issues, both the press and policymakers are responding to changes in indexes of objective conditions. Responses of either or both may be disproportionate – a long period of under-reaction with bursts of over-reaction (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This means that the relationship between the press and policymakers is characterized by non-linearities and positive feedback effects, such as tonal, context-setting effects and policy outbursts. Most information signals are not processed in straightforward, proportionate processes. Neither is the politics–media interaction generated exogenously, with no reference to objective conditions.

Indeed, Strünck (see Strünck in this volume) shows that different mobilization dynamics in different situations can be characterized by indexing, agenda-setting, or by detection. His study of pension reforms in Britain, Germany, and the United States indicates that each may be characterized by different press–policy relations, depending on local dynamics.

In some respects, it does not matter whether the media acts as agenda-setters, as indexers, or as information detectors. Once a positive feedback reaction sets in, the rule of policy outcomes become different, large changes are more probable, and public opinion becomes more important. In the information processing framework, we suggest that information about the importance and salience of issues are transmitted as signals, which can be amplified or attenuated by the interaction of media coverage and public opinion in a complex environment with multiple streams of information. The media can reweight the strength of these signals. The stronger the signal, the clearer and more urgent the message, the more likely government will respond, and the larger the response.

While this implies that our notions of causation, and hence influence, must become more sensitive to context, it by no means implies we need to give up on the development of theory. It does mean that these theories will be increasingly related to the ‘complex systems’ perspective common in the natural sciences today.

Notes

- 1 This variable – mentions US government official, government agency, government action or discussion of action the government has taken (or should take), etc.; includes any level of US government, including state and local; does not include foreign governments – is meant to distinguish between those articles mentioning anything about government activities or government officials and those that do not.
- 2 This variable – also includes congressional advisory bodies, Library of Congress, other legislative branch activities of the federal government; also includes discussion of legislative debates where they clearly took place in Congress, even if Congress is not specifically mentioned; does not include discussion of previously passed legislation unless Congress is specifically mentioned – is meant to distinguish between those articles

- mentioning the Congress, the House or Senate, Members of Congress, staff members, or the legislative process..
- 3 For an extended discussion of coding *New York Times* stories at the major topic level only, see Baumgartner *et al.* (1998).
 - 4 This study can have zero scores for issue/year.
 - 5 This assumes the sources are independent. See Bendor 1985 and Landau 1969.
 - 6 One problem with this estimate is the long lag time (one year) involved. We really don't have any other option given the low number of hearings and stories across topics. In any case, the findings are strong given this long lag. The proper interpretation is that when there is a preoccupation with an issue, it tends to sustain itself across time, in the media and in Congress. This does not mean there are not shorter-term effects; it is just that we cannot pinpoint them with our design here. Given this type of issue dynamics, the media indexes issue controversy in Congress, and does not seem to set the agenda for Congress.
 - 7 This could be due to an earlier rise in crime in the New York City region, or sensitivity on the part of editors at the paper to early warning signs of the rise, or for other reasons.

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3 Do the media shape parties' agenda preferences?

An empirical study of party manifestos in Belgium (1987–2003)

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Whether mass media affects public policy and political decision making still is an unanswered question. One of the reasons we do not have a conclusive answer yet is that *the media's* impact on *the public policy* simply is too broad a question to be answered. It can only be dealt with when split up into small and theoretically and empirically manageable subquestions: which media, which politics, and what impact? One of the most straightforward ways of defining media power is to consider the media's role in setting the political agenda, that is, the array of topics that receive attention in a given political system. But even in this distinct sub-domain, the available studies contradict each other: some claim the media do matter for the political agenda, others disagree and argue that the media is entirely tangential to the agenda-setting process (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). The dependent variable – the political agenda affected by the media – has, in most studies, been the official and institutional agendas of parliament, government or the president. Studies sought to find out whether, for example, oral questions and interpellations in parliament (Soroka 2002a; Walgrave *et al.* 2007); governmental decisions (Walgrave *et al.* 2007); or presidential statements (Bartels 1996; Edwards and Wood 1999; Gilberg *et al.* 1980) are affected by preceding media coverage. The central argument this paper makes is that focusing on these institutional political agendas is only half of the story. Media might on the one hand directly affect the political priorities of democracy's primary *institutions* such as parliament or government. Yet, media coverage might on the other hand also affect the agenda of democracy's primary *actors* which are in most democracies political parties. The aim of this paper is to *scrutinize whether political parties' agenda preferences are affected by preceding media coverage.*

In many democracies, parties' issue priorities affect actual public policies. Parties make pledges in their manifestos and when they are elected in office they tend to carry out those pledges. Klingemann and his colleagues (1994) demonstrated, based on longitudinal evidence covering 40 years and ten democracies, that party manifestos matter for policy making. Parties keep their manifesto promises: when parties devote attention to a certain issue in their manifesto, chances are high that government spending on policies related to that issue will go up in the following legislature. Others have shown, in single country studies, that not only budgeting but also legislation is affected by electoral program

promises (Budge and Bara 2001; Stimson *et al.* 1995; Walgrave *et al.* 2006). Our point is that party manifestos matter; they affect the political agenda and steer policy attention towards certain issues and away from other issues. Party manifestos are good ‘predictions’ of subsequent public policy.

Consequently, media coverage may not only directly affect the priorities of democracy’s main institutions – the legislative and executive branch of government – but may also indirectly, *via* political parties, matter for political agenda-setting. The mass media set the agenda of the political parties, the political parties in turn set the policy agenda. Hence, examining whether media coverage affects party programs is a useful, albeit indirect, way to tackle whether mass media affect political decision making and public policy. However, we note that party manifestos cannot be equated with actual public policy. At the heart of this book lays the distinction between media’s impact on the policy debate on the one hand and on policy institutions on the other hand. Party manifestos sit somewhere in between: they are not pure discourse as they encapsulate the main political actors’ official policy pledges; they are not real political institutions that can issue binding decisions either.

This chapter considers the case of Belgium, a small consociational democracy. Belgium is the prime example of a partitocracy dominated by political parties (de Winter *et al.* 1996; de Winter and Dumont 2003). Party manifestos, hence, are important policy documents in Belgium. Belgian parties are the main players in the polity – issue entrepreneurs and veto players at the same time – determining government policy. If we effectively find the media to impact party programs in Belgium this would almost certainly mean that the media indirectly determine public policy. Yet, Belgium also is a tough case. Parties are closed mass organizations exclusively associated with a host of befriended social organizations in a system called ‘pillarization’ or segmented pluralism (Lorwin 1971). Parties do not have too much leeway to react freely on media cues and to change their issue priority as they are closely connected to organizations who try to influence their priorities. In the period under study, though, the pillars were gradually disintegrating and consequently we expect the grip of organizations on their befriended party programs to have diminished.

In this chapter, first, we review the existing evidence about how party programs come about and we formulate five explorative hypotheses. Next, we present our evidence: party programs covering five national elections in Belgium between 1987 and 2003. Then, we turn to our results and empirically assess whether the media effectively affect parties’ priorities. We conclude with summarizing our results and sketching avenues for further research.

What affects party program priorities?

Party manifestos have received extensive scholarly attention. Doubtless, the most important stream of research has been produced by the Manifesto Research Group (MRG) who has systematically focused on party manifestos in 25 democracies for more than half a decade (Budge *et al.* 2001). MRG scholars have

undertaken ample research on the left–right dimension in party programs, on the link between programs and electors, on the policy consequences of party programs, on policy equilibria, on government composition, on the polarization of party systems etc. (Budge and Bara 2001). Remarkably, the primary question – where party programs come from in the first place – has been largely neglected. The origins of party manifestos did not receive a lot of scholarly attention. We know relatively little about where party manifestos come from, how they are drafted and, especially, how and why party programs change over time (Rohr-schneider 2002). This implies that we do have access to ready hypotheses about to what extent and under which circumstances party manifestos are affected by preceding media coverage.

Our research question on the media’s impact on party manifestos can be reframed in more general terms of party program *change* (see also: Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). Only if party programs change can they be determined by media coverage. As circumstances change – new demands, new issues, new popular preferences, and new challenges turn up – party manifestos are expected to follow and to change too. These new demands, issues, and preferences are partially conveyed to parties via the media. Electoral competition should lead to constant adaptation of parties’ preferences, as Downs (1957) has argued. The maximum of votes lies in the middle of the ideological spectrum, around the median voter. Parties try to maximize votes by trying to get as close as possible to the median voter. Other scholars maintained that parties only change their manifesto when they see elections as competitive and they need extra votes to win. If winning or losing is perceived as being sure, they do not need to win votes and, thus, will not adapt their programmatic preferences (Robertson 1976). Budge, in contrast, argued that parties have no, or only imperfect, information about whether they will win or lose the election, or about the median voter’s position, and thus they move little or incrementally because they do not want to risk losing the votes they have (Budge 1994). Hence, Budge, in contrast to Downs, expects no adaptation but hardly changeable and incremental party manifestos.

Empirical research tends to confirm Budge’s argument: party preferences are quite stable. Parties’ programmatic left–right positions, for example, do change but big changes are rather uncommon (Budge and Bara 2001; Budge and Klingemann 2001; Volkens and Klingemann 2002). Parties do not change opinion all the time and they do not haphazardly jump from one issue to another; they hardly leapfrog each other. Budge and Bara found, regarding some compound measures of party position, in the 18 countries under study between 1945 and 1998, that party positions remained remarkably stable ‘which may tell one something about the rigidity of party ideology and their lack of responsiveness either to external problems or electoral concerns’ (Budge and Bara 2001: 53). If parties do not adapt their programs and hardly change, the media’s impact on the party manifestos, obviously, cannot be large. But sometimes parties *do* change their program, sometimes even dramatically (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). In those instances, does media coverage then play a role?

Media coverage probably plays a role because parties consider the media to reflect the issue priorities of the public. Parties may not react on media coverage per se but to their perception of public opinion as reflected to media coverage; this 'proxy effect' is a well-known mechanism in the political agenda-setting literature (Cook *et al.* 1983; Kennamer 1992; Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). So, the general argument goes as follows: parties adapt their party program to gain votes; via this adaptation they try to get as close as possible to the median voter; they find out about the position of the median voter via mass media coverage. Hence: the more media cover a certain issue the more parties will consider this issue as being an important issue for the public at large and, consequently, the more attention they will devote to that issue in their party program. This very general hypothesis must, of course, be qualified and specified. We expect not all parties to react to media coverage to the same extent.

The only study we found that systematically examined the media's impact on the content of the party manifestos and the government agreement is a study by Rihoux *et al.* (2005). They found that, in Belgium in the 1990s, 14 percent of the issue saliency variation in party programs could be attributed to preceding media coverage (Rihoux *et al.* 2005: 137–139). Their study also established interesting differences between parties. The Christian-Democrat center parties' programs were more affected by the preceding media coverage than the manifestos of the socialist and ecologist parties. Also, they found differences between the two elections they examined with more impact of the media on the 1995 manifestos than on the 1999 manifestos.

What tentative hypotheses can we put forward? Janda and colleagues (1995) argue that one of the main drivers of programmatic renewal is electoral success or failure. One can expect that parties that lost the previous elections tend to change their program more dramatically than parties that won the previous electoral competition. Electoral loss often severely shakes parties: party leaders resign, parties reorganize their structures, and the party reconsiders its party manifesto. This is precisely what Janda *et al.* (1995) found in their analysis of party manifesto change in Britain, Germany and the United States. Looking for cues about what to change in their failing program, parties may look at media coverage to see what the public cares about and change their issue emphases accordingly. *Manifestos of parties that lost the previous elections are more affected by media coverage than parties that won the previous elections* (H1).

Klingemann and colleagues contend that opposition parties more than government parties have strong reasons to draft innovative and alternative programs. As they have only their program to attract attention and not their deeds, manifestos of opposition parties tend to be more changeable than government parties' manifestos trying to seek maximization of votes (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). Moreover, incumbents run the risk of being confronted afterwards with their pledges while opposition parties cannot be held accountable for the fact that their program has not been carried out. To be responsive, opposition parties more than government parties draw on media coverage to nurture their program. Research has shown, similarly, that opposition MPs' parliamentary action is more affected

by media coverage than government MPs' initiatives (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2009; Walgrave *et al.* 2007). The second hypothesis, thus, states that *opposition parties' issue priorities as reflected in their manifesto are more affected by mass media coverage than government parties' programs* (H2).

Apart from their government or opposition position, parties' ideological position may play a role too. Centre parties' ideological positions are less outspoken; they are positioned less clearly on the deep cleavages dividing societies than more extreme parties. Often, they switch government partners and alternate left-wing with right-wing government partners. Their ideological maneuvering space is probably more extended than parties positioned at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (see Rihoux *et al.* 2005). This allows centre parties to adapt more easily and to follow media cues more closely (Klingemann *et al.* 1994). *Parties having a central ideological position are more affected by media coverage when drafting their program than ideologically extreme parties* (H3).

The agenda-setting literature established that there are quite some differences across issues in the way political actors react on coverage. Whether issues are 'prominent', 'sensational' or 'governmental' makes a difference, as Soroka (2002b) has shown. Law and order issues and environmental issues are most typically 'sensational' and we expect the media to affect the party programs more when it comes to these issues than to political and social issues that are 'prominent' or even 'governmental'. Hence, we hypothesize that issues matter and that the agenda-setting impact of the media will differ. *For some issues mass media coverage affects the party manifestos more than for other issues* (H4).

Finally, the political agenda-setting literature states that political actors tend to react quickly on media attention. As the issue attention cycle from both public and media tends to be short (Downs 1972) it is not in political actors' interest to wait before reacting. They react immediately or they do not react at all (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006). On the one hand, as parties want to display their responsiveness, we expect party manifestos to obey these same mechanisms of immediacy. On the other hand, party manifestos are sometimes well-wrought pieces of work designed to have some staying power; they contain a party's plans for the whole next legislature and this is not reconcilable with an immediate and symbolic reaction on media cues. A crucial question of course is *when* precisely parties draft their program. Drafting the program might be a sustained process stretching out for months or it may be a clenched exercise taking just a few weeks. This is important as it determines the media coverage to take into account. The question thus remains: Do parties incorporate in their party manifesto media coverage during a longer period relying on their long-term memory or do they just attend to the short time period when they are actually drafting their program? As we have no clear clue here, our hypothesis can only be general. *Parties' electoral manifestos are differentially affected by long-term and short-term media coverage* (H5).

Our aim is to test media's independent impact on party programs. Since party programs, like many political documents or activities, are often stable and characterized by inertia and path dependency, we will control for parties' own

programmatic past. Consequently, we will not only assess whether media coverage merely affects the attention for issues in the manifestos but also whether media coverage affects the *change* in parties' issue attention from one manifesto to the next.

Data and methods

Our study focuses on the 1987–2003 period. In this period, Belgium counted ten major parliamentary parties – we omitted parties that held seats in parliament during only a small fraction of the research period. In the 18-year research period five general elections were organized. So, we consider the 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, and 2003 national elections and party manifestos. Party manifestos were carefully encoded (quasi)sentence per (quasi)sentence following the methodology devised by the MRG (Budge *et al.* 2001). However, we did not rely on the 53-code system as developed by MRG but on a much more detailed issue categorization system drawing on 141 different issue codes (for more details, see: Walgrave *et al.* 2007). Not only manifestos but also the mass media were measured drawing on the same codebook.

The mass media database consists of two separate parts. National media do not exist in Belgium: both media-systems are completely separate with (Dutch-speaking) Flemings only reading Flemish newspapers and watching Flemish television and French-speaking people doing the same with their media. Therefore, for the core 1991–2000 period including three of the five elections covered here, we take into account French-speaking as well as Flemish media, and code both print and broadcast media in both regions. In Flanders, our media dataset for this period contains three Flemish newspapers, tabloids and broadsheets with different partisan leanings (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*), and two main television channels: one public service broadcasting (TV1); and the other commercially run (VTM). For the newspapers, no indexes were available and we consequently used actual newspaper copies. We coded all front-page newspaper stories, with exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays, on a daily basis. The main news programs in prime time (7 p.m.) of the two main national television channels TV1 and VTM were coded on a daily basis. For the Walloon media, we undertook a comparable effort, also combining newspapers with TV news. The newspapers we coded are *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*, both broadsheets but one with a more leftist and the other one with a more conservative leaning. Just as in Flanders we focused on the two main news channels, RTBF and RTL-TV, the first a public channel and the latter a commercial channel. Taken together, the Flemish and French-speaking media database contains 180,265 news items (to be precise 113,658 TV items and 66,607 newspaper items).

For the 2003 manifestos, we do not have at our disposal such detailed preceding mass media measures. We only have – thanks to the Flemish Electronic News Archive (see ENA website) – an extensive measure of the issue salience of the coverage on the main evening news on the Flemish public and commercial

Table 3.1 Number of (quasi)sentences per party manifesto 1987–2003

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	Total
CVP	817	897	750	1,278	2072	5,814
PSC	477	583	671	656	3,846	6,233
SP	831	2,930	771	557	390	2,842
PS	648	1,265	1,073	851	763	4,600
VLD	197	385	205	1,339	244	2,370
PRL	776	264	312	1,247	3,405	6,004
Agalev	2,405	712	1,239	2,574	3,509	10,439
Ecolo	174	3,052	340	1,698	690	5,954
Volkunie	210	235	1,730	1,842	–	2,460
Vlaams Belang	201	270	1,425	4,826	2,230	6,945
Total	6,736	7,956	6,959	16,868	15,142	53,661

Note

The name of almost all Belgian parties changed during the research period. We opted to use the name that was used during most of the research period, often this is the old party name.

broadcaster, TV1 and VTM, in the months preceding the May 2003 elections. In total the TV database for 2003 includes 7,191 news items. For the 1987 elections, we do not have at our disposal any media coverage at all. Consequently, we use the 1987 manifestos only as a control for the path-dependency of the 1991 manifestos.

The dependent variable of our study is based on an extensive coding of the 50 Belgian party manifestos issued during the 18-year research period. Table 3.1 documents the data per party and per year.

One can observe that some party manifestos are more detailed than others but in general the number of observations (quasi-sentences) per party and per manifesto is quite high. The Flemish green party, Agalev, clearly issues the lengthiest programs; the Flemish liberal party, VLD, has the most succinct manifestos. Over time a net increase in the volume of the Belgian party manifestos is manifest. The average size more than doubled from 1987 to 2003.

An analytical problem for our analysis is that parties do not produce and present their party manifesto at the same time. Some approve their manifesto months before Election Day while others only approve their program just before the elections. As only *preceding* media coverage can affect party manifestos the precise media coverage period to take into account differs from party to party. We decided to only consider media coverage up till one year before Election Day on a monthly basis. If a party issued its manifesto in September while elections were in December, for example, we will check whether media issue coverage from January till August has had any impact on the issues put forward in the manifesto presented in September.

Analyses and results

General results

As a first step, we calculate simple Pearson's correlations between party manifestos and preceding media coverage for four aggregated party manifestos of all parties (1991, 1995, 1995, and 1999). In this explorative phase, we do not distinguish between elections, time periods, issues, losing or winning parties etc.

Many associations are significant. This means that there is, at least statistically, a relation between parties' issue attention and the media coverage for these issues in the preceding months. This suggests that the media indeed affect party programs. Correlations are most of the time modest, however. There are differences between parties and media outlets which we regrouped according to language and type. French-speaking parties seem to be systematically less affected by media coverage than Dutch-speaking parties (average correlation of 0.64 compared to 0.106). Most affected by media coverage are the programs of the Christian-Democrat CVP (0.130) and the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang (0.131). Least affected by media coverage are the programs of the French-speaking socialist party PS (0.059). Comparing the TV and newspaper coefficients yields a more or less consistent picture. Both French-speaking and Flemish party manifestos seem to be more affected by newspaper coverage than by TV coverage. This is in line with earlier studies by Walgrave and colleagues (2008) showing that political actors react more to newspapers than to TV. The least influential media clearly are the Dutch-speaking TV-stations TV1 and VTM, both among French-speaking and Flemish parties.

If we run analyses 'predicting' a certain party manifesto's issue attention based on the same party's previous manifesto we come to very high autocorrelations (systematically +0.60). This means that party programs are highly path-dependent. There is a lot of continuity in party programs; parties do not change issue emphasis frequently or strongly. The consequences are obvious: there is little variance left over to be explained by external factors like the media or changing real world situations. Media's impact on party programs can only be modest as manifestos are largely determined by their own past (that past might, in turn, be partially determined by past media attention).

Testing the hypotheses

We proceed with testing our five explorative hypotheses one by one. For each hypothesis we present analyses. First, we always correlate party programs' *level* of proportional attention for issues with the media's *level* of proportional attention for the same issues in the preceding months. Second, we correlate party programs' attention *change* for issues with media coverage's attention *change* for the same issues in the preceding months. This latter procedure controls for path-dependency; that is: programs being determined by their own past.

Table 3.2 Correlation (Pearson and significance) of party program issue attention (%) and preceding media issue coverage (%) (1987–2003)

	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish media television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Average</i>
<i>Flemish parties</i>							
CVP	0.099***	0.148***	0.127***	0.123***	0.148***	0.137***	0.130
SP	0.084***	0.111***	0.119***	0.094***	0.107***	0.105***	0.103
VLD	0.053**	0.088***	0.089***	0.081***	0.106***	0.102***	0.087
Agalev	0.067***	0.056***	0.085***	0.059***	0.066***	0.081***	0.069
Volksumie	0.088***	0.141***	0.114***	0.095***	0.133***	0.112***	0.114
Vlaams Blok	0.104***	0.143***	0.152***	0.113***	0.136***	0.138***	0.131
Average	0.083	0.115	0.114	0.094	0.116	0.113	0.106
<i>French parties</i>							
PSC	0.010	0.067***	0.047**	0.092***	0.091***	0.099***	0.068
PS	0.027	0.072***	0.055**	0.064***	0.069***	0.066***	0.059
PRL	0.033	0.081***	0.066***	0.052**	0.071***	0.063***	0.061
Ecolo	0.027	0.096***	0.054**	0.066***	0.091***	0.081***	0.069
Average	0.024	0.079	0.056	0.069	0.081	0.077	0.064

Note

N depends on analysis: ranges from 2,961 to 4,935. Significance: ***p < .001; **p < .01

Electoral success or failure

Table 3.3 tells us that there is no systematic difference between parties that won and parties that lost the previous elections. The first hypotheses that especially losing parties would adopt media cues must therefore be rejected. For both elections (1995–1999) there are even fairly clear signs of the exact opposite pattern: winning parties are slightly more adaptive to media cues than losing parties. This opposite pattern is apparent among both the Flemish and the French-speaking parties alike (not shown in table). Losing elections clearly does *not* inspire parties to take media attention into consideration more carefully. Of course, adapting to media cues might have been what made the winning parties successful in the first place. So if there is some continuity in parties' behavior it might be the case that parties who gained votes thanks to their adaptability to media cues continue to do so and persist in their winning strategy. Losing parties would then follow the opposite pattern and stick to the losing non-adaptive strategy.

Table 3.3 also contains the analyses of the *changes* in coverage and programmatic attention. Patterns are unclear. Often, we find negative correlations. This means that when media coverage for an issue goes up attention for that issue in the subsequent party programs goes down, and vice versa. This is, of course, difficult to explain. For 1999 however, there seems to be an interesting consistent pattern emerging. Parties that lost votes at the previous elections change their party manifesto in the *opposite* direction than media coverage change. This opposite pattern is entirely absent among the winning parties. Again this seems to suggest that losing parties do not adapt to media cues. Even the opposite seems to be true to some extent. Parties that have lost the previous elections adapt their program by attributing less attention to issues that gained more attention in the media. This non-adaptive strategy may lead to more electoral defeats.

Opposition and government parties

Table 3.4 seems to confirm the hypothesis that opposition parties take media coverage more into account than government parties when drafting their party manifestos. This seems to be a general tendency that applies both to the 1995 and 1999 elections. Except for a single case (1995, French TV), all coefficients tapping the correlation between media and party manifestos are larger for opposition than for government parties. Most telling is that there often is a negative and significant relationship between party manifesto change and media change and that this only applies to the government parties, never to the opposition parties. When government parties change their program compared to their previous program they even move in the opposite direction than the media; their party manifesto tends to drift away from media coverage instead of getting closer to the media agenda.

Table 3.3 Correlations between winning versus losing parties' (previous elections) issue attention and preceding issue attention in the media (N = 1692)

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
Attention level 1995 manifestos							
Winning parties	0.117**	0.125**	0.095**	0.133**	0.157**	0.109**	0.123
Losing parties	0.122**	0.115**	0.120**	0.111**	0.140**	0.084**	0.115
Attention change 1995 manifestos							
Winning parties	-0.065**	-0.042	-0.077**	0.019	0.008	0.015	-0.024
Losing parties	0.009	0.034	-0.023	-0.029	-0.004	-0.046*	-0.010
Attention level 1999 manifestos							
Winning parties	0.131**	0.137**	0.110**	0.134**	0.132**	0.119**	0.127
Losing parties	0.046	0.059*	0.023	0.068**	0.084**	0.045	0.054
Attention change 1999 manifestos							
Winning parties	0.042	0.044	0.033	-0.025	-0.036	-0.012	0.008
Losing parties	-0.151**	-0.137**	-0.146**	-0.125**	-0.072**	-0.127**	-0.126

Table 3.4 Correlations between government versus opposition parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) issue attention in the media (N=846)

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
	<i>Attention level 1995 manifestos</i>						
Government parties	0.146**	0.155**	0.120**	0.142**	0.152**	0.126**	0.140
Opposition parties	0.154**	0.159**	0.132**	0.141**	0.159**	0.119**	0.144
	<i>Attention change 1995 manifestos</i>						
Government parties	-0.086*	-0.080*	-0.070*	-0.039	-0.062	-0.009	-0.058
Opposition parties	0.027	0.050	-0.006	0.005	-0.009	0.017	0.014
	<i>Attention level 1999 manifestos</i>						
Government parties	0.080*	0.102**	0.043	0.074*	0.093**	0.045	0.073
Opposition parties	0.126**	0.137**	0.098**	0.120**	0.137**	0.087*	0.118
	<i>Attention change 1999 manifestos</i>						
Government parties	-0.157**	-0.164**	-0.112**	-0.179**	-0.110**	-0.178**	-0.150
Opposition parties	-0.001	0.004	-0.007	0.002	0.010	-0.005	0.001

Center and radical parties

Looking at Table 3.5 it shows that especially the party manifesto of the radical Flemish nationalist and right-wing Vlaams Belang is inspired by media coverage. The congruence of this populist party's manifesto and the media coverage is by far the highest both in 1995 (0.179) and in 1999 (0.166). This makes some sense as we can expect populist parties to be very sensitive to media coverage. Next come the Christian-Democrat parties. Their program priorities came fairly close to the media agenda in the previous period in 1995 (0.129); this had changed in 1999 (0.090). This mixed finding more or less confirms the hypothesis that center-parties are more affected by media coverage. Indeed, the least affected by media coverage seem to be both green parties that, especially in 1995 (0.049), were not inspired at all by media coverage. On the other hand, extreme parties are not less affected by media coverage than the other parties, contradicting the radicality hypothesis. We also see differences between both elections in the tables with some parties only weakly affected in 1995 and stronger in 1999 (e.g. the socialist parties).

The part of Table 3.5 taking the change in attention in media and programs as focus does not yield clear and interpretable results. There is no clear indication that media attention change leads to party manifesto change and that this differs systematically across party families. Also, 1995 and 1999 results partially contradict each other.

Issue type

We run the issue type analysis only for the 1995 data. We created two groups of issues: on the one hand the 'law and order' issues from which we know that they often affect the political agenda and on the other hand all other issues pooled together. These two groups are mutually exclusive. We then ran our correlational analysis on these two separate groups. The results yield a nuanced picture. First, when inspecting the top of the table we see that, on average, coverage on law and order themes affects the party programs more than coverage on non-law and order issues; congruence is higher for law and order issues. Especially French TV coverage on law and order themes, and consequently the aggregated French media agenda, was very strongly correlated with law and order issue attention in the party programs of both the Flemish (0.346) and the French (0.431) parties. These are the highest correlations we found so far.

The bottom table documenting the change in issue attention in the party manifestos shows, again with unusually high correlations, that the change in media attention for law and order issues was followed by a similar change in attention in the Flemish party manifestos in the amount of attention devoted to law and order. Remarkably, this only applies to the Flemish parties. French parties did not react at all to changes in media coverage. We believe this fact must be attributed to the presence and the electoral success of the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang in Flanders who forced the other Flemish parties to embrace a more

repressive law and order agenda. The impact of the Vlaams Belang on the French parties – the Vlaams Belang is not participating in the elections in the French speaking part of Belgium – was much less compelling and they did not react as strongly on the increased media attention for law and order issues. Our results corroborate the hypothesis put forward: both when it comes to the level of attention and when it comes to attention change, parties do seem to adjust their programs more to law and order coverage than to other kinds of coverage. If media devote more attention to law and order issues, then parties tend to follow. This is especially the case when a strong challenging party is claiming the issue of law and order, pushing the other parties to be extra sensitive to crime and similar coverage.

Long- or short-term impact

Table 3.7 contains the analyses distinguishing two periods. We take into account long-term impact by assessing media coverage 6–12 months before the elections and we assess short-term impact by measuring coverage 1–6 months before Election Day.

An interesting pattern emerges from the data. When it comes to attention level the long-term impact seems to prevail slightly. Both in 1995 and in 1999 the correlations with the earlier period are somewhat more substantial than the correlations with the latter period. When it comes to attention level change, in contrast, the data suggest the opposite. Correlations with the short-term period are higher – yet also here very modest – than with the longer-term period. This seems to suggest that parties, when drafting their programs take both the long- and the short-term into account, but differently. For the level of attention they stick to the longer-term, to decide what issues should get more or less attention compared to the previous program they seem to rely on the coverage just before they started drafting the program. Hence, we can cautiously maintain our hypothesis that there would be a diverging impact from short- versus long-term media coverage as the hypothesis is not clearly rejected but certainly not strongly corroborated either.

Conclusion

Our analysis was preliminary and explorative. Our methods were not very sophisticated and we did not control for alternative effects on party manifesto content. Party manifestos, for example, may not only be affected by preceding media coverage but also by other activities and initiatives parties and their representatives undertake. For example: party programs may also be ‘predicted’ by a party’s preceding activities in parliament. Parties, then, would first adjust their issue emphasis in parliament and only afterwards change their party program. Another track to pursue is to see what happens *after* a party has changed or not changed its party program according to media coverage. We may anticipate, for example, that parties who do manage to adjust their manifesto to media coverage

Table 3.5 Correlations between parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) issue attention in the media across party types (N=846)

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
Attention level 1995 manifestos							
Traditional parties	0.110**	0.124**	0.081*	0.132**	0.127**	0.129**	0.117
Extreme parties	0.125**	0.147**	0.084*	0.112**	0.127**	0.094**	0.115
Socialist parties	0.091**	0.093**	0.080*	0.104**	0.093**	0.108**	0.095
Liberal parties	0.088*	0.109**	0.051	0.093**	0.090**	0.090**	0.087
X-democratic parties	0.111**	0.122**	0.085*	0.154**	0.155**	0.146**	0.129
Green parties	0.045	0.058	0.024	0.055	0.069*	0.040	0.049
Nationalist party (VB)	0.202**	0.216**	0.164**	0.165**	0.179**	0.145**	0.179
Attention change 1995 manifestos							
Traditional parties	-0.001	-0.006	0.005	0.044	0.034	0.045	0.020
Extreme parties	-0.075*	-0.068*	-0.065	-0.002	-0.079*	0.071*	-0.036
Socialist parties	-0.062	-0.086*	-0.019	-0.042	-0.032	-0.042	-0.047
Liberal parties	0.059	0.057	0.046	0.016	0.038	-0.008	0.035
X-democratic parties	-0.015	0.005	-0.034	0.118**	0.055	0.153**	0.047
Green parties	-0.032	-0.030	-0.026	0.039	-0.007	0.074*	0.003
Nationalist party (VB)	-0.024	-0.035	-0.007	-0.009	-0.035	0.018	-0.015

Attention level 1999 manifestos

Traditional parties	0.119**	0.129**	0.095**	0.097**	0.112**	0.071*	0.104
Extreme parties	0.173**	0.182**	0.145**	0.167**	0.181**	0.131**	0.163
Socialist parties	0.148**	0.146**	0.137**	0.086*	0.093**	0.068*	0.113
Liberal parties	0.065	0.077*	0.042	0.074*	0.105**	0.033	0.066
X-democratic parties	0.097**	0.111**	0.069*	0.092**	0.091**	0.081*	0.090
Green parties	0.110**	0.115**	0.092**	0.109**	0.142**	0.060	0.105
Nationalist party (VB)	0.176**	0.179**	0.156**	0.168**	0.156**	0.159**	0.166

Attention change 1999 manifestos

Traditional parties	-0.035	-0.041	-0.019	-0.018	0.007	-0.032	-0.023
Extreme parties	0.015	-0.003	0.034	-0.075*	-0.059	-0.063	-0.025
Socialist parties	0.088*	0.054	0.111**	0.067	0.042	0.066	0.071
Liberal parties	-0.084*	-0.068*	-0.085**	0.000	0.008	-0.007	-0.039
X-democratic parties	-0.036	-0.037	-0.026	-0.122**	-0.048	-0.144**	-0.069
Green parties	0.004	-0.015	0.028	-0.078*	-0.002	-0.115**	-0.030
Nationalist party (VB)	0.047	0.049	0.033	0.048	-0.060	0.123**	0.040

Table 3.6 Correlations between the Flemish versus French parties' issue attention and preceding (6–12 months) media attention across issue types

	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
Attention level 1995 manifestos							
Law-and order (N=60)							
Flemish parties	0.013	0.346**	0.033	0.110	-0.019	0.435**	0.153
French parties	-0.005	0.431**	0.011	0.147	-0.030	0.535**	0.182
Other issues (N=786)							
Flemish parties	0.170**	0.133**	0.182**	0.157**	0.137**	0.107**	0.148
French parties	0.051	0.072*	0.075*	0.080*	0.014	0.062	0.059
Attention change 1995 manifestos							
Law-and-order (N=60)							
Flemish parties	0.356**	0.371**	0.387**	0.010	0.201	0.478**	0.301
French parties	0.009	0.104	0.150	-0.008	-0.180	0.142	0.036
Other issues (N=786)							
Flemish parties	-0.015	-0.008	-0.021	-0.055	-0.004	0.038	-0.011
French parties	-0.071*	0.045	-0.072*	0.003	-0.052	0.077*	-0.012

Table 3.7 Correlations between parties' issue attention and preceding media attention by preceding time periods (N=846)

<i>Months before election</i>	<i>Flemish media</i>	<i>Flemish newspapers</i>	<i>Flemish television</i>	<i>French media</i>	<i>French newspapers</i>	<i>French television</i>	<i>Average</i>
	<i>Attention level 1995 manifestos</i>						
6-12	0.159**	0.171**	0.128**	0.092**	0.082*	0.096**	0.121
1-6	0.116**	0.114**	0.108**	0.081*	0.104**	0.059	0.097
	<i>Attention level 1999 manifestos</i>						
6-12	0.175**	0.178**	0.155**	0.076*	0.093**	0.050	0.121
1-6	0.128**	0.130**	0.113**	0.108**	0.089**	0.110**	0.113
	<i>Attention change 1995 manifestos</i>						
6-12	-0.013	-0.019	-0.003	0.049	0.001	0.084*	0.017
1-6 n	0.032	0.019	0.042	0.064	0.053	0.045	0.043
	<i>Attention change 1999 manifestos</i>						
6-12	-0.052	-0.069*	-0.017	-0.009	0.025	-0.035	-0.026
1-6	-0.063	-0.050	-0.074	0.146**	0.152**	0.120**	0.039

have a higher chance of winning the elections than parties who do not follow the mass media.

What have we learned in this chapter? The first finding is that party manifestos are highly stable and not very variable. Party programs are strongly path-dependent. This means that, inevitably, the media's impact on the party manifestos can only be small as there is not much variation left to be explained. Second, we do find systematic similarities between issue emphasis in manifestos and preceding media coverage. Party programs and media coverage are associated. Statistically, the associations are weak but they are significant. Third, our hypotheses did not really deliver very strong results. Our understanding of party manifesto antecedents remains limited. Two hypotheses kept the track and were corroborated. First, opposition parties are more inspired by media coverage than government parties. Second, issue types make a difference with more media impact on attention for law and order issues in the programs than for other types of issues. Another interesting finding, going against our initial hypothesis, is that parties who won the previous elections do seem to adjust their manifesto *more* to media coverage than parties who lost the previous electoral contest. If adjusting to media coverage is a winning strategy this would mean that some parties persist in their winning strategy while others persist in embracing a losing strategy. We also found some proof of the fact that some parties' manifestos are more affected by media coverage than other parties: in Belgium, especially the extreme-right populist party Vlaams Belang seems to have been inspired by media coverage more than any other party. Finally, long-term media impact on party manifestos seems to prevail on short-term impact – parties are more inspired by media coverage a long time before they draft their program – but this finding was not entirely consistent and must be nuanced.

By and large, we found some evidence that media matter for party manifestos, but admittedly the link we found was weak and elusive. Media matter to some extent, it is clear that parties decide on their priorities while somehow taking media into account, but the association is not straightforward nor is it easy to disentangle it. Especially the level of attention media and parties devote to issues is correlated, but a change in media attention hardly seems to lead to a subsequent change in party attention. Our analysis was explorative, our results show that there probably is something going on, but we need more research to lay bare the actual process.

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4 Closing the circle

A case study in the role of spin in the policy cycle

Neil T. Gavin

Introduction

It can be argued that at a *general* level politicians in the contemporary world now need to respond to the demands of the media in a way they did not formerly. Politics has become ‘mediatised’, to use Meyer’s (2002) term, with the media’s inexorable logic strongly influencing the way the political classes conduct themselves, and in significant ways, politics is now carried on through, and with reference to, those media (Schulz 2004). There is also a growing sense that the performance of the media is crucially significant, since the representation of politics has direct consequences for effective democracy and political accountability. Disquiet about this performance is evident, with some commentators feeling that the media is fixated with process over substance (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995), and that, as a consequence, politicians will be too. Yet the direct role of the media in policy development is under-explored, as various contributors to this volume attest, and clearly the dynamics of the processes involved are not as well understood as they ought to be.

Figure 4.1 illustrates, in a necessarily simplified form, the constellation of players involved in these processes, and the way they are connected. The public can influence the media in a number of ways (B). Media content is, in part, influenced by audience demand expressed through the market. As a corollary, journalists are highly attuned to what the public want to read and watch, expressed in their sense of what newsworthiness is or has news value. Last, the public can have a direct impact via their direct involvement in coverage, as *vox pop*. The media, for their part, can encourage citizens groups or sectional interests to organise and mobilise – the recent petition against road pricing in Britain perhaps being an example (G). Sectional interests may also mobilise, but do so to influence or lobby government more directly (H). And governments, in turn, can encourage the integration of sectional or organised interests into existing policy networks (I). But they are also responsible for programmatic or legislative output, which directly impacts upon the public, one and all (C).

As we might expect in a representative democracy, there is also a place for a reverse connection here, one between public preferences and government policies (D). Indeed, Hobolt and Klemmensen’s (2005) rather mono-dimensional

quantitative model of British and Danish politics suggests that changes in issue salience for the public (particularly on unemployment and the economy) pre-date policy changes, and they conclude that these governments are, in fact, responsive to their citizens. But, their study completely fails to engage in any way with a range of other important factors. For instance, the mass media’s influence on the salience of particular issues (McCombs 2005) is completely unexplored (A), as is the impact on media content of governments and of other significant political interests (F¹ and F²). Their model scarcely touches on the government’s direct responses to media coverage, a theme of many of the other contributions to this volume (E). Nor does it seem to acknowledge the response of legislators to the media’s *perceived* influence – the notion of a ‘third person effect’ (Herbst 2002; Perloff 1993; Kepplinger 2007). However, this general weakness is not entirely unknown in this research domain (Burstein 2003).

The analysis which follows seeks to address some of these gaps, and it focuses on Britain and on the economy, particularly the issue of unemployment

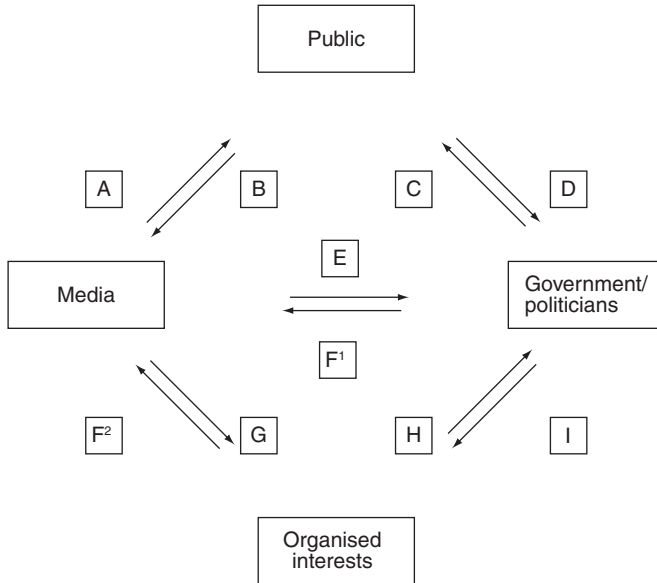


Figure 4.1 Players and processes.

Notes

- A: content delivery; attitude formation.
- B: audience/readership demand; citizen access; news values.
- C: policy implementation/delivery.
- D: polling; anticipated reaction; voting.
- E: opinion ‘re-expression’; third person effect; anticipated reaction.
- F: political marketing; spin; image management.
- G: reinforcement of mobilisation.
- H: lobbying; anticipated reaction.
- I: policy network encouragement.

– perennial preoccupations of governments and citizens alike. But rather than looking at the policy process in this domain and the media’s direct role in policy development, attention is focused on news coverage of the issues, and at its subsequent impact on the public (A). This exploration should also help illuminate the connection – if there is one – between the activities of government or of organised interests and the mass media, at the level of content (F¹ and F²). It should also help us appreciate the prominence of citizens within reports (B). Finally, it is hoped that an understanding of the influence of coverage on citizen’s attitudes will place the relationship between government and public (D) in a much clearer perspective.

The underlying assumption in what follows is that governments and many organised interests actively and continually seek to influence the policy debate and the policy agenda, although as we will see, they are not always successful. We can explore and hypothesise a causal connection between media activity and political or policy developments (Walgrave and van Aelst 2006; and in this volume, Walgrave and Lefevere, as well as Howarth, and Strünck). The following analysis will contend that we need a much more prominent place for the notion that this connection can, potentially, run in both directions, with politicians and other organised interests seeking to influence media coverage. In a sense we have to theorise a circuit or cycle of influence. But we need to conceptualise integrated, dynamic and *reciprocal* relationships, and this holds true for the connection between activities of governments or other organised interests and the coverage they get. Importantly, this conceptualisation, as we will demonstrate, should emphasise *conditionality*. In other words, it should acknowledge the contingencies of image management, the vagaries of media receptivity to government or other elite voices, and the uneven impact on the public of any subsequent coverage.

An empirical assessment of economic coverage and image management

This conceptualisation of reciprocal and contingent influence also has a strong empirical dimension, insofar as it requires sustained attention to, and observation of, media coverage, lest we rely too heavily on assumptions about its contours. Sadly the literature on spin in Britain is light on sustained attention to coverage, which is ironic since effective image management is thought to require consistent attention to media output. Commentators have focused on the history of spin (Negrine and Lilleker 2002) or how to define it (Andrews 2006), without dealing in any detail with media content. Extended analyses of spin, while highlighting its ability to corrupt the news production process, are heavy on anecdote and description, but thin on systematic attention to coverage (Jones 2000). And even those sceptical of the power of spin offer only the odd anecdote (Heffernan 2006). There is an alarming tendency to rely on high profile instances of spin, often fleshed out by rather thin descriptions of media reports, and now accompanied by what is beginning to look like a mandatory reference to the Jo Moore

affair on 9/11 (Kuhn 2005). This limited attention to content is also manifest in studies dealing with specific topics or events, such as education policy (Gewirtz *et al.* 2004) or party conferences (Stanyer 2001). In contrast, one of the primary concerns in the following analysis is that we begin with a substantial longitudinal exploration of economic news, since judgements about coverage based on limited evidence (Jensen 1987; Rae and Drury 1993; Warner and Molotch 1993) have been prone to deliver a partial or even a distorted sense of what it conveys (see Gavin 2007 for a fuller assessment of these deficiencies).

The time frame for the following exploration is quite distant (1997 to late 2001), but was chosen quite deliberately to reflect the period when the New Labour administration was at the height of its image management powers. They were considered 'the sultans of spin' (Jones 2000) and seemed to have stolen the march on the Conservatives. For a number of reasons, the subjects of the economy and (un)employment are useful issues for a testing of the government's ability to manage or influence the media agenda. In the period concerned, New Labour, most of all, was desperate to establish its economic credentials. The previous Labour government of 1974–1979 had floundered on the rocks of economic dislocation and unemployment. As a result, the Labour Party had carried a reputation for economic incompetence that they were desperate to shake. On top of this, the government's Welfare to Work employment programme was a leading element in a busy legislative programme. Finally, New Labour were fully aware that generally speaking, governments are held responsible for the trajectory of the economy, and that unsurprisingly its health or ill health are important determinants of electoral success (Sanders 2000; Sanders *et al.* 2001). So failure in this strategic domain could have seen the party ignominiously shunted back into another protracted spell in opposition. New Labour, then, needed to sustain sufficient popular momentum to gain itself an unprecedented second term in office, and success with the economy was an important part of this.

The economy, from this perspective, mattered, and it mattered a lot. This makes the tenor of economic news in general – and employment news in particular – a significant test of New Labour's ability to control or influence the agenda. Their degree of influence will be assessed indirectly, but through a number of strands of analysis. The first strand looks at the overall tenor of coverage of jobs in the context of what was a protracted and almost unprecedented period of dropping unemployment. This is important because the coverage would give the public a sense of how the economy was performing, and how the government were handling the issue. The second looks at the voices that were heard in the news – the people that were accessed and whose words were conveyed to the audience. The issue here is whether the government or, indeed, the corporate sector, was able to dominate the commentary in a way that forced out alternative voices and interests. Finally, the analysis touches on the way (un)employment was explained to the public, i.e. the kind of factors that figure in the news by way of explanation for job increases or job losses. This touches on the way the media connect social phenomena – in this case (un)employment – to the action or inactions of particular players. The way this

shakes out is important for determining whether governments or other players are either held responsible for positive economic developments (and therefore to be praised) or are seen as culpable for negative ones, and should therefore be blamed.

The object of the analysis was the prime-time, flagship news broadcasts on the main public service and commercial channels, notably BBC *Nine O'clock News* and ITN *News at Ten*. The emphasis, therefore, was on a medium that is considered, in Britain at least, to be the most important and most trusted source of political information (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002).¹ This lead medium should, therefore, be an important target for the dissemination of political messages or, at least, be a place where governments and other interested parties would want to ensure effective damage limitation. To begin with, stories bearing on (un)employment were isolated from the broader run of economic reports which were identified as part of an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) sponsored study of the impact of economic news.² The resultant corpus of (un)employment news was therefore exhaustive and straddled the period between mid-1997 and December 2001. Existing research on the impact of economic news on public opinion gave a convenient and useful way of categorising stories according to their overall tenor (Gavin and Sanders 1996, 1998 and 2003; Sanders and Gavin 2004). A story might be balanced. But more commonly they tend to emphasise either the negative or the positive, as the following two examples illustrate:

Hundreds of insurance jobs face the axe today after Guardian Royal Exchange accepted a £3.45 billion takeover bid from Sun Life and Provincial. The company hasn't said where the job losses would come from or how many would go until they've discussed terms with the unions.

(ITN, *News at Ten*, 1 February 1999)

Pilot schemes for the Government's so-called New Deal for young unemployed people have begun across the country at a cost of £3 billion. An extra £250 million will also be provided to help people over twenty-five back to work. The scheme offers a choice of subsidized work or full-time study. Those who refuse to take part will have their benefits cut.

(BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 5 January 1998)

Such stories were classified as either positive (+1) or negative (-1) according to the overall balance of news in their opening sequences. Subsequently, the positive and negative stories were collated, and the number of +1s and of -1s were added up to express the overall balance for each of the months in sample.³ This allowed us to look at the broad sweep of coverage and determine whether it had, on the whole, a positive or negative inflection.

The results from this assessment are represented in Figures 4.2 and 4.3. Each entry represents the numerical balance of good news and bad news stories for any given month. For example, in July 1997 on BBC there were four more good

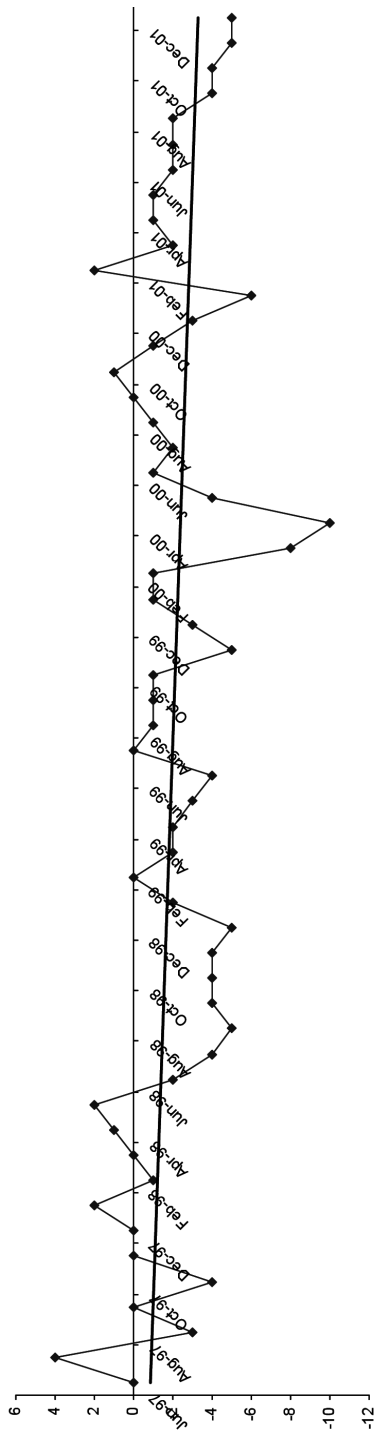


Figure 4.2 Balance of 'positive' and 'negative' (un)employment stories on BBC flagship bulletins, with fitted line, January 1997–December 2001.

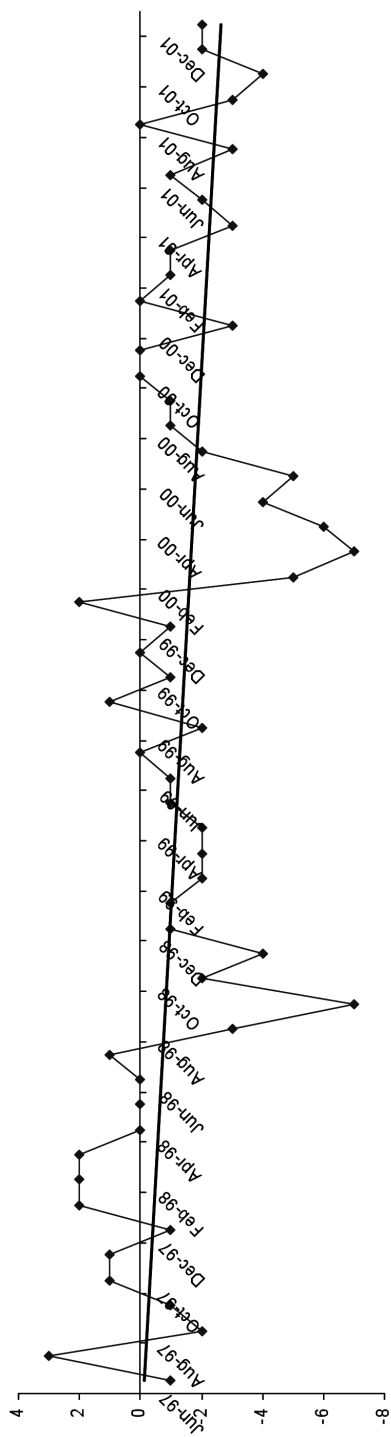


Figure 4.3 Balance of 'positive' and 'negative' (un)employment stories on ITN flagship bulletins, with fitted line, January 1997–December 2001.

news stories than there were bad news ones, showing as a +4. The reverse was true for November 1997. What is most obviously apparent is that for both BBC and ITN the number of months where good news stories outnumbered bad news ones were very few and far between. Both channels saw a cluster at the beginning of the period assessed. There were also a few positive blips on BBC in autumn 2000 and spring 2001 and on ITN in late 1999 and early 2000. However, overall the picture is one where bad news predominates, a feature that appeared to get worse towards the end of the period, as we can see from the line fitted to the data.⁴ So, the position for New Labour appears to have got worse as their first administration came to an end and their second term began.

The results here are significant for a number of reasons. The research on the impact of such news clearly shows that it affects the salience of economic issues (Gavin 2007). Furthermore, it has a consistent, significant and non-trivial effect on the public's perception of the health or otherwise of the economy (Gavin and Sanders 1996, 1998 and 2003; Sanders and Gavin 2004). This, in turn, influences the citizen's views of the government's competence in handling the economy and, subsequently, their support for the administration. In short, this coverage will have made a difference. That it will have done so, will no doubt have galled the government, since the trends in (un)employment at the time gave grounds for considerable optimism. Unemployment, measured by the claimant count, was on a downward trend that was to continue until late 2004.⁵ This particular measure has been controversial in the past. But even the more widely accepted Labour Force Survey shows unemployment falling, and employment rising briskly too (see Gavin 2007: 55). Not surprisingly, then, there were a number of points where the news suggested that unemployment was at a historical low: 'Unemployment's fallen to its lowest level in ten years' (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 12 August 1998), and 'Unemployment is down again to its lowest level for nearly 20 years' (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 15 December, 1999). Nevertheless, the overall pattern of coverage was dominated by *unemployment*.

The coverage, in this context, expresses a form of negativising imbalance or bias that has been analysed more fully elsewhere (see Gavin 2007). The stories may simply be the product of conventional news values that put a premium on simple, clear narratives carrying dramatic developments of social or economic significance (Harcup and O'Neill 2001). But this was still bad news for the government and their spin doctors. The results, therefore, have a bearing on the government's ability – or, more precisely, its inability – to dominate or even influence the agenda. One of two things appears to have been happening. The administration's image management machinery may not have been keeping its eye on this particular ball, and failed to intervene, with the result that New Labour got an undeserved bad press. Alternatively, they were in fact strenuously engaged in image management and just failed to make an impression at a time when things were, in fact, going rather well for the economy. Only a retrospective, interview-based analysis of economic spin management under New Labour (and of journalists' response to it) could determine which of these is more plausible. But either way the story does not speak to the government's overwhelming success in influencing, let alone determining, the issue

space it inhabits. Contrary to received wisdom New Labour were not always the ‘sultans of spin’. Instead, important themes were overlooked or important opportunities missed. Either way, the notion that governments and their communication apparatuses could, and frequently did, influence the issue agenda decisively, looks rather suspect in the light of these results.

Who speaks in the news?

A similar story can be told with regard to the range of voices heard on (un)employment news. The issue of who is given space to speak in the media is an important one. Potentially, they can act as the ‘primary definers’ in a report (Hall 1978), setting out the terms of debate, delineating the breadth of argument, or constraining the range of positions expressed. From this perspective, they are important ideas brokers, and critical commentary has tended to suggest that elite voices tend to dominate, the government among them. The voices heard give a report a narrative drive and a degree of personalised immediacy. Consequently, who gets on, and who does not, is important. Who, then, got to speak in the (un)employment news surveyed? It was not possible to trawl all the stories that figured in the previous section. The corpus examined there was particularly large, and an assessment of the range of voices accessed would have been too difficult on this scale. Nevertheless, two years’ worth of economic news (extending from January 1998 to December 1999) were analysed to determine the identity of those who were allowed to speak. This period was early in the first New Labour administration where, as noted earlier, the powers of the spin doctors were thought to be at their zenith. Each separate voice that appeared in a news report was isolated, identified and placed in one of ten categories.

Table 4.1 Sources interviewed on BBC and ITN (un)employment coverage, January 1998–December 1999

	<i>BBC 1998–1999</i>	<i>ITN 1998–1999</i>	<i>Total</i>
Vox pop	74	62	136
Unions	29	13	42
NGOs/consumer groups	6	5	11
Company/business representatives	90	34	124
Economic experts	27	12	39
Job centre, civil servants, Bank of England	10	10	20
Politicians:			
Government	42	32	74
Opposition	12	16	28
Unspecified	5	1	6
Others	15	1	16
Total	315	185	

Source: Gavin (2007).

The results are presented in Table 4.1, and a number of features are clear. The government evidently (and unsurprisingly) outmatches the other political parties with respect to on-screen profile, with New Labour representatives appearing twice as often as their Conservative and Liberal Democratic counterparts. But perhaps the most significant feature of Table 4.1 is the fact that it was not the government, nor even the corporate community, who figured most often in news stories, but the general public in the form of a vox pop element. This group (if indeed they can be called a group) were the most regular individual contributors to news. Admittedly, they were often given limited time in front of the cameras. For example, in a story headlined ‘Hundreds of Jobs Axed in Blair’s Own Back Yard’ (ITN, *News at Ten*, 4 September 1998), one worker laments, ‘The semi-conductor industry – there’s nothing in there for Britain, it’s totally gone’, while the other says, ‘I’m afraid it’s just back to a normal factory job, I think, and wasted skills and a wasted three years for me personally’. Likewise, on the 23 July 1998, when the BBC ran a story about the Scottish Secretary closing down direct labour organisations (DLOs), two workers are reported. The second of them only had space to say, ‘It’s a disgrace. Never had this trouble in my life’. However, in these and other stories the people affected were able to convey quite forcefully and bluntly their responses and reactions to developments. And even if we leave aside the vox pop components of the reports, the trades unions and consumer groups figure much more often than Her Majesty’s Opposition. Indeed, their prominence is on a par with the government’s. Not untypically, the Scottish Trades Union Congress representative who follows on from the workers in the DLO story is given as much space as corporate or government sources generally are:

There are thousands of workers and their families, across Lanarkshire and Ayrshire tonight, who are extremely unhappy, extremely bitter and extremely disappointed. They kept the DLOs going for 18 years of a Tory government, and within 18 months of a Labour Government, they’re facing redundancy.

The implications of this need to be understood in the light of the results for the preceding section. The economy – for which the government has primary responsibility – was not only portrayed in a more negative light than was perhaps justified, but those most directly and negatively affected were given ample space to convey how they felt and what it meant for them. There was no obvious dominance of the airwaves by the corporate elite (cf. Davis 2002 and 2003), let alone the governing one. The usual suspects normally thought to constitute the ‘primary definers’, were not obviously primary in this instance. Nor can we say that this was a function of the factors which are said to weaken the empirical plausibility of the notion of primary definition or undermine its theoretical utility – principally, the idea that governments and organised interests are rarely monolithic blocs, and are therefore prone to indiscipline and factionalism (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). New Labour, at the time, was as disciplined as any political

machine gets, and the spin machine was a good deal more unified than it was to become later (Kuhn 2005). But regardless of how we explain the government's failure to press its definition of events onto the agenda, the fact remains that its image management machinery seems to have failed to make a decisive impression in this strategically important domain.

Connecting the government to (un)employment

However, if those most directly and negatively affected by unemployment were not only vocal, but were also offered a significant proportion of airtime, we still need to know whether their shouts of pain were directed at the corporate or business community, rather than at the government. This in itself would have been a victory of sorts for a government spin machine, and might have constituted a form of deflection. And, indeed, evidence presented elsewhere (Gavin 2007) shows that where the news offered commentary on the explanations for (un)employment, they tended to feature an important role for the corporation or for business management: 'The Rover Group is Poised to Announce 1,500 Job Losses as the Strong Pound Begins to Bite. The car company is to cut its workforce in the Midlands by 1,500' (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 22 July 1998). Or,

Hundreds of insurance jobs face the axe today after Guardian Royal Exchange accepted a £3.45 billion takeover bid from Sun Life and Provincial. The company haven't said where the job losses would come from or how many would go until they've discussed terms with the unions.

(ITN, *News at Ten*, 1 February 1999)

Table 4.2 outlines the range of causal agents and forces that were implicated in fluctuations in employment. The entries represent the number of separate instances *within* stories where particular actors, processes or developments were identified. As we can see, corporate decision alongside the dynamics of company mergers figure prominently. The corporate sector, then, was portrayed as bearing much of the direct responsibility for job losses (as well as gains), though generally they, in turn, were hedged about by forces that might be beyond their control. This can be illustrated by a story headlined 'Shell Shuts its UK Headquarters as Jobs Crisis Mounts', where the commentary goes on to pronounce,

It's a London landmark, and it's a sign of the economic times that the imposing Shell Mex House along with other European offices is to close. The world financial downturn is the reason Shell UK jobs are now on the line.

(ITN, *News at Ten*, 18 September 1998)

These snippets, accordingly, figure in Table 4.2 under columns A1 and B4 respectively. Clearly the corporate sector are in the firing line, but so too were the government, as we can see from section C of the table. A range of

Table 4.2 Causes of (un)employment in BBC and ITN news January 1998–December 1999

	BBC 1998	BBC 1999	ITN 1998	ITN 1999	Total
(A) Company:					
1	29	20	18	8	75
2	10	13	3	7	33
3	12	5	13	0	30
4	9	10	4	5	28
5	13	4	2	5	24
6	2	8	5	3	18
7	8	3	4	2	17
8	2	6	4	1	13
9	7	0	5	0	12
10	5	3	1	1	10
11	2	7	1	0	10
12	5	3	2	0	10
13	5	3	1	0	9
14	3	2	0	2	7
15	1	0	4	0	5
16	3	1	0	0	4
17	0	2	2	0	4
18	2	1	0	0	3
19	3	0	0	0	3
20	0	2	0	0	2
21	0	1	1	0	2
(B) Economic					
1	28	7	12	4	51
2	22	4	13	0	39
3	9	3	13	1	26
4	11	1	8	0	20
5	6	1	3	0	13

6	Bank of England (action/inaction)	8	1	2	0	11
7	Telephone/internet banking	0	5	1	2	8
8	Asian: slowdown/upturn	4	0	3	0	7
9	Computerisation	1	0	0	3	4
10	Trade war(s)/sanctions (US.)	0	4	0	0	4
11	Internet sales/revolution	0	3	0	0	3
(C) Government						
1	Action(s)/inaction(s)/decisions/spending	26	14	19	5	64
2	'New deal'/'welfare-to-work'	12	1	8	0	21
3	Aid/subsidies/grants	5	4	2	1	12
4	Taxation/tax system	7	0	5	0	12
5	Benefit/welfare system	9	0	1	0	10
6	Utility regulations/price review(s)	0	3	0	3	6
7	Regulation	1	4	0	0	5
8	Minimum wage	0	0	3	1	4
9	Nationalisation/privatisation	2	1	0	0	3

(D) European Union

1	'Duty free' abolition	0	3	2	3	8
2	Fisheries policy	0	1	0	2	3
3	Aid or aid withdrawal	0	3	0	0	3
4	Environmental rules	0	2	0	0	2
5	Tax harmonisation	2	0	0	0	2
6	Regulation	0	1	0	0	1
(E)	Trades unions/ industrial disputes	8	2	3	0	13

(F) Regional politics

1	Scottish Independence	0	1	0	2	3
2	Northern Ireland Peace Dividend	0	1	0	0	1

Source: Gavin (2007).

government-related decisions, policies and activities were flagged by both BBC and ITN as implicated in changes in employment. However, the table only offers an outline of these connections. There is little by way of detail, though with the degree of negativising apparent from preceding analyses, it might be anticipated that in the domain of employment, New Labour was being associated with the creation of problems, rather than with their solution. To test whether this was indeed the case, stories containing references to the government were isolated and their topic examined in detail. The question is whether the government, at a time of declining unemployment and a burgeoning jobs market was able to force onto the agenda good news stories about their role, or alternatively, obscure their association with bad news.

In the course of the two years of news surveyed there were 35 stories on BBC and 19 on ITN which figured government involvement. A précis of the topics is given in Appendix 4.1. There were obviously a lot of successes for New Labour. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of these revolved around the issue of its New Deal on employment, and the Welfare to Work programme, for which the government got credit throughout the two years of coverage surveyed – for instance ‘The New Deal to get people off benefits and into work, was launched today by the Government. It’ll focus primarily on the young jobless, but it’ll also be expanded to include older, long-term unemployed’ (ITN, *News at Ten*, 5 January 1998). In addition, there were a number of references to increased public spending, where this was to result in more front-line nurses, teachers and police personnel being recruited.

Clearly, the government was capable of making a splash. However, as we can see from the bottom half of Appendix 4.1, it is equally clear that there were numerous stories across the period where New Labour signally failed to dodge the flak. They were regularly on the receiving end of a range of bad news stories, some of them relating to areas of the economy where vulnerable people were involved:

Union leaders are calling on the Government to change its mind over the closure of a number of the Remploy factories which supply work for more than 1,000 disabled people. Remploy is Britain’s biggest employer of disabled people and the unions are concerned that the workers affected could end up without a job and on benefit.

(BBC, *Nine O’clock News*, 27 August 1999)

And neither was this particular bad news story an aberration in a run of otherwise good news reports. Appendix 4.1 makes it clear that there were almost as many bad news as good news stories, and that these were dispersed across a range of policy domains, events and developments. The government, despite a very promising context of declining unemployment, was unable to avoid or play down the negative implications of its actions or inactions. Clearly, there was a limit to spin, rebuttal and image management in this particular, strategically important domain.

Those instances where the government was directly implicated in the negative consequences of unemployment are very important. Governments in Britain are perceived to be responsible for the general state of the economy (Paulson 1994), so adverse news about employment is bad enough. However, there is a growing body of research suggesting that there needs to be a direct linkage between government and economic developments *before* this translates into increased or decreased popularity (Petrocik and Steeper 1986; Abramowitz *et al.* 1988; Iyengar 1989; Sigelman *et al.* 1991; Shields and Goidel 1998; Anderson 2000; and Johnston and Pattie 2002). In other words, public disenchantment with the government is partly conditional on citizens making a connection between government (in)activity and subsequent social, political or economic developments. The sort of news outlined in the bottom half of Appendix 4.1 allowed them to make just such a connection. These reports may represent a balance in the overall tenor of commentary. But given the backdrop of falling unemployment and rising numbers in jobs, one wonders whether the government could have made more political capital out of its economic achievements.

Conclusion – some clear, some tentative

Lees-Marshment (2004: 396) remarks that political image management, ‘is about creating a credible product that will satisfy the user in order to achieve organisational goals’. And hopefully one cannot promote a clearly dubious political product, certainly not over a sustained period of time. However, the results from the preceding argument suggest that there are occasions when one cannot even spin a good one. Indeed, the first New Labour government – the so-called ‘sultans of spin’ – was not terribly effective in managing the coverage of (un)employment, an issue that was of crucial importance to its political future and on which it had a reasonably good record. This finding is in tune with those commentators who suggest that spin is not the dramatic and demonic threat to the body politic that it is often portrayed (Palmer 2002; McNair 2000). But it is testimony to the need for sustained attention to media output, if we are to get a true understanding of the processes involved – a practical but nevertheless an important consideration.

The conclusions that follow from the preceding analysis are also significant at a theoretical level. It is clear that we may hypothesise that the relationships outlined in Figure 4.1 may, indeed, be reciprocal, but we cannot assume either they are consistently symmetrical or uniform – this is true with respect to image management, elite dominance of political discourse, and the impact of coverage on the public. For instance, spin and political PR may be ubiquitous, but evidently they are not always effective, even in important areas like the economy. Likewise, elites may seek to, and may actually, dominate coverage as ‘primary definers’. But obviously this is not uniformly true, even in areas where there are strong vested interests. And, finally, it would also be wholly wrong to make assumptions about media influence. Meyer (2002: 2) states, ‘In the light of previous research on the reception of media texts, it would seem justified to *assume*

that those texts themselves provide a powerful input to *everyone* exposed to them, one that influences *all* further communication' (first emphasis original, the latter two mine). But the accumulated weight of research says otherwise. The influence of televisual unemployment news has only a weak and elliptical agenda-setting impact, i.e. somewhat counter-intuitively it influences the salience of the economy rather than that of unemployment (Gavin 2007: 81–84). The influence of economic news on citizens' attitudes towards the economy and the politicians who run it, is equally complex. There may be a consistent impact on economic and political attitudes, and this may be consistent over time and across different governments, but it is certainly *not* determinate, overpowering or uniform across the entire population (Gavin and Sanders 1996, 1998 and 2003; and especially Sanders and Gavin 2004). The picture, then, is exasperatingly complex, and the processes, dynamic and interactive. But it certainly implies that, when it comes to the relationship between the media, the political agenda and the policy process, we certainly ought to be sceptical of one-dimensional models of cause-and-effect that run in uniform directions.

One final point is perhaps worth making, though of necessity it has to be somewhat tentative. The coverage outlined in the preceding analysis did not necessarily reflect with much accuracy the state of the real economy. But neither was it overly influenced by the government or other political actors, a feature also noted by Howarth elsewhere in this volume. This is in stark contrast to the situation in the United States, as the analyses of Entman and his colleagues, and of Jones and Wolfe – also in this volume – attest. Significantly Entman *et al.* focus on the catastrophe that was the (second) Iraq War, and on the accountability gap opened as a function of the administration's ability to lead or manage the media agenda. It is perhaps no accident that in Britain – another participant in the war – the negative fallout for the government from its involvement happened sooner and was more profound, than it was in America. This may be partial testimony to the British government's *inability* to manage the agenda, the likes of which we also saw with respect to unemployment coverage. We might not always appreciate the pugnacity and independence of the British media, but herein perhaps lies some hope for its role within the British political process.

Appendix 4.1

Essence of the stories in which references to government responsibility (or culpability) figure:

Good news connections

New Deal Helps People Back to Work (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 5 January 1998)

New Deal to Get People into Work (ITN, *News at Ten*, 5 January 1998)

Grants to Car Industry Help Create Employment (ITN, *News at Ten*, 6 January 1998)

- Welfare to Work Programmes Helps 18–24 Year Olds off the Dole (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 3 February 1998)
- New Deal to Tackle Youth Unemployment (ITN, *News at Ten*, 11 February 1998)
- Education Investment Leads to More Teachers being Hired (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 12 February 1998)
- New Money Funds more Teacher's Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 12 February 1998)
- Chancellor Advocates Government Spending to Address Unemployment (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 20 February 1998)
- Budget Designed to Get People off Welfare and Back to Jobs (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 17 March 1998).
- Budget to Get People off Welfare and into Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 18 March 1998)
- New Deal Tackles Unemployment (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 6 April 1998)
- Extension of New Deal to Give Opportunities for Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 6 April 1998)
- New Deal Helps Long-term Unemployed to Find Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 29 June 1998)
- Education Spending will mean 6000 More Teachers (ITN, *News at Ten*, 15 July 1998)
- More Doctors and Nurses Jobs Promised (ITN, *News at Ten*, 16 July 1998)
- Scheme Helps Long-term Jobless Back to Work (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 24 August 1998)
- Government 'Noises' Prevents Royal Ballet Board Announcing Closure (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 9 September 1998)
- Government to Offer Package to Retrain People to get Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 16 September)
- New Agency Need to Help Re-employ Vickers Workers (ITN, *News at Ten*, 17 September 1998)
- Blocking of Gas-fired Power Station Building Saves Miner's Jobs (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 8 October 1998)
- Government Grants to the Car Industry may Prevent Plant Closure (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 27 November 1998)
- Government Claims Lowest Unemployment in 20 Years Proof of their Schemes (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 13 January 1999)
- Trade Secretary Pressures Rover to Keep Plant Open (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 8 February 1999)
- Government Financial Assistance will Help Rover Plant Stay Open (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 8 March 1999)
- Government to Intercede to Save Kvaerner Yard (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 14 April 1999)
- Chancellor Seeks Goal of Full Employment (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 27 September 1999)
- Government Spending Helps Recruit 11,000 New Police Officers (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 30 September 1999)

Bad news connections

- Refusal to Invest in Channel Tunnel Threatens Future of the Business (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 29 January 1998)
- Rescue Package Refusal Threatens Cornish Miner's Jobs (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 5 February 1998)
- Minimum Wage could Jeopardise Jobs and the New Deal (ITN, *News at Ten*, 28 May 1998)
- Government Decides to Close Down Dounreay Nuclear Power Plant (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 5 June 1998)
- Dounreay to Close (ITN, *News at Ten*, 5 June 1998)
- Scottish Secretary Closes Down Direct Labour Organisations (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 23 July 1998)
- Hague says Government Responsibility for High Interest Rates Causes Job Losses (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 4 September 1998)
- Fujitsu Decision to Shed Jobs Influenced by Government Policy (ITN, *News at Ten*, 4 September 1998)
- Government Fails to Prevent Computer Jobs Going (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 16 Sept 1998)
- Redwood says Government has Precipitated Closures in British Manufacturing (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 21 October 1998)
- Government Fails to Prevent Job Losses in 'Banana War' (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 4 March 1999)
- Pharmacy Jobs to go as Office of Fair Trading Changes Pricing Regime (ITN, *News at Ten*, 11 March 1999)
- Employers Claim Government's Raising of Minimum Wage will Cost Jobs (ITN, *News at Ten*, 1 April 1999)
- Change in Grant Maintained School Funding Arrangements Leads to Lay-offs (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 20 April 1999)
- SNP Claim Job Losses are Due to Government Mismanagement (ITN, *News at Ten*, 21 April 1999)
- No Help with Bridgend Jobs? (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 28 May 1999)
- Deputy PM Orders Closure of Coastguard Centres (ITN, *News at Ten*, 12 August 1999)
- Government to Close Remploi Factories, the UK's Biggest Employer of the Handicapped (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 27 August 1999)
- Government Promises no Compulsory Redundancies from Remploi factory Closures (ITN, *News at Ten*, 27 August 1999)
- New Jobs Cancelled as Deputy PM Blocks Development of a Cambridge Business Park (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 9 September 1999)
- Government will not Intervene to save Ellington Colliery (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 1 November 1999)
- Hope that Government will not Wash its Hands of Situation in Welsh Water Industry (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 9 December 1999)
- Package to Help Rover Broke EU Competition Rules (BBC, *Nine O'clock News*, 17 December 1999).

Notes

- 1 'Public Trust' (2003) YouGov. Online, available at: www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/TEL020101018_2.pdf.
- 2 The data are derived from a project titled 'Press, Television and Political and Economic Opinion in Britain' (ref. R000221336), and the generous support of the ESRC for this is gratefully acknowledged. In this context, (un)employment stories dealt with the following issues: closing/closure of business(es), (un)employment, jobs/jobless, redundancies, staff(ing), posts, work, axe, shut(ing)/open(ing)/set(ting) up of business(es), lay-off(s), or go(ing) bust/to the wall/out of business.
- 3 For a clearer sense of the coding structure see Gavin and Sanders (1998) and Sanders and Gavin (2004), or contact the author for more detail.
- 4 Technically speaking, this represents a regression line with the generic structure $y = a(x) + b$. Here 'a' is the gradient and 'b' the point where it hits the vertical axis. In mathematical terms the line minimises the sum of the squares of the distances between each observation and the line itself.
- 5 See Office for National Statistics website. Online, available at: www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/SAR_CC06.pdf.

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5 Knowledge culture and power

Biotechnology and the popular press

Pieter Maesele and Dimitri Schuurman

Introduction

At quiet times in mature democracies, the work of management proceeds with mechanical impersonality, as if people and politics scarcely mattered. It is far different in times of crisis, when a political apparatus feels the need to justify its utility and efficiency to the citizens it seeks to serve.

(Jasanoff 2005: 84)

This introductory quote could be referring to the recent frenzy at the European level concerning ‘climate change’ policy. In March 2007 after a two-day EU climate change and energy summit in Brussels, German chancellor Merkel was quoted saying: ‘This summit has allowed Europe to take up a proper vanguard role, making itself fully credible’, as were the words ‘historic’ and ‘revolutionary’ uttered by European Commission president Barroso and French president Chirac, respectively (Parker *et al.* 2007). In fact, the quote refers to another but very similar case: European biotechnology policy. The biotech watershed events of 1996/1997 – the birth of Dolly the cloned sheep and the import of Monsanto’s Roundup Ready Soya – marked the beginning of the ‘years of controversy’ in Europe in which there was heated public debate and a major overhaul of the European regulatory framework (Gaskell and Bauer 2001). Policy consequences like these are unique in the neo-liberal political and economic context of our high-tech knowledge societies in which the role of science and technology for innovation and social progress generally goes unquestioned, and resistance and critique to new technological evolutions and products are isolated by characterizing them as irrational incidents, driven by emotions, fears, and radical utopian goals of a minority of activists. In other words, resistance to new technologies is characterized as not in the public interest. This dominant ideological trait of our liberal democracies is constitutive of and is constituted by a technological power structure in which science institutes and industry, with the support of governments, blend into a ‘science-industrial complex’, which in its turn is sustained by a political-ideological consensus on the hegemonic idea of progress through technology.

Without assuming a causal link between policy-making and news reporting, the main research question of this chapter is whether we find evidence of

whether and to what extent the political-ideological consensus concerning technological power relations in our liberal democracies is found to be under pressure in public opinion on biotechnology, before linking this evidence to the policy culture. To this end, a snapshot of news reporting on biotechnology for three popular newspapers in the northern Dutch-speaking and most populous region of Belgium, Flanders, will be studied. In a first section of this chapter, it is discussed how a powerful science-industrial complex has developed itself relatively independent of state control. A second section deals with the media-sociological perspective with which the newspaper data will be investigated, a perspective drawing from social constructivism and the concept of framing. After discussing national and international surveys on public attitudes on biotechnology, a third section elaborates on data from a representation and metaphor analysis of popular press coverage of three biotech-applications in Flanders between January 2000 and October 2004, before concluding by discussing the status of the political-ideological consensus concerning biotechnology in public opinion and its relation to the policy culture concerning a biotech-application.

Social context

Clearly, science policy has become a matter of high politics, and world leaders are vying with one another to demonstrate support for research and development. This is consistent with the observation by sociologists of science and technology that a fundamental shift is currently in progress from the rusty industrial societies of the nineteenth century to the glistening, high-tech ‘knowledge societies’ of the twenty-first. In this new social configuration, knowledge has become the indispensable resource and state policymakers correspondingly must scramble both to produce more knowledge and to nurture better skilled workforces to capitalize on this increasingly valuable commodity.

(Jasanoff 2002: 363)

It is Sheila Jasanoff who has convincingly argued how bio(techno)logy and politics have converged across much of the industrialized world in her book *Designs on Nature* (2005) in which she compares the politics and policy of biotechnology in the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as the European Union as a whole. One of her main arguments is that democratic theory can no longer be understood without including the politics of science and technology. And it is biotechnology – also referred to as the life sciences – which has triggered this evolution:

All three countries, along with the European Union, were early enthusiasts for biotechnology, and all saw the need to move the results of bench science quickly into commerce in order to reap competitive advantages from their investments in the life sciences. This imperative led in each country to a re-examination of the tacit social contract between science and the state. More

specifically, each government had to reconsider a paradox that the social contract of the Vannevar Bush era had managed to mask. How could the ideal of an autonomous, value-free, and disinterested science be reconciled with a science that was at one and the same time economically productive and, especially in the case of the life sciences, a fertile source of medical, agricultural, and environmental innovation for a world straining to overcome the limits to growth?

(Jasanoff 2005: 226)

There has been a clear trend towards the privatization of scientific research during the last decades of the twentieth century as Western governments have recognized this as another interesting condition for stimulating economic growth. Biotechnology has developed its technological tools in a neo-liberal political and cultural climate in which the market-place and the ideals of competition are promoted as the most 'efficient' guiding principles in the social organization of society as is the policy of non-intervention by the state in the economy (Meyer 2006). In his cross-national approach, West (2007) describes how the deregulation of the public sector, technology transfers and subsequent university spin-offs, have led to a close collaboration between science and industry bringing both sectors together into a 'science-industrial complex' united by powerful economic interests in the promotion of biotechnology (see also Bauer and Gaskell 2002: 379–404). University campuses have become sites for industrial development, exemplified by biotech-valleys worldwide that group the biotech-departments of universities together with biotech-industries in one geographical location, as for instance in Ghent, Belgium. Governments – for whom technology has become an important export commodity as its contribution to trade and national development has been widely acknowledged – are usually broadly supportive of this evolution. West further argues that this development is global in nature and relatively independent of state control and as such has undermined the power and autonomy of the state in regulating biotechnology.

When nations place restrictions on biotechnology, it typically is due to a combination of religious and cultural forces that allow these countries to use social pressure as a mechanism for strong state capacity. In these cases, moral concerns lead the public sector to overcome lobbying from the science-industrial complex. As a political conflict moves from the technocratic area of low visibility and low public conflict to partisan and ideological conflict involving fundamental values, the greater visibility and salience of these subjects allows voters and politicians to place restraints on biotech innovation.

(2007: 133–134)

The arguments employed by the science-industrial complex to 'push for leniency in the rules of the game' (West 2007: 134) are, on the one hand, its potential for *economic growth* towards policy-makers, and on the other, towards the public, the necessity of *scientific progress* and innovation for its future well-

being. Kleinman emphasizes how the discourse of *technological progressivism* which equates technology to progress has been firmly established in our imagination, resulting in a common sense view that the development of new technology is a *natural* and *inevitable* process and thus inappropriate for social debate, thereby creating a discursive space for marginalizing critics as ‘Luddites, alarmists, and champions of technological stagnation’ (2005: 5). Social theorists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990) have both argued that in the conditions of late modernity the high-consequence modernization risks can only be ‘forced on’ the sciences ‘from the outside, by way of public recognition’ (Beck 1992: 160) and both point to social movements, through their radical engagement, to be at the vanguard of defining alternative technological futures and putting a check on the logic of unfettered technological innovation sustained by the hegemonic idea of progress through technology.

A media-sociological perspective

Dynamics of a technology movement

To conceptualize the role of the media in scientific and technological developments, it is necessary to juxtapose traditional science communication with a media-sociological perspective. Whereas a *conventional* science communication approach is aimed at answering the questions of what communication strategies and which type of media should be used to transmit which type of scientific knowledge to which segments of the public, a media-sociological approach argues instead that one should have a clear understanding of which type of science by way of which type of actors has more access to the media and social debate first (Maesele and Schuurman 2008; Verstraeten and Maesele 2006). Furthermore, drawing upon insights from social psychology (Flynn *et al.* 2001; Gaskell 2001; Wagner *et al.* 2002) and the sociology of science (Bucchi 1998; Irwin and Wynne 1996; Nowotny *et al.* 2001), this media-sociological approach views the relationship between science and the media from the perspective that science and scientific legitimation are not constituted a priori distribution to the public; on the contrary, they are achieved (‘constructed’) within the science communication process itself (Verstraeten 1996; Maesele and Schuurman 2008; Wynne 1992).

This media-sociological perspective corresponds with the research heuristic of the public sphere (of technology) by Bauer, Durant and Gaskell (Bauer and Gaskell 2002; Durant *et al.* 1998; Gaskell and Bauer 2001) which does not start from the assumption of a technological trajectory with a predestined teleology; on the contrary, it starts from the dynamics of a technology movement of strategic actors who mobilize support for particular representations, i.e. employ ideologies to construct a particular future. In this research heuristic the public sphere is conceived as a triangle of mediation between (a) policy and regulation, (b) media discourse and (c) public perceptions. Each of these three dimensions serves as input, output, or mediator variable for the other two, and the public sphere is the ultimate result of their intersection and mutual influence. For the

strategic actors engaged with biotechnology as a technology movement, not only regulation (government and administration) serves as a hurdle for the development of this technology, but also public opinion. The latter is represented by both the arena of the mass media and the arena of everyday perceptions and conversations. Examining both as parallel systems avoids making the argument that media discourse has a causal effect on public perceptions. Not reducing public opinion to polls or surveys is a vital aspect of this heuristic model, as media coverage is perceived by many actors to create an index of public opinion as well, which is the root cause for the active lobbying by the strategic actors of the technology movement to control media attention and frame the issue in favorable terms (see Nisbet and Huye 2006; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). But it is Matthew Nisbet who has most persuasively laid out the case for the last several years that in current science controversies communication has taken on the form of strategic or political communication as science, industry, political strategists, social movements and journalists selectively define (i.e. ‘frame’), technoscientific issues in ways that shape policy decisions, public attitudes, media discourse and political culture. His research has shown how power and participation is managed by framing because of its role in controlling public attention to an issue while simultaneously representing the issue in advantageous terms (Nisbet and Huye 2006).

If an interest group is favored by the status quo in policymaking, it is in their best interest to frame issues in highly technical and instrumental ways, since these interpretations deflect attention, and attract only narrow constituencies. But, on the other hand, if an interest group is disadvantaged by the status quo in policymaking, it is in their best interest to re-frame the issue in dramatic and often moral ways since these interpretations catalyze attention and mobilize a diversity of groups to take action to challenge the status quo. (Nisbet 2007)

Nisbet and Huye’s study on the media coverage of agricultural biotechnology proved especially valuable in providing some explanations to the low level of controversy surrounding the issue in the United States in comparison with the rest of the world. The framing of the issue in technical terms since early policy decisions appears as an important factor in limiting the scope of participation, and this is how a policy monopoly was established in administrative policy arenas. Eventually, the different strategic actors of the biotechnology movement are engaged in a constant struggle to strategically frame the issue in advantageous terms and shape policy, media discourse and public perceptions and their mutual influence in the public sphere.

Framing and news media

What news media do is offer a platform or a *public arena* for different ideological positions to confront each other through a framing contest. In this

process, media and news producers act as ‘managers’ of this public arena by employing the professional codes of journalism such as objectivity, impartiality and balance (Taylor and Willis 1999; van den Berg and van der Veer 1986). These codes guide the selection and construction of information, but they are not to be regarded as ‘neutral’ or ‘universal’ codes, as they work within a dominant ideological consensus that determines which facts, actors and views are ‘relevant’. These structural rules of access reflect power differences between groups and actors in society. In our late modern capitalist societies, news media operate within highly competitive markets in which they aim at the broadest possible audiences, which in turn implies a characterization of the news in terms of a certain social consensus (van den Berg and van der Veer, 1986). In this process, media do not reproduce the existing social consensus themselves, but they construct representations of an assumed consensus, and only when the latter is under attack is there is a margin for a possible shift in their criteria for determining relevant facts, actors and views in their role as managers of the public arena. In other words, the selection and construction of relevant information is regulated by professional codes that bring about a certain type of ideological representations, which has been characterized as constituting a ‘preferred meaning’ (Hall *et al.* 1978). This means that these codes have been interpreted in terms of an assumed consensus about which interests are relevant or acceptable to the public interest.

The framing concept is particularly worthwhile for investigating these processes. Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 3) have provided us with a most useful definition of this concept: frames are central organizing ideas ‘for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue’, and Nisbet and Huges (2006) have added how this central organizing idea persuasively packages or ‘wraps up’ a complex message by focusing on certain interpretations over others. But frames, interpreted as persuasive story lines, should not be equated to one-sided issue positions. It is more helpful to consider them as persuasive possibilities, or even opportunities, for supporting, legitimizing and naturalizing ideological meanings tied to certain interests and norms of behavior. Framing, then, functions as the persuasive element of ideology in maintaining or challenging hegemonic positions. Therefore, framing contests do not take place on a level playing field: frames construct meanings which, in turn, serve certain interests. Frame sponsorship and framing contests are shaped by the distribution of economic, political and cultural resources, and are related to questions of social and political power (Carragee and Roefs 2004; Gamson 2003: ix; Nisbet and Lewenstein 2002). Carragee and Roefs (2004: 222) distinguish the ‘uncontested’ from the ‘contested’ realm of media discourse. In the former, particular frames are so dominant that they are taken to be ideologically neutral or *common sense* reflections of the social world, although this dominance is clearly the product of ideological enterprise. In the latter, challengers to the status quo such as social movements have succeeded in contesting these dominant frames by igniting an interpretive struggle by way of prominently displaying their counter-hegemonic frames.

Frame sponsorship, ideology and biotechnology

William Gamson has emphasized how the frames present in an issue culture, like biotechnology, belong to a wider political culture consisting of ideologies (Gamson 1992). He proposes a heuristic concept of cultural themes that exist in a dialectical relationship with counterthemes. The themes are safe and conventional and constitute the mainstream hegemonic ideas in society. They are challenged by counterthemes that are adversarial, contentious and oppositional, and sponsored by challenger groups in society. For instance, concerning the relationship between nature and technology, *scientific progress* represents the safe theme, while *Pandora's Box* is part of the adversarial countertheme. Concerning the relationship between state and economy, the *economic prospects* frame represents the conventional theme, whereas *public accountability* represents the adversarial countertheme. The conventional themes of *scientific progress* and *economic progress* are advocated by the science-industrial complex and are pro-(commercial) biotechnology. They originate from an ideological position that is grounded on the assumption that the development and introduction of biotechnology is a *normal* element of an *inevitable natural* scientific and economic development that serves the public interest. Therefore, the interests of scientific biotech-institutes and the biotech-industry are public interests and the disruption of this natural process by 'excessive' government regulation or collective actions by social movements or other pressure groups disturb scientific and economic progress and thus serve nobody's interests. In our late modern liberal democracies this dominant ideology provides the general problem definition for social conflicts like science-technological controversies. Frames like *ethical*, *Pandora's box* or *public accountability*, on the other hand, put forward scientific or economic development as a contested object of which the direction is steered by certain agents, thereby allowing an ideological position from which to question the structure of technological power relations and to call for regulation to put a check on unfettered technological innovation, whether for ethical or social reasons.

Public attitudes

National surveys indicate a public consensus concerning biomedical applications and reproductive cloning applications, of which the former are supported by a majority of Belgians and the latter firmly rejected (Claeys *et al.* 2004; van Brabander 2003: 38–45). On the other hand, agricultural biotechnology is shrouded in controversy: public attitudes are clearly ambivalent. A comparison with earlier surveys not only confirms these tendencies but also indicates a strengthening with time. The desirability of biomedical and agricultural biotechnology is clearly evolving in opposite directions. Recent European surveys such as 'Europeans and Biotechnology in 2005' (Gaskell *et al.* 2006) and 'Social Values, Science and Technology' (European Commission 2005: 81–84) validate the above results as Belgians appear as the most supportive residents concerning

biomedical biotechnology applications and as relatively strong opponents to the cloning of human beings. When it comes to agricultural applications, Belgian citizens find themselves on the European average, which is fairly low as only about a quarter of respondents think GM foods should be encouraged.

Research question

This differential pattern in public attitudes in Belgium towards biomedical, agricultural and reproductive cloning applications leads us to splitting the broader biotechnology topic into these three different applications for further analyses. To answer the research question of this chapter whether and to what extent we find the political-ideological consensus concerning technological power relations in the case of biotechnology under pressure in public opinion, our popular press analysis will focus, first, on the presence of challenger groups, adversarial counterthemes, risks, and negative evaluations in the case of biomedical, agricultural and reproductive cloning applications, and second, on the presence of metaphorical links to potentially threatening cultural narratives.

Methodology

Data collection

Based on figures published by the Belgian Centre for Information about Media (CIM), the three Flemish newspapers with the largest amount of readers were selected for this study: *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Gazet van Antwerpen*. In our opinion, it is very important to also map out the representation of biotechnology in the newspapers that are read by most Flemish people, instead of focusing only on the elite press, which is common in the literature but limits the amount of readers. Especially the fact that we want to relate these representations in newspaper coverage to trends in public attitudes (i.e. ‘mass opinion’, see Entman and Herbst 2001) counts as an important factor in our choice. In our further analyses, we are not interested in differences between these three newspapers. By using the aggregated data only, we aim at producing a data set that is independent of possible idiosyncrasies of any single source. For a time span from 1 January 2000 to 31 October 2004 inclusive, a Mediargus (Belgian and Dutch digital press databank) keyword search was run on the Dutch equivalents of ‘Biotech*’, ‘GMO’ and ‘Cloning’. After discarding duplicates and non-applicable articles our total population consists of 506 articles.

Coding scheme

First, the articles were divided according to application. Biotech-applications are generally distinguished by a certain color: *red* biotechnology refers to biomedical applications and *green* biotechnology to agri-food applications (GMOs, GM crops or food). The third option is *reproductive cloning*, the term used to

describe the creation of genetically identical individuals or specimens, of which Dolly the cloned sheep serves as a primary example. If an article could not clearly be assigned to one of these categories, it was allocated to a fourth ('general biotechnology'), which will not be of further interest. Second, their contents were classified into the following six categories: scientific research, legislative discussions or announcements, public opinion in terms of protest activities or opinions, industry/marketing, training/education and the residual category 'other'. Third, the main protagonist of the actions described and the most frequently cited source were coded as 'actor' and 'cited actor', respectively. The categories here are science and industry for the science-industrial complex, governments and public sector agencies, pressure groups, individual citizens and international regulatory institutions. Fourth, articles were coded according to their main frame to interpret the reported events: either we register the conventional themes of *scientific progress* and *economic progress* as advocated by the science-industrial complex, or the adversarial counterthemes *ethical*, *Pandora's box* or *public accountability* (see Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Durant *et al.* 1998). The negligible presence of the frames *runaway*, *nature/nurture* or *globalization* warrants their absence from further analysis. Fifth, after registering whether an article associated specific risks and/or benefits with an application, these two variables were then reassigned to the 'balance' variable, directly indicating whether or not an article presented only risks, only benefits, both, or neither. Sixth, for the variable 'evaluation', a three-point scale (positive, neutral, or negative) was used to assess the article's standpoint regarding the application. Intercoder agreement between these variables was tested by way of the Kappa statistic on a 20 percent sample of the population of articles. Our Kappa values range from 0.72 to 0.94 which shows that we have a good agreement among our two coders (see Altman 1991: 404). Last, it was also coded whether an article used 'metaphors' to describe any biotechnology activities, processes or parts thereof, as to enable a metaphor analysis.

Representation analysis

Literature

The most comprehensive research project on the representation of biotechnology in the public sphere is the 'Life Sciences in European Society' or LSES-project – funded by the European Commission – in which a longitudinal analysis of elite press coverage for the period between 1973 and 1999 was conducted in 15 European countries, Belgium not included (Bauer and Gaskell 2002; Durant *et al.* 1998; Gaskell and Bauer 2001). Our own study is partly based on this research project but covers the period from 2000 to 2004 – which means our analysis starts when the LSES research stops – and focuses on the representation in the popular press. The LSES data demonstrate a clear difference in representation in the period before the watershed years 1996/1997 and after. The events surrounding the import of Monsanto's Roundup Ready Soya and the birth of Dolly the

cloned sheep mark a spike in the intensity of coverage for biotechnology, next to a differentiation. Whereas analyses of the 24-year period from 1973 to 1996 emphasize the gradual increase in the intensity of a rather homogeneous press coverage, which is predominantly positive and about red biotechnology (Gut-teling *et al.* 2002: 95–128), the analyses concentrating on the latter half of the 1990s in particular observe a ‘crystallization of two different plots’ (Bauer *et al.* 2001: 35–52): red biotechnology is represented as beneficial, while green is represented as problematic and risky. Reproductive cloning gradually appears in the European elite press after the birth of Dolly and is primarily represented as an ethical issue, i.e. too important to leave it to the scientists. The authors conclude that the elite press in Europe ‘seems to show the emergence of an international plot in the theatre of biotechnology, with clear assignments of who is playing what role’ (Bauer *et al.* 2001: 43).

Results

In terms of the intensity of popular press coverage, reproductive cloning (184 articles; 36 percent) appears as the most frequently covered topic, followed by red (156 articles; 31 percent) and green biotechnology (133 articles; 26 percent). While the red–green proportion is similar to the LSES studies, the large number of articles covering reproductive cloning is remarkable. This is mainly due to the ‘race of announcements’ about the first cloned baby between the ‘human cloning company’ Clonaid (a spin-off from the Raëlian sect), the Italian professor Antinori and the American professor Zavos. These announcements appeared to constitute another watershed event for reproductive cloning, as many actors in the (bio-)technology movement felt compelled to react. Taking a look at covered news activities (Figure 5.1), we find a similar picture with red biotechnology and reproductive cloning: coverage focuses on scientific research with legislation coming far behind, totaling almost 80 percent in both cases. In the case of green biotechnology, we find coverage focusing on legislation or opinions and protest instead, with scientific research coming only third. This clearly signals that coverage concerning agricultural biotechnology is not focusing on the science, but on the challenges and counterchallenges between protests, opinions and legislation, indicating a social conflict. In the case of the coverage of actors and the quoting of sources (Figures 5.3 and 5.4), again we find similar patterns with red applications and reproductive cloning focusing on science and industry, while in the case of green applications pressure groups in the form of environmental and consumer organizations have succeeded in becoming the most covered actors and most quoted sources. The latter results are reflected in the frames with which news events are interpreted (Figure 5.2): whereas red and cloning are primarily framed in terms of *scientific progress* (and in the case of cloning also a highly featured *ethical* frame), green is framed by the adversarial counterthemes of *public accountability* and *Pandora’s Box*. The similarities between red and cloning, however, disappear in the case of benefits and risks on the one hand (Figure 5.5), and evaluation on the other (Figure 5.6). Whereas red

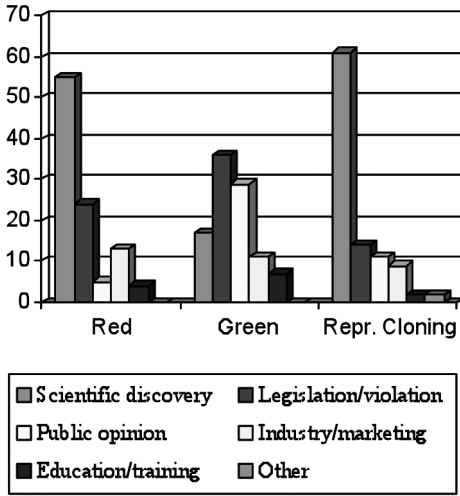


Figure 5.1 Application by content.

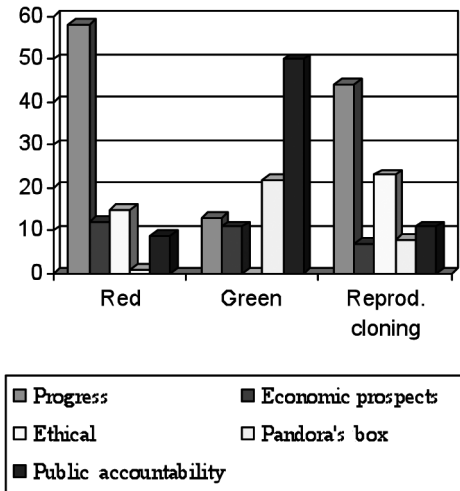


Figure 5.2 Application by frame.

biotechnology is represented primarily as a benefit-only and positively evaluated story, green and cloning are accompanied with a similar amount of risks and benefits next to a negative evaluation.

These results point to the fact that the political-ideological consensus in our popular press data is firm in the case of red biotechnology, but is heavily under fire in the case of its green counterpart, in which coverage is populated by social

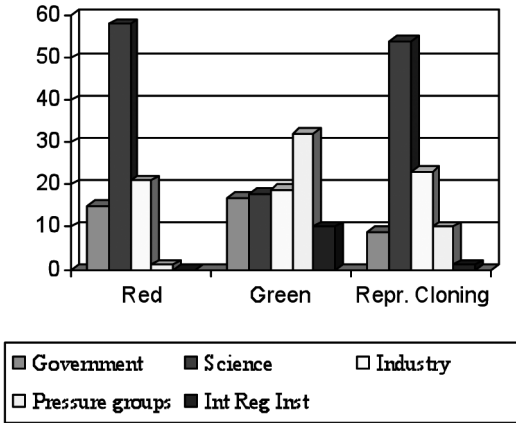


Figure 5.3 Application by actor.

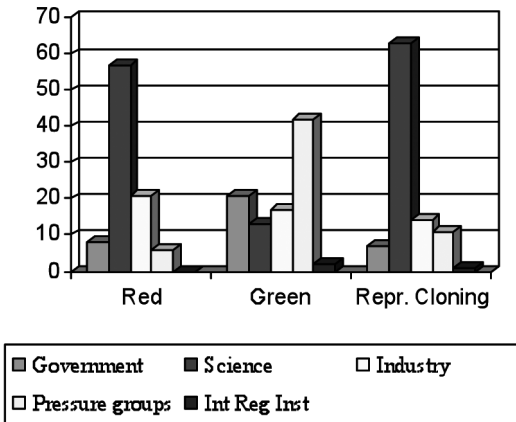


Figure 5.4 Application by cited actor.

movements and framed not as a matter of *scientific progress* but as a matter of *public accountability* and inherent dangers in the deployment of the technology, thereby demanding government intervention. There is every sign of a social conflict in the case of agricultural applications. On the other hand, whereas reproductive cloning is framed in terms of *scientific progress* or a case of *ethical boundaries*, progress in this case is hardly evaluated positively or as without its risks, quite the contrary.

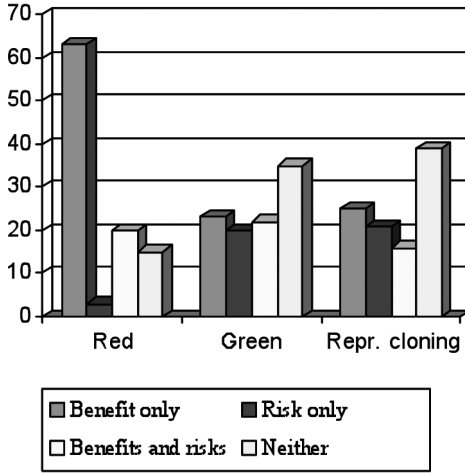


Figure 5.5 Application by benefits and risks.

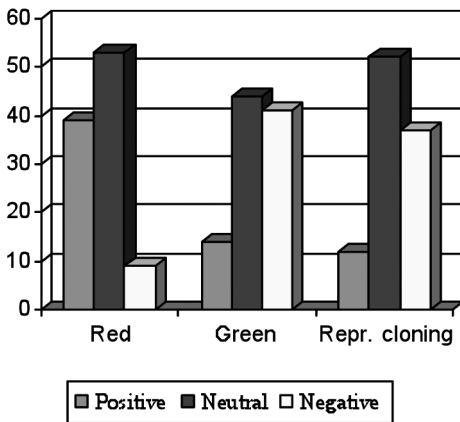


Figure 5.6 Application by evaluation.

Metaphor analysis

Literature

Research on the representation of biotechnology in the mass media often stresses the importance of metaphors in science communication, the public understanding of science, and the relationship between science and the media (see, for example, Christidou *et al.* 2004: 348–349; Hellsten 2002; Larson *et al.* 2005: 245; Liakopoulos 2002: 8; Nelkin 1994; Väliverronen 2004: 363–364). Rather

than presenting rational arguments, metaphors create and evoke images in readers' minds that echo existing cultural narratives. Information processing research and cognitive psychology have shown that people generally use cognitive shortcuts or 'heuristics' to reduce the complexity of decision making processes (see Shrum and O'Guinn 1993; Shrum 2001), whereby especially affective impressions play a direct and primary role in motivating behavior. The 'affect heuristic' underlies our 'experiential' mode of thinking which:

Encodes reality in images, metaphors, and narratives to which affective feelings have become attached. . . All the images in people's minds are tagged or marked to varying degrees with affect. An individual's 'affect pool' contains all of the positive and negative markers associated (consciously or unconsciously) with the images. The intensity of the markers varies with the images. People consult or 'sense' the affect pool in the process of making judgments. (Slovic *et al.* 2005: 36–37)

This implies that risk and benefit judgments are not just based on how people rationally evaluate a technology, but also on how they feel about it: risks will be judged as less significant and benefits as more significant when people have positive feelings towards an activity, and vice versa. Wagner *et al.* (2002: 325) suggest that when a society is confronted with techno-scientific innovations which are perceived as potentially threatening, mass-mediated representations trigger a process of collective symbolic coping in which this new phenomenon is accommodated 'within the existing repertoires of social knowledge, [by way of which] various interpretations, images, and metaphors [will] emerge in media and conversations which render it intelligible'. While experts working in the relevant area draw from scientific resources in an analytic mode of thinking, the general public will draw from everyday life, common sense and public communication resources from their experiential ways of knowing. After a claim of social relevance is construed, a new technology will be accompanied by a diversity of interpretations which are metaphorically linked to pre-existing knowledge. Eventually this diversity will *converge* into a 'new conventionalized interpretation' which becomes part of the common sense in the form of an image or a metaphor. This image or metaphor is determined by the experiential validation of the collectivity, not by any measures of scientific accuracy, but by plausibility. This means that a collectivity in the midst of a symbolic coping process will be characterized by a higher number of 'fantasy-filled' and 'menacing image-beliefs' than in a pre- or post-coping stage. As soon as the political controversy fades and the issue is no longer high on the media-agenda, the prominence of menacing and fantasy-filled images decreases.

A metaphor analysis covering a specific period can thus highlight certain 'conventionalized' metaphors that have managed to survive the convergence stage and are therefore encountered frequently. Previous studies on metaphors and biotechnology have mostly categorized metaphors on the basis of their source domain (see, for example, Liakopoulos 2002; Christidou *et al.* 2004;

Väliverronen 2004). In the metaphor 'A is B', A is the target domain into which the meaning of the source domain B is projected. So in the phrase 'a clone is a copy', properties of the source domain 'copy' lend meaning to the concept 'clone'. By equating a clone to a copy, one infers that clones look the same and behave the same, as in a genuine copy. In this study, which takes a different approach, the metaphors are grouped according to their target domain. This enables us to consider the source domains by which they are given meaning. This also allows us to have a clear insight into how exactly a new technology is linked by which source domain to pre-existing knowledge.

Results

Of the 506 articles selected, 202 contain a total of 400 metaphors. Thus, 40 percent of the articles contain one or more metaphors. From our data, five distinct target domains emerged (see Table 5.1).

Conventionalized metaphors in the Flemish popular press between 2000 and 2004 turn out to be: biotechnology as a kind of agriculture or horticulture, cloning being a prolongation or renewal of life, a clone being a copy, cloning as eternal life, GMOs referring to Frankenstein, organs being replaceable machine parts, and genes and cells being machines or a code. When considering the valence of the metaphors, some remarkable differences emerge between the different target domains. The target domains genetic manipulation and GMOs are colored by menacing images. It is clear that in the case of GMOs (green biotechnology) the affect pool is filled with negative images. This suggests that Flanders is in the midst of a collective symbolic coping process concerning green biotechnology in which GM food as 'Frankenfood' and to a lesser extent 'GMOs as viruses' have become conventionalized metaphors and constitute more than half of the metaphors used to cope with the target domain of GMOs. The debates on the labeling of GM food in supermarkets and the successful campaigning for 'GMO-free municipalities' by pressure groups constitute the elements for a political controversy and create a sense of emergency, which subsequently puts pressure on society to symbolically cope with this new and potentially threatening technology.

This trend is less clear cut with cloning in which fantasy-filled metaphors referring to a longer, renewed or eternal life are balanced by menacing metaphors referring to clones as copies and monsters. Nonetheless, the huge amount of metaphors concerning cloning (146) also indicate a state of symbolic coping concerning reproductive cloning with conventionalized metaphors such as 'cloning is the prolongation and renewal of life', 'a clone is a copy' and to a lesser extent 'cloning means eternal life'. The valence of these metaphors is not straightforward, although source domains as supernatural, monstrous and nightmarish, Jurassic Park, unnatural, and clone doctors as clowns and cowboys do not paint a positive picture. The metaphors which could be deemed to create positive images (renewed, eternal life, or religious) are almost of a utopian nature inferring the meaning that cloning is fictitious. Scientists and individuals transferring this to reality are subsequently metaphorically linked to source domains as cowboys and clowns. It is more difficult to relate

Table 5.1 Metaphors grouped by target domain

<i>Target domain</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Biotechnology	44
Biotechnology is agriculture or horticulture	27
Biotechnology is science fiction/a futuristic science whose contents are out of touch with reality	7
Biotechnology is a weapon or means of defense against disease	4
Biotechnology is a nightmare or horror scenario	3
Biotechnology is an existing technology/science which is merely better controllable	2
Biotechnology is a 'slippery slope'	1
Cloning	196
Cloning is a prolongation of life or a renewed life	45
A clone is a copy	44
Cloning means eternal life	26
Cloning is a way of granting a person his or her life again	14
Cloning is something religious or supernatural	13
Cloning is described as monstrous and nightmarish	11
Cloning is Jurassic Park	6
A clone is not a monster	5
Cloning means turning back the clock or enjoying eternal youth	5
Cloning is unnatural	4
Cloning is an art	4
The doctor who clones is the parent of the clone	3
Doctors who clone are clowns	3
A clone is not a copy	3
A clone is a 'superbeing'	3
Cloning is taking a cutting from a plant	2
Doctors who clone are cowboys	2
Cloning is an adventure	1
Cloning is a numbers game	1
Cloning is letting the genie out of the bottle	1
Genetic manipulation	34
Genetic manipulation is a Nazi practice	10
Use of the 'designable' human metaphor	9
Genetic manipulation is tampering, tinkering or engaging in an illegal activity	8
Genetic manipulation is 'Brave New World'	6
Genetic manipulation is an activity pursued by Saddam Hussein	1
GMOs	46
Use of the 'Frankenstein' metaphor	22
GMOs are viruses	7
GMOs are pollutants	4
GMOs are a miracle	2
GMOs are weeds	2
GMOs are a time bomb	2
The battle against GMOs is a witch hunt	2
The battle against GMOs is a crusade	2
Consuming GMOs is a dangerous game of chance	1
GMOs are a dream	1
The battle against GMOs is tantamount to pillorying	1
Genes, organs, DNA	80
Organs are (replaceable) machine parts	23
Genes/cells are machines	16
DNA and genes are a collection of letters from a common code	16
Recording genes is making a map	11
Genes are the building blocks of life	6
Genes are our identity card	2
Genes are commodities	2
Genetic stock	1
DNA is a musical composition	1
Genes are playing-cards	1
Genes are living beings	1

the other target domains to any of our specific biotechnology topics. And except for the case of genetic manipulation, the target domains of 'biotechnology' and 'genes, organs, or DNA' are not characterized by an abundance of menacing or fantasy-filled images.

Conclusion

In a social context in which a science-industrial complex sustained by a political-ideological consensus on the hegemonic idea of progress through technology has developed itself relatively independent of state control, policy-making and regulation will only be found to be able to restrain its development when this political-ideological consensus is found to be under attack. Whereas there have been numerous efforts around the world to ban reproductive cloning (Australia, the United Kingdom, many states of the United States, and – however nonbinding – declarations at European and UN level) the – political – controversy was usually about how to allow therapeutic cloning (which serves medical purposes) while simultaneously banning reproductive human cloning. The basic principle of both is the same, but the eventual goal is different: therapeutic cloning refers to the cloning of specific body parts and organs for medical purposes, where reproductive cloning refers to full-grown genetically identical copies. The ethical implications are thus very different. On the other hand, agricultural biotechnology has indeed led to a genuine social conflict with profound political and economic implications. In Europe, a so-called 'de facto moratorium' on the commercialization of new GM crops was in place from 1999 to 2004 during which there was a thorough renewal of the regulatory framework. Today, the EU has implemented one of the most stringent process-based regulatory regimes worldwide (Devos *et al.* 2008).

The accommodating policy culture for biomedical applications is accompanied by a public opinion in which, first, public attitudes are found to be very supportive, and second, popular press coverage construes representations of a social consensus on the scientific and economic progress as delivered by the science-industrial complex. On the other hand, the political-ideological consensus is found to be severely under attack in the case of agricultural applications, in terms of popular press coverage in which challenger groups have succeeded in contesting the dominant frames of scientific and economic progress by igniting an interpretive struggle, resulting in a 'contested' realm of media discourse with adversarial counterthemes that call for government regulation and that question the power structure of current technological power relations. Ecological organizations in Europe have succeeded in reframing the issue in dramatic terms and in expanding the scope of participation. A European Union still seeking public credibility and trust has responded favorably to these framings (Jasanoff 2005). Furthermore, the menacing images concerning GMOs as 'Frankenfoods' and 'viruses' display a negative mood which goes beyond the mere mentioning of risks. These risks and other features of the text are clearly interpreted in the light of the metaphors linking this application to pre-existing knowledge emphasizing fatal consequences. With ambivalent public attitudes and a negative popular

press in which the science-industrial complex is losing (or has lost?) the interpretive struggle, public opinion indeed looks like a hurdle to making GM crops or food a successful story, at least in Flanders. Although at first sight the worldwide condemned application of reproductive cloning is found to be predominantly represented through the hegemonic idea of progress through technology, progress in this case is found to be negatively evaluated and imbued with risks. Here, we do not find explicit calls for more regulation in terms of counterthemes, probably because reproductive cloning had not yet spawned an industry nor was there a perceived lack of political will to prohibit this application. And second, the metaphor analysis brings to light a mass of fantasy-filled and menacing metaphors, which indicates that this application arouses popular imagination to a large extent and displays a struggle to metaphorically link reproductive cloning to experiential knowledge and previous cultural narratives perceived as potentially threatening. The almost unanimous rejection in public attitudes and an ambivalence to negative popular press makes public opinion in the case of reproductive cloning as much a hurdle as with agricultural applications.

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6 Aid organizations, governments and the media

The critical role of journalists in signaling authority recognition

Matthias Ecker-Ehrhardt

In the face of humanitarian crises, the responsibility to help by civil or military means represents a major issue of public debate. Because of uncertainty regarding the scale of human suffering, its local context, and causes, societies abroad are in great need of credible information and interpretations about what crises ‘mean to them’, in terms of their own capacities and duties. The media play a key role in providing an infrastructure to disseminate such meaning, but in order to convince their audiences of the credibility of death tolls, moral obligations, and effective means available to mitigate suffering, they need to refer to trustworthy and competent sources. This is where a variety of international governmental and non-governmental organizations (IGOs/INGOs) like United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) gets extensive coverage by mass media, as humanitarian ‘authorities’ who compensate for the lack of interpretational certainty of journalists and their audiences.

Following the sociological line of reasoning about ‘authority’ as a certain mode of power, these organizations are influential actors in contemporary humanitarian politics – not in terms of coercion or incentives, but with respect to the willingness of people to be influenced by the interpretations and prescriptions of these actors. In this vein, the chapter addresses the topic of a bi-directional, elite-media linkage from the vantage point of international relations scholars’ common intuition that the locus of authority in the international realm has shifted to a remarkable extent from states to a heterogeneous patchwork of governmental and non-governmental actors. Media actors, I contend, play an important role in the construction and reproduction of these ‘new’ authorities. By privileging one source over others, journalists help to bring about and reify the shared recognition of a variety of governmental and non-governmental actors as authoritative, among them major IGOs like UNHCR or the World Food Programme and INGOs like Oxfam, MSF or CARE.

To make this point, the chapter proceeds in two steps. First, I introduce the concept of authority as a certain mode of power and discuss its communication in terms of ‘authority talk’. Second, I focus more narrowly on the role of authority talk in the context of mass media coverage of humanitarian crises. For some sort of ‘plausibility probe’, I draw recurrently on a reconstructive analysis of the

authority talk found in the coverage of the Darfur crisis in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. With respect to such coverage, the media–politics linkage is commonly perceived to prove a simple ‘indexing hypotheses’, namely, the conjecture that the decision-making power of political elites is what makes them the dominant sources of reporting. Nevertheless, as can be shown, governments are repeatedly introduced as authoritative sources on humanitarian matters. In addition, the analysis provides some evidence for my claim that media coverage reflects authority recognition of humanitarian IGOs/INGOs to a remarkable extent as well. Therefore, ‘power indexing’ yields at best only a partial understanding of the media–politics linkage; journalistic authority talk thus becomes an important part of humanitarian crisis coverage by mass media. Some final conclusions about the fruitfulness of such an approach for the issues of ‘media power’ and the ‘world polity’ are drawn, and some possible routes for future research are suggested.

Authority, communication and world politics

Locating authority in a multi-centric world

A plethora of international governmental and non-governmental organizations (IGOs and INGOs) play prominent roles on the world political stage today. As more than a decade of international relations (IR) research has been keen to demonstrate, these organizations influence other actors’ definitions of political problems, the public perception of causes, and the probability of achieving certain outcomes through the available political means. IGOs and INGOs help to formulate international or private regulatory standards and verify compliance or non-compliance by a variety of addressees, ranging from nation-states, over companies to other international organizations. Some IGOs and INGOs are even able to effectively sanction inappropriate behavior by convincing states or consumers to redirect financial support.¹ This influence has been applauded by most observers as a trend towards a more legitimate and effective ‘cosmopolitan order’ (Held 1995) in which universal human rights have become the constitutional grid of world political debate (United Nations 2000). Others, conversely, have spelled out how democratic institutions might be undermined by these actors, and how societies may become increasingly critical of their role internationally (see, for instance, Grant and Keohane 2005; Zürn *et al.* 2007).

What is striking in this respect is the role of recognition, which is necessary, in order for these organizations to be powerful at all. Insofar as most of them lack considerable financial resources, market power, or any control over the means of military coercion, their power hinges on the willingness of others to accept their definitions, explanations, or prescriptions as true, adequate, and rightful. Therefore, their increase in power has been convincingly described by the term ‘authority’, indicating a certain kind of power that is based on recognition (Cutler 1999; Cutler *et al.* 1999; Higgott *et al.* 2000; Wolf 2005). Through a far-reaching *authority shift*, it is said, the locus of rule has been dispersed over a

variety of actors. From an institutionalist perspective on global order, an unfolding 'world authority structure' (Boli and Thomas 1999) has started to transform the classic nation-state system into a hybrid, 'multi-centric world' (Rosenau 1990, 1997; Mathews 1997).

To understand its mechanisms – and the crucial role of media therein – it is imperative to carefully clear the meaning of 'having authority' in this context. Following a Weberian taxonomy, 'authority' defines a certain mode of control in which 'the willing unconditional compliance of a group of people rests upon their shared beliefs that it is legitimate for the superior ... to impose his will upon them and that it is illegitimate for them to refuse obedience' (Blau 1963: 307). Based on the recognition of an authority, therefore, a subject may obey a command or instruction irrespective of alternative modes of social control like coercion, incentives, or persuasion (Weber 1980; Blau 1963; Hurd 1999; Hall and Biersteker 2002). While a lack of recognized authority may be compensated for by the use of force or bribes, habitual – i.e. unquestioned and uncritical – compliance becomes the 'purest expression of authority' (Rosenau 1998: 13; Blau 1963: 307).

The common terminology of 'will' and 'command' here is unfortunate, however, because it restricts the use of the concept to situations where preferences for action are more or less directly coordinated in densely institutionalized hierarchies. Instead, Pierre Bourdieu (1991), like others, has pointed to the 'horizontal' power of societal actors like priests, experts, or teachers, which hinges on the shared recognition in a given social setting and can therefore be understood in terms of a broadened perception of authority. Accordingly the power attributed to IGOs and INGOs to 'shape the frames that orient other actors' (Boli and Thomas 1999: 15) can best be conceptualized as a non-hierarchical variant of discursive authority (Arts 2003).

To make full use of such a broadened concept it is essential, though, to differentiate 'authority' from the 'persuasiveness' of given content. It is important to be clear on this point, because the widely perceived 'authority shift' in world politics comes with a second phenomenon, namely, the rising demand for and supply of communicational linkages in world politics vis-à-vis processes of intensified cross-border activities by societal and political actors. In this context, NGOs and international institutions become, it is said, 'structural foci of universalistic discourse and debate' (Boli 1999: 299). Accordingly, what makes them powerful for many is the growing ability of these institutions to formulate and distribute compelling arguments to a broadened, almost global audience (Risse 2000: 19; Deitelhoff and Müller 2005). Nevertheless, studies on the psychology of persuasion have argued that people operate as 'cognitive misers' (Taylor and Fiske 1978) and 'lazy organisms' (McGuire 1985; Zaller 1992) and tend to ignore most of the information given in a message. Instead they focus on peripheral cues to gauge the credibility of the source (Hovland *et al.* 1959; Cacioppo and Petty 1986; Chaiken *et al.* 1996; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Even Jürgen Habermas (1981) as the most prominent advocate of 'the power of the better argument' admits that authority is a crucial surplus of functional differentiation,

because it relaxes the actors' duty to give compelling reasons (Habermas 1981: 384–419).

Accordingly, an actor's 'soft power' (Nye, Jr. 2004) in world politics should at least be expected to be a mixture of content-related resonance of 'good' arguments and actor-related authority to be heard and taken seriously. Although transnational or international organizations may be influential in both ways, for an analysis of a changing world political order it is imperative to determine whether and how those organizations succeed in transforming their situative control over persuasive content into 'habitualized' authority, that is, an actor-specific persuasiveness based on the shared recognition of particular actors as credible (trustworthy, competent) sources.

Signaling recognition by 'authority talk'

But how does such actor-specific persuasiveness come into being? In order to address the role of the media in the production and reproduction of authority, let me turn to the matter of authority talk, that is, communication practices that signal the recognition of authority to a mass audience. Due to these practices, I contend, media actors are capable of teaching their readers or viewers whom to recognize. With respect to this issue, I focus on two of these practices, namely, appealing to authority and authority-selective gate-keeping.

First, the recognition of authority is signaled in a communication by *appealing to authority*, that is, statements in the form of 'P is true, right or truthful, because x said it' – the classical *argumentum ad verecundiam* (Fogelin and Sinnott-Armstrong 2005). In this function, authorities represent a maximally efficient means of simplifying political communication because third parties can use them (authorities) whenever they themselves (third parties) lack crucial authority on a specific issue under debate. Appeals to authority as parts of complex arguments are common in communicative settings (e.g. assemblies, committee or board meetings). In the public sphere, mass media transport arguments by other actors in which appeals to authority are uttered. Moreover, journalists play an important role as commentators who take sides on politically important issues themselves and argue with reference to certain authorities in the respective field.

Second, authority recognition can be signaled by *authority-selective gate-keeping*. In this vein, Karl W. Deutsch (1963: chapter 10.5) considered authority to be the 'successful claim for preferential treatment of messages and commands because of their source'. In virtually all central forums of the political process such gate-keeping becomes institutionalized in professional roles, for instance, those of chairpersons or moderators who select statements based upon the recognition of their sources as competent and trustworthy. Insofar as such recognition plays a role in this selection process, the ensemble of participants of political debates (as sources of statements) reflects societal authority structures to a certain – though varying – extent. This holds especially with respect to journalistic routines. To safeguard the credibility of the single media organization, the

attribution of information to authoritative sources is a crucial ingredient of the ‘objectivity ritual’ (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 92; Tuchman 1972; Gans 1980). In this way, the attribution to journalistic sources defines a functional equivalent of the *argumentum ad verecundiam* qua ‘neutral reporting’.

Both types of authority talk, I contend, reproduce authority relationships insofar as these practices signal recognition of authority in the public realm. The empirical analysis of authority talk is therefore of major scientific interest in at least two ways. First of all, journalists are well-trained experts in public authority talk, who have developed a professional sense of who belongs to the ‘credibility hierarchy’ (Ploughman 1997) of their respective audiences and who does not. Therefore, the analysis of journalists’ authority talk should yield important information about shifting authorities in an upcoming ‘multi-centric world’. Second, the media play a key role in ‘teaching’ authority to their audiences. While the credibility of the media is a major outcome of the objectivity ritual, the basic technique of ‘naming credible sources’ also makes the media an important factor in the public production and reproduction of authority relationships. By introducing authority talk into their coverage, journalists signal the credibility of sources to their audiences and help to reify existing relationships of authority recognition. Moreover, by introducing IGOs and INGOs as credible sources, the media may have a causal impact on the much debated authority shift.

Journalistic authority talk and complex emergencies

Any argument about the importance of the media as a major locus of production and reproduction of authority hinges on the empirical observation of relevant authority talk in and by the media. From this perspective, press coverage of humanitarian crises seems a promising object of research in several ways.

First of all, international politics is a remote and opaque topic for public debate; it defines an area where demand for authoritative meaning is high. Thus, where international politics in general may be predestined to foster authority talk, this is even more so the case for humanitarian crises, especially if these crises qualify as ‘complex emergencies’, in which massive human suffering is caused by an obscure mixture of civil war, economic interests, corruption, natural degradation, and so forth (Väyrynen 2000). As a matter of convenience, I have chosen media coverage from media outlets in the United States and the United Kingdom, and the ongoing complex emergency in Sudan/Darfur for the empirical case (Slim 2004; Flint and de Waal 2005; Prunier 2007). The selection of media debates taking place in the United States and the United Kingdom is straightforward here: The United States and the United Kingdom are two of the biggest donors of aid from state and civil sources; their respective positions within the UN Security Council give them the power to promote or veto important resolutions, missions, or sanctions; and their willingness to deploy military capacities is crucial for any decision on military action to become a credible threat on the ground. After all, these countries are two of the biggest, if not the two biggest, players in the humanitarian game (Macrae *et al.* 2002; Duffield 2005).

Second, by choosing media coverage of humanitarian crises as the starting point, one can articulate the issue of ‘authority talk’ most directly, by relating it to a long on-going debate about the effects of mass media on political decisions to intervene by civil or military means into such crises. The main result of this research is that the simplistic conjecture of media-driven foreign policy decision-making (the so-called ‘CNN effect’), which has been the most prominently formulated and propagated, can be rejected on empirical grounds (Livingston and Eachus 1995; Livingston 1996, 1997; Mermin 1999; Hasenclever 2001; Robinson 2002). Indeed, the well-known cases of Ethiopia and Somalia became headline issues only after members of the US Congress and governmental officials started to promote them as matters of major concern (Bosso 1989; Livingston and Eachus 1995). Actors like Senators John Danforth in the Ethiopian case or Nancy Kassebaum and Joe Liberman with respect to Somalia attract media attention much more easily than more peripheral actors; they can therefore direct or lead mass public debate to a significant extent just through their interpretations and public appeals. Most studies thus treat the coverage of statements by political elites as examples of ‘indexing’, and consider the importance of decisional power as the major rationale behind journalistic selectivity (Livingston and Eachus 1995; Mermin 1999; Robinson 2002). Following Steve Bennett’s (1990) conjecture, the range of viewpoints presented in this coverage is commonly assumed to have been ‘tied or ‘indexed’ to the public pronouncements of, and the degree of public opposition among, key public officials who can affect decisions about the issues (1997: 105; Chomsky and Herman 1988; Entman and Page 1994).

In the context of the argument put forward here this answer appears to be too simple. First, the attractiveness of governmental elites as sources is not completely reducible to decision-making power; rather, it has much to do with ‘authority’, in the way that concept is used here. Second, international organizations like the UNHCR or Oxfam have become credible sources of information, too, and therefore highly influential for public humanitarian politics. Focusing solely on ‘indexing’ is thus wholly insufficient for giving a complete and correct account of the real power of the media here. What the media does, in fact, is to signal the credibility of a variety of actors and teach the audience to recognize such actors as authorities.

Just following the trail of power? Political elites as authorities

First of all, attributing the selection of political elites *completely* to decisional power is unconvincing for theoretical reasons. The importance of this selection is most apparent where it concerns the coverage of decision makers’ statements which reflect actual intent vis-à-vis their own actions, that is, where such statements are in effect ‘commissive’ speech acts. The explanatory power of this conjecture nevertheless decreases rapidly with respect to factual or moral interpretations of a given situation, where the statements do not match public perception of competence and credibility – the crucial ingredients of authority as

outlined above. Thus the authority of political elites should be considered an alternative explanation for selecting their statements on crucial matters such as the actual severity of a given humanitarian crisis or the complicity of regional actors in creating it.

Many governmental actors are indeed plausible candidates as authorities in their own right (Page *et al.* 1987). Some, whose coverage by the media has been taken as evidence of indexing, are well-trained specialists on issues: such is the case of the US Secretary of State or governmental agencies for humanitarian aid like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Not too surprisingly, intelligence and military sources are frequently cited in media coverage of humanitarian crises because their expertise, viz., their ability to interpret combat situations, is widely recognized (Hasenclever 2001, with respect to the French debate on Ruanda in 1994). Even members of parliament have received frequent media attention after visiting crisis regions, because this made them effectively competent eye-witnesses to human suffering. Thus, media coverage of 'older' authorities like governments, governmental agencies, or parliamentarians is often far too quickly attributed solely to their decisional power. They are in fact competent to an extent that makes their statements potentially attractive as matters charged with 'authoritative meaning' beyond mere power indexing.

Linking these observations to the concept of authority talk, the empirical form in which governmental sources are introduced by journalists is instructive. First, journalists refer regularly to these actors qua *argumenta ad verecundiam*, that is, they use the statements of others as evidence that a specific (journalistic) conclusion is compelling. In this way journalistic claims, for instance, about the severity of a situation, are continually bolstered with evidence from governmental sources. In an opinion piece by Nicholas D. Kristof from the *New York Times*, 25 April 2004 one can read the following statement:

The State Department has suggested that Sudan breached the cease-fire on its first day, and the United States Agency for International Development says that even in the best of circumstances – even if the fighting stops – 100,000 people in Darfur will die of disease and malnutrition. Meanwhile, the world seemed to spend more time observing the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and solemnly vowing 'never again' than actually doing something to prevent a recurrence in Darfur.

What makes such a passage an *argumentum ad verecundiam* are two things: the author utters a conclusion ('recurrence of genocide in Darfur'), and he refers to statements (by the state department and USAID) that provide evidence that this conclusion is actually valid (breach of cease-fire, high death tolls). This usage, I contend, sends a strong signal to the reader, namely, that the author considers both organizations as authoritative on the matter.

More implicit, but a potentially powerful way to signal recognition, is the recurrent use of authoritative sources by journalists in non-commenting reports.

A good example of this is provided by a lengthy passage from a news piece on CNN.com International Edition (27 January 2005), which reported the following statements under the by-line ‘GOP Lawmaker: Stop Sudan “Genocide”’:

A bipartisan congressional delegation, accompanied by an Oscar-nominated actor, urged the United States and the international community Thursday to take action to end the war in the Darfur region of Sudan. The six-member delegation, led by Republican Rep. Ed Royce of California, recently returned from the region after getting a firsthand look at the humanitarian crisis and examining how the United States and other countries are responding. ‘This killing goes on day in, day out’, Royce told a Capitol Hill news conference. ‘I saw young children who have lost their hands. I asked one how, and he said by sword, by the Janjaweed [militia]. Many others have lost their hearing from the bombardment. We saw many crippled people. We know of the systematic rape that has occurred throughout this region, the plunder of crops and of cattle. And right now there are over 1.4 million displaced people wandering around in Sudan [and] about a quarter of a million over the border now in Chad as a consequence of this genocide’. Royce, chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa of the International Relations Committee, is demanding the U.S. government push harder for U.N. sanctions against the Sudanese government. ‘This is not a problem for Africans alone to solve. The whole world must be engaged’, he said.²

Without any journalistic conclusions in its context, this passage does not qualify as an *argumentum ad verecundiam*. Nevertheless, it sends a journalistic signal of recognition to the audience, namely, that these statements by that particular parliamentarian are worthy of being reported and read, because the credibility of their source makes them collectively an authoritative description of the situation. For lack of any direct connection to political decisions, however, the journalistic rationale behind this lengthy report of what a particular member of the US House of Representatives believes is going on in Darfur, is probably more accurately described as ‘authority-selective gate-keeping’ rather than ‘power indexing’.

Aid organizations as authoritative sources

Another case in point is the role of aid agencies like the UN World Food Program (WFP), UNHCR or Save the Children Fund (SCF) who have become highly attractive as authoritative sources of information. As Susan Moeller (1998: 26) points out, ‘no longer residents of all the countries they cover, journalists become parachutists jetting madly to regional crises, jumping into situations cold’. Thus activists regularly compensate for journalism’s own constraints on time and resources. Where the general trend for media organizations is to invest less in their own staff and travel expenses, journalists at home tend to rely exclusively on external material made available by international (governmental and non-governmental) aid organizations. Accordingly, surveys

of journalists' opinions suggest that they themselves want actors on the ground to make experiences and interpretations accessible, as a necessary condition for timely and valid news (Ross 2004).

Indeed, humanitarian agencies try hard to keep up with this demand by giving easy access to textual information, photos, and audio and video material (Benthall 1993; Strobel 1997; Ross 2004). The need of these agencies for private and public funding makes them 'interested parties' in the run for media attention. They vie for funds in a highly competitive market, seeking the support of private and institutional donors (like states) who, in turn, are free to choose from a variety of agencies all competing for available resources (Macrae 2002). Media attention directs donations not only to specific crises, but also to organizations active in specific crisis areas. Moreover, an agency's own appeal for donations will have a much higher news value in the context of a crisis ranked important on the public agenda.

Although such interests might prove damaging to their credibility, major aid organizations like CARE, SCF or Oxfam UK are generally of high repute in the public realm. In 1999, by awarding Doctors without Borders (MSF) the Nobel Peace Prize, the Nobel Committee recognized that organization's 'professional assistance – efficiently – to people who are suffering or in need... , never compromising over this paramount mandate that one can achieve outward legitimacy and inner inspiration'. Remarkably, the Nobel Committee explicitly rewarded MSF for its efforts as 'representatives of a much greater number of self-sacrificing men and woman all over world ... putting their life at risk, in scenes of the profoundest suffering and degradation' (Francis Sejerstad, in his speech as chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee 10 December 1999). Such overwhelming statements by the Nobel Peace Prize Committee have a long tradition, if one put this single prize in the context of others given to the International Red Cross, UNICEF or the UNHCR. Moreover, they reflect a widely shared recognition of IGOs and INGOs in this field, as can be inferred from the fact that private donations to these organizations have consistently risen over recent decades (Radtke 2007).

In short, humanitarian agencies satisfy media organizations' desire to obtain scarce information by actors who are widely recognized to be authoritative. Therefore, it is not too surprising to find journalists regularly referring to these organizations using journalistic authority talk in both of the outlined ways. First, commentators refer to aid agencies qua *argumentum ad verecundiam*. From Nicholas D. Kristof, again, one reads in the *New York Times* from 11 September 2004:

So I salute the Bush administration for formally declaring on Thursday that the slaughter is a genocide. But as we commemorate the anniversary of 9/11, let's remember that almost as many people are still dying in Darfur every week as died in the World Trade Center attack. 'There's kind of a reign of terror that exists', said Kenny Gluck, director of operations for Doctors Without Borders in the Netherlands. Even in the camps where

Doctors Without Borders is present, he says, Janjaweed gunmen often rape women or execute men who go off to seek firewood. So now, he said, many families are making an agonizing choice: they are sending their small children out at night to gather wood because small children are less likely to be murdered or raped. So I've got some questions for President Bush: Why don't you turn up the heat on Sudan?

In this example, 'turn up the heat on Sudan' as a conclusion is justified by citing Kenny Gluck from MSF, who is presented as an epistemic authority who credibly certifies the warrant of Kristof's appeal to Bush, namely, the 'reign of terror that exists' in Darfur with all its details given in the above passage. Second, journalists operate as authority-selective gate-keepers by 'neutral' reporting that signals the recognition of specific aid agencies to their readers. For an instructive example one might take the piece of CNN Chief International Correspondent, Christiane Amanpour, from 11 August 2004. Under the headline 'Starvation Stalks Youngest in Darfur' one reads:

Hamdi Ismail is one and a half years old, but weighs only 12 pounds. Other two- and three-year-old children at an emergency feeding center weigh as much as the average three-month-old infant in the United States. Doctors from the French relief group Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders, estimate one in five children in western Darfur is severely malnourished. Children like Hamdi don't have long to live unless they can keep fluids and formula down. Mothers are told to force formula into skin-and-bones infants every three hours.

Again, as such passages suggest, the selection of aid agencies like MSF as a source seems regularly to reflect a shared recognition of authority that commands public attention and 'makes news'. Their facts, interpretations and appeals become relevant and worthy of being reported because they have become authoritative sources on the matter.

A quantitative analysis of authority talk

To demonstrate the empirical significance of this mechanism, let us consider the results of a quantitative analysis of authority talk on Darfur. First, a set of texts from the media coverage of Darfur were collected via Lexis-Nexis. This set included a selection of articles published in the *New York Times* (N = 248) and the *Guardian* (N = 115). The selected articles had to meet two criteria: they had (first) to contain at least one reference to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur in the lead paragraph (function 'hlead' in Lexis-Nexis) and (second) to have been published on an odd-numbered day between 1 January 2004 and 31 December 2006.

In these texts, journalists regularly refer to a variety of actors qua *argumentum ad verecundiam* or made use of them as authoritative sources. Not all 'neutral' reporting of sources, however, indicates *authority-selective gate-keeping*. As

already admitted, mere decision power is an alternative factor that might induce journalists to ‘open or close the gate’ for certain statements. Moreover, journalists sometimes report statements simply in order to oppose them or to adhere to the convention of ‘considering all viewpoints’ (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 92; Tuchman 1972). To control for these cases, I count as ‘authoritative sources’ only those, (a) where reported statements are not merely commissive speech acts, i.e. announcements of intent vis-à-vis humanitarian aid, for instance, or some new Security Council initiative (Searle and Vanderveken 1985); (b) where statements are reported without the credibility being denied through explicitly stated reservations; and (c) where statements are reported without placing them in the context of contradicting statements. Thus I assume that the journalistic selection of sources in these cases reflects, on average, a shared recognition of these institutions as credible, that is, authoritative. Given the low number of articles analyzed, I present pooled data from both indicators (arguments *ad verecundiam* and authority-selective gate-keeping).

The results are remarkable in several ways (Figure 6.1). Although parliamentarians have been described as ‘drivers’ of public media attention, they usually debate off the record in the Darfur context. Nevertheless, references to governments are frequent. Again, the numbers do not reflect the coverage of governmental action or intentions; rather, governmental assessments of death tolls or diplomatic issues are reported in a neutral or even affirmative way. Although, one may assume some sort of latent ‘following of the trail of power’ (Bennett

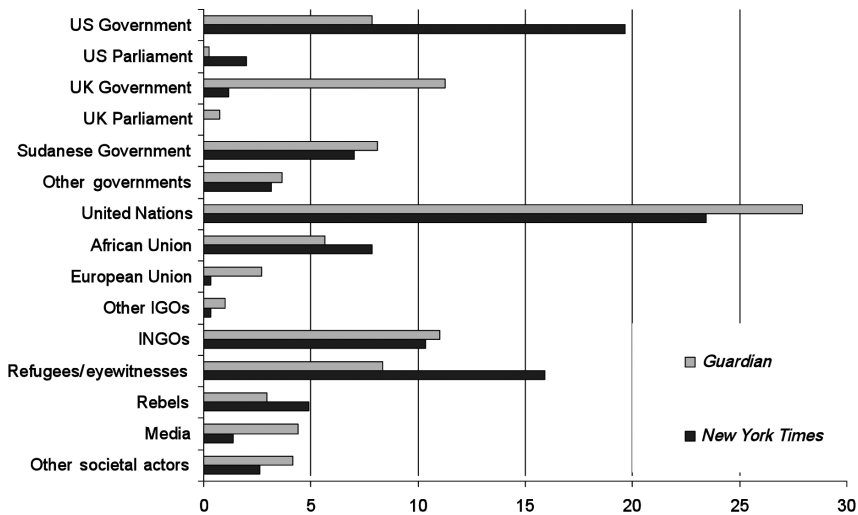


Figure 6.1 Instances of ‘authority talk’ on Darfur in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, 2003–2006.

Notes

Total percent of instances of ‘authority talk’ in the *New York Times* (N = 956) and the *Guardian* (N = 408) 2003–2006 on Darfur (own calculations, articles coded: *New York Times* N = 248, *Guardian* N = 115).

1997) on the part of journalists, this should be read as an indication of governments' roles as authorities on the matter. In this way, the varying relevance of governmental sources is noteworthy: although both governments play an important role in their own respective national contexts, only the US government functions as an authoritative source in both countries and has, therefore, a specific transnational quality.³

Turning to international actors, the overwhelming importance of UN actors like the UNHCR, WFP or the UN Secretary General as sources of 'authorized meaning' is most impressive. To use references to national governments as a benchmark: whereas the share of references related to the UN already exceeds those related to the US government in the *New York Times*, the journalists in the British *Guardian* refer more than twice as often to UN actors as authoritative sources than they do to their own government. Compared to this almost omnipresence of the UN, regional organizations like the African Union or the European Union are of minor importance. Nevertheless, taken together, about one-third of all sources deemed authoritative in the Darfur debates are from IGOs, but the share of those references is significantly higher in the British *Guardian* (36.3 percent) than it is for articles published in the *New York Times* (31.6 percent).

Remarkably, with a share of about 10 percent of references to INGOs (as authoritative sources), the data does not support the often heard conjecture that we are experiencing an ongoing 'NGO revolution' (United Nations 2000: 1) or the emergence of a 'non-governmental order' (Boli and Thomas 1999). An initial explanation might be that the UN is perceived as being less dependent on 'media hype', while journalists assume that INGOs, conversely, may exaggerate their respective cases because they have an interest in gaining media attention. Moreover, the UN has an institutional structure which makes its various agencies a part of a universal whole, a 'brand' of its own with high recall value (on 'branding' and IR, see Ham 2002; Dzenovska 2005). Thus the discursive authority of the UN might have greater significance for journalists than similar authority associated with any single, highly specialized INGO.

Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that INGOs like MSF, Oxfam and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have an indirect, though important role in Darfur-related authority talk, which is reflected in another of the categories shown in Figure 6.1, 'refugees and eyewitnesses'. Due to the waning presence of well-informed correspondents in humanitarian crises, a significant part of coverage on the Darfur crisis is made up of eyewitness-reports of mass-rape and incidents of 'ethnic cleansing', which were recorded by field workers of major INGOs and published in press releases and comprehensive reports on these issues (e.g. HRW 2004; MSF 2005). What is instructive from the specific vantage point of journalistic authority talk is not just the fact that these statements were deemed credible enough to be reported in the first place; by referring to such recorded minutes, journalists signal their readers that INGOs are a trustworthy link in the chain of news production, which reifies their common recognition as authoritative sources of genuine facts and interpretations on the matter.

Conclusions

The widely shared observation that a fundamental change in the international order has occurred immediately raises the question of what kind of order is actually emerging and how we can understand this process. In this sense, this chapter has attempted to elaborate on the world political role of the media as a powerful actor dynamically involved in the construction of a rising world polity (Boli 1999). A wider definition of discursive authority was used to reconsider the relationship of aid organizations, governments, and the media.

Journalists, it was argued, play an important role in the construction and reproduction of 'new' authorities. By privileging one source over others, the media help to bring about and reify the societal recognition of actors like UNHCR, WFP, MSF, or CARE. As was shown by a reconstructive analysis of authority talk in the coverage of Darfur, journalists regularly articulate a 'humanitarian authority structure' consisting of a variety of actors including governments, INGOs, and IGOs. Nevertheless, although a noteworthy 'UN-ization' of the Darfur coverage could be found, the often reiterated claim of an all-pervasive 'NGO-ization' seems to be exaggerated. INGOs play an important role as authoritative sources, but the main outcome of this initial study seems to be more in line with the idea of a 'multi-centric world' (Rosenau 1997), where a plurality of authoritative voices from governmental and non-governmental organizations compete in setting the public agenda and orient a mass media audience on questions of responsibility and prudent policy choices. An interesting outcome in this respect is the insight that the role of national governments in these debates cannot be captured in the simple notion of 'power indexing', i.e. a dominance of actors from the 'political center'. Although IGOs and INGOs are of major importance as authoritative sources, so too are government officials.

It would seem correct not to attach too much weight to the empirical data referred to here, before other debates have been similarly analyzed in depth. Among other things, this additional research will have to cover more cases and expand the set of references accordingly, in order for any really significant results to be obtained. Additionally, some further questions need to be addressed. First of all, what is the scope of the different 'spheres of authority' (Rosenau 1997) in terms of their power to give orientation on specific matters? As the examples given already suggest, INGOs and the various UN agencies in the field function mainly as epistemic authorities for a narrowly defined scope, for example, as experts on refugees, malnutrition, or human rights violations. Nevertheless, authorities sometimes give mere numbers a normative meaning, for instance, by attributing responsibilities to certain actors or communities. In so doing, such actors are probably acknowledged not only as epistemic experts but also, to some extent, as normative authorities. What is lacking, though, is a more detailed consideration of the meaning which different authorities actually certify and how media actors are involved in this.

Second, how do the media cover specific actors and how can we understand the long-term impact of media routines on the sphere of authority of a single

organization? What this discussion so far leaves unaddressed is the extent to which journalists' 'authority talk' has an impact on public beliefs. As other studies suggest, this impact might vary considerably over different groups of cognitively more or less mobilized readers (Cacioppo and Petty 1986) and patterns of media exposure (Wei and Lo 2008). Finally, future research must address the impact of 'negative coverage' about misinformation or bad performance of IGOs and INGOs that might lead to critical beliefs about the trustworthiness or competence of these actors. With respect to the distribution of authority in the humanitarian field and elsewhere, it is crucial to shed light on the extent to which IGOs and INGOs are held accountable by the media (Davis 2007). With respect to the humanitarian sphere, journalists have indeed covered accusations of abuse extensively, for instance, in the case of corruption in the Oil-for-Food Program or the cases of alleged sexual abuses by aid workers from the UN and various NGOs in Bosnia, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (United Nations 2002; Naik 2003). Future research will have to systematically examine the mechanisms and impact of such criticism in which authority talk ventures beyond the 'normal mode' of simple reification and begins to problematize specific spheres of authority. This research could yield good news for democratic theorists and others who constantly criticize international and non-governmental institutions for being too powerful without fulfilling the standards of democratic accountability (Grant and Keohane 2005): IGOs and INGOs are, one may anticipate, more constrained and easier to control by simple virtue of the fact that their power rests on their having a fragile sort of recognition – at least, insofar as the misuse or abuse of power could turn out to be good selling 'bad news' in an emerging 'world polity'.

Notes

- 1 Important work on this phenomena has been carried out, for instance, by Keohane and Nye, Jr. 1972; Haas 1992; Risse-Kappen 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Boli and Thomas 1999; Cutler *et al.* 1999; Risse *et al.* 2005; Micheletti 2003; Barnett and Finnemore 2004.
- 2 See CNN website. Online, available at: www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/africa/01/27/sudan.us/index.html> accessed 28 October 2008.
- 3 Due to its specific role in this crisis, the numbers presented suggest a similar role of the Sudanese government. Nevertheless, what is not captured in this static perspective on 'authority talk', is the rapid decline of this government's credibility over the years. Accordingly, the data merely reflect the initially broad and uncritical reporting of governmental statements, where the Sudanese officials successfully countered early accusations of supporting massacres committed by the Janjaweed militia.

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Part II

Policy institutions, constellations of actors and the media

7 The media and the policy process

A policy centric approach

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Introduction

A researcher who sets out to investigate the relationship between the media and the policy process soon becomes aware of a pair of apparently contradictory propositions. First, in the United States and the United Kingdom at least, policy makers (both politicians and civil servants) are highly sensitive to media coverage of their work and pay significant amounts of attention to shaping coverage or considering what hypothetical coverage might look like (Adelman 1991; Campbell 2008). Second, policy makers do this even though political science and communications researchers struggle to find much in the way of media influence on policy other than in narrowly defined circumstances (Kingdon 2003; Robinson 2002). This chapter argues that it is possible to reconcile these positions if we understand policy making as an activity where the gathering, processing and dissemination of information are central. If policy making is treated as taking place in an informational environment characterized by network structures it becomes possible to understand why policy makers are so sensitive to the media and why existing research has identified such circumscribed effects. In addition new dimensions of the interaction between media and policy process become visible.

Thus the primary objective of this chapter is to develop a theoretical picture of the policy process. The raw material for this enterprise comes from two overlapping sources. First, the literature of social network analysis as applied to organizations and organizational fields (Kilduff and Tsai 2003; Burt 2005). The chapter does not apply social network methods in a formal sense but draws on the conceptual armoury of this approach. On the basis of the analysis developed here this is an approach that has significant potential for providing a structured comparison across issue areas and across countries. Second, the chapter draws on the mountain of evidence documenting the work of policy makers and those that seek to influence them in the United States. There is an overlap between these fields in a number of important studies that have put forward perspectives on the policy process that emphasize the importance of networks of exchange and communication (Laumann and Knoke 1987; Heinz *et al.* 1993) and in the way that actors operate within this structure (Whiteman 1996; Feldman 1989).

By drawing on this organizational perspective it becomes possible to understand what the media do (and do not do) in relation to policy.

This is not to claim that the American case is typical but the volume of material available makes it fertile ground for developing a model of media-policy interactions. The concluding section of the chapter will return to issues for comparative analysis.

This chapter develops its argument in four steps. The first step is to develop a model of the policy process as a social network characterized by uncertainty and conflict. The second step is to identify the information sources that are used by agents within the network. This allows the analysis to locate the mainstream media as part of a broader information environment. The third step is to analyse the role of the news media in terms of how media organizations produce policy relevant news, what policy makers do with the media, and how and why they contribute to that flow of news. The final section examines possible issues for comparative research and the impact of technological change on the relationship between media and policy process.

The policy process: structures and dynamics

This section outlines three assumptions about the organization and dynamics of policy making and policy implementation. First, that the policy process can usefully be understood as a social network. Second, that the policy process is shot through by uncertainty and that information gathering is a strategy to manage this. The networks that exist will shape what is known by actors and their available options for action. Third, the policy process is marked by conflict. Conflict has multiple sources; policy itself; the allocation of resources; the distribution of credit and blame. The configuration of the networks will influence, and are influenced by, the dynamics of conflict.

The idea that policy is shaped by ‘issue networks’ or ‘policy networks’ of actors from inside and outside government has become broadly influential over the last two decades. The network terminology has largely been used as a metaphor to indicate the weakening of ‘iron triangles’ or ‘policy communities’ and hence an opening up of the policy process to a broader range of influences (Hecl 1978; Smith 1993; McCool 1998). Despite the use of network terminology the application of concepts and analytical techniques from social network analysis (SNA) has been rare.

Social network research treats the social world as composed of relationships and argues that mapping and analysis of the patterns of relationships will reveal aspects of the world that cannot be detected through study of the attributes of agents either as individuals or categories (Knoke and Song 2008; Monge and Contractor 2003). These analytical techniques can be applied to relationships between individuals or organizations, or these can be treated as different levels of analysis within the same network (Kilduff and Tsai 2003: 88). Network analysis has sometimes been treated as a structural approach (Knoke 1990) but can also be seen as a variety of structurationism where there is an interaction

between the structural properties of relationships and the strategies and attributes of the agents that compose it (Degenne and Forsé 1999). Particular structural configurations will tend to give power to some actors rather than others. The absence, as much as the presence, of relationships structures the distribution of power and information. The absence of a connection between two actors A and B, what is sometimes termed a structural hole, may create a situation where another actor C is able to gain influence from the fact that they are able to link actors A and B. As a result C can choose to pass on information and resources and extract benefits from doing so (Burt 1992, 2005). Groups of actors who share many connections with each other will tend to share attributes and information, the phenomenon known as homophily (McPherson *et al.* 2001). Groups that have many connections and interact regularly will find it easier to work together and are more likely to share information (Tushman and Scanlan 1981; Hansen 1999). However, tightly connected groups may be vulnerable to 'closure' so that they become insensitive to their environment, thus external connections and those that control them become disproportionately important (Granovetter 1973; Burt 2005).

While social network analysis draws on graph theory to provide a set of techniques for the analysis of relational data this abstract language needs to be coupled to a theory of how the networks under study will behave. Two networks may have the same structural configuration but if one of these networks is composed of computers and the other of self interested pressure groups some aspects of their behaviour will be quite different. For instance studies of structural holes have normally engaged with business organizations where the resulting brokerage can be used to produce relationships that are beneficial to all sides (e.g. Burt 2005). While similar exchange relationships will exist within the policy process structural holes may be produced and used in different ways. Because of the prevalence of conflict, disconnection may be used to exclude groups from participation in a decision. Rather than 'selling' information for benefit structural holes are used to ensure that potentially interested parties are kept in the dark. Thus the strategic control of information can be used in resource exchange but can also be used to exclude other interested parties. More generally structural holes will exist within the structures of governance because most actors have no reason to maintain close relations with actors who are not engaged in the same issue areas as they are. Maintaining relationships requires resources and the capacity to do so is limited. Information does not flow freely but instead follows the patterns of relationships. From this perspective non-communication is normal. Situations where different parts of the same organization are pursuing contradictory initiatives, or different parts of the same government bureaucracy fail to coordinate, are normal.

One consequence of this picture of policy networks is these structural holes reinforce a pervasive state of uncertainty for actors within the network. Thus governance is marked by pervasive uncertainty and ambiguity and this drives organizational and individual behaviour through efforts to reduce the risk that it poses (Heinz *et al.*; 1993, Burden 2003). Uncertainty has multiple sources. Part

of it is ontological; actors are never quite sure what they will do until they do it and communication can never fully bridge the alienation between human beings (Peters 1999). A second source comes from outside the policy network for instance from the actions of foreign governments or terrorist groups or from the limitations on scientific knowledge of complex problems. Other sources come from within the policy process. One group or department may launch actions or make decisions that have consequences for other actors. These actors may fail to communicate their intentions either deliberately or simply through the difficulty of conveying information within a complex network environment.

One of Schattschneider's maxims about interest groups was that to be effective a group required a good 'intelligence service' if you did not know a decision was being made you could not attempt to influence it (Schattschneider 1942: 201). In complex policy environments this is a requirement of all actors not simply of interest groups. Uncertainty drives policy actors to invest in efforts to monitor their environments for emerging threats and opportunities. Information gathering becomes a key concern. In his discussion of organizations and information Arthur Stinchcombe has argued that uncertainty should be regarded as a driver of organizational form. Organizations develop mechanisms to reduce key uncertainties by gathering information about developments that are crucial to them (Stinchcombe 1992). Policy actors forge relationships with those that are able to provide them with relevant information (Whiteman 1995; Heinz *et al.* 1993).

In addition policy actors gain benefits from being able to provide information. Interest groups play a role as consumers, producers and transmitters of information within the policy process. The ability to supply information about the substance and politics of issues is a central source of influence (Rasmussen 1993). Decision makers may rely on interest groups for timely and useful information. One participant study discusses the 'just-in-time' strategy by which congressional staffs seek information from pressure groups as they need it rather than building up libraries of reference materials (Young 1997). Shared information may also contribute to the development of common understandings of policy even if it does not have an immediate value (Feldman 1989).

While, as Baumgartner and Jones have argued, uncertainty about the general parameters of policy may be quite low this does not eliminate uncertainty for actors within the policy process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2006). Incremental changes in budgets at the level of a cabinet department might actually mask the elimination of entire programmes within departmental areas of responsibility. For instance during the summer of 2008 the US Navy announced the decision to not to purchase additional destroyers of the DDG-1000 type but to buy more of an older type, the DDG-51. While the basic parameters of US naval strategy or the size of the budget did not change, this decision had major ramifications for the departments involved, the shipyards and the congressmen who had suppliers for the programme in their districts (O'Rourke 2008).

The third assumption made in this analysis is that conflict is endemic to the making and implementation of policy. Broadly three sources of conflict can be

identified. First, conflict over policy itself, second conflict over resources and third, conflict can emerge over personal or institutional standing. Conflict may be confined within organizations or it may cross departmental boundaries, it may be confined to wars between offices within the same bureau or may involve large coalitions that cut across departmental boundaries and pull in allies from other parts of government and beyond. The outcome of a conflict is a function of its scope. The actors and resources that are mobilized on either side of a conflict will determine the balance of forces. As a result actors will seek to either limit who is involved or expand the scope of the conflict to involve more people. It then follows that the structure of the network will produce obstacles and opportunities to spread or limit the scope of conflict (Schattschneider 1960).

If we assume that the policy process is characterized by conflict and uncertainty then information gathering becomes a central element of political behaviour. It follows that the nature of available information flows will have a significant influence on the behaviour of actors within the network. Much useful information will be available somewhere within the policy making network but is not available elsewhere – either because the costs of gathering and transmitting the information are too great or because of the strategic advantages to be gained by withholding it. This information can be thought of as being embedded within the relationships that constitute the network. Policy actors are left with two strategies to improve their information sources and hence reduce uncertainty. First, to forge new relationships with policy relevant actors who might have useful information. The problem here is that these other actors may simply refuse to share or may demand a price that the first actor is unwilling to pay. The second strategy is to look for information sources that are relatively detached from the policy process; the news media are the most prominent example of these disembedded information sources.

The role of specialist media

From the discussion so far it is clear that the news media have the potential to overcome the communication gaps within the policy process and communicate information to all potentially interested agents. However the mainstream news media need to be seen in the context of other sources of disembedded information. Each policy area is covered by an array of specialist media outlets.

The term specialist media is used here to take in a range of publication types. Among these are government publications that announce proposed regulations and contracts; newsletters and magazines that are produced by governmental bodies departments; commercial newsletters, magazine and web sites, and business intelligence services. Interest groups, think tanks and professional groupings also produce newsletters, magazines and web sites that cover issue areas. Added to the publications are a growing range of blogs that in their readership and contributors may straddle the boundaries of government. Taken together these publications provide coverage of personnel movements, policy developments, ongoing issues, contracts, and legislative developments. We should also

add specialist political media that provide detailed coverage of the operations of Congress to this list.

These media outlets act as quasi-public media: theoretically available to everyone but read by small attentive publics. These publications may have very limited circulations and be expensive to purchase or simply be of interest to a very narrow range of people. Some of the information that they contain will come from original reporting or research, some from the policy organizations that they cover and some will be the result of ‘information arbitrage’; reproducing information from other publications and news agencies that will be of interest to the readers but have not been widely disseminated. The values of the publication will generally accept the assumptions of the policy networks that they serve.

Specialist media play an essential role in the information ecology of policy making, helping to create common agendas and shared understandings of issues. They bridge structural holes within policy areas but their specialization and cost limit the extent to which they can carry information across the boundaries of different policy networks. In total they provide a volume of information at a level of detail that vastly exceeds that provided by the mainstream news media. Further, they consistently rather than episodically cover policy developments. Given that the specialist media do a better job than the mainstream media in covering policy what is it that the general news media do?

The role of the news media

In a network with structural holes it cannot be assumed that any piece of information is known by all the parties who are potentially interested in it. It becomes impossible to assume that knowledge about the external world is actually shared throughout a policy making organization (or even has made it into the organization). Given the esoteric nature of much of the trade press, issues reported in one outlet will not necessarily spread beyond the fraction of the policy area that happens to read that particular outlet.

The mainstream news media have three features that shape their interaction with the policy process; first, unlike the specialist media they will reach all of the potentially relevant policy actors, second their coverage is extremely selective and third they help policy actors to develop an overall picture of the political situation.

The remainder of this chapter explores these questions by following the cycle of coverage, consumption, and contribution. The news media cover certain types of stories that are consumed in particular ways and that stimulate particular types of interventions by policy actors. The issue here is what do policy makers (and those that seek to influence them) get from their consumption of the news media? How do they contribute to coverage of the policy process? And what actually gets coverage?

Coverage

Only a tiny fraction of policy developments are reported in the mainstream news media. The assumption is that coverage is largely driven by conflict. The fraction that is reported will be driven by the perceived newsworthiness of the policy area and the level of conflict. In some policy areas the conflict threshold at which coverage becomes worthwhile is lower than in others. In addition some actors may be seen as more newsworthy than others either by virtue of their office or by some other characteristic such as their ability to turn a pithy phrase or their ability to commit gaffes (Cook 1989, 1998).

However, the presence or absence of conflicts in the news media cannot reliably be taken as evidence of the existence or the importance of those conflicts. News media are able to write stories about conflicts that do not exist and they may not recognize or have access to information about conflicts that do exist. The availability of sources within the ongoing conflict is a multiplier for the newsworthiness of any policy conflict. A conflict may be of great importance in policy terms but remain hidden where sources are unwilling to provide information to the media. A policy conflict that has sources on both sides may receive a high level of attention despite its relative insignificance. The presence or absence of sources is likely to be a function of the extent to which a policy area is seen as a distinct beat where journalists routinely seek stories. This leads to the development of relationships which will ease the newsgathering task. The result will be that the news media will be more sensitive to conflict in areas with existing sources (Manning 2001; Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Coverage gives priority to conflict that involves high profile actors. It will largely ignore policy areas where consensus exists or are not judged to be interesting because of their complexity or irrelevance. Coverage tends to focus on the most prominent political actors; the president, secretary of state, secretary of defence, congressional leadership (Cook 1998).

A central concern of policy coverage is the political implications of policy issues. This is an extension of the role of the strategy frame in election campaigning (Lawrence 2000). A theme that will run through the coverage is what the outcomes of the issue will do for the political strength of those involved. Thus, coverage of the policy process is likely to focus on its implications for the political system as a whole.

Thus coverage is driven by the relationship between (first) the perceived significance of the policy domain, (second) availability of sources, (third) prominence of protagonists and (fourth) the nature of the conflict.

Consumption

These assumptions about the nature of coverage of the policy process are hardly surprising. They become more significant if we then consider how news coverage is used by those within the policy process. Research on how elites consume media is relatively rare, but a number of ideas emerge from research

and other sources (Cohen 1963; Sigal 1973; Davison 1983; Linsky 1986; Davis 2005).

What can policy makers be expected to extract from news media coverage? It is useful to draw a distinction between those who are currently directly involved in managing an issue, and those who are potentially involved.

For those directly engaged the first point is that the importance of the news media is a function of the density of alternative communications. Where actors are in frequent direct communication around an issue news media are likely to be less important as sources of information. Particularly with overseas events where there are many structural holes between agents the news media may be the only source of information about developing events (Cohen 1963). In domestic politics policy actors and press offices will routinely monitor news media coverage. There are likely to be systems to collect and circulate coverage (Hess 1984: 41–45).

The news media may serve as a primary source of information or as a supplement to other sources. Even where government information sources can provide information journalists have access to actors who are not otherwise available. One advantage that the news media have over official reporting channels is that if they are covering an issue they may be doing it more quickly than governmental organizations for whom transmitting information upwards may not be a priority and who are subject to the distortions of reporting in the chain of command (Cohen 1986). It is worth re-emphasizing the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in political life. In Marlin Fitzwater's memoirs of his time as President G.H.W. Bush's press secretary there is a memorable vignette of the President and his senior advisors watching a coup unfolding in Panama. Even though they have immediate telephone access to US diplomatic and military source and are watching pictures live on CNN they are still unable to make sense of what is happening (Fitzwater 1996: 201–203).

There is also evidence that policy actors use the news media quite deliberately to keep a check on what others are telling them. During his diplomacy in the Middle East in the 1980s George Schultz would monitor the Israeli press for evidence that they were being fed information for domestic consumption that contradicted what he was being told in negotiations (Schultz 1996).

For policy actors who are not directly connected to a specific issue the news media are a major source of information (Cohen 1963, 1986). Information from internally generated sources, for instance intelligence or diplomatic reporting, are going to be seen by only a fraction of those who can potentially influence an issue or who might like to influence an issue, and specialist media will be read only by those with an ongoing interest in a policy area. This dependence on the mainstream media generates an agenda setting effect. This effect is social as well as cognitive it comes from superiors, journalists, members of Congress asking questions about an issue, not just from the direct consumption of coverage. The presence of an issue on the news agenda is taken as indication of significance. This should also be coupled with the existence of third person effects. An actor may not consider an issue to be important but may be convinced that other

people with think that is and as a result choose to address it (Cohen 1963; Davison 1983: 224–230).

A major element of what is learned from reporting is information about the state of the political system. Policy actors can also be assumed to be followers of Marshall McLuhan's dictum that 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 1964: chapter 1). A statement should be interpreted for how it was made and not simply its content. Timing, choreography, design and context all contain potentially relevant information. These multiple levels of interpretation also create possibilities for tacit communications. This is a phenomenon that has been more widely discussed in relation to diplomacy but also exists in democratic polities. In work on diplomatic communication, Raymond Cohen has argued that diplomatic observers postulate a law of non-redundancy; everything is assumed to mean something, including dress, body language and seating arrangements. This allows agents to communicate through modulations of language and choreography in ways that are not at all obvious to non-specialists. For instance in diplomatic communications intended meaning may only be obvious through comparison with earlier statements. Non-verbal actions can reinforce or undermine verbal messages (Cohen 1981).

More generally mass mediated messages may help to coordinate the policy process by overcoming the obstacles to communication and coordination that exist in large organizations and between political actors. Ironically, news media coverage may bridge structural holes that have been deliberately produced. One of the tenets of the US intelligence community is the separation between analysis and policy. Intelligence analysis is a profession and 'politicization' is to be avoided but Thomas Ricks makes the point that during the run up to the Iraq War intelligence analysis was affected by media stories about WMD and the inevitability of war (Ricks 2007: 91–92).

Given these considerations about the interpretation of media coverage what impact do media have? Positive media coverage for an actor or agency will have the effect of strengthening its short and long term position. Positive media coverage is normally going to be unwelcome to opponents or competitors. Coverage will have the effect of raising saliency and potentially mobilizing new resources or actors into the policy arena. However, from the perspective of those inside an agency, coverage that is purely positive is actually difficult to find. Even where an agency or actor has sought to mobilize positive coverage the process of producing the story, including finding quotes from other sources and writing a compelling narrative will produce something that differs from the agency's own preferred narrative. Indeed an agency is likely to see errors or criticisms in a story that are invisible to other people. In consequence media coverage, particularly in an area that rarely gets much coverage may look like criticism even when it is not. At a minimum, questions will be asked by superiors about the effect on the organization.

The impact of critical or hostile coverage will be greater. Senior management will seek explanations for the stories. The appearance of one critical story may trigger additional coverage (Adelman 1991). Journalists will start digging for

additional material which will create more space in the news for critics or opponents. News media coverage may encourage greater involvement by new actors, for instance political opponents who see this as an opportunity to generate political advantage. At a minimum, coverage which is not self-initiated is likely to be disruptive, at worst it may generate a growing political-media storm as more attention generates more coverage and criticism. As Schattschneider (1960) argues the outcome of a conflict is a function of who is involved and media coverage has the potential to involve new actors that may disrupt the balance of power within the policy network.

This perspective suggests that in many circumstances media coverage is likely to be perceived as a disruptive force by those within the policy process regardless of the policy outcome. Particularly for those inside government a successful defence of a policy outcome against an attack mobilized and reinforced by media coverage will impose a cost that they would rather avoid. The sensitivity to media coverage grows out of the potential costs of managing the conflict in terms of opportunity cost, political capital and reputation. How the current issue is handled is a measure of competence and will influence an actor's reputation in dealing with other issues. A corollary of mediated policy conflict will be the impact of media coverage on how those dealing with the issue are perceived. The audience may not have any particular interest in the specific issue under consideration but the perception of how it is being handled may have an impact on the perceptions of those handling it. What is being shaped is the reputation for competence and effectiveness (Neustadt 1960: chapter 4; Cook 1998: 128).

At a minimum, policy makers use the news media to help form an overall impression of the state of the political system, at a maximum it can serve as a channel of communication for actors within involved in conflict around an issue.

The role of the news media in expanding the scope of policy conflicts explains much of the motivation for policy actors in seeking coverage and acting as sources for the media. Working through the mainstream news media provides the opportunity to attract attention of all potentially relevant policy actors, to move an issue beyond the existing configuration of conflict.

The ability of news media coverage to bridge all the structural holes within the political system as whole means that it functions as the ultimate means of conflict expansion. News media coverage can mobilize groups who are not currently involved in an issue if they see threats or opportunities that they were not previously aware of. This expansion does not necessarily mean that the general public will become involved but that interested NGOs, pressure groups, members of congress and experts can be mobilized. Following Schattschneider's logic the expansion of the scope of conflict may force the side resisting scope expansion either to mount its own mobilization or to attempt to resist the socialization of conflict. Those who are on the weaker side of an internal policy fight have the incentive to seek publicity if they believe that it will assist their cause (Hughes and Griffiths 2003). It can also be suggested that defensive reactions are necessary because of the role of the news media in shaping an actor's reputation. Even if an actor is confident that the right side will prevail in a policy conflict it may

be important that this is seen to happen in a way that will advance the standing of the victorious side.

To conclude this discussion of the cycle we should give some consideration to the dynamics at work. As a policy conflict breaks into the news media the following will happen. If it appears to be a 'good' story in terms of newsvalues news organizations will actively seek more information. As the volume of reporting increases there is more incentive for policy actors to become involved by supplying information. As this happens there is more chance of information that is new to policy actors being reported in the news media. This may happen because the growing allocation of news gathering resources is providing information from outside the policy process. At the same time policy actors have more opportunity to communicate directly via the news media. As a result careful attention to media content will become even more essential. The point was made as long ago as the 1960s that, particularly in a crisis, media reporting (especially news agency feeds) will outpace internal official reporting channels this is true to an even greater extent in the age of 24-hour news. The transcript of the trial of Vice President Cheney's Chief of Staff, I. Lewis 'Scooter' Libby provides an example. In her testimony Cheney's Press Secretary Cathie Martin gave evidence of the increasing monitoring of the media as the controversy over the naming of Valerie Plame escalated. As the controversy grew routine monitoring of the newspapers was supplemented by attention to television news and current affairs programming but as the crisis intensified waiting for the television channels to provide their own transcripts was too slow and the Vice President's Office began to produce their own transcripts in order to keep track of who was commenting (Waas 2007: 98–99). The Libby transcript suggests an important point about consumption of news by elites: their focus was less on the media than on the sources presumed to be behind the coverage. For instance the CIA was suspicious that the Vice President's Office was using leaks to the media to deflect criticism onto the agency (Waas 2007: 78–79).

Conclusions

Given this analysis, how important should we see the news media as being? The overall argument is that to evaluate the significance of the news media within the policy process we should treat the policy process as an environment where gathering, communicating and processing information is a central activity conducted through multiple channels of which the mainstream news media are only one. The key features of news media coverage are its universal reach but selective content. Most policy issues will be invisible most of the time. However, the news media will consistently provide information about the overall state of the political game and policy actors will interpret this picture in the light of their own positions. This is not to say that the picture is accurate but that policy actors are aware that everyone is following this coverage and will be attempting to calculate how they will respond. When coverage of an issue area begins to appear this marks the possibility of change through expansion of the scope of conflict.

At a general level ‘the media’ as an independent actor will rarely have an impact on the policy process. The real significance of the media lies in what they tell policy actors and potential policy actors about the state of the politically relevant world. One source of significance is in which bits of the world it tells the policy actors about. A second source of significance is in the way that the media generates publicness in contemporary politics. Public actions are different from those that happen in private or relatively private settings (Elster 1995). Even where policy actions happen behind closed doors the possibility of disclosure affects those actions. Policy actors may prefer a closed policy process but the threat of disruption from media intrusion generates the sensitivity to the media found in interview based studies. In thinking about the CNN Effect debate the issue is not that the media was or was not able to drive policy but that media coverage changed the nature of the policy fight around these issues.

Given the inherent uncertainty of the political environment the news media will always be of interest to those involved in the policy process. Thus what it reports (or doesn’t report) always has a potential to trigger action from those inside the process. The extent to which the mainstream news media do have an impact will depend on the nature of the policy domain – how are its alternative channels of communication organized? Mainstream news media reporting may be significant because it represents a movement towards conflict expansion. Whether this is the case depends on the state of the policy process as a whole but also on the nature of the policy domain and of the issue.

Thus it is possible to resolve the apparent contradiction raised at the beginning of this chapter. The sensitivity of policy makers to the media stems not from any ability of the media to determine policy outcomes, but from the impact of media coverage on the dynamics of politics. If policy change emerges it is as result of the interaction between the media and policy actors. Even if a policy position is successfully defended, the costs of doing so are likely to be greater where media coverage has expanded the scope of conflict.

The analysis developed here is rooted in observation of the American experience. What are the issues that need to be faced in extending the analysis? Consideration needs to be given to variation across issue areas, variation across time and variation across countries.

In assessing variation across issue areas we need to examine the nature of internal communications channels with the network. In a comparative analysis of policy making in the energy and health domains Laumann *et al.* reported that policy actors in the energy area were ‘somewhat more likely to use daily newspapers and trade and professional journals’ as a source of information than were those in the health domain who relied more on ‘computerized databases, the Federal Register, Congressional Record and reference books’ (1985: 16). Their suggestion is that energy information was easier to find, this would be consistent with the view that during the period of their study the energy domain was less institutionalized and more conflictual than the health domain. This finding suggests hypotheses about the roles of conflict and institutionalization in looking for evidence for variation across policy domains. If an issue area does not attract

coverage those involved in it must rely on other channels of communication. The issue then arises to what extent is absence of coverage a function of the level of consensus with the policy domain? To what extent do we see coverage of areas where there are high degrees of consensus? Are there areas which are marked by high levels of conflict but which do not attract much coverage?

In assessing the variation across time we can examine both the impact of the policy cycles and the impact of policy development and longer term political and technological change. To what extent does technology generate change in the information seeking behaviour of policy actors? Does the rise of new media change the supply of information across structural holes?

How do government systems differ in their communications dynamics and what is the relationship between these dynamics and their media systems? For instance, going back to Leon Sigal's work of the 1970s it has been suggested that the size and decentralization of the US government makes the news media important as a channel of communication among policy actors whereas smaller and more centralized executives, as in the United Kingdom, would have better internal channels of communications (Sigal 1973: 132–133). Apart from size and centralization, the effectiveness of internal communications channels will interact with external media. Do systems of government with stronger party discipline or with more professionalized civil services have more effective internal communications structures?

It could also be suggested that countries with news media that lean towards the interpretive (Continental model) would have a different type of policy–media interaction than would Anglo-Saxon objective journalism countries (Archetti 2008).

The starting point of this chapter was the suggestion that we should take the metaphor of the policy network more seriously. The language of social network analysis has the potential to provide a language that can be used to describe variation across domains, time and countries. Network analysis provides tools for tracking the flow of information and a way for formally linking the media and the policy realm.

The final point is that the news media are an ever present part of the policy process even if only as a source of information about the overall political scene. Their impact is more subtle and more pervasive than is usually thought but at the same time this impact cannot be separated from the broader operation of the political system. The reality is that government is necessarily a mediated activity but that mediation is not necessarily in the mass news media.

Note

- 1 This chapter benefitted from a semester spent as a Shapiro Fellow in the School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

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8 Contested processes, contested influence

A case study of genetically modified food in Britain

Anita Howarth

Setting the scene: the story of genetically modified food in the United Kingdom

Tony Blair inherited an apparently stable system of regulating genetically modified (GM) food and crops but within three years the system had been destabilized; public and media confidence in policy had been eroded; political elites warned that ‘rational policymaking’ was at risk; and they blamed the media.

Britain started to build a GMO regulatory system in 1976 and by the 1997 there was a network of specialist scientific committees operating with ‘well respected guidelines’ (Poole 1998: 11). Companies were banned from growing, marketing or selling GM food without a licence. Approval procedures centred on science-based risk assessments and provided that the proposed GM food was substantially equivalent to conventional versions and there was no evidence of potential harm, then approval was likely. This framework was perceived to be less susceptible to political buffeting than elsewhere in Europe – hence, Zeneca’s decision to launch Europe’s first GM food in Britain in 1996 (*ibid.*). The following May, soon after Labour won the election, EU harmonization of biotechnology regulations came into effect and meant processes and principles already routine in Britain were further embedded and entrenched.

GM tomato paste was seen as a ‘test case’ in that it was the first GM food product available to shoppers and labelled as GM¹ and there was uncertainty over how the public and media, sensitized by years of food scares, would receive it. Initial reaction was positive. The media were ‘cautious’ and ‘broadly welcoming’ and sales of GM tomato paste outsold the conventional product by 2:1 (Austin and Lo 1999: 644; Burke 1998: 13). But within two years, attitudes had shifted. Media focus on GM food intensified and they became hostile towards the science and the technology. Doubts about the science underlying the technology, translated into doubts about the ability of policy processes to protect the public. Media and public confidence in regulation of GM food collapsed. Sales plummeted. Retailers withdrew GM tomato paste; found alternative non-GM sources of soya and maize; and launched high profile GM avoidance policies (Austin and Lo 1999: 650). Consumer groups and food retailers called for mandatory labelling of all GM food. This collapse of

confidence and surge in opposition to GM food threatened key policy commitments.

Government faced a number of ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.* 1988) in deciding how to respond. On the one hand, there was an explicit manifesto commitment to extend consumer choice and rebuild public confidence in food safety. On the other hand, another commitment pledged to improve British competitiveness by promoting the country's science base and high technology industries. But GM tomato paste had shown, that given choice, consumers would not buy GM and this was perceived as having the potential to undermine Britain's nascent industry (House of Lords 1998). On the one hand, applications for GM food licenses had been lodged but granting new consents risked inflaming public and media sentiment. On the other hand, ministers were legally prevented from over-riding scientific recommendations on political grounds (Meacher *et al.* 1999: 32) and any change in the law required a majority vote in the European Parliament. So, policy priorities were potentially contradictory – or at least could be constructed as that – and the legal framework of policy limited the political options open to government. These, together with mounting media and public resistance to the new technology, contributed to a policy stalemate. Government declared a moratorium on the commercial cultivation of GM crops and granted no new licences for GM food. Political elites accused the media of putting at risk 'rational policy making' (Science and Technology Committee 1999: 11) when there was no scientific evidence of harm posed by GM food; policy elites believed GM food policy was the most media-stricken science-based policy in a generation; and divisions emerged between departments and key personnel.

This chapter proposes to analyse these developments through the prism of three questions running through this book.

- In what circumstances and to what extent may the media be able to influence policy processes as well as policy debates?
- To what extent is food safety policy particularly vulnerable to media interventions in policy?
- To what extent is it helpful to distinguish policy debate in which problems are selected and prioritized from the structures, institutions and processes of policymaking?

A theoretical and analytical approach

Anecdotal evidence in existing studies highlights elite claims that media did influence their actions in certain circumstances (Hoge 1994; Robinson 2001, 2002) but empirical studies of a *direct* link between media representations and policy outcomes are contradictory (Soroka 2003). However, there is considerable evidence of an *indirect* link between media coverage and policy outcomes – how this works has been under-researched (DePrizio 2002; Kingdon 1984). Robinson (2001, 2002) suggests one way of negotiating this is to focus less on proving causality and more on examining the circumstances in which media *may*

be able to influence policy. He hypothesizes that media influence on policy processes is most likely in conditions of policy uncertainty, which he deconstructs into a typology that provides a useful analytical framework. However, given his focus on US humanitarian interventions, care needs to be taken when applying Robinson's analytical framework to a case study of GM food in Britain. The implications of these differences in policy setting and type need to be identified and integrated into an adapted version of Robinson's analytical framework before it can be applied elsewhere.

The concepts of ambiguity and uncertainty

Robinson identifies one source of uncertainty as 'ambiguous policy between sub-systems' (2002: 36). Thus, ambiguity and uncertainty are perceived as related concepts but the distinction between the two and hence the inter-relationship is unclear in Robinson's theorization.

Uncertainty is the inability to analyse the present situation or predict future consequences because of inadequate knowledge, 'ignorance or imprecision' (Zahariadis 1999: 75). Ambiguity is vagueness about intended meanings, multiple interpretations or ambivalence (Bishoff 2003; Hilsman 1987; Zahariadis 1999). Thus, increased knowledge can address uncertainty, but is likely to exacerbate ambiguity by making available more interpretations.

Identifying 'ambiguous policy between sub-systems' as a source of uncertainty (Robinson 2001, 2002) suggests divergent interpretations of the same problem or solution in different departments could give rise to uncertainty in the form of ambivalent communication or dissent. Robinson's conceptualization of 'elite dissent' draws on a strand of manufacturing consent thesis, which allows for some dissent but presents this as the exception rather than the rule in an otherwise hegemonic polity. However, political science presents conditions of ambiguity as endemic in modern policy systems. Empirical evidence points to fragmented, overlapping and complex policy domains, which span different departments each with its own distinctive interpretations, priorities and constituencies (Flinders 2002; Heffernan 2005; Rhodes 2000). Thus, conditions of ambiguity are more common than Robinson acknowledges and so too is the potential for policy uncertainty in the form of ambivalent communication and dissent.

However, it would be fallacious to conclude that because policy ambiguity is systemic and uncertainty may be more common than Robinson contends, media influence on policy processes is pervasive. First, there are huge swathes of policymaking where the media do not engage at all in policy debates (see Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer in this volume) so questions of their potential influence become irrelevant. Therefore, media engagement cannot be assumed – it needs to be investigated. Second, conditions of ambiguity may be pervasive, but these do not inevitably translate into *public* manifestations of policy uncertainty represented in the media. Third, media's potential to influence actual policy as opposed to policy debates may also be related to the nature of the policy domain – some may be more vulnerable to media influence than others and here particular

knowledge claims could be crucial. Robinson's conceptualization does not examine the relationship between policy uncertainty and knowledge. Knowledge not only underpins policy but a certain type of knowledge – or the lack thereof – may generate a particular type of policy uncertainty particularly in science-based policy domains such as food regulation. Here scientific assumptions form the basis of much decision-making particularly assessments of potential harm to consumers. However, scientific disagreement about the reliability of the knowledge that underpins these decisions can provide the media with the means to challenge science-based policy decisions. This not only introduces scientific uncertainty to policy debates, it also potentially undermines the very rationale of policymaking, the ability of governments to justify decision-making and public confidence in government ability to protect them. This loss of confidence can translate into de facto food boycotts that threaten the collapse of part of the food industry and cost the government billions in trying to salvage it (see, for instance, salmonella and BSE). So, the framing of certain types of media debates can potentially destabilize policy processes thus introducing policy uncertainty.

To sum up, then, the application of Robinson's framework requires the following:

- an empirical examination of whether not media engaged in policy debates as a pre-condition on the potential to influence processes;
- an analytical distinction between systemic and pervasive conditions of policy ambiguity and the types of policy uncertainty these may give rise to;
- a consideration of when and how ambiguity gives rise to public manifestations of policy uncertainty; and
- a widening of the conceptualization of policy uncertainty to include a consideration of the type of knowledge on which policy is based.

These adaptations facilitate a more calibrated framework than is possible with Robinson's one for the analysis of conditions that facilitate media influence and of domains that may be more susceptible to media interventions.

Distinction between American and British systems

Robinson's framework is derived from an analysis of American foreign policy; this chapter is concerned with British policy on GM food. So, it is necessary to consider how differences in the American and British systems may mediate conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, privileging certain types of uncertainty over others in different national contexts.

The American civil service is a patronage system with the majority of officials political appointees made by the president in return for loyalty (Halligan 2004; Peters and Pierre 2004).² This ensures a high degree of partisanship, politicization and staff turnover with each new administration. Thus, it minimizes the possibility of the entrenchment of ideas and potential conflict between incoming politicians and permanent officials; but it also is fundamentally destabilizing

with the change of a president. The British civil service is based on a permanent civil service with relatively little turnover with the change of administration. This is ideally intended to ensure impartial advice and staff stability at the change of government, but it also facilitates the entrenchment of positions, historic rivalries, territorialism and resistance to change. It also lends itself to a relative imbalance in the experience and knowledge of senior civil servants vis-à-vis new ministers and the possibility that new ministers, isolated from their colleagues, can be socialized into the department culture and imperatives (Barberis 1996; Dunleavy 1996; Hennessy 1989, 2005; Marsh *et al.* 2000). So, a change of government in Britain can lead to a paradigmatic change at ministerial level but attempts to translate these into policy may be counter-balanced by resistance from officials. Thus, American-type policy uncertainty may stem from staff turnover at elections whereas British-type uncertainty is more likely to stem from policy differences/disagreements between ministers and civil servants.

Long-established departments with permanent officials headed by a minister accountable to parliament for policy reinforce vertical policy-making processes (Barberis 1996; Dunleavy 1996; Hennessy 1989, 2005; Marsh *et al.* 2000). These 'are arguably effective at delivering discrete policies and providing clear lines of management and accountability... [But] the system is administratively, constitutionally and culturally ill-equipped to deal with ... problems which reach across departmental boundaries' (Flinders 2002: 56). Thus, there is constant tension between vertical policy processes and political imperatives for horizontal – or co-ordinated – policies.

This institutional context reinforces the notion that policy ambiguity is systemic and presents two possible types of policy certainty/uncertainty. Either, uncertainty can take the form of official resistance to ministerial agendas or certainty can take the form of continuity of permanent personnel and 'departmentalitis' – 'the tendency for ministers to become obsessed with their own department's objectives' (Flinders 2002: 66). With the latter, there are likely to be relatively high levels of certainty *within* departments but a relatively high degree of uncertainty *between* departments as a result of territorialism. Historically, both have been problematic for governments (Hennessy 1989) – hence, the formation in 1916 of the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate policy across government and mediate disputes between departments and ministers. By 1997, the department was well-equipped to deal with conflict-based uncertainty because of its location within Downing Street, but it had no policy formation role, a very small staff and so was structurally ill-equipped to deal with the no-policy type of uncertainty. Tony Blair expanded the department's size and remit to include joint policy formulation in recognition of the growing imperative for more co-ordinated policy-making (Hennessy 1989; Rhodes 2000).

This brief outline of the particularities of the British policy-making context identifies sites of policy ambiguity and potential fissures where policy uncertainty over GM food could emerge. These fissures create potential entry points for media interventions. In some cases, the media may be 'invited in' by elites seeking to use the media to put pressure on colleagues and so 'win the internal

argument' (see Kingdon 1984). Or perceived contradictions in elite communication of policy may present media with opportunities to frame debates in terms of ministerial divisions or contradictory policy so create doubt about the robustness of food safety policy.

Distinction between foreign policy and domestic policy

The previous section argued that modified versions of Robinson's core concepts of ambiguity and uncertainty can be applied to the British context but whether concepts used to analyse foreign policy can be used to analyse domestic policy also needs to be ascertained.

This chapter agrees consideration needs to be given to how different policy types might mediate the application of the concept, but it disagrees with Malek's argument that domestic policy studies 'may have little relevance' for foreign policy analyses – or vice versa. He contends that 'foreign affairs' deals with a relatively uninformed public; that 'foreign policy issues are clearly more complex than domestic policy issues and are more difficult to identify with'; and that foreign affairs issues are presented at a greater distance from the public (Malek and Wiegand 1997: 11).

However, familiarity, identification or relevance – that is, proximity and distance – to the issues should not be conflated with an informed public. The decline in science education in Britain means few lay people and few journalists have the basic skills needed to assess debates and reach an informed lay view about the veracity of scientific knowledge and the robustness of science-based policy processes (for the science-background of journalists, see Hargreaves and Lewis 2004). So, policy elites working in areas at the forefront of science like GM, have to communicate complex, technical arguments that emerge from fragmented, ambiguous spaces to a largely uninformed lay public primarily through a media unsuited to the conveying of complexity and where most journalists writing about GM food and crops have little if any scientific background. This creates a paradox. Debates over science-based food policy may be proximate to readers in terms of direct relevance for daily decisions yet be distant in terms of unfamiliar and obscure.

This paradox is thrown into sharp relief in debates about food safety. Scientific risk assessments are complex, technical and too obscure for lay-people to understand; yet the outcomes are highly personalized through what they eat, the potential consequences for their health and that of their families. With some safety policy domains, consumers are asked to place their personal trust – and that of their families – in processes far removed from their understanding. With pharmaceuticals this has been relatively less problematic; with food safety this has been problematized over a decade of food scares including salmonella, e-coli, irradiation and BSE. Thus, public trust in scientific processes that underpin food safety policy is likely to be fragile and particularly susceptible to media constructions of food scares (Eldridge and Reilly 2003; Kitzinger and Reilly 1997; Reilly and Miller 1997).

This paradoxical proximity–distance – the potential to frame the story as directly relevant but posing an obscure threat through life-sustaining practices of eating – and the history of government mishandlings of food scares increases the likelihood that media will engage in food safety debates (see Pennington 2000). What gives food scares particular political traction, is that – having been informed of the ‘risks’ and government handling of these by the media – consumers can ‘vote’ on policy decisions through what they choose to buy. The aggregated consequences of individual decisions such as these can have devastating effects on an industry, so compelling government to act. This convergence of factors makes food safety policy particularly susceptible to media interventions.

Methodology

This chapter uses a case study methodology to do a policy field analysis because it is well-suited to a multi-method analysis of a single phenomenon, especially where the relationships between complex strands and different agents need to be examined (Gom *et al.* 2000). A case study can use quantitative methods but the research discussed here did not set out to show causality but to explore qualitative dimensions of the conditions in which media may be able to influence policy processes. Quantitative methods would not facilitate this type of exploration. Furthermore, the methodological aim was to capture shifts in media coverage and elite responses; it was not to arrive at generalizable findings for the whole period based on a representative sample.

The analysis of policies, conditions and behaviour drew on document analysis of white papers and parliamentary statements (Scott 2005) as well as interviews. These were used to descriptively map departmental responsibilities; construct a time line of policy developments; inform an interpretation of developments; and act as a check on any conclusions reached (see Robinson 2002).

Media analysis centred on newspapers because in the British political public sphere the broadcast media may set the immediate news agenda, but it is the newspapers that set the medium term agenda because of their ability to launch campaigns and investigations (McNair 2000) – as was the case with GM food. Certain newspapers – *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Mirror* – were selected to reflect a cross section of broadsheets and tabloids as well as a cross section of political persuasions. A Nexis search on ‘GM food’ and ‘genetically modified food’ was used to select relevant articles, and coverage each month for each title was noted. The ensuring figure was used to show the ebbs and flows of media interest (see Figure 8.1). The original intention was to do a qualitative content analysis of coverage during the most intensive period – that is the highest peak of coverage. However, the analysis of select committee evidence and interviews indicated that the previous peak was the turning point so this was selected partly because this should capture the shift in tone and issues that captured the interest of editors and journalists. Every third article was analysed in terms of source, tone and event/topic. The chronology of media events and policy events were then synchronized.

Empirical findings

Conditions of policy ambiguity in the GM policy domain

Policy ambiguity is evident in the degree of fragmentation, overlaps and duplication with seven departments having at least some responsibility or involvement in economic or regulatory aspects of GM policy. The Department of Environment (DoE), Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) and to a lesser extent the Department of Health (DoH) were the lead departments on the regulation of GM food and crops (House of Lords 1998). They were supported by over 20 advisory committees. Thus, there were a number of sites of potential ambivalence or conflict. For instance, between an economic agenda of promoting Britain's biotechnology industry and a regulatory agenda that was inherently more cautious; or between the DoE and MAFF when dealing with issues of the environmental impacts of food cultivation especially given that environment and food regulation were based on a different set of principles with the former even more precautionary than the latter. Thus, the GM policy domain was a typically modernist policy domain characterized by systemic ambiguity which created fissures out of which policy uncertainty could emerge.

From conditions of ambiguity to conditions of policy uncertainty

One potential type of policy uncertainty occurs when 'an issue arises and [there is] no policy in place' (Robinson 2002: 26) but it is unclear what is meant by 'no policy'. If Robinson means no relevant policy at all to guide ministers and officials, then this type of uncertainty does not apply to GM food. Labour inherited bans on the unlicensed sale of GM food and an extensive system of scientific committees, detailed procedures and guidelines on risk assessment. However, there were two voids that did represent a variation of 'no policy'. There was no specific *Labour Party* policy on GMOs that clarified the *ministerial* position on it and there was no *overarching/framework* to co-ordinate inherited policies. The 1997 Labour manifesto made no mention of GMOs but did contain generic components that could be developed into a framework policy – for instance, a pledge to set up an independent food regulator, to extend consumer choice and to promote British science and high technology industries. However, there was no indication of how these parts might fit together in an overarching biotechnology policy or what the priority would be if different parts were perceived to be in conflict with each other. So, there was scope for confusion and conflict but only if GM became a problem with the media and public.

This systemic ambiguity did translate into policy uncertainty and interviews illustrate how. A former senior communication adviser said:

There was no real policy about GM except the [science-based] one ... adopted by MAFF ... the Environment Dept, [their] traditional enemy ... took a completely different view. Their universe happens to include green

groups. John Prescott had been egged on by Michael Meacher ... started to raise government doubts as to whether it was a wise policy to pursue. And Prescott authorized Meacher to start briefing the Sunday newspapers weekend after weekend against the policy as it stood and against GM and in particular Monsanto.

(Grannatt 2007)

Thus, existing fissures of ambiguity (rivalries and vertical policy processes) combined with uncertainty (no party policy and no framework policy) and the political agenda of individuals (Prescott and Meacher) to shift internal disputes into the media domain.

Sir Richard Packer (2007), permanent secretary at MAFF until 2000, corroborated this interpretation and identified another point of tension between ministers and officials. He said:

The truth was that the MAFF pressure would always have been in favour of rationality ... The environmental pressure was always in favour of irrationality ... Many Labour ministers had been part of the people who were spouting this doctrine [of irrationality] ... The Labour government ... had as ... one of its principle claims that they would be more careful on consumer matters than the previous lot. So their instincts were to be cautious and ... Jeff Rooker ... [and] Meacher ... [are] the irrational brigade ... against GM food and crops.

That is, Packer identified resentment in the science-dominated MAFF to the consumer-emphasis of new ministers. So, there was conflict *between* the two departments responsible for regulation of GM food and crops as well as *within* MAFF between permanent officials who were advocates of science-based approach and ministers who advocated a more politically-sensitive policy agenda. These splits could have remained secret, behind the closed doors of Whitehall but this was not the case with GM food. However, it cannot be assumed that growing media hostility to policy followed elite dissent – as hypothesized in indexing thesis (Robinson 2001, 2002) – without checking the timeline of media coverage and the sources of negative stories. Here, empirical evidence offers a counter-explanation to indexing thesis.

Media engagement and intervention in policy domain

Media coverage of GM technology and policies became increasing hostile during 1998, presenting a ‘barrage of media hysteria’ (Cunningham 1998: 4). Senior MPs referred to it as ‘total delirium, hysterical headlines ... fact-free stories that suggested all ... GM foods were a threat to human health’ (Science and Technology Committee 1999: 9). But there was also recognition that ‘media reports have resonated with understandable public scepticism towards the Government’s handling of food matters following the BSE crisis and have formed the hostile

background against which the scientific advisory system must deliver its advice to Government' (ibid.). The danger, according to elites, was that that the combination of 'hysterical headlines', 'public scepticism', experiences with BSE and lack of confidence in food safety would put at risk 'rational policy making' (ibid.).

Media attention to GM food issues escalated from an average of 13 stories a month in 1997, to 43 in 1998 and 262 in 1999 (see Figure 8.1). There were too many articles to analyse in detail so this study focused on peak three (May to October 1998). This did not have the most articles but according to interviews and select committee evidence it marked a turning point in the coverage and set the tone for what followed (ibid.: 4).

Three 'news events' illustrate how media attention shifted during peak three – the launch of a £1 million advertising campaign by multi-national Monsanto, an article by Prince Charles and a *World in Action* documentary. Monsanto claimed it wanted to 'foster a debate' about GM, to present the 'facts' and 'both sides of the debate' to readers. The *Guardian* focused on the uncertain science and its implications for the environment. *The Times*, while concerned about ethics of the technology and the uncertainty, focused on the burgeoning profits and aggressive corporate strategy of Monsanto. None of the tabloids were interested in GM at this stage. The catalyst for the *Daily Mail's* entry into the debate was an article in the *Daily Telegraph* by Prince Charles which enabled them to frame the debate in terms of ethics/religion, uncertain science and unknown effects.³ They also highlighted the associations made by Prince Charles between GMOs and BSE in terms of unpredictable consequences, unknown effects and uncertain science (Kay and Hughes 1998). The next day the newspaper claimed the Prince's intervention had opened divisions between the agriculture minister and environment minister on whether current 'regulations were tough enough' (Eastham and Poulter 1998). The *Daily Mail* claimed, four months later, that there was another ministerial split between the two departments over a moratorium on 'Frankenstein crops' (Eastham and Poulter 1998). Then just as media interest in GM started to subside, a *World in Action* covered research by Dr Arpad Pusztai who claimed there was scientific evidence of a link between genetically modified potatoes and mutations in mice. The Royal Society peer reviewed his findings and discredited them; Pusztai was suspended and then dismissed.

By October the dominant media discourse was uncertainty – uncertain science, unknown effects and the unacceptability of these to the public. News stories were mainly sourced from NGOs who focused on health and environment risks. The only newspaper to focus primarily on policy dimensions was the *Daily Mail* which devoted over 50 per cent of its coverage of GM food issues during peak three to these, compared to 35 per cent in the *Guardian*, 22 per cent in *The Times* and 10 per cent for the *Mirror*. The *Daily Mail* was also the only newspaper to claim that government was divided on policy, and repeatedly questioned the efficacy, suitability and reliability of regulatory decisions. All the newspapers ignored government assertions there was no scientific evidence of harm

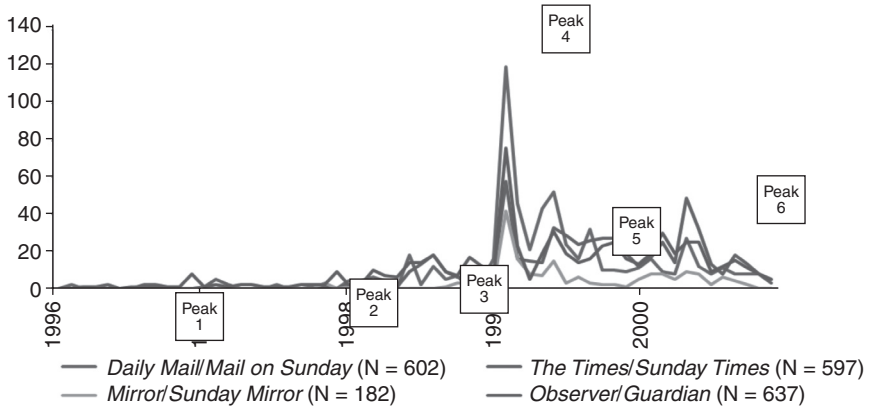


Figure 8.1 Comparison of GM food coverage across four titles and across six peaks of coverage.

Note

Total population of all articles across five peaks of newspaper coverage in selected titles between 1996 and 2000, N = 2009 (based on a Lexis Nexis search).

and cited the BSE/CJD saga as justification for their scepticism. The discrediting of Putsztai's work did little to appease the scepticism.

Some four findings emerged from the analysis of coverage during this peak:

- The news agenda was set by 'trusted' others, not by policy elites as indexing thesis would claim. The views of Prince Charles and Dr Pusztaï crystallized doubts and, acted as catalysts for coverage of scientific and ethical uncertainties.
- The intervention of 'trusted others' widened the debate beyond non-government sources to include ethics and contested science.
- Public uncertainty as captured in opinion polls conducted on behalf of NGOs and pressure for consumer choice became significant themes and part of the media narrative about lack of confidence in regulation.
- Only the *Daily Mail* at this stage was directly concerned with the uncertainties and inadequacies of policy; the other newspapers dealt with it indirectly through discussions on risks, consequences, etc.

These findings cast doubt on the indexing thesis that forms a key component of Robinson's (2002) analysis. Classic indexing thesis (Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 1996) contends that coverage that is critical of policy is indexed to elite dissent and therefore only expresses views already circulating in official circles. Robinson develops this further by arguing that media indexing can expand existing conflict and thereby influence policy. Althaus (2003) provides a caveat to indexing thesis when he shows empirically that media professionals do

go beyond government beats when they have reason to distrust government sources.

The textual analysis for this case study indicates critical media coverage was sourced from outside elite circles. Interviews also suggest there were individual ministers and officials who were sceptical about the policy but this did not develop into dissent, counter-briefing, etc. until *after* the media tone had shifted from sceptical to critical of the technology and policy. Likewise, the *Daily Mail* only highlighted elite dissent *after* the Prince Charles article and the *World in Action* programme.

Linking media coverage, public attitudes and consumer behaviour

A key factor identified in the interviews as exacerbating elite dissent was the links elites made between media coverage and consumer behaviour. Political elites used a number of different indicators of public opinion. First, there were three opinion polls – by Genewatch/MORI, Guardian/ICM and Friends of the Earth/NOP – published between June and October 1998.⁴ The opinion polls were constructed by the green groups and media as evidence of growing public opposition to GM food and growing pressure for mandatory labelling and consumer choice. The government also commissioned its own surveys of public opinion (Science and Technology Committee 1999: 21). These, however, capture mass opinion; but the literature highlights how policy elites are more concerned with issue publics or active publics (Entman and Herbst 2002; Risse-Kappen 1994). In the case of GM food, that would include membership of NGOs etc but the more significant indicator for elites was what the retailers' were saying about consumer behaviour.

Sainsbury's Customer Careline identified two trends starting during peak three and continuing through to 1999: rising customer concern⁵ about GM food and a link between media representations and shifting customer attitudes. During the spring and summer of 1998, the company recorded about 50 calls a week about GM. In August 1998, following the *World in Action* programme this rose to 900 calls a week for a period of about a month. 'This then subsided to a base of about 70 calls a week until February 1999 when the *Daily Mail*, *Express* and *Independent* commenced GM campaigns and GM became a topic for Prime Minister's Questions' (Sainsbury's 1999: 4). In response to growing customer concern, Sainsbury's opened a dedicated GM information line which took over 300 calls in the first four hours and over 2,500 calls in three days following the Blair–Hague exchange. The company also noted that 'concerns were changing from "We want labelling" to "We just do not want GM material"' (Austin and Lo 1999: 645). After July 1999, when the company announced a GM-avoidance policy and withdrew GM tomato paste from the shelves 'calls ... dropped off to such an extent that the company closed its dedicated GM line and these calls were handled by the general helpline' (ibid.). The most dramatic indicator, though, of shifting 'consumer attitudes' was consumer behaviour. At the peak of sales GM tomato paste outsold the

conventional product by 2:1 but by the end of 1998 sales were negligible. Sainsbury's made clear there was a perceived relationship between media coverage and buying behaviour (ibid.). Food retailers, wholesalers and fast food outlets responded to the collapse of GM food sales by adopting high profile GM-avoidance strategies.

Response of government to changing circumstances

Not only did retailers link the media-induced food scare to the 'collapse of consumer confidence' in the regulation of food, so too did government (Packer 2007). As media and public opposition grew, so did briefing by ministers of journalists. One interviewee said: 'We realized we had a real problem on our hands ... not only in terms of a lack of policy and the perception of the technology ... we had a government that was internally at war with itself' (2007).

The multi-faceted response of the government says much about what they perceived the problems to be. The institutional response was to involve the Cabinet Office. A committee was set up within the Cabinet Office comprising representatives from each department with responsibility for GM so that 'arguments could be reconciled in the normal way through collective discussion' (ibid.). The communicative response saw the Cabinet Office also take responsibility for communicating government policy. The idea was to provide a

Single reference point to the press office and the cabinet office and a single website which would ... allow for the exposition of the arguments the Cabinet put forward ... it was interesting ... the official spokesman for the issue became the website.

(Ibid.)

A special press office was set up to draw on existing 'facts', scientific evidence and inherited policy components to rebut media claims about the risks of eating GM food. Thus, a communicative strategy pre-dated a party or framework policy.

However, a communicative strategy on its own cannot stand for long. The void created by the lack of a framework policy needed to be addressed urgently if the government was to have a coherent policy to communicate. Given that the different departments with responsibility for different parts of GM policy were 'at war' with each other, none of them could take the lead. The responsibility for devising a framework policy was delegated to a committee in the Cabinet Office, but

Trying to produce a joint policy was an anathema to the Cabinet Office whose normal role ... had been policy neutral. [It] ... was merely a mechanism for ensuring that policy is collectively formed and propagated, it's not a mechanism for forming policy ... [this] was thrown into their laps.

(Ibid.)

One of the first things the committee did was to ‘review ... the existing framework of checks and controls and advice to Ministers and the Government just to consider whether it was as comprehensive and as coherent as it needed to be’ (Cunningham 1998: 784). The framework policy arrived at by late 1999 sought to balance regulatory and economic imperatives by focusing on consumer choice. It was summed up as ‘we still believe in the technology but people have to be free to make the choice ... got to be about compulsory labelling’ (elite interview 2007).

This still left the government with the problem of public and media perceptions of the technology. Ministers could not ban GM products as demanded by some newspapers because it fell under EU law and ministers were legally prevented from over-riding scientific advice on political grounds (Science and Technology Committee 1999). Neither could they grant licences for fear of fueling anti-GM hostility. The government resorted to a series of compromises and delays. The processing of applications for licenses to market new GM products stalled and no new ones were granted for six years; a five-year voluntary moratorium on the commercial cultivation of GM crops was agreed with industry; and a review of the existing regulatory and advisory system for biotechnology was launched. In essence, then, there was policy stalemate. The newspapers could not secure the policy reversal they demanded but neither could government press ahead with routine decisions on the licensing of new GM products.

Assessing media influence on policy

Robinson’s (2001, 2002) hypothesis on media influence has two parts. First, he contends that media coverage that is critical of policy is indexed to or follows elite dissent. Second, the media have the potential to influence policy in conditions of policy uncertainty. The analysis of news texts suggests critical media coverage was sourced from sources outside government and elite dissent did not become a media issue until after the tone of coverage had started to shift. What was more significant was the link food retailers made between media coverage and the de facto boycott of GM food. In the face of growing media hostility, public resistance to the products and the threat this was perceived to pose to Britain’s biotechnology industry, government felt compelled to act. As MPs noted, ‘the government, which was at first supportive of genetically modified foods but then was forced into reviewing both attitudes and statutory approval procedures in the face of the public and media panic’ (Science and Technology Committee 1999). However, the latent reservations of some ministers had been fuelled by growing media and public opposition so much so that even after the Cabinet had adopted a government and framework policy they continued to brief the media against policy and Monsanto (interview 2007). This meant the media were able to sustain anti-GM editorial policy for a number of years. The significance of the media has been summed up by Packer. He said:

I think there is nothing in which the media has played a bigger role than GM, no scientific issue I would say. The only comparable ones would be in

my time, would have been the row over irradiation of foods I would say but GM has been bigger than that.

(Interview 2007)

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to apply a modified version of Robinson's (2001, 2002) framework to a case of GM food policy in Britain through the posing of three questions.

First, in what circumstances and to what extent do the media have the potential to influence policy processes as well as policy debates? This chapter challenged assumptions that policy ambiguity and uncertainty are exceptions. It counter-argued that the nature of modern policy domains contribute to systemic ambiguity and the particular nature the British system with its permanent civil service and vertical policy structures exacerbate these, deepening the fissures in government. These fissures are sites out of which particular types of policy uncertainty within or between departments can emerge, and sites of potential media intervention in the policy domain. It is at this point of convergence between ambiguity, uncertainty and intervention that media's potential to influence policy processes lies.

Empirical data from the case study of GM food supported this conceptualization. It identified a highly fragmented policy domain that was particularly susceptible to media attack partly because Labour had no party political position on GM food and there was no framework policy around which the different components of existing policies could be prioritized. It was also susceptible to media interventions because of the particular nature of the policy domain. When media and public scepticism against the technology hardened into opposition to it and to policies, the structural fissures opened further and dissent between departments, ministers and civil servants grew. Some of this dissent was captured in the media as some policy elites sought to take the ideological struggle over policy into the public domain. However, the timeline suggests that hostile media coverage did not emanate from within elite circles as indexing theorists and Robinson would contend. Instead, the drivers of the media agenda at the turning point – peak three – were 'trusted others' such as Prince Charles and the independent scientist Dr Pusztai, possibly because the previous government's handling of BSE/CJD had led the media to be deeply sceptical about assurances from government scientists. As media hostility grew, public confidence in food safety fell and sales of GM food collapsed, ministers felt compelled to act. But their room for manoeuvre was limited primarily by EU policy and by existing laws that prevented ministers from over-riding scientific advice on political grounds. This meant that ultimately media's ability to influence policy was limited by wider frameworks.

However, they were able to destabilize GM food policy to the extent that government felt compelled to review existing regulations and to delay granting new licenses. Part of the reason for this addresses the second question as to whether

certain types of policy domains are more vulnerable to media interventions than others. This chapter argued that food safety policy is particularly so because of the nature of the knowledge-base of decision-making. Challenges in communicating the rationale for safety decisions and media challenges to the scientific knowledge on which decisions were made, undermined public confidence in the reliability of government claims that no harm was posed. In certain other policy domains a loss of public confidence in government policy may not have an immediate material effect. In the case of food, the loss of confidence in GM was readily manifest in individual choices not to consume the products and when aggregated, this translated into a collective protest in the form of de facto boycott. Government felt compelled to act to protect British biotechnology industry.

The third question posed was to what extent is it helpful to distinguish policy debate in which problems are selected and prioritized from the structures, institutions and processes of policymaking? A distinction between debate and processes is often based on a pragmatic attempt to manage limited resources. The advantage of creating two analytically separate domains also allows both to be studied in more detail, as is fitting the complex interweaving of the strands in a debate or sprawling nature of policy domains. However, the distinction is an artificial one and this chapter has sought to illustrate the dialogical and dialectical relationship between the two – that is, how public debates about policy can exacerbate fragmentation or fuel dissent in ways that compromise policy. This analysis is on a small scale and therefore limited. There is a need for more work in this area.

Notes

- 1 The only GM food products that had been licensed for use in Britain were bakers' yeast and an enzyme in vegetarian cheese, so Zeneca's tomato paste was the first GM food – as opposed to derivative – to secure a licence.
- 2 In Britain, the most explicit form of patronage is the appointment of special advisers and although their number has increased in recent years special advisers remain a minority.
- 3 The *Mail on Sunday*'s royal correspondent, Richard Kay, quoted Prince Charles as warning that scientists were straying into 'realms that belong to God and to God alone'. Prince Charles argued that the 'lesson of BSE' is the unforeseen consequences whereby 'even the best science cannot predict the unpredictable'.
- 4 Total coverage of GM food in all UK publications including specialist press, local newspapers and national newspapers topped 232 in June, 211 in July and 317 in August 1998. These increases are even more notable given that the summer months are among the quietest of the year and a time when pagination tends to fall.
- 5 It is beyond the remit of this chapter to explore the differences and overlaps between 'public', 'consumer' and 'customer'. What is important that all three were cited by political elites as indications of what the 'public' thought about GM food.

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9 Going public?

(Re)presentation of women's policy in the media

Birgit Sauer

Publicity and privacy in the context of gender policy

'Making the Private Public' – none of the political mottos of the women's movement has gained as much notoriety. The women's movement brought to the light of day the homely secrecies of private life, so as to make visible the general in the particular and thus to make possible solidarity among women, to politicize and hence make subject to change women's lives that traditionally had been conceived of as private – as for instance in the case of domestic violence. No doubt this constituted a noticeable disruption of the Fordist world of the Western democracies of the 1970s. One of the results of this strategy of publicity was that it alerted the public to matters of gender discrimination and the establishment of women's policy as a legitimate policy field, including the crafting of gender-related institutions like women's ministries and anti-discrimination officers; legal changes regarding, for instance, abortion rights, domestic violence, and affirmative action; and the invention of new policy concepts like gender mainstreaming.

The media have played an important part in the origin and spread of the second women's movement in West Germany in the early 1970s. It was, for instance, a media campaign – the magazine *Stern* presented, under the headline 'I have had an Abortion,' testimony from 374 famous women who had broken the law by aborting pregnancy – that initiated not only publication and scandalization of a misogynous and socially unjust penal practice, but also a public policy debate that eventually led to the reform of the anti-abortion paragraph 218 of the Criminal Code. Beyond its immediate target, this campaign was the symbolic point of origin for the struggle against women's discrimination and hence an important milestone for the mobilization of the second women's movement.

It has been nearly 40 years since, and the media system has changed in these years just as fundamentally as the women's movement. While the communication triangle citizens–public policy–media has gained much in complexity the media's interest in women's issues and gender equality policies is rather low. That until today, for example, almost nobody outside the circle of activists and professional politicians is familiar with concepts like gender mainstreaming, anti-discrimination or diversity politics is to no small degree owed to the lackadaisical attitude of the media towards these issues.

Should we conclude from the low intensity of reporting on women's and gender equality policies that media influence on these policies is equally low? Do the media contribute at all to the framing of gender equality policy (Gamson *et al.* 1992)? Does 'media-crazy' exist at all with regard to gender issues? Is it possible that the media, with regard to this policy field, do not function as political actors in their own right – as agenda-setters or as framers – as they do in other policy fields (Ross 2002: 66–67; Jones and Baumgartner 2005)? Or does the marginal role of gender issues in the media point to a different form of taking influence on gender policies, i.e. dethematization and negation? If so, should we consider the media to be proactively engaged in the marginalization of gender related policies, or are they merely mirroring the preferences of political actors in the administration and the political parties who construct women's and gender equality policies as unimportant? In other words, are the media reproducing rather than producing relations of male hegemony in politics? And do these male institutions and actor constellations constrain media influence on women's policies?

While in recent years, women's and gender studies have done a great deal of analytical work concerning the effects of women's and gender policies on the transformation of gender-specific relations of inequality, discrimination, and suppression, the role of the media in regulating and making public the supposedly private and non-political relations between men and women has attracted surprisingly little attention. As of yet, no empirical studies on the role of the media in gender equality policies are available. Therefore, the aim of this article is to offer some conceptual ideas to stimulate future research, focusing on the case of Germany. These ideas have two foci, *first* institutions and actors in the policy field, which might have an impact on media's influence and *second* the interpretative aspect of the policy process and the role of media as framers of gender equality policies. These perspectives might explain on one hand the low intensity of media reporting on gender equality policies, i.e. the media's inattentiveness vis-à-vis the topic and on the other media's influence on gender policies by means of what I would like to call passive attentiveness. Prima vista, the evidence suggests that gender equality policies fall victim to 'negative mediatisation' by way of the dethematization, trivialization, and neglect of political issues and problems related to women. Such passive neglect, however, can also turn into active negative campaigning. Thus, the media's impact on gender equality policies consists primarily in the complementary, reinforcing relationship they have with politics: they cooperate in the reproduction of masculine hegemony. However, the media's disinterest cannot be explained by a simple reference to masculine dominance but also by the institutional structure and the actors in the policy field as well as by the asynchronicity of news cycle and policy cycle.

In the following, I shall *first* discuss media influence on gender and anti-discrimination policies in the logic of the policy cycle and sketch out the agenda-setting processes and the processes that lead to the institutionalization of the policy field in historical perspective. *Second*, I shall inquire into the obstacles

that the institutional and structural setting of the policy field presents to adequate media-reporting and discuss the mechanisms of masculinist dethematization. I shall *third* discuss the mechanisms of framing and reframing, to which a new policy field like gender equality is particularly vulnerable and *conclude* with remarks on the specific forms of interaction between the media and the field of women's policies.

Agenda-setting in gender equality policies: the media as a feminist resource of power

Communication research confirms that the influence of the media on the definition and articulation of a political problem, i.e. their agenda-setting function, is much higher than on the usually drawn-out processes of decision-making and policy implementation (von Beyme 1994; Jarren *et al.* 1996: 9–12).¹ The first phase of the policy process is about the making virulent of new issues 'that gain media attention simply by virtue of being new and surprising' (Jarren *et al.* 1996: 14). The media hence have a self-serving interest in picking up a new issue (or presenting an old issue as new) because newness in itself defines news-worthiness and commands public attention (Altheide and Snow 1979). According to Klaus von Beyme (1994), the media are most likely to take independent initiative in political processes and decision-making, if an issue is either contested and conflictual (particularly in a moral or ethical sense) or new and innovative. These conditions are met in the agenda-setting phase of the gender equality policy process.

For political actors – as insiders and outsiders of the political system proper – too, the media are of particular strategic importance during the agenda-setting: This is when the conditions are best, particularly for political actors who hold non-majoritarian positions, to launch a new issue or to feed new takes on old subjects into the process of political decision-making (Voltmer 2007). Excluded or marginalized actors – like the women's movement – have to struggle for the attention of established political actors, and one way to achieve the goal is active usage of the media public. Media thus can be used as a resource in political agenda-setting, especially if traditional channels are clogged or if access to the networks of political decision-making is restricted – as is certainly the case with the women's movement and with feminist activists within political parties. Marginalized political actors can hence use the media as partners in the strategically important framing process of the agenda-setting phase.

More than any other part of the policy cycle, agenda-setting is a media process. It is centrally concerned with the definition and interpretation of political reality by political and media actors. The framing of an issue in the media is of such central importance because not only *which*, but also, and perhaps even more so, *how* issues are being presented in the media has an important influence on further political decision-making. Frames are 'central, organizing ideas or structures' that suggest 'a specific perspective on the issue and corresponding solutions to the problems it presents' (Bonfadelli 2002: 205; Gamson *et al.* 1992;

Bacchi 1999). Agenda-setting in the political and media systems hence functions as a filter: some issues and actors 'pass' and gain visibility, others remain invisible; some issue areas are being construed as important, others fall victim to trivialization and negation.

In the early stage of feminist mobilization, the West German media played an important role in giving publicity and gaining attention for the discrimination of women. They played the role of Fourth Power by exerting control, scandalizing injustice, and pressuring for policy change. The media supported feminist activists in the mobilization phase of the German women's movement and made an important contribution to feeding new frames for the role of women, the relations between men and women, and the perception of female autonomy into the public debate and helped women to gradually escape the trap of family(-policy).

Gender equality policy in the German Federal Republic is hence an example of a successful agenda-setting process via the media. The campaign in the magazine *Stern* had significant impact on the change of abortion law; but even beyond the immediate issue, it contributed to the institutionalization of gender equality policy. Feminist actors had no choice but to work with and through the media, since they had no immediate influence on the legislative and administrative systems, and since the political parties as the primary organizations for the aggregation of interests were largely unwilling to engage in gender equality policy issues.

Thus, the alternative public of the women's movement was successful in gaining entry to the public of the mass media in the early 1970s. For the women's movement, media publicity was not only a resource for mobilization, but a power resource too, because it facilitated the exertion of pressure on the traditional male political elites. Furthermore, media publicity helped create alliances between feminist actors and mainstream organized interest, as in the case of the abortion rights debate, where the medical profession, too, argued in favor of reform.

In an era when politics was an almost entirely male domain and political institutions sealed themselves against the integration of women and women's issues, the media opened space for political debate. They did so, of course, only to the extent that the women's movement's strategies of publicity matched the media's logic of newsworthiness. The success of the *Stern*-campaign was to no small degree determined by the strategic framing of the issue in the sense of 'the publicity of the private' – i.e. unwanted pregnancy – that added a certain human touch appeal to the story. In more general terms, it is a common trait of the most successful instances of feminist mobilization and agenda-setting that they strategically catered to the desires of the media: Public staging of spectacles of the female body, polarization of men versus women, or the negative campaigning of feminist activists like Alice Schwarzer – all aimed at increasing the newsworthiness of the early women's movement. Framing issues in a manner that maximizes moral and ethical contention and the potential for conflict, too, creates an opportunity structure to penetrate the media filter. This certainly was the case with the abortion debate. Personalization is another strategy employed by

feminist activists in the early 1970s: The *Stern*-campaign would never have been that successful, had the women who admitted to being criminal offenders by having had abortions not been famous. In short, news-relevant factors like newness, contentiousness, and fame and news-formats like personalization and dramatization are the ingredients that made the ‘I have had an Abortion’-campaign such a spectacular success.

Institutionalization and ambivalence: normalization and dethematization of women’s and equality policies

The phase of agenda-setting and of the invention of gender equality policy in the 1970s was succeeded by the phase of its normalization and its transformation into ‘regular policy’ (von Beyme 1994: 332) since the 1980s. From this time forward, the new issue area of gender equality policy shared with other policy fields the problem that media interest recedes once the political salience of the issue area has been sufficiently established. The flipside of the media’s fascination with the articulation of stances is their impatience with and inattentiveness regarding the drawn-out processes of negotiation and decision-making.

Slow-moving negotiations, drawn-out decisions, tedious committee work and communication processes lack sex-appeal; this is why the media do not care much about policy processes. News cycles and policy cycles are therefore not congruent; the former tend to be much shorter than the latter (Lengauer *et al.* 2004: 207). Media reporting is oriented towards events more than issues (Kitzinger 2004: 23). While making the private public is considered newsworthy and may even carry a grain of scandal, the slow and tedious struggle for equal pay, reform of the family name law, or gender-discriminating formulas in the determination of old age insurance provide less attractive news stories. ‘Once it becomes a policy-problem, social inequality in gender relations loses its emphatic character’ (Holland-Cunz 1996: 168). Even if one does not agree with the more dramatic depiction of the state of gender equality policy, it certainly is a fact that with the de-dramatization of gender issues, media interest dwindled.

What contributed to this problem was that conflicts between different actors in the processes of decision making and legislation remained largely invisible to the outside. Feminist actors did not break ranks and use the media to garner support for their positions. Institutionalization of gender and anti-discrimination policy on the levels of federal, state, and local politics thus remained largely on the lee side of media interest. The slow drilling of thick boards had to commence in silence, it did not make for good news, and media-orchestra was not playing.

The structural transformation of the female public sphere and the mis-match between the media and gender equality policy

Gender equality policy in Germany was institutionalized in a highly ambivalent and contentious process, particularly regarding the framing of the contents of the

new policy. Still, it was not able to stir much media interest. This can be explained, as we have seen, in terms of the discrepancy between media and policy cycle. But this is not the whole story. In this section, I shall propose that the policy field itself possesses characteristics that impede its media effectiveness and restrain and caution the actors in the policy field in their behavior vis-à-vis the mass media public.

Gender policy in the traditional sense refers to the narrow and generally mono-institutional field of policies that aim primarily at women. Traditional gender policy treats the female existence as a selective risk and women's issues as particularistic and differentiating, not general problems that concern predominantly or exclusively women. Consequently, gender policy measures in this traditional sense rarely take the role of men into consideration. While traditional gender policy is distributive, thereby neither intending nor causing the just redistribution of social resources and structural change in the social position of men and women, gender equality policy is primarily regulatory and aims first and foremost at the de-hierarchization of gender relations (Kulawik and Sauer 1996: 30). Policy measures that belong with gender equality, i.e. affirmative action, anti-discrimination laws, or gender mainstreaming aim directly at relations of gender inequality. Their goal is to give women equal access to all social resources, tackle discrimination in all areas of social interaction, and increase the social autonomy of women by minimizing their familial dependencies and especially their dependence on men (Lang and Sauer 2003: 432).

The conceptual differentiation between traditional gender policy and policies of gender equality sheds some light on the specific conditions of the field that have worked to facilitate or dampen media interest in the different phases of the policy cycle. Contemporary 'multimedia and multi-channel public sphere' (Plasser and Ulram 2004) accepts only issues of a particular structure. Polarization and male-female conflicts match the media logic: men versus women – this is the stuff the media like to adopt. Media attention, therefore, is highest where the limits of traditional women's policy are being transcended and the gender-political dimension of a political problematic, i.e. the stakes of women and men and their relational positions, come into focus. Such 'contentious negativity' is characteristic of issues like the 'Gewaltschutzgesetz' (the 2002 'protection against violence'-law, which strengthened the position of victims of domestic violence in the Civil Code) or the debate surrounding the introduction of 'Elterngeld', a 'parents' allowance,' (i.e. wage replacement for young parents at a replacement rate of two-thirds up to a maximum of 1,800 Euro, to be paid for 12 months if only one parent takes a leave of absence and 14 months if both parents commit to a share of early childhood education). Treating men as an integral part of the 'women's problem' reliably stirs enough controversy to stimulate media reporting.

However, the policy field has certain characteristics that impede media interest and reduce its newsworthiness, even in cases of sufficiently 'scandalous' border transgressions. Gender inequality *first* is not a single issue, but a complex constellation of problems. The fact that gender equality cuts across the traditional

divisions of policy fields and cabinet positions and that consequently responsibility for gender equality is shared among various departments and agencies is a serious obstacle in the way of gaining influence on the media. *Second*, the traditional weakness of the ministry nominally responsible for gender issues only compounds this effect. *Third*, the gender equality policy arena is highly ideological and conflict-ridden and policy loyalties in the bureaucratic apparatus are volatile. In large-scale reform policies, discussion of their ‘particularistic’ gender effects tend to disappear behind issues that are perceived as being of a non-particularistic, ‘general’ nature. For instance, in the run-up to the German reform of labor market and unemployment policies by the red–green coalition in 2002, the Ministry for Family Affairs consciously avoided addressing matters of gender discrimination so as not to risk derailing the reform by untying the package. It took the intervention of feminist academics to at least reduce the preference for the single-male-wage-earner model implied by the proposed legislation.

Fourth, the connections between ‘media reporting and policy process are embedded in a complex network of mutual attempts to take influence on the respective other side’ (Voltmer 2007). Hence, media representation of a policy field is not determined by its content alone. Apart from substance, it is elite constellations, actors’ networks, and institutional structures that mediate between the political and the media system and structure the representation of policy in the media as well as ways in which the media contribute to shaping the policy-field. The policy network of women’s and gender-equality policy is extremely heterogeneous and open, consisting of ministries on federal and state level run by different parties’ women’s organizations on local, national, and international levels, professional organizations like the Union of Female Attorneys (Juristinnenbund), and movement activists like women’s shelters. These heterogeneous actors constantly change arenas, moving, for instance, from problem articulation to program definition to implementation and back (Holland-Cunz 1996: 168). This fractious state complicates the strategies of personalization so dear to the media. And in the absence of corporate actors like labor unions to constantly mobilize around gender biases (Marcinkowski 1996: 206–207), the whole work of thematization has to be done by the comparatively tiny institutions of gender equality policy and to civil society organizations with their grossly insufficient capacities and resources.

Fifth, institutional gender equality policy sits rather uncomfortably at the interface between political-administrative system and autonomous women’s movement and finds itself in a double bind: ‘In the different phases of policy-making, conflicts of interest are organized along entirely disparate lines of conflict and coalition. The actors repeatedly have to change roles and adopt different perspectives’ (Holland-Cunz 1996: 169). That gender policy is conducted in such a complex and conflictual ‘net of women’s politics’ (ibid.: 161) contributes to the paradoxical nature of its media politization.

While movement actors tend to use the media to criticize institutional gender equality policy, change it or push it to action, institutional gender equality policy

is in the precarious position of having to seek legitimacy both internally in the context of government and administration and externally vis-à-vis civil society activists and hence has to find forms of cooperation both with the masculinist institutions and the feminist activists. The clash at the interface with civil society and tensions within the ‘*velvet triangle*’ of women’s movements, femocrats, and politicians (Woodward 2004) make politization through the media both difficult and dangerous. For conflicts amplified by media coverage may put successful policy-making at risk, have issues disappear in a Bermuda Triangle of neglect, or discredit important actors.

Sixth, still a comparatively young policy field, the state of institutionalization in gender equality policy continues to be precarious and somewhat provisional, which, too, weakens its position vis-à-vis the media. Actors in the field are reluctant to stage conflicts in public, so as not to endanger what has been achieved so far. Gender equality is generally considered a ‘soft’ policy field and hence of limited importance and relevance. Women’s policies are frequently disregarded as being mostly atmospheric and effective at best in terms of political culture, but largely irrelevant with regard to structural changes in redistribution (for a critical take see Holland-Cunz 1996: 161). The ‘passive’ adaptations that can be accomplished by gender equality policy are not prone to produce dramatic decisions or spectacular successes – not even what constitutes ‘success’ in women’s policy is sufficiently defined (ibid.: 170). This, too, is a soft flank that makes adequate media presentation of gender equality difficult.

Seventh, strategies of personalization and privatization neither are effective to place the issue area ‘women’s policy’ in the media. The precarious state of the policy field is compounded by the problematic perception of female politicians, who are still conceived of as representing the private in the political sphere and whose leadership qualities can easily be damaged by strategies of privatization (i.e. the political use of their private sphere). While their male colleagues use their families like decorative accessories, the families of female politicians are rather used to deny them competency and leadership quality. See, for instance, the case of Katherina Reiche, who was supposed to become Minister for Family and Women’s Affairs had the Christian-Conservative CDU/CSU won the 2002 campaign: The media and members of the own political camp used the fact that she was a single mother against her and denied that she was qualified to preside over family policy. Hence, female politicians, as for instance German chancellor Angela Merkel, often hide their private sphere, which leaves the policy field ‘faceless’ and void of leadership that has been approved by the media as ‘authentic’. The exception from the rule – a radical counter example indeed – is the current Minister of Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen, who has with much success deployed her seven children as proof of her expertise. The unusual size of her family has secured her much media attention and made her very successful in framing her family-political agenda as women’s policy.

Hegemonic masculinity: the negation of women's and gender equality policy in politics and media

Although gender policy has been institutionalized in Germany on multiple policy levels, its position has remained precarious: Women's policy institutions are constantly threatened by budget cuts or in danger of being abolished altogether (Lang and Sauer 2003). When former chancellor Schröder derided the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs as the 'Ministry for Family and General Bruhaha,' he unambiguously expressed the low esteem and the lack of political determination in the area of gender policy that prevailed even in the red-green government.

The media do little to challenge the masculine hegemony over the political sphere; rather the media and politics close shoulders in their disregard for gender equality policy. A study by Monika Weiderer, for instance, found that in 1993, news items regarding gender equality policies represented only 1.8 percent of the total news on German television (Weiderer 1993). Studies find gender related topics gaining ground since the 1980s notwithstanding (Ross 2004a: 157), it still seems to be the case that, as Brigitta Huhnke claims, politics and the media jointly engage in 'patriarchal consensus manipulation' that discriminates not only against women as political actors or journalists, but against women's and gender equality policies as well (Huhnke 1998: 57–59).

Strategies of annulment and trivialization of gender policy in the media (on these concepts see Tuchman 1980: 42) reinforce the masculinist hierarchization of policy fields and delegitimize gender equality policy. Its difficulties to gain access to the media are closely related to its perception as a 'soft' policy field – but the media have been instrumental in framing it as such in the first place, by drawing on traditional gendered hierarchies like hard/soft and important/unimportant that pervade all social spheres, including the political. It is this circle of reinforcements that explains the absence of women's and gender equality policy in the media public sphere. Let me take the opportunity to sketch out some aspects of the masculinist hegemony in the media and how it feeds back into politics.

Female journalists in public and private media – 'twilight of the males'?

A central aspect of media masculinity and hence of the dethematization of gender equality policy is to be found in the male domination of the news desks. To be sure, women journalists have over the course of the last three decades strengthened their position in the media in general and in the newsrooms in specific and have hence also gained influence in the media construction of gender. The gap between male and female presence in the media has narrowed. But there is no trace of a female takeover. By the mid-1990s, women accounted for 31 percent of newspaper journalists, but only 18 percent of the leading positions (Lünenborg 2005: 4). A 2005 survey conducted by the pro-

professional organization of women journalists (Deutscher Journalistinnenbund) showed that only 18 percent of the content of daily newspapers was authored by women.

The media industry is evidently gendered: control over resources, selection of photos, decisions over what shall be shown and offered for consumption are determined in an environment of gender inequality. With few exceptions, it is men who operate the levers; they are over-represented in project planning, in the selection of picture material, and in headline writing (Lowrey 2004: 24).

Specially the masculinist newsroom culture, i.e. the gendered, male dominated rules of conduct within the journalistic profession (de Bruin and Ross 2004: VII) has been held responsible for the marginalization of women in newsrooms, which expresses itself not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively, in male dominance over financial resources, in the selection of news items, and in the power to determine how an issue will be framed. Particularly the political news business is still male centered, in print media as well as in broadcasting; masculinity as 'standard journalistic practices' is constantly reproduced in the criteria that define newsworthiness, sensationalism, readability, and the assumed interest of the audience (Ross 2004a: 145). Thus, journalistic practice perpetuates male perspectives, renders them unproblematic, leaves them unquestioned, and thus construes them as seemingly unbiased (*ibid.*: 146). Political scientist Pallaver (2000: 225) sums up: 'If one keeps newsworthiness as determined by the generally acknowledged factors constant, events that are male determined have better chances to become news.'

The march of female journalists into the newsrooms in general and into political reporting in particular, slow and cumbersome as it was, has had only limited effects on the representation of gender issues in the media. Gender issues may be more likely to be considered newsworthy today than 30 years ago, but they still do not enjoy high priority (Ross 2002: 135–136). However, communication research is still inconclusive whether there is a verifiable nexus between the context in which news are being produced and the content of the news, or in other words, whether there is a correlation between the gender of journalists and the 'construction of media reality as characterized by gender parity' (Lünenborg 2005: 5). A Mediawatch-analysis from the early 1990s suggests no correlation: At the time, 37 percent of the journalists of the media in the survey were women, but only 15 percent of the reporting was about female actors (*ibid.*). Other analysis, however, convincingly suggest that male journalists are much less likely to present female politicians and women's policy issues than their female colleagues (Ross 2004a: 156), who turn to these topics even though they often are not particularly sexy by news standards. A 2005-analysis of German daily newspapers, for instance, found that the ratio of female actors in articles authored by female journalists stood at 29 percent, compared with 18 percent in articles from male authors (Röser 2006: 33). Röser explains this difference as an effect of the diverging experiences of women and men that result in diverging perspectives and make female journalists more likely to take into account the expectations of fellow women.

The marginalization of female politicians and the dethematization of gender equality policy

Marginalization of female politicians in the media is another plausible candidate for explaining the marginalization of women's and gender equality policy. The media – and television in particular – have been playing a central role in the construction and re-construction of gender difference, including gender inequality. Media presentation contributes to the 'othering' of female politicians according to gender lines. Female politicians are continuously constructed and presented in an 'othering' fashion; an exoticizing gaze that is highly problematic in terms of democratic practice (Ross 2002: 80–82). As Pippa Norris has noted, reporting on female politicians 'reinforces rather than challenges the dominant culture, and thereby contributes toward women's marginalization in public life' (Norris 1997: 1). And 'their hairstyle always seems more newsworthy than their policy positions' (Ross 2002: 163).

An Austrian study from the beginning of the century on gender in political communication has demonstrated a remarkable gender bias in the presentation of policy fields in the eight o'clock news show of Austrian public television. According to this study, reporting on women's policy issues features 57 percent female main actors. In health and education, the rate stands at 48 percent, and at 20 percent in family policy, 24 percent female main actors in social policy, 12 percent in fiscal and 8 percent in economic policy (Lengauer *et al.* 2004: 212). This certainly reflects the lack of interest and engagement for the 'soft' policy fields among male politicians. But the reverse is plausible too: The lower the media's attention to female politicians, the lower the media representation of women's policy. This is an instance of a mediated correlation between media reporting on the policy field and media presentation of female politicians.

Studies on the quantitative media representation show the under-representation of female politicians. It should be noted that media coverage of female politicians is consistently lower than the rate of female holders of office or mandate. An evaluation of the German main news shows on one sample day in 2005 found that 24 percent of all persons covered in the main television news shows were female; in radio broadcast the percentage was 23, and in the news sections of the daily newspapers 20 (Hesse and Röser 2006: 13). On average, this is 22 percent, compared to 15 percent one decade earlier (*ibid.*: 14). The relation of female politicians in the political coverage in 2005 stood at 19 percent in television and newspapers, and 23 percent in radio news (*ibid.*: 16). Reports on female politicians, however, tend to be placed on the back pages of the newspapers (Röser 2006: 34–35).

'Sex sells, gender does not' – male hegemony in issue selection

Framing has, as we have already seen, a significant influence on the relevance afforded to an issue or policy field in the media, and hence also for its presentation. Frames present politics and policies as coherent narrative plots; they

suggest contexts and connections, select and combine. The media have a preference for controversial frames, morally contested issues that fit with established lines of conflict and present conveniently binary oppositions, and dramatic events revolving around deviant or even criminal behavior (Voltmer 2007). Only some of the women's and gender equality policy issues match this preference – or rather: lend themselves to being framed in this fashion. It is specifically those issues that make it into the media and even become agenda-setters in their own right.

At present, one such issue is violence against women, particularly violence against 'other' women, i.e. migrants. Forced marriages, honor killings, and trafficking in women have had an unanticipated surge. Jenny Kitzinger (2004) has analyzed the career of violence against women in the US-media and found that, in the 1970s, neither domestic violence nor rape received any substantial media coverage. By the mid-1980s, the curve began to angle upward, with special attention given to the abuse of young girls (*ibid.*: 15). This change reflects on one hand the increasing efforts in lobbying by women's movement organizations and represents a case of successful agenda-setting. Forms of violence formerly treated as 'private' now trigger automatic action by the public prosecution. On the other hand, media have played an important part in making sexual violence an issue of public interest rather than treating it as private and individualistic (*ibid.*: 33). This results not least from the marketability of these policy issues, whose colorful mix of sex and crime, victimhood and voyeurism presented the media with an attractive angle on female repression and male domination: 'Sex sells, gender does not.' The emphasis on these issues reflects more than anything else their compatibility with the news market: they fit with the 'postmodern logic of communication' (Lengauer *et al.* 2004: 152) and allow mechanisms like personalization to function. Gender-specific *structures* of repression can be personalized in female victims ('poor girls') and male perpetrators (traffickers in women). Thereby, these issues run the risk to be *individualized*, i.e. to be reduced to an individual level and to human interest stories.

Other stylistic strategies that are applicable to gender policy issues include confrontational negativity (women against men), narrative dramatization, a sports-like dramaturgy (i.e. the replacement of issue with game orientation), and episodic instead of issue framing (*ibid.*: 202). From the perspective of the media, it is a particular advantage of the issue area 'violence against women' that political solutions and achievements are rather clear-cut and hence easy to present, like legal changes to punish stalkers or child molesters more severely. This, however, engenders a particular, victimizing perspective on women and women's policy that matches the male hegemonic gaze and perpetuates gender differences and gender inequality. In this sense, the media selectively amplify certain (but not other) issues in a gendered context that reproduces traditional images of femininity and masculinity.

The media as amplifiers of male political hegemony

Thomas Meyer's (2001) argument about 'media-cracry' and the colonization of the political sphere certainly exaggerates the power and influence of the media. Relevant studies show quite the opposite, i.e. that the media rarely take an oppositional stance against an established consensus of the political elite. Rather, they absorb information from policymakers and present it according to their own stylistic preferences. This holds for gender equality policy, too: the media contribute selectively to thematization and dethematization, but they are not colonizers of the political sphere, and usually do not even engage in active framing.

A study of the German parliamentary election campaign 2002 found that the media principally operate on the basis of newsworthiness of news items, but they do not take information value in absolute terms (Lang and Sauer 2003). Rather, they weight the information value news items have according to the importance attributed to them by leading political actors in parties, parliamentary groups, and the government, and according to the ideological spectrum represented by these actors (see also Bennet 1990). In effect, and as far as women's policy is concerned, the media amplify the dethematization strategies of the campaign offices (Lang and Sauer 2003: 434). The election campaign staff of the parties had the dubious distinction of defining women's policy as 'a bad sell' and to claim that the media had no interest in the matter – notwithstanding a survey by Infratest dimap right before the election, according to which 77 percent of female voters were in favor of gender quotas (Müller-Hilmer 2002: 1). The media's reporting on the campaign reinforced this neglect of the policy field by political actors. Only the minimalist slogans issued by the parties' campaign headquarters for the mobilization of women voters was picked up by the media. But in the big picture, the campaign revealed an obstinate lethargy regarding women's issues. The media failed to actively promote women's policy; they did not engage in active agenda-setting; and did not exert control vis-à-vis the male-dominated political sphere.

The media displayed a remarkable lack of creativity with regard to the presentation of women's policy. With few exceptions, women's policy became a subject only on initiative of the parties. The only stratagem of the media consisted in presenting *women* – either female politicians or the wives of the top candidates – as representatives of gender-related policy issues, thereby adding a personal touch (Lang and Sauer 2003: 439).

To sum up, the media contribute little to active political decisionmaking, to the framing of problems and solutions, and to normative revaluations. Rather, male hegemony in politics and the media construes women's and gender equality policies as unimportant and marginal (Ross 2004b: 72). For the most part, media do little more than package news according to the clues they receive from politicians. The negative amplification provided by the media is not without consequences for the democratic polity. For only issues that resonate sufficiently strong in the media receive enough public attention to encourage movement activists to involve themselves in the political and public process.

The media-masterframe: family policy

‘Innovative media-influence on politics occurs only (...) in the case of innovation in the policy field’ (Jarren *et al.* 1996: 12). Based on this hypothesis, one should expect the media to play an innovative role in current women’s policy (Koch-Baumgarten 2007). As a new field, gender equality policy is always latently threatened by ‘program-termination’ (Holland-Cunz 1996: 168), but currently nothing suggests this danger will materialize, either in the political or the media sphere. Rather, the field is currently reframed from women’s and gender-equality policy to family policy. The shift in focus to family policy conveniently pacifies women’s policy and presents it in an easily-to-digest, non-controversial fashion. Family policy becomes a counter-discourse to, and de-legitimizes, gender-equality policy (Lang and Sauer 2003: 431).

The reframing of women’s as family policy has considerable news value, and the media participate actively in the reconstruction of the policy field. The surge in media attention dedicated to the topic of family can be explained by its narrative properties, especially its potential for dramatization – ‘the Germans are becoming extinct’ – and for the construction of foes, such as selfish women concerned only with their own careers. The prescriptive content of this plot is a renewed emphasis on motherhood. What makes the plot especially media-compatible is the ready availability of appropriate solutions, i.e. measures to increase fertility levels.

More than in policy areas that have achieved certain routine standards, ‘the actors in innovative decision processes know that they are under the scrutiny of the media’ (Jarren *et al.* 1996: 12). They attempt to exploit this and communicate extensively with the media. The high visibility that family policy has gained especially since the 2002 electoral campaign and recently through the policy initiative of the family minister for public child care makes speedy policy changes seem probable and, from the perspective of the voters, desirable. This corresponds with a flurry of agenda-setting activity by the government with regard to women’s and family policy, supported by the media’s redefinition of women’s as family policy in a neo-liberal or neo-conservative frame. Ursula von der Leyen, whose ministry encompasses responsibility for families, senior citizens, women, and youth, presents herself almost exclusively as a ‘family minister;’ her feature in an eight-pages long ‘family and job’-supplement to the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (12 April 2006) is a good example for the intensity of communication between policy-makers and the media in the redefinition of the gender policy agenda.

Here, we can see the ambivalent effects of media-influence on gender equality policy, alternating between progressive agenda-setting (for instance by making public private relations of inequality) and conservative gate-keeping for the protection of traditional gender roles (Ross 2004b: 68).

The gendered selectivity of publicity: conclusion

This chapter tried to explain the particular forms of interaction of the media and the field of gender equality policies. Hopes that seemed realistic in the early phases of feminist strategies in the 1970s to bring private modes of domination into the broad light of the public have since been thoroughly crushed. The concept of a feminist counter-public sphere that could at once help shape political decisions and subvert the hegemonic media culture has obviously failed. However, the women's movement has been successfully establishing women's policy machineries and the policy field of gender equality. To explain the mismatch of the institutionalization of a new policy field and the media representation of women's and gender issues the chapter took two aspects into account, first the frames and second the structures, institutions and actors in the policy field.

It seems that the media fail to represent gender equality politics as a politics of emancipation because they frame women primarily as objects and victims (of violence, prostitution, trafficking in women, forced marriages, female genital mutilation) or as the 'other', i.e. as derivative beings of a male world. Also, gender equality policies are reduced to family policy in the frame of a demographic crisis. Moreover, gender equality policies are subject to 'volatile media-tization', i.e. as a still young and insufficiently established policy-field, women's and anti-discrimination policies and institutions often are the passive and disempowered subject of their own construction and reconstruction by their media-environment. The impact of the media on the policy field can be described as masculine hegemony, due to the weak implementation of the policy field but also to a male dominance in politics as well as in the newsrooms.

Note

1 All translations of German texts are by Birgit Sauer.

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10 Public pushing for pension reform?

The short-term impact of media coverage on long-term policy making in Germany, Britain and the United States

Christoph Strünck

The growing saliency of pension reform

Pension reform has been on the agenda in Western welfare states for two decades now. However, the mass media rarely scoop with these issues. This is because pension politics is mostly confined to policy networks that deal with technically complex questions and have established enduring relationships. Pension politics means long-term policy making that affects present and future generations, too. This is why in most democracies party competition is low and consensus building high when it comes to tinkering with pension schemes. But new ideas have emerged that can help to bypass the complexity of pension systems. Privatization of public pension stands at the forefront of these ideas which are evenly spread across different countries and welfare states. In Germany, Britain, and the United States, governments have tried to enact laws that boost private savings.

This chapter does not aim to trace the ideological heritage of privatization in pension politics. It raises questions on the role of mass media and public opinion in shaping pension reforms. How do media coverage and public opinion shape a policy which is often deeply rooted in secretive, consensus-oriented institutions? Is long-term policy making substituted by rather short-term activities of governments? Do certain actors gain more influence when pension reform turns into a high key issue in the mass media?

Usually, the politics of pension is deeply embedded in institutions that are quite independent from media coverage. Pensions are not exposed to sudden events but are subject to long-term developments. On the other hand, pensions are a broad issue relevant to large parts of the electorate. Thus you would expect some impact of media coverage in the cognitive dimension but barely an effect in the institutional dimension (see introduction to this book). This chapter holds that even the institutional setting of pension politics has been affected by media coverage, changing the strategic leeway of governments and other actors.

Several studies indicate that the media has become more interested in pension policy because former consensus has given way to conflicting frames. Performance

of financial markets has fuelled and dashed optimism about private savings for old-age provision. This has added a cyclic momentum to pension policy which raises its attractiveness for the mass media. Also, attitudes of important electoral groups such as the baby boomers are remarkably shaped by media coverage on pensions (Huber and Skidmore 2003).

Studies hint that media coverage shapes people's opinion independently from institutional settings. For instance, citizens in Greece and Spain strongly back public pension schemes whereas Germans are quite critical of them. However, all three countries show similar shares of public pension schemes (van Groezen *et al.* 2006).

Thus it is likely that media coverage affects strategic choices of political actors as well. Does increased media attention lower the autonomy of governments, parties, or interest groups when it comes to the politics of pension? As for governments, they may even benefit. When the media draws attention to public policy governments can score by keeping other players from setting the agenda. Public pushing drives governments to seize policy making. By doing so governments scale back the influence of insider coalitions that usually conceal their actions from the public. Thus public pushing can give governments more leeway in response to interest groups and policy networks.

These are of course general arguments which have to be linked to institutional features and dynamic aspects of the political process. Methodologically, the chapter pursues an explorative approach using case studies to highlight factors that constrain or enhance media impact in pension politics. Case studies reveal that the institutional setting in policy fields is as important as general features of the political system. Both may limit as well as enlarge the mass media's influence on decision making.

The features of pension systems in Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States are similar, whereas their political systems vary. Both Germany and the United States feature popular public pension schemes that follow Bismarckian principles of pay-as-you-go schemes which are quite mature. Pay-as-you-go schemes (PAYGO) rest on earnings-related contributions that go off the payroll. Current employees pay pensions for current retirees. Most European countries have followed this path of the 'social insurance model' (Schludi 2001). Britain stands out because its elements of PAYGO are rather young, as it is more of a latecomer among PAYGO countries (Myles and Pierson 2001).

When it comes to pension schemes the United States and Germany show stronger kinship than Britain and the United States which is not strictly in line with Esping-Andersen's types of welfare states (1991). In his typology both the United States and Britain represent liberal welfare states whereas Germany stands for the conservative type. Also, path dependency of pension schemes in the United States and Germany is relatively high, given the maturity of their public pension system.

As for basic features of democracy, both the United States and Britain represent majoritarian democracy, contrary to Germany's more consociational pattern (Lijphart 1999). Given the fragmented system of government in the United

States, leeway for government is greatest in Britain. So media coverage might primarily affect the strategic range of government action in the United States and Germany and not in Britain.

Of course demographic and financial pressures vary across countries, too. However, it is not possible in this chapter to systematically control for the influence of socio-economic variables compared to institutional variables. Assessing the impact of the mass media is more about the framing of socio-economic pressure not the objective data (Strünck 2005). So the chapter will point out how media influence on the policy debate might also transform political institutions in pension politics.

In a first step I will briefly summarize the impact the mass media can theoretically have on pension politics. Following this, I will describe paths of pension reform in Germany, Britain, and the United States. Additionally, I will highlight the role of public debate and media coverage in policy making. Does this impact vary across the three countries due to differences of institutions and electoral politics? As a starting point I pick the case of Germany where pension politics has typically been embedded in a 'grand coalition state' (Schmidt 1996) for a long time, but has apparently been traded for a more adversarial style of policy making.

Mass media and the politics of pension reform: theoretical arguments

Policy makers are often sensitive to sudden shifts and events. This holds especially true for policies that are exposed to cyclical turns or events like crises or scandals. Foreign policy, economic policy or environmental policy serve as good examples. Pension politics stands out because there are usually no shocks that might undermine policy making in that field, at least when it comes to public pension schemes. Parameters that influence pensions are all predictable or automatically linked to pension adjustment. Additionally, the technical core of pensions is handled by long-serving experts, civil servants and politicians that usually form a closed shop of policy networks. The institutional setting of pension politics gets little exposure to media coverage.

Politics of pension reform have often followed the 'parallel processing' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) type of policy making. It means that there is no dramaturgy of action and reaction but rather a continuous process of policy making in different networks. This is the classic style of policy-making when it comes to policies which heavily rest on expertise and long-term decisions. This stands in contrast to serial processing which shapes issues that are highly controversial and volatile. Very often a scientific consensus forms the backbone of parallel processing (Fischer and Forester 1993). Parallel processing also means that governments are not the most important actors. Instead it is rather secretive policy networks that are in charge. There is even widespread expectation that governments must not interfere with basic functions of pension schemes. It is obvious that short-term democratic politics and long-term stability of pensions can be at odds sometimes.

In the electoral arena, pensioners are important to all political parties as is the workforce that is paying contributions. So pension politics cuts across cleavages in political systems (Kitschelt 2001). Theory holds that the median voter in democracies strongly supports a public pension system (Browning 1975). This is why even in a liberal welfare state like the United States social security is the most prominent pillar of pensions being a PAYGO system that fits in the Bismarckian model. Up until today US presidents and Congress have barely been able to fundamentally change that system which stems from the New Deal era (Myles and Pierson 2001).

Given the structure of policy making and the crosscutting effects in the electoral arena, governments usually do not easily tinker with pension schemes. But what if attention is drawn to pension reform by the mass media, be it driven by events or by political entrepreneurs and interest groups?

Mass media play a vital role in different respects. Media coverage conveys different frames of risk, it provides points of access to governments, interest groups and other actors, the media is able to set the agenda independently, and it generally shapes people's attitudes towards pension schemes. Media coverage can steadily deliver messages and it can suddenly change strategic fields when events and external shocks occur.

From a more theoretical perspective framing of risks is mainly conveyed through the mass media.¹ Pension schemes deal with long-term risks and the way these risks are publicly framed influences confidence in the politics of pension. Bad news about pensions or scandals might undermine people's trust in pension schemes. Decreased trust in pension systems might translate into decreased trust in government's capabilities which forces politicians to act. Political entrepreneurs who want to champion privatization can benefit from this fear of electoral loss and set their agenda (Kingdon 1984).

Secondly, governments, experts, parties, and interest groups can all resort to the media to get their agenda going. This is in line with indexing theory as opposed to agenda-setting theory that expects the mass media to pursue their own goals (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). When it comes to framing risks there are also actors like banks and insurers that seek to deliver their messages via mass media. Also, growing dissent among scientists might end up changing the agenda-setting content in the media as well.

Thirdly, if things turn more dynamic and dramatic the mass media might be directly or indirectly be pushing for pension reform. The media might also set their own agenda raising pressure on politicians. Does this pushing reduce government's autonomy in acting and does it reduce its range of strategic choices to simple reaction? There are two arguments why this is not necessarily true. On the one hand, governments usually depend on expertise and policy networks that barely give them leeway to act on a partisan agenda. A public debate on pensions rather curbs the influence of these networks which effectively yields more power to governments.

On the other hand, it might well be government's advisors themselves who managed to convey a strong message via the mass media. In both respects gov-

ernments are not automatically weakened by public pushing. Instead they can follow up on the debate to set new policy goals and scale back the influence of clandestine policy networks and vested interests. On the other hand, new actors like private companies emerge as new players in the field of pensions.

Also, this ability varies between different political systems. In a majoritarian, Westminster-style democracy like Britain the government generally enjoys more autonomy than in consociational democracies like Germany (Lijphart 1999). However, it is mainly private pension funds which are more vulnerable to shocks on financial markets or fraud. Although they are not directly linked to public policy such events might draw attention to flawed regulatory policies.

Fourth, media coverage shapes citizens' preferences on old-age provision. Looking at Europe these preferences are not at all homogeneous, neither do they vary across the boundaries of different welfare states.

Therefore, looking at pension reform in Germany, Britain, and the United States might reveal in which way media effects affect governments' abilities to act. This chapter states that a growing saliency of pension schemes has turned the politics of pension into a more controversial one. Whether this leads to new policy choices like privatization depends both on general features of democracy, path dependency of pension schemes, and electoral dynamics in selected countries.

Did the media kill consensus? Pension politics and pension reform in Germany

Pension policies in Germany are typical of the 'grand coalition state' (Schmidt 1996) that has shaped a vast amount of social policy. Most reforms in health policy or pension policy have been informally agreed on by Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, backed by collaborating chambers of parliament. For a long time pension politics has shown the face of consensual policy making.

German pension schemes represent traditional Bismarckian institutions. Pensions mainly rest on a compulsory pay-as-you-go scheme for employed persons. It covers roughly 90 percent of the workforce and provides roughly 85 percent of the average retiree's income (Börsch-Supan 1999). Public schemes are linked to salary growth and adjusted for inflation. There have been several adjustments over the last two decades. Previous governments added factors to come to terms with demographic change. Most recently, the legal age of retirement was raised from 65 to 67, effectively resulting in lower pensions for future generations.

These were important reforms yet still within the path of a Bismarckian pension scheme. However, the former red-green government partially left that path in 2001. It introduced a new minimum pension and a private pillar of old-age provision (Nullmeier 2003). Beginning in 2001, 10 percent of public pensions' replacement rate will be reduced incrementally. Additionally, a voluntary and privately funded pillar was introduced ('Riester Rente', named after the then serving secretary of social affairs). By doing so the government put elements into place that have no features of Bismarckian pension schemes, but rather, peculiarities of Beveridge systems. Equally important, the new pillar provided a

boost for banks and insurance companies that entered the arena of interest group politics and public framing.

It comes as no surprise that pension politics has changed its face and has become more public. Business groups resorted to the media to push for even more spending on private old-age provisions. The debate on demographic change was fostered, as well. Media coverage on pension politics had already changed before these new laws were enacted (Hinrichs 1998). Media content analysis shows the dramatic tide before fundamental reforms were signed into law in 2001. In a research project, media coverage of three quality newspapers and the leading weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* were compared. When the key words ‘old age provision’ were singled out and counted there were impressive peaks in 2000 (Ney 2001). This content analysis hints that the media shifted to the ‘crisis story’ on public pension schemes and highlighted the importance of private old-age provision before legal change took place (see Figure 10.1).

Several preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this. First of all, the need for old-age provision has apparently been discovered as a newsworthy subject. Secondly, coverage has left behind narrow reporting on legal adjustments in the public pension scheme and has diverted attention to alternative sources of old-age provision. These conclusions are in line with arguments stating that the policy making and policy reporting focus has broadened in the 1990s in Germany (Hinrichs 2000).

Does this shift and increased volume in coverage have an impact on policy making? In qualitative terms media coverage on pension issues has helped to split up scientific consensus on pension policy (Ney 2001). This has also been backed by new interest groups like banks and private insurance companies that cast doubt on some scientific findings. The policy arena has been filled with more actors which resort to their own sources of scientific data and interpretation.

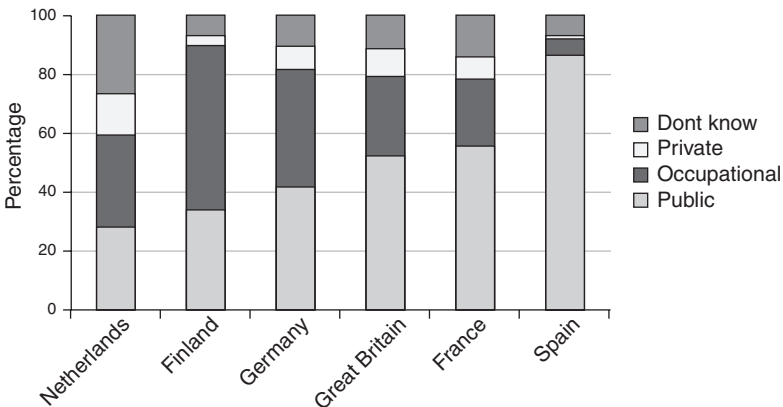


Figure 10.1 Citizens' preferences on old age provision in the year 2001 (source: van Groezen *et al.* 2006: 7).

Until the beginning of the 1990s experts in pension politics vastly subscribed to a common set of beliefs that had bolstered a ‘self-referential political cycle’ (Nullmeier and Rüb 1993). Participating experts shared the same diagnosis of problems and the view that pension politics should be kept out of the electoral arena.

This consensus has dissolved, mainly because the mass media allowed in new positions and arguments and provided space for dissent. Interestingly, this also enabled the ministry in charge to push through proposals without consulting established policy networks of interest groups, public agencies, and party officials. Those groups could no longer come up with an accepted consensus (Trampusch 2006). Additionally, recent governments have installed mixed expert bodies that bypass pension policy networks and are directly linked to government policy. They could take advantage of growing dissent among scientists and convey a message of urgency.

Germany serves as a striking case for the increasing impact of the ‘crisis story’. This is important because a widespread notion of crisis is necessary to pave the way for privatization of public pension schemes. Boeri *et al.* (2002) have empirically shown that the introduction of a privately funded pillar in 2001 had significant effects on attitudes towards public pension schemes. After the law had been enacted the percentage of those who deemed future cuts in benefits unavoidable went up by more than 10 percent. Generally, a vast majority of Germans (85 percent) believed in 2002 that public pension schemes would plunge into crisis in the foreseeable future. Opting out of public pension schemes has turned into a popular demand. Research on experts’ opinions confirms the thesis that the ‘crisis story’ has become much more popular among policy communities in Germany as well (Ney 2001).

Pushing without being pushed? Pension reform in Britain

Britain certainly has one of the most rigorous majoritarian systems of government which also helps governments in pension politics. The number of veto-points is considerably low. However, there are both influential interest groups outside as well as influential departments inside the government which limit the power of prime ministers.

Compared to Germany private pension funds have been more important. Also, the British pension system rests on different pillars, namely a basic universal public pension system, as well as an earnings-related system, occupational and private funds. This mix has a crucial consequence in electoral politics. It enables governments to confine retrenchment to targeted groups which helps to avoid being punished at the ballot box. A winning minority is sufficient in the British electoral system.

As for the different pillars of pensions, the whole system has undergone fundamental changes. It was introduced after World War II as a combined system which comprised a universal, flat-rate public pension and an earnings-related scheme. Alternating Labour and Conservative governments kept tinkering with

it. Astonishingly, a new PAYGO earnings-related scheme was introduced rather late in 1975, defining Britain as a latecomer among countries with PAYGO elements. This delayed launch paved the way for quite radical reforms when Margaret Thatcher came to power.

Because of the immaturity of the new system and their overwhelming majority in parliament the Tories could dare a sweeping reform. First and foremost, this reform aimed at privatization of public pensions (Pierson 1994). But despite that window of opportunity even the Thatcher government was not able not fully abolish the public pension system. Tax subsidies were supposed to make employees contract out of the public scheme and pick a private account. This option was signed into law in the Social Security Act of 1986. By the end of 1991 two-thirds had chosen to contract out (Myles and Pierson 2001).

How could that happen? The mass media had not turned up as an independent agenda-setter in the 1980s. It was rather think tanks, experts and the government itself that had issued lots of reports in the 1980s which framed pension policy as a problem of rising expenditure (Nesbitt 1995). Government reports especially conveyed a steady message of urgency. On the other hand, government proposals had also drawn sharp criticism by unlikely adversaries, for instance the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). The CBI was in favor of occupational schemes which were supposed to fall victim to a renewal of pension policies, as well.

In the wake of a heated public debate the Thatcher government stepped back from its original plans to abolish the public pension system. But this was not due to external criticism. It mainly reflected internal tensions between departments. The Treasury was opposed to abolishing the public scheme because it would have taken a lot of taxpayers' money to manage the shift (Bonoli 2000). But in the end the government almost accomplished its goal because public pensions had lost attractiveness. Thanks to only a few veto-points, the Treasury having been the crucial one, the Thatcher government could put far-reaching policies into place.

During that period it was not the mass media that pushed government to reform pensions. It was rather the government itself which created an atmosphere of urgency backed by think tanks. This was different, however, in the 1990s. This period was shaped by scandals which affected private pension funds and shifted the debate towards regulating this tier (Davis 1997).

The Mirror Group's pension fund lost a million pounds due to fraud and misconduct in the evolving Maxwell scandal in 1991. Also, it became public that personal pensions had been sold wrongly, accompanied by flawed counseling and advice from private insurance companies. Both scandals were widely covered in the press and urged government action. In 1995 the Pensions Act enacted regulatory measures and launched a new agency which was supposed to safeguard employees and retirees against fraud and misconduct of pension funds. In the meantime the government has been closely working with think tanks to outline new reforms (Brooks and Denham 2005).

Most recently, media coverage on pension policies has swollen again. Thanks to the Freedom of Information Act *The Times* unearthed documents that show

how Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown defied close advisors and pushed through a harmful policy. Because he deprived pension funds of tax relief these funds will have to pass these losses to pensioners at a high level. Advisors and interest groups did lobby Brown not to pursue this kind of 'stealth policy'. But in the end a secretive group surrounding the chancellor decided on this issue (*The Economist* 2007). In this case, secrecy in pension politics has backfired and has done serious damage to Gordon Brown.

Summed up, the government resorted to the mass media in the 1980s to champion its vision of privatization. Given the power of the Westminster system and the ideological push by Thatcherism, the media indirectly conveyed those ideas. Thatcher did not have to rely on favorable coverage to retain her majority. So the exceptional power position of the prime minister kept the media's influence at bay.

It was the government itself that created a sense of urgency which did not stem from a consensus among experts or public opinion. Quite contrary the government was pushed by public opinion when scandals surfaced in the 1990s. Although majoritarian policy making helped the government in the 1980s it had to react to media coverage in the 1990s due to the vulnerability of private pension funds. Since then the media has kept its grip on the politics of pension with financial instability and government secrecy being the two main issues.

Has the media undermined trust in private old-age provision? The case of the United States

Although the United States also has strong institutions of majoritarian policy making, its political system is far more fragmented than the British one (Jones 1994). With pension politics representing a typical case of domestic politics at the federal level it is subject to checks and balances, gridlock and tense relations between Congress and the presidency.

Social Security, the Bismarckian PAYGO scheme, is still at the core of pension politics in the United States representing the highest percentage of all social programs (Lynch 2006). It has been called the 'third rail of American politics' that is almost as popular as the National Health System in Britain (Béland 2005). Thus institutional inertia is relatively high and path dependency is relatively strong. Also, in the electoral arena president and Congress cannot confine cuts to distinctive groups as British governments can do. So the risk of electoral punishment is quite high in the majoritarian system of voting. It is worth noting that private funds have also been supported by US governments; the so-called 401k saving schemes and Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) have not only been financially rewarded but also actively championed by governments (Hacker 2004).

Privatization of public pensions gained momentum as a policy debate in the 1990s, although no fiscal crisis had turned up. It was accompanied by the frame of demographic pessimism, at an earlier stage than in Germany where this notion was spread at the end of the 1990s. As in Germany, confidence in public pension schemes has significantly dropped over the last decade (Cook *et al.* 2002).

Additionally, optimism about the performance of financial markets was widely trumpeted in the mass media, following up on impressive turnover and gains on these markets. On the other hand, even partial privatization has met fierce opposition by America's most influential lobby groups. This is especially true for the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) that accounts for half of American pensioners (Campbell and Lynch 2000). Supporters of Social Security stress that its defined-benefit structure better protects workers against poverty compared to a defined-contribution scheme.

Under President Clinton the reform of Social Security was put on the agenda in 1997 although it was not initiated by the mass media. It was rather policy advisors and key figures that got their messages through and made use of public opinion. For the first time in the history of Social Security a federal report came out in which a strong minority of experts supported partial privatization (Derthick 2001).

Subsequently, Clinton came up with a proposal that did not pick up the idea of partial privatization although it had been widely channeled through the media. Instead he wanted to divert parts of budget surplus into additional savings accounts alongside the existing PAYGO system of social security (Béland 2005). By doing so he was also seeking to avert tax cuts that were championed by conservative Republicans. His strategy drew sharp criticism from opponents in Congress and think tanks. Supporters of privatization conjured up fears of 'big government' that secretly started to control American companies through massive shares held by the state.

In the aftermath of the impeachment debate there was no leeway to strike a deal. Although new President George W. Bush appointed a commission on Social Security Reform, it went nowhere after the attacks of September 2001. Beforehand, the Enron scandal had already undermined financial optimism and had wreaked havoc on the agenda of privatization.

With hindsight, Social Security has only undergone minor changes. A big overhaul still seems to be a thorny issue for politicians no matter how optimistic the media and think tanks are about stock markets and fiscal development. Although baby boomers reached their peak earnings in the 1990s, even the exceptional decade of flourishing financial markets did not provide enough legitimacy to push through privatization.

Shortly after, turmoil on the stock market dashed optimism about private savings. The media drew attention to cyclical shifts on financial markets and to consequences of corporate fraud and misconduct for private old-age provision. Given the ingredients of gridlock in a decade of party realignment there was no winning majority for reform in a majoritarian democracy like the United States. Social Security was never meant to be the only pillar of pensions, contrary to Germany. As a basic public insurance scheme, it still has a reputation of being a safeguard against total losses. Knowing this, the media has never really sparked a debate which could have changed the institutional patterns of pension politics in the United States.

On the other hand, critical coverage on private pension plans has significantly constrained those who champion privatization. Along with path-dependent Social Security institutional change has also been stalled by the media.

Mass media, public opinion and pension reform: some preliminary conclusions

How does media coverage impact politics of pension reform and how does it relate to institutional features of democracy, to path dependency of pension schemes and to the dynamics of electoral politics in different countries?

Generally speaking, there are two frames which have emerged thanks to growing media attention. The first refers to the 'crisis story' of public pension schemes due to demographic change. Of course, this frame is only powerful where demographic pressure meets pension schemes that can barely deal with it. This is especially the case where a traditional Bismarckian PAYGO scheme was put in place. Thus Britain is different from both the United States and Germany because its PAYGO scheme is not mature and does not share the same percentage of old-age provision as in the United States and in Germany. It is no wonder that partial privatization has been most successful in Britain. However, bad news from financial markets has also prompted British governments to act which highlights the second frame of 'financial optimism'.

This frame is traditionally set up by supporters of privatization. It can easily turn into its opposite, namely the fear of financial instability. This is exactly what happened in the United States and Britain in the 1990s. Financial instability is an even more powerful frame because pension politics rests on long-term expectations, demands and decisions. This opposite frame of financial pessimism has not been successful in Germany where the crisis story of public pension schemes seems to have persisted up until now.

By and large, the British government could take advantage of two distinctive factors: its fragmented pension schemes that lower the risk of electoral punishment and its majoritarian type of democracy that limits the number of veto-points. So the crisis story was an important factor but a sense of urgency was created by the government's winning majority rather than by the media itself (Bonoli 2000).

It was the government that took to the media to create a favorable desire for change in Britain. So pushing does not necessarily mean that public opinion exerts influence over governments. It may well be the other way round. Governments can tailor reports to the needs of their agenda and spur public pushing for their own agenda. The case of Britain is a neat illustration of this and fits into the assumptions of indexing theory.

Although similar frames were salient in the American media, privatization has not been pushed through in the United States. First of all, the number of veto-points is much higher in the United States which was obvious when President Clinton was facing a hostile Congress. Secondly, the institutional setting of public pension schemes is much more mature and shows a higher degree of path dependency than in Britain (Myles and Pierson 2001). Thirdly, media coverage quickly turned negative when financial scandals surfaced.

Astonishingly, it is Germany where the mass media apparently have had the strongest impact on the politics of pension reform. The German political system

is not as fragmented as the United States when it comes to pension politics. This is because main issues have to be dealt with at the federal level where a stable coalition can deliver reforms more easily than a President in a divided system of government in the United States.

Equally surprisingly, it was also Germany where the red–green government for the first time left the Bismarckian path of public pensions to add a funded pillar of old-age provision. Not only was this reform prepared by widespread crisis stories in the mass media; its enactment further fostered the frame of demographic crisis (Streeck and Trampusch 2005). Although German reforms have by no means resulted in ‘privatization’, the former consensus on pension schemes has given way to a more controversial climate that governments can take advantage of. In a nutshell, media coverage helped to loosen path dependency of pension politics in Germany whereas it was rather reinforced in the United States.

Looking at Germany, a preliminary consequence can be drawn which is also true for Britain and the United States. The politics of pension has become more controversial, partly thanks to media coverage and its effects on public opinion and electoral politics. This growing controversy has opened up space for new actors like banks and insurance companies in the German case. It has generally shrunk the importance of secretive policy making and policy networks which have been a common feature of pension politics. Simultaneously, there is a growing risk of hasty decisions that could hurt the long-time functioning of pension systems.

Theoretically, constructivist approaches would be worth being applied (Cox 2001; Douglas 1982). Both the framing of risks and the case of ‘urgency’ which is dramatically made for long-term public pension schemes are subject to interest group politics and the social construction of problems.

Media coverage has shown different effects in the three presented countries. By and large, however, the crisis story of public pension schemes has gained influence. As a result the politics of pension has become more controversial, fuelling the policy debate. This has mobilized new interest groups and has scaled back the impact of secretive policy making in policy networks. So it is not only the policy debate that has changed thanks to different frames that are used in the media. To some extent policy institutions have been affected, too, giving more leeway to policy entrepreneurs and other actors. Paradoxically, it has also strengthened the government, at least in the German case. Yet political institutions do not exclusively constrain the media. Policy debates spurred by media coverage can also change the institutional setting which might even weaken constraints.

So pension politics reveals factors that can limit or lift media influence on decision making. The very variables that limit media influence – bipartisan and technocratic rule-making – can yield high awareness to outsiders once they go public. If governments embark on new proposals it is also institutions of decision making that change over time.

It is an open question whether governments, parties or interest groups gain more influence at the expense of others. Future answers will lie with institutional

features of pension schemes and their importance for electoral politics. Answers have also to be found in accordance with general features of democracy and electoral results.

From what is presented in this article it appears that institutional theories of path dependency cannot sufficiently explain why pension reform has played out differently in welfare states. Media coverage and public opinion do make a difference. Whether governments get more autonomy from growing public controversy depends on path dependency of pension schemes as well as on factors like electoral results or cyclical economic development. The way the media sets the agenda, the way this scales back or increases the influence of interest groups is not a priori given. It takes more theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence to provide a dynamic perspective on the 'public' politics of pension reform.

Note

- 1 There are other policies like consumer policy or environmental policy where these effects have been intensely scrutinized (Strünck 2005).

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11 Condemned to repeat

The media and the accountability gap in Iraq war policy

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Can media influence public policy? This chapter offers a somewhat qualified ‘yes’ to that question based on the case of US war policy in Iraq. There are two qualifications: media influence on policymaking elites is reciprocal, the result of mutually constrained relationships between the two sides (with a supporting and also constrained role for public opinion); and the influence comes indirectly, through the media’s impact on elites’ incentives. We suggest that the media limited the influence of public opinion (Page and Bouton 2006; Sobel 2001) on US policy in Iraq by creating an ‘accountability gap’ whereby news coverage *disconnects policy outcomes from each other, from the larger strategic picture – and from the officials responsible*. In turn, limiting the effectiveness of public opinion (perceived, actual and anticipated – Entman 2004) *reduces incentives for American officials to learn from and correct their errors by changing flawed policies*. We advance these tentative thoughts based on the results of content analyses probing major US media outlets’ treatment of American casualties in Iraq and of President George W. Bush’s surge policy.

Ironically, in a kind of vicious circle, such media influence on elites’ decision-making incentives arises in major part from journalists’ dependence on the selfsame elites’ public discourse rather than relying on their own judgments and knowledge of history – even history of a few weeks past. All that’s necessary for officials to evade accountability and keep the public functionally in the dark is a paucity (often, a complete absence) of powerful leaders energetically and consistently promoting a coherent view contrary to that of the American administration. When elites agree, or the White House’s opponents are largely silent or are adjudged powerless to alter the policy (Entman and Page 1994), the press goes along, before and throughout America’s military interventions. This point, the core of Bennett’s (1990) indexing model, has been supported by most research (Mermin 1999; Robinson 2002; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Entman 2004; Bennett *et al.* 2007; Althaus *et al.* 1996) but the larger project from which this chapter is drawn offers a comprehensive theoretical explanation of the operation and policy implications of elite–media co-dependence, the attendant decoupling of policy from manifestations of public opinion, and the resulting disincentives for elites and journalists to avoid repeating the mistakes of their histories.

In the 2004 election, 18 months after President Bush's premature 'Mission Accomplished' speech, after it was clear Saddam Hussein possessed no weapons of mass destruction and that the United States was not enjoying a 'cakewalk' to victory, Bush won a popular vote majority for the first time, and his party maintained control of Congress. Apparently a decisive factor was the perceived superiority of Bush and his party's record on national defense. We suggest that the failure to hold Bush and his party accountable for the Iraq fiasco until November 2006 reflects the press's incapacity to *consistently* frame as such the increasing evidence of failure in conception and execution of war policy, and the press's almost unswerving responsiveness to continually renewed White House and Pentagon spin. The vulnerability to news management – despite the government's history of repeatedly misleading the media and the public from 2002 on, despite journalists' frequent vows to avoid the mistakes they made in the run-up to war – thus has important implications for public opinion and foreign policymaking.

By 7 January 2007 President George W. Bush himself admitted that the tactics followed for over three and a half years after the end of 'major combat operations' – and one and a half years before Americans voted in 2004 – were dysfunctional and required change (Abramowitz *et al.* 2007). The 2006 election signaled public desire for change too. Yet, rather than reduce US involvement in what many saw as an intractable Iraqi civil war, the Bush administration decided to escalate US involvement by sending *more* troops. How might we explain the disjunction between the electorate's dovish message¹ and the new administration policy? Although surely not the only factor in producing the apparent breach, the media played an important role. Public opinion did not constrain the administration's war policy as might be expected and the primary reason we suggest is the press's tendency to create and maintain accountability gaps. For reasons we touch on later, similar gaps open up during most wars. These recurrences suggest that the media have difficulty learning from and rectifying earlier missteps.

The accountability gap

As an initial illustration of an accountability gap, the weak relationship between the frames dominating the news and the facts on the ground essential to rationally evaluating the policy, consider the *Washington Post's* inability to learn from its own history. In a contrite 2004 analysis of shortcomings in coverage of the pre-war period, Leonard Downie, Jr., the *Washington Post's* managing editor, expressed regret for placing the administration's pro-war arguments on page one and material critical of the administration line on inside pages:

We were so focused on trying to figure out what the administration was doing that we were not giving the same play to people who said it wouldn't be a good idea to go to war and were questioning the administration's rationale. Not enough of those stories were put on the front page. That was a mistake on my part.

(Kurtz 2004)

In the words of the *Washington Post*'s Pentagon correspondent, Thomas Ricks: 'Administration assertions were on the front page. Things that challenged the administration were on A18 on Sunday or A24 on Monday.' As the *Washington Post* suggested, coverage in other mainstream media was similar, and this imparted substantially greater impact and credibility to the administration line than to opposition (Entman 2004; Entman and Page 1994). Bob Woodward told Kurtz, 'We should have warned readers we had information that the basis for this [the war and the administration's claims concerning WMD] was shakier' than widely believed. 'Those are exactly the kind of statements that should be published on the front page.'

Despite Woodward and Downie's acknowledgement of mistakes in overplaying administration claims during the lead-up to the war with Iraq, the *Washington Post* came close to making the same blunders again when the Bush administration began denouncing Iran for supplying especially deadly arms to Iraqis attacking US forces. While the *Washington Post* coverage questioned the reliability of the administration's intelligence on Iran, it provided the administration frame substantially greater visibility, detail and coherence. The *Washington Post* led page one with government assertions that Iran's Shiite leaders were behind the supply of weapons to Iraqis (Partlow 2007a), even though this was both uncertain and of debatable relevance even if true. By the US government's own estimate, only 170 US deaths to that point came from Iranian explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), and most Americans were killed in Sunni-dominated areas (Shiite Iran opposes Sunni insurgents) (Stockman and Thanassis 2007). The next day, on page A18, a story quoted the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, saying he knew 'nothing tying [Iranian] leaders to arms in Iraq' (DeYoung 2007a). 'It is clear that Iranians are involved, and it's clear that materials from Iran are involved, *but I would not say by what I know that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit,*' acknowledged General Pace (emphasis added).

By Wednesday, President Bush acknowledged that he wasn't certain top Iranian officials knew about the alleged weapons shipments, though the *Washington Post*'s page one lead headline read 'Iranians Aid Iraq Militants, Bush Alleges' (Baker 2007). Beneath this was a second story headed 'Skepticism over Iraq Haunts US Iran Policy,' which discussed doubts about the administration's claims but focused heavily on the political game and slighted the problematic logic and relevance of the allegations (DeYoung 2007b). As to television, the major evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC either barely acknowledged or ignored doubts about Iranian perfidy in their coverage.

In making their news choices, it appears the networks and the *Washington Post* did not weigh heavily their experiences from 2002–2003. As was almost universally recognized, news organizations had been misled by administration claims of certitude in intelligence findings (Bennett *et al.* 2007), and had helped divert the attention of citizens from information raising doubts about the administration frame (Isikoff and Corn 2006). Even the best news organizations, such as the *Washington Post*, show a proclivity to report official claims that prove

inaccurate, and later offer corrections and sometimes *mea culpas* – only to go through the same cycle all over again, and again.

Media responses to good and bad news

Bolstering their consistent deference to White House frames and media events no matter how often they have misled, is the media’s tendency to pay declining attention to the costs of war as they accumulate – and become less and less novel. One key source of the administration’s continued capacity to dominate framing, then, appears to be that *the magnitude and cultural resonance of media attention to negative results of foreign policy tends to decline as they become more commonplace*. As casualties and other consequences of policy in Iraq became routine, their news value diminished. Although the accountability gap is rooted in several news practices that seem more or less immutable whatever the specific foreign policy problem, during war itself, this novelty norm is critical. For some significant period, with occasional perturbations due to unusually costly events, we can expect this paradox: the worse the situation, the larger the accumulated costs of the policy, the less well news organizations hold officials accountable for them.

Figure 11.1 illustrates the hypothesized gap, with the escalating solid trend line of a hypothetical cost–benefit ratio of the war. Also shown is a hypothetical broken line of news clearly framing the costs in an unambiguous counter-narrative to the administration’s (understandably) self-serving progress narrative. The latter curve fails to parallel or even approximate the cost–benefit ratio. The gap arises both from incoherent coverage of negative events and information, and from often-cooperative, relatively passive coverage of the administration’s PR-savvy efforts to maintain its progress frame. Figure 11.2 graphs the hypothesized gap in terms of non-hypothetical costs measured as cumulative US fatalities.²

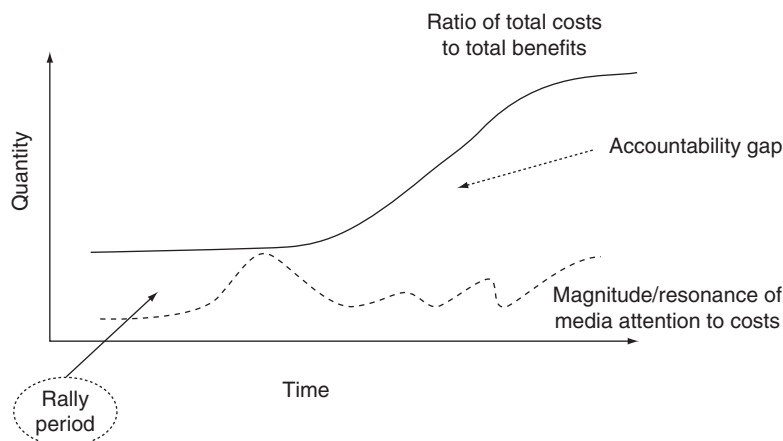


Figure 11.1 Accountability gap.

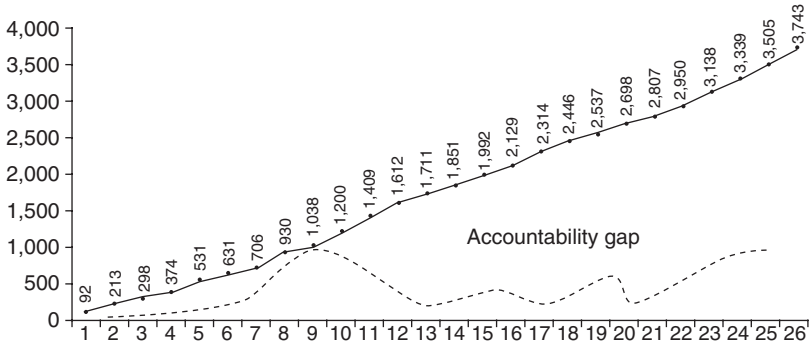


Figure 11.2 Hypothetical curve (dotted line) of media attention to costs plotted against actual cumulative fatalities 2003–2007.

The first place to seek the pattern predicted by the accountability gap is in media treatment of casualties, perhaps the most emotional, simple and therefore presumably newsworthy measure of policy cost. Analysis of casualty coverage in the *Washington Post* provides some tentative support for the accountability gap hypothesis. In 2003, a six month sample of page-one stories in the *Post* produced 27 reported combat deaths in Iraq. In 2004, seven months of coverage produced 235 accounts of combat deaths and in 2005, as the escalating insurgency created greater chaos and misery, 111 deaths were reported in seven months of coverage. Finally, during the first seven months of 2006, the *Washington Post* noted 40 combat casualties in page-one stories. These simple data are graphed as percentages in Figure 11.3 and they roughly fit the hypothetical curve in Figure 11.1.

Not only does attention to bad news seem to decline after an early peak in 2004, attention to apparently good news – or at least news that fits the administration’s preferred frame – remains relatively high. This disproportion is illustrated in the following qualitative comparison of the media’s treatment of a successful US operation against Abu Musab al Zarqawi, leader of ‘al Qaeda in Iraq’, in June 2006, to coverage of a deeply discouraging National Intelligence Estimate on 3 February 2007. *Time* magazine put Zarqawi on its cover and *Newsweek* featured Zarqawi prominently on its website, displaying a gallery of 17 pictures relating to him including a close-up death image that appeared in most major news outlets. This latter practice reprised the release of close-up photographs of Saddam’s two sons, Qusay and Uday following their death in an attack on their compound (CNN 2003). Such images tend to offend many Muslims, incidentally, so this coverage probably did the United States little good in winning crucial hearts and minds outside America (Justus and Hess 2006).

Meanwhile, Pentagon rules require that journalists obtain a signed consent from a wounded soldier before an image of him or her can be published. This

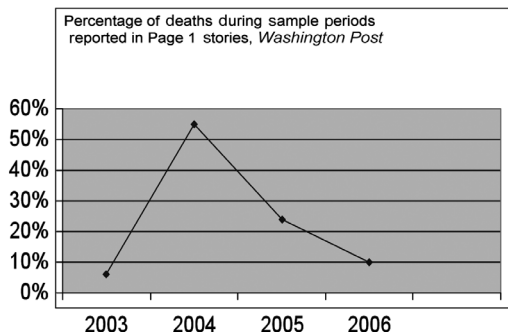


Figure 11.3 Page one casualty reports in the *Washington Post* parallel hypothetical curve.

has made it all but impossible for US combat casualty images to make their way to press. As one veteran combat photographer put it,

They are basically asking me to stand in front of a unit before I go out with them and say that in the event that they are wounded, I would like their consent ... making that kind of announcement would make you an immediate bad luck charm.

He added, ‘They are not letting us cover the reality of war.’ Prohibited altogether are images that distinguish the faces or otherwise allow for the identification of those killed in combat (Carr 2007).

While these practices might be defended as necessary to avoid undue grief to the families of fallen soldiers and to maintain ‘good taste,’ no such restraint is exercised when reporting on the successes of US military operations, including the killing of Zarqawi. *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines featured lengthy, detailed graphical expositions on the dramatic Zarqawi operation (see Powell and MacLeod 2006 for *Time*, and Thomas and Nordlund for *Newsweek*). Although both also contained passages warning that its success would not end the blood-letting in Iraq – President Bush admitted as much – these caveats were belied by the enormous visual attention. And the cautious words were outweighed by detailed discussions of, as Farad Zakaria (editor of *Newsweek International*) wrote, ‘political signs’ that gave reason for ‘hope’. The killing offered visually compelling images, symbolized much-desired progress and above all, offered emotionally gratifying victory over a personalized enemy.³

Compare the fuss over this purported indicator of progress to treatment of the 2 February 2007 release of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the consensus view of 16 US intelligence agencies indicating that the likelihood of success in Iraq was remote. The body of the report begins with the following ‘key judgments’:

Iraqi society's growing polarization, the persistent weakness of the security forces and the state in general, and all sides' ready recourse to violence are collectively driving an increase in communal and insurgent violence and political extremism. Unless efforts to reverse these conditions show measurable progress during the term of the Estimate, the coming 12 to 18 months, we assess that the overall security situation will continue to deteriorate at rates comparable to the latter part of 2006.

Even if violence is diminished, given the current winner-take-all attitude and sectarian animosities infecting the political scene, Iraqi leaders will be hard pressed to achieve sustained political reconciliation in the time frame of this Estimate.⁴

The typical media response to this negative report was diffident. A search of the 39 US newspapers in the Lexis-Nexis 'Major Papers' library reveals six newspapers mentioning the report on the front page and 17 covering it on inside pages (average page number: 11). Only the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today* (2007) published editorials. *Time* did not mention the NIE. *Newsweek* devoted seven sentences to it in a total of three stories and briefly debunked the Iran weapons charge, saying that although Iran contributed to Shiite militias it was 'not likely to be a major driver of violence' in Iraq. CBS and NBC each did broadcast 350–400-word stories that accurately summarized the report's 'dark new assessment' (2 February 2007), while ABC apparently ignored it. In contrast, ABC's *World News* devoted about 4,000 words to Zarqawi's death just in its first two days of coverage, and CBS and NBC offered similarly extensive treatment.

The disparity in media reactions supports the accountability gap hypothesis, revealing news organizations' apparent tendencies to convey the administration's orchestrations of news that promotes its problem definition and remedy, such as the Zarqawi death and the Iran weapons charges, while allocating comparatively little attention to news like the NIE report that undermines the policy. Journalists might have regarded the NIE report as 'old news' in that its pessimism did not radically differ from that of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) a few months earlier (Baker and Hamilton 2006). But whereas the ISG was produced by a bi-partisan group of foreign policy 'Realists' no longer serving in government, the NIE represented a consensus of 16 intelligence agencies led by the Bush administration's own appointees. Aside from its importance to government accountability, this story might therefore have been expected to generate more attention for its 'man bites dog' quality.

Public opinion

The kind of coverage illustrated by these examples may help explain the course of public opinion between mid-2004 and mid-2006. After a drop coinciding roughly with the Abu Ghraib scandal and the first anniversary of the war, in spring 2004, many indicators of public opinion stabilized. By several of the most

widely used measures, public support for the war barely dropped for two or more years. Thus in July 2004, 54 percent of respondents considered the Iraq war a mistake, as did 56 percent as late as February 2007. Asked whether the war was worth it, 43 percent in mid-2004 and 41 percent in mid-2006 said yes. And asked to rate Bush's Iraq policy, 34 percent expressed approval in August 2004; 34 percent in August 2006.

Beyond the apparent stability in surveyed public opinion for over two years was its disorganization. This trait is illustrated by an August 2006 *New York Times*/CBS poll showing 55 percent approving President Bush's handling of the campaign against terrorism, even while 60 percent disapproved his 'handling of the Iraq situation' (Hulse and Connelly 2006). It was Bush himself who said Iraq was the main front in the war on terror, yet substantial majorities simultaneously opposed his Iraq policy while endorsing his conduct of that very same war on terror. A majority of voters also gave him and his party victories in the 2004 presidential and Congressional elections.

Until at least the November 2006 elections, no large and consistent majority opinion for policy change was apparent – no unambiguous pressure from polls showing a majority seeking rapid termination of the war. This lack of a clear trend toward a crystallized majority opposed to the president's Iraq policy sent ambiguous political signals to leaders in the White House and Congress. Our research suggests that the two-year period of stability and contradiction in indicators of public opinion reflects, to some extent, the press's incapacity to *consistently* narrate the shortcomings of the war policy, and its consistent responsiveness to government manipulation. Put another way, the accountability gap advantaged the government's management of press narratives about policy failure in Iraq. That in turn undermined the public's ability to collectively convey to elites, through their survey responses, a logically consistent and politically compelling majority sentiment against the war.

The handling of the Iran weapons charge indicates that this advantage continued well into 2007. The party-changing November 2006 Congressional election thus only partially diminished the administration's ability to orchestrate the news frame it wanted and to dissipate the force and focus of potential oppositional framing. We use the word 'frame' deliberately to refer to a narrative that repeats and reinforces itself over time by telling a relatively coherent story of a problem, its cause, and its solution (Entman 2004). The absence of a frame clearly making the case for policy failure in consistent competition with the administration's regular framing of 'light at the end of the tunnel' reduced the clarity of the signals coming from the public to Congress – and the incentives of potential elite opponents to press for policy change.

Framing the surge

Beyond these case studies, systematic content analytical evidence further sustains the accountability gap hypothesis. *New York Times* depictions of President Bush's surge plan between 9 January and 15 March 2007, reveals a marked

preference for the White House frame, even though the surge provoked a broad wave of criticism. Members of both parties in Congress, policymaking elites, public intellectuals, newspaper columnists, military officials and Iraqi political leaders all challenged the White House view in the days and weeks afterwards. Not surprisingly, polls indicated that there was strong public opposition to the plan as well. One week following the president's address, virtually every major national opinion poll – including those conducted by CBS News, ABC/*Washington Post*, CNN, Pew/NPR, AP/Ipsos and FOX News – showed that the majority of Americans disapproved of the proposed troop increase and ranked the war in Iraq as the number one, or 'most important,' problem facing the nation.

In short, the 2007 surge debate presented the media with conditions that theoretically would enable virtual parity between the White House and the oppositional Iraq frames. There existed widespread and vocal elite dissent against this policy change, a newly elected Democratic majority in Congress, and many citizens both opposed and paying attention. Nor was the policy decision in question – whether to send more US troops – complicated or inaccessible, features that have constrained foreign policy debates in the past (Baum 2004; Woods 1997).

The ensuing political debate over the surge made for an especially compelling case for observing frame dynamics because of the White House's skill in setting the parameters of remedy endorsement. In his initial surge speech, Bush not only advanced a clear remedy – a troop increase – he also *prioritized the importance of offering a remedy* by highlighting the opposition's failure to do so, pointing out that those with different views 'have a responsibility to explain how the path they propose would be more likely to succeed'.

With the battle lines so drawn, President Bush proceeded to characterize an opposition remedy that called for any level of troop withdrawal as both counter-productive and dangerous (White House Briefing 2007):

To step back now would force a collapse of the Iraqi government, tear that country apart, and result in mass killings on an unimaginable scale. Such a scenario would result in our troops being forced to stay in Iraq even longer, and confront an enemy that is even more lethal.

This claim achieved two powerful functions: first, it preempted an opposition frame that was clearly incompatible with White House goals; second, and more impressively, it implied that the opposition remedy *was* to quickly withdraw US troops, that they were unaware of the dangers of a hasty retreat, and suggested to Americans, even those opposed to Bush's handling of the war, that the new Democratic Congress could not be trusted with the dangerous realities of the current war. This instantly put the Democrats on the defensive, a very difficult position from which to advance a coherent counterframe.

Any opposition frame was now expected to advance a counter-policy in order to be considered valid – simply rejecting the surge policy, unaccompanied by an action-oriented remedy that addressed the 'unacceptable' situation in Iraq, was not enough. This is an inherently imbalanced challenge with respect to skill,

opportunity and the structure of American government. The White House is able to articulate policies in a unitary fashion, while Congress must subject its policies to debate, public scrutiny, criticism and compromise before formal passage, and even after a bill is passed, the partisan debate often continues. Also, blocking the surge on its own merits – for no other reason than because it is bad policy – is as legitimate a policy option as replacing the surge with an alternative remedy, yet it lacks the impact of a remedy endorsement. In other words, it is poor logic to assume that ‘doing something’ is necessarily preferable to ‘not doing something’ in wartime Iraq, but ‘not doing something’ does not present a viable challenge to the White House frame.

For these reasons, the content analysis that follows focuses on the representation, by paragraph, of the White House (WH) frame’s preferred problem definition (PD) and remedy endorsement (R) – the most influential of the four framing functions identified by Entman (1993) – compared to that of the counterframe. (The causal analysis and moral judgment aspects of framing are not unimportant, but they are less actionable than the problem definition and remedy endorsement aspects, much less likely to be subject of opinion polls, and therefore send less clear signals to policymakers.) We distinguish between *Strong* (S) and *Weak* (W) frames based upon the presence (or absence) of PD and R aspects that support one side of the debate. Strongly framed paragraphs include a problem definition and associated remedy; weakly framed paragraphs include only one or none of these two primary framing functions.

We analyzed coverage of the Iraq War surge debate from 9 January 2007, the day before its announcement, to 15 March 2007 in the *New York Times*. We included news and opinions sections, but excluded letters to the editor and arts reviews. Using Nexis, we searched for framing words – those words that have the capacity to stimulate support or opposition to the sides in a political conflict – to isolate articles and transcript segments.⁵ Coding of frames was done by relevant paragraph, with a paragraph defined as containing at least 50 words. A relevant paragraph includes at least one of the following search terms: ‘surge,’ ‘escalate/escalation,’ ‘buildup’ or ‘increase’ *made in reference to the topic of the study*; that is, President Bush’s January 2007 surge proposal.⁶

White House versus opposition-supportive framing

This analysis focuses on whether each paragraph contained zero, one or two aspects of both the White House and opposition (OPP) problem definition and remedies, with those containing both for one side considered ‘Strong’ for that side:

- White House problem definition: PD_{WH} = Problem defined as: A military problem, lack of security forces, lack of US troops. When defined as Iraq itself, problem can be: general situation/violence, Iraqi insurgency, terrorists, sectarian violence resulting from discrete events (e.g. 2006 Samarra mosque bombing), illegal Shi’ite militias, al-Sadr/Mahdi army, or external

threats to the Iraqi government. Can also be defined as political opposition/ Congress for not enacting the White House plan.

- Opposition problem definition: PD_{OPP} = Problem defined as: American casualties, Iraqi casualties, troop escalation, US occupation, Iraq as a political problem. When defined as Iraq itself, problem can be: Civil war or near-civil war, Iraq-as-Vietnam, naturally occurring or seemingly organic sectarian violence, Prime Minister al-Maliki, Iraqi parliament or governmental corruption.
- White House Remedy: R_{WH} = Remedy: Continued and increased American troop presence, send requested troops and allow surge to take effect, demonstration of political will.
- Opposition Remedy: R_{OPP} = Remedy: Phased redeployment or decrease of US troops, immediate and/or complete withdrawal of US troops, calls for specific diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East, i.e. including Iran and/or Syria, multilateralism with regional and coalition forces.
- Paragraphs containing causal and/or moral judgment aspects (the two weakest framing functions) were noted.

The disparity of frame strength between the White House and opposition sides was dramatic. Of the 519 total paragraphs, 81 percent supported at least one of the four aspects of the WH frame, and 73 percent supported at least one aspect of the OPP frame. However, when broken down into strong and weak frames, this balance disappears, with a strong administration frame (one containing its problem definition and remedy) supported in 77 percent (320) of all paragraphs, and a strong opposition frame supported in just 8 percent (30 paragraphs).

There were also far more strong WH-only framed paragraphs than strong OPP-only paragraphs, with 129, or 25 percent, of all paragraphs containing *only* a strong WH frame, and just 20, or 4 percent, featuring a strong OPP-frame independently. There was a fair share of neutral or balanced weak-frame paragraphs (15 percent), but just one balanced strong-frame paragraph containing both White House and Oppositional problem definitions and remedies, (rounded down to 0 percent in the data set).

Table 11.1 Balance of White House versus opposition frame

	<i>White House</i>	<i>Opposition</i>	<i>Total</i>
Any of four framing functions represented in paragraph	418 (0.81)	379 (0.73)	519 (1.0)
Strong framing paragraphs: include both problem definition and remedy	320 (0.77)	30 (0.08)	350 (0.67)

Notes

Cells display number and percentage of all paragraphs (in parentheses). Figures do not add to 1 due to paragraphs with aspects of both White House and opposition frames.

These cases together reveal the very opposite tendency of what many administration officials, including President Bush and Vice President Cheney, claimed, that media neglected good news and emphasized bad news. Certainly media paid attention to bad news almost daily, even before summer 2006, but as suggested by the poll evidence of persistently amorphous public opinion, it was inconsistent and disorganized – shapeless rather than framed – attention.

Why the accountability gap?

Why have America's major news media seemed incapable of applying the baleful lessons of their own histories, once again opening up an accountability gap in Iraq as in the Gulf War, Vietnam and other cases before (Andersen and Ernst 2007; Hallin 1986; Bennett and Paletz 1994)? The short answer is that as each novel foreign policy problem appears, its construction by the media passes through a stable configuration of forces acting on all national news organizations. Journalists respond to these predictable pressures in predictable ways, time after time. The responses are deeply rooted in commercial necessity and professional custom, their impact reinforced by their unspoken, implicit quality.

In Iraq, the president's ability to frame 'light at the end of the tunnel' progress and hope swamps the unconnected sporadic dots of news about specific negative events ranging from the sectarian murders and attacks, to government reports like the NIE. The administration retains its ability to orchestrate dire intelligence warnings, 'purple finger' election rituals, other alleged milestones of progress including elimination of what might be called 'celebrity villains' like Zarqawi, hyped mini-crises like the Iran weapons charges, or official visits to Iraq suffused with images of cheering Americans in uniform, which almost always appear prominently across all the media in terms that resonate with important cultural values.

These media events made big news in part because all were new *happenings involving the most powerful American officials*, however familiar the scripts, and however dubious the officials' claims. They also formed a coherent and reassuring argument that all will be well, which is much easier for everyone – journalists, governing elites, and the public – to swallow than the counter-argument that all will be terrible. Continued and perhaps inevitably heavy reliance by news organizations on administration and military sources for wartime information permitted the government not only to keep on weaving an integrated story, but as survey data suggest, to achieve some traction with it right up until the last part of 2006 and beyond.

Among the less informed, less attentive and ideological Americans, media coverage interweaving assurances of progress (Zarqawi) and scary warnings of threats (Iran weapons and terrorists 'following us home' if the United States withdrew from Iraq) with near-daily but disconnected reports of mounting costs, and neglect of more profoundly negative news not rooted in daily events (Livingston and Bennett 2003 on event-driven news), ultimately failed to produce a clear signal from public opinion as late as the autumn of 2006 if not beyond.

Even by spring 2007, survey evidence remained murky enough to discourage opponents in Congress from uniting around a failure frame built from the following elements:

- 1 The Iraq war could not be won by force of arms.
- 2 Iraq had little to do initially with the war on terrorism (though it came to because of the chaotic conditions created by the invasion itself).
- 3 Therefore, the invasion of Iraq undermined counterterrorism efforts and American security.
- 4 The best way to ‘support the troops’ and (as the 2007 NIE intimated) minimize the spread of terrorism would be to end the US mission expeditiously.

This is not to assert that such a frame was the only legitimate one or that the list above exhausts all of the potential elements of a cogent counterframe; nor is it to say that the administration’s arguments for staying the course deserved no coverage. Our point is that even with all the facts on the ground, elite dissent and the escalating costs, the administration obtained far more than parity with an oppositional frame, opening up the accountability gap.

A coherent, resonant frame that emphasized policy failure would have potential significance for accountability *irrespective of any impacts on public opinion poll responses*. Such framing might exert independent pressure on elites. Even if ordinary citizens become less interested in casualties and other bad news as time elapses, the paucity of the media images themselves may reduce pressure on officials to consider changing problematic policy. The main reason for this, we suggest, is that elites infer current and predict future public opinion and the intensity of any potential public opposition based on how the media are reporting the evidence of failure, not merely on what the current polls are saying (Entman 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007).

The media environment rendered the political threats to potential elite opponents more salient and credible than they might otherwise have been. Throughout 2004–2006 and well into 2007, no matter the events on the ground, the administration skillfully deployed images and rhetorical claims to fit media needs, while the Congressional opposition only fitfully raised individual voices of criticism rather than a unified critique. As long as the press relies on Congress as the main legitimate source of oppositional framing, we should expect to see the continuation of a resonant voice out of the Executive branch, versus an often timid, discordant, and scattered chorus from Congress.⁷

This reticence resulted in little pressure on journalists, who used disconnected rather than coherent newsworthy quotes in counterbalancing the administration. Continuing opposition in Congress might also have reduced the administration’s ability to shape news through intimidation by charging that critical coverage originated in the media’s alleged liberal bias and lack of patriotism (Bennett *et al.* 2007).

For the most part, a self-reinforcing circle operated. At least until the Democrats began campaigning for president in 2007, the undeniably negative event

news from Iraq was not organized around an alternative, framing problem definition (the government’s war policy itself) and remedy (cessation of US involvement as rapidly as feasible). The absence of the media counter-frame reduced the clout and political courage of elite opponents, and those opponents’ timorousness and impotence further reduced the visibility and coherence of the counterframing (Entman and Page 1994). Nor were the presidential candidates able to amass sufficient pressure to compel Congressional action to reverse the Bush policy – even though polls showed about two out of three Americans disfavored that policy and disapproved of the president.

The relationships that we hypothesize to diminish opposition look something like the adaptation of Entman’s (2004) cascade model in Figure 11.4. These relationships help to answer the questions of why policy change took so long, and why it took the form of an escalation rather than withdrawal plan. Not before late 2006, with the release of the bi-partisan, authoritative and downbeat Iraq Study Group report, could leaders in government (and in the media too) safely speak out unequivocally in favor of ending the war forthwith. Administration allies could still successfully heap criticism on opponents for supporting the enemy, for ‘cutting and running,’ through the summer of 2006, without much fear of backlash from an intense or comprehensive oppositional majority. Instead, politicians favoring an alternative problem definition and remedy had good reason to anticipate a backlash for seeming unsupportive of the troops. The commencement of the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination appears particularly significant in helping to raise the visibility of anti-war framing, although as we have shown, this did not prevent the administration from dominating early coverage of its surge policy, nor did it embolden the nominally Democratic Congress to effectively defy President Bush.

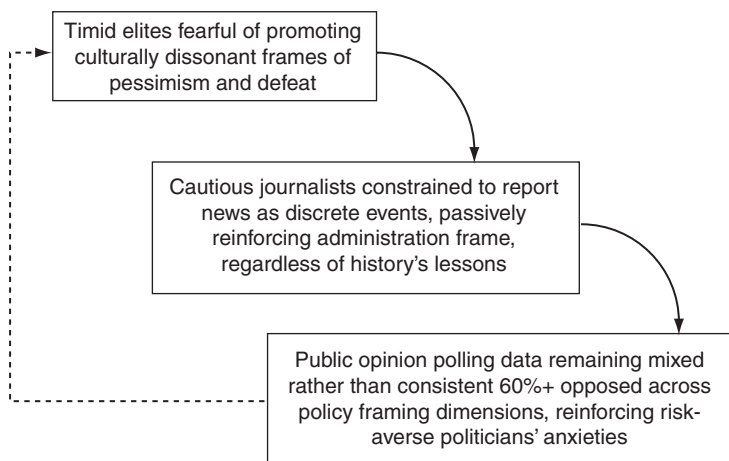


Figure 11.4 Explaining the limits of elite and media opposition, or, why (US) journalists are doomed to repeat.

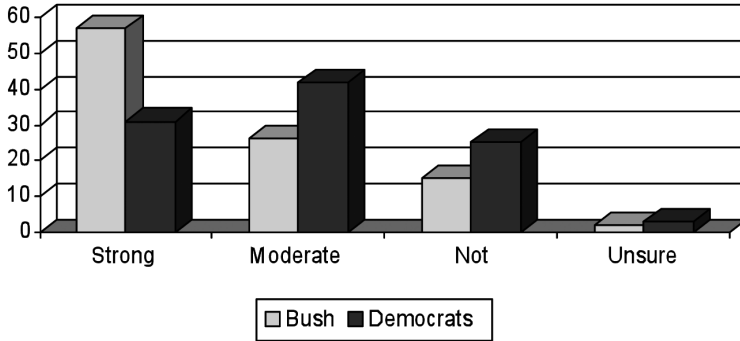


Figure 11.5 'Support of troops', May 2007.

Notes

CNN/Gallup Poll May 4–6, 2007 questions: 1. 'Do you think President Bush strongly supports, only moderately supports, or does not support the US troops currently stationed in Iraq?' 57 percent strongly; 26 percent moderately; 15 percent does not support; 2 percent unsure. 2. 'Do you think the Democrats in Congress strongly support, only moderately support, or do not support the US troops currently stationed in Iraq?' 31 percent strongly, 42 percent moderately, 25 percent does not support; 3 percent unsure.

An intriguing CNN/Gallup poll reveals how fear of being labeled unpatriotic and soft might have constrained Democratic opponents (and even potential Republican challengers as well). As shown in Figure 11.5, despite all the bad news from Iraq, a substantial survey majority of 57 percent felt President Bush's administration 'strongly supports the troops' in May 2007, several months into a surge that a (different?) majority said they opposed. Only 31 percent said the Democrats strongly supported the troops. War opponents had apparently not punched through with a convincing message that 'supporting' troops meant ending the war rather than extending their tours of duty (as the Bush administration did, from 12 to 15 months) and deploying them for two, three or more rotations (Jonsson 2007). Moreover, only a minority (41 percent) of respondents indicated they thought the war was lost as of May 2007, with a majority still believing in the possibility of victory as they had roughly six months earlier. Along the same lines, 43 percent of respondents said Iraq was part of the war on terrorism, versus 54 percent saying it was not, the same percentages as 18 months earlier (CNN/Gallup Poll: December 2005).

Poll evidence continued to indicate limited diffusion of an oppositional frame that saw Iraq as a lost cause damaging to the fight against terrorism – despite support for that conclusion from the NIE and Iraq Study Group among other authoritative sources. Moreover, polls offered disorganized, difficult-to-interpret information to elites that reflected the weakness and disorganization of the oppositional frame in the media even as it reinforced the disincentives for elites to invest political capital in organizing that opposing narrative. Indeed, throughout 2007, anxiety about a public backlash for 'losing' Iraq apparently kept the

Democratic majority in Congress from using all the tools at its disposal to force troop withdrawals. Thus was the government's persistence in war policy bolstered, lessons of history notwithstanding.

By the end of 2007, the media had widely labeled the surge a success at markedly reducing levels of sectarian and anti-US violence (see for instance Michaels 2007).⁸ Granting that premise, many questions remained (Murphy 2007), including how long the United States would have to keep more than 130,000 troops (and tens of thousands of private contractors) in Iraq; whether the turmoil would resume once US troops were withdrawn as surveyed majorities wanted; and whether the surge could help in achieving the long-term strategic objectives of US foreign policy. The election of the anti-war Democratic Senator Barack Obama in November 2008 once again sent a mixed message. A *Newsweek* poll taken in late October showed the public evenly split (47 to 45 percent) on which candidate would be best at handling Iraq, and favoring Republican Senator John McCain over Obama by 50 to 40 percent on handling 'terrorism and national security.' It was on the economy and health care that Obama trounced McCain. Further illustrating the ambiguous signals from the public: despite McCain's frequently expressed willingness to keep American forces in Iraq indefinitely, it was only when the financial crisis hit the United States in mid-September that Obama pulled ahead of McCain in the presidential preference polls for good. Throughout the summer and into early September, McCain was ahead in some of these surveys, Obama in others (in many they tied) (see Polling Report Inc. website).

Conclusion

As suggested by coverage of the Iranian weapons and National Intelligence Estimate, along with the 9:1 ratio of strong pro-administration framing in the *New York Times's* early coverage of the surge, the administration could still supervise the *framing* of Iraq news, even if they found it impossible to staunch the flow of *negative daily event reporting* on the war. Put differently, they could still dominate the narrative even as discordant plot developments mounted up. Media framing might well have helped to constrain the scope, depth and coherence of opposition, maintaining sufficient freedom of maneuver for the Bush administration to mount its surge policy despite the apparent majority support for a reversal of course.

Administration influence over framing is of course inevitable, and to some degree desirable. We do not contend that in the real world it would be feasible for the dotted curve of counter-framed news to precisely mirror the solid curve of rising costs in Figure 11.1. Bound by objectivity rules, mainstream media cannot place many fully elaborated, opposition-framed stories on page one or the lead position of newscasts. Still, when the facts on the ground suggest as much, accountability would arguably benefit from circulating an overarching narrative of policy failure and cessation to compete with the narrative of progress and possibility coming out of a White House that cannot afford to admit its mistakes (on competing frames, see Druckman 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007a, b).

It should also be noted that multiparty systems may provide more opportunities for counterframing than America's ideologically confined two-party system. One item for future research would be determining whether accountability gaps are larger in the United States than in other media and political systems (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

In any case, as we have suggested, media exert influence on foreign policy-making either way. In the United States the influence may be indirect, cementing disincentives for elite dissent that prevent a cascade of opposition from permeating news framing and stimulating pressure from perceptions of a consistently opposed and aroused public opinion. In political systems where media and parties encourage more competitive framing of foreign policy, we might speculate, the press's influence on foreign policy would come from their ability to maintain elite incentives to challenge government policy and stimulate public pressure on the ruling party. Yet even in the United States, the flaws in conception, planning and execution of Iraq policy were well documented in long-form journalism (see among many examples Packer 2005; Ricks 2006a; Isikoff and Corn 2006). This suggests it might be possible even in the constrained American environment for journalists to make policy consequences slightly clearer in real time, and to hold government somewhat more accountable in the daily news reports and editorial comment that help to shape the political environment, policymaking and ultimately, history itself.

Notes

- 1 See Gartner and Segura 2007 and Abramowitz 2007 on the Iraq war and the 2006 midterms.
- 2 The costs are comparatively easy to quantify: A careful and conservative estimate of direct and indirect costs using data as of December 2005 by Bilmes and Stiglitz (2006: 30) ranged from \$1 trillion to \$2.2 trillion (though much uncertainty remains as this range indicates); benefits are probably impossible to put in monetary terms, and in any case would largely become known only in the long-term. The purpose of this graph is to illustrate what we believe to be a consequential and predictable gap between the two curves rather than an exact quantification.
- 3 See Ricks 2006b, describing how the American military engaged in a systematic effort to inflate the importance of Zarqawi and turn him into a personified symbol of the enemy. Ricks notes that the US 'propaganda program largely has been aimed at Iraqis, but seems to have spilled over into the US media'. The story further quotes a military briefing at which it was asserted that 'Through aggressive Strategic Communications, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi now represents: Terrorism in Iraq/Foreign Fighters in Iraq/Suffering of Iraqi People (Infrastructure Attacks)/Denial of Iraqi Aspirations'. This *Washington Post* story appeared two months before the celebratory coverage of his demise in its corporate sibling, *Newsweek*, and elsewhere.
- 4 Online, available at: www.fas.org/irp/dni/iraq020207.pdf.
- 5 Stories were pulled from Nexis using the following terms: [Headline, subject, or keyword: 'Iraq'] AND [Full-text: 'surge' OR 'troop increase' OR 'troop buildup' OR 'escalate!' OR 'withdraw!'].
- 6 For example, the following paragraph, from the *New York Times* article, 'Yes, More Troops Would Help, a Bit' (T. Shanker 17 September 2006: section 4: 3) would not be included in the study, even if it were within the chronological scope:

Yet even with more troops, [Cordesman] said, ‘the empty swaths of desert would not be worth securing’, even though insurgents are free to maneuver there. ‘But more troops could help in specific cities’, Mr. Cordesman said. He suggested focusing on the towns and cities along the river west of Baghdad, as well as the roads from Falluja toward Syria.

Although this paragraph substantively discusses a troop increase in Iraq, it does not refer to the specific troop ‘surge’ proposal that is the concern of this study.

- 7 There is arguably an important partisan difference: timidity and incoherence seems more likely to characterize Democratic than Republican opposition to a president’s foreign policy. Republicans’ ‘ownership’ of the defense issue –the wide perception of the GOP as ‘strong on defense’ – enables them to strike bolder oppositional poses. When Democrats Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter held the presidency, Republicans were able to fashion more consistent and influential oppositional frames. This point is often lost in the literature on media and US foreign policy (Entman 2004).
- 8 Opinion polls suggested the surge had no appreciable impact on evaluation of Bush’s handling of Iraq (67 percent disapproval in January 2007, 68 percent in November, according to the NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* survey). But there was an uptick in those responding (to a Pew Center poll) that the military effort was going very well or fairly well (from 30 percent in February 2007 to 48 percent in November 2007) (see Pew research website. Online, available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=373>).

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12 Conclusion

The interplay of mass communication and political decision making – policy matters!

Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten and Katrin Voltmer

This volume set out to explore the relationship between the media and public policy. The articles collected here move beyond the traditional dichotomy of excessive media power versus media impotence that has obstructed the academic debate on the political role of the media for years. Our main question that guided the contributors to this volume was whether, how and under which conditions the media influence political decision making. Which conditions promote, and which limit the involvement of the media in the policy process? What are the mechanisms by which the media exert influence? And what kind of influence do the media exert?

The volume takes a *policy-specific* and *comparative* approach to these questions. Its findings show that the media's role in the policy process varies significantly depending on the policy field in question. Each policy field constitutes a complex political arena with its own characteristic structures and dynamics; so any attempts to draw conclusions with regard to the political influence of the media in general would fail to acknowledge the complexity of the underlying processes. Rather, these processes can be properly investigated only through a policy-specific contextualization that seeks to interpret media influence within a multicausal framework, taking account of the many and diverse factors impacting on the political process.

In the Introduction we suggested the distinction between policy debates and policy institutions as a general framework in which the role of the media in public policy can be conceptualized. In this Conclusion we will further develop this line of argument by emphasizing how the specific settings of policy fields enable, or constrain, media influences on the policy process.

Media power in the policy debate: discourse matters

Interpretative approaches in policy research (Kingdon 1995; Stone 1997) – and the constructivist turn in the social sciences in general (Holstein and Miller 1993) – have heightened awareness of the distinction between the production, or output, of public policy and its representation in public communication (Edelman 1985). This awareness has broadened the traditional understanding of politics, based on the work of Max Weber, as a form of *procedure* targeting the acquisition of power

and the assertion of interests. Politics is also a form of *discourse* – a struggle over meaning in which different interpretations of reality are pitted against one another. The production of policy outputs through formal procedures and the presentation of policies in discourse are inextricably linked. We adopt a broad definition of ‘discourse’, understanding it to be all ‘(more or less) public, planned and organized processes of discussion’ in which various actors compete for ‘binding interpretations of social and political events’ (Keller 2004: 7, 22, our translation).

Discourse can be seen as a *social construction of reality*: only a limited number of current events are selected, presented in the media, and thus perceived as existent. The media – but also interest groups and experts – are involved in the selection of the events, facts and problems that are brought to public consciousness and subsequently put on the political agenda as issues to be addressed and resolved. Thus, reality is not simply reflected, but constituted in discourse. These constructions of reality do not necessarily satisfy ‘objective’ relevance criteria; the selections made are determined by the specific organizational environments or the professional norms of the actors involved. While interest groups pick issues that affect their members’ interests, the media apply their own professional logic, which is informed by aspects of newsworthiness, journalistic norms and market interests. Thus, only certain issues are made visible to the public – and not necessarily those that have priority for political decision makers. Indeed, the media systematically ignore topics they consider not to be newsworthy. In other cases, stories are made to fit journalistic criteria (Staab 1990): issues are dramatized, personalized and sensationalized. Differences of opinion between political actors are built up into major conflicts, generating an impression of ‘confrontational negativity’ (see Sauer in this volume). Public expectations of effective and rapid solutions are unrealistically heightened; scope for compromises is reduced (Voltmer 2007) and certain (minority and outsider) positions are overemphasized, thus gaining influence and power (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Discourse not only implies a selection of current events and issues, however; it also involves their evaluation with reference to the competing interpretations offered by the media and other actors (e.g. experts, interest groups, social movements, political parties). Communication science discusses these relationships in terms of *framing*: The media embed events in *frames* that give the facts reported specific meaning and relevance. These frames may contain references to the past as the background to the event, speculations about its implications and normative evaluations (Entman 1993; Bennett and Livingston 2003; see also Entman *et al.* in this volume). Equally important for the generation of meaning are policy metaphors (see Maesele and Schuurman in this volume). At the discourse level, the media compete with other actors – from political parties to experts and interest groups – for the power of interpretation. As such, they are not the dominant players, but can nevertheless have an important role to play.

Content analyses have shown that the selection of frames is also driven to a large extent by media logic (Iyengar 1991; Scheufele 1999), even though the

media do not always speak with a single voice. While the print media often cover the same topics at the same time ('focussing'), there is less often consensus on these issues or on the political preferences articulated ('consonance') (Eilders 2001). Either way, the scope for political decision making is modified: focussing leads to pressure in the political system to address problems, while consonance influences the direction of these efforts.

If policy institutions (i.e. the procedure of policy production) and policy debate (i.e. the discourse of presenting public policy) are two dimensions of the political decision-making process, procedural power converges on interest groups and political parties, which have 'privileged access' to the institutional decision-making centre (von Beyme 1997: 212) and wield the necessary instruments to assert their interests: expertise, conflict management and organizational capacity. Discursive power, in contrast, converges on the media, which have privileged access to the public and wield the power of publicity. Political actors have long since responded to this structural division of power by extending their channels of strategic political communication (Kriesi 2004). Today, the public acquires most political information from the mass media, which are thus able to influence the major themes of public debate and bring about long-term shifts in public attitudes. Given that they depend on public support, politicians are not willing or able to go against public opinion and risk losing (individual or collective) popularity or even political power in future elections.

Whether and to what extent political decision makers adopt the media's constructions of reality in their own perceptions and evaluations remains an open question, however. First, political professionals might be excessive media users, but they have elaborated information-processing strategies that largely immunize them against media influence on their attitudes (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987 on different media effects on experts and novices). Second, because the political elites are also embedded in various channels of direct communication and have access to insider documents, they are able to access numerous alternative sources of information (see Brown in this volume). The specific function of the media is to process and consolidate different streams of information, thus providing an overall picture of the situation, beyond the highly specialized communication networks of experts. For political elites, the media thus serve as an important instrument 'to identify, characterize and prioritize complex multiple information streams' (Jones and Wolfe in this volume).

Mechanisms of media influence: the media as a source of information and power

In modern democracies, media influence on the policy process is consequently rarely the result of intentional political intervention on the part of journalists. In everyday editorial practice, its effects tend to be more peripheral, although specific campaigns can certainly have far-reaching effects (Protess *et al.* 1991). Rather, media influence emerges *indirectly*, as an unintentional outcome of the dynamic interaction of public and political perceptions, triggered by media

coverage of political issues. It is this discursive power of the media that can impact on policy making. Lasting media attention is not necessary to initiate these dynamic interactions. Key events, scandals and the coining of emotive ‘buzz words’ that come to define and drive the debate are relatively short-term media events with potentially long-term implications. Based on their longitudinal study of different political fields, Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 84) concluded that ‘short periods of [media] attention affected outcomes and government policies for decades.’

Several mechanisms are responsible for media influence on policy.

First, the discursive hegemony of the media can limit the policy choices likely to engage public support. A ‘tonal environment for policy making’ (Jones and Wolfe in this volume) develops, which further defines the scope for political action. As the example of collective bargaining policy in Germany illustrates, it makes a crucial difference whether the demands of interest groups and state institutions are framed within a discourse of competition or one of social justice (Koch-Baumgarten 2007). In contrast, as Entman *et al.* show (in this volume), it might be the government that supervises the framing of politics in international affairs.

Second, public policy debates can accelerate the otherwise often long drawn-out pace of political negotiations. The media’s thirst for topicality generates expectations of rapid policy output; politicians respond with symbolic gestures (Elder and Cobb 1983) or rash, short-sighted decisions (see Strüch in this volume).

Third, the media can equip political actors with *discursive power* in the policy debate. When the focus of a debate is shifted, there is corresponding change, not only in the political options that can be justified to the public, but also in the capacity of those involved to assert their interests. For example, the success of interest groups hinges not only on conflict management and organizational capacity, but also on access to public support and discursive power (Jamieson 2001; Koch-Baumgarten 2005; Terkildsen *et al.* 1998). This can be played off against procedural power – by the executive against influential interest groups, by interest groups against opposing groups and by political newcomers against insiders or traditional power alliances. The mere threat of ‘going public’ (Kernell 1997) can now be enough to bring difficult negotiation partners and opponents into line. However, the success of this strategy depends on the media’s susceptibility to being instrumentalized for such political ends. This susceptibility is decreasing: the media are responding to the professionalization of political marketing with increasing suspicion, and media reports often draw attention to political attempts to manipulate public opinion (Esser and d’Angelo 2003). Gavin’s study (in this volume) of media coverage of economic issues suggests that the government’s attempt to manipulate the news is much less successful than the elaborate ‘spin machine’ of the Blair government might suggest.

Fourth, new topics and interpretations introduced by the media can lead to the reconfiguration of a political field. New actors may gain access to previously

closed decision-making circles. Likewise, media support has helped social movements to gain a firm foothold within the established structures of environmental and gender policy. The same holds for non-governmental organizations in international politics (see Ecker-Ehrhardt in this volume). Conversely, new or altered discourses can lead to the dissolution of existing alliances or precipitate a change in leadership.

Conditions of media influence: institutions matter

The presence of the media and their influence on the policy process differ from one policy field to the next. Von Beyme (1994) points out that the media are not involved in ‘routine politics’ – that is, in most political decision-making processes – and argues that only innovative and controversial policy fields are subject to media influence. This is corroborated by Walgrave and Lefevere’s study (in this volume) on party manifestos in Belgium. They show that the interplay of media and the party policy agenda varies substantially across political fields: high levels of interconnection can be observed in areas such as ‘law and order’, security, labour market and development policy, and low levels in health, defence and foreign policy. There are some policy fields that are obviously of no journalistic interest to the media and in which – despite the need for public support – political decision makers do not adopt the strategy of going public or compete for media attention. Any shade of media influence is possible, from ‘non-existent’ to ‘high’. Moreover, even within a policy field, long periods out of the limelight may be interspersed with short bursts of media attention.

Linear processes of mediatization are thus just as unlikely as general conditions for media influence across policy fields (see Jones and Wolfe in this volume). All the evidence suggests that the depth and course of media influence depends on the policy field in question. Moreover, *policy contents*, the *structural* contexts of policy fields, and *situational* factors all have a role to play. First, the extent to which *policy contents* (i.e. the specific characteristics of a policy) comply with news factors differs. Second, policy fields each have different *structural* characteristics, reflected in complex patterns of political roles and responsibilities. The political decision-making process takes place in various multiple-actor settings and multilevel systems reaching from the local to the international level. This leads to policy-specific differences – not only in groupings, institutional structures and decision-making levels, but also in interest structures, negotiation cultures, policy contents, path dependencies and the sections of the public involved. Third, events and their unpredictable consequences provide a specific *situational* context for political activity. Such events open windows of opportunity for both political agents and the media (Brikland 1998).

Policy contents

Some policy fields are deemed more newsworthy than others in terms of the topics covered. Criminality, for example, receives regular media coverage,

thanks to the clear focus on the crime, the perpetrator and the victim. In contrast, structural problems such as poverty and unemployment are often underrepresented in the media. Von Beyme (1994) points to the relationship between type of topic and media interest, and identifies innovative, distributive and controversial topics as having particular relevance for the media. Thus, ‘perceptibility’ and ‘visibility’ of a topic have been highlighted as important in environmental policy (Jänicke 2007: 65). By the same token, technical, routine, protracted and complex topics do not comply with news factors. A prime example here is the ‘normal’ collective bargaining that takes place outside industrial disputes, the details of which are of as little interest to the media as is the ritualized and cooperative negotiation process itself (Koch-Baumgarten 2007). The issues addressed in pensions policy and gene technology policy (see the articles by Strünck and by Maesele and Schuurman in this volume) are similarly technical and complex. In the context of cross-cutting issues, such as equality and gender policy, it is difficult to identify individual actors and thus to personify media content (see Sauer in this volume).

Media resonance can thus be systematically limited by the specific characteristics of an issue, with the result that policy positions are reported only in rather routine terms. As a rule, it is political actors – from interest groups to the executive – that have the power of definition within the policy discourse (see for international politics Entman *et al.* in this volume), leaving the media at most the role of ‘amplifier’ (Bennett 1990; see also the empirical findings in Koch-Baumgarten and Mez 2007). It is only in cases of conflict, crisis or scandal that media interest in these political fields is sparked.

Constellations of actors and the media in multilevel systems of political decision making

One of the major structural conditions impacting media influence is the specific constellation of actors involved. Today’s political decision-making processes generally take place within complex and heterogeneous settings. This applies in international politics – which, in the era of multilateral rather than bilateral alliances, is characterized by greater instability and potential for conflict (Entman 2000) – as well as in most policy fields at the national level. The institutions involved cannot be seen as units representing clear and fixed interests. Many of today’s political processes involve several ministries advocating different policy options and interests, not to mention parliamentary groups embedded in complex social networks of parties, interest groups and constituencies. Parties and interest groups have assumed an even more important role in contemporary governance as the policy process has shifted from formal and institutional procedures and structures to informal ones, primarily networks (Kjaer 2004; Kooiman 2003; Mayntz 1993). The situation becomes even more complex when international institutions such as the European Union and the European interest groups, are involved. Indeed, a considerable amount of today’s legislative process in European countries is driven by EU policies.

Given the increased need for political legitimatization and the pressure of constant media observation, multiple actor groups may increase media influence on the policy process. It seems likely that the potential for conflict increases with the number of actors involved: diverging interests, institutional power struggles and individual politicians' desire for public recognition are all potential triggers for the use of strategies that include mobilizing the public as a source of power in the negotiation process or conflict. At the same time, however, media interest decreases as a function of the complexity of the negotiation process in terms of its length, the number of actors involved and the complexity of the material covered. Complex multiple-actor constellations fail to comply with news factors, especially personification, making them difficult to present in the media.

Hence, neither the need to legitimize policy solutions to the public nor multiple-actor groups is a sufficient reason for media influence. Further *situational* and *structural* factors are also required. From the *structural* perspective, the composition (dependence on the electoral process, access to non-media channels of information) and, in particular, fragmentation of the institutions of decision making seem to affect a policy field's susceptibility to media influence. Small, coherent and informal decision-making settings, such as those that have developed in networks or corporate elite cartels in the bargaining democracy, clearly limit mediatization effects (Koch-Baumgarten 2005, 2007). From the *situational* perspective, conflicts within the elites and policy uncertainty – both of which are inherent in fragmented structures – play a major role (Robinson 2001; see also Howarth in this volume). Fragmentation can arise when new actors are excluded from privileged access to institutional processes or when workable political consensuses or finely tuned power arrangements collapse.

In many policy fields, bargaining is dominated by small, coherent and informal decision-making centres, such as networks and corporate elite cartels. These bodies are dominated by selected representatives of the executive and powerful interest groups; they become established as strategic alliances and long-term cooperative relationships. As a rule, networks and corporate cartels are largely immune to media influence, for several reasons.

First, they follow the logic of bargaining systems: they seek joint resolution of problems through long-term cooperation by methods of compromise and consensus. They are based on an underlying consensus, a shared set of rules, acceptance of specific spheres of influence, and the legitimacy of the interests represented (which may diverge and compete; see Mayntz 1993: 45–52). It is thus not rare for path dependencies to develop in these policy fields. Although most of the time the actors involved have no interest in a strategy of going public, they have the opportunity to turn to the media in cases of conflict: representatives of interest groups can harness the power of the media to assert their demands; government representatives can mobilize against the social pressure applied by interest groups; leading politicians can seek media exposure and public recognition. In reality, however, members of exclusive elite cartels are unlikely to jeopardize the future of their long-standing relationships by mobilizing media and public opinion against a negotiating partner to achieve a short-term gain.

Second, the key actors in these networks tend to remain out of the media spotlight. Studies have shown that the media agenda corresponds less with the agenda of the executive branch of government than with that of the legislative branch. This may be because political decision making and problem solving has in fact long been concentrated in the executive, and parliaments have increased their public relations activities in response to successive losses of power. This holds particularly in areas with a structural hegemony of executive actors, such as the European Union and European policy, where ‘press release journalism’ tends to dominate (Kantner 2007: 220).

Third, informal elite cartels are exclusive, limited to a small, selected circle of players, and closed to newcomers. The established players have no interest in admitting the media – a new player that may be difficult to control and threatens to introduce new interpretations to the debate, with unforeseeable consequences.

Fourth, networks are not only decision-making circles, they are also high-density and high-efficiency means of communication (see Brown in this volume). Beyond the mediatized routes, direct channels of communication are still in place between political decision makers within and between institutions and organizations. In the ministries, these include the inter-ministerial channels and direct contacts with experts and interest groups. Political actors – and this applies to parties as well as to interest groups, to unions as well as to employers’ associations – have a number of direct channels of information and communication at their disposal. For example, their own print and online media facilitate communication and cooperation among in-house, regional or local organizational structures. In this way they can communicate with their own constituencies without relying or depending on the mass media. Their internal media function as instruments of mobilization and legitimization and serve as multipliers of executive strategies and positions. Despite the inherent divergence of interests between capital and labour, corporate bodies are thus fairly resistant to media influence (Koch-Baumgarten 2007).

Fifth, ministerial bureaucracies and most interest groups are relatively independent of the electoral process, and consequently have no direct interest in seeking public legitimation for their policies. Interest groups are hierarchical organizations that tend to have democratic deficits; their leaderships tend to be answerable to only certain sections of the public, often a small circle of politically active members. They campaign for re-election within the organization, but rely less on media presence and charisma than on expertise and negotiation skills. In the self-image of interest group elites, it is not skill in handling the media and getting one’s message across to the public that are seen as necessary qualifications for the policy process, but professional competence, discretion and interpersonal skills (Sebaldt 1997: 68, 254, 360).

Thus, the current findings from policy research show that, in periods of ‘routine politics’, the policy process tends to take place well out of the media spotlight. However, this changes as soon as new actors challenge established political cartels in times of crisis, or when a broad policy consensus within an established network collapses, resulting in policy uncertainty until a new con-

sensus has been achieved – sometimes through a process of conflict. In these cases, existing power arrangements may also become destabilized and have to be reconfigured. In other words, whenever coherent decision-making settings are weakened, such that groups of political actors are fragmented or unstable, a window of opportunity for media influence is opened.

Fragmentation, conflict, and policy uncertainty as a basis for processes of media influence in public policy

In political contexts with strong corporate structures it is relatively rare for fragmentation and conflict orientation to trigger processes of mediatization. These processes tend to be observed either when a new policy field is established or following crises in policy fields previously characterized by long periods of continuity, institutional and political stability, and strong path dependencies. New challenges, political crises and sudden catastrophes may also cause turbulence: events such as war, terrorist attacks and accidents in nuclear power plants may be followed by changes in the discourse and policy in established policy fields (Entman 2003; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Luke 1990; see Entman *et al.* in this volume). At the same time, slow long-term change can produce new problems that cumulate in sudden structural crises. In such cases, the prevailing elite consensus – in which the media are usually bound up – collapses. This can result in policy uncertainty and spark intense debate over political alternatives. Alternatively, previously accepted divergences of interests and differences of opinions on potential solutions can become so entrenched that a latent conflict becomes manifest and tacit compromise can no longer be upheld. Under these conditions, political actors may become interested in mobilizing the media against competing interests. Minorities may voice their concerns.

Structural crises of this kind often precipitate the involvement of new actors in the policy field. These newcomers are not yet part of established decision-making circles and have yet to secure privileged access to institutional procedures or political decision makers. In Britain's agricultural policy, for example, consumer groups became involved in the discussion on the production of genetically modified foodstuffs and formed an alliance with the media against established interests in the field (see Howarth in this volume). In other cases, the highly publicized release of scientific reports has triggered political shockwaves and heated debates with repercussions for the political elite – like the current debate on climate change. It was after the part-privatization of the pensions system that German banks and insurance companies first made themselves heard in this political field (see Strünck in this volume). In family and 'women's' policy, it was the new women's movement that put forward demands to policy makers. As von Beyme (1994) noted, these new agents do not have direct, privileged access to the centres of political decision making; they have no means of accessing the formal channels of influence in ministries and parliamentary committees that are open to the 'silent powers' of established interest groups and

insiders. As such, they have little choice but to use the media to communicate their concerns to policy makers. They depend on the mass media to relay their demands; public pressure is their only source of power. Accordingly, they enter into strategic alliances with the media to establish themselves in the political field and put their concerns on the political agenda.

Conclusion

The contributions to this volume have demonstrated the growing power of the media in public policy, but also its limitations. The media can affect policy processes, the content of policy debates and the institutional contexts of policy making. However, findings indicate that processes of mediatization are not linear, continuous or all-encompassing. Rather, media effects depend on the policy field and the time period in question; they are discontinuous and inconsistent. These effects can best be described as 'volatile mediatization' (Sauer in this volume), the defining characteristic of which is that it increases policy uncertainty.

In some policy fields, political decision making takes place out of the media spotlight for extended periods of time, meaning that the production of politics can follow the internal logic of the policy process. The presentation of politics does not challenge the discursive hegemonies of the executive and established interests in these contexts, either. The media thus function at most as an 'amplifier'; they do not upset the prevailing elite consensus in the field, which may be informed by normative patterns of interpretation, path-dependent solutions, and the desire to keep certain issues off the media agenda.

Under certain structural and situational conditions, however, media influence may increase. Structural factors that promote media influence include fragmentation, a lack or eroding of political consensus, the exclusion of social actors from a policy field, and the compatibility of policy contents with news factors. Specific crises and conflicts often open a window of opportunity for the media, giving them access to the policy process, and the chance to effect change in it. The media can act as an accelerating factor, causing political decisions to be made hastily, without due consideration and ad hoc. They can amplify conflict by applying the techniques of sensationalization and confrontational negativity, highlighting outsider and extreme positions and overemphasizing differences of opinion, and thus making it difficult for decision makers to achieve compromises and potentially even prompting irrational overreactions.

Finally, access to discursive power can affect the ability of political actors to assert their interests. At the same time, the public perspective on the content of a topic may shift, as has been seen in many policy fields, including economic policy, the environment, foreign policy and immigration. These changes may in turn have repercussions for the actors involved. The media can give voice to outsider or minority interests, help to establish new actors in a policy field or equip established interests with discursive power against newcomers or competing interests (e.g. the executive against the opposition of powerful interest

groups). They can help to overcome political blockades and forge new consensus.

Research on the media–policy nexus is still in its infancy. It is hoped that, by providing both theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, this volume has contributed to understanding of the media’s role in public policy, and that these contributions will help to stimulate further debate. The interplay of mass communication and political decision making is emerging as an exciting area of academic investigation in which further work is clearly warranted.

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