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How politics becomes news and news becomes politics. A comparative experimental study of the politics-media relationship

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Chapter 3

Journalists' selection: How politics becomes news

Media are key for politicians because they allow them to get their messages across to potential voters. Moreover, politicians can use news reports to influence their fellow politicians. Yet their influence over which messages get reported is limited; they are dependent on journalists as the gate keepers who determine what becomes news. This chapter investigates how political journalists decide which political messages and events they cover. Which selection criteria do they apply to political news? The theory of news values has often been used to explain both why and how events get covered. How these news values are applied by political journalists in the context of political news and whether and how the political system affects this selection is studied. Findings point to a key role of the political system when journalists evaluate political news, in particular the distribution of political power among parties. However, in contrast to common perception neither the background of the journalist nor the organizational structure within which they operate seem to have a substantial influence on the messages they select. Thus, although the political system shapes their selection, there is also evidence that political journalists across systems have a number of shared news routine when deciding which aspects of politics to cover.¹

3.1 Introduction

Although political actors can also communicate with citizens directly or via social media, the most effective way to reach a larger audience is still via mediated mass communi-

¹ Part of this chapter is published as Helfer and Van Aelst (2016). What makes party messages fit for reporting? An experimental study of journalistic new selection. *Political Communication*, 33(1), 59-77.

3.1. Introduction

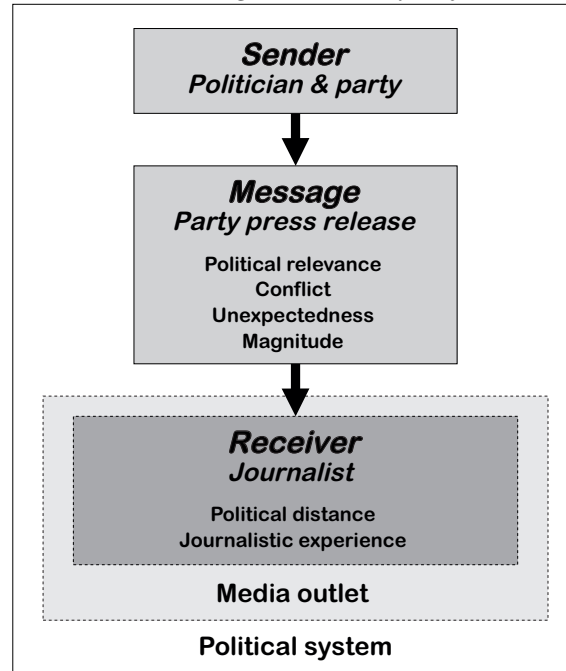
cation. Therefore political actors have professionalized their communications strategies and bombard journalists with messages on a daily basis. Only a limited number of these messages, however, will make it into the news (Berkowitz and Adams, 1990). Not only because news media have a restricted “carrying capacity,” but also because journalists want to inform (and entertain) their audience rather than please their political sources. This leads to the question of why some political messages make it into the news, while others are neglected.

One of the most important theories explaining why some events get covered and others do not is the theory of news values or news factors. It was first introduced by Galtung and Ruge (1965) in their study of foreign news coverage. They defined a set of characteristics that influenced whether an event got covered or not: the news values or news factors. Others developed the theory of news values further (e.g. Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). In the study presented here, I apply the concept of news values to examine how political journalists judge the news potential of communications by political parties. Do universal news values such as conflict and unexpectedness have a similar influence on selection, or are some more important than others?

To date, studies on news values often base themselves on content analyses. Such an approach to the study of news making and the selection of news has been criticized as limited. As Shoemaker and Vos pointed out in their review of gatekeeping studies: "Although content analysis data can tell us what becomes news, surveys can help us understand why news items exist." (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009b, p. 81). News values and news content are indeed important, but they are only one aspect that helps us understand how news is formed. The background of journalists, their beliefs and the structures within which they operate are crucial factors as I have already emphasized in the first chapter of this book (see subsection 1.2.2). The study presented here thus follows the traditions of hierarchy of influences models in the field and investigates how the background of the journalist and the organization within which she or he is embedded independently affect whether political messages are deemed newsworthy. Figure 3.1 gives an overview of the design of the study.

In particular with regards to political news, the wider context affects which messages get selected by journalists. In Figure 3.1 this is illustrated too with the political system. Specifically, parties and politicians in different systems might have different incentives to communicate with their voters via the media. More importantly, studies on journalistic reporting have shown that coverage of politics is not the same across political contexts. In a comparison of political news coverage across four Western European countries, Van Dalen (2012b) showed that in some news cultures, matters concerning the government are seen as newsworthy by definition, whereas in other cultures, political news is subject to the same evaluation criteria as other news. The study here builds on these findings by comparing how news is selected in Switzerland and the Netherlands. The two countries

Figure 3.1: The research design of the study of journalists' selection



have very similar media systems and share many similarities in the political system too (see section 2.2). The distribution of political power, however, is one important aspect in which the countries differ and which is expected to influence political news selection by journalists. This difference will affect which parties journalists deem more relevant in their selection of news as I will show later in this chapter.

To study which criteria journalists apply to select political messages, I focus on party press releases and manipulate several aspects of this message to gauge their influence on selection. Press releases are a classic example of an “information subsidy” (Gandy, 1982) that sources provide to journalists and which are still considered important for information gathering (Gershon, 2012). While political actors often attempt to get their messages into the media via the backstage, by building up informal relationships with journalists or leaking information, studies in multiple European countries also show that press releases do affect the media agenda, in particular during campaign periods (Brandenburg, 2002; Hanggli, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2012). Additionally, parties often publish press releases on a wide range of issues. Thus, using them as experimental stimuli makes the design realistic.

Experimental approaches to the study of news selection that allow discerning the influence of each factor individually are rare despite the fact that they can be particularly insightful (Shoemaker and Vos 2009b, for an exception see Kerrick et al. 1964; Patterson

3.2. Expectations

and Donsbach 1996). In experimental studies not only what does make it into the news, but also what does not become news can be studied which allows to draw a more fine-grained picture of the factors influencing this selection process. This kind of research design furthermore allow to disentangle what specific factors make messages newsworthy. Because news values mostly occur together, it can be challenging for researchers to isolate their relative influence (Donsbach and Rentsch, 2011). An experimental design can thus provide particularly interesting insights into the selection of news.

3.2 Expectations

News making involves a number of actors, starting with the source of the news. The information is conveyed to the journalist and then in many newsrooms to the editor, who decides whether a story is run and how prominently it will be placed. However, despite the involvement of other actors, the role of the individual journalist is still key (McManus, 1994). She or he is the initial gatekeeper who decides whether a story is pitched to the editor in the first place. Studies show that most stories do not even make it through this initial news gate (Berkowitz and Adams, 1990; Gant and Dimmick, 2000). Because journalists are inundated with messages on a daily basis, they have to make a selection.

As explained in section 1.3, whether a message is selected for reporting depends on three elements: the sender, the message and the receiver. Figure 3.1 shows which aspects of these elements are relevant. First, the sender of the message is either a party or a politician. The status of the party or politician, for instance whether they are in power or not, will affect whether their message is selected. Second, the content of the message that reaches the journalist is another key part in the selection. Is the information unexpected? Both the sender and the message are manipulated in the experimental study based on an extensive body of research on news values.

The theory of news values or news factors (O’Neill and Harcup, 2009) is one of the most influential concepts explaining what features make an event worth reporting (Donsbach, 2004). Although Galtung and Ruge (1965) were the first to apply the theory to the reporting of news, it was Walter Lippmann (1922) who introduced the idea of news values to the field of journalism study almost a century ago. News values refer to common views, particularly among journalists, about what is believed to be intrinsically relevant and interesting for the public. As Shoemaker and Reese (1991, p. 90) state: “news values provide yardsticks of newsworthiness and constitute an audience-oriented routine.” This means that news values concern collective routines and criteria grounded in an organizational context, which determine the news production (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Tuchman, 2003).

Although studies on news values have improved our insights into why and how certain events get reported, the approach has certain drawbacks for studying the selection mo-

ment. For example, news value studies are mainly based on content analyses. By studying characteristics of news stories, scholars can show that the presence of certain news values increases the prominence of those stories (e.g. Schulz, 1982) or determines which news values make it into the final news product (Zhong and Newhagen, 2009). Related to the steps defined in the Politics-Media Wheel (see Figure 1.1), these findings might thus be informative about the aspects journalists choose to emphasize when producing a story and the eventual news product. However, these studies tell us less about why these stories were selected in the first place (O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). Scholars have tried to overcome this limitation by so-called input–output analyses (White, 1950; Buckalew, 1969; Gant and Dimmick, 2000), meaning that the characteristics of real world events are compared with the reports about them. This implies that one can define and ideally create an exhaustive list of all events. Van Belle (2000), for instance, compared the coverage of natural disasters with official statistics on these type of events in his study of foreign news coverage. This assumption is, however, rarely met in the political arena, where it is difficult to identify a true population of news stories (Staab, 1990). This “unobserved population problem” is particularly relevant when studying the communication of political actors (Groeling, 2013). Should a comment or statement from the Prime Minister to a journalist be considered an event? Or does it only become one when other people react to it? Even when one focuses on official party communication, it remains unclear what the role is of other forms of communication and informal contacts between journalists and politicians in determining the news agenda (Hopmann et al., 2012). The factorial survey experiment (for an elaborate description see section 2.1) allows to overcome some of these shortcomings. First, by applying an experiment, the study can zoom in on the selection process taking place before the story is produced. Second, the experimental setting gives the researcher maximal control over the variables and the setting. As a consequence, perfect comparability between the events whose effects are measured is assured.

News values are thus “rational means to efficiency” McManus (1994, p. 85) that provide journalists under pressure with guiding selection criteria. The theory has however also been criticized as limited (e.g. Donsbach, 2004; Staab, 1990). Although it is often surprising how journalists agree in their evaluation of what should become news (e.g. Bennett, 1996), scholars have emphasized that the individual journalists and the broader context within which they operate matters. In a “psychology of news decisions” Donsbach (2004) for instance argues that journalists are largely influenced by their peers in their work. Others focus on the influence of the news organization and emphasize that news is not the same across news organizations. Whether a news item is produced for a print outlet or a broadcaster for instance matters, for both production and selection (Abbott and Brassfield, 1989). One of the most important models of influences on newsmaking was brought forward by Shoemaker and Reese in 1991 in their hierarchy of influences. Because the model has been introduced in detail before (see subsection 1.2.2), it suffices

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to emphasize here again that there are a number of factors that influence the work of journalists next to the news values. Therefore, next to the sender and message, influences of the receiver of the message are investigated. Influences of the sender, the message and the receiver on the selection of political news are discussed in turn in the following section.

3.2.1 Politician and party influences

Parties and politicians regularly send out party communication and the status of the actor who sends such a message is one of the most important factors influencing whether journalists select a message for reporting. This news value labeled as ‘elite status’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1982) or ‘power elite’ (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001). Although most studies focus on individual politicians, this status can also be attributed to a party. Like politicians who can hold more or less influential political positions, parties can be in more or less powerful positions. Hypotheses on both are formulated here.

Politician The political standing or power position of a politician is one of the most tested effects on presence in political news and has been found to hold across countries and media outlets (Vos, 2014). High political standing translates into presence in the media, as journalists follow the “trail of power” (Bennett, 1996; Gans, 1979). Many studies have focused on the advantage of the prime minister over other political actors in terms of quantity and favorability of the media coverage (Hopmann et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld and Sheaffer, 2006). On a lower level in the political hierarchy, there is evidence that parliamentary party leaders are covered more often than ordinary MPs (Tresch, 2009). Although content analyses can tell us how much coverage an actor gets, the position of the actor might be confounded with other news values. For instance, cabinet members can announce measures with a direct impact on the public more often than the average MP. If higher political power indeed means an actor is more attractive to the media, the mechanism should hold when we check for all other aspects of the message. Thus, messages from the parliamentary party leader should have a higher chance of getting selected than a message coming from an ordinary MP.

H3.1: A message citing the parliamentary party leader is more likely selected than one citing an ordinary MP.

Political party A comparable mechanism is expected to hold for political parties. Across countries and outlets, government parties have been found to receive more media attention than opposition parties. Scholars refer to political impact as the key explanation: government parties determine policy making, whereas opposition parties are mostly restricted to the role of criticizing government (Hopmann et al., 2012). Government parties have more political power than those in opposition and decisions they make are often more relevant and consequential. This difference will also matter for the selection

of news. Journalists want to select only those messages for reporting that are relevant and important for a broader public.

H3.2: A message from a party in government is more likely selected than one from an opposition party.

The effects of the political party will however not be the same in the Netherlands and Switzerland. As elaborated before in this chapter (see also Table 2.2), only in the Dutch case are there important differences in terms of the political power between the major parties. In Switzerland power is distributed fairly evenly across parties. Consequentially, the difference between parties represented in government and those in opposition is expected to only apply in the Dutch case. In that sense, the two countries provide a robustness check (see also below on effects of the receiver, subsection 3.2.3).

3.2.2 Party press release influences

The content of the party press release is expected to matter too for selection by journalists. It is the content of a report after all that they will then report on and base the news report on. Four news values that are most common and relevant in political coverage are selected and tested in the present study; relevance, conflict, unexpectedness and magnitude.

Political relevance Relevance is one of the most important news values. In the limited space available to them, journalists want to publish reports that are relevant. Therefore, they are expected to choose reports on issues they deem politically relevant at that moment. Indeed, Keppinger, Brosius and Staab (1991) show that what a journalist thinks of an issue influences how much importance a journalist ascribes to a story. Consequentially, perceiving an issue of a message as politically relevant is a precondition for reporting and is therefore listed as the first of a number of news values.

H3.3: The more politically relevant a journalist perceives the issue of a message, the more likely s/he selects that message.

Conflict There are various political instruments that allow individual members of parliament to criticize the government (Wiberg, 1994). Generally, voicing criticism is one of the main functions in a parliamentary democracy, especially for opposition parties. Besides playing an important role in the political arena, there is also strong evidence that voicing criticism and attributing responsibility for certain outcomes to specific actors plays an important role in news selection. Conflict has been found to be one of the most important news values when it comes to journalists' selection of news content (Eilders, 2002; Vliegthart et al., 2011; Groeling, 2010). Analyses show that conflict content is often identified in news, and political news in particular. It is one of the most widely

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used frames in political coverage in the United States (Neuman et al., 1992) and Europe (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). In the present study, we want to investigate how actor-related negativity (Lengauer et al., 2012), in the form of criticism being directed at the government, affects news selection by journalists. It is expected that a message containing criticism of government has a higher chance of getting selected than a message not containing criticism.

H3.4: A message containing criticism of the government has a higher chance of getting selected than a message not containing criticism.

Unexpectedness Events that are rare and do not fit with their view of the world are more likely to trigger the interest of journalists and to be selected for coverage (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). Politics is often perceived as something predictable, with parties usually communicating and siding with the already known. When something out of the ordinary happens we can expect journalists to report on it. This relates to the audience-oriented dimension of news values: the unexpected is likely to trigger the attention of the public. In the present study, we examine the surprise element of the issue a party communicates on as one possible operationalization of the news value of unexpectedness that is particularly relevant in a political context.

In recent years, the theory of issue ownership has been used to explain parties’ reaction to news coverage (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Thesen, 2012) and the amount of coverage parties obtain (Petrocik et al., 2003), which in turn affects voters and their voting choices (Walgrave et al., 2009). In sum, parties prefer to focus the political debate on their core issue. However, from a journalistic perspective, issue-ownership might have the opposite effect. Parties that communicate on the issue they own might be considered less newsworthy because people mostly already know this position. Therefore, it is expected that if a party communicates on an “unexpected” (not owned) issue the message has a higher chance of getting selected than if the party communicates on one of its core (owned) issues.

H3.5: If a party communicates on an unexpected (not owned) issue the message is more likely selected than if the party communicates on one of its core (owned) issues.

Magnitude As a final news value, I also test whether there are differences in the importance journalists attribute to specific political instruments based on their “magnitude” or potential impact (Harcup and O’Neill, 2001, p. 279). Political parties have various legislative and non-legislative parliamentary instruments that they can use to influence the political agenda and ultimately the decision-making process (Green-Pedersen, 2010; Russo and Wiberg, 2010). To my knowledge, no study has compared the newsworthiness or amount of news coverage of various political instruments. Parliamentary questions are a relatively easy, though not always very successful, tool for politicians to attract media

attention (Kepplinger, 2002). In many countries, such as the Netherlands (Van Aelst and Vliegenthart, 2014), the number of questions asked in parliaments and initiatives taken by members of parliament has increased rapidly over the past years. Only about one-fifth of parliamentary questions was covered in the newspapers and, if they were covered, the topic was mostly already at stake in the media (Van Santen et al., 2015). To study selection mechanisms, asking a parliamentary question is contrasted with submitting a bill, which requires both more time and commitment from the politician(s) or party submitting it (Schiller, 1995). These parliamentary actions are expected to affect selection by journalists differently:

H3.6: A message announcing a bill is more likely selected than a message announcing a parliamentary question.

Table 3.1: Overview of hypothesized effects on the selection by journalists

<p>Sender effects</p> <p><i>H3.1:</i> A message citing the parliamentary party leader is more likely selected than one citing an ordinary MP.</p> <p><i>H 3.2:</i> A message from a party in government is more likely selected than one from an opposition party [Netherlands only].</p> <p>Message effects</p> <p><i>H3.3:</i> The more politically relevant a journalist perceives the issue of a message, the more likely s/he selects that message.</p> <p><i>H 3.4:</i> A message containing criticism of the government has a higher chance of getting selected than a message not containing criticism.</p> <p><i>H 3.5:</i> If a party communicates on an unexpected (not owned) issue the message is more likely selected than if the party communicates on one of its core (owned) issues.</p> <p><i>H 3.6:</i> A message announcing a bill is more likely selected than a message announcing a parliamentary question.</p> <p>Receiver effects</p> <p><i>H 3.7:</i> The closer the political party is to a journalists' own political position, the more likely a message is selected.</p> <p><i>H3.8:</i> More senior journalists are less likely to select a message for reporting than their junior colleagues.</p> <p><i>H3.9:</i> Broadcast journalists are less likely to select a message for reporting than their colleagues from print outlets.</p> <p>Interaction effects</p> <p><i>H 3.10:</i> A message from coalition actors containing criticism of the government is more likely to be selected than one from opposition MPs [Netherlands only].</p>

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3.2.3 Journalist and outlet influences

Three levels of influence of the receiver are investigated that were introduced in the first chapter of the book (see subsection 1.2.2). First, although different actors in a news organization are involved in selecting news, there is no doubt that the individual journalist plays an important role in this process (Reich, 2009). While producing content is a conscious process for journalists, selecting messages is based much more on “a feeling” (McManus, 1994, p. 111). This makes it particularly relevant to know whether and how the background of the journalists affects selection. Individual-level studies like the present one are best suited to investigate causal mechanisms between journalists’ background and their selection (Donsbach and Rentsch, 2011, p. 165). The media organization within which journalists are embedded constitutes the second level. It also allows comparison between print and broadcast outlets. On the most aggregate level lies the country, which allows studying whether and how a country’s political system affects selection.

Journalists’ political distance from the party News reporting is often criticized by partisans for its perceived slant. This “hostile media effect” is documented across contexts (Gunther and Liebhart, 2006). One of the explanations these critics bring forward is that the journalists’ background has a profound impact on their reporting. Journalists leaning to the left or right supposedly cover “their” parties differently making them active political players Patterson (2008). Not surprisingly, the influence of individual-level characteristics of the journalist on the news has been subject of scholarly debate (Shoemaker et al., 2001; D’Alessio and Allen, 2000).

Ties between media outlets and political parties were considered normal until only a few decades ago. Nowadays, however, non-partisan reporting is a key expectation in Swiss and Dutch media. Studies confirm that coverage in these two and many other Western European countries shows no clear bias for any political side (e.g. Tresch, 2009; Eilders, 2002; Kriesi et al., 2006). These studies are mostly based on content analyses of media outlets. Findings of studies that zoom in on the individual journalist and connect their reporting with their background come to different conclusions. Some find no evidence that journalists’ political orientation matters (e.g. Patterson and Donsbach, 1996), while others find that journalists’ opinion on an issue does affect their reporting (e.g. Kepplinger et al., 1991, p. 275). One possible explanation could be that scholars do not agree on how to measure political bias (Entman, 2007). This study thus takes a more direct approach and investigates whether journalists prefer messages from parties that are closer to their own political standing. The influence of a journalist’s political orientation might be more pronounced in the (unconscious) selection moment than in reporting, because they perceive those messages as more credible which affects their selection decision. Indeed, some scholars find that if journalists perceive sources of press releases to be more similar to them, they evaluate the report differently (Kopenhaver,

1985, p. 41). The expectation is thus that journalists are more likely to select a message from a party that is closer to their own political position than one that is further away.

H3.7: The closer the political party is to a journalists' own political position, the more likely a message is selected.

Journalistic experience A large part of those active in journalism do not receive formal training, making professional socialization an important aspect for understanding how news is selected. Journalists learn the rules of the game on the job during newsroom meetings when potential stories are discussed (Gravengaard and Rimestad, 2011). Their experience on the job will influence whether they select messages for reporting, particularly in the political arena. Firstly, journalists will want to make sure not to miss a story that others have. More junior journalists will therefore be more prone to react to party communication than their senior colleagues. Secondly, personal contacts between journalists and politicians are a key aspect to gain access to information (Davis, 2007). Less experienced journalists will not have had time to directly establish a link with potential sources of information and be more dependent on official party communication. Therefore, a systematic difference between junior and more senior reporters is expected.

H3.8: More senior journalists are less likely to select a message for reporting than their junior colleagues.

Media outlet Print media outlets follow a different logic than broadcasters. Although they use similar news values to evaluate messages that are presented to them, they operate under different constraints (e.g. Abbott and Brassfield, 1989). The type of media technology is one of the three dimensions that shape the media logic, next to the degree of professionalism and commercialism (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014, p. 17). Possibilities for sound and visuals are crucial in broadcasting, while they are less important in print for instance. As such, “media technology is never the only message, but it is always an important part of the message” (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014, p. 18) and is therefore likely to affect selection too. Journalists have more flexibility and more room to cover a story in newspapers; from a brief note of five lines to multiple stories on one single issues covering several pages. News broadcasts, on the other hand, have a more constraint format and contain fewer items than an average newspaper. This leads us to expect that overall, broadcast journalists who work for TV and radio media are less likely to select a party message for reporting than those working at print outlets. The selection criteria the two groups apply are, however, expected to be similar (Kepplinger et al., 1991, p. 283).

H3.9: Broadcast journalists are less likely to select a message for reporting than their colleagues from print outlets.

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The journalistic cultures in Switzerland and the Netherlands are very similar (for an overview see chapter section 2.2). Consequently, only minimal differences are expected between how journalists in Switzerland and the Netherlands select political party messages. In fact, news values, such as the ones tested in this study, are shared by journalists in these two countries and beyond. Because no differences are expected, no hypotheses are formulated. Only the *interpretation* of certain news values is likely to differ between the countries. The power of the political party (*H 3.2*) will only have an effect in the Netherlands where parties have differing powers depending on their coalition status. In Switzerland however, differences in political power are not as pronounced between the major parties. Therefore, the applicability of certain news values depends on the political system and they can get a different meaning depending on the context.

3.2.4 Interaction effects

Coalition membership and conflict Criticizing the government is one of the central functions in politics. However, not for all parties. While it is of course normal for an opposition party to criticize the government, such criticism is seldom voiced by governing parties themselves. As elaborated above, surprise and unexpectedness is one an important news value for journalists (see subsection 3.2.2). This means that from some actors, criticism might be perceived as business as usual by journalists. It is one of the central functions of opposition parties to criticize government. Members of opposition parties can be expected to constantly voice criticism towards the government, as it is their goal to show to voters how incompetent government is handling specific issues (Thesen, 2011). Yet when a government party suddenly criticizes the actions of its government, this might come as a surprise to journalists. A government MP criticizing government potentially compromises the stability of the whole government coalition.

Consequentially, the effect of voicing government criticism is conditional on who the actor is. Whether this indeed matters for journalistic selection of party press releases can be tested by including an interaction effect between the senders' party and the respective variable.

H 3.10: A message from coalition actors containing criticism of the government is more likely to be selected than one from opposition MPs.

Because in Switzerland coalitions shift constantly, it is normal for parties, also those in government, to criticize each other. Therefore, the effect is only expected to be present in the Dutch case.

3.3 Methods

In an online survey, political journalists received several short fictional, though realistically formulated, press releases from political parties. Within those press releases, variables concerning the sender and message had been manipulated. After evaluating the press releases, respondents answered questions about their background and attitudes. These are presented separately in this section, followed by information on data collection, on respondents, and on how the analysis was conducted.

3.3.1 Experimental design

Fictional press releases were used as experimental stimuli to investigate how journalists select political messages for reporting. Table 3.3 gives an overview of the variables manipulated in the press releases while Figure 3.2 shows an example of such a press release.

The fictional press release started with a mention of the party sending out the press release and an opening statement on the issue. To test for the influence of the news value of powerful elites I used actual party names to keep the fictional press releases as realistic as possible. In addition to the three parties with the most seats in the lower house of parliament, the biggest party with a clear profile on environmental issues was chosen (for an overview of Swiss and Dutch political parties see Table 2.2). From a theoretical point of view, this selection ensures that the politically most relevant parties are included in the study. Methodologically, this choice results in the selection of parties from similar party families in both countries (see Table 3.2). This is central to ensure comparability in the comparative research design between the two countries as elaborated in more detail in the methodological section (see section 2.2).

Table 3.2: Overview of the tested issues with corresponding issue owners and journalists' self-reported political relevance of issues per country

Issue	Issue owner	Switzerland		Netherlands	
		Party	Relevance	Party	Relevance
Asylum seekers	Populist right	SVP	5.7 (1.22)	PVV	5.1 (1.40)
Taxation SMEs	Liberal	FDP	3.7 (1.10)	VVD	4.3 (1.38)
Unemployment	Socialist	SP	3.1 (1.43)	PvdA	6.4 (0.82)
Sustainable energy	Greens	GPS	5.3 (1.24)	GroenLinks	3.8 (1.48)

Note. N Switzerland 84, Netherlands 67. Mean, SD in parentheses. Relevance is operationalized as momentary political relevance, 7-point scale. SMEs = small and middle sized enterprises.

In the Netherlands, the Liberals (“VVD”) and the Socialists (“PvdA”) formed the government at the time of data collection, The Greens (“GroenLinks”) and the Populist Right (“PVV”) were two of the opposition parties. In Switzerland, the Liberals (“FDP”), Socialists (“SP”), and the Populist Right (“SVP”) were part of government. So were the

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Christian Democrats (“CVP”), who we had not included in the messages. In Switzerland, the Green party (“Grüne”) did not have a minister in the government (“Bundesrat”) at the time of the field work. To test for the influence of power status of the political actor, the political leader was compared with an ordinary MP. For Switzerland, the political party leader (“Parteipräsident”) is considered the political leader, whereas in the Netherlands, it is the leader of the parliamentary party group (“fractievoorzitter”). In both countries, these actors are members of parliament. Only the positions were described in the press releases; no names were used.

Table 3.3: Overview of experimentally manipulated variables in party press release

News value	Variable(s)	Values
Power status	Party	Government – Opposition
	Actor position in party	Political leader – Ordinary MP
Conflict	Criticism of government	Present – Not present
Unexpectedness	Issue	Not owned – Owned
Magnitude	Political action	Bill – Parliamentary question

Criticism was included in the quote from the principal actor of the press release. Where no criticism was present, the sentence containing criticism was omitted to provide a neutral reference category. To make the press releases as realistic as possible we focus on criticism of the government, as responsibility for policy outcomes can mostly only be attributed to the politicians in charge. It is highly unlikely that a government party would for example criticize the opposition for a specific (negative) outcome in their country (Thesen, 2012). To test for the effect of issue ownership on news selection, I included one issue that is “owned” per party (see Table 3.2 for an overview). This selection was based on recent voter surveys in both countries (Kleinnijenhuis and Walter, 2014; Lachat, 2014). For an additional test of whether the hypothesized party issue combination applied, I also asked journalists to indicate for each issue-party-combination how strong the link was on a 7-point scale. Scores for the hypothesized combinations (e.g. social democrats and unemployment) were significantly higher than those for other combinations (e.g. social democrats and migration). In the analyses, I include this variable as a dummy indicating presence of issue ownership or not. To test whether the news value of magnitude influences selection, half of the party press releases included the announcement of a parliamentary question. To ensure functional equivalence between the countries, this was contrasted with the most consequential political action an individual MP can take; an interpellation (“Motion”) in Switzerland and a private member bill (“initiatiefvoorstel”) in the Netherlands. In the press releases, only the form of action but not the description was changed.

Of the 128 possible combinations of experimental stimuli, a half fraction factorial sample was made (for a detailed account of the method see section 2.1). The 64 press

Figure 3.2: Example of a fictional party press release shown to journalists (translated)

The Liberal Party wants to reduce taxation of small and middle sized enterprises. Today, the party leader of the Liberals will submit a question to government to ask whether innovative entrepreneurship can be supported by tax reductions. "The government completely abandoned the SMEs. These companies are the backbone of our economy and therefore need to be supported during these hard times", the party leader motivates the demand.

releases that resulted from this sample were randomly distributed into 10 decks. Each respondent was presented with only one of these decks, consisting of 6 or 7 press releases presented in randomized order. After each press release, political journalists rated on a 7-point slider scale whether they would consider the press release as the basis for a news item or not.² The formulation of the dependent variable relates to the moment of journalistic selection in the Politics-Media Wheel introduced in the introductory chapter of this book (see subsection 1.2.1). It taps into the first moment when a journalist learns about a new issue and has to decide, whether a message should be discarded or whether it merits further attention and investigation. This personal judgment of the press release forms the dependent variable of this study. Sample questionnaires in German (Switzerland) and Dutch (Netherlands) can be found in Appendix B. Overall, respondents evaluated the press releases as fairly realistic on a 7-point scale with 3.48 ($SD = 1.59$) and 4.13 ($SD = 1.31$) in Switzerland and the Netherlands respectively. Each of these 64 press releases was judged by more than 7 different journalists on average to isolate effects of the sender on selection.³

3.3.2 Journalist and outlet variables

The news value of relevance was operationalized as a journalists' perceived political relevance of the issue of the press release. After the experimental part, respondents were asked to indicate for a number of issues in line with those of the experimentally manipulated party press releases, how politically important they thought those were at the moment. Although when drawing up the survey it had been ensured that no issues were included that were judged systematically more relevant by respondents (e.g., crime), there was variation both between issues and respondents as Table 3.2 shows.

To gauge the influence receiver effects, the background of the journalist and the media outlet, additional information was gathered. These questions were also part of the survey

² The question wording in the Swiss case was as follows: "Würden Sie auf Basis dieser Medienmitteilungen einen Bericht verfassen?" and in the Dutch case "Zou u op basis van dit persbericht een nieuwsbericht maken?"

³ In the Netherlands, press releases were evaluated by between 3 and 9 different journalists ($M = 6.70$ journalists). In Switzerland those were 5 to 11 journalists ($M = 8.32$ journalists).

3.3. Methods

following the experiment and are self-reported. The effects of a journalists' political orientation on selection was studied by including the *distance* between the journalists own political orientation and the standing of the party as an absolute measure. Journalists indicated their political orientation on a left-right scale ranging from 0 to 10. Party scores on the same scale were obtained from the most recent Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2012). This difference was estimated for each press release evaluated by a journalist. Finally, information on journalistic experience and gender, the control variables, was included.

3.3.3 Data and respondents

In most newsrooms in Switzerland and the Netherlands, both in broadcasting and print media, there are journalists specialized in reporting on national political developments. This is the population of journalists that was targeted for this study. Journalists who report on politics regularly also get granted access to parliamentary buildings. While this list of journalists with an access pass is publicly available in Switzerland, the equivalent Dutch list had to be compiled by searching websites of media companies (broadcasters), checking actual political coverage (mainly print) and calling newsrooms. To ensure that, for both countries, only journalists who regularly covered politics were included, respondents were asked to indicate how many of the previous 10 items that they had produced contained a national politician or party once the survey was administered. Data collection took place in June and July 2013 in both countries simultaneously. The survey took respondents approximately 12 minutes to complete. The relevant sections below provide a more detailed account of the contacted population, the data collection and the resulting respondents for each of the countries separately.

Switzerland Contact information of political journalists had been obtained from publicly available official lists of journalists who have access to parliamentary buildings. These were either journalists who had an accreditation (“Akkreditierung”) because at least 60% of their full-time function is devoted to political reporting, or journalists who had an access pass (“Zutrittsberechtigung”) because, for instance, they only report on politics for a part of their time. For the 241 journalists working for German speaking media, e-mail addresses were obtained by searching online or contacting the respective newsrooms. The focus of this study of German speaking journalists was discussed in detail in section 2.2 on the country selection.

Journalists were first contacted via a personalized e-mail sent from the researcher's account that contained a link to the survey at the end of May 2013. Some responded that they did not work as a journalist and were excluded.⁴ Besides e-mail (beginning

⁴ These include employees of media organizations for example working camera or sound or photographers for media outlets and press agencies.

of June), journalists were reminded personally inside the parliamentary buildings and in the journalists' centre close to parliament (June 2013). A few respondents filled in the survey on a tablet, most promised to still fill it in on their own computer.

A total of 130 journalists accessed the survey, which is approximately 55% of all journalists contacted. Only journalists who reported that at least three of their ten latest news items contained a national politician or party were included for analyses, with the average being 8.1 articles. Six journalists were excluded based on this criterion. Because some respondents did not complete the survey, results are based on the answers of a total of 84 Swiss political journalists (for an overview see Table 3.4). Most of them had an access pass to parliament (92%) and 26% ($n = 22$) were female, which is equal to the contacted population (24%). The average age (43 years, $SD = 10.97$) matches that of other studies of the journalist population in Switzerland which reported 45 years for print journalists and 43 years for others (Bonfadelli et al., 2012). The number of years of experience in journalism is comparable to that of political journalists in other Western European countries (Van Dalen, 2012a) with 16 years ($SD = 8.78$). On average, Swiss political journalists placed their political orientation at 5.22 ($SD = 1.79$) on an 11-point left-right scale.

Table 3.4: Overview of respondents (political journalists)

	Switzerland		Netherlands	
	n	percent	n	percent
Access pass to parliament buildings	77	92	41	61
Female	22	26	11	16
Age (average)	43 years		46 years	
Journalistic experience (average)	16 years		20 years	
<i>Media outlets</i>				
Print daily	31	37	20	30
Print weekly	20	24	9	13
Broadcaster	23	27	32	47
Other ^a	10	12	6	9
Number of respondents	84		67	
Response rate	36.7		31.3	
Number of observations	533		429	

Note. Rounded percentages do not add to 100%.

^aMainly journalists working for news agencies.

Netherlands Obtaining lists of political journalists was more challenging in the Netherlands. No official lists exist and those from other researchers were outdated. By searching on the websites of broadcasters and checking the authors of political newspaper coverage as well as newsrooms (phone), with the help of two student assistants I compiled a list of political journalists. This list was then checked by the head of the association of political journalists (“Parlementaire Pers Vereniging”) for accuracy.

3.4. Results

208 Dutch political journalists were contacted via personalized e-mails sent from the researcher's e-mail address at the end of May 2013. Those who had not participated were reminded with another e-mail 10 days later. In a last attempt to increase response, a number of journalists were also contacted by phone. In the end, a total of 102 Dutch journalists accessed the survey, which is just over 45% of all journalists contacted. More than 85% of those completed the experimental part. Only journalists who reported that at least three of their ten latest news items contained a national politician or party were included for analyses, with the average being 7.4 articles. Six journalists were excluded based on this criterion.

This resulted in a response of 67 Dutch political journalists who had completed the whole survey (for an overview see Table 3.4). Almost two thirds of respondents had an access pass to parliament (61%). Only 16% ($n = 11$) of the respondents were female, which is lower than the population contacted (26%). The average age of respondents (46 years, $SD = 9.45$) matches that of other studies of the journalist population in the Netherlands at 44 years (Pleijter et al., 2012). The number of years of experience in journalism is comparable to that of political journalists in other Western European countries (Van Dalen, 2012a) with 20 years ($SD = 8.94$). On average, journalists put their political orientation at 5.88 ($SD = 1.35$) on an 11-point left-right scale.

Analyses As mentioned, each journalist evaluated 6 or 7 party press releases and each evaluation is treated as one case. The results reported below are based on an analysis of 962 different cases from 151 respondents (see Table 3.4). Multilevel models were used with MLE for estimation. To illustrate differences between countries and to provide the reader with a detailed account of the robustness of the findings, separate models are reported for each of the countries. Additionally, marginal effects are reported to allow for more accessible interpretation of the effects of specific variables on the selection of messages by political journalists. For a more elaborate account of the analysis strategies with data from factorial survey experiments, see the section on data analysis in section 2.1.

3.4 Results

Including several news values presents respondents with a task in line with their daily work and allows to gauge the relative influence of these factors often confounded in reality. I will discuss the influence of the sender, message and receiver variables in turn.

Overall, almost half of the times when a journalist received a press release, the press release was not likely to lead to reporting. In fact, 52% of all judgments receive a score of 3 or lower on the 7-point scale.⁵ This is in line with findings from other gate keeping

⁵ Lower values mean that the press release are not likely to lead to coverage, high values mean that

studies; most information is dismissed when it first reaches journalists. Interestingly however, there are significant differences between the two countries ($t(df)=-7.52(960)$, $p<.001$). On average, Dutch journalists were more likely to say that they would select a press release for reporting ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.79$) than their Swiss colleagues ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.75$).⁶ What does this mean for their selection mechanisms? Are similar aspects important in their selection of party press releases? The next section will discuss these effects based on results from linear hierarchical regression models (see Table 3.5) and subsequent calculations of marginal effects.

3.4.1 Politician and party influences

More powerful parties and politicians have more media access because political power is one of the most important news values in political reporting. First, with regards to the political actor. I expect that the higher the status of a politician cited, the more likely this press release is selected (*H 3.1*). However, results of the regression models are not in line with this expectation and this hypothesis needs to be rejected. Journalists make no significant difference between press releases citing a political party leader or an ordinary MP in party press releases. This is surprising because previous studies, mostly based on content analyses, have repeatedly shown that the political position of an actor matters for getting in the news. As I will discuss later in this chapter in section 3.5, this diverging finding is probably due to the focus on the very first selection moment of this study opposed to the news product itself.

Next to the politician cited in the report, journalists are expected to distinguish between messages coming from government and opposition parties (*H 3.2*). However, this effect depends on the political power of parties within a political system as expected. Results are indeed different for the two countries as Table 3.5 shows. In the Dutch case, messages coming from government parties have a significantly higher chance to be selected than those from opposition parties. A press release from a government party receives a much higher score, with 4.53 on the 7-point scale compared with an opposition party which only scores at 3.52 (marginal effects). Thus, by simply switching the name of the party from an opposition to a government party in the press release and maintaining the remainder of the content of the press release, chances of selection are higher. In contrast, journalists in Switzerland do not show “preferences” for specific parties. As mentioned, this is because being in government does not automatically come with more influence in the policymaking process. Also, when models are run that include the individual parties as dummy variables (not in tables), I find no difference. Swiss journalists apparently attribute more importance

journalists are likely to follow up on the press release.

⁶ Linear hierarchical regression models including all variables reported in Table 3.5 and an additional dummy variable for the country support the conclusion that Dutch journalists are more likely to select press releases for reporting than Swiss ones ($b = .97$, $p < .001$, results not in tables).

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to other aspects of the message. This hypothesis is thus supported by the findings.

Overall with regards to the news value of political power, the findings show that there is evidence that political power translates into better media access for parties, but not for the politicians representing the parties; at least in the first selection moment in the broader news making process studied here.

3.4.2 Party press release influences

Concerning the effects of the content of a party press release, the influence of a number of news values is studied. First, the relevance of a message can be seen as a precondition for sparking a journalists' interest at the first selection moment (*H 3.3*). Results show that there is a significant positive effect and the hypothesis is supported in both countries (see Table 3.5). For illustration, we can compare how a journalist evaluates a news report covering an issue that a journalist deems very politically relevant and one the journalist does not deem relevant at all. If we calculate the differences between the marginal effects, these are pronounced among both Swiss (0.66) and Dutch (1.03) political journalists.⁷ It shows that the relevance of an issue of a press release is key in the selection of political messages.

Conflict is another widely studied news value. In the experiment, I tested whether voicing criticism toward the government, an indication of political conflict, increases the chance of selection (*H 3.4*). In the results, there is no significant difference for messages that do or do not criticize the government and the hypothesis is rejected. Whether this effect might be conditional on who voices it will be discussed below. I also expected the issue communicated on by a party to matter. More specifically, a party taking a stance on an unexpected issue that it does not own increased chance of selection. Communicating on a new issue is surprising for journalists and sparks their interest (*H 3.5*), because usually, parties stick to specific issues they are known for and that speak to their voter base. In line with this expectation, this variable does have a considerable influence in both countries. Journalists are triggered by messages from parties that go beyond their usual topics. In the concluding section of this chapter (see section 4.5) I will discuss elaborately that communicating on new issues might be good for the parties to get into the media, but the strategy might not be fruitful if they want to win votes.

The last news value that was manipulated in the party press release is the magnitude of the action announced. Because journalists want to only report on the things that matter, they are expected to think that submitting a bill (Netherlands) or motion (Switzerland) is more newsworthy than asking a parliamentary question (*H 3.6*). The data show that there is a difference between the two political instruments. The press release announcing a potentially more consequential political action is more likely to get selected by journalists than a parliamentary question.

⁷ A press release on an issue perceived as highly politically relevant receives a score of 3.44 (CH) and 4.39 (NL), while one on an issue is scored at 2.78 and 3.36.

Table 3.5: Hierarchical regression model of sender, message and receiver effects

	Switzerland		Netherlands	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	3.41*** (0.60)	3.32*** (0.61)	3.07*** (0.62)	2.98*** (0.59)
<i>Sender effects</i>				
Political leader	0.03 (0.10)	0.04 (0.10)	-0.17 (0.14)	-0.17 (0.14)
Government party	0.02 (0.12)	-0.003 (0.12)	0.99*** (0.15)	1.08*** (0.21)
<i>Message effects^a</i>				
Relevance (1-7 scale)	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)
Conflict	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.14)	0.05 (0.21)
Unexpectedness	0.60*** (0.12)	0.64*** (0.12)	0.36* (0.17)	0.36* (0.16)
Magnitude	0.30** (0.10)	0.30** (0.10)	0.30** (0.10)	0.31** (0.10)
<i>Receiver effects</i>				
Political distance	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Experience in years	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.002 (0.01)	0.002 (0.01)
Gender	-0.40 (0.33)	-0.42 (0.33)	-0.05 (0.33)	-0.04 (0.33)
Media outlet [reference print (daily)]				
- Print (weekly)	-0.56 (0.37)	-0.55 (0.37)	-0.56 (0.37)	-0.55 (0.37)
- Broadcast	-0.49 (0.36)	-0.489 (0.36)	-0.49 (0.36)	-0.489 (0.36)
- Other	-0.71 (0.48)	-0.71 (0.48)	-0.71 (0.48)	-0.71 (0.48)
<i>Interaction effects</i>				
Government sender * conflict		0.21 (0.26)		0.21 (0.26)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Journalist level	1.19	1.19	.79	.78
Press release level	1.16	1.16	1.45	1.45

Note. N Switzerland 533, Netherlands 429. Answer to question "Would you create a news report based on this press release?" Model fit statistics are reported in Appendix B.

^a For operationalization of message effects see subsection 3.3.1.

#p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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3.4.3 Journalist and outlet influences

Finally, next to the content of the sender and message, the receiver is expected to influence the selection of messages for reporting. The background of journalists possibly influences how likely they select a message and what kind of messages they prefer. Results show that the background of a journalist helps improve models; the unexplained variance does decrease if journalists' characteristics are added (see models in Appendix B) and the model improves significantly. However, only some of the tested variables are equally important.

On the individual journalist's (micro) level, the effects of three variables were tested: the first one refers to the journalists' political orientation. There is a significant difference between the political orientation of Swiss and Dutch political journalists as mentioned earlier (see subsection 3.3.3). But are journalists generally more likely to select messages from parties closer to their own political standing than those further away (*H 3.7*)? Results show there is no consistent significant effect. Only in Switzerland there is an effect in the expected direction: the bigger the distance between a journalists' own political orientation and that of a party, the less likely the message is selected for reporting. Although in the same direction, the effect is not significant for Dutch journalists.⁸ There is thus only partial support for an influence of a journalists' political orientation on news selection.

Another variable at the level of the individual journalist that was expected to influence journalists in their selection is experience. Journalists who have been working longer might be less likely to select a press release for reporting (*H 3.8*). Effects are however not significant in either country. The effect is in the expected direction in Switzerland however, while in the Netherlands the effect is positive (see Table 3.5). The fact that journalists appointed to the prestigious political beat usually have 15 or more years of experience (see Table 3.4) could be an explanation for not finding any significant effects.

Moving from the individual to the organizational level, it was expected that, due to the difference in space available for reporting, broadcast journalists might differ from its colleagues from other media outlets (*H 3.9*). Results however show no systematic

⁸ Additional analyses point to an additional indirect effect of partisanship on news selection for Dutch journalists however. When their political orientation (instead of the political distance to the party) is interacted with the judged relevance of an issue, both the interaction effect ($b = .08, p = .020$) and the main effect of the journalists' political orientation ($b = -.50, p = .015$) are significant, while relevance is not anymore ($b = -.33, p = .135$) [results not in tables]. This means that for issues journalists do not deem relevant, there is an effect of their political orientation on selection via their judged issue importance. Additional analyses using marginal effects confirm this interpretation and show that the more journalists place themselves on the right side of the political spectrum, the less likely they are in general to select a message for reporting they do not consider politically relevant. These effects are significant for issues scoring three or lower on the 7-point scale with lower values indicating less political importance (marginal effect is $-.23$ ($p = .042$) for an issue scoring at three). Taken together, these findings show that the effect of a journalists' political orientation on news selection might manifest itself through a "preference" for parties closer to their own standing in some cases like Switzerland, and in others more indirectly through how relevant they perceive specific issues to be such as in the Dutch case particularly when it concerns issues that are not generally perceived as politically relevant and journalists have more leeway.

significant variation between journalists working for different types of outlets. Although when comparing journalists working for daily published print outlets with those working for weekly print media and broadcasters, the effects point in the expected direction in both countries; it is more likely that a press release gets selected for reporting by a journalist working for a daily appearing newspaper for example than by a radio or TV journalist. As pointed out, these differences are not significant and thus warrant additional investigation. Additional statistical tests only revealed a significant difference between all print journalists and the remaining journalists working for broadcasters or news agencies for example in Switzerland. They were more likely to select press releases for reporting than their colleague thus showing that hypothesis 3.9 might warrant further investigation.⁹

3.4.4 Interaction effects

Voicing criticism is an important part of politics, yet, the effect might be conditional on who voices it. Journalists could be accustomed to opposition parties criticizing government, as this happens frequently. If, however, politicians from government parties criticize actions of their own government, they might be more interested (*H3.10*). The interaction effect between the government and criticism dummies is, however, not significant in either country (see Table 3.5). Indeed, although journalists distinguish between press releases from government and opposition parties, whether they voice criticism in a press release is not as important. The hypothesis is not supported.

3.5 Discussion

Following the tradition of gatekeeping theory, this study investigated why some events are reported and others ignored and zoomed in on the first moment a journalist learns about a new issue. The findings show that news values associated with both the sender and the message affect the selection of journalists than their own background. Journalists generally agree on the selection criteria of political messages. This is in line with other research. Based on an extensive content analyses of bills and related news coverage combined with a survey with the corresponding journalists, Shoemaker and colleagues (2001) concluded that the messages were more important than the individual background characteristics of journalists.

Party, politician and message effects One of the most important effects relates to the issue of the report. For journalists, it is important that they deem the issue of a press

⁹ Paired-samples t-test ($t(df) = -2.66(531)$, $p = .008$) with a mean of 3.33 ($SD = 1.71$) for print journalists and 2.92 ($SD = 1.78$) for others for Swiss political journalists.

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release politically relevant at that time. Relevance is a key news value for journalists to decide, whether to further investigating a message. Yet, although there is a common understanding that “relevant” information should be published, there is variation between journalists in their judgment of the political relevance of specific issues (see Table 3.2). For this study, issues had been included that can broadly be classified as valence issues as much as possible and that did not intrinsically differ from each other as explained in the methods section of this chapter. The unemployment issue in the Dutch case with its exceptionally high mean score ($M = 6.41$ on a 7-point scale) shows that issues that are high on the societal and political agenda are deemed relevant by a large part of journalists, while for those lower on the societal agenda, differences are more pronounced.

The news value of unexpectedness also plays a key role in selection. This was tested using party issue ownership. Although studies have found that the media in general cite parties more often in the media on “their” issues than on others (Hayes, 2008; Walgrave and de Swert, 2007), in selection this works differently. A party communicating on a “not-owned” issue was more likely to be selected for reporting than if a party communicated on an issue it “owns”. For journalists, the unexpected is more newsworthy than the expected. If parties want to catch journalists’ attention, it might be good for them to turn to issues they are not (yet) known for. However, parties have to take into consideration how this affects their electorate. If an issue the party has built a reputation on is in the media, it can win votes (Norpoth and Buchanan, 1992). Content analyses furthermore show that MPs are covered more favorably on their owned issues than others (e.g. Hayes, 2008). This means that parties have to balance two diverging interests. Communicating on unexpected issues will catch the attention of journalists. Yet, it might also leave voters confused about the issues the party stands for, which can cost votes.

The news value of political power however did not have consistent effects. The political power of the sender profoundly influences news selection by political journalists. Press releases from parties in a powerful government position, which is the case in the Netherlands, are more likely to be selected for coverage, whereas the party does not matter in the Swiss case, where power is distributed more evenly across parties. This indicates that journalists take into account the political system to determine if a party communication is worthy of their attention. Indeed, parties in government in the Netherlands have a higher impact on actual policy making than opposition parties.

There was a similar effect when taking the potential power or magnitude of the political action into account. The announcement of a bill is more likely to be selected than a parliamentary question. A bill requires more investment from politicians than questioning a minister in office. Furthermore, a bill can become a law and have a real policy impact, whereas parliamentary questions can only try to signal certain aspects of governmental politics and seldom have tangible consequences for policymakers. In their comments on the survey, journalists in both countries emphasized that it mattered to

them, whether the political action had a chance of success. Only when they thought that a proposal actually had a majority in parliament they would report on it.¹⁰ Because this often depends on the momentary political context, the experimental study was not able to capture these differences through an interaction effect between the sender and the political action however (results not in tables).

Although many did have significant effects, not all news values turned out to be relevant for how newsworthy journalists perceived party messages. Selection was not affected by the formal position of the individual politician cited in a press release although the political power of the *party* did matter. As mentioned before, this contradicts findings from content analyses that show that the status of political actors is crucial to explaining why some people are more in the news than others (Sheafer, 2001). The probably most straightforward explanation for this finding is that while content analyses focuses on the news product resulting from the news making process, the present experimental study focused on the first selection moment. These are two distinct moments in the news-making process that I also distinguish in the Politics-Media Wheel (see subsection 1.2.1). It is not beside the point to expect different considerations to matter. In a reaction to the survey, journalists also repeatedly pointed out that they would not publish a report solely on the information provided in a press release. Indeed, once their interest is triggered they start to demand further information from sources, cross-check information, include reactions from other actors, etc. With regards to the press releases used in this experimental study, it might be that there is a ‘spillover effect’ from one politician to another (Hopmann et al., 2012). When a politician of low rank sends out a report to get into the media, journalists might end up contacting the senior colleagues for quotes. This interpretation is supported by evidence from some questions also included in the survey reported here. Journalists were asked for a number of incumbents how easy it was for them to place a new issue on the media agenda. Results show that political power is the most important explanatory variable; the more powerful a politician is, the easier they have access to the media.¹¹

Besides the superiority of powerful political actors in the news, content analyses have also shown that voicing criticism and conflict are among the most important characteristics of news. The findings of my study with journalists indicate that this news value might not be that essential when it comes to selection. Criticizing the government is probably too much business as usual for journalists, and doesn’t necessarily catch their

¹⁰ After they had evaluated several party press releases 25% of all journalists that had participated in the study left a comment ($M = 185$ characters, min./max. 44/244) to the following open question: “Would you like to comment on the press releases that you have just read? If not, you may leave this field empty.”

¹¹ Controlling for politicians’ political experience and gender, Dutch and Swiss ministers are judged to have significantly easier media access than all other types of politicians. They are followed by the political leaders of the parties, Swiss political party leaders and Dutch parliamentary party group leaders, and finally ordinary politicians.

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attention. Conflict might also be inherent to party politics, and not something journalists need to highlight in their coverage (see also Donsbach and Wenzel, 2002). More surprisingly, not even press releases coming from a government party criticizing government policy sparked journalists' interest. One of the reasons might be that, in a coalition government, criticism and conflict, also among coalition parties, is all too common. Internal critique might be more newsworthy in single-party governments. Potentially, also more direct personal attacks or a more extremely formulated statement containing harsh criticism might have a significant influence on selection. This is clearly a limitation of the experimental approach of this study. Our design contrasts one variable with a neutral one. Different operationalization of those values, for example contrasting criticism with praise, might have produced different results. The same might apply to the status difference of the political actors, as opting for a comparison of ordinary MPs with ministers would have more likely produced differences, which the comparison with party leaders did not. As with any new approach, only replications of our study using an experimental approach, but with different operationalizations, will be able to give a more grounded understanding of political news selection.

Journalist influences Studies on news values using content analyses tend to conclude that journalists have a shared logic and that there is not much variation between individual journalists. The findings indeed show that neither the journalists' background nor the organization they are working for plays a crucial role in the selection process. This is in line with other studies, for example by Shoemaker and colleagues (2001). A similar argument of shared news routines could be made for the lack of effects of the news organization a journalist is working for. Because their peers are among the most important judges of professionalism (Donsbach, 2004), they have similar selection mechanisms across outlets and even countries (Bennett, 1996). Political journalists across outlets select their stories based on a very similar logic, albeit there are small differences in the overall likelihood to be inspired by a party press release in the first place – depending on the logic of the media outlet they are working for.

Another source of influence on journalistic selection that is more specific to political reporting is the journalists' political orientation. Based on the findings, there is some indication that journalists are more likely to select messages originating from parties they are politically close to. In fact, there is a significant negative effect in Switzerland and a negative but not significant one in the Netherlands. This is remarkable considering that the studies were carried out in two countries with no partisan media. Effects might be accentuated in more polarized systems such as the United Kingdom or the United States. There, journalists more strongly identify with the political leaning of their outlet (Sigelman, 1973). This in turn may affect how they select (and report) political news. The findings here are in line with previous studies. In a comparative experimental study of the reporting of news, Patterson

and Donsbach (1996) find that journalists tend to select headlines and illustrations for reporting that are in line with their partisan leaning. This indicates that the journalists' political leaning might play a role in both the selection and reporting of political news. Whether this effect is cumulative should be investigated in future studies. Research shows that journalists sometimes select some reports simply to attack them (Baum and Groeling, 2008). Also, because of the central role of impartiality in reporting, particularly in non-partisan European media (e.g. Schudson, 2011), it is not clear how the slightly higher likelihood of selecting a message from a party close to the journalists' own political orientation would actually play out in the reporting of political news. Factorial experimental approaches such as the one used here might be particularly fruitful.

To sum up, this study demonstrates that not all news values are equally important for the selection of political news. The relevance of an issue and whether a party communicates on an unexpected issue are important factors and also the political power of the sender of a message matters as well as the political action announced matter. These are all aspects that cannot be interpreted independently of the political system. These results thus indicate that for journalists, the political situation is of central importance when they select messages. There is also some indication that their own political leaning is important, at least in the Swiss case. However, the media outlet they work for does not seem to play a role in the selection of political news.

Although crucial because most stories get killed during this first instance, the selection moment is of course only the starting point. The Politics-Media Wheel illustrates that there are more stages involved before a report will ultimately be published. Studies show that, although journalists might evaluate specific events in the same way, outlets emphasize different aspects of the same story in their reporting eventually (Kepplinger et al., 1991). Consequentially, not finding differences between media outlets in the selection does not mean that there are none in the reporting. Different journalists and media outlets might emphasize different aspects of a story. However, the results do show the criteria journalists apply when they decide what political messages they will report on and which they do not. They are useful shortcuts for journalists under constant time pressure to make decisions on what to report on and what not. Future studies should further investigate the role of the short-term political situation or structural differences between political systems in comparative designs to further study how political news comes about.

