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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 5

Linking the selection moments

The relationship between politics and the media is characterized by a complex interdependence; politicians use the media as an important source of information for their political work, and journalists need political actors to provide them with information on what is taking place in politics. Yet, both journalists and politicians have to be very selective in the information they ultimately react to. These mechanisms were investigated through a comparative experiment in two separate studies. The selection criteria journalists use to decide what merits their attention and what does not were discussed in chapter 3 and the selection criteria politicians use to decide what news reports they should react to in chapter 4. While these chapters thus unraveled the selection mechanisms separately, this chapter aims to discuss the similarities and differences found in the two studies. First, the focus is put on the actors, the journalists and politicians. Next, because the effect of a similar set of variables was tested in the parallel research design (see section 1.3), the effects of message content is compared. Overall, this direct comparison provides some insights into the mechanisms that potentially drive the interaction between politics and media.

Next, in a section on the contributions and limitations of the studies, the selection moments will be put into context. Although crucial because most information is discarded at this stage, selection is only one of several stages in the politics-media interaction. By making reference to the Politics-Media Wheel introduced earlier (see subsection 1.2.1), avenues for future research are furthermore singled out. In the final section of this chapter then, some ideas of how the experimental factorial survey method introduced in this book could be applied to answer related research questions and contribute to a more comprehensive theoretical framework are put forward.

5.1 Selection by journalists and politicians compared

Overall, the findings of the two studies point to clear differences between the selection criteria journalists apply and those politicians use. I will investigate those more systematically in the following sections. First, the actors, journalists and politicians, are compared. Are journalists more alike in their selection of messages than politicians, as news values theory would lead us to expect? Next, a comparison of the effects of the message follows. In the parallel research design introduced in the beginning (see Figure 1.2), the influence of a number of similar variables was tested in both studies and gives the unique possibility to directly compare the selection criteria. Do journalists and politicians react to different parts of a message? Are there parts of a message that trigger both journalists' and politicians' attention?

5.1.1 The actor perspective

An important contribution of this book is its focus on the actors, politicians and journalists. By means of the survey experiments carried out with both groups, maximal control over the context was obtained. This means that selection mechanisms can be compared directly from an actor perspective. First, between the two countries studied, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and next between the two groups of actors.

What part of selection patterns unraveled in the studies with journalists and politicians might be attributed to the more general selection patterns shared by these actors, and which might be attributed to differences between countries? The hierarchical regression models used to analyze the results in the previous chapters provide a more overall measure, the intraclass correlation (ICC)¹ measuring how alike (or different) a set of values is. Specifically, the amount of explained variance that can be attributed to a general selection patterns and the amount that can be attributed to the background of an individual journalist or politician can be investigated. Higher values of the ICC indicate higher levels of similarity, while lower values indicate less similarity. Thus, if the ICC value for one country is higher this indicates that selection criteria by these actors are more alike. Similarly, lower values indicate that when they are presented with a party message or a news report, there is more variation between these actors. The ICC is a measure that has been successfully applied by others who studied the politics-media relationship (Midtbø et al., 2014). Table 5.1 gives an overview of the ICC levels for each country separately.

Comparison between countries There is evidence of a shared news routine among journalists in both countries, as indicated by the relatively high levels of ICC with .53 and .44. In both countries, approximately 50% of the variance in the responses can

¹ For more information on the Intra Class Correlation see Figure 2.1.1 in chapter 2.

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

be explained by the messages the journalists received. This is a relatively high score, considering that each journalist who participated in the study received a different, albeit very similar, set of party press releases to evaluate. The high number shows that how journalists evaluate the messages can be explained by how the messages are written, for instance whether a party communicates on a known issue or not. This is an indication that journalists have a strong common understanding when deciding whether to report on a party communication or not.

Table 5.1: ICC scores of selection by journalists and politicians for both countries

| Dependent variable | Switzerland | Netherlands |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Selection by journalists | | |
| News coverage | 0.53a [0.43; 0.64] | 0.44 [0.30; 0.58] |
| Selection by politicians | | |
| Talking at meeting | 0.32 [0.16; 0.47] | 0.31 [0.11; 0.51] |
| Taking political action | 0.19 [0.05; 0.34] | 0.48 [0.29; 0.67] |

Note. Confidence intervals in brackets.

^a Results are reported for party press releases sent out by government parties only to account for political system differences in the comparison. Overall, ICC is 0.51 in Switzerland and 0.21 in the Netherlands.

Because the exact same studies were conducted in both countries, we can compare these scores more directly. First, overlapping confidence intervals show that there is no significant difference between Swiss and Dutch journalists. These findings are in line with the theory of news values explained in chapter 3. News values are routines and shortcuts that help journalists make decisions about which messages should become news and which should not. These “rational means to efficiency” (McManus, 1994, p. 85) explain that Swiss and Dutch journalists select messages in a similar fashion. A press release in which a party communicates on an unexpected issue but on a topic journalists deem politically relevant at the time, possibly mentioning the submission of a bill, is likely to be reported on by journalists the detailed findings show (see Table 3.5). Journalists’ own background hardly affects their selection; a small effect of their political leaning was found in Switzerland, but in the Netherlands neither their experience or the media outlet they work had a significant effect. It shows that journalists within a country have a shared understanding of what constitutes news. The ICC scores simply underline these findings.

In contrast to journalists, politicians show more variation in their evaluations. Overall, less of the variance in their judgments can be explained by the news reports they received. Or, put differently, more variation can be attributed to their background. ICC levels between the countries are more or less equal when politicians are asked whether they would bring up a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting. In both countries, only 30% of the variance can be explained by variations in the messages. More

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

than two thirds of the variance is due to differences between politicians. However, while the ICC score is lower than for journalists, differences are more substantial when we look at the scores for taking political action in a more public setting. Moving from the hidden to the more public setting, the ICC score increases for Dutch politicians to .48. This means that in the Netherlands, members of parliament are more alike when they consider taking political action based on a report than when they think about mentioning it at a party group meeting. Detailed results indeed show that Dutch MPs express their own personal opinions more during parliamentary party group meetings as indicated by the influence of the perceived political relevance of a news report. However, once they enter parliament in a more public setting, they follow the party line and respect the internal division of labor (see section 4.4).

Swiss politicians in contrast have *less* of a shared understanding when deciding to take political action compared with mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting. The ICC decreases from .32 to .19. Possibly, in the informal setting of the parliamentary party group, Swiss MPs tend to focus their discussion on issues raised in the media that are important from a party perspective. Such discussions are, however, not binding for politicians once it comes to taking political action in parliament like in the Dutch case. Indeed, the confidence intervals of the ICC with regards to political action which barely overlap bear evidence that there is a substantial difference between the two countries. As elaborated in chapter 4, the different electoral systems of the Netherlands and Switzerland provide different incentives for politicians to react to news reports. Finding higher ICC scores in the Dutch context is in line with expectations, because these politicians are more subject to a party's control. Members of parliament usually vote in line with their party specialist (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011) and this division of labor likely also translates into political actions; only the MP who is specialized in the issue is sanctioned to take action. Furthermore, the party has a lot of power over elections due to the quasi closed list system. A Dutch member of parliament is likely to stick to the party line (Louwerse and Otjes, 2016). Swiss politicians, however, have less of a shared understanding of which news reports are relevant for taking political action, as shown by the low ICC score. Because they are elected within their respective small districts, mostly on the basis of personal (preference) votes, the party has less influence over elections. As a consequence, Swiss members of parliament take action when they deem it necessary, for instance when it concerns constituents from their own Canton. Overall, the Swiss parliament is known for the low party unity the members of parliament show in comparison with other countries, including the Netherlands (for an overview of 15 European countries see Van Vonno, 2016, p. 48).

Taken together, these differences between Switzerland and the Netherlands provide an explanation for the different ICC scores between the countries when it comes to taking political action. The fact that these same scores are almost identical in the more hidden

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

party group setting and then compare very differently to taking political action in the two countries underlines the importance of studying media's influence on politicians in a comparative setting. At the same time, findings underline that very different mechanisms of media influence are at play, depending on whether a more public or hidden political setting is studied. This points to the importance of studying the media's influence on different political agendas, in particular those that are often hidden from the public's eye, such as parliamentary party group meetings. The mechanisms of media influence are likely very different in these settings suggesting that media can also indirectly influence politicians' actions as suggested by Kepplinger (2007). In comparison, journalists' selection of party messages shows a less variation. Their own personal considerations seem to play a smaller role, the content of the message is more important.

Comparison between journalists and politicians The comparison at the country level has provided some insights into how the political systems shape the politics-media relationship. However, the parallel research design that focused on the comparable selection moments of journalists and politicians in the Politics-Media Wheel (see subsection 1.2.1) also allows for a more direct comparison between journalists and politicians. This gives some indication of the power either politics can have over the media or vice versa. This argument is inspired by Brown (2011, p. 62) who, in a historical account of news management strategies used by political actors, convincingly argues that when journalists adhere to a shared objectivity norm instead of being partisan, political actors have more opportunities to shape the news. Similarly, in an essay on the power of political actors over the media, Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) argue that news coverage of groups and individuals from outside the political establishment in particular will be guided by journalistic news values. In other words, selection by news values means that other actors can have access to the news, provided they play it right and adhere to those criteria. This argument can easily be applied to the selection moment studied here; a shared understanding among journalists of what messages should be selected opens up avenues for politicians to influence this selection. If journalists do not show much variation and generally agree which messages should be selected, once politicians know about these selection criteria they can influence journalists relatively easily. Results of the studies here show that journalists indeed show relatively high values of ICC (see Table 5.1) which can be explained by the news values mentioned before.

Politicians, however, are expected to be less alike in their selection than journalists. First, there is variation in parties because of their different policy focuses, as well as between politicians from the same party, for example due to their differing background or experience. Moreover, members of parliament might be driven by personal considerations more because they might base their political decisions on their personal experiences. This leads to expecting lower ICC scores overall for politicians than for journalists. Results

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

indeed show that politicians seem to agree less on which reports matter in their selection than journalists. Lowest scores are reported for Swiss politicians. When it comes to taking political action, less than 20% of the variance in the evaluations of news reports by Swiss politicians can be explained by the message. With .31 and .32, the ICC is also lower for politicians than for journalists in the parliamentary party group setting in both countries. This underlines that politicians' backgrounds matter when they decide whether to politically react to news reports or not. Table 5.2 gives an overview of the specific variables of influence in politicians' and journalists' selection of messages and underlines this interpretation if journalists and politicians are compared as "receivers" or selectors of messages. For journalists, hardly any influence was found. For politicians however, their background matters greatly, but at the same time varies systematically between the countries due to their different electoral systems, as elaborated in chapter 4 and in subsection 4.4.3 in particular.

An important variable referring to politicians' and journalists' background is their experience in their respective occupation. However, neither for journalists nor for politicians parliamentary experience plays a consistent role in selection. Experience can be linked to socialization "on the job" which does not play a central role for selection of messages in the two consociational multiparty systems studied here. This can be explained by the experience these actors usually need to have obtained before they are assigned these influential positions. The political journalistic beat is prestigious and often only accessible to experienced journalists (McNair, 2000, p. 202). Indeed, on average, the political journalists who participated in this study had more than 15 years of experience on the job in both countries (see Table 3.4). Politicians too are usually not directly elected into the Lower House but they have been members of a party for many years and their socialization has taken place before they obtain their post. They are known in their party and have extensive political experience, for instance on the municipal level.² In sum, there is no strong indication that experience plays an important role for whether politicians react to news reports or journalists select a particular party message.

With regards to an overall comparison between journalists and politicians, some general conclusions can be drawn. Both when the selection by journalists and politicians is compared on the more general level using ICC scores and when zooming in on the detailed results of the studies, the evidence suggests that journalists are more alike in their selection of party messages than politicians are in their selection of news reports. Findings also show that while the meso organizational level of the party matters for a politicians' selection of news report, no systematic influence was found of the media organization the journalist works for. What are the consequences of this finding? For politicians who attempt to influence media coverage this means that, provided they adhere to these general

² Because politicians can have a different understanding of what could be counted towards their overall political experience, the present study measured political experience as a politicians' number of years as member of the Lower House.

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

Table 5.2: Overview of the results of the parallel comparative research design

| Journalist selection | | | Dependent variable | Politician selection | | | | |
|----------------------------------|----|----|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|----|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| News coverage | | CH | | NL | Talking at meeting | | Political action | |
| CH | NL | | | | CH | NL | CH | NL |
| Politician and party | | | Sender | Media outlet | | | | |
| Politician's political power | o | o | | o | o | + | o | Reputation of outlet |
| Party's political power | o | + | | | | | | |
| Party press release | | | Message | News report | | | | |
| Political relevance | + | + | | + | + | + | + | Negativity |
| Conflict | o | o | | o | o | o | o | Conflict |
| Unexpectedness | + | + | | o | o | o | + | Unexpectedness |
| Magnitude of action | + | + | | | | | | |
| Journalist | | | Receiver | Politician | | | | |
| <i>Actor level (micro)</i> | | | | <i>Actor level (micro)</i> | | | | |
| Journalistic experience | o | o | | o | o | - | o | Parliamentary experience |
| Political distance to party | - | o | | + | + | + | o | Political relevance |
| <i>Media outlet level (meso)</i> | | | | <i>Party level (meso)</i> | | | | |
| Print-broadcast beat | o | o | | o | o | o | + | Issue specialization |
| | | | + | + | + | o | Party issue ownership | |
| | | | - | + | o | - | Party's political power | |

Note. + indicate positive effects, - negative effects, o no significant effects. Detailed results of the journalist selection study can be found in chapter 3 and in chapter 4 for the study of selection of news reports by politicians.

selection criteria, a large number of political journalists will select their message. While this is not the place for a normative evaluation of this shared selection by journalists, these results do contribute to addressing “the theoretical challenge [...] to explain how competing journalists making thoughtful and often very personal choices can produce such similar newsoutcomes at the end of the day” (Bennett, 1996, p. 373). Results here suggest that these choices are not as “personal” as Bennett might have assumed.

This is quite in contrast to how politicians select which news reports they will react to. Their decisions are more influenced by the political context they work in, ranging from the political system within which they operate to their own personal evaluations and motivations (for an elaborate discussion see section 4.4). With regards to the media's influence over the actions of individual politicians this allows drawing a number of tentative conclusions. First, in contrast to journalists, the influence of news reports on politicians is more diverse. While it seems that if played right, a politician can influence journalists across the board, an equally strategic journalist could not influence as many politicians at the same time. Rather, the influence a report can have on politicians depends on (a) the background of the politician him- or herself and (b) on the setting in which she or he will then mention the report. Results show that, depending on the

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

country studied, party issue ownership or the individual politicians' specialization play a key role when they decide whether to react to a news report. On the party level, because not all parties "own" the same issue(s), depending on the issue covered in a news report, politicians from different parties will take action on a news report. Similarly, not all politicians within a party are affected by the same news coverage. Only those specialized in a particular issue will react (in the Netherlands) or those who consider a particular issue politically important at that time. Findings suggest that politicians likely use media coverage strategically to further their parties' agenda (through party issue ownership) or their own (through their issue specialization or personal interest). Comparable mechanisms have already been identified on the party level (Thesen, 2011; Van der Pas, 2014a) supporting this conclusion.

To summarize, while the influence of the media on politics might thus be considerable on an aggregate level and issues discussed in media and politics are related, once we shift our focus to individual politicians, they use news coverage selectively to further their own goals. They are not at the mercy of the media but rather strategically select which news reports they react to. This is in contrast to journalists whose selection is mainly influenced by the content of the party communication they receive. Although their political orientation does affect selection, the media organization they work for hardly affect their selection. This general comparison has given some insights into whether these actors have a shared understanding of what messages should be selected.

5.1.2 The news values perspective

The Politics-Media Wheel (see subsection 1.2.1) shows how messages move through either the media or the political sphere to influence each other. In some cases, messages might end up moving back and forth between politics and media because they get selected in turn by both actors. A journalist might deem an event or issue newsworthy enough to cover it. Once published, the same issue or event might lead to a politician asking a question in parliament during question hour. In turn, this action in parliament itself might, under certain circumstances, again lead to media coverage. Because the selection moments studied here are central in how messages and information moves between politics and media, directly comparing the criteria journalists and politicians use in their decision making is informative for the relationship as a whole.

Both the study with politicians and the one with journalists tested the influence of a number of message characteristics that are most important in political reporting. The theory of news values or news factors (see section 3.2) is most widely used to explain why journalists select some messages but not others. However, this theory can also be applied to study how the *audience* of these news reports, here politicians, select their messages. Although often overlooked by scholars, in their seminal article on news values Galtung

and Ruge (1965) base criteria on general psychological mechanisms that guide human attention, not only journalists'. Based on an overview of studies that extended the theory of news values to study how audiences select what news they adhere to, Eilders (2006, p. 16) indeed concludes that "there is considerable plausibility in assuming that news factors establish a relevance schema and thus guide selective attention and information processing in the audience. News factors in this perspective help to reduce complexity by directing attention to the meaningful and potentially dangerous."

To shed some light on whether and to what extent journalists and politicians apply the same selection criteria to a message, the effects of a number of news values tested in both studies are directly compared below. As Table 5.2 shows, the message characteristics tested with journalists produced significant effects more often than those tested in the selection by politicians.

Unexpectedness and party issue ownership The studies show that for both journalists and politicians, the issue that is covered in a message is the most important aspect. What a news report or a party press release is about, is crucial. From a party's point of view, the "owned" issue can be a key aspect in election campaigns, but this also holds true outside the campaign period; research shows that if a party lets another party communicate on "its" issue, this other party can weaken the issue ownership connection in the electorate (Walgrave et al., 2009). For parties, there is thus an incentive to communicate on an "owned" issue. The question is whether journalists act in the interest of the parties and select messages on issues owned by the party.

Results from the study with journalists (see chapter 3) show, however, that the unexpected is more interesting for journalists. Political journalists are more inclined to select a party press release covering an issue that is not owned by the party. A press release covering an issue the party is already known for is business as usual, and does not grab journalists' attention. This means the selection mechanism of political journalists works against parties' interests; while a party would want to gain media coverage on an "owned" issue to maintain its issue ownership position vis-a-vis the electorate, journalistic selection criteria are likely to prevent this. Political parties and journalists have diverging interests when it comes to the selection of issues for the coverage of politics. This impression is supported when we look at how politicians (and not parties) select news reports to take (public) political action on. Findings of the politician study show that for politicians, party issue ownership works similarly to the party-level mechanisms hypothesized before (see chapter 4). Unlike journalists, who get triggered by reactions on unexpected issues, politicians prefer the familiar. Party issue ownership has a positive effect on politicians across the board.

Taken together, these findings indicate that selection mechanisms of journalists and politicians are not the same with regards to party issue ownership. On the one hand there are the journalists, always on the lookout for the unexpected, who, in line with news value

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

theories, would rather select party messages that cover a party communicating on a new and surprising issue. On the other hand, there are the politicians, who have an (electoral) incentive to capitalize and enforce existing party issue ownership connections and react to news reports that cover issues their party already owns. This shows that, when it comes to party issue ownership, the selection mechanisms of journalists and politicians work in opposite directions which could have a “balancing” effect in the politics-media relationship. Although the media might prefer to report on a politician taking action on an issue that is “new”, chances that this would actually happen are slim. Politicians do not have incentives to act in the way the media would like them to, at least if they put the party’s interests above their own.

The fact that in the Netherlands, a politicians’ issue specialization basically absorbs the effect of party issue ownership should not go unnoticed. It shows that while the politician might agree that the party should obtain coverage on already owned issues, once personal interests are in play members of parliament might also choose to put their own issue specialization first. Based on the results here no conclusions can be drawn as to how often the interests of the politician and the party diverge. They do however illustrate two important things. First, the tension between a politicians’ personal interests and those of his or her party might not only be present with regards to voting behavior (for a recent example see Van Vonno (2016)), but possibly also with regards to reactions to media coverage. Second, comparing the results of the Dutch study with the ones from Switzerland points to an effect of the institutional context on politicians’ reactions to media coverage. The voting system provides different motivations for strategically acting politicians to prioritize some aspects over others as the discussion in the relevant chapter has already shown (see subsection 4.4.3).

Issue relevance Relevance is one of the most central news values in explaining why some events are covered. Studies of the influence of news values have often operationalized this variable as the relevance for the audience, thus indicating an “audience orientation” in the framework of Landerer (2013). However, ‘relevance’ here is actually operationalized as how politically relevant journalists and politicians perceive an issue to be, which is more relevant for political news and reactions thereon.

In journalistic selection, the more politically relevant an issue is according to the journalist’s perception, the more likely she or he will select a message on this issue for coverage. This effect is present in both countries. In political selection as well, issue relevance plays an important role for politicians results show. However, it might not be such a core concept as it is for journalistic selection. For MPs, relevance is just one of the aspects, and it is influenced by the political system. When politicians decide (not) to take action based on a news report, Swiss MPs value the relevance of the issue, next to party issue ownership. For Dutch MPs, on the other hand, relevance does not play a significant role. Rather, their own specialization and their relation to the issue at hand is

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

key. When it comes to mentioning a news report at a parliamentary party group meeting, a different mechanism is at play. If an MP considers an issue to be politically relevant at that moment, he or she will be more likely to mention the report at a parliamentary party group meeting. This finding was consistent across different political contexts and when models controlled for other (possibly related) factors, such as the type of development that was described, party issue ownership, or the MPs' specialization. In that sense, members of parliament are more like journalists when they are behind closed doors: in that case, the (momentary) importance of the issue is an important aspect. Politicians discuss the relevant issues that are current at that time, however, that does not imply that they publically react. When stakes are higher and their actions might be more "costly", for instance in the case of taking political action, there are other considerations that are possibly more related to the party and the current political context that are of importance. For politicians, issue relevance is just one of several aspects, including their personal and party's broader strategic considerations relevant to choosing whether or not to take action based on a news report.

In sum, relevance does play an important role in political selection, but possibly it is not as central as in the case of journalistic selection as illustrated by the effects of other issue-related variables. This might be explained by the fact that journalists don't have strategic considerations to report on a certain issue or not. Therefore, they collectively focus on the issues they consider politically relevant at that moment. Politicians on the other hand only react to relevant issues in the news when it fits their own political agenda. As a consequence, political relevance is not a sufficient condition. This finding is in line with agenda-setting studies that stressed that different mechanisms are at play depending on the issues at stake. For instance, Tan and Weaver (2007) simultaneously testing how the public, media and policy agenda of the US Congress influence each other point out that the directions of influence depends on the issues (see also Soroka, 2002).

My study suggests that perceived political relevance at the individual actor level might partly explain why on some issues the media influence the political agenda, but not on others. Considering the importance of the news value of relevance for both the selection of messages by journalists and politicians, it would be informative to study of the individual level how politicians and journalists form these perceptions of political relevance and, in particular, how they influence each others' perception of political relevance.

Potential for conflict through criticism and responsibility attribution Conflict has been found to be one of the most important the media use. Both studies contained variables that tapped into this aspect of the politics-media relationship, albeit in a slightly different way. In the first study with journalists, a party press release criticizing government was expected to pique journalists' interest more often than one without criticism. Especially when a coalition party criticizes government, this should be an opportunity for journalists to report on a conflict. However, no evidence was found that this mattered for

5.1. Selection by journalists and politicians compared

journalists in the context of this study. The variable did not have a significant influence.

For the politicians' selection, based on research by Thesen (2012) and others (e.g. Baum and Groeling, 2009; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010), it was expected that when a news report held the government responsible, politicians would be more likely to mention the news report or take political action. The effect applied in the Dutch case and was, as expected, conditional on the political party. Dutch politicians from opposition parties were more likely to take action if the government is held responsible for a development than their colleagues from government parties were. In addition, a negative development could provide opposition party MPs with a window of opportunity to criticize the government, while coalition party MPs might be more inclined to point out positive aspects and thus react to reports covering positive developments. However, the interaction effect was not significant showing no systematic difference between government and opposition MPs in their reactions to news reports covering positive or negative developments.

Overall, these findings from the two studies show that conflict, at least the way it was operationalized here, does not have the same effect on the selection of journalists and politicians. One possible explanation could be methodological since conflict is a variable that is highly situational. In comments in the survey, journalists indeed pointed out that they would take into account the momentary political context when deciding whether to investigate an issue further. At the same time, the studies here explicitly focused on the everyday aspects of politics and were aimed at isolating the selection mechanisms at play in the daily politics-media relationship. The incidents of conflict that often catch the attention of the public and indicate the influence of media over politics and vice versa are, in fact, incidents: extreme statements or actions that are out of the ordinary and speak to the preference of media actors for unexpected events. The same holds true for politicians: only when the media uncover new (scandalous) information about proceedings of the government or one of its actors will politicians "get on board" and capitalize on the opportunity to scrutinize government. In a series of real-world experiments, Protess and colleagues (1987) show how policy makers sometimes adjust policy even before an investigative report is published. For everyday politics, however, conflict, or at least voicing criticism, might not be as central for either journalists or politicians as those incidents seem to imply, which might explain why no strong effects were found here.

Negativity The effects of the important news value of negativity were mainly studied with regards to politicians' selection of news. The variable was operationalized as either describing developments that are positive, such as a decrease in unemployment numbers, or negative, such as an increase in same numbers. Findings show that politicians are much more likely to react to negative developments, both in the parliamentary party group setting and with regards to taking public political action. Because politicians are the ones expected to solve problems when they arise, this is not surprising. Although this variable

was not tested in the journalist study, there is evidence across the board that negativity is also one of the most important aspects in journalistic reporting (for an overview see Lengauer et al., 2012) and an important news value in news selection (for an overview see O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). With journalists and politicians reacting more to negative developments than positive ones, one could be inclined to speak of an “accelerating” effect of negative developments. Both groups of actors will come into action when negative events are in the spotlight, either through media coverage or political actions. In theory, this attention from either politics or media could in turn fuel an already ongoing story and lead to more attention to an issue than might otherwise be warranted. Shoemaker (2006, p. 108), questioning the media’s focus on negative news, puts forward that this might well be the main function of the media; “in a democratic society, the role of the news media is not to mirror the world as it is, but rather to spotlight and draw public attention to problems and situations that need solutions and repair.” These negative problems and situations should be addressed by politicians, and results of the study here show that politicians are indeed responsive.

5.2 Conclusions

Politicians are news junkies that need to keep up with what is going on in society and some of this information influences their political work. Yet, information in the media is often already affected, and sometimes even largely determined, by politicians. Consequentially, this book set out to investigate both how political coverage comes about and how it can subsequently lead to politicians’ actions. The two separate studies on the selection mechanisms of political journalists and politicians have given important insights into what drives the decisions of these two actors. At the same time, the combination of the two studies has helped to unravel the differences and similarities between political journalists and politicians in their selection of messages. This concluding section first underlines a number of lessons that can be drawn from the studies of this book. Next, several shortcomings are addressed. Finally, I take a brief broader look at the research on the politics-media relationship and potential steps toward a theory of the influence of media on politics the field is currently largely lacking.

Both studies presented in this book focused on the selection moments in the Politics-Media Wheel (see subsection 1.2.1), the moment when politicians decide whether or not to take political action based on a news report and journalists decide whether a press release makes a chance to become a news report. This focus on the individual actors instead of the overall content produced by media outlets or political actions taken by members of parliament, provide an important contribution to the existing literature. Recently, several publications have zoomed in on the individual actors. Kepplinger (2007)

5.2. Conclusions

or also Sevenans et al. (2016) conceptualize and study the politics-media influence at the individual level. Although in many countries it can be challenging to get politicians and journalists to cooperate, results of such studies contribute to the field and help our understanding of how mechanisms of influence take place. Political journalists, this study shows, are less influenced by their own background than politicians. For them, the characteristics of the message they receive is most important although their own political orientation influences their selection in some contexts. This is in line with the news value theory in journalism studies.

The studies at the individual level also add to our knowledge on the mediatization of politics as a whole. Repeatedly, scholars have raised the question whether politicians are guided by a media logic, commonly seen as a negative influence, or by a political logic. Yet, not many scholars clearly define these concepts (Landerer, 2013; but for an exception see Esser and Strömbäck, 2014, p. 14ff) and empirical studies allowing for such a clear comparison are scarce. The parallel research design, however, which tests a similar set of variables in the study of the selection by political journalists and the selection by politicians, made it possible to directly compare these actors. Results do not show evidence that the media are taking over politics. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) already underlined more than a decade ago that the negative view of the media's role in politics some authors refer to might be exaggerated. The findings of this book show that the interactions between both politicians and media messages, and journalists and political messages, are influenced by the political system within which their exchange takes place. For politicians, strategic considerations related to party issue ownership and their own specialization are important; they do not blindly follow the media. This is in line with findings from parties' reactions to news coverage (e.g. Van der Pas, 2014b; Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2011). If we want to understand the media's influence on politics, we must also take into account that these actors, parties as well as politicians, mainly react to media coverage when it fits with their own expertise (issue specialization) or with the expertise of the party (issue ownership). Moreover, there are systematic differences between the countries that can be linked to the electoral systems. However, particularly longitudinal studies could be fruitful because they would allow controlling for variables such as party strength and the effect of public approval of issues. Overall, these findings underline that "the media can trigger political attention and direct political attention to events and issues, but political logics strongly influence what type of content parties [and politicians] politicize" (Thesen, 2013, p. 196).

Also the study of the selection of messages by journalists informs the broader understanding of the mediatization of the politics-media relationship. Many studies on mediatization see journalists as the culprit in the relationship and particularly the degree to which journalists are influenced by a *political logic* has not received much scholarly attention. Political logic has been conceptualized as consisting of

three dimensions; polity referring to the institutional context, policy to the process of problem definition and politics more focused on elections and gaining support (e.g. Esser and Strömbäck, 2014, p. 14). Results of the study of the selection by journalists presented in this book show that the institutional context matters for them too. In a system such as Switzerland where all major parties are part of government and there is no strong opposition holding many seats in parliament, journalists do not make a systematic difference between government and opposition parties. Political power only plays a role when there is a real opposition present in parliament as is the case in the Netherlands. At the same time, there is evidence that the policy aspect plays affects journalists' selection. In both countries journalists make a significant difference between political instruments; a law proposal is more likely to be reported than a less consequential parliamentary question (see Table 3.5 for detailed results). These results show that future studies should maybe take a closer look at how journalists precisely operationalize the news values that guide their selection logics and possibly other stages of the news making process. With political journalists being so closely connected to what is taking place in politics as a whole, it is plausible to assume that their work is also influenced by the processes of problem definition and deliberation taking place within and between political parties. Both in personal conversations and in the comments sections of the surveys, journalists emphasized how they would take into account the political context in their work. To further our understanding of the politics-media relationship, we should thus not only focus on how media (logic) influences politics and politicians, but also how politics (and the political logic) influences media content.

Overall, the book underlines the importance of the context when studying individuals' actions and decision making. If we want to study how the media influence politics, we are well advised to look beyond the news report and take into account these actors' backgrounds and the broader context. This is not a new approach. In his account of bounded rationality, Simon (1985) already argued three decades ago that actors' decisions cannot be understood as rational if the context of these decisions is not taken into account. My two-country comparison allowed to focus on the effects of a number of political system variables. Broad generalizations cannot be made based on these findings, but they provide interesting avenues for investigating the role of the electoral systems in future studies of the media's role in politics. Are other aspects of importance for politicians in two-party systems than in multiparty systems like the ones investigated here? Or, more generally, it is the country's electoral system or maybe the nomination procedure within a party that can help us understand politicians' reactions to news coverage? Interviews with these elites could provide additional insights into the motivations that drive politicians.

This being said, it should be acknowledged that no scientific method can fully explain the exact decision-making process of these individual elites. The step-wise regression

5.2. Conclusions

models reported in the appendices (see Appendix B and Appendix C) clearly illustrate that a substantial amount of residual variance remains. In less statistical terms, this illustrates that despite the high number of variables tested, there is still part of these actors' decision-making that has not been captured. This indicates that other factors that are hard to measure, such as personal experiences or personality characteristics, have an influence on the decisions taken by these actors. However, the experimental factorial survey approach has allowed keeping many of the important contextual influences as constant as possible and has allowed tackling at least some of these (potential) influences.

Limitations The choice to focus on the selection moments and the experimental approach also come with a number of limitations. Firstly, the studies focus on the selection moment only. Conclusions about the process taking place between politics and media as a whole as depicted in the Politics-Media Wheel should be drawn with care. The experimental approach allows to zoom in on a selection moment that is usually not visible and hard to study. However, this also means that other stages in the process had to be left out. To get a more complete picture of the overall mechanism of influence taking place, future studies could focus on different stages of the Politics-Media Wheel for which other methodological approaches might be more fruitful. The studies presented here can provide a "starting point" through their focus on the very first selection moment.

Second, in both studies respondents were only asked whether they intended to take action and no actual behavior was measured. Moreover, as the Politics-Media Wheel illustrates, the actual production of news reports and actually taking action only come after a message has been selected. First, resources have been allocated. Only at a later stage more actors get involved and, depending on the particular newsroom or the political party, journalists and politicians are not the only ones involved anymore. The selection moments studied here are thus only one step of a multi-layered process. It is only plausible to assume that also during deliberation/news production, more messages do not make the cut and that thus in reality, even fewer party press releases would make it into a news report and even fewer of these news reports would have any political consequences than the results here show. While the overall chances of selection the studies here measured might thus be higher than in reality, the main goal of the experimental studies was to gauge the *relative* influence of a number of key variables. Most likely, the fact that respondents were asked for intended behavior and not actual behavior did not influence the effect of specific variables. Factorial experimental designs do provide important insights into the relative influence of variables. This brings me to another important limitation.

On a related note, one might also question the generalizability of the findings due to social desirability. Particularly for politicians it is important to be aware of how they are perceived by the public. While respondents giving the answers they think the researcher would want them to give is obviously a challenge in all survey research, there

are several reasons to suggest it should not be a major concern here. The factorial survey method has been chosen precisely to alleviate the challenges associated with studying the potentially normative question of politics-media influence. As elaborated in the methods section (see in particular subsection 2.1.2), the complex factorial stimuli presented to respondents make it less likely that they would know that, for example, the researcher was interested in the difference in media access of government and opposition parties (Alexander and Becker, 1978). Moreover, if present, social desirability would have most likely affected the overall mean likelihood to (not) react to a message. The main goal of the studies was disentangling the *relative* influence of a number of message characteristics in the politics-media relationship. Although such concerns should of course be addressed, most likely these have not systematically influenced the results presented here.

Third, the experimental nature of the study means that the influence of only a selection of variables could be tested for. The factorial survey experiment with its multivariate design allowed testing more variables than generally done in an experimental study with a limited number of respondents. However, the multivariate design also means that all variables influence each other and should therefore be chosen with utmost care (see section 2.1). The variables chosen here had been identified as important influences in the politics-media relationship by previous studies, often in isolation due to practical constraints. Future studies using a similar factorial approach could test for the effects of a different set of variables or using different operationalizations. The effects of the display of negative developments, tentatively interpreted as evidence of a possible accelerating mechanism (see subsection 5.1.2) between politicians and journalists, could be explored further by comparing different levels of negativity and their respective formulations. Additionally, a research design that explicitly focuses on how not all actors react to message content in the same way, thus including interaction effects between an actor and the content, could be particularly fruitful. In my study I found that some politicians are more inclined to select some news reports over others, for example because it is related to their area of specialization. Similarly, for more experienced Swiss MPs whether a news report covers a positive or negative development is not as important as for their more junior colleagues. It would be interesting to further explore the role of politicians' socialization in the political arena, through experimental studies or interviews, to see how their view of the role of the media and their selection develops over time.

What do we then take home now from the studies presented here and how do they contribute to the field more generally? First and most importantly, the findings of this book underline the conditionality of the media's influence on politics and vice versa. The context within which this exchange takes place is key and we should try to learn more about how it affects the decisions made by the involved actors. Instead of trying to identify general mechanisms of influence in large comparative studies, we might learn more by focusing on a smaller number of countries carefully selected based on theoretical

5.2. Conclusions

considerations following Tarrow's (2010) a strategy of "paired comparison". In these cases, more qualitative approaches that make less use of predefined answer categories but focus on accumulating information and only afterwards aim to find patterns in these answers might be more appropriate.

While more insights into the factors that play a role in the politics-media relationship are important, the field could benefit greatly from a hierarchy of these sources of influence of some sort. While news value theory provides a well-established theoretical basis for journalists' selection, others have brought forward tentative theories of what media reports influence politicians (see Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006). More information is needed on which aspects of a message are more/less important for selection in the context of political news. For journalists, party issue ownership was found to be crucial, while the political standing of the actor cited in a press release was not. Politicians' selection, however, was conditional on the institutional context and the setting within which a news report was mentioned. Factorial experimental designs can help us to distinguish the more important sources of influence from those that might be less important in some cases to further study the conditionality of these mechanisms. The studies here show that factorial designs which simultaneously test for the influence of several variables can be particularly interesting to study elite decision making.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that conducting research with political and media elites is of course challenging. The fact that it has been feasible to collect the data for the studies in this book in two Western European countries by one single researcher does not imply that it has been easy. On the contrary. And there are many countries where politicians and journalists are a lot more reluctant to participate in research projects. But, that does not mean that we should refrain from it. I hope this book has shown that having direct access to these elites and being able to study them at the individual level is important for our field. The experimental approach has proven to provide valuable insights into the selection moments and allowed to systematically unravel (part of) how members of parliament and political journalists choose what kind of messages they deem relevant for their work. Or, put differently, how politics becomes news and news becomes politics.