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

Helfer, L.

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Author: Helfer, L.

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English summary

The relationship between the media and politics is close and often characterized by tensions. For example, politicians often are accused of being led by short-lived media cycles, thereby losing sight of broader societal interests. The media, on the other hand, are accused of primarily seeking out conflicts and sensational news, a type of political reporting that is detrimental to both politics and society. To what extent are these allegations justified? What criteria are decisive for journalists in selecting their reporting? And on the other hand, what factors decide whether politicians take political action on the basis of a media report? These questions are examined in the Netherlands and Switzerland by means of two experiments: an experiment with political journalists and a second one with politicians.

Studies show that politicians often refer to media reports in debates. However, this is not enough basis to assume an influence of the media on the politics. Politicians themselves are an important source of information for journalists, and therefore it might well be that they themselves have launched the reports to which they refer to in parliament. In order to be able to determine what is the cause and what is the effect in this complex interaction, the present study uses an experimental approach. In a so-called "factorial survey experiment", journalists and politicians were presented with fictional but realistically formulated party press releases and media reports. The hypothesis was that the decision of whether a message is selected by these actors depends on the sender of the message (party or newspaper), the message itself, and the recipient (journalist or politician).

Journalists' selection: How politics becomes news Based on what criteria do political journalists in the Netherlands and in Switzerland decide whether they select a party press release for reporting? There is a large body of literature on news values theory, i.e. the criteria that journalists, as so-called "gatekeepers," apply when selecting messages. However, these theories have seldomly been tested with experiments. Moreover, little is known about the relevance of news values for political news coverage specifically. This experiment was conducted with journalists who regularly report on the Second Chamber, the "Tweede Kamer" in The Hague (n = 67) and the "Nationalrat" in Berne (n = 84). They were presented with fictional media reports by political parties and asked whether they would select them for reporting. The results indicate the central role of the sender and

the content of the press release in journalistic selection. When a party communicates on a topic that is not at the core of their program, journalists are more interested than usual. However, it is rather surprising that it does not matter whether the communication cites a member of party leadership or an elected member of parliament without any further mention of function. Last but not least, the study shows that the political system, in particular the distribution of power in politics, plays a crucial role. Parties with more political power have better chances to be selected for reporting, regardless of the content of the message. In addition to the sender of the message, some aspects of the content of the media message also influence the selection process. Journalists also differentiate between the type of political action announced: a simple parliamentary question, which often has no great political consequences, generates much less attention than a law proposal. Contrary to expectations, criticism of the government, on the other hand, hardly increases the interest of journalists, even if it is expressed by a government party. This is particularly noticeable in the Dutch context with majority governments. The results also show that the personal attitude of the journalists plays a role: messages on topics that a journalist considers to be more relevant are more likely to be taken into account. However, an influence of the political orientation of the journalists can only be detected in Switzerland: the closer a journalist is to a party, the more likely he is to select that party's message. Overall, the experiment shows that political aspects are the main focus for journalists when they select messages for reporting.

Politicians' selection: How news becomes politics Do politicians use a similar set of criteria as journalists when they decide whether to act on the basis of a media report? In order to clarify this question, a second experiment was conducted. Elected national politicians were interviewed in Switzerland ($n = 50$) and in the Netherlands ($n = 30$). They were presented with a number of fictional but realistically formulated newspaper items, and asked two questions. First: Would you mention the article if a parliamentary party group (faction) meeting was held 'today'? Second: Would you take political action, such as asking a parliamentary question, based on the article? Again, influences of the sender of the message, of the message itself, and of the recipient were distinguished. The newspaper publishing the report had no systematic effect: whether an article is published by a popular tabloid newspaper or by a quality outlet has no influence on whether the politician carries an article into the political process. The content of the article is more important. The results show that politicians are more likely to react to reporting on negative developments than positive ones. Very interesting is the influence of the topic of an article. The experiment shows that politicians will mention different articles behind closed doors at a parliamentary party group meeting than they would when taking a more publically visible political action, such as asking a parliamentary question. This depends on three aspects: whether the issue is a core issue of the party, whether it is an issue the politician is specialized in, and whether s/he regards it as currently politically relevant.

There are differences between the two countries that can be explained by the different institutional context. Dutch politicians are likely to take political action based on a media report dealing with a subject they are specialized in. In the context of a parliamentary party group meeting, however, it is important for them to consider whether the issue is one of the core issues of the party, and whether they consider it momentarily politically important. Swiss politicians, however, do not distinguish between a reaction in the public sphere and a reaction in the parliamentary party group. In both cases whether an issue is a core issue of politician's parties and whether they regard the issue as politically important at that moment is decisive for a reaction. These differences between the two countries are likely to be due to the political system: as politicians in Switzerland are elected in relatively small constituencies (Cantons) and parties have little influence on which candidates are elected, so politicians want to be visible for their voters. The goal is to benefit from the party profile and show that they are on top of the issues that are relevant for the public (media). In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the party has a much greater influence on which politicians are elected as preference votes hardly influence election outcomes. In this system, it is therefore important for politicians to adhere to the division of tasks within the party and, above all, to develop a profile of their own core themes in the public sphere. All in all, the experiment with the politicians underlines that they are strategic actors who take into account the institutional context.

Importance of the study In summary, the complex research design of the experiments allows important insights into the interplay between politicians and journalists. The comparison of the countries shows how important the institutional framework is. Even if politicians follow media reporting very closely, the relation between the two is different than simple knee-jerk reaction. Even if politics as a whole might seem to follow media coverage, the results show that, depending on the issue at stake each time, different politicians react to media reports. They do so on the basis of strategic considerations. This also applies to journalists. The direct comparison of the selection mechanisms, made possible by the parallel design of the examination, also shows that individual criteria in the interplay between journalists and politicians can have reinforcing effect, whereas other criteria tend to have a balancing effect and might cancel each other out. From a methodological point of view, the present project is also an important addition to the existing literature. Experimental studies with elites are rare. The factorial survey experiment used in this study allowed experimental research to be carried out under very realistic conditions in such elite populations in two countries.

