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Media and lawmaking : exploring the media's role in legislative processes

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Chapter 5

Introducing a study loan: an in-depth analysis of *de Wet Studievoorschot Hoger Onderwijs*

5.1 Introduction

The Netherlands has a long history of financially supporting students that follow higher education. Public financial student support policies have existed since the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815. As from 1986, the system provides a basic grant to all students (Slaman, 2014). Ever since then, there has been discussion about the desirability of this system, primarily motivated by growing financial and political pressure; over time the number of students increased tremendously (Slaman, 2014, p. 273). Although there has been political debate about abolishing this basic grant and the student financing system has been adjusted multiple times, the principle of the basic grant remained intact until 2015.

In May 2014, the coalition parties *VVD* and *PvdA* came to an

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agreement, with opposition parties *D66* and *GL*, that was necessary to achieve majority support in both Houses of Parliament. Subsequently the Minister of Education introduced a bill to abolish the basic grant and introduce a study loan. Media attention did not wane once the agreement was signed; the legislative process that followed got substantial media coverage. Did this media attention affect the process, and if so, in what manner? Guided by the four questions presented in subsection 2.3.1, I study whether the parliamentary reports and debates about the bill as well as the (proposed) changes in the content of the bill are inspired by or a response to media attention. The analyses show that media coverage did play a role in the legislative process, but that it did not affect the content of and support for the bill.

5.2 The case: bill introducing a new student finance system

The bill 'study loan higher education' (*Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*/WSHO, 34.035) introduces a student finance system to replace the existing basic grant with the possibility to apply for a loan. The possibility to lend money for study purposes already existed, alongside a basic grant, but from September 2015 onwards this basic grant is abolished. The bill was introduced in September 2014 and passed the Lower House in November 2014 and the Upper House in January 2015. In both Houses of Parliament the bill was supported by the coalition parties, i.e. *VVD* and *PvdA*, and by *D66* and *GL*, two opposition parties that had signed an agreement about the issue in April that year. In the Lower House also two one-man factions, *Van Vliet* and *Klein*, supported the bill. This implies that various opposition parties did not support the bill, including *CDA*, *SP* and *PVV*. The bill was published in the law gazette in February 2015. The legislative process contained 42 amendments and 12 motions; 5 amendments and 5 motions passed, changing among other things the connection with child allowance, the minimum monthly repayment, the value of student vouchers and the monitoring of the bill.

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Although the main system change introduced with the bill is the abolishment of the basic grant and introduction of the student loan, the bill also addresses related topics. This broader package of measures includes that the supplementary grant for students with a low parental income is increased; the earnings threshold is abolished; a remittance is introduced for students that get delayed due to medical conditions; the repayment phase is extended; and the loan is available for everyone under the age of 55 years. Also, the public transport card students receive becomes available to *MBO* (secondary vocational education) students under 18. The expected proceeds of this new system are invested in higher education; because of the time lag, the first cohorts of students will receive a voucher of €2.000 for professional training after their graduation. In order to control the new investments, the councils representing students and staff at colleges or universities get the right of assent with regard to the outlines of the institute's budget.

The package of measures included in the bill is the outcome of a long political process. In his dissertation, Slaman (2014) presents the political history of student financing in the Netherlands and shows that since 1815 there has been a permanent struggle about student financing. Since 1986, the system contained a basic grant for all university students, but political debate about abolishing this grant developed already in the early 21st century, inspired by a growing desire to reduce the budget for student support. This financial pressure increased and during the formation of a new cabinet in 2010 *VVD* and *CDA* came to a compromise (Slaman, 2014, p. 272). The coalition agreement of this Rutte-I government proposed to introduce a 'social student loan system' for students in Master's degree programs only (*Regeerakkoord VVD-CDA*, 2010, p. 32). A bill ('To study is to invest', *Studeren is investeren*) was prepared to formally effectuate this intention, but this bill never became law; it was rejected as controversial by the Lower House after the cabinet resigned in April 2012. The coalition agreement of the new Rutte-II government proposed a 'social student loan system' again, this time for students in both Bachelor's and Master's degree programs (*Regeerakkoord VVD-PvdA*, 2012, p. 17). This time the cabinet

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proposed to introduce the new system by September 2014 and to maintain the supplementary grant for students with a low parental income, to replace the free public transport card for students by a reduced-fare card by 2015, to make this card available for *MBO* students, and to invest the proceeds of the system in education and research.

For practical and pragmatic reasons, the cabinet decided to first introduce a bill with respect to a loan system for Master's students (*Wet sociaal leenstelsel masterfase*, 33.680), and planned to subsequently propose a bill for such a system in the Bachelor phase. The first bill was introduced in June 2013 and proposed the loan system for Master's as of September 2014. The bill received substantial media attention. As the Minister of Education, Science and Culture Bussemaker (*PvdA*) said during the legislative debate about the bill in December 2013: "It has been a while since we debated with each other about the content. There has predominantly been debate in the media" (*Behandeling Wet sociaal leenstelsel masterfase*, 2013-2014, p. 30). During this debate, it became clear that none of the opposition parties was willing to support the bill. This was a political risk for the cabinet: *VVD* and *PvdA* did not have majority support in the Upper House. If none of the opposition parties in the Lower House would vote for the bill, it was highly unlikely that in the Upper House enough opposition parties would grant support to get a majority.

During the debate, the minister announced that she would propose a new, integrated bill in the spring of 2014 to introduce a loan system in both the Bachelor and Master phase. In order to increase the likelihood of majority support in the Upper House, the minister started negotiations with the parties that proposed a loan system in their election programs: *VVD* and *PvdA*, and opposition parties *D66* and *GL*. They came to an agreement in May 2014 about what was called *Het Studievoorschot* (*Het studievoorschot: naar een nieuw stelsel van studiefinanciering en een ambitieuze onderwijsagenda*, 2014), literally translated 'the study advance'. These plans were worked out by the minister in the bill 'Study loan higher education'.

The selection of this particular case is the outcome of the sequential selection strategy (see subsection 2.3.3). In addition to the selection criteria that apply to all three cases, the results from the first two case studies are taken into consideration. As a result, the bill that is central in this chapter differs from the two bills studied previously. First, the policy area is different: this bill contains education policy. Second, because it was suggested in the interviews of the second case study that media coverage could be different when a topic applies to a specific group instead of all ‘ordinary’ people, this bill strictly speaking targets a particular subgroup: (future) students. Third, because it was suggested that media effects may be stronger when there is more opposition to the bill, a bill was selected that received limited (but sufficient, because the bill has to have passed to meet the selection criteria, see subsection 2.3.3) support in parliament.

5.3 Data

For the content analysis 109 parliamentary documents are taken into account. Via LexisNexis all articles and items from national newspapers and magazines that were published during the legislative process in parliament are retrieved that discuss student finance, grants, and loans. The same criteria are applied to the selection of radio and television broadcasts of national television and radio channels (see Appendix IV). This results in 477 print articles and 30 broadcasts from September 5, 2014 (two weeks before the bill was introduced into parliament) until February 10, 2015 (the day the bill was published in the law gazette).

In addition to the content analysis of the parliamentary and media documents, 34 people have been interviewed. The interviewees are political and departmental actors involved in the legislative process, as well as journalists who published articles or made items about it. The interviewees include 21 MPs who were the spokespersons on behalf of their parties in the Lower or Upper House, three departmental actors, and 11 journalists (for a full list of interviewees see Appendix V).

5.4 Results

In order to answer the research question whether media attention affected the legislative process, and if so, in what manner, I answer the four research questions (see subsection 2.3.1). Firstly, I explore the media attention for the (topic of the) bill. Secondly, I discuss whether and how political actors respond to media attention. Thirdly, I study if and how these actors try to get and influence media coverage. Finally, I analyze whether media attention has influence on the support for the bill and its amendments.

5.4.1 Media attention

To answer the question about the media attention, I discuss the distribution and type of media coverage and the visibility of political actors.

Attention for the legislative process

The content analysis shows that much coverage is related to the legislative process. However, coverage is not so much focusing on the actual content of the bill, but more on its political characteristics. Journalists are interested in which parties will (not) support the bill, and in whether the bill will pass the Upper House.

In total 29% ($N=146$) of all media coverage contains references to the legislative process (see Table 5.1), mostly to the vote or support in parliament (19%) of the coverage. There is also relatively much attention for the legislative reports, debates or procedures (14%) and for the bill itself (12%). The legislative round table is mentioned in five items; this is a small number, but still remarkable considering the fact that such formal parts of the parliamentary process usually do not get any media attention at all. Also noteworthy is that only two media items contain an implicit reference to amendments, although none of the journalists writes or talks literally about amendments. No motions are discussed in the media. Even though a number of the 42 amendments was introduced several times, primarily because of

Legislative element	Percentage of items (%)	Absolute number of items (N)
Bill	12	59
Legislative debate/report	14	68
Legislative round table	.9	5
Amendment	.4	2
Motion	0	0
Vote/support in parliament	19	98
Any legislative reference	29	146

Table 5.1: References to the legislative process (*WSHO*) in all media coverage: items with at least one reference to legislative element

technical adjustments, it shows that journalists were clearly not interested in proposals to change the content of the bill.

Political focus

Most references to the legislative process are to the vote or support in one or both Houses of Parliament (168 references in 98 media items). This is indicative of media interest in the political and ‘procedural’ aspects of the legislative process. Journalistic interest was drawn to these elements because the introduction of the bill was preceded by a political process in which the minister first did not find enough support for a bill introducing a loan system for Master’s students and then had to negotiate with opposition parties for almost half a year in order to come to an agreement. Because it was clear that the *VVD*, *PvdA*, *D66* and *GL* would support the bill in the Lower House – representatives of these parliamentary parties had signed the agreement – journalists referred to their support quite frequently. A headline in *NRC Handelsblad* is telling: “Criticism in abundance, but the loan system will get there” (Dekker, 2014). Journalists emphasized that the debate would not be exciting and discussed the critical comments that were voiced by opposition parties or interest groups. *Het Parool* wrote on the day of the first legislative debate in the Lower House: “Studying becomes more expensive; the basic grant will go down. The opposition in the House does one more attempt to

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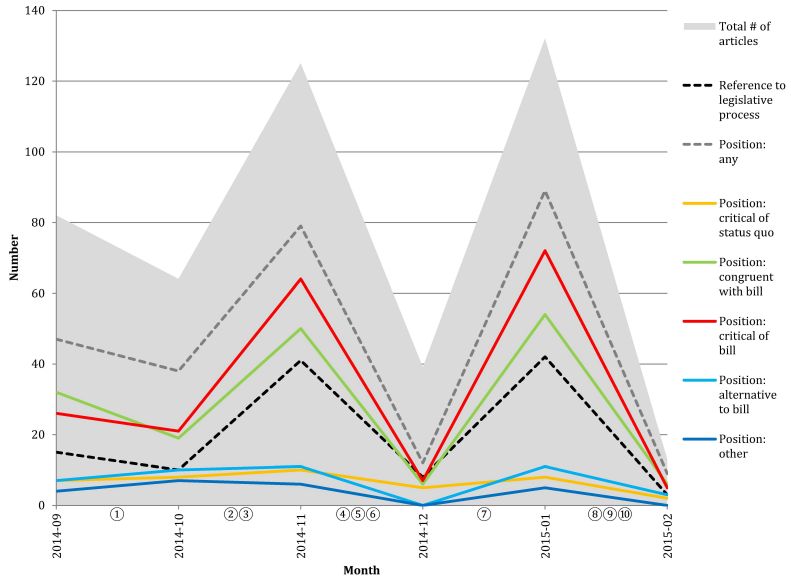
torpedo the plan. But *VVD*, *PvdA*, *D66* and *GroenLinks* persist. The battle between proponents and opponents of the bill is about image and time” (Duin, 2014).

Journalists were particularly interested in which parties would support the bill in the Upper House. The prior bill was put on hold and negotiations were started mainly because the coalition did not have majority support in the Upper House. The parliamentary party groups in the Senate were however not part of the negotiations, so it was not certain whether all four parties would support the bill in the Senate. Three developments even added to the journalistic interest for the Upper House.

Firstly, three days after the vote in the Lower House, there was a student demonstration in The Hague against the loan system. The students organizing this event targeted the Upper House; the vote in the Lower House was already taken.

Secondly, shortly before this bill was discussed in the Senate, a government bill about health care was rejected by the Upper House. This is highly unusual and this rare defeat was perceived by many as a blow for the cabinet (e.g. Niemantsverdriet, 2014). The student loan being the first bill that was put to vote since, journalists explain they closely monitored the developments; if a second bill would be defeated, it might cause a political or even cabinet crisis. As a journalist noted: “Will the Upper House refer another bill to the trash can? Opponents of the loan system for students smell blood: can the Senate, after the health care bill, also block the controversial proposal to replace the basic grant with a loan?” (Keultjes, 2015).

Thirdly, senator Koole of the *PvdA*, the party group that ‘caused’ the rejection of the health care bill, publicly criticized the loan system. In interviews Koole said that he had not decided what to vote yet: “Only after the answering by the minister, I will decide my vote. But I do oppose the over-the-top thinking in terms of efficiency” (Hendrickx, 2015). Because journalists found out only in a very late stage that there was political conflict about the health care bill, with this bill they were eager to follow the political developments closely and write about the potentially limited support in the Senate.



Note. The numbers in the figure indicate key moments in the legislative process.

Figure 5.1: Media attention in newspapers per month and key moments in parliament WSHO 2014-2015

Distribution of coverage

Media attention peaks around the debates and votes in both Houses of Parliament (see Figure 5.1). The total number of articles is about equally high in November 2014 and in January 2015 (grey area). The other phases of the legislative process are less newsworthy, which is reflected in the number of articles that contain references to the lawmaking process (black dashed line). There are clearly two peaks around the plenary debates in parliament (5 and 8), with about 40 bill-related articles. There is also media attention around the introduction of the bill in September (1). Media attention wanes in October when the committee phase, including a round table, takes place (2-3). In November most amendments are introduced and the

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debates and vote in the Lower House take place (4-5-6). A few days after this vote, a demonstration against the bill is organized. In the Upper House in December and early January 2015 the committee phase takes place including an expert meeting (7). This part of the process does not receive much journalistic interest. Journalistic interest increases with the legislative debates and vote in the Upper House (8-9), which are accompanied by substantial media coverage. Finally, the publication of the bill in the law gazette in February (10) is not reported.

The total number of references to the legislative process is arguably a conservative indicator of media attention: authors not always explicitly state that the topic they write or talk about is a particular bill. For example, in an opinion article in *De Telegraaf* the author criticizes the fact that the additional grant remains intact and mentions “the new loan system for students” (Janssen, 2014) without explicitly referring to the bill being debated in the Lower House. Something similar happens in journalistic articles, for instance in the *Nederlands Dagblad*: “The cabinet should explicitly take the effects of new policy plans on the debts of Dutch citizens into account, Schouten thinks. She refers to the loan system as an example” (Sloot, 2014). Such reports do not contain explicit references to the legislative process, although they do concern the content of the bill; the ‘study loan’ or ‘loan system’ had become familiar concepts over time. People usually referred to those concepts instead of for example to the ‘bill study loan’ or the ‘loan system law’, so there likely is de facto more attention for the lawmaking process than the number of bill-related articles presented in the graph shows.

Types of coverage

Throughout the process, about two thirds of all newspaper coverage contains at least one position (Figure 5.1; grey dashed line). Media coverage consists primarily of positions that are critical of the bill (red line) and positions that are congruent with the bill (green line). Few articles pay attention to positions that are critical of the status quo (yellow), that propose an alternative to an element of the bill (turquoise line), or to other positions (blue line). The positions that

are present concern a range of topics, but primarily touch the core of the bill, i.e. whether the loan system should be introduced or whether the basic grant should remain intact, and what the consequences will be for the accessibility and quality of higher education.

The coverage of the bill is primarily of an evaluative nature, containing positions from the two categories that are most frequently visible in the media, i.e. positions congruent with and critical of the bill. Articles often contain both phrases that discuss the measures the minister proposes with the bill, as well as comments from political or societal actors criticizing these measures. Parts of articles explain what the main policy measures in the bill are and what they mean for current and prospective students, and their parents. Therefore these articles contain positions that are considered congruent with the bill. The evaluative component contains judgments of and comments on the bill, predominantly in the form of critical positions. Sometimes this coverage refers to policy alternatives, but the emphasis is on the critique.

An example of such coverage is an article in the *Reformatorsch Dagblad*, the day after the introduction of the bill: “Minister Bussemaker (Education) introduced the long-awaited bill to replace the free basic grant by a loan yesterday. A flow of criticism developed, from the Council of State to student unions” (Redactie politiek, 2014). It subsequently discusses criticism voiced by the Council of State and comments by three student unions and four opposition parties. In closing, the article shortly mentions the parties that signed the agreement and support the bill, and a comment of a coalition MP. Overall, there is hardly any coverage that is predominantly informative about the content of the bill, except for some articles on the days after the bill passed the Senate.

In addition to journalistic articles providing a platform to critical voices, articles were published on the opinion pages of newspapers. In such articles representatives of interest groups and ordinary citizens comment on the bill; several columnists and journalists published their opinion. Sometimes opinions are critical: “The bill about the loan system is ill thought-out and hardly feasible, and does not contribute to the quality of higher education”, according to a

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Political party	Standing	Newspaper articles	Radio & television items
<i>PvdA</i>	Coalition	48	8
<i>D66</i>	Committed opposition	40	7
<i>GL</i>	Committed opposition	37	6
<i>VVD</i>	Coalition	25	6
<i>CDA</i>	Opposition	22	4
<i>CU</i>	Opposition	20	1
<i>SP</i>	Opposition	16	3
<i>PVV</i>	Opposition	7	0
<i>SGP</i>	Opposition	6	1
<i>OSF</i>	Opposition	1	0
<i>PvdD</i>	Opposition	1	0
<i>Klein</i>	Opposition	0	0
Total		223	36

Table 5.2: Political parties in media coverage (*WSHO*): number of items with at least one reference to party

professor of financial economy in *Metro* (Eijffinger, 2014). Some opinions are more supportive of the bill, although they often contain reservations, like a student who writes in an opinion article in *NRC Next* (Balduk, 2014): “I may be the only student in the Netherlands that says so, but I think the reforms are a blessing”. There are hardly any experts present in the media – except if you consider students and representatives of student organizations experts on the issue.

Visibility of political actors

Positions of political parties were visible in the media. Table 5.2 includes all parties that participated in the legislative process in the Lower and/or Upper House, ordered by the number of references in the newspapers.²⁸ Note that the parties that are mentioned most frequently in the newspapers are the same parties that are

²⁸ All parties are represented in both Houses of Parliament, except for *Klein* (only represented in the Lower House) and the *OSF* (only represented in the Upper House)

mentioned most often in radio and television items. Magazine articles did not refer to party positions and are not included in the table.

The four most frequently mentioned parties signed the agreement about the study loan: *VVD* and *PvdA* and the opposition parties *D66* and *GL*. Journalists often mentioned that these parties would support the bill and thereby create majority support (see also the frequent references to the support for and vote on the bill in Table 5.1). The relatively high number of references to the *PvdA* is due to the attention for the potentially dissident *PvdA* senator Koole. Of the opposition parties, *CDA*, *CU* and *SP* received most attention in newspapers. *SGP* and especially *CU* were mentioned relatively often, mainly by the two newspapers with a Christian character, i.e. *Nederlands Dagblad* and *Reformatorisch Dagblad*. The positions of opposition parties are often reported via quotes from MPs, mostly from the Lower House. In particular *CDA* MP Rog is quoted frequently.

The parties mentioned most often on radio and television are *PvdA*, *D66*, *GL* and *VVD*, followed by *CDA* and *SP*. Focusing on the visibility of the spokespeople of parties in the Lower House, we see that *CDA* MP Rog and *D66* MP Van Meenen are both interviewed in a radio show. There is a short interview with *SP* MP Van Dijk at the student demonstration, and parts of his contribution to the legislative debate are broadcasted in two items; there are radio interviews with the senators Koole (*PvdA*) and Ganzevoort (*GL*). Other actors present in the media are (former) representatives of a range of student organizations. However, in line with what we know from the literature, those with formal political power get most media attention (e.g. Bennett, 1996); the person invited and interviewed most often is the Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker (*PvdA*), who appeared in 13 radio and television items during the legislative process.

5.4.2 Behavior of political actors

This section answers the question if and how MPs respond to media attention. First, I discuss responses via parliamentary questions. The next part goes into the ways in which media attention was reflected

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in legislative reports and debates. Third, I discuss whether media attention has an effect on the introduction of motions and amendments.

Parliamentary questions

In this particular legislative process, media-inspired parliamentary questions (PQs) do not play an important role. During the process only two sets of PQs relevant to the topic of the bill were asked, both by *CDA* MP Rog. The first set is about the compatibility of the loan system with an international treaty and refers to an article published in an online university magazine. The second was introduced in response to coverage in the *NRC* and another online university magazine, shortly after the vote on the bill in the Lower House. In the months prior to the legislative process, three sets of PQs have a link with the bill, two of which refer to mass media coverage as the source and one to an online university magazine. In his questions, *SP* MP Van Dijk refers directly and extensively to the introduction of a loan system. The responses of the ministers to the two other sets contain references to the bill.

The reason for MPs to ask PQs seems to be to emphasize the consequences of the proposals and strengthen one's own critical position. One of the MPs explains he asked the questions "in this case to reveal the consequences of the accursed loan system, also towards of course the elections later on, in which we will again take a position on that". Another argues: "If as a politician, you say: 'a loan system is bad, because students will get higher debts', and you read it in the newspaper the next day, than you pose parliamentary questions and in fact say: look, minister, it's not just me saying this. The newspaper also says it, and the students say it as well."

The fact that there were not many PQs about the issue is likely to be related to the relative short duration of the legislative process, i.e. less than five months. In that short period and because of the ample journalistic attention for the issue, MPs did not need PQs to draw attention to their position or get information from the minister.

Legislative reports and debates

There is congruence between the positions in the media and in parliament. As was already touched upon (see subsection 5.4.1), not all positions from the legislative reports and debates are reflected in the media, but a rather large range of sub-debates is mentioned in the media. Most positions refer to the core of the bill, i.e. the desirability of a study loan system. Both in the media and in parliament all five categories (see subsection 2.3.4) of positions are present, but some more than others. In particular alternatives to elements of the bill are relatively less present in the media than in parliament.

The committee phase in the Lower House consisted of a round table and two legislative reports with ministerial responses. The round table was organized by the parliamentary committee on Education, Science and Culture; all committee members could propose guests to invite to this session. Media attention played a role in one of the invitations. On the initiative of VVD MP Duisenberg a student was invited to this meeting, because this student wrote an opinion article in which he supported the loan system, in the *Volkskrant* on June 3, 2014 (*Herziene convocatie rondetafelgesprek wetsvoorstel studievoorschot*, 2014).

The content analysis provides indications that in the Lower House MPs asked questions in legislative reports about topics because of prior media coverage. In the second legislative report, the *SP* does so explicitly as they “wonder whether the government has taken note of the article *Actiegroep helpt Amerikanen van zware studieschulden af*” (*Nader verslag Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014, p.2), an article that was published two days earlier in *Nederlands Dagblad*. The *SP* also asks for a governmental response to research that shows that “37% of the current Bachelor’s students does not know they will not receive a basic grant anymore for their Master’s”, referring to an article on the website of a local newspaper (*Nader verslag Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014, p. 9). And third, the *SP* asks how the government justifies its position that studying is a good investment in one’s future “when looking at the recent media coverage that three quarters of both *hbo’ers* and *wo’ers* will experience difficulties in finding paid jobs” (*Nader verslag Wet*

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studievoorschot hoger onderwijs, 2014, p. 3).

In line with the general expectation that members of opposition parties can use the media better than members of coalition parties (e.g. Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013), the *SP* is not the only party that refers to media coverage: the other active opposition party *CDA* behaves similarly. The *CDA* refers to an article on a university magazine website that shows students will have to pay more money when interest rates are higher (*Nader verslag Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014, p. 46), and refers explicitly to recent newspapers coverage: “Can the government also indicate whether she is familiar with the article by Leo Prick in the *NRC* of Saturday 25 October, in which he demonstrates in clear calculations that the repayment of study debts will fall short? Can the government explain her vision on this article” (*Nader verslag Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014, p. 49). The minister responds to these media-based questions in her written answers. Overall, however, the number of explicit media references in the committee phase of the Lower House is limited, considering the fact that over a thousand questions have been asked. Moreover, in the committee phase of the Upper House, there are no explicit references to media coverage at all.

Media attention plays a role in the legislative debates in both Houses of Parliament. It is mainly used by opposition MPs to put pressure on the minister, a coalition MP or an MP from one of the committed opposition parties. In the words of an opposition MP: “What you do is (...) making every effort to [use] what is uncomfortable for the coalition”. A coalition MP explains that media coverage was not very useful for him: “The newspapers didn’t really write things that helped me, so there was not much to quote, really.” In the Lower House, MPs from the *PVV* and *CU* refer to a statement by the minister in the television program *WNL op Zondag* on the Sunday before the first legislative debate took place, namely that the basic grant was out-of-date. This was a sensitive statement, because the minister also argued that in the past the basic grant made higher education accessible for large groups of citizens. Referring to this statement was a way for the MPs to get the minister to repeat inside parliament what she said in the media before, because thereby the

statement would become part of the legislative history. *PVV* MP Beertema uses an opinion article by Leo Prick, that the *CDA* referred to as well, to criticize *D66*. *SP* MP Van Dijk refers to the media and media coverage seven times during the debate. For example, he uses a newspaper article published on the day of the legislative debate, to illustrate his fundamental critique that abolishing the basic grant will result in fewer students: “Read for example *Trouw* of today. In that newspaper there is a story of a mother who says: if the basic grant is dropped, we’re just not going to do it; in that case I wouldn’t have studied myself and for my children it will be an enormous problem, because the costs will end up on my plate.” Van Dijk uses this to put pressure on *PvdA* MP Mohandis: “Mister Mohandis thus charges the parents” (*Behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014-2015b, p. 14). Van Dijk uses other media references to criticize the minister, *GL* and *D66*, by referring to a television item and to various recent and older articles published in *de Volkskrant*.

There is an interesting media-politics interaction concerning *CDA* MP Rog. In his contribution to the debate, Rog refers to a media statement of the minister. Other MPs ask Rog questions about a media performance by himself. On the morning of the first legislative debate, an interview with Rog was published in *De Telegraaf*, wherein he argues that it will become too easy for students to borrow money from the government and that this has negative consequences for the budget and for the level of investment in higher education. Both *PvdA* MP Mohandis and *GL* MP Klaver refer to the article and ask Rog questions about it. One MP explains he referred to the article and not to the underlying document Rog shared with all MPs, “because I expect people to have rather read an article in the newspaper than a calculation”.

Later in the debate, the journalist that interviewed Rog published a follow-up article on the website of *De Telegraaf* in which, amongst others, Van Ojik, the party leader of *GL*, is quoted. Rog immediately confronts *GL* MP Klaver with his statement: “The party leader of *GroenLinks* just said in *De Telegraaf* that the state may indeed have to pay a lot of money for students that borrow a lot and take a long time for their studies. He calls that the social [element] of the system. I

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don't think there is anything social about that, but he does. For the treasury that may indeed become a problem, mister Van Ojik says. (..) Can mister Klaver acknowledge here that it is because of him that we are stuck with a system in which it is rewarding to run up debts?" (*Behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014-2015a, p. 49). A discussion develops and eventually Klaver concludes: "I appreciate *De Telegraaf* as the best read newspaper of the Netherlands – for a moment I wanted to say 'quality newspaper' – and I appreciate the journalist of this newspaper, who always loyally sits on the gallery to follow us, especially on this dossier. He is probably writing at this very moment. In the article mentioned, statements are written that suggest something should be amended. I don't think that is in order, so I cannot go into that" (*Behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014-2015a, p. 49).

Media coverage plays a less prominent role during the debates in the Upper House, but one interruption concerns *PvdD* senator Koffeman's assessment of prior and future media coverage. Koffeman argues that since the government has to search for coalitions to get majority support in the Senate, senators are not judging the bill based on its content only. According to him party discipline is used in an attempt to bind senators to agreements made in the Lower House. Koffeman continues: "The foregoing caused that the reporting about this bill in the media has narrowed to the question whether three or more members of the *PvdA*, *D66* or *GroenLinks* in this House can be found that will vote against this bill during the voting by call this evening. If that is the case, than the coverage in the coming days will be dominated by the question whether the voting behavior of the so-called dissidents could be related to the opportunities they did or did not get from their party for a second term" (*Voortzetting behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014-2015, p. 17). *GL* senator Ganzevoort states to experience this as a personal attack and asks whether Koffeman has indications that he is not judging the bill on its content. Koffeman: "There are a lot of signs in the media. The media thus experience that in this House the agreements made on the other side [in the Lower House] will be followed". Ganzevoort: "Are the media more important to mister Koffeman than the integrity

of his fellow senators?” Koffeman: “This is certainly no attack on the integrity of my colleagues. However, I do find that for a number of parties it has been determined beforehand in the media, also in conversations with representatives of those parties, that they will vote for the bill, despite the fact that they have been very critical about it” (*Voortzetting behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014-2015, p. 17).

This political confrontation is illustrative for the way in which media coverage played a role in the Senate. As already discussed (see subsection 5.4.1), the coverage in the weeks prior to the plenary debates in the Upper House had a strong political focus. Because of the earlier rejection of a health care bill, that addressed amongst others the so-called ‘free choice of doctors’, journalists were very interested in the voting behavior of the senators. On December 30, 2014, after the rejection of the health care bill, but before the debate about the study loan, *De Telegraaf* published a full-page advertisement by five student organizations that said: “We are looking for 3 heroes in the Upper House that want to stop the loan system. We know you are there! Speak up, stop the loan system!”. As one of the senators argues: “What happened in that phase, (...) shortly after the [bill on] the free choice of doctors, the idea came into being that it would very well be possible that it will be much more critical and tense than we expected previously. Immediately all journalists come.”

Indeed, various journalists argue that their interest was at least partly due to the prior rejection of the health care bill. A newspaper journalist explains he followed this phase of the legislative process more intensely than the debates in the Lower House, “..because there were hints, from the Lower House and from societal organizations that were opposed to the bill, that they hoped there would be senators, like with the free choice of doctors, that dared to be dissidents”. Interestingly, he did not expect this bill to be rejected. “I wrote this piece, but I remember that it was less tense than with the free choice of doctors. Everybody did have the expectation that it would nevertheless [pass]”, he argues. “Maybe that as a journalist you hoped a little bit, not because you have an interest in it, but just

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because it is nice, because you just experienced it with the free choice of doctors, that (..) there would again be such a situation". According to another senator, the media coverage and the speculations about the degree of support for the loan system "had an effect on the atmosphere, there was a certain tension".

PvdD senator Koffeman also refers to the fact that shortly before the debate it was decided at a party congress of the *PvdA* that senator Koole and some of his colleagues were unlikely to be reelected because of their low position on the list of candidates. It was suggested that this might result in not following the party line – supporting the bill – because they did not have much to lose. In addition to the attention for the fact that Koole was critical of the bill as such, there was some attention for the specific content of his critique, i.e. the focus on 'the investing student' and on the performance of students (*'rendementsdenken'*) instead of on what Koole called 'the responsible student', who is responsible for his or her own living costs but also has a responsibility towards society. This media attention is noticed by all senators and was referred to in the legislative debate. This happened rather implicitly, for example when *VVD* senator Bruijn says about the criteria that are used as financing parameters: "They unarguably have adverse effects, leading to understandable criticism – I also look at the *PvdA* – about over the top *rendementsdenken'*" (*Behandeling Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs, 2014-2015b, p. 9*). According to one senator, it is obvious to act upon such media coverage: "If you read something like this, that he [Koole] is worried about that, then of course you read that very carefully. (..) And then you do something with it, of course."

In both Houses of Parliament, MPs followed very carefully what was published in the media about the study loan, during the legislative process but also prior to that. Media coverage was considered to be most useful by Lower House MPs; they have the right to propose amendments and motions and can change the content of the bill. Although in this particular case they do not indicate that the media were an important, autonomous source of information, all MPs monitor the media. "The media have here and there put the spotlight on parts of the study finance, like the medical

students, or the top sportsmen, and that is of course also the task of the media, to be the spokesperson of what is going on in society”, a Lower House MP explains.

Media coverage however did not contain much novel information for MPs. Most MPs had been spokespeople on the issue for a long time already and there had been debate about student grants for years. MPs had ample research at their disposal; interest groups and individual citizens approached them with information; they discussed the topic with people from their own party; and they invited experts and people from the field to expert meetings. Also, the lack of new information was due to the content of the media coverage, which was primarily directed towards the political process. An MP explains: “Often it is very different, but in this specific case, I was already very familiar with the topic, and I very much chose my sources. There are a lot of other bills where you really use the media as a source of information that feeds you. But to be honest, I haven’t had that here.” Because the opinions of most parties were clear and fixed in an early phase of the process, media coverage did not change parties’ positions. It only confirmed their opinions – which shows that political actors view media from a particular perspective and see the things they want to see, and also that the debate was polarized without much room for parties to adjust their existing positions.

The strongest effect the media had on legislative debates was the strategic and rhetoric use of coverage. “To reinforce our own position, and to emphasize the differences of opinion. That is what it’s about, of course: politics is creating an image”, one MP states. Another argues that media coverage has been helpful: “Journalists have (...) cooperated very well. They for example went to interview students, and you can read that back in the debate. *De Volkskrant* for example had portraits of young people (...) who said: if this [bill] is passed, I will not go to university anymore. Somebody like that in the newspaper can be used very well to strengthen your plea. Because if a Member of Parliament says something, that’s just one thing, but if a youngster, a victim, says it, that is of course much stronger.” According to another MP, an article he referred to “was a good source, because what he did fitted the frame that I came up with.” One of the

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Lower House MPs summarize the media's role in the debate as follows: "It was appropriate that it caused a great deal of controversy in the media, and that this media coverage had an influence on our debate. Not with regards to my position, but with regards to my coloring, with regards to my choice of examples and some accents."

Introduction of amendments

The content analysis and the interviews do not provide evidence for a direct relationship between media coverage during the legislative process and the introduction of motions or amendments. None of the proposals to change the bill were an immediate response to a newspaper article or radio or television item. With regards to only one amendment the media may have played a subtle role; it was one of the sources of information that inspired the MP to write it. This amendment to partly cancel the debt of medical students was in part inspired by articles about the situation of these students in the months prior to the introduction of the bill. The MP argues: "I cannot mention one specific moment, like: this article caused this amendment, but is it a reciprocal process. (...) At a certain point that group of students [started] emailing me, writing articles in the newspapers. And then, at some point, you pick it up and acknowledge, okay, this is an issue, we have to do something with it."

With regards to the motions introduced in the Upper House, there is no relationship with prior media coverage at all. In the Lower House media attention may have played a role with regards to a single motion. MPs in the Lower House from parties that supported the bill mention that they have responded to the image in the media that the accessibility of higher education was in danger and that some people, in particular children from families where it is not obvious to go to college or university, were scared to contract a study loan. An MP: "That played a role for me, to insist on good information and on monitoring". He calls it the '*Rog-Van Dijk-effect*', referring to the MPs from *CDA* and *SP* respectively who according to this MP fueled the media: "This kind of media coverage, that is somewhat tendentious in my view, plays a role in what people think." On the one hand, these MPs were worried that this coverage would become a

self-fulfilling prophecy: journalists provided a platform to those saying that people might decide not to go to university, so some people would indeed decide not to do so. On the other hand, several MPs acknowledged that it was impossible to predict what the consequences of the bill would be. Therefore they wanted to monitor the effects early and precisely. Eventually the committed opposition parties and the coalition parties introduced a joint motion in which they requested monitoring of the consequences of the bill for specific groups of students after four years.

Also relevant are the official promises (*'toezeggingen'*) from the minister that were requested in the Senate. These promises are part of the legislative history and relevant to the law. Senators from various parties asked the minister to take things into consideration, resulting in 16 promises by the minister that were officially documented. One of these promises was requested by opposition party *CDA*, one by opposition party *CU* and coalition party *PvdA*; all other promises were requested by one or more of the four agreement parties. These promises cover a broad range of issues, varying from the promise to use the term 'responsible student' instead of 'investing student', to the promise to consult deans of Bachelor studies about students' move to Master studies. A majority of promises is related to the major debate about the bill: whether introduction of the loan system decreases the accessibility of higher education. This was also one of the main topics in the media coverage about the bill and for several senators it seems to have reinforced their urge to ask for a promise. "I remember that at a certain moment the fear that a lot of students would not go to university because of the loan system was in the media, so: the accessibility," a senator explains. "Well, that is an important signal. So then you delve deeper into that, and check what that fear is based on". It was not a reason to change position, "but we have (...) asked for an evaluation of the bill, in which this would specifically be taken into account". Another explains that media coverage was "not one-on-one" related to his requests, but that "in the media, you encounter again the voices that you also sat around the table with as stakeholders, or that you hear things that were already said in the Lower House. So, in part, the media repeat what

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you already know, magnify certain elements, and thereby shape the opinion in a certain direction". There is thus no direct link between media coverage and the requests towards the minister make promises with regards to elements of the bill, but media coverage reinforced concerns about the potential consequences of the bill.

5.4.3 Feedback loop: the politics-media influence

The content analysis shows that media coverage is related to the legislative process, but not focused on the actual content of the bill (see subsection 5.4.1). Journalists mainly pay attention to the political game, e.g. the heat of the debate in both Houses of Parliament and the political support for and resistance to the bill. The positions of members of the coalition and committed opposition parties are usually described by journalists; those of opposition parties are often reported via quotes from MPs, mostly from the Lower House. It is unlikely that those MPs were quoted against their will; in fact, it could very well be that politicians actively sought such media coverage.

The analysis of the interview data shows that there is a difference in behavior of members of the two Houses of Parliament. None of the senators has approached journalists. They emphasize that this is something they almost never do. "It really doesn't suit us here, to seek the media," a senator argues. "It really has to do with the fact that we are the *chambre de réflexion*. So we are really not here to sensation-hungry try to find a platform". Another says: "Usually I am somewhat reserved, and don't seek out for it. When I am being called, yes, then I wait and see. Generally, we don't look for publicity". A third senator does not consider approaching journalists, "because I don't believe it is instrumental. Look, when I'm being approached by a journalist, I always think in accordance with any media training, chapter one, page one: do I have a message to bring?".

There has been contact between journalists and senators, but only on the journalists' initiative. Journalistic interest was directed towards senators of the parties that signed the agreement: they were necessary for the bill to get majority support in the Senate. One of the

opposition senators explains: “That really has to do with the fact that they are very interested in the game, much more than in the content. And that means it is not that interesting for them to ask us [what we think], because they know what our position is.” The senators who were approached by journalists before the bill was put to the vote either did not cooperate because they wanted to await the ministerial response to their questions and remarks, or they did cooperate because they wanted to create visibility for their parties’ position. And some believe it was instrumental to get media coverage before the legislative debates took place: “The intra-parliamentary and extra-parliamentary game are intertwined. And the direct communication with the government inside the House is one of your instruments, and the communication via the media is another instrument. So it is not just a matter of, let’s inform the media and thereby the country about what is happening, because then you could also say, let’s wait a few days and then you’ll know. These are for each of us also instruments to influence the political game inside the House”, a senator explains.

For some parties media coverage was useful to try to get things done, but media attention was not an isolated instrument. In particular the parties that were expected to support the bill had direct contact with the ministry, via the formal channels within the legislative process as well as via informal consultation. Still, some MPs were happy to participate in interviews and get media coverage, first and foremost to create visibility to communicate with the general public, but also to communicate with other political actors, including the minister.

In the Lower House the picture is different: the contact between journalists and politicians is more frequent and initiated by both sides. The main motivation mentioned by MPs is again creating visibility, i.e. to give account to voters and to a wider audience. “The most important thing is that you want to make your position public”, an MP states. But Lower House MPs perceive media coverage also as an instrument to influence the legislative debate. They take into account the way journalists work: “You are kind of trained, as a Member of Parliament, you become more skillful. So you think: how

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can I, as short as possible, in a few words if possible, still get my message across? Because newspapers, they only write down two sentences about what you think.” An MP describes what his contact with two journalists he initiated looked like: “I contacted them, because it was an interesting new point. And it sounded good. (...) In consultation with my press officer, I chose broad media. (...) You look for media where you think your point lands best.” Once the journalists showed interest, the MP kept in touch with them and decided on a strategy. “Of course I have discussed everything one-on-one with [them], and also agreed on who would be first (...), and then the other would do it as well. And yes, we had contact the whole time”.

Getting coverage in the direct run-up to a legislative debate is considered an efficient way to influence the topics that are discussed. An opposition MP explains how it works: “It can help to strengthen your position in the debate. If I send out a press release (...), and it is in the newspaper, than it has impact. Then all other MPs read it, and the minister reads it as well. And then she says: ‘Well, I have seen what Mr. X wrote in *de Volkskrant* this morning, and I disagree’. (...) So the messages in the media play a role in the debate”. An opposition MP argues that for him media appearances are aimed at being visible, but also that he hoped they would impact the support for the bill. “You want to make clear what the position of your party is, and show that you are serious about it. (...) And if you really disagree with something, it is important to become issue owner, by approaching the media a lot. And at the same time, you always have the hope that you can find a gap in the coalition. I never cherished illusions about finding one in the Lower House. But I have always directed my statements towards what we call here ‘the other side’”, i.e. the Upper House.

Journalistic interest was not equally distributed over Lower House MPs: journalists were primarily interested in the supporting parties and the largest parties opposing the bill. MPs of smaller opposition parties were aware of this and did not attempt to get journalistic attention for their position, amendments or motions. According to one of these MPs, the lack of interest is due to the size of

their parliamentary party as well as to their position: “If you take a furious position, that is of course much more interesting for the press than when you have a nuanced story to tell. It is difficult to bring such a nuanced story to the attention of the media. It sounds much better when it is said, ‘political party: demolition of higher education has started’. (...) But you will not hear us say that, because it’s not what we think. (...) And then you see that in the media, [our] position falls away. That is the price you pay”. Several journalists admit that they were really only interested in the four parties supporting the bill and not even in the positions of the larger opposition parties, because they were “not necessary for the majority”.

Next to some contacts between journalists and politicians on the initiative of the latter, journalists frequently contacted Lower House MPs. MPs were usually happy to participate in interviews, for various reasons. First of all, parties that signed the agreement and supported the bill agreed to participate in order to make sure the coverage of the bill was accurate. An MP that was contacted to explain the content of the bill was willing to respond, “because students have a right to know what the facts are, instead of the agreement and disagreement of a member of the coalition and a member of the opposition. The system will be introduced, what does that mean for students, and what should you take into consideration. I believe that is something that is necessary”. This MP was in continuous contact with journalists during the legislative process. “They attend the debate, they text you: ‘Is it true what you are saying?’. At a certain point I got almost pitchforked as the expert of the system. (...) If you’re so into the system, you also get [such] questions from journalists. Because they just don’t want to write something down that is incorrect”.

MPs from the supporting parties agreed to interviews to emphasize elements of the bill that were successful outcomes of the negotiations from their perspective. Each party wanted to have coverage of these parts of the new system they protected or introduced. “I often went to journalists [to say] hey, do you know that this-and-that is an issue. And sometimes it was just, trying to [show] that certain successes in the negotiation turned in my direction”, one of the MPs explains. Another explains that he accepted an invitation

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to be in a radio program because “it was a good opportunity to tell our own story. That was the idea behind it, and I think that’s what I did”. Overall, MPs in the media wanted to show the public what they were doing. “We are nothing without the media. Every politician should be honest about that. Without the media everything that is happening in this building would remain secret. Instead of that, we want to tell the outside world what we think, and therefore the media are very important, to spread our points of view”.

In sum, most political actors have tried to get or influence media coverage about the bill. Senators primarily responded to requests from journalists, however; in the Lower House there was more real interaction between politicians and journalists, with both parties approaching each other frequently. Politicians in both Houses of Parliament did so primarily to create visibility for their perspectives and positions, but also to try to influence the topics that are being discussed and the direction of legislative debate about the study loan system.

5.4.4 Legislative outcome

In the Lower House, a total of 51 motions and amendments were introduced to the bill (see section 5.2). The latter are parliamentary amendments; no government amendments were introduced. As the analysis in subsection 5.4.2 showed, two exceptions aside, there was no direct relationship between media coverage and the introduction of motions and amendments. Only two media items refer to amendments – without literally mentioning ‘amendments’ – and no motions were discussed in the media. Even when looking at more general relevant topics that are discussed in the media, the content analysis does not indicate that there is a relationship between media coverage and support for motions and amendments. Moreover, the interviews confirm that media coverage did not influence the support for change proposals in the Lower House. Which motions and amendments were passed was dependent on political context: those proposals that were introduced by (one of) the parties that signed the agreement received majority support, the others did not.

Two amendments that were introduced by non-committed opposition parties did pass. One amendment, introduced by *Klein*, proposed indexing the value of the vouchers for current students; the other, introduced by the *SGP*, proposed to legally separate the basic financing of higher education from the proposed complementary financing on the basis of the so-called system of ‘quality-financing’. The minister did not advise against these amendments, in contrast to all other opposition amendments, but wrote that she respectively “leaves the judgment about this amendment to the House” and “is in principle favorable to this amendment” (*Schriftelijke reactie op amendementen ingediend bij het voorstel voor de Wet studievoorschot hoger onderwijs*, 2014). Both amendments never received media coverage. The amendments that were covered in two media items were not passed by the Lower House.

The three motions introduced by the *CDA* in the Senate did not pass. Again, there is no relationship between media coverage and support for the motions. The motions as such received no media coverage, but two motions addressed topics that had been in the media, i.e. the bill’s consequences for students of masters’ programs of more than one year and the transitional arrangement for current students.

It is difficult to judge whether the promises made by the minister in the Upper House are related to media coverage. There is no reason to believe that minister Bussemaker would not have made those promises without the media coverage. However, in view of the fact that the ministry closely monitored the media and because in the Senate, according to one departmental actor, “the approach route during the debate in the House was particularly to give comfort to the coalition parties”, it is likely that media coverage increased the pressure to make a promise. Note that ‘media coverage’ here does not refer to specific items or articles, but to media attention over a longer period of time. A senator explains that in the media he voiced his main concerns, but did not disclose his voting behavior “to increase the pressure (..) on the minister, (..) so I can try to adjust things a little bit in the direction I prefer”. The issues he raised were not new, but by emphasizing it in the media “you keep it warm”. Similarly,

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another senator explains his media performances as a deliberate attempt to communicate with the minister about the issues his party wanted promises on. “It is also substantial, or strategic, however you want to call it. There are a number of things that I want from the minister. So I am not going to say in advance, well, minister, it’s ok. (..) Repeating it every time to whichever journalist that wants to know, is also meant to make clear in the end to the ministry: these are our criteria. So that she does not only hear it via the House, but also via the press. Then she knows that I not only said it, but also that other people know I said it. (..) So in that sense you also use the media to mark your position.” The relationship between media coverage and the formal ministerial promises is summarized by a senator as follows: “Regarding the promises, I’m not sure whether Bussemaker is that sensitive to public opinion, or the pressure from it. So I don’t know, but let me say that the total package of intra-parliamentary and extra-parliamentary pressure, including the media, and including the stakeholders and the like, I don’t think it is possible to fully disentangle them. (..) But that whole complex has had an influence on the balance that is eventually found, on the outcome”.

Regarding the eventual support for the bill in parliament, there is no evidence of strong media influence. The four parties that signed the preceding agreement on the study loan are also the parties that voted in favor of the bill in the Senate. In the Lower House, additional support came from two one-man factions. There are no parties in parliament that fundamentally changed their position during the process. The fact that it was such a long-standing political debate seems to be relevant here: parties positioned themselves on the issue in an early stage. The minister negotiated with a broad range of parties in order to see whether she could get support for the introduction of the loan system, not just with the parties that eventually signed the agreement. Preparing for these negotiations, parties already developed their position. An MP explains: “Because we had meetings with Bussemaker, the minister, in the preparatory phase, we actually took up our ideas before all this became a discussion and got publicity, thus before the spring of 2014. I don’t remember any issues that I ran into (..), that we haven’t thought about

before, and [because of which] we should reconsider our assessment”.

If media coverage had any effect on the ultimate decision of parties on whether or not to support the new study loan system, it was by reinforcing and strengthening their position. Media coverage of various interest groups, particularly student organizations, reinforced the concerns of opposition parties. An opposition MP argues: “It reinforces each other. If I say: the loan system is a bad idea. And if the [student union] *LSVb* then writes an article in the newspaper that says: ‘the loan system is a bad idea’, then of course I feel strengthened. [It is] a kind of backing: look, it is also in the newspaper, these students also say it. So it is a constant process of media and politics influencing each other”.

In the Upper House, media coverage also had a reinforcing effect on parties’ positions. One of the senators calls it “informative in the sense that it confirms what you already thought and think is up for discussion. There you also see responses from readers, opinion pieces that confirm your opinion. You take that into account. And if they are different, than you think, well, everyone can have their own opinion. It is primarily about the general tendency around a bill. If the general tendency is that people are scared to contract a loan and because of that abandon their studies, if you can get that out of the media, than that is relevant”. The fact that voting by call was requested by a *CDA* senator is related to media coverage: once it became clear via the media that there was pressure on the four parties to support the bill, this opposition party hoped that a vote by call would cause some members of those parties to vote against the bill – which is what had happened with the health care bill. In particular because media attention in this phase of the process was focused on the question whether the bill would pass, in particular MPs from *PvdA* and *GL* may have experienced some pressure. “I think that for people in the party who want to vote differently, it makes it much more difficult to make their voices heard,” an opposition senator argues.

Another senator suggests that the media coverage had an indirect effect: it encouraged citizens to become active. “The media hammer on [the fact that] only three people need to be persuaded, and the bill

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won't make it. Then people start thinking, hey, it makes sense to target the Upper House. Insofar the media contribute, because they can increase the pressure". However, during the debate it became clear that it was unlikely for the bill to be rejected; it likely would be too harmful for the *PvdA* and for the government coalition if for the second time within a few weeks deviant voting behavior of a small number of senators would cause a government bill to be voted down. According to one senator, "If there has been such an incident, you feel that it is the main priority of the *PvdA* not to let that happen again. Because then the image to the outside world is that it is chaos. (..) I believe that the ample media coverage for that previous debate (..) has considerably influenced this debate. Because they wanted to avoid at any cost that something similar would happen again". A senator from one of the other supporting parties explains that the media served as a source of information about the criticism from *PvdA* senator Koole: "Those are the things that you hear a lot about via the media. Let me put it like this: they are looking for [political] fuss". However, it did not lead to serious worries about majority support for the bill. "In that period, to be honest, I never got the feeling that it would become very problematic. No".

When asked whether the media and media coverage influenced the legislative outcome, the responses of MPs in both Houses are unanimously negative. "The debate does not get a fundamentally different course because of it", a senator argues. An MP says: "It has not resulted in a different law, or something like that". The political context has been decisive with regards to this legislative process. Because the bill was based on a political agreement signed by four parties from the Lower House, the bill was not like any other bill. A precarious political balance was constructed that needed to be kept intact; changing one fundamental element of the bill at the wish of one of the parties would endanger the delicate balance: "The die was cast, and that was very clear".

5.5 Conclusion and discussion

This third case study contains an in-depth analysis of whether and how media coverage influenced the lawmaking process that resulted in the introduction of a new student loan system in the Netherlands as of September 2015. The analysis of media coverage, parliamentary documents and interviews with various relevant actors shows that media attention may have influenced the process, but did not have fundamental consequences for the process or legislative outcome.

The bill was introduced in September 2014 by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science Bussemaker (*PvdA*), but in fact was the result of a political agreement between *VVD*, *PvdA*, *D66* and *GL* in the Lower House of Parliament. Throughout the legislative process this agreement was decisive for the political decisions made. Party positions were fixed, and since most spokespeople had dealt with the topic for quite a while, media coverage did not contain new information they felt like they had to do something with. Media coverage may have directed politicians' attention to specific topics, but it never served as an autonomous source of influential information.

Media coverage was used by MPs, in particular in the Lower House, but only to strengthen their position and/or to attack political opponents. Political actors used existing media coverage in this way; some MPs tried to create media coverage. Some Lower House MPs approached journalists; MPs in both Houses enthusiastically accepted journalistic requests. The primary reason to do so was to create visibility for their party, to communicate their position to the public at large and to their voters in particular. At the same time, for some MPs it was a deliberate attempt to influence the legislative debate, and maybe even to influence policy content. Whereas it was certain that the bill would pass the Lower House, because of the preceding agreement, several opposition MPs hoped for rejection in the Upper House. These hopes were reinforced when a governmental bill on health care was rejected by the Senate shortly before the vote on the study loan bill. Journalistic attention for the (lack of) support in the Upper House expanded as a result. This increased the pressure

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on the four parties to vote in favor of the bill, in particular on the *PvdA*, the party of which three senators had voted against the health care bill. The fact that a *PvdA* senator voiced critical comments further increased speculations on the possibility that this bill might be rejected as well.

Media attention was used by some senators of the ‘supporting parties’ to emphasize that they were not very happy with the bill and to ask for formal promises by the minister. She was requested to adjust her communication style and to pay attention to specific groups of students in the evaluation of the bill, among other things. In the Lower House, media attention was not used in this way. However, in both Houses of Parliament MPs from supporting parties responded to criticism about the consequences of the loan system for the accessibility of higher education in the Netherlands. This criticism was present in the media, but also in other sources of information at MPs’ disposal. This increased the urge of Lower House MPs from the committed parties for early and precise monitoring of the bill, resulting in the introduction and support for a motion with such content. Generally speaking, however, media coverage has not substantively influenced the legislative outcome. No amendments that fundamentally changed the bill were passed in response to media coverage; the parties that were expected to support the bill because of the agreement did so in both Houses of Parliament. The media’s role during the legislative process in parliament was limited.

This case study shows that ample media coverage is not a sufficient condition for major influence on a bill. MPs monitored the media and took coverage into consideration when preparing for the debates about the bill, but it did not change their ideas or behavior. On the contrary, most MPs felt that media coverage only strengthened their position. This concurs with the finding that politicians respond to media coverage when the framing is right to reach their pre-established policy goals (Van der Pas, 2014). In sum, media coverage played a role in this legislative process, primarily as one of the sources of information for political actors. In the end, however, this coverage did not have major consequences for the law. The deal was done earlier, even before the bill was introduced to parliament.