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

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Chapter 7

Conclusion and discussion

7.1 The media's role in lawmaking

“The press keeps a check on [those in] power, is the thorn in the side. That is the point of departure. But politicians and journalists often have common interests. The politician wants attention for his bill, and the journalist is looking for news. And then the distinction between ‘thorn’ and ‘side’ is sometimes suddenly lost” (NTR, 2011). These words by journalist Coen Verbraak, expressed in the Dutch television series “Looking inside the soul: Politicians” (*Kijken in de ziel: Politici*), suggest a strong relationship between journalists and politicians in the context of lawmaking. Does the available empirical evidence confirm that the media play an important role in legislative processes?

There is scholarly consensus that media and politics are intertwined and that politicians and journalists mutually influence each other (e.g. Sellers, 2010; Wolfsfeld, 2011). Political communication research has generated studies demonstrating and explaining the mediatization of politics (e.g. Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008). In addition

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to research about media effects on the public, scholars have devoted attention to the political agenda setting power of the media (e.g. McCombs, 2004; Midtbø *et al.*, 2014; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2014). The issue attention of the media influences the topics that are discussed by governments and parliaments. The people whom it directly concerns perceive this relationship in a similar way: politicians consider the media to be very powerful (e.g. Davis, 2007; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011, p. 308; Walgrave, 2008) and journalists themselves, to a more limited degree, also perceive the media to be influential (Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014).

The overwhelming amount of research conveys an impression that all politics is mediatized. The concept 'politics' however delineates many things, and not all types of political processes have been studied to the same extent. Moreover, scholars have become aware that media effects are contingent on a number of factors and that such effects are stronger on symbolical than on substantial political agendas (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The media may affect the symbolic behavior of politicians, e.g. what they say in speeches (Reinemann, 2014), more than the substance of politics, e.g. the issues new policies are proposed about. However, there is no principal or fundamental reason to believe that the media's influence on politics stops when it comes to substantial politics. The same goes for the timing of media effects: if media affect political agendas, they may as well influence later stages of the policy process (Cook, 1989; Soroka *et al.*, 2013).

Research further suggests that the media may affect the duration of legislative processes (Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Wolfe, 2012), but in particular outside the US context political communication scholars have "devoted little time and energy in examining the policy connection of media effects" (Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner, 2013, p. 176). This leaves several important questions unanswered. How about the parliamentary legislative processes? Is the behavior of elected representatives in parliament affected by the media when discussing a bill? Does media coverage have consequences for legislative outcomes? The aim of this study was to explore whether and how media coverage influences the functioning of legislative

processes and the content of laws. The main research question is: does media coverage play a role in legislative processes, and if so, how?

7.1.1 A negligible impact on legislative outcomes

I focused on lawmaking in the Netherlands, and because so little is known about media and lawmaking - in particular in a non-American context - the first thing we needed to know was what media coverage for lawmaking looks like. Research suggests that such coverage is very unevenly distributed over bills (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2015). In the Netherlands most bills do not receive any media coverage at all; only 10% of all bills receives substantial media coverage. A first, quantitative exploration of media effects on legislative processes suggested that such media coverage does not affect the duration of legislative processes. This result differs from Wolfe's (2012) findings that suggest that media attention mediates the speed by which bills become laws. The different Dutch result may be due to a peculiarity of the legislative process; in the Netherlands there is no legislative discontinuity principle (Van Schagen, 1997), so slowing down the legislative process, for example in response to media coverage for a bill, is a much less effective way to stop a bill from becoming law as may be the case in other countries.

My preliminary investigation of media effects on lawmaking did nevertheless suggest that media attention impacts on the behavior of political actors during the legislative process. If journalists pay more attention to a bill, more amendments and motions are introduced. To understand this association, and study how exactly that dynamic works and if media coverage has any other effects on legislative processes, I conducted three in-depth case studies. The respective bills dealt with the remuneration of senior officials in the (semi)public sector, the restructuring of employment law and the introduction of a new student finance system. All bills received ample media coverage and there were many potential moments of influence during the respective legislative processes; if the media do affect lawmaking, the relevant mechanisms via which it does would have

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likely become visible.

The comparative analysis of the cases showed that media coverage indeed played a role in all three legislative processes, but that it had limited, if any, influence on the final outcomes. In some instances political actors referred to media coverage in legislative debates or during the process asked questions that were partly inspired by media attention, and only in very exceptional cases they introduced an amendment or motion partly because of media reports. This key non-finding suggests that the relationship found in the quantitative exploration between media attention and the introduction of change proposals may have been spurious. It rather seems that bills that address important topics, such as large reforms that affect the daily lives of many citizens, receive ample media coverage *and* are amended heavily. Interpreting the correlation in causal terms may be tempting, but that is not what the case studies showed.

It should be noted that this study suggests weak media effects, but also and more generally that MPs probably exert limited influence during the formal legislative process. Most, if not all, fundamental decisions are already made by the time the bill is introduced into parliament. As discussed extensively in Chapter 6, the political context must be taken into account when studying the media-lawmaking relationship. Bills are often developed in response to prior political or corporatist agreements, and this study suggests that the content of these agreements and the commitment of the partners involved have a strong influence on the subsequent lawmaking process in parliament. Even if there is ample media coverage during the legislative process, this does not have a strong effect on the process, nor on the outcome. The effect of media attention on support for amendments, motions and bills is negligible. Political actors may not be immune to the media and media coverage, but this coverage is not decisive and even not very influential for legislative processes and substantive outcomes.

7.1.2 Implications for media effects research

My findings contribute to knowledge about media effects on policymaking in various ways. First, the results concur with findings of other research on substantial agendas (e.g. Brown, 2010; Jones & Wolfe, 2010) and support the idea that media effects on substantial political agendas are much weaker compared to effects on symbolic agendas (e.g. Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The media's role in, for example, the highly symbolic parliamentary question hours, which are often 'designed' for political actors to respond to current affairs, is very different from the media's role in complex and lengthy lawmaking processes. It seems like the less symbolic and more substantial a political agenda is, the less representatives of relevant political parties have the freedom, or feel the pressure, to act and respond to the media.

Second, this study sheds light on the media's role beyond the agenda setting phase and complements research on legislative agenda setting (e.g. Cook, 1989; Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014; Sellers, 2010; Walgrave, Varone & Dumont, 2006). It answers appeals for research about media effects on later phases of policymaking processes (Wolfe, 2012). Although various scholars suggest that the media matter throughout the whole policy process (Cook, 1989; Soroka *et al.*, 2013), I did not find empirical evidence for such effects during the Dutch parliamentary legislative process. After the agenda setting phase, i.e. the moment the bill is prepared and introduced into parliament, legislative processes seem to be rather autonomous. This may be due to the fact that measures in proposed bills are often complicated and technical, which would be in line with studies suggesting that the complexity of issues constrains media effects (e.g. Soroka *et al.*, 2013; Yagade & Dozier, 1990). As argued in the previous chapter, it also is very likely that contextual factors limit the potential for media influence, similar to what is argued in some research on policy processes more generally (e.g. Esser, 2013; Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010).

Third, in addition to this empirical contribution to agenda setting research, this study adds to media effects research with its multi-method approach and in-depth focus on the behavior of

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individual political and journalistic actors. By conducting a quantitative prestudy and qualitative case study analyses in which content analyses are accompanied by interviews, this comprehensive study bridges the gap between large-scale agenda setting studies, in which data are often aggregated on the level of issues or policy areas (e.g. Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Walgrave, Varone & Dumont, 2006) and studies of the behavior of individual actors that rely on interview data only (e.g. Davis, 2009; Landerer, 2014). The combination of content analyses of parliamentary and media documents and interviews with both journalistic and political actors that were themselves involved in the processes under study is promising and allows for triangulation. Moreover, the interviewees are not asked general perception questions, but specific questions about their own behavior in concrete cases (as suggested by Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). All in all, this leads to more nuanced and in-depth knowledge about the interaction between journalists and politicians in the context of lawmaking processes.

Fourth, with its focus on lawmaking in the Netherlands, the results of this study provide insight into the applicability of the conclusions of American research in the contemporary European context. The suggestions of American scholars with regard to media effects on legislative processes and the importance of media strategies in legislative work (e.g. Cook, 1989; Sellers, 2010; Wolfe, 2012) do not seem to fit lawmaking in European parliamentary democracies very well. Apparently the situation in the Netherlands is different from the US, where already thirty years ago "making news has frequently become integral to the legislative process" and "reporters for all kinds of news outlets can (...) be present at any stage of the legislative process and can be instrumental to shaping the results" (Cook, 1989, p. 168). Also, the conclusion that American "politicians and journalists jointly shape (...) legislative outcomes" (Sellers, 2010, p. 205) does not apply to lawmaking in the Netherlands. The situation is more nuanced or even fundamentally different in the Dutch context: journalists only sometimes attend legislative debates, and there are only rare examples of MPs trying to use the media to their advantage.

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There are a number of factors that may account for the significant differences with lawmaking in the United States. First of all, not all American scholars clearly delineate what they mean by 'the legislative process' and some employ a rather vague and very broad definition of lawmaking, including pretty much all behavior of politicians in Congress (Cook, 1989). Similarly, it is not always clear whether civil servants or elected politicians are meant when scholars study media effects on 'policymakers' (Thorbjørnsrud, Ustad Figenschou & Ihlen, 2014). In addition, there are significant differences between the Dutch multiparty parliamentary democracy and the American two-party presidential democracy: for example, whereas in the US bills are introduced by Congress members, in the Netherlands the vast majority of bills comes from the government. Consequently, legislative processes in the Netherlands are probably more reactive, whereas members of Congress may adopt a more proactive stance towards lawmaking and use the media more actively. In addition, whereas party politics is a crucial aspect of legislative work in the Netherlands, electoral motives and constituency interests play an important role in the work of members of the House of Representatives (Cook, 1989); both responding to and being in the media is more important for American than for Dutch MPs. In sum, the overall picture emerging from the case studies does not confirm Cook's impression that "Making news, in short, has become a crucial component of making laws" (Cook, 1989, p. 168). Rather than a 'crucial' component, MPs' interaction with journalists seems to be an incidental and subordinate component of lawmaking processes.

Fifth, this study complements existing European research on the media's role in policymaking by empirically studying suggestions about media effects during such processes. Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten concluded their book on *Public Policy and the Mass Media* by stating (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten, 2010, p. 9): "We do not suggest (...) that the media's influence in the policy process is paramount or that policymaking is dominated by the dynamic of public communication. (...) However, we argue that if the media enter the policy arena they are able to change the course of decision making and the policy outcome in significant ways". It may be true

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that on occasion the media have such power, but this is not confirmed by the results of the current study. It may be possible that the media prevent bills from becoming formal law, but that mechanism did not show in the cases studied (see section 7.2 for a further discussion of the implications of the current research design). It may also be that media may play a stronger role in other types of policymaking, for example in policy processes that are more ad hoc and linked to current developments, or in other phases of the policymaking process, such as the agenda setting and implementation phase. Overall, however, the study primarily concurs with the suggestion that the media's influence in policymaking is not paramount. Thereby it also points in a different direction than Davis' research on perceived media impact in the UK, which shows that British MPs believe legislative debates are influenced by the media (Davis, 2009). It may be that the situation is different in the UK, but he arguably may find strong effects because MPs simply (subconsciously) overestimate the power of the media (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011).

7.1.3 The emphasizing effect of the media

This study has developed insights into the media's role in the legislative process in order to complement knowledge about political agenda setting and media effects on symbolic political agendas, and to respond to appeals for more in-depth investigations of the media's influence on policymaking. The overall conclusion is that the media do not play an autonomous role in Dutch legislative processes. By showing that the media affect lawmaking only to a very limited extent, this study strongly nuances ideas about the mediatization of politics, the perception of the media as a major 'political institution', and the challenge this poses to representative democracy (Cook, 2005; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Sparrow, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Instead, this study fits better with the observation by Brown (2010, p. 136) that the media rarely have substantial impact on policy processes as an independent actor: "At a minimum, policymakers use the news media to help form an overall impression of the state of the political system, at a maximum it can

serve as a channel of communication for actors involved in conflict around an issue”.

If there is any media effect, I would argue that the influence on lawmaking is an emphasizing effect. This effect occurs in two ways. Firstly, as a source of information media coverage puts emphasis on an issue, argument or actor. The media can highlight specific consequences of a bill, or a particular argument, or the position of for example an expert. Secondly, media attention is most often used as a rhetorical instrument in legislative debates. It helps to stress the topicality of an issue, to influence the direction of the debate, and to argue the validity or relevancy of an argument. This concurs with the suggestion by Wolfe, Jones and Baumgartner (2013, p. 179) with respect to policy agenda setting, that “the media may be less a causal factor in setting the agenda than an amplifying one”, weighing information and helping to focus attention.

In the following section, I sketch potential ways in which the media can have this emphasizing effect in the process of lawmaking. This overview does not reflect the extent to which these motivations occurred in the cases under study, nor is it an exhaustive list of potential mechanisms. Instead, it is a discussion of and reflection on the ways in which this study suggests the media may have an emphasizing effect on lawmaking. As such this discussion primarily suggests questions for future research on the political influence of the news media.

Media as a source of information in lawmaking

As a source of information, the media can emphasize issues, arguments or actors. When media coverage is relevant to a particular legislative process, it is very likely to be consumed by MPs dealing with the bill. And although such media coverage hardly ever contains *new* information, it can highlight the position of political actors, interest groups, or individual citizens. By being in the media, actors can draw extra attention to their position and remind political actors of this position. This confirms ideas about the media's reinforcing effect on political processes (e.g. Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner, 2013). Note that in the rare occasion that MPs

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read about or see someone's position in the media they did not know about before, they will often consult additional sources to check this information and gain more in-depth knowledge about the position or argument of this actor.

Although not functioning as an autonomous source of information, the media can provide several types of information to MPs. Media provide a platform for other actors to voice their opinion, known as the 'linkage function' of the media (e.g. Kenamer, 1992). Political actors monitor the media in order to 'know what is going on' in society and in politics. The media fulfil a platform function, informing MPs about positions of societal and other political actors (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016, p. 7), helping them to develop an overall picture of the (political) situation (Brown, 2010, p. 132), and displaying what is communicated via the media to the public (Cohen, Tsfati & Sheaffer, 2008). Such information is relevant to politicians, because it provides an indication of the breadth and intensity of the debate as well as of the positioning of their political friends and foes.

Political actors are not naïve or neutral in consuming media coverage. Parties and politicians have made up their mind with regard to the fundamental decision whether to support a bill or not, prior to the legislative process, if only because their election program may contain relevant proposals. With this in mind politicians look at media coverage, to see whether this coverage confirms their pre-existing opinion or to learn about the positions of their political opponents. This fits with Brown's finding that in policymaking the media can play a role in the information they provide about "the state of the politically relevant world" (Brown, 2010, p. 137-138). Policymakers are likely to follow media coverage if it fits with their belief structure (Yanovitzky, 2002). This finding relates to various well-known insights in psychological literature about confirmation bias and motivated reasoning (e.g. Kahneman, 2011; Kunda, 1990; Lord, Ross & Lepper, 1979). People tend to look for information that confirms the views and beliefs they already hold; in particular people with strong opinions on complex social issues tend to accept confirming empirical evidence almost at face value. Politicians are no different from ordinary people. MPs are well aware of the media

attention for the (topic of the) bill they deal with as the spokesperson, and they interpret what they see and hear from their own pre-existing political perspective.

Media as an instrument in lawmaking

In line with the popular idea that politicians are strategic actors, who may use and adapt to the media to reach their objectives (Sellers, 2010; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016), media attention can be used as a rhetorical instrument during legislative processes. The fact that information in the media is not new to political actors does not exclude the possibility that they employ it to reach their political or policy goals.

Political actors may use media coverage rhetorically during legislative debates to emphasize the correctness, value, or importance of one's position. MPs can use it to set or keep an issue on the legislative agenda or to influence the direction of the debate. Also, politicians employ media coverage to justify their position or to try to increase support for their position, i.e. to underline the relevance and validity of an argument. Another reason to refer to media coverage is to be responsive to actors in the media, either to journalists or to societal actors that voiced concerns. Explicitly mentioning media coverage may even be a way to attract journalists' attention and increase one's chances of receiving media coverage afterwards.

MPs may also use media references to put or to increase the political pressure on other parties. If a minister or MP says something in the media that contradicts previous statements or that was not said in parliament before, political opponents can try to increase the pressure by referring to this coverage. And if a respected expert voices an opinion that goes contrary to the position of one's political opponents, in particular when this expert is affiliated with the opponent's party, such media statements can be employed to reconsider their position, or at least to demand a response from this party.

Being in the media may also be instrumental for MPs to create visibility. This confirms the idea that press coverage can enhance an MP's reputation and direct other political actors' attention to them

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(Cook, 1989, p. 170). A primary motive is to create visibility for their (parties') position, to give account to one's voters, and maybe to reach potential voters as well. This concurs with research suggesting that media publicity is a means for MPs to positively influence their (party's) public image (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012, p. 64).

7.2 Directions for future research

The choice for an exploratory approach in this study was inspired by the lack of knowledge about mechanisms of media influence on lawmaking. This comes with a cost: prior research (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2015) shows that only a small minority of lawmaking processes receive substantial media coverage, so the cases studied are definitely not representative for all bills. To what extent the results can be generalized to the population of legislative processes in the Netherlands is extremely difficult to assess. Future research should address this question, by taking the results from this study as a starting point. In particular by selecting new cases with more variation in terms of legislative outcomes, including bills that are rejected or withdrawn, the conclusion that media attention does not have a substantial effect on legislative processes and outcomes could be tested more elaborately. A case in the Netherlands that might for example be interesting to study is a health care proposal known as the bill 'limiting the free choice of doctors' (*Beperking vrije artsenkeuze*), which was rejected by the Upper House in December 2014.

Another question further research should address is to what extent and under which circumstances media coverage affects legislative processes. The comparative analysis suggests that media effects vary according to the type of legislative process, and that whether and how the media influence lawmaking strongly depends on contextual factors. Media effects on legislative processes may increase the more the characteristics of a process are suitable with the logic of the media (Esser, 2013) and adhere to news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). If, for example, the responses to a bill are very negative and cause political conflict, a

media storm or hype may develop (Boydstun, Hardy & Walgrave, 2014; Vasterman, 2005), that asks for a political response. This may even cause the issue to be taken off the legislative agenda. By including such 'negative' cases, follow-up studies could investigate whether media coverage may have the effect to prevent a bill from becoming a law.

The Dutch Constitution determines that "Acts of Parliament shall be enacted jointly by the Government and the States General" (*Grondwet voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, 2008, article 81) and that "Bills may be presented by or on behalf of the King or by the Lower House of the States General" (article 82, paragraph 1). Because a large majority of bills is introduced by the government (Bovend'Eert & Kummeling, 2010, p. 198) and in order to capture the processes that are most relevant to citizens, the bills selected for this study were all from this dominant category. In other countries the share of parliamentary acts is often more substantial (Mattson, 1995, p. 478), as in the UK where several hundred private member's bills are proposed per term of Parliament (Bowler, 2010, p. 476). It would be interesting to see whether the media do influence private member's bills, and if so, whether the mechanisms of influence are similar or different compared to governmental bills. Because private member's bills do not originate in coalition agreements, they may, for example, be a more immediate response to problems reported by the media. Also, and in addition to being a substantial instrument for policy change, private member's bills may be an instrument for MPs to attract media attention. It is suggested that in the Netherlands getting media attention is one of the motives for introducing a private member's bill (Kas, 2016). In academic literature private member's bills are sometimes depicted as 'pseudo-legislation' (Mattson, 1995, p. 482), because their success rates are often low or the issues they concern are perceived as relatively unimportant. Solvak (2013, p. 42) argues that such bills "might be more of a communication tool, drawing attention to certain issues"; similarly, Marsh and Read (1988, p. 24) suggest they are "introduced to promote debate and publicity with no thought of success". By announcing the introduction of a private member's bill, an MP may attract considerable media

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attention. Considering that the percentage of private member's bills that is eventually passed is quite small in many countries (Andeweg & Nijzink, 1995, p. 170-171), this may indicate a symbolic use of this substantial parliamentary instrument.

This study argues that the media's minimal effects on legislative outcomes may be due to the importance of political context and the limited room for maneuver MPs experience during the legislative process in parliament. Adopting a broader interpretation of legislative processes, i.e. including the preparatory phase of bills, may be recommendable in order to develop a better understanding of both politicians' and the media's role in the period prior to the introduction of bills in parliament. Moreover, if one were to include the implementation phase of the law as well, it would be possible to compare the media's role in the phases preceding and following the formal legislative process. In these early and late stages political actors may be less committed to a political position and may have more freedom to maneuver. Their interaction with journalists could be more intense and thus one could find more and more important effects. And because this study suggests that contextual factors, such as the political agreements underlying bills, limit the potential for media influence, one may find stronger media effects in countries that have minority governments, no ad hoc political agreements, or a political tradition that is not aimed at consensus seeking and at reaching political compromises.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the role of journalists and the journalistic news selection of lawmaking. Whether or not media affect legislative processes may first and foremost be the result of media attention. If there is no media attention, it is impossible that media coverage has an effect on the legislative process. Research shows that the newsworthiness of legislative processes is both selective and predictable and that the amount of media coverage can be predicted on the basis of conventional news values such as political conflict and significance (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2015). By comparing bills that are covered heavily with bills that received very little coverage in the media, insights may be developed into how the newsworthiness of bills affects the degree of media influence. Some

interviewees in the current study suggested that if bills receive some media coverage, or if only a particular element of a bill gets attention, political actors may feel more inclined to act on it. It may be that in cases with ample media coverage MPs cannot see the wood for the trees; the likelihood that they do notice and act upon media coverage may actually increase if the media coverage for a bill is more exceptional. In a similar manner, MPs who want to amend a bill may give information that is helpful for their purposes to a journalist, in order to be able to subsequently act upon this coverage. If there is no other media attention for the bill except for this particular aspect, other politicians may perceive that issue to be important and be more inclined to support the adjustment. Furthermore, even the absence of media coverage may affect the legislative process; it might be the result of deliberate attempts by political actors not to attract journalistic interest, for example causing a bill to be quietly passed that might have otherwise caused a controversy.

In addition, scholars may consider broadening the definition and analysis of 'the media'. In this study, the media analysis is limited to the coverage in traditional mass media, i.e. national newspapers, magazines, radio and television. To broaden and deepen insights into the role of 'the media', these could be extended to online media, including social media, and to specialist journals, including trade, professional and scientific journals.

A final suggestion is to conduct comparative research. It is difficult to assess to what extent the results of this study apply to other mediatized bills in the Netherlands. But without a cross-country comparison, it is impossible to draw inferences about the applicability of the results to other countries. Nevertheless, the finding that media play a marginal role during legislative processes may travel to other countries and is in line with findings by foreign researchers (e.g. Brown, 2010; Jones & Wolfe, 2010; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). It is plausible that similar effects occur in (European) countries that are comparable in terms of both the media system and the political system. If the media system can be classified as a democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and the political system is comparable in terms of its institutional order, the

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media's role in lawmaking may be similar. This is particularly likely if bills in multi-party systems with comparable legislative procedures are built on more or less fragile agreements and party discipline, or at least in systems where party group unity is strong. Only after research similar or complementary to this study is conducted in other countries, we can draw more general inferences with a sound empirical basis, and develop more advanced theories about the media's role in lawmaking.

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Democracy is not a one-dimensional concept and “what might be considered to be high-quality news journalism from the perspective of one model of democracy might not be the same when taken from the perspective of another” (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 332). Different models of ‘good democracy’ have different normative implications for the role of the mass media. Because it can be regarded a ‘realistic’ model of democracy (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 334), here I adopt the idea of a ‘competitive’ or ‘electoral’ democracy (Sartori, 1987; Schumpeter, 2010 [1942]) to discuss some normative implications of this study.

In this realistic model of representative democracy, elections are essential. During elections, politicians or parties compete for the votes of the electorate. In order for the electorate to hold their representatives in parliament responsible, it is of importance that voters have access to information about the behavior of MPs. Political journalists act as the principal intermediaries between politicians and citizens (Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2012, p. 511) and corresponding to the ‘trustee model’ of journalism (Schudson, 1999, p. 119-121), journalists should provide citizens with the necessary information to act as informed participants in democracies. Elections are the moment for citizens to award or punish elected political actors for their behavior. As summarized by Christians (2009, p. 116), the basic tasks of journalism in such a democracy are to inform the public, to comment and express opinions as an independent actor, and to provide a channel or platform to other voices.

From this realistic democratic perspective, it is problematic that

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most legislative processes do not receive any media coverage: the public does not receive information via the media about a majority of the political processes that result in laws. This harms the principle that journalists should monitor political elites in what they have done and promised to do, and to inform people about the record of those in office, and about the political alternatives (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 339). Even if it is taken into account that some bills may be rather technical or ‘compulsory’ because of EU regulation, it is problematic that there are numerous bills with consequences for the (daily) lives of many people that remain out of the media’s spotlights.

The bills that are central to this study are not this type of bills. Instead, due to the deliberate selection, the bills received ample media coverage; so citizens have no reason to complain. If the media pay attention to the introduction of bills into parliament, voters know that if they have an opinion about it, this is the moment to contact MPs. And if the media report during the course of the legislative process, voters can take into consideration what the party of their choice did in the debate. Journalists are not ‘lap dogs’ that are uncritical of the policy process (Sparrow, 1999), but provide room for political and societal actors to voice criticism. However, attention for the content of bills, let alone for the various positions parties taken during legislative debates, is very limited. Although the media sometimes do explain the general consequences of bills for the public, certain parts of legislative processes, e.g. motions and amendments, do not always get coverage. This harms two other roles of the media in an electoral democracy, namely that “the news should be proportional” and that “media and journalism should focus their attention on the words and actions of political alternatives” (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 339).

In general, at least according to this study, journalists do not perceive it as their role to report elaborately on legislative debates: they for example think that the reader is not interested in it, or that they will not be able to ‘sell’ it to their editor. If they do pay attention to a lawmaking process, this is usually because there is some kind of political conflict; for journalists it is obvious that they report on the political game. Citizens that follow the mass media consequently get

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a biased impression of what happens in parliament: they hardly ever read or see anything about bills when these are discussed in parliament, and if they do, the coverage is short, purely informative about the content of the resulting policy change, and predominantly oriented towards conflict and the political game.

Mass media are considered to be a platform for public opinion and public debate. The fact that the media only have an emphasizing effect on legislative processes means that media coverage has little added value. Only occasionally it reminds political actors about the position of a particular interest group, or makes the likely consequences of a bill more visible by displaying individual's personal stories. Usually this information is not new to politicians and it rarely – if ever – changes their opinion or position.

On the other hand, the limited media coverage for legislative processes and for the details of legislative debates may have a positive effect on the functioning of representative democracy. The fact that journalists do not closely follow every move a politician makes in the context of lawmaking gives MPs the opportunity to focus on the content of the bill. It enables political elites to 'act' (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 334). This may be reassuring for those who worry that the media are turning democracy into 'mediacracy' (Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014, p. 42). In such a mediacracy the media would determine what is on the political agenda and more generally take over the role of political institutions. However, at least with regard to legislation in the Netherlands, there are no indications that the mass media play such an influential role. The behavior of legislators does by no means suggest that parliament as a political institution is taken over by 'the media'.

Legislative processes seem to be autonomous and arguably it is healthy that MPs – in the Lower House, and even more so in the Upper House – are not 'obsessively' occupied with what journalists write or might write in the newspaper, or present on radio and television. Different from other types of parliamentary processes, such as the question hour, MPs seem not to be swayed by the issues of the day when they are discussing and making bills. This is an important conclusion in light of the alleged mediatization of politics.

7.3 Normative implications

Journalists are present in and around legislative processes, but their substantial influence is marginal and not necessarily negative from a democratic perspective. For the functioning of representative democracy, these thoughts are comforting.

