

Influencing law-makers' agenda

Metropolitan newspapers and TV as sources for political initiatives by members of the Swedish Parliament

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Abstract

The basic research question was: To what extent does the media coverage of events and processes in society affect initiatives in political life? We hypothesized that the mediatisation of politics would increasingly tend to make members of parliament (MPs) base their initiatives on the media instead of receiving propositions from i.e. their constituencies or organized interests, thereby boosting the role of the media in the public policy process. The alternative hypothesis was that the combined effect of commercial pressures, fragmentation, and tabloidization have meant a decline in the influence of the media in setting political agendas. Based on these alternative hypotheses, the study intended to establish the number of incidents of referencing the media as a starting-point for political initiatives in the parliament.

The study covered 15 years of parliamentary bills from elected private members of the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag. Bills were studied comparatively over time—sampling the 1991-1992, 1996-1997, 2001-2002 and 2006-2007—parliamentary sessions to obtain a time-series of the prevalence of media quoted as sources of issues or problems needing political attention on a national level.

Results generally supported the hypothesis of a growing mediatisation of politics. However, the empirical data indicated a decreasing level of media influence towards the end of the period studied, giving at first some credibility to recent effects of tabloidization on politics in a parliamentary democracy. On closer analysis, it turned out that the determining factor was whether a right-wing or a left-wing coalition was in power. When in opposition, the right-wing parties dominated the use of the metropolitan press in parliament. Left-wing MPs did not use the media as sources of political initiatives to the same extent during any of the periods studied. The role of the solidly non-socialist press seemed to be supporting the conservative/liberal political opposition. Using the sympathetic press, powerful agents seem to have influenced law-makers' agenda. Television played a minor, but somewhat more balanced role in influencing parliamentary initiatives.

Key words: political economy, normative theory of the media, the mediatisation of politics, Parliament, political agenda-setting.

Resum. *Influència dels mitjans en l'agenda política. Els diaris metropolitans i la televisió com a fonts de les iniciatives polítiques dels membres del Parlament suec*

El punt de partida d'aquesta recerca és fins a quin punt la cobertura periodística d'esdeveniments i processos de la societat afecten les iniciatives polítiques. Es va considerar que

la mediatització de la política incrementaria el fet que els membres del parlament basessin les seves iniciatives en els mitjans de comunicació en comptes de rebre propostes, per exemple, de les seves circumscripcions o de grups organitzats, la qual cosa potenciarà el paper dels mitjans de comunicació en el procés de les polítiques públiques. La hipòtesi alternativa és que l'efecte combinat de les pressions comercials, la fragmentació i la sensacionalització dels diaris han provocat una disminució de la influència dels mitjans de comunicació en l'establiment d'agendes polítiques. Basant-se en aquestes hipòtesis alternatives, l'estudi pretén establir el nombre d'incidents de referència en els mitjans de comunicació com a punt de partida per a iniciatives polítiques al parlament. L'estudi comprèn quinze anys de projectes de llei de membres privats escollits pel Parlament suec, el Riksdag. Hi va haver diversos projectes de llei que van ser estudiats comparativament en el temps —les sessions parlamentàries de 1991-1992, 1996-1997, 2001-2002 i 2006-2007—, per obtenir una sèrie cronològica sobre la prevalença dels mitjans de comunicació esmentats com a fonts de qüestions que requereixen atenció política d'àmbit nacional.

Els resultats van confirmar, en general, la hipòtesi d'una mediatització creixent de la política. No obstant això, les dades empíriques indicaven una disminució del nivell d'influència dels mitjans cap al final del període estudiat, la qual cosa donava credibilitat, en primer lloc, a alguns dels efectes més recents de sensacionalització de la política en una democràcia parlamentària. Amb una anàlisi més detinguda, es va descobrir que el factor determinant era que una coalició de dretes o d'esquerres fos al poder. Quan estaven a l'oposició els partits de dreta, va dominar l'ús de la premsa metropolitana al Parlament. Els diputats de partits d'esquerra no van fer ús dels mitjans de comunicació com a font d'iniciatives polítiques en la mateixa mesura en qualsevol dels períodes estudiats. La premsa no socialista semblava que donava suport a la conservadora (els polítics de l'oposició liberal). Els agents més influents semblava que havien influït en l'establiment de l'agenda. La televisió hi va tenir un rol secundari, però també més equilibrat a l'hora d'influir en les iniciatives parlamentàries.

Paraules clau: economia política, teoria normativa dels mitjans de comunicació, la mediatització de la política, el Parlament, establiment de l'agenda política.

Summary

Background and research problem	Analysis of the results
Methodology	Discussion
Theory	References

The media in this study are regarded as an independent variable, part of the process of political meaning making rather than just a convenient indicator of the outcome - analyzing the factors that shape news coverage of politics (Benson, 2004, 276). Benson suggests that political communication studies draw upon the sociology of news media far more extensively than has been the case in the past. Schudson claims that sociology's most recognizable contribution to studying political communication is to have entered into the intellectual life of communication programs (Schudson, 2004)¹.

1. The author's BA and MA degrees from Stockholm University were in sociology; the doctoral thesis was defended at the Communications Department of the University of Umeå, and at

Background and research problem

The basic research problem was: *To what extent does the media coverage of events and processes in society affect initiatives in political life?* We hypothesized that the mediatization of politics would tend to make MPs base their initiatives on the media instead of receiving propositions from i.e. their constituencies or organized interests, thereby boosting the role of the media in the public policy process (Hernes, 1968; Asp, 1990). The alternative hypothesis was that the combined effect of commercial pressures, fragmentation, and tabloidization have meant a decline in the influence of the media over public policy (Postman, 1985). Two research questions are in focus:

RQ1: How has the number of incidents of referencing the media as a starting-point for a Parliament initiative developed over time?

RQ2: Which roles as sources of political initiatives were played by, respectively, the metropolitan press and national television?

A number of more specific research questions were developed. Some of these research questions are general in nature, such as the mapping of *themes* addressed by MPs, using media as sources, or the identification of *actors* using the media as a platform to influence public policy. Some are *politics-oriented*, primarily towards MPs' behavior, e. g. the role of left-wing or right-wing MPs, or the role of political initiatives when part of a majority in parliament as compared to behavior in opposition. Other research questions are *media-centered*, e. g. the role of left-wing and right-wing media as sources of political initiatives, or the role of individual powerful media.

The study covered 15 years of parliamentary bills from private members of the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag, and their distribution over the different Parliamentary Standing Committees. Bills were studied during the 1991-1992, 1996-1997, 2001-2002 and 2006-2007 parliamentary sessions to obtain a diachronic time-series of the prevalence of media quoted as sources of issues or problems needing political attention on a national level.

The ongoing research program includes studies of the role of all major media groups, i.e. metropolitan and regional newspapers, public service-radio and-TV, commercial radio and TV, community radio, magazines, free sheets, web sites and other Internet sources and also interviews with MPs, party staff, and press officers on how they use the media and political journalists in their efforts to promote, negotiate or shift political agendas. This article is limited to the role of the metropolitan newspapers and national television. As metro-

present the author is engaged in journalism education and research at Kalmar University. I am grateful for the support given by the Research foundation of the latter school. My background having served for some fifteen years as a press officer in the Swedish Parliament, living the interdependencies between journalists and politicians, may to some extent explain the choice of research problem in this study.

Table 1. Metropolitan newspapers in Sweden

	Circulation 2006	Editorial stance
<i>Morning papers</i>		
Stockholm		
Dagens Nyheter	347.100	Independent liberal
Svenska Dagbladet	193.500	Conservative
Dagen	18.400	Christian Democratic
Dagens Industri	117.800	Pro-business
Gothenburg		
Göteborgs-Posten	242.700	Liberal
Malmö		
Sydsvenska Dagbladet	123.200	Independent liberal
Skånska Dagbladet	39.200	Center Party
Arbetet (folded in 2000)	105.400 (1994)	Social democratic
<i>Evening papers</i>		
Expressen (with GT and Kvp)	326.300	Independent liberal
Aftonbladet	416.500	Social democratic

Source: TS and TU.

politan newspapers are registered those newspapers that were published in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, and in the two other major cities, Gothenburg and Malmö.

There were ten metropolitan newspapers in the country in the beginning of the period. After the demise of the *Arbetet* in the year 2000, nine metropolitan papers remain. All morning newspapers that remain and one of the evening papers are considered independent or liberal/right wing media. One of the morning papers, the *Dagens Industri*, is a business paper, printed on pink, *Financial Times*-style, newsprint, representing business (right-wing) interests, published by the liberal Bonnier group that also controls the *Dagens Nyheter* and the *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*. Two of the metropolitan newspapers are evening papers; both published in Stockholm; the liberal one has two regional editions. The other evening paper has a declared left-wing editorial tendency (although owned by a publishing house that traditionally has published conservative-leaning papers).

In the capital of Stockholm, four morning newspapers are published. One of these, the *Dagens Nyheter*, dominates the media scene in terms of circulation and revenues. The others are significantly less important and some survive partly due to government subsidies, distributed to maintain a plurality of news perspectives and opinion (table 1).

In this study, national television is restricted to the two public service general programming channels, SVT1 and SVT2, and in the three most recent periods, the «commercial public service channel», TV4. The presence of other commercial channels and of the educational channel as sources of political ini-

Table 2. Major TV Channels in Sweden 1998

	Share of viewer time 1998	Owners
<i>Public service TV</i>		
SVT1	22%	A government foundation
SVT2	26%	A government foundation
<i>Commercial TV</i>		
TV4	27%	A group of private
Others	25%	owners; from the last period the Bonnier group

Source: MMS (based on TV meters).

tatives was found non-existent during the period. All the three major channels were under strong public service regulation requiring them to be balanced and fair in their reporting of events and processes in society (table 2).

General research questions

The individual member bills are distributed over some 20 standing parliamentary committees, which gives an idea of what areas of political life are touched upon in the bills. Using the specific topics addressed, a more detailed analysis of issues can be performed.

RQ3: What topics or broader *themes* were addressed by MPs who used media as sources, over the period?

Some media texts that were used as sources for political initiatives in parliament were texts, produced by other opinion-makers, often members of the government, or high-ranking civil servants or representatives of organized interests or experts, and often by people active in the cultural arena, e. g. authors of books. In this study, actors in the media were divided into three rough groups, «powerful actors» (powerful enough to publish articles in the press or to be interviewed as opinion-makers or experts) vs «weaker actors» (often victims of problems in society); a third group was labeled «neutral», e. g. representing the whole population in opinion surveys).

RQ4: What was the pattern of media used as sources of political initiatives in terms of major *actors* appearing in the media?

Politics-centered research questions

Three of the parties represented in the Swedish Parliament are, according to long-standing traditions, defined as left-wing (Social Democrats, Left — previously the Communist Party— and the Environmental party, to be compared to the Green Party in many countries). The four non-socialist parties, the

Moderates, the People's Party/Liberals, the Center Party, and the Christian Democrats, are referred to in this study as right-wing parties. In period III, 2001/2003, there was also an extreme-right party, New Democracy, represented in the Swedish Parliament, leaving few traces.

RQ5: What was the pattern of media use as sources of political initiatives among *left-wing* and *right-wing* MPs respectively over the period?

Right-wing governments in power in periods I and IV; left-wing in periods II and III.

RQ6: What was the pattern of media use as sources of political initiatives among parties supporting the *government* and among *opposition* MPs?

Media-centered research questions

As was noted in the background, most of the metropolitan press seems to be sharing «non-socialist» views, although to some extent claiming to be «independent». The Swedish press has a long tradition of political affiliation, and this situation is still valid to-day (Asp, 1995). Only two of the newspapers were during the period outspoken supporters of the social democratic party or the labor movement. The TV channels were all «fair and balanced» according to the stipulations of their broadcasting licences. Some observers claim that the commercial channel, TV4, has a tendency to favor the liberal ideas of their owners, but this has hardly been substantiated by research. It is, however, somewhat less «information-oriented» than its government-owned competitors, which may be relevant in this study.

RQ7: What was the pattern of media use as sources of political initiatives in terms of *editorial stance* over the period? 1991-1992 and 2006-2007.

One particular text, the op ed page in the largest morning paper (Swedish: DN Debatt), is often accused of playing too dominant a role in the agenda-setting process in national politics. There are, however, equivalent opinion and current-affairs debate spaces in other papers that may deserve political attention, such as the op ed pages of the *Svenska Dagbladet* (Swedish: Brännpunkt and Under strecket), chronicles in the evening papers and in the papers published in the two other big cities, Gothenburg and Malmö. Public service TV channels are supposed to play a major role in politics and in opinion formation, compared to the commercial channels, but this must remain an open question to be investigated empirically.

RQ8: To what extent did *individual papers* or *TV channels* dominate in the role as sources for political initiatives?

Methodology

There is a data base available on all bills from private members of the Swedish Parliament dating back to the beginning of the nineties (www.riksdagen.se/documents/motioner). Search words were defined, which would identify bills where media were manifestly used as sources of Parliamentary initiatives. A list of various combinations of the names of the Metropolitan papers was compiled and tested, and a corresponding list of national television channels was, similarly, compiled and tested. These lists included widely used abbreviations, such as DN for the *Dagens Nyheter*, and SVT for the Swedish Television Corporation. Of course, bills dealing with these keywords as objects of policy or regulatory initiatives would also appear, creating redundant information in the entries produced. One example is the abbreviation UR that stands for educational broadcasting; the letters «ur» in Swedish stand for the preposition «from» in English, widely used in any context. By careful inspection of each entry, it was determined whether a newspaper or a TV program had functioned in the role in focus in this study —as a source of a political initiative in the parliament, e. g. by bringing an issue or a problem to the attention of law-makers or by observing facts that supported or opposed an initiative already present in the policy-making process, often in the form of Government bills. The findings are limited to comparisons over time of only those bills tabled by MPs where news media and news content are manifestly referred to as sources.

Theory

The Swedish media system, solidly «Democratic-Corporatist», had changed dramatically before the period under study, notably with the appearance of commercial TV channels around 1992² and the following explosion of television channels and interactive media. During the period, other dramatic changes took place in the country's media scene, e. g. the disappearance of a major Social Democratic newspaper, the *Arbetet*, in 2000. These *media system* changes were considered potential explanatory factors in understanding changes over time in the relationship between the media and public policy.

Another factor was hypothesized to be influential, namely the party-political situation in the Parliament: in two of the selected years, 1995-1996 and 2001-2002, the political majority was «Red-Green» or left-leaning, with the Social Democratic party forming governments, in the other two years, 1991-1992 and 2006-2007, the majority was «Non-Socialist», with coalition governments based on four parties, headed by conservative Prime Ministers.

The study presented in this paper is part of an ongoing project evaluating the role and status of journalists in the political parliamentary process.

2. The concept «Democratic-Corporatist» was coined by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their study of European media systems.

The study takes its theoretical inspiration from political communication theory, especially *normative ideas* of the press in a democratic society, but also to *agenda-setting*. The empirical findings can also be discussed in terms of *media effects* or the *power of the media* to influence public policy, i.e. pushing an issue, where multiple issues are competing for political attention, to the very top of the parliamentary agenda. This piece of research offers an antidote through studying well-documented proceedings in parliament as a measure of direct media effects in setting issue agendas and framing policy debate.

An alternative way of understanding the results is guided by media sociology and scholarship on sourcing, focusing on the link between *journalists and sources* as a way to consider broad questions about journalistic power and autonomy. Sourcing practices have been assumed to reflect inter-dependencies that are mutually dependent and advantageous, often involving political reporters and government officials, trading media exposure for information. The present study reverses this exchange in terms of sourcing and agenda setting—the media themselves are turned into sources and as for the audience, it is made up of politicians (and their staff).

A traditional and broad definition of political communication and its role in Western democratic political systems is at the foreground. A broad definition of politics as the «authoritative allocation of values» in society is used (Bennett and Entman, 2001, 2). By authority is meant the linkages between citizens and government through which power to make decisions are conferred, willingly or forcibly. Decisions concern the regulation of the flow of goods, services, health benefits, physical safety and the many other common assets in society. Mediated communication is seen as central and as the hub which engages all three groups of actors in political communication—politicians, media, and citizens.

Theoretical underpinnings - normative ideas

Political communication research rests on the assumption of interdependency of the political and journalistic worlds in Western democratic political systems. Scholarship has been focusing on the optimum functioning of the political system. Expectations about the political role of journalism under the catchphrase of fourth estate are tied to the evolution of modern forms of democracy where the press is seen as a guardian of democracy and a defender of the public interest³.

Even if we are a distance away from a coherent normative theory of Journalism, Schudson imagines at least seven goals that a media system, dedicated to democracy, can be measured and judged by. These are, abbreviated:

3. For a thoughtful analysis of changes in the networks of interdependencies which structure political journalism, see Neveu (2002).

- Fair and full information for citizens' decisions.
- Coherent frameworks for citizens' comprehension.
- Common carriers of group perspectives.
- Reasonable quantity and quality of news.
- Hold governments accountable and speak for the public interest.
- Help citizens appreciate the situation of other human beings in the world.
- Provide a forum for dialogue among citizens that informs democratic decision making.

As Davis (2007) summarizes, much research to-date on «mediated politics», with few exceptions, «remains speculative when it comes to making assessments of how politicians and agendas are actually influenced» (*ibid*, 184). It is worth underlining that the present study can only be counted as viewing the tip of the iceberg, when the complex web of politics-media interdependencies are at question⁴.

The growing centrality of the news media has become a serious challenge to politics as well as other actors, and within the field of political communication this is frequently discussed in terms of the mediatization of politics often carrying critical (not to say apocalyptic) evaluations. The concept relates to deep processes of social change in which media play a key role and «where political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by the mass media, but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions» (Mazzoleni and Schultz, 1999, 247). Mediatization applied to this empirical study, news media influencing or setting the parliamentary agenda, covers primarily «accommodation» and «amalgamation» as two of the four different analytical functions of mediatization (Schultz, 2004, 88-90). Accommodation stands for how «political actors adapt to the rules of the media system, trying to increase their publicity and at the same time accepting a loss of autonomy» (*ibid*, 89). In terms of amalgamation, the study tries to capture instances where the news media's definition of reality amalgamates with political definitions of reality⁵.

Theoretical underpinnings - agenda-setting

Political communication researchers have been attracted to the hypothesis of agenda-setting originally coined by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and further developed by McCombs (2004). Agenda-setting theory in its most fundamental form is about the transfer of salience among agendas. Scholars have traditionally investigated the news media's ability to shape, set and transfer the agenda

4. In line with Kuhn and Neveu (2002), the concept of «web of interdependencies» seems analytically more rewarding than the more frequently used concept of «interaction».
5. Extension and substitution are the two other processes of social change closely connected to the development of communication media included in the four processes of mediation, see Schulz (2004).

of public discussion about politics. The most common application of agenda theory is thus that the public receives indication through the news media what the most important issues of the time are and that this is reflected in what the public perceive as the main issues. This study aimed at the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the political agenda, defined as initiatives taken by law-makers, members of the national Parliament (MPs). The purpose is to explore to what extent and concerning what political issues the news media are a direct influence on political initiatives in the national parliament.

One consistent approach to investigating media influences on politics has evolved directly out of agenda-setting studies. Methods tend to rely on quantitative data that compare news with political content. Davis (2007) discusses some of the shortcomings of the agenda-setting paradigm where studies have offered more mixed findings on the relationship between news texts and political agendas, but while still underlining the importance of media influences on politics. One objection that Davis makes is the problem of establishing the line of causality where the political process is slow moving and involving many different actors and information sources. Extensive studies found that «processes involving substantive political change were usually already in motion before news coverage of the relevant issue intensified» (*ibid*, 183). One other objection is that frequent content analyses may register political responses more likely to be of a symbolic nature and «what might be classified as news media effects and agenda-setting by some may be classified as political news management by others» (*ibid*, 186). Most MPs in Davis' study also suggested that «the news, in some way, contributed to setting the political agenda in Parliament for the day». Most MPs were also able to think of examples of «when the weight of a media campaign had been responsible for initiating or altering new legislation and budgetary decisions» (*ibid*, 186). In effect, if news media and journalists play a part in setting and framing political agendas in Westminster, it is unlikely to be along the stimulus-response line, tested in much agenda-setting research. MPs «use alternative sources to inform themselves in policy matters, consume news with caution, have an insider's knowledge of news production, and have regular contacts with those they read» (*ibid*, 187).

Theoretical underpinnings - media effects

Much research of media effects have been efforts to measure to what extent the news media live up to one or several of the well rehearsed expectations on the news media in a democracy. This scholarship has been driven by large-scale observation and has often concluded with suggestions for journalistic reform.

[...] by which the efficacy of a given media system could be expected to improve. It examined how the world of journalism ought to operate in conjunction with certain political systems, with an emphasis on whether, to what extent and how journalism influenced electoral and decision —making processes and policies (Zelizer, 2004, 146).

Studies into the amount and different kinds of journalistic influence on decision-making processes and policies are often analyzed under the heading of «effects» and in terms of «power». Who has the power to influence the election agenda, or determine the messages in the flow of news or how political advertising influences opinion on a particular issue? But journalists by themselves cannot make people act, nor can they make people's actions have political consequences. Instead, journalists' principal effects are as messengers. «Sometimes, the right message, carried by the right messenger at the right time can instigate action» (Gans, 2003, 89).

On the question of effects, it is easy to accept Schudson's (1995, 22) insights that what must astonish people with beliefs in causality and the vast power of the media «is how difficult it is to measure media influence». Many instances of media effects «fade and disappear on close examination» and many effects once attributed to the powerful media turn out to be explained more simply by other factors. Schudson's argument becomes a point of departure for the present study. «There is a great distance between news and political action. The effects of the former on the latter will always be difficult to measure because news is not autonomous» (*ibid.*, 27). The research question evolved from the reversing of these binoculars, starting to study instances of media reporting as manifest sources in parliamentary proceedings, where all private members' bills referring to media as explicit sources are regarded as straightforward and simple media effects. Again, it is relevant to remind the reader of the tip of the iceberg metaphor, but also that it is vital to realize the need for a broad understanding of the multitude of actors and organized interests that are joined in the infrastructure behind many initiatives presented as news or opinion in the news media. Such a pluralistic view:

[...] suggests that the mediation of politics extends far beyond the mass media to the inter-institutional mediation of political realities by government institutions, sometimes working alone, sometimes in concert, sometimes in transactions with extragovernmental institutions such as political parties, interest groups and the mass media (Nimmo and Swanson, 1990, 29-30).

Theoretical underpinnings - source-media relations

News media rely heavily on dependable newsworthy sources, very often closely interrelated through institutional means such as press conferences, institutional spokespersons, lobbyists, publicity agents, prominent actors and experts of all kinds. Scholarship on journalists sourcing practices have «offset the naïve notion that the power of journalists was limitless. It positioned them within an identifiable set of interactions with people in other worlds, and it positioned journalism in the context of other institutions» (Zelizer, 2004, 150-153).

In his work developing a model of source-media relations, Schlesinger finds an «excessive media-centrism» in much existing research in media sociology Schlesinger (1990, 61). It is in the tug of war in the source-journalist

relationship that both the incentive-factor, to get information into the public domain, and the second factor of power came into play. Schlesinger is concerned over the under-conceptualization of the relations between media and sources and the failure in much work in media sociology to look at source-media relations from the perspective of the sources themselves. In the work presented here, the source-media relations are reversed as the media are seen as sources themselves, feeding directly into parliamentary political initiatives and decision-making. The study can also be seen as a way of applying the sources-themselves perspective, sources that have been successful in seeking and gaining access first to the news media and now also to the law-makers. One central research question is to analyze, broadly, who those successful actors are.

The previously established seven goals derived from normative theory should be understood in this connection as qualities of the larger political communication context affecting political content patterns that may vary along media ownership, competition levels, journalistic professional standards and audience consumption patterns.

A critical evaluation of fashionable interpretations and caricatures of the role of political journalists in the political process are offered by Kuhn and Neveu (2002). They want to challenge the effects of analytical routines on the approach to the study of political journalism by political communication researchers. These routines include the customary focus on the role of journalists during election campaigns as opposed to periods between elections, the view of journalists as condemned to an endless and hopeless defensive struggle against spin-doctors (Kuhn and Neveu, 2002, 1).

The basic objective of their work seems to be questioning a kind of routinized «casting» of political communication actors. Much research to-day, they claim, has followed four lines of research:

- Emphasized the professionalization of communication.
- Stressed the important role assumed by communication consultants and spin-doctors, a new breed of string-pullers.
- Focused on the role of the demos (political opinion or as audiences).
- Presented the role of journalists as trapped, as victims or as villains that threaten democratic ideals or weaken the public's interest in politics (*ibid*, 2).

The authors want a move towards a re-evaluation of the role and status of journalists in the political communication process:

- Journalists can and do develop proactive strategies in their relationship with audiences and political sources.
- They are neither powerless victims, nor passive cogs in a communication machine.
- Their contribution needs to be reassessed in a relational framework.

Journalists do not live in a social vacuum; they operate in a web of «interdependencies», Kuhn and Neveu state (they prefer this term to the more frequently used concept «interaction»).

The study presented in this paper investigates the amount and different kinds of initiatives where the news media are claimed as sources for private member bills in parliament. This is an attempt to study precisely those interdependencies between politicians and journalists that Kuhn and Neveu refer to.

Other researchers have captured these interdependencies metaphorically as performing an «intricate tango» (Allern, 1997), or as an «incestuous relationship» (Charron, 1994) or as the «couple satanique» (Wolton, 1997).

Analysis of the results

Mediatization of politics

The hypothesis of increasing mediatization over time at first seemed to receive support in the results, were it not for the final year of the 15-year period. Chart 1 displays the number of incidents where references were made to articles in the metropolitan press (Press) and to TV programs (TV) as sources of facts or opinion that the bill drew upon. Period I is 1991-1992, period II is 1995-1996, period III is 2001-2002, and period IV is 2006-2007. These charts address research questions 1 and 2:

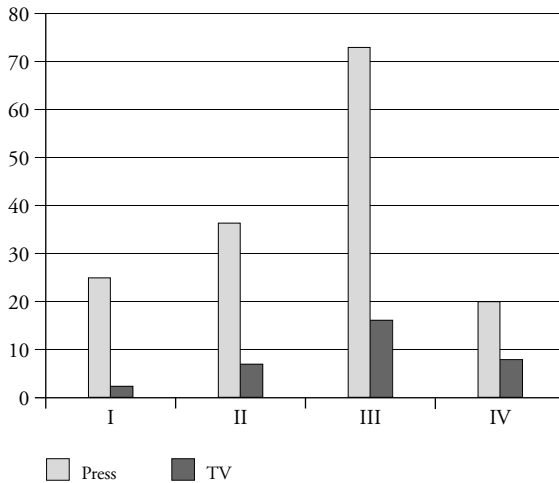
RQ1: How has the number of incidents of referencing the media as a starting-point for a Parliament initiative developed over time?

RQ2: Which roles as sources of political initiatives were played by, respectively, the metropolitan press and national television?

The result immediately provoked the question Why were the media —metropolitan press and TV— used so much less as sources of parliamentary initiatives in the final parliamentary session of the 15-year period studied, as compared to the previous periods? A number of ideas were tested:

- Internet web sites may have been used to a greater extent. Search words such as «Internet» or the major web sites linked to metropolitan newspapers, e g «www.aftonbladet.se», left the researchers with no clue to the deviation from the initial ten-year pattern of increasing use of the media as sources for parliamentary initiatives.
- Other sources of political news and commentary have replaced the press and the media as sources of political initiatives, e g blogs or communities. No results were produced from replacing these search words for traditional keywords such as «press» or «TV».
- Newspapers and TV may no longer produce political content that can serve as a basis for parliamentary initiatives. No research results have been identified that support this idea of the metropolitan press or TV virtually

Chart 1. The number of bills where metropolitan newspapers and TV were sources of political initiatives in the Swedish Parliament 1991-2007



leaving the political arena (with the growing number of political reporters covering parliamentary affairs, and as political news peaks we know for sure this is not so).

- MPs and their staff no longer turn to the press or to TV to identify news that can be used in parliamentary agendas and decisions. No evidence was found that can reasonably well support such an idea of political withdrawal from the news media. On the contrary, politicians have become increasingly more visible in all kinds of sit-coms, morning sofas or more entertainment-driven actuality content.

Themes and actors

One of the research questions focuses on the subject matter of the bills that referred to media:

RQ5: What topics or broader *themes* were addressed by MPs, using media as sources, over the period?

The political initiatives based on media content were analyzed in terms of which standing parliamentary committee the bill was addressed to. There were a total of 18 such committees, which have been lumped together in table 3, to gain a better understanding of major themes.

Dominating the first period, 1991-1992 (with a non-socialist government), in terms of political initiatives with media sources was constitutional affairs, often related to freedom of expression legislation. The second period, 1995-1996 (with

Table 3. Political initiatives based on media sources (metropolitan newspapers and national television) 1991-2007. Distribution over standing parliamentary committees

Committee/Session	I	II	III	IV
	1991-1992	1995-1996	2001-2002	2005-2006
Labor committee	1	3	8	–
Finance and taxes	2	9	8	3
Legal	2	6	14	3
Constitutional affairs	7	6	8	6
Culture & education	1	1	6	3
Environment & agric.	1	1	4	2
Industry & communication	2	6	6	4
Social affairs & housing	4	5	26	6
Foreign affairs & defense	7	6	9	–

a social democratic government), had high scores on the finance and tax committees, often related to the so-called cleansing of the budget deficit during this period. The third period, 2001-2002 (also with a social democratic government), was dominated by bills presented at the standing committee for social affairs, social insurance, and housing, and also at the standing legal committee. The final period in the study, 2006-2007 (with a non-socialist government), had relatively high scores on constitutional affairs and social affairs and housing.

In terms of issues or problems addressed, a more detailed analysis reveals the dominance of a few themes, to some extent different for each period. The first period, 1991-1992, had relatively high scores for media policy, the issue of making the National holiday a proper holiday (a day off from work), protests against the Swedish participation in an EU military force or the EU at large and the sensitive issue of the policy towards asylum seekers.

The second period, 1995-1996, saw above all taxes as the top theme, all kinds of taxes were put under scrutiny, as part of a consorted opposition drive to improve the business climate in the country. Proposals to sell out the relatively large government holdings in business seemed to be part of this greater theme. Violence against women also ranked high among issues addressed during this parliamentary session.

During the third period, 2001-2002, violence, this time in connection with riots, was a major concern of the media and law-makers alike. The violent opposition in connection with the June 2001 EU summit in Gothenburg and the presence of George Bush was the triggering factor here. Violence against women was an issue related to the growing problems with trafficking, involving women from Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Abortion rights, established since the late sixties, became an issue sponsored by Christian Democrats, since late abortions and life-saving opportunities at early births seemed to converge.

Table 4. Political initiatives based on media sources (metropolitan newspapers and national television) 1991-2007. Distribution over selected issues or themes

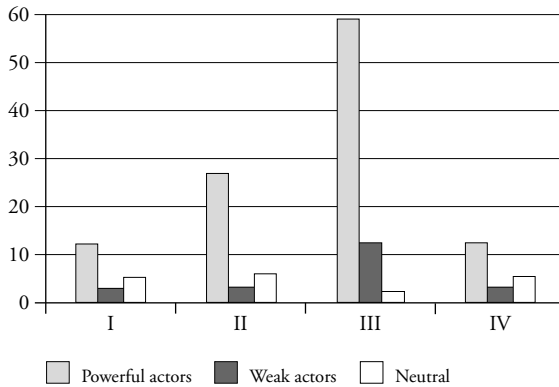
Theme/Session	I	II	III	IV
	1991-1992	1995-1996	2001-2002	2005-2006
Media policy	xxx	x	x	x
Holidays	xx	–	–	–
Rights of homosexuals	x	–	x	x
EU military force	x	x	–	–
Asylum seekers; child refugees	xx	x	x	x
Taxes	–	xxx	xx	xx
Violence	–	xx	xx	xx
Privatization, economic reforms	–	xx	xx	xxx
Abortions	–	–	xxx	x
Climate change	–	–	–	xx

The final period, 2006-2007, during the rule of the new non-socialist government, voices were raised in the media and in parliament about risks involved in privatization of hospitals; the US system was repeatedly used as a bad example; private hospitals tend not to engage in research was one observation. Violence was again a theme, this time gang-related violence and the tendency for witnesses in court to abstain from testifying against gang violence. New were issues related to climate change. The information in table 4 on issues brought up in private member bills must be regarded as highly subjective, but is intended to show the mix of permanent issues and issues that seem to disappear with time. The number of x:s relate to an idea of the intensity of an issue, and to the number of bills related to the issue.

The results of the study were also analyzed in relation to which actors seemed to have their voices heard in the media texts that were specifically referred to in the political initiatives in the Parliament. Here a simple division was made into coverage where relatively powerful actors were active in the press or in TV programs, often at their own initiative, and texts where weaker parties, ordinary men, were present. Texts that were produced by e.g. opinion-makers, scientists, other experts or politicians were classified as «powerful actors» and texts that involved problems in society were classified as «weaker actors» whose voice was somehow articulated by this media representation, e. g. reports by watchdog or investigative journalists on victimized citizens or the maltreatment by authorities. As «neutral» were classified those media references that involved the whole population, e.g. opinion polls. Here, research question 7 is addressed:

RQ7: What was the pattern of media used as sources of political initiatives in terms of major *actors* in the media?

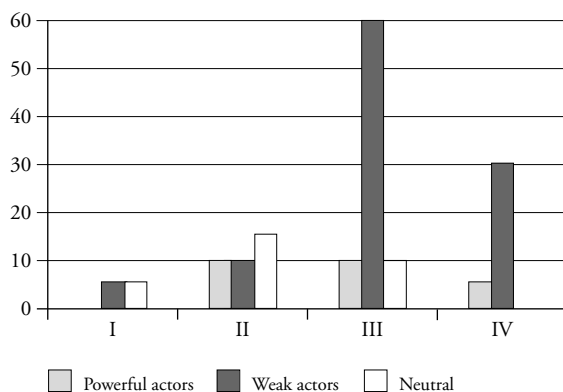
Chart 2a. Political initiatives based on media sources (metropolitan newspapers) 1991-2007. Distribution over actors in the media that stimulated political initiatives



The dominant pattern involves powerful actors, e.g. organized interests and lobby groups that work through the media to influence law-makers. Many of these powerful actors are public officials promoting the interests that their government agency or ministry is there to defend. Others are private business interests that require legislation to protect their business interests. Typical stories are:

1. The Swedish Chancellor of Justice has freed pornographic content in a «male» magazine; several conservative MPs want to sharpen legislation against sexual violence in the media (1991-1992).
2. The mayor of Helsingborg, a major town in the southernmost province, wants to withdraw local government support for the Hell's Angels, hitherto classified as a «non-profit organization», eligible for government support. Two conservative MPs want to change the rules for support to non-profit organizations to exclude criminal gangs like the Hell's Angels (1996-1997).
3. The Minister of industry, Mr Rosengren, writes in the *Dagens Nyheter*, stating an increasing skepticism to the sale of government-owned businesses. Several conservative MPs refer to the article, but advocate a faster rate of privatization of government property (2001-2002).
4. The President of the prestigious Karolinska Institute warns against privatization of hospitals, because their owners will probably not find it in their interest to participate in clinical research in the same fashion as the publicly-owned hospitals. This results in a private member's bill from several MPs who all belong to the Left Party. The bill is in direct opposition to the non-socialist government's bill that proposes to privatize some government hospitals. A social democratic group in parliament tables a similar bill and also asks the parliament to vote No to the government's intentions regarding

Chart 2b. Political initiatives based on media sources (TV) 1991-2007.
Distribution over actors in the media that are followed up by political initiatives

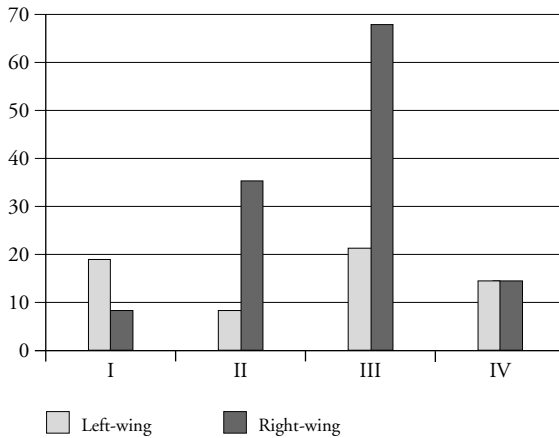


the country's health care system. In this case, powerful actors defend the interests of medical research (2006-2007).

The corresponding data on actors/coverage for television are more limited, as television is referred to much more seldom in private members' bills. Within these small numbers, it seems that TV programs more often bring up individual stories of victims that MPs find suitable to refer to, in asking for e.g. stronger punishments for violence towards women or children, or try to protect the rights of kids that were taken out of ordinary schools and were placed in schools for the slow and mentally retarded children. Typical stories are:

1. The world could follow the Kurdish tragedy (in Halladja) via television; MPs from several parties urge the Swedish government to bring the issue to the attention of the United Nations (1991-1992).
2. British television reported maltreatment of children in Chinese day-care centers. Christian Democratic MPs want a change in the (socialist) government's policy towards China (1996-1997).
3. Investigatory journalists in public service television (Swedish: Uppdrag Granskning) document that Swedish authorities send African asylum seekers back to Ghana that happens to accept this, although these people have no previous connection to the country: MPs of several parties want a change in the relevant legislation (2001-2002).
4. An SVT documentary reveals that many children have been transferred to schools for the mentally retarded, without any analysis of the children's mental status. A Christian Democratic MP wants increased support for the association «Stolen Childhood» (2006-2008).

Chart 3. The number of bills where left-wing and right-wing MPs used the media (press and TV) as sources of political initiatives in the Swedish Parliament 1991-2007. Right-wing governments in power in periods I and IV; left-wing governments in power in periods II and III



Left-wing and right-wing MPs in opposition or supporting the government

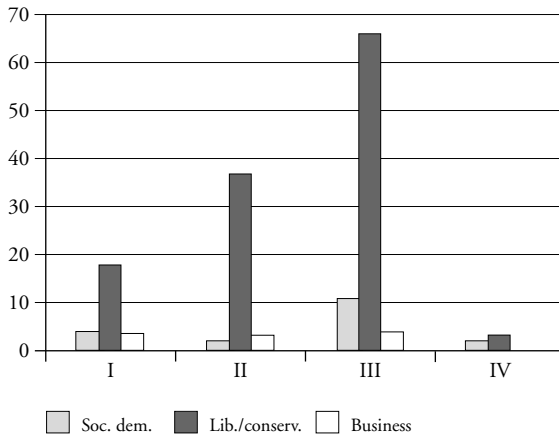
Addressing the distribution of left-wing vs right wing initiatives and majority vs opposition initiatives, a deeper understanding of the results was possible. This analysis seems to cast some light on the unexpected drop in the use of the media as sources of political initiatives in the Parliament during the last period studied. Research questions 3 and 4 are in focus here:

RQ3: What was the pattern of media used as sources of political initiatives among *left-wing* and *right-wing* MPs over the period?

RQ 4: What was the pattern of media used as sources of political initiatives among supporters of the *government* and among *opposition* MPs?

First, results were analyzed as to which MPs (in terms of party affiliation) dominated in the use of the media as sources of political initiatives. A simple division into left-wing and right-wing parties was used, as shown in table 3. The right-wing parties dominate the two middle periods when they were in opposition (left-wing governments were in power in periods II and III). Left-wing MPs did not to the same extent dominate the use of media during their periods of opposition, especially so in the last period. A possible stronger explanation for the lack of reliance on the media as sources of left-wing political initiatives in Parliament is the political structure of the metropolitan press; it is, as has already been noted, overwhelmingly non-socialist in editorial policy, especially since the *Arbetet*, a leading left-wing paper folded shortly after period II (in 2000). Neither the press nor TV seem to produce the kind of critical,

Chart 4a. Political initiatives based on media sources 1991-2007. Distribution over editorial policy in newspapers



watchdog coverage of «its own» on the non-socialist government for the use of left-wing politicians as a basis for political initiatives in Parliament. Chart 2 seems to indicate that it is the right-wing MPs, the government supporters in periods I and IV, that have avoided to use the media as frequently as they did while in opposition (periods II and III) when the (predominantly non-socialist) media may have been stronger in their criticism of the then left-leaning government.

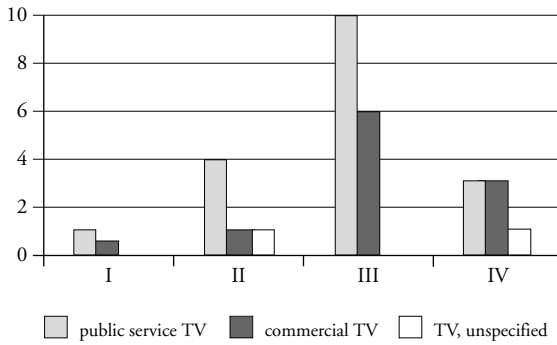
In may also be the case that the predominantly right-wing, market-centered media fulfilled a weaker watchdog mission towards a liberal/conservative administration, thereby providing less nourishment for parliamentary initiatives by the left-wing MPs.

Left-wing and right-wing media

As mentioned previously, the bulk of metropolitan newspapers are non-socialist; only two papers lean towards a leftist editorial stance. It is still of interest to examine the role of these groups of media as sources of political initiatives in parliament, also in relation to the different periods with a socialist majority (periods II and III) vs the periods with a non-socialist majority (period I and IV). The dominance of the liberal/conservative press is obvious from chart 3. However, the Aftonbladet seems to play an important role as source for political initiatives in parliament, also for non-socialist MPs. The research question in this analysis is:

RQ6: What was the pattern of media used as sources of political initiatives in terms of *editorial stance* over the period?

Chart 4b. Political initiatives based on media sources (national television) 1991-2007. Distribution over public service, commercial and TV unspecified (incl. foreign TV)



The dominance of DN Debatt and Uppdrag Granskning

In the Swedish media debate, the dominance of not only the liberal/conservative press, but also the role of one single paper's debate forum —DN Debatt— has sometimes been observed. To what extent does this newspaper or this section in the paper monopolize the political agenda in the country? The research question was phrased:

RQ8: To what extent did individual papers or TV channels dominate in the role as sources for political initiatives?

The answer to this question is fairly straightforward: DN Debatt was behind 47 of the grand total of 154 incidents where MPs used the press as a source of political initiatives, i. e. roughly a third of all cases. The reader is free to evaluate this figure as a case of monopolizing the political agenda or simply to note that this is the preferred route for organized interests when they want to promote an issue and bring it to the attention of the public and of law-makers. Is this a case of Governing with the news?

In television, there was a similar emphasis on single media or, indeed, single programs. The series of investigative journalism in the SVT Uppdrag Granskning (Mission Watchdog) ranked high in the empirical data on TV programs that led to parliamentary initiatives. Roughly one fourth of the cases where TV programs were sources of political initiatives, the inspiration for private members' bills came from Uppdrag Granskning. A substantial number of initiatives were also based on the corresponding TV4 investigative journalism series, Kalla Fakta (Cold Facts).

Discussion

The study presented in this paper has been informed by what Dahlgren calls the broader Habermasian tradition or the public service approach, asserting the norms of democracy, looking at institutional arrangements, especially in the media, as well as constellations of power and patterns of communication, that can foster or hinder moving society in that direction. He contrasts this approach with on the one hand the political science approach, covering the formal, democratic politics, leaning towards traditional liberal notions of democracy. A third approach to political communication is inspired by a rich variety of cultural theory, culturalist traditions, working with concepts such as meaning, identity and social agency (Dahlgren, 2004, 15-16).

The findings offer some insights into the part played by the media in setting issue agendas and how unexpected variation over time casts new light over patterns of news media «colonizing» politics (Meyer and Hinchman, 2002).

The number of private members' bills in parliament that used media reports as a source has been investigated. The main hypothesis was one of a growing mediatization of politics over the studied 15-year period. On closer analysis, the emerging pattern was one of a massive campaign via the predominantly non-socialist press, on the part of the non-socialist MPs while in opposition. They seemed to back up their bills in parliament demanding a radical change in policies by referring to debates initiated by powerful organized interests who could use the liberal or conservative press to present their case. The left-wing MPs seemed to find less of stimulating material in the (government-supporting) media when they were in opposition. Or —which has not been investigated here— the left-wing MPs would tend to lean on their organized interest groups, typically the labor unions, with «direct access» to friendly MPs without the need to be offered coverage in the media, traditionally hostile to the labor movement.

The alternative hypothesis, one that is based on a decline of political importance for the media, did not receive support in the study. The non-socialist MPs were actively using the media when in opposition, but passively supportive of the government when in power. Then they did not refer to the media, but, possibly, more often to governmental committees or reports from think tanks and other institutions to make proposals for legislation. The relative scarcity of media use as sources for parliamentary initiatives during periods of right-wing governments may simply show the impact of the dominant role of the non-socialist press and the ideological will by both non-socialist MPs and the media to attack socialist governments, but support one's own government during periods of being in power. If one regards non-socialist political parties as representatives of the economic power in society, one could observe here a concentration of power —an alliance between media power and political/economic power

One is reminded here of Gans's observation that democracy is as much a function of political and economic equality as of keeping abreast of the news.

The wealthy and the powerful will always know more than is contained in the from-the-top-down news that journalists deliver along with the politically irrelevant stories that fill much of the available time and space. Journalists help legitimate and even glorify the sources and strata from which they report. In effect, journalists «follow the power» or turn into messengers of the political, governmental and other leaders (Gans, 2003, 47-49)⁶.

In terms of system change, the disappearance of the social democratic Arbetet has no visible effect, nor does the appearance of a long-awaited commercial TV channel seem to have had a great impact. Surprisingly, though, the commercial TV4 seems to have been used as a source for initiatives almost as often as public service television. Television, overall, played a more limited, but also more balanced role as a source of inspiration for law-makers.

The above results, from an empirical study of hands-on media-oriented policy making, shows that politicians and the news media have an uneasy and multifaceted relationship. Elected members of parliament use the work of political reporters and analysts/experts/opinion makers as an inventory of content relevant to the day-to-day political process. Sometimes the two also combine in consciously formed alliances.

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6. The phrase «journalists follow the power» was coined by Robert Entman at a conference at the Joan Shorenstein Center: Press, Politics, and Public Policy, June 28, 2001.

* Some titles have been translated into English by the author.

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The Editorial Board dedicates the article to the memory of her author, who passed away last year.
