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Investigating Journalist Influences on Political Issue Agendas at Westminster

AERON DAVIS

This piece investigates the role of news media and journalists in setting political agendas. It presents evidence to challenge the agenda-setting paradigm most often adopted in such research. Instead it argues for greater employment of methods and perspectives more usually employed in media sociology. It then presents findings from research on Members of Parliament (MPs) in Britain. The findings, based mostly on semistructured interviews with 40 MPs, offer some interesting perspectives on the relationship between political journalism and the political process at Westminster. The overall conclusion is that intense media attention on issues can shift political agendas and policy development, but not according to the simple stimulus-response model of agenda-setting commonly employed. More often, news content and journalists play a significant role in setting agendas because politicians use them, in a variety of ways, to promote or negotiate agendas and policy options among themselves. In other words, journalism and journalists have a significant social and cultural role in helping MPs, consciously or unconsciously, to reach agreed agendas and positions.

Keywords journalism, agenda-setting, political elites

This article investigates alternative forms of news media and journalist influence on political issue agendas and decision making. It begins with a critical evaluation of media agenda-setting research—the more commonly adopted paradigm for exploring this question in political communication. Instead it argues for a greater adoption of methods and perspectives developed in media sociology. These typically draw on a mix of sociology, psychology, and ethnography to explore how media audiences use and relate to news, culture, and cultural producers in their everyday cognitive and behavioral processes. In this case, the audience is made up of politicians, and the line of inquiry is how they use news and journalists in their efforts to identify political agendas and make substantive decisions.

The rest of the article then presents some preliminary findings of research that applied these issues to Members of Parliament (MPs) in Britain. The findings, based mostly on semistructured interviews with 40 MPs, offer some interesting perspectives on the relationship between political journalism and the political process at Westminster.

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The overall conclusion is that intense media attention on issues can shift political agendas and policy development, but not according to the simple stimulus-response model of agenda-setting commonly employed. Politicians are usually too skeptical of news content, too media aware, and have too many non-news sources to draw on in policy matters. Instead, news media and journalists influence the issue agendas used in other ways. British MPs, who are both media savvy and media obsessive, consciously shift their policy agendas with future news reporting in mind. Politicians, working either independently or in partnership with journalists, are frequently the sources behind news campaigns, as they try to “ride” the media to influence agendas. Lastly, politicians often use news consumption and their daily interactions with journalists to reach an understanding of what other politicians think are the main issues and policy solutions to be engaged with. In other words, journalism and journalists have a significant social and cultural role in helping MPs to reach agreed agendas and positions.

Investigating News Influences on Political Elites: From Media Effects to Mediation and the Social Construction of Issue Agendas

One consistent approach to investigating media influences on politics has evolved directly out of agenda-setting studies in political science and communication (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Reeves, 1997). Although this work has mostly been applied to public audiences, there has been a steady trickle of research projects that have focused on political elites¹. Commonly, because qualitative and experimental research is difficult with this audience, the methods have tended to rely on quantitative data that compare news with political content. The quantity of news coverage on key topics is tallied up, over time, in one or more key news publications or broadcasts. This is then compared with time-specific, aggregate data on the number of instances that political elites communicate on such issues and/or make substantive responses.

Thus, Soroka (2003) finds a link between increased news coverage of foreign affairs and rises in defense spending. He (2002) also found that increases in news coverage of environmental issues resulted in more public discussion of these issues in Washington while, at the same time, finding the reverse in terms of the issue of government budget deficits. Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) compared levels of crime reporting with shifts in levels of resource expenditures for criminal justice in seven cities over a 31-year period. They found a possible causal link in two of the cities but nothing elsewhere. Edwards and Wood (1999) found that the president’s public pronouncements on foreign affairs and crime seemed to be in response to heightened levels of broadcast news coverage. The results were more mixed in other areas of domestic policy such as education and health care. Brandenburg’s (2002) analysis of nine key issues in the British General Election found no data to confirm that media influenced the political agendas of the two main parties but some instances of the reverse.

A few studies, notably Protess et al. (1991) and Baumgartner and Jones (1993), used a wider range of methods and, consequently, offered more mixed findings on the nature of the relationship between news texts and political agendas. Each, while underlining the importance of media influences on politics, says as much about the shortcomings of the agenda-setting paradigm. Two particular objections come to the fore. First is the problem of establishing the line of causality from news media stimuli to political response. Effects research has always struggled to isolate media stimuli and separate them from other possible “real-world” stimuli. Political decision making is no less of a problem. The passage of legislation, from policy idea to votes in the legislature, is usually a slow moving

process involving multiple actors and information sources. These two extensive studies of media influence (see also Cook et al., 1983) found that processes involving substantive political change were usually already in motion before news coverage of the relevant issue intensified.

Second, political responses may be tallied up during content analysis but are usually more likely to be of a “symbolic” rather than a substantive nature (see also Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993; Walgrave & van Aelst, 2004)². That is, politicians may respond to heightened media interest with more speeches or hearings, but this does not necessarily translate into budgetary, regulatory, or legislative changes. In each of these case studies, it was clear that politicians discussed the issues with journalists and other interested parties prior to news stories being produced and then prepared responses accordingly. Thus, what might be classified as news media effects and agenda-setting by some may be classified as political news management by others (e.g., Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Jones, 1995; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Miller, 2004).

There is also a third objection concerning the nature of the political elite audience being observed. One conclusion, deducible from several other studies in this field, is that politicians are less likely than most to be influenced by political coverage (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1992, 1997). The indicators are that, if individuals have more education, consume more news media, have a greater interest in politics, or have more knowledge of an issue from nonmedia sources, they are less likely to be subject to media influences on the issue³. At the same time, politicians are confronted with multiple issues and conscious choices every day. This differs from the one-off issues or voting choices made in isolation or at a later date, as tested in much agenda-setting research. It is thus not a matter of looking at news issues and their effects in isolation but, rather, the competition to achieve salience among multiple issues in the social arenas in which politicians exist (see Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Ansolabehere et al., 1997).⁴

Thus, for Gamson (2004, p. 310) “the social sciences overall need a more sophisticated social psychology in which cognition, emotion and calculation all play their parts. . . . A primitive stimulus-response model still lurks behind many of the key formulations in the study of political communication.” As Walgrave and van Aelst conclude (2004, p. 15) “public agenda-setting is a cognitive process while political agenda-setting is essentially a behavioural process. It is not what politicians think or believe but what they do that matters. . . . Precisely for that reason we need a specific behavioural theory of political actors and we cannot simply rely on the simple public agenda-setting model.”

There are a number of studies, in related research areas such as media sociology, that offer methods and perspectives that might assist in these goals. An alternative media effects tradition looked at individual media “uses” and “gratifications” (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Blumler & Katz, 1974). Parallel work in media sociology investigated how audiences actively interpreted their media (Morley, 1980; Ang, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1990). More recently, inquiry has focused on the “mediation” of social and political processes (Martin-Barbero, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Livingstone, 1999). This seeks to observe how individuals, in their use of media, inadvertently alter their behaviors and relations. In terms of political decision making, the research question then becomes: How do individual politicians adapt their behavior and decision making processes in relation to the evolving news media environment that they are faced with?

In terms of political communication, this question has usually been investigated in terms of the efforts of politicians to manage and/or adapt to news agendas. Thus, political parties and governments employ professional marketing and public relations firms to either “spin” news media (Ewen, 1996; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Miller,

2004) or adapt and reinvent their brands and policies in ways news journalists and voters will positively respond to (Scammell, 1995; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Norris, 2000). For others, by adapting to an increasingly commercialized media, political processes, including agenda-setting and decision making, have become driven by a populist, entertainment-oriented media logic (Hallin, 1994; Franklin, 1997; Bennett, 1997; Underwood, 2001; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Altheide, 2004; Entman, 2005). This thesis has been presented at its most extreme in the work of Street (1997) and Meyer (2002). For Meyer (2002), as political elites adapt themselves to news media imperatives, so news media “colonize” politics. Politics has come to be dominated by an “iron triangle” of politicians, pollsters, and media executives. The unavoidable conclusion is that issue agendas and political processes are being altered as politicians attempt to accommodate and exploit the mediated political environment.

The most significant empirical study conducted in this area is that of Herbst (1998). Herbst asked questions such as: How do political staffers regard the information in news media in terms of its objectivity and ability to crystallize public opinion? Asking such questions leads one to place journalists and news journalism within the long-term research agenda concerned with “who decides” and according to what criteria (Mills, 1956; Dahl, 1961, 1989; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974) in political policy spheres and networks?

However, apart from Herbst’s research, to date, much of the “mediated politics” work remains speculative when it comes to making assessments of how politicians and agendas are actually influenced. It often tends to conflate the “public sphere” with the “policy sphere”. That is, it merges the presentation of politics, parties and policies with the actual business of politics that largely takes place in private. In total, this work says more about public political campaigning, political brand management, and the shaping of news in the public sphere. It says rather less about the day-to-day impacts of news media and journalists on elite cognitions, agendas, and behaviors in the political private sphere.

A second, alternative approach to the issue of news media influence on politics focuses on the nature of the relationships that form between political reporters and politicians. Building on earlier studies (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979), recent work in media sociology has renewed its interest in the activities of news sources and media-source relations (Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994; Manning, 2000; Davis, 2002). While the main focus of this research has been news construction, much of it at the same time suggests something about how political elites are influenced by their relations with journalists.

A key finding of this news sources work, like that of studies of investigative journalism (Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1991; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) is that politicians and political journalists move in overlapping spheres (see also Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Parsons, 1989; Herbst, 1998; Davis, 2003). Journalists and politicians, whether in conflict, regular dialogue, or working in coalitions, contribute to issue agendas and policy debate. These often exclude the wider public sphere and considerations of public opinion altogether (Lang & Lang, 1983; Protess et al., 1991; Davis, 2003; see also Kantola, 2001). In this scenario, it is not a matter of news media as an independent variable affecting the cognitive processes and behaviors of political elites. Nor is it a matter of political elites adapting their thinking and behavior to accommodate the requirements of journalists and news production. Instead, journalists and politicians, fairly often, have some form of combined role in the identification and selection of issues and their solutions. How that combined role and politician-reporter relations generally are used in agenda-setting from the point of view of politicians is rarely explored.

Methods

The study presented here is “audience-centered” and conceived along these latter lines of mediation and social interactionism. Its starting assumptions are that politicians consume and make extensive use of news in their daily information-gathering and cognitive processes and that politicians also have regular interactions with journalists in the course of their work, which affects their thinking and behavior. Consequently, journalism and journalists are likely to play a part in the construction of political agendas and political deliberations generally. In terms of the approach adopted, the choice of methods is limited. The difficulty with gaining access to elite participants is well documented (e.g., Moyser & Wagstaff, 1987; Abercrombie et al., 1990). It is unlikely that cooperation can be gained for experimental, focus group, ethnographic, or extensive survey research. The most realistic research methods therefore involve interviews, content analysis, participant observation, and use of other survey data.

The research to date has been almost entirely interview based with some limited participant observation. Forty-six semistructured interviews were arranged with 40 MPs and 6 former MPs now in the House of Lords. Currently serving MPs were “theoretically sampled” (Strauss & Crobin, 1998), according to fixed quotas, in order to gain a representative mix that reflected the current balance of MPs according to party and gender⁵. There was also an element of snowballing in gaining several of the interviews (although still guided by quota considerations). This did lead to certain biases in the sample, such as a greater proportion of MPs with media experience or interest, and more with ministerial or shadow (opposition) ministerial experience. In addition, the research draws on parallel interview-based research with a further 20 senior political journalists/editors.

Each politician was asked a very similar set of questions with variation according to their position and experience. Where possible, interviewees were also asked their responses to a set of quick closed questions. With time constraints, there was not always time to put every question to every interviewee. Interviews lasted on average 35–40 minutes and generated just over 5,500 words of transcript material each. A few were as short as 20 minutes, several lasted over an hour, and one was 2 hours in duration. All but four interviews took place face to face at sites in or around Westminster.

Politicians, News, and Issue Agendas: Evaluating the Stimulus-Response Model

In some ways, the interview material did offer evidence supportive of a classic political agenda-setting paradigm. The majority of politicians were self-confessed “news junkies.” On average, MPs consumed four to five different news sources, including three newspapers, each day (see matched finding in Duffy & Rowden, 2005). Just over two thirds listened to radio news, and the same amount watched television news. A third used online news services. Interestingly, many explained that there was a constant news media presence in their offices. This was often observed first-hand when conducting interviews in MPs’ offices. A television might be on showing News 24, the Parliament Channel, or Ceefax and a desk computer might well display the BBC Web site and tickertape news headlines.

News media appeared to be a key information source for MPs. Politicians were asked: “What are your main sources of information when it comes to informing yourself about and deciding where you stand on political issues?” The question was put several times in relation to interviewees’ role (back-bench MP or [opposition] minister), whether they had

a special interest/expertise in the issue, and if they were required to vote on the issue. Overall, news media was the second most mentioned source by all interviewees, with four out of every seven listing it. Significantly, it was the most important source for roughly half of the back benchers who listed it. This also found support in a MORI survey (2001). MPs were also asked which sources of information “are most useful to you in your work”; 59% responded “articles in newspapers or magazines” (the top answer).

For many interviewees, the news media were a starting point for their day and gave clues as to what issues needed to be looked at further:

I guess it's [news] a kind of funnel, then, in the sense that, you start with awareness of the issue in general terms, and that will probably come from a news source. . . . If it's an issue which is then either in one's spokespersonship, or of particular interest, then I would proactively start looking for data or information (John Thurso).

Obviously the newspapers are very important to me. I read habitually . . . and I try to keep up with what the latest thinking is. And then I look, . . . if, for example, something's referred to I'll go look up the original source. . . . So those daily and weekly newspapers and magazines signpost me where to go (Sadiq Khan).

A quarter of MPs also suggested that the news, in some way, contributed to setting the political agenda in Parliament for the day. News stories could become the prominent issues and talking points for MPs, journalists, and other parliamentarians. For a smaller group, they went further in “setting the context” or “framework of interpretation” of an issue: “I'm very interested in political commentary . . . in politics, it's very important to understand the context in which you're operating because the context shapes a lot of the way people will see what you're doing” (Danny Alexander), or “I read a range of newspapers and Web sites every day to try and make sure that I know what the issues of the day are . . . that hopefully sets me up for the day”. (Angus Robertson)

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 decisions⁶. Legislation on gambling, alcohol licensing hours, hand guns, dangerous dogs, immigration, and asylum and funding decisions on hospitals, schools, and rural railways were some of the issues mentioned. Several also talked about media campaigns being the main driving force behind an issue agenda, policy shift, or ministerial resignation: “The written media hunt in packs — with some honorable exceptions . . . in the 3 weeks of May and June [2006], all the papers ran on Home Office related issues” (Simon Hughes) or “The media can, as it were, suddenly get into its collective head the idea that a particular proposal is wrong . . . and the policy-making process . . . has suddenly whipped itself up into a storm” (Paul Goodman)

I think editors can [change political decisions] by the way in which they decide to launch a campaign and sustain it. They have to be prepared to sustain it over a long period. I think once several journalists decide that they have to run together, because they will be picked off separately and their editors will see them as less competent, less aggressive, less successful, those people then join together. And, once they've joined together, then they can have a major impact (David Blunkett).

However, the interview material, in many other ways, suggested that news media in isolation rarely had such an impact. There was a high degree of skepticism generally about news content in the U.K. When asked about their sources of news, not a single MP listed the *Sun* or *Daily Mirror*, and only three mentioned the *Daily Mail* (the three most-read newspapers in the U.K.). Few MPs talked about the media in terms of its ideal “fourth estate” roles. Few believed news was an actual reflection of public opinion and looked to it for that purpose. Just under half, without prompting, described political coverage as overly “trivial” and dominated by “personalities” and the “dramatic”. Just over a third used terms like “the pack” or “the herd” to describe political reporters as a group. Thus, acquiescence to news media agendas did not result because MPs believed political reporting presented reasoned debate or “the will of the people”: “I don’t think many of us would pay very much attention to the media as a gauge of public opinion” (Graham Brady).

It disturbs me how the media tends to come to issues too late and when they do they treat them in a trivial way. The trouble is, particularly the newspapers now are providers of entertainment and opinion rather than news, and they must titillate and excite their readers rather than inform them (Peter Luff).

Similarly, although many MPs listed the news media as an important source of information for their jobs, it was not usually regarded as a source of information on specific policy matters. It was one of the least (seventh) mentioned information sources for former government ministers. They prioritized civil servants, personal networks, and interest groups well above news media. For back-bench MPs, it was fourth as an information source; constituents, interest groups, and party briefings were more likely to be mentioned. The general impression was that, for most politicians, news media were no more than a general, background information source on policy and legislative matters.

At the same time, it was clear that politicians, unlike the typical audience examined in media effects research, had a very good knowledge of journalism, journalists, and news production. Just over four fifths of those asked had had formal media training and/or previous experience in journalism or public relations/affairs. Many interviewees spoke about the ease of guessing future headlines and slants on the way issues and announcements would be covered. Many appeared to have extensive knowledge of individual publications and journalists: “You could work out the headline; you could write the headlines for them; you can have a real fun time writing the next day’s headlines and you’re nearly always right” (Ann Widdecombe), or “Most of the time, for a politician, the way the press will react is fairly predictable” (Frank Doran).

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 contact with those they read. However, when asked more about why they consume and think about news, further information is revealed about the part played by news in setting issue agendas and framing policy debate.

News Media, Anticipatory Media Effects, and MP Agenda Setters

One such alternative line of media influence might be termed an “anticipatory news media effect.” What is clear is that, even when MPs are critical of the news media and its ability to reflect public opinion, they are still very concerned with its output. They still assume

news has some sort of impact on public opinion, and that concern appears to be increasingly influencing the development of issue agendas and policy discussions in a number of subtle ways.

The majority asked about media influence believed the media did contribute to public opinion of the parties and individual politicians generally. Almost as many thought MPs were themselves influenced by news coverage. However, as often explained, this was usually put down to MP's obsessions with news media and a concern with how constituents would respond: "I'm not saying the media always has an effect on everything it does. I'm saying . . . if the media can affect public opinion, and politicians have to be sensitive to public opinion, then indirectly they are affected by the media" (Martin Linton).

You've got to be careful that you don't get sucked into this goldfish bowl that everything that we think, the political classes and the journalists think, is necessarily important to most people out there. . . . I think it's other MPs, it's other journalists, it's the political classes in here. And I think it does affect the mood music here in terms of the way people [here] think (Kevan Jones).

Former government ministers and shadow ministers explained that discussions of policy were frequently linked to the issue of how the policy would play in the news. For many, in fact, this had bordered on media "obsession." Almost every interviewee who had served in a cabinet or shadow cabinet since the late 1980s talked in such terms. As a consequence, an "anticipatory media effect" can be said to have developed as party leaders increasingly select issues and make policy decisions with future news headlines in mind. According to Conservatives Ann Widdecombe; "We never discussed a policy without discussing the media impact, ever, because you would be very blind if you just launched a policy and didn't work out exactly what people were likely to make of it."

John Major, on the other hand, cared deeply about what the media said and became obsessed with it. . . . William [Hague] would be delivering a major speech, he would understandably want to get coverage and, therefore, he would consult his press secretary . . . and they would say we've got to have something which is newsworthy, and that meant a policy. . . . The concern was always how can we get coverage, and the only way you get coverage is by saying something new, and by saying something new you were having to announce something (Conservative John Whittingdale).

Labour member Frank Field stated: "Actually they're [the Blair government] obsessed by it. It's the number one priority. The number one priority [in 1998–1999] was the media coverage because at all costs we had to win a second time. . . . Never mind about getting reforms."

I think where the media has an impact, and where it has a huge impact, is in relation to the question which is constantly in a minister's mind, "what is the media going to say about this?" Rather than taking information provided by the media as a basis for decision making, it's more that, as you come to make those decisions, the thinking's about "how's this going to play with media and therefore the public?" (Labour member Chris Smith)

Such media-oriented policy-making was supported in accounts given by several political journalists: "Previously, parties developed policy and then publicized it, but they only

considered the publicity at a late stage. But now . . . what the Labour government has done is to make communications a part of the strategy from the beginning” (George Jones)

Politicians have to take note of how a policy will play with the media. It was said that Hague was rather too conscious of the reactions of the *Telegraph* and the *Mail* in the lead up to the general election. . . . Politicians have to take note of how a policy will play with the media. . . . The need to present policy permeates through the whole way the government does its business (Andy McSmith).

Ordinary MPs and party leaders are extremely sensitive to news media coverage and, in addition, have an intimate knowledge of how news is produced. These two things therefore suggest that the development of issue agendas and policy debates is inadvertently influenced by prevailing news values. Those issues and policy solutions that are likely to gain media coverage are more likely to be addressed. Those that are not are less likely.

It also became quite evident that many MPs, and shadow ministers would use their knowledge of news construction to source stories, produce news content, and ride news trends. According to an anonymous former Conservative minister; “Heseltine’s theory was, if you’re an opposition spokesman, you flick on Ceefax, you look at the top 10 stories and see if you can muscle in on one of them during the day. And there’s some truth in that.”

You’re looking for stories which would allow you to exploit them, to obtain publicity, to promote your ideas, to provide a chance of attacking the government . . . you can create your own stories. It’s hard work but you can create them from nothing, but it’s much easier to have a story which is up and running and then manage to sort of attach yourself to it and get coverage that way (John Whittingdale).

In fact, for many interviewees the news media was regarded as a vital tool for influencing news agendas and policy debates. This was certainly the case for most of the select committee chairs and all of the opposition ministers interviewed. Where the relevant government minister chose to ignore the findings and recommendations of select committees, media coverage was regarded as an alternative way of adding pressure and forcing responses. For opposition ministers, news media were regarded as the most important means for raising issues and applying pressure to governments: “The relationship is very different in opposition. You want them, you need them. If you want to make news, make an impact, run a campaign, you need their support” (Frank Dobson) or “Leaders of the opposition take media very seriously because it’s all you’ve got. You can do it on media campaigns, so you work very closely with them and they are very important to us” (John Redwood).

As a Select Committee chairman, I’m very conscious of the fact that the single most powerful weapon we have is publicity. Where our reports are reported is crucial. We need to have good relations with the media for that. I’m developing those at present with the Trade and Industry Select Committee . . . it’s crucial. It is our meat and drink (Peter Luff).

Many back-bench MPs interviewed, including those on the government side, also said they spoke to the media for the explicit purpose of influencing Parliamentary agendas and

government decision making in some way. Several described long-term campaigns that only influenced budgets or legislation when they gained a media profile:

I ran a campaign over about 3 years to get the VAT reduced on sanitary products. . . . And the year that he [Gordon Brown] actually did it in the budget, we sat and talked about what else we could do. . . . I did a really good interview with them [*Woman's Hour*], and they allowed me the time for the interview. And a couple of newspapers did kind of say that the Chancellor was under pressure. . . . And I know that even if he hadn't been going to do it, in the end, he had to do it because the serious newspapers were saying he was expected to do it. And when newspapers then say those things, you know, ministers become — even Gordon — become quite cornered (Christine McCafferty).

The Pension Reform Group, which I am associated with, we're seeing the prime minister on Monday with our proposals. . . . Last Sunday I gave to the *Sunday Telegraph* the letter I'd written to the Chancellor following up a meeting I'd had with him a few days before. And I think the *Guardian* will do something this Friday and then, hopefully, if all the facts are through, we'll get stuff in the media this coming Monday. So I use it to build up the campaign. And . . . the sad fact is if the Prime Minister reads it in the press, he thinks it's real (Frank Field).

This state of affairs finds support in many accounts offered by journalists: "What Mandelson brought was spinning ahead of the meeting in an effort to bounce people into decisions in advance. It's been a long process . . . from fairly orthodox, when PR was the conduit only, now through to policy-making by design" (Paul Routledge).

There is a constant jockeying for position in any party, and the media is a part of that. It's part of the game of politics. . . . If there is a big cabinet discussion coming up, a big disagreement between ministers, lots of briefing goes on. They will often try and bounce the prime minister into something, or rubbish their opponent's case (Andrew Grice).

Put all together, we are left with a larger picture in which anticipation of news coverage, as well as attempts by MPs to ride and divert issue coverage, has a shaping effect on the overall policy agenda. Issue saliency is, in part, influenced by anticipation of news media coverage and therefore by longer-term news values. As such, there appears some evidence in the interview material to support the "mediated politics" thesis (Hallin, 1994; Franklin, 1997; Bennett, 1997; Underwood, 2001; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Altheide, 2004; Entman, 2005).

Journalists as Participants in the Political Process

In addition, the interview material suggested that interaction with individual journalists had other subtler influences on issue agendas and policy deliberations. Politicians used individual journalists, in a variety of ways, to gather information on core processes within Parliament itself. They read and talked to key journalists with a view to finding out what other politicians thought, the general mood of the political parties, and even what issues and policy options should be put forward.

In the classic literature on media-source relations (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979; Tiffen, 1989; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994; Hess, 2000), there is regular contact between politicians and journalists. The relationship between the two is a multi-faceted one where, fundamentally, both sides need each other. Reporters need political information and comment, and politicians need publicity and to promote their policies. But it is also presented as a relationship of tensions that can be extremely damaging to individual careers. However, what also became clear during the interviews was that politicians were not just seeking publicity when talking to journalists. These discussions were themselves part of the political process.

The MPs interviewed did, indeed, have a very high level of contact with political reporters and so were well acquainted with the authors of the news they were consuming. Without exception, MPs had regular contact with local and/or regional journalists who covered their electoral constituency. In many cases MPs either wrote for their local papers or virtually constructed the reports that appeared in their local press. All ministers, shadow ministers, and a slim majority of back-bench MPs talked to national reporters on a regular basis. In all, just over two thirds talked to correspondents, on average, at least once a day, and usually several times a day. At busy periods some said they could have between 10 and 20 conversations with reporters in a day. The other third talked to journalists once or several times a week. None spoke to journalists less often than this.

For ordinary MPs, maintaining good relations and gaining publicity were necessary to retain constituency support. Just as back-bench MPs talked to local journalists, government and shadow ministers did the same with national lobby journalists in order to explain the details of new policy and legislation. The traditional two-way relationship, documented elsewhere, came out in many interviews: "We maintain good relations with our local journalists, newspapers, television station, radio stations. . . . You've got to keep them on side, you've got to feed them with stories, you've got to show them you're alive, intermittently alive" (Austin Mitchell) "You get to know all the local journalists . . . a productive relationship. They're looking for stories and copy, and they can help to highlight causes that you're wanting to campaign on. And you can help them write their newspaper" (Jo Swinson)

At the end of the day, you know, you want to be able to feed them with your information. You want them to be able to write stories with your information. [Journalists are] judged by what they produce in the main paper . . . it's in their interests to also be alongside you and hope that you will give exclusive rights or feed them stories (Iain Duncan Smith).

National lobby reporters similarly recounted the details of working relationships that formed between politicians and themselves over lengthy periods. Successful political journalists often remained in their posts much longer than the average correspondent because they had gathered and retained a number of important contacts:

Relationships are built partly upon mutuality of interest so that the moment I cease to have access to platforms on newspapers, radio and television, and the Internet, you know, most ministers will not return my calls. Why should they? This is based on mutual interest and everybody understands that (Michael White).

Over time you get to know people quite well . . . after the '83 election I'd spoken to John Smith. I said "Who should I get to know of your new intake?" and

he said “Oh, you ought to get to know Gordon Brown and Tony Blair.” And, of course, it was in that order, and I did thankfully, and so I’ve known them for 23 years. So it’s not in any sense a social relationship or anything like that, but when we see each other there’s a hinterland there of contact, relationship, referring back to earlier times, all that, and that’s very important (Peter Riddell).

However, many MPs, when asked in more detail why they talked to reporters or read newspapers, offered responses that implied that the relationship offered something more. These, in different ways, all suggested that journalists could be more central to the political processes within Parliament itself. Interviewees were asked why they consumed news media and what kinds of information they were looking for other than breaking news stories. The most common response given, by just over half of MPs, was that they were interested in particular columnists or editorial comment sections. Interviewees explained that they were looking for “commentary” and/or “analysis” of issues and events beyond just the reporting of facts: “I would make a point of reading all the commentary columns. News comes from so many sources now . . . and I’m much more interested in hearing what people are saying about something than just reading to know what” (Tony Wright). It was also apparent that certain lobby correspondents were also taken more notice of and played a more formative role in directing opinion among both journalists and politicians. A number of different commentators and correspondents were named by several MPs without prompting (David Arronovitch, Colin Brown, Matthew D’Ancona, Simon Heffer, George Jones, Trevor Kavanagh, Polly Toynbee, and Michael White). Because so many politicians read these columnists or lobby journalists, it was assumed they had a more significant impact on opinion and processes within Parliament itself:

You have two categories of journalists, some who are influential, others who aren’t. . . . But there are some journalists that politicians will read regularly and often be influenced by. You know, Peter Riddle or David Arronovich in the *Times*, Polly Toynbee, Martin Kettle in the *Guardian* (Martin Linton).

A quarter of MPs also stated that news was a way of gauging what others, either in one’s own party or in rival parties, were thinking on issues. Some also made clear that they often attempted to work out who the political sources of stories were and why they were sourcing the story. In effect, news media aided MPs in their attempts to interpret “feelings” or trends in opinion within the parties themselves:

I read the *Daily Mail* to see what my political opponents are thinking, and doing, and to see what the right-wing media are saying about us. I don’t read it for news . . . if most politicians are honest, if they’re speaking to a journalist in a quality newspaper, then they’re probably speaking as much to their own MPs and party members as the public (Wayne David).

I get a lot of my news about what’s going on in the Labour Party from the media. . . . I’m very interested to know what happened with the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party] and how Blair’s speech went down, and what it is that the rebels on the Education Bill are prepared to accept to stop rebelling . . . [that’s] how the other political parties would get their information about what was going on. From the newspapers, not exclusively, but in a very large part (Julia Kirkbride).

The role of commentary and columnists, as a part of the calculative process of politicians, was also mentioned by several journalists: "Once a policy is out in public and being debated, a paper will write commentaries on it. . . . And there's no doubt that one key issue in Blair's mind, when deciding a new policy, will be the media climate" (Andrew Grice).

You know, the changes that were made on tuition fees, the changes that were made on trust schools weren't only shaped by a very sort of feverish debate within Parliament but [were] also shaped by the way the leader writers discussed all these subjects. I mean I think it's not necessarily the news stories as much as the way the leader writers of various papers, the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *FT*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*. I would say they all had [a] huge impact on the shape of legislation (Philip Webster).

At the same time, a majority of MPs, regardless of party or position, appeared to have established relations with national journalists that went beyond the merely functional. Many used terms like "friend" or "colleague" and would meet for social as well as professional reasons. Others referred to relationships as occasionally taking the form of "alliances" or "coalitions". In these cases, it seemed clear that journalists were very much part of the policy networks that evolved within Parliament: "I would say there's about six or seven journalists that I know and speak to, you know, once a fortnight, and feel quite chummy and chatty with" (Chris Bryant).

In any place of work, it's best to have reasonably friendly relations with your working colleagues, and they [journalists] are in a sense some of our working colleagues. And I get on with a number of people, some of which work for sympathetic bits of the media, and some of them don't (Frank Dobson).

For some MPs, these regular exchanges with certain journalists became a means of gaining more knowledge about what was happening in Parliament. They were a further way of gauging opinion or developments taking place within one's own party or in a rival party. Journalists moved between groups or individuals and carried bits of conversation or opinion with them: "They may well have got wind of a particular emerging story, and they ring in order to get a comment. . . . And if you know them and trust them, then that can be a very fertile process" (Nick Raynsford).

I would, of course, also be trying to find out from them [journalists], from time to time, in so far as I can, what else is going on in the wider conversation—what government ministers are saying in policy areas, or political areas I'm interested in. . . . Dealing with journalists is perhaps not unanalogous to one of these novels about information gathering in the world of Cold War. I mean they're trying to find pieces of information from MPs, and MPs are trying to find pieces of information from them (Paul Goodman).

Several journalists also stated that MPs and ministers actually come to them to try to get their opinions and advice on a range of policy issues and processes: "I mean very few policies, quite rightly, come totally out of the blue . . . people are very keen to talk [to me] about policy when they're sitting there all day wondering how to make their particular department work better" (Polly Toynbee). "People in the last Conservative administration did so [consulted me] all the time. . . . I had friends who were well known to be

sympathetic to the Labour Party who were often consulted by Conservative ministers” (Simon Heffer).

I’ve had leaders of the Liberal Democrats asking me what should they ask at PMQs. I’ve had Conservatives asking me what are the points of vulnerability at the moment in the government. And I’ve had Labour ministers asking me what do I think the Tories are going to do over X, Y, and Z. And they all do the same, you know, they all want a little bit of your inside info (Colin Brown).

These alternative forms of journalist information suggest that interaction with individual reporters is also relevant as a means of evaluating and relating to the political processes within Westminster itself. News and journalists play a key part in the business of politics itself. MPs read and talk to specific journalists with a view to asking: How do key columnists and correspondents, who mix with MPs on a daily basis, assess political issues and legislation? What will be the likely talking points around Parliament on any given day, possibly for days to come? What are other MPs saying and thinking, and what are the “moods” within the parties? This seemed to be particularly the case with back-bench MPs who found themselves further removed from decision making at the top ends of their party structures. It might also be suggested that these forms of information and interchange were a key means by which issue agendas and opinions may be agreed upon within the Parliamentary political sphere. In Philip Webster’s account:

Legislation does get changed a hell of a lot as it goes through Parliament, and a lot of that is due to the debate that is sparked sort of within the press and within Parliament. I think the two go together. I think MPs often take their lead from a [news editorial] leader, for example, and sometimes it’s the other way round, sometimes the press might well pick up and say these guys have got it right, there should be a change, this is where the government could make a change to a legislation.

In many ways, the findings among Westminster politicians are similar to some previous studies of issue agenda construction in the United States (Cook et al., 1983; Protess et al., 1991; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; see also Schorr, 1997). Politicians and journalists do have uneasy relations with each other that revolve around an exchange of political information for news coverage. However, the relationships between the two are more multifaceted than that. Politicians use news and their interactions with journalists to get other sorts of information that are relevant to the political process on a day-to-day level. The two also combine, sometimes consciously in alliances, and sometimes by playing off each other, to influence political agendas and the search for policy solutions.

Conclusions

As argued, increased media attention, alone, is unlikely to result in pushing an issue near to the top of the Parliamentary agenda. At any one time, there are multiple issues competing for political attention. Politicians have many alternative sources of information on policy matters that they regard as more authoritative or significant. They are also extremely knowledgeable about the process of news production, are skeptical of media content, and know first-hand the reporters and politicians who construct the news.

What matters more is that a critical mass of MPs, or a smaller group of party leaders, come to believe that an issue needs to be addressed more substantially and, collectively, identify policy solutions. For that, intense and sustained attention and communication among Parliamentarians needs to take place. For Hilgartner and Bosk (1988), a process of feedback and amplification is needed. Wolfsfeld (2001) describes this as “wave amplification” and Edwards and Wood (1999) a “loop effect.” Widespread and sustained media attention on an issue or individual can sometimes achieve this on its own—however, as explained here, not really according to a simple stimulus-response model.

More likely is that this attention is sourced and sustained by MPs themselves, often in some form of regular exchange or alliance with specific journalists. As also argued here, news media consumption and daily exchanges with journalists can play a less obvious but equally vital role. They contribute to politicians keeping an eye on evolving processes, moods, and consensuses on issues among politicians themselves. In effect, news media and political journalists can fulfill a necessary social and cultural function in which they are one possible means by which agreements are reached on issue agendas and policy solution options.

Notes

1. For a very useful summary and analysis of work in this area, see Walgrave and van Aelst (2004).
2. See Boorstin (1962) and Edelman (1964) for early observations of the process of symbolic over substantive politics.
3. At the same time, there are indications that news media may have greater priming and reinforcement effects on these same individuals. Such might be deduced from Iyengar and Kinder (1987) and Zaller (1992, 1997) and also in MacKuen (1984) and Miller and Krosnick (1997). For MacKuen (1984), “Short-term public responsiveness to events on the public stage is concentrated only at the upper stratum of political involvement” (p. 383).
4. For a range of other objections to media effects and agenda-setting forms of research, see Morley (1980), Ang (1986), Gauntlett (1998), and Norris et al. (1999).
5. This included 23 Labour, 11 Conservative, and 6 Liberal Democrat and Independent MPs (32 men and 8 women). In all, 2 of the interviewees were party leaders, 13 had government ministerial experience, 17 had shadow ministerial experience, and 8 were, or had been recently, chairs of parliamentary select committees.
6. There are also several documented case studies where media campaigns appeared to change substantive policy or legislative decisions (see, for example, Nelson, 1989; Mannheim, 1994; Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Anderson, 1997; Davis, 1999).

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Appendix: List of Interviewees Cited

Danny Alexander, Liberal Democrat MP for Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (February 2006)

Rt Hon David Blunkett, Labour MP for Sheffield Brightside, former shadow minister and government minister (March 2006)

Graham Brady, Conservative MP for Altrincham and Sale West, shadow minister (December 2005)

Colin Brown, Deputy Political Editor of the *Independent* (August 2006)

Chris Bryant, Labour MP for Rhondda (December 2005)

Wayne David, Labour MP for Caerphilly (January 2006)

Rt Hon Frank Dobson, Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras, former shadow minister and former government minister (March 2006)

Frank Doran, Labour MP for Aberdeen North, former shadow minister and select committee chair (May 2006)

Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith, Conservative MP for Chingford and Woodford Green, former shadow minister and party leader (April 2006)

Rt Hon Frank Field, Labour MP for Birkinhead, former government minister and former chair of select committees (April 2006)

Paul Goodman, Conservative MP for Wycombe, shadow minister (March 2006)

Andrew Grice, Political Editor of the *Independent* (September 2001)

Simon Heffer, Political Columnist and Associate Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, (August 2006)

Simon Hughes, Liberal Democrat MP for North Southwark and Bermondsey, former party leadership contender, Party President and Shadow Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, and Attorney General, (July 2006)

George Jones, Political Correspondent at the *Daily Telegraph* (August 2001)

Kevan Jones, Labour MP for North Durham (February 2006)

Sadiq Khan, Labour MP for Tooting (March 2006)

Julia Kirkbride, Conservative MP for Broomsgrove, former shadow minister (February 2006)

Martin Linton, Labour MP for Battersea (February 2006)

Peter Luff, Conservative MP for Mid-Worcestershire, former party whip and chair of select committees (March 2006)

Lord Robert Maclennan of Rogart, former Labour government minister, leader of the Social Democratic Party, and Liberal Democrat shadow minister (February 2006)

Christine McCafferty, Labour MP for Calder Valley (April 2006)

Andy McSmith, Chief Political Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* (November 2001)

Austin Mitchell, Labour MP for Great Grimsby (February 2006)

Rt Hon Nick Raynsford, Labour MP for Greenwich and Woolwich, former shadow minister and former government minister (May 2006)

Rt Hon John Redwood, Conservative MP for Wokingham, former government minister, shadow minister, and party leadership candidate (February 2006)

Peter Riddell, Chief Political Commentator for the *Times* (August 2006)

Angus Robertson, Scottish National Party MP for Moray (January 2006)

Paul Routledge, Chief Political Commentator of the *Daily Mirror* (September 2001)

Lord Chris Smith of Finsbury, former Labour MP, shadow minister, and government minister (February 2006)

Jo Swinson, Liberal Democrat MP for East Dunbartonshire (March, 2006)

Lord John Thurso, Liberal Democrat MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, former shadow minister (December 2005)

Polly Toynbee, Political Columnist for the *Guardian* (August 2006)

Philip Webster, Political Editor of the *Times* (August 2006)

Michael White, Political Editor of the *Guardian* (October 2001)

John Whittingdale, Conservative MP for Malden and East Chelmsford, former shadow minister and select committee chair (February 2006)

Rt Hon Ann Widdecombe, Conservative MP for Maidstone and the Weald, former government minister and former shadow minister (March 2006)

Tony Wright, Labour MP for Cannock Chase, chair of select committee (March, 2006)

