

Peter Maurer\* and Florian Arendt

# A blessing or a double-edged sword? Politicians' perceptions of newspapers' impact on the functioning of democracy

DOI 10.1515/commun-2015-0027

**Abstract:** This study investigated the interplay of politicians' perceptions regarding the political influence of leading newspapers and the mass media's general impact on democracy. The scope of the study was restricted to democratic-corporatist media systems. We used comparative data of political elites ( $N = 392$ ; countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland) and assessed direct and indirect effects of their perceptions about national broadsheets' political influence on the mass media's perceived general impact on democracy. As expected, we found a positive direct effect regarding perceptions of the media's role in democracy that corresponds with theories stressing the 'guard-dog role' of the quality press for political elites. However, we also found a negative indirect effect of perceived newspaper influence through perceptions of the media's agenda-setting and career-controlling power. We argue that this effect can be explained by feelings of disempowerment among politicians. Arguably, perceived disempowerment causes criticism from political actors towards the media inasmuch as they feel constrained in the full exercise of their democratic functions.

**Keywords:** perceptions, quality newspapers, politicians, democracy, media influence, media power

## 1 Introduction

The media system performs important functions for the political system (Aalberg and Curran, 2011; Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White, 2009; Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990). Consequently, Karl W. Deutsch (1963) had already recognized the huge political significance of communication over 50

---

\* Corresponding author: Peter Maurer, University of Vienna,

E-mail: peter.maurer@univie.ac.at

Florian Arendt, University of Munich, E-mail: florian.arendt@ifkw.lmu.de

years ago and termed it “the nerves of government”. But beyond that, mass communication about political matters is also of crucial importance for the kind of relationship citizens are expected to develop with their elected representatives and the political system in general (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Gunther and Mughan, 2000). Put differently, the extent to which modern democracies fulfil specific criteria associated with their ‘health’ or ‘quality’, such as the high quality of political discourse taking place in the public sphere leading to high levels of representation, legitimacy, and political involvement, depends to a large degree on the news media (Habermas, 1989).

Yet while much research exists on the presumably negative consequences of political coverage spoiled by media logic on the level of political involvement and political attitudes in the populace (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Maurer 2003), knowledge about how *political decision makers* assess the media’s impact on democracy is very limited. However, those personal evaluations might determine not only how legislators behave in the media arena but also how they might think about issues like media regulation. There is some evidence that European politicians’ relationship to the media as well as the coverage addressed at them have both deteriorated (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, and van Praag, 2010; Kepplinger, 2009a, 2009b). As McNair (2014) puts it: “Media organizations pursue and harry political actors; (...) politicians attack journalists for their perceived hostility and lack of respect for the democratic process” (p. 297). But whether politicians’ media-related perceptions, which may be strongly influenced by ephemeral events and experiences made in the day-to-day business of dealing with the media, have the power to influence their evaluation of the media’s general democratic input is an open question.

Hence, this paper approaches the relationship between the media and contemporary democracies from the perspective of political decision makers, and asks how they perceive the mass media’s impact on the functioning of democracy and whether perceptions concerning media power influence their assessments. We concentrate on legislators (i.e., MPs and government officials), on whom political power has been democratically delegated for a defined period of time. Depending on political support from the electorate and from within political institutions, politicians must care about the news media’s impact on the public agenda, political opinions and decisions. Therefore, we study politicians’ evaluations of the media’s democratic input in connection with their perception regarding the media’s political influence. Research conducted in Western European countries has recently pointed to the fact that MPs are convinced that the mass media have an enormous influence on the political agenda and on the career prospects of leading figures (Lengauer, Donges, and Plasser, 2014; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011). According to this literature, the amount

of power ascribed to the media is remarkably high, but given that advanced democracies are also advanced with respect to the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008), it is hardly surprising.

However, the consequences that flow from these media power perceptions for political actors' attitudes towards the media's impact on democratic government are largely unexplored. Thus, we examined whether they influence their assessment of the media's impact on the functioning of democracy. Put differently, do politicians think that media power is problematic or not in terms of the ability of the media to fulfil their democratic functions properly? We will probe this question using data from legislators from six European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland) sharing a democratic-corporatist media system and a consensus and party-oriented political system. Due to their strong position in the media system, opinion-leading newspapers are placed in a central position. They have traditionally been pillars of party democracy and, at the same time, influential political actors in their own right. Consequently, possible ambiguities in terms of politicians' perceptions towards the media should become visible, especially with respect to these influential media outlets.

## 2 The ambivalence of the political role of the quality press' for politicians

Some of the most important functions the media perform for democracy imply their autonomy vis-à-vis political (and other) interests and a high degree of professionalism in the treatment of news. If these conditions are met, the media have a high degree of discretionary power over the political topics that are most apparent in the public sphere and, thus, the media may exert political influence on the policy agenda and possibly on other political decisions. In this respect, Neidhardt (1994) pointed out that the prestigious media, in particular, such as broadsheets with a national reach, fulfil a necessary orientation function for citizens who want to engage in or understand political debates. Other research suggests that their orientation function even applies to political elites (Davis, 2007). Moreover, according to Leurdijk, Slot and Nieuwenhuis, of all the political news media, quality newspapers publish most of the political news (as cited in Powers and Benson, 2014). In addition, they enjoy high levels of trust from their audience (Kiouisis, 2001).

Newspapers in general play a significant role in politics, especially in countries with a so-called democratic-corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini,

2004). This media-system type is characterized today by its high level of newspaper circulation and a legacy of press-party parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Humphreys, 1996; Mancini, 2012). In fact, by 2008, Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland showed the highest daily newspaper reach among all European countries, with between 70 and 81% of the population reading a newspaper every day (World Association of Newspapers, 2008). Traditionally, parties relied on the newspapers virtually allied to them to secure and strengthen their support base in the population, and newspapers also served as a forum for negotiation among contending interests. Even though close parallelism is a thing of the past, newspapers still have political tendencies, which is a part of their profile and reputation. Especially broadsheets with a national circulation, the so-called quality press, enjoy a position as opinion-leading media in all six countries studied herein. They are read by decision makers from all sectors of society, and politicians believe that they influence the formation of political opinions among voters, and act as agenda-setters for the political system and for other media outlets (Davis, 2007, 2009; Fuchs and Pfetsch, 1996). Moreover, results from a study from the nineties by Fuchs and Pfetsch (1996) suggest that newspapers (and weeklies, which play an important role in the German context) provide political actors with more instructive information for the decision-making process than television does.

Hence, from the viewpoint of political actors, quality newspapers are an extremely useful point of reference for determining or adjusting their own positions, since they can signal to them the range of what the attentive public 'would accept as legitimate decisions in a given case' (Habermas, 2006, p. 418). Following democratic theorist Jürgen Habermas (2006), what distinguishes the contribution of the quality press to democratic health from that of the electronic media is the kind of political information they offer. According to Habermas, the mode in which politics is mediated by the electronic media contributes to a 'diffuse alienation of citizens from politics' (Habermas, 2006, p. 422). Conversely, the independent quality press, he says, employs a mode of mediation that is conducive to a more democratic and participative political process.

Even putting normative considerations aside, from the perspective of politicians, the political functions of quality newspapers are important constraints for the achievement of their own objectives. Quality newspapers' political significance can yet have different meanings and implications for politicians. These will first be systematized before their media-related perceptions are assessed empirically. First, we examine potentially beneficial functions of the press for party democracy from the politicians' perspective. Second, we will mention aspects of the press' power that may disturb politicians and, thus, dampen their enthusiasm regarding the media's impact on democracy.

### 3 The usefulness of the quality press for political actors

The quality press is the type of medium that most closely follows the political agenda of the government, of the opposition, and is interested in political parties' internal processes in terms of opinion formation. This loyalty for, and pronounced interest in, party politics stems from the times when newspapers were – apart from being information channels – more so than they are today also the media for political expression and mobilization (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004 and Mancini, 2012 for an overview). However, the orientation towards (a) political substance rather than superficial drama or personalization and (b) the agenda of (parliamentary) parties is still a particular feature of the quality press. In addition, in all countries studied herein, at least two leading newspapers with different political leanings exist. This is, for one, conducive to political pluralism in the public sphere and, secondly, it ensures that both the center-left and center-right parties have their preferred outlets when they try to bring specific issues or viewpoints into the political debate or need public forums to explain political proposals.

Furthermore, American researchers have made the argument that leading media outlets, such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, tend to align their own agendas to the issues and interpretation favored by the political elite. Especially in the case of foreign affairs, the leading papers tend to be co-opted by government officials, all too often neglecting their watchdog role (Bennett, Lawrence, and Stevenson, 2007). Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston (2006) suggest that political journalists – of whom the great majority work for newspapers – determine how much power politicians hold when they make a decision regarding who is able to contribute to a policy story. In the same vein, Donohue, Tichenor and Olien (1995) compare the role of leading media outlets in the US context with that of guard dogs of the established power structure of the political system. As guard dogs, they stabilize the system and tend to protect its modes of decision making and its political authorities.

The tendencies of the quality press to reflect the same range of opinions that the political elites defend is not unknown to European democracies either. Thus, as Eilders states for the German context, 'the party structure is still reflected in today's press system, especially in opinion-leading national quality newspapers' (2002, p. 29).

Finally, there is another reason to expect that politicians do perceive of a special relationship between the quality press and democracy. The majority of political journalists in the capitals work for newspapers, and the most re-

nowned work for the quality press. They stand in a symbiotic relationship with MPs and government officials: the journalists' stock-in-trade is in having access to good sources and being 'chummy' with influential policymakers. In exchange, they can offer politicians more space for political background than any other mass medium can. This gives politicians a good chance of being able to control the news agenda and of introducing their desired spin.

## 4 Leading newspapers' own political influence as constraint for political actors

However, media outlets – and this applies in particular to leading newspapers – are more than mere conduits for the power of politicians. Rather, they must be seen as political actors in their own right too (Couldry and Curran, 2003; Eilders, 2002; Pfetsch and Adam, 2008). Due to the differentiation of the media and political systems in advanced post-industrial democracies, media outlets have become fully autonomous from political actors (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In recent decades, the pendulum has even swung in the opposite direction; that is, the logic that media outlets process political events has forced political actors to more or less adopt the media's criteria of newsworthiness in order to secure their access to the mass-mediated public sphere (Strömbäck, 2008). This is known as the mediatization hypothesis, and it suggests that the media have intruded into the political system (Strömbäck and Esser, 2009), thereby forcing political actors to adapt their agendas increasingly to meet with the criteria of newsworthiness that the media dictates (de Beus, 2011; Strömbäck, 2008).

How strong the media's political influence has become is hard to assess, though. It becomes manifest first of all in the tendencies of politicians to adapt their own behavior to political issues or frames emphasized by opinion-leading media outlets. Hence, as Lengauer, Donges and Plasser (2014), as well as Maurer (2011), have pointed out, media influence or 'power' emerges from perceptual ascriptions of influence by the political elite. Therefore, researchers have begun to study political actors' individual perceptions of the media's political agenda-setting and career-controlling influence in some Western European democracies. Results point to the fact that politicians assume that the media strongly influence both the political agendas and the career prospects of politicians. This finding is consistent, regardless of whether MPs were surveyed using closed-ended items (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011; Walgrave, 2008) or whether in-depth interviews were conduct-

ed with them (Davis, 2007, 2009). Moreover, the findings point to an apparent dissatisfaction among MPs with how the media covers politics. For instance, the large majority of a non-representative sample of MPs surveyed in a Dutch study held the view that journalistic coverage of political matters ‘leads to lack of trust in politics’ (Brants et al., 2010, p. 35).

Furthermore, empirical findings suggest the possibility that perceptions of a powerful or ‘intrusive’ media spur the dissatisfaction of politicians in the media and “lead” to perceptions that journalists are overstepping their competencies. Hence, in a recent study, Maurer and Pfetsch (2014) detected that the more politicians perceive journalists as acting politically, the more elements of media logic they see in political coverage. Moreover, many other studies agree that parliamentarians in several European democracies are convinced that the mass media have gained an unduly strong influence over the political process (Dohle, Blank, and Vowe, 2012; Kepplinger, 2009b; Walgrave, 2008). For example, Walgrave (2008) found that the perceptions of the strong agenda-setting power of the news media are spurred on by perceptions that the media is overly powerful. In line with this, other results suggest a positive association between MPs’ dissatisfaction with the media’s coverage of politics and their perception that the media is more powerful than it should be (Dohle et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2008).

Evidence from Sweden suggests that political actors feel pushed into adapting to the media reality of politics (Strömbäck, 2011), and German studies have consistently found that political elites assume that mass-mediated cues impact opinions in the citizenry (Dohle et al., 2012; Fuchs and Pfetsch, 1996). Hence, chances are high that political elites feel pushed into adapting their original political programs to a mainstream agenda, which is heavily influenced by actors in the media system. Based on his own results in line with this assumption, Davis (2007, p. 188) uses the term ‘media-oriented policy-making’ to describe British MPs’ adaptation to a policy agenda that is pre-defined by the media system.

Hence, in sum, the available findings on politicians’ *perceptions* of the relationship between media and policymakers point in the opposite direction to the conventional wisdom. They indicate that politicians are concerned and overwhelmed by empowered and professionalized journalism, which challenges their prerogatives as elected decision makers in two respects: First, politicians increasingly stand helplessly by in the face of the ability of the leading media to proactively set the public agenda and thereby force them to react with statements and policies. This is equivalent to adapting the policy agenda to meet with the media agenda, and not vice versa. Second, since the media prefer to construct political news stories around personalities, the career prospects of

politicians have become increasingly vulnerable to their media image and to their personal relations with the media elites. Both forms of (perceived) media power, available research suggests, are recognized by political elites from European party democracies. However, the question is whether these perceptions have a negative bearing on how politicians view the democratic impact of the media, and thereby lead them to change their perceptions regarding the democratic role and impact of opinion-leading media such as the quality press.

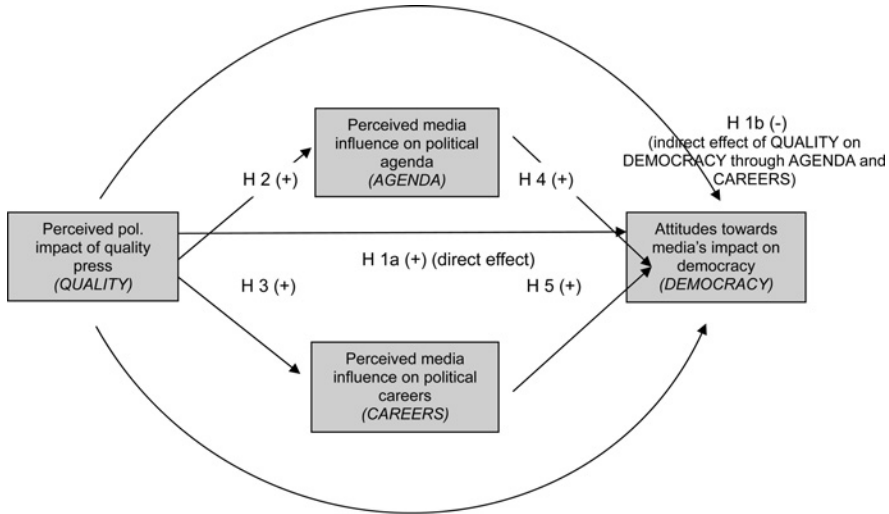
## 5 Summary and hypotheses

We trace the relationship between the perceptions of the media's political influence and the perceptions about the media's impact on democratic functioning using a large sample of politicians from democracies with a 'democratic-corporatist' media system and the same type of political system, that is, party or consensus democracy. To reiterate, the aim of this study was to explore whether and how politicians' perceptions of the political impact of leading newspapers influence their perceptions of the media's impact on European (party) democracies' functioning. We not only consider the direct connection between the independent variable – the perceived political influence of quality newspapers – and the dependent variable – perceptions of the mass media's impact on democracy performance – but also take into account that a possible direct effect might be mediated by perceptions of the agenda-setting and career-controlling power of the media.

Based on the foregoing arguments, we must consider that political elites cultivate ambivalent orientations towards quality newspapers. Thus, it seems realistic to expect that political elites perceive quality newspapers as a blessing for democracy and, at the same time, as competing 'agenda-setters' and illegitimate 'kingmakers' (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, and Weaver, 1991; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal, 1981). Therefore, as the first hypothesis, we expect that political elites' perceptions that the quality press has a strong political impact lead to positive evaluations of the media's contribution to the quality of democracy (H 1a). As additional hypothesis, we predict a *negative indirect effect* of politicians' perceptions of quality newspapers' political influence on their perceptions of the news media's impact on democracy (H 1b).

How does the indirect effect work? we believe that it is straightforward to assume a positive effect of the perception that quality newspapers have a strong political influence on the perception that the media in general exercise a strong influence over the policy agenda (H 2) and the careers of politicians (H 3).





**Figure 1:** Theoretical model. Black arrows stand for influence. +/- = positive/negative influence.

Furthermore, it flows from the foregoing review of studies investigating politicians' media power perceptions that a strong agenda-setting power and career-controlling influence of the media has problematic consequences for political elites: They might feel partly disempowered by intrusive media. Consequently, it can be assumed that a politician's perception that the media strongly impact the policy agenda (H 4), on the one hand, and political careers (H 5), on the other, has a negative influence on his or her attitude towards the media's democratic role.

To sum up, according to the first hypothesis (H 1a), political elites embrace the political significance of quality newspapers as the 'guard dogs' of the political system; hence, the predicted positive direct effect on their perceptions of the media system's democratic input. In addition, we expect a negative *indirect* effect of their perceptions about the political significance of quality papers on the same evaluation *through* perceptions of a strong media influence on the political agenda and on the rise and fall of politicians (H 1b). The expected relationships are summarized in Figure 1.

## 6 Method

To test the hypotheses and the assumed chain of causality, we estimated a path model ( $df = 0$ ). Data were collected in a survey of political representatives –

either MPs or government officials – from the above-mentioned six European democracies: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland. Politicians were interviewed as part of a collaborative research project on political communication culture in Western European countries. Due to the similarity of the political contexts, we treated the political elites as one functional group, and thus had a sufficient number of cases to build and test a model of the effects of their individual media power perceptions on their evaluation of the media's democratic input.

Of the total number of participants ( $N = 392$ ), the overwhelming majority were members of one of the national parliaments ( $N = 358$ ), and a small group came from the national governments ( $N = 34$ ). As noted earlier, the rationale behind the country selection was similarity with respect to the media and political system characteristics and, thus, it provided a homogenous context in terms of political communication. We took advantage of this similarity of contexts to enlarge our sample of political elites. Testing the hypotheses with a path model would not have been possible with only one country because there were not enough cases. It is important to note that it was *not* our primary goal to compare perceptions across the six countries. Rather, we wanted to test the hypotheses with an accurate sample.

## 7 Sample

A positional approach was used for the sampling (Hoffmann-Lange, 1987), which rested on the premise that political influence is bound to formal positions. The influential positions in the governmental system were defined by national experts of all of the countries during project meetings. As a result of the discussions, all of the ministers, secretaries of state, leadership of the parliamentary groups, chairpersons and deputies of the parliamentary standing commissions, presidents and deputies of the houses were included. However, in Switzerland and Denmark, no government elites could be reached. National particularities as regards the organizational structure of the legislative and executive bodies were considered when the sampling frames were constructed. Sampling was done by the national experts, who decided about replacements when a selected politician declined to participate, or could not be reached.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> To increase participation, respondents could choose between a telephone interview, a personal interview, an online questionnaire or a questionnaire to be completed by hand. Most interviews were conducted over the phone and in the online mode.

Response rates among MPs varied between 21 and 64 % depending on the country, but were satisfactory altogether given that political elites are extremely difficult to reach and that the length of the entire interview was between 30 and 45 minutes (due to the international project context).<sup>2</sup> If a politician definitively declined an interview, he or she was replaced by another person holding a similar position, if possible. In the German case, it was necessary, though, to replace faction leaders and speakers of standing committees with MPs without such functions.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of respondents across countries (Government/MPs) shows that most come from Finland ( $N = 5/N = 95$ ), followed by Sweden ( $N = 12/N = 81$ ), Germany ( $N = 9/N = 58$ ), Switzerland ( $N$  (MPs) = 64), Austria ( $N = 8/N = 30$ ) and Denmark ( $N$  (MPs) = 35), with 62.2% of the respondents male and 37.8 % female. Respondents mostly fall into the 50 to 59 age group, followed by the group of 40- to 49-year-olds. With very few exceptions, the age of the respondents ranged between 30 and 69 years. Fieldwork started in April and May 2008 and lasted until at least June 2008, depending on the country.<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked to respond to a multi-page questionnaire designed by a team of country experts as part of the international research project. It included a broad range of items measuring different perceptions relating to political communication and socio-demographics. The measures used in this analysis were taken from that survey.

---

<sup>2</sup> Response rates in percent for the respective countries (Government officials/MPs): Austria: 24.4 %/23.5 %; Denmark: –/58.6 %; Finland: 38.0 %/57.0 %; Germany: 26.7 %/21.1 %; Switzerland: –/34.4 %; Sweden: 22.4 %/64.4 %.

The response rate for Germany was not much lower than those rates obtained in comparable MP surveys. For example, Dohle and Bernhard (2014) attained 31.3 % and Kepplinger (2009b) 31 %.

<sup>3</sup> Non-response was not correlated with any specific characteristic of the sample. The only exception was that in the Swedish sample parliamentarians of the Social Democratic Party and in Germany members of the Conservative Party are slightly underrepresented. In the Swiss sample, German-speaking parliamentarians were slightly overrepresented compared to the French-speaking ones.

<sup>4</sup> In Finland, fieldwork went on until September 2008, and in Denmark, until January 2009. In Germany and Sweden, a second fieldwork phase after the initial phase in spring/summer 2008 was necessary to enable us to conduct all of the interviews. The second fieldwork took place in Sweden from October to November 2008 and in Germany between November 2008 and March 2009.

## 8 Measures

All respondents answered the same questionnaire. Equivalence of wording was ensured through a harmonisation process of translations within the network of experts and was verified by reverse translation. The constructs were measured by one closed-ended item each with five-point Likert-type scales for expressing agreement or disagreement. *Attitudes towards the media's influence on how well the democracy functions* ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), the dependent variable in our model, were measured by asking politicians, 'In your opinion, does media coverage have a positive or a negative impact on how well democracy functions in your country?', with answer categories ranging from *very negative* (coded as '1') to *very positive* (coded as '5').

Presumed media influence was measured by a number of items: The core independent variable is the perceived *significance of quality newspapers*. The item reads: 'Media can have a different impact on politics. In your opinion, how strong is the impact of the quality press?' ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). Answer categories ranged from *not strong at all* (coded as '1') to *very strong* (coded as '5'). *Perceived media influence on the political agenda* ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) was measured by the following statement, 'It is the media and not the politicians who decide which issues are important in politics and determine the political agenda', with answer categories ranging from *strongly disagree* (coded as '1') to *strongly agree* (coded as '5'). *Perceived media influence on the career path of political leaders* ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) was measured by the statement 'Media make and break politicians'. Again, answer categories ranged from *strongly disagree* (coded as '1') to *strongly agree* (coded as '5'). The following items were included as controls: the perceived significance of tabloids and TV as well as the gender and political experience of the respondents (political experience in years:  $M = 15.07$ ,  $SD = 10.16$ ). For the perceived significance of tabloids ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and TV (public service TV:  $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = .79$ ; commercial TV:  $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), the same item wording and scale as for the quality press were used. Including other media perceptions than the perceptions of quality newspapers as control variables certainly reduced the size of the effects, but it was worthwhile for the sake of a realistic assessment of the influences.

## 9 Results

We used the structural-equation modelling software Amos to test the hypotheses. In the first step, the path model outlined in Figure 1 was specified. We

specified the causal directions as discussed in the theory section. As there is insufficient evidence to specify a causal direction between the perceived media influence on the issues' agenda and on the careers of politicians, we simply specified a correlational relationship.

In addition to the variables specified in Figure 1, the full model contained the following control variables: the perceived significance of tabloid newspapers, public service and commercial television, the political experience of politicians and their gender.<sup>5</sup> We very briefly report on the significant correlations between the control variables 'gender' and 'political experience' with some of the endogenous variables before we turn to the effect of the perceived impact of quality newspapers on the dependent variable. Path coefficients show that the women perceived the political influence of the quality press as somewhat higher than the men did ( $y = 0.19, p < 0.05$ ), and they also perceived that there was more media influence on the political agenda ( $y = 0.22, p < 0.05$ ).

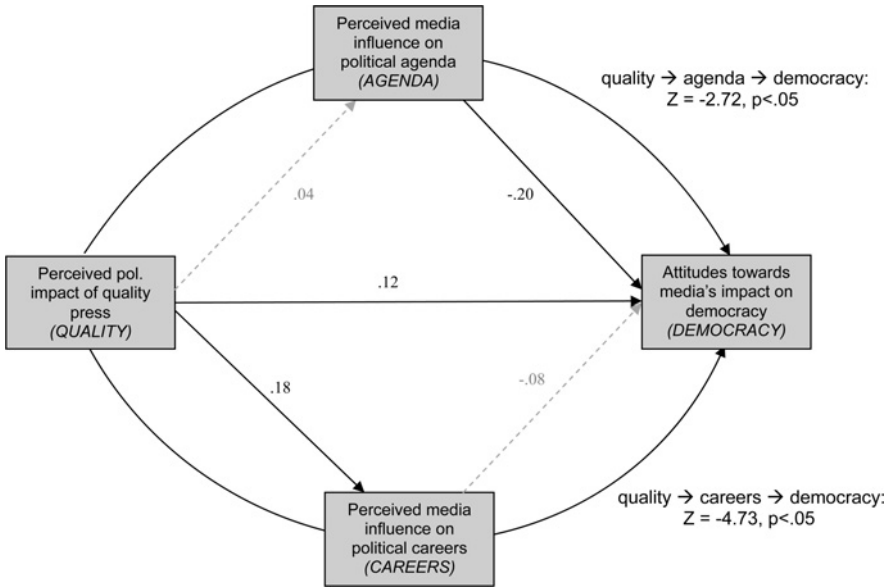
We turn first to the predicted effect described by H 1a. It predicted a positive effect of the politicians' perceived strength of the political influence of the quality press on perceptions concerning the news media's impact on the health of democracy. This hypothesis was supported by a positive (standardized) path coefficient ( $.12, p < 0.05$ ), as shown in Figure 2.

The corresponding standardized path coefficients for H 2, H 3, H 4 and H 5 are shown in Figure 2. We note that the effect of the presumed impact of the quality press on the media's presumed agenda-setting power is positive ( $y = .04, n.s.$ ) but insignificant, whereas the same perception had a significant effect on the media's presumed impact on political careers ( $y = .18, p < 0.001$ ). As regards the influences of the perceptions that the media determines the political agenda ( $y = .20, p < 0.001$ ) and makes (or breaks) the careers of politicians ( $y = -.08, n.s.$ ) on perceptions concerning the news media's role in democracy, they are both negative, as predicted. Only the coefficient associated with the influence of the perceived agenda-setting power is significant.

Now we turn to the supplementary hypothesis of H 1a; that is, H 1b. It predicted a negative indirect effect of the perceived strength of quality newspapers' political influence on perceptions concerning the news media's impact on the health of democracy running through respondents' perceptions of the strength of the news media's power to influence the political agenda and the career paths of politicians. Indeed, a small negative (standardized) indirect effect, which, however, reached statistical significance, was found ( $Coeff = -.02, p < 0.04$ ; using bootstrapping). Thus, the perceived influence of the quality

---

<sup>5</sup> The full path model can be obtained from the authors upon request.



**Figure 2:** Direct and indirect effects for the quality press' perceived political impact (standardized path coefficients). Black arrows stand for influence; grey dashed arrows stand for insignificant paths.

*Note:* The size of the indirect effect of QUALITY through AGENDA and CAREERS on DEMOCRACY is *Coeff.*  $-.02$ .

press not only had a positive *direct* effect on the political elites' assessment of the media's impact on democracy, but also a negative *indirect* effect through the perceived media influence on the political-issue agenda and on the careers of politicians. Actually, a similar indirect effect was also found for the perceived political significance of tabloids ( $-.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; using bootstrapping<sup>6</sup>) but there was no significant direct effect for that type of newspaper.

Taken together, the direct positive effect of the perceived political impact of opinion-leading newspapers on politicians' evaluations of the media's impact on democracy indicates that political decision makers seem to associate this particular type of media outlet with the democratic functions of the media

<sup>6</sup> Although the direct effect of the perceived media influence on politicians' careers on perceptions of the media's impact on democracy did not achieve significance, the *specific indirect effect* (see Holbert and Stephenson, 2003) of the perceived political significance of the quality press on it through perceived news media influence on political careers did ( $z = -4.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

system. That said, we also note a negative indirect effect, which is, however, substantially smaller than the positive direct effect. Hence, from the perspective of politicians, the impact of quality newspapers on the functioning of democracy is indeed of an ambiguous nature.

## 10 Discussion

At the center of this study stood the consequences of politicians' perceptions regarding the political impact of the news media and, in particular, quality newspapers in terms of their evaluations as to whether the media in general are beneficial or harmful to democracy. Especially in political communication systems made up of a democratic-corporatist media system like we analyzed here, the quality press has always played a crucial role in linking the political elite and society. However, European democracies have experienced declining trust in political institutions as well as increasing media power, and it seems that the relationship between politicians and journalists has become tenser against this background. Against this background, political actors need to master the interaction with influential media outlets if they wish to win and hold power. Thus, it finally seemed questionable as to whether the political elites would see the influential newspapers exclusively as 'guard dogs' of established political processes, or rather as challengers to their own leading role in the political system.

The analysis actually revealed a positive *and* a negative effect of newspapers' perceived political influence on the evaluation of the media's democratic input. The positive effect is in line with the guard-dog theory as regards the political role of the quality press. Thus, politicians indeed seem to see the quality press as a blessing for the political system, and they seem to appreciate its function in the political process. However, the analysis of the interplay between their media-related perceptions also revealed a negative *indirect* effect regarding the newspapers' perceived significance. The size of the effect was indeed small, but this could be expected given that it is an indirect effect. This indirect effect of the presumed influence of the quality press on the democratic evaluation of the media's overall performance was mediated by politicians' perceptions of the mass media's agenda-setting and career-controlling power. How can this finding, which goes against the conventional wisdom, be interpreted?

One possible explanation is that the strength of the quality press as an opinion leader and an autonomous force that can mold public opinion fosters not only trust in the media system among the political elites but also feelings

of ‘disempowerment’ vis-à-vis the news media. Politicians obviously amalgamate their perceptions of an influential press, and their perceptions of the media’s general agenda-setting and career-controlling power. For obvious reasons, politicians may not like the idea that the press’ influence also expands to decisions taken inside political institutions, because it has no democratic legitimacy for that. Practically, a strong media influence might constrain their choices and make political compromise harder to achieve. For example, due to the perceived media influence on the public agenda, political actors may refrain from addressing issues they see as important but which they think fall outside the media’s area of interest. However, this may disrupt links between them and specific societal groups. Hence, the negative indirect effect makes sense, given that we surveyed legislators who certainly need media with a broad reach to communicate with society, but who are primarily accountable to societal interests and the groups of voters that they represent. Therefore, the perceived need for media-centered policymaking may be very costly for parties and politicians in terms of losing ground in some of their core constituencies.

In a way, the finding of a negative influence of politicians’ perceptions of media power on their evaluation of the media’s democratic performance answers to the findings of a positive association between MPs’ perceptions of politically powerful media and a critical view regarding the consequences of its influence (Brants et al., 2010; Dohle and Bernhard, 2014). Hence, if we combine our findings and these findings, we can cautiously conclude that from the political actors’ point of view, the media’s influence on politics can result in a growing trade-off between vote-seeking and policy-seeking for politicians. This may lead to feelings of disempowerment and media cynicism.

In sum, the results presented here are testament to the politicians’ unease with the growing media power, and they highlight disturbing implications regarding their general attitudes towards the media system.

Like all research projects, this one has a number of limitations. Although many efforts were made to get all of the leading politicians in the six democracies to participate, the full array of top-ranking politicians could not be included. Participation by cabinet members was very rare and the participation of parliamentarians in leadership roles was uneven across countries: It was higher in the smaller countries, whereas in Germany, most respondents were MPs without an outstanding function. Second, as it was a cross-sectional analysis, we cannot prove causality with this design. It is also not fully satisfactory that we had to use single-item measures and could not use scales to measure the constructs. Finally, it has to be underscored that we only measured perceived, not ‘real’ influence. That being said, perceived influence and especially its as-



assessment as positive or negative with respect to democratic government could trigger a wide range of behavioral reactions by politicians.

In other studies, the perceived media influence was found to trigger media motivation and effort, and more parliamentary activities among MPs (Cohen, Tsfati, and Shaefer, 2008). Hence, it does not seem far-fetched to wonder whether negative attitudes towards the media and beliefs in strong media power could provoke media-adverse legislation, maybe not in mature democracies but in new democracies or in systems that are in transition. Therefore, further research on the presumed media influence and the consequences of those beliefs among political decision makers should include younger democracies, such as post-communist countries and emerging democracies in Asia or Latin America, where freedom of the press is still a more fragile achievement.

**Acknowledgments:** We want to thank Barbara Pfetsch (The Free University of Berlin) for the permission to use the data. This research was supported as part of the ECRP II program of the European Science Foundation and funded by FWF, FIST, AKA, DFG, MEC, VR, and SNF. Principal investigators are Barbara Pfetsch (Freie Universität Berlin), Juan Díez Medrano (University of Barcelona), Patrick Donges (University of Greifswald), Anders Esmark (Roskilde University), Nicklas Håkansson (Halmstad University), Otfried Jarren (University of Zürich), Tom Moring (University of Helsinki), Fritz Plasser (University of Innsbruck), and Slavko Splichal (University of Ljubljana).

## References

- Aalberg, T., & Curran, J. 2012. How media inform democracy: Central debates. In T. Aalberg & J. Curran (Eds.), *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach* (pp. 3–14). London: Routledge.
- Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. G., & Livingston, S. 2006. None dare call it torture: Indexing and the limits of press independence in the Abu Ghraib scandal. *Journal of Communication* 56(3), 467–485.
- Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. G., & Livingston, S. 2007. *When the press fails: Political power and the news media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brants, K., de Vreese, C., Möller, J., & van Praag, P. 2010. The real spiral of cynicism? Symbiosis and mistrust between politicians and journalists. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 15(1), 25–40.
- Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. 1997. *The spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Christians, C. G., Glasser, T. L., McQuail, D., Nordenstreng, K., & White, R. A. 2009. *Normative theories of the media: Journalism in democratic societies*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

- Cohen, J., Tsfaty, Y., & Shaefer, T. 2008. The influence of presumed media influence in politics: Do politicians' perceptions of media power matter? *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72(2), 331–344.
- Couldry, N., & Curran J. 2003. The paradox of media power. In N. Couldry & J. Curran (Eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked society* (pp. 3–16). Oxford: Rowmann and Littlefield.
- Davis, A. 2007. Investigating journalists' influences on political issue agendas at Westminster. *Political Communication* 24(2), 181–199.
- Davis, A. 2009. Journalist-source relations, mediated reflexivity and the politics of politics. *Journalism Studies* 10(2), 204–219.
- de Beus, J. 2011. Audience democracy: An emerging pattern in postmodern political communication. In K. Brants & K. Voltmer (Eds.), *Political communication in postmodern democracy: Challenging the primacy of politics* (pp. 19–38). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. 1996. *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Deutsch, K. W. 1963. *The nerves of government*. New York, NY: The free press of Glencoe.
- Dohle, M., Blank, C., & Vowe, G. 2012. Wie sehen Parlamentarier den Einfluss der Medien? Ergebnisse einer Befragung der Bundestagsabgeordneten [How do MPs view mass media's influence? Results from a survey of members of the Bundestag]. *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 2, 344–355.
- Dohle, M., & Bernhard, U. 2014. Presumed online media influence and support for censorship: Results from a survey among German parliamentarians. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 26(2), 256–268.
- Donohue, G. A., Tichenor, P. J., & Olien, C. N. 1995. A guard dog perspective on the role of media. *Journal of Communication* 45(2), 115–132.
- Eilders, C. 2002. Conflict and consonance in media opinion: Political positions of five German quality newspapers. *European Journal of Communication* 17(1), 25–63.
- Field, G. L., Higley, J. 1980. *Elitism*. London: Routledge and Kegan.
- Fuchs, D., & Pfetsch, B. 1996. The observation of public opinion by the governmental system. *Discussion Paper FS III*, 96–105. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/49826>.
- Gunther, R., & Mughan, A. 2000. The political impact of the media: A reassessment. In R. Gunther & A. Mughan (Eds.), *Democracy and the media: A comparative perspective* (pp. 402–447). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gurevitch, M., & Blumler, J. G. 1990. Political communication systems and democratic values. In J. Lichtenberg (Ed.), *Democracy and the mass media* (pp. 269–287). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, J. 1989. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. London: Polity Press.
- Habermas, J. 2006. Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory* 16, 411–426.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. 2004. *Comparing media systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffmann-Lange, U. 1987. Surveying national elites in the Federal Republic of Germany. In G. Moyser & M. Wagstaffe (Eds.), *Research methods for elite studies* (pp. 27–47). London: Allen and Unwin.

- Holbert, R. L., & Stephenson, M. T. 2003. The importance of indirect effects in media effects research: Testing for mediation in structural equation modeling. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47(4), 556–572.
- Humphreys, P. 1996. *Mass media and media policy in Western Europe*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kepplinger, H. M. (2009a). *Politikvermittlung* [Mediation of politics]. Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.
- Kepplinger, H. M. (2009b). Rivalen um Macht und Moral: Bundestagsabgeordnete und Hauptstadtjournalisten [Rivals for power and morality: Members of the Bundestag and journalists in the capital]. In H. Kaspar, H. Schoen, S. Schumann & J. R. Winkler (Eds.), *Politik – Wissenschaft – Medien* [Politics – science – media] (pp. 307–321). Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.
- Kiousis, S. 2001. Public trust or mistrust? Perceptions of media credibility in the information age. *Mass Communication and Society* 4(4), 381–403.
- Lengauer, G., Donges, P., & Plasser, F. 2014. Media power in politics. In B. Pfetsch (Ed.), *Political communication cultures in Europe: Attitudes of political actors and journalists in nine countries* (pp. 171–195). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mancini, P. 2012. Instrumentalization of the media vs. political parallelism. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5(3), 262–280.
- Maurer, M. 2003. *Politikverdrossenheit durch Medienberichte: Eine Paneluntersuchung* [Disenchantment with politics through media coverage: A longitudinal study]. Konstanz: UVK.
- Maurer, P. 2011. Explaining perceived media influence in politics: An analysis of the interplay of context and attitudes in four European democracies. *Publizistik* 56(1), 27–50.
- Maurer, P., & Pfetsch, B. 2014. News coverage of politics and conflict levels. A cross-national study of journalists' and politicians' perceptions of two elements of mediatization. *Journalism Studies* 15(3), 339–355.
- Mazzoleni, G., & Schulz, W. 1999. "Mediatization" of politics. A challenge for democracy? *Political Communication* 16(3), 247–261.
- McNair, B. 2014. The media as political actors. In C. Reinemann (Ed.), *Political communication* (pp. 289–303). Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Neidhardt, F. 1994. Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen [The public sphere, public opinion, social movements]. In F. Neidhardt (Ed.), *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen* (pp. 7–41). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Pfetsch, B., & Adam, S. 2008. Die Akteursperspektive in der politischen Kommunikationsforschung – Fragestellungen, Forschungsparadigmen und Problemlagen. In B. Pfetsch & S. Adam (Eds.), *Massenmedien als politische Akteure: Konzepte und Analysen* [Mass media as political actors: Concepts and analyses] (pp. 9–26). Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag.
- Pfetsch, B., Maurer, P., Mayerhöffer, E., Moring, T. (in press). A hedge between keeps friendship green – concurrence and conflict between politicians and journalists in nine European democracies. In M. J. Canel & K. Voltmer (Eds.), *Comparing political communication across time and space: New studies in an emerging field*. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Powers, M., & Benson, R. 2014. Is the internet homogenizing or diversifying the news? External Pluralism in the U.S., Danish, and French Press. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 19(2), 246–265.

- Semetko, H. A., Blumler, J. G., Gurevitch, M., & Weaver, D. H. 1991. *The formation of campaign agendas: A comparative analysis of party and media roles in recent American and British elections*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Strömback, J. 2008. Four phases of mediatization: An analysis of mediatization of politics. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 13(3), 228–246.
- Strömbäck, J., & Esser, F. 2009. Shaping politics: Mediatization and media interventionism. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization: Concept, changes, consequences* (pp. 205–223). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Strömbäck, J. 2011. Mediatization and perceptions of the media's political influence. *Journalism Studies* 12(4), 423–439.
- Van Aelst, P., Brants, K., Van Praag, P., De Vreese, C., Nuytemans, M., & Van Dalen, A. 2008. The Fourth Estate as superpower? *Journalism Studies* 9(4), 494–511.
- Van Aelst, P., & Walgrave, S. 2011. Minimal or massive? The political agenda-setting power of the mass media according to different methods. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 16(3), 295–313.
- Walgrave, S. 2008. Again, the almighty mass media? The media's political agenda-setting power according to politicians and journalists in Belgium. *Political Communication* 25(4), 445–459.
- Weaver, D. H., Graber, D., McCombs, M. E., & Eyal, C. 1981. *Media agenda-setting in a presidential election*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- World Association of Newspapers 2008. *World press trends 2008*. Paris: ZenithOptimedia.