

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2022-04-05

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Van Aelst, P., Belchior, A. M., Merle, P. & Santana Pereira, J. (2020). Introduction: Mass media effects and the political agenda: Assessing its scope and conditions. *The Agenda Setting Journal: Theory, Practice, Critique*. 4 (1), 3-16

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1075/asj.00005.int](https://doi.org/10.1075/asj.00005.int)

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Introduction. Mass Media Effects and the Political Agenda: Assessing its Scope and Conditions

1. Introduction

Do the mass media influence the issue priorities of politicians? This question has been present in the literature on the media and political agenda-setting since the mid-1970s when scholars first addressed it within the broader agenda-setting research. While only eighteen empirical pieces examined this topic until the mid-2000s (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), in the last decade the number of studies on the media and the political agenda has expanded considerably (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). In fact, in the last ten years (2005-2015), more than thirty studies focused on the media's political agenda-setting power. The research now features a wider geographical scope, richer datasets, and more contingent factors have been investigated in detail. Studying the relationship between the media agenda and the political agenda has therefore become a flourishing subfield in political communication. In addition, it connects a community of political scientists interested in factors that influence public policy with communication scholars who work on the political influence of the mass media.

Existing evidence has previously showed that the reasons why political actors decide to consider certain issues as more salient than others include a diverse set of factors, such as individual preferences of decision-makers, the political and economic environment, political institutions, interest groups, the nature of issues, party organization and the perception of public preferences (Baumgartner, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2011; Kingdon, 2003; Mortensen et al. 2011; Soroka, 2002; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Wagner & Meyer, 2014; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2014). In a context of mediated political

communication, both top-down and bottom-up, the role of the media in shaping those perceptions is believed to be significant. Recent research has shown that the mass media influences the political agenda, meaning that for political elites some policy issues become more salient than others due to the media coverage they receive (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013). Empirical analyses have verified, that the media can determine, to some extent, the agenda of parliaments and governments (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008; Vliegthart et al. 2016), and that the saliency of public issues in the media co-determines the governments' agenda priorities (Baumgartner et al. 2011: 948-953; Jennings & John, 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Mortensen et al. 2011).

Yet, ambiguity tends to prevail regarding the effective existence and importance of media effects on the political actors' agenda-setting (Kingdon, 2003). As Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) put it: "We still cannot answer the basic question whether the mass media determine the political agenda or, put more precisely, under what specific circumstances the mass media are able to boost political attention for issues" (2006: 89). These authors argue that the mass media impact on policy makers' issue prioritization may be contingent upon media input factors (such as the type of media outlet, the issues at stake and the sort of coverage: positive or negative) as well as political context factors such as the time period under consideration, the institutional rules, party characteristics, the placement of parties in the electoral competition (government or opposition), or who the relevant political actors are (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). So, on one hand, compared to 2006, evidence explains more clearly how and under which circumstances the media agenda affects the political agenda, yet on the other hand, scholars still struggle with mixed findings and consequently several aspects remain unanswered.

In this introduction, we will discuss studies and insights on the main factors. A thorough understanding of media effects on the political agenda demands further

empirically-grounded and systematic inquiries to really understand (a) the magnitude of media agenda-setting effects on political agendas, and (b) the potential mechanisms leading to moderating influences on such impacts. Next, we will elaborate on the factors that require extra attention and that will be addressed in this special issue. This includes an assessment of the role of media system and political system characteristics; the economic context and crises, and the growing potential of social media.

2. What do we know?

2.1 Symbolic vs substantial

A first finding, robust across context and time, is that the influence of the media is contingent on the type of agenda under study. More concretely, studies show larger influence of the media on symbolic than on substantial political agendas. Agenda-setting scholars don't study 'the' political agenda, but rather focus on one or more specific political agendas (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 18). Symbolic agendas are primarily rhetorical: they contain the words of politicians but have limited tangible political consequences. Substantial agendas, on the other hand, are direct measures of policy output. Probably the most substantial agenda is a nation's budget or what Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) call the 'resource agenda'. The allocation of money and resources to the different issues or policy domains has the most far reaching consequences. However, since this agenda is highly incremental and stable over time it is no surprise that little media impact has been found.

Other studies that deal with substantial agendas conclude that the influence of the media is generally 'moderate' at best (e.g. Joly, 2014; Miller, Nadash, & Goldstein, 2014; Walgrave et al. 2008; an exception regards the study of cabinet agendas, as measured through the policy content of the Council of Ministers' press releases, which found that

cabinets do respond to the media; see Borghetto and Belchior, 2020). In contrast, many studies dealing with the parliamentary agendas came to strong impact conclusions (e.g. Chaqués-Bonafont & Baumgartner, 2013; Van Noije, Kleinnijenhuis, & Oegema, 2008; Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2011b; Vliegenthart et al. 2016). Also the few studies that deal with the symbolic government agenda (speeches) mostly find robust media impact (e.g. Valenzuela & Arriagada, 2011).

The focus on the parliamentary agenda and the limited attention for the government agenda is probably due to the fact that the latter is less accessible for researchers. For instance, the agenda of the cabinet is seldom made public, in contrast to the agenda of parliament. This also explains why the majority of papers in this special issue study a parliamentary rather than a governmental political agenda. To sum up, previous research has shown that the media effect is higher when the agendas are symbolic (and of the parliament), than when the agendas are substantial (and regard the government).

2.2 The influence is bi-directional

The first studies on the media and the political agendas clearly focused on the effects of media coverage on the political agenda. Today, studies more often start from the assumption that the relationship is reciprocal and that feedback loops need to be taken into account (Sellers, 2010). Van Aelst & Walgrave (2016) show in a recent overview that almost half of the studies (period 2005-2015) take bi-directional effects into account. These studies investigate the agenda impact of the media on politics as well as, to what extent the media agenda follows the political agenda. This is important because it better allows to understand the dynamic nature of media influence. For instance, Soroka (2002) demonstrates relevant interactions between media, public opinion, and policymakers in Canada, showing that the leading effects of each of these agendas on the others depends

upon the issue at stake. Van Noije et al. (2008) do not only show that the media coverage on the Dutch and UK parliament is significant, but also that it is larger than the opposite influence from parliament on the media.

2.3 Party type and position matter

One of the most discussed contingent factors in political agenda-setting studies is the moderating role of political parties. There is a growing consensus that politicians do not react in a uniform way to media coverage, and that the type and position of parties matter. Two patterns in the literature come to the fore. The first is that opposition parties react more to media coverage than government parties (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Thesen, 2013; Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011a; 2011b). For opposition parties, the broad, problem-seeking, often conflictual and negative coverage prevailing in the mass media is more readily usable than for government parties. Opposition parties are freer to react to media coverage when it is advantageous to them, and not to react when it is disadvantageous, while government parties' political responsibility forces them in many cases to take a public stand (Thesen, 2013). Especially in coalition governments, majority party MPs, for example, must be very careful in what they do in order not to destabilize their own government; so they use the media moderately and with caution. Opposition party members do not experience these constraints and can use the media freely to challenge the government. Therefore, when compared to governments, parties in opposition have greater incentives to strategically react to the media in order to give visibility to their own agendas.

A second factor on the party level is the so-called 'issue ownership' of parties. Parties care more about some issues than about others, they have a more outspoken position on some issues, and they establish more competence over these issues. This

makes them 'owners' of the issue in the eyes of the citizens (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). Studies find that parties react more on issues that are covered in the media when they are the owners of the issue (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2011b). For example, green parties are widely considered to be the owners of the environmental issue; this makes them more reactive to environmental coverage in the news. This suggests, more generally, that parties react strategically and instrumentally to the news of the day. The media may not be the real 'cause' of their attention but provide them with a window of opportunity to promote the issues they already care about.

Furthermore, the focus of the media on parties' owned issues impacts differently depending on whether they are in government or in opposition. Opposition parties are less limited using the media than governments as they can take advantage of media coverage of their owned issues without being too adversely affected when the media covers on issues owned by government. On the contrary, government parties may be electorally penalized both when the media agenda focuses on opposition owned issues and when their owned issues receive a negative coverage. Opposition, therefore, has little to lose and much to gain from an issue friendly media agenda (Thesen, Green-Pedersen, & Mortensen 2017).

Since parties have become such a central variable in agenda-setting research it is no surprise that almost all contributions in this special issue take into account parties or partisanship in their research designs. Either by comparing incumbent and opposition parties, differentiating by how parties work in a certain country or including political parallelism as a relevant moderator, this special issue puts parties center stage.

3. What do we not (yet) know?

3.1 System characteristics

Overall, studies on agenda-setting and the media focus on a certain country, in the past mainly the US. Therefore, our knowledge of why and how characteristics of the media or the political system influence the political agenda-setting power of the media is limited. There is, however, some mixed proof about the role of these systemic factors. So-called ‘subjective’ studies based on interviews with politicians go in different directions. A large comparative study by Midtbø, Walgrave, Van Aelst, and Christens (2014) asking about the agenda-setting power of the media fails to find significant country effects once the features of individual MPs are taken into account. However, Van Dalen and Van Aelst (2014) do show in their study based on perceptions of political journalists that both media system and political system characteristics matter to explain country differences. So, when asking elites about their perception of how powerful the media is in determining what they do, not a lot of patterns appear that allow to draw firm conclusions about country differences. This is probably because elites are not able, or willing, to distinguish the media’s specific agenda setting power from the media’s other powerful roles (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011).

In a more objective study, Vliegenthart and colleagues (2016) find evidence that the composition of the government affects parties’ reactions to media coverage: in political systems with coalition governments, incumbent parties are more reactive to media coverage than in countries with single-party governments. In addition, there is some evidence that media systems may shape the strength of media agenda-setting effects (Santana-Pereira, 2012, Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, Weaver, & Barkin, 2013), but a thorough analysis of how and why this may be the case in terms of political agenda-setting capacity of the media has never been carried out.

Following up on these recent studies, four articles in this issue focus explicitly on characteristics of the media landscape and the role of political system features to explain

country differences (see Table 1). One of them, by Santana-Pereira, regards the importance of media system characteristics in moderating the political agenda of individual politicians and political institutions in Europe. By comparing 27 European media systems the author tests whether the development of the press markets, the journalist professionalization, the strength of public television or the external political pluralism contribute to shaping the strength of that relationship. Seddone's article focuses on a media subsystem factor, using Italy as the case study. She explores the interaction between politically parallel media - measured as the ideological closeness of media outlets coverage to political actors - and the political agenda (using parliamentary questions), taking into account a set of policy issues. Helfer and Van Aelst's article focuses instead on the political system characteristics. Drawing on the comparison between Switzerland and Netherlands the authors argue that the electoral and party systems features play a role in mediating the politicians reactions to the news. Using a different method, also Sciarini and colleagues examine differences between parties regarding their agenda-building capacities in Switzerland and Netherlands. This research analyses the media influence across government systems of both countries, simultaneously assessing the differences of such influence in government and in opposition parties.

With this subset of articles, this special issue aims to contribute to a better understanding of the mediating effects of the characteristics of the media and of the political systems on the influence of the media agenda over the political agenda.

3.2 Context characteristics

The mediating effect of contextual conditions on the media agenda effects has as well been rarely studied, in particular, the economic context. Previous research has already

demonstrated that the economic context influences the policy agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2011: 948-949; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Mortensen et al., 2011). In specific, under changing contextual conditions, such as an economic crisis, parties tend to take more electoral advantage by focusing on pragmatic issues (that is, issues related to economic policy choices), to the detriment of value-based issues (Tavits, 2007).

The consequences of budget deficits and economic crises on political parties' stands has been studied in depth by scholars of American politics (e.g. Blyth, 2013; Dood & Oppenheimer, 2013). The political impact of the economic crisis in Southern Europe and underlying austerity policies has also generated a burgeoning literature over the last few years (e.g. Bosco & Verney, 2016; Magalhães 2014). This new economic context in Europe is undoubtedly relevant to the study of media agenda effects. In such a situation, the government sees its room of maneuver curtailed as its leeway for political decision is constricted, not only because the difficult economic conditions, but also because the constraints arising from the need for external financial intervention (for an overview of the political consequences of the economic crisis in the political system, see: Bosco & Verney, 2016; Hobolt & Tilley, 2016). In general, the crisis led to increasing electoral polarization around economic and welfare policy issues, and heightened party confrontation in the countries more severely hit (Magalhães 2014: 191-197). This scenario had implications on the redefinition of political actors' issue attention, redirecting policy attention towards economic and crisis related issues. Furthermore, the media agenda effects are expected to be stronger in such a crisis context (Paletz, 1998). Thus, it is expected that a mediating effect will occur on the media agenda, probably reinforcing its impact.

As far as we know, there is no knowledge about the role of mass media on parties' issue prioritization strategies under these harsher economic contexts. Some of the articles

in this special issue intend to contribute to fulfill this gap by comparing media effects before and after the emergence of the sovereign debt crisis in Europe, namely in particularly struck countries such as Portugal or Spain (see Table 1). The article on Portugal, by Belchior, explores the media, the public opinion, and the parliament agendas contribution to explain parties' agenda-setting in campaign manifestos, and, more in specific, the media agenda effect on the other agendas' impact. The author uses party's role in parliament (government or opposition) and the economic context as contingent factors of parties' agenda-setting by the media. Palau and Ansemil's study on the Spanish case focuses on the euro crisis to explain media attention to EU affairs. The authors also aim at assessing the consequences of the emergence of the crisis on different types of actors (political, economic, executive elites and civil society) capacity for influencing EU debates in the media.

3.3 Social media as a new hybrid agenda

Agenda-setting theory, traditionally, states that the mass media determine what issues citizens think, and political agenda-setting studies broadened this idea to the influence of mass media on political elites. However, recent studies looking at social media use seem to challenge this iron law. The rise of social media use puts the underlying causal mechanism—from mass media to the public—into question. For instance, Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, and Bae (2014) speak about a 'reversed agenda-setting', with the causal arrow potentially pointing from citizens to the media (in addition to vice versa). In recent years, more scholars are trying to integrate social media data in the (political) agenda-setting literature (e.g. Ceron, Curini, & Iacus, 2016). It is clear that in particular the growing use of social media by politicians and parties offers new opportunities, but also poses challenges, for political agenda-setting studies. On the one hand, it can be

considered a (new) political agenda, a platform where citizens can learn about the issue priorities of political actors. On the other hand, social media are an instrument that politicians (mainly) use to influence the traditional media agenda. The rise of social media has also stimulated a new line of political agenda-setting research that does not focus on the policy priorities of groups, such as political parties, but rather puts the individual politician at the center (see also Helfer, 2016; Sevenans, Walgrave, & Vos, 2015). Social media allows to see what kind of issue or stories individual politicians would like to promote and how this might influence other media and political agendas (Harder, Sevenans, & Van Aelst, 2017; Peeters, Van Aelst, Praet, 2019). Although social media are not addressed in this issue, we strongly believe this is a promising line of research that agenda-setting scholars can and should further explore in the future.

4. The contribution of this special issue

This special issue is innovative in at least three ways: it proposes to comparatively explore diverse contingent conditions of the media on policy agendas by focusing on diverse and seldom researched cases and on comparative research as well, it explores more than one type of methodology to assess such conditions, and it uses broad and uncommonly rich data sources.

First, this special issue is fundamental because it tests the validity and reliability of a dominant theoretical framework by expanding its geographical scope. Through the focus on a broad range of Western democracies, rather than a continued emphasis of studies on a handful of extensively studied countries, this work features a novel approach to agenda-setting. The specific studies on cases such as Portugal and Italy, rarely investigated, gives strength to the growing internationalization of agenda-setting and, additionally, allows scholars to really draw a global comparison and verify the validity

and reliability of previous findings, testing them in different institutional (such as the political system features), media (the media characteristics) and contextual settings (such as an economic crisis).

Second, scholars have recently called for a stronger diversity of methodological approaches to agenda-setting to really test causality and further determine who and what has the most effect. This issue encompasses both case studies and comparative analysis (between the EU member-states as a whole, and between selected European countries) and applies a variety of methodologies such as content analysis, experimental design, and time series analysis. Underlining the implications of methodological choices on findings, places us a step closer to fully determine with a stronger level of confidence the relationship between media and political actors and political agendas. Assembling a multitude of evidence, qualitative and quantitative appeared necessary to answer the overarching question across countries and possibly validate and consolidate this special issue's general conclusions.

Third, answering a plea within the political communication research community for less cross-sectional and more longitudinal data, some of the papers presented here rely on extensive, longitudinal and exceptional data sources. These include quantitative data on party pledges and policy attention in electoral manifestos, issue attention in the media, issue attention in parliamentary questions, policy preferences of the public, and experts survey data. Therefore, the papers address both 'symbolic' political agendas (e.g. parliamentary questions) and more substantial political agendas (such as party pledges in manifestos).

The articles in this special issue either adopt a comparative stance on the subject, focusing on large or narrower sets of cases specifically selected in order to test hypotheses about macro- or meso-level factors; the remaining articles contribute to the literature both

by focusing on seldom studied countries or by analyzing the within-country dimensions that may foster or hinge media effects on policy agendas. Most articles address the contingent conditions of media effects on the political agenda and, for that reason, allow the comparative analysis of findings.

Overall, this special issue presents a panoply of studies that put to test one of the most prevalent theoretical frameworks in political science and media effects. A good theory must hold true under various scopes, through diverse methodological approaches, while continuously appearing parsimonious, reliable, replicable, and fundamental to the scholarship. Scholars featured in this work did just that: testing agenda-setting and although as Dearing and Rogers (1996) so clearly stated, several hundred studies have already been dedicated to agenda-setting, limited evidence had previously enlightened us on the mechanisms and extent of media effects on policy agendas. This special issue is a first comprehensive attempt to empirically analyze such effects, and the approach that we will follow provide solid guarantees of the richness and robustness of findings.

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Table 1. Structure of the special issue and main characteristics of the articles

Paper	Cases	Dependent variables	Independent variables	Data - method
<p>Do media systems matter? Media system characteristics and the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda in Europe</p> <p>José Santana Pereira.</p>	27 European countries	Perceptions of agenda-setting power of the media	Media system characteristics (development of press markets, journalist professionalization, strength of public television, and external political pluralism)	Expert survey + country data
<p>Media political parallelism and political agenda setting in Italy</p> <p>Antonella Seddone</p>	Italy	Parliamentary questions	<p>Media system characteristics (parallel media)</p> <p>Party role in parliament (government-opposition parties)</p>	Content analysis of media (Tv) and PQs; Time series analyses
<p>Why politicians react to media coverage: A comparative experiment of political agenda-setting</p> <p>Luzia Helfer and Peter van Aelst</p>	Switzerland - Netherlands	How do individual MPs react to media messages	Individual MP characteristics (eg issue specialization) linked to electoral system and party system	Experimental design (vignettes imbedded in survey with MPs)
<p>Political agenda-setting and -building in small consensus democracies: Relationships between media and parliament in the Netherlands and Switzerland</p> <p>Pascal Sciarini, Anke Tresch and Rens Vliegenthart</p>	Switzerland - Netherlands	Media coverage and parliamentary questions (reciprocal impact)	<p>Government system characteristics</p> <p>Party role in parliament (government-opposition parties)</p>	Content analysis of media (newspapers) and PQs; Time series analyses
<p>Media, public opinion and parliamentary agendas' influence in political parties' agenda-setting</p> <p>Ana Maria Belchior</p>	Portugal	<p>Party manifestos</p> <p>(government-opposition <u>parties</u>)</p>	<p>Economic crisis</p> <p>Party role in parliament (government-opposition parties)</p>	Content analysis of different agendas (CAP); Time series analyses
<p>Political actors' access to the media agenda: A case study of the impact of the euro crisis in Spain</p> <p>Anna M. Palau & Miquel Ansemil</p>	Spain	Political actors (incl. different types of <u>parties</u>) on the media agenda in the case of EU coverage; tone of coverage	Economic crisis	Content analyses of media (newspapers) + real world economic data