

**Specifying the media's political agenda-setting power.
Media, civil society, parliament and government
in a small consociational democracy (Belgium, 1991-2000)**

Stefaan Walgrave & Michiel Nuytemans

Stefaan Walgrave

Center for European Studies
Harvard University
27 Kirkland Street
Cambridge MA 02138
USA

University of Antwerp (UA)
Department of Political Science
Media, movements and politics (www.m2p.be)
Belgium

walgrave@uia.ua.ac.be
+1/857/92 82 687
+1/617/49 58 509

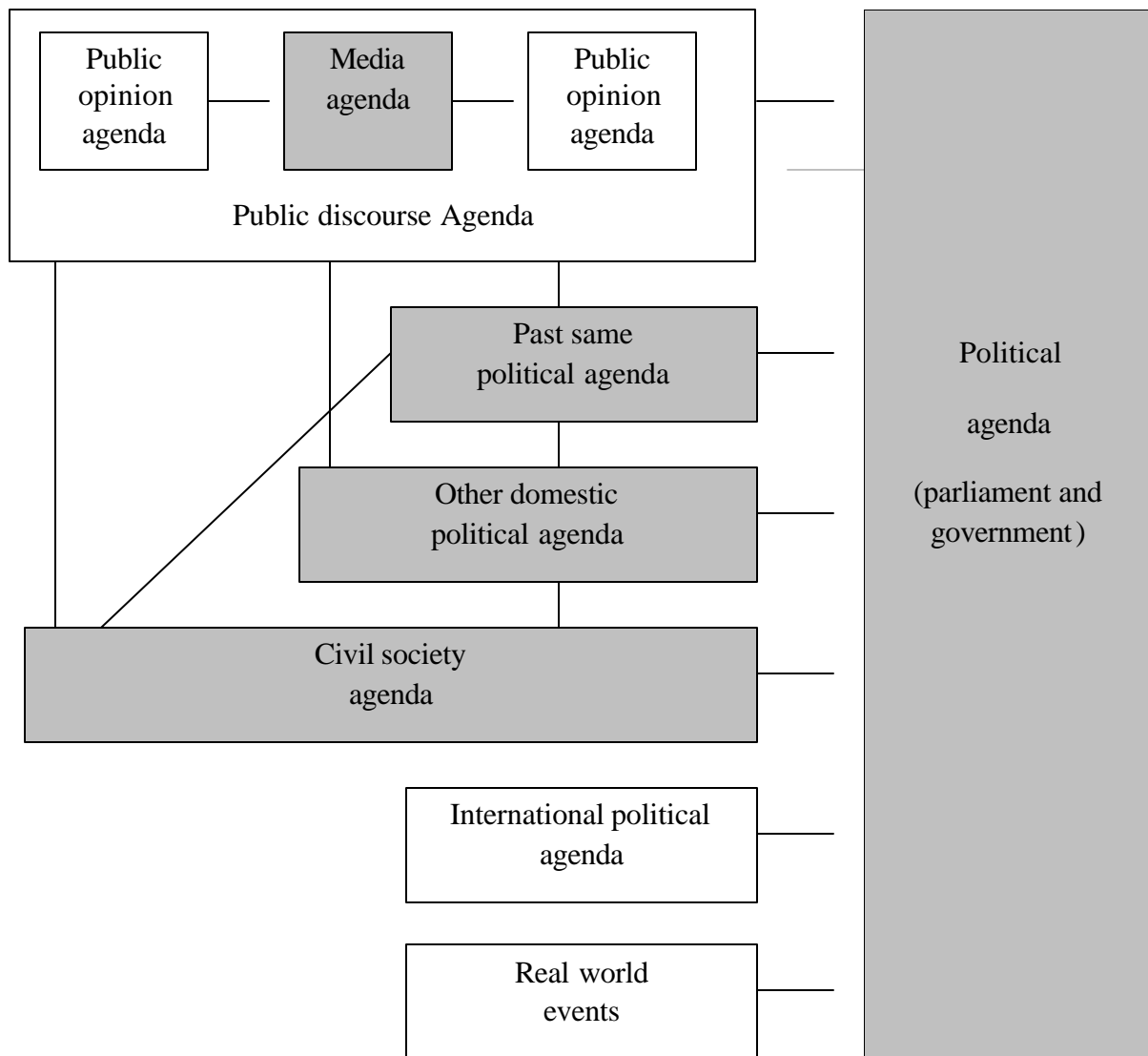
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Introduction

The media's political power debate is an evergreen among political communication scholars. The study of the media's effects on politics, a very broad domain with a steady stream of publications, can be divided in several subfields: media might influence *who* makes political decisions via their role in the selection of political personnel; media might affect *how* political actors function since they affect political styles and procedures (e.g. personalization, emotionalization, professionalization); media might co-determine *about what* decisions are taken due to their agenda-setting role; and finally, media might affect the actual content of political decisions, *which* decisions political actors take, via their directional coverage or framing (media bias, partisan media). Most of these impact tracks can be direct or indirect, which means that public opinion can act as an intermediate or not. Media's framing of an issue, for example, might influence public opinion which, in turn, influences politics. But the media's presentation of an issue might also directly affect politician's attitudes and opinions without intermediating public opinion.

In this paper we will focus on only one but crucial track of potential media influence on politics: can the media (co)determine the political agenda or not? This is a crucial test for media power theories. If the media are not able to do such straightforward thing as simply drawing the attention of political actors to the subjects they cover, the 'about what' of politics, it is improbable that they are capable of affecting the 'who', the 'how' and the 'which' of politics. If mass media really matter for politics, then they should affect at least the political agenda, that is the list of the issues to which different political actors at different institutional levels devote attention (time, money, personnel, space...). The central question underlying this contribution is straightforward: can the media be considered as playing an independent role in the formation of the political agenda or not? More concretely we want to specify the precise circumstances under which the media may impact politics in one country only: Belgium, a small consociational democracy.

The media's political agenda-setting power has not received the scientific attention it deserves. Of course, a considerable number of studies dealt with political agenda-setting in election times (Semetko, Blumler et al. 1991; Roberts and McCombs 1994; Dalton, Beck et al. 1998; Brandenburg 2000). Yet we think that political agenda-setting in election and in normal political times has a different dynamic, although it is not clear how this different dynamic might be conceptualised (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977; Dalton, Beck et al. 1998; Walgrave and Deswert 2003). Moreover, electoral agenda-setting studies consider the party agendas during the election campaign (e.g. party programmes, press releases, stump speeches...), while we are interested in the media's impact on institutional agendas like parliament and government. Consequently we will *not* draw upon these electoral political agenda-setting studies here. The number of empirical political agenda-setting studies focussing on the media in routine political times has been amazingly limited. Furthermore, the results of the present studies were often contradictory and their evidence mixed. The reasons for opposite outcomes were seldom articulated and a real scientific dispute on the media's political agenda-setting power tackling the question under what *specific* conditions the media affect politics, has been lacking so far. Some available empirical research might be flawed as



the design of some studies was not fully suited to tap media effects. Summarizing, the limited number, contradicting results, lacking specificity and inadequate research designs of previous studies are good enough reasons to reassess the role of the media in political agenda-setting. We need to reconsider or at least supplement the findings of previous studies attempting to discriminate and isolate more precisely the conditions of media impact.

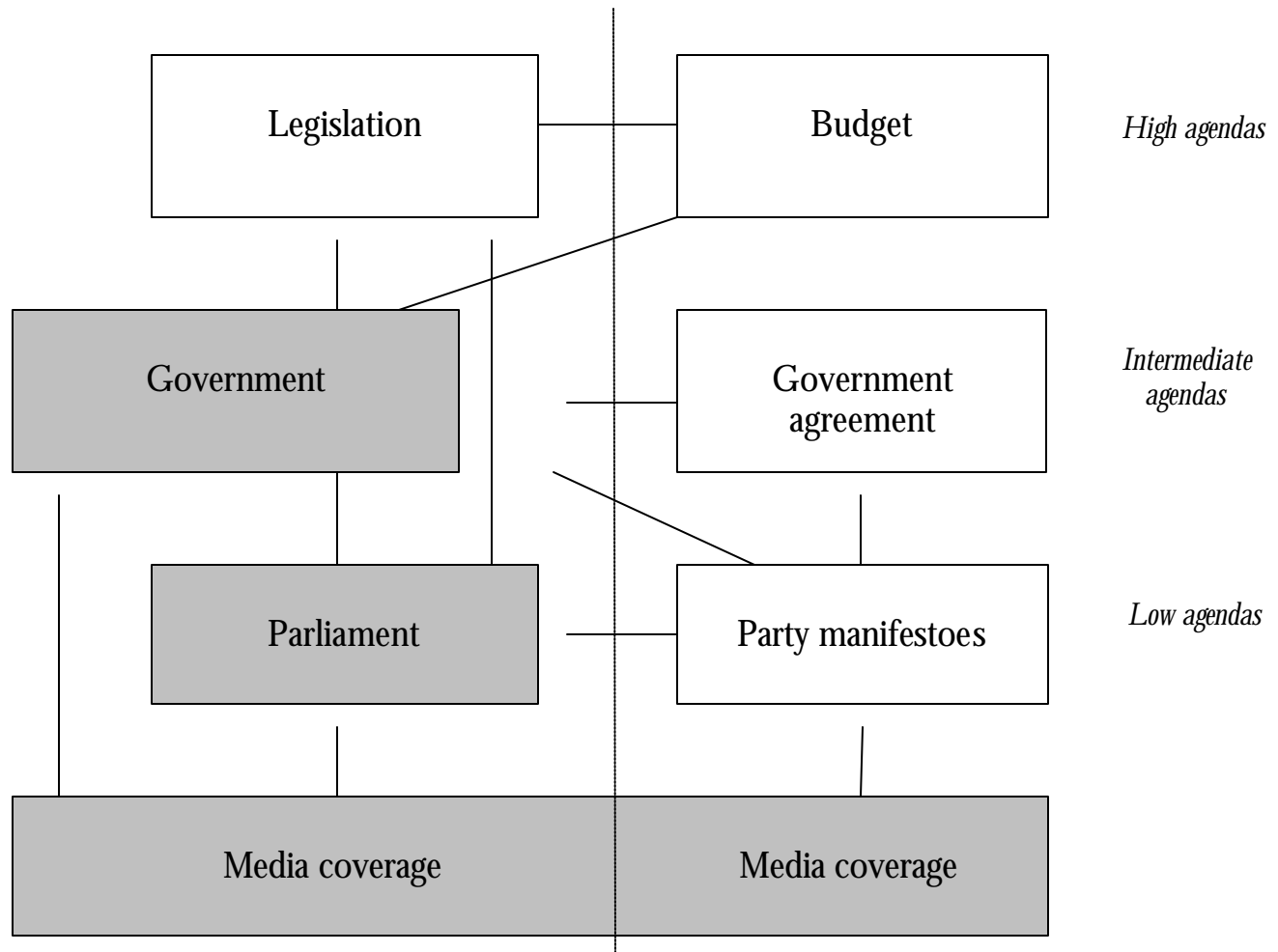
Media could affect politics following two causal paths: direct or indirect, mediated by public opinion or not. Public opinion could be a prior variable influencing media. Since we lack Belgian public opinion data for the period under study – the traditional ‘most important problem’-question has not been asked – we will not be capable to distinguish the media’s direct from its indirect influence, nor its priority on public opinion. We believe that this technical limitation does not pose major problems to our present undertaking. Whether media are the prior variable affecting public opinion which affects politics, or the subsequent variable directly affecting politics but following public opinion, or whether both are the case, does not really matter: our ultimate interest lies with the impact of public discourse on the political agenda. GRAPH 1 catches the design of our study graphically. We are not interested what happens *within* the box labelled ‘Public discourse agenda’. We will consider the media as a representative of the broader public discourse. Scores of public agenda-setting studies, starting with McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) seminal trigger article, demonstrated the close link between public opinion and media (Dearing and Rogers 1996). Hence we may safely suppose that both agendas correspond empirically.

As can be derived from the directions of the arrows in GRAPH 1 we want to explain the political agenda. It is the political agenda, or better: the political *agendas*, which are the main independent variables in the present study. Of course, the reverse causal relationship – political agendas affecting media agendas - is a legitimate research topic too. Yet the media’s reporting on political issues, the media agenda following the political agenda, can be considered as a normal and ubiquitous phenomenon. After all it is the mass media’s *raison d’être* to inform the public about what is going on in their society, about what is relevant and might affect them. Political decision making or non-making is often highly relevant to the public and can affect it directly and personally (e.g. tax reform, unemployment measures, inflation policies...). Hence, establishing that media coverage follows politics is no more than the confirmation of a truism. The reverse relationship, the focus of our study, can be much less taken for granted. It is not politics vocation to follow the media agenda nor is it the media’s task to determine politics.

While GRAPH 1 summarizes the general design of our study it becomes clear that it has two major limitations. We will only take into account the greyed boxes in the graph: we control the effect of the media on our two political agendas for the past of the

same political agenda (inertia hypothesis), for the impact of other political agendas, and for the civil society agenda which can be considered as a potential alternative for bottom-up agenda-setting. Yet we do *not* take into account international political agendas. Since Belgium is member of the European Union and a small open economy, plenty of its policy measures are initiated by international and supranational actors. Not taking into account this prior variable might bias our findings. Finally, we will only timidly control for the so-called real world. Obviously political agendas are affected by what really happens in society. Unemployment surges, traffic accidents augment, crime rates go up... and all these facts impact the political agenda (or at least they should) even without intermediation from the media.

GRAPH 2: Two tracks of media impact on political agendas: the fast (left) and the slow track (right)



The political institutions whose agendas will be taken into account in the present study are parliament and government. This implies another limitation of our enquiry. Political agendas come in different kinds, and we could also analyze party

programmes, government agreements, legislation or the budget as dependent variables. This paper is part of a bigger project in which exactly these other political agendas will be the core of our attention. This paper only involves what we would like to call the *fast* track media impact on two rapidly evolving political agendas, parliament and government. But this causal path is only a part of the whole picture. Probably the media can also affect *slow* political agendas. GRAPH 2 depicts this argument graphically.

In line with Stimson and colleagues' dynamic representation concept changes in political agendas (and thus policies) are potentially affected by the media at two different moments: between elections (fast track) and at elections (slow track). The first path is the fast track (left side of graph) on which we will concentrate in this paper (boxes in grey). Issues following this track may not be able to reach the higher political agendas (budget and legislation), that are much more viscous and tougher to conquer, and be contained in the lower and intermediate political agendas. Parliament members pose a few questions, government takes minor (symbolic) decisions without real tangible policy outputs. High politics is not really affected. The intensity and endurance of these issues' media coverage probably determine how far an issue can climb up in the knock-out race and whether only parliament or also government devote attention to the issue. The second track is the slower but perhaps more successful path for the media to affect politics. It is based on the idea that elections, subsequent government formation and negotiations for the government agreement are crucial political agenda-setting moments, at least in Belgium. Based upon the coalescing parties' programmes, the government agreement determines policy for the whole legislature. In between elections the media's effects on the higher political agendas might be neutralized. Once a new government took power, it may be as good as immune for media effects and just sticks to carrying out the government agreement. Media could have an effect on budget and legislation, but only indirectly and in the long-run and mediated via party programmes and government agreement. In short: when issues are covered over and over again by the media during the long years between the elections, they might be picked up by parties, be incorporated in their party manifestoes, become included in the government agreement and start their slow march through the institutions resulting in substantial policy measures involving new legislation and the allocation of resources. But that is not the topic of this paper.

The first chapter is dedicated to previous research. Chapter I contains a literature overview of previous media and political agenda-setting studies. Existing studies are criticized because of their, with some exceptions, inadequate research design not able to specify the media's political agenda-setting power. The selection of issues, agendas and time frames was often flawed, or at least incomplete, leading some studies to overrate the media's power, and others to underrate it. Our critique results in a more encompassing and nuanced research design, to be presented in Chapter II. This chapter presents the research design, introduces the evidence and specifies the agendas

under scrutiny. It explains how data were collected and contains an introductory univariate overview of the evidence. Chapter III is devoted to an overall analysis of whole agendas. It attempts to statistically model the overall relationships between media and political agenda focussing on time and agenda differences while neglecting differences between issue-specific agenda-setting dynamics. We consider agendas as a whole, populated by a myriad of issues fighting each other to get priority, and compare the global similarity and resemblance of these agendas. This analysis draws the background picture, the decorum against which specific issues develop particular agenda-setting dynamics.

I Media and political agenda-setting research: a critical review

For many years the notion of agenda-setting has provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and *communications* research. When mass media emphasize a topic, the audience/public receiving the message will consider this topic to be important (Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Numerous studies all over the world have established firm correlations between the media's and the public's priorities (McCombs and Shaw 1993; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Ghanem 1996). Within *political science* too, agenda-setting is a frequently used concept. Political scientists draw on it to describe and explain how political institutions on different levels and with different functions (government, parliament, civil servants, political parties...) determine their priorities, give attention to or ignore issues, and do, or do not, take decisions or take a stance concerning these topics (Cobb and Elder 1971; Kingdon 1984; Laver and Budge 1992; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Klingemann, Hofferbert et al. 1994). The latter political agenda-setting research focuses mainly on endogenous political factors, ascribing issues on the agenda of a certain political actor (e.g. government or congress), to the influence of (the agenda of) *another* political actor (e.g. government party or the president) or to issues on the same agenda in a preceding period (incrementalism). Yet, the bulk of agenda-setting studies focussed on media and public opinion and not on media and politics. The number of studies explicitly focussing on the political agenda and the media has remained limited (Rogers, Dearing et al. 1993; Eilders 1997; Schultz 1997). Both agenda-setting traditions, in communications and in political science, developed separately. Only timidly starting in the mid-80s some scholars began to concentrate on the media *and* the political agenda, sometimes with the public¹ as intermediate factor. They scrutinised if and how public and media agendas, previously the focus only of communications researchers, interact with political agendas, formerly the exclusive playground of political scientists. The outcome of these investigations was mixed and both scholars, in communications and

¹ For reasons of convenience we will speak in this report about 'the public' and 'public' agenda-setting *not* to refer to the rich concept of the public and the public sphere and all its complexities, but only to a thin concept of the public as being public opinion and more specifically merely the list of policy issue priorities prevalent among the population of a country.

in political science, seemed to stick to their core business: “*If media scholars are, by and large, much taken with the agenda-setting power of the press, many scholars of traditional political institutions seem less impressed*” (Bartels 1996).

Some studies revealed only modest or even absent media influence. The impact of the media on the political agenda, these scholars state, is limited. Walker, for example, pointed out that *The New York Times*, concerning the three innovative safety laws passed in the US Senate from the 50s onwards, simply followed the legislative process instead of determining it (Walker 1977). Kingdon (1984: 61-62), based on interviews with the insiders of the political decision-making game in the US, stated that: “*One can find examples of media importance... but such examples are fairly rare... The media report what is going on in government, by and large, rather than having an independent effect on government agendas*” (see also Kingdon 1995). Light followed a similar research track, interviewing the US president’s advisors about whom where the most important agencies fuelling the domestic agenda. He concluded that the media were not important because they were only seldom mentioned by policy makers (Light 1982; Considine 1998). Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg (1995) in their study of economic issues in The Netherlands even found a net *negative* impact of media on the political agenda. In a later study, Kleinnijenhuis (2003) only found modest media impact on politics and a much stronger reverse impact. The limited power of the media, some of these authors speculate, is due to its short attention span always running from one crisis to another hence diluting its impact on the slower workings of democracy (Kingdon 1984; Dearing and Rogers 1996; Protess, Cook et al. 1991). Another weakness of the media, says Kingdon (1984), is its propensity to highlight the most spectacular stories, while these stories tend to take place at the end of the policy-making process, and not at the beginning. Except for specific issues like foreign policy (Herman 1993; Livingston 1997; Mermin 1997), for special kinds of journalism like investigation journalism (Molotch, Protess et al. 1987; Protess, Cook et al. 1987; Protess, Cook et al. 1991), and for some uncommon and non-routine crisis situations (Walker 1977; Eichhorn 1996; Wood and Peake 1998) the media’s political agenda-setting impact is limited, these scholars affirm.

Other researchers, in contrast, claimed the existence of strong media bearings on the political agenda. In their influential overview of agenda-setting research, Dearing & Rogers (1996: 74) state that “*The mass media often have a direct influence on the policy agenda-setting process*”. Among the founding fathers of the political science tradition of studying agendas, Cobb & Elder (1971: 909) stated more than 30 years ago: “*The media can also play a very important role in elevating issues to the systemic agenda and increasing their chances of receiving consideration on institutional agendas*.” Edwards & Wood (1999) established an independent media impact on the foreign *and* the domestic agenda of the US president. Trumbo (1995) closely examined the rise and fall of the global warming issue from 1985 till 1992 and concluded that the media played a considerable role in

the heightening of policy attention for the issue. Linsky (1986), after empirical research among US policy makers, attributes a lot of agenda-setting power to the media. Soroka (Soroka 2002) came to similar conclusions based on a time series analysis of three issues in Canada linking the media with a whole range of political agendas: especially in terms of the environmental issue, an unobtrusive issue, the media are setting the agenda of public and politics. Baumgartner and colleagues found a firm relationship between media attention and US congressional attention for four domestic issues and concluded "... *that the media help create situations that make increased government attention almost unavoidable*" (Baumgartner, Jones et al. 1997). Bartels relying as well on longitudinal time-series data, maintained that the media have an independent impact on the political agenda. Concerning *The New York Times*, the undisputed major institution of American press, Bartels states that "... *the results presented here support the claim that, by and large, The Times led and the politicians followed.*" (Bartels 1996) Drawing upon an innovative experimental design also Cook and colleagues (1983) found that policymakers were influenced by watching TV news and considered the covered topic to be more important, and thought that government action was more urgent, after than before watching the programme.

Sure enough the contradicting conclusions of previous research can be explained by the dissimilarity of their research questions, hypotheses, design and methodology. Media content was sometimes measured but then it was not, some studies relied on interviews with policymakers while other drew upon objective accounts of policymakers words and/or deeds, some focussed on just a few issues while others covered a broad issue range, some relied on just a few media outlets while others took into account large numbers of different media, some used a time-series design following different agendas over time while others were based on cross-sectional analyses, most of the studies were situated in the US but some of them occurred in other Western countries. Undertaking a political agenda-setting study requires five basic decisions: (1) which the issues to consider, (2) what number and kind of political (dependent) and (3) media agendas (independent variable) to incorporate, (4) what time period to cover, and (5) where the study will be located. To organize our literature review we will follow these five basic research design choices. This will assist us in developing more precise research hypotheses and suggests the contours of a broader research design that will be presented in Chapter II.

Issues

Except for some rare examples (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977; Wanta and Foote 1994) most political agenda-setting studies took a limited number of issues into consideration. The studies who actually did consider more issues pointed out that political agenda-setting dynamics, and the media's role, may differ dramatically conditional upon the type of issue (Bartels 1996; Soroka 2002; Soroka 2002). Yet as

good as no enquiries have developed a specific typology of issues to account for the divergences in the media's impact. Well aware of the fact that the public agenda differs a lot from the political agenda, we are forced to rely on the literature of *public* agenda-setting to suggest us some hypothesis for *political* agenda-setting,. Which issue features might affect their agenda-setting appropriateness and could generate testable hypotheses?

The distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues is a classic in public agenda-setting. We expect media to have also more political agenda-setting power when it comes to issues that, without media, would simply be not observable. When the media act as solitary sources, for public *and* politicians, their impact increases (Lang and Lang 1991; Soroka 2002). Second, the institutional ownership of an issue might be relevant too (Manheim 1986). In the US, for example, foreign policy is considered as being the exclusive US president's fishing ground, while domestic issues are shared with US congress (Wood and Peake 1998). It is to be expected that the clearer the responsibility of a political actor for an issue, the higher the chance that media coverage on that issue will urge that agency to act, while diffuse and shared responsibility breeds little political action (Pritchard 1992). Third, the duration of an issue's prominent presence in the media can play a role. Agenda-setting is a slow cumulative drip-by-drip process and only prolonged media attention might influence policy makers, as Kingdon (1984) states when trying to explain the media's limited power. Fourth, the newness of an issue on the media-agenda could make a difference as well. Relatively new issues might have a stronger agenda-setting effect than permanent issues because public and politicians are less familiar with the issue and have not yet developed a clear stance. They are still searching for information in order to make themselves an opinion and are, hence, more susceptible for media cues (Molotch, Protess et al. 1987; Brosius and Kepplinger 1992; Trumbo 1995). Media effects are thus conditional upon the life cycle of an issue. In a similar vein, Linsky (1986) states that the media are most powerful in the initiating stages of policy processes (issue identification and solution formation) while actual policy adoption and implementation fall beyond the scope of their influence. Fifth, the intensity of the issue coverage could make a difference. Only intensively covered issues might be able to infect the political agenda in a kind of threshold logic (Brosius and Kepplinger 1992). Sixth, Brosius and Kepplinger (1992) assert that coverage of an extraordinary event far beyond day-to-day coverage (e.g. spectacular closing down of a factory rendering a lot of workers unemployed) may have a much more powerful agenda-setting impact than normal coverage (e.g. monthly routine news about new unemployment figures), even if the sheer amount of news stories devoted to this issue is similar. Cobb & Elder (1972) defined such events as 'focussing events' and argue that the absence of focussing events could block an issue's rise to the political agenda (Birkland 1998; Harrison 2001). Seventh, Protess and colleagues (1987) state that the style of the coverage of an issue might make a difference for political agenda-setting:

unambiguous reporting clearly defining the problem and pointing towards solutions might bear more agenda-setting power than ambiguous and less dramatic coverage with many ‘ifs’ and ‘mights’ and no self-evident solutions. Eighth, Baumgartner and colleagues established that negative coverage of issues has a more

TABLE 1: hypotheses on issue attributes

Author	Issue attribute	Hypothesis
Cobb, 1972	Extraordinary event vs. day-to-day coverage (focussing events)	Extraordinary events coverage bears more media impact
Kingdon, 1984	Duration of media attention	The lengthier media attention, the more media impact
Protess, 1987	Unambiguous vs. ambiguous reporting	The less ambiguous reporting the more media impact
Protess, 1987	Political presence (agenda and solutions)	The more an issue is already present on the political agenda, the more media impact
Lang, 1991	Intensity of media attention (thresholds)	The more intense media attention the more media impact
Pritchard, 1992	Clear vs. unclear (shared) political responsibility	The clearer the political responsibility the more media impact
Trumbo, 1995	Newness of an issue (policy stages)	The newer an issue the more media impact
Bartels 1996	Foreign vs. domestic	For foreign issues media impact is bigger than for domestic issues
Baumgartner, 1997	Negativity	Negative news bear more agenda-setting impact than other news.
Soroka 2002	Obtrusiveness (visibility of the issue for political actors)	The more unobtrusive an issue, the more media impact

powerful agenda-setting effect (Baumgartner, Jones et al. 1997). Since politics is the business of problem solving negative news automatically turns all heads to politics expecting at least some form of policy reaction. Ninth and finally, also the politicians’ sensitiveness for certain issues might play a role. If issues are already on the political agenda and get attention from politicians who consider it to be an important theme, and even more if solutions are ready available within the political system and are promoted by political actors, we expect media coverage of that issue to boost the ranking of that issue to a larger extent (Protess, Cook et al. 1987). In short: issues matter. TABLE 1 summarizes all hypotheses about relevant issue attributes.

There is another issue-related matter. Most studies concentrated on one or only a few issues, yet this choice fundamentally discards the zero-sum assumption underlying all agenda-setting research: when an issue climbs up an agenda, other issues have to come down since the space on every agenda is limited. Hilgartner & Bosk in their seminal article called this ‘the limited carrying capacity of public institutions’ (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Picking out one issue, or just a few issues, neglects this crucial zero-sum

aspect of policy-making: some decisions are taken, and others are not, precisely because the first have captured all the policy makers' attention. Most agendas cannot be expanded but are confined to well-defined limits. TV news, for example, has a standard length and most issues need to adapt to fit in the available 'news holes' to get any attention. The parliamentary agenda too, is constrained by institutional procedures and internal right-of-way rules. Even if an agenda can be expanded, the zero-sum idea still applies and topics can only climb up this (enlarged) agenda at the expense of others.

Political agendas

A tricky topic in political agenda-setting research is the way the political agenda, the dependent variable, is conceived. Agenda-setting scholars agree largely on how the public's and the media agenda are to be measured, but the measures of the political agenda are far from standard ranging from assessing the political parties' agendas by considering all issue mentions that were ascribed to that party (Kleinnijenhuis 2003) to a count of the days spent on hearings about issues in US Congress, or an assessment of the paragraphs devoted to an issue in the yearly presidential activity reports (Edwards and Wood 1999). As problematic as the selection of an indicator for a political agenda is the selection of the political agendas themselves. Most studies are confined to one or two political agendas. To our knowledge, only the work of Protess' research group (Cook, Tyler et al. 1983; Protess, Cook et al. 1987; Protess, Cook et al. 1991) and Soroka (2002) considered more than two political agendas. Why would we need different political agendas? The answer is simple: every political agenda has its own logic and dynamic and, consequently, the choice for one of these agendas as being the one and only political agenda largely moulds the outcome. Knowing, for example, that a state's budget only changes incrementally and that a national budget is as a slowly reacting oil tanker - votes have to be found, agreements have to be struck, procedures have to be developed, agencies have to be set up - it is hardly surprising that studies have found no link between media coverage and subsequent budgetary spending (Landry, Varone et al. 1997). Only focussing on parliament and neglecting the government, to give another example, might lead to entirely different results because the legislative and the executive branch of government have divergent interests, competences, procedures and logics.

Crucial in this respect, is the distinction between symbolic and institutional political agendas. Some studies focussed on symbolic rather than on institutional political agendas, merely reflecting 'policy' changes that are largely rhetorical rather than substantial with tangible regulatory, legislative or administrative consequences (Cobb, Ross et al. 1976; Protess, Cook et al. 1987; Baumgartner, Jones et al. 1997; Soroka 2002). Protess and colleagues discern three potential political results of media reporting: deliberative (debates, hearings), individual (sanctioning, promoting) and substantial

(policy changes) (Protest, Cook et al. 1991). Parliament is democracy's preferred place for (symbolic) deliberation while the executive branch takes individual measures and initiates substantial policy change. That is one of the reasons we would expect parliament to be more susceptible for media coverage than government. Most scholars who actually established strong media effects on political agendas indeed defined their political agenda in a symbolic way (Bartels 1996; Wood and Peake 1998; Edwards and Wood 1999). The US presidential agenda, for example, was defined as containing all issues about which the president spoke in public (speeches, press briefings) or communicated about to the public (press releases, press officers' briefings) venting the president's opinion on the issue of the day. Not surprisingly those scholars found firm correlations with media content. Those presidential outlets are explicitly targeting the media and try to respond to media cues in order to 'get the line of the day out'. In a sense these studies merely substantiated a relationship between the media agenda and the media-targeted political communication of an important political actor. But the US president's communication is largely mere symbolic, showing that he cares about an issue and that he is busy handling it. Many of those public utterances have no policy consequences whatsoever. Edwards and Wood note that while US president Ronald Reagan, for example, was publicly communicating a lot on educational issues he did hardly implement any educational policy (Edwards and Wood 1999). The same problem of considering only symbolic political agendas applies, though to a lesser extent, to studies focussing on the political parties' manifestoes (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995). Party programmes are meant to impress the public and to show that the party is well aware of what is going on in society, it is foremost political communication. Yet the relationship of manifestoes with actual policy-making is not clear (Klingemann, Hofferbert et al. 1994). A similar point was made by Pritchard and Berkowitz in their longitudinal account of crime coverage and its political responses in the US. They assert that the media are able to influence the symbolic agenda – "... those lists of issues that require visible but not necessarily substantive action on the part of the policymakers" – but that media systematically fail to impact what they call the resource agenda, that is "... those lists of issues that require substantive action, including the possible allocation of resources" (Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993). They conclude as follows: "Symbolic agendas are inherently more flexible than resource agendas. It is fairly simple for policy makers to hold a news conference, issue a press release, or make proposals for reform. It can be quite difficult for them to shift resources from one priority to another.... Resource agendas seem to be more resistant to media influence than are symbolic agendas." (Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993) In sum: defining the political agenda too narrow and institutional only considering the 'highest' political agendas makes media impact sheer untraceable in empirical research; defining the political agenda too symbolic, on the other hand, confining oneself to the 'lowest' political agendas, might make finding media-effects trivial and irrelevant. The political agenda does not exist. Politics is made by different political actors ranging from institutional (parliament, government) to non-institutional actors (political parties, interest groups). All these actors have their own agenda, sometimes the same

actor or institution runs a symbolic *and* a substantial agenda at the same time (e.g. symbolic debates and hearings in parliament in contrast to parliament's substantial legislative output). Most likely all these political agendas react differently on media coverage with some agendas highly susceptible for media agenda-setting and others almost immune for media incentives.

Media agendas

Like *the* political agenda, *the* media agenda does not exist either and this agenda too must be split up in different media agendas. TV and newspapers, for example, might have other effects. Again, precise hypotheses on the different media's roles in political agenda-setting are missing and we must lend ideas from *public* agenda-setting studies. In public agenda-setting the debate on the power of print and electronic media is far from settled. Some scholars claim the prevalence of newspapers while others reject this and believe in the power of TV (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977; Protess and McCombs 1991; Schoenbach 1991). The same might be the case for *political* agenda-setting. Bartels (1996) found that the political effect of a national newspaper like *The New York Times* differs from the impact of local newspapers which, in turn, have different effects than national TV network news. Interesting enough, he demonstrates that the national institute *The New York Times* is not directly influencing US congress, but only indirectly via intermediation of *ABC-news*. Trumbo (1995), analysing the global warming issue in the US including Congress' attention from 1985 to 1992, substantiated considerable differences in amount, time lag as well as life cycle phase of TV, magazine and newspaper coverage's political agenda-setting power. Not all media played the same role, with the same immediacy in the same phase of an issue's political life. Trumbo's findings boiled down to the fact that newspapers (co)set the political agenda, that the subsequent policy actions were mainly covered by television and magazines, but that the TV's coverage of those policy measures had a renewed independent effect on the policy agenda. Political agenda-setting is thus a cyclical process with different media intervening at different stages. Also Palmgreen and colleagues established differences in agenda-setting power of local and national newspapers, local and national TV (Palmgreen and Clarke 1977). Kleinnijenhuis (2003) found significant agenda-setting differences between media: TV news had a direct impact on the political party agenda at the Dutch elections of 1994, 1998 and 2002 but the television news itself was codetermined by newspaper coverage. Collapsing all media together in a general media category and not considering their differential workings on the political agenda, may lead to wrong or at least not specified enough conclusions.

What is it about TV and newspapers that might account for their different political agenda-setting power? The political agenda-setting literature, again, does not help us much further. We can speculate that newspapers, due to their more in depth and

complete coverage, might be more able to affect policy makers. Another possibility is that politicians themselves, due to the more time flexible use of print media and the easier processing of paper material, are personally more exposed to newspaper than to TV news and, hence, are more affected by newspapers than by TV (Fuchs and Pfetsch 1996). Yet, if politicians *consider* TV to have bigger an impact on the public's priorities, even if they themselves only watch it rarely, TV coverage's impact on politics could be higher because political actors anticipate on TV's public agenda-setting effects. Eilders argues that for the media to have impact on politics it requires a high congruence of the different media outlets. Only if (all) media are focussing on the same issue (focusing), frame it in a similar way (consonance) and if they do so with perseverance (persistence), can the media be expected to impact the political agenda (Eilders 1997; Eilders 2000; Eilders 2001). Hence, implicitly Eilders claims that one needs to examine different media to assess media impact.

Time

Basically agenda-setting has got to do with time and with successive changes in agendas. The notion of agenda-setting always implies some time lag between the presence of an issue on one agenda and the subsequent 'infection' of another agenda with that issue. Analytically and to tap causality, time-series studies are to be preferred above others research designs, except for experimental researches. Time-series studies are generally more convincing than studies relying on interviews with political actors as the latter focus on perceptions and attitudes, which are biased by faulty appraisals of its own independence of the media, in stead of on actual behaviour (Bartels 1996). Time-series studies are more powerful as well than other quantitative cross-sectional or hierarchical studies comparing issues on different agendas at one point in time (Brosius and Kepplinger 1992; Soroka 2002). Most agenda-setting researches drawing on time-series analyses concentrated on relative short time periods whereby the potential tangible and substantial policy changes ran the risk of falling beyond the period under study. Baumgartner and colleagues give the example of urban affairs in the US whereby an increase in effective budget grants followed the media coverage with a time lag of more than ten years (Baumgartner, Jones et al. 1997). As political agenda-setting research tries to match two remote agendas, each with a different composition, a divergent logic, and especially a dissimilar timing, the time topic is one of the most pressing themes in the field. In general, the research literature maintains that the media-agenda is wavering with issues up-and-down all the time (Downs 1972; Bosso 1989) and media issues are considered to have a short half-life period (Eilders 1997). In contrast, most authors consider the political agenda to be more viscous, reacting more slowly and, consequently, much tougher to conquer for new themes (Kingdon 1984; Dearing and Rogers 1996). What lessons can be learned concerning time from the available studies?

Many studies used different time lags. Winter and Eyal conclude after their literature review that the media's impact on the *public* agenda is at its highest point two to five months after the media coverage (Winter and Eyal 1981). Due to the above mentioned institutional inertia we expect the political agenda, or at least the more institutional political agendas like the budget or the legislation, to react slower to media outlets. Trumbo found media effects on the US congressional agenda with highly variable time lags ranging from just two weeks to three months (Trumbo 1995). Again, theoretical propositions and established hypotheses on the time it takes for political agendas to adopt highly covered issues, are lacking. Most studies seem to have engaged in a kind of non-theoretic trial and error process with highly diverging time lags as a result. Brandenburg, (2000) in his election study combining party agendas and media, used daily measures and time lags of just a (few) day(s); on the complete other end of the scale Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg worked with time units of two years and no time lags at all (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995). Still others (Wood and Peake 1998; Edwards and Wood 1999) relied on weekly evidence to check whether media impacted the (symbolic) US presidential agenda and established diminishing effects from one to ten weeks after media coverage. Bartels (1996) relied on daily measures and substantiated a slowly diminishing impact from the media on US president and US congress spread over an entire month. Kleinnijenhuis (2002) found that it took normally more than two weeks before parties reacted on mediatized issues in The Netherlands. And Soroka (2002), working with monthly measures, found media effects with a time lag ranging from two to six months in Canada.

Some studies did suggest time related hypotheses. Brosius and Kepplinger claim that the same amount of issue coverage might have a different agenda-setting effect at different points in time (Brosius and Kepplinger 1992). Building on that general assertion some studies implicitly put forward hypotheses. The association between media and political agenda might be influenced by the legislature itself, that is: the government in power. Edwards and Wood (1999: 340) established that the media played another role under de Reagan than under the Bush and Clinton US presidency. Wanta and colleagues came to similar conclusions when establishing that the yearly State of the Union of different US presidents was sometimes following the media agenda, but then again setting the media agenda (Gilberg, Eyal et al. 1980; Wanta, Stephenson et al. 1989). To complicate things further we can hypothesize that not only the media's role differs between governments but even between periods under the same government. Something like a governmental 'honeymoon' period might exist in which the new government is treated with more mildness and consideration by the media. This would mean that the media tend to follow the new government's issue agenda initially not bombarding the young government with new topics in its early years. The longer the government in power, the more the media become critical and try to impose their issues onto the government (Protess, Cook et al. 1991). Also within a political year there might be some cyclical season effects. Parliament and government

are not always as energetic: in periods of intense political activities (e.g. emptying the drawers just before parliamentary recess in summer), political decision makers are overloaded and not receptive for media cues, while in quiet periods with a less pressing agenda political actors might be just waiting to be activated to tackle a new problem spotted by the media (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Two more time-related hypotheses can be formulated. If omnipresent accounts on growing political media impact due to the ‘mediatization’ of politics are correct, we would expect to find the media’s political agenda-setting power gradually rising over the years. And, finally, from time to time polities are distressed by external sweeping events that temporarily destabilize the political system. McQuail (McQuail 1993) speculates that the media might have more impact on the public in these crisis times. The same might apply to the political agenda-setting power of the media. TABLE 2 summarizes all these time period related hypotheses.

TABLE 2: time-period related hypotheses

Time attribute	Hypothesis
Elections	Media impact is bigger in election times
Government	Media impact differs from government to government
Legislature	Media impact is lower in the beginning and stronger at the end of a legislature
Season	Media impact is smaller in busy political times than in quiet periods
Proliferation	Media impact is larger at the end than at the beginning of the research period
Events	Media impact is larger in periods following major shocking events

Location

An overwhelming majority of the political agenda-setting research has been carried out in the United States and the research literature is extremely US-centric (Dearing and Rogers 1996; Soroka 2002). If one wants to explain how a fundamental political process as the political agenda-building functions, it is evident that the specific features of the national political and media system play a crucial role. This implies that American research results cannot be generalised to other nations. American exceptionalism is a current expression in comparative politics indicating that the American political system differs a lot from other Western countries. The central role of the American president, for example, in determining the foreign policy of the US, an issue studied frequently in political agenda-setting research, is dissimilar to the situation in most West-European countries. If we want to make progress with political agenda-setting research, we really need more studies in more different countries.

Summary

To recapitulate our literature review we summarized the design and the results of previous studies in TABLE 3. The table is, of course, incomplete and contains only political agenda-setting studies not focussing on election periods. It underpins the

preponderance of American studies. US president and congress were the subject of many studies. We found only a handful of studies in other polities, more especially The Netherlands and Canada. Of the 20 studies in the table, 9 of them established strong media impact on the political agenda, 3 resulted in considerable impact conclusions, 4 found only weak impact, 3 recorded hardly any impact and 1 study concluded that the media did not have any impact at all. Especially after 1995 and from then exclusively relying on time-series analyses, scholars appeared to have recorded a larger media impact than before, except for Kleinnijenhuis (2003) and Landry et al. (1997). One glance at the table suffices to note that the kind of political agenda matters a lot. *All* strong impact conclusions were based on enquiries that examined symbolic political agendas, that is: public communication on an issue by an actor with this communication not having necessarily any tangible policy consequence. Whenever institutional political agendas like legislation or resource allocation were considered, researchers were much less impressed by the media's impact. Studies based on interviews with policy makers, tended to minimize the media's power. The interviewees focussed on substantial agendas. Another part of the explanation is that policy makers in these interviews implicitly compare the media's power with the influence of other political actors, while most time-series researches were not suited to compare the media's impact with the influences of other political actors. The table confirms that more research is needed. The outcomes are mixed and the available evidence is limited: media impact depends on the issues involved, on the media included, on the political agendas considered and on the time period covered. In a nutshell: political agenda-setting is in need of specification.

TABLE 3: design and conclusions of available media and political agenda-setting studies

	Issues	Media agendas	Political agendas	Time				Place	Media's impact
				Method	Period	Unit	Lag		
1977, Walker	Car safety Coal mine health Health act	New York Times	Senate	Time series	1952-1972	1 year	1 year	USA	No impact
1980, Gilberg	Jobs Energy Defence Peace Human rights Middle East Panama canal Taxes	Newspapers (2) TV network news (3)	President (State of the Union)	Cross sectional	1978 (2 months)	-	-	USA	Strong impact
1982, Light	Not specified	Not specified	President	Interviews	-	-	-	USA	Hardly impact
1983, Cook	Health fraud	NBC-news magazine	Government and interest elites (interviews) Budget Legislation Regulatory measures Senate (hearings)	Field experiment	1981 (3 weeks)	-	-	USA	Considerable impact
1984, Kingdon	23 cases	Not specified	Not specified	Interviews	-	-	-	USA	Hardly impact
1986, Linsky				Interviews	-	-	-	USA	Strong impact
1987, Protess	Toxic waste	TV5 (Chicago)	Policy elites (interview) Budget Legislation Regulatory measures	Field experiment	1984 (3 weeks)	-	-	USA	Considerable impact
1991, Cook	Crime against the elderly	New York Times	Public spending (#grants) Congress (#hearings, mentions)	Time series	1970-1980	1 year	no lag	USA	Considerable impact
1991, Protess	Police Violence Children rights Dialysis scandal	Local NBC (Chicago) CBS Local newspaper	Policy elites (interview) Regulatory measures	Field experiment	1983	-	-	USA	Strong impact
1993, Pritchard	Crime	Local media (7)	Public spending (#police officers)	Time series	1950-1980	1 year	1 year	USA	Weak impact
1994, Wanta	International crises East-west Other foreign National defence Inflation Unemployment Taxes Education Environment Poverty	TV network news (3)	President (#public statements)	Time series	1989-1990	1 week	1 week – 10 weeks	USA	Weak impact

	Crime Abortion Gun control Patriotism Censorship								
1995, Kleinnijenhuis	Taxes Income levelling Real wages GNP Inflation Social security	Newspapers (3)	Party manifestoes	Time series	1980, 1982, 1984	2 years	No lag	Netherlands	Hardly impact
1995, Trumbo	Global warming	Newspapers (5) Magazines (3) TV-news (3)	Congress (#in congressional record)	Time series	1985-1992	2 weeks	2 weeks – 3 months	USA	Strong impact
1996, Bartels	Bosnia Medicare NAFTA Whitewater	New York Times Local newspapers (3) ABC-news	Congress (#hearings, speeches, statements) President (# public discourses)	Time series	1993-1995	1 day	1 day - 30 days	USA	Strong impact
1997, Baumgartner	Drug abuse Nuclear power Urban affairs Smoking	Magazines (central index)	Congress (#hearings)	Time series	1945-1988	1 year	1 year	USA	Strong impact
1997, Landry			Budget Legislation	Time series				Canada	Weak impact
1998, Wood	Soviet-Union Arab-Israeli Bosnia	TV network news (3)	President (#paragraphs public discourse)	Time series	1984-1995	1 week	1 week – 3 weeks	USA	Strong impact
1999, Edwards	Crime Health care Education US-soviet Arab-Israeli	TV network news (3)	Congress (#days hearing) US president (#paragraphs public discourse)	Time series	1984-1994	1 week	1 week – 8 weeks	USA	Strong impact
2002, Soroka	Inflation Environment Debt/deficit	Newspapers (8)	Question time Throne speeches House Committee reports Introduced Bills	Time series	1985-1995	1month	1 month – 6 months	Canada	Strong impact
2003, Kleinnijenhuis	Social security Tax relief Asylum seekers Unemployment Infrastructure Europe Education Public health Crime	Newspapers (3) TV (2)	Party agenda (as perceived by media)	Time series	1994, 1998, 2002	2 weeks	2 weeks	Netherlands	Weak impact

II Data and research design

As mentioned above, issue selection is a tricky issue. We solved it by *not* making a choice but by simply considering the whole agenda without excluding issues². Thus the fundamental zero-sum aspect of agenda-setting is accounted for, especially since we always draw upon proportional issue measures and not on absolute figures. Since precise issue delineation is to be preferred over general and internally heterogeneous demarcations concealing agenda differences, we split up the different agendas in 143 different issues trying to get as near as possible to the smallest issue unit. We used the internationally widely employed and hierarchical EUROVOC-thesaurus³ designed for encoding all EU-documents and originally containing 6075 different ‘descriptors’. This thesaurus was adapted to our needs resulting in 143 different issue codes. The backdrop of our choice for issue diversity was that the content analysis of all the news items could only be cursory, especially since hardly any content indexes were available. Hence we only consider issue saliency and we do *not* get into the actual content, framing, direction or tone of the issue attention on the different agendas. Moreover, we encoded all items for one issue only.

For this paper⁴ we decided to focus on three political agendas only: civil society, parliament and government. Parliament and government are the independent variables of the analyses while civil society is used as a kind of independent control variable to put the media’s agenda-setting power in perspective. How did we tap the agendas of these political actors? Civil society consists of all interest groups, intermediary organisations and social movements active in Belgium. A lot of these groups are not registered, nor do they index or report their activities in a systematic way suitable for large-scale issue coding. Ideally we would dispose of a database containing all external issue claims aired by these groups on press conferences and in press releases. Practically this is as good as impossible and theoretically we would be confronted with difficulties in coping with issue saliency. What does it mean in terms of agenda-setting power if a small environmental organization with a few thousands members releases a press communiqué claiming that noise pollution has gotten worse? And can this be

² The Belgian interuniversity agenda-setting project (2001-2004) was granted by the ‘Federale Diensten voor Wetenschappelijke, Technische en Culturele Aangelegenheden’ (DWTC). It is conducted by Stefaan Walgrave (coordinator, UA), Lieven de Winter, André Frogner, Frédéric Varone and Benoît Rihoux (UCL), Patrick Stouthuysen (VUB), and Marc Swyngedouw (KUL).

³ For more information on this thesaurus see: <http://europa.eu.int/celex/eurovoc/>

⁴ This ongoing project actually considers not three but *seven* different political agendas: apart from civil society’s contentious actions, parliamentary actions and ministerial councils regarded here, our integrated database contains comparable evidence on (daily) legislative output (N=5,500 issue entries), (annual) national budget (N=12,000), (four annual) party manifestoes (N=45,000) and (four annual) government agreements (N=1,800). Since all these other political agendas, except for the legislative output, are ‘slower’ with only a few measuring points during the whole ten-year period and thus not suited for the time-series analysis we want to undertake here, we preferred not to integrate them in the present study.

compared with a major press conference of the largest national union fighting the government's unemployment politics? We opted to consider the number of demonstrations staged by social organization. Only stronger organisations are able to successfully mobilize for a demonstration and the amount of issue-related demonstrations yields a raw measure of that issue's saliency. We are fully aware of the limitations of this operationalization of civil society's agenda favouring contentious actions over tacit lobbying and probably overrating the agenda-setting impact of protest. We drew upon the work of Van Aelst and Walgrave who charted the Belgian demonstrations from 1991 till 1997, specified and recoded their categories, and extended their account by adding the last years of the 90s using the same method (Van Aelst and Walgrave 1999; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2001). For the whole 90s this amounted to a dataset with more than 4000 demonstrations recorded on a daily basis, although it is clear that on many days not one single demonstration was recorded.

Parliament does many things. Debates on recent events are organised, bills are introduced, debated and amended, and, sometimes, voted, the government is controlled and challenged by the opposition... All these activities can to some extent be considered as separate parliamentary agendas. For this study we decided to focus on the 'lower' parliamentary agenda being the oral questions and interpellations. These two kinds of activities are targeting government and require an oral answer in parliament from a cabinet minister. Questions and interpellations may criticize governmental policy or non-policy, but can also contain simple questions for information. We tested whether this kind of parliamentary activity tends to be undertaken by government or opposition MPs and government MPs are almost as engaged in these activities as opposition MPs. Consequently questions and interpellations reflect the agenda of parliament as a whole and not only of the challenging parties. Questions and interpellations can be considered as representative for the 'lower' parliamentary agenda representing foremost a symbolic part of parliamentary politics. We expect this part of parliamentary politics to be most responsive to media outlets. Drawing upon official parliamentary records and using the parliamentary thesaurus⁵ based on EUROVOC, we produced a dataset containing 6,686 parliamentary actions for the whole period on a daily basis.

Just like parliament government is engaged in different activities. One of the most important decision-making moments of Belgian government is its weekly council of ministers. All cabinet ministers meet for a sometimes lengthy gathering to take and confirm all executive branch decisions ranging from appointing officials and top civil servants, setting up agencies, initiating legislation, to all kinds of minor executive

⁵ Thanks to the computer unit of the documentation services of the House of Representatives, we have had a limited access to the database of the Federal Parliament. PAROLIS (PARliamentary OnLine Information System)

decisions on maintenance on government buildings.... The council's official minutes nor the preparing documents are accessible for scholarly research. We decided to examine the weekly press summary called Facts (Feiten/Faits) edited during the whole period by the Federal Information Service. Facts contains a short description of decisions taken by government in its weekly gathering. Comparison of a few official comprehensive minutes of the ministerial councils in 1999 and 2000 with Facts disclosed a correspondence of more than 80%. The government agenda was gathered on a weekly basis. Except for some weeks, there is only one council a week. The council shows a similar discontinuity with no, or less, records during parliamentary recess, holiday periods and election times. In total we included 6,296 governmental decisions.

In terms of independent variables, the basic question is what media will be taken into account. Belgium is a federal country with a highly decentralised political system. The two major language communities, Flanders (Dutch-speaking) and Wallonia (French-speaking) have their own parliament and own government deciding on many competences ranging from education over culture to environmental matters. Not only in an institutional sense but also politically does Belgium consist of two *separate* political systems. In both regions, other parties compete for the votes. There are not any genuine 'national' parties, only regional parties solely competing in their region even in national elections. Public opinion is diverging too, with other issues on top of the priorities. National media simply do not exist: both media-systems are completely separate with Flemings only reading Flemish newspapers and watching Flemish television and Walloons doing the same. Since our independent variable is the national political agenda (national parliament and national government), we decided to take into account Walloon as well as Flemish media. Since agenda-setting scholars are debating the relative powers of newspapers and TV we encoded TV-news as well as newspapers in both regions. In Flanders our media dataset consists of three Flemish newspapers, tabloids and broadsheets and with different partisan leanings (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*), and of the two main television channels, one public service broadcasting (TV1) and the other commercially ran (VTM). For the newspapers no indexes were available and we were forced to use actual newspaper copies. We encoded all front-page stories, with exception of the newspapers that appeared on Tuesdays and Thursdays⁶. In total this amounted to 5,958 physically

⁶ To limit the tedious and expensive encoding task, we originally planned to encode only half of the newspaper copies, alternating the days of the week. Previous research on Belgian newspapers showed that Saturday's newspapers contain more political news (De Swert, K. and B. Cuyt (2000). *Media en politiek. Een kwantitatieve analyse van de binnenlandse politieke berichtgeving in drie Vlaamse kranten.* PSW. Antwerp, University of Antwerp (UIA). , and we chose to include all Saturday's papers. Since the project for which the data were recorded aims at explaining the political agenda, also the Monday's papers seemed indispensable: in Belgium Sunday's TV-news shows regularly set the political agenda for the following week. Moreover, Monday's papers contain two days of news (Rucht, D. and F. Neidhardt (1998). *Methodological Issues in Collecting Protest Event Data: Units of Analysis, Sources and*

browsed newspapers⁷ containing 36,729 different news stories. For television news, we undertook a comparable effort. The main news programmes in prime time (7.00 p.m.) of the two main national television channels TV1 and VTM were encoded. Unfortunately we only have television data from 1993 onwards since we encoded the news shows on the basis of written summaries produced by a commercial firm (*Auxipresse*) and they only began doing that in 1993. In total 5,062 news broadcasts⁸ were covered: *all* televised news items were scrutinised, resulting in a television database of 59,887 news items. For the Walloon media, we undertook a comparable effort, also combining newspapers with TV news. The newspapers we encoded were *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*, both broadsheets but one with a more leftist and the other one with a more conservative leaning. Following the same logic we considered 31,898 TV news stories in the whole period⁹. Just like in Flanders we focussed on the two main news channels, RTBF and RTL-TV, the first a public channel and the latter a commercial channel. We ended up with examining 54,308 Walloon TV news items¹⁰. Taken together, the Flemish and Walloon media data base contains 182,822 news items. To tap issue saliency we decided to weigh TV items according to the number of seconds they were covered. For newspaper articles, the weighting or non-weighting of the newspaper items gave almost no difference. Still we opted for using the following weight factors: very long articles: 10; medium articles: 7; very short articles: 1. The tiny weight factor for the small articles is justified, because it really concerns *very* small articles on the front page, sometimes not more than just a few lines referring to an inside story.

A final decision concerns the time period to cover. We opted to regard all agendas for the whole 90s period, that is: from January 1st, 1991 till December 31th, 2000. We are aware of the fact that some agendas probably require an even longer incubation and contamination period, but this 10-year period permits us to test most time-related hypotheses. Except for the newspapers, all data were gathered continuously meaning that all available information was processed on the smallest time unit level not taking samples but using the whole population. In this 10-year period Belgium evolved institutionally and some sweeping political events took place. The policy-making

Sampling, Coding Problems. *Acts of Dissent: New Developments in the Study of Protest*. F. Neidhardt. Berlin, WZB.

We were left with two possibilities: Wednesday's and Friday's newspapers or Tuesday's and Thursday's newspapers. A preliminary test proved that Wednesday's and Friday's newspapers contain more political news than Tuesday's and Thursday's newspapers and therefore we omitted the latter in our encoding.

⁷ Despite considerable efforts, we could not lay hands on all the selected newspaper copies, but fortunately the missing editions (105 or 1.7%) are randomly spread throughout the whole period.

⁸ Some news programmes were missing: 13.3% of the news programmes were not covered, and unfortunately, for some periods data are completely lacking: October-November-December 1995 and the first 10 days of May 1998. These missing data are not retrievable in any form comparable to the *Auxipresse* data.

⁹ For Walloon newspapers we miss on average 6% of the newspapers, with October 1991 as the most problematic period.

¹⁰ For Walloon TV each year roughly 20 to 40 news broadcasts were missing with most missing in 1995 (13%).

literature suggests that mass media are largely outsiders in the policy game and, hence, no influential political agenda-setters. Yet the same literature states that, from time to time, these routine times can be deeply disturbed by external not-anticipated events suddenly opening up a formerly closed policy domain to other groups that were previously kept outside of the policy process and did not belong to the usual insiders (e.g. specialised civil servants, lobbyists, interest groups, party specialists and members of ministerial cabinets). We expect that the media to have more agenda-setting power in those turbulent times, when normal policy-making consensus and procedures are falling apart. What kind of important external shocks has Belgium witnessed in the 90s? External shocks are mostly domain specific and they should be examined on issue level instead of on system level. But some of the events in the 90s were so sweeping, that they might have had repercussions on the whole political system. The first of these shocks was the spectacular breakthrough of the right-populist party Vlaams Blok in Flanders at the general elections in November 1991. This deeply affected Belgian politics. The Vlaams Blok thrives on issues like crime and immigration, but it is mainly its antipolitical frame and discourse that boosts its electoral faith (Walgrave and Deswert 2003). The Vlaams Blok specifically criticizes the political agenda-setting process: it claims that politicians are engaged in topics that do not interest the public, that Belgian politicians are playing political games for which the people don't care, and that they are at odds with what the public really wants. As a consequence, it would not be surprising to find a more receptive and susceptible political agenda immediately after this event: politicians from all parties were tumbling over each other assuring the public they heard the signal of the Vlaams Blok voters and would behave differently in the future. The second event was the Agusta-Dassault scandal in 1995. Socialist party leaders accepted bribes from an Italian military helicopter manufacturer. Again the system was in shock and the legitimacy of Belgian politics reached rock bottom. The most severe shock had yet to come. In August 1996 the Dutroux-case broke loose. A child kidnapper and murderer was seized. Soon it showed that police and judiciary committed serious errors failing to capture him. The country went into a never seen legitimacy crisis with the largest demonstration and protest wave in Belgian history (Rihoux and Walgrave 1998; Walgrave and Manssens 2000). Again, the most frequently heard interpretation of the popular anger mentioned the estrangement between the people and its leaders and the need for politicians to find a connection with the public's needs. Again, but implicitly, a failing political agenda-setting process was at the heart of the political debate. A fourth dramatic event was the so-called dioxin crisis in May 1999: toxic dioxins were found in food and that had contaminated the food chain periling popular health. The crisis led to dramatic electoral results in the following elections: the greens almost doubled their result while the christian-democrat party, always in power since the 50s, lost the elections and experienced their opposition premiere. All these events, which equally affected the Flemish and the Walloon region, might have led to a temporary heightened sensibility

of the political world for media coverage and hence to a high in the media's agenda-setting power.

We want to conclude this data and methods chapter with a univariate overview of the available evidence. TABLE 4 contains the figures for all (regrouped in 30 categories) issues on all agendas for the whole period. First, the sheer heterogeneity of the agendas strikes the eye. Almost all 30 issues are present on all seven agendas. Most diverse agendas are the parliamentary and governmental agendas (low standard deviation). Second, the four media agendas resemble each other fairly closely. Third, it does not ask for close scrutiny to notice that the media and political agendas are fundamentally different. Some topics receive considerable media attention while they do not seem to be very important for the political actors while other issues get a lot of political attention but cannot grasp the media's attention. Most media report extensively on events in foreign countries but Belgian political actors do not follow the media and devote limited time to foreign topics. The states' finances are an example of the opposite with relatively small media attention vs. high parliamentary and governmental commitment. Fourth, the political agendas are different from one another too. A whole range of important topics like work, mobility, the organization of the political system, public health, the states' finances, social policy, education, development aid, information and the administrative system, get strikingly different amounts of attention of the three political actors under scrutiny. The baseline of TABLE 4 is: high diversity. Consequently, all expectations about the political agenda-setting power of the media must be limited. Media and political agendas are dissimilar and contain unlike issues that are not to be found on other agendas. Why would internal affairs of foreign countries, for example, be present on the Belgian parliament's agenda? It is none of the Belgian parliamentarian's business and they do not mind. Why would media show a great interest in the administrative system, that is the appointment of top civil servants or the maintenance of government buildings? The singularity and peculiarity of every agenda with only a limited common ground between media and politics, makes finding any media effect a real challenge. Large parts of the political agendas are basically immune for any media impact and are not related to media coverage at all. The composition of the political agendas is probably largely determined by the competences of the political actor at stake, by established procedures and institutional rules.

TABLE 4: Issue saliency (in %) of 30 issues on seven agendas in Belgium (1991-2000)

	Flemish TV	Walloon TV	Flemish Newspapers	Walloon Newspapers	Civil society	Parliament	Government
Law and order	17.9	15.9	18.0	9.2	13.3	12.5	7.7
Foreign countries	16.0	19.9	14.9	20.7	3.6	2.1	0.1
Defense and conflicts	9.7	7.6	9.3	7.3	4.8	6.0	7.9
Work	5.5	6.1	4.3	5.1	10.2	4.7	7.5
Mobility	5.1	3.9	4.3	2.3	3.8	6.7	3.3
International politics	4.1	6.7	4.0	8.2	2.6	4.0	5.7
Culture and sports	3.5	2.3	3.3	4.3	0.9	1.0	2.2
Environment and energy	3.2	2.4	2.9	2.3	4.2	3.3	3.3
Political actors and elections	3.1	3.6	3.6	3.9	2.1	1.6	1.1
Political system	2.9	3.9	3.2	4.8	0.3	7.1	3.0
Companies and corporations	2.8	3.0	2.8	4.5	5.7	3.1	0.3
Public Health	2.6	3.1	3.1	2.2	2.2	7.3	5.3
Economy	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.2	1.3	3.4	4.7
Finances	2.0	2.2	3.3	3.3	1.4	6.7	8.0
Population	2.0	1.5	2.2	1.5	0.5	1.1	1.1
Europe	1.9	2.5	2.5	4.0	2.8	2.2	5.4
Disasters in Belgium	1.9	1.0	0.8	0.5	0.0	0.6	0.5
Agriculture	1.8	1.2	1.2	0.4	6.3	2.3	1.6
Foreigners and immigrants	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.0	4.1	2.8	1.7
Social policy	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.8	3.6	8.2
Education	1.2	1.9	1.7	2.2	17.6	0.9	0.7
Science and research	1.2	0.5	1.3	0.6	0.0	0.4	1.9
Development aid	1.2	0.8	0.9	0.8	0.1	0.7	4.4
Information and communication	1.1	1.0	2.0	1.7	0.1	1.4	3.8
Territory	0.8	0.4	0.6	0.9	1.7	0.6	0.2
Intercommunity conflicts	0.8	1.3	1.1	1.7	1.7	1.8	1.1
Rights	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.7	4.2	2.1	0.7
Administrative system	0.5	0.6	1.1	1.1	1.4	8.0	7.2
Law	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.4	1.4	1.1
Ethical matters	0.3	0.2	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.7	0.3
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Standaard deviation	4.2	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	2.9	2.8

III Overall agenda dynamics analysis

As mentioned above, the scholarly literature agrees that issues matter a lot. Agenda-setting is a different thing depending on the issue at stake. A lot of hypotheses (TABLE 1) concentrate on features of specific issues (e.g. obtrusiveness, newness, polarisation...) and claim that these characteristics are paramount to explain political agenda-setting. Empirical studies confirmed the different agenda-setting dynamics for different issues. We fully acknowledge the claim that issues matter. Issue specification is the subfield in which political agenda-setting research has made most progress. Specifying the specific circumstances under which media matter for politics was the main goal of our endeavour, yet issue diversity is *but one* of the circumstances that has to be taken into account. As we spelled out above, the national context, the political and media agendas taken into account, and the specific time period scrutinized might have determined the outcome of previous studies. That is why, in this paper, we will focus empirically on agendas and time, and neglect differences between issues. We will sketch agenda-setting dynamics in general, by comparing the composition of *whole* agendas and not picking out certain issues with conducive or non-conducive agenda-setting features. By ignoring issues and their features we concentrate exclusively on the other circumstances that must be specified: which media, which political agendas and in which time period?

But an overall agenda dynamics analysis has major drawbacks that must mitigate our expectations to establish substantial media effects. *First*, comparing complete agendas with each other raises the methodological problem of confusing diffuse and direct issue competition (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). The limited carrying capacity of agendas leads to competition: all issues fight all others because the rise of an issue on an agenda can only be realized at the expense of other issues coming down this same agenda. Mathematically this competition is foremost diffuse because every issue only occupies a small fraction of the total carrying capacity of the agenda at stake: a certain issue's attention claim is not directly targeting another specific issue's attention. Yet, for some issues and agendas there is direct competition. Agendas being subdivided in subarenas, some issues can only gain attention if issues belonging to the same specific subagenda give way. If a newspaper, for example, is organized in sections – domestic news, foreign news, educational news, scientific news – issues competing for this newspaper's attention do not fight all other issues but only issues belonging to the same section. In short, an overall agenda-setting analysis is based on the idea of diffuse issue competition among a myriad of non-preorganized issues; in reality we cope with an archipelago of subarenas containing issues directly competing each other within their subarena (only). This poses two problems: the more sectionalized an agenda, that is organized in apart subarenas, the less the presupposition of diffuse competition applies and the less an overall analysis is able to grasp agenda-setting dynamics; the

more the agendas one wants to relate to each other are sectionalized differently, with the same issue belonging to different subarenas and thus competing with different other issues on both agendas, the less an overall analysis is suited to tap associations between these agendas. Obviously, media and political agendas are to some extent organized in subarenas, while the organizing principles of newspaper content or TV news are not identical and both sectionalize their agenda differently. A *second* problem with our overall analysis is that it draws upon a linear assumption: we expect issues to rise and fall on dependent agenda B (politics) to the same extent as it rose and fell on independent agenda A (media). Probably, however, linearity is not what happens in real life (Brosius and Kepplinger, 1992). It is likely that issues are confronted with thresholds: an initial gradual rise in media attention does not generate any effect on political agendas until a certain barrier is taken and the political attention suddenly surges. This kind of pattern is impossible to trace under a linear assumption. *Third*, sudden dramatic events could affect media and politics differently, caused by the inherently different logic of these agendas. Basically, not all agendas are as flexible and changeable. The Dutroux case, for example, caused the media to heighten its attention for justice and crime dramatically: during a prolonged period the Dutroux case completely marginalized all other news. Yet, we do not expect this to be the case for the political agenda too. Political agendas are more viscous and stable. They always contain other issues even if the media would focus on one topic only. An overall analysis would conclude then that the media's impact diminished due to the event while in fact it increased and pushed the event issue upward on the political agenda. *Fourth*, our overall agenda-setting analysis considers hundreds of issues, all with their own agenda-setting dynamic. As their logics are probably different, maybe even reverse. If there are opposing dynamics involving different issues, this might counterbalance and conceal actual effects. In short: opposing dynamics might neutralize each other.

Are media and political agendas determined by their own past?

A precondition for establishing causality in time-series modelling is testing for autocorrelation. Have we got to do with variables or with constants? In particular regarding the political agendas, one could expect that past political agendas determine the present political agendas to a large extent because of the inertia of political agendas. Put otherwise: some agendas might be highly stable, hardly changing over time. If this were the case, our enquiry into the effects of media on politics would be deemed to fail, since one cannot explain a constant (the political agenda) with a variable (the media agenda), nor the reverse. TABLE 5 contains autocorrelation coefficients for all seven agendas on a monthly basis. Coefficients in the table are Identity Coefficients capturing the overall similarity between two frequency

distributions (IC)¹¹. The table contains the mean IC for the whole period on a monthly basis (N=120), as well as the minimal and the maximal observed IC value.

A classic time series assumption holds: agendas are more determined by (better: are more alike to) their recent past than by their farther past. All ICs of all agendas consistently decrease with the passing of time. Yet even after four months most agendas remain largely similar to their past. Agendas change, but only to a limited extend mitigating our expectation about large media-effects. A second observation is the remarkable stability of the media agendas. One of the main arguments scholars developed to highlight why media would *not* able to influence the political agenda is exactly that their issue coverage is highly variable, wavering up and down all the time and hence diluting their impact. But the autocorrelation table reveals the opposite: media coverage is not instable at all. Media do not jump from one topic to another, they appear to be not primarily event-driven (at least not driven by events in different issue realms) but stick to the same ever greens for a longer period of time. In some cases a monthly media agenda almost perfectly matched the previous month's distribution. Newspapers' agendas are somewhat more stable than TV news' agendas. Media agendas display a systematically higher autocorrelation than political agendas. In fact the *least* stable agendas in our analysis are political, challenging even more the changing-media-versus-stable-politics argument. This is good news for our analysis. As political agendas are changing and not entirely determined by their past, there are opportunities for other agendas to influence political priorities. Differences between parliament, government and civil society are limited but it seems as if civil society owns the most changeable agenda while parliament has the most stable agenda.

¹¹ This similarity measure shows to what extent two frequency distributions are alike. An IC of 1 means that the two distributions are identical, an IC of 0 means that there is no similarity at all between the two distributions. We will use these ICs as an alternative measure for overall similarity between agendas. The IC formula goes as follows:

$$e_{xy} = 2 \frac{\sum x_i y_i}{\sum x_i^2 + \sum y_i^2}$$

TABLE 5: Monthly non-lagged and lagged (maximal four months) autocorrelation (IC) of 110 issues on seven agendas in Belgium (1991-2000)

	Flemish TV	Flemish Newspapers	Walloon TV	Walloon Newspapers	Civil society	Parliam.	Govern.
(-1) Mean	0.75	0.79	0.73	0.78	0.45	0.63	0.55
Min	0.09	0.60	0.24	0.43	0.01	0.16	0.06
Max	0.94	0.96	0.97	0.94	0.92	0.86	0.81
(-2) Mean	0.69	0.75	0.66	0.76	0.36	0.63	0.54
Min	0.10	0.50	0.15	0.37	0.02	0.07	0.11
Max	0.92	0.90	0.92	0.90	0.91	0.82	0.79
(-3) Mean	0.67	0.73	0.64	0.75	0.35	0.63	0.53
Min	0.13	0.35	0.07	0.41	0.03	0.12	0.04
Max	0.90	0.91	0.91	0.92	0.91	0.87	0.84
(-4) Mean	0.68	0.73	0.64	0.74	0.33	0.60	0.51
Min	0.23	0.46	0.14	0.40	0.01	0.15	0.05
Max	0.94	0.88	0.90	0.90	0.87	0.84	0.81

Are media and political agendas similar?

TABLE 6 contains similarity coefficients of (non)lagged independent variables (media) and (non)lagged dependent variables (politics). Let us consider the non-lagged similarities. To reveal any causal relationship between media and politics we need at least some communality, a minimal common ground, between media and political agendas. Are agenda distributions at the same point in time similar or do agenda compositions *not* resemble each other at all? The table shows that inter-media ICs are far larger than all others (quadrant 1). Newspapers or TV, Flemish or Walloon media, it does not make a difference: all media seem to resemble each other in terms of the issues they cover. The synchronous resemblances between media agendas and political agendas, the aim of our endeavour, are much lower pointing towards limited similarity (quadrant 2 and 3). Thus, having their own proper logic, media and politics have some common ground but issue communality is limited. This does not mean that the resemblances between the three political agendas are any bigger. In fact, the inter-politics ICs are relatively small and comparable with the media-politics ICs (quadrant 4). The three political agendas under study have their own logic and composition. Especially civil society's demonstration activism seems to be rather unconnected to the parliamentary and governmental agenda. Government and parliament are somewhat more alike, but their resemblance is smaller than we expected. After all, the two central institutions in the Belgian political system, parliament and government share, per definition as good as all issues and competences. Moreover, tapping the parliamentary agenda via its government control activities, we tied these agendas closer together than would have been the case if we had, for example, considered the legislative activities of parliament because these are less reactive to government initiatives.

TABLE 6: Monthly non-lagged and lagged (till three months before) identity coefficients of 110 issues on seven agendas in Belgium (1991-2000)(62=N=120)

		Flemish TV	Flemish Newspapers	Walloon TV	Walloon Newspapers	Civil society	Parliament	Government
Flemish TV	(+0)	-	0,80	0,75	0,71	0,30	0,40	0,28
	(-1)	-	0,71	0,65	0,64	0,29	0,39	0,28
	(-2)	-	0,68	0,60	0,61	0,26	0,38	0,27
	(-3)	-	0,67	0,59	0,61	0,26	0,38	0,28
Flemish Newspapers	(+0)	0,80	-	0,70	0,74	0,27	0,45	0,30
	(-1)	0,72	-	0,64	0,68	0,25	0,42	0,29
	(-2)	0,69	-	0,61	0,66	0,24	0,41	0,30
	(-3)	0,67	-	0,60	0,65	0,23	0,41	0,30
Walloon TV	(+0)	0,75	0,70	-	0,74	0,31	0,42	0,34
	(-1)	0,64	0,63	-	0,65	0,27	0,40	0,32
	(-2)	0,60	0,60	-	0,63	0,27	0,39	0,32
	(-3)	0,58	0,59	-	0,63	0,27	0,40	0,34
Walloon Newspapers	(+0)	0,71	0,74	0,74	-	0,27	0,44	0,33
	(-1)	0,65	0,68	0,66	-	0,26	0,43	0,33
	(-2)	0,62	0,65	0,64	-	0,24	0,42	0,33
	(-3)	0,61	0,65	0,63	-	0,23	0,41	0,33
Civil society	(+0)	0,30	0,27	0,31	0,27	-	0,22	0,17
	(-1)	0,26	0,24	0,28	0,25	-	0,21	0,46
	(-2)	0,25	0,23	0,28	0,24	-	0,21	0,43
	(-3)	0,26	0,23	0,28	0,24	-	0,21	0,45
Parliament	(+0)	0,40	0,44	0,42	0,44	0,22	-	0,44
	(-1)	0,39	0,44	0,42	0,43	0,21	-	0,17
	(-2)	0,37	0,42	0,40	0,43	0,21	-	0,18
	(-3)	0,39	0,42	0,40	0,42	0,21	-	0,17
Government	(+0)	0,28	0,30	0,34	0,33	0,17	0,44	-
	(-1)	0,28	0,29	0,33	0,32	0,15	0,45	-
	(-2)	0,27	0,28	0,31	0,32	0,16	0,42	-
	(-3)	0,27	0,28	0,31	0,32	0,15	0,42	-

Is inter-agenda similarity affected by time lags?

Let us approach our central research question nearer: do the media set the political agenda or not? The *lagged* ICs in quadrant 2 of TABLE 6 give us some preliminary evidence in that respect. The figures show the similarity between media-agendas at a certain point in time and the political agendas in the *subsequent* three months. In time series analysis causality is inferred from the time order in which phenomena take place. If, first, the media agenda changes and, afterwards, the political agenda alters, and if the latter agenda is not completely determined by its own past (autocorrelation), a causal relationship (granger causality) between the two agendas can be assumed. The table shows that there is indeed a similarity between previous media agendas and present political agendas, but also vice versa. Most of the times this similarity tends to diminish with the passing of times. The longer media attention precedes a political agenda, the more differences we record, although this diminishing similarity appears not to be a robust observation and differences between lags are modest (sometimes even inexistent). Especially the governmental agenda does not display a diminishing similarity with the media agendas.

Do the media codetermine the political agenda?

A real test of the media's political impact can only be carried out relying on multivariate modelling. We stacked the dataset and ran logistic regressions. Wanting to compare TV and newspapers effects, we limited the time scope of our analyses to 8 years, as we do not have TV data for the 1991-1992 period. Since we are not interested in the effects of specific issues, we can simply stack our data: agenda-issue-week combinations are the records of our analysis and proportional attention for a certain issue in a certain week on a certain agenda are the variables of the model. The stacking dramatically increased the amount of records. In stead of drawing upon 416 records (8 years*52 weeks), our analyses rely on a dataset with potentially 45,760 records (8 years*52 weeks*110 issues). However, especially our political agenda datasets contain plenty of missing values: during long (holiday) periods parliament did not gather because it was in recess, and the same applies to government. This limits the number of useful cases and these missings, due to the lagged variables in the analysis, tend to 'spread out' to neighbouring periods. To keep up the amount of useful records, we decided to exclude cases pairwise in stead of listwise in our regressions. The vector autoregression models presented in TABLE 7 explain a political agenda's issue attention by previous issue attention on the same agenda and, this is the focus of our enquiry, by previous issue attention on other agendas. The basic models in TABLE 7 cover the whole 1993-2000 period.

TABLE 7: Parameters of regression models predicting issue attention on political agendas in Belgium based on lagged issue attention on the same agendas and issue attention on lagged media agendas (1993-2000)

		Parliament model I	Parliament model II	Government model I	Government model II
TV	(-1)	0.055	0.029	0.054	0.032
	(-2)				
	(-3)				
	(-4)				
Newspapers	(-1)	0.050		0.031	
	(-2)	0.051			
	(-3)	0.054		0.024	
	(-4)	0.066	0.038	0.051	
Parliament	(-1)	-	0.124	-	0.070
	(-2)	-	0.184	-	0.034
	(-3)	-	0.120	-	0.031
	(-4)	-	0.092	-	0.041
Government	(-1)	-	0.049	-	0.140
	(-2)	-	0.027	-	0.119
	(-3)	-	0.044	-	0.077
	(-4)	-	0.043	-	0.093
Civil society	(-1)	-	0.027	-	
	(-2)	-	0.024	-	
	(-3)	-		-	
	(-4)	-	0.027	-	
N		23,870	23,870	35,540	35,540
Adjusted R ²		0.05	0.20	0.13	0.13

Parameters are standardised beta coefficients and significance in linear regression analyses

Did the Belgian media have an impact on the overall composition of the political agendas in Belgium in the 1991-2000 period? Yes, they did but their net impact was limited. First we estimated *models I* containing only media as independent variables. These models yield a large number of significant media effects. TV has a short-term effect: one week after TV coverage political agendas bear the traces but earlier TV coverage seems to be ineffective. Newspaper coefficients in models I point to more dispersed effects of (almost) all preceding weeks, but with the strongest effect after 4 weeks only. The media's impact on parliament is, as we expected, larger than their influence on government witnessed by more significant standardized betas and larger coefficients. Models I thus largely confirm our expectations: fast TV impact and slower newspaper influence, and parliament being more susceptible for media coverage than government. The bulk of these media effects, however, do not survive the introduction of the (own) past of the (other) political agendas in *models II*, but some media effects do persist. The basic tendencies revealed in models I are confirmed. Parliament model II underpins the different workings of TV and

newspapers: TV has a flash effect but no slow effect, while newspapers have no significant effect in the short-term, but only with the passing of time. Government model II confirms the flash impact of TV but rejects any newspaper-effect. Again, parliament appears to be more influenced by the media than government. Remarkably, government seems to be swiftly affected by TV-news, while parliament tends to be affected by short-term TV *and* long-term newspapers effects. The reason for the loss of significant media parameters between model I and models II is the strong autocorrelation of both political agendas: the own past agenda of parliament and government affects their present agenda much stronger than the media do. Far the highest parameters in models II are the autoregressive ones: parliament determining parliament, and government impacting government. Yet even when we control for these strong autoregressive elements, do the media continue to play a measurable role. To put the media's role in governmental and parliamentary agenda-setting in perspective, it is useful to compare it with civil society's parameters. We included civil society exactly to compare the media's effect with another outsider and intermediary agenda. The media's bearing on the political agendas is similar to civil society's power: the media has somewhat less impact on parliament but more on government. The models so far concerned the whole 10-year period and specified dependent and independent variables. But what about the time period specification? The research literature suggests that media's agenda-setting effects might be depending on the time period. This matter is tackled in the next paragraph.

Agenda-setting modulated by time periods?

To test the time period hypotheses put forward in TABLE 2, we ran a number of similar regressions systematically comparing agenda-setting dynamics in contrasting periods: elections vs. non-electoral times; the three legislatures in the 90s; busy vs. non-busy political times; begin vs. end of a government; before and after the Dutroux-case; the beginning and the end of the 90s. If agenda-setting and the media's role in it is contingent - the central claim of this contribution - we should stumble onto differences between these periods. And we did, as is shown in TABLE 8 and 9 containing respectively the parliament and the government models. Before we turn to the results, let us first explain the periodization we applied.

TABLE 8: Parameters of regression models predicting issue attention in Belgian parliament based on lagged issue attention on the same agendas and issue attention on lagged media agendas in different time periods (1993-2000)

		Non-elect.	Elect.	Dehaene I	Dehaene II	Verhofst. I	Begin legislature	End legislature	Not busy	Busy	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Before Dutroux	After Dutroux
TV	(-1)	0.070	0.136	0.089					0.033		0.094					
	(-2)	-0.062														
	(-3)								0.058				0.052	-0.051		
	(-4)					0.083			-0.057			-0.069				
Newsp.	(-1)		-0.123													
	(-2)	0.069										0.054				
	(-3)							0.060								0.053
	(-4)		0.080		0.046		0.047		0.038	0.061		0.082		0.116	0.064	
Parliam.	(-1)	0.092		0.089	0.140	0.082	0.115	0.142	0.130	0.120	0.090	0.093	0.191	0.079	0.095	0.178
	(-2)	0.260	0.231	0.155	0.189	0.185	0.207	0.161	0.156	0.231	0.175	0.197	0.170	0.193	0.235	0.188
	(-3)		0.137	0.143	0.106	0.146	0.139	0.101	0.129	0.113	0.124	0.105	0.115	0.146	0.092	0.153
	(-4)	0.070	0.164	0.087	0.095	0.096	0.068	0.122	0.102	0.077	0.056	0.057	0.121	0.128		0.129
Govern.	(-1)	0.043		0.055	0.054		0.048	0.057	0.069			0.096			0.099	
	(-2)	0.063	0.104		0.027	0.078	0.029			0.039			0.058	0.049		
	(-3)	0.055		0.055	0.036	0.095	0.052	0.036	0.043	0.059	0.077		0.045	0.073		0.053
	(-4)	0.070	0.129		0.052	0.058	0.045	0.047	0.053	0.034		0.068		0.095	0.069	
Civil soc.	(-1)		0.073			0.087	0.036		0.035	0.030				0.068		
	(-2)				0.040			0.048	0.026			0.047	0.035			0.061
	(-3)		0.112	0.044							0.055					
	(-4)		-0.067		0.026	0.055	0.058			0.048		0.049				0.053
N		17,380	6,490	6,270	13,860	3,740	12,750	10,890	15,950	7,920	5,170	6,050	7,370	5,280	3,740	3,740
Adjusted R ²		0.20	0.36	0.15	0.21	0.29	0.22	0.19	0.20	0.21	0.13	0.18	0.24	0.27	0.15	0.29

Parameters are standardised beta coefficients in linear regression analyses. All figures are significant at the p>0.01 level.

TABLE 9: Parameters of regression models predicting issue attention of Belgian government based on lagged issue attention on the same agendas and issue attention on lagged media agendas in different time periods (1993-2000)

	Non-elect.	Elect.	Dehaene I	Dehaene II	Verhofst. I	Begin legislature	End legislature	Not busy	Busy	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Before Dutroux	After Dutroux
TV (-1)				0.045		0.050		0.050			0.065			0.089	0.065
TV (-2)															
TV (-3)															
TV (-4)															
Newsp.(-1)															
Newsp.(-2)															
Newsp.(-3)															
Newsp.(-4)	0.057											0.049			
Parliam.(-1)	0.067	0.147	0.067	0.079	0.075	0.064	0.084	0.064	0.084	0.078	0.071	0.074	0.090	0.075	0.110
Parliam.(-2)				0.041	0.089	0.042		0.042	0.034			0.049	0.065		
Parliam.(-3)	0.056	0.086			0.110	0.034	0.034	0.034	0.047				0.075		
Parliam.(-4)	0.053		0.056	0.046		0.042	0.047	0.042		0.051	0.072	0.037		0.076	
Govern.(-1)	0.145	0.180	0.199	0.108	0.099	0.099	0.185	0.099	0.185	0.208	0.104	0.119	0.101	0.099	0.117
Govern.(-2)	0.158		0.105	0.126	0.140	0.117	0.119	0.117	0.119	0.096	0.110	0.157	0.118	0.080	0.154
Govern.(-3)	0.131	0.082	0.053	0.083	0.163	0.098	0.056	0.098	0.056	0.054	0.073	0.096	0.116	0.051	0.083
Govern.(-4)	0.058		0.087	0.116		0.090	0.102	0.090	0.102	0.082	0.101	0.131	0.075	0.118	0.085
Civ.soc.(-1)															
Civ.soc.(-2)															
Civ.soc.(-3)															
Civ.soc.(-4)															
N	24,750	9,790	10,670	17,490	6,050	18,370	15,730	23,760	10,780	9,020	8,470	8,800	8,250	4,400	4,620
Adjust. R ²	0.17	0.11	0.11	0.13	0.18	0.12	0.14	0.12	0.14	0.11	0.11	0.17	0.14	0.09	0.13

Parameters are standardised beta coefficients in linear regression analyses. All figures are significant at the p>0.01 level.

We defined (1) an election period broadly as the half-year period leading up to Election Day and aggregated all pre-elections periods. Belgium witnessed five separate elections in the 1993-2000 period: local elections in 1994 and 2000, European elections in 1994, and general elections in 1995 and 1999. In term of (2) governments we ran separate regressions for each government period in the 90s beginning with the oath at the King's palace till the next general elections day. The governments were the Christian-democrat and socialist coalition Dehaene I (1991-1995), a similar Dehaene II government (1995-1999), and the liberal-socialist-green Verhofstadt I cabinet (1999-2003). Regarding (3) the legislature effect, we simply compared the aggregated first halves of each governmental period (more or less 2 years) with the second aggregated halves. Concerning the (4) busy vs. the non-busy period we checked the parliamentary and governmental records and noticed that, as expected, both agencies tend to have a fuller agenda with more issues in the months preceding holiday periods. Before the X-mas, Eastern and summer break both institutions are very busy emptying their drawers. So we considered March, July and December as being the busy months, and all other months as non-busy. For the (5) proliferation hypothesis we divided the 1993-2000 period in four equal parts each comprising about two years. Since the Dutroux case that broke loose in summer 1996 was by far the most significant shocking event in Belgian politics in the 90s, to test the (6) event hypothesis, we compared the 6 months preceding the case with 6 months following the start of the case.

Browsing through the periodized results in TABLES 8 and 9 confirms the findings of the above 8-year encompassing analysis. In many periods newspapers have a slow effect on parliament, ranging from 2 to 3, to predominantly 4 week lags. Newspaper coverage has hardly any immediate effect on parliament, but takes time to percolate through. Written press effects on government are as good as absent, in the long as well as in the short term. TV's effect on government is much larger, and it is an immediate effect. If government picks up mediatised themes it does so the week immediately after TV-coverage and not later. Most puzzling is the effect of TV on parliament. First of all we end up with a few slow (-3 week and -4 week) negative effects that are hard to explain: why on earth would parliament *reduce* its attention for a theme when TV *increases* coverage?¹² Second, sometimes TV has an effect on parliamentary activities: at times these effects are slow, in other periods these effects

¹² The close correlation among the media variables might be the statistical explanation: the models only yield negative TV parameters combined with strong positive newspaper parameters in about the same lagged week. This suggests that multicollinearity might be the culprit here. High multicollinearity among the independent media variables in the models, a frequent problem in time series analyses, might indeed distort the findings. Wanting to scrutinize differential effects different of lagged media, it is difficult to avoid this problem. In a next version of this paper this problem will be addressed in depth.

are fast but no pattern emerges.

In terms of the more specific time hypotheses, comparison of the contrasting periods learns that media effects differ considerably. Time matters and our contingency claim is underpinned: time modulates the media's agenda-setting power. Yet most hypotheses about the direction of these differences (TABLE 2) must be rejected: the media do *not* have more impact at the end than at the beginning of the legislature; political actors are *not* more susceptible for media cues in quiet times than in hectic times; the media's impact did *not* gradually increase during the 90s due to gradually growing mediatization; and the media's impact on the political agendas was *not* bigger just after than just before the Dutroux case. It is very difficult to make sense of these deviant results, and an underlying statistical multicollinearity problem might be causing of these awkward results. Another reason might be that the research periods delineated to test the time hypotheses overlap considerably. Election periods, for example, overlap with the end of the legislature; and the three government periods are strongly associated with the four time periods.

The only time-related hypothesis that can be provisionally spared is the electoral modulation of media effects. We expect that the media's political impact would foremost be *bigger* in election times. We could speculate as well that political actors react more *immediately* on media coverage than they do otherwise: the short and compelling time frame of the imminent elections might urge political actors to react without delay. Another difference might be that TV and newspapers play another role. Scholars agree that especially *television* has become central in the campaign and therefore we anticipated TV effects to outweigh newspaper effects under general election conditions. Since media impact on government is limited, we confine ourselves to parliament. First of all it is puzzling that we get two negative media parameters, one in election and the other in non-election times, in the parliament models. This raises more questions about the statistical soundness of the analysis. The immediate impact of TV (-1 week) increases indeed substantially in elections times, as expected. For newspapers too their impact seems bigger in election times, although slower. In short: the electoral hypothesis is not rejected, there is more media impact in elections times, but the negative parameters are hard to explain and raise doubt about the results.

In the margin, it is interesting to note that the explaining power of the models of parliament, and to a lesser extent government, grow with the years. We are better able to predict issue composition of political agendas at the end than at the beginning of the decade. This is *not* due to increasing media-effects but to augmenting autocorrelation of parliament and government, their past explains their future better, and to the growing mutual impact of the political agendas. The Belgian political system seems to have become more stable during the 90s and more integrated. This limits the

potential direct effects of the media on parliament and government.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this paper was to test the media's agenda-setting power: do the media play an independent role in the setting of political agendas? We reframed this initial question as follows: *under which circumstances* are the media able to influence the political agenda? Political agenda-setting is far from a uniform and universal process obeying to iron laws or following identical dynamics. The core claim of this paper is that political agenda-setting is contingent. It depends on specific circumstances and our endeavour here was to specify some of these circumstances. The literature review suggested five of these circumstances: place, issues, political agendas, media agendas, and time. In other words: the where, what, who, and when of political agenda-setting. Since we conducted our study in one country only, place differences could not be explored here but we expect political agenda-setting to be highly contingent upon the political system. We neglected issue differences as well in this paper, although we fully acknowledge issues' importance. Instead we focussed on specifying agenda and time differences.

In terms of political agendas, our study largely confirms that media as well as political agendas make a difference. Government and parliament react differently on media coverage. In general, parliamentary action (in Belgium) is more affected by the media's issue attention than governmental decision making. MPs do get cues from the media and their parliamentary action is measurably swayed by it. Remarkably, issue coverage is not immediately converted into parliament's actions but takes time to find its way to the parliamentary floor. Although less susceptible for media impact, government is not immune for media exposure either. In contrast to our expectations government's reactions on media cues, if any, are immediate. We drew upon these two political agendas considering them as exemplifying symbolic and institutional political agendas. Obviously, MP's activities in parliament, and especially the ones we scrutinised, are mostly symbolic discourses without tangible or substantial policy consequences. Governmental decisions on the other hand, can be expected to be closer to the institutional side of the continuum and their chances of containing effective policy measures, or high politics, are considerably greater. As anticipated, the symbolic agenda (parliament) was more affected by the media than the institutional agenda (government). The sometimes instant reaction of government, however, raises doubts about the institutionality of the governmental agenda. At times the Belgian government makes apparently use of its ministerial council report to demonstrate that it cares about issues with large media exposure and to conduct symbolic politics.

Our study underpins the different political workings of TV and newspapers. There

seems to be no substantial difference in their effect's size but more in the immediacy of their effects. Yet it is safe to conclude that TV has faster and more immediate effects than newspapers. TV coverage leaves predominantly immediate traces in parliament and government, but after only a few weeks its effects have withered. Newspaper news on the contrary, takes more time to penetrate into the political system and most established effects take 3 or 4 weeks to materialize.

Finally, our study learns that time periods seem to matter indeed. Comparing a large amount of time periods based on 6 hypotheses about time modulation, we stumbled onto substantial differences in media affects depending on the timely context. Yet our time-related hypotheses were not confirmed and the outcomes often refuted our expectations. Most likely the jerkily outcomes of these models are to a certain extent associated with statistical problems and we are bound to remedy this in a next version of this paper.

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