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## 12 Media, political agendas and public policy

**Abstract:** This chapter reviews research on the influence of the media on legislation and public policy. After reflecting on why politicians react to media coverage at all, the chapter mainly focusses on political agenda-setting, but also goes beyond this to come to a broader view on the role of the media in the policy process. In order to do so, the chapter takes a close look at how media define, frame and amplify issues or constrain the political agenda and how this impacts political decision making. It is argued that the media link together relevant actors including the public and make it possible that they respond to each other on a limited number of core issues. In addition, the media have the ability to force politicians to react and take a position in such a way that they can accelerate or rather decelerate the policy process. The chapter closes with a call for more studies trying to understand the complex interaction of media and political decision making.

**Key Words:** political agenda-setting, public policy, anticipatory media effects, reciprocal effects, public opinion

### 1 Introduction

When political communication scholars talk about “media effects” they mostly mean the influence of media coverage on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of ordinary citizens. The interpretation of how minimal or maximal these media effects are, is not always clear, nor is it stable over time (Bennett and Iyengar 2008), but the scientific debate is supported daily by new effect studies (see also the chapters in section VII). This is far less the case for the influence of the news media on one of its main subjects (and sources): political actors. This does not mean, however, that the power relation between media and politics has not been looked into. Much has changed since Gandy (1982: 1) complained thirty years ago that “we know next to nothing about the impact of media structures on the behaviour of major institutions in our society”. In recent decennia a wide variety of studies investigated the way media influence both the structures of political institutions and the behaviour of politicians (Veltmer and Koch-Baumgarten 2010).

In this chapter we will focus less on the structural impact on institutions and rather follow an actor approach. The media can have an impact on different aspects of political elite behaviour. Most clearly the media has forced politicians adapt their communication style and tempo (Altheide and Snow 1979). For instance, over the last decennia the time allotted to politicians on television has

been reduced sharply, forcing them to use more one-liners (Hallin 1992; Esser 2008). Related to that impact on how politicians communicate the media also influence the selection of political personnel. Politicians that are charismatic (Sheafer 2001) or better trained in dealing with the media have more career opportunities (Davis 2010) (see also the chapter by Shafer, Shenhav and Balmas). But perhaps more important is the potential impact on the substance of politics: the issues and problems that are discussed and eventually translated in legislation and policy. This last type of influence will be the main focus of this chapter.

Political agenda-setting has proven to be a successful approach in the study of the media influence on politicians and policy makers (Graber 2005). Using different methods agenda-setting scholars have accumulated evidence on when and how media coverage influences the issue priorities of political actors. However, the approach also has its limitations. Political agenda-setting is mainly concerned with the salience of issues, but tells us little on how these issues are constructed and defined. If we want a more complete picture of how media influence law making and public policy also studies on framing and frame-building should be taken into account. A second limitation is that agenda-setting focuses mainly at the beginning of the policy process, and fails to understand the role of the media in the later phases of the process. This chapter will address both limitations and suggest to distinguish between five types of media influence on politics.

Before turning to an elaborate discussion of political agenda-setting we need to address two broader aspects of the relationship between media and politics. First, the reciprocity between media and political actors will be discussed. Although this chapter deals with the influence of media on politics it would be misleading to ignore that media content, in turn, is to a large extent shaped by elite communication (Bennett and Livingston 2003) (see also the chapters by Shafer, Shenhav, and Balmas and by Kioussis and Strömbäck). Second, we will address the question why political actors react to media coverage. All too often this reaction is taken for granted and treated as a mechanical effect.

## 2 The reciprocal power relationship between media and politics

Although most scholars acknowledge the interdependence between media and politics most research focuses one-sidedly on the influence of politics on media or on the opposite media on politics. The main difference is whether they consider the media and its coverage of politics as the dependent or the independent variable.

A first stream of research focuses on the influence of the news media on the agenda, position and behaviour of political actors. The media is treated as the independent variable that might have an effect on politicians and their policies. This includes most political agenda setting studies (see further) and research on

media framing and bias in determining the distribution of power (Entman 2007). Also research on the so called ‘CNN effect’, that focuses on the influence of media coverage on international military interventions, considers the media as a (strong) independent variable (Gilboa 2005) (see also the chapter by Robinson). This influence of the media on politics does not necessarily imply that politicians react after something appeared in the news media, but often they anticipate on how media will react and take this into account when designing policy proposals and choosing which issues to put forward (Davis 2007: 187–188; Sellers 2010: 3). This *anticipatory news media effect* is also in line with the mediatization thesis that states that political actors structurally adapt to the media and its logic (Strömbäck 2008) (see also the chapter by Schulz and by Shaefer, Shenhav and Balmas).

A different research tradition focuses on the influence of politicians and governments in particular on the work of political journalists. Many of these studies can be related to the indexing theory or similar source theories that stress the dependence of journalists to a limited number of official elite sources (e.g., Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007) (see also the chapter by Robinson). Also studies on different forms of news management and spin doctoring start of from politicians’ need or desire to control the political news (see the chapter by Kioussis and Strömbäck for an extensive discussion). Finally, part of the agenda-setting studies has treated the media-agenda as the dependant variable (Reese 1991). Most of these studies have focused on how sources have tried to set the agenda in election campaigns (e.g., Semetko et al. 1991; Hopmann et al. 2010).

Besides these two lines of research we can distinguish a somewhat distinct third approach, where not the media coverage of politics or its influence on different political agenda’s is central, but rather the interaction process itself. Several case studies of insiders (e.g., Crouse 1974; Rosenstiel 1993; Jones 1995) have given us a behind-the-scenes view on how the bargaining process of news and information takes place. In addition political communication scholars have used surveys and in depth interviews to study the perceptions politicians and journalists have of their position towards one another (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch 1981; Donsbach and Patterson 2004) and also the actual daily (informal) interactions between politicians and journalists (e.g., Davis 2009; Van Aelst, Shehata, and Van Dalen 2010).

The differences between these three lines of research are partly artificial while no scholar really denies the reciprocity of the relation and the importance of the interaction process. Furthermore, several studies tried to build in a two dimensional measurement of influence or at least incorporated a so called “feedback” loop, for instance, Sellers’ (2010) impressive study that analyses the complete cycle of agenda-setting and strategic communication in US Congress. According to his four stage model politicians first create a message and next promote it. The crucial third step is when the message receives coverage and in the final stage the coverage feeds back to influence politicians’ political communication and policy

debates. The four stages constitute what Sellers calls a “cycle of spin” where both journalists and politicians react to each other, but the process is initiated by the latter. Also Entman’s (2003) cascading model departs from the promotion of frames by political and bureaucratic elites but acknowledges an important feedback role of the news media (see also the chapter by de Vreese and Schuck).

Although political agenda-setting studies mainly treat the news media agenda as an independent variable potentially influencing a certain political agenda, a few studies explicitly incorporated reciprocal effects. In general they agree that the influence works both ways, with some showing the dominance of the media-to-politics dynamic (Van Noije, Oegema, and Kleinnijenhuis 2008; Walgrave, Soroeka, and Nuytemans 2008), while others proved that the politics-to-media effects are much stronger (Brandenburg 2002; Jones and Wolfe 2010).

### 3 Why do politicians react to media coverage?

Most studies on media power deal with the influence of the media on a macro level (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010: 664), however, turning to the level of individual political actors might help to understand the mechanisms for media responsiveness. So far a comprehensive behavioral theory that explains why and when political actors react to media coverage is missing, but scholars suggested possible reasons for media responsiveness (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006; Kepplinger 2007).

Politicians might be influenced by the media as most citizens are: They learn about what is happening in the world via the news media and this might affect their attitudes and behavior. This is all the more the case since most politicians are true news “junkies” consuming news for several hours a day (Van Aelst et al. 2008). For instance, if TV shows dramatic images of deprivation in Africa politicians might be moved and willing to act. It would, however, be naïve to consider politicians as ordinary news consumers. Not only because politicians are on average higher educated, have a good understanding about how the media work and are generally skeptical to what the media report (Davis 2007). But more importantly because politicians are rational actors that pursue certain (policy) goals (see also the chapters by Strömbäck and Kioussis any by Shafer, Shenhav and Balmas). In that respect the media are a tool that is highly politically relevant. We distinguish three strategic reasons that explain why politicians react to media coverage.

Firstly, politicians closely monitor the news media, as they see it as a proxy for the public agenda or what Pritchard (1992: 105) called the media-as-surrogate-for-public-opinion function. Because public opinion data are often missing the politicians turn the media as an alternative source on what the public thinks both in terms of problems that need to be addressed and solutions that might be appropriate (Protess et al. 1991). This information is useful if politicians want to shape

an image of being sensitive to the concerns of ordinary people. Ultimately, being responsive to public opinion is seen as crucial for reelection (Pritchard 1992; Cook 1989). But even if politicians don't consider the media to reflect the public agenda or have superior information about public opinion it is still possible that they take the media into account because of the opposite relationship: the influence of the media on public opinion. Studies have shown that the politicians perceive a large influence of the media on the attitudes and preferences of readers and viewers (e.g., Van Aelst et al. 2008). According to Schudson (1995) the power of the mass media lies not so much in its direct influence, but in the perception of politicians that the mass media have a profound impact on the general public. Gunther and Stokes (2003) labeled this indirect effect "the influence of presumed influence": because you perceive the media to influence the behavior of others you will react to that perception (see also Mutz 1989). As such media influence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: because politicians believe the media matters, they act accordingly. Cohen and colleagues (2008) found empirical proof for this effect among Members of the Knesset in Israel. Their study showed that perceived media influence on the public had not only an effect on their efforts to come in the media but also on their parliamentary activities. In sum, we can conclude that politicians monitor and react to media coverage because politicians believe media and public opinion to be connected (see also the chapters by Shafer, Shenhav, and Balmas and by Tsfatì).

A second and totally different reason why politicians take the media into account is because they also reflect the agenda and frames of other politicians. The policy process is a very complicated one which involves multiple actors ranging from ministers over ordinary backbenchers to special interest groups. The negotiating process takes place in parliament, its corridors and usually behind closed doors. But in the search for support a political actor might "go public" to convince his or her colleagues (Kernell 2007). By doing so the broader public becomes involved in the process, even though it is hardly the main target (Herbst 1998). Leading politicians have gone public in the past to influence other political actors. Heffernan (2006) for instance has shown that Tony Blair went public before the Iraq War, not only to influence the public but also the MPs of his own party. But also politicians from opposition parties actively use the mass media in the policy making process (Kedrowski 1996) for example by joining forces with journalists as a means to publicly put pressure on governments. In sum, politicians and bureaucrats consume the media because it contains important (hidden) information on the agenda of other political actors (Brown 2010: 134; Sellers 2010: 8–9) (see also the chapters by Strömbäck and Kioussis and by Robinson).

A third reason why politicians react to media coverage is because of the information it contains. The importance of information and information processing in the context of policy making is emphasized in the work of Jones and Baumgartner (2005). They define information processing as the "collecting, assembling, inter-

preting, and prioritizing of signals from the environment” (2005: 7; see also Workman, Jones, and Jochim 2009). It is clear that media carry a lot of policy relevant information with them. Most political journalists move constantly between politicians of all parties and take bits of strategic information with them. But the information can be also of more substantial value. Many journalists can be considered as experts as they have specialized in certain topics and in some cases been around longer than many politicians. This does not mean, however, that the media is the main, let alone most important, source of information for politicians. Often politicians and journalists both respond to external events or exogenous streams of information (Jones and Wolfe 2010), giving the false impression that politicians react to media. Besides providing extra information the media is perhaps even more important to “reduce the overwhelming information-processing tasks confronting policymakers” (Cobb and Elder 1981: 392). Kingdon (1984) showed how members of congress dealing with an oversupply of information turn to the media to know what really matters.

## 4 Political agenda-setting

### 4.1 The origins of a popular concept

Both in communication as well as in political science agenda-setting has become one of the dominating paradigms. The same concept, however, means quite different things in both domains. In communication science agenda-setting is mainly a theory about media-effects: media coverage of issues influences the issue priorities of the public, and indirectly their voting preferences. Since the study of McCombs and Shaw (1972) the popularity of the agenda-setting approach among media scholars has grown steadily and it now is one of the most-cited media-effects concepts (Dearing and Rogers 1996; Bennett and Iyengar 2008) (see also the chapter by Arendt and Matthes).

In political science, the policy agenda-setting or agenda-building approach deals mainly with the limited attention of policy makers for a wide range of political issues. Building on the insights of Schattschneider (1960), Cobb and Elder (1972) were among the first who investigated why some issues managed to get attention of decision makers, while others failed. The media was seen as one of the possible factors that could influence the agenda of policy makers, but not a very important one. Gradually the media got more attention in the study of policy agendas but was seldom the main focus of attention (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; but see Linsky 1986).

A more recent stream of research has tried to combine both traditions and focused on the effect of mass media coverage on the political agenda (Rogers and Dearing 1988; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). For these scholars the central question is to what extent mass media coverage affects the issue priorities of politi-

cians. Although some prefer the term policy agenda-setting (Rogers and Dearing 1988) or agenda-building (Denham 2010) we refer to this research as political agenda-setting. “Agenda-setting” is preferred over “agenda-building” because it allows political media effect studies to connect with the large political agenda-setting research tradition in political science<sup>1</sup>. This does not mean that we believe that the political agenda-setting process is highly similar to the process of public agenda-setting. Although both processes deal with the relative importance or salience of issues we agree with Pritchard (1992) that the agenda of policy makers is different from the agenda of the public. The agenda of politicians is hardly ever operationalized by asking them to list the issues on top of their mind, but rather by looking at their words or deeds (see further). It is not what politicians think (cognitive) but what they do (behavior) that matters. Furthermore, using the term agenda-setting does not imply that the agenda of politicians is simply “set” by the media but rather sees the media as one potential source of influence among many others.

Political agenda-setting can be considered as part of the larger policy process. This process has generally been conceptualized in terms of a sequence of different phases<sup>2</sup>: problem identification, policy formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation (Cobb and Elder 1981: 394). Agenda-setting overlaps with this first phase. Due to its ability to focus attention media influence is typically seen as high in this phase of the policy process<sup>3</sup> (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Esser and Pfetsch 2004: 388). This does not mean that journalists actually initiate new issues, but rather that they play a role in strengthening and structuring the initiatives taken by political actors (Reich 2006; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006). Mostly this role is defined positively: issues that are high on the media agenda can obtain, in turn, a more prominent position on the political agenda. However, the media also influence the political-agenda by filtering and selecting issues that do not appear on the agenda. Or, as Van Praag and Brants (1999: 199) conclude on the basis of their campaign study: “The agenda-setting power of journalists seems to lie more in denying access and in forcing politicians to react on issues than in actually initiating them”. This effect can be labeled as “agenda-constraining” (Walgrave, Van Aelst, and Bennett 2010) and is closely related to the well-known gate-

<sup>1</sup> Berkowitz (1992) tried to differentiate between agenda-setting and agenda-building as two related but different processes. We rather treat these terms as synonyms (see also McCombs 2004: 143). The reason to prefer “political” agenda-setting over “policy” agenda-setting is mainly because the later term is more narrow and focuses primarily on what governments say and do, while the first term is much broader and for instance also includes the agendas of ordinary MPs or political parties.

<sup>2</sup> The idea that the policy process is a well structured chronological process is highly contested by public policy scholars. Among others Cobb and Elder (1981) claim that the classical idea of a policy process should be replaced by a more dynamic and flexible model (see also Kingdon 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Esser and Pfetsch (2004: 388) add that also in the last phase of the policy process the role of the media becomes more important again.



keeping concept (Shoemaker 1991) in communication science: only a part of the many issue messages generated by political actors passes the media gates and receives news coverage. From a policy perspective the media contribute to limit the scope of decision-making to some issues (Bachrach and Baratz 1962: 952) (see also the chapters by Stanyer, by McNair and by Wahl-Jorgensen).

## 4.2 Defining and operationalizing the political agenda

Agenda-setting scholars never study “the” political agenda, but rather choose to focus on one or more associated agendas (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 18). Actually, there is no such thing as the political agenda (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006: 95). Political agenda-setting scholars have studied (a combination of) the following agendas: parliament or Congress (Trumbo 1995; Soroka 2002; Van Noije, Oegema, and Kleinnijenhuis 2008; Jones and Wolfe 2010), political parties (Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995; Brandenburg 2002; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010), government (Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008), the President (Gilberg et al. 1980; Wanta and Foote 1994; Edwards and Wood 1999), or public spending (Cook and Skogan 1991; Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993).

Each political actor has its own semi-independent agenda that is composed according to its own logic and dynamic. Furthermore, most agendas can be operationalized in different ways. For instance, the agenda of a political party can be measured by coding its manifesto, an extensive document that can be considered a list of issue priorities (Walgrave and Lefevere 2010). The same party agenda, however, can also be operationalized by using a much shorter time span as Brandenburg (2002) did by using daily press releases during a British election campaign. Both ways of measuring the party agenda are valid, but not necessarily identical.

Not every political agenda has the same importance and impact on actual legislation and policy. Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) suggest that agendas can be placed on a continuum ranging from symbolic to substantial. Symbolic agendas are primarily rhetorical: they contain the words of politicians but have limited tangible political consequences. Substantial agendas on the other hand do have a direct impact on policy or legislation. In their overview of political agenda setting studies Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) showed that all scholars who actually found strong media impact defined the political agenda symbolically such as parliamentary debates or presidential speeches (e.g., Bartels 1996; Edwards and Wood 1999). However, when more substantial political agendas like legislation and actually policy were the subject of study, researchers found much less media impact. Probably the most substantial agenda is the state’s budget or what Pritchard and Berkowitz (1993) call the “resource agenda”. The allocation of money and resources to the different issues or policy domains has the most far reaching consequences.

ces. However, since this agenda is highly incremental and stable over time it is no surprise that hardly any media impact has been found (Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993; but see Van Belle 2003).

In sum, the agenda-setting impact of the media depends to a large extent on how scholars define and operationalize the political agenda. Probably this is the most important factor that influences media impact, but certainly not the only one.

### 4.3 The contingency of political agenda-setting

Most of the agenda-setting studies cited above rely on a time-series design testing to what extent the actual behaviour of political actors regarding specific issues is preceded in time by media coverage about the same issues. A majority of these studies have concluded that “the media matter”, but at the same time stressed the conditionality of the media’s influence on the political agenda (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2011). Besides the type of political agenda we distinguish and briefly discuss four sets of contingent factors: (1) types of issues; (2) the characteristics of the media agenda; (3) party characteristics; and (4) system level characteristics.

First, the influence of the mass media varies considerable across issues. According to Soroka (2002: 16) “difference in agenda-setting dynamics are most often products of differences in the issues themselves”. Soroka has introduced a typology to distinguish between prominent (e.g., unemployment), sensational (e.g., environment) and governmental (e.g., national deficit) issue types. Media influence on public and policy agenda is most plausible for sensational issues that are in general not obtrusive (little direct experience) and that lend themselves to dramatic events. Differences in the agenda-setting impact of the media can also be related to the structure, constellation of actors and dynamics of a policy field. In addition, some policy fields are simply not newsworthy and therefore lack the basic premise for media impact (Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer 2010).

Second, we mostly talk about “the media”, but that does not mean all media outlets and types of media coverage have the same agenda-setting potential. Previous studies have shown that newspapers have a higher agenda-setting impact but that this influence only becomes effective via TV news (e.g., Bartels 1996). Some types of coverage such as investigative journalism clearly have a higher impact on politics than routine coverage (Protess et al. 1987). Ordinary coverage can become more powerful as it is more congruent across outlets (Eilders 2000). The more harmonious or consonant the media, the more difficult it is for politicians to ignore them. Also the tone of the news is relevant: positive and negative news lead to different public and political reactions (Soroka 2006; Baumgartner and Jones 1993) (see also the chapter by Stanyer).

Third, Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2010) and Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) found party characteristics in multi-party systems to be a third set of contin-

gent factors. They showed that the political influence of the media depends on the parties' position (opposition versus government) and the own issue agendas of the parties. In a recent study, Thesen (2011) has linked tone of the news and party positions showing that opposition parties mainly react to negative news as it offers them the opportunity to attack government policy, while government parties mainly use positive news to defend their policy record.

A fourth and final set of contingent factors are related to the political and media system. Despite the increased attention for the contingencies of political agenda-setting we still know relatively little about how the responsiveness of politicians to the media agenda varies across countries. The literature about political agenda-setting is mostly based on single country studies and mainly comes from the United States (see Green-Pedersen and Stubager, 2010: 663). Only a few studies looked at the agenda-setting role of the media in comparative perspective. For instance, Van Noije, Oegema, and Kleinnijenhuis (2008) compared press coverage and parliamentary debates in the Netherlands and the UK while Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2011) focused on parliamentary questions and news coverage in Denmark and Belgium. Both studies stress the similarities rather than the differences between the media-politics dynamic in the two countries. However, studies that included more different countries found a larger impact of institutional settings on the agenda-setting role of the media. Van Dalen and Van Aelst (2012) compare the perceptions of political journalists on the political agenda-setting power of different actors including the mass media in eight West-European countries. The study for instance shows that Spanish journalists perceive the role of the media in the agenda-setting process as much weaker compared to other political actors. This could be related to the higher degree of political control over the media and to the degree of political concentration of power. In political systems that lack strong centralized power such as Sweden and Norway politicians are more inclined to react to the agenda of the media (see also the chapter by Pfetsch and Esser).

## 5 Beyond agenda-setting: other types of media influence

So far we focused on the role of the media in setting and constraining the agenda of politicians and policymakers. We acknowledge, however, that the media might have other types of influences and that the influence is not only located at the beginning of the policy process. We discuss three other ways the media potentially influence substantive politics and policy making in particular.

### 5.1 Framing or defining the issue

Political agenda-setting scholars almost always refer to the work of Schattschneider (1960) and Kingdon (Kingdon 1984) as source of inspiration. These pioneers

did put the importance of issue salience up front, but simultaneously stressed the importance of how these issues were discussed and interpreted. Schattschneider (1960: 73) noted that if a party wants to get in power it needs to be able to make “its definition of issues prevail”. Politics is a struggle about issues first, and a struggle of definitions afterwards. Kingdon (1984) referred to this process as “alternative specification”: narrowing the range of possible positions on an issue.

This attention for issue-definition in policy making has been enriched by communication studies on framing and frame-building. Frame effect studies assume that how an issue is presented has an influence on how it is understood by people (De Vreese, Peter, and Semetko 2001). It thus concerns a type of effect that cannot be considered as the mere extension of the larger agenda-setting concept<sup>4</sup> (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Framing has become one of the central concepts in communication science, used in a variety of contexts, but mainly as a study of media text and its effects on the public (for a recent overview see Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011) (see also the chapter by Arendt and Matthes). Several authors also linked framing research with the reciprocal relationship of media with politics and policy (Entman 2004; Vliegenthart and Roggeband 2007; Baumgartner, Linn, and Boydston 2009). According to Entman (2004: 4–6) the political power of frames lies not only in its capacity to define a problem, but also in its ability to suggest a particular remedy. In that way a frame can directly promote support (or opposition) to certain policy measures or legislative initiatives. This is highly relevant as policy makers often agree on what the problem is, but far less on the adequate solution (Kingdon 1984).

Focussing on foreign policy, Entman sees growing framing influence of the media. Not so much as initiators of frames, but rather in cases of political conflict by favouring one frame over another. In absence of elite disagreement political actors can still challenge or at least hinder the dominant political frame (Entman 2003). Also Baumgartner and colleagues show (2009) that how an issue is framed in the media has a potentially significant impact on public policy. Their study of the death penalty in the US proved that the shift to an “innocence frame” in the press in the late nineties contributed to the decline of death sentences. Similarly, Strünck (2010) provided support that media coverage had an impact on the politics of pension reform in Germany by framing the debate in terms of a “crisis story” (see also the chapters by Strömbäck and Kioussis and by Robinson).

## 5.2 Linking all actors in the process

Agenda-setting and framing have focused the attention on a crucial part of the politics: selecting and defining issues. Scholars using these concepts have shown

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<sup>4</sup> Note that some scholars use the term second-level agenda-setting instead of framing. Definitions of both terms partly overlap as they are both more concerned with how issues (or other objects) are discussed (Weaver 2007).

that the media has at least the potential to influence this process. However, scholars in public policy claim that the role of the media transcends this part of the policy process and suggest a more holistic interpretation. Cobb and Elder (1981) claim that in essence policy-making is a process of communication between compound actors. Although, not all communication goes through media channels, the mass media play a central role linking actors and information together. This insight is far from new and goes back to the work of agenda-setting forerunner Cohen (1963: 16) who stated that the media “are one of the devices that keep the separate parts of the political system in touch with each other”. Kennamer (1992) has further developed this idea of the “linkage function” of the news media. Besides linking together the main actors (leading politicians, parties, interest groups, civil servants etc.) the media also link public policy with public opinion. This is not only important as a means of information exchange, but even more in terms of defining the debate. Or as Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 107) put it: “The media help to move all disjointed actors (including the public mood) in the same direction. This explains why shifts in attention in one venue are quickly followed by others.” In sum, several authors have stressed the importance of the linkage function of the media, but without indicating how this should be operationalized and investigated. Perhaps, as Brown (2010) suggested, the language and tools of social network analysis may offer a fruitful strategy to map this type of media influence.

### 5.3 Accelerating the process

In his in-depth study of how the US press affected policy making in the beginning of the 1980s Linsky (1986: 107–112) stressed the impact media have on the timetable of policymakers. His case studies and interviews with policy makers show that when media collectively focus on an issue they give politicians the feeling as if they have to decide, “whether or not they were ready to do so” (see also the chapter by Stanyer). Also Livingstone (1997) points to the importance of the media as an accelerator in (foreign) policy making. Mainly the omnipresence of real-time media drives politicians to take a position. Interviews with policymakers show that this limits the time for deliberation with partners and investigating the consequences of policy measures. For Linsky speeding up the process also means that issues and decisions are moved up the bureaucratic ladder. “The more intense – and the more critical – the press coverage, the higher the level of the government that deals with the issue” (Linsky 1986: 107). In terms of political agendas this means that issues move from symbolic to substantial agendas.

However, several authors have also pointed to the opposite effect: media as decelerator. For instance, Wolfe (2012) shows that in the case of US law making increased media attention can at times create political friction, which slows down the law making process instead of accelerating it. In particular coverage of conflict-

ing political positions can lead to a process of negative feedback, counter-mobilization and ultimately hinder finding compromises among political actors (Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer 2010: 216). Further research is needed to better understand the conditions under which media can speed-up or rather slow-down the policy process.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the influence of the media on legislation and public policy in the broad sense of the word. We focussed mainly on political agenda-setting as a central concept and a subdomain of scholars that made progress in understanding the interaction between media agendas and political agendas. We also tried to go beyond agenda-setting to come to a broader view on the role of the media in the policy process. Generally, however, we devoted most attention to the potential impact of the media in setting (new) issues on the political agenda, and in what Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) call the “amplifying” of existing issues. Related to this optimistic concept the media as gatekeepers also have the ability to constrain the political agenda. As important as what issues dominate the agenda, is the way these issues are defined or framed. In particular, the power of frames goes beyond the definition phase of policy, but also suggests possible solutions for the problem raised. Next, two types of influence were discussed that mainly received attention from public policy scholars and less from communication scholars. The media link all relevant actors including the public together and make it possible that they respond to each other on a limited number of core issues. Finally, the media force politicians to react and take a position in such a way that they can accelerate or rather decelerate the policy process.

This classification of types of influence is partly artificial as these different types of influence are overlapping. For instance, agenda-setting and framing are highly connected as some issues only get attention from politicians as they are framed in a particular way. Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 125) even showed that “the sudden fascination with a given issue was usually, but not always, associated with changes in how the issue was discussed”. Political agenda-setting can also be seen as part of the larger linkage function of the media: by transferring issue salience from one agenda to the other actors get connected and move in the direction of a common policy agenda.

Still, we believe it is useful to distil the role of the media in different parts or functions as this is necessary to grasp the larger impact question (see also Livingstone 1997). In recent decennia political communication scholars have come closer to understand the political power of the media by using a more nuanced and modest approach. Small contributions on the conditionality and reciprocity of media influence on politics have proven to be more useful than sweeping generali-

zations on minimal effects or an absolute mediatization of politics (see also the chapter by Robinson). Timothy Cook (2006) is probably right that the study of the media in politics has become more difficult as news making and policy making have become so intertwined that it is hardly impossible to dismantle them. But that does mean we should no longer try to do so.

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