

Chapter Ten Conclusion & discussion

Much literature is devoted to the omnipresence of the mass media and the trivialisation of politics in contemporary society. In this study a uniquely extensive data set was brought to the fore to empirically tackle whether media control over national parliamentary politics has indeed intensified in the European Union. The central agenda-building question, applied to the two watchdogs of democracy, was: What is the balance of power between the national parliamentary agenda and the national media agenda? In contrast to other political communication traditions dealing with media power, in agenda-building research it is not the tone of or frames in the news that matter in processes of reciprocal influence, but the sheer attention paid to issues. Hence, MPs and journalists may *agree to disagree* by copying each other's issues, on which they are then free to hold different opinions. Consequently, although influencing the political agenda is an important aspect of political power, this study does not claim to say anything about the outcome of political decision-making. This study claims to reveal who decides what issues are considered for political decision-making.

Agenda-building studies have to date failed to agree about the balance of power between media and politics, as has also been emphasised in a comprehensive overview by Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006). Moreover, they have largely neglected to allow this balance of power to vary in different contexts. The objective of the present study was to offer a more integral approach to agenda building, by explicitly conceptualising it as a contingent process and thereby suggesting and testing explanatory mechanisms. This study applied longitudinal, cross-sectional and cross-national data to assess shifts in the balance of power through time, during elections, as well as differences across issues and countries. Furthermore, a first explanation for the balance of power in different contexts was offered, by introducing the prominence of European actors and political conflict in the news.

This chapter starts by briefly walking us through the applied methodology and the research findings per hypothesis and per country (section 10.1). Section 10.2 discusses limitations of the research design and suggestions for future research. The ensuing section takes a closer look at the contributions of the present approach to agenda-building theory, to European communication research, as well as to the multilevel governance research (section 10.3). Sections 10.4 and 10.5 discuss practical implications for parliamentary politics and journalism, after which section 10.6 rounds off with a short concluding remark.

10.1 A recapitulation

10.1.1 Part One

The purpose of the first and central part of this study was to determine the reciprocal flows of influence between the parliamentary agenda and the media agenda: who leads whom? Additionally it was assessed whether the answer to this question is different for different periods in time, during elections, and for issue domains of EU decision-making authority.

Methodology. The data comprised all relevant parliamentary debates (thousands) and newspaper articles (hundreds of thousands) from three national dailies in each of three countries on the issues of agriculture, the environment, drugs and immigration, covering a period of fifteen years for the United Kingdom, eight years for the Netherlands and five years for France. Besides a qualitative content analysis to explore the discussions causing attention peaks, a thematic top-down automated content analysis was used to assess the amount of attention that each agenda paid to each of the four issues per month. Extensive wordlists with rules for disambiguation were manually drafted and validated by iterative visual inspection of the results, after which they were used to count keyword frequencies as a measure of attention.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was deployed to see if one time series of issue attention systematically precedes the other and to estimate all paths of influence. SEM is a parsimonious technique that has the power to instantly generate a simple answer to the conceptually simple question of reciprocal influence between two agendas within a given time frame. To ensure that the underlying data allowed the SEM models to produce such simple and valid results, an elaborate effort was invested in diagnostic statistics. These included tests of the normality of each variable (Box-Cox), of time-series stationarity (Dickey-Fuller), of the speed and the duration of influence (VAR models, Schwarz's Bayesian Information Criterion: monthly time unit with maximum delay of two months), of serial autocorrelation (Breusch-Godfrey) and heteroscedasticity (Engle's ARCH) in the regression residuals, and of causality in the long run (Granger causality). The Granger causality tests had yet another function than to optimise the SEM models: they also gave a provisional idea of the direction of causality, and thus of the balance of power. However, they neglect instantaneous influence (within one month) and merely determine cumulative influence over the course of a year. These results are best understood as long-term incremental influence, whereas the research questions are primarily concerned with short-term routine interactions rather than occasionally delayed responses between the agendas.

For each hypothesised contingency, a SEM model was constructed: an overall model to test agenda building under general circumstances, as well as models for different periods in history, for elections versus non-elections,

and for EU versus non-EU issues. The results regarding each hypothesised contingency will now be recapitulated.

Hypothesis 1: The parliamentary agenda does not only influence the media agenda, but the parliamentary agenda is also influenced by the media agenda. Based on inconclusive evidence of both political and media dominance in agenda-building research so far, it was argued that the often-assumed primacy of politics should not be confused with a monopoly of politics. Whereas the agendas exert a mutual influence in the UK, the Dutch media agenda is not influenced by the parliamentary agenda, which contradicts the results of an earlier Dutch study (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995). Especially the lack of influence in both directions in France is striking. The assumption of reciprocity may only hold for the UK, but the assumption of media influence on the parliamentary agenda is undeniable both for the UK and the Netherlands.

Hypothesis 2: The agenda-building power of parliament over the media is stronger during elections than during times of routine politics. The media were expected to be more receptive to the overwhelming influx of campaign news, as it complies better with the journalistic routines of news production. Unfortunately, the Dutch results for agenda building during non-election times, as well as the French results during elections turned out to be unreliable, which makes it impossible to come to a conclusion. Only agenda building in the UK supports H2, where strong parliamentary control over the media agenda during elections indeed replaces media dominance during routine politics, in accordance with results from Brandenburg (2002).

Hypothesis 3: The influence of the media agenda on the parliamentary agenda has increased compared with the influence in the reverse direction. The argument was found in the emergence of the interpretative style of reporting to which the communication strategies of politicians have had to adjust, as well as by an increasingly uncertain political environment created by European integration. Once again, there was no trace of an agenda-building relationship between the French parliament and media, neither in the late 1990s, nor in the early 21st century. Nevertheless, both the British and the Dutch media have gained considerable control over the parliamentary agenda, while parliament is left empty handed, convincingly confirming H3. It is noteworthy that the visibility of European actors in the news as presented in figure 8.1 did not increase during the research period. Hence, the idea that the increase in media power over time is caused by the process of European integration is therefore less plausible.

Hypothesis 4: In issue domains with more European decision-making authority, media agenda-building power increases vis-à-vis parliamentary agenda-building power. The EU environment is one of uncertainty and complexity for national MPs. In contrast to domestic politics with its familiar routines, their traditional status and value as news sources may be impaired in EU policy domains. In part one, European prominence was

narrowly defined as the amount of European decision-making authority in issue domains according to the formal three-pillar classification of the EU. As pillar-one issues, agriculture and the environment were classified as EU issues. The issue of drugs was classified as purely domestic, since no common European decision making occurs. As an intergovernmental pillar-three issue, immigration was classified as an 'issue in transition', subject to both national and supranational decision-making authority. Although none of the issues is capable of triggering agenda-building interactions between parliament and the press in France, all British and Dutch issues support H4 except for the Dutch environment. Parliament clearly dominates the media agenda regarding this EU issue. Furthermore, the level of media power in the case of both British and Dutch immigration, the 'issue in transition', is much stronger than anticipated. This Dutch finding of media influence on parliamentary debates is consistent with recent results by Vliegenthart (2007).

Interestingly, the Granger causality tests provided evidence that the French parliament and media do not operate in total isolation, as the French press succeeds in influencing the parliamentary agenda of agriculture and immigration in the long run, consistent with British and Dutch media dominance regarding these same issues. Adding the Granger causality results to the SEM results also made British agenda building resemble Dutch agenda building more closely, since long-term parliamentary influence showed up in the case of British drugs and the environment after all. Therefore, in the UK, the Netherlands and even in France, agriculture and immigration clearly involve an unchallenged media agenda, whereas drugs and the environment leave room for parliamentary influence in both the UK and the Netherlands.

The evidence of a parliament-dominated Dutch environmental issue, as well as the repeated evidence of a media-dominated immigration issue suggested that the political level at which decisions are formally made, may be an important but not exclusive factor in determining whether an issue is subject to routine politics. H4 cannot be accepted in its present form, but a modified version might be, since even the unexpected results across the countries seem to point in the same direction. It was the aim of part two of the study to present a more conclusive answer to these lingering questions (see section 10.1.2).

Controlling for real-world cues. In order to exclude the possibility that the parliament-media influences are spurious due to both agendas really responding to real-world cues (RWC) rather than to each other, the number of asylum applications was controlled for in the agenda-building model of immigration. RWC strongly impacts the British media agenda, the Dutch parliamentary agenda in the Netherlands, but again neither of the agendas in France. Vliegenthart (2007) has also found that asylum applications impact the Dutch parliamentary agenda of immigration rather than the

media agenda. However, these effects neither change media dominance as initially established in the UK and in the Netherlands, nor the original lack of agenda building in France.

Hypotheses 5 & 6: The national political (H5) and national media agendas (H6) in EU member states display convergence over time. Such convergence would enhance the plausibility of the assumption in H4 that European integration affects national agendas across Europe. This was backed up for the British and Dutch parliamentary agendas, as well as for the British and Dutch media agendas. France is again responsible for deviant results. No trend towards convergence was observed between the priorities in France and in the UK or the Netherlands, whether observed on the parliamentary or on the media agenda. A general outcome is that the European media agendas increasingly give evidence of shared concerns, and more so than the parliamentary agendas. Therefore, the European outlook of the media must be explained by other news sources than just parliament. Although one can only guess whether these sources are foreign media according to the self-referential media momentum, or other political sources, it is a preliminary indication that news coverage may not have such a narrow domestic focus as often assumed.

10.1.2 Part Two

In the second part of the study, the interest shifted from determining the reciprocal flows of agenda-building influence under a variety of circumstances, towards explaining why certain results about the power balance were found in a European vs. domestic context. The role of two variables, the visibility of European actors in the news and political conflict, was investigated in two separate studies (chapters 8 and 9), each with its own methodology.

Hypothesis 7: Higher visibility of EU actors or member-state actors in the national public debate increases the influence of the media agenda on the parliamentary agenda. The issue-specific agenda-building models (H4) left a puzzle regarding unexpectedly strong Dutch parliamentary influence in the case of the pillar-one issue environment, as well as the unanimous evidence of media dominance in the case of the pillar-three issue immigration, which had yet to be resolved. To this end, a modified, functional conceptualisation of European prominence was put forward. It was hypothesised that it is the true contribution of European actors to national issue discussions, rather than EU's formal pillar-based authority, that moderates national agenda building.

Methodology. This functional version of the 'Europeanness' of the issues was made operative by counting the number of references to EU and member-state actors in the news, in an automated content analysis similar to the methodology of part 1. The resulting time series of actor visibility in the news were first explored by ranking the issues according to the level

of European visibility and by relating this rank order to the level of media power as found in the issue-specific SEM models. Finally, the moderating effect of European visibility on the power of the media agenda over the parliamentary agenda was tested with regression-based interaction models.

Results. The nature of the key events in the news and debates of the Dutch environment and of British and Dutch immigration, described in chapter 6, suggested that we were on the right track to consider the actual involvement of Europe in political discussions to classify issues as European or not. European events and actors do not play a role of importance in the case of the environment, whereas the predominance of Europe is high in the case of immigration. In line with these observations, the rank order of issues revealed for all countries that agricultural news involves the highest visibility of EU and member-state actors, followed by immigration news, in which member-state actors are highly visible. Environmental news merely involves a modest level of European visibility, combined with highly visible national actors. Lastly, news about drugs shows very little European visibility. This rank order matches the rank order according to media power as found in the SEM models (H4). Finally and most importantly, it was statistically confirmed for all countries that media's control over the parliamentary agenda indeed increases with the visibility of European actors in the news, in support of H7.

Hypotheses 8 & 9: European actors are relatively more often associated with conflicts in national news than national actors (H8). Conflicts involving European actors enhance the influence of the national media agenda on the national parliamentary agenda (H9). An attempt was made to determine whether the moderating role of Europe is partly attributable to political conflict. Europe was expected to increase the opportunities for political conflict; conflicts open the circle of debate to less elite stakeholders, which leads to higher competition among authoritative news sources and increases media's freedom to choose among news sources, at the expense of national MPs.

Methodology. The aim was to build an interaction regression model with scores for the co-occurrence of European actors and conflicts. Conflict is a concept that negatively values a relationship between actors, and is therefore more linguistically ambiguous and context sensitive than factual objects and actors. A different technique was needed to detect conflict in the news, while ensuring semantic and predictive validity (e.g., Krippendorff, 2004). Rather than counting word hits with pre-established (though validated) wordlists, a bottom-up approach was chosen by having human coders indicate expressions of conflict in the news. These manually extracted conflict indicators were used to validate a classifier following a machine-learning approach. The resulting classifier should be able to automatically identify conflict in a future media corpus. Unfortunately, the classification performance of the final model proved insufficient. Time restrictions of the current research project prevented us from improving the classifier, although this

should be very well feasible in the longer run. Our efforts to test the moderating effect of conflict had to be ceased.

10.1.3 Conclusion

National MPs are presently more responsive to the national media agenda than approximately a decade ago. Though the evidence was lacking until now, neither the agenda-building scholar, nor the MP or the journalist will be blown away with surprise by this result of increased media power just yet, since it is commonly assumed that the political game has changed in our global information societies and that everyone has had to adapt to the new rules. The assumption of the primacy of politics widely shared among scholars is not necessarily undermined by this single result just yet. However, the present study has come up with an additional, more provocative finding. In the majority of issue domains here investigated, the tables have turned, as parliament finds itself unable to exert influence on the media agenda. Hence, media power is not just increasing, but the media even often prevail. Our results showed that especially a strong European flavour in news discussions enhances the empowerment of the media, or the disarmament of parliament. In answer of the central research question, the balance of agenda-building power most frequently favours the media agenda. The media now often determine what politics is about; so much for the primacy of parliamentary politics.

10.1.4 A closer look at country differences

The findings of media dominance are similar, but not equally outspoken across the countries. In general it applies to all three countries that issue domains with higher European activity trigger more media influence on the parliamentary agenda. The primacy of politics has survived in the Netherlands, but merely on some occasions. Whereas the French democratic process appears to move in mysterious ways, as no short-term agenda building was established, the political representation of the British people seems extremely mediated by the British press. These differences in the degree to which the media have taken over the agenda-building process in the three countries might very well be the legacy of the Liberal political and media systems of the UK, the Democratic Corporatist systems of the Netherlands and the French Polarised Pluralist systems, as described in Hallin and Mancini *Comparing media systems* (2004). Let us see if we can find more clues with which to understand the differences.

The conclusion that the authority of the parliamentary agenda in the face of the media is most solidly anchored in the Netherlands compared with the UK or France, is supported by a series of other findings than parliament's agenda-building dominance in the case of domestically rooted issues. First, media dominance was found to be of a later date in the Netherlands than in the UK. This suggests that the Dutch media may not have had the time to