What Media Reports Influence Political Actions of Members of Parliament?
A Comparative Political Agenda-Setting Experiment

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Introduction

Extensive research has been conducted to gain an understanding from when and to what extent media influence the public. From the hypodermic needle approach we transitioned to minimal effects theories only to circle back to theories such as the elaboration likelihood models that focus on the individual-level information processing. Especially when we turn to the effects in the political realm in the triangle of media voters and the political sphere, we see a development from the macro-level models focusing on society as a whole such as agenda-setting towards a focus on the micro-level of the individual member of the public with priming effects for example (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). There is thus a vast body of literature focusing on the (political) media effects on the individual voter or member of the public. However, surprisingly enough, only seldom studies have yet tried to take a closer look at how political elites are influenced by media. In interviews with elites, those actors from the political realm openly admit to using the media to strategically influence (other political) elite (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2011) (Davis, 2007; ....). Some authors have called for a shift to a focus on elite to elite communication, moving away from the focus on the media as simple mediators allowing the exchange between politics and the public (Davis (2003)). Cleary thus, the media do have an effect on those highly informed, but how that mechanism works and what aspects of a media report trigger a politician to come to action is not as clear. Interviews or surveys with elites in both the political and journalistic field have provided important insights on the attitudes of the two groups vis-à-vis each other. However, studying the behavioral aspects on the level of the individual actors has been more challenging. Most often, studies have focused on a general comparison of the media and political agendas. Especially in the challenging environment of the media influence where also culture and the political context have an impact (Davis, 2003), isolating the influence of single factors becomes challenging. That is why in this paper I apply an experimental approach to studying how media affect political actors, more specifically national-level MPs in the Netherlands and Switzerland, two Western European multi-party systems.

The central question is what aspects of a media report make a politician react based on media coverage. The factorial survey design used to draw up the experiment has already successfully been applied to investigate news selection by political journalists (Helfer & Van
Aelst, forthcoming). In the context of this study, it allows to test for the influence of both
politician characteristics such as specialization, and also characteristics of the media message.
The aim of the present paper is to add to the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, by testing
hypotheses that have been deduced from research on the aggregate level on the individual
politicians and his/her actions, it informs theories on the individual actor level. Existing theories
on political agenda-setting have mostly relied on aggregate-level analyses of media and political
agendas or on anecdotal evidence from interviews. Building on the knowledge from both areas
of research in political agenda-building, the present study can link the findings from the two
approaches by focusing on the individual level while not having to rely solemnly on perceptions
but being able to draw on (intended) behavior. Secondly, the experimental nature of this study
allows to isolate factors influencing how the media affect an individual actors’ decision to take
political action. The conditionality of the medias influence on the political agenda has been
underlined by many authors (see Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006 for a comprehensive summary)
and some have even claimed that the influence of the media is overestimated when solely
relying on the aggregate level because real-world influences cannot be separated from media
effects (Davis, 2007). In an experimental setting, those influences can be at least partially
controlled for. Finally, the comparative design allows to also study how the political context
might affect this the political agenda-setting effects of the media. The power distribution
between opposition and government has been used to explain how parties react differently to
media coverage (Thesen 2012, Green-Pedersen). By comparing two multiparty systems that are
different when it comes to the distribution of political power between parties, namely a
country where all major parties are part of government and one that knows a more common
coalition-opposition structure, this paper can study how these factors mediate media influence
on politicians.

Media Influence on Politicians’ Behavior

The media are a “marketplace/arena in which political ideas and proposals are launched,
tested, scrutinized, and contested” (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Media attention can exert an
amplifying effect because they weigh information; if something is covered in the media this
signals importance (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, Forthcoming). Studies that looked at how the media influence politics have found that already politicized stories, meaning containing political actors, had a far higher chance of producing a political reaction than those who did not (Sevenans et al., 2013). Politicians use media as surrogate for public opinion if they don’t have other information available, and they might respond to media coverage based on their anticipation of a shift in public support for an issue (Cook et al. 1983). Media are thus one of several political institutions that organize attention, so the question then is what the effect is on individual actors when the media put their spotlight on something.

Many studies have abandoned the absolutistic view of politics being at the mercy of the media, but instead focused on the reciprocal nature. Whether politics follows a ‘media logic’ or a ‘political logic’ is a question of degree. In interviews, political actors in many Western European countries underline how they do not consider themselves to be influenced by the media in what they do (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2011). Whereas they might turn to the media again in order to gain more coverage (Van Santen, Helfer, & Van Aelst, 2013), either to show the public that they are responsive or to influence fellow politicians, news reports also have the potential to directly trigger political actions. This study focuses on the latter. Research on media effects has often focused on masses, but how it actually affects those who are subject of the coverage is a lot less common (Kepplinger (2007)).

Building on results of previous studies that depart from the political action taken and aim at making a construction of explanatory factors, by adopting an experimental approach this study has the individual media message as a unit of analysis and asks what the effects are of characteristics of this single message on behavior. It thus allows to shed light on why individual political actors respond to things they hear (or see) in the media, in addition to existing knowledge on political agenda-setting at the aggregate level. By mimicking the situation where politicians have to choose from the vast amount of information they obtain, this study focuses on existing behavioral mechanisms that are at play in reality by presenting politicians fictional news report and asking them two questions: Would you bring up the news report at a parliamentary party group meeting? And would you undertake parliamentary action based on the news report? Whereas the first tests a more deliberative (debates, hearings) type of
reaction, the latter dependent variable gets closer to a more substantial reaction that has the potential to lead to policy change (Protess et al., 1987). Do the typical ‘media’ variables such as conflict and negativity play a role, or can reactions by individual political actors rather be explained by more ‘political’ variables like the specialization of the political actor or government and opposition powers? In contrast to interview situations, this approach allows to limit socially desirable answers by political actors because they are asked to judge a news report as a whole.

As already mentioned, by conducting the same experiment in two different Western European countries with a multiparty system, the Netherlands and Switzerland, this study has the potential to capture differences in the political or media system which affect which media messages affect politics. Whereas Dutch MPs are bound by coalition agreements when they are members of a coalition party (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), Swiss MPs do not know such restrictions as there is no clear separation between government and opposition parties. In the Swiss case the composition of “coalitions” changes depending on the issue at stake and power is fairly evenly distributed among the major parties (Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008). In a comparative perspective Swiss MPs have been found to be of the most independent…. More differences between the countries are expected. Issue ownership could play a more significant role in the Netherlands than in Switzerland, where individual expertise and interest of the MP has a more substantial influence on which news reports lead to political action. Next to these differences, probably the most relevant difference between the two countries can be found on the level of the voting districts and media outlets. In the Netherlands, the majority of news outlets with high circulation have a clear national orientation and there is one single voting district. Switzerland on the other hand is much more focused on its districts (cantons) with MPs being elected on that level and also most news media having a clear local orientation. In recent years however, coverage of national politics has become centralized for many of those smaller news outlets to bring down production costs, which leads to national political events being almost exclusively covered from a national perspective. Thus, in Switzerland coverage of national politics is quite uniform when it comes to the print media. Furthermore, in the most recent Party Rep survey Dutch and Swiss MPs were similar in their thinking of local issues. In both countries, the main motivation for MPs is to influence government. This study expects this to
be at least one, if not the, most important motivation for an MP to adjust his or her behavior based on a single news report.

The previous paragraphs have shown how various factors influence whether and to what extent news reports can lead to a political action. The goal of this study was to take it one step further and take a closer look at how specific characteristics of a news report influence the decision of an individual politician to take action.

**Hypotheses**

The following section presents the variables that were tested in the experimental setting by formulating hypotheses. The main question this paper aims to answer is: Which characteristics of a news report lead a politician to take political action? In this section, both political (development, responsibility, issue ownership) and media (news outlet, source) variables are presented that were manipulated in the news reports presented to politicians. However, because also characteristics of the MP, for example whether s/he belongs to an opposition or coalition party, are expected to influence reactions to media coverage, some hypotheses are also further developed.

**A. Development**

Responses to positive and negative news differ, for both the public and policymakers (Soroka, 2006). Politicians can be expected to be more reactive when the media report on a negative development simply because when it concerns a societally relevant issue, they are expected to solve it. On the aggregate level, from a party competition point of view, a distinction needs to be made between government and opposition parties. Whereas government is more concerned with implementing policy, opposition actors are always on the lookout for a new unexpected topic that will put government under pressure. What better moment to do this than when a negative development is taking place? In his content analysis, Thesen (Thesen, 2012) found that opposition parties are more likely to ask a parliamentary question based on negative coverage, because this allows them to put government under scrutiny. Coalition parties on the other hand are more likely to make a statement in reaction to positive
developments because this allows them to underline how well they are doing. The research design of the present study allows to both measure the overall effect of (negative) development as well as the role of the respondent characteristic, namely whether s/he belongs to a coalition or opposition party. The following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1:** Negative developments are more likely to trigger a reaction by politicians than positive developments.

**H1 \_government:** Government MPs are more likely to react politically to a positive developments.

**H1 \_opposition:** Opposition MPs are more likely to react politically to negative developments.

**B. Causal Attribution**

Numerous framing studies have been conducted that investigated how the framing used by the media affect the public perception of who is responsible (e.g. Iyengar, 1991). With the public perception largely being influenced by the media, hardly any politician is in a position to ignore who is made responsible for a certain outcome by the media. If it does not influence them directly, it will do so indirectly through their assumption that the report will also be read by their electorate and fellow politicians. Content analyses of political media coverage in Germany has shown that over 90% of the articles contain a causal attribution towards a political actor (Gerhards, Offerhaus, & Roose, 2009). It was also found to be the most common frame used in political coverage in the Netherlands (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Besides being largely present in the media, clear responsibility attribution has also been found to increase the likelihood of a political reaction (Pritchard, 1992). Authors have distinguished between causal and responsibility attribution (Gerhards, Offerhaus, & Roose, 2007), or causal and treatment responsibility (Iyengar, 1991). This study here focuses on the causal attributions linking to the actor that is made responsible for the outcome at hand.

In this study the influence of causal responsibility attribution to the governing political body, the European Union and real-world developments will be compared. Overall, the expectation is that the more tangible the actor made responsible, the more likely an individual MP will react. The biggest effect is expected for causal attributions to the governing body, because it is after all their responsibility to make sure everything in a country is taken care of.
Although both are multiparty systems, in the Netherlands there is a coalition government formed which usually has a majority in government (Andeweg & Irwin, 2009), whereas in Switzerland all major parties are part of government which means that based on the issue at stake, ad hoc coalitions are formed in parliament which formally holds the highest power. This means that compared with the Netherlands, responsibility is spread far more diffuse among political parties and making a distinction between government and opposition parties is not informative.

\( H2_{CH}: \) Swiss MPs do not make a difference between causal responsibility attributions to government, European Union or real-world developments.

\( H2_{NL}: \) Dutch MPs are more likely to react when causal responsibility is attributed to government than to real-world developments or the European Union.

Developing the argument of the distinction between reactions from opposition and government MPs regarding their differing reactions to positive and negative developments, it can be expected that certain forms of responsibility attributions enhance this effect. Causal responsibility attributed for a negative development that is attributed to government has been found to foster the political reaction by a party (Thesen, 2014). Whether this also holds true on the level of the individual MP or whether this is actually a party strategy the party elite decides on that does not necessarily translate to how individual MPs would behave remains to be seen. The reverse hypothesis was formulated for government MPs when it comes to positive developments:

\( H2_{opposition}: \) Opposition MPs are more likely to take action based on media coverage of negative developments where government is made responsible, than government MPs.

\( H2_{government}: \) Government MPs are more likely to take action based on media coverage of positive developments where government is made responsible, than opposition MPs.

C. Issue

On the political and public stage, parties compete for attention on issues to become the authority when it comes to solving any problems related to a specific issue, mainly because this
has a big influence on vote choices (Belanger & Meguid, 2008). Consequentially, parties choose which issues they react to. Only when the issues in the media fit the “issue competition game of politics” (p. 676), the media reports are picked up in politics and thus influence the political agenda (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010). Issue ownership defined as the issue the party is judged by the public as being competent at solving (Walgrave, Lefevre & Nuytemans, 2009) influences a parties’ reaction to news coverage. How this translates to actions taken by individual MPs is however less clear. As vote-seeking actors competing against MPs from other parties, it would be rational for MPs make sure they capitalize on existing party profiles by reinforcing existing issue ownership (Strom, 1998). In the multi-party systems studied here, only when the party gains enough votes, their own seat is then secure. This leads to expecting that party issue ownership translates to individual MPs actions:

**H3: MPs are not more likely to take a political action based on a news report covering an issue their party owns than one their party does not own.**

Another important aspect related to the issue is specialization of MPs. Within most parties, a form of ‘individual issue ownership’ exists when MPs build a profile among on said issue both in- and outside of parliament (Strom, 1998). The design of the present study allows to put both issue ownership, as a variable manipulated in the media reports, and specialization of the MP, as a respondent characteristic, in relation to each other. Next to this, the comparative nature of this study also allows to investigate whether there are differences in these effects between the two countries. Does the strength of the party, with parties being weaker in Switzerland than in the Netherlands, influence which MPs react to? Or can findings maybe rather be explained by specialization of the MP, with Swiss MPs being far less professionalized and specialized being more generalist compared with their Dutch colleagues. The following general hypothesis is formulated and differences between countries will be discussed in the results and conclusion section:

**H4: The effect of a MPs’ specialization on political reaction is bigger than the effect of party issue ownership.**
D. Media Outlet

Which medium is studied exactly has a major influence on the extent of media influence on politics, past studies on the aggregate impact have shown (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Whereas some posit a greater influence of TV on politics directly, others emphasize the importance of specific newspaper outlets. In the present study I focus on newspaper coverage. The agenda of newspaper media has repeatedly been found to influence the TV news (Butler 1998 in Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Among print outlets differences have been found between the impact of reliable and respected news outlets and local newspapers in an American context (Bartels, 1996). Media outlets also enjoy different credibility among political actors, with some being considered as more influential than others. Influence in this respect can be translated into political power of the medium itself. The present study makes a difference between popular and broadsheet newspapers:

*H5: News reports from broadsheet newspapers are more likely to cause a political reaction than those from popular newspapers.*

E. Information source

Scoops are what sells in the media world, as a consequence journalists are always on the lookout for exclusive information. At the same time, politicians need to keep up to date to developments taking place. Only if the news report actually covers an aspect of the issue that is completely new or where legislators expect a spiral of political and media attention to take off, will media coverage produce a reaction (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992).

*H6: Information which has been uncovered by the news outlet will be more likely to lead to a political reaction than generally available information that has been communicated by official government sources.*

As described above, a total of five variables are manipulated in the news reports to study in what way they influence an individual MPs’ decision on whether or not to take political action. At the same time, a number of politician characteristics were discussed that potentially influence whether action is taken. In addition, some control variables will be included that have
been found to be of influence. Firstly, parliamentary experience is included. The longer MPs are in parliament, the less likely that they will react to media coverage. Next, the importance the MP attributes to a specific issue influences whether they will take action. With a vast array of issues always at play, they have to focus on the ones that are important from their perspective. Controlling for issue importance allows to gauge the actual effect of issue ownership on an MP’s actions. Finally, whether an MP belongs to a coalition or opposition party is not only an important interaction effect, but can also be expected to have a main effect. When asked about what inspired their work, MPs from opposition parties reported being inspired more by media coverage than MPs from coalition parties (Midtbo et al. 2014).

Research Design

In order to disentangle if and to what extent each of the criteria of the medium the news report originates from, the report itself, and the politician influence whether or not a news report enters deliberation, national-level politicians in Switzerland and the Netherlands were asked to rate several identical short news reports in an online survey, followed by a number of more general questions.

Table 2.

Overview of news values associated with experimentally manipulated variables and their operationalization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Positive – Negative [2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue ownership</td>
<td>Owned – Not owned [2] a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media outlet</td>
<td>Broadsheet – Popular [2]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a A total of five issues were included, see table 2.

Five characteristics of the fictional news reports were manipulated as already briefly mentioned in the previous section (see Table 1 for an overview). Firstly, for each party one
issue was chosen that can be considered an owned issue on which the party had built a profile. Table 2 gives an overview of those issues for each party family (Kriesi et al., 2006). The manipulation of another variable, the positive or negative development, was connected with the issue. To ensure comparability, in case of unemployment a specific number was used which equaled to a (de-)crease of 2% unemployment reported in the country for the previous year. It was ensured in the operationalization that the positive/negative interpretation of the development would hold across parties and not just for the party that owned the issue.

Table 2. Operationalization of issue ownership and development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue (owner NL/CH)</th>
<th>Positive development</th>
<th>Negative development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberals (VVD / FDP)</td>
<td>The financial deficit is smaller than predicted</td>
<td>The financial deficit is bigger than predicted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats (PvdA / SP)</td>
<td>Less people are unemployed</td>
<td>More people are unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rightwing (PVV / SVP)</td>
<td>Less immigrants with the family reunion program</td>
<td>More immigrants with the family reunion program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (GL / Grüne)</td>
<td>Air pollution has decreased since previous year</td>
<td>Air pollution has increased since previous year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The effect third variable, causal attribution, was measured by including attribution for the positive or negative development to real world developments (e.g. financial deficit increased due to worldwide economic development), decisions by the European Union or decisions by the national government. In the reference condition, the sentence was omitted and no mention was made of any responsibility attribution. For the two media variables, first a picture of the logo of the media outlet that had published the news report was included as the header and the font of the report was adjusted to match the one used by the media outlet in the print version as closely as possible. One popular (CH: Blick, NL: De Telegraaf) and one broadsheet (CH: NZZ, NL: NRC Handelsblad) that could not be attributed to a specific political leaning were used in each country. As the second media variable, the report mentioned whether the information had been published by official government sources or had been uncovered by the news outlet itself.
Of all 64 combinations of experimental stimuli, a half fraction factorial sample of 32 conditions was drawn using SAS. This approach is superior to random sampling as it makes sure that all conditions are represented equally meaning that the orthogonal and balanced sample of conditions allows for statistically efficient estimations of all effects and first- and second-order interactions, for example. As the main goals is to draw inferences about the population of politicians in each country as a whole and to reduce the burden for every single respondent, the 32 news reports were randomly distributed into 8 decks. Each respondent was presented with only one of these decks, consisting of 4 press releases presented in randomized order and for which the experimental conditions presented was balanced. For each news report, politicians were asked to indicate on a 7-point slider scale how likely it was that they would take a parliamentary action based on the news report.¹

To control for coalition/opposition party membership of the respondent, s marker in the survey linked tracked the party the respondent was from. Other measures for control variables were obtained in a survey part after the experimental stimuli had been judged. Respondents were asked to indicate when they had first been elected into parliament. For a total of five issues which included those of the experimental stimuli they had just received, politicians were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale how politically important those were at that moment. MPs were also asked to indicate the three areas of specialization, and based on a coding of those responses the specialization was gauged. Specialization in unemployment questions was coded if either this was mentioned specifically or a more general reference was made to economy. Specialization in migration/asylum was also coded for respondents making reference to foreign policy, asylum questions in general or security issues. Respondents were coded as having a specialization in environmental questions with stimuli having referred to air pollution, if they mentioned environmental or energy issues. Specialization in area of financial deficit were coded when respondents mentioned finances in general or more specifically government finances. This was also done for respondents referring to taxes and other payments. Finally, specialization referring to abortion issues were coded for respondents which responded that their specialization included family or healthcare issues. Overall, because respondents had been
asked to indicate the three most important areas of expertise, some had scores in several areas that experimental stimuli had touched upon, whereas others had no specific expertise.

Data collection took place in two waves in both countries, first in May and June 2014 and again in the fall after the summer break of parliaments. Swiss MPs were contacted in June 2014 during the three weeks parliament was in session, either personally in parliamentary buildings and asked to fill in the survey on a tablet computer by the principal investigator or via email with a link to the online survey. As not all parties had participated equally, in a second wave two MPs of two parties were again contacted in the fall (September 2014) via E-mail to increase response. This resulted in 41 (June: 41, September: xx) German speaking MPs participating which is a response rate of 31%. The average age of respondents was xx and % were female. In the Dutch case, in the first wave press secretaries who had been interviewed a few months before by the researcher were asked to forward information on the study to their MPs before each was invited to the survey in a personal email. The procedure was repeated in the fall (September). This resulted in an overall response rate of xx for the Dutch MPs (May: 21, September: xx). Overall, respondents can be considered representative of the MPs in the Second Chamber in both Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Results

What characteristics of a news report influence whether political action is taken by the politician? These two questions are discussed in turn, including a comparison of the results for the two countries included in the study.

A strong effect of negative developments can be found (H1) in Switzerland; a negative development is a lot more likely to trigger a political reaction by an MP than a positive one. When testing whether this effect is contingent upon whether an MP belongs to a government

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1 Only Swiss MPs that had indicated that German was their language of correspondence and that came either from a canton where German newspapers were sold were included resulting in N=129, omitting 71 French or Italian speaking Swiss MPs.
2 By including a dummy variable in the regression models for wave of data collection and comparing mean scores I will make sure to check for systematic differences between the responses in the two waves.
3 Please note that results for the Netherlands are so far only based on data from one government party, more data is currently collected.
or opposition party, no effects are found (not reported in tables, \(b=2.5, \ p=.131\)). Because in the Netherlands data collection is still ongoing and so far only responses from government party members were collected, H1 on government – opposition differences could not be tested yet.

When turning to the second hypothesis on responsibility attribution, results are contrary to expectations for both the Netherlands and Switzerland when looking at the main effect. Based on the data collected so far, there is no evidence that government MPs are triggered to more political reaction when for example responsibility is attributed to government (\(H2_{NL}, b=-.74, \ p=.151\)). In the Swiss case, once the model controls for MP characteristics, responsibility attribution to parliament is significantly more likely to trigger a political reaction by an MP than when none is made (\(b=.78, \ p=.028\)). When thus a news report mentions that parliament is responsible for the situation, MPs notice and are more likely to come into action.

To further investigating how responsibility attributions might affect political reactions, interaction effects were included to see whether this effect is in any way contingent. In a first step, an interaction effect with the type of development (positive or negative) was included. Results are displayed in figure xx. Surprisingly, results show a significant difference only in the case of responsibility to real-world developments, but not for other types of responsibility attributions included in this study. When responsibility for a negative development is attributed to broader influences such as general economic tendencies, they are more likely to come into action than when it concerns a positive development. Between all other types of responsibility attribution, there are no significant differences. In a next step, a hypothesis will be tested that expected MPs from government and opposition parties. Again, data from the Netherlands will become available soon to further investigate this question.

Table 3.
Hierarchical linear regression of news report evaluations by Swiss and Dutch MPs.⁴

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⁴ Data collection for the Netherlands is still in progress.
When turning to the third and final political variable tested, party issue ownership, H3 expected that politicians are more inclined to bring up news reports that cover issues their party owns than those on which their party does not have a profile. Results in both the Netherlands (b=.70, p=.001) and Switzerland (b=.45, p=.022) an effect of party issue ownership in the models that only include political and media variables. Once however MP characteristics are included like interest and specialization, issue ownership is not significant anymore (NL b=.61, p=.144; CH b=.27, p=.331). These findings are in line with previous research and partly confirming H3. When taking into account how including MP characteristics affects the models, the results also indicate that directly transferring findings from the aggregate level to behavior of individual MPs is probably correct. Once models control for some of the characteristics that also tap into the influence of the issue of the media report, party issue ownership is not of significant influence anymore.

Finally, let us have a look at the two media variables that were included. H4 on the differences between popular and broadsheet outlets can partially be confirmed in Switzerland. In the model including the political and media variables, reports from a broadsheet newspaper

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental manipulations</th>
<th>Netherlands Model 0</th>
<th>Netherlands Model 1</th>
<th>Netherlands Model 2</th>
<th>Switzerland Model 0</th>
<th>Switzerland Model 1</th>
<th>Switzerland Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.985***</td>
<td>0.576</td>
<td>0.434</td>
<td>2.529***</td>
<td>-0.811</td>
<td>-1.751</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(.67)</td>
<td>(.98)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
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<td>0.191</td>
<td>1.067***</td>
<td>1.362***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.21)</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
<td>(.21)</td>
<td>(.26)</td>
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<td>Owned issue (Not owned)</td>
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<td>0.607</td>
<td>0.450*</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.22)</td>
<td>(.42)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
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<td>Responsibility attribution (None)</td>
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<td>-0.252</td>
<td>0.216</td>
<td>0.615</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>(.45)</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>(.39)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>National government</td>
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<td>-0.741</td>
<td>0.268</td>
<td>0.775*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.52)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.35)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.203</td>
<td>0.278</td>
<td>0.485</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.46)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td>(.35)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet (Popular)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.461*</td>
<td>0.369</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.21)</td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>(.21)</td>
<td>(.28)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official government source (News outlet)</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.161</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.23)</td>
<td>(.41)</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
<td>(.25)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Respondent variables**

| Government party MP (opposition) | 1 | 0.225 |
|                                 |  | (.94)  |
| Specialization                  | 1.506 | 0.222 |
|                                 | (.25) | (.41)  |
| Experience in years             | 0.136 | -0.039 |
|                                 | (.20) | (.03)  |
| Issue importance                | 0.063 | 0.132 |
|                                 | (.41) | (.08)  |

Note. All dummy variables in models, reference category in parantheses.
NL: N=32, 12 respondents. CH: N=186, 47 respondents. Standard Errors in parentheses.
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p< 0.001
a Only government MPs included so far.
are significantly more likely to trigger a political action than those from a popular newspaper (b=.46, p=.029). Once models also control for MP characteristics, in neither country are the effects of media variables significant. Neither H5 (type of news outlet) nor H6 (news source) seem to conclusively have a significant effect on whether political action is taken.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented first results of a study of MPs were presented. Individual MPs were presented with fictional news reports to investigate what variables of a media message trigger politicians to a political reaction. The experimental approach allowed for a stringent test looking beyond general linkages between the political and media realm and actually zooming in on the level of the individual news report. Findings show that the issue and the overall development described in the report do matter when it comes to the question of whether a news report has the potential to lead to political action. More fine-grained characteristics of a message like the actor made responsible for the outcome described or the source of the information showed to be far less important. Data currently collected for the Netherlands will allow to study how the distribution of political power between parties affect individual-level behavior of politicians. So far, findings from Switzerland and the Netherlands point towards the existence of general behavioral patterns.

The political context within which a news report appears is expected to be of major influence on the effect of a news report. The controlled experimental setting with the same stimulus being used in two countries allowed to study this effect in detail. This advantage of the experiment is at the same time the biggest limitation of the study. Although news reports were formulated as realistically as possible, clearly a popular newspaper formulates its report different from a broadsheet one, and only mentioning that the report had appeared in a different newspaper without actually changing the wording of said report does not provide enough clues for heavy news consumers like politicians. However, as informed as politicians are, it would be interesting for future research to not only focus on behavior, but also on how perceptions and attitudes of elites are changed through media coverage. This might not be attitude towards a subject, but rather the perception of public support for or against a position
taken which in turn influences their actions. Although not an easy task, it is crucial that we learn more about the media effects on elites as those are the ones making those decisions. The present paper introduced an approach on how to study small populations like elites experimentally. I hope others will follow this and take on this challenge.

References


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1 Exact question wording Switzerland: Netherlands: . In addition, respondents were also asked to indicate for each news report whether they would bring it up if today a parliamentary party meeting would be held. Question order was randomized, responses to this question are not discussed in this paper.