How Political Actors Use the Media

Peter Van Aelst · Stefaan Walgrave
Editors

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A Functional Analysis of the Media's Role in Politics

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Foreword: Political Actors and the Media

In terms of love–hate relationships, few may be more intense than that between political leaders and the journalists who cover their actions. Without the journalists, government leaders would find it harder to get their messages (and names) out to the general public. Other policy makers and advocates would not be able to raise their suspicions, critiques, and complaints about the direction of government policies, nor would they easily be able to present their alternative vision to the public for consideration at the next election. Clearly, politicians and policy professionals of all types depend on the media for both credit-claiming and for generating public concern about policies they feel have gone wrong. At the same time as political leaders rely on the media to get their stories out, so do journalists rely on people in and around government for the substance of their reporting. Journalists compete to be the first to report this or that change in policy, new government statistic, police or crime report, or even the weather, which typically comes from a government source. Most government officials are only too happy to provide the type of information needed for this type of routine media coverage of government actions. But journalists also need the disgruntled losers in the policy process; they need the stories, the complaints, the alternative proposals that were rejected, in a word, they need the combat and the struggle of politics to lure their readers in.

Like any love-hate relation, that between political actors and the media is complex and nuanced. In this book, Peter Van Aelst and Stefaan Walgrave bring together a stellar cast of authors who have each

delved deeply into the nuances of media-government relations in various countries, all based on strong empirical research projects, not just informal essays. The editors propose and the authors address the "information and arena" framework. This brings out collective focus on how the media constitute both an important source of information for those involved in the political world as well as an arena of public debate and discourse separate from, and not controlled by, particular political elites. Therefore, the editors force the authors to address the paradoxes and inconsistencies of media-government relations.

There can no democratic government without robust journalism. And yet governments robustly dislike the media. Political and government leaders are immensely advantaged in their relations with the press, and yet they are not fully in control. Journalists rely on their government sources for officially sanctioned information as well as leaks, unofficial information, and the "inside scoop" that makes their work possible; journalists have both a dependency and a power over their government colleagues. Journalists tend to believe that "bad news" is more interesting, newsworthy, or sells papers better than cheery press releases from government sources. And yet, given the immense advantages that official sources have in the control of information, many times journalists are completely dependent on the government for their content, and they can be manipulated. We only need to look at the initial stages of the US war in Iraq, where journalists took seriously for months unfounded US government assertions of "weapons of mass destruction" under the control of the Saddam Hussein regime. But, as contributor Amber Boydstun pointed out in an earlier study (2013), eventually the government lost control of the narrative associated with the Iraq invasion. Journalists embedded with military units initially reported on the bravery, technological prowess, and successes of US forces, just as their Pentagon handlers presumably calculated they would. But, being on the ground for weeks or months at a time, and looking for stories, they began to make observations that the brass might have preferred to keep unseen: inadequate armor plating on thousands of vehicles, equipment failures, and so on. The initial narrative spun out of control as the weeks went on.

Philosophers sometimes ponder: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? In the realm of politics, if a government official implements a new policy, but no one reports on it, did it happen? Yes: the policy will change and government will operate differently. But, no: Voters and citizens may never find out about the policy change and the leader will miss out on the credit, or avoid the

blame. Of course, governments make un-newsworthy policy changes on a daily basis, often for good reasons. And, of course, journalists are more prone to write about failed policies than school buses that get the children to their classrooms on time, just like yesterday, even if they use a more efficient system to do so. In fact, the vast majority of government actions, particularly successful ones, go unreported. Understanding the selection effects that cause journalistic attention to focus on a small and most likely unrepresentative slice of all government action, bringing it to the glare of public scrutiny and demanding accountability, is fundamental to our understanding of government itself. This is especially true since most citizens know, or can know of government only what they read in the papers or hear though other media outlets.

Generally speaking, modern western governments have vast informational advantages over outside actors, at least with regard to the state of public policy. (Private sector actors may have similar information advantages with regard to their own industry, and this "information asymmetry" has long been seen as a key driver of their lobbying power.) But, as this book makes clear, journalists often report on exactly the type of information that political leaders may need the most, and that political outsiders also crave: who is supporting, who is opposing, where is public opinion, what are the interest groups and specialist actors saying, how will this issue play in the next election? Here, political leaders have no crystal ball, and they are utterly reliant on the media to expand their own information networks. In fact, given that issues may be higher or lower on the media agenda, with differential impacts on the political fates of those supporting or opposing the policy in question, political leaders struggle to control that agenda. But they cannot, at least not without the involvement and cooperation of journalists themselves. And given that journalists are looking for different things than political leaders, often diametrically opposite things, this can be a complex dance, indeed. Thinking of the media as an arena of politics, as Van Aelst and Walgrave insist in this book, gives some insight into these interdependencies.

If the politicians depend on the media for certain forms of (political) information which they can never control unilaterally, they also look to the media to understand the level of salience that a given issue may take. Here, they are not merely watching, but they play a role in enhancing or reducing the salience of any given issue by their own actions. Thus, the media represent not just a source of important bits of information, but also a key arena in which the political struggle, and policy process, is played out. Politics is sometimes done in private, but what we know best is that

part that takes place on the front pages and on the nightly news. Political actors cannot govern in any western democracy without a powerful media presence, and they must learn to operate within the "media arena."

Thinking of the media as an arena of politics, separate from party conventions, agency meetings, voter interactions, or parliamentary chambers helps us understand the skill set needed to rise high in political office. Whether it is learned on the job or selected for when career choices advances become possible, high level political leaders must be adept at the media game. In today's politics, it is not optional for a national leader to master the media arena, no more than to be good in oral debate if a minister. Further, these pressures have increased over time, changing the list of criteria we look for in our national leaders. Not all these changes have necessarily been for the best.

While the media have changed politics and while the interactions between political leaders and journalists have been complex mixtures of mutual dependencies and advantage, these differ in many systematic ways, each explored in the chapters to come. One important distinction is the degree of policy focus of the media outlet. These range from highly specialized reporting outlets targeting given public policies to "respectable" mainstream newspapers and news-related television to gossip and entertainment outlets, with other media niches too numerous to mention. Different types of outlets have different implications for politics, obviously. These differences interact with differences across countries in their political party systems, cultural expectations and legal structures relating to openness in government, and so on. Finally, there is great variation in strategies and behaviors by individual policymakers and journalists. With so many moving parts, it is no wonder that we have no single theory about how political actors use the media, or of how the media use political actors. But this book pushes us a long way in the right direction.

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Acknowledgements

This book started with an idea. We brainstormed about an overall framework about the role of the media in politics that would integrate the growing literature on media and politics. This brainstorm resulted in a theoretical paper that was published in *Journal of Communication* titled "Information and Arena. The Dual Function of the News Media for Political Elites". We thank JoC editor Silvio Waisbord for his critical but constructive role in getting our work improved and published. During the writing of this article we also got useful input from Rens Vliegenthart, Amber Boydstun, Jay Blumler, Claes de Vreese, all members of our research group (www.M2P.be) and several anonymous reviewers.

We considered the article, not as an end, but rather as the beginning of an intellectual and empirical process. This is where this book comes in. We asked several leading scholars on this topic to critical challenge or test the Information and Arena model. We are grateful that all the authors have taken up this challenge, by not simply writing another media and politics paper, but actually interacting with our ideas. The result is a diverse but coherent book on how and why politicians use the mass media.

An important part of this process was a workshop that was held in Leiden, The Netherlands, in June 2016. The necessary financial support for this meeting was provided by a VIDI research grant from the Dutch research council (NWO). Besides all the authors, Prof. Frank Baumgartner, participated as a critical discussant, whose thoughtful

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