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Media Matter
The Political Influences of the News Media

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It is fairly uncontroversial to argue that politics of today is mediated politics. An overwhelming majority of citizens get their information about current affairs and political events through the mass media. In that sense, the mass media has become the major arena for public debate on the political issues of the day, as well as the major channel through which politicians and other political actors can communicate with citizens (Bennett & Entman 2000; Blumler & Gurevitch 1995). In that very basic sense, few would disagree that “media matter” in a democracy. That is not to say, however, that significant disagreement does not exist regarding exactly how and to what extent media matter. When it comes to conceptualizing the sources, character and magnitude of the mass media’s influence in democratic countries there is still considerable debate (Meyer 2002; Schudson 2003; Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006).

Questions regarding how and to what extent “media matter” cannot be fruitfully answered without a clear conception of what “matters” actually mean. One could distinguish between at least three different targets of media influence that all have consequences for their function in democratic countries (this is an extension of Asp’s (1986) two-dimensional typology of mass media influence). First, the mass media may have an influence over policy content and actions taken by political actors. Studies focusing on this dimension of media influence typically use media content or behavior to explain decisions taken by political actors (Davis 2007; Schiffer 2008; Walgrave 2008). Research on the so-called CNN effect, for example, asks whether intensive news coverage of international affairs has a policy agenda setting effect on government (Livingston 1997). Furthermore, the literature on mediatization focuses on how political actors and institutions adapt to media logic – i.e., the norms, routines and demands of the news media – in order gain public attention (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008). Second, media influence may also refer to the power to shape media content. A long tradition of journalism research has, for example, analyzed the relative power of journalists and their political sources in shaping the content of news coverage (Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1978; Reich 2009). In Herbert Gans’ famous
words, the negotiation of news can be characterized as a tango between reporters and their sources (1979). Whether journalists or sources are leading the dance is still a question of controversy within the field. The question of media influence over news content is not confined to the role of individual journalists though, but could also be addressed from a structural perspective where the relative influence of certain media-organizational factors on media content are investigated (Shoemaker & Reese 1996). Third, the mass media could exert a significant influence on public opinion, knowledge, perceptions and behaviors. This mainly refers to the “media effects” paradigm in mass communication research, which can be traced back to the early writings of Walter Lippmann (1997) as well as the pioneering campaign studies by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944). The media effects paradigm typically answers questions about the influence of the media on ordinary citizens – their opinions, worldviews and behaviors.

Thus, the broad question concerning whether “media matter” can refer to different targets of influence. Theoretically there is a wide range of possible combinations of influence ranging from a weak to a strong media influence in society. Consider figure 1 where, for simplicity, the degree of media influence has been dichotomized. While the media could “matter” (i.e., be influential) in relation to one certain target, it could be much less influential to another. The cells represent various situations ranging from a very strong media – which has a substantial influence on media content, policy and citizens (1) – to a very weak media – which lacks influence over its own content, on policy and on citizens (8). Most theories of media influence focus on one of these three dimensions, or
targets of influence, but make explicit or implicit assumptions about the other dimensions (Page 2001). For instance, official dominance models of journalism typically depict journalists as highly dependent on official actors for the construction of media content, but highly influential when it comes to shaping citizens’ worldviews (Hall et al. 1978; Lawrence 2000). The news media’s inferior position towards powerful political institutions also reduces its impact on policy content and actions taken by political actors. This conception of the media is represented by cell 6 in figure 1.

A comprehensive understanding of the role of the mass media in contemporary democracies must necessarily recognize the crucial distinction between the mass media as an arena for public debate and the news media as an independent actor in the political communication processes. As an arena the mass media provide a forum for political actors to discuss issues and current events—a function which is closely tied to the notion of the media as the marketplace of ideas (Cook 2005; Iyengar & McGrady 2007). As an independent institution the news media is guided by a certain logic that influences the character and content of political communication in certain ways. It is well recognized that journalism has gone through a process of professionalization with respect to certain values, rules and norms of appropriate behavior during the last couple of decades (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001; Ekström & Nohrstedt 1996; Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002; Schudson 2003; Wiik 2010). A mixture of professional norms as well as organizational, economic and legal constraints shapes the activities of the news media today. In addition then, the question of whether and, more interestingly, how the media matter is also dependent on what is meant by “media”. News media—organized and controlled primarily by journalists—is only one specific type of media organization, apart from entertainment and niche media channels for example.

Purpose

The studies in this dissertation investigate various aspects of news media influence in mediated democracies. To be more specific, the main purpose of this dissertation is to test several theories, or theoretically grounded claims, regarding the relationship between political actors and the news media on the one hand, and between the news media and citizens on the other. The theories that are investigated apply to slightly different areas within the political communication research field but are all focused on various aspects of the political influence of the news media.

Against this background, the scope, breadth and limits of the studies in this dissertation can be placed into context. First, the focus of this dissertation is on
the role and behavior of the news media in democratic societies. I am not interested in saying anything about the role of other media organizations or channels of communication. From now on then, the term media will almost exclusively refer to news media and should be understood as such. Second, the separate studies address questions along two of the three dimensions of influence outlined above. The first three articles analyze the influence of the news media on citizens. In particular it is investigated whether the news media have any influence on citizens’ perceptions of issue importance (agenda setting) as well as on their interest and involvement in politics. The last three articles address questions regarding the influence over media content. More specifically, they focus on the negotiation of newsworthiness between journalists and political actors. The studies do not address questions related to the first dimension of influence, i.e., whether media content has an impact on policy content and actions taken by political actors. This does not mean that this dimension is of less importance or relevance. In fact, understanding the influence of the news media on policy and political activities is vital for a full picture of the impact of the news media in democratic societies. At the same time, a comprehensive and full investigation of the entire range of possible influences of the news media is beyond the scope of most research projects. To be sure, the studies of this dissertation are far from giving a complete picture regarding the two dimensions of influence that are actually addressed. They should rather be viewed as contributions to a larger research agenda that aims at increasing our knowledge of media effects and news production processes.

The rest of this introduction summarizes and discusses the separate articles. Each study is placed into context of contemporary research, their implications for the current state of knowledge are evaluated and some avenues for future research are outlined. I will start by discussing what is known as “media effects” research, i.e., the influence of the news media on citizens. I then turn to questions about influence over media content and, more specifically, the relations between political actors and journalists.

**Media Effects and Roads to Political Involvement**

Even if the discussion about media influence is narrowed down to being about its influence on citizens only, the question of whether “media matter” still elicits different answers. Most importantly, we need to distinguish between different types of media effects on citizens. Media effects typically refer to “the social or psychological changes that occur in consumers of media message systems [...] as a result of being exposed to, processing, or acting on those mediated messages”
The political influences of the news media (Bryant & Zillmann 2009: 13f.). Such media effects could be either behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, emotional or psychological. Furthermore, media effects could be immediate or they could be long-term, intentional or accidental etc. (ibid). Even though much has happened since the first media effect studies were conducted, the classic agenda setting assumption that the news media may not be very successful in telling people what to think but stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, recognizes the crucial distinction between different types of media effects (McCombs 2004). A commonly held view is that the news media is more influential when it comes to cognitive effects, i.e., in changing what people think or know, than when it comes to influencing citizens’ values and behavior (Asp 1986).

The first studies of political media effects, conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and his team of researchers, concluded that the influence of the news media on people’s attitudes and voting behavior during elections campaigns was quite small (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). Prior beliefs, limited and selective exposure to congenial campaign communication, as well as the strong influence of social networks worked to reduce the influence of what was reported in mass media during the campaign (Price & Feldman 2009: 115). This was the beginning of the so-called “minimal effects” paradigm in media effects research (McQuail 2005), which lasted until the late 1960s and early 1970s when societal changes combined with a reborned scholarly interest for media effects took place. Two societal developments were of particular importance for reconsideration of the prevailing “minimal effects” paradigm at that time (Asp 1986: 45). First, the political stability declined in the U.S. with weakened ties between citizens and political parties. Voter volatility increased and party identification waned, trends that have accelerated in many western democracies up until today (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002; Oscarsson & Holmberg 2008). Second, the media landscape changed dramatically with the spread of television, which led to a broader reach of mediated political communication as well as a weaker influence of selective exposure to campaign information (Asp 1986: 45f.). Both these trends worked to increase the influence of news media on citizens’ cognitions and attitudes. Furthermore, the importance of these societal changes for potential media effects bring questions regarding the consequences of today’s rapid media landscape transformations to the fore. Put simply, the intense proliferation of media channels and outlets, the vast increase in media choice among citizens and the fragmentation of audiences raise a very fundamental question for media effects research: Are we back in a era of minimal effects? (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Blumler & Kavanagh 1999; Takeshita 2005).
The Agenda Setting Function of the News Media

The first study of this dissertation, *Unemployment on the Agenda* (Article I), investigates a specific type of media effect, the so-called agenda setting effect of the news media (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Wanta & Ghanem 2007). Agenda setting theory posits that while the news media might not be very successful in telling people what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about. According to agenda setting theory citizens will regard topics and issues that are covered extensively by the media as important. Stated differently, topics on top of the media agenda are transferred to the public agenda (McLeod et al. 1974; McCombs 2004), which is a clear statement about the causal impact of media content and emphasis on citizens’ perceptions.

Agenda setting theory was one of the media effect theories that developed during the 1970s partly as a result of the political and media environmental changes that took place. Since then hundreds of studies from different countries have documented the presence of agenda setting effects across a variety of topics and settings (McCombs 2004; Wanta & Ghanem 2007). However, recent societal developments have called into question traditional media effect theories such as agenda setting. Starting in the 1980s there has been a rapid proliferation of new media channels and, as a consequence, profound increases in the opportunities for media choice among citizens (Prior 2007). These trends have substantially altered the role of traditional news media in opinion formation processes, and rendered it uncertain as to whether agenda setting theory has become obsolete or not (Takeshita 2005). As Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh have argued: “The presumption of mass exposure to relatively uniform political content, which has underpinned each of the three leading paradigms of political effect – agenda setting, the spiral of silence, and the cultivation hypothesis – can no longer be taken for granted” (1999: 221f.).

What seems to be most crucial for the potentially diminishing impact of traditional news media is the growing importance of selectivity when it comes to patterns of media use. To an extent never seen before citizens now have the opportunities to select media content based on individual preferences but also to avoid information which is of no interest to them: “audiences can more selectively expose themselves to different media as a function of political interest, such that those with minimal interest can avoid news altogether” (Price & Feldman 2009: 124). There are also those who argue that the heightened role of selective exposure is likely to have more profound consequences for some types of media effects than others. For instance, Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar argue that...
The increasing level of selective exposure based on partisan preference thus presages a new era of minimal consequences, at least insofar as persuasive effects are concerned. But other forms of media influence, such as indexing, agenda setting, or priming may continue to be important. Put differently, selective exposure is more likely to erode the influence of the tone or valence of news messages (vis-à-vis elected officials) but may have little impact on the sheer volume of news (2008: 725).

It is important to remember though that news media exposure is a function of both demand (personal factors) and supply (media environmental factors) – a fact that makes the relative influence of traditional news media a variable that varies not only over time but also across countries and local communities (Althaus et al. 2009; Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007).

The Swedish national election campaign 2006 provided an interesting opportunity to study the agenda setting influence of the news media. The issue of unemployment and job creation dominated the news environment during the election campaign. An extensive content analysis of campaign coverage in eleven national news media outlets, conducted by Kent Asp at the University of Gothenburg, showed that this issue was clearly on top of the news agenda during the four-week period leading up to the election (Asp 2006). Asp notes that the issue of employment “strongly dominated the media election campaign” (2006: 30). Therefore, this election campaign can be considered a “critical case” for agenda setting theory: If no agenda setting effects could be detected in this exceptional context, there is less reason to expect them in more issue-diverse contexts. By using a unique panel survey with a representative sample of Swedish citizens, the study tracks changes in perceptions of issue importance among the public during the election campaign both at the aggregate and the individual level.

The results reveal agenda setting effects on both levels. First, the percentage of respondents naming unemployment as the most important political issue in-creased by 17 percent during the campaign – a remarkable increase given the rather short time-span of the study. Second, it is shown that attention to political news coverage had a positive effect on naming unemployment as the most important political issue by the end of the campaign, even when controlling for perceptions of issue importance at the beginning of the campaign as well as other control variables. Thus, people who paid more attention to political news during the campaign were more likely than others to name unemployment as the most important problem at the end of the campaign, irrespective of what issue they considered most important at the beginning of the election campaign. Third, this agenda setting effect was stronger for people with lower levels of political interest, which suggest that psychological involvement in politics has the potential to mitigate or dampen the influence of the news media. Fourth, media
effects were weaker – or less consistent – when estimated using exposure-based measures rather than the attention-based measure of media use. While exposure to public service television news generated agenda setting effects, media effects for exposure to newspapers were almost non-existent based on standard levels of statistical significance.

The relatively weak agenda setting effects for the outlet-specific exposure measures can be interpreted in several ways. One conclusion is that exposure to the news media does not really matter that much. Alternatively one might consider the potential biases of self-reported media use measures as an explanation for the different results between attention-based and exposure-based measures of news consumption (Chaffee & Schleuder 1986; Price & Zaller 1993; Prior 2009). While it is widely recognized that exposure is a necessary condition for attention, these different concepts might also explain why agenda setting effects appeared more consistently using attention to political news as a media use measure. As James Potter argues, exposure and attention imply two very different psychological states on behalf of the media audience (Potter 2009: 30). Attention to news, and particularly political news is a conscious activity which is likely “to expend more mental energy evaluating the message or inferring a pattern from the elements in that message with elements in remembered messages” (Potter 2009: 30). Exposure, on the other hand, is governed by automatic routines whereby media content is not consciously reflected upon. These different information-processing states might explain some of the different results with respect to the agenda setting effects. Not only is conscious and active information processing more likely to generate media effects (Chaffee & Schleuder 1986), but could also be a reason why less politically interested citizens were more affected by the news media than people with high levels of political interest. This is actually what could be expected given the that the degree of media influence is dependent on both new and the mass of stored information that news consumers possess (Converse 1962; De Vreese & Boomgarden 2006; Zaller 1992). People with higher levels of political interest are more likely to both posses and use well structured prior attitudes and beliefs when encountering new information, and are, therefore, less likely to be influenced by media coverage. And this interaction should be more evident when we take attention rather than exposure into account.

Given this, it is striking that exposure to public service television news produced the clearest agenda setting influence on the individual level during the election campaign. This is a very important finding because it has implications for how we consider the influence of traditional news media channels in today’s rapidly changing media environment. The extent to which “media matter” in
opinion formation processes is dependent not only on its effect on individuals but also on its reach in society (Asp 1986; Johansson 1998). Chris Achen (1982) has distinguished between the theoretical importance of an independent variable (the value of the unstandardized b-coefficient) and the level importance – or actual importance – of the same variable (taking the reach, i.e., the mean score of the variable, into account). Not only did exposure to public service television news produce the clearest agenda setting effects, but these news media channels also had the broadest reach in Sweden during the campaign 1: They are the most viewed among the television newscasts and reach a much broader segment than any single newspaper. In that sense, media influence on public opinion and perceptions will depend on how media market fragmentation and increasing media choice affects the composition of the news consumers in the future. I see two crucial implications of the changing media environment. First, the influence of individual news media such as public service television news might decrease due to shrinking audiences. Thus, even though media content affects viewers, the number of people who tune into these channels decreases. As the audience for each news media investigated here has decreased substantially since their heydays just a couple of decades ago, their actual importance has most likely already shrunk. However, this is not to say that the collective behavior of different news media cannot have a profound impact on public opinion – which is a question about the degree of homogeneity of news content across media organizations. Second, as the importance of selectivity processes in media use increases, traditional news media channels might be left with a cadre of politically interested news consumers – exactly the same group of citizens which are least likely to be influenced by the news media in the first place.

In sum, while the news media still have a significant public agenda setting influence, ongoing changes in the media environment are likely to alter the dominance of individual media organizations. Future research should therefore continue analyzing the news media’s role in opinion formation and pay particular attention to patterns of media use among citizens; how selective exposure influence attention, reception and attitude formation across different segments of the population; how the degree of homogeneity and heterogeneity in media content influence selective exposure as well as how interpersonal social networks mediate or reinforce media effects.

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1 These estimates are based on the same panel survey.
News Media Use and Political Involvement

Agenda setting is just one type of media influence on citizens. Another type of effect that has yielded extensive public and scholarly debate concerns the consequences of media use for political trust and engagement among citizens. In short, some argue that the media has a malign effect on democracy by decreasing levels of political trust, interest and participation (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; O’Keefe 1980). The news media’s tendency to frame politics in terms of a game – by focusing on who is winning and losing in the political horse-race, dwelling on potential motives and strategies behind political action, and by being constantly occupied by opinion polls – rather than in terms of issues and policy substance is commonly seen as an important cause of declining trust and engagement among citizens (De Vreese 2005; Patterson 1993). As Kenneth Newton has summarized this so-called media malaise effect of the news media:

‘Attack journalism’, said to be more common, undermines politicians and political institutions, and encourages politicians to campaign negatively by attacking opponents, not stating their own case. This combination of bad news, attack journalism and negative politics tends to create a pervasive sense of cynicism, distrust and suspicion of modern politics and politicians (Newton 1999: 577f).

In contrast to these “media malaise” effect theories proponents of “mobilization” theories argue that the news media promote civic knowledge, trust in politicians and institutions as well as political involvement (Dalton 2006; Norris 2000). Several studies based on cross-sectional survey data lend support to such mobilization theories. A British study found, for instance, little support for any malaise effects due to news media use. Rather, reading broadsheet newspapers was associated with higher levels of political knowledge, self-assessed understanding of politics and political interest – effects that were found for television news as well, although weaker (Newton 1999). Kees Aarts and Holli Semetko (2003) similarly looked at media effects on political knowledge, efficacy, trust and participation in the Netherlands. The results supported a dual effects hypothesis in which “watching public television news regularly has a positive influence on a number of political involvement measures including political knowledge, internal efficacy, and turning out to vote, whereas regularly watching commercial television news has a negative impact on these aspects of political involvement” (Aarts & Semetko 2003: 776).

Overall, studies of media malaise and mobilization effects suggest that the influences of the news media – whether the media promotes or undermines different civic virtues – depend on media content. Many studies supporting media
malaise theories have linked exposure to strategic news frames of politics in the media to increased level of political cynicism using experiments as well as panel surveys. Mostly these negative effects on cynicism are not found when participants are exposed to issue-framed news stories (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; De Vreese & Elenbaas 2008; Valentino et al. 2001). Studies supporting the mobilization argument are typically based on cross-sectional surveys in which political knowledge, interest and involvement are regressed on different measures of self-reported media use and a host of control variables. A question of crucial importance with regards to the causality between media use and political attitudes concerns selective exposure. Pippa Norris, one of the mobilization theorists, has proposed a virtuous circle argument between media use and political involvement (Norris 2000), where both selective exposure to political news and mobilization has a mutual influence on one another. She argues that the most convincing alternative is that there is an interactive reciprocal effect at work, or the theory of a ‘virtuous circle’, where we assume that prior interests and motivation lead towards patterns of media exposure and, in turn, use of these information sources strengthens and reinforces existing opinions and attitudes. […] Hence, people most interested and informed about politics and public affairs will be most motivated to seek campaign information by reading newspapers, watching TV news, and surfing the Internet, thereby becoming more aware of the electoral choices, reducing the information costs of voting participation (Norris 2003: 10f.).

Without panel studies however, she argues, it “remains difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the causality underlying the relationship between use of the media and civic engagement” (Norris 2003: 11). This is precisely the question addressed in the second study of this dissertation, entitled Media Malaise or a Virtuous Circle? (Article II).

The study builds on the same panel survey used for analyzing agenda setting effects during the Swedish national election campaign 2006, and focuses exclusively on the causal relationships between news media exposure, attention to political news and political interest. While it is highly likely that political interest influences news media exposure and attention to political news, the study also addresses the key question that divides proponents of media malaise and mobilization theories: Does news media exposure and attention to political news decrease or increase levels of political interest among citizens?

The panel study enables a close analysis of individual-level change in news media use and political interest during the election campaign. By employing statistical techniques deliberately developed for the study of causal and reciprocal relationships, it is shown that there is a consistent reciprocal influence between
political interest and attention to political news during the campaign. Citizens with a stronger interest in politics are more likely to pay attention to news about politics, but attention to political news also increases their interest. The relationships between political interest and exposure to different news media outlets are weaker and less consistent, but a general pattern of positive reciprocal influence is evident. It appears that political interest has a fairly consistent positive effect on exposure to public service television and radio news (Rapport, Aktuellt and Ekot), and that subsequent effects on interest from these news media are positive as well, even though these effects are weaker and appear less consistently. Few significant effects are found with regards to reading newspapers or watching commercial television news. However, given that the findings reveal no negative effects on political interest at all but rather point to a positive mutual influence between exposure to news media, attention to political news and interest in politics, it is argued that the notion of a virtuous circle best captures the relationship between these variables.

It seems to be the case then that public service broadcasting channels have more positive democratic effects than commercial channels, a finding that is in line with past cross-sectional research (Aarts & Semetko 2003; Holtz-Bacha & Norris 2001). What appears to matter is media content, not media type. Media organizations that either devote more journalistic energy, or have a public service obligation, to serious political news coverage also contribute to democratic virtues to a larger extent than other more commercially oriented news media channels. It isn’t television per se that has a particular influence on citizens’ participatory attitudes, but the type of content that is offered (Newton 1999).

At the same time it is important to remember that political interest proved to be a more consistent predictor of exposure to public service news compared to the reverse public service effects on political interest, which might say something about the dominant causal direction of the reciprocal relationship. Citizens with higher levels of political interest are clearly turning to public service news for information, and in return exposure to these channels seem to reinforce their political interest.

It is also obvious that the relationships between attention to political news — rather than exposure to different news media — and political interest were much more stable and consistent in both directions and across panel waves. This should come as no surprise since attention to political news is closer to political interest in the causal chain than exposure is. In fact, interest and attention to political news could even be seen as different indicators of a common underlying dimension of psychological involvement in politics (Lewis-Beck 2008; Slater 2004). Following this line of reasoning one might argue that the results from these mo-
dels are mainly capturing growing levels of psychological involvement in politics among citizens during the election campaign. However, even though political interest and attention to political news can be regarded as expressions of the same underlying dimension, they are not the same. They are two theoretically related but distinct concepts – one tapping an attitudinal dimension while the other taps a behavioral dimension of involvement – and should be treated as such. The fact that they sometimes have different effects in political communication underscores the importance of separating between the two (consider, for instance, the totally opposite effects that attention to political news and political interest had in the agenda setting process investigated in Article I. While attention to political news had a clear positive effect on naming unemployment as the most important problem, higher levels of political interest had clear negative effects). By utilizing the strength of panel data and employing statistical techniques designed for the analysis of reciprocal relationships we substantially improved our ability to make causal inferences. In this case, the results are more in line with the notion of a virtuous circle than media malaise theories.

The third study, entitled *Pathways to Politics* (Article III), approaches the discussion of media malaise and mobilization theories from a slightly different perspective. First, it focuses on the relationship between news media use and political participation in general and participation gaps between socioeconomic groups in particular. Second, it does so from a cross-national comparative perspective. The main purpose of the article is to develop and propose an institutional framework for analyzing how the news media influence participation gaps in different countries. In doing this I build upon insights from both the media malaise-mobilization literature and comparative institutional theory developed in political science. A crucial argument is that while research on media malaise and mobilization effects (Cappella & Jamieson 1997; Newton 1999; Norris 2000) has contributed significantly to our knowledge of how the news media can affect political trust, cynicism, interest as well as participation, this literature does not provide sufficient tools for a comprehensive understanding regarding how the news media influence socioeconomic gaps in political participation. The institutional framework proposed, influenced by the work of Sidney Verba and his colleagues (1978), is supposed to tackle these insufficiencies in the literature. In short, the framework suggests that closer attention must be paid to the joint influence of two characteristics of media systems:

- The *strength of media institutions* with respect to influencing political participation. This refers to the effects of news consumption on political participa-
tion and is the question that media malaise-mobilization research mainly has been concerned with. It will be argued that the common way of investigating these effects have been confined to a very specific form of influence – the additive effect on participation.

- The distinctiveness of the population base of the news media. This refers to the socioeconomic characteristics of the news consumers, i.e., who the television news viewers and newspaper readers are. It will be shown that news media that have a positive universal influence on participation can either narrow, widen or leave socioeconomic gaps in participation unchanged depending upon the population base of the news media.

Media malaise and mobilization theories are mainly concerned with the first of these dimensions. But this dimension alone does not say anything about how gaps in political participation are actually affected by the news media. It is also necessary to analyze the second dimension, which is concerned with the socioeconomic composition of the news consumers. European Social Survey data from four democratic corporatist countries is used to study these two dimensions of the news media. The results show that watching television news and reading newspapers has a positive influence on political participation. But the distinctiveness of the population base differs for television news and newspapers, which has important consequences for how the news media eventually affect gaps in participation between socioeconomic groups.

The main contribution of the article, however, is the proposed institutional framework, which was deliberatively constructed for cross-national comparative research. The interplay between context and individual-level behavior should be the main focus of comparative research in political communication – a field that has been experiencing a growing scholarly interest during the last decade (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Esser & Pfetsch 2004; Hallin & Mancini 2004; Strömbäck et al. 2008). Developing relevant dimensions that both facilitate comparisons and shed light on substantially interesting cross-national differences is necessary in order to improve our understanding of the linkages between media system variables and individual-level behavior. Pathways to Politics suggests one such direction for future comparative research on media malaise and mobilization effects that pays explicit attention to the design of national media systems.
THE SEMI-INDEPENDENT NEWS MEDIA

As argued in the introduction, media influence on citizens’ opinions and attitudes is, although very important, only one dimension of potential political media influence. The last three studies of this dissertation investigate questions related to another dimension – the relative media influence over news content. More specifically, the focus is on the relationship between political actors and journalists in the negotiation of newsworthiness.

It is widely recognized among political communication scholars that journalists’ influence over media content has increased over time, while politicians’ influence has weakened (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2008; Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002; Hallin 1993; Patterson 1993) Some analyze this from a mediatization perspective where the specific norms and demands of the news media increasingly force other actors to adapt (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Schulz 2004; Strömbäck 2008) while others focus on the interaction between journalists and politicians (Gans 1979; Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002; Reich 2009; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer 2006). In the following I intend to briefly outline the notion of the news media as a semi-independent political institution, discuss how politicians’ media access is shaped by the uncertainties, norms and routines of the news media and distinguish between two aspects of content influence that clarify the different contributions of politicians and journalists in the negotiation of newsworthiness.

New Institutionalism and Media Access

The “new institutionalism” provides, I would argue, the best way of understanding relations between the main political and news media actors in current western democracies (Cook 2005; Sparrow 1999). Just like the “organizational perspective” that has dominated journalism research for decades (Altmeppen 2008; Schudson 2003; Tuchman 1978), the new institutionalism explains individual-level behavior by focusing on structural constraints, norms and role-perceptions rather than individual personality traits among journalists.

New institutionalism grew out of a general dissatisfaction with behaviorism, which dominated social science in the 1950s and 1960s (Hay 2002; March & Olsen 1989; Peters 1999; Powell & DiMaggio 1991). One of the key criticisms of behaviorism concerned the tendency to reduce social and human activity to personal psychology. Despite different assumptions and focuses the “core of all institutionalisms is a denial that all social phenomena can be reduced to individual psychologism” (Cook 2005: 66). Compared to an organizational perspective, on the other hand, the new institutionalism approach to the news media,
as proposed by Timothy Cook (2005) and Bartholomew Sparrow (1999), draws attention to those characteristics and, more importantly, logics that span across news organizations, produce similar media output and ultimately create a unified institution with greater influence than any individual organization could ever possess (see also Schiffer 2008; Schudson 2002). This is one major reason why political actors regard mainstream news media channels as being so important for opinion formation.

An illustrative example of the consequences of shared logics across news organizations is the debate on partisan or ideological bias in news coverage. The news media is commonly criticized for having a partisan slant, by having either a liberal, conservative, leftwing or rightwing bias. But as Girish Gulati et al. have concluded (2004: 239): “Repeated analyses of news coverage of recent presidential elections continue to find no evidence of partisan bias in news reporting”. Similar conclusions come from research on Swedish election news coverage done by Kent Asp (1986, 2003). One of the most striking findings from his research is that some political parties are always treated more positively or negatively in election news coverage, but what parties that are treated positively or negatively vary from one election to another. Furthermore, there is also a large inter-media consensus in how the political parties and the government are treated, irrespective of the political values of individual journalists, the official ideological orientation of newspapers or ownership conditions. A recent research report concluded that “When a party is treated positively or negatively this has more to do with journalistic than party-political values” (Petersson et al. 2006: 69). Overall then, a systematic partisan bias is not what characterizes political coverage in national news media. Rather, the institutional character of the news media is manifested in the presence of what Richard Hofstetter (1976) has labeled structural bias – i.e., bias stemming from the norms, demands, routines and practices of news organizations (Grabber 2006: 236; Peterson et al. 2006: 69; Strömbäck & Shehata 2007).

Journalists working for the mainstream news media are very much governed by the same logics, irrespective of what organization they represent. As research within the sociology of journalism tradition has shown, reporters rely on a specific set of professional norms, routines, rules and standardized operating procedures for gathering and disseminating news (Altmeppen 2008; Gans 1979; Schudson 2003; Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Tuchman 1978). These routines and conventions – or “media practices” as Bartholomew Sparrow (1999) denotes them – are the result of several uncertainties that news organizations constantly face in the process of making news (Sigal 1973). Among those are uncertainties concerning the status and authority of journalists as conveyors and interpreters of politics,
uncertainties regarding access to political information deemed as newsworthy and, finally, economic uncertainties with respect to profitability in a highly competitive media market. According to Bartholomew Sparrow, the cumulative and coincident presence of these [media] practices provides news organizations (or at least the several leading news organizations in the United States) with an essential coherence in the production of salient news about American politics and government. The existence of these shared media practices explains how individual reporters, editors and producers at various levels of seniority, and corporate executives are able to transform the complexity of political reality into a limited set of narratives about national politics. These practices constitute the microfoundations of the news media’s existence as an aggregate political institution and bridge individual and organizational behaviors and macropolitical outcomes (Sparrow 1999: 17).

It is this particular blend of uncertainties and media practices that creates the “semi-independent” relationship between the news media and political actors within major political institutions. One of the most important uncertainties that journalists constantly face concerns how to secure access to political information that is deemed newsworthy and authoritative. Journalists turn to high-level political actors to achieve this task, and, thereby, grant those actors what Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester call habitual media access (Molotch & Lester 1974). Some have argued that the relationship between politicians and journalists should therefore best be understood as an exchange relationship, where journalists and politicians possess scarce goods and services that are being traded for mutual benefit. While journalists gain a constant flow of newsworthy information from their political sources, these sources gain access to the news media as an important channel for spreading their messages to a large audience (Fengler & Ruß-Mohl 2008; Gans 1979; Niven 2005). Others see the relationship between politicians and journalists as highly adversarial, based on mutual cynicism and a general media tendency to favor “gotcha journalism” (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Patterson 1993).

Following the arguments by Lance Bennett and his colleagues (Bennett et al. 2007; Bennett & Livingston 2003), I believe that the relationship between the news media and political actors within major political institutions is best described as semi-independent – permeated both by strong mutual dependencies as well as by distinct role perceptions regarding their obligations, duties and social responsibilities. As Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston explain their position:

Rather than advocate one extreme or the other regarding press-government autonomy or dependence, it makes sense to think of journalists as semi-independent players in the news game. There is no inherent contradiction in the idea that press-government relations are characterized by potentially extreme variations from inde-
pendence to dependence. Rather than continuing to debate the extremes of autonomy or dependence, it makes more sense to explore the uneasy and often disjointed combinations of the two (Bennett & Livingston 2003: 360).

How then, can this journalistic role of being “semi-independent players in the news game” be conceptualized as part of the news-making process? As Timothy Cook has argued (2005), influential political actors and journalists have distinct roles in the negotiation of newsworthiness – a process based on interactions between reporters and their sources (Gans 1979; Reich 2009; Sigal 1973). While official actors – i.e., high-level politicians and public administration representatives – are highly influential in directing media attention to certain political problems and thereby setting the media agenda, journalists exert most of their influence when writing the story. They have high levels of autonomy when it comes to deciding the main story line, picking and choosing among a variety sources and, ultimately, framing the news stories (Cook 2005; Reich 2009; Strömbäck & Nord 2006). Research by Wolfsfeld (2004) and Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) support this agenda-initiation function of actors within established political institutions, as well as a substantial absence of media-initiated stories in both the United States and Israel (Sheafer & Wolfsfeld 2009).

The final three articles of this dissertation focus on how the norms, demands and routines of journalism influence political actors’ access to the news media as a channel for public communication. Media access is obviously a crucial concept here. It refers both to an actor’s presence and prominence in media content as well as a more general form of “behind the scenes” access to journalists. Media access can vary both in terms of quality and quantity. And while some actors tend to have habitual access to the news media others have to rely on disruptive access (Molotch & Lester 1974). In that sense, media access both reflects political power and reinforces it.

In sum, the articles show that not all political actors have the same opportunities to influence news content. Media access is distributed unequally and consistently favors those in powerful political positions. On the other hand, the dynamic of event-driven news can alter the terms of media access and open windows of opportunity for actors that lack habitual media access due to their influential position in the political hierarchy. There is also evidence that journalists try to resist politicians’ agenda initiatives by using independence strategies when writing news stories.

The fourth study in this dissertation, Members of Parliament, Equal Competitors for Media Attention? (Article IV), analyzes how media access differs between politicians working in parliament. The study uses personal contacts with journa-
lists as the main indicator of media access. Much previous research has looked at interactions between politicians and journalists without paying much attention to the different opportunities for media access that exist within this specific elite group. Even though members of national parliaments appear frequently in the media the probability of gaining media access is likely to be unevenly distributed even among MPs (Schlesinger 1990; Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer 2006).

The study is based on an international survey with members of parliaments in five European democratic corporatist countries – Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Hallin & Mancini 2004). A set of hypotheses, based both on differences between and within the parliaments of these countries, is derived and tested. The results both confirm what some other studies have found and give new insights into the interactions between politicians and journalists. First, while the literature on incumbency bonus suggests that government actors and office holders tend to have an advantage in gaining media access relative to challengers, the findings from this study shows that it is the opposition parties that dominate within parliament. MPs from opposition parties tend to have more contacts with journalists than their parliament colleagues of the governing parties. This both reflects the design of the political system, i.e., that parliament is the main arena for opposition parties while governing parties mainly act through the cabinet, as well as the specific norms and demands of the news media. As objectivity and autonomy from political actors are two of the core values that characterize contemporary journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2007; Iyengar & McGrady 2007; Wiik 2010; Zaller 1998), these values have significant consequences for media practices (Schudson 2003; Sparrow 1999). Thus, the media access advantage of MPs of opposition parties is likely to be a consequence of the news media’s willingness to balance the media access advantage of government actors.

Second, the findings support the idea that political standing – i.e., political experience and the holding of key positions in the political hierarchy – increases access to the news media (Schoenbach et al. 2001; Tresch 2009). Third, the findings also show that the context matters for the intensity of the day-to-day interactions between politicians and journalists. More specifically, the frequency of personal contacts seems to be a function of the amount of competition for media access among politicians. MPs working in larger parliaments (Sweden), or in federal states with many MPs in comparable positions (Belgium), have significantly fewer contacts with journalists than MPs in smaller parliaments (Netherlands, Norway and Denmark).

While article IV analyzes the inter-MP competition for media access, Marking Journalistic Independence (Article V) focuses on the distribution of media access
across different groups of political actors with respect to media content. It is based on a content analysis of day-to-day news coverage of politics in two leading Swedish dailies – *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* – during a period of 15 weeks. The basic question that is addressed in the article is how the image of journalistic autonomy and independence that is held by so many, both politicians and journalists, can be upheld despite the common view among academics that the news media are too dependent on powerful political actors and news coverage so dominated by official sources (Bennett 1990; Manning 2001; Mermin 1999; Sigal 1973). One plausible explanation to this puzzle has been proposed by Timothy Cook (2005) who distinguishes between the power to set the news agenda, i.e., to initiate news by directing attention to important problems, and the power to decide how news stories are eventually framed (see also Reich 2009). He argues that while the agenda power is normally in the hands of influential political actors, journalists can practice a significant degree of independence in deciding how these stories are reported by selecting among and including other sources, choosing the main story line etc. Jesper Strömbäck and Lars Nord build upon this distinction in a study of power relations between politicians and journalists in Sweden and conclude that “journalists and their political sources seem to share the power over the process of news making and the media agenda, whereas journalists seem to exert most of the power when it comes to the content and the framing of news” (Strömbäck & Nord 2006: 160).

The purpose of *Marking Journalistic Independence* is to address these questions by analyzing the nature of official dominance and manifestations of news media independence strategies in routine political press coverage in Sweden. It is argued that while some political actors tend to have habitual media access, professional norms regarding autonomy, objectivity and independence refrain journalists from acting as a mouthpiece of any political actor in particular. Thus, reporters have a constant desire to mark their independence in news coverage (Esser 2008; Tuchman 1972; Zaller 1998). The findings are strongly supportive of official dominance theories, but also reveal a couple of interesting features that might be very specific to non-election news coverage. First, just as argued by Timothy Cook (2005) as well as Gadi Wolfsfeld and Tami Sheafer (2006), a majority of news stories are pegged to events or activities controlled by official actors. About 62 percent of the stories were triggered either by government actors, opposition party actors or public administration activities while 30 percent could be attributed to media initiatives, 7 percent to activities controlled by unofficial actors and only 2 percent to unexpected or disruptive events. While the substantial dominance of institutionally driven news stories is partly a result of the specific
sample of news stories included in the study, these findings clearly indicate that news coverage tends to be reactive rather than proactive. This official dominance in media access is evident not only in terms of story initiation but also when it comes to source presence.

Second, not all official actors have the same level of media access. There is a clear incumbency bonus when it comes to media access, as news coverage is more often pegged to government activities than activities controlled by other politicians. Third, when it comes to the journalistic use of independence strategies the findings are a bit surprising. Research on objectivity rituals as well as the indexing hypothesis suggests that journalists would be sensitive to include opposition party sources in news stories triggered by government activities. But this rarely happens. Only one story out of five triggered by government actors also includes a source from one of the opposition parties. In fact, the results show that 65 percent of government triggered news stories pass unchallenged by other sources. Finally, even though there is evidence for the proposition that journalists use game frames of politics to mark their independence when reporting news initiated by politicians, the overall use of this practice is not very common (Esser 2008; Zaller 1998).

These findings of Marking Journalistic Independence are likely to be reflective of a very specific, but also the most common, news-reporting context: The day-to-day routine coverage of national politics. The final study, entitled Facing the Muhammad Cartoons (Article VI), shifts focus to another news-reporting context — one that is hypothesized to unleash a very different dynamic when it comes to media access for official and unofficial actors.

Still focusing on the role of journalism in national daily newspapers the article aims at testing a key proposition of theories of event-driven news: That the intensity of news reporting affects the window of opportunity for unofficial actors to gain media access and, thereby, contribute to how problems are framed in the news (Molotch & Lester 1974; Lawrence 2000; Wolfsfeld 2004). The Muhammad cartoons controversy that erupted in late January 2006 is used as a case study of the struggle over problem definitions and media access. The analysis lends support to the proposed dynamic. As coverage of the issue intensifies the ratio between unofficial and official sources increases. In other words, unofficial actors gain from intensified news coverage relative to official actors. This happens simultaneously as the problem definition promoted by most unofficial actors in the study — the intolerance frame — gains severe dominance in the news over the problem definition mainly promoted by the Danish government and *Jyllands-posten* — the freedom of speech frame. It is also shown that some Swedish journalists were quite active in promoting the intolerance frame themselves.
SCOPE AND EXTERNAL VALIDITY

The studies in this dissertation cover a range of topics related to the political influence of the news media. I would like to close this introduction by discussing some important issues related to the scope and external validity of these studies. While several of these questions are elaborated in much more detail in the respective articles, some general themes might be worth emphasizing.

To begin with, it is important to reiterate the point made in the opening section of this introduction. The political influence of the news media can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives and, more specifically, with different targets of influence in focus. Analytically it is fruitful to distinguish between three general dependent variables, which the news media theoretically could have an influence on: (1) policy content and actions taken by political actors, (2) media content and (3) public opinion, knowledge, perceptions and behaviors. The news media could be influential or lack influence on all three dimensions, or have an influence on some dimensions while lacking it on others. A complete understanding of the political influence of the news media must address each of these dimensions. The studies in this dissertation focus on research questions related to dimensions 2 and 3. Even when it comes to these studies there are several additional aspects of media influence that are relevant to investigate as well as alternative research designs and methods that could have been applied.

When it comes to the news media’s influence on citizens the studies presented here investigated agenda setting and two types of involvement effects. Other types of media effects include second-level agenda setting, priming, issue framing, learning and persuasion (Asp 1986; Iyengar & Simon 2000; Kinder 1998; Preiss et al. 2007; Price & Zaller 1993). Thus, while the studies presented here reveal some important media effects these are not the only potential consequences of the news media. Given the constantly changing media environment, future research should continue to analyze the antecedents and consequences of news media use by expanding the range of effect types. It is also important to investigate the interplay between media environmental changes and selective exposure to different types of media content (Bennett & Iyengar 2008; Prior 2007).

Regarding the relations between the news media and political actors, and their respective contributions in the negotiation of newsworthiness, the studies presented here focus mainly on media access. While both behind-the-scenes interactions between politicians and journalists as well as manifestations of media access in news content are analyzed, questions related to long-term agenda and frame building are not addressed in this dissertation (Entman 2004; Semetko et al. 1991; Scheufele 1999). Questions concerning who sets the media agenda
could also be approached by analyzing news management strategies by political actors (Franklin 2003; Nord & Strömbäck 2003) as well as by conducting more in-depth studies on reporter-source relations (Gans 1979; Manning 2001; Reich 2009), in order to capture the latent power struggles over issue agendas and problem definitions that take place everyday.

Second, evaluations of the external validity of the findings presented here necessarily raise questions about the consequences of country selection. Some of the studies are deliberately cross-national in character while others focus on political communication in Sweden. Overall though, the theories that are explicitly tested or developed in each study are general in nature. Their substance and prior empirical support come, in fact, from an international research context, although sometimes with a strong American bias. Of course, this does not mean that all findings presented here apply to all countries. I do believe, however, that several of the mechanisms and patterns – with respect to media effects and media access – are similar across many western democracies as of today. In fact, most of the hypotheses that are generated are based on previous research conducted in other western democracies. To be a bit more specific I would suggest that the findings are at least fairly representative to the groups of countries that Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) have labeled democratic corporatist (see also Strömbäck et al. 2008). These countries share rather similar political media systems and are characterized by, among other things, high newspaper circulation, a high degree of journalistic professionalization, strong, although decreasing, state intervention with strong protection of press freedom, and the coexistence of strong public service broadcasting and commercial television channels etc. (see also Norris 2000). At the same time, it is matter for ongoing and future research to investigate more precisely the interplay between contextual and individual-level factors in political communication.

Finally, what might be more important than country differences in this regard is the specific political contexts that some of the studies focus on. Two of the effect studies were, for instance, conducted during an election campaign. It might be argued that this is the most crucial time-period from a democratic perspective as much is, obviously, at stake. But the particular election campaign context may also have influenced the findings in unobservable ways. On the other hand, the media access studies presented here focus mainly on non-election campaign periods, which may have certain consequences for the results as well. In particular the degree of incumbency bonus in media access may very well differ substantially between election and non-election periods. It is reasonable to expect a smaller media access gap between government and opposition party representatives.
during election campaigns than in non-election settings. This decreasing incumbency bonus may result both from a greater journalistic sensitivity to accusations of being biased and partisan, as well as from a heightened journalistic sense of social responsibility for the democratic process. Thus, the importance of journalistic norms of fairness and balanced reporting may increase during election campaigns: “[m]ore than in routine times, both the politicians and the public are sensitive to unfair coverage or an unbalanced share of attention” (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006: 98).

One might also consider the two very different news-reporting contexts that are represented by Marking Journalistic Independence and Facing the Muhammad Cartoons. These might be regarded as two extreme cases on a continuum. In the former case, the routine day-to-day coverage of domestic politics, the government’s influence over the daily news flow might be at its highest. In the latter case, the intense reporting of a foreign affairs issue which the domestic government has no interest of getting involved in, journalistic autonomy with respect to media content might be at its highest. This points to another important factor that helps define the semi-independent character of the news media. Even though the specific dynamic unleashed by event-driven news with regards to opportunity windows for media access is likely to apply to a variety of policy areas, issues and events – foreign as well as domestic – journalists will probably always have a stronger autonomy (relative to national political actors) when reporting on events in other countries. When the government or opposition parties – or other influential political actors – lack a clear interest in an issue journalists can operate more independently since they are less likely to be accused for being biased or unprofessional.

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