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Media engagement boundaries and political influence in Europe

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to analyze the level of influence and boundaries that media exert on politics. Specifically, we studied the power of media to set the public agenda, to set the political agenda determining decision-making processes and to generate political disaffection through politicians' and journalists' perceptions. We used a methodology based on in-depth interviews surveying a large sample of 45 individuals. The analysis was focused on the European context, specifically that of Spain. The results show a high level of mediatization of politics but also reveal limits to the political influence of the media. These constraints on the media's influence on politics affect political agenda-setting and the ability to generate civic engagement. Moreover, we detected four media engagement boundaries that boost citizens' political cynicism.

Keywords: media influence, journalists, politicians, political agenda, political disaffection, media power.

Introduction

The significance of the media's influence on politics in general and on political agendas in particular is one of the primary issues addressed by both political science and communications research (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The relationships between media and politicians have become key elements in advanced democracies that have significant effects on the civic lives of citizens (McCombs, Holbert, Kioussis, & Wanta, 2011).

The media has a large influence on politics due to the current mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni & Schutz, 1999). This phenomenon affords media a role in playing politics and participating actively in the dynamics of politics (Strömbäck, 2008). The media are the main sources of information related to politics and the main channel of communication among political actors and citizens. Media coverage has become an inseparable part of the formulation of public politics (Cook, 2005).

The aim of this research was to analyze the level of influence and boundaries media has on politics. Specifically, we studied the power of the media to set the public agenda, to set the political agenda determining decision-making processes and to generate political disaffection through politicians' and journalists' perceptions. We used a methodology based on in-depth interviews surveying a large sample of 45 individuals.

The analysis focused on the European context, specifically that of Spain. The results obtained in this study are compared and discussed in light of similar studies conducted in different European countries, such as Belgium, Holland, Britain and Sweden (Walgrave, 2008; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Davis, 2007; Strömbäck, 2011).

Media influence on setting both the public agenda and the political agenda

Media holds an important influence over public attention. This is possible because the media have become the main sources used by citizens to remain informed about public issues. Media news coverage drives people's attention to certain issues and prioritizes some issues over others (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The standards used to cover public issues in the news influence the public's perception of what are the most important current issues. Thus, the media plays an active role in molding public opinion, and the practice of this influence corresponds with the agenda-setting role of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The media are essential to political life (mediatization) and exert influence over the public (agenda-setting). However, the ability of the media to define the political agenda and determine decision-making processes is a pending issue to be resolved (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The basic question underlying this issue is how political actors determine their priorities, pay attention or ignore issues and take or not take a decision or attitude on these issues.

The answer is complicated and results show two main confronting positions (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). The first one defends the notion that the power of media to influence the political agenda is limited and marginal (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). The media have no real impact on the political agenda-setting because part of their political initiatives are inspired by factors endogenous to the political system, as well as by established political actors' preferences (political parties, parliaments, presidents). External media pressures do not affect these political actors (Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010).

The second position holds that the media have strong influence on political agenda-setting (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Walgrave, 2008). Media

coverage plays an important role when discovering and raising issues in the political agenda. When placing a certain issue before others, the media increase the possibility of that issue being considered by the political system (Cobb & Elder, 1971). Thus, the media's attention normally precedes the political system's attention (Walgrave, Soroka, & Nuytemans, 2008).

Despite the lack of a valid theory, the media's ability to set the political agenda is contingent and depends on different variables and circumstances (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). The impact of the media on the politics involved in an electoral campaign is minimal because during this period the corresponding political parties and candidates set the agenda (Hopmann, Elmelund-Præstekær, Albæk, Vliegthart, & de Vreese, 2012). On the other hand, the opposing political actors tend to let themselves be more influenced by news coverage than government actors do (Walgrave, 2008). Finally, the media seem to affect the symbolic political agenda more than the substantial agenda (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). Symbolic agendas are rhetorical in nature and are connected to political deliberation, while substantial agendas produce tangible effects and regulatory, legislative and administrative consequences (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006).

The predominance of media in setting the symbolic political agenda suggests the importance of influence in this process (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Political actors adopt certain media issues because they believe that television and newspapers determine the topics the public considers to be of primary importance (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Even political actors attribute more influence to television and radio than to the Prime Minister when placing an issue at the top of the political agenda (Strömbäck, 2011). This is how the effect of presumed influence determines the way that people, in this case politicians, behave depending on their perception of the media (Gunther & Storey,

2003). As such, the media's influence on the political agenda is indirect because the media operates through perceptions, whether right or wrong, of their power (Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheaffer, 2008).

The consequences of media influence on politics: political disaffection and civic engagement

Media coverage of political issues provokes effects on civic engagement. Some authors defend the idea that the influence of the media on politics is negative and generates, among other consequences, an increase in political disaffection. This is the basis of the videomalaise hypothesis, which claims that television is the main factor in the rise of negative attitudes and feelings in citizens toward politics (Robinson, 1976). The predominance of negative news (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006), the tendency for news media to cover politics through a game frame (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012), the incivility of political discourse displayed on television (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), the mistrust and the hyper-adversarialism in the relationship between journalists and politicians (Casero-Ripollés, 2008; van Dalen, Albaek, & de Vreese, 2011) and the logical apparition of self-referencing generate "spirals of cynicism" and reduce political trust among citizens (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1994).

On the other hand, we find political mobilization theories that maintain the opposite hypothesis: media have a significant positive impact on the public in terms of civic engagement. The consumption of news media generates greater knowledge and a better understanding of politics, provoking mobilizing effects and encouraging political participation. Citizens who are regularly exposed to news media for long periods are better informed on political issues; they have more trust in political institutions and are more involved in elections (Newton, 1999). Media induce political interest. The

consumption of news media generates a “virtuous circle” (Norris, 2000) because, in the long term, it reinforces the activism of the active and the engagement of the engaged.

Method

To study the influence of media on political agenda-setting and political disaffection, we applied a qualitative research technique based on in-depth interviews that analyzes the perceptions of journalists and politicians. The study of these perceptions is essential to investigating the interaction among media outlets and politics. The high complexity of this case study, provided with lots of variables and dimensions, motivated the selection of this method because the technique is perfectly adapted to the situations considered.

The sample consisted of a total of 45 interviewees, 22 journalists, 16 political actors and 7 spin doctors. The interviews were carried out in Spain. The journalists belong to different media outlets: newspapers, radio, television and Internet. The political actors are officials from different levels of government (state, regional and local) and also members of opposition political parties. Finally, the spin doctors work in press offices of government institutions and also in opposition political parties. The intensive interviews were conducted from January to May 2012 and were conducted face-to-face. Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes.

The questionnaire include three types of questions: (a) questions regarding politicians’ and journalists’ perceptions of the influence of news media on public opinion, (b) questions regarding politicians’ and journalists’ perceptions of the power of media to set the political agenda and decision-making processes and (c) questions regarding politicians’ and journalists’ perceptions of the impact of media on political disaffection.

Results

Globally, the results reaffirm the idea that politicians and journalists give great power to the media's influence on the public and public opinion (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008). In general terms, both groups share the classic view that considers journalism the main entity of the communication system and the mass media as key strategic resource in the process of building public opinion.

“I think that it (political information) has a great influence. People breathe according to what media says. The main opinion leaders, radio talk shows, television talk shows, opinion articles in newspapers, all of these in a way are contributing to build public opinion in the street”. (Journalist 4).

“It does have influence. It has such a great influence that many times, when you assist to internal acts of the party, you meet militants who give more credibility to news media than to an internal communication of your own party”. (Journalist 14).

Results also suggest that politicians and journalists consider the media the main source of political information as well as a channel of communication among political actors and citizens. This conceptualization coincides with the first dimension of political mediatization (Strömbäck, 2008). In this framework, politicians believe that they need the media to connect widely to citizens. On the other hand, results suggest a high level of political mediatization.

“It has a great influence as the work that has been done by a political party gets to the audience mostly through the media. [...]. Classic media outlets still have a great weight in the creation of social alarm, politics participation, electoral campaigns... (Politician 10).

The limited role of the media in political agenda-setting

Regarding the consequences of media playing a role in political agenda-setting and in decision-making processes, results indicate a very different discourse between

politicians and journalists. Although among journalists, the idea that they still exert a noticeable influence on political agenda-setting prevails, political actors delimit or define the extent of this influence, reducing the power of media discourse.

Journalists consider that, in a more or less well-defined way, they still maintain a high level of influence on the political agenda and decision making. Indeed, the interviews show that a majority of journalists consider themselves to have power regarding the decisions of the political sector. This is mainly attributed to the importance currently assigned to public image and to the fear of image being affected by adverse media coverage.

“I believe that it is higher than it should be; they are always complaining about the media system because they have realized they make decisions or statements depending on the kind of information that will be broadcast. Political information weighs too much in the public management”. (Journalist 19).

“Politicians are scared of the press and headlines. When you write two headlines against a politician he/she gets very nervous; he/she calls you... that is the reason why they try to be kind, in order to avoid this kind of headlines [...]. Politicians want to be in the press, but they want it to be positive”. (Journalist 13).

Among political actors there exists a great level of agreement when valuing the influence of media on political agenda-setting. Except in some cases involving politicians of the opposition, with no direct responsibilities in decision making, globally, politicians refuse to acknowledge the influence of the media and assert their independence in public management.

“For me, initially, media do not determine what I do regarding something on which my party has already decided and has been included in our program”. (Politician 6).

Politicians indicate rather clearly that there are other more influential factors that affect their decisions. Among these factors, they highlight polls and demoscopic surveys perceived as indicators of social claims.

“I believe that nowadays the results of the surveys commissioned by official organizations about different issues have a greater influence on government when making decisions than political information has”. (Politician 14).

On the other hand, some politicians recognize that the media hold certain influence, but it is limited only to decision making in specific respects. On the one hand, the media only affect minor and superficial issues within public management. On the other hand, the media is involved with issues previously unknown to a political actor until revealed by the media.

“If the media, echoing the general discomfort of the citizens, inform about a particular important circumstance unknown until that moment [...]. In this case, this information could affect my decision once I have determined it to be true and that I have confirmed that it is what citizens want to be done”. (Politician 6).

Shared responsibility facing the rise of citizens’ disaffection

Except for a pair of cases, the interviews confirm the existence of unanimity between journalists and politicians when recognizing the seriousness of political disaffection as well as assuming certain shared responsibility in this respect.

“We all have a great responsibility. Politicians have a lot; they are who have it [...]. The thing is that journalists are constantly showing an image of politicians to society that provokes citizens to move away from politics” (Journalist 4).

“Politicians are mostly responsible because it is their responsibility, so we are perceived to be doing things in a wrong way. It is also true that we reach citizens through the press, which means that the channel is also missing”. (Politician 16).

The results indicate four main causes of the rise of political disaffection. First, we find explicit references to politicians’ inability to respond to solve citizens’ requests and the primacy of partisan interests.

“The problem is that the response given by politics to citizens’ problems is incomplete and leaves them a bad impression. Media outlets only transmit the inability of government to answer the population’s needs”. (Journalist 21).

“Journalists have a great responsibility in this deterioration of the image but do not have as much responsibility as politicians have, as they systematically give preference to their electoral and partisan interests instead of national interests”. (Journalist 8).

On the other hand, political actors in particular make reference to a second cause of political disaffection: the negative image of politics that media transmit when focusing on negative news (corruption cases, judicial processes) or in the game frame news linked to disputes among parties (fights over power, statements of war, personal criticism). Politicians hardly criticize negative media coverage and consider it to be the direct result of the standard of newsworthiness held by media (Cook, 2005), which related to mediatization.

“Journalists also have a responsibility, as in part, they show a negative image of politics. I mean, to respond to the axiom “good news, no news”. It is at the core of journalistic work”. (Politician 9).

Third, from a self-critical point of view, journalists indicate two causes of disaffection related to media coverage: the lack of objectiveness and the subordination of news media to political interests.

“I believe that journalists are mostly responsible. Politicians try to preserve their image in a way, and maybe he/she could use bad methods (such as public money or press conferences), even with the aim of forcing such comfort in the news that provokes our apathy and their absolute dominance of the news and situations. Therefore, if it is part of the game; the one who is not following the rules is the journalist who is not doing his/her homework; he/she is settling in. We cannot call it journalism anymore, and it is normal that it does not interest society”. (Journalist 9).

The high level of self-referencing in the news media is the fourth cause of political disaffection identified in the interviews. Political news has become a closed

discourse destined to self-consumption within the political and journalistic world, ignoring citizenship and favoring cynicism.

“Neither journalists nor politics step onto the street, and we make the mistake to forget citizens. We, the journalists, have the bad habit of writing for politicians, when we are supposed to do it for citizens. This is a widespread bad practice” (Journalists 13).

Journalists agree when noting this problem, as in the alarming symptom of the disconnect between the journalistic and political elites to social reality.

“Basically, disaffection is produced in the political class, with the politicians who live in their world, in an unreal world disconnected from a majority of the citizens of a particular country. Media outlets, with their work, have contributed to the rise of this disaffection”. (Journalist 16).

Discussion and conclusions

Journalists and politicians consider the media to hold great influence in setting the political agenda. This result coincides with the results of other studies carried out in other countries of northern Europe (Sweden, Belgium and Holland) (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Walgrave, 2008). Both sets of actors consider the media to have power in being able to determine the dynamics in the public opinion building process. These perceptions can condition the way in which politicians behave, following the theory of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003; Cohen, Tsifti, & Sheaffer, 2008)

By contrast, this investigation detected that the role of the media in political agenda setting has boundaries, unlike in other studies of north Europe, which claim a strong influence (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Walgrave, 2008). As in the British case (Davis, 2007), in Spain, the media’s influence does not correspond to the simple stimulus-response model of agenda setting. Our results suggest the existence of a dual discourse. Journalists believe that media has a great influence. Politicians, instead, restrict the extent of the media’s power and assert their independence from the news

media in decision-making processes. These actors give more importance to polls and demoscopic surveys considered to mirror citizens' claims than to the media when determining their political agenda. The media's influence is limited to minor issues and to issues previously unknown by politicians until broadcast by the media.

Political disaffection has been recognized to be a problem, and both politicians and journalists assume a shared responsibility in this self-critical exercise. The results also indicate four main causes that favor the political cynicism of citizens: (1) The inability of politicians to respond to citizens' claims, (2) the focus of media coverage on negative news and game frame news, (3) the lack of journalistic objectiveness and the assignment of partisan interests and (4) the predominance of self-referencing. These factors shape the boundaries of media engagement.

This investigation reveals a high level of political mediatization. Media are perceived as a key element of democracy. This conclusion reaffirms the results reported by other reference studies performed in other European countries (Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Walgrave, 2008). However, although media are considered to have a central and powerful position, our investigation detected limitations in their political influence. These constraints on the influence of media on politics affect the political agenda-setting process and the media's ability to generate civic engagement.

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