

TITLE: The Formation of the Campaign Agenda: A Cross-national Comparative Study of Television Journalism and Campaign News in the 1999 European Elections

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IS-national study

Abstract

This study investigates the role of news organizations in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands in forming the campaign agenda during the 1999 European elections. The degree of organizational effort invested in the campaign coverage, the editorial policies, and the application of news values were explored. The study draws on interviews with political correspondents, senior editorial staff, and Editors-in-Chief and on content analytic indicators from the news in the three countries. A number of cross-national differences were found. While the visibility of the campaign was low to modest in all countries the news organizations differed substantially in their contribution to the agenda formation process. British news followed the political agenda to a greater extent than Dutch news which generally neglected the elections. Danish news, however, played a central and active role in setting the agenda. The findings are discussed in the light of future research on news coverage of European affairs and campaign agenda formation processes.

The Formation of the Campaign Agenda: A Cross-national Comparative Study of Television
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The campaign agenda during an election is the result of interaction between politicians, political parties, spin-doctors, lobbyists, news media organizations, and the electorate. Much research in political communication is concerned with the impact of news media coverage of politics on public perceptions of politicians, issues, and events. However, an equally important question deals with the factors that influence news media content. An important, but comparatively understudied question is: what role do news organizations play in forming the campaign agenda? In answering this question it is important to understand and try to conceptualize the multiple factors that influence the news coverage of politics and elections. In this study, the role of news organizations in forming the campaign agenda during the 1999 European elections is explored. Behind this investigation is a broader conceptual model for understanding influences on news content.

News content is the result of a complex process and a multitude of forces and influences. These forces are found both within and outside the news organizations. Previous studies have approached the investigation of the production of news from political economy, ideological, and sociological perspectives. Notions of the newsworthiness of events, news management, and organizational routines have also guided studies looking at the production of news. While the assumptions and approaches vary in these different studies, one important element brings them together, namely the observation that news organizations are central and active players in the interaction between politics and the public. The processes of influence are reciprocal rather than unidirectional indicating the forces that shape news content are also influenced by news themselves.

In a conceptual overview of the 'field of political communication', Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) address the notion of factors influencing news production. They argue in favor of a 'systemic perspective' in which the different components of the system – media institutions and

professionals; political institutions, parties and political advocates; audience members at the receiving end of the output produced by these institutions; and the surrounding socio-political environment – interact and impact upon each other (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000, p. 4). The authors have supported the systemic perspective over three decades and in their most recent contribution they argue the continuous validity of the perspective (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981, cf. Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000). Despite changes in the communication of political actors, technological advances, new modes of political communication and changes in the geography of political communication, a systemic framework of understanding present conditions is still appropriate.

Applying the more general systemic conception of the field of political communication in more specific fashion to the production of news, at least three aspects are particularly pertinent: the national political system, the national media system, and journalistic culture. The type of political system may influence the production mode of news. A bipolar party system, for example, may lead to one type of political coverage compared to political news coverage in a multiparty system. The media system and the degree of competition may also have implications for the coverage of politics. Finally, historical and cultural traditions for journalistic modes of production and reporting are important to understand journalists and news organizations role perception. These dimensions are also identified by Semetko (1996) in a review of media systems and mediated communication during election campaigns. Journalistic culture, generally defined in a national context, has been explored in a number of studies over the past two decades in both the US (e.g. Patterson 1998), Europe (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 1989, 1998; Esser, 1998; Köcher, 1986, Semetko & Canel, 1997), and in a cross-continently, comparative perspective (e.g. Semetko et al., 1991)¹. In Europe, Esser (1998) suggested that German journalists have a more 'holistic' notion of journalism compared to their British counterparts who have a more closed and centralized conception of the profession. Köcher (1986), based on more than 800 face-to-face interviews with journalists in Britain and Germany, concluded that British journalists to a greater extent consider themselves as transmitters of facts whereas German journalists value their ability of transmitting opinion. The findings from Britain are

¹ These studies of journalism and the profession are indebted to earlier seminal work within political economy and sociological traditions such as Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Golding & Elliott, 1979, Tuchman, 1978, and Tunstall, 1971.

echoed in a comparative study of Britain and the US, suggesting that American journalists were more pro-active in initiating issues on the agenda than their British counterparts who were cautious and reactive (Semetko et al., 1991). In relation to the journalists' approach to covering of elections specifically, Semetko and Schönbach (1994) found German journalists to be confident and aware about their role as agenda-setters in the election campaign. In a Spanish context important differences between public and private broadcasters were found. It was suggested that the journalistic style at the private broadcaster was exceedingly more pro-active, analytic, and interpretative compared to the public broadcaster (Semetko & Canel, 1997).

While the political and media systems as well as journalistic culture may vary considerably cross-nationally, a number of developments characterize the changes over the past two decades in many European countries: While the political system has changed towards increased professionalism, so too has the broadcasting landscape changed. Two decades ago, almost all European countries had public broadcasting monopolies. Today, no European country has a public monopoly.

The dimension dealing with the process of news production within the systemic perspective suggested by Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) may be advanced further by distinguishing different specific factors that shape news content. In an overview of research on forces that influence news content, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) distinguish five levels of influences: a) influences from individual media workers, b) influence of media routines, c) organizational influences, d) influence from outside media organizations, and e) ideology. In their attempt to synthesize and structure previous research they acknowledge, from a pragmatic point of view, that integrating all levels of influence in one study of news production is hardly feasible. In this study, the focus is on the role played by news organizations in forming the agenda. The routine level, the organizational level, and the extra-media level are the most pertinent levels to investigate.

The influence of media routines on content is perhaps most forcefully illustrated by referring to the notion of gatekeepers in the media. As a gatekeeper in the newsroom, a journalist must select a limited number of events and issues for presentation in the news and decide to leave others. The degree to which this process is primarily an individual one or the results of organizational routines

has been explored. In a seminal study, Tuchman (1978) identified production routines as a set of rules, and suggested that reporters who master these routine modes of processing news are valued for their professionalism. An important aspect of organizational routines is the set of norms for selecting news. The notion of news values was explored by, for example, Galtung and Ruge (1965) and has since been developed and refined. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) attempt to synthesize these studies and suggest a) prominence/importance, b) human interest, c) conflict/controversy, d) the unusual, e) timeliness, and f) proximity as the most important news values to be distilled from both journalistic practice and literature about journalism. These news values have arguably become an integral part of the organizational routine of selecting news.

The organizational influences address the impact of how organizations are structured and how power is distributed in the newsroom. Shoemaker and Reese (1996, pp. 142-143) suggest organizational roles, organizational structure, policy-making, and policy enforcement as important dimensions. Newsmaking is very much an organizational process in which the size and authoritative nature of an organization, internal conflicts between editors and reporters, and issues of social control in the newsroom play central roles. A final organizational aspect that may influence content is ownership. Most news organizations are part of larger networks or corporations. This carries a number of responsibilities in terms of profit making which may have implications for content.

Influences from outside the media organizations include the impact of market structures, governmental policies and regulations as well as the economic environment and technology. A strongly competitive market may imply certain editorial preferences for maximizing audiences compared to a low-competition, monopoly market. The direct political influence and the discretion given in regulations for news organization for themselves to determine their profile is equally important. Developments in technology, such as the on-going implementation of digital production modes in television, are also important for understanding the impact of external influences of content. For the news coverage of politics at least two additional dimensions are of importance. First, the degree of professionalism in the political world, i.e. the use of spin-doctors, news

managers, campaigns strategists. Second, the role of public opinion, i.e. the degree of impact of public opinion polls.

News organizations: Agenda-sender or agenda-setters?

The distinctions suggested by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and the systemic perspective offered by Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) are conceptual frameworks. An important addition in studying the formation of the campaign agenda is the integration of a theoretical framework which may account for some of the processes at the different levels. While few theories are as parsimonious as general models or perspectives, theory may offer a more coherent understanding of the interrelation between the different actors and levels.

One important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between political actors, the news media, and the electorate is the theory of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting was first formulated in the ability of media to tell people 'what to think about' rather than 'what to think' (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Although the majority of studies on agenda-setting have focused on the relationship between the media and the public agenda, an equally important, but relatively neglected area is the dynamics of how the media agenda is formed and the role news organizations and journalists play in this process. Lang and Lang (1981, p. 278) concluded that 'the whole question of how issues originate is side-stepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built'. One reason for the relative neglect of this strand of research is reluctance on the part of news organizations to open up their newsroom and share experiences and insights with communication scholars. Access is a crucial factor which may have limited the volume and impact of this type of research (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998; Holtz-Bacha, 1999; Semetko, 1996).

Previous studies of election campaigns across Europe from the 1970s (e.g. Asp, 1983; Siune & Borre, 1975) and 1980s (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 1989; Hjarvard, 1999; Semetko et al., 1991) have suggested that European broadcasters have traditionally covered elections in a respectful and cautious way, adhering largely to the agenda of parties and politicians. While this role may be labeled 'agenda-sending', recent research, however, has suggested that this may no longer be the case (see e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998; Hjarvard, 1999; Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell &

Semetko, 1999; de Vreese, 2000). News organizations have been found to be more pro-active in their coverage of politics and to exert more discretion when choosing which stories to bring and how to cover these issues. This role may more appropriately be labeled 'agenda-setting'.

The theory of agenda-setting transcends the different levels suggested by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). Agenda-setting operates on the routine level where many decisions about newsworthiness are made. It is part of the organizational level in that structures in the newsroom and editorial policies influence the agenda-setting process. Finally, agenda-setting also operates on the extra-media level: forces outside the news organizations like politicians, interest groups, spin doctors, and information managers all try to exert influence on the news organization in setting its agenda.

Research Questions

This study investigates the role of national news organizations in the agenda formation process around the June 1999 European elections². With the concepts outlined above and the theoretical framework of agenda-setting as the interpretative background, the following questions guide the investigation: RQ 1) How did news organizations approach the European elections? This question is addressed by investigating how the campaign coverage was organized, by looking at what news values were applied, and at how visible the campaign was in the news. The second research question deals with the role of the news media in forming the campaign agenda: RQ 2) Which role did the news organizations play in the agenda formation process?

The questions will be addressed in a cross-national comparative perspective. The study focuses on Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands in particular. This sample of countries is designed to reflect a certain diversity in terms of size and opinion about advanced European integration.

² A note about the European elections is warranted. The interaction between politicians, parties, the news media, and the electorate has most often been studied in relation to national elections. In analyzing the role of news organizations during an election campaign, it is important to distinguish between first-order and second-order elections (van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). This study examines the production and content of the television news coverage during the 1999 European Parliamentary elections, a second-order type of election that is generally perceived as less important by European publics (van der Eijk, 1999). The June 1999 elections in the 15 EU member states took place at a crucial moment in the process of European integration. The common European currency, the euro, was introduced on January 1, 1999, and the European Union faces challenges of enlargement and harmonization of judicial systems. The turnout at the elections was significantly lower than in 1994 in most European countries and in some countries the news media were 'blamed' for contributing to this decline.

Britain is a large euro(pe)-skeptical country, the Netherlands a small pro-European country, and Denmark a small, euro-skeptical country. The political and media systems in the three countries are distinct, yet comparable. The programs included in the analysis are the two most widely watched television news programs in the three countries: BBC 9 o'clock News and ITN News at 6.30³ (Britain), DR TV-Avisen at 9 p.m. and TV2's Nyhederne (7 p.m.) (Denmark), and NOS Journaal at 8 p.m. and RTL Nieuws at 7.30 p.m. (the Netherlands). All programs are comparable in terms of their length, ranging from 25 to 30 minutes. BBC, DR, and NOS are publicly funded broadcasters, TV2 is 1/3 publicly and 2/3 privately funded, and ITN and RTL are privately funded networks.

This study is relevant for a number of reasons. First, it addresses the role of news media at a key moment in the process of advanced European integration. Second, the study is cross-nationally comparatively designed to investigate similarities and differences across different key-European countries. The European elections were an important European event likely to be covered in more countries and therefore ideal to study similar processes cross-nationally. Third, the study focuses on the production of news, political journalism, and the formation of the news agenda which is less developed aspect of the dynamics of agenda-setting. Finally, an enhanced theoretical understanding of the role of political journalism in a competitive environment is a first step towards understanding the effects of news media in influencing public opinion by the choice of events and how these are covered in the news.

Method

The study draws on two primary data sources. First, structured interviews were conducted with senior political and economic correspondents, senior editorial staff members, editors and Editors-in-Chief. A total 12 interviews with a duration of 1-1,5 hour on average were conducted. The total number of editorial staff involved in formulating and implementing policies about the election coverage is limited. The sample of interviewees covers the total population extensively. Given the

³ ITN used to have its main evening news bulletin at 10 p.m. However, as of March 1999 this was rescheduled into a bulletin at 6.30 and a shorter news update at 11 p.m.

logistic constraints of cross-national research, the interviews and observations were restricted to the public broadcasters (BBC, DR, and NOS) only in order to ensure comparability⁴.

The interviews followed a common interview protocol which was designed to address the role of the news organization in forming the campaign agenda. In the interviews, individual perceptions and interpretations of the campaign coverage policy were investigated and the editorial strategies elaborated. Themes such as priority of and approach to the 1999 European elections were addressed in each interview. In addition, the role of the political agenda, changes in election coverage policy over time, and differences with coverage of national elections were explored with senior news executives and reporters. In investigating the routine and organizational level, as defined by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), three dimensions indicating the degree of organizational effort invested in the campaign coverage, the underlying editorial approach, and the application of news values when evaluating the newsworthiness of the election campaign were addressed. The extra-media level was only marginally investigated in the interviews and will, along with information about the national political and media system, be used as an interpretative framework.

Organization. This dimension addresses the organizational structure and effort invested in the campaign coverage. The questions guiding this investigation were: How was the coverage of the campaign organized? Were special preparations made in advance? Was a special budget allocated? Was the political staff expanded during the campaign? Did the usual political reporters deal with the coverage or was a specifically political analyst/ commentator assigned?

Approach. This dimension addressed the formally defined organizational approach to the elections. The questions guiding this investigation were: What was the officially formulated policy on covering the elections? Did the news organizations assume a reactive or a pro-active, initiating role? What was the policy regarding covering issues brought forward by politicians and parties?

⁴ An additional source of information comes from newsroom observations at the television news programs in the three countries. This observational component consisted of a two-three days of presence in the newsroom prior to the elections. A researcher was present in the newsroom, attending central editorial meeting and monitoring discussions between journalists, editors, and correspondents. As the European elections were held on June 10, 1999 in all three countries, naturally the observations could not take place on the same days. In Denmark, these were carried out on June 7-8 and in the Netherlands on June 10-11. In Britain, the observations of editorial production processes were conducted after the elections (September 1999) and can only be seen as illuminating background information for understanding the editorial decisions discussed in the interviews.

News values. This dimension addresses the application of news values in the campaign coverage. The questions guiding this investigation were: Were standard criteria for evaluation of the newsworthiness of events and issues applied? Or were special criteria applied for evaluation of election stories? Were special campaign segments implemented? Or did news about the election compete equally against all other news?

The second data source was an assessment of the news coverage in a content analysis of the television news programs in the three countries⁵. In this paper, the coverage in the 'hot phase' of the campaign is investigated (June 1-10). The relatively short period compares with earlier studies of the television news coverage of European elections suggesting that attention to these elections is limited and focused in the last days before the election (Leroy & Siune, 1994). All stories in the news programs were analyzed to identify news about the campaign. The unit of analysis was the individual news story. The content analysis covered all television news programs and was designed to examine the visibility of the campaign, the topic of campaign news, and to explore the role of the political agenda.

Findings

One observation overrides all other comments about the campaign. The period leading up to the European Parliamentary elections was heavily influenced by the conflict in Kosovo. During the course of the election campaign NATO carried out bombing, peace negotiations were initiated, and on Election Day (June 10, 1999), a peace agreement was reached. The highly unusual news environment has important implications for the coverage of the European elections. In the presentation of the findings the different sub-questions will be addressed individually.

Organization.

None of the news programs implemented a special daily campaign segment in their bulletin which has been tradition during national election campaigns. The elections were to be covered within already existing structures of political coverage. However, all programs allocated additional

⁵ The content analysis is integral to a larger research project, funded by the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research [NWO] and The Danish Research Academy, currently underway at The Amsterdam School of Communications Research ASCoR. One project involves content analysis of the campaign news coverage in all 15 EU member states, including Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. At the time of writing, March 2000, analyses for this project are taking place.

budget for covering the elections and all initiated advance planning in special units. All news organizations operated with a triadic organization of the election coverage. The studio headquarters and central newsroom worked together with the political unit (at Westminster in Britain, The Hague in the Netherlands, and Christiansborg, Copenhagen in Denmark) and the news organization's Brussels desk.

The BBC has a fairly large bureau in Brussels with a bureau Chief and four correspondents working there. They are permanently covering the 'Brussels beat' for the whole range of BBC outlets (BBC1+2, BBC World, BBC 24, BBC Radio). BBC News Gathering, to meet the demands of the different outlets, automatically covers events such as European summits. The 9 o'clock News, along with the other programs, can commission stories to be produced by the Brussels bureau by making use of an allocated budget per program. Prior to the European elections, a few stories dealing with Europe were commissioned by the Editor-in-Chief of 9 o'clock News:

ÒI chose thematic issues rather than saying 'let's go to Germany and see what they think about the European elections'. I had two issues basically: Where was Europe heading politically now with all these center-left governments in power, so different from a few years ago? And similarly for the economy: The economy of Europe, by then nearly six months in to the euro, what conclusions could be drawn on that relatively short time scale?Ó.

As acknowledged by the Editor-in-Chief these stories eventually played only a marginal role in the actual coverage:

ÒThe off shot was the period of the campaign. Without Kosovo I might have done more. I would certainly have done more in Europe, I would have send more people around, maybe to Greece capturing the world outside the currency. Greece didn't want Kosovo at their doorstep so Greece had very ambiguous news about everything. So I would have done more under normal circumstances, but as it was, I scaled it back a bitÓ.

Danish television (DR) started preparations for covering the elections campaign six months prior to election day. Specifically, the two reporters from the Brussels bureau, and reporters from the Copenhagen based political unit and the Domestic desk prepared the elections in a small 'working group'. One important managerial and editorial choice guiding the coverage was to carry

out a national survey with the Gallup Polling Institute. This survey was designed to investigate the electorate's agenda for the elections. As the Editor-in-Chief put it: *As the kick-off for our campaign coverage, we wanted to know: what issues, what themes are interesting to the public prior to these elections. A very unambiguous answer emerged. What came back was that at the top of the agenda was fraud.* The survey led DR to assign two reporters full time during the campaign to investigate the 'fraud issue'. The Head of the Political Unit functioned as a daily coordinator for the election coverage. He also played an important role on election day by analyzing the exit polls and their political implications.

Dutch NOS Journaal in anticipation of the European elections created a 'Europe Unit'. The group consisted of the program's Brussels correspondent, The Hague based political reporters and editors. A number of issues, such as the competence of the European Parliament, fraud, the EU budget, and voter apathy, were explored and preparatory research carried out. However, in the actual coverage of the campaign, these advance preparations were never used and the internal organizational structures setup to cover the campaign were never implemented.

Approach.

A news organization's approach to covering elections can largely be found in the editorial and organizational effort and in the visibility and priority of the campaign in the news. However, on a more abstract level, the approach may also be formulated in, for example, internal memos in which the role of the news program in initiating own stories and dealing with the advance scheduled political agenda is addressed. For the European elections the approach applied by the BBC, DR, and NOS varied considerably.

The BBC's original plans of initiating a number of political and economic themes were only marginally implemented. The pro-active nature of the preparations were not implemented and in fact the BBC ended up following the political agenda to a greater extent than initially planned. According to a senior political reporter covering the European elections this was a result of two things: the competitive news environment with Kosovo dominating and the pro-active Tory campaigning versus the passive government campaigning:

ÒWe tried to set our own agenda to the extent that we did attempt before the campaign had really got rolling, from this unit, to sell ideas for features setting up what would be the main issues and main questions [...] When it came down to it, that wasn't really available to be done, so we ended up following the stories of the day. That also arose out of the fact that they [Nine o'clock] really didn't want to take any pieces they didn't have to have, and ended up the having to take a piece every day at the end of the campaign in order to feel that they had done the job properly, which means that they had to take the 'story of the day' out of the press conferences. [...] We ended up paying a lot of attention to the euro. Particularly we were, and the government was, driven by the agenda set by the opposition. Because they were the ones campaigning most vigorously, they ended up setting the agenda for everybody else and they did very well. As a result, as they were the only people really setting an agenda, the government was choosing not to set an agenda, it was the Conservative agenda we followed.Ó

DR approached the elections pro-actively and decided to structure its campaign coverage according to the results of their survey. Assuming this clearly agenda-setting role was a debated decision in the campaign. As the Editor-in-Chief noted:

ÒIf you ask the politicians what the agenda is, then it is totally different. Then you get big, abstract things like the expansion [of the European Union] to the East, very diffuse themes that in terms of news coverage have been extremely difficult to make some concrete political stories about 'what is this election all about? [...] What you have here is a gap between what the voters think is interesting, what they would like to see addressed – corruption which we have done a number of stories on – and what the politicians want. This has meant that we have all the Members of the European Parliament criticizing us, pissed off, saying that we have derailed the debateÓ.

NOS Journaal in the Netherlands intended to assume an active role and initiate topics of their own in relation to the European elections. This policy was, however, never implemented, and the Dutch news, by far and large, neglected the elections. The Second Editor-in-Chief elaborated: ÓIt is correct that we did not do much. But there was no campaign. Even the political parties reduced their campaign activities to an absolute minimumÓ.

News values.

The application of news values in selecting campaign news is an indicator for the weight and importance given to elections. While broadcasters have traditionally extended the news bulletins or

designated daily campaign segments at national elections (see, for example, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1998; de Vreese, 2000), this was not done by any of the news organizations during the 1999 European elections. The networks, however, varied in the degree to which standard criteria were applied for evaluating the newsworthiness.

The BBC applied fairly standard news criteria in evaluating the campaign news. Contrary to the coverage leading up to the first step introduction of the euro on January 1, 1999, 9 o'clock News did not commission an entire series of stories focusing on the elections and important European themes. News about the 'euro-elections' were not given extra priority. While arguing that selection criteria were not adjusted during the campaign, DR did up-grade the campaign in comparison with other available news, on for example the fraud issue. However, the elections were not covered daily, and the up-grade was used to cover the fraud issue rather than to follow candidates on the campaign trail. The Editor-in-Chief elaborated on this:

ÒGiven the fact that we give European issues the same news priority as all other issues and given the fact that we had a period of Kosovo war and peace negotiations that largely influenced the news agenda, then our coverage of the European elections has to some extent been damaged. This must be understood so that because we did not choose to work with other selection criteria, a news story about the European Parliament must compete equally with a story about peace or not in Kosovo. We cannot enter that process and say: we must have four such stories in the beginning of our program every day. We don't do that, we select according to normal news values.Ó

The Head of the Political Department at DR elaborated on the rationales for the television news organizations not covering the campaign more closely:

ÒOne reason is logistical. One can say why don't we go out and cover one of the election rallies / evening meetings. We have done that. But if you want to cover the content of such a meeting then you cannot bring it the same evening and already then it is 'dead' in terms of news. It is difficult to go on air and say to the viewers: 'Yesterday evening there was a rally and this is what the candidates said...'. To be quite frank: not many people find that very exciting, it is old news. What we have done is to cover a couple of meetings, but within the time available to us, dealing with the interest for the election which is almost absentÓ.

News about the European elections was evaluated against conventional news values and selection criteria at NOS Journaal. The Second Editor-in-Chief noted that this policy was both an advance choice and a pragmatic function of the general news environment during the campaign:

ÒThe threshold for the European elections to get in the news was extremely high. These Parliamentary elections are a 'non-issue'. It means nothing to the voters. Added to this were a number of factors: the war and peace negotiations in Kosovo, our governmental crisis, the resigning Minister of Agriculture, and the elections in Indonesia and South Africa which in other countries may not receive much attention but are important here in the Netherlands [...] Under more normal circumstances we would have covered the European elections more, but even then we would not have extended the coverage very farÓ.

Priority and Visibility.

Given the differences in news values applied, one could expect differences in the actual priority given to the campaign in the bulletins of the different networks. On an overall level, the visibility of the campaign was low to modest in all countries. Content analyses of the campaign coverage during recent national elections in the three countries have suggested that election news receives between 25 to 60 per cent of the coverage during the campaign (Norris et al., 1999 p 72; de Vreese, 2000, p. 17). No such measure is available for all the countries in relation to European elections. However, during the campaign for the 1979 European elections, between 40 (the Netherlands) and 100 (Britain and Denmark) minutes in the news bulletins of the public broadcasters were devoted to the European elections (Kelly & Siune, 1983). For the 1999 European elections, the public broadcasters devoted 14 (BBC), 4 (NOS Journaal), and 47 (DR TV-Avisen) minutes respectively during the last 10 days of the campaign. The proportion of election news varied from a high 19% at DR in Denmark to a low 1% at RTL in the Netherlands.

As Table 1 shows, the European elections were covered in a total of ten stories at the BBC and ITN during the last ten days of the campaign. The elections were mentioned once in the headlines and received 3% of the coverage at ITN and 6% at the BBC. In Denmark, a total of 23 stories were devoted to the campaign. DR carried the most stories (16), mentioned the elections four times in the headlines, and devoted almost one fifth of the entire news coverage to the

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elections. Dutch news neglected the elections and both channels carried only one story on June 9, the day before the elections⁶.

TABLE 1

The Agenda Issues.

In investigating the issues that dominated the coverage in the different countries, strong cross-national differences emerged. Table 2 summarizes the issues covered in the news in all three countries. British news was primarily concerned with the euro, the Conservatives' policy on this issue, and the anticipated electoral apathy. BBC and ITN did not differ substantially in their perspective on the campaign, though the BBC seemed to up-play the 'euro battleground' whereas ITN gave more room for the expected low turnout. In Denmark, the agendas of DR and TV2 differed considerably. DR paid strong attention to the fraud/ corruption issue, visited Britain, and covered two public debates about the elections. TV2 dealt with expected low turnout, visited Italy, and addressed the fact that many 'celebrities', authors, and sport stars run for the European elections. News in the Netherlands neglected the elections and carried only one obligatory story reminding the electorate about the elections. Both these stories emphasized the lack of interest from a voter perspective and the expected low turnout.

Table 2

Discussion

This study explored the role of news organizations in the formation of the campaign agenda during the 1999 European elections. The first research question dealt with the approach of the

⁶ On Election Day the British and Danish networks carried exit polls. On June 11 and 12, most programs made only brief reference to the European elections. The actual results of the elections were not made public until Monday June 14, 1999. This time lag was due to a regulation stating that all election results in the EU member countries were to be made publicly available simultaneously. The remaining countries all went to the polls on Sunday June 13, 1999.

news organizations to the elections. The approach was strongly influenced by the crisis in Kosovo. All news programs had the intention to cover the elections more extensively, but this was adjusted considerably during the campaign. Advance planning concerning the initiation and coverage of specific issues and themes was not implemented in the actual coverage.

The second research question dealt with the specific role did the news organizations played in the agenda formation process. The formation of the campaign agenda can be seen as a process, where the contribution from news organizations can range from low to high. This varied considerably in the three countries. In Britain, the Conservative Party with its *ÒIn Europe, not run by EuropeÓ*-slogan was fairly successful in setting the agenda, also for the BBC who followed the political agenda to some extent. Dutch NOS Journaal chose to almost completely neglect the elections. This can be seen as a deliberate editorial choice not to define the elections as newsworthy, i.e. an important agenda issue. Danish TV-Avisen covered the elections rather extensively and assumed a clear agenda-setting profile in the networks focus on the fraud issue.

The extent to which the news organizations assumed more or less 'agenda-sending' or 'agenda-setting' roles was influenced, on the routine and organizational levels, by the editorial policies, the degree of organizational effort, and the application of news values in evaluating news about the campaign. On the extra-media level, the general news environment and whether or not 'Europe' is a salient political issue was important.

The low visibility of the European elections in the Dutch news is a finding that is in line with observations made about the 1979 campaign. For the 1979 election, it was suggested that the Netherlands was the only country in which *Òneither broadcasters nor parties felt very concerned about promoting a European consciousnessÓ* through television which is one explanation for the absence in coverage (Noel-Armanda, 1983, p. 92). The argument put forward by Noel-Armanda (1983) suggests that news coverage of an issue on which there is widespread consensus will be only marginal. This seems like a plausible explanation and it is in line with other research on for example news values. Studies in different countries have suggested that presence of conflict in an issue is an important common criterion for selecting news (see, for example, Eilders, 1997; McManus, 1994; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, Staab, 1990). The differences in approach to the

elections and amount of campaign coverage emphasize the importance of cross-national comparisons. The findings from the Netherlands are in fact 'non-findings', but these become interesting in a comparative perspective.

While not at the core of this study, one interesting aspect embedded in both organizational constraints and journalistic culture emerged from the interviews and observations. The notion of impartiality, at the core of European public service ideals, manifested itself as an important factor influencing the campaign coverage. While impartiality is defined differently in national elections in Europe (Semetko, 1996b), the notion of equal access and balanced reporting about different political parties prevails in both Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Editorial staff also emphasized this when evaluating the campaign coverage. With the shift to proportional representation in Britain, new challenges met the news organizations, and influenced the coverage of the elections. As a senior political reporter noted:

At the News at BBC we set our own guidelines that are more stringent than the laws demands. But all those rules we are familiar with are thrown up in the air by proportional representation. With this, all kinds of middle groups have to be taken a lot more seriously than they ever would have been under the old system. For television, it was a big nightmare to construct a piece because there were too many voices that needed acknowledging. And because the 'Euro-elections' were deemed to be intrinsically boring, they [the editors] would be offering you 1 minute and 45 seconds but ask you to include the viewpoints of six political parties.

Also at the Danish TV-Avisen, the notion of political balance was prominent. At editorial meetings, effort was made to structure the coverage to include a whole range of the Danish parties running for the elections (11 in total). During the making of a piece on fraud with salaries in the EU, aired only two days prior to Election Day, great caution was taken to criticize both ends of the political spectrum equally in order not to be accused of unbalanced reporting.

This current study is an exploration of the role played by news organizations in covering a European election. The study is limited in that it is not possible to draw historical conclusions. The only cross-national investigation of the production of news about European elections dates back to the first elections in 1979 (Noel-Armanda, 1983). It remains an open question whether the findings presented in this study represent changes or a continuation of already existing developments. In

one sense, the findings are limited to the 1999 election only. The wide-ranging impact of the Kosovo crisis makes it difficult to compare and generalize. Another limitation to this study is the selection of news media. The focus is on television news only and it would obviously make sense to include both traditional print media and also new interactive forms of communication. Each of the political parties, for example, made special links on their homepages dealing specifically with the European elections. However, this study is only a first step towards understanding some of the (organizational) factors that influence content and shape election coverage.

A number of paths would be beneficial for future research to pursue. To further investigate the process of agenda formation, it may be useful to combine interviews and observations in newsrooms with interviews with politicians and party spoke persons. In combination with content analyses of for example party manifestos and press releases on the one hand and news media coverage on the other, it would be possible to investigate the agenda formation process in greater detail. Looking beyond the question of how the campaign agenda is formed, the question of the influence that this may have for the public agenda and the public perception of elections emerges.

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Table 1. Priority and visibility of news about the 1999 European Elections in British, Danish and Dutch television news

	Frequency mention in headlines	Number of election stories	Total seconds	App. Percentage of coverage
BBC	1	6	807	6
ITN	0	4	411	3
DR	4	16	2828	19
TV2	1	7	1670	11
NOS	0	1	268	2
RTL	0	1	137	1

June 4	-	-	-	(3, 4:39) (Solana appointed) (4, 1:10))	-	(EU appoints Solana (6 0:32) (EuroTop Cologne Role EU in Kosovo) (2, 2:17)
June 3	Conservative pressured to deny EU leaving policy (7, 1:57)	-	(EuroTop Cologne) (4, 1:48)	(EuroTop Cologne: Role EU in Kosovo, role DK in EU) (5, 3:50)	(EuroTop Cologne Role EU in Kosovo) (2, 3:14)	
June 2	-	Campaign stepping up, fear for turnout (10, 2:01)	25% of EP administration 'moonlighting' (6, 4:20)	-	-	-
June 1	Hague calls for government to ban Euro (6, 2:45)	-	Danish PM support EU defense cooperation (2, 2:35)	Europe-politicians don't show up at meetings (1, 4:56)	-	-

*influence of press or tv decisions
a technical view of the production of news?
which agendas?*