

# Television Reporting of Second-Order Elections

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**ABSTRACT** *This study is a cross-national investigation of television reporting of the 1999 European elections in Britain, Denmark, and The Netherlands. Three aspects of the role of news organizations in shaping election news coverage are considered: the degree of organizational effort invested in the coverage, the editorial policies of the news organization and the application of news selection criteria. The study draws on interviews with (senior) political correspondents and editors-in-chief as well as content analytic indicators from the news in the three countries. A number of cross-national differences were identified. 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 reflected the politicians' agenda to a greater extent than Dutch news, in which the elections were largely neglected, while Danish news organizations played a proactive role in setting their own news agenda. The increased editorial autonomy and selectivity are discussed in the light of previous research on political communication in European elections.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Agenda Setting, Campaigns, European Elections, Journalism, News, Television*

The effects of news media coverage of politics on public perceptions of politicians, issues, and events are often emphasized in political communication research. An equally important question addresses the antecedents of such media effects: the factors that influence news media content. News content is the result of a complex process and a diversity of forces and influences found both within and outside the news organization. Previous research has approached the investigation of the production of news from political economy, ideological, and sociological perspectives while focusing on, for example, notions of the newsworthiness of events, issue management, and organizational routines (see Shoemaker and Reese [1996] and Schudson [2000] for overviews). While the assumptions and approaches vary in these different studies, one important element brings them together, namely the observation that the news organization is a crucial player in the interaction between politics and the public. Some studies suggest that news organizations are the place where culturally defined norms of news values and selection criteria are manifest (e.g.

Breed, 1955; Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Other studies stress that news media are active players in defining the news agenda (e.g. Tuchman, 1978) and Manheim (1998) sees the newsroom as *the* key locale for defining news and proposes that news is a product of internal behaviours and values of the institutional needs of the newsroom.

In this exploratory study, the role of news organizations in reporting a transnational election is investigated from the perspective of the newsroom, the focus of study being the 1999 elections for the European Parliament.

## Television News and Elections

Elections are pivotal moments in the democratic process and news media play an increasingly important role as intermediaries between the electorate and the political arena. The editorial approach of news organizations to covering an election can be distinguished in a continuum between *sacerdotal* and *pragmatic* approaches as suggested by Blumler and Gurevitch (Semetko et al., 1991). The typology refers to the status attributed to elections and cam-

paign news. In a sacerdotal approach, elections are perceived as the fundament of democracy and campaigns are considered newsworthy *per se*. The attitude towards politicians is respectful, cautious, and reactive. In a pragmatic approach campaign news is evaluated against conventional news selection criteria and is not automatically given special attention. The pragmatic orientation implies that the “amount of time or space allocated to [political events] will be determined by strict considerations of news values, in competition with the newsworthiness of other stories” (Semetko et al., 1991, p. 6).

### *Covering National Elections*

Previous research investigating the role of news organizations during campaigns has largely focused on *national* election campaigns. The series of interviews and newsroom observations by Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch of the BBC news coverage of general elections in Britain allows for unique over-time comparisons (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000). While studies of journalism in Britain in the 1980s found a predominant sacerdotal ethos, in relation to the 1997 general election it was found that “British journalists intervened more independently and forcibly ... than at any previous post-war election” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000, p. 388).

Cross-national comparisons of this type of research are rare, with one notable exception. In an analysis of the 1983 British general election and the 1984 American presidential election, it was found that BBC journalists were prudential and cautious, concerned about “ensuring that television journalism was, and would appear to be, politically beyond reproach—perhaps even politically innocuous” (Semetko et al., 1991, p. 53). By comparison journalists at the US network NBC were more analytic and committed to a conventional journalistic approach “looking for events to report that would be laced with drama, conflict, novelty, movement and anomaly” (Semetko et al., 1991, p. 55).

Taken together, we have only limited knowledge about changes over time in news organizations’ approach to national elections. Evidence from cross-national comparisons of national elections is virtually non-existent

(Schudson, 2000). In a temporal comparative perspective it seems that journalists in Britain have become more assertive and that journalists have assumed a more central role in election news coverage at the expense of politicians. Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) conclude that in some respects political journalism in Britain has moved closer to an American model of political communication so that in the 1997 election “sacerdotalism was conspicuously absent from the approach to political institutions, parties and the political establishment” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000, p. 398). As the authors acknowledge, these findings may be part of an international trend, but their data do not allow for such inferences.

### *Covering European Elections*

Turning to European-level elections, a study of the 1979 elections offers the only baseline from which to make comparisons. This study attempted to investigate comparatively the role of broadcasters in election coverage. In relation to the 1979 first-time elections for the European Parliament, Noël-Aranda (1983) conducted the only study addressing the attitudes of broadcasters towards their role in the campaign. Based on a survey of broadcast journalists in the then nine member states of the European Community, it was found that only about half (53 per cent) of the broadcasters felt a need to play a part in defining the issues of the European elections. This suggests a strong presence of “sacerdotal” sentiments among the journalists and the study concluded that many of the broadcasters were adhering to the agenda proposed by politicians and that they “appeared fearful of advancing into a territory they considered to be reserved by the politicians” (Noël-Aranda, 1983, p. 97).

As noted, our knowledge of how news organizations and in particular television journalists approach European elections and deal with key political institutions is limited. One study explored the tension between national newspaper headquarters and the Brussels press corps (Morgan, 1985), but a recent study succinctly concluded that “little or no work has been done on how television journalists deal with Eu-

ropean issues" (Gavin, 2001, p. 305). It therefore makes sense to investigate the journalistic approach in relation to a pan-European event such as the European elections.

### *Changes in Political Communication*

Evidence from changes in the politics-journalism interface at the national level may inform our understanding of the European level. A substantial body of research has addressed the parallel changes in the direction of professionalization of politics on the one hand and responses by the media to such developments on the other (Bennett and Entman, 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Farrell, 1996; Mancini, 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Changes in the communication strategies of politicians and political parties have direct implications for political journalism, which is dependent upon input from the political arena. Broadly speaking a transition has taken place in which the journalistic focus on strategy and the horse race aspects of politics has been paralleled by politicians' use of streamlined communication structures, PR strategists, news managers, and spin doctors. For their part, journalists have adapted by making the "exposure" of professional political tactics the focus of news stories (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Esser et al., 2001; Norris, 2000; Newman, 2000).

While these developments have been addressed in the context of national-level elections in both Europe and the US, little is known about changes in the political culture at the European level. The changes at the national level provide reason to believe that European political institutions have also adapted new strategies and that the media have responded accordingly. Only one study has investigated the efforts made by European Union institutions to deal with public relations and media attention. That study provides an ungracious analysis of the European Commission's media communication, suggesting that fragmented political authority, a pervading technocratic mindset, and inadequate staffing result in severe communication deficits (Meyer, 1999). This study suggests that the degree of profes-

sionalization of politics at the European level might be less than at the national level. However, the general tendency in Europe is to adapt more advanced technical and organizational modes of communication as well as strategic parameters of professional campaigning (Plasser et al., 2000).

Hypothesizing about changes in news organizations' approach to European elections must be cautious given the scarcity of longitudinal research. Based on evidence from single-country studies of politics and campaigns, however, it seems reasonable to expect that European broadcasters today will approach European elections differently than in 1979 when sacerdotalism prevailed. European elections have been referred to as "second-order elections" (Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Reif and Schmitt, 1980) that are generally perceived as less important than national elections by European publics (Eijk, 1999). If European elections are less centre stage than national elections, it can be expected that the increasing degree of discretion displayed by broadcasters in the more salient national elections is likely to affect the coverage of European elections too so that by 1999 pragmatism shaped the campaign coverage. One might even speculate that newsmakers exert even more discretion in their coverage of European elections than when dealing with national elections. European elections are low key, which provides more leeway in defining and implementing editorial policies.

Despite their "second-order" election classification, European elections remain key moments of electoral representativeness and accountability in the process of European integration. Specifically, the June 1999 elections in the 15 member states took place at a crucial moment in the process of European integration. The common European currency, the euro, was introduced on 1 January 1999, the European Commission stepped down in March 1999, and the European Union was facing challenges of enlargement and harmonization of judicial systems. The turnout at the elections was significantly lower than in 1994 (overall European Union average 49.4 per cent in 1999 compared with 56.8 per cent in 1994) and in

some countries the news media were blamed for contributing to this decline.

### **Organization, Editorial Policies, and News Selection Criteria**

The goal of this study is to extend previous research on the approach of television news organizations to elections with a cross-nationally comparative dimension. This is achieved by an empirical investigation of how news organizations approach European-level elections. The study is guided by a focus on three key dimensions of election news coverage (Blumler et al., 1986; 1989; Semetko et al., 1991).

#### *The Organization of the Campaign Coverage*

The first dimension addresses the organizational structure and effort invested in the campaign coverage. Logistics is a key component of election news, since political activities in national campaigns often take place simultaneously in various locations. In a European election context, this challenge is even greater, since an additional level of European governance is included (Siune, 1983). Key indicators to assess the organization of the campaign coverage include the set-up of the coverage within the newsroom, the degree of advance preparation, the possible allocation of budgetary means, and the potential expansion of political staff during the campaign.

#### *Editorial Approach*

The second dimension addresses the formally defined organizational and editorial approach to the elections. Key indicators for evaluating the editorial approach include officially formulated policies regarding the elections, the use of reactive and or proactive strategies by the news organization, the policy regarding coverage of issues brought forward by politicians and parties, and the either sacerdotal or pragmatic approach to politics, politicians, and institutions. To further understand the dynamics of forming the campaign agenda, agenda building (the process through which agendas are built) is a key concept (Lang and Lang, 1991). Traditionally, European broadcasters have covered na-

tional elections in a cautious way, adhering largely to the agenda of parties and politicians (e.g. Asp, 1983; Blumler et al., 1989; Hjarvard, 1999; Semetko et al., 1991; Siune and Borre, 1975). While this role may be labelled "agenda sending", recent research, however, suggests that this may no longer be the case (see e.g. Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998; 2000; Hjarvard, 1999; Norris et al., 1999; Semetko and Canel, 1997; de Vreese, 2001). News organizations and journalists have been found to be more proactive in their coverage of national politics and to exert more discretion when choosing which stories to bring and how to cover these issues. This role may more appropriately be labelled "agenda setting". It remains an open question whether this development also applies to European-level elections, the only available benchmark being the 1979 elections, at which broadcasters were found to be primarily agenda sending (Noël-Aranda, 1983).

#### *News Selection Criteria*

The third dimension addresses the use of news selection criteria in the campaign coverage. Key indicators to assess the application of selection criteria are whether standard criteria for evaluation of the newsworthiness of events and issues applied or whether special criteria are applied for evaluation of election stories. Additional indicators include whether special campaign segments are implemented or whether news about the election competes equally against all other news.

While the three dimensions pertain to the news production process, the actual outcome of the editorial policies and the application of news selection criteria can be observed in the news itself. The results and implementation of the policies are detectable in, for example, the visibility (amount of coverage) of a campaign in the news and the priority given to news about the campaign given (e.g. lead story, mentioned in headlines, etc.).

### **Reporting Second-Order Elections: research questions**

This study brings together the different dimensions of coverage in an investigation of the role

of national television news organizations in the agenda formation process around the June 1999 European elections. With the dimensions outlined above as the interpretative background, the following overarching question guides the investigation: How did television news organizations approach the 1999 European elections? This general question is addressed on the one hand by mapping how the campaign coverage was organized, by locating the editorial approach in the sacerdotal–pragmatic continuum, and by investigating how news values were applied. On the other hand, the study also investigates the outcome of the choices made by the news organizations, the actual news coverage, by assessing the visibility and topical focus of the election news.

The questions are 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 diversity in terms of size and opinion about advanced European integration. On the aggregate level, the three countries can be situated on a “Europe-warm/Europe-cold” scale. In Britain, public opinion is divided and the country is among the most Eurosceptic members of the European Union, both in general terms and with regard to specific key European Union policies such as the common currency and enlargement (Eurobarometer, 56, 2002). Denmark is lukewarm towards advanced integration. On the aggregate level, the support for membership is similar to the European Union average. The support for the euro is lower than in most other countries, which was demonstrated in the 2000 rejection of the euro in a national referendum, but support for the enlargement of the European Union is higher than in most other countries. The Netherlands is pro-European, both in terms of general support and in terms of support for key European Union policies.

The cross-national design does not include a large pro-European country such as Spain or Italy. Admittedly, this would have added value to the generalizability of the findings. However, the three countries do represent variance and this cross-national perspective is an advancement for current research on political journal-

ism. Based on previous cross-national investigations, we may expect system characteristics to affect political journalism (Semetko et al., 1991). In the case of European politics, we may in particular expect news coverage in countries with polarized public opinion and the presence of anti-European political parties to be more visible than in countries with consensus on the benefits of European integration (Peter, 2003).

The European election was an event likely to be covered in more countries and therefore ideal for studying journalistic practices cross-nationally. By using the national differences in aggregate-level public opinion about European integration as the backdrop for understanding the findings, the investigation of television news’s role in the European integration process is potentially enhanced beyond the level of national parochialism. It should be stressed that the comparative approach taken in this study utilizes national characteristics as a context for understanding differences. These characteristics are not formally modelled to explain differences (Przeworski and Teune, 1970).

### Reporting Second-Order Elections: research design

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 at the news programmes of the public broadcasters in the three countries. Second, an assessment of the news coverage was made following a content analysis of the television news programmes in the three countries.<sup>1</sup>

The programmes included in the analysis are the two most widely watched television news programmes in the three countries: BBC *Nine O’clock News*<sup>2</sup> and ITN *News at 6.30*<sup>3</sup> (Britain), DR *TV-Avisen* at 9 p.m. and TV2’s *Nyhederne* (7 p.m.) (Denmark), and NOS *Journal* at 8 p.m. and RTL *Nieuws* at 7.30 p.m. (The Netherlands). All programmes are comparable in terms of their length, ranging from 25 to 30 minutes. BBC, DR, and NOS are publicly funded broad

casters, TV2 is one-third publicly and two-thirds privately funded, and ITN and RTL are both privately funded networks.

All interviews were held with representatives of these specific news programmes. The level of interview was the news programme rather than the network or organizational level. A total of 12 face-to-face interviews (five in Britain, four in Denmark, and three in The Netherlands) with a duration of 1–1.5 hour on average were conducted.<sup>4</sup> The sample of interviewees covers a substantial part of the total population of journalists and editors covering the elections for these specific programmes. The interviews were restricted to the public broadcasters (BBC, DR, and NOS) only in order to ensure comparability.<sup>5</sup>

The interviews followed a common interview protocol with questions pertaining to the organizational structure and effort, the editorial approach, and the application of news selection criteria. The interview protocol 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 in coverage of national elections were explored with senior news executives and reporters.

The content analysis included the hot phase of the campaign from 1 to 10 June 1999. The relatively short period accords 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 and Siune, 1994). All stories in the news programmes were analysed to identify news about the campaign. The unit of analysis was the individual news story. The key measures of the content analysis were the visibility of the campaign (defined as number and length of stories) and the topic of campaign news (recorded as open-ended descriptions of the story focus).

### Reporting Second-Order Elections: findings

One observation overrides other comments about the campaign. The period leading up to the European Parliamentary elections was influenced by the conflict in Kosovo. During the course of the election campaign NATO carried out bombings, peace negotiations were initiated, and on election day (10 June 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 dimensions will be addressed individually.

#### *The Organization of the Campaign Coverage: logistics and ambitions*

None of the news programmes implemented a special daily campaign segment in their bulletin, which has been traditional during national election campaigns. The elections were covered within already existing structures of political and economic coverage. However, all programmes allocated additional budget to cover the elections and all initiated advance planning in specialized *ad hoc* 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 full-time correspondents who permanently offer coverage of the Brussels beat for the entire spectrum of BBC outlets (BBC1 and 2, BBC World, BBC 24, BBC Radio). BBC News Gathering automatically covers events such as European summits to meet the demands of the different outlets. The *Nine O'clock News*, along with the other programmes, can commission stories to be produced by the Brussels bureau by making use of an allocated budget per programme. Prior to the European elections, a few stories dealing with Europe were commissioned by the Editor-in-Chief of the BBC's *Nine O'clock News*:

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I 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 centre-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 into the euro, what conclusions could be drawn on that relatively short time scale?

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

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The 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 sent 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. I would have done more under normal circumstances, but I scaled it back a bit.

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Danish television (DR) started preparations for covering the elections campaign six months prior to election day. Specifically, the two correspondents from the Brussels bureau, and reporters from the Copenhagen-based political unit and the domestic desk prepared for the elections by forming a small "working group". The Head of the Political Unit functioned as a daily coordinator for the election coverage. An 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 issues of fraud and malpractice in European Union institutions.

In anticipation of the European elections Dutch *NOS Journaal* created a "Europe Unit". The group consisted of the programme's Brussels correspondent and The Hague based Parliament-political reporters and editors. Preparatory research was carried out for a number of issues, such as the competence of the

European Parliament, fraud, the EU budget, and voter apathy. However, in the actual coverage of the campaign, these advance preparations were never used and the internal organizational structures developed to cover the campaign were never implemented.

*Editorial Approach: whither sacerdotalism?*

The news organizations' editorial policies were formulated in internal memos in which the role of the news programme in initiating its own stories and dealing with the advance scheduled political agenda was addressed. For the European elections the editorial approach of the BBC, DR, and NOS to covering the elections varied considerably.

The BBC's original plans of initiating a number of political and economic themes were only marginally implemented. The proactive nature of the preparations was 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 proactive Tory campaigning versus the passive government campaigning:

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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 News*] really didn't want to take any pieces they didn't have to have, and ended up having to take a piece every day at the end of the campaign in order to feel that they had done the job properly. This means that they had to take the "story of the day" out of the press conferences.

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A sacerdotal approach prescribes a respectful perception of political institutions, including the European Parliament. At the BBC the European Parliament was considered an institution in transition, but not a strong political authority. According to the Editor-in-Chief,

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The European Parliament is becoming a more powerful body, and had new powers this year. Therefore it is potentially more influential and

therefore potentially more important who goes there. There was in the past a kind of unwritten feeling that Members of the European Parliament were actually just kind of going over there talking, declaring their expenses, doing not very much ... It was a bit of talking shop and not totally relevant. Leading up to the European elections, because the Parliament had given the Commission a very bloody nose only three months previously, it was seen to have scored some kind of a victory and asserted its position against fraud, plus it was taking on the new powers.

The perception of the Parliament as an institution that is both physically and mentally far away from most voters and that requires a certain critical reflection was also found at the Danish DR. The Head of the Political Unit described the perception of the Parliament in these words:

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The difficulty of covering "Europe" is that, in the eyes of our viewers, it is still something very distant. I do not believe that many people are too concerned about the competences of that Parliament. And throughout the years an image has been created that it is not a real Parliament like the national one.

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DR approached the elections proactively and assumed a distinct agenda-setting role, which was a debated decision in the campaign. As the Editor-in-Chief noted,

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If you ask the politicians what the agenda is, then it is totally different. Then you get big, abstract things like the enlargement [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, saying that we have derailed the debate.

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*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 and large, neglected the elections. The Second Editor-in-Chief explained, "It is correct that we did not do much. But there was no campaign. Even the political

parties reduced their campaign activities to an absolute minimum."

*News Selection Criteria: business as usual*

The application of news selection criteria is an indicator of the weight and importance given to elections. While broadcasters have traditionally extended the news bulletins or designated daily campaign segments during national elections (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1998), 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 introduction of the euro in 1999 and 2002, for example, the *Nine O'clock News* did not commission a series of stories focusing on the elections and important European themes. News about the "Euro-elections" was not given extra priority. While arguing that selection criteria were not adjusted during the campaign, DR did upgrade the campaign in comparison with other available news, on for example the fraud issue. However, the elections were not covered daily, and the upgrade was used to cover the fraud issue rather than to follow candidates on the campaign trail. The Editor-in-Chief elaborated on this:

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Given 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.

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

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One reason is logistical. One can say why don't we

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

Country	News outlet	Frequency mention in headlines	Number of election stories	Total length (seconds)	Percentage of total news coverage
Great Britain	BBC	1	6	807	6
	ITN	0	4	411	3
Denmark	DR	4	16	2828	19
	TV2	1	7	1670	11
The Netherlands	NOS	0	1	268	2
	RTL	0	1	137	1

*Note:* British, Danish, and Dutch television news, 1–10 June 1999.

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 absent.

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:

The 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 far.

*Priority and Visibility: a few needles in the haystack*

Given the differences in news selection criteria applied, one would expect differences in the actual priority given to the campaign in the bulletins of the different networks. In general,

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 elections take up anywhere between 25 to 60 per cent of the news during a campaign (Norris et al., 1999). No comparable measure is available for the European elections. One indicator, however, suggests that 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 and Siune, 1983). For the 1999 European elections, the public broadcasters devoted 14 (BBC), 4 (*NOS Journaal*), and 47 (*TV-Avisen*) minutes, respectively. The proportion of election news as part of the total news varied from a high 19 per cent at DR in Denmark to a low 1 per cent 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 per cent of the coverage at ITN and 6 per cent at the BBC. In Denmark, a total of 23 stories were devoted to the campaign. DR carried the most stories (16), mentioned the elections in headlines on four occasions and devoted almost one-fifth DR's entire news coverage of the elections. Dutch news neglected the elections and both channels carried only one story on 9 June, the day before the elections.<sup>6</sup>

The cross-national design of the study suggests a strong similarity in terms of work rou-

tines, logistic organization of the coverage, and criteria for selecting events to become news. However, the cross-national perspective also illuminates differences in the editorial policy defined by the different news programmes. The findings from The Netherlands illustrate this point, since the approaches taken by, for example, NOS and DR become interesting when viewed comparatively. Both programmes can be said to have been pragmatic about the elections by not considering them relevant *per se*. However, one programme as a consequence decided to neglect the elections (NOS) whereas the other chose to set a different agenda than the one put forward by the political arena (DR).

*The Issue Agenda: neglect, apathy and fraud*

Strong cross-national differences were found in the issues that dominated the coverage in the different countries. Table 2 provides an overview of the issues covered in the news in all three countries. The Dutch news programmes neglected the European elections and each channel carried only one obligatory story reminding the electorate about the elections. Both of these Dutch stories emphasized the lack of voter interest and the anticipated low turnout.

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 perspectives on the campaign, though ITN gave more room to the expected abstention whereas the BBC seemed to play up the "euro battleground". A senior BBC political correspondent commented,

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We ended up paying a lot of attention to the euro. Particularly we, but also the government, were 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, and the government was choosing not to set an agenda, it was the Conservative agenda we followed.

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In Denmark, the agendas of DR and TV2 differed considerably. TV2 dealt with expected low turnout, visited Italy, and addressed the

fact that many celebrities, authors, and sport stars run for the European elections. DR visited Britain and Germany, covered two public debates about the elections, but paid the strongest attention to the fraud/corruption issue. The Head of the Political Unit commented,

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We responded to reality. Fact is, which perhaps is sad, that [1] there is hardly any interest for these elections, [2] the politicians have a very hard time selling anything with reference to the European Parliament, and [3] we know from other news and our own research that fraud and the lack of working discipline in the Parliament are the most important issues to the audience.

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One additional aspect embedded in both organizational constraints and journalistic culture emerged from the interviews and observations. The notion of impartiality and balanced reporting, at the core of European public service broadcasting ideals, manifested itself as an important factor influencing the campaign coverage. Though there is no single definition of bias or impartiality in television news (Gunter, 1997), the notion of equal access and balanced reporting about different political parties prevailed in Britain, Denmark, and The Netherlands. Editorial staff 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,

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At the News at BBC we set our own guidelines that are more stringent than the law's 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.

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At the Danish *TV-Avisen* also, 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 involv-

Table 2. Overview of television news about European elections in Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands

Date	Britain			Denmark			The Netherlands		
	BBC	ITN	DR	ITN	DR	TV2	NOS	RTL	
June 10	Polls close at 10 p.m.; turnout low (3, 0:25)	First proportional representation elections (5, 0:13)	Poll: who's in and who's out (2, 1:50) Danes stayed at home (3, 3:00) 'Mimi' lost the race (4, 2:00) Electorate stayed at home, only politicians out (5, 3:40) Latest poll and analysis (2, 3:50) Party to return contribution (7, 7:23) Britain: euro dominates elections (8, 3:05) TVA apology to June Movement (9, 0:30)	—	—	One hour before closing: exit poll (3, 4:37)	—	—	
June 9	Political leaders on final day of campaigning (3, 3:20) Proportional representation and new ballot papers (4, 2:00)	Turnout expected to go down; big ballots (8, 2:37)	EU "Roman Kingdom" of committees (3, 3:32) Live debate in Jutland (5, 0:25) Fraud with salaries in EU (8, 4:01) Live: Nasar Kadar vs. Mogens Camre in Copenhagen (6, 3:36)	—	—	Campaigning in empty rooms (4, 4:54)	European elections tomorrow: expected low turnout (10, 4:28)	Elections for European Parliament (11, 2:37)	
June 8	Euro is election battleground. Britain to lead or leave Europe (5, 3:00)	—	June Movement to be halved (3, 02:30) Conservatives to lose (4, 2:58)	—	—	Italy wants strong EU defence (8, 2:48)	—	—	
June 7	—	3 days away: persistent predictions of low turnout (8, 2:00)	—	—	—	Commissioner Bjerregård "interferes" in Danish campaign (7, 2:06)	—	—	
June 6	—	—	—	—	—	Mickey Mouse elections: sport stars and actors dominate (7, 3:55)	—	—	
June 5	—	—	—	—	—	EU elections (3, 4:39)	—	—	

Table 2.—Continued.

Date	Britain			Denmark			The Netherlands		
	BBC	ITN	DR	TV2	NOS	RTL			
June 4	—	—	—	Solana appointed (4, 1:10)	—	(EU appoints Solana (6 0:32))			
June 3	Conservative pressured to deny EU leaving policy (7, 1:57)	—	Euro Summit Cologne (4, 1:48)	Euro Summit Cologne: role of EU in Kosovo, role of Denmark in EU (5, 3:50)	Euro Summit Cologne: role of EU in Kosovo (2, 3:14)	Euro Summit Cologne: role of EU in Kosovo (2, 2:17)			
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 supports EU defence cooperation (2, 2:35)	Europe politicians don't show up at meetings (1, 4:56)	—	—			

Note: Entries are headlines of television news. In brackets are the story number in the news programme and the length of story.

ing salaries in the EU, aired only two days prior to election day, great care was taken to criticize both ends of the political spectrum equally in order not to be accused of unbalanced reporting.

### **Reporting Second-Order Elections: discussion**

This study explored the editorial approaches and role of television news organizations in reporting the 1999 European elections. The British, Danish, and Dutch news programmes all intended to cover the elections more extensively, but this initial ambition was downsized considerably during the campaign. Advance planning concerning the initiation of specific issues was often not implemented in the actual coverage. A common link between the various news programmes was the pragmatic approach to the elections they adopted—implying that politics (including election campaigns) are not considered newsworthy *per se*, but that political events and issues compete for broadcast time against other news topics. The event was not considered to have sufficient intrinsic importance or interest and the European Parliament was evaluated critically and did not enjoy any privileges as a political authority. In general, the elections were not upgraded and events in the campaign were mostly evaluated according to normal news selection criteria.

Though the approach of all the news programmes during the 1999 European Parliament elections was pragmatic, this took different forms. Some news programmes chose (1) to neglect the elections due to an editorial assessment of the event as non-newsworthy (e.g. Dutch *NOS Journaal* and *RTL Nieuws*), or (2) to set their own agenda without paying attention to the political party agenda (e.g. Danish *DR TV-Avisen*) or (3) to make the anticipated voter apathy a key theme in the coverage (e.g. BBC, ITN, TV2). These findings contrast with previous research documenting European broadcasters' sacerdotal approach to politics, in which political processes are considered crucial to democracy and therefore newsworthy *per se*. These findings suggest that the approach taken by television journalists in the coverage of Eu-

ropean affairs has changed considerably since the first European Parliamentary elections in 1979. Noël-Aranda (1983) concluded that broadcasters during the 1979 campaign were cautious and adhered largely to the agenda put forward by politicians. This is no longer an appropriate description when one assesses the approach taken by broadcasters in the 1999 elections.

In the campaign agenda formation process the contribution from the news organizations varied and the degree to which the networks adapted the political agenda differed. In Britain, the agenda of the political parties was important for the building of the news agenda. Most notably, the Conservatives received extensive coverage and their "In Europe, not run by Europe" slogan seemed influential. 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. as an important agenda issue. Danish *TV-Avisen* covered the elections rather extensively and assumed a clear agenda-setting profile in the network's focus on the fraud issue.

Turning to the news coverage itself, the study suggests that the elections received only limited coverage, the elections being most visible in Denmark and Britain and most invisible in The Netherlands. The low visibility of the European elections in the Dutch news is in line with observations made about the 1979 campaign. Of the 1979 election, it was suggested that The Netherlands was the only country in which "neither broadcasters nor parties felt very concerned about promoting a European consciousness" through television, which is one explanation for the lack of coverage (Noël-Aranda, 1983, p. 92). The argument put forward by Noël-Aranda (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 (e.g. Eilders, 1997; McManus, 1994; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The differences in approach

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

The topical focus of the news revealed some cross-national differences, the emphasis of Danish news on the fraud issue being the most significant. A shared feature across the countries was the frequent references to expected low turnout and prevalent voter apathy. Critics suggested that the repeated predictions of abstention became a self-fulfilling prophecy that fuelled the low turnout. While the content analysis in this study supports the claim that "expected low turnout" was a prominent theme on the news agenda, often initiated by the news media themselves, no clear conclusions about negative real-life effects can be drawn from the literature. On the one hand there is hardly any evidence to suggest that polls predicting the level of turnout in elections have large effects. Studies of demobilizing effects of the publication of polls yield either minimal or no effects on voters' choice to turn out to vote (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1994; Sudman, 1986). On the other hand, Zaller (1992) has suggested that the most significant effects of media content are likely to occur in a situation where the information environment is dominated by coverage of an issue with a consistent directional bias. It is therefore unclear, and also beyond the scope of this study, to determine what (if any) effects the prevalence of the "turnout" theme in the campaign news coverage had.

This study is an exploration of the role played by news organizations in covering a common political event. The study is only an initial step towards understanding some of the (organizational) factors that influence content and shape election coverage. Though the study

does not allow for longitudinal inferences, the difference between the findings from this study and those from the cross-national investigation of the production of news about the 1979 European elections are considerable. It remains an open question whether the findings presented in this study represent recent changes or a continuation of already existing trends. In this sense, the findings are limited to the 1999 election only. However, the findings dovetail with studies of political journalism during national elections that also suggest that sacerdotal approaches have been replaced by more pragmatic considerations and more selective editorial strategies (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2000).

In the future of political news journalism in the process of European integration, the editorial autonomy and discretion exerted by broadcasters are likely to increase. Television news seems to have moved beyond sacerdotalism and this may translate into stronger selectivity, not only in terms of which topics are selected for coverage, but *how* these stories are told. Since news is the key information resource for European citizens, current developments do not provide much optimism that television news is a remedy for the legitimacy deficit in the EU or that news may change the perception of European elections as "second-order elections".

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The content analysis is integral to a larger research project, funded by the Dutch Science Foundation (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, a book manuscript dealing with both the campaign and the electoral outcome is in progress.

- <sup>2</sup> The BBC currently (2003) broadcasts its main evening news programme at 10 p.m.
- <sup>3</sup> ITN used to have its main evening news bulletin at 10 p.m. However, since March 1999 this was temporarily rescheduled as a bulletin at 6.30 p.m. and a shorter news update at 11 p.m. In 2002, ITN reinstated *News at Ten*.
- <sup>4</sup> The interviewees appear in this article by title/function in the newsroom rather than by name. The titles vary by programme and the most concise and applicable have been chosen.
- <sup>5</sup> An additional source of information comes from newsroom observations at the television news programmes in the three countries. This observational component consisted of 2–3 day attendances in the newsrooms prior to the elections. A researcher was present in each newsroom, attending central editorial meetings and monitoring discussions between journalists, editors, and correspondents. As the European elections were held on 10 June 1999 in all three countries, the observations could not take place on the same days. In Denmark, these were carried out on 7–8 June and in The Netherlands on 10–11 June. 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.
- <sup>6</sup> On election day the British and Danish networks carried out exit polls. On 11 and 12 June 1999 most programmes made only brief reference to the European elections. The actual results of the elections were not made public until Monday 14 June 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 13 June 1999.

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