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Online battles

Conflict frames in political actors' online communication: Context, content, and consequences
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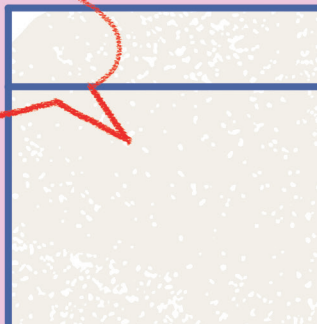
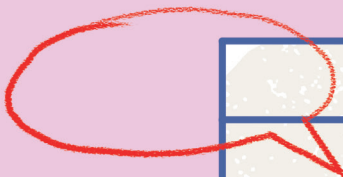
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CHAPTER 4

Do politicians knowingly create conflict to gain media attention?¹

¹ This chapter is under review. An earlier version of this chapter is presented at the ICA conference 2023, Toronto.

Abstract

Given the importance of negativity and conflict in political news coverage, it is assumed that political actors strategically seek out conflict with political opponents or employ negative campaign tactics to cater to the logic of the media and secure their presence in the news. However, since existing research on politicians' self-mediatization predominantly relies on surveys or content analyses, we have little in-depth insight into how politicians perceive and navigate the news media's strong focus on conflict and negativity. Addressing this gap, our study employs a qualitative approach to investigate how politicians feel affected in their day-to-day activities by a media environment predominantly focused on negativity and conflict and how they adapt their strategic communication efforts accordingly. We conducted 31 interviews with members of the Dutch Parliament. Our findings reveal that while MPs recognize the influence of the negative and conflict-driven media environment on the political domain, their adaptation to it varies. Some MPs strategically use media logic to their advantage when seeking political influence or attention. Others actively try to restrain the media's logic, emphasizing collaboration to increase political success. Importantly, politicians disclose that adaptation is contingent on factors such as party affiliation, the kind of conflict it concerns, and the timing (during or after election campaigns). Our research offers valuable insights into politicians' perspectives on how to resist or adapt to the perceived influence of the media.

Introduction

Political news often focuses on elements like political misconduct, conflicts between parties, or politicians not living up to voters' expectations. Journalists, aiming to gain a broad audience in a competitive attention economy (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), and fulfilling a critical watchdog function (Bartholomé et al., 2015), exhibit a bias toward negativity in political reporting (Esser et al., 2016). A core element of this negativity bias is journalists' tendency to report on political conflict, emphasizing disagreement between political actors and incompatibility between viewpoints (Bartholomé et al., 2015). Likewise, in politicians' communication, negativity and conflict are often dominant elements (Klinger et al., 2022; Chapters 1 & 2), potentially as a strategic anticipation of the media's understanding of what is newsworthy. As we know markedly little about how politicians themselves perceive and navigate the news media's strong focus on conflict and negativity, this paper aims to advance our understanding of politicians' perspectives on the current media logic. We will do so by mapping perceptions among a diverse group of political actors, such as incumbent and opposition parties, including populist ones.

In today's *mediatized* society, the logic of the media extends beyond the realm of journalism and is generally more central to political communication processes, including the self-presentation of politicians (Strömbäck, 2008). It is presumed that politicians must adapt their behaviour to the logic of the media to be visible to voters, inform them about their policies and plans, and influence policy decisions (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). Consequently, politicians might (strategically) emphasize negativity and criticize opponents to suit journalistic news selection criteria – i.e., news values like negativity and conflict – ensuring their presence in the news (Van Santen et al., 2015). In this paper, we seek to understand to what extent politicians are aware of the importance of these news values, and how they incorporate them into their daily work by, for example, emphasizing conflict or using negative rhetoric to increase the newsworthiness of themselves, their party, or issues they want to raise.

Previous studies exploring politicians' adaptation to media logic have either examined the relationship between politicians' perceptions of media power and strategic behaviour or made comparisons between politicians' communication and media content (see e.g., Haßler et al., 2014; Ketelaars & Van Aelst, 2021). These studies, however, relying on survey data and content analyses, are limited in uncovering the nuanced and underlying motives driving politicians to emphasize negativity and conflict. Given the complexity of media adaptation, a more in-depth approach is necessary. While surveys are essential for grasping general trends in

politicians' behaviour, our research employs qualitative interviews to gain a detailed understanding of the reasons behind politicians' decision-making. To study the role of media's focus on negativity and conflicts on politicians in all its facets, we look at how politicians perceive these media biases, how they influence their daily work, and their strategic communicative behaviour (online). Our central question is: how are Members of Parliament (MPs) affected in their daily work by a media environment predominantly focused on negativity and political conflict and do they adapt their communication strategies accordingly?

To answer our research question, we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with Dutch MPs representing a diverse range of political parties across the political spectrum. This study enriches the literature on conflict framing, mediatization, and negativity through an in-depth exploration of the different strategies and motives employed by political actors in navigating the dominant media logic that prioritizes negativity and conflict.

Theoretical framework

Mediatization of politics

The concept of mediatization is crucial in understanding the relationship between politics and the media (e.g., Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). Mediatization of politics refers to the process whereby the media's importance and impact on political institutions, actors, and organizations have increased over time (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). Strömbäck (2008) outlines four phases of mediatization. Applied to politics, the first phase emerges when the media becomes the primary source of political information, facilitating politicians' communication with the public. The media gained political independence in the second phase. Subsequently, in the third phase, political coverage is predominantly guided by media logic, with journalists prioritizing their routines and rules over political considerations (i.e., political logic). In the fourth and final phase, the media's influence is so profound that politicians must adapt to media norms and practices (Strömbäck, 2008). This paper focuses on examining the fourth phase of mediatization, recognizing the institutionalization of media within political processes.

While early mediatization literature predicted political actors being 'governed' by media logic (Strömbäck, 2008), recent perspectives suggest that politicians strategically use the media to reach their goals (e.g., Ketelaars & Van Aelst, 2021). Current research refrains from assuming that politicians adapt to the media without

question; instead, adaptation is viewed as a phenomenon requiring in-depth study. According to Marcinkowski and Steiner (2014), “‘mediatization’ denotes not so much the passive submission of other systems to media forces but the active utilization of media services” (p.74). Since politicians know what the media are looking for, they can anticipate the media's logic and adapt their communication tactics accordingly. This is called self-mediatization, representing the active incorporation of news media principles and practices by political actors in their decisions and actions (Blumler & Esser, 2019). However, political actors may also resist conforming to media logic, prioritizing political considerations and following their values or logic instead (Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011). Against this backdrop, this study aims to understand the extent to which politicians perceive to act independently of the media logic, feel pressured to adapt their communication according to this logic or renegotiate it to make it fit their political goals.

Recent perspectives on social media logic challenge the traditional mediatization approach (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In our current digitalized media environment, politicians can directly reach the public and depend less on journalists to convey their message. On social media, politicians can bypass journalists and produce their content. Central to this production is not traditional media logic, but, for instance, politicians' sense of what will go 'viral' and encourage voters' engagement (Jost, 2023). Therefore, with social media's advantages, the need to adapt to traditional media logic may look different. In our paper, we consider this critique on the traditional mediatization approach in the context of politicians' direct self-communication: To what extent and how does the opportunity to circumvent journalists and gatekeeping mechanisms allow politicians to be less dependent on the traditional media logic?

Negativity and conflict as dominant news values

Because political coverage is guided by media logic, media select and frame news items based on news values to attract and maximize the audience's attention (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). Consequently, certain aspects, notably negativity and conflict, have gained prominence in media coverage (Lengauer et al., 2012). The literature on negativity bias indicates that individuals display a stronger (unconscious) preference for negative information, showing greater attentiveness to negative than positive news (Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Negativity in political news encompasses news providing a pessimistic outlook on politics, focusing on the incapability of political actors, or negatively evaluating politics. A specific form of this negativity involves journalists framing politics in terms of conflict, emphasizing disagreements between political parties, incompatibility between viewpoints, and hostile politicians (Bartholomé et al., 2015). According to Lengauer et al. (2012) conflict frames are “more

‘marketable’ than positive news as it is more eye-catching, adds drama, stimulates interest, and is easy to understand even by uninformed audiences” (p.182). Beyond their attention-grabbing potential, journalists incorporate negativity and conflict into their coverage to fulfil their journalistic roles as objective and critical reporters (Bartholomé et al., 2015).

Before turning to the potential effect of the bias towards negativity and conflict in political news-making on politicians, it is essential to understand the extent to which politicians recognize and evaluate this biased media logic. Despite social media enabling the circumvention of media’s gatekeeping role, traditional media remain a crucial information source due to their large reach, resources, and role as sources of news content that other platforms pick up on (Langer & Gruber, 2021). Hence, the question arises, how do MPs make sense of the media environment within which they operate? With the mediatization of the political domain, do politicians perceive that negativity and conflict, as central news values, are translated to be dominant elements in the political sphere?

RQ1: How do politicians **perceive** and **evaluate** the focus on negativity and conflict in the news?

Adapting to media logic

Studies considering mediatization have focused on politicians’ perceptions of media’s influence and their media activities. These studies show that most politicians recognize the media’s significant influence on public opinion, election results, and policy outcomes (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2008). This perceived influence is expected to shape their behaviour. However, survey research investigating the relationship between perceptions of media influence and behaviour yields conflicting findings. While Cohen et al. (2008) found that a stronger belief in the media’s power to influence public opinion correlates with media attention-seeking strategies, Ketelaars and Van Aelst (2021) did not find that perceptions of media importance translate into strategic communication efforts.

Furthermore, studies have examined mediatization processes by comparing the content of political and journalistic discourse to assess their alignment, yet these results have also been inconsistent. While Bastien (2020) found evidence of politicians adapting to the media, employing strategic framing to gain attention, Haßler et al. (2014) did not observe parties consistently following news media logic, such as emphasizing negativity. Moreover, what is noticeably missing in the literature is an investigation into the strategic intents and underlying motives of politicians adapting

(or not) to the media. By inductively mapping politicians' direct perceptions of the influence of mediatization on their daily practices and perceptions, this study aims to advance our understanding of how politicians respond to news values allegedly dominant in the current media environment.

Securing media attention is of central importance to politicians (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). The media serve as powerful platforms for politicians to enhance electoral success (Hopmann et al., 2018), promote issues, and shape the political agenda (Walgrave et al., 2008). Politicians depend on the media to get their vision of politics across. However, adapting to media logic, particularly by emphasizing negativity and conflict, may pose challenges to other strategic objectives, such as increasing vote share, influencing policy, and attaining control over public office (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). For instance, a party solely focused on gaining media attention by attacking opponents may risk alienating core voters who dislike conflict. This approach might also hinder the party's potential to cooperate in future coalition governments, limiting its opportunities for governance. Therefore, parties must make careful decisions about which goals to prioritize, avoiding blind adherence to media logic for attention. An experiment by Philipps (2022) among German MPs reveals that politicians are willing to share information with the media about parliamentary negotiations to attract attention, even though this obstructs policy compromise. However, the experimental design employed by Philipps (2022), does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the underlying perceptions and considerations of politicians regarding media disclosure of negotiation information.

The extent to which politicians embrace news values such as negativity and conflict may depend on their party affiliation or personality traits. Valli and Nai (2020) find that candidates from challenger parties, right-wing parties, or those at the fringes of the political spectrum are more inclined to attack other parties. Additionally, research reveals that opposition parties, as opposed to government parties, and populist parties, compared to non-populist ones, are more likely to employ conflict frames in their online communication (Chapter 2). Given that opposition parties are less likely to receive coverage and are tasked with criticizing the government, they may use negative rhetoric to attract attention. Similarly, since the communication strategy of populist parties is inherently antagonistic (i.e., anti-elite and anti-establishment), and parties with extreme ideologies are more prone to strong disagreement with others, these party types are more likely to use a more confrontational tone (e.g., Maier & Nai, 2021; Nai, 2021). Furthermore, research on political campaigns shows that personality traits, such as agreeableness and extraversion, are important drivers of negativity (Maier & Nai, 2023). Thus, emphasizing conflict may also be a matter of personal taste. For these

reasons, our study will map perceptions among a diverse group of political actors. Given the variety of ways in which the news values of negativity and conflict could influence politicians' strategic behaviours, understanding how politicians perceive this influence on their work is crucial:

RQ2: How do politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict translate into their daily work?

Negativity in politicians' online communication

In RQ2, MPs are asked about their perception of the need to adapt to the media's focus on negativity and political conflict, but the next question is whether they also use this logic to their advantage in their communication online. Hence, arguably, the traditional power relations between the media and political actors need revisiting considering social media that afford direct communication without the mediation of traditional gatekeepers. While politicians still need traditional media to connect with voters, politicians increasingly rely on online media to get their message across (Jungherr, 2016). On social media, politicians can control the content of their messages without journalists' interference (Hong et al., 2019). Given the often complicated and distrustful relationship between politicians and journalists (Brants et al., 2010), it is convenient for politicians to bypass journalists and use their online channels to avoid the risk of unfavourable coverage. Consequently, with the rise of social media, it is argued that politicians are no longer bound by traditional media logic but are instead influenced by 'social media' or 'networked' logic (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In this context, mediatization refers to political actors adapting communication strategies to capture the attention of users on social media platforms and encourage interaction with the message, ensuring maximum reach (Jost, 2023). However, online media are not only used to sidestep traditional media but also to attract journalists' attention (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). Politicians emphasize conflict, use uncivil language, or attack other parties, to ensure journalists cannot ignore them (Ekman & Widholm, 2015). Matthes et al. (2019), for instance, found that politicians with a strained relationship with the press are less likely to initiate contact with journalists and increasingly see conflict and drama as effective communication strategies to secure media coverage. Hence, we also address whether politicians perceive similar news values to influence their online communication:

RQ3: How do politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict translate into their online communication strategies?

Method

Sample

To answer our research questions, we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with Dutch MPs. The Netherlands offers an intriguing case for examining adaptation to a media environment focused on negativity and conflict, given its highly fragmented political landscape. At the time of the interviews, the parliament consisted of 150 MPs representing a total of 20 parties with significant differences in size and ideological background. This context allows us to investigate our research questions from diverse perspectives, which is crucial since the role of negativity varies across parties (e.g., Valli & Nai, 2020). For ideologically extreme parties, seeking conflict for media attention may have more desirable outcomes than for a government party that needs to defend the status quo. Additionally, in a fragmented setting with numerous parties and a competitive attention economy, media visibility can be crucial for political parties' electoral performance (see e.g., Hopmann et al., 2018).

We invited Dutch politicians to participate in our research, focusing on national-level MPs (N=150). Combining convenience and snowball sampling, our primary inclusion criterion was to ensure a maximum variety of perspectives related to mediatization. We aimed to include MPs from as many different political parties as possible. Contact was initiated with all politicians without any a-priori selection in April 2022, through an email outlining the goals and procedure of the research. Appointments were scheduled one week after the email through phone calls to politicians' party offices, followed by additional contact attempts via phone and email. MPs were also encouraged to refer other interested politicians. This process resulted in a sample of 31 MPs. While the response rate of almost 21% may not be high, we consider it satisfactory given the inherent difficulty of recruiting politicians for interviews in the Netherlands. Comparable studies have relied on similar sample sizes (see e.g., Strikovic et al., 2020). We recruited a sufficiently diverse group of MPs: representing 14 different parties, 48% being a member of a government party, 16% being a populist party member, 55% being female, and 16% being a party leader.

Data collection

We held the interviews between May 2022 and September 2022. As the interview meetings were combined with an elite survey, the meetings lasted on average 45 minutes, with approximately 15 minutes dedicated to the specific questions of this paper. The recruitment of politicians and the interviews involved four researchers and four student assistants. We conducted 42% of the survey in-person, and 58% via Teams. In-person interviews predominantly took place in Parliament itself. Given that the interviews were held in politicians' private work settings and anonymity was guaranteed, they

were encouraged to be honest. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, recorded, and transcribed using Teams' software or a traditional recorder. Teams' transcriptions were reviewed by a research member to ensure accuracy, while traditional recorder interviews were manually transcribed². The research project received approval from the University of Amsterdam's Ethical Review Board (ID: 2022-PCJ-14777).

The interview guide was structured along the three components of the main research question: (1) perception of media's focus on negativity and conflict; (2) influence of media's bias towards negativity and conflict on daily work; (3) and its influence on online communication (see Appendix for full interview guide).

Data analysis

A step-by-step coding procedure was employed, utilizing the grounded theory framework of open, axial, and selective coding, and conducted in Atlas.ti (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The analysis began with open coding, where descriptive labels (open codes) were assigned to words or sentences from the interview transcripts, summarizing the essence of relevant fragments. Open coding was guided by the research questions and sensitizing concepts including perceptions of negativity, conflict, and the general media logic and their effect on politicians' daily work. Although these concepts drove the selection of relevant segments of text and the labelling during open coding, we stayed open to different perceptions of the media's logic that were not pre-defined by our sensitizing concepts. This approach enabled the identification of potential new categories or themes emerging from the data.

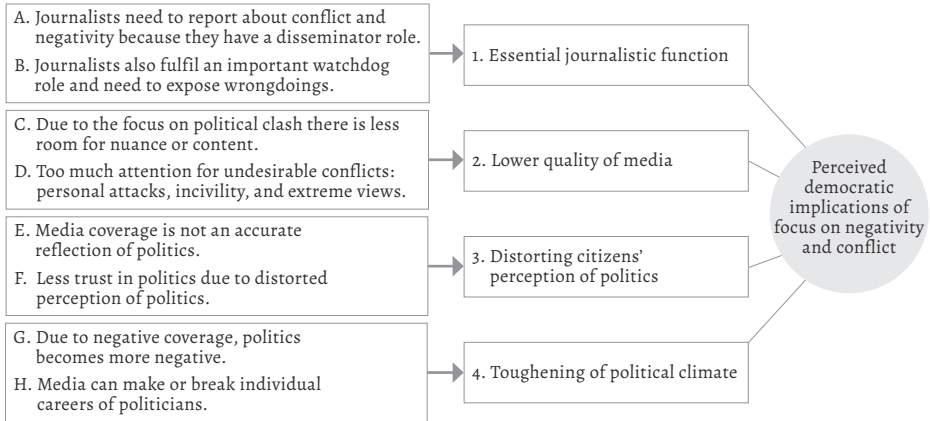
The second step involved axial coding; wherein different code groups were developed based on the relationships between the open codes. We merged codes and organized them into higher-order codes that detached the open codes from their context. For instance, initial open codes such as 'critical reporting keeps politics sharp' and 'negativity is not bad because MPs need to be held accountable', were grouped under the axial code 'essential journalistic function', as they collectively provided insights into the functionality of negativity in the news.

In the third step, we used our research questions to guide selective coding. We investigated which axial categories relate to one another and clustered them under major themes. For example, two axial categories, 'essential journalistic function' and 'distorting citizens' perception of politics,' both provided insights into the democratic implications of the focus on negativity and conflict and thus were combined under this overarching theme. To illustrate our results, only a small number of exemplary

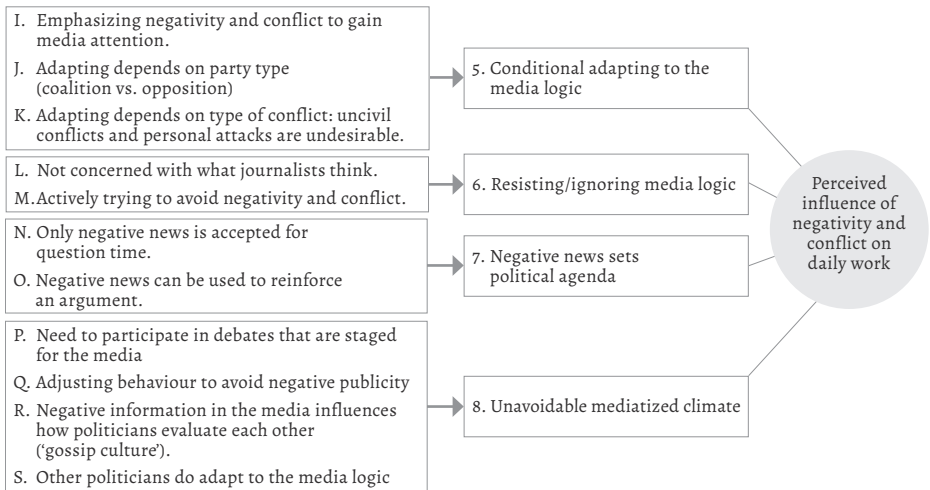
² The data (anonymous transcriptions) that support the findings of this chapter are available upon reasonable request.

quotes will be presented below, additional quotes are available in the Appendix. After analysing the data along the lines of these three steps, the codes were re-inspected and sometimes reformulated for clarity, while maintaining their original meaning.

RQ1: How do politicians perceive and evaluate the focus on negativity and conflict in the news?



RQ2: How do politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict



RQ3: How do politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict translate into their online communication strategies?

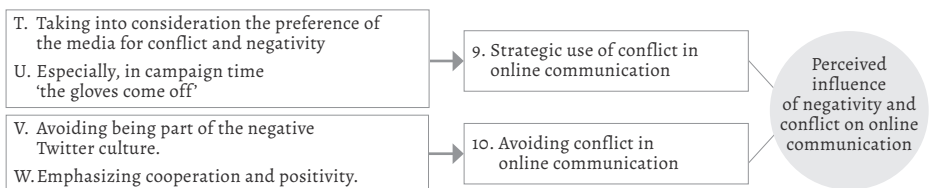


Figure 1. Data structure.

Findings

Overall, MPs agree that conflict and negativity are prominent news values and that their dominance in the media environment has important democratic implications. While MPs argue that it is essential for journalists to report on conflict, they also worry that the excessive focus on conflict may cause a decline in media content quality, distort citizens' perception of politics, and toughen the political climate (see Figure 1, RQ1). The extent to which MPs feel influenced by the media environment focused on conflict and negativity varies widely, with some adapting conditionally, while others resist or ignore the media logic. MPs also acknowledge the media's power in shaping the political agenda and contributing to a mediatized political climate that they must navigate (see Figure 1, RQ2). Regarding online communication, MPs identify negativity and conflict as dominant values too. Some politicians strategically emphasize conflict, whereas others seek alternative and more positive communication strategies (see Figure 1, RQ3).

Positive and negative democratic implications of the focus on negativity and conflict

First, we examined politicians' perceptions and evaluations of the focus on negativity and conflict in the news. In all cases, MPs recognized the importance of negativity and conflict for news-making. Reflecting on this, they often used strong language to highlight the centrality of these elements: "I think it's *the* news value. It's really only about negativity, about things not working out, about things going wrong, about arguments, about conflicts, about burning each other down." Since negative or conflictual news is the standard, positive news is overshadowed according to the interviewees, and harmonious debates rarely make headlines. Furthermore, MPs underscored that the media prioritizes commotion over substantive disagreement, thereby neglecting the complexity of situations or ideas. Hence, there is quite a clear understanding among MPs of which news values are central to news-making, and, thus, what politicians should emphasize to increase chances to attract attention. When questioned about the democratic implications of this journalistic focus, opinions varied, with some emphasizing its importance and others expressing criticism. We divided their answers into four subcategories:

Essential journalistic function: As indicated by several MPs, the focus on negativity and conflict is not inherently alarming. They recognize journalists' responsibility to accurately depict the political landscape and underline the importance of incorporating negativity and conflict into news reporting. In doing so, MPs refer to journalists' watchdog role, emphasizing the need for them to criticize political actors

and hold them accountable for their actions. So, news featuring conflict and negativity is deemed not just unavoidable but also necessary: “I don't think negativity as such necessarily should be regulated. I think it's an important, democratic, principle that journalists are also a thorn in the side and are critical.”

Nevertheless, a collective frustration exists regarding the portrayal of politics. MPs express cynicism towards the media, highlighting potential negative consequences of the focus on negativity and conflict for media content, citizens' trust, and the political culture. We organized these negative implications into three categories:

Lower quality of the media: Due to the predominant coverage of clashes and turmoil in the news, MPs observe limited space for discussing the complexities of issues or presenting nuanced and moderate perspectives. The media's logic, according to MPs, oversimplifies the representation of political reality. Additionally, they distinguish between desirable and undesirable conflict types, with concerns raised about the focus on personal attacks rather than substantive differences: “While I don't think it's wrong to report on political conflict, I do think it would be good if that were specifically about substantive partisan differences, and less on personal attacks.” Some MPs express worry about incivility and extreme views garnering media attention, with one stating, “If I don't insult someone, you don't see it anywhere,” and another highlighting, “[T]here is a lot of room for especially the most polarized and most intense sides in the debate.”

Distorting citizens' perception of politics: MPs also voiced concern about the media's portrayal of politics and felt compelled to correct it. One MP, for example, feels the need to clarify that numerous civil political meetings occur behind the scenes, challenging the prevailing media narrative that exaggerates the omnipresence of conflict. MPs argue that the media, with its emphasis on negativity and conflict, fails to provide an accurate reflection of political reality. This distorted view, they fear, contributes to a decline in citizens' trust in politicians. One MP acknowledges the politicians' role in this trust deficit but highlights the media's amplification by misrepresenting politics, stating “If you just focus on arguing, like it's a TV soap opera, we're less often taken seriously, like we're just toddlers, while there're a few toddlers out of those 150 people, but not everyone.”

Toughening of political climate: Besides influencing voters and the media, MPs notice that the media's focus on negativity and conflict toughens the political sphere. They argue that due to negative coverage, politics itself also moves in that direction and that politicians are behaving less inappropriately, simply because they know they will get attention from the media: “I'm sure if things go wrong today at that nitrogen debate

in the plenary hall. That's where the cameras are on. That's where the spotlight is. That also makes politicians behave less well just to attract attention.”

Furthermore, several MPs highlighted the media's considerable influence in shaping individual careers. The media hold the power to emphasize one scandal while disregarding another: “They can mention the same offense, mistake, or error of a minister repeatedly. Yes, and the other, they can downplay.” This awareness among politicians reflects a keen understanding of the media's influential role in politics.

In addressing RQ1, our results underscore politicians' awareness of negativity and conflict as essential news values. While MPs acknowledge the importance of these news values, they share concerns about their potential downsides, such as declining news quality, distorting citizens' views of politics, and toughening of the political climate.

Different degrees of adaptation to the media's focus on negativity and conflict

In our second research question, we asked how politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict translated into their daily work. Our findings revealed a spectrum of responses among MPs, reflecting varying degrees of adaptation to these news values. The spectrum of adaptation ranges from politicians strategically amplifying conflict to attract media attention on one end, to those who resist media logic by accentuating positive aspects on the other. Despite the varied nature of adaptation, we categorized the responses into two groups that represent the endpoints of the spectrum: MPs who partially embraced media logic and those who either dismissed journalistic influence on their daily practices or actively strived to counteract it. We will elaborate on the two categories below.

Furthermore, MPs highlighted additional ways in which the media hold power over politics. They emphasized the media's noteworthy influence in shaping the political agenda and establishing a mediatized political environment that politicians must navigate. Following the examination of adapting and resisting media logic, we will reflect on the broader influence of the media on the political agenda and the overall political climate.

Adapting to the media logic: First, some MPs disclose that they adapt their behaviour to fit the media's needs. Among those who adapt, many see it as a voluntary choice, believing they have the agency to decide when to do so. Only two politicians express that adapting feels unavoidable, recognizing the media's influence over their behaviour. Despite their reluctance to conform to the news values of negativity and conflict, they feel

compelled to adapt to convince colleagues of an issue's importance or to enhance their effectiveness as parliamentarians. Additionally, MPs highlight other ways in which the media exert influence over their behaviour and that of their fellow parliamentarians, which we will reflect on later (see heading unavoidable mediatized climate).

The modes of adaptation vary, encompassing both active and passive strategies. Active adaptations may involve forceful interruptions or impactful quotes, while passive approaches may entail avoiding certain subjects or projecting unity off-camera. For example, one MP emphasizes friction and conflict: "It certainly influences your actions, because you know that's how the media work. Because you know that you only come into the spotlight the moment you come up with something that chafes a little bit, that is interesting, that shows a conflict between the House of Representatives and the cabinet."

MPs offer several reasons for pro-actively adapting to media logic. One prominent motivator is the belief that visibility is crucial as representatives of the public. Seeking media attention is key for reaching voters, and MPs perceive that voters appreciate confrontations between politicians. When emphasizing conflict and negativity, MPs clarify that visibility is not an end goal but a strategic tool. Once a topic gains media coverage, it compels other politicians to take a stance, fostering debate: "The rationale is that you want publicity. You want to solve your problem, but then it must be made public first. So, then you do consider that how you present it makes it attractive for journalists to write about it." Thus, seeking attention serves different strategic goals, with visibility never being the sole purpose. Through the media, politicians aim to maximize their parliamentary influence, pressuring others to consider specific issues and enhancing voter support by being visible with their ideas.

MPs themselves mention and observe that adaptation is dependent on party type and the nature of the conflict. Opposition party MPs argue that it is more common for them to seek conflict and criticize government parties. In contrast, MPs from government parties mention restrictions due to coalition agreements, discouraging them from engaging in media conflicts over these matters. Similarly, moderate parties emphasized that conflict is less beneficial for them than for more radical parties. Second, although it is more likely to grab media attention with incivility and personal attacks, MPs strive to distance themselves from such conflicts. Attacks should be substantive, not personal, and cursing is considered undesirable: "It does have to be about positions and arguments. So, I think a debate is fine, right? If you interpret conflict as debate and the exchange of views, I think it's fine. If it's about violence or threats. Then I think the line has been crossed." Concerning the emphasis

on fundamental differences, politicians either deliberately avoid it, or seek ways to polarize the debate.

Resisting/ignoring media logic: In contrast to the adaptation approach, several MPs actively chose to resist conforming to media logic. They prioritize the substantive party agenda over gaining media attention. While some MPs express nonchalance towards journalists, focusing on their job without much consideration for media dynamics, others adopt a proactive stance, actively resisting media logic. These politicians aim to avoid incivility, loaded terminology, and spinning, opting for a positive tone, emphasizing cooperation, and incorporating humour.

“We said at the very beginning: what are we going to do? Are we going to make sure, in a very populist way, that the media sees us and is going to write about us to appeal to the electorate? Or are we going to see what substantive agenda we have and are we going to pursue that here and then no attention? And in the end, we all chose the latter.”

Several MPs refused to adapt to media logic for distinct reasons. First, they considered such adaptation normatively unacceptable, as it would contribute to the toughening of the political climate and the erosion of citizens' trust in politics—a situation they sought to avoid. Second, for these MPs, media presence was not viewed as an essential part of being a representative of the people; their primary focus was on serving the public's interests rather than their own. Third, non-adapting MPs argued that conflict might hinder the achievement of political goals. Conflict was perceived as a distraction from substantive matters and counterproductive, especially considering the necessity of cooperating with other parties to pass a bill or motion: “If I want to be in the newspaper, then I say, ‘in this motion considering’ and then suddenly I'm also going to say ‘this asocial VVD minister...’ Yes, but then you have a problem and then I won't get it passed. So, I'm not going to do that.”

These results demonstrate that MPs weigh the multi-faceted consequences of their actions. MPs who refuse to adapt to media logic prioritize maximizing their parliamentary influence. While the media could offer a strategic channel for policy promotion and pressuring other parties to think about them, aligning with the news values of negativity and conflict is perceived as counterproductive. Finally, some MPs also mention that adapting to the media logic does not fit the personal style of the politician or the party's image. Beyond weighing various goals connected to the parliamentary, electoral, and media arena, individual personality traits and the party's image also emerge as influential factors.

Negative news sets political agenda: While MPs differ in the extent to which they adapt to the media's preferences, there is a common feeling that negative news often determines the political agenda. Only negative news is accepted for question time, and negative news can be used to underscore the importance of an argument as it shows urgency.

Unavoidable mediatized climate: MPs feel that the media's focus changes the political culture, thereby influencing politicians' daily work. One politician, for instance, mentioned the need to participate in debates that are staged for the media, often centred more on conflictual elements than substance. "I feel like I'm just trying to be concerned with the content, but sometimes you must participate in debates that we've collectively decided we should have, even though it's mostly about conflicts. But you can't avoid them either."

A widespread concern among politicians revolves around the media's influence on individual careers. Politicians assert that they modify their behaviour in response to media criticism or to avoid negative publicity. Furthermore, negative information about politicians in the media shapes how politicians perceive one another, fostering a 'gossip culture.' Interestingly, although MPs often argued they do not consider media preferences, they noted other MPs did. These MPs alter their communication and operations, changing their tone, preparing interruptions in advance, and framing motions to provoke opposing parties. So, MPs are very aware that the media logic influences colleagues but deny its impact on themselves: "You also have Members of Parliament who, if they are not mentioned in a newspaper somewhere for two weeks, that they get physical withdrawal symptoms. Well, I'm not one of those."

The results indicate that while politics is undoubtedly mediatized, politicians feel they have agency in how much they adapt to it. There is a shared feeling that politics has become more negative, with negative news driving the political agenda, and other political actors adjusting their communication styles to align with media logic. Despite these observations, most politicians do not feel compelled to adhere to the news values of negativity and conflict. Instead, they maintain the ability to strategically employ or avoid adapting to these news values for their benefit.

Strategically emphasizing or avoiding conflict in the online environment

Lastly, we asked how politicians' perceptions of a media environment focused on negativity and conflict influenced their online communication strategies. In the context of online behaviour, the news values of negativity and conflict played a similar role. Like their offline behaviour, a dichotomy emerged among MPs: some actively sought to avoid conflict on these platforms, while others strategically emphasized it

to engage the public and journalists. Interestingly, a notable portion of MPs refrain from using social media, particularly X, expressing strong sentiments about the platform. One MP describes it as “a negative medium with lots of trolls who are allowed to comment anonymously.” However, this strong negative sentiment seems to shift during campaign periods, when politicians recognize the utility of social media. They note that in the lead-up to elections, they find enjoyment in its usage.

Avoiding conflict in online communication: Several MPs indicated deliberately avoiding negativity and conflict online because the online environment is already quite conflictual. Online conflict triggers nasty reactions and can hamper political goals. Instead, they use social media for self-promotion and connecting with the public. Some also feel the influence of the media, by deliberately trying to be positive, or carefully crafting their messages: “I’m incredibly careful with choosing my words when I tweet. Then I think about whether, is this the right time? Is this the right message? Could it suggest something that might have a negative impact?”

Emphasizing conflict in online communication: The politicians who strategically emphasize conflict do so to convey their political message but also to attract the attention of voters, and, but that is of secondary interest, the media. So, MPs emphasize that conflict can help them to receive media attention, but that is not the primary goal. Both traditional media logic and social media logic seem to coincide here. Politicians are aware that negative messages increase engagement and reach more people, but they also know that the media are more likely to pick up on such content. Importantly, MPs argue that different rules apply in the campaign period. During this time, ‘the gloves come off,’ even among coalition parties. Political parties choose a political opponent whom they then attack on social media and see the traditional media as more important during this period.

“The goal of an election campaign is to make sure that you spread your point of view across as many channels as possible so that as many people as possible hear it. Mainstream media can help with that and then it helps to write something up in such a way, that it’s more likely to be picked up. And one of the ways to do that is to state something in a way that indeed shows conflict, opposition, but also negativity.”

The results indicate that social media presents additional challenges to the decision to adapt. Given the already conflictual nature of social media, politicians tend to be careful in choosing their words. However, during campaigns, this is less of an issue, as the MPs emphasize that they resort more to negativity during this period.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate how a negative and conflict-focused media environment influences politicians' daily work and their strategic communication efforts online. Departing from the actor-centric approach to mediatization (Ketelaars & Van Aelst, 2021), we found that politicians vary in their adaptation to the media's preferences. While widely acknowledging the impact of the media's preference for negativity and conflict on the political realm and fellow politicians, MPs expressed varying degrees of adaptation.

Addressing our first research question regarding politicians' perceptions of the media's focus on negativity and conflict, our findings indicate that politicians indeed recognize the central role of these news values (Lengauer et al., 2012), overshadowing positive, nuanced, and complex information. As argued by Lippmann (1955), news values can distort truth by simplifying complex matters, a concern acknowledged by politicians. Furthermore, while MPs noted the potential democratic benefits of the journalistic focus on negativity and conflict, they also expressed concerns about the quality of the media, citizens' perceptions of politics, and the political climate. This tension is also reflected in the literature. While it is argued that the media should function as a burglar alarm that informs people about important threats (Zaller, 1999), Bennett (2003) cautions against excessive negativity as the continuous ringing of the burglar alarm may distort reality.

Our second research question explored the degree to which politicians conform to media preferences in their daily activities. Prior research has presented evidence of politicians both adhering to (Bastien, 2020; Cohen et al., 2008) and resisting media logic (Haßler et al., 2014; Ketelaars & Van Aelst, 2021). Our research contributes to these two streams by revealing that politicians strategically decide to adapt to the media logic if it aligns with their political goals, but also try to resist the media logic if it does not. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate nuanced adaptation to conflict. While politicians understand that conflicts such as personal attacks, uncivil disputes, or polarized disagreements garner media attention, they sometimes actively avoid them because they might backfire on their effectiveness as MPs. In the literature, similar distinctions between types of elite conflicts have been identified (Nai & Maier, 2021; Chapter 2). Like politicians, studies differentiate between conflicts that focus on issues and personal attacks, between civil and uncivil conflicts, and between deep and ordinary conflicts. A central question in the literature has been to what extent the diverse types are desirable for the well-functioning of democracy and the findings show that politicians themselves are also concerned with this.

Furthermore, while adaptation to the media logic varies, MPs do agree that the media are powerful in setting the political agenda. This perception aligns with findings from elite surveys across European countries (e.g., Van Dalen & Van Aelst, 2014). Additionally, MPs disclosed that the media significantly influences the behaviour of their fellow parliamentarians. This observation reflects a third-person effect (Davison, 1983), where politicians acknowledge the media's influence on others but downplay its impact on themselves. This phenomenon, also identified in prior research on mediatization among local government public servants (Sandén & Turunen, 2020), can be attributed to individual motivational processes, driven by a desire to view oneself more positively than others.

Addressing our third research question about the influence of a conflict and negativity-focused media environment on politicians' online communication, we uncover a noteworthy impact of social media logic, consistent with prior findings (Jost, 2023). Politicians are not only concerned about messages that attract attention from journalists but also about engaging the public. Using conflictual language increases the likelihood of capturing public attention and expanding reach. However, some politicians intentionally avoid contributing to negativity due to the inherently conflictual nature of online media.

Overall, our findings make an important contribution to the mediatization and conflict framing literature by highlighting politicians' perspectives on how to resist, negotiate, or adapt to the perceived influence of the media. Our findings reveal political actors experiencing agency, strategically employing media logic to their advantage when seeking political influence or attention. Politicians feel the freedom to selectively avoid media pressure when it is advantageous to their political goals or profile. The extent to which this avoidance represents true agency or is merely a reaction to inescapable news values remains a subject of debate. Nevertheless, MPs do not unequivocally perceive a power imbalance favouring the media, which is especially relevant to consider in a digital information landscape where politicians can use both established media formats and direct channels to reach the public.

Despite the valuable insights gained, the study has limitations. Directly asking politicians about their adaptation to media preferences may have led to socially desirable answers. To mitigate this, we offered the politicians complete anonymity and conducted the interviews in private work settings. We also initiated discussions with questions about the media rather than the politicians themselves, allowing for critical perspectives on the media before delving into how it influences them. Variability in politicians' responses suggests overall honesty. Additionally, while the

sample size was relatively small, it included politicians from over 14 different parties, offering sufficient diversity in partisan backgrounds. Although politicians occasionally mentioned the influence of their party on their behaviour, the qualitative nature of the study prevented the identification of patterns across parties. Thus, future research should explore how parties differ in their adaptation to media logic.

Moreover, the insights from our study are specific to the context of a multi-party setting that is highly fragmented, limiting the generalizability of our findings to countries with different media and political systems. For example, in a majoritarian system with partisan media, such as in the US, politicians may find it easier to secure their presence in the news, potentially having less incentive to cater to the media's selection criteria. However, in systems without partisan media, where legacy media holds similar reach and influence, and where multiple parties compete for attention, similar dynamics are likely to be at play.

In conclusion, our study provides evidence that the media's focus on negativity and conflict has shaped the political culture, forcing politicians to make a strategic decision to either adapt to or resist it. This decision-making process is complex, influenced by considerations of voter impact, parliamentary responsibilities, and political goals. Politicians also discern between distinct types of conflicts, with uncivil behaviour and personal attacks considered the most undesirable. Finally, timing emerges as a factor too. While MPs may circumvent conflict outside elections, when the campaign period starts the gloves come off. Hence, despite the media's considerable influence, politicians experience agency in navigating this mediatized political landscape by ignoring, resisting, or using media logic to their advantage.

Appendix Chapter 4

Interview guide (translated from Dutch)

Introduction

We are interested in your views on the relationship between politics and the media and specifically your perception and evaluation of negative news about politics and campaigning. By negative news, we mean coverage in which politicians or politics are portrayed or evaluated negatively. A special type of this negative news is coverage that focuses on political conflict. It is argued that conflict and negativity are important news values that determine the selection of news items in mainstream media (newspapers, television, online news media).

Perceptions of news values

1. We are first interested in how you view negativity in political news.
 - a. To what extent do you recognize the image that negativity has an important news value when it comes to political news?

[Instruction: possible further question: To what extent do you think the amount of negativity in news about politics is disproportionate?]

Adapting to media logic

2. Now I would like to ask further questions about the relationship between journalists and politics.
 - a. Do you feel that journalists' routines and selection processes affect your daily work or the way you do your job? And in what ways is your work affected by the actions of journalists?

[Instruction: If they don't bring up negativity themselves:]

- b. Do you feel that you take into account or adapt to journalists' preference for negative news? If so, in what ways?

[Instruction: Possibly ask explicitly to give specific examples]

- c. And what are your motivations for adapting or not adapting to journalists' preferences?

- d. Do you also sometimes use negative news as a lead ('hook') to put certain issues on the political agenda [Instruction: possibly explain: asking chamber questions, bringing up in debates]? If so, in what way?

[Instruction: possibly ask explicitly to give concrete examples]

3. In addition, we want to talk about a specific form of negative news, namely the focus on political conflict.
 - a. To what extent does the journalistic preference for political conflict affect the way you communicate with other parties and politicians?
4. We are additionally interested in your online communication during campaign time but also outside of it on social media like Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook.
 - a. Does journalists' preference for political conflict also specifically affect your personal online communication (tweeting/posting) or online campaign? And if so, in what ways?
 - b. Does conflict have a prominent role in your online communications? And if so, for what purpose?

Democratic implications

5. Finally, I would like to conclude with a more general question.

[Instruction: If they have not yet clearly given an evaluation of negativity and conflict in the news, then 6a. else 6b]

- a. To what extent do you think we should tolerate negativity and conflict in the news? Is there a point that it is undesirable or even harmful to democracy? If so, how and who should regulate it?
- b. [Instruction: If they have given a negative evaluation before] We talked before about the desirability of conflict and negativity in the news. If conflict and negativity in the news could be detrimental to democracy, in what way and by whom should we regulate it?

Table 1. Representative data

Major categories	Representative data
RQ1 Evaluation	
1. Essential journalistic function	
A. <i>Disseminator role</i>	<p>A1. "I think that purely covering political debate is not harmful to democracy. In fact, it is conducive to democracy. If you were to say, we're not going to write any more about the different positions that there are between parties on healthcare or education, that wouldn't help democracy."</p> <p>A2. "Yes, there is obviously an important value for people in making it clear what the differences are between parties and how that political process works."</p>
B. <i>Watchdog role</i>	<p>B1. "I see the negativity and the tendency toward negativity, so to speak, in the media, as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. The moment the media is not fixated on that, then it is an uncritical public."</p> <p>B2. "I think the role of journalism in exposing abuses is just crucial. If you think just about the benefits affair, about actually all kinds of say great exposés about really profound abuses, like Groningen, about what's going wrong in policy and governance, I think that's very, very important."</p>
2. Lower quality of the media	
C. <i>Less room for nuance or content</i>	<p>C1. "But the nuanced arguments and good substantive questions, often fade into the background a bit. Because yes, the smoke of fierce skirmishes, that is what stands out."</p> <p>C2. "A riot or something someone does in the plenary hall is much more likely to be news than the substantive debate in the committee room. And I sometimes find that very annoying."</p>
D. <i>Too much attention to undesirable conflicts</i>	<p>D1. "I think it does indeed become harmful to democracy at some point and the reason why is because then you only focus on the argument between Wilders and someone, so to speak. And while it should be about the ideas of the different political parties and what you think about the different topics."</p> <p>D2. "There are a lot of debates here where things are neat and tidy with no conflict actually. Most of the debate hours here go without incident. But you don't see news coverage about that."</p> <p>D3. "See, right now the negativity is making the extremes bigger. And it just seems like extremity pays. I think in the end we all, as a democracy and as a society, are not better off having that."</p>
3. Distorting citizens' perception of politics	
E. <i>Media coverage not an accurate reflection of politics</i>	<p>E1. "I also feel a great need, and I have had to do this a great deal recently, to also explain to voters that of course any time they see such an unpalatable debate in the House of Representatives about Tribunals or I don't know what, that at the same time, we still have 130 Members of Parliament elsewhere in this building concerned with receiving organizations and citizens and reading boring laws and thinking about that. Namely just the chamber work."</p> <p>E2. "So, I do look for contact with parties also behind the scenes to see if we can't start looking for the connection after all, and then you see that what the public sees may be somewhat different from what is happening behind the scenes."</p>

Table 1. Continued

Major categories	Representative data
<i>F. Less trust in politics due to distorted perception of politics</i>	<p>F1. "I think it's very damaging. I also really think that people just lose their faith in it in democracy."</p> <p>F2. "And I have seen lately that confidence in politics does drop a little bit because of all these incidents. And that these are piling up, all these negative incidents, I would say. That does something to the standing of politics. And also, when I walk down the street, "You guys are greedy, you can't be trusted! Have you kept your phone calls? So, I do think that that does something to politics, how normal people look at politics."</p> <p>F3. "Why does this bother me so much if I think about it now? Really due to people thinking "yeah, what do I have to do with politics anymore?" That causes a) people to stop voting because they think, "it's a mess over there anyway," and b) people may also start to respect certain decisions being made less."</p>
4. Toughening of political climate	
<i>G. Due to negative coverage, politics becomes more negative.</i>	<p>G1. "So, you get to a point where politicians can no longer optimally communicate to society who they are, why they are acting, what their dilemmas are, so those then also become one-dimensional, and that creates a lot of tension and gives a lot of room for people who want to undermine our democracy, who will feed that."</p> <p>G2. "I see that because of the media, the image that people have of politics is really totally distorted and it doesn't match the reality that I see here inside. It does become more and more the reality by saying it. So, by reporting negatively about it, it becomes more and more negative here as well."</p> <p>G3. "That's just what's going on in The Hague right now and then you see in the quotes that you notice of, oh yeah, politicians tumbling over each other to say more and more extreme things because that's how you make the news."</p>
<i>H. Media can make or break individual careers of politicians</i>	<p>H1. "They do have a definite influence. They can mention the same wrongdoing or mistake or error of one minister and another. Yes, and downplay the other. It's a kind of trade-off. If you just keep this out of the paper or make it a little smaller, you'll have an exclusive interview a week from now. Well, that's interesting, of course."</p> <p>H2. "I saw that with Kaag. When people wanted to come to her house with torches. That was very scary. How she is also portrayed in the media as a witch. I also think that women, female politicians suffer much more from that."</p>

Table 1. Continued

Major categories	Representative data
RQ2	
5. Conditional adapting to the media logic	
<i>I. Emphasizing negativity and conflict to gain media attention.</i>	<p>I1. “Yes, that certainly influences me, because I know exactly which party on topics... How do I say... Where the tension is on a topic. So, you can also look for that very much in the debate. And that also does put the two sides of an issue on sharp. And then you also know that that is something that the media is more likely to write about it, yes.”</p> <p>I2. “Well, because, of course, sometimes you yourself obviously would like to draw attention to a particular issue that you think is important. And in order to get attention for that, it can help that it gets into the media, because then other parties and ministers and so on are also forced to think about it.”</p> <p>I3. “Yes, because, part of your job as a member of the House of Representatives is making sure that you can get your point of view into publicity, that’s part of it, unfortunately. One way to do that is to adjust the tone of voice, of course, in a way that makes it more attractive for the media to write things up. Not just attractive, right? More eye-catching, too.”</p> <p>I1. “Yes, I think that [adapting] is inevitable. Because otherwise you also don’t get support from colleagues to put an issue on the agenda if it’s not, if something bad hasn’t happened.”</p>
<i>J. Adapting depends on party type.</i>	<p>J1. “But that may be different for other parties. If you’re doing very well in the polls, you’re more likely to try to drive the coalition apart than we would, who just need time to build the whole thing up.”</p> <p>J2. “So, if I start saying within the coalition “I want this”. They will get angry and say yes but coalition party X may want this, but probably not. The other coalition Y party definitely wants this. Then we’re done. Then in the coalition, it will become a hassle. (...) Then I might get my way, but then we have to drop off education or something like that somewhere else where there was tension.”</p> <p>J3. “But if I have a conflict with another coalition party, I will express it in a different way during the debate, because you know there are ears perked somewhere when you actually come to confront each other there. And before you know it, it’s interpreted as a fundamental difference of opinion. That means you often get on the same page with each other beforehand anyway, because you don’t want it to end up completely affecting the debate and where you’re going to end up landing. So yes, that also affects the way you communicate in the Chamber.”</p>

Table 1. Continued

Major categories	Representative data
6. Resisting/ignoring media logic	
<i>M. Actively trying to avoid negativity and conflict.</i>	<p>M1. "Pietje or Marietje, shall we make sure that we do not face each other during the debate because that produces an ugly picture" I think we want the same thing, so can't we adjust something? So, in that way, it also forms part of the parliamentary process precisely to avoid the spotlight there."</p> <p>M2. "So, do I take it into account? Yes, because I don't do it [emphasize conflict and negativity], and if you're already trying to draw attention, do it with humour or something."</p> <p>M3. "No. Because then I would have to try to argue with parties as well. And we have agreed with each other that we just try to work together as much as possible because then you also bring in content."</p> <p>M4. "I think it's bad that some politicians adjust their behaviour accordingly. And that goes both ways. So, that can mean that you avoid conflicts because you don't like negative publicity. It can also mean that you seek conflicts because that negative publicity works in your favour, right?"</p> <p>M5. "So, my style is also to focus on the content of the debate and where the differences are, on the one hand, but also to connect with other parties and get the job done together. And then you see that the differences actually die out very quickly and that it is much less interesting for the media, but that there [in that connection] things are forged that we can move forward with."</p> <p>M6. "Yes, I myself stay away from it a bit if I'm very honest. That does not apply to everyone within the party, but well, they are not interviewed. No, personally I stay away from it. That just has to do with how I am. But also, because it takes an enormous amount of energy to go against that."</p> <p>M7. "But I'm here for substantive work, so I don't like it as much. I just don't like it. I'm not like that."</p> <p>M8. "Because I really think that... You're not in politics just to sit on talk shows and be visible. You're in... At least, I'm here because I want to achieve something. Because I think too little is being done for the elderly because I think demographics are not being taken into account enough in policy development and policy visions."</p>
7. Negative news sets political agenda	
<i>N. Only negative news is accepted for question time.</i>	N1. "If you submit negative news for the question time, then you have a chance of being included. I occasionally submitted positive news or wanted to submit positive news for the question time, but that is, it is said of it: 'that has no chance'."
<i>O. Negative news to reinforce an argument</i>	O1. "It is out there anyway, the [negative] news, so then you can also use it to address something."

Table 1. Continued

Major categories	Representative data
8. Unavoidable mediatized climate	
<i>P. Need to participate in debates that are staged for the media.</i>	P1. "I feel like I'm just trying to be concerned with the content, but sometimes you have to participate in debates that we've collectively decided that it is necessary to talk about, despite the fact that the [debate] is mostly about conflicts. But you can't avoid them either, so to that extent... Does it affect my work? Yes, it affects my work, because you have to participate in such debates, and so you are there. But it doesn't affect my work substantively."
<i>Q. Adjusting behaviour to avoid negative publicity.</i>	Q1. "Look, it always has a little bit of influence, of course. But you also have that with your environment. You know. I don't necessarily want to be loved, but I also don't necessarily want to be portrayed negatively."
<i>R. Negative information in the media influences how politicians evaluate each other</i>	R1. "You just get influenced by everything you read, hear, or see. So, to that extent, you do [get influenced]. I wouldn't try to do that one-on-one with someone in an informal conversation, but certain information you receive from the media does play a role in how you subsequently enter a debate or how you subsequently assess motions or proposal. Yes, that is, maybe in part even sometimes subconsciously, but that is just the way it goes." R2. "The [conflict] then though is just an informal topic of conversation that everyone is talking about here in a kind of gossip culture."
<i>S. Other politicians do adapt to the media logic</i>	S1. "I imagine that those other parties, what I have read from the VVD, they are, everything is for their image, the media. That's my impression. I was never part of them, thank God. But we, yes, we are different." S2. "Well, not in my case. But I do see colleagues from opposition parties gladly posting videos on Twitter or elsewhere, attacking someone from the coalition, for example. I myself do not do that and my posts are actually usually constructive. Except in campaign time, because then the gloves come off, even within the coalition, and then I might do a post directed at the XXX or directed at the XXX. And then you actually look more within the coalition to find the difference."
RQ3	
9. Strategic use of conflict in online communication	
<i>T. Taking into consideration the preference of the media for conflict and negativity</i>	T1. "And in doing so, it helps if you write something in such a way that it is more likely to be picked up by the mainstream media because that ensures that your ideas reach a larger audience. But interpreting something from the perspective of conflict, already inherently, from itself has a dynamic to reach more people." T2. "In the language and sentence structure, so the way you present it, I think you do, because you might be hoping that there's something in there that people will pick up on. So, you do take into account how you put things out there, whether it could get enough follow-up." T3. "I especially use Twitter for that. Because Twitter has two functions, which is serving journalists who are interested, and then they pick something up from that, or the constituency."

Table 1. Continued

Major categories	Representative data
9. Strategic use of conflict in online communication	
<i>U. Especially, in campaign time 'the gloves come off',</i>	<p>U1. "Yes, this is, in campaign time I do look for the conflict myself more than outside campaign time. Because outside campaign time you are bound by the coalition agreement."</p> <p>U2. "Look we as (party name) do always pick an opponent in election time. And I think every party does that."</p> <p>U3. "So, the moment you're campaigning and there's conflict over whether social housing is necessary, yes definitely. Then I will go in with a straight leg. Then I really do use conflict to also put forward my own position because I am in favour of that. From the content, I certainly do that."</p>
10. Avoiding conflict in online communication	
<i>V. Avoiding being part of the negative Twitter culture.</i>	<p>V1. "No, although I do notice that it is more difficult on some subjects than others. So, for example, one that you really do have to choose your words very carefully is about Corona. This is of course an extreme example and not part of my portfolio. But before that, you saw that very much with any message that you put online on climate, there are a lot of reactions to it. So, if you don't want to be concerned all day with responding, you have to think very carefully: what words am I using and not using? And I think that varies greatly by topic."</p> <p>V2. "I started that conversation with my party a few months ago, in which I said Well I don't know if I want to be part of the Twitter culture. Because there's so much negativity in there. So much trash can be thrown at you. I wonder to what extent it has negative effects on the delusion of the day. And therefore, also on our political climate. What happens on Twitter influences what gets attention here the next day, and I find that worrisome."</p>
<i>W. Emphasizing cooperation and positivity.</i>	<p>W1. "So, I do exactly the opposite, so I have done this and this with these parties. I always try to mention we initiated this and that initiative. Also, if other parties forget to mention me, I say WE did this."</p>