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### Media positioning: Comparing organizations' standing in the news

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# Media positioning: comparing organizations' standing in the news

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Visibility in the media is considered important for organizations, as it is alleged to affect their reputation, public legitimacy, and stakeholder relations. Strategies for media relations often discern corporations, public organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The media attention for those organizations is, however, often studied in isolation. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of media positioning to compare media coverage for corporations, public organizations, and NGOs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A quantitative content analysis of the media coverage of 61 Dutch organizations was conducted. The comparison focused on three aspects of media positioning: prominence, context, and evaluation.

**Findings** – Public organizations and corporations were most similar, whereas corporations and NGOs differed most strongly in their media positioning. Corporations appeared most prominently in the media. While corporations and public organizations were more often related to organizational issues, NGOs were more often linked to substantial issues and received more positive coverage.

**Originality/value** – Insight into the content, amount, and tone of organizational media coverage is crucial for the formulation of public relations strategies by corporate communication professionals. The analysis shows whether and how the prominence, context, and evaluation differs among corporations, public organizations, and NGOs. The findings shed light on institutional factors that affect the visibility of different types of organizations, thus enabling future scholars in the field of visibility analyses in corporate communication to refine theories on drivers and characteristics of media coverage regarding different types of organizations.

**Keywords** Corporations, Public organizations, External communication, Media positioning, Media relations, Non-governmental organizations

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

For organizations, the news media can be fascinating and frightening at the same time (Schillemans and Jacobs, 2011). Media coverage about an organization is usually not valued for its own sake, but for its supposed consequences. Favorable media coverage may improve an organization's reputation, improve relationships with stakeholders, and lead to strategic advantages (Deephouse, 2000). But media coverage can also put pressure on an organization to comply with societal expectations (Brammer and Millington, 2006). While negative coverage is considered as one of the biggest threats to reputation (Pharoah, 2003), research shows mixed results regarding the consequences of negative news (Meadows and Meadows, 2016; Verhoeven, 2016; Kioussis *et al.*, 2007). Organizations thus consider their appearance in the media usually as highly relevant mainly because of assumed consequences for organizational reputation or public legitimacy (Einwiller *et al.*, 2010; Van Ruler and Verčič, 2005).

Within organizations, corporate communication professionals are responsible for communicative aims and strategies and managing the organization's image and media presence. The news media can fulfill several important roles with regard to these communication "tasks." Communication professionals employ media relations to inform stakeholders and the general public about organizational topics, but news media can also inform communication practitioners about issues, stakeholder positions, public opinion, and competitors (Jacobs and Schillemans, 2016; Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Thus, knowledge on



institutional (news) factors that play a role in the coverage of an organization, its fellows, and its competitors can inform targeted and effective media and public relations strategies.

Insights in institutional factors that affect media visibility can also expand our theoretical understanding regarding organizational media coverage. Most content analyses of organizations in the news, however, focus on companies (e.g. Van Lunenburg, 2002; Verhoeven, 2016). Some focus on non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often from a social-movements perspective (Andrews and Caren, 2010). Also the media presence of public sector organizations is recognized as a specific field of study and has rarely been analyzed (Schillemans, 2012). Comparative research on the visibility of types of organizations in the news is scarce (Wonneberger and Jacobs, 2016). This is surprising given the different roles that these organizations fulfill in society and the different functions that media attention has for these types of organizations. For companies, media coverage is linked to market considerations with the final goal of improving reputation and maximizing profit (Boyne, 2002). Public sector organizations, in contrast, are established to solve societal problems and receive public funding (Boyne, 2002). Because public organizations are accountable to the public, journalists are assumed to practice greater scrutiny toward these organizations (Liu *et al.*, 2010). For NGOs media coverage can also be considered as an important strategic resource to communicate and inform stakeholders and the public about their issue (Andrews and Caren, 2010).

Institutional factors of organizational media coverage can help communication professionals to reflect on the implications of the institutional position of their organization for their own communication strategies. For example, if media scrutiny turns out to be indeed higher for public sector organizations, then this is an important factor to take into account when practicing public relations for such an organization. Insights into the way media portrays your type of organization might lead to relevant in-group comparisons. In addition, out group comparisons – thus comparing media positioning across types of organizations – might trigger organizational learning, as best practices can be copied across fields.

Based on agenda-setting theory, the present study introduces a typology of three dimensions to analyze and compare the positioning of organizations in the media coverage. We adapt and combine existing typologies of media salience and positioning to make them suitable for the analysis of organizations in the news (Carroll and Deephouse, 2014; Carroll and McCombs, 2003; Kioussis, 2004). The first dimension is prominence, or the relative importance of the way an organization is positioned in the news (Kioussis, 2004). This media salience may affect the prominence of the organization in the public agenda (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Second, the context of organizational news coverage is relevant, that is, the topics with which an organization is associated in the media (Carroll and Deephouse, 2014). The third dimension is evaluation referring to the affective dimension of the subject discussed in the news (Carroll and Deephouse, 2014; Kioussis, 2004). Media are traditionally considered as the ones scrutinizing the powerful in societies, whether they are companies or public sector organizations. To date, research has not yet compared to what extent media attention systematically differs for different types of organizations. Based on their different functions in society, different power positions, and degrees of media dependency, we can expect that journalistic selection criteria also differ. Therefore, our research question is:

*RQ1.* How are companies, NGOs, and public sector organizations positioned in the news with respect to prominence, context, and evaluation?

### **The positioning of organizations in the news**

Although developed in the context of political communication, the theory of agenda setting can help to understand how organizational media coverage affects organizational reputation (Carroll and McCombs, 2003; Kioussis *et al.*, 2007; McCombs, 2005). First-level agenda setting describes how the prominence or salience of objects, such as political parties, candidates but

also organizations, in the news translates into public awareness of these objects (e.g. Kioussis *et al.*, 2006). Second-level agenda setting links objects to specific attributes and, thus, not only predicts public awareness about organizations or other objects but also what audiences think about these organizations (e.g. Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis, 2006). A distinction is made between substantive attributes that place organizations in a specific context and affective attitudes that add a valence dimension to agenda-setting effects (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). In sum, the three dimensions that matter most about organizational media coverage according to agenda-setting theory are prominence, context, and evaluation. While these aspects have often been analyzed to assess media effects, they can also be used to compare the positioning of different organizations in the media. The following sections will elaborate on these three dimensions and discuss how the media positioning of corporations, public organizations, and NGO might differ.

### *Prominence*

Being concerned about raising public attention, organizations first of all seek to increase their visibility in the media. According to agenda-setting theory, topics and actors that receive a greater salience in the media become more salient in the public agenda (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Also a mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 2001) can explain why media prominence is considered as generally positive, contributing to the recognition among potential customers and other stakeholders. While media salience or prominence is often translated as the amount of media coverage that an organization receives (e.g. Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis, 2006), also other characteristics may increase public awareness.

The amount of coverage can be discerned from the coverage volume. An organization might be mentioned frequently in short articles, while another organization might occur less often as a subject of in-depth coverage. In addition, the placing of articles matters. News appearing on the front page or one of the first pages is more likely to be read and thus more likely to set the public agenda compared to articles placed more in the back of a newspaper. Within a news story, the relevance of an organization can range from serving as a main actor or fulfilling a secondary role. For example, a hospital could be discussed in terms of its care for patients and be the focal point, but could also serve to describe a situation, such as an accident that happened near the hospital (Carroll and Deephouse, 2014). Finally, it is relevant whether actions or opinions are displayed or whether the organization is depicted in a more passive manner (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Ferree *et al.*, 2002). In addition, organizations can have a voice in the media or simply being the subject that is described. The so called “standing” refers to the opportunity for actors to “provide interpretation and meaning” (Ferree *et al.*, 2002, p. 85).

The preconditions for prominent positioning in the media depend on the type of organization. Corporations oftentimes actively seek out media attention by investing in PR, media relations, and other publicity activities (e.g. Schafraad *et al.*, 2016). Research indeed has shown that a more prominent position in the media is positively related to the reputation of a company (Fombrun, 1998). Similar to for-profit organizations, NGOs seek out a prominent position in the media – but following different motivations. The success of NGOs in terms of public support or influencing social change has been found to be highly dependent on agenda-setting effects (Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2012). However, media prominence of NGOs is often limited and faces specific challenges. The “access dilemma” of NGOs has been attributed to a lack of institutional power as well as the fact that social movements that NGOs are part of are fragmented and characterized by internal rivalries hindering a clear and consistent positioning in the media (Gamson, 2004).

Public sector organizations, in contrast, have been found to more often shy back from media attention (Deacon and Monk, 2001) or more actively try correct negative media coverage (Schillemans, 2012). For them, it is also considered as more difficult to work on

their reputation via media relations, due to their political nature. They experience problems trying to connect to stakeholders on an emotional level. In addition, being part of the group of governmental organizations creates the challenge to stand out as a unique organization (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012).

In sum, we can expect that corporations have the most prominent position in the media compared to NGOs and public organizations. We expect that the volume of their coverage will be bigger, that they have a more prominent position in newspapers, that they will function more often as the main actor in the message, and that they will be covered more often in active terms and with citations:

- H1.* Corporations are covered more prominently in the media compared to public organizations and NGOs in terms of (a) volume, (b) placing, (c) relevance, (d) active role, and (e) standing.

### *Context*

Organizations can be related to numerous topics in the news: their products or services, the dismissal of employees, a crisis and so forth. Second-level agenda setting refers to the salience of these objects with which an organization is associated in the news. Stakeholders use these substantive attributes to form an opinion about the organization, for example, regarding its performance or leadership (Carroll and McCombs, 2003; Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis, 2006). They do this specifically for reputation dimensions that are difficult to observe, such as social responsibility. Media coverage is in that case the main information source for stakeholders (Einwiller *et al.*, 2010). Research on news values assumes that some events or organizations have better chances for being covered in the media than others, as a consequence of these attributes (Eilders, 2006). Events that fit one of the criteria of the journalistic selection process, such as relevance, controversy, elite persons or organizations, continuity, proximity or an elite nation can increase the chances of being covered (Eilders, 2006). For movement organizations, chances to be covered in the news increase when they work in certain areas (Andrews and Caren, 2010). Public sector organizations are less frequently subject to content analyses of their media visibility (Deacon and Monk, 2001; Schillemans, 2012). Corporations can actively try to build the agenda with using news values in their press releases. When they aim to do so, the best strategy for them is to include the news factors surprise, controversy, high negative impact or being an elite organization in their press releases. Some topics are also more successful than others when pushed forward with a press release: Organizational issues, employees and management and financial performance increase the chances of being covered (Schafraad *et al.*, 2016).

In this paper, we are interested in the attributes that are associated with an organization instead of the other way around, i.e. certain topics that are discussed in the news and for which an organization serves as the context. The organization should thus be the central actor (Carroll, 2011). To balance between rather abstract news values and reputation attributes on the one hand and a numerous list of concrete topics on the other hand, we discern organizational issues that are related to the way an organization functions in terms of its structure, personnel, and management and substantial issues that are concerned with the core business of the organization (products and services) or external issues. We assume that journalists are more critical as an organization is more powerful in society. Consequently, corporations and public organizations might be covered more often in terms of organizational issues, since their functioning can have a high impact on society. This is probably less the case for NGOs that do not provide essential products or services to citizens. Moreover, we expect that NGOs appear more often in the context of substantial issues. For NGOs, the media are an important channel to connect to their stakeholders and media relations are an important part of their strategies to gain public support for their

cause (Andrews and Caren, 2010). They may stress cause-related substantial issues in their PR strategies that, in turn, affect the news coverage about this type of organizations:

H2. Corporations and public organizations appear more often in the context of organizational issues compared to NGOs.

H3. NGOs appear more often in the context of substantial issues.

### *Evaluations*

Next to context, the way an organization is evaluated in the news matters for the way stakeholders think about it (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). This aspect has been analyzed with several labels, such as “valence,” “sentiment,” “favorability,” and “tone” (Carroll and Deephouse, 2014). By using positive, negative or no evaluations (neutral), the media can have an evaluative second-level agenda-setting effect. In that sense, they do not only affect the fact that certain organizations are on our mind, but also how we think about them (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Tone does not only matter for setting the public agenda, but also to organizations, as they see negative media coverage as a big reputational threat (Pharoah, 2003). However, critical media attention can be considered as a logical consequence of a position in society given that power elicits scrutiny (Liu and Horsley, 2007).

There is not a clear or consistent relation between the way an organization is evaluated in media coverage and its reputation. Kiouisis *et al.* (2007) did not find a relationship between the tone that was used to cover a company in the media and its perceived corporate reputation. In contrast, research on Fortune’s top 500 companies showed that positive news increased corporate reputation while negative coverage damaged reputation (Meadows and Meadows, 2016). Specifically, stressing the ability to create value and taking innovative actions can increase favorability (Rindova *et al.*, 2007). Thus, no general conclusions can be drawn regarding the consequences of the tone of media coverage for corporate reputations. Communication professionals in public sector organizations experience that the tone that is used to cover their organizations is more negative than the one that is used for corporations (Liu *et al.*, 2010). However, organizations’ portrayal in the media not necessarily matches with perceptions of communication professionals (Jacobs and Wonneberger, 2017). Since NGOs can be considered as less powerful actors in society and as they are established to “do the right things,” we expect that coverage regarding NGOs will have a more positive tone than articles on corporations and public organizations:

H4. NGOs are evaluated more positively compared to corporations and public organizations.

In addition to the valence of evaluations, the source of evaluation might play a role for public perceptions of organizations. In the context of discourse opportunities, resonance is considered an important factor that contributes to public awareness (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004). Resonance is the evaluative response which actors obtain from other actors in the public debate. For organizations in particular it can make a difference if they are judged by internal actors (members of their own organization) or external actors, such as a journalist, citizen, member of parliament or other kind of “third party.” External actors as outsiders of an organization might be conceived as more trustworthy compared to representatives of an organization, they can serve as a third-party endorser (Carroll, 2010). However, especially companies invest heavily in the positioning of their organization in the media by providing information subsidies in which internal voices might have a stronger presence (Verhoeven, 2016). If the coverage about companies builds on information subsidies provided by them, their evaluations might more often stem from representatives of the organization than from

other, external actors. Consequently, we expect that corporations are evaluated more often by internal actors compared to public organizations and NGOs:

*H5.* Corporations are evaluated more often by internal actors than by external actors.

## Method

A quantitative content analysis of the media coverage of 61 Dutch organizations was conducted. The data form part of a larger study that also included a survey among communication professionals (Jacobs and Wonneberger, 2017). The selection of organizations for the present study was guided by several theoretically informed selection criteria that were applied to ensure high variation of media attention within different institutional settings: with companies, public organizations, and NGOs three different types of organizations were chosen. The companies were selected from the Dutch Elsevier top 500 list, a list that is comparable to the Fortune 500. The public organizations were selected on the criterion of operating at arms-length distance from the central government as these fulfill public tasks while having more freedom in their (communication) strategies compared to less autonomous organizations. Agencies of Dutch ministries and quasi-autonomous NGOs (quangos) fit this criterion. A list of well-known national NGOs operating in societal, political and environmental areas served as a basis to select this third type of organization. For each group of organizations a selection was made to reach variation in scope (international, national, regional/local), size (number of employees) and sector. The final sample consisted of 18 companies, 20 public organizations and 23 NGOs.

Three Dutch national newspapers were chosen that reflected the spectrum of organizational media coverage in the Netherlands. The selection included a quality newspaper (*de Volkskrant*), an economic newspaper (*Het Financieele Dagblad*) and a popular newspaper (*De Telegraaf*). All sections of the print papers from January to August 2014 were searched for relevant articles in LexisNexis. For each organization, a separate full-text search was conducted using the name and possible variations and abbreviations as a keyword list. To obtain comparable sub-samples for each type of organization, the number of articles per organization was limited to 100. For organizations with a greater number of articles, a selection was made that was equally distributed over the entire research period resulting in a total sample of  $N=2.520$  articles. Two student coders manually coded all articles after an extensive period of coder training and testing. Over 10 percent of the sample ( $n=271$ ) were used for a pretest that indicated on average a high intercoder reliability (mean Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ : 0.828). The lowest scores were obtained for implicit evaluations (0.673) and evaluation source (0.684; see below) that were, however, still acceptable.

## Measures

*Prominence.* A total of seven different features served as indicators of the prominence of an organization within the media coverage. On the organization level, the number of articles published with at least one mentioning of an organization was considered as the amount of coverage ( $M=116.63$ ,  $SD=274.92$ ). This measure of amount consisted of the total number of articles mentioning the organization and was not restricted to the maximum of 100 coded articles. The number of words per article constituted the volume of coverage ( $M=574.53$ ,  $SD=453.96$ ). Placing was operationalized as the page number of an article. Mean imputation was used to replace missing values ( $M=15.22$ ,  $SD=9.68$ ). The relevance of an organization within an article was coded as either primary ("1") or secondary ("0") ( $M=0.28$ ,  $SD=0.45$ ). An active role ("1") of the organization was coded if actions or opinions were displayed as opposed to a passive role ("0") that consisted of a reference of that organization by a journalist or other actor

( $M = 0.66$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ). Finally, an organization's standing was indicated by whether or not the organization was depicted with at least one indirect quote ( $M = 0.15$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) or at least one direct quote ( $M = 0.18$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ) in an article.

*Context.* Two different types of issues were distinguished to describe the context of organizational media coverage. Organizational issues was coded if an article focused on topics, such as management, re-organization, new positions, redistribution of tasks, internal problems, etc. ( $M = 0.14$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ). Substantial issues, in contrast, were coded if an article focused on topics, such as products, services, or other substantial activities or external issues ( $M = 0.78$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ).

*Evaluations.* Explicit and implicit evaluations of an organization were coded separately to cover the entire breadth of sentiments expressed regarding an organization in one article. Both variables were coded on five-point scales ranging from “-2 – strongly negative” to “+2 – strongly positive.” Explicit evaluations were coded based on the language, frame or tone used in relation to the organization or its actions ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ). Implicit evaluations, in contrast, were coded based on an anticipation of how the article would be perceived from the perspective of the organization, i.e. whether the article potentially damaged or improved the image of the organization ( $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). Both measures were strongly correlated ( $r = 0.745$ ). In addition, the type of actor explicitly evaluating an organization was coded to discern the source of explicit evaluations. Evaluative references could either stem from the journalist ( $M = 0.66$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) or author of an article, from other external actors ( $M = 0.16$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ) or from internal actors ( $M = 0.14$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ), that is, from members of the organization.

#### *Analytic approach*

The analysis was conducted on two different levels. First, on the article level all individual newspaper articles served as unit of analysis. To detect the differences in journalistic coverage between the different types of organizations separate multi-level models were estimated for each characteristic of media coverage as dependent variable and organization type as independent variable, i.e. between-subjects factor (Table AI). The organization served as second-level unit to account for interdependencies within the media coverage about the same organization. Linear models were run for metric and ordinal variables. Binary coded dependent variables were estimated with logistic models.

Second, to check for the robustness of the findings and minimize the influence of variations in coverage volume between organizations, the data were aggregated to the organization level. Multiple one-way ANOVAs with organization type as between-subjects factor were conducted to test the differences in the coverage characteristics between the three types of organizations (Table AII). Since the Levene's test revealed heteroscedasticity for some of the coverage characteristics, the Games-Howell test was chosen as a *post hoc* test.

## **Results**

About 53 percent of all coded articles referred to a corporation ( $n = 1,329$ ). Public organizations ranked second with 30 percent ( $n = 751$ ) followed by NGOs with 17 percent ( $n = 440$ ). According to the models on the article level that account for intra-organizational variation (see Table I), corporations and NGOs differ the most with six significant differences. Public organizations and NGOs differ in four aspects. Public organizations and corporations differ in three aspects and can, thus, be considered as most similar. The models on the level of the organization revealed a slightly different picture (Table II). Especially NGOs' representation in the media differed from corporations and public organizations while the latter two were rather similar in most respects.

**Table I.**  
Organizational  
differences in  
positioning factors  
(means and standard  
deviations;  
article level)

	Corporate organization	Public organization	NGO	Total
<i>Prominence</i>				
Volume	520.46 <sup>a</sup> (387.66)	638.58 (508.56)	628.55 <sup>a</sup> (516.96)	574.53 (453.96)
Placing	17.05 (8.43)	12.92 (9.73)	13.64 (11.79)	15.22 (9.68)
Relevance	0.30 (0.46)	0.25 (0.44)	0.27 (0.44)	0.28 (0.45)
Active role	0.69 <sup>a</sup> (0.46)	0.63 (0.48)	0.59 <sup>a</sup> (0.49)	0.66 (0.48)
Direct quote	0.11 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.32)	0.25 <sup>a</sup> (0.43)	0.23 <sup>b</sup> (0.42)	0.18 (0.38)
Indirect quote	0.11 <sup>a</sup> (0.31)	0.19 <sup>a</sup> (0.39)	0.22 (0.41)	0.15 (0.36)
<i>Content</i>				
Organizational issue	0.16 <sup>a</sup> (0.37)	0.14 <sup>b</sup> (0.35)	0.06 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.24)	0.14 (0.34)
Substantial issue	0.77 <sup>a</sup> (0.42)	0.74 <sup>b</sup> (0.44)	0.89 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.31)	0.78 (0.41)
<i>Evaluations</i>				
Explicit evaluation	-0.01 (0.63)	-0.02 <sup>a</sup> (0.32)	0.08 <sup>a</sup> (0.44)	0.00 (0.52)
Implicit evaluation	-0.01 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.79)	0.02 <sup>a</sup> (0.57)	0.17 <sup>b</sup> (0.65)	0.03 (0.71)
Reference: journalist	0.67 (0.47)	0.66 (0.47)	0.63 (0.48)	0.66 (0.47)
Reference: external actor	0.17 (0.37)	0.13 <sup>a</sup> (0.34)	0.19 <sup>a</sup> (0.39)	0.16 (0.37)
Reference: internal actor	0.11 (0.32)	0.17 (0.38)	0.15 (0.36)	0.14 (0.34)

**Notes:**  $n = 2,520$ . <sup>a,b</sup>Significant mean difference,  $p < 0.05$ , resulting from pair wise comparisons with Bonferroni adjustment based on estimated marginal means of multi-level models with type of organization as fixed-effects factor (see Table AI)

**Table II.**  
Organizational  
differences in  
positioning factors  
(means and standard  
deviations;  
organization level)

	Corporate organization	Public organization	NGO	Total
<i>Prominence</i>				
Amount	73.83 <sup>a,b</sup> (45.32)	37.55 <sup>a</sup> (39.89)	19.13 <sup>b</sup> (25.22)	41.31 (42.77)
Volume	480.59 <sup>a</sup> (106.42)	551.24 (165.32)	711.03 <sup>a</sup> (383.57)	590.64 (274.80)
Placing	14.65 (5.60)	12.41 (3.65)	15.69 (10.45)	14.31 (7.43)
Relevance	0.27 (0.13)	0.29 (0.24)	0.30 (0.27)	0.29 (0.22)
Active role	0.69 (0.23)	0.64 (0.19)	0.59 (0.30)	0.63 (0.25)
Direct quote	0.15 (0.14)	0.18 (0.19)	0.28 (0.30)	0.21 (0.23)
Indirect quote	0.09 (0.07)	0.22 (0.26)	0.10 (0.14)	0.14 (0.18)
<i>Context</i>				
Organizational issue	0.17 (0.15)	0.16 (0.16)	0.09 (0.21)	0.14 (0.18)
Substantial issue	0.77 (0.16)	0.76 (0.19)	0.87 (0.22)	0.81 (0.20)
<i>Evaluations</i>				
Explicit evaluation	0.02 (0.19)	-0.02 <sup>a</sup> (0.07)	0.21 <sup>a</sup> (0.37)	0.08 (0.27)
Implicit evaluation	0.03 <sup>a</sup> (0.36)	-0.10 <sup>b</sup> (0.35)	0.49 <sup>a,b</sup> (0.53)	0.16 (0.50)
Reference: journalist	0.68 (0.13)	0.67 (0.23)	0.54 (0.34)	0.62 (0.26)
Reference: external actor	0.13 (0.10)	0.12 (0.13)	0.22 (0.22)	0.16 (0.17)
Reference: internal actor	0.15 (0.14)	0.18 (0.24)	0.20 (0.29)	0.18 (0.24)

**Notes:**  $n = 61$ . <sup>a,b</sup>Significant mean difference at the 0.05 level based on Games-Howell *post hoc* tests (see Table AII)

### Prominence

Our first hypotheses concerned the differences in prominence between corporations and the other two types of organizations. As opposed to our expectation, coverage volume – that is, the average volume per article – was higher for NGOs and public organizations compared to corporations. This difference turned out to be significant on the article and on the organization level. However, overall following from the data aggregated to the organization level, the amount and thus total volume of coverage was greatest for corporations. With an average

amount of 19 articles ( $SD=25.23$ ) for NGOs and 38 articles ( $SD=39.89$ ) for public organizations, these appeared on average significantly less often in the news compared to corporations with 74 articles on average ( $SD=45.32$ ). The difference between NGOs and public organizations, however, was not significant. Consequently, *H1a* was partly confirmed: Corporations were covered more prominently in the media compared to public organizations and NGOs in terms of the absolute volume of their coverage.

There were no significant differences between organizations in terms of placing and relevance – neither on the article nor on the organization level. *H1b* and *H1c* were, therefore, not confirmed. Corporations were, however, displayed in a more active fashion. This difference was significant on the article level between corporations and NGOs – partly confirming *H1d*. Although being displayed in a more active way, corporations were less visible with direct and indirect quotes. These tendencies were found on both levels of analysis. Both, public organizations and NGOs were displayed significantly more often with direct quotes. Both types of organizations also scored higher on indirect quotes compared to corporations. However, this difference turned only out as significant for public organizations on the article level. *H1e* was thus partly confirmed.

### *Context*

The second and third hypotheses addressed differences in the context of organizational media coverage. The models on the article level revealed that corporations and public organizations appeared more often in the context of organizational issues compared to NGOs. *H2* was thus confirmed. Also *H3* was confirmed: As expected, NGOs appeared more often in the context of substantial issues compared to corporations and public organizations. Also on the organization level, NGOs appeared more often in the context of substantial issues and were less often related to organizational issues. These differences to corporations and public organizations were, however, not significant.

### *Evaluations*

Finally, the last two hypotheses compared the sentiment and sources of sentiment between organizations. In line with *H4*, NGOs were evaluated more positively compared to corporations and public organizations. This difference is significant between NGOs and public organizations for explicit evaluations on the article and on the organization level. For implicit evaluations, NGOs differed from public organizations and corporations. Again, this difference appeared as significant on the article level and the organization level. While the evaluation of NGOs was thus significantly more positive – implicitly and explicitly, the other organizations are covered in a more ambivalent way resulting in more neutral scores on average.

The final *H5*, could not be confirmed. Corporations were not evaluated more often by internal actors compared to the other two types of organizations. All three types of organizations were most often referred to by journalists. In addition, on the article level, NGOs received significantly more attention from external actors compared to public organizations. Although not significant, on the organization level, NGOs were more often evaluated by external actors compared to corporations and public organizations.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

Studying the content of media coverage is in general an important prerequisite for the formulation of communication strategies by corporate communication professionals. Next to that, this study adds to our knowledge on how different types of organizations are positioned in the news, thus allowing corporate communication professionals to compare their own type of organization with their fellows and other types of organizations to enhance organizational reflecting and learning. Based on agenda-setting theory, this study proposes a typology of organizational media positioning consisting of the three

dimensions prominence, context, and evaluation. A content analysis of national media coverage about Dutch organizations allowed to compare companies, public organizations, and NGOs with regard to these three dimensions.

The results showed considerable differences indicating that journalistic selection criteria vary for these three types of organizations. Public organizations and corporations were most similar whereas corporations and NGOs differed most strongly in how they were positioned in the media. More nuanced differences between organizational types appeared when accounted for intra-organizational variation. However, also on the organization level some differences were confirmed and can thus be regarded as most pronounced in organizational media coverage.

While corporations appeared more often in the media, public organizations and NGOs were covered in longer articles. Corporations were displayed in a more active fashion whereas public organizations and NGOs had a greater standing, that is, were more often displayed with direct quotes. Corporations and public organizations appeared more often in the context of organizational issues compared to NGOs who were more often related to substantial issues. Finally, NGOs received more positive coverage whereas the coverage of corporations and public organizations was more balanced consisting of negative and positive journalistic evaluations.

These findings reflect differences in the relevance of media coverage for these types of organizations and their societal functions. This is highly relevant for those working on public relations in one of these three types of organizations. For corporate communication professionals in corporations, obtaining media attention is part of their various efforts to increase publicity. The findings reflect that – in comparison to organizations that utilize less resources on publicity – companies are indeed successful in attracting journalistic attention. Of course, high variations can be found between companies that can be ascribed to the size of an organization but also its connection to highly salient issues, such as organizational crisis situations (Coombs, 2007; Fombrun, 1998). As opposed to a focus on organizational attention, public organizations and NGOs are more strongly linked to societal discourses. Fulfilling public tasks and spending public resources, public organizations have been assumed to be heavily scrutinized by the media (Liu and Horsley, 2007). Our findings, however, suggest a rather moderate level of media scrutiny given the moderate level of media attention. This might strengthen the self-confidence of communication professionals in public sector organizations: There is nothing to be scared about, there is no reason to be “pathologically introverted” (Marr, paraphrased in: Deacon and Monk, 2001, p. 155). Raising attention for their organization and more importantly for societal issues is crucial for NGOs (Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2012). Even though they receive overall less media attention, our findings confirm that NGOs appear more often in longer and thus more in-depth coverage that is typical of societal problems. Non-profit communication professionals might benefit from this insight: Knowledge about this (implicit) criterion of a journalist can help the organization to make its media strategies more effective. An NGO can try to fit their “news” (even more) in the frame of societal problems and lead on to longer, in-depth coverage. While representatives of public organizations might be quoted more often to defend their organization (Schillemans, 2012), a high number of quotes from NGOs might reflect their role as experts on societal issues but also voice of otherwise silent minorities (Gamson, 2004). Knowing that your organization is a journalistic favorite for quotes might help an organization to also position itself accordingly in order to strengthen its organizational profile and gain more favorable media coverage. Lastly, each type of organization can learn from the lessons as formulated for the other types. For example, public organizations might also feel attracted to figure in longer coverage related to societal problems, as is currently the case for NGOs. With their specific position as the fulfillers of public tasks, they might want to position themselves more as “experts” and “societal problem solvers” in the mind of journalists.

*Limitations and future research*

While our sample is by no means a representative sample, we can still assume similar results for larger sample that would include more organizations and also other media types. First of all, the selection of organizations included the most important national organizations of varying sizes of each type. Furthermore, print newspapers can be considered a good proxy for organizational media coverage because less attention is paid to organizations on television and online coverage has been found to be highly similar to corresponding print newspapers (e.g. Hoffman, 2006). Consequently, we assume that the findings of this study present substantive insights into systematic differences of organizational media coverage that should, however, extended by internationally comparative research. A comparison to social media could broaden our understanding about the role of different types of organizations in public discourses.

Trying to influence whether and how an organization is covered in the news will always be unpredictable to some extent, due to characteristics of the topic and the message, interactions between communication professionals and journalists, interpretations and editorial choices and competition with other issues in the news (Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2015; Schillemans and Jacobs, 2011). Communication professionals can, however, use the findings of this study to reflect on the role of their organization in society and its consequences for its media positioning. This study shows that there are systematic differences in the media attention that are associated to organizational structure and the role of an organization in society. The three dimensions of media positioning – prominence, context, and evaluations – offered a useful tool for the analysis of organizational differences. Future research should study these differences from the perspective of news production to assess how journalistic routines and selection criteria are applied for different types of organizations.

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**Table A1.**  
Estimated coefficients  
of multi-level models  
with coverage  
characteristics as  
dependent variables  
and organization type  
as independent  
variable (article level)

## Appendix

Dependent variable	Fixed effects			Random parameters	
	Intercept	Corporate organization	Public organization	Residual	Intercept (organization)
<i>Prominence</i>					
Volume	664.87 (36.95)	-158.31 (47.77)**	-68.49 (49.86)	193698.09 (5511.02)	11491.10 (3794.77)
Placing	14.88 (1.13)	1.25 (1.55)	-2.72 (1.57)	83.72 (2.42)	16.77 (6.88)
Relevance	0.27 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.20 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Active role	0.56 (0.04)	0.13 (0.05)*	0.07 (0.05)	0.21 (0.01)	0.01 (0.00)
Direct quote	1.19 (0.20)	0.86 (0.27)**	0.19 (0.28)	1.00	0.34 (0.12)
Indirect quote	1.69 (0.24)	0.53 (0.32)	-0.16 (0.33)	1.00	0.52 (0.17)
<i>Context</i>					
Organizational issue	2.84 (0.29)	-1.16 (0.34)**	-0.99 (0.36)**	1.00	0.41
Substantial issue	-2.15 (0.26)	0.90 (0.32)**	0.91 (0.33)**	1.00	0.50 (0.16)
<i>Evaluations</i>					
Explicit evaluation	0.12 (0.04)	-0.13 (0.06)*	-0.14 (0.06)*	0.25 (0.01)	0.02 (0.00)
Implicit evaluation	0.29 (0.07)	-0.28 (0.09)**	-0.31 (0.09)**	0.45 (0.01)	0.05 (0.01)
Reference: journalist	-0.39 (0.16)	-0.36 (0.20)	-0.36 (0.21)	1.00	0.18 (0.08)
Reference: external actor	1.27 (0.22)	0.49 (0.29)	0.74* (0.31)	1.00	0.44 (0.15)
Reference: internal actor	1.78 (0.22)	0.31 (0.29)	-0.01 (0.30)	1.00	0.36 (0.14)

**Notes:**  $n = 2,520$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

Dependent variable		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	$\eta^2$
<i>Prominence</i>							
Amount	Between groups	30,637.023	2	15,318.512	11.226	0.000	0.28
	Within groups	79,142.059	58	1,364.518			
	Total	109,779.082	60				
Volume	Between groups	582,436.579	2	291,218.289	4.278	0.018	0.13
	Within groups	3,948,625.618	58	68,079.752			
	Total	4,531,062.197	60				
Placing	Between groups	118.296	2	59.148	1.076	0.348	0.04
	Within groups	3,189.574	58	54.993			
	Total	3,307.869	60				
Relevance	Between groups	0.009	2	0.004	0.084	0.920	0.00
	Within groups	3.025	58	0.052			
	Total	3.034	60				
Position	Between groups	0.104	2	0.052	0.854	0.431	0.03
	Within groups	3.519	58	0.061			
	Total	3.623	60				
Direct quote	Between groups	0.191	2	0.096	1.861	0.165	0.06
	Within groups	2.979	58	0.051			
	Total	3.170	60				
Indirect quote	Between groups	0.204	2	0.102	3.314	0.043	0.10
	Within groups	1.782	58	0.031			
	Total	1.986	60				
<i>Context</i>							
Organizational issues	Between groups	0.098	2	0.049	1.529	0.225	0.05
	Within groups	1.861	58	0.032			
	Total	1.959	60				
Substantial issues	Between groups	0.137	2	0.069	1.783	0.177	0.06
	Within groups	2.234	58	0.039			
	Total	2.371	60				
<i>Evaluations</i>							
Explicit evaluation	Between groups	0.661	2	0.331	5.224	0.008	0.15
	Within groups	3.671	58	0.063			
	Total	4.332	60				
Implicit evaluation	Between groups	4.179	2	2.090	11.174	0.000	0.28
	Within groups	10.847	58	0.187			
	Total	15.026	60				
Reference – journalist	Between groups	0.286	2	0.143	2.160	0.125	0.07
	Within groups	3.834	58	0.066			
	Total	4.119	60				
Reference – external actors	Between groups	0.116	2	0.058	2.201	0.120	0.07
	Within groups	1.531	58	0.026			
	Total	1.647	60				
Reference – internal actors	Between groups	0.023	2	0.012	0.202	0.818	0.01
	Within groups	3.312	58	0.057			
	Total	3.335	60				

Note:  $n = 61$

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