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Gattermann, K.; Vasilopoulou, S.

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Absent yet popular? Explaining news visibility of Members of the European Parliament

KATJANA GATTERMANN¹ & SOFIA VASILOPOULOU²

¹*Amsterdam Centre for Contemporary European Studies (ACCESS EUROPE)*; ²*Department of Politics, University of York, UK*

Abstract. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) represent their citizens in European Union policy making, having the power to approve, amend or reject the near majority of legislation. The media inform EU citizens about their representatives and are able to hold them publicly accountable. However, we know little about whether, and to what extent, MEPs are visible in the news. This study investigates the visibility of MEPs in national broadsheets in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy. It seeks to explain individual-level variation by employing an original dataset of news visibility of 302 MEPs over a period of 25 months (September 2009–September 2011) and tests the applicability of the news values and mirror theories in the context of supranational politics. The results show that political office, length of tenure and domestic party leadership have a positive effect. Legislative activities have a mixed effect on MEP news visibility. Attendance negatively affects news visibility, while non-attached MEPs receive more news coverage. In short, despite the core supranational nature of EP legislative politics, MEP news visibility primarily depends on journalists' domestic considerations. This informs both our understanding of MEP parliamentary behaviour and journalism studies in the context of the EU.

Keywords: European Union; MEPs; news coverage; routine period; visibility

Introduction

The role of news media is central to the European Union's (EU) drive for increased representation, legitimation and accountability. In the absence of an EU media system, national news media become the link between supranational elites and national publics. They publically scrutinise EU representatives; provide a forum for exchange of information, deliberation and discussion of EU-related issues; and fulfil crucial functions in the EU policy process. EU political actors may gain legitimacy through this exposure and can be held publically accountable (Koopmans 2007: 184; see also Trenz 2008). EU publics also depend on national media in order to receive information about their elected representatives as media coverage is able to raise citizen awareness (e.g., De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2006).

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are important actors in the EU policy process having the power to approve, amend or reject the near majority of European legislation. However, the extent to which they are visible in the EU Member States' national newspapers remains significantly under-researched. While there is extensive literature focusing on national legislators in the news (e.g., Schoenbach et al. 2001; Sheaffer 2001; Fogarty 2008; Tresch 2009; Van Aelst et al. 2010; Midtbø 2011), little attention has been paid to the news presence of EU legislators (Gattermann 2011). Scholars

have, thus far, focused on general news coverage of EU affairs (e.g., Peter et al. 2003; Boomgaarden et al. 2010), EU election campaigns (e.g., De Vreese et al. 2006; Schuck et al. 2011; Boomgaarden et al. 2013) or the European Parliament (EP) (Gattermann 2013). This article seeks to fill this lacuna through an examination of individual MEP visibility in national broadsheets of five European countries during a routine period. It investigates whether, and to what extent, MEPs are covered in the news and asks: Why are some EU legislators more visible than others in the quality press?

Following Tresch (2009), we test two theories, which we derive from journalism studies: the first postulates that journalists apply their own standards of 'newsworthiness' based on audience-oriented routines (e.g., Galtung & Ruge 1965; Schlesinger 1978; Shoemaker & Reese 1996). The second suggests that news media respond to politicians' legislative activities based on organisational routines, thus 'mirroring' political reality (see Tuchman 1978; McQuail 1992). Our main proposition is that, in the context of EU supranational politics, these theories do not function in exactly the same way as they do in national politics. We argue that despite the supranational nature of EU legislative politics, MEPs' news visibility depends on journalists' domestic considerations. Journalists produce news stories in order to cater for domestic audiences and, as a result, we expect them to show greater interest in those MEPs that channel their political resources towards the domestic rather than the EU level.

The results lend support to our argument: in line with our expectations deriving from the news values theory, MEP news coverage is positively associated with political office, length of tenure and political leadership at home. Contrary to what the mirror theory expects for the national level, but in consonance with our argument, EP attendance has a negative impact on press visibility and non-attached MEPs receive more news coverage. Our results show further that engagement in legislative activities has a mixed effect. While drafting reports is not associated with MEP news exposure, parliamentary questions are less likely to generate attention. Only speeches are associated with higher visibility.

This study builds on and extends current literature in four ways. First, in terms of *focus*, it researches the visibility of EU legislators once elected into office. Such a focus is appropriate in light of the increased relevance of European legislative actors in EU legislative decision making. Second, in terms of *theory*, we test two domestic-specific theories in the context of supranational politics, and in so doing we offer our own insights building on these theories. Moreover, unlike prior research that has identified the relevance of system-level drivers (e.g., Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Boomgaarden et al. 2010, 2013; Gattermann 2013), this article focuses on individual-level rather than country-level variation. Third, in terms of *timeframe*, unlike existing literature that often focuses on EU election campaigns (e.g., De Vreese et al. 2006; Schuck et al. 2011), this study provides an analysis of MEP visibility during a routine period in order to methodologically isolate campaign-specific effects on MEP visibility. Fourth, in terms of *data*, the article employs an original dataset of monthly measures of news visibility of 302 MEPs over a period of 25 months (September 2009–September 2011). It considers two major broadsheets in five EU countries: Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy (N = 7,550).

Determinants of MEP visibility in the national press

News-making and policy-making processes have become intertwined with news being increasingly an outcome of interaction between journalists and politicians. Both parties seek to maximise their interests from this reciprocal relationship based on information exchange and public attention (see, e.g. Fengler & Russ-Mohl 2008). Research on the personalisation of politics shows that media coverage tends to increasingly focus on individual representatives (e.g., Rahat & Sheaffer 2007; Boumans et al. 2013). This trend generally occurs ‘alongside a focus on policy issues’ (Van Aelst et al. 2012: 214); and varies across European countries (e.g., Kriesi 2012). Although MEP decision-making power has increased over time, we know little about the extent to which EU legislators are visible in the quality press and what may explain the variation in their coverage. Since existing literature finds that the EP receives regular news coverage (Gattermann 2013), we expect that this would also apply to its legislators (see also Gattermann 2011). In terms of explaining the variation among MEPs, we argue that their visibility in European broadsheets is dependent on individual-level explanatory factors related to politicians’ parliamentary behaviour and status.

Following Tresch (2009), we derive and test two groups of hypotheses that are related to two prominent theories in journalism studies and that may affect the amount of news coverage politicians receive. The first examines actors’ visibility on the basis of specific journalistic criteria of ‘newsworthiness’, such as power and prominence; and the second expects that journalists’ coverage of individual politicians will ‘mirror’ their parliamentary activities. These have also been identified by Vos (forthcoming) who has created a typology of micro-level characteristics, distinguishing between ‘who a politician is’, which includes individual characteristics such as political position and seniority, and ‘what a politician does’ in terms of parliamentary activities.

Our main proposition is that despite the core supranational nature of EP legislative politics, EU legislators’ news visibility primarily depends on journalists’ domestic considerations. This phenomenon is prevalent in foreign news reporting in general where the ‘domestic filter’ (Nossek 2004; Eide & Ytterstad 2011) is at play. Foreign correspondents are incentivised to cover those events and issues that are determined by certain news factors including geographic proximity (e.g., Chang et al. 1987; Wu 2003), cultural proximity or direct impact on their audience at home (Galtung & Ruge 1965). Although – strictly speaking – EU news cannot be categorised as foreign news given the intertwining of supranational and domestic politics, similar processes to those explained above tend to take place. Despite increasing EU integration, most media outlets are mainly organised domestically, reaching out to a national rather than a European audience. Journalists therefore produce news stories that must be meaningful to domestic audiences (e.g., see Kevin 2003; Peter et al. 2003; Gleissner & De Vreese 2005). Moreover, since MEPs become elected in light of political developments at home (e.g., Hix & Marsh 2011), journalists would be incentivised to cover news stories that are of direct relevance to the electorate. We thus argue that, albeit arguably a news selection criterion in itself, this domestic focus will affect the applicability of both the news value and mirror theories for MEP news visibility in the following two ways: the news values of prominence and status are not only related to MEPs’ roles inside the EP, but also to their political posts at home; and contrary to what the mirror

theory would predict, journalists are less inclined to closely follow individual legislative activity but, instead, report on those MEPs who concentrate their political resources in the domestic arena.

The ‘news values’ theory considers journalists as having their own incentives and filtering mechanisms based on audience-oriented routines (Schlesinger 1978; Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 111; O’Neil & Harcup 2009). These involve a number of subjective considerations, including whether what is to be reported on would receive audience attention (Golding & Elliott 1979). Prominence and importance represent key news selection criteria (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 111). Journalists are likely to believe that politicians in leading positions, such as cabinet members, spokespersons or chairpersons, are more newsworthy than parliamentary ‘backbenchers’ because their actions and decisions directly affect the citizenry (e.g., Squire 1988, Schoenbach et al. 2001, Schaffner & Sellers 2003; Midtbø 2011). Length of service positively influences news coverage – not least because longer serving parliamentarians tend to also have established more media contacts over the years (e.g., Cook 1986; Schoenbach et al. 2001; Sellers & Schaffner 2007, Van Aelst et al. 2010). Applying this to EU legislators, we may deduce that ‘who a politician is’ (Vos forthcoming) within the EP matters. Hence we hypothesise that:

H1a: MEPs holding a senior political or legislative office in the EP are likely to be more visible in the news than EP ‘backbenchers’.

H1b: Longer serving MEPs are likely to be more visible in the news than those who have been in office for a shorter time period.

Journalists produce news stories that address the domestic audience and have increased incentives to cover stories about politicians who occupy significant posts at the national – as opposed to the supranational – level. In addition, EU-related issues are not as newsworthy as domestic news. EU actors tend to receive less media attention compared to domestic political actors (Peter & De Vreese 2004; De Vreese et al. 2006). EU-related news occupies marginal space in the national media (e.g., Peter et al. 2003), and tends to be more salient around key events, such as elections or Council summits (Kevin 2003; Boomgaarden et al. 2010). Hence, we expect that journalists are especially interested in producing reports about MEPs who they deem have political relevance at the domestic level. From this we derive that:

H1c: MEPs who hold the leadership of their domestic party are likely to be more visible in their national press than those who do not hold such position.

News making is not only structured by audience-oriented routines (Schlesinger 1978) – that is, news values – but also by organisational routines enabling journalists to deal with large amounts of news on a daily basis (Tuchman 1978). Here, certain types of news such as legislative activities that are predictable because of their continuous nature (Tuchman 1978: 56–58) facilitate the intra-organisational processing of information. Tuchman (1972) considers the objectivity of journalists to be a type of defensive routine, which may protect them from professional criticism. From this perspective, journalists act as impartial

observers providing a ‘mirror image’ of what happens in the political arena, serving the needs of informed political participation. Journalists perform the key function in democratic politics of supplying the electorate with information on day-to-day politics so that the latter can make informed political choices. Since news here is considered to be an accurate and neutral reflection of reality (McQuail 1992), the expectation is that the media coverage of political actors will be proportionately related to the extent to which they engage in parliamentary activities. In this sense, ‘what a politician does’ (Vos forthcoming) becomes important in their media coverage. However, empirical findings testing the effects of politicians’ legislative behaviour on their media exposure are inconclusive. Although some studies find either no, or a negative, relationship between parliamentary activity and media attention (e.g., Squire 1988; Sheaffer 2001; Fogarty 2008), others suggest that legislative behaviour translates into news visibility (Tresch 2009; Midtbø 2011).

In the case of EU legislative politics, we argue that – unlike what the mirror theory would expect – MEP coverage will not be proportionately related to their engagement in parliamentary activities. This is due to the dominance of the domestic perspective in the selection of EU news. Correspondents tend to find it difficult to cover EU affairs due to the complexity of EU decision-making structures and the length of legislative processes (see Gleissner & De Vreese 2005: 229). When it comes to EP news coverage, journalists primarily focus on decisions and especially those that are relevant to their domestic audience (see Gattermann 2011: 128–140). Given the highly specialised nature of EP affairs, individual legislative behaviour is therefore of low salience at the domestic level. Thus, we hypothesise that:

H2a: MEP activity at the EP level, in terms of parliamentary speeches, questions and reports, is unlikely to translate into individual news visibility.

Similarly, journalists may not necessarily report on those MEPs with high attendance records. Instead, the domestic focus implies that journalists are more likely to report on those legislators who channel their political resources towards the domestic political arena as opposed to those who are primarily oriented towards EU-related legislative activities. Høyland et al. (2013) show that MEPs with career ambitions at the national level tend to be less active in the EP. Moreover, the ‘absentees’ not only lack interest in the day-to-day EP politics, but also prioritise the national arena and the voters (Brack 2012). They focus predominantly on national politics in order to become popular in the domestic arena. Thus given the domestic relevance of ‘what these MEPs do’, journalists might prefer them over those Brussels-based MEPs that devote their time in EP activities. From this it follows that:

H2b: MEPs with low attendance records are likely to be more visible in the news than those who attend the EP more frequently.

Political affiliation is also relevant to news coverage. Some MEPs do not organise their interests within European party groups and are not required to behave in line with a European political party (see Hix et al. 2007). These MEPs tend to be Eurosceptic belonging to small parties with representation only at the EP level. For them, office in the EP becomes a means to a wider end – that is, political office at home. Since the national party

is naturally their main political ‘home’, they are likely to seek agreement over political preferences and actions in accordance with their national party leadership. From this it follows that these politicians have increased incentives to seek news coverage at the national level. We thus expect journalists to pick up on this and hypothesise that:

H2c: Non-attached MEPs are likely to be more visible in the news than those who are affiliated with an EP political group.

Data and method

Sample

We selected 302 MEPs from five EU Member States: Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy. Our country selection includes four founding members and one of the first EU accession countries. They vary in terms of population and hence in the number of elected MEPs, with Germany having the largest delegation (see Table 1). Our sample is limited to West European countries. Yet, it comprises three distinct media systems, which are categorised based on – among others – the degree of press partisanship (political parallelism) and the degree of state dependency (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Italy and France are classified under the polarised-pluralised system where levels of political parallelism and state intervention are high. The Netherlands and Germany, which are categorised within the democratic-corporatist model, are characterised by a high degree of political parallelism that has substantially decreased in recent decades, and the co-existence of press freedom with state regulation. Britain belongs to the liberal model where commercial newspapers are prominent and political parallelism is relatively limited ‘with the important exception of the highly partisan British press’ (Hallin & Mancini 2004: 75).

In our model, we refer to England because we did not consider MEPs elected in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. We excluded French overseas MEPs and one MEP from South Tyrol as he represents a German-speaking minority. Since we only look at newspapers distributed at the national level, including these MEPs would bias our results. We chose one major centre-left and centre-right broadsheet in all countries bar Italy. The

Table 1. Broadsheet selection and MEP sample

Country	Broadsheets considered	Number of MEPs in sample	Size of EP country delegation in 2009
England	<i>The Guardian, The Times</i>	56	72 ^a
France	<i>Le Monde, Le Figaro</i>	57	72
Netherlands	<i>De Volkskrant, Trouw</i>	22	25
Germany	<i>Frankfurter Rundschau, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	98	99
Italy	<i>Corriere della Sera, La Stampa</i>	69	72

Note: ^a UK delegation.

two Italian broadsheets are centrist. All broadsheets have a reasonably large readership and have been included in previous studies (e.g., De Vreese et al. 2006; Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Boomgaarden et al. 2010). Only the Dutch *Trouw* and the German *Frankfurter Rundschau* have somewhat lower circulation figures, but have been studied in similar research (e.g., Schuck & De Vreese 2006, 2008). We only considered pure news and commentaries in national editions. We employed several coders to code a total of 8,675 articles following a detailed codebook. To test inter-coder reliability we coded a small sample ourselves. Krippendorff's alpha produces satisfactory results.¹

We acknowledge that broadsheets may take a different approach to covering MEPs compared to other media. Although television programmes remain the main source of information about the EU for its citizens followed by newspapers, radio and the Internet (e.g., European Commission 2012), '[n]ewspapers generally have more political news than does television news, because they have far fewer constraints in terms of space and production costs' (De Vreese et al. 2006: 483). Broadsheets cover EU affairs more comprehensively than tabloids (e.g., De Vreese et al. 2006; Schuck et al. 2011). Since we are interested in the individual determinants of MEP news coverage, we consider our selection sufficient to enable generalisability of our results to other media.

The sample includes MEPs who sat in the European Parliament for the whole period of investigation and is broadly representative in terms of EP party affiliations (see Appendix Table 1). The time span of investigation comprises 25 months from September 2009 to September 2011 during the seventh EP term. This period allows us to account for over-time variation – in particular for developments in the legislative cycle of the EP and for changes in domestic political contexts.

Dependent variable and model

We operationalise MEP news visibility by relying on Vliegenthart et al. (2005: 371), who interpret visibility as 'the chance of reading about [an issue] in one "unit" of reading time', which is sublinearly dependent on the number of referrals.

$$v(MEP) = \sum_{a \in \text{articles}} v(MEP_a) \quad (1)$$

$$v(MEP) = \sum_{a \in \text{articles}} \log_2(8f_{\text{head}} + 2f_{\text{body}} + 1) * fp \quad (2)$$

where $v(MEP)$ is the visibility of each MEP in a given newspaper per month. Mentions in the title (f_{head}) weigh three times compared to number of appearances in the rest of the article (f_{body}). Fp gives articles that appear on the front page twice the weight as articles that appear elsewhere in the newspaper. Van der Pas et al. (2013: 464) have also adopted this measure to operationalise the visibility of Dutch politician Geert Wilders. We add the constant 1 to the formula because some MEPs received no news coverage. Vliegenthart et al. (2005: 371) and Van der Pas et al. (2013: 464) also considered circulation figures for individual newspapers in their within-country research. However, in our study this would entail a fictional cross-country bias (see also Boomgaarden et al. 2010: 511). For example,

German broadsheets have comparatively lower circulation figures because they compete with numerous regional (quality) newspapers.

We aggregated $v(MEP)$ as a monthly measure for both broadsheets in each country. Our dependent variable is non-count, yet continuous. It ranges from 0 to 523.28 ($M = 2.44$; $SD = 12.38$). Since we consider 302 MEPs over 25 months ($N = 7,550$) our data have a panel structure characterised by time-series cross-section. A random effects model would be appropriate (following the Hausman test of the full model, random effects are preferred to fixed effects, $\chi^2(34) = 44.37$, $p < 0.110$). However, the Pesaran test informs us that our observations exhibit cross-sectional dependence ($p < 0.001$; average absolute correlation of residuals = 0.349). This is due to the relatively large number of monthly observations for each MEP (see Driscoll & Kraay 1998). Thus we estimate pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) models in Stata 12 using the `xtsc` command developed by Hoechle (2007). This programme applies Driscoll-Kraay standard errors, which are robust to cross-sectional and temporal dependence. We chose a maximum lag length of 2 in the autocorrelation structure to estimate the regressions.

Independent variables

To operationalise our first set of hypotheses (news value theory) we use several variables to measure whether an MEP was holding a senior political or legislative office (*H1a*). Dummy variables indicate whether an MEP was leader of a European parliamentary group (*EPG leader*) or a national delegation (*Nat delegation leader*), member of the Bureau of the European Parliament (*Member of EP Bureau*) or chairing a committee in the EP (*EP committee chair*). We accounted for individual-level changes over time. The variable *Years in office* measures the seniority of an MEP (*H1b*) as the distance from his or her first election to the year of our dependent variable. The variable *Dom party leader* (*H1c*) indicates whether an MEP is leader of his or her national party.

Regarding our second set of hypotheses (mirror theory) we measure the activity of MEPs (*H2a*) on a monthly basis. We coded individual MEPs' number of parliamentary questions (*PQs per month*), number of speeches (*Speeches per month*) and number of reports drafted (*Reports per month*) extracting data from the EP's online archives. The variable *Attendance* (*H2b*) is a constant for each MEP. We obtained this information from the votewatch.eu website and used the attendance rate (percentage) between 14 July 2009 and 31 December 2011 as a proxy for our time period of investigation.² *Non-attached* (*H2c*) is operationalised as a dummy variable. Changes over time are accounted for. Descriptive statistics for all independent variables can be found in Appendix Table 3.

Controls

Individual-level controls include gender (dummy *female*) and *age*. The literature often finds an incumbency bonus in the news coverage of political actors (e.g., Schoenbach et al. 2001; Van Aelst et al. 2008), and so we control for government participation with a dummy if an MEP's party supported the government back home. Members of larger parties may be given preference in the news, assuming that they are able to rely on more (communication) resources and an established network with the press (cf. Van Aelst et al. 2010). We control

for this by including for each MEP the EP seat share of their national party (*EP seat share of nat. party*).³ *EP recess* measures the time when the EP was not in plenary session (August), as it receives less press coverage during the summer months (Gattermann 2013).

Controls at the country level may include the type of media system; citizens' support for EU membership (Brüggemann & Kleinen-von Königslöw 2009; Gattermann 2013); different electoral systems (Gattermann 2014); or varying levels of party political contestation (Schuck et al. 2011). However, given our small country sample, their effects would not be justifiable. We include country dummies and also control for the squared monthly distance to national elections, which yields a differentiated between-country effect for each monthly observation and serves as an indicator for the salience of domestic politics.

Findings

We focus on a routine period to assess whether MEP visibility in national broadsheets is driven by factors related to news values and/or the mirror theory. Before proceeding to the explanatory section of the findings, we present descriptive results. Table 2 shows that 61 out of 302 MEPs (20 per cent) received regular news coverage. They were visible in the news in at least 13 out of 25 months, which we consider as regular if we expect that they receive coverage every other month. However, 40 MEPs (13 per cent) were not reported at all. We find considerable cross-country variation. Only three MEPs from England received regular news coverage, while almost a quarter were not visible in the news. Although the German delegation comprises 99 MEPs (here: 98), only 17 per cent did not receive any coverage over the 25-month period. The press frequently reported on 15 German MEPs. This figure is twice as large for the French and Italian MEPs: approximately 30 per cent in each country received regular coverage. Fewer French and Italian MEPs (9 and 7 per cent, respectively) did not receive any coverage at all. All Dutch MEPs in our sample, by contrast, received at least some attention by their broadsheets during the time period of investigation; and almost a quarter of all Dutch MEPs were frequently reported in the press. This is consistent with Gattermann's (2013) findings, which indicate that the amount of EP news varies across countries, with British newspapers paying the least attention to the EP.

Table 2. Comparing MEPs with regular broadsheet coverage and those with zero visibility

Country	Total number of MEPs	Regular coverage (≥13 months)		Zero visibility	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
England	56	3	5.36	13	23.21
France	57	17	29.82	5	8.77
Netherlands	22	5	22.73	0	0.00
Germany	98	15	15.31	17	17.35
Italy	69	21	30.43	5	7.25
Total	302	61	20.20	40	13.25

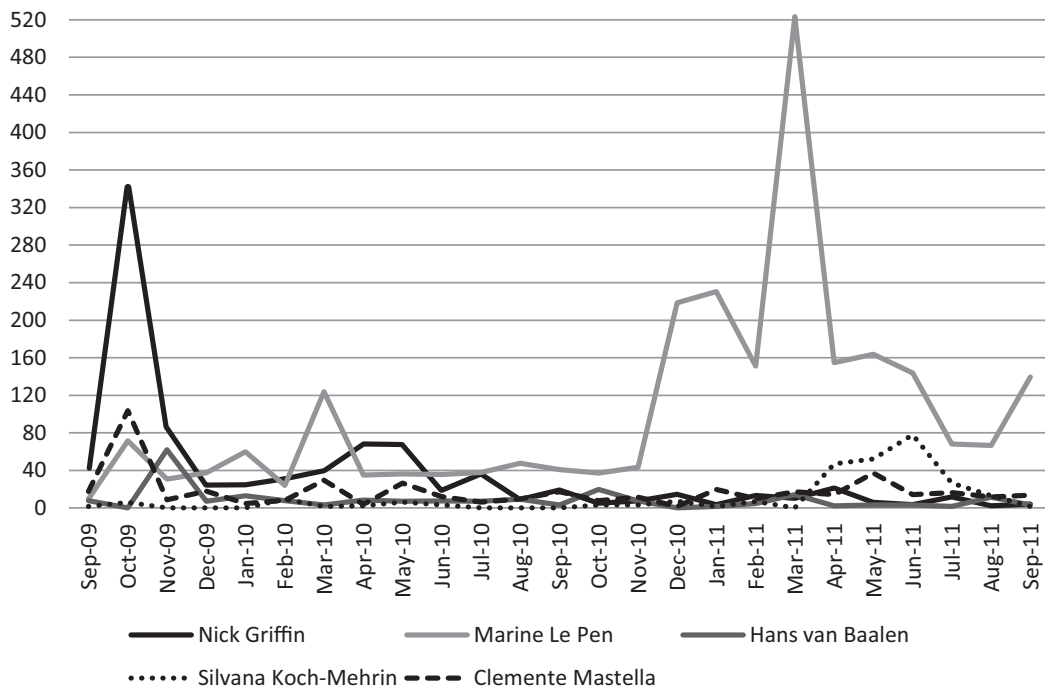


Figure 1. MEPs with the highest average visibility scores per country in both selected broadsheets.

When considering those MEPs who are – on average – most visible in each country sample, we may also discern temporal variation. Figure 1 shows that British MEP Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party during our timeframe, received more attention compared to the rest in autumn 2009, mainly because he appeared on the BBC show *Question Time*. French MEP, Marine Le Pen, received very high levels of news attention in the last few months of our period of investigation, which coincided with her running for the leadership of Front National. The visibility of Italian MEP, Clemente Mastella, and Dutch MEP, Hans van Baalen, was also considerably high in autumn 2009. The latter was a key figure in the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy and leader of the delegation in the EP. In October 2009 he became leader of the Liberal International and was immediately involved in a political row in Nicaragua after which he was expelled from the country. Clemente Mastella held several ministerial positions in Italy before his election to the EP via the Party of Freedom in 2009. His name was often linked to political controversies and, at the peak of his coverage, the media reported that his wife was charged with corruption. The coverage of German MEP Silvana Koch-Mehrin, who used to be a popular politician in the Free Democratic Party, peaked in spring 2011 when she was publicly accused of plagiarism in her doctoral dissertation. She then stepped down as leader of her party delegation and resigned as EP Vice-President.

These examples inform the news values and mirror theories. Whereas political office seems to play a crucial role for the newspaper coverage of prominent MEPs, legislative behaviour appears to be less important. They also show the relevance of case-specific controversies, which we cannot fully control for at the individual level. The country

dummies account for variation across political contexts. We proceed by testing the relevance of news values and mirror theories by OLS regressions with Driscoll-Kraay standard errors, which are shown in Table 3.

Model 1 only includes our main independent variables (plus country dummies). Model 2 adds individual-level controls. Model 3 is complemented by the squared distance to national general elections. The remaining three models are similar to model 3, but each of them excludes a certain set of MEPs. Model 4 excludes the top 10 per cent of MEPs with the highest mean visibility scores. Model 5 excludes MEPs with no visibility and model 6 only considers MEPs who received regular coverage. Given the various patterns in our data, models 4, 5 and 6 serve as robustness checks (see Appendix Table 2 for descriptive statistics).

We begin by examining whether the ‘news values theory’ in the context of EP politics applies to MEP news visibility. Regarding legislative or political office (*H1a*), we find support for our hypothesis with one exception: political office does not make a difference for her news coverage if an MEP is a European party group leader at a given time, but members of the EP Bureau receive about 1.63 to 1.73 units more attention in those models that consider the full sample of MEPs. Similarly, the visibility of committee chairs is 3.35 (model 1) to 6.53 units (model 6) higher compared to those who are not in charge, although the effect is not significant in model 4. The visibility of leaders of national delegations in the EP is about 0.31 (model 4) to 3.63 units (model 6) higher than for those who do not hold such office, if we disregard the most visible MEPs or those who do not receive regular coverage, respectively. With regard to *H1a*, this means that type of office at the EP level is able to explain high news visibility scores.

Seniority in office (*H1b*), holding everything else constant, has a positive and significant effect in all models except model 6 – that is, when we only consider those MEPs who received regular news coverage. Every additional year in the EP increases the news visibility of an MEP by about 0.05 (model 4) to 0.12 units (model 5). This is in line with our expectations and corresponds with Van Aelst et al. (2010), who find that senior national parliamentarians tend to have more personal contacts with journalists. Remarkably, however, age has the reverse effect compared to seniority in office. MEP news visibility decreases by about 0.04 to 0.14 units with every one-year increase in age, although this effect does not hold in model 4, which deselects the most visible MEPs. This suggests that younger legislators are more attractive to the press, which is not an uncommon finding in political communication research (e.g., Midtbø 2011). Our last hypothesis (*H1c*) receives support across all models in Table 3. Holding everything else constant, the news visibility of MEPs who are leaders of their domestic party back home is about 11.59 (model 4) to 26.44 units (model 1) higher than for those who are just members of their political party or independent legislators. In line with our expectations, these results suggest that MEPs who are considered relevant to domestic politics receive more coverage.

Turning to our second set of hypotheses, we expect that MEP activities inside the EP are unlikely to translate into news visibility (*H2a*). Our results partially support this hypothesis: monthly parliamentary activity in terms of drafting reports does not affect news visibility; not even for MEPs who receive regular coverage (model 6) as none of the effects are statistically significant. These results are in line with previous research: Fogarty (2008) finds that the number of sponsored bills does not make a difference for the news coverage of

Table 3. OLS regression with Driscoll-Kraay standard errors, explaining variation in MEP news visibility

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
EPG leader	2.209 (1.538)	2.303 (1.453)	2.287 (1.457)	0.204 (0.373)	2.110 (1.433)	2.028 (1.209)
National delegation leader	-0.017 (0.276)	-0.094 (0.261)	-0.105 (0.258)	0.312* (0.159)	0.213 (0.221)	3.626*** (0.981)
Member of EP Bureau	1.728** (0.666)	1.680** (0.646)	1.628** (0.652)	0.062 (0.151)	1.113 (0.687)	-0.623 (1.974)
EP committee chair	3.353*** (0.972)	3.617*** (0.975)	3.620*** (0.974)	0.191 (0.111)	3.614*** (1.013)	6.530* (3.383)
Years in office	0.076** (0.031)	0.110*** (0.032)	0.112*** (0.032)	0.051*** (0.011)	0.120*** (0.038)	-0.051 (0.101)
Dominant party leader	26.436*** (5.432)	26.237*** (5.450)	26.237*** (5.448)	11.592*** (3.982)	25.623*** (5.376)	17.397*** (5.859)
PQs per month	-0.018* (0.009)	-0.030** (0.014)	-0.029*** (0.013)	-0.009** (0.004)	-0.029** (0.014)	-0.199 (0.200)
Speeches per month	0.052** (0.020)	0.034 (0.021)	0.043* (0.024)	0.012 (0.008)	0.057* (0.028)	0.094 (0.112)
Reports per month	-0.026 (0.104)	-0.052 (0.094)	-0.046 (0.095)	0.019 (0.068)	0.050 (0.168)	-0.051 (1.073)
Attendance	-0.269*** (0.032)	-0.270*** (0.034)	-0.270*** (0.034)	-0.025*** (0.003)	-0.286*** (0.037)	-0.543*** (0.093)
Non-attached	15.462*** (2.480)	15.187*** (2.484)	15.183*** (2.484)	3.570*** (0.940)	15.732*** (2.557)	26.456*** (5.105)
Age	-0.038*** (0.012)	-0.038*** (0.012)	-0.037*** (0.012)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.038*** (0.013)	-0.144* (0.078)
Female	0.280 (0.278)	0.280 (0.278)	0.281 (0.278)	-0.389*** (0.088)	0.486 (0.325)	5.274*** (1.774)
Government	-0.075 (0.197)	-0.075 (0.197)	-0.081 (0.198)	-0.390*** (0.053)	-0.275 (0.200)	0.432 (0.647)
EP seat share of national party	-0.029*** (0.006)	-0.029*** (0.006)	-0.029*** (0.006)	-0.012*** (0.003)	-0.029*** (0.007)	0.020 (0.042)
EP recess	-0.961*** (0.205)	-0.961*** (0.205)	-0.857*** (0.186)	-0.486*** (0.055)	-0.949*** (0.210)	-3.065*** (0.986)
Squared distance to national GE			-0.001* (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.001* (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)
France	3.586*** (0.521)	3.651*** (0.533)	3.833*** (0.473)	1.316*** (0.152)	4.116*** (0.515)	8.717*** (1.636)
Netherlands	-1.046*** (0.238)	-1.386*** (0.295)	-1.505*** (0.330)	0.273** (0.123)	-1.752*** (0.397)	-11.996*** (2.793)
England	-3.088*** (0.774)	-2.866*** (0.712)	-2.992*** (0.736)	-0.591*** (0.076)	-3.431*** (0.892)	-12.016 (9.180)
Italy	0.265 (0.246)	0.605*** (0.204)	1.216*** (0.409)	0.664*** (0.113)	1.164*** (0.466)	1.565 (2.049)
Constant	24.611*** (2.882)	27.032*** (3.344)	27.158*** (3.378)	3.057*** (0.358)	28.624*** (3.676)	58.297*** (11.187)
R ²	0.231	0.233	0.233	0.145	0.235	0.277
Excluding	-	-	-	Top 10%	Zero visibility	Non-regular
N (MEPs)	302	302	302	270	262	61
Overall N	7,550	7,550	7,550	6,750	6,550	1,525

Note: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. Driscoll-Kraay standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: news visibility of individual MEPs per month.

individual United States Congressmen; and Sheafer (2001) finds a negative effect of legislative activity by members of the Israeli Knesset on their media prominence. Furthermore, all else being equal, the number of parliamentary questions is associated with lower visibility, indicating that active MEPs tend to be remote from domestic politics. Here every additional question decreases the visibility by about 0.01 to 0.03 points, although the effect does not comply with standard levels of statistical significance in model 6. These findings contradict those of Midtbø (2011), who argues that more parliamentary questions result in more comprehensive newspaper coverage in the Norwegian context. This underlines once again that, given the complex nature of the EP legislative process, the drivers behind MEP news visibility are not necessarily comparable to those of national politicians. However, we find that speeches have a positive effect in models 1, 3 and 5. Every additional speech in the EP increases news visibility by about 0.04 to 0.06 units. This is not surprising as the ultimate purpose of a speech is publicity.

In line with our expectations (*H2b*), we find that attendance has a negative effect on MEP news visibility: with every 1 per cent increase in the attendance rate, MEP visibility decreases by 0.03 (model 4) to 0.54 units (model 6). This means that MEPs who more frequently attend EP plenary sessions are less visible in the news. These results are robust across all models. Put differently, absentees receive more broadsheet coverage, whereas an MEP's legislative contribution in terms of reports and parliamentary questions either does not matter, or is less likely to generate attention than the activities of those MEPs who are more active outside the EP. These findings suggest that the press does not necessarily report on an MEP's work at the EU level but rather pays more attention to those representatives who spend more time in their constituency or elsewhere.

Finally, we find that non-attached MEPs receive more news coverage (*H2c*). The news visibility for MEPs who are not affiliated with any political group in the EP is about 3.57 (model 4) to 26.46 units (model 6) higher than for those who belong to a political group. Again, this finding holds across all models, controlling for everything else – even when the most visible MEPs are removed. This result supports our assumption that newsmakers respond to those European representatives who use the EP in order to gain political office at home. It may also lend support to the news value theory. All non-attached MEPs in our sample are right-wing and Eurosceptic. Their opposition to the EU can be related to the 'negativity' news value (Galtung & Ruge 1965: 65–71), which would expect them to attract the newsmakers' attention.

The remaining controlling effects at the individual level show a mixed picture: the effect of gender does not comply with standard levels of statistical significance except in models 4 and 6. When the most visible MEPs are removed from the analysis, the effect of being female is negative (–0.39) implying that men tend to be more visible in the news than women among those MEPs who do not receive a lot of news coverage. However, if we only consider those MEPs who receive regular news coverage, this effect is positive and significant (5.27) suggesting that women are more visible than men. These results are likely to be driven by certain MEPs such as Marine Le Pen and Silvana Koch-Mehrin, who were among the most visible and received regular press coverage.

The effect of government is only statistically significant in model 4, which disregards the most visible MEPs. It does not support assumptions about an incumbency bonus as the effect is negative: the news visibility of MEPs whose domestic party participates in

government is about 0.39 units lower than for those who belong to an opposition party back home. Similarly, MEPs of larger national party delegations in the EP receive less news coverage. With every increase in seat share, MEPs news visibility decreases by about 0.01 to 0.03 units, although this effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance in model 6. While previous research found opposite effects for Belgian politicians in national election campaigns (Van Aelst et al. 2008), both these findings might be explained by the interplay between the supranational and domestic levels. In particular, they suggest a ‘second-order’ effect in the news coverage of MEPs. According to the second-order character of European elections, voters punish larger parties and those in government and instead cast their vote for smaller and/or opposition parties (e.g., Reif & Schmitt 1980; Hix & Marsh 2011). Our results suggest that this phenomenon is – at least partially – reflected in the news visibility of MEPs.

As regards time effects, we find, first, that MEP news visibility is about 0.49 (model 4) to 3.07 units (model 6) lower when the EP is in recess, which is in line with previous research on EP news coverage (Gattermann 2013). Second, the control at the country level reveals that proximity to the next national polling day leads to higher MEP news visibility: albeit very small (<0.01), the effect of the squared distance is negative and significant in the full model 3 and in model 5, which omits those MEPs with no visibility. This implies that MEPs receive more attention the closer the national election, although we are unable to assess whether this applies to before or after the polling day. Yet, Gattermann (2013: 451–452) finds that the EP receives slightly more news coverage prior to election day, suggesting that ‘MEPs supposedly become involved in the campaigns’.

As argued above, we are primarily interested in individual-level effects and our main assumptions hold while controlling for country dummies. The effects of the latter show that MEPs from Germany receive less broadsheet attention compared to French and Italian MEPs, but more coverage than Dutch and English MEPs. These findings suggest that MEPs from the polarised-pluralised media systems in Italy and France are more visible compared to MEPs from other media systems. However, as argued above, our country sample is too small to establish causal links between media, political or electoral systems, on the one hand, and individual MEP news coverage, on the other.

Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to investigate the news visibility of MEPs from five countries – Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy – over a period of 25 months during the seventh parliamentary term of the EP. Operationalising news visibility based on Vliegthart et al. (2005: 371), we have *identified* and *explained* variation of individual MEP broadsheet coverage. We have tested, for the first time, the explanatory value of individual-level characteristics with regard to EU political actors’ news visibility. In doing so, we have extended the application of the news values and mirror theories – two prominent theories in journalism studies – to the context of EP legislative politics. Our argument is that journalists take a domestic perspective when reporting on the EU parliamentary arena. We have shown that variation in visibility depends more on ‘who these MEPs are’ in terms of office, seniority and status and less on ‘what they do in the EP’,

measured by daily legislative duties. This resonates with existing journalism studies that find that political standing is a more powerful explanatory factor for the amount of individual news coverage than legislative work (Vos forthcoming).

This has significant implications for the career prospects of politicians. If news visibility is not linked to legislative activity, then we should expect those MEPs with career ambitions at the domestic level to avoid spending time in the EP and to refrain from engaging in its activities. Our finding lends support to Høyland et al. (2013: 7), who assume that being visible in the national media is an indication that they are ‘capable of conducting tasks associated with holding national office’. For those MEPs seeking to continue their career in the EP, visibility comes with seniority and expertise. MEPs with similar career ambitions but without renowned legislative office are not picked up by the press for their daily legislative work. Our results also suggest that the quality press reflects the second-order phenomenon of EU elections (see, e.g., Reif & Schmitt 1980) in their news coverage of sitting MEPs and thereby underline the prevalence of domestic considerations: MEPs from smaller and opposition parties back home tend to be more visible in the news during the legislative term. This may impact on the goal of those policy-shaping MEPs to become re-elected to the EP as their legislative achievements are unlikely to turn into informed choices of EU citizens at the polls. This is why our findings also contribute to the EU democratic deficit debate (see Føllesdal & Hix 2006). Considering the premise that the media are able to affect citizen awareness (see, e.g., De Vreese & Boomgaarden 2006), we find that citizens’ familiarity with their representatives’ legislative work becomes constrained by journalists’ choices. Nevertheless, we show that the number of MEPs who receive regular coverage is higher compared to those who receive no coverage. This suggests that EU citizens may recognise a number of MEPs in their national media; and shows that news coverage is able to provide some linkage between MEPs and their represented (Vasilopoulou & Gattermann 2013).

Although this article has considered few EU Members States, we are confident that our findings may be generalised, given that our sample consists of 40 per cent of the legislature. Further research may assess whether our findings hold across a larger country sample. Our study focuses on the quality press. Given that broadsheets are regarded as opinion leaders and may influence other media content (see Kleinnijenhuis 2003: 184), we consider them appropriate to a study of the relationship between European representatives, the media and, ultimately, EU citizens. Future research may also test whether other media devotes more, equal or less attention to MEPs and assess the relevance of individual-level effects on MEP visibility. Our study not only contributes to our understanding of MEP incentives to pursue their legislative role inside the EP, but it also provides a reason for EU political communication research and journalism studies to further investigate individual-level factors.

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Appendix Table 1. Party affiliations of MEPs in the dataset and EP composition

EP group	Number of MEPs per political group		EP composition (2009)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
EPP	99	32.78	265	36.01
S&D	66.44	22.00	184	25.00
ALDE	37.32	12.36	84	11.41
Greens	30	9.93	55	7.47
ECR	23.44	7.76	54	7.34
GUE-NGL	14	4.64	35	4.76
EFD	23.12	7.66	32	4.35
N/I	8.68	2.87	27	3.67
Total	302	100.00	736	100.00

Note: The observations account for some Italian and British MEPs whose affiliation changed during the period of investigation.

Appendix Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables

	Excluding	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
$v(MEP)$	–	7,550	0	523.28	2.44	12.38
$v(MEP)$	Zero visibility MEPs	6,550	0	523.28	2.81	13.26
$v(MEP)$	Top 10%	6,750	0	82.97	0.88	3.23
$v(MEP)$	Non-regular coverage	1,525	0	523.28	10.47	25.87

Note: Cell entries are rounded to two decimals where necessary.

Appendix Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the independent variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	Standard deviation
PQs per month	7,550	0.00	171.00	1.56	4.44
Speeches per month	7,550	0.00	54.00	1.88	3.65
Reports per month	7,550	0.00	26.00	0.05	0.40
Attendance	7,550	53.57	100.00	88.52	8.80
Non-attached	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.03	0.17
EPG leader	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.02	0.15
National delegation leader	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.10	0.29
Member of EP Bureau	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.02	0.15
EP committee chair	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.05	0.22
Years in office	7,550	0.00	32.00	6.05	6.27
Dominant party leader	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.01	0.11
Age	7,550	26.00	83.00	53.47	10.28
Female	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.36	0.48
Government	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.46	0.50
EP seat share of national party	7,550	1.35	34.72	20.83	10.70
EP recess	7,550	0.00	1.00	0.08	0.27
Squared distance to national GE	7,550	0.00	1,681.00	362.64	404.07

Note: Cell entries are rounded to two decimals where necessary.

Notes

1. Krippendorff's alpha scores are available from the authors upon request.
2. Accessed on 16 May 2013. This precise information was missing for three MEPs. We took the overall measure in their case. The mean difference for the remaining MEPs between their overall attendance rate and their attendance during the shorter period is only between 0.007 and 0.055 percentage points at the 95 per cent level, $r = 0.98$ ($p < 0.01$).
3. In case that an MEP was an independent, we counted one seat relative to the size of the national delegation.

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Address for correspondence: Katjana Gattermann, Amsterdam Centre for Contemporary European Studies (ACCESS EUROPE), University of Amsterdam, PO Box 15718, 1001 NE Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: K.Gattermann@uva.nl