Why European tv news matters: a cross-nationally comparative analysis of tv news about the European Union and its effects

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The impact of the amount of EU coverage on the perceived importance of European integration depends on the nature of elite opinion

Along with broader notions of the EU as a public and published institution, scholars have begun to study how the EU communicates itself to the media (Gramberger, 1997; Meyer, 1999) and how it is communicated by the media (Gerhards, 2000). The underlying reasoning is that EU citizens should be able to inform themselves about the EU. Given the abstract nature of EU politics, the media play a key role in bringing EU politics to EU citizens. However, the EU's relationship with the media seems to be characterized by a communication deficit – not only in terms of the EU not adequately conveying its policies to the media (Meyer, 1999), but also in terms of the media not adequately conveying EU policies to the citizens (Gerhards, 2000). The lack of EU coverage has been by and large corroborated with respect to the visibility of the EU in routine and summit periods (see Chapter 3), but with respect to the election period striking differences between the various EU member countries emerged. The European election campaign took place in the coverage of the Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries including Austria, whereas it was virtually invisible in the remaining countries. This offers the opportunity to investigate a simple, yet important question. Does the mere amount of EU coverage influence opinions about the EU? Or, more specifically, does the mere amount of EU coverage affect EU citizens' perceptions of how important further EU integration is? The first goal of this chapter is to address this question.

The link between the amount of media coverage and the perceived importance of issues has been abundantly demonstrated in agenda-setting research (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; for reviews see: Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Eichhorn, 1995; Rössler, 1997). Simply

45 It has been outlined in section 1.1 that the studies in this book try to investigate the influence of EU coverage on opinions about the EU. In terms of agenda-setting, the use of the term opinion may be conceptually problematic. However, three aspects should be taken into consideration. First, as emphasized in section 1.1, the use of the term opinion has primarily a summarizing function in this book. Second, agenda-setting scholars emphasize the telling people what to think about character of agenda-setting and claim to focus on cognitive processes such as the accessibility of problems. However, it is unclear to what extent importance perceptions of problems as the most often used operationalizations of agenda-setting really tap the cognitive accessibility of problems, which one would rather have to assess with response latency measures (for a similar reasoning, see: Scheufele, 2000). One could also argue that the perception of the most important problem facing the country is close to an expression of an opinion. Third, a lot of research on (public) opinion phenomena is related to the perception of own or other people's opinions, for example in research on the looking-glass perception or other perceptual biases (for an overview, see Glynn et al., 1999). Hence, it seems justified to subsume importance perceptions under the broader term opinion.
Effects on the importance of European integration

put, the amount of coverage that media devote to a particular issue can shape to what extent individuals consider the particular issue important. The agenda-setting function of the media has been found to hold with respect to a variety of issues using different study designs. However, it is unclear whether this mechanism also applies to the perceived importance of European integration. There may be two reasons for this research gap. First, agenda-setting is biased towards domestic problems. The most commonly used operationalization of the public agenda explicitly asks for the 'most important problem facing the country' (Rössler, 1997; Smith, 1980). Although international events such as a war may surface on both the media and public agenda (Funkhouser, 1973), it is rather unlikely that a remote, abstract, and supra-national issue such as European integration makes it on the two agendas. Second, media coverage of European integration and EU politics is usually less visible or less prominent than other political coverage as the preceding chapters have shown. Agenda-setting, however, is predominantly concerned with top issues. Given the findings of the preceding chapters, this may almost always result in the issue of European integration being at the bottom of the media agenda, if anything. More generally, the preoccupation of agenda-setting research with top issues may lead to ignoring less powerful, yet also meaningful effects. Therefore, in their often cited overview of agenda-setting, Rogers and Dearing (1988) have requested that "future scholars of the agenda-setting process should include issues and events that receive much less media attention (ranging down to those that are hardly mentioned in the media) and that may only barely register on the public agenda" (p. 567). This request dovetails with the peculiarities of research on EU coverage. Thus, because the primary goal of this chapter is to investigate whether the amount of EU coverage shapes the perceived importance of European integration, it will be accompanied by an approach that pays attention to the peculiarities and problems of studying the effects of a less visible supra-national issue.

The second goal of this chapter results from another request by Dearing and Rogers (1996) in their review of the agenda-setting literature. The two scholars explicitly call for "more research in a wider variety of countries" (p. 98) in order to enhance our understanding of agenda-setting. Of course, this should not be confused with a call for yet another study demonstrating the occurrence of agenda-setting effects in countries other than the US. What is at stake here, is the potentially moderating role of country-level characteristics in agenda-setting processes. In other words, what has been outlined in section 1.3 as basic strategy of the effect analyses in this book, may be of particular relevance to the agenda-setting concept. To date, it has not been convincingly investigated whether country characteristics interact with individual media reception in their effect on agenda-setting. Although the explanatory power of such cross-level interactions has theoretically been discussed more than ten years ago (Pan & McLeod, 1991; Price et al., 1991), cross-level interactions have not yet been applied in agenda-setting research. Agenda-setting research has been stunningly attentive to explaining the dangers of different levels of analysis, but it has been remarkably oblivious of analyzing the possibilities of different levels of explanation. Thus, the second goal of this chapter is to investigate cross-level interactions in agenda-setting from cross-nationally comparative perspective.

Research on agenda-setting and on the EU have only a few things in common. One of them is that political interest is considered an important influencing factor. Scholars in both
strands of research maintain that political interest affects the citizens' sensitivity or resistance to either issues in the news or opinions about the EU (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Hewstone, 1986; MacKuen, 1984; Schoenbach & Semetko, 1992). This suggests that it may be worth bringing these two lines of research together. Moreover, news about European affairs is often argued to be abstract and remote (e.g., Meyer, 1999). Given that political interest, as sub-element of broader notions of political expertise, has been found to positively influence news reception (Fiske, Lau, & Smith, 1990), the study of political interest may also be useful for initial insights into the reception of news about EU affairs. As a result, the third goal of this chapter is to investigate whether political interest modifies the presumed effect of the amount of EU coverage on the perceived importance of European integration.

In sum, this chapter investigates whether the amount of EU coverage affects the perceived importance of further European integration. Employing a cross-nationally comparative perspective, the chapter focuses on the question of whether the presumed effect of the amount of EU coverage is conditioned by (a) country characteristics and (b) political interest.

4.1 Agenda-setting, elite opinion, and political interest

If existing studies have focused on media effects on the perceived importance of issues, they have not dealt with European integration (for an exception, see: Schönbach, 1981). And if studies have dealt with European integration, they have hardly focused on media effects. There is a simple reason for this. Research dealing with the perceived importance of issues is usually located in communication science and thus less concerned with EU issues. Research concerned with EU issues is usually located in political science and thus predominantly interested in 'political' explanations of perceptions of the EU. As a consequence, the existing literature unfortunately can only provide rough guidance as to expectations. The key question is whether the coverage of a remote, abstract issue such as EU politics can be expected to affect the perceived importance of European integration at all. In a study conducted around the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, Schönbach (1981) found that higher exposure to television news led people to perceive further European integration to be more important. Unfortunately, the actual media coverage was not assessed. Further evidence in order to presume media effects on the importance perceptions of European integration derives from a strand in agenda-setting research that centers upon the character of issues. Several agenda-setting studies have documented that unobtrusive issues (i.e., issues that most people cannot experience directly) led to stronger agenda-setting effects than obtrusive issues (i.e., issues that most people can experience directly) (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Smith, 1988; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Winter, Eyal, & Rogers, 1982; Zucker, 1978). Because unobtrusive issues can only be experienced through the media, the coverage has a greater potential to shape people's perceptions of the issues. Assuming that, to the vast majority of EU citizens, EU politics is unobtrusive, the expectation is that a greater amount of EU coverage will be associated with higher perceived importance of European integration.\footnote{There is also agenda-setting research demonstrating that obtrusive issues lead to more pronounced agenda-}
The emphasis here lies on differing amounts of EU coverage and differing levels of perceived importance. This is an important modification of traditional agenda-setting research. Usually, the ranking of various issues on the media agenda is compared with the ranking of various issues on the public agenda. Along with the crude categorical assessment of the importance of issues as either important or unimportant, this procedure often leads to a preoccupation with top-issues. If one really wants to investigate whether less prominently covered issues affect perceptions of importance as suggested by Rogers and Dearing (1988), it is in the first place necessary to study (potentially) differing levels of media coverage of a particular issue along with (potentially) differing levels of perceived importance of the particular issue. Moreover, such an analysis requires an individual level of analysis. The disaggregation of analyses is another desideratum of research (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) which helps circumvent the danger of ecological fallacy. To summarize, only a focus on the coverage of one particular issue together with a more nuanced assessment of the importance of this issue at the level of individuals presents an appropriate test of the presumed association between coverage and importance perceptions (for a similar reasoning, see: Schoenbach, 1991).

In general, research on the association between media coverage and the perceived importance of issues has largely neglected cross-nationally comparative approaches and explanations combining variables from different levels. Although studies in different countries exist (Edelstein, Ito, & Keplinger, 1990), the comparative character of these investigations remains confined to repeating the same analyses in each country and checking the results for differences between the various countries. However, the primary task of going comparative is to detect and ultimately explain phenomena that could not be detected or explained in single-country analyses. This, in turn, requires that the stage of naive comparativism be left and that country names be replaced with proper variables as suggested by Przeworski and Teune (1970). Put differently, we already know that agenda-setting exists in a variety of countries (for overviews, see Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Rössler, 1997). Hence, yet another replication of agenda-setting does not seem necessary. Cross-nationally comparative research may enhance our understanding of the concept by showing that substantive characteristics on which countries differ condition the agenda-setting process.

Concerning a presumed association between the amount of media coverage and the perceived importance of European integration, such a conditioning influence may come from consensus or polarization in elite opinion on European integration. It is important to note that setting effects (Demers, Craff, Choi, Pessin, 1989). This is theoretically integrated with the cognitive priming hypothesis stating that personal experience cognitively primes or sensitizes people to messages about a particular issue. Other researchers have conceptualized obtrusiveness of an issue as characteristic of the recipient rather than as predetermined characteristic of the issue (e.g., Lasorsa & Wanta, 1990), which is in line with the concept of a person's issue sensitivity (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; summarizing: Rössler, 1997). Although the turn from a message-oriented to a recipient-oriented perspective is an important advancement in agenda-setting research, it is of limited use for the problem of this study. It is not plausible to assume that, among all EU citizens, there are very much differing degrees of issue sensitivity. The vast majority is not even slightly sensitized to EU issues, as for example the consistently low awareness levels of EU institutions show (Anderson, 1998; Janssen, 1991).

47 Of course, this is not to say that there were no analyses at the individual level. Particularly, the still conceptually and methodologically outstanding study by Erbring et al. (1980) must be mentioned in this respect.
the nature of elite opinion is conceptualized here as macro-level phenomenon. By elite a
country's political elite is meant, consisting in this chapter of the political parties in national
parliaments. Elite-driven approaches have their foundations in Converse's (1964) important
work and have recently been advanced by Zaller (1990, 1992). In research on the EU, they
have been used to explain public support for European integration or EU-related opinions
(e.g., Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Inglehart, 1970; Janssen, 1991; McLaren, 2001; Wessels,
1995b). The basic notion is that citizens form their opinions about European integration by
relying on cues they get from political parties (for empirical evidence, see for example: van
der Eijk & Franklin, 1991; Wessels, 1995b). Linking this notion to media influence on
support for European integration, Banducci, Karp, and Lauf (2001) found the nature of elite
opinion on European integration to be an important moderator of media coverage. Depending
on whether elite opinion was consensual or polarized, the amount and tone of party coverage
had opposing effects. Although support for European integration and perceived importance of
European integration are conceptually and psychologically different, the powerful
conditioning impact of nature of elite opinion reported by Banducci et al. (2001) suggests that
the basic pattern may also hold for the interplay of media coverage and perceptions of
importance. However, before expectations can be specified, the two components of the
presumed moderator – its consensual or polarized nature and its elite character – must be
disentangled.

The moderating influence of both elite opinion on the one hand and consensus or
polarization on the other have only been tentatively discussed in agenda-setting research. Rogers and Dearing (1988, Figure 1) mention interpersonal communication among elites as
one of the influences on the agenda-setting process. Apparently, it is self-evident to the
authors that political elites play an important role in shaping the perception of political issues
because they do not further elaborate on this aspect. Besides the media, it is the political elites
that define problems and potential solutions and, thereby the importance of issues. McCombs
and Gilbert (1986) have discussed the polarization of issues as influence increasing agenda-
setting effects. Although the authors present only one empirical study as evidence, it seems
plausible to assume that polarization of an issue (or, in this study, of the parties that argue
about an issue) increases the perceived importance of an issue. Polarization of an issue
suggests that the issue is meaningful and evolves around a problem that needs to be solved.
This may particularly apply to an issue as remote and abstract as European integration. Van
der Eijk and Franklin (1996) and Duch and Taylor (1997) have pointed out that consensus
among elites reduces the chances of European integration to become a prevalent issue in
elections. What may be obvious for the choice of election topics, may also apply to citizens'
importance perceptions. Citizens interpret elite consensus in the sense that solutions to an
issue have been found and that the issue is consequently less threatening and, thus, less
important.

48 However, particularly in political science-based research, there are several studies demonstrating how political
elites try or indeed influence issue definitions and opinion processes, e.g., Caldeira (1987); Erikson, McIver, &
Wright (1987); Erikson, Wright, & McIver (1989); Franklin & Kosaki (1989); Holzhacker (1999); Marshall
The considerations outlined in the preceding paragraphs lead to the following expectations: The basic association between greater amounts of EU coverage and greater perceived importance of European integration depends upon whether elite opinion on European integration is consensual or polarized. In other words, to what extent (individual) exposure to EU coverage influences importance perceptions is conditioned by the (contextual) nature of elite opinion. If elite opinion is consensual, greater levels of EU coverage will not increase the perceived importance of European integration. However, if elite opinion is polarized, greater levels of EU coverage will be associated with greater perceived importance of European integration. One conceptual confusion should be avoided here. Chapter 2 has shown that polarized elite opinion on European integration is conducive to EU coverage. One could thus conclude that greater perceived importance of European integration is merely the result of higher amounts of EU coverage in countries with polarized elite opinion. Such a conclusion implicitly takes only the country-level into account and ignores the cross-level character of the expected interaction. What is more, this conclusion neglects the core of the proposed cross-level interaction: if the amount of coverage an individual is exposed to is kept constant (i.e., at identical levels of EU coverage), individual perceptions of the importance of European integration will differ depending upon the nature of elite opinion.

The third goal of this chapter is to investigate whether political interest modifies the presumed effect of the amount of EU coverage on importance attributed to European integration. More specifically, it will be studied whether political interest moderates the two-way interaction between amount of EU coverage and nature of elite opinion. Politically more interested persons are usually found to be more supportive of the EU than politically less interested persons (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Rohrschneider, 2002). Similarly, several agenda-setting scholars have reported that the politically more interested are more susceptible to agenda-setting effects (MacKuen, 1984; MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Schoenbach & Semetko, 1992; Wanta, 1997; Williams & Semlak, 1978; yet see also: Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McLeod, Becker, & Byrnes, 1974; Weaver et al., 1981). Zaller (1992, especially pp. 16-21, 275) has pointed out that political awareness, a concept closely related to political interest, affects people's responsiveness to elite opinion: the politically more aware are more likely to receive cues from elite opinion, most notably from consensus or polarization of elite opinion. Consequently, the politically more aware may be presumed to refer to these cues when judging the importance of issues.\footnote{This presumption does not imply that the politically aware adjust to the views that elites hold on the issues in question.}

Assuming that the aforementioned results from EU and agenda-setting research can be transferred to the topic of this chapter and that Zaller's (1992) findings also hold for the moderating influence of political interest, the following pattern may be expected. Recall that agenda-setting effects are presumed to occur only if elite opinion is polarized. If (a) this is indeed the case, if (b) the politically interested are more sensitive to elite opinion, and if (c) the politically interested are more susceptible to agenda-setting, then agenda-setting effects will be most pronounced among the politically interested in countries with polarized elite opinion. Put differently, hardly any agenda-setting effects are expected if elite opinion is
consensual. If anything, consensus among elites may cue the politically interested in the sense that European integration is not important. As a consequence, in countries with consensual elite opinion, the politically more interested will not differ much from the politically less interested with respect to the effects of the amount of EU coverage on perceived importance of European integration. Essentially, there will be no agenda-setting effects if elite opinion is consensual.

However, if elite opinion if polarized, the politically more interested may be expected to respond more sensitively than the politically less interested to the cues that disagreement among political elites conveys. As a result, the amount of EU coverage will have the strongest effects on perceived importance of European integration among the most politically interested. Conversely, the least politically interested will probably not be able to adequately interpret the cues from elite opinion (for a similar reasoning, see Zaller, 1992). As a consequence, the politically least interested may hardly respond to the amount of EU coverage, agenda-setting effects may not occur in this group. Technically speaking, a three-way interaction between amount of EU coverage, nature of elite opinion, and political interest is expected.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Procedure and measures

This chapter links the content analysis of the television news coverage of the June 1999 European election campaign to post-election surveys carried out in all EU member states immediately after the European elections. How the content analysis was designed and conducted, has been described in section 2.2.1. Note that the Luxemburger television channel was not included in the content analysis. Due to irregularities in the coding of a crucial category and for consistency reasons with the next chapter, Portugal also has been excluded from the analysis. To assess citizens' perceptions of the importance of further European integration along with a number of control variables, the surveys carried out in the EU member states immediately after the European elections were used. The computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted from June 14 to July 8, 1999 and were in each country based on a nationally representative random sample of people older than 18 years of age.

50 In any interaction, it is crucial to decide about the focal independent variable. In this chapter, this is the amount of EU coverage. Further, it is important to decide which of the other interacting independent variables is first-order moderator and which is second-order moderator. In this book, country characteristics are conceptualized as first-order moderators (here: nature of elite opinion). Therefore, political interest is a second-order moderator. However, with a different theoretical focus, it would also be possible to consider political interest as first-order moderator and nature of elite opinion as second-order moderator.

51 The surveys are part of the 1999 European Election Study (EES). The EES is funded by grants from the University of Amsterdam, the Dutch National Science Foundation (NWO), the German Federal Press and Information Agency, the CIS (Spain), the University of Mannheim, Germany, and Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Fieldwork was carried out by a consortium of European survey organizations directed by IPSOS, Germany. Neither the original collectors of the data nor their sponsors bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations published here.

52 In Italy, a telepanel was used instead of telephone interviews. The Spanish sample is a quota sample.
The sample size was at least 1000 respondents in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK and at least 500 respondents in Austria, Belgium, Finland Greece, Ireland, and Sweden.\textsuperscript{53} The response rates varied between 28\% in Greece and 59\% in Denmark (see Table B2 in Technical Appendix B for detailed information). These response rates are low, but this may not necessarily bias the results as Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, and Presser (2000) have recently demonstrated.\textsuperscript{54}

**Measures – dependent and independent variables**

As outlined above, the perceived importance of European integration needs to be assessed slightly differently than is usually done with the "most-important-problem" question. In the post-election survey, EU citizens were asked: "Thinking about European integration, is this compared to other important topics in <your country> a topic of great importance, some importance, little importance or no importance at all?" The multiple response categories allow a more nuanced view on people's perception of the importance of European integration than is possible with the "most-important-problem" question with its top-issue (and singular) bias. The variable was inversely coded so that 4 means great importance.

The amount of EU coverage was operationalized as the cumulated frequency of both EU stories and EU-related stories. Both types of stories were weighted by the prominence of the particular story (for explication of the prominence measure, see section 2.2.1). EU stories were stories that either dealt with the European election campaign or other EU topics such as EU enlargement or the euro. EU-related stories were characterized by referring explicitly to the EU, EU politics, or EU institutions.\textsuperscript{55} Including the latter type of stories is an acknowledgement of the fact that EU-related coverage had a large share in the coverage in the two-week period of investigation as Figure 2.2 has shown. Omitting this additional media information about the EU, would not appropriately mirror the EU-related information people actually received from television news during the period of investigation.

However, it is obvious that EU stories and EU-related stories cannot be treated equally in terms of their potential impact on importance perceptions. In order to adequately represent the relation of EU-related to elaborate EU stories, EU-related stories were multiplied by 0.5.\textsuperscript{56} The weighting of the stories by their prominence has been requested by a number of scholars who argued that people not only receive cues of the importance of issues by the frequency with which they occur, but also by the length, placement, or presentation of stories in a bulletin (Brosius, 1994; McCombs, 1981; McCombs & Gilbert, 1986). The nature of elite

\textsuperscript{53} 3708 respondents participated in the survey (telepanel) in Italy.
\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, it should be taken into account that the computation of the response rates is based on a very conservative definition of the net sample which includes the relatively high amount of losses of respondents who could not be contacted at all. The fact that no contact at all was made with the person to be interviewed might, however, also indicate corporate lines, fax numbers etc., i.e. quality-neutral losses. A less conservative definition of the net sample would have resulted in higher response rates.
\textsuperscript{55} Note that this operationalization deviates slightly from the operationalization in the second chapter where stories on the election campaign and other EU topics were in two different categories. However, in this chapter such an operationalization seems no longer appropriate.
\textsuperscript{56} Multiplication with values between 0.3 and 0.75 did not change the basic pattern of results.
opinion on European integration was gauged as the existence of a sufficiently visible anti-EU party (see section 2.2.1 for the detailed operationalization). The question for political interest was: "To what extent would you say you are interested in politics? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, a little interested or not at all interested?" Response categories were again recoded such that higher values indicate greater interest.

**Measures – control variables**

A number of control measures were included in the analysis. The basic aim is to present a test as rigorous as possible for media measures to exert influence. In other words, only if factors that have been shown to affect opinions about further European integration are included and media measures are yet influential, one can be confident not to have found spurious effects. The set of control variables was created with respect to findings from both agenda-setting research and studies on opinions about European integration. As result of a review of agenda-setting research, Rössler (1997, pp. 283-284) distills an explanatory model that includes, amongst others, the following variables: age, gender, education, media use and exposure, and need for orientation.57 Research on the antecedents of opinions about European integration has focused on utilitarian motives (e.g., Gabel & Palmer, 1995; Gabel, 1998a; McLaren, 2002), party cues (e.g., Franklin et al., 1994, 1995), or the position on the left-right spectrum (e.g., Budge, Robertson, & Hearl, 1987; Inglehart, Rabier, & Reif, 1987; McLaren, 2002).58

I include five more control variables of varying specificity: attentiveness to news about the European Union, interpersonal communication, support for the European Union, support for further European integration, and the level of conflict in the coverage. Attention to media content is argued to be an essential additional measure complementing exposure and should therefore not be omitted from analyses (Drew & Weaver, 1990; McLeod & McDonald, 1985). Interpersonal communication can be regarded as protection against media messages and should be controlled for (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944; and more recently, Schmitt-Beck, 2000). The two support measures were included because it cannot be assumed that opinions about the EU and European integration present a coherent, consistent, and logical entity. What has been found for political opinions in general (e.g., summarizing: Zaller & Feldman, 1992), may even more apply to EU-related opinions as Anderson (1998) has argued. Moreover, virtually all measures of knowledge, awareness, and information about European integration employed in Eurobarometers consistently show that EU citizens know fairly little about what is going on at the EU level (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Janssen, 1991). This suggests that people may rather answer questions instead

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57 Rössler (1997) also includes other variables such as the size and structure of a person's personal network, issues sensitivity, strength of personality, political knowledge, or communicative style. Because the analysis presented here is a secondary analysis, these variables were not available.

58 In his review and test of various influences on support for the EU, Gabel (1998a) also identifies cognitive mobilization (e.g., Inglehart, 1970; Janssen, 1991) as an impact factor on EU support. However, it remains questionable to what extent his operationalization captures cognitive mobilization rather than people's involvement in political conversation. Involvement in political talks does not necessarily imply engagement and mobilization. As will become clear later, a very similar measure is used in this chapter, yet simply as operationalization of interpersonal communication.
of revealing preferences trying to rationalize and render consistent the little they know about European integration. Therefore, it seems justified to include the two support measures even though the two may not have a causally clearly unidirectional relationship with importance perceptions. The emergence of potential media effects is only robust, if the alternative explanation of rationalized answers is controlled for. Finally, the level of conflict in the coverage was also controlled for. One could argue that polarized or consensual nature of elite opinion primarily shapes the level of conflict in the stories, but does not drive the pattern specified above. To preclude this, the level of conflict in the coverage has to be controlled for.

The measurement of age and gender was straightforward. The comparative measuring of education, however, generally presents a problem because the educational systems in the various countries are dissimilar. To ensure comparability, it was asked how old respondents were when they stopped full-time education. For respondents still studying their age at the time of the interview was coded. In order to avoid a distortion of the education measure through people who were relatively old when they stopped full-time education, the maximum age at which people stopped full-time education was set at 26. This is by and large the age around which the majority of students in the various countries have completed a university degree. The use of television and newspapers was gauged as the number of news outlets/newspapers a respondent watches/reads. The number of outlets/newspapers used was computed as the sum of news outlets/newspapers a respondent mentioned in response to the open-ended question "Which channels or television news programs [newspaper or newspapers] do you watch [read] regularly?" Exposure to television and newspapers was operationalized by asking people "(Normally), how many days of the week do you watch television/read a newspaper?" Need for orientation could not be gauged in the traditional way suggested by Weaver (1977). However, the question "Do you think you are sufficiently well informed or not sufficiently well informed about the politics of the European Union" may be assumed to tap at least the uncertainty component of Weaver's concept. The dichotomous response categories were inversely coded so that 0 is equal to not sufficiently well informed.

Following operationalizations by Gabel (1998a), utilitarian motives were gauged with two measures: respondent's current work situation and their subjective class. Respondent's current work situation was dichotomously coded into people being in or out the labor force (e.g., retired, unemployed, in school). Respondents could place themselves in one of five social classes ranging from 1 (working class) to 5 (upper class). The cues people receive from parties stances on European integration were measured as follows. It was assessed how likely people were to vote for a particular party, which respondents could indicate on a ten-point scale where 1 equaled not at all probable and 10 equaled very probable. If respondent's self-reported likelihood of voting a particular party was 6 or higher, it was assumed that they receive cues about the party's stance on European integration. In a further question, respondents placed the particular party's position towards European integration on a 10-point scale with the anchors 1 (unification has already gone too far) and 10 (unification should be pushed further). This estimation was subsequently taken as a particular respondent's party cue. If respondent were likely to vote for two or more parties, the mean of the estimated party

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59 The income measure could not be included because it was not assessed in Italy.
positions was computed and taken as party cue. If a respondent was not likely to vote for any of the parties, it was assumed that he/she received only vague cues from parties about further European integration. The respondent was assigned to a middle category. Respondents’ self-perceived position on the left-right spectrum was assessed with their self-placement on a ten-point scale where 1 meant left and 10 means right.

Respondents’ attention to news about Europe was tapped with the question “How much attention do you pay to news about Europe? A lot, some, a little, or none?” The answers were inversely coded so that 4 equals a lot. Citizen’s interpersonal communication about EU affairs was assessed with the question “[During the two or three weeks before the European election], how often did you talk to friends or family about the election? Often, sometimes, or never?” The response categories were recoded such that 3 means often. Diffuse support for the European Union was assessed with the question “Generally speaking, do you think that <your country’s> membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?” Recoding of the response categories led to a scale where 1 equals a bad thing, 2 equals neither good nor bad, and 3 equals a good thing. Specific support for European integration was operationalized with the question “Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say that it already has gone too far. What is your opinion?” Response categories ranged from 1 (unification has already gone too far) to 10 (unification should be pushed further). The level of conflict in the coverage was assessed with the explicit mentioning of conflict or disagreement in the EU stories and EU-related stories and then summed across all days per outlet. Inter-coder agreement was 79%. Similar to the operationalization of amount of coverage, the conflict measure was weighted by the prominence of the particular story. If conflict occurred in EU-related stories, the conflict measure was multiplied by 0.5 in order to represent the relation between EU stories and EU-related stories.

**Missing values**

Trying to specify a model as rigorously as possible to test media effects usually comes at the cost of an increased number of missing values. The traditionally applied listwise deletion of missing values subsequently leads to a deletion of all respondents if they did not answer only one of the relevant questions. This entails not only a loss of valuable information, but also a severe selection bias which has been shown to be as big a threat to the validity of inferences as omitted variables (King, Honaker, Joseph, & Scheve, 2001). Given that about 50% of the respondents would be lost applying the above specified model, it seems necessary to impute the missing values. Therefore, I tried to logically reconstruct non-responses by using related information provided by the remaining answers in the questionnaire. For example, if a respondent had not placed himself/herself on the left-right scale, but had indicated the likelihood of voting particular parties, his/her left-right position could be concluded from where he/she had placed the particular party on the left/right scale. Similarly, political interest was estimated from people’s participation in political events, attention to European news was deduced from people’s exposure to European election news, news exposure from media use etc. In general, this procedure led to a reduction of missing cases ranging between 30% and
Effects on the importance of European integration

70% for the particular variables. The remaining unsolvable missing cases were replaced either by mean substitution (for metric variables) or were recoded the most frequent value (for dichotomies). The replacement of missing values with substantive values was only done for the control variables. In order to minimize the danger of arbitrary data modification, the dependent variable was excluded from this procedure. This also goes for the two support measures because they will be used as key independent and as dependent variable in Chapter 5.

4.2.2 Data analysis

Because the survey sample comprised 500 respondents in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and Sweden and 1,000 respondents in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK and 3,708 in Italy, the data were weighted. The total sample (without Luxembourg and Portugal) was 12,748 respondents. Acknowledging the bicultural character of Belgium, the country was split in its Flemish and Wallonian part resulting in overall 14 'systems' for analysis. The samples of each of the 14 systems were subsequently weighted such that the each system had the same sample size while the original total sample size was preserved, systems with a larger sample size were weighted down (usually with a factor around 0.9) and systems with a smaller sample size were weighted up (usually with a factor around 1.8).

The amount of EU coverage was assessed with the content analysis, weighted by story prominence as explained above and was subsequently added, per country, to each respondent who regularly watched one or both of two news outlets content analyzed. For example, in Britain those respondents who watched BBC 9 o'clock news or ITN's News at 6:30 or both were assigned the pertinent EU coverage measures. This means that, per country, three different values were assigned. Because not all respondents regularly watched one or both of the outlets, the overall sample sized reduced to 8,432 respondents. However, the selected sample did not meaningfully deviate from the original sample. Additionally, to each of the 14 country samples it was added whether elite opinion was consensual (coded as 0) or polarized (coded as 1) in the particular country.

Multilevel modeling...or not?

The measurement of elite opinion at the country level introduces the problem of modeling hierarchical data structures into the analysis. In the data analysis sections of the preceding chapters, I have already discussed the basic problem associated with hierarchical data structures: the underestimation of the standard error and, thus, the greater risk of type-1 errors, especially in regular OLS regressions. The problem applies to the present analysis, too.

60 Dividing the total sample of 12,748 respondents by 14 countries results in a 'typical' sample size of 910.57. This is subsequently divided by the actual number of respondents per country to obtain the weighting factor for each country.

61 In Austria, no commercial broadcasting exists. In Ireland, the commercial channel was basically meaningless when the study was carried out.
Within the pooled sample (i.e., all respondents from all countries together in one overall sample), the countries form clusters and the respondents sampled within a particular country are no longer independent of one another. The underestimation of the standard error becomes particularly manifest in variables that are located at the country-level (i.e., the nature of elite opinion) and their interaction with other (individual-level) variables (i.e., the presumed cross-level interaction between the nature of elite opinion and the amount of EU coverage an individual is exposed to).

In a recent issue of the American Journal of Political Science, Steenbergen and Jones (2002) have suggested multilevel models as one remedy to the problem. In the next issue of the journal, Rohrschneider (2002) applied multilevel models to Eurobarometer analyses with cross-level interactions explicitly referring to Steenbergen and Jones' article. This suggests that multilevel models may increasingly define the state of art in analyses of EU-related investigation topics. Without any doubt, the problem described above and in preceding chapters deserves great attention and the theoretical section of Steenbergen and Jones' (2002) work will quickly become essential reading for comparativists interested in more appropriate modeling of comparative data. However, the concrete application of multilevel models to EU-related investigation topics and, what is more, to the peculiarities of data sampled in the 15 EU countries is not without its problems. Three concerns have to be raised.

1. In cross-national comparative EU research, necessary prerequisites of sampling contextual data are not met. Multilevel models originated in educational sciences with their typical multi-stage sampling. For example, in a first step schools are randomly sampled, in a second step classes are randomly sampled, and in a third step pupils are randomly sampled. Obviously, this sampling technique hardly applies to any comparative political science or communication science data. Typically, the countries or, more generally, the contextual units are not randomly sampled. This problem may be less pressing if all 15 EU countries (i.e., the contextual units) are used and if inferences do not aim at a larger universe than the EU (which may be assumed for EU-related questions). Then, however, the question arises whether the concern about the underestimation of the standard error really presents such a threat and whether the problem could not much more parsimoniously be resolved with existing corrections of the standard error.

2. Multilevel models are data intensive and EU data with its 15 contextual units lack sufficient power to adequately study cross-level interactions. All multilevel scholars agree that "sufficient power to test hypotheses about cross-level interactions and variance components hinges on the availability of sizable numbers of contextual units" (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002, p. 234; see also: Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998; Raudenbush et al., 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). As a rule of thumb, sufficient power starts with 20-25 contextual units, otherwise the robust standard errors cannot be computed (e.g., in the commonly used software HLM).

3. "Multilevel models also place a hefty premium on valid and reliable measurements. Bad measures in multilevel models 'get worse' because such a heavy demand is placed on the data in terms of estimating coefficients and variance components" (Steenbergen & Jones, 2002, p. 234). Several of the survey measures employed here resemble Eurobarometer...
measures. Eurobarometer surveys have been criticized for various methodological shortcomings (Saris & Kaase, 1997) and it seems questionable whether the traditional Eurobarometer questions meet the requirements of multilevel models. More generally, it seems that applications of multilevel models to Eurobarometer data suffer from a misbalance between cutting-edge statistical methodology of the 21st century and measurement techniques of the 20th century. In other words, it seems paramount that the design and measurement of comparative studies be improved along with the advancement of statistical tools. Furthermore, if multilevel models are applied, then the sampling techniques must be integrated more thoroughly in the models than has been done thus far. Eurobarometer surveys are typically based on multistage probability samples. This probably affects the estimation of parameters in the same fashion as the clustering of respondents within countries.

Although the three concerns raised should not be mistaken for a general rejection of multilevel modeling, they may explain why the value of multilevel models seem questionable when it comes to analyses of Eurobarometer data or comparable data like in this chapter. It is Steenbergen and Jones (2002) who "caution researchers against 'blindly' using these models in data analysis" (p. 234). Instead, they "urge them to consider the full range of methods for handling clustered data" (p. 234). Among the methods Steenbergen and Jones suggest is the 'sandwich' standard error (Huber, 1967; White 1980), which I have already applied in the analyses in Chapters 2 and 3. Therefore, I will keep on using this correction of the standard error in the case of clustered data. In other words, multiple regression models are estimated in which the standard error is corrected in terms of the clustering of the data. This also entails that the critical $t$-values are assessed on the basis of number of clusters (i.e., countries) minus one degrees of freedom. Particularly for individual-level effects, the significance of the results may thus be slightly underestimated.

**Post hoc probing of interaction effects**

In section 4.1, several interaction effects have been proposed. In this and the following chapter, the conditional effects that represent the essence of interaction effects will be post-hoc probed for significant difference from zero. Several scholars have suggested this procedure (e.g., Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990). However, because their important suggestions have not sufficiently been adopted in current research, I outline in Technical Appendix A the basic logic of their suggestions and explain the relevant formulas. Sections A1 and A2 in Technical Appendix A are particularly relevant to the understanding of this chapter. Moreover, they present the foundation for the interaction analyses of the following chapters. For the investigation of the interactions, the metric variables amount of EU coverage and political interest are centered around their mean to avoid multicollinearity problems (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard et al., 1990).
4.3 Results – polarized elite opinion elicits agenda-setting effects

The first goal of this chapter was to test whether EU citizens who watched more EU coverage also perceived further EU integration to be more important. If one analyzes the various countries separately as a first approach to the problem (see Table 4.1), no clear pattern emerges.

Table 4.1: Impact of the amount of EU coverage on the perceived importance of European integration per country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Unstandardized multiple regression coefficient (standard error)</th>
<th>Explained variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flanders (n = 182)</td>
<td>.006 (.003)*</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece (n = 134)</td>
<td>.005 (.002)*</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark (n = 716)</td>
<td>.003 (.002)*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom (n = 457)</td>
<td>.003 (.006)</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (n = 662)</td>
<td>&lt;.001 (.002)</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (n = 1,663)</td>
<td>&lt;.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands (n = 639)</td>
<td>-.017 (.007)*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallonia (n = 110)</td>
<td>-.009 (.007)</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland (n = 287)</td>
<td>-.003 (.002)</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain (n = 363)</td>
<td>-.001 (.003)</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden (n = 362)</td>
<td>-.001 (.002)</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France (n = 577)</td>
<td>&lt;.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * p < .05. The coefficients presented in the table are controlled for all variables outlined in section 4.2.1. The analyses could not be done for Austria and Ireland where only one public broadcasting outlet was analyzed and where the measure of amount of coverage thus lacks variance.

Data sources: EES 1999, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign

Both positive and negative effects occurred, yet if significant, effects were predominantly positive, except in the Netherlands. In other words, there is only very tentative evidence of a homogeneous influence of the (weighted) amount of EU coverage on importance perceptions. This suggests that country characteristics such as the nature of elite opinion may moderate whether the amount of EU coverage affects importance perceptions.

Was there evidence that the nature of elite opinion on further European integration conditioned whether the amount of EU coverage impacted upon importance perceptions? As model 1 in Table 4.2 shows, a significant interaction between the nature of elite opinion and the amount of coverage emerged \((b = .005, p < .05)\). If one plots the predicted values of the model (see Figure 4.1), it becomes more easily comprehensible how the nature of elite opinion conditioned the influence of amount of coverage. For computational reasons, the values of the weighted amount of coverage are centered. The sample mean of this variable is zero. Negative values indicate an amount of coverage below the sample mean, positive values

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62 For reasons of linguistic ease, I will keep on using the terms *watching more EU coverage* and *amount of EU coverage* although they do not fully reflect the operationalization of the concept which weights the number of EU stories by its prominence.
indicate an amount of coverage above the sample mean. If elite opinion on further integration was polarized, higher amounts of EU coverage were indeed associated with perceptions of further EU integration as more important. However, if elite opinion was consensual, higher amounts of EU coverage seemed to be related to perceptions of European integration as less important.

To see whether this first impression is statistically tenable, the simple slopes (i.e., the slope of each line in Figure 4.1) have to be tested as to whether they differ significantly from zero. This entails computing a standard error for each simple slope (see for more information, section A2 in Technical Appendix A). The necessary values for the computation of the standard error of the simple slopes were obtained from the variance/covariance matrix, which would be too large to be documented here. The standard error of the simple slope when elite opinion is consensual (i.e., the variable equals zero, subscript: \( e=0 \)) or polarized (i.e., the variable equals 1, subscript \( e=1 \)) is:

\[
SE_{e=0} = (8.6 \times 10^{-6} + 2 \times 0 \times (-6 \times 10^{-6}) + 0^2 \times (5.2 \times 10^{-6}))^{1/2} = 2.93 \times 10^{-3}
\]
\[
SE_{e=1} = (8.6 \times 10^{-6} + 2 \times 1 \times (-6 \times 10^{-6}) + 1^2 \times (5.2 \times 10^{-6}))^{1/2} = 1.34 \times 10^{-3}
\]

The simple slopes at the two values of elite opinion are:

\[
SL_{e=0} = -0.002 + 0.005 \times 0 = -0.002
\]
\[
SL_{e=1} = -0.002 + 0.005 \times 1 = 0.003
\]

The t-values are obtained by dividing the slope by its standard error:

\[
t_{e=0} = -0.002 / 2.93 \times 10^{-3} = -0.68 \text{ (n.s.)}
\]
\[
t_{e=1} = 0.003 / 1.34 \times 10^{-3} = 2.24 \text{ (p < .05)}
\]
Table 4.2: Interaction effect of amount of EU coverage, nature of elite opinion and political interest on the perceived importance of European integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control variables</th>
<th>Model 1 (n = 7,481)</th>
<th>Model 2 (n = 3,662)</th>
<th>Model 3 (n = 7,481)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-.001 (.032)</td>
<td>-.020 (.046)</td>
<td>-.002 (.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.002 (.004)</td>
<td>.007 (.005)</td>
<td>.002 (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In labor force (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-.039 (.016)*</td>
<td>-.050 (.031)</td>
<td>-.040 (.017)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective social class</td>
<td>.035 (.018)</td>
<td>.028 (.020)</td>
<td>.036 (.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication</td>
<td>-.023 (.022)</td>
<td>-.032 (.020)</td>
<td>-.023 (.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party cues</td>
<td>-.009 (.015)</td>
<td>-.001 (.020)</td>
<td>-.001 (.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right position (10 = right)</td>
<td>-.013 (.005)*</td>
<td>-.010 (.006)</td>
<td>-.013 (.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for the EU</td>
<td>.320 (.041)**</td>
<td>.281 (.054)**</td>
<td>.318 (.041)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for European integration</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.041 (.019)*</td>
<td>.063 (.024)*</td>
<td>s. b.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for orientation</td>
<td>-.097 (.046)</td>
<td>-.144 (.049)**</td>
<td>-.096 (.046)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to EU news</td>
<td>.196 (.030)**</td>
<td>.203 (.024)**</td>
<td>.198 (.028)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV exposure</td>
<td>.005 (.006)</td>
<td>.015 (.009)</td>
<td>.006 (.006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper exposure</td>
<td>-.009 (.008)</td>
<td>-.022 (.010)</td>
<td>-.009 (.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of TV news outlets</td>
<td>-.010 (.020)</td>
<td>-.040 (.119)</td>
<td>-.001 (.019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of newspapers</td>
<td>-.013 (.018)</td>
<td>-.018 (.033)</td>
<td>-.011 (.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict in EU coverage</td>
<td>.001 (.003)</td>
<td>-.001 (.003)</td>
<td>.001 (.004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of EU coverage</th>
<th>Model 1 (n = 7,481)</th>
<th>Model 2 (n = 3,662)</th>
<th>Model 3 (n = 7,481)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polarized elite opinion</td>
<td>.010 (.104)</td>
<td>.045 (.123)</td>
<td>-.029 (.108)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.084 (.034)*</td>
<td>s. b.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two-way interaction effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elite opinion X</th>
<th>Model 1 (n = 7,481)</th>
<th>Model 2 (n = 3,662)</th>
<th>Model 3 (n = 7,481)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount EU coverage</td>
<td>.005 (.002)*</td>
<td>.006 (.002)*</td>
<td>.005 (.002)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest X</td>
<td>.001 (.001)</td>
<td>s. b.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three-way interaction effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elite opinion X</th>
<th>Model 1 (n = 7,481)</th>
<th>Model 2 (n = 3,662)</th>
<th>Model 3 (n = 7,481)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount EU coverage X</td>
<td>-.116 (.049)*</td>
<td>.198 (.028)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political interest

| Constant      | 1.643               | 1.661               | 1.528               |
| R square       | .19                 | .20                 | .19                 |

*p < .05; ***p < .001

Note. Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in brackets.

Data sources: EES 1999, Content analysis 1999 European election campaign
In this post-hoc probing, the effect of the amount of coverage a person is exposed to on individual importance perceptions as moderated by a particular context characteristic is investigated. As a consequence, the degrees of freedom for the assessment of the critical t-value can be determined on the basis of the individual respondents. With 7,459 degrees of freedom, the critical t-value is +1.96 (for positive values) or −1.96 (for negative values) for a coefficient to be significant at the 5% level. Consequently, the slope when elite opinion is consensual (subscript $e=0$) is not significant while the slope is significant when elite opinion is polarized. In other words, if people watch more EU stories in countries in which European integration is contentious among parties, they consider European integration to be important. However, if people watch more EU stories in countries in which elite opinion about European integration is consensual, their importance perception of EU integration remains unaffected. Thus, the post hoc statistical probing of the interaction term has revealed that the initially visually detected negative relationship between amount of EU coverage and

---

Even if the significance testing is done at the basis of 13 degrees of freedom (number of countries minus one), which is in line with the original analyses in Table 4.2, the effect when elite opinion is polarized is still significant at better than the .05 level. However, setting the degrees of freedom to 13 presents a very rigorous test, which seems in this post hoc probing of the interaction effect not appropriate given the conceptualization of the effects as individual-level effects.
importance perception in countries with consensual elite opinion was random. However, the traditional agenda-setting pattern holds in countries with polarized elite opinion.

One could argue that the preceding analysis does not present the most rigorous test possible because respondents in the sample may have received their information about the EU from other television outlets as well. In order to preclude this, only those respondents have to be selected who exclusively watch one or both of the two outlets. However, even with this restricted sample, the findings remain consistent as model 2 in Table 4.2 demonstrates. This also applies to the post-hoc statistical probing of the slopes, which is not documented here for reasons of space.

The third goal of this chapter was to investigate whether political interest moderated the interaction effect of amount of EU coverage and nature of elite opinion on importance perceptions. A three-way interaction effect was expected. Was there evidence that the politically most interested tended to stronger agenda-setting effects than the politically least interested if elite opinion was polarized? The answer is a clear no. Model 3 in Table 4.2 indicates that the interaction between the nature of elite opinion and amount of EU coverage was not conditional on levels of political interest ($b = -0.001, \text{n.s.}$). In other words, little coverage remains little coverage and much coverage remains much coverage regardless of whether politically more or politically less interested persons are confronted with it. No matter how strong individuals' political interest was, the original interaction effect between amount of EU coverage and nature of elite opinion remained unaffected. This is, much EU coverage augmented the perceived importance of further EU integration if elite opinion was polarized, but had no effect if elite opinion was consensual irrespective of levels of political interest.

Though not the focus here, one aspect of Model 3 in Table 4.2 is noteworthy in order to avoid confusion. The significant effect of political interest ($b = 0.084, p < .05$) must not be interpreted in the sense of a main effect. Similarly, the interaction effect between elite opinion and political interest ($b = -0.116, p < .05$) must not be interpreted in the sense of a traditional two-way interaction. When (higher-order) interactions are included in a model, the lower order effects do not present constant influences across all levels of the remaining variables, which is typically the case for main effects (Aiken & West, 1991; Jaccard et al., 1990). Rather, they indicate the conditional effect at the mean of moderating metric predictors (zero for centered ones) or at the value zero of moderating dichotomous predictors. In other words, the more politically interested persons are, the more important they consider European integration if elite opinion is consensual and EU coverage is at its sample mean. The interaction effect between elite opinion and political interest means that, if the amount of EU coverage is at its mean, political interest exerts a positive influence when elite opinion is consensual and has a negative effect when elite opinion is polarized. Clearly, this interaction effect would have to be post hoc probed. However, given that amount of coverage is the focal independent variable in this chapter, further elaboration on this problem would be digressing.
4.4 Discussion – bringing context (back) in

This chapter has shown that what is probably the simplest category of television coverage of EU affairs – its amount – matters. Bridging the gap between the two neighboring disciplines of communication and political science, the findings may be useful for both research on agenda-setting and studies on opinions about the EU. The chapter advances agenda-setting research in that it documents agenda-setting effects concerning an issue that receives less media attention than the top issues usually investigated in agenda-setting research. More importantly, by adopting a cross-nationally comparative perspective, the chapter was able to show that agenda-setting effects are not homogenous across countries. The effect of the amount of coverage on importance perceptions was conditional upon the nature of elite opinion in the various countries. The chapter may contribute to research on opinions about the EU in that it demonstrates that television coverage matters. Moreover, it shows that elite opinion may not only impact upon support for European Union, but can also function as an important moderator of perceptions of the importance of European integration. Four main conclusions can be drawn.

First, agenda-setting research benefits from a cross-nationally comparative perspective. Agenda-setting has been investigated with respect to many recipient and media variables and has been found to depend on a variety of factors (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Eichhorn, 1995; Rössler, 1997). Nevertheless, scholars who warned that agenda-setting may not be spatially indifferent remained largely unnoticed (e.g., Merten, 1991). Evidence of agenda-setting processes in various countries seemed to corroborate a more universal character of agenda-setting. However, this accumulation of single evidence from different countries cannot substitute for a cross-nationally comparative test of agenda-setting. This chapter has shown with respect to a particular issue – EU politics – studied during an identical period of time that there was no homogenous, directionally consistent association between the amount of EU coverage and importance perceptions of European integration across the 14 systems. Higher amounts of EU coverage were not necessarily related to greater perceived importance of further European integration. What, however, moderated (and clarified) the initially confusing pattern was the contextual variable nature of elite opinion: polarized elite opinion was conducive to the traditional agenda-setting pattern, while no agenda-setting effect occurred when elite opinion was consensual.

There is nothing new or spectacular about including country-level (or more general: contextual/systemic) variables as moderators in an explanatory model if within-country (or more general: within-context/system) analyses have elicited contradictory results. Przeworski and Teune described the basic procedure already in their seminal work on the logic of comparative research in 1970. This chapter demonstrates that cross-nationally comparative research and cross-level interactions can enhance our understanding of agenda setting. Agenda-setting is not only dependent upon certain recipient and media characteristics, it is also affected by the larger country context. Country characteristics can, as shown, include the nature of elite opinion. It also seems plausible that characteristics of the media system may play a role. In a cross-national study of agenda-diversity, it was recently found that the number of problems respondents considered very important depended on the number of
television outlets watched (Peter & de Vreese, 2003). The authors concluded that it may be worth investigating cross-nationally to what extent a media systems' external diversity may shape agenda-setting processes. In sum, these first findings suggest that agenda-setting research may derive new insights by being approached from a cross-nationally comparative perspective.

Second, agenda-setting research may reveal interesting effects when focusing on issues that are not breaking news. The bias in agenda-setting towards the investigation of top-issues implies structural similarities among the top issues. Top issues typically share the news values of controversy, relevance, surprise, or important persons and it is consequently virtually impossible for people not to find such issues important (at least as far as impersonal, abstract issues are concerned). This may even result in a ceiling effect and the disappearance of agenda-setting effects (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990). With less frequently covered issues, the structure of issues and the response of the audience may be more versatile. In other words, there may be much more variation in audience response to the amount of coverage if the coverage does not impose the issue upon the recipient.

The findings suggest that the response may be shaped by the nature of elite opinion about an issue. Whether people react in their importance perceptions to higher amounts of coverage of a generally less visible issue depends on the contentiousness of the issue among political elites. This finding was obtained when the level of conflict in EU coverage was controlled for. Thus, it is not the conflict-loaded character of the coverage that (indirectly) would shape citizens perceptions of the importance of the EU. Rather, it is the cues people get from polarization or consensus among elites that lead them to respond to media coverage more sensitively. Political elites disagreeing about European integration seem to sensitize citizens to the issue. Political elites agreeing about European integration seem to numb them. The conclusion is clear: if the EU aims at sleepy (but possibly permissive) citizens, any confrontation among political elites should be avoided. If the EU aims at caring (but possibly critical) citizens, then public arguments among elites should be encouraged. Whether European integration is perceived as a soporific and unimportant fait accompli or as an exciting and important development depends largely on elite discourse.

Third, elite opinion about European integration is not only a powerful influence on what people think about Europe, it also conditions whether they think about Europe at all – and this might have far-reaching consequences. Typically, research has conceptualized the influence of elite opinion as having a direct impact on people's support for European integration (e.g., Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993; Janssen, 1991; Wessels, 1995b). Recently, researchers have successfully begun to investigate indirect forms of elite opinion affecting support for European integration (Banducci et al., 2001). This chapter takes the moderating influence of elite opinion further (or some may say: back) to importance perceptions. It may be an interesting question for future research to investigate whether the two findings concerning the moderated influence of media coverage on importance perceptions and support are related. As Miller and Krosnick (2000) have shown, the perception of issues as important conditions whether media coverage affects further judgments. If (a) elite opinion moderates agenda-setting effects, if (b) elite opinion moderates the effects of coverage on support for
European integration, and if (c) agenda-setting conditions media effects on other judgments (e.g., support), then media effects on support for European integration should be most pronounced among citizens in countries with polarized elite opinion and considerable amounts of EU coverage. Disentangling the various relationships may not only enrich our understanding of the antecedents of support for European integration but also about the ramifications of agenda-setting.

However, isn’t the strong moderating role of elite opinion somewhat miraculous? Isn’t elite opinion also conveyed by the media? Can, in other words, the moderating role of elite opinion more rigidly and parsimoniously be captured with characteristics of the media coverage? It would be ignorant to argue against the fact that media and television in particular are the most important source of information about the EU. However, there are also more direct sources of information about the EU (e.g., meetings, talks with EU representatives), especially during European election campaigns. More importantly, the substantive key variable of conflict in EU coverage was controlled for along with a lot of other media measures such as the number of outlets and newspapers people used and the degree of media exposure. In non-experimental designs, this presents a strong barrier against spurious effects. Undoubtedly, one can argue that EU coverage was substantively different in countries with polarized EU opinion. However, it is not very likely that, in these countries, the journalists or actors in the news stories blatantly told people how important European integration is whereas they did not do so in countries with consensual elite opinion. What seems more likely is that polarized elite opinion both shapes and results from a more general contentiousness of the EU as already mentioned in Chapter 2. Admittedly, this is a vague concept reminiscent of a component of the spiral of silence theory, the extent to which an issue is morally loaded (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Nevertheless, it may be useful to include an adequately operationalized sociotropic measure in future surveys asking people to what extent they perceive European integration to be contentious in elite opinion.

Fourth, political interest does not moderate the conditional influence of EU coverage on importance perceptions if elite opinion is polarized. Politically more interested people do not differ from politically less interested persons in their response to the amount of EU coverage in countries where agenda-setting effects were found, i.e., countries with polarized elite opinion. This finding is at odds with several agenda-setting studies and runs, to some extent, counter to some patterns established in political science research. However, three aspects should be borne in mind. First, political interest as operationalized in this chapter tapped subjective political interest and may hence be subject to socially desirable distortions. Second, in this chapter political interest referred to general political interest. Specific political interest in EU affairs might prove a more powerful predictor. Third and most importantly, political interest as a concept referring to a person’s sensitivity to political information may be inferior to other concepts such as political knowledge. Several studies have demonstrated that political knowledge outperforms related concepts when news reception is to explained (e.g., Fiske et al., 1990; Krosnick & Milburn, 1990; Price & Zaller, 1993) and also strengthens the stability of attitudes (Zaller, 1990). Future research may therefore include political knowledge measures in addition to political interest measures to investigate this issue further.
This chapter has linked television coverage to importance measures in 14 EU systems and applied this to questions related to agenda-setting research at the individual level. Although the results provide new insights, there are at least two problems – first, the problem of stringent causal reasoning and, second, the problem of the time lag between the assessment of the media agenda and the individual agenda. The first concern applies to the fact that the study is based on a content analysis linked to a cross-sectional survey of people. This does not permit a clear reasoning that the media coverage changed individual importance perceptions. In terms of stringent causal reasoning, a baseline measure of respondents’ importance perceptions assessed before the content analysis was conducted would have been required. In other words, although the importance measures were collected after the content measures, it cannot be ruled out that there is merely a correlation between the media coverage and importance perceptions. Causally even more troublesome, it might be that journalists correctly picked up people’s perceptions of the importance of European integration and adjusted the coverage accordingly. Assuming further that importance perceptions are stable and did not change over the period of investigation, there could have been actually effects of people’s importance perceptions on the amount of EU coverage. Similar problems have been widely discussed in agenda-setting research and scholars tried to solve them with cross-lagged panel correlation designs (e.g., Tipton, Haney, & Baseheart, 1975) or time series analyses (e.g., Brosius & Keplinger, 1990). However, such analyses are typically done at an aggregate level and are thus subject to ecological fallacy (for summary, see: Rössler, 1997). Moreover, it does not seem feasible to apply such designs to comparative studies with 14 systems. In sum, this chapter can, strictly speaking, provide only evidence of an association between television coverage of the EU and individual importance perceptions. However, given the tradeoff between comparative research at an individual level of analysis and internally more valid, yet still problematic designs, the findings of this chapter seem encouraging.

A second concern may relate to the time lag between media coverage and people’s response. Several studies have investigated the optimal time lag for agenda-setting effects to occur (e.g., Winter & Eyal, 1981; Wanta & Hu, 1994). Tentatively, one may conclude that, for non-local television news, the optimal time lag lies somewhere between one and two weeks when the analysis is to be conducted at the individual level (Rössler, 1997). This suggests that for the respondents interviewed between June 21 and July 4 the agenda-setting effects should be the strongest, which may introduce somewhat of a bias into the sample. Conversely, one may argue that the design of this study does not take into account forgetting about media contents and assumes that people perfectly remember what they have watched some time ago. Watt et al. (1993) and Zhu et al. (1993) have suggested an effect decay curve to take memory decay into account, but investigated it only at the aggregate level of analysis. Unfortunately, such modeling was not possible in this chapter due to systematically missing data, but will be applied in the sixth and seventh chapter. However, it must be clearly stated that time lag problems and unrealistic assumptions about cognitive processes plague the vast majority of studies in the field and it is by no means clear to what extent they deteriorate the findings.

64 In the Italian sample no date of interview was collected because the survey is based on a telepanel.
4.5 Summary

This chapter focused on the question of whether the amount of EU coverage affects the extent to which EU citizens perceived European integration to be important. Investigating this question from a cross-nationally comparative perspective, led to the following findings:

1. Analyzing the various EU countries separately, no homogeneous effect was found across the countries. Only in the minority of countries, more EU coverage led to an increase in the perception of how important European integration is.

2. The occurrence of the agenda-setting pattern depended on the nature of elite opinion about the issue in question. The more EU stories people watched in countries in which elites disagreed about European integration, the more important they considered European integration. If elite opinion about European integration was consensual, this pattern did not occur.

3. Political interest did not influence the basic relationship between amount of coverage and the perceived importance of European integration as moderated by elite opinion.

This chapter has only dealt with the amount of coverage and has left aside more substantive aspects of EU coverage. Of course, this leads to the question of whether not only the amount of EU coverage, but also its content matters. In the second chapter, it has been shown that EU representatives were typically negatively evaluated. Does this affect citizens' opinions about European integration? This question will be explored in the next chapter.