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Reporting on Political Acquaintances: Personal Interactions Between Political Journalists and Politicians as a Determinant of Media Coverage

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To explain which politicians make it into the news, this study considers the influence of the personal interactions between political journalists and politicians. While theoretically plausible, there is little empirical evidence that the personal interactions between reporters and politicians are associated with news content. This study draws on a survey of political journalists combined with a content analysis of their newspaper articles to analyze how personal interactions with politicians and the background characteristics of journalists relate to their news-making. Overall, it is found that journalists report more often and more positively about politicians they have personal contact with and about those politicians who hold similar political views. Hence, personal interactions with journalists can be useful for politicians to attract (positive) media coverage.

Keywords: media coverage, journalists, politician-journalist contact

In democracies, news coverage is considered to be essential for the political success of individual politicians and political parties (Van Aelst et al., 2008). A vast majority of voters rely on the media for their information about politics. How journalists report about individual politicians and their respective parties thus plays a decisive role in how citizens come to perceive and evaluate political actors (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Ultimately, media coverage has the potential to shape electoral outcomes by paying (prominent) attention to politicians and presenting them in a(n) (un)favorable way (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2010). The antecedents of political actors in the news have been subject to ample scholarly attention (e.g., Tresch, 2009; Vos, 2014). However, one potential antecedent of politicians' presence in the news has remained noticeably unexplored: the personal interaction between politicians and journalists. It is crucial to address this interaction, as journalists and politicians depend on each other for the construction of journalistic texts, and political journalism seems unthinkable without the political information that politicians provide.

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Earlier studies that sought to understand media coverage of politicians and political issues have identified a wide variety of factors influencing whether and how actors and issues are covered. On the one hand, these factors can be identified in the journalistic news production process. A leading example here is the hierarchy of influences model that defines different levels on which those factors are present, ranging from the social system to individual journalists (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). On the other hand, the efforts and strategies of politicians and other societal actors to get into the news (in the desired way), by, for example, staging pseudoevents or negative campaigning, has been widely studied (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004). In this study, we focus on the role of the individual journalist in the decision to include politicians in their news stories. Even though politicians devote ample resources to shape the media's agenda, the extent to which politicians are able to attract coverage depends largely on the aims and selection criteria of journalists (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Two main determinants dominate the current literature that explain how journalists influence the coverage of political actors. First, it is predicted that journalists tend to focus on politicians who are deemed more newsworthy because of their political standing (Vos, 2014). Second, it is expected that journalists tend to devote disproportionate attention to politicians or political parties with similar political orientations (Tresch, 2009).

We contend that additionally, reporters' personal interactions with politicians, both formal and informal, are of importance (Van Aelst & Aalberg, 2011). Theoretically, it has been argued that such forms of personal relationships affect news reporting (Cook, 2006; Davis, 2009). This interaction, on the one hand, provides journalists, and thereby news audiences, with unique political insights. On the other hand, it might backfire as it hampers the ability of political reporters to maintain the necessary distance, objectivity, and critical perspective necessary for accurate reporting (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2014).

Empirical studies on personal interactions and how they shape news coverage are lacking. Earlier studies that seek to explain the effects of personal interactions primarily use interview and survey data and are therefore only able to shed light on the *perceived* influence (e.g., Dindler, 2015; Maurer & Beiler, 2018). This study, instead, relies on a unique combination of data sources that offer the opportunity to consider how it relates to *actual* news-making. An elite survey among political journalists in The Netherlands is conducted and combined with a content analysis of their news articles. Although relatively few journalists participated in the survey, this study offers insight into the personal interactions among 20 journalists and their different political sources across the political spectrum. Moreover, the combination of data sources allows us to move beyond investigating merely perceptive measures of influence and consider how the interaction between journalists and politicians is associated with actual reporting.

RQ1:   *How does the personal interaction between political journalists and politicians relate to journalists' coverage of these politicians and their parties in The Netherlands?*

The Netherlands provides an interesting case since the relatively small size of the Parliament creates the opportunity for frequent personal encounters across the political spectrum (van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2012). Moreover, because of the high number of parties with small ideological differences, parties need to make their distinct profiles clear, resulting in fierce competition for media attention (Van Aelst, Sehata, & van Dalen, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Politicians and Media Coverage

Van Aelst and Walgrave (2016) have put forward a "functional framework" (p. 498) to understand the role of the media for political actors. The media fulfill different purposes for political elites, including the possibility to reach out to potential voters. As the vast majority of people do not speak to politicians directly, they turn to the media for political information (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Even though social media provide new opportunities to communicate to voters, traditional media remain the most effective way to reach a larger and more dispersed group of voters (Helfer & Van Aelst, 2016). Accordingly, politicians constantly seek access to the media and are involved in an ongoing struggle over publicity with their fellow politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2010).

Three dimensions of media coverage have been identified in the literature as particularly important for politicians: *visibility*, *prominence*, and *tone*. For voters to get acquainted with political actors and their visions, and to consider them as viable government candidates, politicians and parties need first and foremost to be visible to them. Earlier studies have consistently found that media visibility affects the electoral success of political actors by increasing recognition and shaping vote choice (e.g., Hopmann et al., 2010).

Tresch (2009) argues that next to mere visibility, we need to consider prominence. While presence refers to whether an actor is mentioned in a journalistic text, prominence signifies how noticeable he or she is. Prominence refers to media appearances where politicians are not merely discussed by others but have the ability to voice their concerns and get their preferred arguments across (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 173). This is, for instance, achieved by being quoted or paraphrased (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). In multiparty systems such as The Netherlands, where there are many political parties with small ideological differences and comparable party positions, direct quotes offer the opportunity to present arguments to distinguish oneself from others. Prominence can therefore be of vital interest.

In addition to visibility and prominence, empirical research has also considered the tone of coverage (i.e., *how* journalists report about politicians; Hopmann et al., 2010). Journalists can present political actors either positively or negatively, for instance, by discussing standings in the polls, performances in debates, or individual characteristics (Geers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017). Whereas visibility and prominence are vital for voters to learn about political actors and their viewpoints, the tone might actually guide voters in deciding to vote for a certain political actor or not. Hopmann and his colleagues (2010), for example, find that Danish voters are more inclined to vote for a party if that party is evaluated more favorably in the news. Although the need for positive coverage has recently been challenged by populist politicians and parties who deliberately engage in conflict-bearing interaction with journalists (van Dalen, 2019), the dependency on positive coverage, at least for mainstream political actors, is clear.

To understand what shapes visibility, prominence, and tone, it is first necessary to reflect on journalistic practices and how news is constructed. Scholars have identified multiple levels of influence on news content: individual journalists, media routines, news outlets, social institutions, and the broader journalistic culture of a country (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In this study, the level of the journalist is of

central interest. At this level, the influence of the decision making, background characteristics, and other individual practices of the journalist on news content can be studied. Moreover, it is at this level that the interactions with politicians have their impact on news-making.

The Influence of the Journalist

Although politicians devote ample time and resources to influence news output, relatively few politicians receive more than occasional coverage. The role of the journalist is key in this process. Scholars argue that politicians are highly dependent on the aims and selection criteria of journalists (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Although journalists are dependent on politicians for information, they have an important role when it comes to selecting what makes it into the news (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). In the current literature, two main determinants of the presence of individual political actors in news media are considered: the newsworthiness of political actors and a bias toward specific politicians or parties (e.g., Haselmayer, Wagner, & Meyer, 2017; Tresch, 2009). Both focus on the influence of journalists on reporting. However, to understand why politicians receive attention, the efforts and strategies of politicians themselves cannot be ignored. Politicians can try to exert influence on news-making through political marketing. By adapting to the "logic" of the media, politicians can enhance their media presence as they themselves or their issues become more attractive for journalists (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013, p. 342). As this study focuses on the perspective of journalists, it is not possible to analyze the strategic attempts of politicians in great detail. Nonetheless, the personal interactions between journalists and political reporters can be considered a way through which politicians can actively influence the content of news. Before exploring how personal exchanges might be used as a strategy to gain media attention, the two dominant theories are discussed.

Newsworthiness and Ideological Distance

The theory of news values suggests that journalists decide to include or exclude certain actors and events in their journalistic productions on the basis of newsworthiness. The newsworthiness of an actor is determined by a wide range of factors such as relevance, institutional position, seniority, gender, and potential political impact of the actor (for an overview, see Vos, 2014). If an actor scores high on factors such as potential political impact and holds a high institutional position, (s)he is considered more interesting and therefore likelier to appear in the news (Tresch, 2009; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016; Vos, 2014). Following news value theory, the actions and messages of, for example, party leaders are far more relevant and newsworthy than the things ordinary politicians say and do.

Although previous studies have found ample evidence for news value theory, it has also been criticized for assuming a rather passive, apolitical journalist that covers political actors because of the rational assessment of objective news values. Yet, because of the notion that political attitudes and ideology can be strong drivers of people's opinions and behaviors (e.g., Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), political orientation can potentially play an important role in journalists' individual decisions. Accordingly, it is assumed that journalists are—to a certain degree—guided by their own political orientations or the political orientation of the outlet they work for, in their news decisions and the construction of journalistic texts (Haselmayer et al., 2017; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Thus, ideological distance between a journalist/outlet and a politician/party might partly

explain who makes it into the news, where those with opposing ideology are less likely to be covered by journalists compared with those with similar political orientations.

With regard to the level of the outlet, studies have found some evidence for the effect of ideological distance, also in the Dutch context. Historically, The Netherlands, among other countries, has been characterized by a strong partisan press. Until 1960, the Dutch society was divided into ideological and religious pillars and newspapers functioned as a mouthpiece for the parties they were linked to within their pillar. Because of secularization and individualization in the 1960s, the importance of the pillar decreased, and consequently, newspapers became increasingly independent and critical (Brants & van Praag, 2006). Nonetheless, a recent study by van der Pas, van der Brug, and Vliegenthart (2017) finds that political parallelism is still present in The Netherlands and that newspapers are likelier to report on political issues that align with the political affiliations of their readership.

Little empirical evidence is available concerning the effect of ideological distance between journalists and politicians on the construction of political news since only a few studies have linked the characteristics of journalists with actual media output (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). Nevertheless, as previous studies have highlighted the importance of ideological proximity between journalists and, for example, their editors (Ceron, Splendore, Hanitzsch, & Thurman, 2019) and citizens (Splendore & Curini, 2020), it is expected that journalists' news decisions can also reflect their political preferences. Journalists are expected to reach out to political sources that have similar political orientations—a close ideological distance. Consequently, these political actors will arguably receive more media coverage from that individual journalist compared with politicians with opposing views. Moreover, as outlets often have a group of readers with fairly similar political preferences, journalists might want to satisfy their readership by favoring some actors over others (Haselmayer et al., 2017). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1:   *The smaller the political distance between a journalist and a political actor, the (a) more visible and (b) prominent a political actor will be and the (c) more positive the coverage of that political actor will be in the articles of that journalist.*

Personal Interaction

This study proposes to consider the personal interaction between journalists and politicians as an additional determinant of media coverage. Besides meeting on organized occasions, such as press conferences, journalists and politicians frequently contact each other, for instance over the phone or via e-mail, and through this regular contact can establish a personal relationship (Van Aelst & Aalberg, 2011). Hence, personal interaction could be, to a certain extent, an indication of a personal relationship or bond between journalists and politicians. For the current study, we extrapolate arguments on journalist-political relationship from previous work to theorize about the potential explanatory power of personal interaction on journalist's news production. Earlier studies that seek to explain how the regular formal and informal personal interactions between political journalists and politicians might influence reporting have provided insight into the *perceived* influence on journalistic productions and not the impact on *actual* news-making (e.g., Dindler, 2015; Maurer & Beiler, 2018). Nonetheless, these studies on perceptions can be helpful to

understand the potential effect of a personal interaction on the visibility of, prominence of, and tone toward political actors in the news.

Scholars have argued that establishing a personal relationship with journalists constitutes an important strategy for politicians to increase their media visibility (e.g., Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2010). Politicians constantly seek to enhance their influence on news, through personal relations politicians can unobtrusively try to control the news output (Maurer & Beiler, 2018). Both actors depend on each other. They have valuable resources to share with one another, and a personal relationship might facilitate this exchange of information and ultimately might result in coverage. On the basis of interviews with political journalists in Austria, Maurer and Beiler (2018) conclude that regular contact with a journalist increases the politicians' chance of being included in a news story. Journalists felt that personal contact influenced their work and were likelier to report on politicians they have personal contact with.

The reversed story also seems to hold. The absence of a personal interaction with journalists could explain why certain politicians are inadequately represented in the news. According to Aalberg and Strömbäck (2011), the underrepresentation of female politicians as news sources could be attributed to the fact that they have less frequent and personal encounters with political reporters compared with their male counterparts.

Besides the influence on visibility and prominence, a personal interaction likely has a direct impact on the tone of coverage. Although personal interactions have clear advantages for journalists, they are also perceived as problematic (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2014). Especially informal and close personal interactions seem to conflict with some of the most important journalistic principles. Objectivity and autonomy are key ideal journalistic norms that provide legitimacy and credibility to news-making. Objectivity refers to the attempt of journalists to reflect political reality as it is without the interference of their own biases, and autonomy refers to the independence of journalists of their sources (Deuze, 2005). A close and friendly relationship with politicians might be at odds with those norms. Personal interactions are characterized by proximity and therefore seem to contradict with maintaining the necessary distance of a source. Moreover, being close to a source could limit the ability of journalists to objectively report about that source (Schudson, 2003). Skovsgaard and van Dalen (2013) discuss that journalists might develop a "blind spot" (p. 373) that causes misconduct or other irregularities to go unnoticed.

The same argument seems to hold with regard to journalists who have established more professional and formal personal relationships with journalists. It can be quite difficult for journalists to be critical of their political sources as they depend on them for information. If politicians are negatively portrayed in the news, they might refuse to share information in future contact (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & van Praag, 2010). This way a professional interaction could also result in a positive bias as journalists feel pressured to provide their sources with favorable coverage. Concerning the influence of personal interaction, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

H2:   *Political actors with whom a journalist has the most regular personal contact will be (a) more visible, (b) more prominently covered, and (c) more positively covered in the journalist's articles compared with political actors who have less or no contact.*

Research Design

Data

To test the hypotheses three different steps of data collection have been undertaken. First, a survey is conducted among political journalists to obtain information on their political backgrounds and personal contact with politicians. Secondly, articles from these journalists have been collected and analyzed to assess the visibility of, prominence of, and tone toward political actors. Thirdly, information on the background characteristics of politicians have been collected, to control for the newsworthiness of politicians and to determine the distance between the political orientation of the journalists and the politicians.

1. To examine the interaction between journalists and politicians, a survey was conducted among Dutch political reporters. The survey contained questions on background characteristics, political orientation, and interactions with politicians and parties. Political journalists are defined as "journalists who report, analyze or give commentary on national politics" (van Dalen et al., 2012, p. 910) and are operationalized as journalists who have reported on domestic politics in their last 10 news articles. The data collection has been carried out online. The names and addresses of various political journalists have been collected by visiting Web pages of media outlets and by additional telephone inquiries. Eventually, a total of 197 journalists received an e-mail in February 2019 in which they were invited to participate in an online survey. After several reminders over a period of two months, 42 journalists filled out the survey (response rate = 21.3%). However, more than half of them refused to answer with which politicians or political actors they have personal contact and could therefore not be included in the sample. The final sample, therefore, consists of 20 journalists (slightly over 10% of the total sample). Although this response rate is rather low, it provided enough information on various relationships between journalists and political actors. Moreover, because of the combination with other data, the final data set holds a multilevel structure and a multilevel model can be appropriately estimated with a limited number of clusters. The sample of journalists consists of four women and 16 men between the age of 25 and 67 with, on average, 24.55 years of experience. The journalists work for various newspapers; two journalists primarily work for television.

2. To determine the association between personal contact and news coverage, news articles of the journalists that filled out the survey were obtained. We only have information about the current political sources of journalists and therefore a recent timeframe is considered, from March 8, 2018, until March 8, 2019. Most of the online as well as offline articles were accessible through the digital LexisNexis database. From the journalists (also) working for television, we only included their written articles. With television news, it is often not possible to identify who is responsible for the content of the production; consequently, television broadcasts were excluded from the sample selection. To acquire additional articles from news websites that were not directly available on LexisNexis, the online archive INCA was used (for more information, see Trilling et al., 2018). The articles of the journalists were first selected with general search terms, such as "politics," and articles with a high level of similarity were omitted.[1] Afterward, a list was composed of

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[1] LexisNexis omits the news stories that do not or barely differ from each other but that are repeated in multiple newspapers.

all the politicians/parties, and only the articles that covered at least one politician/party were included. Finally, the sample consisted of 1,476 articles covering 129 members of Parliament and 24 (junior) ministers. The decision to consider members of Parliament as well as ministers was guided by the survey responses, where both types of politicians were mentioned frequently. Politicians who are not mentioned at least once in the articles or as a source are not included in the analysis. An automated content analysis was performed to capture the visibility of politicians and parties. For tone and prominence, a manual quantitative content analysis was deemed more reliable (see online Appendix A for the codebook: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10ae7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917). All the articles have been coded by one member of the research team. To assess intercoder agreement, a sample of 10% randomly chosen articles for sentiment toward politicians and parties, and 5% for prominence, were double-coded by another member of the research team. The Krippendorff's alpha, a measure of intercoder reliability, produced a score of 0.67 for tone toward politicians and a score of 0.62 for tone toward parties. The intercoder agreement score of prominence is 0.77. Although these scores are not perfect, we consider them satisfactory here, given the often-reported complexity of coding sentiment in newspaper articles (see Boukes, van de Velde, Araujo, & Vliegenthart, 2020).

3. Finally, information on the background characteristics of politicians, such as gender and experience, was retrieved from the official government's website (www.tweedekamer.nl). For the political orientation of the parties and the politicians, The Chapel Hill Expert Survey of 2017 was used. This survey is completed by political scientists who specialize in political parties and contains an estimation of party positions (see www.chesdata.eu). Since there is no information on this variable for the relatively new party FvD, this party and its two party members have been excluded from the sample.

Operationalization of the Variables

Dependent Variables

The first dependent variable, *visibility*, is measured by the number of times a politician or party is mentioned in an article, and this was coded automatically. This count measure is preferred over a dummy variable (mentioned or not) because it accounts for actors being addressed only briefly, and those actors that received substantive attention in a news item. In line with earlier studies, only the first five politicians or parties that are present in an article are considered, as they are likely to be the focus of the article (Hopmann et al., 2010), and because it is relatively uncommon that more than five politicians are mentioned in one article. In our sample, less than 10% of the articles contained more than five politicians. On average, articles contain 10.68 mentions of politicians and parties, which includes multiple mentions of the same actor.

Prominence was manually coded by considering whether a politician is quoted (0/1) and whether the politician is paraphrased (0/1) in the article. A scale of *prominence* was constructed by adding the two dummy variables. The scale runs from 0, not present in the article or only referred to in passing, to 2, both quoted and paraphrased (Cronbach's alpha: 0.74). On average per news item, 1.93 politicians are quoted, and 0.73 politicians are paraphrased.

The variable *tone* was also coded manually and operationalized as the average tone toward an actor and measured on a 3-point negative to positive scale. Following van Dalen and associates (2012), a positive tone (+1) is present when "the actor's merits, successful solutions, solved problems or abilities" (p. 911) are emphasized, and a negative tone (−1) is indicated by a focus on "the actor's failures, unresolved problems or inabilities" (p. 911). If the article does not contain any evaluative judgements, or when there are both positive and negative references, the variable tone is coded as neutral/mixed (0). Overall, the mean tone is slightly positive, which is in line with previous findings on sentiment toward political actors in Dutch media coverage (see Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011).

Independent Variables

The first main independent variable, *contact*, is operationalized as being one of the political actors the journalist, who wrote the article, has the most personal contact with (1) or not (0). Personal contact was defined as direct communication with politicians through meeting them personally, by talking over the phone or via e-mail, and so forth. This variable is generated from the following question posed to journalists: *Can you tell us which politicians/party you have the most personal contact with?* The journalists could write up to three politician names and a party name.[2] Of the journalists, 14 indeed mentioned three names; the rest indicated one or two relevant names (i.e., members of the Senate or European Parliament were not included[3]) and three of them mentioned only the party/parties they have contact with. In total, 36 different politicians and seven different parties were mentioned.

For the second main independent variable, *political distance*, the distance between the political position of the journalist and the politician is calculated. In the survey, the journalists indicated on an 11-point scale whether they lean more to the left (0) or to the right (10) side of the political spectrum. There is a small left bias in the sample ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.73$), but five journalists positioned themselves in the middle and three clearly to the right. For the political parties and their party members, the party positions of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey are used. This survey has a similar scale to measure political leaning. The absolute distance between the journalist and the respective party on the scales is used as an independent variable.

Control Variables

Because of findings from previous research, the following control variables have been included to estimate a completely specified model (see online Appendix A.4 for the operationalization: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10ae7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917). First, party leaders, ministers/secretaries, members of the government parties are likelier to receive news coverage because of their higher political

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[2] Note that the contact variable only includes up to three of the sources journalists most often have personal contact with. The journalist can have more sources that are not captured with this variable.

[3] For these politicians, the process of personal interaction and getting in the news might be different, especially physical meetings might be less common/different with EU politicians. Also, research has shown how EU politics and politicians are not that commonly covered in Dutch news (e.g., de Ruiter & Vliegenthart, 2018), which might distort the relation between personal interaction and media coverage.

standing and resulting newsworthiness (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Secondly, experience has been found to have a positive influence on media coverage (Tresch, 2009). Thirdly, political centrality needs to be considered as niche party members might receive increased attention because of their extreme positions on issues. Fourth, gender needs to be controlled for, as male politicians tend to receive more attention. Finally, the overlap between the subject of the article and whether the politician is a spokesman on that issue is included in the model. If a politician is an expert on the topic, (s)he will likely be included in the article. Concerning the party, three aspects are considered: whether the party is part of the government, whether it is seen as an extremist party, and party size. Here, the same logic applies as with the politicians. Government parties, larger parties, and niche parties are deemed more newsworthy and are thus likelier to gain additional media coverage (Vos, 2014).

Finally, control variables on the article and journalist level are included. The difference between tabloid and broadsheets are considered as the latter tend to devote more space to political issues and might refrain from using explicit positive or negative references toward politicians. Article length is controlled for, as longer articles may contain more references to politicians. Lastly, we control for the frequency of personal contacts a journalist in general has.

Analysis

The first dependent variable, *visibility*, is measured by count data, which implies that there is a high concentration of zero occurrences (politician not mentioned in the article) in the data set, and only a few cases with high values (mentioned very often). As visible in Table 1, the mean of visibility is concentrated around zero and the variance is considerably larger than the mean, which indicates overdispersion. A negative binomial regression model is a viable option here (e.g., Tresch, 2009). Therefore, a negative binomial regression model is preferred, and the incidence rate ratios (IRR) are reported. The IRR tells us the factor change in the expected count of visibility for a unit increase in the independent variable. Values above 1 signal a positive relationship and values below 1 a negative.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Main Variables for Politicians and Parties.

Variables	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
Dependent variables*				
Political actor level:				
Visibility Politicians	0.04	0.53	0	48
Visibility Parties	0.42	1.39	0	30
Tone Politicians	0.07	0.61	−1	1
Tone Parties	0.07	0.58	−1	1
Prominence Politicians	0.01	0.02	0	2
Explanatory variables**				
Political actor level:				
Contact Politicians	0.02	0.13	0	1
Contact Parties	0.08	0.27	0	1
Political Distance Politicians	2.75	1.84	0	9
Political Distance Parties	2.44	1.83	0	9

Note. The descriptive statistics present journalist-politician combinations.
*From automated and manual content analysis.
**From elite survey data and Chapel Hill expert survey 2017.

      In addition, it is necessary to account for the dependency in the data with a multilevel model. A three-level approach is adopted: the politicians and parties are considered nested in articles, and the articles are nested in journalists. The journalists are thus at the upper cluster level, and the politicians are at the lower unit-level. For each journalist in the data, there are multiple articles and for each article, there is information on 153 politicians and 12 parties. This resulted in 221,391 cases of journalist, article, politician, and party combinations. Four different models have been estimated through a step-by-step inclusion of variables. The first model is an empty model and is used as a reference. The main independent variable contact is included in the second model. In the third model, the independent variable political distance and a range of background variables of the political actors are added. The final model consists of additional controls on the level of the article and the journalist.

      For the dependent variables *tone* and *prominence*, a multilevel ordinal logistic regression is applied since these variables are measured on a 3-point and 4-point scale respectively. With an ordinal logistic regression, the proportional log-odds of being in the same category or higher versus being in any other category is estimated. A test of the proportional odds assumption indicates that the assumption is not violated for the two main independent variables, contact and political distance, in both the model predicting prominence and tone. Each of the analyses will be conducted separately for politicians and parties. Note that the tone model only includes the politicians that are mentioned in the articles.

Results

Visibility

Table 2 summarizes the incidence rate ratios of the fully specified model predicting visibility. The likelihood-ratio tests of the subsequent regression steps indicated that the full model is preferred over the other models (see online Appendix B.1 for more information: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10a e7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917).

H1a predicted that the smaller the political distance between the journalist and the political actor, the more visible that actor would be in the articles of that journalist. The results indicate that distance in political orientation is negatively related to visibility. With an increase in distance by 1, the incidence rate ratio of being visible significantly decreases by a factor of 0.88 for politicians, and by a factor of 0.83 for parties, holding all the variables constant. This means that journalists are less likely to report on political actors who are more distant from their own political orientation.

Table 2. Multilevel Negative Binomial Regression. Dependent Variable: Visibility.

	Full Model Visibility			
	Politicians		Parties	
Politicians/Parties:				
Contact	6.787***	(0.954)	1.853***	(0.129)
Distance political orientation	0.877***	(0.017)	0.827***	(0.013)
Party leader	16.631***	(1.227)		
Gender (1= female)	0.681***	(0.041)		
Spokesman of subject article	15.137***	(1.740)		
Minister	4.129***	(0.284)		
Experience (standardized)	1.198***	(0.029)		
Government party (member)	1.419***	(0.106)	2.331***	(0.138)
Niche party (member)	0.686***	(0.073)	1.310***	(0.095)
Party size			1.054***	(0.003)
Article:				
Article length (standardized)	1.183***	(0.048)	1.388***	(0.050)
Broadsheet	1.057	(0.178)	1.160	(0.180)
Tabloid	0.980	(0.129)	0.942	(0.113)
Journalist:				
Frequency of contact	1.550***	(0.164)	1.241	(0.163)
Constant	0.002***	(0.001)	0.054***	(0.021)
Random effects:				
Journalist level				
Variance component	0.292**	(0.113)	0.477**	(0.183)
Article level				
Variance component	0.917***	(0.079)	0.763***	(0.063)
LR-test versus Model 3 (chi)	65.32		228.91	
LR-test versus Model 3 (*p*)	*p* <0.001		*p* < 0.001	
Observations	203,681		17,710	

Note. IRR (Standard errors). * *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001.

Turning to H2a, it was expected that political actors who have the most often personal contact with a journalist would also be more visible in news articles written by that journalist. Table 2 shows that contact is positively associated with being visible, both for individual politicians and for parties, and that this association is relatively strong compared with the other variables. Personal contact increases the average expected visibility of politicians by a factor of 6.787 and parties with a factor of 1.853, controlling for all the other variables in the model. This increase seems considerable, yet considering the low mean of visibility, the overall presence of political actors in news articles should not be overestimated. To obtain a better understanding of the effect size, the predicted counts of visibility for politicians with and without regular personal contact are calculated.

Figure 1 illustrates these predicted counts of visibility when all the other variables are held constant at their mean. The predicted count for politicians with personal contact is around 30 percentage points higher compared with politicians who do not have this regular personal contact. Besides, the predicted count of visibility in an article is around 45% for parties without personal contact and almost 85% for parties with contact (see online Appendix B.1 for more information: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10ae72 95a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917). This difference is substantial and in line with H2a. However, the confidence intervals are quite large, and the absolute results should therefore be considered with caution.
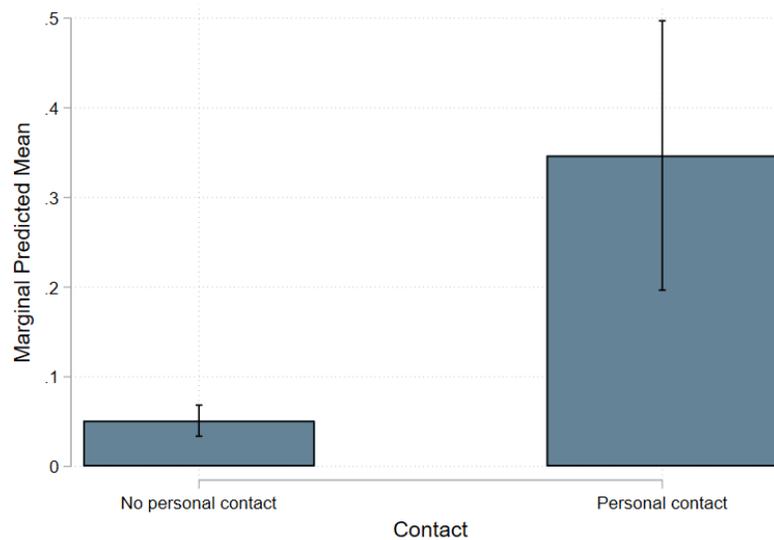
Figure 1. Predicted count of visibility for politicians with and without regular personal contact.

Prominence

Table 3 shows the explanatory power of the aforementioned variables on the prominence of politicians in the news. Interestingly an increase in the distance of political orientation is not only negatively associated with visibility but also with prominence (H1b). For each unit increase in distance of political orientation, the proportional odds of being quoted and paraphrased versus the other categories (nothing, only quoted or paraphrased) decreases by 11%, controlling for all the remaining variables. This means that politicians who have a similar political orientation as the journalist are likelier to be both quoted and paraphrased in the article of that journalist. Results are in line with H1b.

Table 3. Multilevel Ordinal Logistic Regression. Dependent variable: Prominence.

	Full Model Prominence	
	Politicians	
Politicians		
Contact	3.668***	(0.316)
Distance political orientation	0.890***	(0.017)
Party leader	8.545***	(0.560)
Gender (1= female)	0.689***	(0.045)
Spokesman of subject article	8.840***	(0.692)
Minister	2.317***	(0.152)
Experience in days (standardized)	1.138***	(0.027)
Government party (member)	1.701***	(0.123)
Niche party (member)	1.013	(0.117)
Article:		
Article length (standardized)	1.021	(0.033)
Broadsheet	0.848	(0.111)
Tabloid	0.862	(0.084)
Journalist:		
Frequency of contact	1.442***	(0.156)
cut1	6.829***	(0.327)
cut2	7.800***	(0.329)
Random effects:		
Journalist level		
Variance component	0.315*	(0.125)
Article level		
Variance component	0.188***	(0.040)
LR-test versus Model 3 (chi)	13.64	
LR-test versus Model 3 (*p*)	*p* <0.01	
Observations	203681	

Note. Proportional odds ratios (Standard errors). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

In addition, having personal contact also tends to correspond with whether politicians are quoted or paraphrased in an article. The proportional odds of being quoted and paraphrased in the news is for politicians with personal contact higher than for politicians without personal contact by a factor of 3.67 (267% higher). These findings are in line with H2b.

We have also conducted the same analysis for politicians that are mentioned at least once in the article and found that the findings do not hold. Although contact does increase the overall chance of getting quoted or paraphrased, the political sources who already get attention in an article are not necessarily likelier to get quoted (or paraphrased) in that same article. The same goes for political distance (see online Appendix B.2: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10ae7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917).

Tone

Table 4 presents the proportional odds ratios of tone toward a politician or political actor mentioned in an article. The third model is presented instead of the full model since the log-likelihood test indicated that the inclusion of variables on the article and journalist level did not improve the model (see online Appendix B.3: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only=c4b10ae7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917).

Table 4. Multilevel Ordinal Regression. Dependent Variable: Tone.

| | Model 3 Tone | | | |
	Politicians		Parties	
Politicians/Parties:				
Contact	1.696***	(0.247)	1.292*	(0.163)
Distance political Orientation	0.891***	(0.028)	0.956	(0.032)
Party leader	0.865	(0.094)		
Gender (1= female)	1.380**	(0.159)		
Spokesman of subject Article	0.637**	(0.090)		
Minister	0.964	(0.113)		
Experience in Days (standardized)	0.906**	(0.034)		
Government party (member)	0.731*	(0.093)	0.724*	(0.091)
Niche party (member)	1.036	(0.209)	0.953	(0.152)
Party size			0.977***	(0.006)
cut1	−2.637***	(0.189)	−3.325***	(0.144)
cut2	0.865***	(0.170)	1.271***	(0.123)
Random effects:				
Journalist level				
Variance component	0.170	(0.106)	0.000	(0.000)
Article level				
Variance component	0.636***	(0.141)	2.676***	(0.265)
LR-test versus Model 2 (chi)	94.64		61.00	
LR-test versus Model 2 (p)	$p <0.001$		$p <0.001$	
Observations	2792		3285	

Note. Odds ratios (standard errors). * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

H1c predicted that if the political distance between a journalist and a politician becomes smaller, the coverage of that politician becomes more positive. Table 4 shows a negative significant association between political distance and tone of coverage of politicians. With a unit increase in political distance, the proportional odds of positive coverage versus negative or neutral coverage decreases by almost 10%, holding all the other variables constant. Put differently, if the political orientation of a journalist and a politician are further apart, the journalist is less likely to provide the politician with positive coverage, which is in line with H1c. However, this association does not hold with regard to political parties. The tone of coverage does not become significantly more negative if the distance in political orientation between the journalists and the parties increases.

The positive association of contact found with regard to visibility and prominence also appears to be present for tone. The proportional odds of positive coverage versus negative or neutral coverage is for politicians with personal contact higher than for politicians without this contact with a factor of 1.696. To facilitate the interpretation of the odds ratios, the predicted probabilities for politicians with and without regular personal contact of positive and negative coverage, while keeping the other variables at their means, are presented in Figure 2. This figure illustrates that politicians with personal contact with the journalist who wrote the article are likelier to receive positive coverage, around 29%, compared with politicians without personal contact, just over 20%. For parties, a similar trend can be found (see online Appendix B.3: https://osf.io/k8xjr/?view_only =c4b10ae7295a47d1bb9cac4d5046e917). Parties without personal contact have, on average, a 12% chance of receiving positive coverage, compared with parties with personal contact who have around a 15% chance. These results lend some support to H2c, but the overlapping confidence intervals do signify that differences are not omnipresent and deviant cases occur relatively frequently.
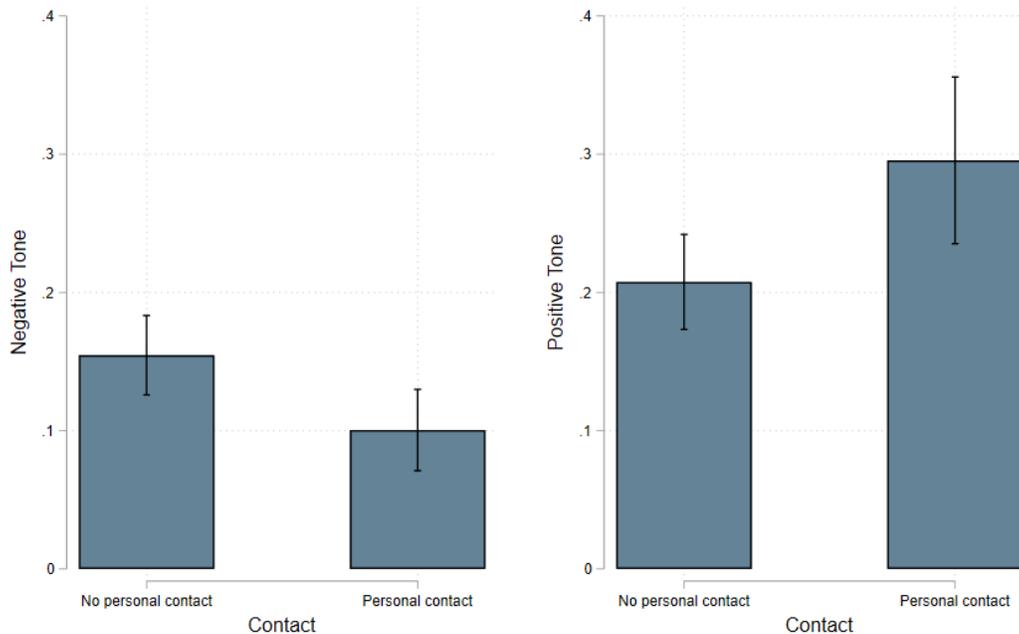
Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of negative versus positive tone toward politicians.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to explore how the personal interaction between political journalists and politicians relate to journalists' coverage of these politicians and their parties. Personal relations were expected to be associated with an increase in the visibility, prominence, and positive coverage of political actors in the news. The study draws on a unique combination of data sources that enabled us to move

beyond analyzing perceptive measures of influence on journalistic productions, toward measuring whether the personal contact of journalists with their political sources is related to the presence and positive portrayal of these sources in their news articles.

The empirical analyses indicated that regular personal contact between journalists and political actors can contribute to media visibility and prominence. The political actors that are among the most personally contacted sources for a journalist are likelier to be visible, quoted, and paraphrased in the newspaper articles of that journalist. This is in line with the theoretical expectation that politicians can increase their presence in the news by establishing personal relationships with political reporters (e.g., Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011). This presence should, however, not be exaggerated. Although there is an increase for political sources, the findings of this study also signify that overall visibility for individual politicians remains rather low.

For the tone of coverage, there seems to be some indication of a positive bias as politicians (and parties) that have regular personal contact are likelier to be presented positively. However, the greater part of the coverage remains neutral, and politicians who do not have regular contact with the journalists also frequently receive positive coverage. Moreover, it is important to reemphasize that the intercoder reliability of tone toward political parties slightly deviates from the statistical standard that has been set for reliable measurements. As this study is explanatory, we considered the measure to be acceptable; yet, it is recommended that future research considers whether the preliminary findings of this study replicate.

This study has also provided some support for the idea that political closeness between the journalist and politician/party matters for news-making (Haselmayer et al., 2017; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). Journalists are likelier to provide similar-minded politicians with significant presence in their news articles, and they are likelier to provide them with positive coverage. They might do so because they want to satisfy their readership by favoring some actors over others or because it is simply not possible to exclude political preferences (Haselmayer et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding these interesting findings, this study has some important shortcomings. First, given the small sample size of journalists, it is hard to substantiate claims outside the sample, and we have to be extremely careful with overstating the implications of our findings. There also could have been selection bias of these journalists, as only half of the initial respondents of the survey were willing to share their political sources. Nonetheless, considering that the original sample consists of a select group of journalists, who have been known to be difficult to recruit for research and very hesitant to share information about their political preferences and contact, this research has provided us some interesting insight about journalists' interaction with politicians and political parties and how they relate to news-making.

Second, we have tried to account for a range of potential alternative explanations on various levels (i.e., by including outlet characteristics). However, we did not include the strategies and efforts politicians make to get into the news, either positive or deliberately negative (see van Dalen, 2019). Although they might partially be reflected by individual contacts with journalists, they encompass a wide range of other activities (see, e.g., Gershon, 2012) that we were unable to systematically collect.

Finally, as this study only relies on cross-sectional data, it is not possible to draw strict inferences about causality. Given the theory, we expected that a journalist's reporting style differs because of a personal relationship, but since there is no information on reporting style before personal contact, causal claims cannot be made. Furthermore, we could not assess the linearity of the effect—whether increased contact causes more coverage—because there is no information on the intensity of contact among the sources.

Overall, the findings of this study do give rise to a more normative question: To what extent should we consider it problematic that the political background and personal interactions of journalists are associated with their reporting? On the one hand, it could be argued that both influences are inherent to political journalism and that it is both impossible as well as undesirable to exclude them. Especially personal contact is crucial for gaining access to more and better political information and journalism seems unthinkable without these interactions. On the other hand, it does also raise some concerns about favoritism and politically independent news-making (McNair, 2009). If journalists report more on politicians who they have personal relationships with and whose political ideas they favor, the public could potentially be misguided in their perception of who is considered important in the political domain. However, the influence on perception should not be overstated as voters do not rely on a single source for their political information, they often turn to different media and are presented with alternative views. Moreover, journalists will not necessarily give all politicians, who are good at getting access to the media, attention. Studies have shown that extreme utterances, for instance, are less likely to be covered (e.g., van Dalen, 2019). Finally, it has to be noted that Dutch journalists do not construct news articles in complete isolation. Although Dutch reporters greatly value their autonomous position, news stories also get reviewed by the editor before they get published (Pleijter, Hermans, & Vergeer, 2012). Hence, there are also external influences that can minimize the effect of personal interactions and political background on political reporting.

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