

Peter Vasterman (ed.)

# From Media Hype to Twitter Storm

News Explosions and  
Their Impact on Issues,  
Crises and Public Opinion



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University  
Press

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*News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and  
Public Opinion*

*Edited by  
Peter Vasterman*

Amsterdam University Press

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*It is not difficult to see the similarities between massive starling flocks, flying as one and creating new shapes – murmurations – and the way media operate during explosive news waves, the main topic in this book.*



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I also owe many thanks to Jeroen Sondervan, who believed in this project from the start, and to Maryse Elliott, who guided the review and production stages, both Humanities publishers at the Amsterdam University Press.

Peter Vasterman



# Preface

*Hans Mathias Kepplinger*

Why is media hype interesting? It is interesting because hype cannot be entirely explained by the mechanisms of media reporting. Why not? Because media outlets report significantly more intensively about some events than about other, comparable events. Why is this relevant for society? Because media users find it very difficult to distinguish between an increasing number of media reports and an increasing number of reported incidents. One possible consequence of this can be the serious misperception of reality. Why is this politically relevant? Because politicians and other agents are more frequently oriented by media reporting than other reality indicators. Possible consequences of this include misperceptions of reality and incorrect decision-making in situations of crisis, conflict, and scandal. And why is media hype relevant to journalists? Because journalists are charged with representing reality objectively. This also applies to how often an event is reported – over a given time period, the frequency of reports should correspond to the frequency of incidents being reported. In situations of hype, this is not the case.

How can it be proven that media hype is a phenomenon in itself, in need of a special explanation? One must show that a large number of reports in the media is not, in fact, caused by a large number of similar incidents. This is possible by comparing reports to genuine facts – facts that can be counted, irrespective of media reports. For example, earthquakes and other natural disasters; shipping accidents and other large-scale accidents; incidences of cancer and other serious illness among celebrities. By comparing the frequency of each event with the frequency of reports on the event, it can be shown that media hype is a phenomenon in itself. One could criticize the test outlined above by pointing out that it is only possible for a few types of media hype. This criticism is justified, but in this case excessive, as testing special cases is standard practice in all areas of science. The law of gravitation was verified by experiments on bodies in an evacuated chamber, but is used by airplanes that fly through the air. Materials are tested for durability by exposing them to forces they would not normally be exposed to. Medication for humans is tested using the ‘animal model’.

How does media hype change the character of the message being communicated? According to traditional theories, this is event driven: events with characteristic qualities (news factors) and established selection criteria

(news values of news factors) are seen as the cause of publication decisions, and the subsequent publication is seen as a consequence of these decisions. In the case of media hype, this causal theory is extended by a teleological model: publication decisions are not (only) due to the causes named above, but due to the intended effect of the story. This changes the character of the news, as the consequences of causes become means to an end. Traditional theories of journalism do not account for this, due to a specific definition of the role of a journalist: journalists do not play an active role in society, but are impartial observers. If journalists, in fact, emphasize or minimize particular stories in order to cause or avoid particular effects in the wider public, they cease to be impartial observers and become active participants. They are themselves a part of the event that they and their colleagues are reporting about. This is in conflict with the expected role of a journalist as well as a journalist's self-perception of their own role. It leads one to ask whether journalists who deliberately fan the flames of hype can be held morally accountable for the negative consequences of their reporting.

What effect can media hype have? Due to the intensity of news coverage, media hype can have both direct and indirect consequences. One example of a direct effect is the impact of intensive coverage of a court case on the verdict of the court. One example of indirect effect is the influence of the verdict on the length of sentence imposed on the guilty party. Other examples of indirect consequences include the influence of political decisions on the population affected by the decision, under the impression of media hype. In theory, indirect effects can also happen when those affected by the decision were not following the story in the media. The generally accepted axiom 'no effects without contact' therefore does not apply to secondary consequences. This is not due to a special characteristic of mass communication. Some well-known examples of indirect consequences in everyday life are so-called domino effects: Nobody would deny that the last domino fell, indirectly, because the first one did. The concept of indirect effects might be a breath of fresh air to enable a fresh and more realistic view of the impact of media on social developments.

How can media hype be best explained? As it is not possible to entirely explain media hype with reference to the events being reported, there must be other factors that play a role between events and reporting. These factors could be primarily within the media or primarily outside the media. Empirical studies of media hype without reference to extra-media data make the (implicit) assumption that the media is a largely autonomous, self-referential system that, under certain conditions, does not react to its environment, but to elements of its own structural constraints. For this reason, external

factors can be ignored. Structural constraints include the interests of publishers, broadcasters, and media employees, both material and immaterial, as well as professional norms and journalist's understanding of their role. Empirical studies of media hype with reference to extra-media data make the (implicit) assumption that the media is an input-output system, and that reports are significantly determined by the input, even in cases of hype. For this reason, external factors must be considered. Here, one can distinguish between two levels: the content of the report (events, themes, etc.) and the actors in the pre-media sphere (protagonists of the news story, politicians, stakeholders, etc.). These factors can intensify, mediate, or halt the formation of media hype. One example of the latter is when a minor accident that created media hype is followed by a major catastrophe. In most cases, the media hype relating to the minor accident will then collapse. One important question, both theoretically and practically, is: What is the relative importance of internal and external factors on the development of media hype? The answer to this question will shed some light on the importance of various causes of the perception of current events by media users: Who decides what we believe to be important? In addition to this, it will show to what extent the protagonists of a scandal, a crisis, a mediated conflict, etc. have an influence on the development of media hype. In both questions, it is a matter of the distribution of power in society.

Because of the reasons given above, research into media hype leads directly to central epistemological, theoretical, and methodological questions of mass communication research. The question of localizing the media within contemporary theories of democracy, with both a theoretical and empirical foundation, is part of this research. This is because it is only possible to explain media hype by viewing all of the actors as people who are guided by their intentions, particularly in extreme situations. This volume contains a large amount of substantial discussion on these topics, for those who are interested in such questions.

### About the author

**Hans Mathias Kepplinger** studied political science, history and communications in Mainz, Munich and Berlin where he gained a PhD in political science (1970). He was full professor at University of Mainz (1982-2011), Research Fellow at University of California, Berkeley (1980) and Harvard University (2005), and Guest Professor at numerous universities. He won the Helen Dinerman Award in 2012 and was Research Fellow ICA 2015. His



research interests are the relationship between reality covered and media coverage about reality. His most recent studies deal with effects of media coverage on protagonists of media coverage (Kepplinger & Zerback, 2012), the effects of media coverage about nuclear energy on public opinion from 1965-2011 (Kepplinger & Lemke 2014), media coverage on Fukushima in Germany, France, UK, and Switzerland (Kepplinger & Lemke, 2015), and journalists' appraisal of important violations of journalistic professional rules (2017).

# Introduction

*Peter Vasterman*

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One of the most inspiring articles when I started studying explosive news waves back in the eighties was one written by Mark Fishman, 'Crime Waves as Ideology', dating back to 1978 and published in *Social Problems*. It continued on the track set out by Stanley Cohen, founder of the Moral Panic school of thought (see: Garland 2008). What struck me was the systematic analysis of the prerequisites and the different stages of a crime wave, which is, in fact, a media-generated wave of crime-related incidents. The number of stories on a particular crime explodes, while the actual number of incidents remains the same or even declines. It takes just one editor looking for news on a slow day to trigger this. Fishman describes how one TV reporter brings three different small stories, which would probably never have made the news together, under one new catchy denominator: the rising number of crimes against the elderly, committed by perpetrators from ethnic minorities. Since news judgements continuously overlap in space and time, it will not take long before reporters have found and published all the stories that seem to fit this new theme. This wave of news reinforces again and again the news values of this crime topic.

'Crimes against the elderly', Fishman writes, 'became a typical crime with typical victims, offenders, and circumstances'. Triggering not only public outrage but also an immediate outcry by authorities, politicians, unions and other stakeholders, reinforcing the focus of media and politics on this new type of crime. Fishman also points out the authorities, as information suppliers on crime, have a strong news-making power that could also be used to neutralize an unwanted crime wave. The concept of a crime wave is not new, a well-known historic example is the one described by the famous American muckraker Lincoln Steffens in 1928: 'How I Made a Crime Wave' (Steffens, 1928). A hilarious story about his competition with another reporter Jacob Riis in a spiralling series of scoops about robberies: 'Many other reporters joined in the uplift of that rising tide of crime, but it

was my creation, that wave, and Theodore Roosevelt (then president of the police board) stopped it'.

Another study, quite similar to that of Fishman, was undertaken by the Dutch criminologist Herman Franke, who published the articles '*Kustgeweld of mediageweld?*' ('Violence by the seaside or in the media?') and '*Rampsferen en paniekstemmingen*' ('Moral panic and the fiction of catastrophe') in 1986 (Franke, 1986). In this case, only one fatal fight between young men at a beach led to a presumed 'wave of violence' flooding the Dutch shores. Franke used the theories of both Fishman and Cohen to analyse the step-by-step build-up of the news wave and the growing social concern. Another scholar studying the impact of news themes on the perception and construction of reality by the media was David Altheide, who coined the concept of 'media logic', together with co-author Robert Snow in 1979 (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Altheide, 1985). Media logic refers to the way the media classify, select, and create news and these studies laid the groundwork for the 'mediatization of politics' theoretical framework (see: Mazzoleni & Splendore, 2015).

The main point of Fishman's and others' studies of crime waves is that they actually describe a *modus operandi* in news-making and the interaction with social actors that can also be observed in all kinds of other areas than crime. The basic point being a self-reinforcing dynamic triggered and powered by this particular *modus* of creating news. This can be seen in many news waves about varying topics like political conflicts, risk issues to (celebrity) scandals. The news seems to develop a life of its own like a resonating bridge in the wind. And it is not only the news, it also applies to the public arena as a whole, including – in this digital era – internet and social media.

An important pioneer in this field is Hans Mathias Kepplinger, who began publishing about what he terms '*publizistische Konflikte*', mediated conflicts, from 1977 onwards (Kepplinger, Frühauf & Hachenberg, 1977). Mediated conflicts are defined as disputes of issues fought in the media, who, as managers of the public arena, play an important role in the way the conflict develops. Two elements in his theory are relevant: feedback loops and instrumental actualization (Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab, 1991).

In mediated conflicts, every action triggers a countermove by an opponent, with a series of sub-conflicts that become news again, creating what Kepplinger calls '*Eigendynamik*'. Instrumental actualization refers to the tendency of journalists to frame stories in line with their position in the conflict and to focus on similar events. This corresponds to Fishman's observation of the way the news theme works in creating a wave of incidents

in the news. It structures the hunt for more news about similar incidents, which confirms the news theme again and powers the news wave.

There are also social psychological aspects in the focus on information that fits in the already existing theme or frame. There is a lot of research showing that the heuristics people use to process information leads to selective perception (Festinger, 1957), stereotypes, availability and representativeness bias (see: Kuran & Sunstein, 1999 and Kahneman, 2011). In that respect, journalists are just people; despite being a professional. In later years, Donsbach (2004) defined these psychological aspects in his 'Psychology of news decisions' study. He argues that reporters try to cope with uncertain or indefinite situations by sharing their beliefs with others in order to create a shared reality validating their beliefs. This interaction with others, colleagues, sources, etc., creates a basis for frames that become dominant in news coverage.

Almost ten years before, in 1995, Kepplinger and Habermeier published their groundbreaking study on how so-called key events with a high visibility trigger a wave of news reports due to a temporary change in news values and news selection (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). In terms of Fishman, everything that seems to fit the news theme will become news. The most important point in this study is the choice of events to test this theory. The events used were 'genuine events', completely independent from any media coverage, such as an earthquake in California or a major traffic accident. This is crucial because it enables a comparison between media coverage (number and frequency) and the actual number of genuine events. It shows that, after a key event, the media tend to report on similar events much more than before the key event, and publish much more thematically related news than before (statements from sources and interest groups, debates, and opinions).

However, this kind of test is impossible in cases where media coverage cannot be compared with objective media-external data, because they do not exist. In these cases, the media impact the social construction of the original event and subsequent events. If it is a topic with a social definition, like 'random violence' (see: Best, 1999; Vasterman, 2004), child abuse, or even sexual abuse, this comparison is a pitfall. The definitions of these social issues change over time, particularly in cases with much-publicized key events and a follow-up news wave (see: Egelkamp, 2002). These changing discourses and definitions go hand in hand with an increasing willingness to report incidents by victims, but also by authorities, institutions, and stakeholders like action groups. This reinforces the media hunt for more similar incidents and thematically related news.

In sum, one can observe this systematic build-up of this news wave, but a comparison with 'reality', i.e. the actual objective number of cases, becomes impossible. Media are not just reporters of events; they also create them, or at least influence the chain of events after the key event. This methodological problem – there is no reality check – makes it very tricky to make any claims regarding the disproportionality of the news wave or exaggeration of the social problem at hand. This was the main problem I ran into when I decided to define explosive news waves as media hypes in my dissertation (Vasterman, 2004): On the one hand, hype is a perfect concept for the self-reinforcing process during the news wave; on the other, it carries the implication of a disproportional and overblown media coverage.

Scholars using the concept 'moral panic' have the same problem: Who decides that the response to a perceived threat is a panic? And who decides that the threat is not really important or even non-existent? This made the moral panic theory a slippery slope for many scholars, mainly focusing on debunking the socially perceived threat (drugs, crime, sexting, etc.). Critics also pointed out that moral panic is essentially ideological: it was used to aim at issues defined by the right, defending conservative moral standards, and not at those from the left with liberal standards (see: Critcher, 2008; Garland, 2008). The only way to avoid these problems is to focus on the characteristics of the explosive news wave itself, disregarding the questions of disproportionality and exaggeration.

In my dissertation *Mediahype* (Vasterman, 2004, 2005), I defined a media hype as

a media-generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media. During a media hype, the sharp rise in news stories is the result of making news, instead of reporting news events, and covering media-triggered social responses, instead of reporting developments that would have taken place without media interference.

The element of making news instead of just reporting it turned out to be quite problematic, because it implies a clear distinction between the 'real' events and those triggered or influenced by the media. It works for independent events like car accidents, but not for suicides, for example, because they may have been triggered by previous media reports on suicides (Stack, 2003). Charlotte Wien and Christian Elmelund-Præstekær addressed this in their study *An Anatomy of Media Hypes* (2009): 'From a theoretical point

of view such a distinction seems clear, for empirical purposes, however, it cannot be made'. Because all actors anticipate how the media work (see Altheides' media logic) a news-reporting story is easily converted into a news-making story and vice versa. This is why they decide to only use the criterion of intensity in coverage of a single issue to define media hypes. Amber Boydstun, Anne Hardy, and Stefaan Walgrave used an inductive approach to find an empirical basis for distinguishing what they call 'media storms' from regular coverage using the amount, the increase, and the duration of media attention to a specific issue (Boydstun et al., 2014).

But using only the intensity of media coverage as the main criterion for media hypes blurs the distinction between media hype and other news waves that follow huge and dramatic events like war, terrorist attacks, economic meltdowns, or natural disasters. Apparently, these events also trigger a self-reinforcing dynamic in media coverage. But calling them media hype is usually met with disbelief and scorn. This implies that a new approach is needed, one that does not try to classify every news wave into the dichotomy of whether or not it is a media hype.

For me, a real eye-opener was the paper written by Stefan Geiß, published in 2010, called 'The Shape of News Waves' (Geiß, 2010). His starting point is not the explosive news wave in particular, but *all* news waves in a specific time frame focusing on the different shapes they have. According to Geiß, the development of news events can be described along three dimensions: the length of total coverage, the dynamics of coverage, and the position of the peak of coverage. There are 'slow burners' escalating at a certain point, but also 'firestorms' of news lasting weeks or even months. The short news waves can be explosive with a long tail, or, conversely, start slow, but explode later (the 'degressive' or 'progressive heating news wave').

It is not difficult to recognize the media hype in the short-term explosive news waves, but, at the same time, this study shows that the self-reinforcing dynamic of media production can be found in the firestorms as well as in the slow burners. Consequently, it may be better to define media hype not as a specific news wave, but as a specific *modus operandi* that the media switch to under specific circumstances (Vasterman, 2015). Marcello Maneri presented the same option for moral panic studies:

If we measure disproportionality by discursive dynamics rather than according to external indicators, the drawback of value judgment is avoided and an analysis of the construction of 'the problem' – of the degree, quality and logics of its amplification – may be carried out (Maneri, 2013: 184).

Amplification solely refers to the dynamics of representation, similar to the way media hype only describes a *modus operandi* in the news production. Recent publications show how this *modus operandi* may be analysed in the future.

In 2014, Annie Waldherr introduced a completely new line of research using simulation to study the fundamental mechanisms of issue attention cycles in news coverage (Waldherr, 2012, 2014). She developed an agent-based computer model for studying the dynamic interplay of key forces in the media arena, such as news values, attention thresholds, key events, issue sponsors, and intermedia agenda-setting. Her study revealed that the momentum of news waves is mainly driven by the adaptive reporting behaviour of journalists. The key mechanism for generating news waves is the self-reinforcing process of intermedia agenda-setting between (heterogeneous) journalists. Issue sponsors (sources) are not necessary to generate news waves, but do have substantial impact on their dynamics, leading to more frequent, longer, and more volatile news waves. This agent-based model makes it possible to study the dynamics of news waves without any reference to the problematic criteria of disproportionality and exaggeration. As Waldherr states, her model should be extended to include the audience that nowadays has access to the public arena through social media.

This refers to another new branch of research that is closely related to that of the attention cycles and news waves: the studies related to 'information cascades', 'Twitter storms', and 'virals'. The focus is on the explosive diffusion of information among networks caused by users following others, neglecting their own preferences or opinions. Augustine Pang sees similarities with media hype and defines social media hype as 'a netizen-generated hype that causes huge interest that is triggered by a key event and sustained by a self-reinforcing quality in its ability for users to engage in conversation' (Pang, 2013). After a few waves, saturation sets in and, similar to media hype fatigue (see also Beyer & Figenschou, 2014), a downward spiral develops. This kind of herd behaviour can, of course, also be seen in the way journalists follow and refer to each other for fear of missing news or deviating from the rest. This self-referential character is also becoming an important aspect of social media dynamics.

In her recent dissertation *Akzidentielle Medienhypes*, Vivian Roese defined the 'accidental media hype' as the result of a spontaneous interaction between news media and social media (Büttner, 2015). The Twitter storm is another new concept to describe explosive bursts of negative messages on social networks (see: Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). Social media enable citizens, for instance, to launch scandals (Poerksen & Dettel, 2014) by

putting incriminating videos on YouTube, or to get issues on the political agenda by creating a Twitter storm, a strong cascade of supportive tweets that cannot be ignored by the news media and other social actors, including politicians or CEOs under fire (Mandell & Chen, 2016). This makes it relevant to study the specific context in which this spiralling of feedback loops in the news media and social media occurs. Media storms are relevant as power boosts in media scandals (Thompson, 2001), issue attention cycles (Djerf-Pierre, 2012), policy agenda-setting, and the social amplification of risk (Pidgeon et al., 2003).

As Ulrich Beck stated in his ground-breaking publication *Risk Society* (1992/1986): modern risks generally remain invisible and

thus only exist in terms of the (scientific and anti-scientific) *knowledge* about them. They can thus be changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge, and to that extent are particularly *open to social definition or construction*. Hence the mass media and the scientific and legal professions in charge of defining risk, become key social and political positions (1992: 22-23).

Since the eighties, the topic of risk has developed into several new lines of social research: the social amplification of risk, the role of availability cascades in risk regulation, and the culture of fear.

The social amplification of risk framework (SARF) studies the process in which a specific kind of risk becomes a huge social and political issue with all kinds of ramifications, almost regardless of the 'real' risk defined in terms of scientific assessments (Kasperson et al., 1988). This framework uses the metaphor of amplification to analyse the way various social actors perceive, define, and pass on risk signals. These signals go through several amplification stations, which can decrease or increase the volume of information, and which can change interpretations, symbols, and images of the risk. The mass media are among the important stations of amplification, often feeding the growing concern or even outrage among the public, which inevitably creates new political realities. Later research showed that the sender-message-receiver model is much too simple to deal with the complex interaction between citizens, interest groups, public health agencies, politics, media, and science. (Pidgeon et al., 2003; Murdock et al., 2003). Furthermore, the theory was criticized for the same bias as the moral panic literature, i.e. the presumption that society develops an exaggerated view of the potential risk and responds in a disproportional way (Murdock et al., 2003).



A second line of research is centred on the concept of *availability cascades* in relation to risk issues. A key publication in this field is 'Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation' by Kuran and Sunstein. They analyse how availability cascades may eventually lead to unnecessary, ineffective, even counterproductive policies and risk regulations. They define an availability cascade as 'a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse' (Kuran & Sunstein, 1999: 683). This process can lead to mass anxiety ('mass scares') about risk with no scientifically proven hazards. Its basis is psychological, but its elaboration is sociological: how do these cognitive biases develop into a social process creating new policy and regulations?

The third risk-related field of research focused on fear. The social amplification of risk mirrors the amplification of fear, varying from fear of crime, fear of immigrants, to fear of terrorism. Studying the construction of fear – or what some scholars typify as a 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999) – is part of the media logic approach, developed by David Altheide (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999 and Altheide, 2002). The culture of fear is primarily defined as a discursive formation: mass media and popular culture employ an entertainment oriented media logic, in which the problem frame promotes risk and danger as fear (Altheide, 2002: 188). While there is often a gap between the widespread fear and the stable and declining trends in, for example, crime and violence, media increasingly make fear a central topic. At the same time, claims makers and moral entrepreneurs feed this discourse to promote their interests. According to critics, the culture of fear approach has a tendency to focus on the content of media and popular culture, and less on audiences and how they deal with this flow of fear (Critchler & Pearce, 2013).

New studies focus more on the struggle over framing and the relevant power structures in which some actors have more leverage than others. With the arrival of the social networks online, it became inevitable to acknowledge that the audience – formerly seen as passive receivers of media messages – had become very active and capable of gaining symbolic power through social media (Chung, 2011).

Intensive media attention may create political urgency and even crises, resulting in policy punctuations – radical changes in the political agenda (Wallgrave & Vliegthart, 2010). A model that tries to explain these sudden turnovers is the punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), which states that 'long periods of stability are interspersed with bursts of frenetic activity', leading to new frames and paradigms. 'Media storms

are the media correlates of this pattern', according to Boydston et al. (2014) in their study about media storms and sudden surges in media attention. Closely related is the concept of 'media tsunami', introduced by Giasson, Brin, and Sauvageau in 2010, to describe how the media amplify the importance of a new issue through successive waves of press coverage that gain in intensity and magnitude over time. In doing so, they can manufacture social 'crises' (Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau, 2010).

Another line of research explores more at meta-level the cultural and rhetorical impact of the use of the word 'hype' in public debate and discourse. Adam Auch explores how 'hyped' is being used as an accusation to dismiss a rival claim or position, often with very little further justification (Auch, 2013). At the same time, hyped claims seem more important, or more worth engaging with, than non-hyped claims. Devon Powers analyses hype at the cultural level: she defines hype as 'a state of anticipation generated through the circulation of promotion, resulting in a crisis of value'. Hype increases the expectations of the audience to such a level that disappointment is inevitable (Powers, 2012): 'The increasing speed and evolving avenues of media technology [...] intensify hype's essential character and accentuate the fundamental problems of publicity that hype pinpoints' (Powers, 2012: 867).

This overview of new developments would not be complete without a reference to interdisciplinary economics. Swiss researcher Bartosz Wilczek recently published a study (Wilczek, 2016) that establishes a new framework for integrating economic theories on herd behaviour with results from journalism and communication studies. 'It discusses how journalists' scoops based on whistleblowing trigger herd behaviour among their peers and how social media users and PR experts engage in these cascades by shaping journalists news agendas'. Wilczek rightly calls for more interdisciplinary research strategies, applying methods from journalism and mass communication research as well as from behavioural economics, to explore the social phenomena resulting from aggregated outcomes of individual decision-making.

## **Preview of the book**

As this brief academic history on media hype shows, there has been a steady and growing flow of research on self-reinforcing news dynamics and the impact of news waves on politics, social problems, and public opinion. The aim of this book is to bring together many of the above-mentioned scholars

together in one book. It presents a varied collection of current and new studies, covering different theoretical perspectives and methodologies as well as detailed case studies. With thirty-one authors from eleven different countries, this book has a truly international scope. Chapters are not only about international hypes and online storms, but also about specific national events, crises, and media. The book is organized into four thematic parts, although strict lines are hard to draw with authors touching upon the central topics.

Part I. *Theory, concepts, and methodology* addresses the fundamental theoretical questions regarding the definition of media hype and social amplification and the problem of disproportionality and exaggeration.

The Italian sociologist Marcello Maneri analyses in Chapter 1 (*Media hypes, moral panics and the ambiguous nature of facts. Urban security as discursive formation*) the problematic relationship between media hypes and the question of whether or not there is a real problem 'out there'. Using a rape panic in Rome as an example, Maneri shows how public concern about security is created by claims makers, media, and politics. and how this rhetoric creates new realities. Consequently, any claim of disproportionality becomes extremely difficult. The external indicators – normally used to confront public concern or media coverage – not only reflect the changes in definitions, but also create and reinforce them as well.

Chapter 2 (*News waves in a changing media landscape 1950-2014*) details how a Dutch group of researchers related to the Dutch News Monitor, Wouter van Atteveldt, Nel Ruigrok, Kasper Welbers, and Carina Jacobi, took on the phenomenal task of studying news waves over an extensive period of sixty-five years, from 1950 through 2014, in one particular Dutch newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, the newspaper with the largest circulation throughout those years. By using topic modelling methods, they were able to analyse about four million newspaper articles from these sixty-five years, measuring the amount, duration, and size of media hypes. Did news production routines change under the influence of the professionalization and commercialization of the press, as predicted by mediatization theories? And is there a shift from hard to soft news? The results are surprisingly counterintuitive: there is no increase in news waves and its shapes also turn out to be different. The authors justly point out the lack of a gold standard definition as a problem for validating the method used.

Chapter 3 (*The dynamics of media attention to issues. Towards standardizing measures, dimensions, and profiles*), written by the German researcher Stefan Geiß, explores in-depth the methodological questions that arise

when the pivotal aspects of issue dynamics have to be translated into a set of measurable variables, dimensions, or types. This chapter is a follow-up of his earlier mentioned paper on the shape of news waves. On the basis of criteria like spike momentum, issue baseline, spike frequency, and spike oscillation, he is able to profile types of issues: routine issues, flatline issues, struggling issues, launching issues, and bursting issues. This is a fruitful framework for studying explosive news waves and their impact on issue careers in the public domain.

Chapter 4 (*Hype, argumentation and scientific dissemination*) has a more philosophical approach. The Canadian philosopher Adam Auch focuses on what he describes as science hype, the sometimes alarmist, exaggerated, and hyperbolic media coverage of stunning discoveries or so-called revolutionary breakthroughs in science. Hying science in this way may undermine trust in science and scientist, because it triggers false hope, which is inevitably followed by disappointment. Auch also addresses the problem of value judgements, defining hype more in terms of the way messages are received by audiences. Several recommendations are offered to counter science hype.

Part II. *Anatomy of self-reinforcing dynamics: Case studies* offers four case studies from Belgium, Canada, Denmark, and Portugal respectively.

In Chapter 5 (*The mechanisms of media storms. Uncertainty correlates with imitation*), the Belgian political scholar Anne Hardy, part of a research group that has previously published on media storms (Boydston et al.), explores what is going on behind the scenes during a media storm. One round of interviews with reporters was conducted immediately after the terrorist attacks on the Brussels airport and subway on 22 March 2016. This chapter analyses the different motivations behind the news decisions, taken under pressure during a calamity. Media storm coverage lowers the thresholds for any related news and reinforces imitation, i.e. following the decisions of other news desks. But uncertainty is the intervening factor here: when uncertainty about what to do is low, so is imitation. The conclusion that uncertainty correlates with imitation is an important specification of media storm theory.

In Chapter 6, (*Much ado about nothing. Five media hypes in a comparative perspective*), the Danish professor in media and communication Charlotte Wien challenges another aspect of the media hype theory, the presumed impact of the media on the political agenda and government policies. Based on a comparative case study of five Danish media hypes on failing care centres for the elderly, she concludes that the media's influence is limited

and that hardly any political actions can be linked directly to the successive news waves. She also specifies the anatomy of the media hype by stressing the important role of sources and experts, who tend to deflate the hype by explaining the complexity of the case. This is comparable with the end of the euphoric stage in the issue attention cycle posited by Downs (1972).

In Chapter 7 (*From media wave to media tsunami. The 'Charter of Values' debate in Quebec, 2012-2014*), Colette Brin, Thierry Giasson, and Marie-Michèle Sauvageau from the Quebec research group on political communication apply their concept of media tsunami to a new study on the 'reasonable accommodations' controversy in Quebec. They show how the media, through successive waves of press coverage, each gaining in intensity and magnitude, amplified the importance of the issue of cultural accommodations for minorities and fuelled issues concerning diversity and integration. In this chapter, they highlight the decisive role of political actors in creating this tsunami. The 'charter of values' intended to end conflicts on accommodations failed and instead stimulated historic fears of cultural endangerment among the French majority in Quebec.

In Chapter 8, Gonçalo Pereira Rosa from the Portuguese Research Centre for Communication and Culture describes in detail in *How a small-scale panic turns into an unstoppable news wave about mass mugging on the beach* how the media, in interaction with political actors, turned a small incident on a Lisbon beach into a mass 'dragnet' attack carried out by black perpetrators. The incident was immediately described as an imitation of the mass muggings on Brazilian beaches, popularly known as 'arrastões'. Once this prototype was activated, any debunking information was ignored. Until saturation sets in, the media only tend to integrate information that is compatible with the dominant frame. This case study reveals the power of information circularity, especially when minority groups are involved associated a priori with deviant behaviour.

Part III. *Impact on issues, crises, and public opinion* explores the impact of intensive news waves on the construction of social issues and public opinion.

The Korean American policy research professor Ik Jae Chung reconstructs in his Chapter (*Dynamics of media hype. Interactivity of the media and the public*) the successive news waves in South Korea amplifying a risk issue: the building of a new tunnel with a high-speed railway. Social actors and hunger strikes played an important role in this process in terms of getting the attention of the media and the public. Online newspapers and the website message boards of social organizations worked as an open

arena for risk communication. The interaction between the media and the public apparently boosts amplification. Media hypes are often seen as solely self-referential, but Chung's conclusion is that, especially in an online communication environment, public attention or reaction to media hype is clearly a critical factor in explaining the beginning and the process of media hype.

Chapter 10 (*Why and how media storms affect front-line workers. Scandalized Danish crèches as an example*), contains a question that is often mentioned in debates on media waves, but is seldom the actual object of empirical research: what is the impact on professionals working in institutions scrutinized and pilloried by the media? Danish scholars Pernille Carlsson and Christian Elmelund-Præstekær set up a case study among pre-school teachers responding to scandalizing publications about day care centres as 'loveless storage' of toddlers. Although the teachers feel hurt professionally, the results also show that the public debate may serve as a positive contribution to reflection and improvement. Remarkably, the parents did not criticize their own pre-school workers, but showed support. However, they were still worried and needed reassurance. This chapter offers new theories on the direct and indirect impact of media storms at street level, still quite uncharted territory.

In Chapter 11 (*Media Hypes and Public Opinion. Human interest frames and hype fatigue*), the Norwegian researchers Audun Beyer and Tine Figenschou focus on the way the public evaluated the media hype following the planned deportation of a young, Russian immigrant. The young woman became the voice of illegal immigrants and, for the media, the personification of an immigration success story. Her arrest triggered a massive news wave lasting two weeks. The media framed these events mainly as a human interest story, focusing on the drama of the inevitable eviction and portraying her personal struggle in a highly emotional manner. Contrary to expectations, the Norwegian public turned out to be very critical of the coverage and, in particular, of the volume of the coverage, which was extensive. Moreover, people criticized the scope of the coverage focusing only on one person and taking sides in favour of the 'victim'. This shows that human interest stories may trigger hype fatigue among a critical public.

The last chapter in this part (*News waves generating attentionscapes. Opportunity or a public waste of time?*), from Estonian scholars Marianne Paimre and Halliki Harro-Loit, evaluates the impact of 'attentionscapes', generated by successive news waves, for the public debate on drugs and drugs trafficking. The long-term discourse on drugs has changed considerably: Estonian drugs smugglers serving long sentences in foreign countries

initially received positive support, but later the negative criminal aspects dominated. The attentionscapes created more awareness on the drug problem and influenced the policy agenda on drugs. Despite this, the sub-discourses that constructed drugs couriers as victims survived for a long time.

In Part IV (*Interactivity: The role of the social media*), the focus is on the new hybrid media landscape in which news media continuously interact with social media and the active audience. The German researcher Annie Waldherr is specialized in using computer simulation models to analyse the dynamics of issue attention and news waves. In her chapter (*Modelling issue attention dynamics in a hybrid media system*), she tries to incorporate the rise of the social media in her earlier developed agent-based model of the media area. By varying aspects such as heterogeneity of agents, attention thresholds, and local or global visions, she is able to analyse the dynamics of issue attention. Steep bursts of attention, for example, require quite homogeneous populations such as Twitter publics dominated by journalists. On the other hand, conditions such as lower diversity and local vision reduce the probability of waves. The agent-based simulation model offers new ways to explore the consequences of the expanding hybrid media system for the issue attention dynamics.

The next chapter (*You won't believe how co-dependent they are. Media hype and the interaction of news media, social media, and the user*), continues the exploration of the new media landscape. German researcher and journalist, Vivian Roese analyses how social media changed the news media and how their co-dependency impacts news flows and hypes. Social media have increased the viral potential of all kinds of news topics, including trivial events that previously would never have reached the thresholds of the prevailing news values. Other aspects such as emotion and *shareability* are often decisive in these accidental media hypes. Social media act as news providers, but, because their output is based on algorithms, the scope is limited and adapted to the previous choices of the users. The information flows in these filter bubbles may strongly deviate from what news media currently report on, fuelling distrust of the mainstream media.

Andrea Cerase and Claudia Santoro give a perfect example of the interaction between media and the social media by analysing the impact of racial hoaxes. In Chapter 15 (*From racial hoaxes to media hypes. Fake news' real consequences*), they show how these online hoaxes, designed to show how immigrants threaten public health, national security, and the state budget, penetrate the media and politics, sometimes triggering media hypes. Their

research is based on a collection of eighty-five hoaxes spanning two years, three of which are studied in detail. In forty-two cases, the hoax triggered the dynamics of media hype, while in others hoaxes intervened at a later stage, to exploit the media hype. Even in cases where the media succeed in debunking fake news, the hoax may still have consequences in public discourse. Part of the success of these hoaxes is the fact that they adopt the style and structure of the regular news report, generating an air of plausibility.

The final chapter (*Reputational damage in Twitter #hijack. Factors, dynamics, and response strategies for crowd sourced campaigns*), written by a Singapore-based research group – comprising Augustine Pang, Jeremiah Icanh Lim Limsico, Lishan Phong, Bernadette Joy Lopez Lareza, and Sim Yee Low – presents five international cases in which Twitter campaigns were hijacked, triggering negative firestorms and resulting in serious reputational damage. This chapter examines the dynamics of these hijacks and their breeding grounds: wrong timing, simmering issues and anger, poor choice of hashtags, and opportunities for activists. Hijacks tended to peak within hours of the launch, aggravated by influential Twitter users, internet activists, and online media interest. The authors discussed response strategies that organizations under fire can employ.

Reflecting on the chapters in this book as a whole, I am convinced that the variety in topics, case studies, and research questions will be useful for scholars, students, and professionals wondering what the drivers are for bursting attention waves, media hypes or Twitter storms in the new hybrid media landscape. While circumstances may differ, the fundamental research questions remain the same, hence the importance of having knowledge of the theoretical history and research into self-reinforcing news dynamics.

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## About the author

**Peter Vasterman** is media sociologist and assistant professor emeritus Media and Journalism at the Department of Media Studies of the University of Amsterdam. Defended his dissertation *Mediahype* in 2004 at the University of Amsterdam. Main research topics: media hypes, risk and media, media scandals, and mediated crises. Published in several Journals on risk topics (disasters; pandemics, UMTS and fine particles); digital scandals; copycat and cry wolf; Facebook riots; child (sexual) abuse and media framing; Journalism studies in the Netherlands, etc. He is a contributor to the Dutch daily, *NRC Handelsblad*.



**I.**

**Theory, concepts, and  
methodology**



# 1. Media hypes, moral panics, and the ambiguous nature of facts

Urban security as discursive formation

*Marcello Maneri*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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## Abstract

Concepts like media hype and moral panic are often studied through a juxtaposition of public concern and actual ‘reality’. Drawing on my previous studies on moral panics about urban security in Italy, I illustrate how opinion polls and data on crime – the usual indicators for disproportionality – are more the result of changing practices, priorities, and definitions than ‘real life’ indicators. Foucault’s idea of discursive formation helps us to see these supposedly objective indicators as embedded in the same phenomena they are supposed to measure from the outside. Nonetheless, as long as they are conceived as statistics interacting with the forces that mould them, they can be important for the analysis of media hypes and moral panics.

**Keywords:** moral panic, media hype, discursive formation, urban security, disproportion, social concern

Self-reinforcing news waves have always attracted not only scholars’, but also the public’s attention. The expression ‘media hype’ was used in popular debate before being conceptualized as a framework for research (Vasterman, 2005). Similarly, but in reverse, the concept of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 2002 [1972]; Hall et al., 1978; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009 [1994]) was introduced in scholarly work but ended up being widely used in public debates. This unrestricted interest in both ideas has not been only beneficial. Everyday concepts are typically loaded with value judgements and these theoretical models could be suspected of doing the same. Indeed, the concept of moral



panic has already been criticized on this basis (Waddington, 1986; Garland, 2008). The idea of moral panic, it has been argued, is often used to dismiss social problems that can be unimportant for the scholar, but which can be disturbing for the people involved.

Understandably, many authors tried to find empirical indicators in order to ground the 'hype idea' on a solid base. For example, several studies focused on scares about problems that eventually produced almost no damage. Others showed how the emergent alarming phenomenon that had triggered the panic, on the contrary, was declining. The contrast with 'objective facts' is often striking and gives the sensation of a fatal blow to the fault-finder. However, these external indicators of disproportion are not so easily available and may be affected by the news waves themselves, reflecting the hype as much as the 'facts'. A different strategy calls for the investigation of what the media (and their associates) precisely do, studying the various steps in the process of amplification (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995; Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Maneri, 2013a). Despite its undeniable merits, this approach does not look like a knock-out, leaving many researchers tempted to go back to the familiar 'reality on the ground'.

As I will try to argue below, without an adequate examination of the production of this 'external reality', i.e. of the construction of the data on crime, illness, or any other condition, there is a risk of falling into the ill-conceived alternative between the existence or non-existence of a real problem out there. Figures are rising? No media hype. They are shrinking? What media hype! Despite the interest of figures, to rely on them means to lose the grasp of the sociological nature of hypes and panics. Worse, it means the danger of naturalizing evidence that is the outcome of both hypes and panics. As moral panics and media hypes tend to emerge in series, and are generally part of deeper crises, they navigate in an agitated enunciative field (Foucault, 1969). The discursive formations that arise from that field give shape to new objects that interfere with the 'facts' and construct the world that the researcher would like to measure. The following pages are an attempt to explain this claim, building on what happened in Italy in the field of 'security'. Thinking of the problems foregrounded by hypes and panics in terms of discursive formations, where appropriate, helps to better see the issue of the relationship between facts and representations.

### Preamble: A ‘rape emergency’ in Rome

At the beginning of 2009, a series of rapes perpetrated in the city of Rome and its surroundings grabbed unprecedented public attention. While other similar episodes had not been given much consideration, if they were reported at all, four sexual assaults reached the front pages of national newspapers and received a prominent position and sensationalistic coverage in prime time TV news. In just a single national newspaper, the widely read and liberal *la Repubblica*, these four incidents totalled 308 articles in three months.

As Figure 1.1 shows, each new episode was reported with greater attention and gave the opportunity for thematically related follow-ups on the previous ones. The key event that triggered the news wave took place at a party organized by the municipality of Rome on New Year’s Eve. The circumstance and the moment explain the attention paid by the media. The following incidents, however, were perpetrated in anonymous, isolated areas: an abandoned periphery in the neighbourhood of Primavalle on 21 January, a secluded road in the Roman satellite town of Guidonia on 23 January, and a hidden corner in Caffarella park on 14 February.

Why did they become sensational news? Why in Rome and why in 2009? Rome’s mayor had been elected three months before with a campaign

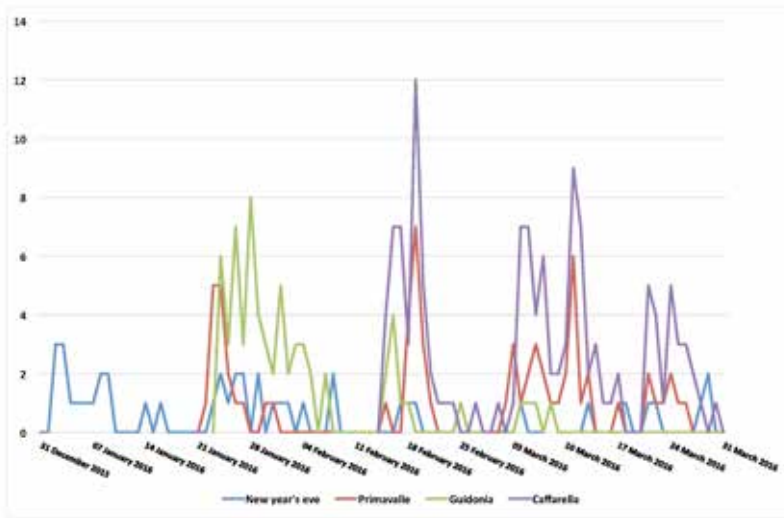


Figure 1.1. Coverage of four sexual assaults in *la Repubblica*, 1 January 2009-31 March 2009. Number of articles per day

centred on urban security and had already claimed a sharp reduction in crime with the use of zero-tolerance measures. So he could be easily attacked by his opponents for his failure. In other words, these episodes were politically viable, and not only for this reason. More importantly, the main target in his fight on crime was people from the Roma ethnic group.

Actually, none of the victims had accused a member of the Roma community of the assault. In the last three aggressions, they had described dark-skinned men with an Eastern European accent. The police soon directed its search towards people coming from Romania who, like Roma people, had been presented as a public danger<sup>1</sup> in recent times. One year before, the homicide in Rome of a woman by a Romanian citizen (of the Roma ethnic group) had become a national emergency. The outrage had triggered a political campaign on both sides of the political spectrum about the dangerousness of people from Romania. This led to the passing, in one day, of a Legislative Decree that made possible expulsions of Romanian citizens.<sup>2</sup> In part as a result of this episode, Roma and Romanians were often confused by the media and the public. The Roma/Romanian represented the stereotypical villain and his misconduct raised the greatest social alarm and deserved the toughest measures.

After three weeks of a search for the culprits, the two initial (Romanian) suspects of the Caffarella park incident had to be released. But the DNA found on the victim, interpreted as 'confirm[ing] that the nationality is Romanian',<sup>3</sup> was used to justify a narrow investigation: the perpetrators had to be Romanian. The media emphasis on the suspects' origin confirms the same framing: merging victims' testimonies, popular reaction, and source statements, newspapers and TV news foregrounded foreign origin as a source of danger, fear, and anger. Headlines included: 'Patrols and baseball bats: Primavalle, it's open season on Romanians' (*Ronde e mazze da baseball. Primavalle, è caccia ai romeni*, 24 January); 'Guidonia, immigrant hunting' (*Guidonia, caccia agli immigrati*, 27 January), and 'Rape, here's Romanians' hideout' (*Stupro, ecco il covo dei romeni*, 29 January).

As in the previous year, the political reaction was swift and muscular. Two ministers (from the xenophobic party *Lega Nord*) demanded castration for rapists, chemical or surgical. An 'anti-rape Decree' passed on 23 February 2009,<sup>4</sup> strengthening measures against sexual assailants, stalkers and, yes, immigrants. More interestingly, the spectacular clearance of informal settlements (often inhabited by Roma families) was widely publicized, despite the absence of any direct link between Roma and rapists. Then, after three months, the attention on rape cases gradually faded away. As it turned out, the first two episodes had been invented, but that revelation received little attention.

## Media hypes and moral panics: Similarities and differences

The ‘rape emergency’ of 2009 is a typical case of media hype. A key event triggers media attention and a news theme (Fishman, 1978) is established. Subsequently, every incident or declaration that can confirm the news theme is given more attention than usual, starting a consonant news wave; the latter rises suddenly and fades away gradually. The number of news reports is not related to the frequency of actual events, but it is the result of the lowering of the threshold of newsworthiness, which leads to the massive reporting of thematically-related episodes, features, and opinions. The wave is also the outcome of the interaction of the media with other relevant social actors, like politicians, public officials, grassroots groups, and experts.

At the same time, this ‘emergency’ is also a clear instance of a moral panic episode, where a condition, or a group of persons

emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values [...] its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion [...], moral barricades are manned by editors, [...] politicians and other right-thinking people [...] ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears (Cohen, 2002).

The model of moral panic was developed in the fields of Criminology and Sociology of Deviance, and, with some exceptions (Maneri, 2001, 2013a; Chritcher, 2003), it dedicates little attention to the mechanisms that generate, propagate, and dissolve a news wave. However, this body of research showed very effectively how the media can suddenly stir up public indignation towards a deviant group in a process of collective stigmatization, declaring a high level of threat with graphic vocabulary, and leading frequently to exceptional punitive and preventive measures.

If media hypes amplify the representation of a problem – in that the public tends to believe that the greater the number of news reports, the greater the seriousness of the condition (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995) – then when they build on a sense of moral outrage, qualifying as a moral panic, their social effects may well be more important. The public, on behalf of which the news media speak, is not only worried (as in the case of a dreaded bird flu pandemic), but also indignant. To the public’s expectation of protection is added a self-righteous wrath against those who violate our norms, and a call for punishment of a generalized ‘other’. This emotional activation can be a powerful social force, one that has been manipulated in well-known episodes in history.

## Open issues: Disproportion and public concern

What makes media hypes and moral panics so interesting is their creative power, their ability to amplify and, especially in the second case, to mobilize. From the beginning, what attracted much attention was the disproportion between the nature of the actual threat and the amplitude of the societal reaction. As disproportion and concern are two central but controversial ideas in both sociological models, I will dedicate some space to their examination.

The risk with the idea of disproportion is to take the sociologist's evaluation of the harm and her concern about it as the reference point for judgements about the correct representation of a social phenomenon, or about 'reasonable concern' over a particular condition. This family of critiques, frequent in the moral panic debate (Waddington, 1986; Watney, 1987; Ungar, 2001; Cornwell & Linders, 2002), led to attempts at finding indicators that could be used to assess whether the portrayal and the concern about a threat are disproportionate. Among the indicators proposed by scholars are the statistical trend of the deviant behaviour, the attention paid to the condition as compared to that paid at another point in time, and the exaggeration and fabrication of figures. The first indicator, the comparison between representation and 'hard facts', is very attractive for its objective flavour, but often difficult to manage. If a moral panic is successful, it will unleash a repressive tide, influence the perception of the public, and stimulate the reporting of the crime, thereby affecting statistics that will eventually measure a blend of deviant behaviour and reactions to it. In addition, as Young (2011) pointed out with respect to illegal drug use, the construction of a dangerous problem and its criminalization can create a secondary harm that is greater than the primary harm. For example, it can harden the original deviance so that the societal reaction can appear proportionate to the present condition, but out of all proportion if we consider the original situation.

In sum, the productive nature of moral panics may make the idea of 'objective' facts ambiguous, something to which I will return later. Even when empirical data on deviant behaviour seem to corroborate the researcher's perception of disproportion, they should be handled with prudence. In the 'rape emergency' in Rome, for example, the prime minister declared that rapes were decreasing and yet the government had to intervene because of the clamour. So, we could say that the clamour was disproportionate. But how reliable are crime statistics that, in the case of the rape crime, are estimated to record only about nine per cent of actual sexual assaults? And what about place, time, and circumstances: is four rapes in Rome in the first

two months of the year perpetrated by strangers more than usual, less, or about the same? Clearly, the claim of a crisis may find empirical support in many ways, and in as many ways the sociologist can dismiss it. Objective data can have very subjective meanings.

The other indicators mentioned before do not make reference to 'objectively recorded' deviant behaviour, but instead to what the media do. Do they adopt alarmist and emotive tones, hyperbole, prominent headlines? Do they use ad hoc evidence (statistics, summaries of episodes) to convey a sense of crisis, or do they hysterically demand tough measures? Do they change their standards of newsworthiness, selecting and highlighting what in routine news making is, in comparison, downplayed or overlooked? The analysis of media behaviour and language, together with the examination of the self-reinforcing news wave, does not make any reference to the correspondence of the message to 'objective reality'. While the search for 'objective facts' tends to cage the researcher into a forced alternative, i.e. between saying that something is the source of justified concern or that it is socially constructed (meaning 'fake'), when we analyse the media and other social actors' reciprocally oriented actions, a rise in deviant behaviour may or may not be there. Nevertheless, in both cases the 'problem' is socially constructed, i.e. actively shaped. It is precisely the nature, background, and consequences of this construction that deserve to be addressed.

Since both media hypes and moral panics revolve around a problem, it is reasonable to think that there should be somebody concerned about it. Indeed, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) considered public concern as a necessary attribute for the researcher in order to speak of a moral panic. However, both the amount and nature of concern and, above all, *whose* concern we are talking about is often taken for granted, implying deep and widespread concern among the public or society as a whole. Nevertheless, the media, public officials, activists, and public opinion are different entities that may have diverse levels of concern. In addition, worry, outrage, fear – generally conflated in the single concept of concern (or fear) – are different emotions and indicators developed to measure each of them could give rise to different results.

That the media and moral entrepreneurs in general are concerned is easy to see: they mobilize. Whether they are genuinely worried or instrumentally riding the issue of the month is another thing, as difficult to investigate as it is scarcely useful to understand the overall dynamic. But whether and how the public is concerned is an interesting sociological question, because it is in its name that troops are rallied, and how much the public is bothered is a key legitimization in any speech or intervention. Surely enough, the public

is claimed to be worried, scared, outraged. The public, as it is explicitly or implicitly represented in the media and in public statements, is concerned. But what about what real people actually think?

People could be more or less worried or scared. Some of them surely are, others are not. In the short term, an important fraction of the public could be, or could not be, influenced by the media representation of the events, but after the wave disappears it could just as well forget about the concerning events. So is public concern a long-lasting consequence of moral panics and media hypes or just a close and volatile mirror of media waves? Is it even an independent variable in the process? The role of concern in the dynamic of a moral panic should always be addressed and so should its temporal trend. However, in this case as well, objective indicators are less objective than their usual treatment would suggest. I will return to this problem below, but before doing this it is necessary to introduce a new conceptual framework.

### **Repeated hypes and panics as discursive formation**

An important point to take into account is the fact that often moral panics appear in series, in connection to fundamental changes in societies that bring about problems in the social order. The targeted condition and group relate closely to underlying anxieties (Cohen, 2002), which are a symptom of disruptive change (Young, 2009). Since the early 1990s at least, particularly in Europe, migrants have assumed the unenviable role of the salient folk devil. To put it simply, they symbolize what is wrong with so-called globalization. From below, they can be seen as the cause of the end of a perceived symbolic order. From above, they can provide an occasion to rally popular consent, by displacing concerns and fears onto them, to delegitimize the ruling majority or, on the part of the government, to re-legitimize itself.

Repeated moral panics and the residue they leave – in terms of rumours, coalitions, priorities, institutional practices, and norms – are the surface manifestations of power relations that set the conditions of existence, or ‘enunciative field’, for what Foucault (1969) called a discursive formation. With this expression, he meant a system of connected discourses conveying ideas, attitudes, and courses of action that systematically construct their objects and the worlds of which they speak. In other words, moral panics are often part of, and instrumental to, a wider, new framework for making sense of and dealing with something that concerns a given community. The new discursive formation provides patterns of sensitive issues, perspectives, concepts, and themes that constrain the range of current truths.

As I will claim in the next section, this has happened in Italy (and elsewhere) with regard to the discourse on urban security. The discourse on security became the framework to interpret and handle the presence of a new immigrant population, establishing a set of priorities, ideas, objects, and categories that shaped the way social reality could be understood. Returning to the issues left open in the moral panic debate, in this 'enunciative field', public representations and reactions are not simply 'disproportionate', and concern and fear are not merely more or less widespread, because it is the very way society defines and deals with 'a new problem' that is at stake. All data at that point are deeply embedded in the new discursive formation, be it in the form of opinion polls or media coverage. Analysis of the discourse and practices on security clarifies this point.

### The discursive formation on 'security' in Italy

Discourse on urban security emerged gradually in Italy. Beginning in the late 1980s, a series of protests were organized by groups of residents in the streets against such phenomena as prostitution, drug dealing, and selling of merchandise, as well as against the mere presence of settlements of immigrants or of Roma. These mobilizations did not receive much consideration by politicians and the media until, in 1990, the first comprehensive law on immigration was discussed in parliament. From then on, immigration would be a political issue, one that allowed political parties to distinguish themselves in relation to an important topic.

At this point, protesters were courted by mayors, political parties, and local officials, who zealously proposed remedies for problems that the media were presenting using graphic language and Us-Them rhetoric. Their solutions were tough and ostentatious. In concert with law enforcement, they organized police roundups and raids and, in particular, pursued a policy of eradication with regard to immigrant encampments. These sweeps, in turn, became news events themselves and confirmed the peril posed by the individuals involved.

When Italy joined the Schengen agreement in November 1990, European authorities were calling for a strengthening of controls at the Area's borders. Illegal immigration was becoming the privileged target of police operations, both at the frontiers and in areas associated with immigrants. Illegal migrants, or '*clandestini*' as they were named, were the most convenient point of intervention in situations that were often in between marginality and deviance. Not only did their illegal status permit their administrative



expulsion for behaviours that often were not crimes, but when they did commit crimes, this illegality permitted the authorities to proceed without having to deal with a complicated gathering of judicial evidence (Quassoli, 2013). '*Clandestini*' soon became the quintessential Other.

For many years, following cycles that tended to become most energetic in proximity to election season, sheriff-mayors, rabble-rousing activists, and other moral entrepreneurs of insecurity expanded their radius of action, fulminating against 'illegal street vendors', 'traffic light window washers', 'street pirates', 'foreign-born muggers', and 'Albanian/Roma/Romanian rapists'. This hysteric turmoil took place in a period of dramatic financial crises. Italy had to exit the European Monetary System in 1992 due to repeated currency attacks from international speculators, and then had to fight hard to meet the requirements to enter the Euro zone. The unrest was also a symptom of a legitimization crisis for the political elite: the '*Tangentopoli*' corruption scandal between 1992 and 1994 had wiped out all the parties that had been governing for thirty-five years. Going after 'what the people want', in this situation, was seen as an effective means of replacing people's fears and contempt with popular support.

Beginning in the second half of the 1990s, what had often been a local issue became established on a national level, in daily news reports, television coverage, and political debate. Individual episodes reported in the news were connected thematically and transformed into national crisis situations quickly framed as 'immigration emergencies.' Moral panics began to spread: an 'invasion' of 'fake refugees from Albania', several 'rape alarms', a 'homicide emergency', and so on.

The 2001 electoral campaign opened with the theme of 'security'. The posters of the candidates from the two principle parties read: 'More security for all' (Berlusconi, centre-right) and 'Everyone has the right to be safe. My duty is to guarantee that right. The law should apply equally to everyone; stop the traffic of illegals; speed up our system of justice' (Rutelli, centre-left). The climax was reached with the beginning of the 2008 election season. At that point, representatives of the Democratic Party (centre-left) began to repeat, whenever possible, such slogans as 'security is everybody's business', 'security is the fundamental right that underlies all others', and '[security] isn't a left-wing or a right-wing idea', in an attempt to gain ground on a topic that had become decisive and had always been their opponent's signature song.

As Figure 1.2 shows, 'urban decay' and 'security' became, in the course of a few years, an inescapable refrain. In the *Corriere della Sera*, one of the two major national newspapers, these terms were employed in twenty to thirty

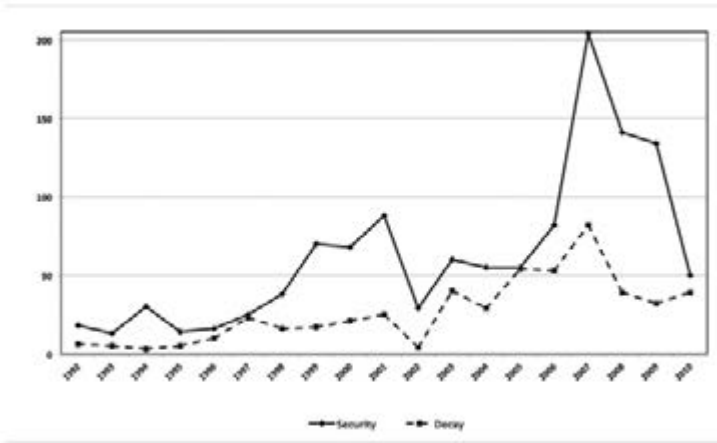


Figure 1.2. Frequency of the words ‘urban decay’ and ‘security’ as problems of petty crime and immigration in headlines from Corriere della Sera 1992-2010. Absolute values

headlines per year in the first half of the 1990s, but nearly three times that amount in the second half of the decade. In the critical three years between 2007-2009, the incidence of headlines containing these terms was nearly ten times greater than it had been a decade earlier.<sup>5</sup> In the election year 2008, ‘urban decay’ and ‘security’ appeared in 286 headlines – essentially, once a day with weekends off.

What is no less important is the mutation of the meanings assigned to these terms. At the beginning of the 1990s, the word ‘security’ (*‘sicurezza’*) was used in the context of potential dangers in transportation, public buildings, and construction sites or was related to the risk of terrorist acts. ‘Decay’ (*‘degrado’*) meanwhile, had to do with the presence of garbage or the deterioration of public infrastructure. An extremely different meaning of the term ‘decay’ – one that barely existed for the entire preceding decade – began to take precedence during the second half of the 1990s. In that period, the term ‘decay’ came to be used, almost without exception, to refer to the degeneration of the urban landscape and the threats to residents’ safety (security) caused by the presence of immigrants, Roma, the homeless, drug addicts and prostitutes, petty criminals, and late-night noise.

The term ‘security’ was also transformed, in a process that took a bit longer but was quantitatively more relevant. If we consider the ordinances issued

by various city mayors beginning in 2007 (later regulated by a 5 August 2008 Ministerial Decree that granted mayors additional powers to provide for urban security) and the production of legislative measures (so-called security packages approved in 2008 and 2009), what becomes visible is the way in which the concept of security, even in a general expansion of the sphere of repressive legal responses, constitutes a clearly delimited object. From the entire universe of phenomena that could threaten security – even in the limited sense of physical safety – the entities that are pinpointed are *'clandestini'*, Roma, and rapists (targeted by national laws), along with drug dealers, itinerant merchants, traffic-light window washers, beggars, the homeless, squatters, prostitutes, and young people who threaten public decorum and disturb the peace (drawn from an impressive number of mayoral ordinances – at least 508 in a seven-month period, see Cittalia-Fondazione Anci ricerche, 2009). All of these are categories clearly associated in the public mind with the presence of immigrants.

To summarize, in the context of a political conjuncture characterized by crisis, instability, and the establishment's delegitimization, most politicians, media, grass-roots groups, and public officials formed a short circuit of reciprocal pressures<sup>6</sup> that identified immigration, and associated phenomena, as the principal threat to security and tranquillity. A set of new objects – simultaneously abstract and concrete – was created, namely 'insecurity' and 'decay', associated with 'illegals' and their threat to ordinary people and 'decorum'. These objects were the coordinates of a 'surface of emergence' (Foucault, 1969) for 'new' problems that were put at the centre of public preoccupations. In order to deal with these newly objectified problems, an impressive apparatus of police operations, law enforcement reorganizations, legislative and administrative measures was deployed. All these practices offered sites of visibility through which immigration could be made sense of and spoken about.

This web of power/knowledge relations imposed undisputable priorities and correlated 'realities', thus establishing a 'regime of truth', i.e. rules of formation for a discursive statement, conditions according to which a statement will be deemed true. A regime of truth operates by rules of exclusion: it limits the objects that can be spoken of, the position from where one may speak, who may speak, and how.

As far as objects were regarded, the inclusion in security discourse of a limited set of offences and of a restricted set of culprits implied the exclusion of other crimes and perpetrators. The definition of urban security was a veritable masterpiece in the creation of its own world. Sustained from the beginning by an array of metaphors – such as the 'invasion', 'flood',

'assault', or 'conquest' of a 'besieged' community that had become a 'hunting ground' for petty criminals – the idea of security changed definition and metaphorical trappings when the image of an unprecedented surge of street crime had to be abandoned after several years of declining crime figures. The politicians who admitted that 'objective insecurity' could not be described as an emergency were glad to discover, on the other side of the ocean, the concept of 'perceived insecurity'. If objective reality was not there, a subjective reality was, and deserved attention. Thus, the problem was smartly redefined as 'demand' or 'need' for 'security'. A new set of metaphors was ready for the occasion: 'An unsettling spectre is haunting Italy. It is insecurity. Dense and severe enough to border on fear' (*la Repubblica*, 6 November 2007). In the 2000s, 'social alarm', 'fear', which 'floods', 'spreads like a virus', is a 'nightmare', and 'holds hostage the country' was the new thing.

In this democracy of security, those authorized to speak are 'the people' (i.e. what has been constructed as public opinion) and those who study them (accredited scholars, but especially pollsters), who act as spokespersons for them (the media), who represent or embody them (the political elite), and who protect them (control agencies). Starting from this community of victims,<sup>7</sup> bearers of a 'right to security', the subjects' positions are clearly defined: *We* fear and ask for protection, while *They* threaten us, 'bring decay', offend decorum, and must respect legality. *We* includes both those who have the duty to offer protection and those who ask for it; as the Minister of the Interior declared on the front page of *Corriere della sera*, 'The time for firmness has come. Let us be free from fear' (16 May 2008). Firmness is the only legitimate attitude: 'The best politician, in the field of security, is the one who talks less and starts counting how many uniforms the State has at its disposal and thinking about how to place them on the battlefield to win the war for the right to security' (*la Repubblica*, 20 April 2008).

### Disproportion and concern reconsidered

After illustrating how security became a discursive formation and instituted a regime of truth in Italy, I would like to return to the issues left open in the discussion on moral panics and media hypes. As we have seen, the discourse on security and its correlated enunciative field construct the worlds of which they speak and in which social actors operate. This affects the whole organization of society and the way objects are treated, perceived, shaped, and counted.

The search for objective indicators of disproportion – the first of the two questions tackled above – is clearly affected by the changes in this fact-producing apparatus. In the case of security for example, looking for empirical indicators would entail using crime figures. The problems with crime figures are too numerous and complex to be dealt with here. Suffice it to say that the police and the judiciary can adjust their routines, especially when under pressure, to attribute and record certain types of crime more generously – when they want to show their diligence – or less generously – when the aim is to reassure. As well as discretionary, social actors may be productive. When a condition is perceived as disturbing, both citizens and the police will be more willing to denounce and to intervene. All of this affects criminal statistics.

Just how much agencies of control can change their way of operating in times of moral panic is evident in their own communication strategies. In 1994, a coordinated plan to introduce special squads in Italian cities was announced. The aim of these forces was to intervene in areas where ‘there is the need to contain episodes linked to petty crime, to drug dealing, and to the presence of *extracomunitari* [non EU citizens] who don’t behave according to the rules of civil coexistence’ (*Corriere della Sera*, 28 October 1994). In 1999, to make clarify things further, the vice-chief of the police in Milan announced the creation of a special section that would deal

exclusively with foreign crime. We will have a different approach however: we won’t handle cases by type of crime anymore (a robbery to the robbery section, a homicide to the homicide section) but by criminal groups [...] We will take care of the Chinese in their totality, or of what Slavs do, or of the type of criminal behaviour of Albanians (*Corriere della Sera*, 9 May 1999).

In many cities in the 2000s, local police websites began to feature the responsibilities of their urban security departments. They claimed to contend not only with people charged with the illegal or stigmatized behaviours associated with ‘urban decay’ – such as residing in unauthorized camps, begging, illegal street vending, and windshield washing – but also with inherently problematic people like *extracomunitari* and the inhabitants of ‘Roma camps’.

However, moral panics often target deviance that is not yet classified as crime. It is precisely the attempt to bring a behaviour or a group under the arm of the law that is the purpose of moral entrepreneurs. In these cases, we do not have discretion or proactivity, but rather the production of new

offences. Consider, as an example, one of the many ordinances issued by mayors from 2007 onwards, entitled ‘Measures Intended to Combat Urban Decay: Anti-mendacity’ (Milan, 4 November 2008). It reads:

Note having been taken of the widespread incidence of begging, practiced in a disagreeable or harassing manner [...] [and] the elimination of this grave danger and threat to public safety and urban security being considered necessary, especially in light of the clear offense such a phenomenon constitutes to public decency and the grave nuisance it poses to the free and normal use of public space, as well as of the escalation of criminality [...] it shall henceforth be illegal [...].

This administrative measure takes on board the equation between marginality and threat to public safety – via offence to public decency – that was one of the main features of the discourse on security, creating a new administrative offence (with many others). The researcher, here, does not have statistics on the matter (although they could become available at this point), but what should she measure? The number of beggars, their dangerousness, how many fines will be finally given? What is disproportion here, if not a matter for social critique?

The typical continuous expansion of perceived threats makes the question ‘what should I count?’ less important than the close description of what social actors do. When discursive formations create new objects, or subsume old ones under their logic, it is often not the quantity of episodes that matters but the strategies of definition, which operate, to borrow Foucault’s metaphor again, as surfaces of emergence. Consider mental illness. Nuts are always the same, the layman could think. But in the year 2008, in order to deal with the problem of mental illness, the municipality of Milan instituted a ‘Table for the prevention of social dangerousness’ inviting, beside health authorities, three different police forces, empowered to administer a *T.S.O.* (compulsory mental treatment) because ‘social dangerousness is directly linked to citizens’ need for and perception of security’. This shift in whose is the problem and who should be protected is a definitional move that originates from an overall change of perspective. Although there was no media hype about mental illness, the wide array of similar moves is as much a symptom of underlying modifications of social order as are the hypes and panics that feed on the same transformations.

The battlefield of words is the place where strategic victories take place, while statistics are, at best, just reserves. Moral entrepreneurs of insecurity in Italy got it when they gave up counting crimes and insisted on perceived insecurity instead.

Actually, they did not give up counting; they just changed topic. For opinion polls on 'fear' were the pillars, together with hypes and panics, upon which a wide range of actors built the idea of the flooding of insecurity. From the second half of the 1990s to the end of the 2000s, every few months an opinion poll showing a rise in concern about crime was made public and widely commented upon. What I want to claim now is that widespread concern (and in general public opinion) is more an object of the new discursive formation than a genuine social phenomenon, an 'active' and independent ingredient in moral panics and media hypes.

A few headlines can give the idea of what reading of concern was presented in the mainstream media: 'Crimes go down but people are afraid' (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 February 2001); 'One Italian out of four does not feel safe' (*il Giornale*, 4 April 2003); 'The insecurity of the armoured man' (*la Repubblica*, 27 November 2005); 'Half the country is hostage to fear' (*la Repubblica*, 6 November 2007); 'Italy's Fears' (*la Repubblica*, 9 November 2008). The mass-mediologist is already thinking that this is the result of the media's desire to give the news more impact. But, in fact, the reports of the research institutes who did the polls conveyed the same idea, sometimes even using the same language.

However, if one looks at the only widely used indicator for which a long-term trend is available, the curve is actually rather flat (Figure 1.3).

How could pollsters see a rise in fear everywhere? Even in times when the trend was decreasing, the most general approach<sup>8</sup> was to take a snapshot and comment on how many people felt 'fear', even if many more did not

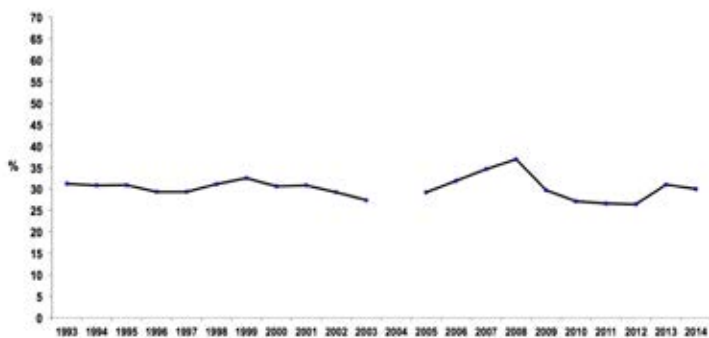


Figure 1.3. Percentage of people who consider the area where they live 'much' or 'somewhat' at risk of crime, 1993-2014

'fear'. For example, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), in 2010, commented in its report that 'individual fear regards a high percentage of citizens. 28.9 per cent feels little or not at all safe when they go out alone or it is dark' (ISTAT, 2010). What about the other 71.1 per cent? Do they feel safe? They are so disregarded that they are not even presented in the table. Insecurity, and not confidence, is the hype of the decade.

In times of scarcity, one might think that pollsters do not want to disappoint the media, which are, together with political parties, the most frequent sponsors of this kind of study. They could hardly present the media with a 'no news' finding like 'Security? Nothing to observe'. But ISTAT, unlike other organizations that carry out opinion polls, is a public body and receives no commissions. Nonetheless, its practice is deeply embedded in the power relations that are part of the discursive formation on security. Be it political influence, perceived obligation to study the current social problems, or incorporation of commonsensical ideas and concepts, research institutes tend not only to interpret data in accordance with hegemonic discourse, but also to produce it likewise. For instance, beginning in 1999, just when the hype on urban decay was on the rise, ISTAT started asking its interviewees periodically if they happened to perceive episodes of 'social decay'. The list of episodes includes 'people who take drugs, deal, or leave syringes on the ground', 'beggars and homeless people', 'acts of vandalism against public property', and 'prostitutes looking for clients'. The list matches exactly the new meaning of urban decay that was appearing in media (and political) discourse in the second half of the 1990s (Figure 2.2).

The media, grass-roots activists, main political parties, and experts (including academics, whose publications on urban security closely followed the trend of public discourse)<sup>9</sup> all constructed the same taken-for-granted idea of insecurity. In this context, indicators of public concern, outrage, or fear<sup>10</sup> can no longer be seen as external empirical data, because the new paradigm influences poll commissioning, question framing, respondents' meaning attribution, and pollsters' interpretations. Rather than what people exactly think, close examination of these studies reveals important processes of definition, or the daily crafting of public opinion.

## Concluding remarks

I concluded my preliminary discussion of 'public concern' by asking whether it can be seen as a long-lasting consequence of moral panics and media hypes, as a close and volatile mirror of media waves, or as an independent



variable in the process. If we rely on the indicators used in Figures 2.2 and 2.3, we see a 400 per cent increase between the years 2005 and 2007 in the discourse on security – as measured by mentions of the word in the headlines – and a rise in the share of ‘concerned’ respondents from 29.2 to 36.9 per cent between the years 2005 and 2008. Although the two measurements are not comparable, the two figures seem to suggest that people’s opinions followed in far less dramatic a way the media hype on security, but did not last.

However, what this case study intends to illustrate is that public concern – ‘insecurity’ in our case study – can be better understood as a new approach to definition that affects the everyday practices of a number of interacting social actors. Concern is an activity (of concerned claim makers); a topic (of media discourse); an assumption or a legitimizing argument (for politicians); and a new trendy topic (for experts). Above all, concern, fear, and outrage should be seen as rhetoric, and as a performance whose social power lies in its being made public. The role of the media in the reification of concern is of utmost importance. Whether they speak as champions of ‘civil society’, quote or promote public opinion polls, publish timely interviews of concerned people, refer to specific complaints, petitions, or reactions using generalizations like ‘the city’, ‘the neighbourhood’, ‘the people’, what the media do is to construct a simulacrum of public opinion, to which politicians and experts promptly respond. Opinion polls could appear to confirm public fear only because they were part of the regime of truth established within the discursive formation on security. Concern, in this context, cannot be distinguished from the new language used to talk about urban security. A language that promotes fear as a framework for understanding and talking about a growing array of topics, borrowing a perspective already well-established in the United States (Glassner, 1999; Altheide, 2002).

Something very similar can be said about ‘disproportion’. The discretion, proactivity, or re-organization of control agencies add to the inflation of the cases that will show up in crime figures. By the same token, the securitization of the problem brings an expansion of the behaviours classified under its umbrella, creating new objects or re-framing older ones. In more general terms, the whole field changes under the scope of the new discursive formation: the actual behaviours as well as how they are perceived, treated, and classified. The identification of a threat rests on a shifting ground of definitions and is a matter of definition itself.

In this situation, the call to examine external empirical indicators in order to assess the nature of media representations and social reactions – to establish whether they are reasonable answers or ‘just moral panics’/ ‘the

usual media hypes' – is extremely difficult to answer, and it can even be misleading. In social sciences, empirical indicators are used when they appear, after careful examination, to be valid, i.e. to be grounded in the real phenomenon the researcher wants to observe. If they are found to measure something else, either the indicator or the concept is reformulated. Similarly, in the case of repeated media hypes and moral panics, if the ground is so mobile that external indicators seem to measure, more than anything, processes of definition and of attribution, they should be conceived as such.

This should not be seen as a defeat of the scientific enterprise, because in these cases the enquiry on the nature and the strategies of meaning-making is the most straightforward and consequent research approach. The dynamic of news waves and the criteria of selection and framing, the intensity and symbolic degree of politicians' and public officials' reaction, the spreading of disaster metaphors and emotive language – all of this is empirical data that can give an accurate picture of what is going on.

It is tempting to argue that this programme represents a departure from the study of reality, engaging self-indulgently with the deconstruction of discourse. But discourse is part of reality and has a deep influence, as we have seen, on social practices that affect the lives of many people. In addition, the analysis of discursive processes does not exclude, and instead must be combined with, the study of external empirical indicators, as long as the latter are seen in their interaction with the forces that mould them. More investigation needs to be done in this respect, as opinion polls and official statistics are too often taken at face value, instead of being analysed for what they are: interactive kinds,<sup>11</sup> the outcome of social scientific classifications that become material realities, embedded in social practice and interacting with human objects and institutions through looping effects. Data record while they create, and are significantly modified according to the definitional practices prevailing at a given time. Those who collect data, adopting these changing definitions and their emphases, are part of society themselves and deeply involved in its power-knowledge relations. This is true for the scholar as well, who can no longer claim to stay outside reality, looking in. Nevertheless, she can confront dominant discourses starting from a different standpoint. Which has the advantage of questioning taken for granted ideas, instead of relying on them.

## Notes

1. This exposure culminated in the declaration of a State of Emergency in relation to Roma settlements on 21 May 2008.

2. Romania was already part of the EU, so the Decree was illegitimate and was never converted into a Law.
3. *Corriere on line*, 5 March, quoted in Naletto (2009).
4. The Decree was converted into a Law on 23 April 2009.
5. Calculating the sum of the two terms and considering solely those meanings that were tied to immigration as illustrated below.
6. For an analysis of the discursive and social dynamics of that short circuit, see Maneri (1998).
7. For the central role of victims in contemporary discourse of fear, see Garland (2001), Altheide (2002), and Simon (2008).
8. For a more detailed analysis of opinion polls on security in Italy, see Maneri (2013b).
9. See Maneri (2013b) on how the cross-correlation between the trend of the use of the word in the media and of the keyword 'urban security' in the academic database Google Scholar is very close, with the academic trend lagging the media trend by two to three years. Exactly how scholars talked about urban security is another question, which would benefit from critical analysis. The scholars who appeared frequently in the media, however, clearly echoed the dominant framework.
10. The distinction between concern about crime, fear of crime, and opinions about crime was never considered in mediatized polls and only rarely in public opinion research reports.
11. I am borrowing the expression introduced by Hacking (2000), although with a different application.

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## About the author

**Marcello Maneri** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Milano Bicocca where he teaches media and cultural sociology. His research focuses on news and power, racism, public discourse on crime and security, and moral panics. He recently published 'From media hypes to moral panics: Theoretical and methodological tools' (2013), 'Media discourse on immigration. Control practices and the language we live by' (2011). He is currently writing a book, with Ann Morning, on the notions of cultural and biological difference in Italy and the United States.

## 2. News waves in a changing media landscape 1950-2014

*Wouter van Atteveldt, Nel Ruigrok, Kasper Welbers, and Carina Jacobi*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018  
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### Abstract

Over time the number of news waves seem to be increasing. Due to intensified competition, journalists are increasingly responding to stories in other media and audience preferences, at the expense of stories on political issues. By using the digitalized archive of the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, news waves were automatically identified in the four million articles from 1950-2014. Contrary to expectations, the amount of news waves has not increased linearly since the 1950s, but shows a U-curve, with more waves in the 1950s than in the 1970s. Political content in news waves peaked in the 1990s. The general shape of news waves consists of a small lead, a sharp and narrow peak, and a slow decline.

**Keywords:** measuring news waves, automatic text analysis, political communication, Dutch journalism

### Introduction

In recent years, numerous studies have investigated the dynamics of media hypes, media storms, and news waves (Boydston et al., 2014; Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Djerf-Pierre, 2012). Although most authors agree on a loose definition of a wave, storm, or hype as a sudden burst of attention for a topic, there is no consensus on one of the most important criteria of 'hypes', namely that the amount of attention is excessive or unwarranted by the real events. This lack of an objective norm about how much media attention should be devoted to an event, makes it difficult to define when media attention is excessive.

A key assumption in the study of news waves is the self-referential nature of media attention. If media coverage were a pure mirror of reality, the amount of attention to an issue would naturally follow events and real-world developments around that issue. Media attention, however, is also guided by the media's need to 'tell a good story' (Wolfsfeld, 2014), leading to issue attention cycles where an issue bursts into attention after a key event, later fading again as all relevant arguments are made and new issues demand attention (Downs, 1972; Zhu, 1992). This intra-media cycle is reinforced by intermedia effects as journalists look to each other to reinforce their sense of news (Cook, 2006). Finally, there are positive feedback loops with audience and (political) sources, as journalists want to write about issues high on the public and political agenda, but this agenda is shaped (and gauged) by the media attention itself. These three positive feedback processes of intra-media, intermedia, and extra-media dynamics reinforce each other, leading to the self-referential spikes of attention defined as news waves.

In keeping with mediatization theory (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014), the self-referential nature of journalism is expected to have increased in the last decade. The storytelling, intermedia, and audience feedback loops identified above are all essential parts of media logic (Altheide, 2004), which is assumed to have increased over time with increasing media independence and commercialization (Asp, 2014). The fierce competition among (new) media outlets means that resources and time investments shrink and journalists increasingly tend to focus on each other, afraid to miss a scoop. This reinforces the imitation behaviour among journalists who are put under pressure to publish news quickly (Anderson, 2011). As a result, journalism is said to have transformed from a trustee model, with journalists providing news they thought the public needed, into a market model, where journalists cater to the audiences preferences to decide what is newsworthy (Schudson, 2003). This leads to media covering news stories that are likely to please large audiences and advertisers (McManus, 2009), meaning those stories highest in news value, such as a focus on elite persons and negativity (Takens et al., 2013). Looking for confirmation (Donsbach, 2004) media become more self-referential, leading to more events that trigger huge and fast developing news waves.

Due to the difficulty of defining and identifying news waves, however, many existing studies focus either on a single topic for which it is easier to compare attention (e.g. Boydston et al., 2014; Vasterman, 2005; Ruigrok et al., 2009) or on a single (series of) waves, arguing the excessive nature of attention on qualitative grounds (e.g. Vasterman, 2005). As a result, similar to many predictions from mediatization theory, there is no sound

empirical evidence that news waves have indeed increased in frequency and intensity.

Research into the dynamics of news waves is important because people depend heavily on the media for information on societal and political developments. News waves concentrate media attention on a single event or issue. In certain cases, this can be beneficial, such as the 'burglar alarm' function that Zaller ascribes to the media (2003): if something really bad is happening, the media need to sound the alarm, using the sudden increase of attention of the news wave to 'wake everyone up' and force attention on the issue. On the other hand, media logic can sometimes be shaped more by what the public finds interesting than by the public interest (Takens, 2013). If news waves take away attention from real issues by focusing on scandals or other 'good stories' (Wolfsfeld, 2014), it is possible that real problems do not get addressed because they do not fit the right patterns or news values required for a wave to occur. Thus, it is important to understand what kind of events can trigger news waves and under which circumstances waves form and end. By providing an automatic way of identifying and measuring news waves and presenting longitudinal results on the frequency, shape, and political content of waves, this study provides a starting point for a more quantitatively informed discussion of how we can identify waves and understand their dynamics.

In this chapter, we propose a method for automatically identifying news waves based on the attention to clusters of co-occurring words using topic modelling. By applying this method to about four million newspaper articles in seventy years of coverage in the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, we can show whether the amount, duration, and size of news waves has changed during this period. This will show whether news production routines that lead to news waves have changed under the influence of professionalization and commercialization of the press, as predicted by mediatization theory (Strömbäck, 2008). Moreover, we will measure whether a news wave is political in nature, giving insight on whether news waves have shifted from hard news to soft news, as would be expected from a market model of journalism (Schudson, 2003).

## Theoretical framework

The term 'media hype' is often used in popular writing to indicate a sudden and presumably unwarranted amount of attention for an issue. In the scientific literature, this term is defined as 'a media-generated, wall-to-wall news



wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media' (Vasterman, 2005: 515; Wien & Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). Other authors prefer other terms than hype. Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2006) use the term 'media wave' to denote periods in which an issue suddenly gets a lot of attention, using the metaphor of politicians 'riding the wave' to use the media coverage to their advantage. In a study comparing such news waves with non-wave periods, Boydston, Hardy, and Walgrave (2014: 511) talk about 'media storms', defined as 'an explosive increase in news coverage of a specific item (event or issue) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time'. Since we will not make any comparisons with real-world indicators of newsworthiness, we will use the term 'news wave' in this study, loosely defined as a sudden, short-lived, and explosive increase of attention for an issue.

### **News waves as a result of positive feedback loops**

People use the media to provide 'information that people can trust and act upon' (Strömbäck, 2005: 339). News, however, is not a direct reflection of reality. Rather, journalists construct 'good stories', and this construction inevitably includes choices on what to cover and how to cover it (Wolfsfeld, 2014; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979). Events that are negative in nature, unexpected, and happen in elite countries, for example, are more likely to be covered than more complex, far away events (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, 2016). Although such news values can explain which events are turned into news stories, they cannot explain why some events get the internal momentum required to turn into news waves. This 'sudden change' in the newsworthiness of events can only be explained by looking at the internal dynamics of media production, in which the influence from other journalists is often at least as important as the intrinsic characteristics of the events. News waves, then, are triggered by an external newsworthy event, but they grow into waves by self-reinforcing positive feedback processes inherent in the logic of the media (cf. Vasterman, 2005). In particular, we can identify three levels at which these processes occur: within a single news organization (intra-media); between organizations (intermedia), and between journalists and their sources and audiences (extra-media).

To start with the intra-media level, in 1978 Fishman found, when looking at the news coverage of both newspapers and local television stations and their reports on crime, that news coverage is presented within a 'theme',

such as violence against the elderly, providing 'presentational order' to the news: 'Items are presented in groups organized around a theme, and items that fit the current theme are covered more extensively with media applying a "consistency rule"' (Fishman, 1978: 534-535). In other words, news determines news. Vasterman (2005) found this same pattern in his study into coverage of random violent acts in the Netherlands. This all-inclusive attention to the topic reduces the news thresholds to other events and information related to the central theme (Vasterman, 2005: 513). As Paimre and Harro-Loit (2011: 435) state: 'This self-referential nature of journalistic performance is an inductive factor for any type of news wave'.

A second dimension of the self-referential character of news selection deals with the intermedia influence. As stated by Cook (2006: 78), competition 'does not push reporters toward the exclusive "scoop" but instead toward risk-averse consensus, on the presumption that the glory they get from the former is less than the trouble they might face if the scoop came into question or if they missed out on the big news story everyone else covered'. The nature of such pack journalism is also an economic choice: it is easier and cheaper to follow-up on an existing story than to start from scratch and attach value to a new event (Lund, 2002). The increasing number of media outlets and commercialization creates further incentives for journalists to compete by copying (Boczkowski, 2010; Redden & Witschge, 2010). Journalists also depend more strongly than ever on press agencies' news feeds, especially online news outlets that need a steady supply of fresh and reliable content to compete in the high-paced 24/7 news cycle (Welbers et al., 2016). Ultimately, the tendency of journalists to monitor their colleagues and institutional sources to avoid missing big stories or making errors can give rise to hypes (Ruigrok et al., 2016: 12).

The third dimension of the self-referential character of news selections deals with the relationship between the media and their audiences and sources. The changing media landscape led to a shift from a 'trustee model' (Schudson, 2003), where professional judgements by journalists determine news selection choices, towards a 'market model', implying that journalists cater to the preferences of the audience (Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 2009; Strömbäck et al., 2012). As Brants and Van Praag (2006: 30) put it: 'the assumed wishes and desires of the public have become more decisive for what the media select and provide'. This is especially true for online news sites. Several studies found that online audience metrics affect the news selection choices of journalists (Anderson, 2011; Welbers et al., 2015). Rather than the inherent importance, the perceived appeal to target audiences determines the newsworthiness of events (Niblock & Machin, 2007: 191; Strömbäck et

al., 2012: 726). The interest of the audience, however, is determined partially by the media themselves (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; McCombs, 2005). By reporting about an issue, public salience of the issue increases, making it more attractive for journalists to follow up on the story, until the curiosity of the public is sated and interest diminishes (Downs, 1972; Djerf-Pierre, 2012).

Similar to their audience, journalists and (political) sources can reinforce each other in what Wolfsfeld dubbed the Politics-Media-Politics cycle (Wolfsfeld, 2014). Van Aelst and Vliegenthart (2014) show how parliamentary questions are often based on media coverage, but these questions, in turn, generate more coverage of the event. Moreover, Ruigrok et al. (2009) show how Geert Wilders, a Dutch populist anti-Islamist politician, plays a central role in two news waves, initiating a first wave by publishing an anti-Islam film and using his political standing to generate press attention for it; and accelerating a second wave by asking inciting parliamentary questions about incidents with Moroccan youths in the town of Culemborg, turning a local incident into a national news wave (Korthagen, 2011).

### Evolution of Dutch journalism: *De Telegraaf*, 1950-2014

In this study, we focus on the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* in the period of 1950-2014. After the Second World War, Dutch society was still 'pillarized' along religious and political lines. The media were largely incorporated into the socio-political system and would aim to influence their (particular) readership with the same opinions as reigned in the pillar (Broersma, 1999, 2007; Wijfjes, 2004). With the process of depillarization starting in the 1960s newspapers were no longer affiliated with a particular party, but showed an internal pluriformity in terms of content (Van der Eijck, 2000: 329; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Journalism became guided by a strong sense of professional norms, especially independence and objectivity, which manifested itself in a critical watchdog role, scrutinizing the political elite and informing citizens (Schudson, 2003; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). After 'depillarization' in the 1960s and 1970s and the weakening of the ties between newspaper companies and readers, a strong increase in mergers and takeovers was observed within the newspaper market. Media outlets have become profit oriented rather than politically oriented (Harcourt, 2005). Together with an increasing journalistic independence, politics journalism showed 'a move away from reliance on craft norms defining what is newsworthy and how to report, toward a journalism based on serving the marketplace' (McManus, 1995: 301). Although *De Telegraaf* was not attached to a specific pillar or political

party, the newspaper went through the same phases of growing independence followed by stronger commercialization and increased competition (Wijfjes, 2004) fitting the pattern described as mediatization (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Brants & Van Praag, 2006).

Media content became more strongly guided by 'media logic', which can be defined as 'the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium. This includes rhythm, grammar, and format' (Altheide, 2004: 294). Moreover, commercial pressure and competition for an ever more fickle readership caused commercial interests to become a stronger factor within the media logic, especially with the onset of commercial television (1989 in the Netherlands) and the spread of online news sources. As defined by Schudson (2003), the trustee logic of independent journalists writing in the public interest was replaced by a market logic of journalists writing what sells best (Brants & Van Praag, 2015).

Empirical support for these shifts in media logic has been more difficult to find, however, partly because of the long time scales involved (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). A study into news coverage of political campaigns revealed a clear shift towards more independent and critical reporting between 1956 and 1986 (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Although they do report a shift towards more contest coverage between 1986 and 2003, news was mostly still substantive and free of cynicism in 2003. Takens et al. (2013) investigated negativity, contest news, and personalization in Dutch election coverage from 1998 to 2006 and found a significant increase only in the level of presidentialization, and a small peak in 2002 followed by decline in the other indicators.

Although the empirical evidence on the general mediatization thesis is mixed, and there are no general, longitudinal studies of news waves, based on the trends reviewed above we expect the amount of newspaper coverage determined by news waves to have increased from 1949-2014.

*H1. From 1950-2014, news coverage in De Telegraaf is increasingly determined by news waves.*

Moreover, due to increased focus on the interest of the audience, especially after the 1980s, we also expect the amount of 'hard news' in news waves, here exclusively operationalized as political news, to have decreased:

*H2. From 1949-2014, the political content of news waves in De Telegraaf decreases*

A final interesting question pertains to the shape of news waves. News waves are assumed to show a 'sharp and continuous increase of reporting on a specific issue for a limited period of time' (Geiß, 2011: 272). Moreover, it is

often found that waves can go through different phases, where a first wave of attention about the facts of the news wave is followed by smaller wavelets as sources discuss the (political) implications of these facts (cf. Ruigrok et al., 2009). Vasterman's (2005) seminal study contains a description of the shape of the news waves studied, showing an increase during the first week and a total length of around three weeks, but these are mostly schematic and based on single events. To our knowledge, there are no studies that systematically analysed the shape of news waves and whether this shape changed over time, so we formulated the following exploratory research question:

RQ1: *What is the general shape of a news wave, and does this change from 1950-2014?*

### **A method for automatically identifying news waves**

A news wave is defined as an abnormally large amount of attention for an issue in a relatively short span of time. In order to identify news waves automatically, we used automatic topic modelling and operationalized a news wave as a time span in which the issue is covered much more intensely than normal.

### **Data and preprocessing**

All digitally available news articles published from 1950 until 2014 in *De Telegraaf* were downloaded and analysed. The articles from 1950 until 1994 were retrieved from the Dutch Royal Library (<http://www.delpher.nl>). The articles from 1999 to 2008 were retrieved from LexisNexis, and the final years were scraped directly from the e-edition, which is an online edition that is identical to the print edition. There is no digital archive available for the years 1995-1999, so these articles are missing. In total, this yields a corpus of almost four million news articles.

These articles were uploaded to the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit (AmCAT; Van Attevelde, 2008) and lemmatized and POS-tagged using the Frog parser (Van den Bosch et al., 2007), meaning that all words are reduced to their dictionary form and the part of speech (i.e. noun, verb) of each word is determined. Finally, all words except for nouns and proper names

were removed, as these are the parts of speech that are most indicative of the topic of a text.

## Defining a news wave

For each year in the corpus, news waves were identified in four steps:

- 1) A vocabulary of potentially interesting words was identified by computing how often each word occurs in a six-day, rolling interval, and using these frequencies to compute the time entropy of each word using the RNewsFlow R package (Welbers & Van Atteveldt, 2016). From this, we selected the 30,000 words with the lowest entropy, that is, the words that are most typical of specific periods in the year.
- 2) An LDA topic model was made with the selected words, using 250 topics. This clusters words that frequently occur together, essentially allowing a wave to consist of multiple related terms (Jacobi et al., 2016). The high number of topics was chosen to make sure that news waves were about a specific event, not a more general issue like the economy (cf. Ibid.).
- 3) A six-day rolling average of the number of words in each topic per day was computed. Potential news waves were defined as consecutive periods in which the attention for a topic was more than three standard deviations higher than the mean attention for that topic.
- 4) Based on the qualitative validation of the 2014 data described below, a threshold was chosen for both long and intense news waves: A long news wave was defined as one in which news on an issue was published on at least seven consecutive days, of which on at least one day attention was four standard deviations higher than the mean. An intense news wave was defined as a wave containing at least one day during which attention was six standard deviations higher than the mean. Note that these criteria are not mutually exclusive, and some waves are both long and intense.

This yields a list of waves per year. For each wave, the length, amount of articles per day, and the total amount of articles was computed. Finally, the political content of news was determined by looking for mentions of Dutch political parties: an article that contained at least one mention of a party was considered political.

## Validation and model estimation

Since there is no agreed definition of exactly what a news wave is, there is also no gold standard against which to validate the automatically identified waves. To provide a validation for the method, we compared the automatically identified waves to our earlier analysis of news waves in 2014 (Ruigrok & Van Atteveldt, 2015). In that study, news waves were identified using a different method and checked manually, so the comparison provides a triangulation that gives an indication of the validity of the automatic method. Moreover, this comparison was used to determine the threshold criteria used in step four, outlined above.

Overall, our qualitative conclusion is that the automatically identified waves are plausible and correspond, more or less, to the waves identified in our earlier study. Examples of intense waves found in this sample are the political affair around the Dutch Intelligence Service (AIVD) and the minister responsible (Plasterk), and the incident around the footballer Suarez, who bit an opponent at the World Championships. Examples of long waves are the Russian invasion of the Crimean region and the Dutch municipal elections. The most important wave that was not found automatically was about the right-wing politician Wilders, who made a statement at a rally that he wanted 'fewer, fewer, fewer Moroccans'. This was not found because the involved words are relatively common and there were no specific nouns or names that typified that wave. Automatically identified waves that were not seen as waves in our earlier study included the coverage of annual events such as Easter and Christmas, due to the very typical vocabulary and the specific time period. These differences notwithstanding, most of the waves did correspond between both methods, lending credence to the automatic method.

## Results

### Are news waves increasing over time?

Our first hypothesis stated that, between 1950 and 2014, the amount of news in waves increased linearly as media logic and especially commercialization increasingly dominated the journalistic profession (cf. Wijfjes, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Figure 2.2 shows the percentage of news that was within a news wave over time. To facilitate the testing of our hypotheses, we divided the data into three periods, based on Wijfjes (2004) and Brants and Van Praag (2006). The latter defines a period of partisan logic until 1970, a

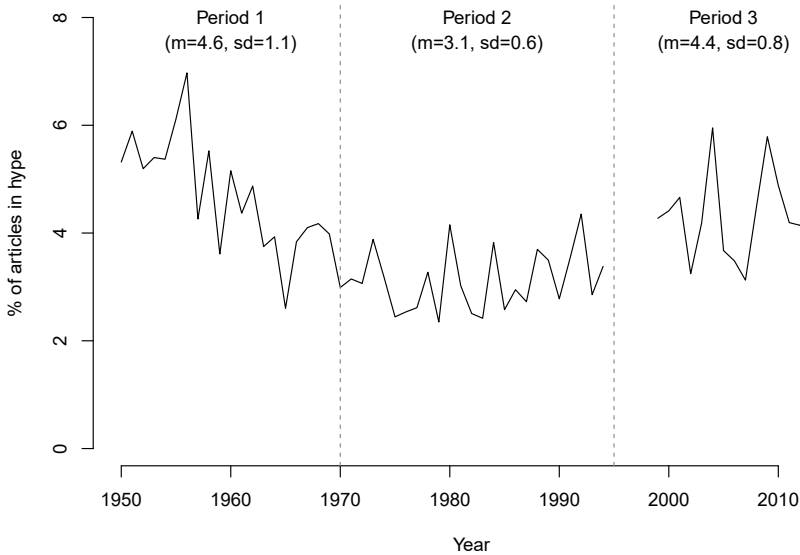


Figure 2.1. Percentage of articles found in news waves over time

period of public logic from 1970-1990, and a period of media logic since 1990. To deal with the missing data from 1994-1999, and because technical and commercial changes to the journalistic profession occurred most strongly in the 2000s, we take the third period to start after 1999.

As can be seen from the picture, the importance of news waves did not increase linearly. Rather, it shows a U-curve, dropping from around 4.5% of news in the 1950s to around 3% in the 1980s, before climbing to almost 4.3% again in the 2000s. Note that the years 1994-1999 are missing since there are no digital archives for this period.

This development is also summarized in Table 2.1, which lists a number of characteristics of news waves per period. The period right after the Second World War is characterized by the longest news waves (8.3 days) and also contains the highest number of articles (86 per wave, on average). As a result, the percentage of all news that was contained in a news wave was highest in this period at 4.5%.

The second period, although it had most news waves per year, is characterized by smaller waves, containing only 63 articles each. As a result, only 3.1% of all news in this period was part of a news wave.

In the third period there are less news waves per year (33). The waves are shorter (7.6 days, on average) and contain fewer articles (62). However,



Period	Number of news waves per year	Average size of news waves (#articles)	Average length of news wave (days)	% of all articles in news waves
1950-1970	36	86	8.3	4.5%
1971-1994	42	63	8.1	3.1%
1999-2014	32	62	7.6	4.3%

Table 2.1. Overview of news waves per period

because the total amount of published news articles also decreased, the proportion of news contained in news waves actually increased to 4.3%, almost as high as in the first period.

Chi-squared statistics were calculated to see if the percentage of articles in a wave is significantly different per period. Results show that all differences are significant: The percentage of news in waves in the first period (4.5%) is significantly higher than in the second (3.1%,  $X(1)=4758.1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and third period (4.3%,  $X(1)=697.6$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Moreover, the third period is significantly higher than the second ( $X(1)=1294$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), confirming the U-curve apparent from Figure 2.1. Since  $H_1$  stated that the proportion of news in waves increased linearly, the hypothesis is rejected: even though this proportion had increased since the 1970s, it climbed back to its level of the 1950s, rather than a linear increase.

### Hard or soft news: Political articles in news waves

Our second hypothesis dealt with the content of waves rather than their frequency. In particular, we expected the nature of waves to shift away from political (hard) news over time under influence of commercialization (cf. Brants, 2015). Figure 2.3 shows two proportions: the solid line shows the percentage of political articles that is contained in a wave, while the dashed line shows what percentage of articles in a wave is political. For example, in 2000, around 5% of all political news was contained in a news wave. In all news waves combined, around 12% of news was political.

The dashed line in the figure shows that there is certainly not a linear decrease in the political content of news waves. On the contrary, news waves in the third period are most political, containing 9% political articles on average, significantly more than in the second (average 4.9%,  $X(1)=543.2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and first period (average 5.4%,  $X(1)=415.1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Although the

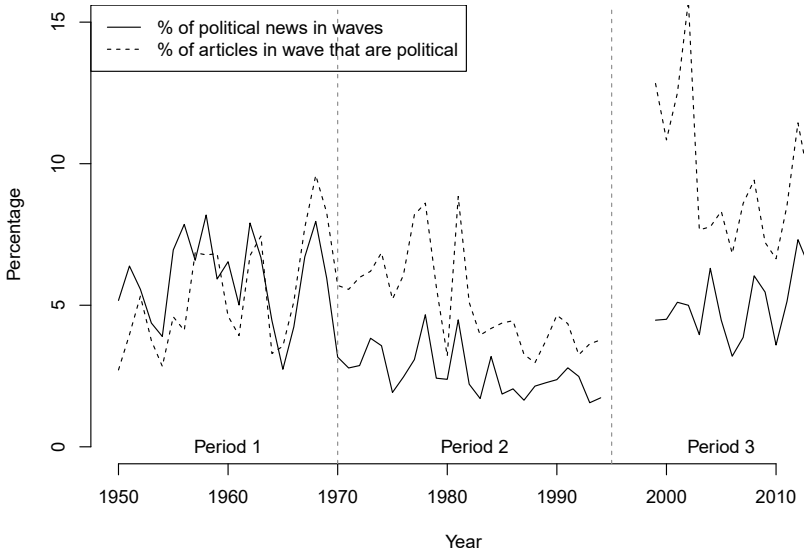


Figure 2.2. Political content of news waves

difference between the first and second period is smaller, waves in the second period are significantly less political than in the first ( $X(1)=12.1$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

The solid line shows the reverse proportion, namely what percentage of all political news is contained in a news wave. Thus, rather than showing whether news waves are political, it shows to what extent political news is characterized by waves. This line is similar to the U-curve in Figure 2.1, with waves in the first period containing the largest proportion of political news (5.8%), significantly more than in the second (2.6%,  $X(1)=1155.8$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and in the third period (5.1%,  $X(1)=30.7$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

These results mean the second hypothesis must also be rejected: news waves in the last period are actually the most political, and the percentage of political news in waves decreases until the 1980s, but then actually increases again.

## Dynamics of news waves

The research question of this study (RQ1) concerns the general shape of news waves. Earlier research suggests that the intensity of waves should increase explosively, followed by a longer decline. Moreover, it suggests that

waves are often characterized by multiple local maxima as the waves goes through different stages (cf. Vasterman, 2005; Ruigrok et al., 2009).

Figure 2.4 shows the shape of news waves per period by calculating what percentage of articles in each wave occurs on which day of the wave, centred around the day with the most news. As discussed in the method section, we included two types of waves: intensive waves and long waves. Since it can be expected that these have different shapes, Figure 2.4 shows both types of waves separately (waves that are both long and have a very high peak are counted in both lines). Moreover, the figure shows separate lines for the three periods discussed above.

From the figure, it is apparent that the general shape of waves is similar for all three periods, and is also mostly similar for intense and long waves: There is a very clear and narrow peak (day 0), which accounts for 20% to over 35% of news. Before the peak there is a small lead, but most days have less than 5% of total news. The peak is followed by an immediate and steep decline, with the day after the peak receiving less than 10% of news. After this, there is a slower decline for about a week, after which there is almost no news. Not surprisingly, intense waves have the highest peak, containing over 30% of articles on the day with the most coverage and declining steeply to less than 5% on day seven. Long waves have a lower peak with just above 20% of news on one day and decline a bit more gradually and

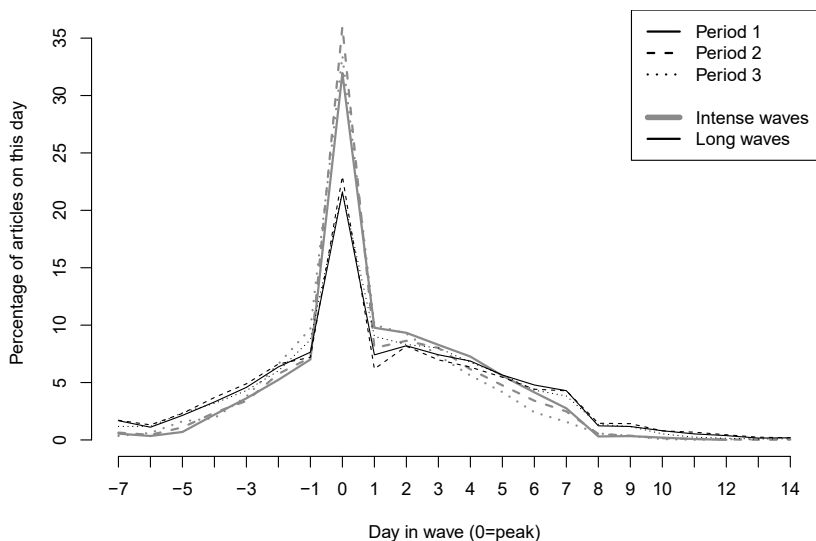


Figure 2.3. The shape of news waves: Percentage of news articles per day in a steep news wave and a long news wave

also have some more news before the peak. Overall, however, the shape for long and intense waves are very similar and vary little between the three periods.

## Conclusion/discussion

Contrary to our expectations, we did not find a linear increase of news waves over time. Rather, we found a U-curve, with the amount of news in waves decreasing from the 1950s until the 1970s and then increasing again in recent decades to almost the same level as the 1950s. It is possible that the relatively large role of news waves in the immediate post-war period is due to the specific situation of *De Telegraaf*. Whereas most newspapers in the Netherlands were closely linked to a specific political party, *De Telegraaf* was neutral and had always aimed for a large market share, rather than a specific ideological niche, focusing on topics such as crime and fraud and stories high on human interest, and introducing new genres such as the interview and the special report (Wolf, 2009).

In line with the general movement towards a more critical and socially responsible press (Wijfjes & Bardoel, 2015), we see that in the 1970s and 1980s the share of news in news waves decreased, reflecting a more professional perspective on journalism and possibly a move towards a trustee model, in comparison to the immediate post-war period. In recent decades, this trend has reversed, in line with the general movement of Dutch media towards a more audience-centred perspective (Wijfjes, 2004; Brants, 2015). This reflects a change from a trustee model to a market model (Schudson, 2003; Welbers et al., 2015), focusing on what the public is interested in under competitive pressure and the need to perform well commercially (cf. Johnston, 2009).

Our second hypothesis stated that, over time, news waves would contain less political news, as journalists focused more on scandals and soft news (cf. Bardoel & Wijfjes, 2015; Brants, 2015). This hypothesis was also rejected, with news waves in the most recent period, in fact, being most political. News waves actually became more political over time, but, overall, politics did not become more dominated by news waves. Similarly, political news was least dominated by news waves in the 1970s and 1980s, consistent with the notion of this period being the high watermark of responsible and professional journalism.

Our final results dealt with the overall shape of news waves. We were unable to find evidence for the idea of a news wave as 'a sharp and continuous

increase of reporting on a specific issue for a limited period of time' (cf. Geiß, 2011: 272). Rather, the average news wave turned out to be strongly centred on a single peak day, containing almost a third of total news on that day, and the decline after the peak was approximately as sharp as the increase before the peak and attention dropped almost to zero after a week. We also found no evidence of waves consisting of multiple peaks as the story evolved from facts to commentary (cf. Ruigrok et al., 2009; Vasterman, 2005), but it is possible that such waves would be split into multiple 'wavelets' by the topic modelling algorithm.

A strong limitation to the automatic method presented in this study is the lack of a 'gold standard' definition of what news waves are, making it impossible to formally validate our method for identifying them. Presumably, the main reason for this lack of a gold standard is that the theoretical definitions of news waves are not sufficiently concrete to be used to distinguish waves from non-waves in an objective manner. The lack of a formal validation also makes it difficult to judge how sensitive the method is to noise in the data, such as text digitization errors. Furthermore, it makes it difficult to compare and adapt the methods, e.g. comparing different settings for the number of topics or by filtering out sections such as sports, lifestyle, or financial reports, which could be said to be of a different kind than regular news. These problems are compounded for studying 'hypes', which have an added normative (and subjective) criterion of there being 'too much' news on a topic.

If we are to move to a more robust and quantitative programme of analysing news waves (or hypes), the first order of business should be to construct a gold standard consensus on which topics and periods can and cannot be characterized as waves. Creating this consensus would force us to adopt a sufficiently concrete conceptualization of news waves, and allow us to formally validate methods for identifying and analysing them. This study is an important step towards creating this gold standard by providing a list of potential 'real' waves, based on a publicly available newspaper archive.

Since pack journalism is an important aspect of news waves, a second limitation is that this study is based on only a single newspaper. Out of the three positive feedback loops that lead to news waves, we limited ourselves to the intra-media loop. Moreover, a more comparative analysis would show whether the patterns discussed above are specific to *De Telegraaf* or indicative of the evolution of Dutch journalism in general. The reason for concentrating on a single newspaper was simply that there were no other digital newspaper archives available for the period before the 1990s.

Fortunately, the Royal Library recently published the digitized archives for *Algemeen Handelsblad/NRC Handelsblad*, a daily newspaper generally seen as a quality or elite newspaper compared to the more market-oriented newspaper *De Telegraaf*. This provides an opportunity to expand this study in future research and show whether patterns and news waves are shared between media outlets, as assumed in Vasterman's (2005) definition of news hypes as 'wall-to-wall' media coverage of an issue, and whether the convergence of outlets has changed over time. Finally, taking the intermedia and audience/source loops into account as well can give a better understanding of the internal dynamics of news waves, although these dynamics might be difficult to trace in daily publication data given that news waves are strongly concentrated on the peak day of the hype.

A final limitation of this study is that we only looked at the frequency and length of news waves, and did not consider the content of the wave or key event, apart from whether it contained politics. In future research, it would be interesting to analyse the content of the identified waves, for example by looking at the general topic and whether a wave was about important events, such as the Prague Spring or fall of the Berlin Wall, or rather about private scandals of public figures.

In sum, this chapter paves the way for a programme of quantitative analysis of the changing role and nature of news waves in Dutch journalism. We provided an automatic method for identifying news waves and applied this to a digital archive of newspaper material spanning almost the entire post-war period. This showed that the idea of a linear increase of news waves is overly simplistic, and provides a starting point for more research into the nature and dynamics of news waves and their role in journalism.

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## About the authors

**Wouter van Atteveldt** is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Science, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (<http://vanatteveldt.com>). His research focuses on political communication, especially the antecedents and consequences of mass media coverage of political discourse, and has a strong methodological focus on developing AI/Computational NLP techniques to improve automatic text analysis. He has developed the Amsterdam Content Analysis Toolkit (AmCAT), an open source infrastructure that makes it easy to do large scale automatic and manual text analysis for the social sciences. Van Atteveldt has given numerous workshops in R

and his research has been widely published in communication sciences journals.

**Carina Jacobi** holds an MSc in Sociology and a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam. Her dissertation explored the questions of how to define and measure news quality in the current digitalized media environment. Her research interests include popular news, longitudinal changes in news content and journalism, and (digital) research methods. She currently works as an information analyst for the Dutch Inspection for Environment and Transport.

**Nel Ruigrok** (PhD) is owner of LJS Media Research, a company that focuses on scientific research for organizations such as government Ministries and NGOs in the Netherlands. She also provides workshops and training session for communication professionals. Academically she is affiliated to the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture, Erasmus University, Rotterdam where she teaches a number of courses at the Master Media and Journalism.

**Kasper Welbers** holds a PhD in Communication Science from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where he defended his dissertation on Gatekeeping in the Digital Age in 2016. His research focuses on changes in the news diffusion process due to the proliferation of new media technologies. In particular, he uses computational text analysis to trace how news messages diffuse through networks of old and new media channels. He is currently employed as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Leuven, where he studies how professional news organizations use social media channels.

### 3. The dynamics of media attention to issues

Towards standardizing measures, dimensions, and profiles

*Stefan Geiß*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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#### Abstract

Although the ebb and flow of issues in the media is pivotal as a dependent or independent variable in communication research, a systematic description of the evolution of issues is lacking. Based on newspaper content analysis, this article identifies basic dimensions and types of issues. The study identifies adequate indicators for the four latent variables that describe issue dynamics: intensity of spikes; baseline coverage; frequency of spikes and oscillation of spikes. Five typical profiles of issues (along the four latent variables) emerge in latent profile analysis (LPA): routine issues; launching issues: bursting issues; struggling issues, and flatline issues. Visual inspection is used to validate the typology. Its applicability in various research areas is discussed.

**Keywords:** media agenda, issue dynamics, issue profiles, agenda building, secondary analysis.

What the news media make an issue structures the social world and affects the actions of citizens and, among them, social elites, whose actions can fundamentally affect society as a whole. News is subject to external inputs and pressures as well as internal dynamics of news production. News issues respond to these influences and evolve according to long-term fashions (Funkhouser, 1973; McComas & Shanahan, 1999; Nisbet, Brossard & Kroepsch, 2003; Nisbet & Huge, 2006) and short-term rhythms (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). While generally interested in these dynamics, communication researchers still lack a toolbox to systematically

describe and typify these dynamics. The task is to translate the pivotal aspects of issue dynamics into a set of measurable variables, dimensions, or types.

Such a toolbox would be most helpful for both content and effect studies. For example, Patterson (1998) discusses 'the limits of the media as an instrument of democracy', criticizing the short attention cycles of the mass media and their bias towards vivid or sensational events. He argues that major societal problems are either overlooked by the media, or they lose interest in the issues before the problem has been discussed and treated adequately. Ricchiardi (2003, 2005, 2008) provides examples of excessive as well as insufficient media attention for issues; however, none of these studies have the tools for systematically describing the patterns of media attention: How much media attention does an issue typically receive? How fickle or erratic is the development of media attention? How often and how strongly does media coverage intensify in news waves? How long do typical news waves last? Qualitative visual inspection is a rather unsystematic and subjective way to describe the dynamics of media attention. The shifting focus of media attention is the primary independent variable in longitudinal media agenda-setting research (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990) and the primary dependent variable in media agenda-building research (Lang & Lang, 1983; Nisbet et al., 2003; Nisbet & Huge, 2006). Ignorance of the typical patterns of change of coverage may lead to misinterpretation of effects and non-effects. On these grounds, it is worthwhile looking into the actual dynamics of various issues in the mass media, and develop a toolbox for describing the pivotal aspects of media attention dynamics.

In detail, a literature review will show that knowledge about the various possible influences on issue dynamics is vast compared to the more anecdotal knowledge about the actual structures of issue dynamics. However, some basic components of issue dynamics can be extracted as a guideline for the analysis. In the method section, I present the data and indicators I used. The results section will offer some basic descriptive statistics of these variables before identifying their underlying dimensions, which I map to latent profiles (Vermunt & Magidson, 2002). Each issue's development is described as a mixture of these idealized profiles. After these exploratory procedures, I will validate whether the types adequately describe the development of issues compared to visual inspection.

## Issue dynamics

The concept of issue dynamics encompasses all dimensions that describe how issues evolve in the media over time. This paper focuses on the mere intensity of coverage (quantitative evolution) of news about issues and blinds out the issues' dramaturgical or qualitative evolution (on more qualitative aspects, see e.g. McComas & Shanahan, 1999). Issues are conceived as cognitive sense-making tools serving as overarching categories or bins – not limited in time or space – into which news stories and the events they cover can be sorted in to facilitate processing and interpretation. Even though they are cognitive structures of individuals, issue labels and parts of their meaning are intersubjective. Public communication serves to continuously synchronize their meaning within a public sphere. Events, in contrast, are narrations of happenings that are tied to specific spaces and times, with protagonists and a dramaturgy (Geiß, 2015; Kepplinger, 2001). Usually, the fit between issues and events will not be perfect, and partial assigning into an issue and categorization of an event to several issues is to be expected (fuzzy logic).

## Internal dynamics of news production

The landscape of news events ('eventscape') journalists expose themselves to (which is treated below) is further filtered according to the attention rules of the news media. There are three main source of intrinsic influences – i.e. factors inherently conducive to professionally judging the attention-worthiness of news (Flegel & Chaffee, 1971) – on news dynamics, located on different levels of the hierarchy of influences on news decisions (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996):

- (1) News routines (Fishman, 1980; Tuchman, 1980) reflect where and how journalists look for news and what basic types of and requirements for news there are. News factors (Eilders, 2006; DeWerth-Pallmeyer, 1997) are a specific set of news routines for judging the newsworthiness of the news that journalists are exposed to and generally find apt for news. News routines therefore influence whether news actually flow into the news system and how high its absolute news value is. For instance, a garbage avoidance initiative backed by leading politicians or by celebrities that highlights the costs of garbage disposal for large strata of the population and that generates a continuous stream of new or surprising developments is more likely to draw media attention than an initiative lacking these characteristics. The newsworthiness of issues changes with the underlying events, though.

- (2) Between-issue competition (Brosius & Kepplinger, 1995; Geiß, 2011; Geiß, Weber & Quiring, 2016) limits the space that can be devoted to each issue. If many 'strong' news issues compete at the newsdesks, an issue needs higher news value (i.e. more characteristics that make it newsworthy) to receive the same level of media attention. Even then, it will receive less media attention than it would if issue competition was lower (Schreiber, 2014). It leads to quasi-evolutionary displacement of issues that are 'worn out' or less newsworthy than the competition. For instance, the initiative for garbage avoidance may receive less media attention when launched during a major sports event like the Olympic Games.
- (3) Between-media orientation (Boczkowski, 2009; Breed, 1955; Reinemann, 2004) standardizes news judgements across journalists in news media that focus on similar audiences and facilitates diffusion of news within the news system. As news judgements are ambiguous in nature, information about the news decisions of other journalists may be informative, because they are in the same situation of ambiguity and they are direct competitors in the news market. For instance, if several influential news media cover the garbage avoidance issue, it is more likely to diffuse through the media system and receive high media attention.

Aside from these intrinsic influences, external pressures may influence the selection of news. For instance, politicians or advertisers (Flegel & Chaffee, 1971; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) may exert pressure to cover some issues more and others less than journalists' independent news judgements would suggest. Taken together, all these influences filter and transform the 'eventscapes' journalists expose themselves to (Fishman, 1980), leading to issue-specific patterns of media attention over time (Hansen, 1991). Thereby, issue dynamics would reflect eventscapes, albeit through the media's filters and lenses.

### External dynamics of eventscapes

Three major event-based elements produce the longitudinal pattern of coverage of an issue: random events, serial events, and recurring events. All these events can either be

- (1) *genuine events* that occur and gain news value according to natural or social processes uninfluenced by the presence and potential coverage of the mass media;

- (2) *mediatized events* that would have occurred even without actual or anticipated media presence, but were significantly modified to fit the criteria for news selection (or otherwise influence or react to news coverage); and
- (3) *staged events* that are produced only to gain media attention or otherwise influence or react to news coverage (Kepplinger & Habermeier 1995).

It should be noted that the distinction between random, serial, and periodical events in this paper are not assertions about the reality of events ('real issue dynamics'), but are assertions about the construction of reality in the news ('news issue dynamics'). Presupposing that issue categories are stable and each event covered by the news fits exactly one issue category, the rate, probability, and occurrence of events that are newsworthy enough to make it into the news can be modelled as follows:

**Random events.** Journalists conceive many events as random events, which are not linked causally or temporally to other events, such that no time-dependent patterns are expected, i.e. the timing of one event is unrelated to the timing of the other events within the issue. Actually, this pattern underlies much of the news media's coverage as far as we know; it leads to a baseline of coverage of an issue. The rate of random events may vary considerably between issue categories, such that some issues are more or less omnipresent (even if no key events occur) whereas others are marginalized. An example may be the coverage of child abductions scattered over the year: child abductions happen throughout the year, some receive more, and some receive less or no media attention; however, they are reported as isolated occurrences that are not related to the others – despite the fact that one crime may have been inspired by an earlier child abduction. Based on such and other random events, a typical (but noisy) baseline level of coverage would emerge in the issue time series on 'crime'. The exact amount of coverage on a given day is not predictable without more information.

**Serial events.** A major force in the upswing and downswing of issues in the news (and the ebb and flow of news waves) is that journalists conceive or present events as linked – causally, temporally, procedurally, or otherwise – to recent key events. They construe, seek out, establish, or produce such links and nodes. Follow-up events gain in news value due to their conjunction with the key event (Boorstin, 1973; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). The media produce news, e.g. by seeking out experts' opinions and assessments (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). This need not cause an uninterrupted chain of events, but increases the rate of events in a certain period



of time (Fishman, 1982) or in several thrusts of activity. After some time, media attention recedes to its normal level (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002).

For example, earthquakes trigger a typical pattern of media coverage (Geiß, Leidecker & Roessing, 2015): The occurrence of earthquakes in a particular area is not randomly distributed. The release of tectonic tensions during an earthquake may increase the likelihood of aftershocks or earthquake swarms; when all potential for tensions has depleted, the likelihood of further earthquakes normalizes or even falls below the initial probability (Hill, 1977). Bound to that period, people react to the natural phenomenon in a typical way. For example, executing emergency plans, mobilizing emergency organizations and donations takes a certain amount of time (Yi & Özdamar, 2007), which provide additional occasions for news reporting. Domestic discussions about contributing to international support and about donation campaigns spring up. After such key events, many events (e.g. press briefings) are significantly modified or they are staged to better fit the news media's criteria for news selection (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995).

Often, the subsequent series of events after a key event is timed according to pre-planned or institutionalized procedures (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Patterson, 1998). Moreover, key events offer social groups and social elites a window of opportunity to shape public debates (Geiß et al., 2016). Actors try to get public attention for their cause or they counter claims of competing actors by linking their cause and their claims to the key event of the issues emerging from the key event. Although not strictly predictably, an initial event typically increases the likelihood of newsworthy events (positive feedback) until opportunities for additional coverage deplete and people become fed up with the issue (negative feedback) (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Downs, 1972). Also, key events may change the journalists' attention rules such that activities are deemed more newsworthy than would be the case in the absence of a key event (Brosius & Eps, 1995; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). While there may be actual causal chains underlying serial coverage, its driving force is social activities due to the window of opportunity that opens after a promising trigger event or supposed series of coverage.

**Recurrent events.** A third major force in creating predictable patterns of news coverage are periodically recurring events (Gonzenbach, 1992:140), for example, according to yearly, seasonal, monthly, weekly, or daily rhythms. Snowstorms are more likely during winter; hurricanes primarily occur during the hurricane season; parliaments do not hold sessions during the summer months; unemployment, consumer confidence, and economic growth figures are published monthly, stock markets pause on Sundays, etc. This will also lead to certain patterns of coverage. Again, actual seasonality or recurrence

can be important, but mostly, social activities have established institutionalized rhythms or adapt to actual seasonalities and superimpose them.

## Resulting patterns of media attention

The three main patterns – random, serial, and recurrent events – overlie each other in every issue and produce a particular temporal pattern of up and down of media attention. We would therefore expect the following patterns in issue dynamics:

(1) Due to random events, there is baseline coverage that is issue-specific: In some issues, many random newsworthy events occur that are equally distributed over time, and baseline coverage is volatile and high. In other issues, such events also occur, but less frequently, and baseline coverage is volatile and low. (2) Due to recurrent events, issues experience ups and downs with different seasonality which may superimpose each other. (3) Due to serial events, there are peaks in news coverage that are issue-specific with regard to their intensity and their temporal dynamics. In some issues, peaks (i.e. temporally condensed clusters of newsworthy events due to positive and negative feedback) occur more frequently than in others (regardless of the shape of peaks). In some issues, peak coverage is very intensive (i.e. positive feedback is excessive) while peaks in other issues are less pronounced. In some issues, peak coverage lasts longer than in other issues (i.e. positive feedback for a long time predominates over negative feedback). The typical shapes of news waves appear to differ regarding duration (short-long), peak intensity (low-high), and peak time (early-late) (Geiß, 2010).

These features are well-applicable to collections of visualizations of issue time series (e.g. Brosius & Kepplinger, 1990; Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). The indicators collected to describe issue dynamics should capture these typical features.

Such a description of issue dynamics does not allow for predicting the development of a particular issue, however. To do so, one would need indicators of the eventscape of various issues, which are not readily available or applicable (Best, 2000; Rosengren, 1970). Rather, the descriptives will allow synthesizing an artificial time series with similar temporal dynamics. Recently, Waldherr (2014) used agent-based simulation to similar ends, i.e. to synthesize or reproduce typical patterns of media attention toward issues. In contrast to the current study, it is based on assumptions about the actions of issue sponsors rather than on observed patterns of news coverage. While Waldherr's approach necessitates information about issue sponsor

activities to synthesize typical time series, the approach of the current study is based on observed patterns of issue dynamics. What is more, the current study allows making descriptions and to classify issues into types. This is interesting for secondary analyses of a broad scope of content analysis data. It may also be applied to analyses of survey data on the public agenda and its development over time.

## Research questions

A multitude of measures will be used to map issue dynamics descriptively. However, the contribution of this paper is to look for general patterns, i.e. a typology of issues. This is done in three steps, along three research questions:

*RQ1*: What are the latent dimensions underlying the indicators of issue dynamics?

*RQ2*: What latent profiles of issues show up along these latent dimensions and how do they differ?

*RQ3*: How do latent profiles of issues translate into differences in visual inspection of issue time series?

*RQ1* and *RQ2* serve to identify types or profiles of issues, while *RQ3* serves to validate the typology against the visual inspection of systematically selected issues.

## Method

For analysing the dynamics of media attention, it is useful to concentrate on a single genre of news media; this study focuses on newspaper issue dynamics. A secondary analysis of content analysis data that were collected by Media Tenor International is conducted (Geiß, 2011; Media Tenor, 2006). Four elite newspapers with well-known political leanings (Wilke & Reinemann, 2001) – *Frankfurter Rundschau* (left), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (centre-left), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (centre-right), *Die Welt* (right) (for their intermedia influence) – and the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* (for its high circulation) were analysed. The data span a period from 1 January 2006 to 16 December 2006. Overall, 55,207 articles with reference to Germany or the European Union were surveyed (all other articles were dropped). Inter-coder reliability was .89 according to the Holsti formula, Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  data are not available. However, for the issue categories, chance agreement

is negligible (with over 3,000 possible and over 1,500 used codes). Holsti and  $\alpha$  values should converge.

## Issue coding and recoding

To use the data for dynamic analyses, data were transposed from article-level to day-to-day time series (spanning a period of 293 consecutive days of reporting). The over 3,000 issue categories specified in the original coding scheme were reduced to eighty-two different issues by merging the least frequent, most similar, or most closely related issues. Holidays and Sundays were removed from the time series. For smoothing, centred moving averages across seven days (CMA<sub>7</sub>) were computed and used for all analyses; the first and last three days of coverage were lost due to this procedure (with 287 days left). To check whether there are overarching patterns of issue dynamics across different newspapers, I checked for sufficient intermedia correlation of issue time-series (CMA<sub>7</sub>) (average correlation  $r = .51$ ). Coverage of all five media was collapsed for all further analyses. Outlet-specific patterns are neglected, and are a source of noise in the data set. This was done to investigate the core of issue dynamics that emerges across media – being aware that issue dynamics are partially outlet-specific. The resulting eighty-two issue time-series (CMA<sub>7</sub>) were used to compute all measures of issue dynamics.

## Measures and analyses

To survey the basic components of issue dynamics identified in the literature review, it was necessary to use a multitude of measures to gauge all aspects of issue dynamics that may be relevant. Two general levels are distinguished: dynamics in the general development of an issue (issue level) and dynamics when a news wave ('spike') can be spotted, most commonly in the aftermath of key events (spike level). To that end, spikes had to be identified and analysed for each issue. For instance, an issue like 'anti-terror policy' (see Figure 3.1, left-hand side of the lowermost panel) is characterized by a generally low level of routine coverage, but several strong spikes, e.g. following terrorist attacks or attempts.

**Identification of spikes.** Most issues experienced short or mid-term phases of extraordinarily high media attention, which I call 'spikes' of the issue time-series. These are often news waves and relate to a trigger event (e.g. a terrorist attack); the term 'spike' is used to denote that the news within such

Label	Description	Formula
<i>Issue indicators</i>		
Articles per year	How intensively do the media cover the issue in general? Count of all issue-related news stories.	$V = \sum_{d=1}^D I_d$
Day-by-day volatility of issue	How much does the intensity of coverage change from day to day? Mean absolute change in intensity between each two subsequent days.	$IVT = \frac{1}{D-1} \sum_{d=2}^D  I_d - I_{d-1} $
Relative volatility of issue	How much does the intensity of coverage change from day to day relative to the initial intensity? Mean absolute change in intensity between each two subsequent days, relative to the former of the two days.	$IVR = \frac{1}{D-1} \sum_{d=2}^D \frac{ I_d - I_{d-1} }{I_{d-1}}$
Spike frequency of issue	How often do extraordinary spikes occur? Total count of spikes.	$E$
Spike-span of issue	Do spikes occur all over the period of study or are they concentrated in a short time-span? Difference between date of the last day of last spike and the first day of the first spike.	$S = (d_B + T_B) - d_1$
Spike-centeredness of issue	What share of coverage occurs within spiked? Summed volume of all spikes divided by the total volume of coverage.	$C = \frac{\sum_{e=1}^E \sum_{i=d_{e-1}+1}^{d_e} I_i}{\sum_{i=1}^N I_i}$
<i>Spike indicators</i>		
Average duration of spikes (M)	How long do spikes typically last? Mean duration of spikes belonging to the issue.	$\bar{T} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E T_e$
Variability of duration of spikes (SD)	How much does spike duration vary between spikes? Standard deviation of duration of spikes belonging to the issue.	$S_{T_e} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E (T_e - \bar{T})^2}$

Label	Description	Formula
Average maximum intensity of spikes (M)	What is the typical maximum amount of media attention in spikes? Mean of the absolute maxima of the spikes belonging to the issue.	$\overline{Max} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E \max(I_t)$
Average volume of spikes (M)	How high is the volume of spikes typically? Mean volume of spikes belonging to the issue.	$\overline{Vol} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E \sum_{t=1}^{T_e} I_t$
Variability of volume of spikes (SD)	How much does the volume of spikes vary within an issue? Standard deviation of volume of spikes belonging to the issue.	$S_{Vol} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E (Vol_e - \overline{Vol})^2}$
Day-by-day Intensity in spikes (M)	How intensively is the issue covered during spikes, typically? Mean intensity of coverage during spikes; averaged across all spikes belonging to the issue.	$\overline{SI} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E \sum_{t=1}^{T_e} I_t$
Distance to next spike (M)	How long does it typically take until the next spike occurs? Mean difference between (1) the date of the first day of the current spike and (2) date of the last day of the previous spike.	$\overline{Dis} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E d_e - (d_{e-1} + T_{e-1})$
Day-by-day volatility in spikes (M)	How much does intensity of coverage vary within spikes, typically? Mean absolute change in intensity between t and t-1 in all spikes belonging to the issue.	$\overline{SVT} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E \sum_{t=2}^{T_e}  I_t - I_{t-1} $
Relative volatility in spikes (M)	How much does the intensity of coverage vary within spikes relative to the initial value, typically? Mean absolute change in intensity between t and t-1 divided by the intensity of coverage on t-1, averaged across all spikes belonging to the issue	$\overline{SVR} = \frac{1}{E} \sum_{e=1}^E \sum_{t=2}^{T_e} \left( \frac{I_t - I_{t-1}}{I_{t-1}} \right)$

Table 3.1 Indicators of issue dynamics

Note: All measures are calculated once per issue. Key: *I*: intensity of coverage on a particular day; *e*=1 to *E*: spike index ranging from 1 to *E*; *d*=1 to *D*: day index within issues, ranging from 1 to *D*. *t*=1 to *T*: day index within spikes, ranging from 1 to *T*. *d*<sub>*e*</sub>: day on which spike *e* starts.

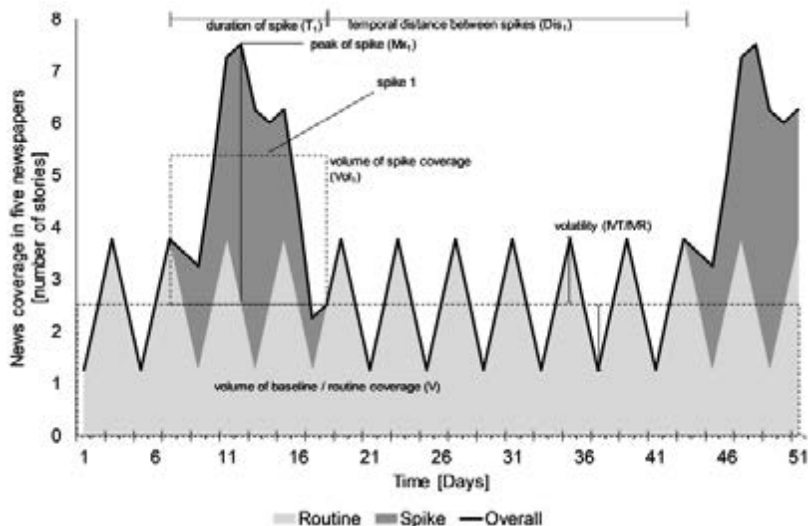


Figure 3.1. *Descriptive measures of issue dynamics: Idealized visualization*

a ‘spike’ needs to be analysed to assess whether it is actually a news wave or not – and which trigger event is at its core. Such spikes are an integral part of issue dynamics as they significantly deviate from the dynamics of routine coverage. Spikes are detected systematically for each issue time-series in three steps: (1) Cut-off: All coverage of an issue below the all-year average  $M$  is cut off; only above-average coverage is considered for spike detection. (2) Threshold: Phases are detected during which coverage continuously remained above average, with a threshold at least three times the volatility  $V$  of the issue (volatility refers to the number of articles the volume of issue coverage changes on average, from one day to the next). All such phases (beginning when the issue climbs above  $M$  and ending when the issue falls below  $M$ ) are recorded as potential spikes. (3) Volume: All spike-level indicators (see below) are recorded for all potential spikes; all records of spikes with a total volume of less than five news items (one per news medium) above the cut-off are dropped. Similar procedures were used in another study (Geiß, 2011), with the same data set. There, it was validated that spikes could be related to coverage of particular events or series of events in almost all cases.

**Indicators of issue dynamics.** Overall, six issue-level variables and nine spike-level variables were recorded on the issue level and were included in the data analysis. They serve to describe the principal shape of the development of media coverage.

**Issue level.** On the issue level, the main constructs to be operationalized are: (1) How intensively do the media cover the issue in general (intensity)? (2) How stable or volatile is this normal level of coverage (volatility)? (3) How often do extraordinary spikes occur (number of spikes)? (4) Do such spikes occur throughout the year or are they concentrated in a short time-span (event-span)? (5) How event-centred is the coverage of that issue (event-centredness)? These measures distinguish between issues with much vs little, stable vs volatile, and event-driven vs routine coverage.

**Spike level.** On the spike level, seven constructs of issue dynamics were defined and operationalized. It was necessary to aggregate those spikes that concerned the same issue, as the study is looking for profiles of issues rather than spikes. Therefore, each indicator at the spike level (e.g. the duration of each spike) was aggregated across the spikes that occurred within the same issue, by computing the mean *M* and, in some cases, also the standard deviation *SD* across all spikes that occurred within the same issue. Thereby, both issue-level and spike-level indicators were available for analysis on the issue level. The seven constructs are: (1) duration of spikes (*M* and *SD*); (2) maximum amount of media attention in spikes (*M*); (3) time-distance to the next spike (*M*); (4) volume of spikes (*M* and *SD*); (5) average intensity of coverage within spikes (*M*); (6) The average absolute volatility of intensity of coverage within spikes (*M*); (7) The average relative volatility of intensity of coverage within spikes (*M*). These measures distinguish between issues with strong vs weak news waves, long vs short news waves, volatile vs stable spikes, and scattered vs quickly succeeding spikes. For details on operationalization, see Table 3.1. Figure 3.1 provides an idealized visualization of the most important descriptive measures of issue dynamics.

## Findings

### *Descriptives*

Table 3.2 shows which characteristics of time-series occur how often; deciles are reported to offer a detailed overview of the features of the issues under analysis (Table 3.2).

**Issue-level characteristics.** One half of the eighty-two issues under study received 917 or more news stories in 2006 in the five newspapers under study, the other half received 917 or less news stories. The median day-to-day volatility of coverage (i.e. the net change from one day to the next) was 3.2 news reports up or down. Relative to the previous day's volume of coverage, the change was at 50% of the daily volume of coverage up or down. The median number of



	Percentiles of distribution										
	MIN	10	20	30	40	ME- DIAN	60	70	80	90	MAX
... per cent of issues below...		90	80	70	60		40	30	20	10	
... per cent of issues above...											
<b>Issue variables</b>											
Articles per year	156	363	512	652	785	917	1063	1261	1500	1883	2879
Day-by-day volatility	.5	1.3	1.8	2.3	2.7	3.2	3.7	4.4	5.2	6.6	10.0
Relative volatility	.1	.1	.3	.4	.5	.5	.6	.7	.7	.9	1.2
Event frequency*	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	5	6	8
Event-span	10	54	87	135	164	175	187	222	243	263	277
Event-centeredness*	.01	.04	.06	.08	.10	.13	.15	.20	.26	.40	.59
<b>Event variables</b>											
Duration (mean)**	6.0	7.0	7.5	8.6	9.3	10.0	10.7	12.2	14.9	18.3	31.0
Duration (sd)*	0.0	1.1	1.7	2.4	3.2	4.3	5.3	6.3	7.6	13.1	32.5
Maximum intensity (mean)*	1.4	2.2	2.9	3.5	4.0	5.0	5.5	6.5	7.6	12.1	30.2
Volume of coverage (mean)***	6	11	16	19	22	29	35	44	78	141	238
Volume of coverage (sd)***	0	5	9	12	17	22	32	42	58	106	317
Day-by-day intensity (mean)*	.6	1.3	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.8	3.1	3.5	4.3	6.9	12.7
Day-by-day volatility (mean)**	.4	.7	.8	1.0	1.2	1.5	1.7	2.1	2.5	3.2	11.6
Distance to next event (mean)**	1	8	14	18	23	27	30	36	46	68	173
Relative volatility (mean)*	.35	.43	.48	.50	.52	.56	.58	.60	.62	.67	1.10

Table 3.2 Distribution of features of 82 issues – equally-sized groups

Note. Reading examples: 40 per cent of issues spawned 785 or less articles per year, 60 per cent spawned 785 or more articles per year. In 80 per cent of issues, the time between the first and the last event of the year 2006 (event-span) was 243 days or less, for 20 per cent of issues, this time distance was 243 days or longer.

\* p<.05 \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001 – non-normally distributed according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov-test.

spikes was four, and the time-span between the start of the first and the end of the last spike was 175 days in the median issue. In most issues, routine coverage was dominant (median: 87% routine coverage, 13% spike coverage). However, it should be noted that the spread around the median value is considerable. For instance, the lowest 10% of issues had less than 363 news reports, the uppermost 10% of issues had 1883 or more news reports (median: 917).

**Spike-level characteristics.** The typical shape of spikes in issues is also displayed in Table 3.2. Typical spikes lasted ten days, peaked with five news reports (above the level of routine coverage), adding about thirty news reports about the issue. Between two spikes within the same issue, about one month elapsed. Again, there is considerable spread in all these variables; for instance, the lowest 10% of issues, spikes lasted only seven days or shorter on average; among the top 10% of issues, spikes lasted eighteen days or longer, on average.

**Describing a typical issue.** The issue 'leadership in corporations' was the issue with the most typical profile, the 'median issue' across indicators. The number of news stories (outside spikes) in that issue was 1080.9, i.e. 3.77 news stories per day in the five newspapers. This amount of coverage was more constant than in most issues, with a day-to-day change of  $\pm 0.67$  news stories, which is a relative volatility of 18%. The issue experienced three spikes, and the temporal distance between the first and the last spike was 195 days. Turning to the three spikes, they lasted 9.7 days on average, with a standard deviation of 3.1. The average of the three peaks was 4.95 news stories (above the 3.77 news stories of baseline coverage), the mean spike coverage was 3.1 news stories (above baseline coverage), with a day-to-day change of 1.6 news stories (relative volatility: 51%), leading up to a mean volume of 30.19 news stories per spike. The temporal distance between two news waves was ninety-one days.

## Factorizing the indicators

**Factorization procedure.** The indicators of issue dynamics were picked to exhaustively rather than parsimoniously survey the phenomena of issue dynamics. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the latent dimensions underlying the indicators (RQ1). Besides allowing more concise analyses, the factorization will allow recommending a more parsimonious set of indicators for future studies. The data, which were z-standardized before analysis, are suited for principal components analysis (MSA = .71). The scree-plot (according to the optimal coordinates criterion), parallel analysis, and Zoski and Jur's multiple regression method (Raïche et al.,

2013) convergently suggests a four-factor solution. To obtain a close match between factors and indicators and retain independent factors, Varimax rotation was applied.

**Spike momentum.** The most important component (accounting for 42% of variation of the fifteen indicators, 37% after rotation) is termed *spike momentum*. It represents different indicators of the intensity and vehemence of spikes within an issue time-series. Issues with high momentum tend to be event-centred issues (issue-level); spikes concerning that issue: (a) tend to last longer (and durations varies more heavily between spikes); (b) tend to reach a higher maximum intensity of coverage; (c) tend to attract more coverage per spike (and the amount of coverage per spike varies more heavily); (d) tend to be covered more intensively on average; and (e) the intensity of coverage tends to fluctuate more pronouncedly (spike level). The mean volume of spikes is the indicator that most closely matches the factor (Table 3.3). The issues with the highest spike momentum (standardized values of +2 or higher) in the sample are elections, the FIFA World Cup, and the Middle East conflict. For instance, if a news wave about the Middle East conflict starts, media attention is likely to increase strongly, and this increase will be sustained.

**Issue baseline.** The second most important component (accounting for 21% of variation, 20% after rotation) is termed *issue baseline*. It represents how much coverage is devoted to an issue during routine phases, i.e. when no spikes are present. Issues with a high issue baseline (a) tend to be devoted to more news items per year, (b) the intensity of coverage tends to vary more pronouncedly from day to day, but (c) intensity tends to vary less compared to the amount of coverage on the previous day (issue level). The number of news items per year is the indicator that most closely matches the factor. The issues with the highest baseline in the sample are corporate finances, corporate products, labour market, and international conflicts (general).

**Spike frequency.** The third most important component (accounting for 14% of Variation, 14% after rotation) is termed *spike frequency*. It represents how often and in what time frame spikes occur within an issue. The higher the spike frequency of an issue, the more often news waves occur, and the wider the time-span between the first and the last spike. At the same time, spike frequency is negatively related to spike duration. The number of spikes per year is the indicator that most closely matches the factor. The issues with the highest spike frequency in the sample are violent crimes and family support. Violent crimes trigger many news waves around spectacular crime cases (murders, robberies, burglaries, rapes), but these news waves are usually rather short.

	F1: Spike momentum	F2: Issue baseline	F3: Spike frequency	F4: Spike oscillation	Extraction
<b>Issue variables</b>					
Articles per year	(+.07)	<b>+.96</b>	(+.17)	(+.03)	.95
Day-by-day volatility	(+.16)	<b>+.88</b>	+.37	(+.07)	.94
Relative volatility	(-.04)	<b>-.90</b>	(+.16)	(+.00)	.83
Event frequency	(-.15)	(+.25)	<b>+.81</b>	(-.27)	.80
Event-span	(-.22)	(+.04)	<b>+.80</b>	(+.14)	.71
Event-centeredness	<b>+.87</b>	-.34	(+.05)	(+.06)	.88
<b>Event variables</b>					
Duration (mean)	<b>+.78</b>	(-.02)	-.52	(+.05)	.88
Duration (sd)	<b>+.77</b>	(+.12)	-.43	(-.22)	.85
Maximum intensity (mean)	<b>+.78</b>	(+.14)	(+.02)	<b>+.57</b>	.96
Volume of coverage (mean)	<b>+.93</b>	(+.14)	(-.24)	(+.18)	.97
Volume of coverage (sd)	<b>+.86</b>	(+.15)	(-.27)	(-.17)	.87
Day-by-day intensity (mean)	<b>+.84</b>	(+.15)	(+.08)	<b>+.43</b>	.92
Day-by-day volatility (mean)	<b>+.70</b>	(+.03)	(+.03)	<b>+.65</b>	.93
Distance to next event (mean)	(+.11)	-.35	(+.17)	<b>+.62</b>	.56
Relative volatility (mean)	(-.04)	(+.20)	(-.19)	<b>+.74</b>	.63
<b>Eigenvalues</b> (initial solution)	6.30	3.09	2.02	1.26	12.67
<b>Explained variance</b> (initial sol.)	.42	.20	.14	.08	.84
<b>Eigenvalues</b> (Varimax)	5.48	2.95	2.14	2.08	12.67
<b>Explained variance</b> (Varimax)	.37	.20	.14	.14	.84

Table 3.3 Four dimensions of issue characteristics

Note. Data are well suited for factors analysis according to MSA = .679 and Bartlett's test of sphericity with  $\chi^2(105) = 1883.7, p < .001$ ; a 4 factor solution was used; 75 per cent of explained variance is reached when using 4 or more factors; Scree-plot indicates elbows at factor 5 (pointing at using 4 factors); Eigenvalues of factors 1 to 4 above 1.0, all other below, pointing at using 4 factors; Varimax rotation was applied.

**Spike oscillation.** The fourth and least important component (accounting for 8% of Variation, 14% after rotation) is termed *spike oscillation*. It refers to how abruptly coverage within spikes fluctuates and how long the distance to the next spike is. This also comprises the peak of the spike and the average intensity of spike coverage. The relative volatility of spikes is the indicator that most closely matches the factor. The issues with the highest spike oscillation in the sample are elections, anti-terrorism policy, and food safety. For example, election campaigns lead to volatile spikes as the intensity and success of campaigning varies with time.

### Profiling the issues

**Profiling procedure.** RQ2 concerns the profiles of issues that can be distinguished empirically, based on the dimensions of issue dynamics just identified: which combinations or mixtures of spike momentum, issue baseline, spike frequency, and spike oscillation co-occur often, forming an issue development profile, which can be interpreted in terms of ideal types of issue development? To form profiles, a latent profile analysis (LPA) of the eighty-two issues was performed, based on their scores for spike momentum, issue baseline, spike frequency, and spike oscillation. Compared to hierarchical cluster analysis, LPA assigns probabilities of class (or: profile) membership rather than exclusively assigning them to one group. The analysis defines a set of latent profiles that explain the pattern of issue characteristics by defining the issue as a mixture of the profiles. So, for example, the configuration of spike momentum, issue baseline, spike frequency, and spike oscillation of a particular issue X is explained by stating that it is a mixture of issue profile A (60%), profile B (40%), and profile C (0%). The number of profiles and their characteristic spike momentum, issue baseline, spike frequency, and spike oscillation are extracted from the data. The R package 'MclustModel' (Fraley & Raftery, 2007) was used to conduct the LPA.

The number of latent profiles and the appropriate profiling procedure (EEI method: in the four-dimensional vector space (factor values), clusters/profiles have equal volumes, have equal non-spherical shapes, and are mapped along the original coordinate axes) were determined using the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). The target number of profiles (1) should have a minimal BIC value, and still (2) explain more than 50% of the total variation of the four basic dimensions of issue dynamics. These criteria are satisfied by choosing a solution with five latent profiles: *routine issues*, *launching issues*, *boosting issues*, *struggling issues*, and *flatline issues*. To

Latent dimensions	Routine issues (n = 5)		Flatline issues (n = 29)		Struggling issues (n = 36)		Launching issues (n = 9)		Bursting issues (n = 3)		R <sup>2</sup>
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Spike momentum	-1.06 <sup>c</sup> (.42)	-1.06 <sup>c</sup> (.42)	-0.00 <sup>b</sup> (.35)	+1.67 <sup>a</sup> (.46)	+2.16 <sup>a</sup> (1.13)						.85
Issue baseline	+2.03 <sup>a</sup> (.65)	+2.03 <sup>a</sup> (.65)	-0.13 <sup>b</sup> (1.01)	+0.31 <sup>b</sup> (.73)	-0.49 <sup>b</sup> (.70)						.34
Spike frequency	-0.33 <sup>b</sup> (.94)	-0.33 <sup>b</sup> (.94)	+0.70 <sup>a</sup> (.70)	-0.34 <sup>b</sup> (.95)	+0.29 <sup>ab</sup> (.31)						.50
Spike oscillation	+0.73 <sup>b</sup> (.64)	+0.73 <sup>b</sup> (.64)	-0.31 <sup>c</sup> (.63)	-0.64 <sup>c</sup> (.52)	+3.45 <sup>a</sup> (1.10)						.62
<b>Measurements</b>	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	R <sup>2</sup>
Spike volume	17.32 <sup>b</sup> (4.03)	22.37 <sup>b</sup> (15.60)	34.09 <sup>b</sup> (17.06)	133.89 <sup>a</sup> (48.89)	156.05 <sup>a</sup> (49.61)						.79
Articles per year	2263.54 <sup>a</sup> (565.06)	745.88 <sup>c</sup> (364.10)	1057.39 <sup>bc</sup> (561.33)	1287.62 <sup>b</sup> (386.93)	1109.95 <sup>bc</sup> (300.99)						.43
Event frequency	3.40 <sup>ab</sup> (1.34)	3.07 <sup>b</sup> (1.07)	4.64 <sup>a</sup> (1.40)	3.44 <sup>ab</sup> (1.13)	2.00 <sup>b</sup> (0.00)						.41
Relative volatility <sup>d</sup>	.60 <sup>abc</sup> (.08)	.57 <sup>c</sup> (.08)	.51 <sup>b</sup> (.08)	.53 <sup>bc</sup> (.52)	.75 <sup>a</sup> (.17)						.30
<b>Mixed-membership percentages</b>	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	n (n = 82)	
.00–(.25) (marginal)	76	40	40	73	79						
.25–(.50) (partial)	2	13	6	0	0						
.50–(.75) (dominant)	1	6	11	1	0						
.75–1.00 (full)	3	23	25	8	3						

Table 3.4 Features of issues profiles

Notes. All values are z-standardized values (factor scores). Mean entries in the same row that share no superscript differ at  $p < .05$  according to Hommel post hoc tests. The R<sup>2</sup> values indicate what percentage of variation are explained by the class membership probabilities (or: mixed memberships), as LPA provides no fixed class allocations. <sup>a</sup>The values indicate by what percentage the intensity of spike coverage changes from one day to the next (averaged), compared to the previous day. For example, a change from  $i_0 = 8$  news items ( $t_0$ ) to  $i_1 = 6$  news items ( $t_1$ ) would lead to a score of  $[(i_0 - i_1)/i_1] = 2/8 = .25$ . By using absolute values, the direction of change is disregarded.

make between-profile comparisons, each issue was assigned to the profile it is mainly composed of (by absolute or, in one case, relative majority). The characteristics of the latent profiles are reported in Table 3.4.

**Routine issues.** Routine issues are covered regularly, producing a strong baseline regardless of salient current events; only five issues dominantly exhibit a routine profile. Routine issues attract more media attention than any other type ( $M = 2,264$  news items per issue), due to their high baseline. They yield a normal number of spikes ( $M = 3.40$  spikes per issue), which have a very low momentum ( $M = 17$  news items per spike) and moderate within-spike fluctuation or oscillation (i.e. spikes are 'smooth' rather than 'edgy'), as visible from the low relative volatility within spikes ( $M = .60$ ).

But how do these features relate to the content of an issue? The routine issues were: job market, corporate policy, corporate products, and corporate performance. Overall, routine issues are issues that are strongly linked to stable and institutionalized social processes that produce news routinely, with a strong prevalence of business issues. There are several instances of issues that are a mix between routine and flatline issues.

**Flatline issues.** Flatline issues are typically not covered significantly at all. If spikes occur, they quickly fade and media attention effectively recedes to zero; twenty-nine issues were categorized as flatline issues. Media attention for flatline issues is lowest compared to the four other types of issues ( $M = 746$  news items per issue). The volume ( $M = 22.37$  news items per spike), frequency ( $M = 3.07$  spikes per issue) and relative volatility of spikes ( $M = .57$ ) of flatline issues do not differ much from routine and struggling issues.

Instances of flatline issues include: corporate scandals; traffic policy; environmental policy; fundamental rights, and fundamental values. It may come as a surprise that such foundational issues of society are flatline issues. However, these foundations of society may be taken for granted; therefore, the issues are only discussed if journalists observe major deviations from the underlying norms. Hence, flatline issues may even turn into launching or bursting issues under specific conditions (e.g. if a major corporate scandal breaks or fundamental rights are violated).

**Struggling issues.** Coverage of struggling issues is less regular and fluctuates more compared to routine issues; they rely more on irregular spikes than on routine coverage; thirty-six issues were categorized as struggling issues. The total volume of coverage of struggling issues is rather low ( $M = 1,057$  news items per issue). Spikes occur frequently ( $M = 4.64$  spikes per issue), their volume tends to be higher ( $M = 30,00$  news items per spike), and their relative volatility tends to be lower ( $M = .50$ ) compared to routine and flatline issues.

Examples of struggling issues include: violent crimes; family support; international conflicts; and party programmes. Unlike routine issues, struggling issues are driven by frequent news waves (event-driven), rather than continuous baseline coverage (routine coverage). Some struggling issues are very stable because key events and news waves spring up almost routinely (e.g. violent crimes or international conflicts). Struggling issues that are not bound to such recurring and continuing events may turn into flatline issues if no events attract media attention.

**Launching issues.** Launching issues can be characterized as second-rate issues in routine phases that can build up considerably in few but pronounced and stable spikes over the course of the year; nine issues were assigned to this type. Launching issues draw moderate media attention over the year ( $M = 1,281$  news items per issue), only outperformed by routine issues. However, not baseline coverage is responsible for this high amount of media attention; rather, the few ( $M = 3.44$  spikes per issue) but powerful ( $M = 133.89$  news items per spike) spikes in issue coverage boost the overall number of news items devoted to launching issues. Still, the spikes are not 'edgy', but are characterized by smooth fade-in and fade-out over a longer period of spike coverage, as indicated by moderate relative volatility ( $M = .53$ ).

What issues turn out to be launching issues? Examples of launching issues were: intelligence services; FIFA World Cup 2006; military operations abroad; and epidemics. Launching issues do not usually feature in the news as regularly as routine issues. The patterns may follow from announced events, their preparation and follow-ups (FIFA World Cup 2006), a current and evolving political debate (healthcare reform), a long-term stream of events (military operations abroad, e.g. in Afghanistan), or political scandals (Bundesnachrichtendienst [Foreign intelligence service in Germany] eavesdropping affair). These events often lead to several successive long-stretched spikes, rather than a short single peak. In the absence of key events, these issues may turn into struggling or even into flatline issues.

**Bursting issues.** Bursting issues are issues that are driven by salient events that lead to short-term peaks in coverage; only three issues are assigned to that type. The total media attention devoted to bursting issues ( $M = 1,110$  news items per issue) is comparable to media attention to launching issues. Like launching issues, baseline coverage is low compared to spike coverage; spikes occur less frequently compared to other issues ( $M = 2.00$  spikes per issue), but receive massive media attention ( $M = 156.05$  news items per spike). Compared to launching issues, spikes are much shorter and much more 'edgy' (high average volatility with  $M = .75$ ). Coverage increases and decreases abruptly with a short peak.



The only examples of bursting issues in this study are: elections; anti-terrorism policy; and food safety. The temporary salience of these issues in the news media results from the 2006 eventscape: five regional elections in Germany were held on two weekends, leading to short phases of coverage of the latest campaign events and the election results; an unsuccessful terrorist bombing attempt in Germany gave rise to a short but intensive debate on anti-terror measures; two instances of finding 'rotten meat' intended for sale led to short phases of outrage. Without such driving events, bursting issues may turn into struggling or even flatline issues.

## Validation

I check the face validity of the issue profiles by visualizing two issue time-series per profile. The goal is to demonstrate the communalities as well as differences between the five profiles or ideal types. The validation procedure tests whether (a) issues time-series with different profiles actually 'look' different; whether (b) the characterizations provided above are accurate; and whether (c) visual features of issues show up that are not covered by the five profiles that were identified. To that end, I also visualize some issues whose dynamics are not well described by the profiles.

**Differences and commonalities.** Routine, struggling, and flatline issues are clearly distinct from launching and bursting issues regarding the patterns of spike coverage. This holds both in LPA and visual inspection (Figure 3.2). Routine, struggling, and flatline issues are characterized by spikes of low and moderate volume (not event-driven) while launching and bursting issues feature very dominant spikes (event-driven).

How can routine, struggling, and flatline issue be distinguished visually? Routine issues display a clearly higher baseline of coverage. Struggling issues exhibit a higher share of spike coverage. In contrast, most flatline issues are characterized by a flat line of media attention over long periods of the year.

Bursting and launching issues have in common that they are driven by powerful spikes, but the frequency and shape of spikes varies: Spikes in launching issues are quite diverse, but they are often more durable and media attention moves up and down smoothly. In contrast, media attention for bursting issues jumps up abruptly, and after a short peak, attention recedes to the baseline level. The descriptions of the types – derived from averages on latent variables and observed indicators – accurately characterized what the issue time-series look like and how they differ.

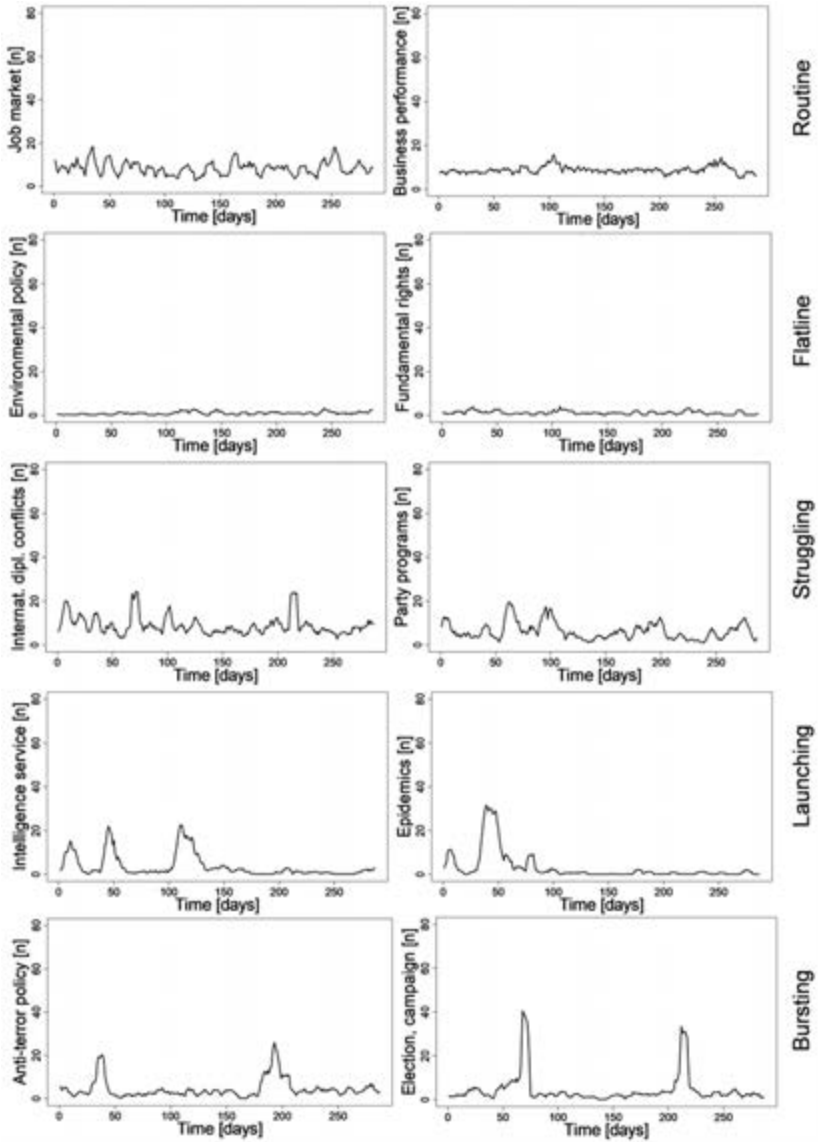


Figure 3.2. Development of ten single-profile issues

**Borderline cases and outliers.** There are several borderline cases where issues match no single profile, but are better described as a mixture of two or more profiles. Figure 3.3 displays three types of borderline cases with mixed profiles: Flatline/struggling issues exhibit both longer periods of flatline coverage (characteristic of flatline issues) and abrupt, short-term,

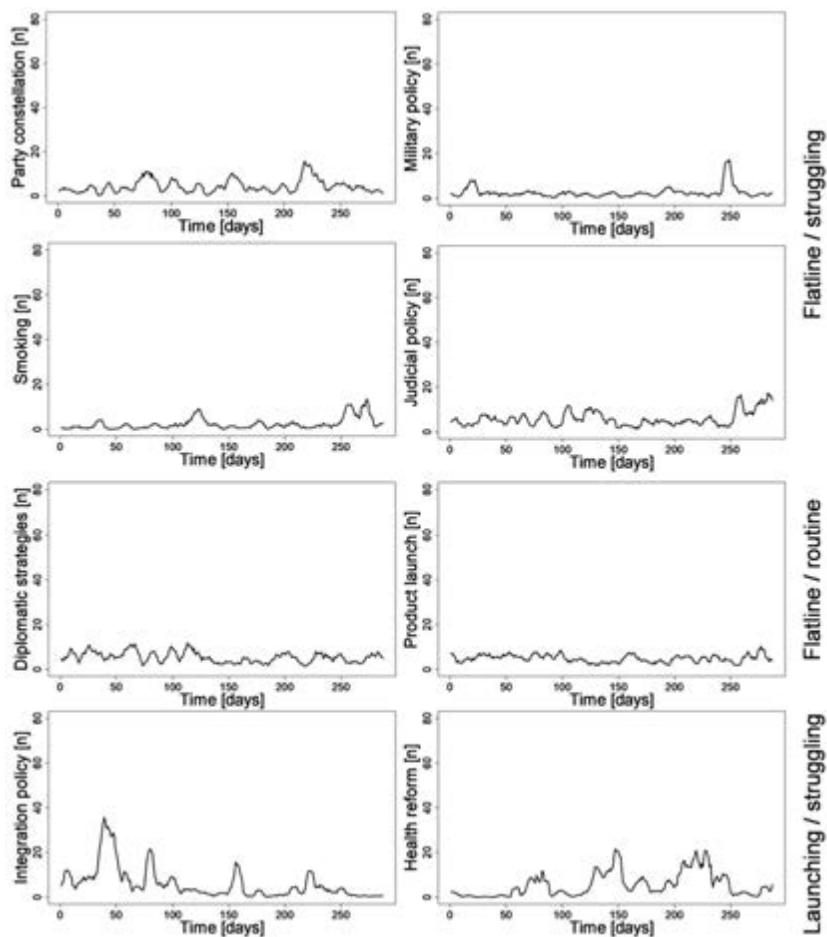


Figure 3.3 Development of mixed-profile issues

low momentum peaks (characteristic of struggling issues). Flatline/routine issues exhibit mostly patterns of routine coverage, but the baseline level of media attention is lower than expected for pure routine issues. Launching/struggling issues resemble launching issues when major spikes occur, and resemble struggling issues when minor spikes occur. The coexistence of major and minor spikes is characteristic of this mixed type. Mixed membership in latent profiles appears to have its place in describing issue dynamics.

There are also some issues that are not well accounted for by the profiling procedure. For fifteen issues, profiling accounted for only 25% of their

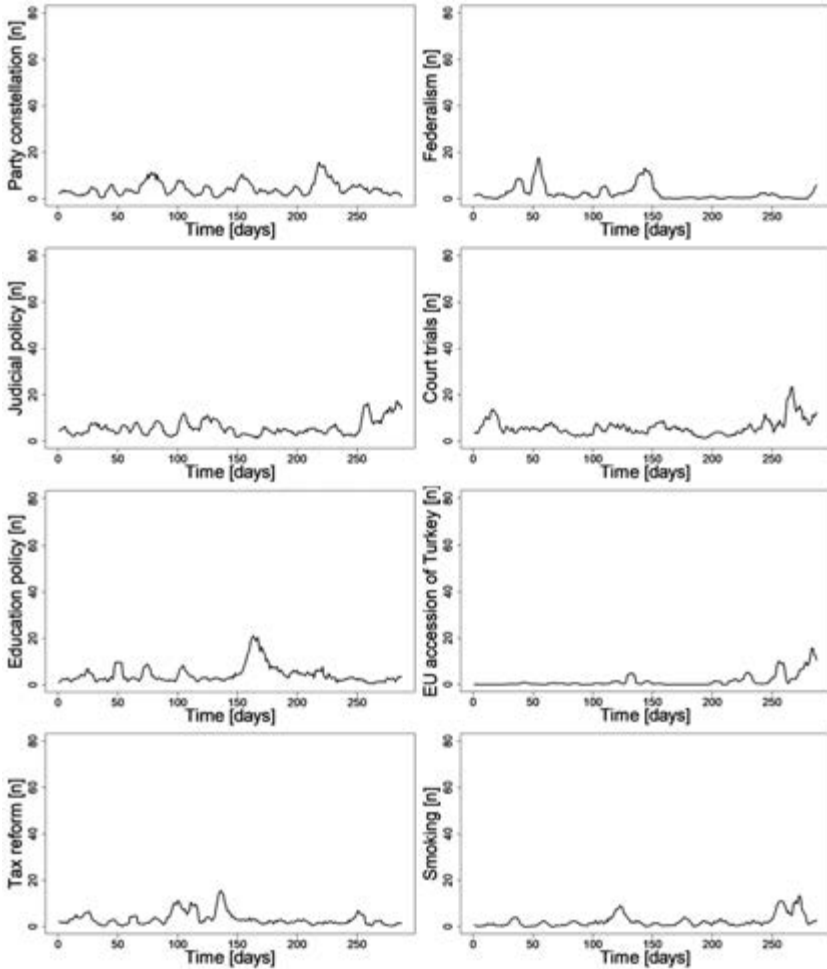


Figure 3.4 Issues that are not well-explained by the five profiles. Less than one quarter of their variation is accounted for by their profiling (along with seven more issues).

variation on the four dimensions or less. Even a mixture of profiles poorly describes these issues' development. The worst fitting issues are: party constellation; federalism; judicial policy; court trials; education policy; EU accession of Turkey; tax reform; and smoking. The plots indicate that low-key, but rather durable spikes characterize these issues. This may indicate that a sixth profile might be necessary to account for such patterns (Figure 3.4). However, mathematical criteria did not suggest that a sixth profile would improve the overall solution.

Each issue time-series is idiosyncratic. The indicators used do not capture all visual features of the time-series, but they capture the basic and most important features; this was the point of this study. Explicating the importance of these features will be a major topic in the discussion below.

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations**

As an exploratory study, there are several limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings. First, the scope of the study should be expanded to other periods of time, other kinds of media, and other countries. Future research will show whether the indicators, dimensions, and profiles are comprehensive. Second, I made several methodological decisions that may provoke criticism – like the choice of thresholds for spikes, indicators of issue dynamics, and cut-off points for the number of dimensions and profiles. However, the intuitive nature of issue profiles as demonstrated in visual comparison of the types supports the notion that the decisions were appropriate. Third, the classification of issues does not necessarily capture the inherent ‘nature’ of an issue; the classification of issues may change if the eventscape changes or an issue moves into the public spotlight for other reasons. Transitions of an issue from one dominant profile to another are possible. Fourth, the LPA could have been conducted using the basic indicators rather than their latent underlying dimensions; however, as several indicators reflected the same dimension this would have led to inadvertent weighting of the dimensions and possible misclassifications.

### **News production**

Studies in news selection have long viewed the selection of individual news stories in isolation. Recently, news selection studies have also investigated continuing coverage of particular issues in the news. This line of research may benefit from the framework presented here: It allows for systematic measuring and classifying the development of issues in the news. These measures can be dependent variables and researchers can try to explain under which circumstances the baseline, the spike frequency, spike oscillation, or spike momentum of issues increases or decreases, or under what circumstances an issue changes its profile. Possible predictors include

external events and extra-media indicators (the eventscape) as well as intra-media processes like news judgements, intermedia orientation, and inter-issue competition. Identifying antecedents and correlates of issue dynamics is the obvious next step, in addition to validating and reproducing the approach used in the current study. It should be applicable to a variety of data collected in other contexts that may be re-analysed to establish measures of issue dynamics and identify latent dimensions and profiles. For instance, under which circumstances can a flatline issue turn into a routine issue, a launching, or a bursting issue, and vice versa? Researchers who plan such an investigation are welcome to ask the author for additional information on calculation procedures.

### **News reception and news effects**

The findings from the present study also inform research into news reception and news effects. Several research areas such as agenda-setting research, framing research, and priming research assume that a shift in the quantity of coverage of a topic (or a frame) at a given time will result in particular audience reactions. Effects of media coverage are therefore only likely if the quantity and/or quality of content changes. Whether there is sufficient change in the quantity and/or quality of coverage to exert any effects on individuals or the audience as a whole is usually not checked in effects studies. Here, classifying media coverage of an issue in terms of flatline, struggling, routine, launching, and bursting issues would be helpful, as media effects are less likely in flatline and struggling issues because these often do not even surpass the 'threshold of public attention' (Neuman, 1990). Routine issues are subject to continuous coverage and are most prone to gradual, long-term effects (if they succeed in raising awareness in the first place), while launching issues may trigger off more far-reaching effects even in the short term. The time frame for change in bursting issues is even shorter. However, the short news waves in bursting issues may provoke only short-term enthusiasm or shock without lasting consequences – as proposed by Downs (1972) and Patterson (1998). Despite such counter-tendencies, as a working hypothesis, and *ceteris paribus*, one can assume that the potential for media effects is low if issues are covered rarely and constantly, while the potential is higher if issues are covered intensively and unsteadily. More generally, classifications of topics regarding the dynamics of intensity of coverage may prove an important contextual moderator of media effects in various theoretical frameworks. Thereby, issue dynamics can be included

mathematically rather than discussing it as one possible explanation for the size of effects. So, a promising future direction of research is to explore how media effects work in different news environments with regard to issue dynamics.

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### About the author

**Stefan Geiß** is Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology and Political Science at the NTNU Trondheim. His research focuses on agenda and frame building, agenda and frame setting, political scandals, and audience–journalist relations. Received dissertation prize of the Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) Mainz for: *Die Aufmerksamkeitsspanne der Öffentlichkeit: Eine Studie zu Dauer und Intensität von Meinungsbildungsprozessen* (The Public Attention Span: A Study of Duration and Intensity of Opinion Formation Processes), published by Nomos.



## 4. Hype, argumentation, and scientific dissemination

*Adam Auch*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the worry that media hype about scientific findings risks undermining public trust in science. Using the example of the seemingly exaggerated media coverage of a recent research finding concerning the effects of global climate change on the habitability of cities in the Middle East, I argue that making sense of this worry requires us to take seriously the value judgements involved in calling such coverage 'hype'. I argue that it is judgements of credibility (who and what one ought to believe) that are put into crisis by science hype and consider a few possible approaches to resolving this crisis.

**Keywords:** hype, credibility, trust, science journalism, philosophy of science

### Case study: Burning hell

In October 2015, a pair of climate scientists, Jeremy Pal and Elfatih Eltahir, published a short paper in the journal *Nature: Climate Change*.<sup>1</sup> In the paper, the authors use climate models for the region surrounding the Persian Gulf to make predictions about when a particular threshold for human survival might be exceeded for the first time. In particular, the authors predict that by the year 2100, heat events will occur in the region in which the 'wet-bulb' temperature (the combination of temperature and humidity) will exceed the point at which human beings are able to survive out of doors. In order to meet the threshold, wet-bulb temperatures of thirty-five degrees Celsius or more would need to be sustained for at least six hours, and would need to affect even those in shaded and well-ventilated spaces. Heat events of this

kind would not be an everyday occurrence, but the authors predict they may occur several times over a thirty-year period.<sup>2</sup> Although such events would be fatal for anyone caught outside, those with access to artificial cooling systems (such as central air-conditioning) would likely survive. Furthermore, the authors take pains to note that the predicted events can be avoided if significant action is taken in the present to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In conjunction with the publication of the academic paper, the public relations department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (where Eltahir is a professor of engineering) published a press release that summarized the main findings of the study in non-technical language.<sup>3</sup> The authors worked closely with the author of the press release to ensure that it accurately reflected the nature and implications of their findings.<sup>4</sup> Later the same day, the information in the press release was reported in a number of stories and blog posts by a wide variety of media outlets. The coverage was intense, with each outlet covering the research from a different angle, reflected in the headlines chosen to accompany the stories. *The New York Times* went with the relatively straightforward 'Deadly heat is forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100',<sup>5</sup> while *The Washington Post* chose the slightly more provocative headline 'Persian Gulf may be too hot for human survival by 2090. Here's what this means for your city'.<sup>6</sup> Other headlines pushed the envelope even further. The website for *Time* magazine introduced its story with the headline 'These cities may soon be uninhabitable thanks to climate change'.<sup>7</sup> But the most striking headline may have been that employed by the website of the *Discovery Channel*,<sup>8</sup> which published its story under the heading 'Burning hell coming for Mideast deserts'.<sup>9</sup>

The stories were widely read and circulated freely on social media. Although the stories themselves adopted a more nuanced tone than the headlines, most of the pieces presented apocalyptic narratives in which climate change would force whole cities to be abandoned to the desert, with relatively little attention paid to the fact that the authors of the paper consider such scenarios a) unlikely and b) avoidable if action is taken to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

In a post for the current affairs website *Slate*, Eric Holthaus, the site's weather and climate blogger, faults the coverage for distorting the import of the research and potentially producing a state of despair and motivational inertia in readers.<sup>10</sup> Holthaus argues that by exaggerating the severity of the predicted event (recall that the heat events would be serious, but survivable by those who remained indoors) while neglecting the important information that the predicted events were avoidable, the coverage risks leaving many readers with the mistaken impression that the study presaged an inevitable

apocalypse. Instead of motivating readers to take action on blunting the effects of anthropogenic climate change, Holthaus worries the coverage has made it more likely that readers will throw up their hands, believing there is nothing to be done. In another post from October 2015, this time lamenting media coverage of retreating Antarctic glaciers, Holthaus puts the point in the following way: 'But lost in all the hype is an important message: It's not too late to save a really, really huge proportion of the ice the frozen continent contains – and thus, virtually every coastal city on Earth'.<sup>11</sup>

## Science hype

Holthaus's use of the word 'hype' to refer to media coverage of this kind links his critique to a number of interrelated worries expressed by scientists, journalists, and other commentators about the way scientific findings are disseminated by the scientific press, reported upon by the media, and taken up by the scientific community. In what follows, I will refer to these worries under the general term 'science hype'.

Examples of science hype abound. In addition to the case described in the previous section, consider the following examples, taken from a workshop on hype in science held in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2013:<sup>12</sup>

**Liberation therapy:** In 2008, a medical journal published a paper announcing a radical new treatment for Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a condition with no known cure. Although MS is generally thought to be a disease of the nervous system, 'liberation therapy' (LT), as the intervention was known, attempted to treat the condition by operating on the vascular systems of affected patients. Jock Murray, the former Dean of medicine at Dalhousie University, argues that the finding lacked support from properly conducted clinical trials, and that, as a result, the medical journal should not have published the paper. Murray alleges that the journal published the finding, in part, due to the possibility it constituted a breakthrough in treatment for an otherwise incurable disease. As Maderspacher puts in his summary of the presentation: 'So, here, [...] a medical journal, failed, allegedly because they deemed the importance of the issue more pressing than upholding the standards of clinical trials'.<sup>13</sup> The finding was widely reported in the media, particularly in Canada, where MS patient groups demanded that LT treatments be covered by government health insurance while further tests were done. Eventually, several provincial governments complied with this request. Ultimately, however, the therapy was found to be ineffective.

**Epigenetics:** Florian Maderspacher, the reviews editor for *Current Biology*, argues that findings in epigenetics, broadly understood as ‘long-term, non-genetic effects on phenotype’,<sup>14</sup> are ‘being hyped both inside and outside science for different reasons’.<sup>15</sup> Outside science, the idea that there are non-genetic elements to heredity has been taken up as vindication for the idea that one’s lifestyle will be passed on to future generations. Maderspacher illustrates this claim by citing a case where research in which a ‘learned sensitivity to odour’ was successfully transferred from one generation of mice to another was reported in the media as establishing that ‘your fears can be transmitted to your grandchildren’.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, within scientific circles, it is sometimes claimed that research of this kind heralds the emergence of a rival evolutionary paradigm to Darwinian theory. Although Maderspacher does not criticize the research itself, he does characterize such claims as hype. In his view, the findings of epigenetic research are neither as surprising, nor as important as they have been portrayed by scientists and the media.

The three cases exemplify a number of interesting interrelated phenomena. The Persian Gulf case features intense coverage of a single research finding in which an already alarming claim (that cities near the Persian Gulf will soon experience deadly heat events) has been exaggerated to fit an even more distressing narrative (climate change will create apocalyptic heat events, rendering the region uninhabitable). Along the way, the nuances of the finding (including the crucial information that the predicted heat events are avoidable) have been stripped away. Something similar seems to be happening in the news reports Maderspacher cites in his critique of epigenetics, where a technical advance in the understanding of heritability in mice is reported as establishing profound facts about human beings – a leap common in media coverage of medical research. There are other areas of concern: the liberation therapy case, for example, seems to involve the presence of both intense, largely uncritical media coverage, and a relaxing of scholarly publication norms. Furthermore, Maderspacher’s critique of epigenetics research takes aim at both the nature of the media coverage and the amount of uptake the field has received within the scientific community. Abstracting from these examples, therefore, we can identify at least four varieties of science hype:

- 1) Exaggerated or careless reporting of carefully conducted scientific research. Exaggeration may come in the form of hyperbolic claims, or in the intensity of coverage.

- 2) A failure to distinguish between peer-reviewed, statistically significant findings generated by well-accepted research methodologies and claims that lack such support but are phrased in superficially 'scientific' ways.
- 3) The publication of questionable research by otherwise reputable scientific journals because of its perceived importance.
- 4) The characterization of well-conducted, but prosaic, research as a revolutionary breakthrough.

The first two varieties of hype are features of the way scientific findings are presented in the non-scientific media, while the last two concern the uptake certain claims receive within the scientific community. Although I will mainly focus on media-driven forms of science hype in this chapter, it is worth reflecting on hype occurring within the scientific community. There are many factors giving rise to this kind of hype. Scientists are under pressure to publish original research to maintain funding and advance their careers. Such pressures may lead to the publication of research that otherwise would not be worth putting forward. In addition, demands that research be 'original', 'groundbreaking', or 'innovative' may affect both how scientists present their findings and what papers are published in scientific journals. That hype occurs within the scientific community suggests that science hype is not simply the product of the preoccupations and limitations of the non-scientific press, resulting from ignorance of scientific norms and procedure. Indeed, hype is a feature of all stages of the scientific dissemination process, from the initial circulation of preliminary findings within particular communities of scientists, to the process by which such findings come to be published in peer-reviewed journals, to the subsequent uptake these findings receive from the non-specialist press and the general public, and the way the findings are brought into political discourse by elected officials, political parties, and interest groups.

Turning our attention, therefore, to media-driven varieties of hype, it is possible to identify at least three worrisome consequences:<sup>17</sup>

- 1) Hype, especially when it takes the form of exaggerated or poorly contextualized coverage of scientific research findings, puts false information into the public sphere.
- 2) Hype has the potential to create false hope (of false despair) in the public at large, or in a particular subset of persons who may have a personal investment in the subject in question.
- 3) Finally, hype is worrisome because it threatens public trust in science and scientists.



In what follows, I want to focus on the last of these claims – that science hype threatens public trust in science and the scientific community. It should be noted that the claim is ultimately an empirical one – albeit one that is quite difficult to investigate.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, empirical investigation requires a definite sense of what the worry consists of and a more fully fleshed out account of how hype is supposed to threaten public trust. The rest of this chapter is aimed at providing such an account.

### Science hype and value judgements

The use of the term ‘hype’ encodes a number of value judgements. For example, when Holthaus calls apocalyptic coverage of findings in climate science ‘hype’, he seems to mean that the scenarios described in coverage are so far removed from the import of the original research that they should not be taken seriously. Similarly, Murray’s contention that much of the discourse surrounding liberation therapy consisted of hype puts forward the idea that the potential treatment had been taken far more seriously (both by the media and the scientific press) than it should have been, given the lack of scientific evidence supporting it. Finally, to claim that certain scientific findings should not be treated as major breakthroughs, no matter how well supported, is to judge them to be unworthy of the attention, investment, or uptake they have received.

For the most part, those taking an empirical or descriptive approach to hype have been reluctant to engage with such judgements. Peter Vasterman, for example, notes that definitions of hype that involve some reference to exaggerated media coverage encode at least two value judgements. For a given topic, one might judge that 1) it has received too much coverage (as in the liberation therapy case), or 2) judge that the media has exaggerated the ‘real facts’ of the story (as in the Persian Gulf example). Vasterman notes the first judgement is a subjective one, involving an assessment of what topics do or do not deserve attention. The second judgement, on the other hand, relies on there being an uncontroversial sense of what ‘the real facts’ of the story are. It is difficult to make an informed judgement in many cases of hype as the facts are either not yet known or partially constituted by discussions in the media.<sup>19</sup> For these reasons, he concludes that ‘a definition of media hype can only be based on the specific dynamic of a news wave, without an a priori denouncement of the phenomenon and excluding criteria like exaggeration and distortion’.<sup>20</sup> In general, those providing accounts of media hype have followed Vasterman’s lead in rejecting value-laden definitions of

hype, preferring instead to look at the ways in which intense media coverage of certain issues and events comes about.<sup>21</sup> While this work has improved understanding of how dynamics within the news media affect how stories are covered, the reluctance to engage with value judgements has meant that the implications of hype for epistemology, public policy, and practical reason are less well understood.

In general, philosophers are more comfortable engaging directly with value judgements in their work. However, as of this writing, there has been very little philosophical work done on the topic of hype. One of the few philosophers to address the topic, Uskali Mäki, does so by way of discussing disputes between traditional economists and scholars working in the emerging field of neuro-economics.<sup>22</sup> In Mäki's view, traditional economists' use of 'hype' to describe the discourse surrounding neuro-economic research is rhetorically inflected. By using the term, traditional economists aim to signal that the norms applied and the methods used in the emerging sub-discipline are not the ones economists ought to use, and that the work is subsequently of little value. In other words, the use of 'hype' to describe neuro-economics research may be nothing more than a rhetorical move by traditional economists to distance themselves from a field with methods and assumptions of which they disapprove.<sup>23</sup>

Given Vasterman's and Mäki's concerns, one may wonder if the problem of science hype, as I have described it above, is intelligible. When Holthaus characterizes media coverage of findings in climate science as unduly apocalyptic, perhaps he is doing nothing more than claiming that the mainstream press and climate scientists have different standards for concepts such as 'uninhabitable'. His use of the term 'hype' to describe the coverage may simply be a means of signalling his disapproval of the version of the concept that appears in media reports. By looking at the issue in this way, the problem of science hype reduces to a dispute about what constitutes good and bad science.

I contend that a full account of science hype must engage in both the descriptive work of explaining how and why the news media come to cover particular stories in the way that they do, and the normative work of identifying and evaluating the value judgements in play when something is called hype. This is no mere academic dispute. Scientific findings, such as the one described in the Persian Gulf case, have important public policy implications. When such findings are apparently distorted in the course of being promoted, there is a need to pay attention to the way hype of this kind affects the ability of audiences to judge the value of information with which they have been presented. For this reason, I believe it is too hasty to

dismiss concerns about science hype as mere ideological posturing. There is, then, a pressing need to think through the ways that facts and values interact in hype contexts.

### **The Powers framework for media hype**

Devon Powers directly addresses the value problem in her framework for hype.<sup>24</sup> Hype, on her account, is 'a state of anticipation generated through the circulation of promotion, resulting in a crisis of value'.<sup>25</sup> For Powers, then, hype is less a feature of the way a particular message is constructed, or of the intentions of a particular speaker, than it is a feature of the way messages are received by audiences. In particular, hype can be identified with an attitude towards a topic that is conditioned by previous experience with promotional activity. This attitude is prospective (forward-looking), projecting a state of affairs that may or may not come to pass. In other words, promotional activity creates expectations which may or may not be met.

Powers argues that promotional activity should be understood quite broadly, as encompassing not only traditional advertising and public relations work, but also media reports, social media posts, and even face-to-face conversations. Importantly, Powers argues that promotional activity must 'circulate' in order to produce hype. As Powers puts it: 'hype becomes – as ads and news stories accumulate; as branding campaigns progress; and as various kinds of audiences read, consume, and debate'.<sup>26</sup> The idea is that promotional acts in different domains interact with each other, intensifying and varying the message received by particular audiences.

Finally, Powers notes that hype produces a 'crisis of value'. The crisis occurs as the expectations set by circulating promotional activity fail to be borne out by subsequent events. Such failures may occur because one's expectations have been set too high, but they can also occur if one's expectations have been set too low (as might happen if one holds back from engaging with something because of previous experience with excessive promotion). Because the process is likely to repeat itself many times in one's life, one may come to find it difficult to make value judgements about topics that have been the subject of intense, circulating promotion. In short, the state of anticipation created by circulating promotion makes it difficult to identify the features that might be helpful in making such judgements. For Powers, the capacity to produce a crisis of value is what distinguishes hype from other, less negatively-valenced products of promotion such as buzz.

This dynamic is perhaps best understood in the context of traditional advertising. In such cases, the value in crisis is monetary – what a given product is (or ought to be) worth to a given person. When a product is the subject of promotion for a long period of time, one's expectations may be raised such that one is disposed to overvalue it – making one willing to pay far more for it than one might have done in other circumstances. On the other hand, especially if one has been through the process before, one may come to undervalue products that receive heavy promotion. Indeed, by repeatedly and systematically affecting one's expectations, promotion of this kind may make it difficult even to determine on what basis such judgements of value should be made.

What values does science hype put into crisis? Although Powers does not explicitly discuss the topic in her paper, she does identify credibility as a value that can be thrown into crisis. The value of credibility is particularly germane to epistemic contexts, such as those that govern the assessment of scientific claims. If hype is able to put judgements of credibility into crisis, then it can create a situation in which individuals are uncertain of who and what they ought to believe. In such a state of confusion, such individuals may be led to fall back on previously held beliefs, evocative narratives, or comforting biases instead of well-justified scientific evidence. Furthermore, some parties might take advantage of this confusion to push their agendas. A context in which credibility is in crisis is one in which claims that it is still an open question whether anthropogenic climate change is really happening are more plausible than they otherwise might be.<sup>27</sup> It is in this sense, perhaps, that hype may serve to undermine public trust in science.<sup>28</sup>

Let us now apply Powers' framework to the Persian Gulf case study. First, Pal and Eltahir put forward their account of their research, first in an academic paper, and, later, in an MIT press release. The information in the press release was then re-reported and re-contextualized as media outlets each put out their own version of the story. For example, the *Washington Post* framed the story of a changing climate in the Persian Gulf in terms of what such changes would mean for its (presumably North American) readers, while the *Discovery Channel's* post placed the finding within an apocalyptic narrative. As the message circulated – as each successive news article was posted to the web, reposted, and commented upon on social media and discussed by different audiences in different contexts, the story was re-contextualized even further. Among these re-contextualizations was Holthaus' post, which attempted to steer the story back to something that more closely resembled the original account. Eventually, the wave died down as writers and audiences moved on to other stories, leaving different

audiences with different expectations depending on the contexts in which they had encountered the story. Some may coalesce around the dominant apocalyptic narrative, while others might refuse to engage with the story altogether. Still others, noting the variety of conflicting accounts, may not know what to do or what to believe. Because hype events are quite common (for example, only two weeks separated Holthaus' post on the Persian Gulf finding and a similar 'debunking' post concerning coverage of melting Antarctic glaciers), it may become difficult for audiences to determine what messages they should trust. Furthermore, because these messages come from a wide variety of sources, audiences may find it difficult to decide who is a trustworthy source for such information in the future.

### Combatting science hype

Now that we have sketched an outline of science hype, one may well wonder how it can be combatted. Commentators have proposed a number of remedies. One option is the notion of 'Post-Publication Peer Review' (PPPR), where knowledgeable commentators attempt to push back against exaggerated or poorly researched science by writing blog posts and essays accessible to the general public.<sup>29</sup> Holthaus' post on the Persian Gulf case is an example of such a strategy in action. Another proposal, aimed at curtailing hype within the scientific community, is to enforce stricter standards for scientific publication. At one extreme is the suggestion, related in Maderspacher, that scientific journals be banned from featuring glossy covers with striking graphics or photography. Finally, most discussions of the topic include a call to increase scientific literacy among journalists and the general public.

The Powers framework for hype can help in understanding why these proposed remedies, while not without merit, are unlikely to be effective at combatting science hype. Firstly, most of the remedies rely on an unstated faith that 'the truth will out' – that once the actual facts about a given subject are put into the public sphere, the hype surrounding it will dissipate. This certainly seems to be the assumption underlying the notion of PPPR. However, this assumption seems too optimistic, since it requires both that the corrective reach the affected audience and that the audience recognize the corrective as authoritative. The former cannot be guaranteed, while the latter may be difficult if the audience finds itself in the grip of the crisis of value, and thus finds it difficult to evaluate the credibility and value of the information provided by a given source. This suggests that methods such

as PPPR are not likely to be effective at combatting the general narrative that hype has built up around a given subject.

Secondly, many of the remedies rely on adopting more austere norms for scientific communication, such as banning glossy covers for science journals or videos like the ones that accompanied the MIT press release promoting Pal and Eltahir's research. Doing so would restrict access to the information in the articles to those qualified to read it, and so would prevent the kind of media coverage that exaggerates the findings of carefully conducted research. However, such an approach would seem to be at cross-purposes with the notion that science should have a bearing on public policy. Indeed, when one's research concerns something as wide-ranging as global climate change, it is unclear what the benefit of keeping this information locked up would be. A solution that denies the need for scientific findings to be publicized to the general public seems no solution at all. Although some degree of reticence is clearly necessary in science communication, this is not a value to be maximized.

Finally, although greater scientific literacy on the part of the general public, or at the very least, on the part of journalists, would certainly ensure more careful presentation of scientific findings (and would allow those findings to be better evaluated by particular audiences), there are two challenges that need to be addressed. The first challenge is that hype appears to be as much a problem within the scientific community as it is outside of it. If, as has been suggested, prestigious journals are susceptible to lowering thresholds for publication when faced with provocative or potentially groundbreaking research, it is not clear that an increased understanding of scientific norms and methods will be sufficient to prevent the spread of science hype.

The second challenge is related to the first: given increased scientific specialization, the background required to judge the importance and value of particular scientific findings is quite vast. Given that public policy may be affected by scientific findings in a wide-range of disciplines and sub-disciplines, it seems unlikely that a sufficient level of literacy could be achieved by a single individual, let alone by the general public.<sup>30</sup> For example, the major finding of the research in the Persian Gulf case study hinges on an understanding of a quite technical definition of human survivability. While increased literacy may help with the public's understanding of basic scientific concepts and methodology, it will not do much to help audiences evaluate the content of specific scientific claims reported in the media.

In what remains of this chapter, I will attempt to sketch a couple of potentially more fruitful alternatives. One approach to addressing media-driven science hype would be to pair increased scientific literacy with

increased media literacy. If audiences had a better understanding of how the media comes to report on different topics and how they come to frame present information in the way that they do, they may be less susceptible to the crises produced by media-driven hype. More generally, defusing media-driven science hype may require the development of new habits of mind. In earlier work, I suggested that, in contexts of hype, one should aim towards a virtue of proportionality, that is to say keeping new claims in the proper perspective.<sup>31</sup> The virtue can be thought of as existing midway between two vices – credulousness and cynicism. A credulous person believes everything she hears in a hype context, while a cynical person rejects it. Both vices are dangerous ones. A credulous agent risks disappointment when her expectations are not met. The cynical agent, on the other hand, risks missing out on something valuable or important. Developing a sense of proportion requires looking beyond one's immediate experience of a subject and asking questions about the circumstances in which the discourse surrounding that subject has been produced.

Another means of combatting science hype may be found in the tendency of hype to follow pre-existing narratives. For example, the hype surrounding Pal and Eltahir's research into the changing climate around the Persian Gulf seemed to feed on already existing narratives of apocalypse and disaster. These narratives, which form the basis of the plots of disaster movies such as Roland Emmerich's *The day after tomorrow*, present disasters as beyond the human ability to prevent or mitigate – it is almost as though the disaster is divinely ordained and the best individual humans can hope for is to somehow survive. As a result, coverage of Pal and Eltahir's work tended to downplay the notion that their predicted disasters were avoidable ones. Perhaps if there existed, in popular circulation, narratives in which coordinated action served to prevent potential disaster, the coverage might be pushed in more positive direction.

## Notes

1. Pal & Eltahir (2015).
2. Chandler (26 October 2015).
3. Ibid.
4. Holthaus (27 October 2015).
5. Schwartz (26 October 2015).
6. Warrick (28 October 2015).
7. Worland (26 October 2015).

8. The website has since been rebranded as 'Seeker.com'
9. Niler (26 October 2015).
10. Holthaus (27 October 2015).
11. Holthaus (14 October 2015).
12. The event was organized by Ford Doolittle, a professor of biology at Dalhousie University, under the auspices of the Situating Science research group. Video of the presentations is available at Situating Science (2014). Conference presentations are summarized in Maderspacher (2014).
13. Maderspacher (2014), p. R301.
14. *Ibid.*, p. R299.
15. *Ibid.*, p. R299-R300.
16. *Ibid.*, p. R300.
17. Hype within the scientific community also has potentially worrisome implications. In particular, it has the potential to skew decisions about what projects receive funding, attention, and human investment.
18. Master and Resnik (2011) make this point in their review of empirical work on the effect of hype about biotechnology on the expectations of particular patient groups. They also go into detail about the difficulties of assessing the effect of science hype on the general public.
19. Vasterman, in comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, points out that media coverage of scientific findings is something of an exception to this principle, since in such cases we can compare claims made in media reports to the findings contained in the original study. However, the specialized knowledge required to understand the implications of such research may make it difficult for non-scientific audiences to make such a comparison. For example, in the Persian Gulf example, the problem seems to have arisen, at least in part, due to the ambiguity of concepts such as 'survivability' and 'uninhabitable'. Although Pal and Eltahir used technical definitions for such terms in their research, reporters and other non-specialist writers applied them more broadly. This ambiguity makes it difficult to establish just what interpretation of the term should be the subject of concern.
20. Vasterman (2005), p. 512.
21. Some writers go even further than Vasterman. For example, while Vasterman draws a distinction between media-driven and organically unfolding news stories, Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) reject such a distinction, in part because it relies on access to facts that one cannot always expect to have (namely, whether or not someone has been manipulating the story at some level).
22. Mäki (2010).
23. I discuss rhetorical manoeuvres of this kind in more detail in Auch (2013).
24. Powers (2012).
25. *Ibid.*, p. 863.
26. *Ibid.*
27. The crisis of credibility can be connected with concerns that post-modern approaches to truth that see it as socially-constructed can be co-opted



- by the same forces that such approaches were developed to critique. See Latour (2004). Thank you to Peter Vasterman for raising this point.
28. This process also serves to undermine trust in the news media. The problem of science hype is thus not merely a concern for scientists alone. Thank you to Peter Vasterman for this observation.
  29. PPPR was championed by Rosie Redfield at the Halifax conference on science hype. See Maderspacher (2014).
  30. Master & Resnik (2011) note that empirical work on hype and biotechnology suggests that specific populations (for example, those affected by a particular disease or medical condition) do not show any loss of trust in science when confronted with hype about technology and treatment related to their circumstances. However, it is unclear whether the implications of these results can be extended to more diverse and less informed audiences.
  31. Auch (2013).

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## About the author

**Adam Auch** received a PhD in philosophy from Dalhousie University in 2012. Since then, he has taught courses in the philosophy departments at Dalhousie, Saint Mary's University, and Mount Allison University. Currently, he works as a writing advisor for the Dalhousie University Writing Centre. His research is focused on the norms of language use and communication and their implications for the dissemination of knowledge.



## **II.**

# **Anatomy of self-reinforcing dynamics: Case studies**



## 5. The mechanisms of media storms

*Anne Hardy*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018  
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### **Abstract**

This chapter investigates the underlying mechanisms of media storms. In other words, what happens exactly on the level of the news-making process when a storm breaks? From the literature, two complementary mechanisms are derived: lower gatekeeping thresholds and imitation. To illustrate these mechanisms, a qualitative dataset of sixteen semi-structured interviews with senior editors and news managers is used. I find evidence for both mechanisms. Lowering thresholds do explain why media storms occur. Further, news outlets look at each other, imitation is daily routine. But the process of imitation is intensified by the presence of a media storm, especially between directly competing outlets.

**Keywords:** media storms, mechanisms, lowering thresholds, imitation

For 125 days, Salah Abdeslam, one of the ten men suspected of carrying out the attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, was the most wanted man in Europe. He handled the logistics for the Paris attacks: he was the fixer, renting cars, finding apartments, picking people up and dropping them off. Abdeslam was supposed to die on 13 November, but instead fled to Brussels just hours after the attacks (Rubin, 2016). For 125 days, Belgian authorities failed to find him. After a four-month international manhunt, on the afternoon of 18 March 2016, Abdeslam was arrested in the Molenbeek neighbourhood of the Belgian capital.

On the morning of that day, a group of senior news editors of the commercial broadcaster *VTM* gathers for a team-building seminar. During lunch, a couple of hours before the arrest, they are notified that Salah Abdeslam is to be arrested. The group of editors decides to interrupt their seminar and to return, together, to the newsroom to cover the arrest in a live broadcast. On the other side of Brussels, the public channel *VRT* is also following the

latest developments on the possible arrest. Forty-five minutes after *VTM NEWS* starts their live broadcast, *VRT NEWS* also interrupts their regular broadcasting schedule for an extra newscast. Both broadcasters devote extensive coverage to the latest developments.

Only a few days later, on 22 March, Brussels is startled by several bomb blasts at the national airport and at the Maalbeek subway station. At 8 am, the editorial news office of *VTM NEWS* hears that there has been an explosion at Brussels Airport. The senior editor of *VTM NEWS* says: 'It only took us four seconds to link the explosion to possible attacks. [...] And after eight seconds, you realize that this will be something heavy: a big disaster or an attack. Since Charlie Hebdo, we are in a permanent "it is possible that an attack will happen"-mode'.

What follows in the hours after the first explosion at Brussels Airport is unprecedented. Both broadcasters *VRT NEWS* and *VTM NEWS* go live for fourteen hours straight to bring the latest updates on the attacks. Even journalists who are not supposed to be working that day come to the news office to help. Nearly everyone is reassigned to cover the bombings. Newspapers also staff their online offices with extra personnel. The newsrooms stay in 'storm mode' for many days. Not just on the day of the bombings, but also during the days afterwards, media outlets generate multiple news updates and follow-up stories about the bombings.

The Brussels bombings that took place on 22 March 2016 are an example of a media storm: an explosive and high-level surge in attention surrounding a triggering event that dominates news coverage for weeks. Most people are able to recognize a media storm when they see one. When media consumers cannot avoid an issue wherever they look, a media storm occurs. Several scholars have tried to define this phenomenon of suddenly peaking media attention in various ways. Vasterman (2005) was one of the first scholars explicitly addressing the similar concept of a media hype. He defines a media hype as 'a media generated, wall-to-wall news wave triggered by one specific event and enlarged by a self-reinforcing process within the news production of the media' (Vasterman, 2005, p. 515). Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) draw upon this definition, but argue that the distinction between news 'making' and news 'reporting' is hard to make in practice. Therefore, they opt to consider media hypes simply as instances of very intense media coverage on a single issue (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009, p. 185). Wolfsfeld and Shaefer (2006) speak of political waves as sudden and significant changes in the political environment, characterized by a substantial increase in the amount of public attention – measured and driven by media attention – centred on a political issue or event. Most

previous work studies one single case: Vasterman (2005) investigates events of random violence in the Netherlands and Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) look at scandals about care of the elderly in Denmark. These studies do not investigate whether the storms they identify are generic phenomena applicable to other issues and other systems. Together with Amber Boydstun and Stefaan Walgrave (2014, p. 511) I argue that a more generic concept is needed. Elaborating on previous work, they introduce the concept of a media storm and identify three crucial characteristics – size, duration and explosiveness – which they incorporate in their definition of a media storm: ‘an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific issue constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda devoted to the issue during a certain time’. They also use these three criteria to develop an operationalization for systematically gauging media storms. The current chapter builds on this latter conceptualization.

The example of the Brussels bombings illustrates what happens when a media storm breaks. Media outlets are taking decisions to deliver extra newscasts influenced by the decision their competitors take. Moreover, in such situations, media outlets are covering the story extensively and produce many more news items than they normally do. Previous work has already speculated about the drivers of media storms, but no study has yet investigated it in a systematic and empirical way. The aim of this chapter is to find out how media storms come about and to see how this process differs from non-storm coverage (‘a routine day’). In other words, *what are the mechanisms of media storms? A, are the mechanisms of media storms different from mechanisms for ‘non-storm/routine’ coverage?*

## Illustrating the mechanisms of media storms

Investigating what drives media storms contributes to a recent and growing body of work dealing with media dynamics. Previous work has already speculated on the drivers of media storms, but no study has yet investigated it in a systematic and empirical way. Boydstun et al. (2014, p. 512) have distinguished two possible mechanisms. First, Kepplinger and Habermeier (1995) identify a change of selection criteria after a key event happens. Specifically, they mean that a key event triggers an increase in coverage of that event, and of similar and thematically related events. Wolfsfeld and Shaefer (2006, p. 336) make a similar argument: ‘Once a wave materializes, media will link events with the overall story and search for sources, information, events’. Events that in different circumstances would not have



been salient enough to make it into the news *do* now pass the media gates and get coverage. This first mechanism explains why media storms are not one-day phenomena, but instead go on for, at least, a few days.

The first mechanism mentioned above refers to an intra-medium phenomenon: a single news outlet can increase its coverage, irrespective of what other media are doing, as it temporarily implies less strict criteria for newsworthiness. The second is a multimedia one: news outlets imitate one another's news coverage. Scholars have often referred to such self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005). Combined, these emulating micro-decisions may lead to a storm on the aggregate level. The second media-storm-generating process especially affects the explosiveness of a storm: imitation on a large scale leads to quickly peaking media attention. Media storms happen because different media simultaneously pick up a news item, which creates a collective dynamic of increasing coverage. In what is truly a self-reinforcing process, this collective dynamic further fuels individual news outlets' incentives to stay locked on the storm.

The theory has probably not been tested so far because it is quite complex to really disentangle these mechanisms in a quantitative way. It requires very detailed data on the micro-level, such as hourly news updates from news websites, which is a very time-intensive process. For this reason, I chose for a qualitative approach. I have used interviews to extract the data needed to disentangle these mechanisms. The benefits of using a qualitative approach are demonstrated here, because they bypass some of the problems mentioned above while delivering insightful evidence. It is important to note that this approach will not really *test* the mechanisms of media storms, but rather illustrate them based on the *perception* of journalists. This chapter explains how journalists experience a media storm and *what they think* happens during a storm. Journalists, especially chief/senior editors and news managers, are valid sources, since they possess the expertise, authority, and responsibility to decide. They know what a media storm is from hands-on experience, rather than from study.

Two series of interviews were conducted. In the first round, in the summer of 2013, I held nine semi-structured interviews with general editors of newspapers and newscasts of the public broadcaster *VRT* and the commercial broadcaster *VTM*. At the beginning of each interview, I sketched my research design and explained how I conceptualized and measured media storms. This was to avoid a situation where editors might talk intuitively about big disasters only, such as the Sierre crash.<sup>1</sup> Of course, people always refer to

what is at the front of their minds. In the summer of 2013, the accession to the throne of King Filip took place. Many interviewees referred to this example because it was a big event that summer. After the Brussels bombings in 2016, a second round of semi-structured, telephone interviews was conducted. For these interviews, I looked for journalists who operate in the newsroom. Whereas most general editors mainly deal with the general policy of their news service, news managers and senior editors actually create the news. No general questions about media storms were asked this time. I briefly introduced the topic to the interviewees, and the questions explicitly dealt with the Brussels bombings. The journalists were, for example, asked to describe exactly what happened in the newsroom on the day of the bombings.

### **Just an ordinary news day**

To understand what happens exactly when media outlets go into storm mode, it is useful to illustrate first how news is made on an 'ordinary', routine news day. In other words, which procedures are used on a daily basis? After doing this, I will shed light on the motivations behind these ordinary news decisions. More specifically, I will look at imitation as a motivation for certain news decisions.

#### **News procedures: How news is made**

Journalists depend on a set of routines to do their job (Boydston, 2013; Gans, 1979; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). The purpose of these routines is to deliver, within limited time and space, the most acceptable product, in the most efficient manner, to the consumer (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). All media outlets work with a fixed format. The particular events that occur change daily, but the process of news-making does not. In most newspapers' newsrooms, the senior editor starts the day with a 'news watch'. He or she gets information about events that happened during the night, makes a summary of the interesting news items in other newspapers (also in Walloon and foreign newspapers), reads his or her own newspaper again and listens to the radio to hear what the radio news picked up from the newspapers. Then, there is a morning meeting led by the general editor or news manager. Here, the 'news watch' is presented and journalists can present their new ideas. Those attending the meeting depends on the newspaper, with only the head of departments present at *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, and any journalist from the publication invited at *Het Laatste Nieuws*. At *Het Nieuwsblad*,

journalists can choose whether or not to come to the morning meeting, but if they come, they should introduce an idea. After this meeting, the process of news-making can start. At *De Standaard*, for example, the head of each department has another meeting with their individual team(s), while *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad* opt for more centralization; all news selection decisions are made by the chief editor. So, at some newspapers decision-making is more centralized than at others.

For television, a similar process takes place. A selection is made based on what journalists read in the newspapers, what radio news has already taken from the newspapers, and the news calendar. This calendar bundles all scheduled events and media outlets – especially TV – anticipate it keenly. A weekly/daily plan is made that appoints specific journalists and camera crews in advance to specific events and news items. The 1pm newscast serves as a framework for the rest of the day. After this, the newscasts of both *VRT* and *VTM* evaluate both their own and each other's newscasts and make only a few adjustments for subsequent newscasts.

### **Motivations behind news decisions: Imitation**

News outlets thus follow a twenty-four-hour news cycle. Imitation is key in their daily routine: every morning, news editors read the newspapers of their competitors. Radio news uses the newspapers as the starting point of their daily news selection; consequently, television takes over the most important facts of the newspapers and the radio news. A study on inter-media agenda-setting in Flanders has shown that radio is a key player. Radio news – more specifically *De Ochtend*, a daily news show on Radio 1, which is broadcast from 6am to 9am – selects the news of the day from the newspapers and sets the agenda for television news later on that day (Hardy, 2008). Liesbeth Van Impe (*Het Nieuwsblad*) indicates that this can be frustrating for newspapers: 'You often wonder', she says, 'why do media outlets take over that particular news fact?!'

Scholars of inter-media agenda-setting have shown that directly competing outlets in particular take notice of each other's news selection decisions and tend to embrace issues that the competition has covered before (e.g. Boyle, 2001; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). This is illustrated by Dimitri Antonissen of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, who, when describing the start of his working day, said that 'one of the very first things I do in the morning is skim very fast our main competitor's newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*'. News editors constantly want to know if they have missed something. Steven De Bock of *Het Nieuwsblad* also confirms this: 'Of course we look at our competitors.'

We assess our newspaper based on what our competitors have shown us. It's not possible to make a good newspaper if theirs is better'. Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) adds: 'We look at our peers. For example, what was the first item of the *VRT* newscast? If *VRT NEWS* starts with this story, then it is by definition important, isn't it?'

Imitation is thus a daily routine for journalists. Liesbeth Van Impe of *Het Nieuwsblad* explains: 'Media look at each other constantly. It is a kind of reflex. In this way, news gets defined. If two newspapers cover the same issue then it is per definition newsworthy and other outlets will cover it as well'. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) adds:

Media *influence* each other. Newspapers influence television and radio and vice versa. *VTM* influences *VRT* and *VRT VTM*. As a news editor you have to read newspapers and listen to the radio to know what the competitors are doing. If other news outlets are bringing a story that you haven't covered yet, you immediately think 'why haven't we covered this yet?' and start thinking about which aspect is not covered yet to elaborate on the story. This only has advantages for the media consumer. Media are incentivized to perform as well as possible.

## What a difference a day makes: Media storm

In the previous section, I looked at an 'ordinary' news day. In this section, I try to systematically compare non-storm news coverage with media storms coverage.

### Lowering news thresholds

Let us go back to the moment when, on 22 March 2016, the first bomb exploded in Brussels airport, and reconstruct how this explosion changed the entire news production process on that day (and the days afterwards). Griet De Craen (*VRT NEWS*) described what staff at *VRT NEWS* did when the first information about the bombings came in: 'We immediately started by calling the police, the airport [...] to verify if our information is correct and what's going on [...]. After only a few minutes, we knew that this was really serious'. What follows is a significant organizational change; the newsroom is operating in a different mode: storm mode. Concretely, (1) coordination becomes extremely important, and (2) nearly all journalists are re-assigned to cover the story of the day.

When a storm breaks, coordination is extremely important. Due to the fact that in storm mode decisions are now mostly made top-down, there is less room for individual journalists to come up with ideas about other issues/events that they want to cover. The chief editor and news managers have to clarify decisions about how the event will be covered and about the division of labour. Griet De Craen (*VRT NEWS*) explains: 'On the day of the Brussels bombings, we had an hourly meeting with general editors and senior editors of the different outlets (radio, website, TV)'. Emmanuel Rottey (Chief Editor Social Media *VRT NEWS*) adds: 'At that moment, it is important to coordinate between different channels and between different outlets. You have to make sure radio and television do not call the same people twice and that *Het Journaal* and *TerZake* cooperate on how they are going to cover the event'. The newspapers *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*, for example, both normally working 'bottom-up' with an editorial meeting with all journalists, cancelled this meeting the day of the Brussels attacks. Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) is more nuanced; he confirms that news managers take editorial decisions, but that all journalists can come up with ideas, even on very busy news days, such as the day the Brussels bombings happened.

In storm mode, almost all journalists cover the same issue, as Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) describes: 'When a storm breaks, the newsroom is divided in two teams. One news manager gathers a big team and they deal with the storm, the other news manager and a couple of other journalists take care of the rest of the news'. Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) explains that on the day of the Brussels bombings they worked with a team of three news managers instead of one: 'We have a rotating system with three news managers that alternately are responsible for the newspaper. When something really big happens, all three of us work. One news manager is coordinating the logistical stuff, the other one the journalists and the third one all the other news'.

Specialists on the topic are important, but so-called generalists are also asked to report on the issue. All interviewees indicated that on the day of the Brussels bombings all journalists – even those who were not supposed to work that day – were mobilized. Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) confirms that this is true at all levels of expertise: 'On one hand, the specialist on a skiing holiday is told to put his Glühwein aside and come up with a hundred lines in print; on the other hand, people who know bugger all about the topic are told to make some phone calls. This way, the newsroom is a mixture of generalists and specialists'. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) adds: 'A bunch of journalists will work on the same issue; also non-specialists. For example,

Peter Verlinden, the Africa expert of the *VRT NEWS*, covered the succession of the throne in the summer of 2013. A lot of people were on vacation and we needed a big group of journalists to cover the event'. Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) describes how this played out for the Brussels bombings: 'The decision to cover only the terrorist attacks was taken quite rapidly. The people working on other projects were re-assigned to the bombings. Even the people of *NINA.be*, our website for women, were brought in to cover the story'.

As a result of these organizational changes (more centralized coordination and reassignment of journalists), the newsroom will be super-focused on just one thing: covering the issue of the storm. When the entire newsroom is working on just one story, this simply leads to a bulk of news items about that story. The story is everywhere. The fact that the news organization is working top-down also contributes to this. The coordinating news manager has a clear task, organizing all input and output about the story. The simple fact that someone is managing the story leads to more news, follow-up stories, and stories with different angles. Even events that, in other circumstances, would not have been salient enough to make it into the news, now pass the media gates and get covered. This is called 'lowering thresholds': the media lower gatekeeping thresholds for similar later events and for 'after'-events (Brosius & Eps, 1995; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). The logic of lowering news thresholds goes back to the 'continuity effect', already identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965, p. 82), who state that 'once an event has "made it" the news channel will be more readily open for the follow-up events, at a lower threshold value'. After an initiating event, journalists even start to cover similar past events that occurred before the key event took place. Journalists and editors know that such events can elicit high levels of public attention, leading to a demand for more information. Mass media try to satisfy this hunger by providing more news about the same issue.

If multiple significant events occur about the same topic, news outlets are more likely to go into storm mode. Jo Buggenhout of *VTM NEWS* explains: 'Since the beginning of last year, since Charlie Hebdo, we're in a kind of "attack modus"'. This means that terrorist events occurring in the weeks or months after Charlie Hebdo were heavily reported upon. Downs (1972) explains this using the 'issue attention cycle argument'. 'Once an issue has forcefully caught the attention of the media', says Downs, 'it stays there for a while until, inevitably, it fades away again as journalists start looking for other, fresh news'. The key element in Downs' account is that spectacularly heightened news attention for an issue is temporary. The public and the media will get bored and turn away. As long as the public stays tuned, the

media will keep on covering the storm issue. Added to that, if news events connected to the media storm issue continue to unfold, journalists will continue covering them (and the threshold for covering events linked to the storm will remain low). In this sense, the duration of a storm probably critically depends on how political or other relevant actors deal with it. If elites keep talking and especially disagreeing about the issue and keep producing events that are worth covering, the storm continues.

### Imitation

In this paragraph, I develop the argument that when a storm breaks, it is important to react quickly. Because news editors have to react fast, this leads to uncertainty. News editors are uncertain about how much attention they must devote to an event and find it hard to estimate what their main competitors will do. This causes imitation.

When a media storm occurs, it is important that news managers immediately undertake action. They make phone calls to inform other journalists and to gather extra information. Often an ad hoc 'news cell' is established. This team meets as soon as possible to see what and how the event is going to be covered, as Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) describes: 'We put everything we've collected for tomorrow's newspaper with the garbage and start all over again. We immediately meet with all the specialists of that issue and ask ourselves: "these are the facts [...] what shall we do? What can we add to the story? What do we want to accomplish?"'

Procedures are more rigid for television news than for newspapers. Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) explains that they have a protocol when something big happens: 'It is important to make fast decisions about an extra newscast. If we decide that the event can be categorized as "a big bang", all relevant actors simply have to open a script on their computer with a step-by-step plan about who needs to be contacted (for example, to interrupt the "regular" broadcasting schedule of broadcaster, to order extra camera crews)'. Newspapers have to decide if they produce an extra edition or extra pages. The website is also important, as Steven De Bock (*Het Nieuwblad*) confirms: 'We have to work at two different paces. The newspaper for the next day is important, but the website as well. On the day of the Brussels bombings, I immediately reassigned some journalists for the "paper version" of the newspaper to produce articles for the website'.

Technology has influenced the speed of news-making. Newspapers are now able to produce an extra edition, because it is technically possible to do this within a limited time frame. TV stations do not need a satellite wagon

to go live, but instead use a 'WNT system' that works with 4G. This gives a broadcaster the flexibility and mobility to cover the event faster.

All interviewees indicated that it is important for things to happen fast. Sometimes this leads to uncertainty. It is not always easy to make a correct estimation on how 'big' to make a particular story. At these moments, news outlets look to each other. What is the assessment of our main competitor? Has *VTM* made an extra newscast? Looking back at 18 March 2016, the day that Salah Abdeslam was arrested, a *VRT NEWS* journalist argues: 'We were in doubt whether we had enough information to bring an extra newscast [...] At such moments, you really look at the others'. Stories that are reported in different media at the same time create a collective dynamic of increasing coverage. Scholars have often referred to such self-referential processes, disconnected from the outside world, leading to pressure on every news desk to join the pack (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Vasterman, 2005). Together, these emulating micro-decisions may lead to a storm on the aggregate level. This second media-storm-generating process especially affects the explosiveness of a storm: imitation on a large scale leads to quickly peaking media attention.

Whereas lowering news thresholds causes media storms, imitation is responsible for sustaining them. Most news editors believe that imitation feeds the storm and makes them stronger. Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) and Wim Willems (*VRT NEWS*) attribute this to the increased level of competition. Antonissen: 'News editors ask themselves at the end of a big news day who was the best and who had the most viewers/readers'. Willems adds: 'The competition is brought to a higher level. We will look more closely what is in the newspapers and what they exactly write about. This might give us ideas how to cover the news ourselves'. Kris Hoflack (*VTM NEWS*) adds: 'Media reinforce each other during a storm. You know that if you decide to take over a news fact, it only gets bigger. In this way, you end in an irreversible news flow where you cannot step out anymore'. Tim Pauwels (*VRT NEWS*) argues that a news editor is restrained by fear:

The only thing a news editor asks himself at the end of the day is "have I missed something?" These people are constantly asked: why does competitor A or B cover this or that and we don't? It really takes a lot of courage to step out of the box. And it will only be done when the news editor feels sure that the mainstream choices are more or less covered. Given the shrinking resources of many redactions, at the end of the day, for many news outlets, the mainstream choices are all they end up doing.



Desmet (*De Morgen*) explains his view: 'It's two-fold. For certain issues, you can see that we all go simultaneously in the same direction. But at other moments, you see that, call it a self-regulation mechanism, we don't because we make another estimation of the story or we do not begrudge our competitor to follow him'.

Let us illustrate this imitation process with an example. The first round of interviews took place in August 2013, only a few weeks after the accession to the throne of King Filip on 21 July. Most news editors indicate that they covered it extensively because they knew other media would do the same. Dimitri Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*): 'Yes, we gave a lot of attention to the abdication of King Albert; it was a big historical event and, more importantly, we didn't want to do less than the others, although we knew that probably a significant part of our readers didn't care about it'. Liesbeth Van Impe (*Het Nieuwsblad*) adds: 'I really was in doubt on how to cover it. Maybe our readers wouldn't mind if we'd brought only four pages. But as a news editor you make the consideration: every outlet is going to get big, so let's do it too'. This is an excellent example of a media storm that is initiated by a forecasted event. Outlets anticipate this event and they all cover it extensively because they expect the others to do so as well. In other words, anticipated imitation also often leads to explosive attention, triggering a media storm.

Yet, imitation does not always drive media storms. News managers were asked whether they closely watched their competitors on the day of the Brussels bombings. Most interviewees indicated that imitation did not play a role on this occasion. The reason is that the event was so obviously important that it was clear for each outlet that they had to cover it extensively. Jo Buggenhout (*VTM NEWS*) confirms that, under these circumstances, there is no need to look at others because 'you're just so focused on your own news'. Peter Goris (*Gazet van Antwerpen*) adds: 'Honestly, imitation did not play a role. Well, of course, you're in the flow. You look at the planning of *De Standaard*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Het Belang van Limburg* [all of these newspapers are in the same media group] and you know that they all focus on one thing. So, automatically, you go with them. But on the other side, this is just so evident'.

In sum, it seems that some level of imitation is a daily practice during routine periods. A majority of the interviewees indicated that imitation increases during a media storm compared to imitation during a 'routine day'. In other words, imitation is driving media storms. Imitation especially takes place when news editors are unsure about making a correct estimation of "how big" to make a story and how much attention they should pay

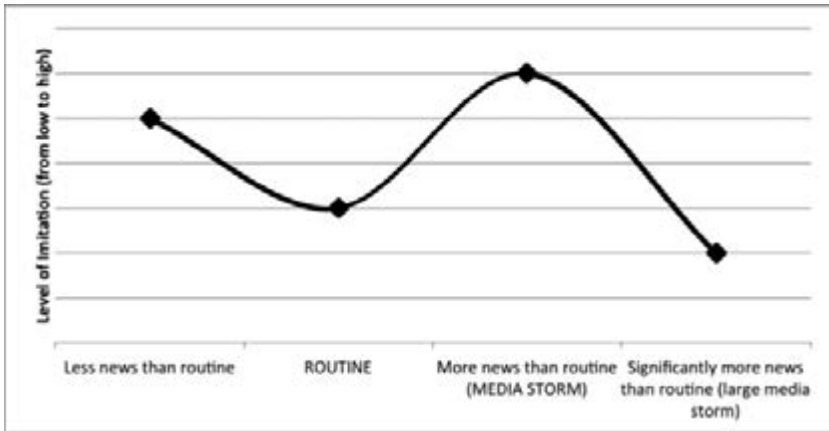


Figure 5.1. Level of imitation during (non) routine periods

to the topic. In a race against time, news editors are supposed to make fast decisions. At such a moment, media outlets will look to each other, and in particular to their direct competitors.

Figure 5.1 visualizes the level of imitation during routine and media storm periods, albeit appears somehow arbitrary to draw a line to indicate this. Based on the interviews, it is safe to say that imitation goes up during a media storm period (but also on a routine day there will always be some level of imitation). Two comments need to be formulated at the extreme left and extreme right side of the graph. On one hand, I learned during the interviews that imitation also takes place on a very slow news day, when there is nothing interesting to report on. Antonissen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) explains: ‘I think the slower the news day, the more competition. If you have sufficient own “exciting” material, you look less at your competitors. But at the moment you think “we don’t have enough good stories for our newspaper” you will look at others more easily’. On the other hand, imitation becomes less important when the event is exceptionally large (e.g. the Brussels bombings) and a correspondingly large media storm breaks, as things are so obvious (and there is so much to be done on the news floor) that imitation becomes less important.

## Conclusion and discussion

The main aim of this chapter was to illustrate the mechanisms of media storms and to systematically compare them with non-storm coverage.

Previous literature has already identified two mechanisms at play: (1) lowering news thresholds (as a result of a spectacular event or development, news outlets temporarily change their news selection process and lower the thresholds of newsworthiness for similar issues and events); and (2) imitation: once a storm breaks, news outlets imitate one another's news selection decisions.

I believe I have found clear-cut evidence for the first mechanism. When a storm breaks, virtually the whole newsroom will be reassigned to the news story. Specialists will be asked to cover the core story; generalists cover similar events and follow-up stories. The newsroom is more centrally coordinated. The news manager assigned has one clear task: coordinating the complete story. He or she is responsible for ensuring that all angles are elaborated, all sources are interviewed and all follow-up stories are covered. Because of the coordination involved, it becomes an intensively reported story. The story will be high on the agenda, not only on the day it breaks, but also in the days following. A sensitivity for the issue is created for a certain period. Lowering thresholds explains why media storms take a large share of the agenda for multiple days.

Secondly, regarding imitation, the picture is a little less clear. Imitation is daily practice, but increases when a media storm takes place. Imitation explains why media storms are sustained. News editors confirm this. Media outlets look to each other due to the difficulties experienced by editors in estimating how intensively they should report on a story. But it appears that there is no linear relationship between the size of a story and the level of imitation. If the event is exceptionally big, journalists are focused solely on their own outlet and do not imitate others. In the case of the Brussels bombings, journalists were clear about the amount of news required and so put all of their efforts into covering this hugely important story. So, especially in the case of uncertainty, media outlets will look more closely at each other and imitation is more likely to occur.

This is the first study that aims to systematically investigate the mechanisms of media storms, hence this importance of using a qualitative approach. Interviews allowed me to explore the processes that cause media storms. Without doubt, this approach has advantages in this context. Had I conducted a quantitative analysis to investigate, for example, the level of imitation for storms versus non-storms, I would never have discovered the fluctuations in the level of imitation, because exceptionally big stories also count as media storms and really slow news days are part of the non-storm coverage. My qualitative approach also allowed me to disentangle the process more precisely, something that is much more difficult with a

quantitative approach. Of course, this approach also holds some limitations. It is difficult to claim that lowering news thresholds and imitations are *the* main mechanism of media storms; rather, I have illustrated how they play a role in the perception of journalists, news managers, and chief editors.

These findings provide a framework for further research about the topic. First, it would be interesting to set up a big project and test the mechanisms in a quantitative way. To what extent is the lowering threshold mechanism *or* the emulating inter-media mechanism responsible for provoking media storms? To measure this question, a micro-level dataset is required, of news items on an hourly level, or even for a shorter time interval. Only then will it be possible to exactly disentangle the mechanisms. Second, this study is a single country study, which is an important limitation. A comparative design would be a very interesting path for further research. It might be that the mechanisms work differently in countries with a different media system to Belgium, for example countries that are more market-driven, such as the United States or Great Britain (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Finally, not only the investigation of mechanisms of media storms deserves more attention. Future research might explore the possible effects of media storms. Whereas previous research finds that the political agenda-setting power of the mass media is generally limited, it seems as though media storms could be a consequential phenomenon with the potential to demand reaction from political actors.

## Notes

1. On 13 March 2013, a Belgian coach crashed into a wall in Switzerland. Of the fifty-two people on board, twenty-eight did not survive the accident.

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## About the author

**Anne Hardy** is a member of the research group Media, Movements & Politics at the University of Antwerp. She holds a PhD in political science. In her thesis she tackled the conducive factors, mechanisms and political effects of media storms.

## 6. Much ado about nothing

Five media hypes in a comparative perspective

*Charlotte Wien*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### **Abstract**

This chapter challenges the widespread assumption that media hypes can put pressure on politicians to change their policies. Through a comparative case study of five Danish media hypes, occurring between 2000 and 2005, the chapter will demonstrate that media hype's influence on policymaking is indeed very limited. No – or only very little – evidence of political actions related to a media hype can actually be traced back to a media hype itself. On the contrary, politicians use media hypes strategically for their own interests, anticipating the recurring patterns of media hype. The chapter will conclude that even though media hypes receive extensive attention, their course and development are, in fact, quite predictable and so is their outcome.

**Keywords:** journalistic practice, media hype, news values, social problems, media power, welfare policy, policymaking

### **Introduction**

On 23 May 2006, media hype broke loose in Denmark. A young journalist had worked undercover at nursing home for the elderly and had been filming with a hidden camera for a couple of months. Featured clips shown on national TV revealed that the elderly at the home were humiliated and treated degradingly by the staff. During the first week, the story generated more than 100 articles in the country's five largest newspapers.

This media hype contained a number of striking similarities with other media hypes on the care and spending on elderly in Denmark with regards to both the subject and the course. For example, the so-called Kærbo hype,

which began on 19 January 2000: A public administration bachelor's student working part-time at the Kærbo nursing home had carried out undisclosed participant observations measuring how his colleagues were spending their working hours. The conclusion was that two thirds of it was spent drinking coffee and complaining about the high levels of stress. A quick glance at the Danish newspaper yearbooks from 2000 to 2006 reveal that a total of six media hypes on the care of and spending on the elderly ravaged the media scene in Denmark during this period. From a superficial point of view, this may seem surprising. Denmark is a modern welfare state and the care of and spending on the elderly is high on the political agenda. It therefore seems reasonable to assume either that the first media hype had led to changes in procedures and policies regarding this particular social area *or* that the conditions at Kærbo, after careful analysis, had proved to be an exception and therefore neither policies, nor procedures needed to be changed.

A couple of questions naturally arise in connection with both this sequence of media hypes in Denmark and media hypes in general: Firstly, do media hypes share similarities in terms of structure and dynamics? Previous studies on media hypes suggest that they do: They occur suddenly and simultaneously in multiple media, they have a clear starting point, where the media attention is most intense, and they appear repeatedly in the same subject areas (Jørgensen & Rasmussen, 2001; Pedersen & Kjær, 2000b; Vasterman, 2005). Another, equally interesting question relates to the effect of media hypes. Do media hypes like these have any political significance, e.g. do they lead to changes and can they, thus, be said to exert power over politicians, forcing them to implement changes?

This chapter is a popularized and shortened version of the results of Elmelund-Præstekær's and Wien's research project 'The power of media hypes', which was previously published in three articles (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008a, 2008b, and 2009). Like said articles, this chapter seeks to answer the two questions above. The chapter is divided into four sections: section one discusses the theoretical guidelines for the analysis. Section two describes the data collection and the method for the analysis. The third section analyses the results. The fourth and final section, the conclusion, will provide the answers to the research questions.

## Theoretical guideline

In this chapter, Boydston & Walgrave's (2014) definition will be used. They define a media hype as 'an explosive increase in news coverage of a specific item (event or issue) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time'. As a consequence of this definition, a media hype must be said to arise from everyday journalism and only differ from ordinary news coverage in terms of its intensity. It therefore seems natural to take a theoretical point of departure in the existing theories on journalism and on how the media agenda is set. The literature on agenda-setting is quite voluminous and comprises more than 400 studies published since 1972 (McCombs, 2005: 555). Unfortunately, this vast body of literature has not created clear and well-defined concepts or a clear and well-defined boundary between research in agenda-setting and other areas of media research. In fact, studying agenda-setting today may well include a number of other central media research concepts, such as gatekeeping, stereotypes, silence spiral (McCombs, 2005: 546) and priming and framing (Weaver, 2007: 142ff). In this chapter, the agenda-setting literature will therefore be used as a theoretical tool for reducing real life complexity. Only the those theory fragments of agenda-setting that seem particularly relevant for this chapter will be presented here.

A media hype can only occur when the journalists prioritize the topic on the media agenda. Media agenda is a zero-sum game (see Zhu, 1992). If journalists prioritize the topic of the media hype then this will happen at the expense of one or more other stories.

This indicates that a news story that has the potential to develop into a media hype must have some special qualities that enables it to attract media attention and justifies the prominence of this particular story in the news flow. The question is, what are these qualities? It seems obvious to include the concept 'scandal' in the discussions of the qualities of media hypes. According to Thompson, scandals are 'actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response' (Thompson, 1999). Thompson continues arguing that transgressions of prevailing norms and values are core ingredients in scandals and that for a scandal to rise it is necessary that some are willing to express their disapproval. Thompson's work does not focus on the activities of media, however it is clear that there is a linkage between the two concepts. Luhmann relates the discussion more closely to media coverage when he argues that a breach of norms is a news criteria in itself (Luhmann, 2000: 29ff). And that this particular news criteria is often



present in news stories that give rise to intense media coverage. Luhmann then indicates that the discussion of the quality of the events that may trigger a media hype should include a discussion of the 'journalistic news criteria'. Schultz (2007: 199ff) has shown how five criteria govern which news stories are prioritized by journalists: relevance, identification, sensation, timeliness, and conflict.

Schultz believes that at least one more news criteria should be added, namely, 'exclusivity'. One could argue that this particular news criteria appears, at first sight, to limit the chances of media hypes occurring, as it is part of the definition of media hypes that they evolve around stories that receive attention simultaneously in multiple newsrooms. So if exclusivity is added, it means that a paradox exists: How can multiple media outlets cover the same story, at the same time, and meet the exclusivity criteria. The only way this is possible is if the story has the potential to be framed in a variety of ways. This provides a partial answer to the question of what characterizes the stories behind a media hype. This characteristic – having the potential for being covered within a variety of frames – leads one to focus on the starting point of media hypes, what is sometimes called the 'key event' (Vasterman, 2005), and at other times the 'trigger event' (Cobb & Elder, 1972).

The latter term will be used in this chapter since it more clearly illustrates that a media hype needs to be triggered by something. The question is, what are the special qualities of the news stories that are capable of triggering a media hype? According to Dearing & Rogers (1996: 78), a trigger event can simplify a complex subject into an image, in its broadest sense, that is easily understood by the audience. But apart from the classical news criteria, the requirement for exclusivity and the requirement for a complex issue to be put in an understandable frame, it remains relatively unclear what the special qualities of these trigger events are.

Regarding the second research question related to the political influence of media hypes, the focus of the study of the media's agenda remains on the question of the media's possible political influence. McCombs & Shaw (1972) argued that the public agenda should be seen as a mirror of the media's priorities of subjects. This gives media heavy influence on public opinion and, consequently, political influence. Since McCombs & Shaw's pioneering study, these relationships have been nuanced in a multitude of studies (useful reviews can be found in Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2005; Newton, 2006; Takeshita, 2005; Weaver, 2007). Unfortunately, it is quite difficult to find any unambiguous conclusion on this matter in the literature.

The reason for this is of course that it is extremely difficult to conduct empirical studies of power. Furthermore, it is difficult to compare the

existing results, because they are based on different types of methods and different kinds of empirical data (see Walgrave & Aelst, 2006).

Looking specifically at the political consequences and thus the power of media hypes, Vasterman (2005) argued that they can create 'a spiral of social amplification that transform individual cases to general social problems'. Thus, media hypes – more than everyday mainstream journalism – should be expected to have direct political impact. A similar claim is made by Pedersen and Kjær (2000b: 221), who argue that media hypes in fact have a direct influence on political processes.

Unfortunately, neither of the two studies explain what exactly they mean by 'impact on the political work'. To counter the prevailing empirical and conceptual confusion, I will use the classic distinction between words and deeds.

Thus, it cannot be seen as 'political impact' if a minister promises to launch a study, or increase budgets, or change the law if he or she does not actually do it. Consequently, real actions leave some kind of evidence. Thus, if a politician has promised that a study will be carried out, it must result in a retrievable written report. Likewise, changes in the budgets can be traced when comparing original budgets to revised budgets and accounts, and a proposal for a legislative change translates into a bill that has been dealt with by the parliament and so forth.

Therefore, when analysing how the media hypes influence policymaking, we will first seek the political promises that were made in public during the media hype, and then we will discuss whether these promises were, in fact, prompted by the hype or were already ongoing initiatives. Finally, we will examine whether the promises were subsequently kept by the politicians and have left any traces.

This means that our study cannot conclude anything about the indirect effects of media hypes, or, for that matter, long-term effects of repeated media hypes on a specific topic.

## Method

In the analysis to follow, I will present data from studies carried out on five national Danish daily newspapers over the period of 2000–2005. A more detailed account of the method can be found in Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer (2008a and b).

In order to capture the media hypes, we developed a search statement on the basis of an earlier work on stereotypes about elderly people in the

Danish media (Wien, 2005). We ran the search statement against the five selected newspapers (using the full-text newspaper database 'Infomedia') and retrieved 7,703 unique articles for the six-year period. All articles were subsequently plotted into a graph showing the total number of articles found each day. By definition, a media hype requires intense media coverage. The concept 'intense coverage' is relative, so operationally we decided to pick all days yielding ten or more articles. This was the case for thirty individual days. We considered each of the thirty peaks a potential media hype and carefully analysed all the articles published on these particular days to determine whether the high intensity was a random coincidence or if the articles concerned the same issue. In total, twenty-five peaks were dismissed as pure coincidence, while five of the peaks contained articles that dealt with the same issue and could thus be considered media hypes. For each of the five media hypes, we carefully read all the articles that appeared a couple of days prior to and after the peak day. The purpose of this reading was twofold: we needed to identify the trigger event of the media hype, and we wanted to extract issue-specific search terms in order to perform a second and more precise search covering a shorter period around each of the five peaks. This way, we developed five new search statements, which – after irrelevant articles were extracted – yielded a total of 569 articles. These 569 are the empirical basis of the analysis to follow.

## Analysis

The first media hype revolves around the Kærbo nursing home, which broke out in January 2000 following the national newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, receiving a copy of a paper written by a Bachelor's student. In his paper, the student describes how he carried out undisclosed observations while working part-time at the nursing home, in which he measured how the staff spent their working hours. He concluded that two thirds of the hours were spent drinking coffee in the staff room and complaining about the heavy work load. In the following three weeks, media coverage was very intense: Initially, relatives of the elderly accommodated at the nursing home blamed the management and employees. But the unions, government, and the opposition parties joined in the debate and gradually the matter became increasingly political.

The second media hype took place in August 2001 and started in Copenhagen. This particular media hype is slightly different from the others

because it has two trigger events. The first was an article with the title 'Elderly are living in filth and dirt', which was published in another national paper *Berlingske Tidende*. This article analysed the impact of changes to the standards of care for elderly in the light of a series of complaints from senior citizens. As fate would have it, just a few days later, the several-weeks-old corpse of an elderly man was found in his apartment: A communications failure had led to the deceased not being collected and buried. This developed into a political conflict at a national level: The right wing demanded more money to be spent on care for the elderly, while the social democratic government promised better internal organization and better training of managers and employers in the care sector.

Our third media hype differs significantly from the previous two in one regard: that its trigger event stems from a political party's actions and not from a scandal in the public sector. One month before the fiscal negotiations in November 2002, the 'People's Party' (a supporting party for the newly formed right-wing government) demanded payment of a so-called elderly cheque to the 200,000 poorest elderly in Denmark. Opposition parties rejected the proposal, arguing that it would not benefit the disadvantaged elderly. In this particular case it makes little sense to discuss how

media agenda influenced the policy since cause and effect is reversed, i.e. in this case, the politicians influenced the media's agenda.

The fourth media hype was also partially triggered at a political level. It broke out in May 2003 when *Berlingske Tidende* printed a few pages from a book being published by the Danish prime minister. In this excerpt, the prime minister advocated the raising of the retirement age in line with the growing life expectancy. Since the prime minister had previously pledged not to change the early retirement scheme, the opposition tried to distort the idea to make the proposal look like a broken promise.

The last of our media hypes started in January 2005, just three weeks before the Danish general election. This media hype was the result of a paradox: During the election campaign for the previous general election in 2001, the right-wing opposition criticized the social democratic government for applying an inhuman and rigorous barcode-based system to ensure the quality in the public sector. The term 'barcode system' became synonymous in the public's minds with a meaningless time tyranny, inhumanity, and over-administration in the public sector. Just three weeks before the 2005 election, two national newspapers (*Berlingske Tidende* and *Politiken*) revealed that, despite the shrill attacks from the opposition a few years earlier, the barcode system was still being used under the new right-wing Government.

## The anatomy of media hypes

The brief review of the five media hypes in the previous section reveals both differences and similarities between them. Therefore, we believe that it is possible to describe the general anatomy of media hypes. In the two sections to follow, I will sketch out the similarities and, on the basis of these, draft a general model of media hypes.

Our analysis shows that, in order for an incident to become a trigger event for a media hype, it must meet the general news criteria. Moreover, at least four factors seem to be influential. Primarily, the trigger event must be suitable for public debate, meaning that it must be about a topic where several conflicting but legitimate points of view can be presented and thus debated in public. Conversely, it is a prerequisite that there are several actors (individuals, organizations, political parties, etc.), who are willing to participate in the debate. Secondly, and in accordance with the previous point, it is important that the trigger event can be presented in several frames. The reason for this is that media hypes place news media in the exclusivity dilemma: On the one hand, it annoys them to see the competitor have a 'good story'; on the other hand, they are reluctant to jump on the bandwagon and copy the story since they all want 'a solo' (see Schultz, 2007: 199ff). It seems obvious from our material that the news media handle this challenge by choosing different frames for the same story. Exactly how they do this will be explained in the next section, 'Editorial policies'.

Thirdly, each of our five trigger events contains a breach of norms. For example, it was a breach of norms for a student to conduct an undisclosed time-measurement study of his colleagues at Kærbo. And it was certainly a breach of norms if the staff at the nursing home were spending two thirds of their working hours drinking coffee and complaining about stress. Luhmann (2000: 29ff) argues that a breach of norms is a news criterion in itself, and that this particular news criterion, often present in news stories, gives rise to intense media coverage. Our findings support this.

Finally, trigger events must be able to condense a complex problem into a single striking image, as Vasterman (2005: 514) pointed out. Such a striking image often draws on existing stereotypes. An example could be the classic notion of lazy public workers and their incompetent leaders, which 'Kærbo' could draw upon.

Regarding the course of the media hypes, we notice a sequence with approximately one media hype per year. We see this as a sign of fatigue on the part of the media, the audience, and the politicians after each media hype. Furthermore we notice that all five media hypes lasted about three

weeks and that they seem to fade away, either once a consensus has been reached among stakeholders, or when the subject becomes too blurred or, finally, when politicians agree to ‘do something’. These observations are in accordance with previous studies (Lund, 2000; Pedersen & Kjær, 2000b; Vasterman, 2005). We suggest the following explanation: During a media hype, journalists call upon different types of sources in a certain sequence: Immediately following the trigger event, journalists draw on politicians, interest groups, employees, and relatives. In this phase, the intensity of the media coverage increases. The reason for this is that the media hype gets its energy from the debate, discussion, and presentation of conflicting views. After some days, the journalists turn to the experts. Since their role is to provide facts, they often end up killing the discussion, which causes the media hype to lose momentum. The experts may also deflate the media hype by illustrating the complexity of the case, by giving several possible explanations and interpretations of the event, or by pointing out that a case is really about something completely different, is not representative of any general trends, and so on. In that case, the media hype also loses momentum, because it is no longer, in Vastermans (2005: 514) words, able to condense a complex problem into a single striking image. One may argue that this is a sign that the media hype is moving through Downs’ ‘issue attention cycle’ (1972: 39) from step two – ‘Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm’ – towards the third step – ‘Realizing the cost of significant change’.

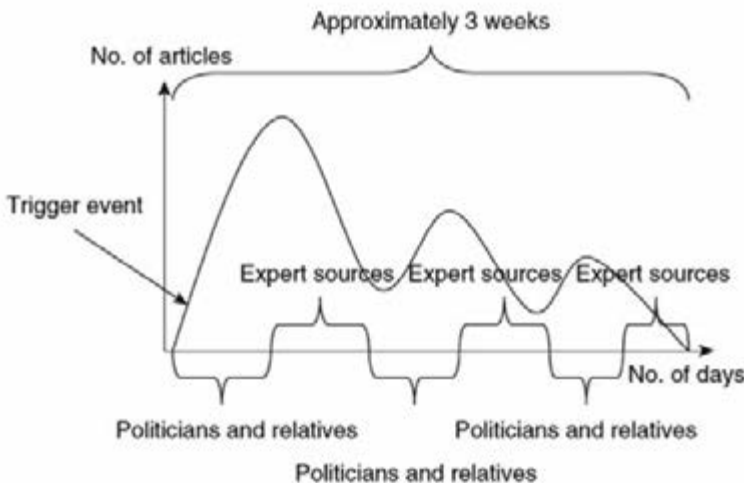


Figure 6.1. The anatomy of media hypes

In terms of media hype quantitative anatomy, our study reveals a pattern in which the trigger generates the first – and typically – biggest wave of media attention. This is followed by one or two waves of decreasing intensity (see Figure 6.1). Each of the smaller waves occurs when a new theme enters the debate. ‘Kærbo’ illustrates this point: The second wave was triggered, in this case, when academia began to debate the ethical aspects of undisclosed observation as a scientific method.

## Editorial policies

As already mentioned, the newspaper solves the exclusivity paradox of the media hypes by choosing different frames for the story. This enables them to cover the same story as their competitors without writing the same articles. Our analysis shows that, in their endeavour for exclusivity, they consistently chose the same editorial line in all five media hypes: It seems from the data that the omnibus newspapers, consciously or unconsciously, maintained a continuous political orientation in their choice of frame, sources, experts and, letters to the editor, and thus became a partisan press: The old right-wing papers like *Berlingske Tidende* and *Jyllands-posten* consistently selected editorial lines favouring the opinions of right-wing parties. *Politiken* chose to emphasize the themes and arguments that resounded with the Danish Social-Liberal Party. In this respect, the two tabloids were apolitical and adopted an editorial line that gave ‘the man on the street’ an opportunity to speak against the power elite. Looking, for example, at the media hype regarding the change in the retirement age, it is clear that *Berlingske Tidende* accepted the (liberal) prime minister’s idea as both reasonable and necessary.

*Jyllands-Posten* (populistic right-wing) spent significantly more ink in the beginning of the media hype, reporting on the negative responses to the prime minister’s proposals. However, it changed its point of view slightly after about a week and began to argue that these proposals had resulted in the debate and the necessary welfare reforms taking a step backwards, since politicians would now have to denounce the deterioration of the early retirement scheme even more strongly than before. *Jyllands-Posten* thereby placed itself in a centre position politically, where, on the one hand, the paper was critical of early retirement, but, on the other hand, it recognized the arguments for preserving the scheme. Thus, *Jyllands-Posten* was able to cover the viewpoints of both the right-wing parties and their desire for

change and those of the Danish People's Party (populistic), who wanted to maintain the early retirement scheme. The social-liberal *Politiken* was the only newspaper that quoted a local economist, who saw no reason to abolish the early retirement scheme. In this way, the newspaper used a frame within which early retirement was seen as a vested welfare right. The newspaper followed this line in their choices of 'letters to the editor', almost all of which (ten, in total) were critical of the prime minister's suggestion.

Both major tabloids *B.T.* and *Ekstra Bladet* chose a populist frame, reflected in a series of vox pops in which 'the man on the street' expressed a lack of will to change anything. The tabloids had a strong focus on readers' attitudes. This becomes especially evident when analysing the letters to the editor and their relative weight in the coverage: Apart from the vox pops, more than half of the remaining units in *B.T.* were reader's letters, compared to fourteen of the seventeen units in *Ekstra Bladet*.

Tabloid readers would argue in favour of the early retirement scheme and their letters expressed distrust of the recommendations and calculations of experts, academics, and politicians.

In other words, the newspapers' choice of editorial lines during the five media hypes solves the newspapers' exclusivity paradox by reviving the partisan press. Ironically, all the newspapers defaulted to the political positions that they had promoted before becoming omnibuses.

## The political impact of media hypes

The short answer to the question of whether media hypes directly influence political work is 'no'. We found no convincing evidence that media hypes result in real political action. To paraphrase a famous quote by Bernard Cohen (1963: 13), the media does not seem to be successful in telling politicians what to think, only what to think about. That is to say, the media appears only to be capable of setting a clear agenda that politicians have to relate to. We found no evidence that the media hypes made the politicians change their policies as a direct result of any of the selected media hypes. The media hypes seem to be more like Lippmannian lighthouses that throw light on particular topics and actors, but do not change or interfere with anything. Instead, media hypes are occasions that politicians can utilize to present well-prepared political plans or forward their existing policies (see Kingdon, 1995 [1984]): We found many examples of politicians re-launching suggestions for resolutions or specific election pledges that were already formulated long before the media hype, but, in general, it was only 'old wine



in new bottles'. Furthermore, the fact that most of the media hypes revolved around the same issue (e.g. service failure in the social sector) emphasizes that the problems were not solved. We can deduce, then, that media hypes may identify problems, but they do not create solutions to them.

This point is well-illustrated by our second media hype concerning the care home in Copenhagen. That same year, the right-wing opposition had suggested a number of specific changes in the organization and funding of this service including a large sum of extra money as well as the introduction of a free choice between private and public nursing care. However, most of these ideas had been the formal policy of right-wing parties already for several years. Therefore, one cannot argue that this media hype made any imprint on the subsequent policy of the right-wing parties. Instead, one may argue that these ideas were part of a larger package of political initiatives, which had been conceived long before the media hype. In this way, the media hype was a timely and practical opportunity to (*re-*)present (old) political ideas.

Likewise, we found some instances where the media coverage had been manipulated in such a way that it seemed as if political action was a direct result of the media hype, although the action and the media hype had nothing – or very little – to do with each other: For example, reports in the media during our first media hype 'Kærbo', claimed that the Minister of Social Affairs was called in for questioning by the parliament on 20 January as a result of 'Kærbo'. However, in reality, the meeting had been summoned long before the Kærbo hype and the questioning concerned a different nursing home. Nonetheless, the media coverage linked Kærbo and this parliamentary inquiry. The Minister of Social Affairs was called in for questioning once again on 24 February, this time about the 'Kærbo' matter. But by that time, media attention had faded and this meeting went unmentioned in the news media. The linking of 'Kærbo' with the initial 20 January meeting can be seen as a journalistic attempt to circumvent the time lag that exists between the media agenda and the political one. That is to say, political work takes time: politicians need time to formulate proposals, discuss them, and present them to the parliament. By the time this process has concluded, the media attention has faded. One way, then, of compensating for this is to link some of the activities of political life to an on going media hype, even when they have nothing – or only very little – to do with each other.

Our study further suggests that politicians benefit from media hypes: During a media hype, journalists lower the news threshold for a particular topic, in our case, the care of and spending on the elderly. As this subject otherwise receives relatively little attention, the politicians specialized in

social affairs may consider a media hype on this topic an opportunity to gain media exposure. Thus, a media hype can give politicians opportunities to present and promote ideas or concrete proposals in mass media, thereby attracting attention to their work. Media hypes create a symbiosis in which politicians, so to speak, present old wine in new bottles, and the media puts the bottles on the shelves for them. This kind of symbiosis between politicians and news media is well documented in several studies (e.g. Aelst & Walgrave, 2016).

The few direct effects we have found were at the local political level. Two of our media hypes had both a local and a national scope. At the national level, none of them led to any political actions, but they did at the local level. Our second media hype is illustrative of this. As a result of this media hype, more than ten million euro extra was allocated to the municipal budget for nursing care for the elderly. This money would not have been allocated if there had been no media hype. Likewise, the media hype on the 'Barcode system' prompted a strike among caretakers. The strike was used as a means for entering into a dialogue with the political management of the municipality and, subsequently, played a role in the bar code system being scrapped. The fact that the only traceable political actions are found at the local level might be a sign of a healthy political system: Most of the services for the elderly are the responsibility municipalities, which is why problems must be solved locally and not through national legislation.

Finally, we must emphasize that we have only analysed the direct and immediate effects of media hypes, and that our conclusion therefore only applies to these. We have not dealt with indirect effects, just as we cannot exclude that long-term effects exist. It is both possible and likely that repeated media hypes can have long-term political effects: They may create a zeitgeist, which, over a longer period of time, can make politicians launch initiatives that they would not otherwise have launched. In fact, the time lag between political work and news production may be the reason why we do not see any immediate effects. Media hypes may well contribute to a much more subtle cultivation of ideas over time and, as such, have an effect on the political agenda (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). In addition, Djerf-Pierre et al. (2013) have shown that the political effects of media hypes depend on how media frames the story. They argue that political impact depends on the framing, i.e. when the theme of a media hype is framed as a policy failure it is more likely to have political impact than if it is framed as a moral scandal. Likewise, Trumbo (2012) has argued that since media hypes have clear and traceable effects on the public, there must be, at least, some indirect political impact although these may seem hard to trace.

## Conclusion

When first published, the analysis of these five media hypes on the care of and spending on the elderly in Denmark in 2000-2005 added comprehensive empirical material to the relatively limited amount of scientific literature on the phenomenon of media hypes. We had two ambitions with our work: First, to describe their anatomy, and second to analyse the political influence of media hypes.

Regarding our analysis of the anatomy of media hypes, we believe that it is possible to develop a general model based on our five cases: A media hype obviously begins with a trigger event. A necessary, but not sufficient, criterion is that this event meets general news criteria. Moreover, that trigger event often contains a breach of norms or an element of a scandal. The event must furthermore be suitable for public debate, i.e. it must allow for several conflicting but legitimate viewpoints. Finally, it requires that both the public and politicians are willing to engage in a debate about the topic.

We found that the duration of a media hype is approximately three weeks. Furthermore, they consist of two to three consecutive waves of declining intensity. Each of the consecutive waves are initiated by some new information related to the trigger event. Within each wave there is a certain sequence of sources: In the initial days, the journalists mainly quote politicians and sources who are somehow emotionally involved in the event, e.g. relatives of the elderly. These sources stir the debate and provide energy to the media hype. After two to three days, the journalists will turn to expert sources, who typically take the energy out of the discussion by providing facts and not feelings.

Through the analysis, we found that the exclusivity paradox of media hypes is solved by newspapers choosing different editorial lines. Their choices follow a well-established pattern that closely corresponds with the individual newspapers' old partisan press ties.

Regarding the political effects of media hypes, we found that, despite the fact that we have selected a topic where both politicians and citizens consider failure unacceptable, we did not identify any direct short-term political effects of the media hypes at the national level. And, as such, we found no evidence that media exerts direct political power or have actual influence on the political work. At the local level things were different: Two out of three of our media hypes concerned the municipal level and prompted local politicians to act. This difference between the two levels is not surprising, since care for the elderly is managed by municipalities,

and since media hypes often revolve around single cases that are played out at individual care centres.

Finally, we found that media hypes create synergy among politicians and news media and thus media hypes say more about modern political communication than about the political reality: By focusing intensely on a particular story within a certain area journalists can make it 'look as if' the media agenda has a direct effect on the political agenda and that the media therefore has some kind of power over politicians. Correspondingly, politicians gain advantage from media hypes since they provide almost unlimited access to (re-)presenting initiatives and proposals that they otherwise would have to fight hard to drum up media attention for. Seen in this perspective media hypes seem to be much ado about nothing.

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## About the author

**Charlotte Wien** is Head of the Research and Analysis department at The University Library of Southern Denmark. She is a former full professor of Communication and Media Science. Her research interests include media stereotypes, media hypes and science communication in mass media. She was the PI for the research project called 'Mediestormens Magt' [The power of Media Hypes] and with her colleague Christian Elmelund-Præstekær she has made several contributions to the international debate about media hypes.



## 7. From media wave to media tsunami

The 'Charter of Values' debate in Quebec, 2012-2014

*Thierry Giasson, Marie-Michèle Sauvageau, and Colette Brin*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the 'media tsunami' hypothesis, which posits that the media, in dealing with an emergent social issue in a relatively short period of time, amplify the importance of the issue through successive waves of press coverage that gain intensity and magnitude over time, manufacturing social crises. The chapter investigates the introduction of a new Charter on secular values by the Parti Québécois (PQ) during the election campaign of 2012. In 2014, the PQ lost the elections. All content on the debate published by thirteen Québec daily newspapers was analysed. The results show that massive and successive waves of media coverage manifested during the eighteen-month period, but also that this tsunami was a politically rather than media fuelled event.

**Keywords:** media tsunami, Quebec, immigration, Charter of Values, Charter of Quebec Values, Parti Québécois, media hype, media amplification

From March 2006 to December 2007, the province of Quebec experienced a contentious public debate on diversity. The 'crisis' was fuelled by what we have identified elsewhere as a 'media tsunami' (Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau, 2010a, 2010b) during which news outlets actively reported on numerous cases of reasonable accommodation practices or administrative agreements in public services granted in the Greater Montreal region to citizens with an immigrant background. The 'media tsunami' hypothesis, an expanded version of Vasterman's (2005) media hype theory, poses that the media, through successive waves of press coverage, each gaining in intensity and magnitude in a relatively short period of time, amplifies the importance of an emergent issue and can manufacture social 'crises'. Following an extensive



content analysis of the press coverage of the reasonable accommodation debate, we found that the news media did engineer a textbook case of ‘media tsunami’ in Quebec on this emergent and divisive social issue. Through this extensive coverage, the media brought these instances of accommodation to the public’s attention. Furthermore, these analyses also showed that, in their coverage of polls and their general framing of the mood of public opinion towards practices of reasonable accommodations in the public service, newspapers focused mostly on the malaise in the population towards immigration and religious diversity, rather than on its openness to diversity and to the positive social outcomes of immigration. In doing so, the media further anchored the widely held impression that a serious social crisis was unfolding and that a wide gap in tolerance existed between Francophone Quebecers, recent immigrants living in Quebec, and other Canadians.

This chapter builds on our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation ‘media tsunami’ to investigate the next public debate the province experienced on the issue of diversity following the arrival to power of the Parti Québécois (PQ) in 2012. A year into their minority mandate, the party introduced in September of 2013 a bill defining a ‘Charter of Values’ for Quebec. It was presented as a definitive way to end conflicting reasonable accommodation practices in the public service, which, according to the Parti Québécois, was an ongoing problem that the previous Liberal government had failed to address since the 2006-2007 crisis. The proposed Charter forbade all civil servants and employees of public institutions from wearing any ‘ostentatious’ religious symbol at their place of work. Although the proposal met with high approval ratings in the population, it was hotly contested by the Liberal opposition as well as by other groups, namely because of its apparent singling out of Muslim women’s headscarves. In April 2014, the Parti Québécois lost the election it had called and was replaced by a new majority Liberal government, which followed through on its campaign promise to kill the Charter project. To this day, the issue of accommodating religious diversity in Quebec while maintaining religious neutrality of the state does not appear to have been resolved.

The chapter examines whether another media tsunami was created by the press in Quebec during the debate over the Charter of Values. Our ‘media tsunami’ hypothesis posits that the media amplified the issue through successive waves of press coverage gaining in intensity and magnitude over time. For this purpose, we turn our attention to the period of August 2012 to April 2014, when the issue of the creation of a Charter was brought into and debated within the public sphere in Quebec.

## Theoretical framework: From media waves to the media tsunami

According to Vasterman, media hypes are observed when a specific event receives such sudden and intense media coverage that the 'media do stimulate, amplify and magnify' (2005: 513) the original news item on the issue. All media will cover the story, regardless of its intrinsic societal importance. Based on this initial story, a dominant frame of the event is defined and becomes vastly shared by all media outlets, regardless of the medium (radio, television, print, digital), which leads to homogeneity in news coverage.

This key event provokes, in turn, a consonant news wave: 'there is a clear starting point for the news wave, an event that receives more attention than comparable events, for whatever reason' (Ibid.: 516). During this period, one may observe a sudden increase of coverage of comparable cases and an important increase of reports of related subjects. These particular practices lead to a situation where 'media are making the news instead of reporting events' (Ibid.).

During a media hype, news reporting becomes self-referential and cumulative; each journalist building on the competitor's scoop, developing an ongoing story based on new information, exclusive interviews, opinions, and debates regarding similar and comparable events. One of the features of the media hype is that it concerns not only the type of events selected for coverage, but also (and we can add, mostly) their framing. Following the trigger event, an archetypal image (or theme) will slowly impose itself, will be constantly referred to in all stories, and will end up being reported as a strong, repetitive (and sometimes, threatening) illustration of the issue.

One of the main consequences of this type of coverage is that it creates an impression of amplification of certain social issues, leading to a perceived social crisis. During a media hype, public discourse – as presented through the media – will also be very homogeneous, following the framing of the trigger event. There will be little room for critique or dissenting opinions. After a certain period of time, the decline of the media wave occurs, a decline that may be explained either by news saturation, lack of sources, or simply because other events have taken centre stage. According to Vasterman, however, one can expect the resurgence of more news waves regarding the same subject shortly afterwards, because of the public's awareness and sensitivity to the issue. This leads to the idea that the media hype model could be expanded by integrating these successive waves of media coverage in the analysis, which we refer to as a 'media tsunami'.

Tsunamis are natural disasters, a series of gigantic waves that successively hit coastal areas as a result of the displacement of underwater tectonic

plates. These movements are the result of violent shocks caused by volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, or other disturbances above or below the ocean. Tsunamis are composed of a series of waves, each interrupted by a period of relative lull, that grow in strength and magnitude in the shallow water. Since the first wave leads the way to the others, the most devastating effects of tsunami occur when the secondary waves hit the coast. Led by the surf of the first wave, the secondary waves are usually stronger in magnitude (strike force) and amplitude (wave height) than the initial wave, therefore causing more significant damage.

Based on this metaphor, and on our remarks regarding Vasterman's media hype model, we consider that four conditions must be present to conclude to a potential 'media tsunami':

- 1) The presence of a trigger event (or key event) that will initiate the first wave (the seismic shock);
- 2) A first wave of coverage associated with the key event that frames the issue and introduces it into the public sphere;
- 3) A relative period of calm (lull) that allows the audience to integrate the news framing (the surf and shock absorption);
- 4) The arrival of successive waves of coverage, all bigger than the first one.

Media tsunamis share characteristics with media hypes: a trigger event reduced by the press to an archetypal image; a general and simultaneous coverage of the event (and of related stories) by all media outlets; a massive coverage that spreads the archetypal image previously defined; a scramble to search for similar cases; the generalization of particular cases and stories (as if the problem described was 'naturally' extended to all society); and extensive coverage of the reactions to the 'crisis.' The difference here is that the media tsunami takes into account the importance of the successive waves of coverage to understand why and how an event may be forced by the media onto the public, in such a way that it contributes to the impression of an amplification of a social issue, problem or even crisis.

This is not to say that social discomfort toward the issue does not exist prior to the media tsunami. To the contrary, this extension of the media hype model recognizes this previous unease or misunderstanding of certain situations as a favourable condition for the development of a media tsunami. For example, Sides and Citrin conclude that social discomfort toward immigration in Europe is due in part to misperceptions of the proportion of immigrants, as well as '*symbolic attitudes about the nation (identities)*' (2007: 477). In fact, the media tsunami hypothesis argues that by driving attention to a specific subject and by producing massive and uniform coverage of an emerging issue

in a short period of time, the media may contribute to creating the impression that a major societal crisis is unfolding. Of course, social crises are often triggered by preconditions such as fear, prejudice, or ignorance. However, we believe that the media can play a role in that process by the way they report events. In their intensive and extensive coverage of certain issues, the media use, mobilize, and catalyse those prejudices and fears, soon becoming the driving force of the crisis. Hence, the media tsunami becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: it contributes to create the crisis it purports to describe.

## Methods

In order to investigate the potential manifestation of a media tsunami in the Quebec media about the creation of a Charter of secular values, we analysed the content of a random sample of articles taken from press coverage of the issue published in thirteen daily newspapers,<sup>1</sup> both in French and English, from 14 August 2012 to 7 April 2014. We initially collected all the news items (news reports, commentaries including columns, analyses, editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor) published in those dailies using a combination of the search words 'Charter', 'Values', and 'Secular\*' in the Eureka database. This initial search generated a corpus of 6,326 news items on the issue. From this population of texts, we then randomly selected 1,955 articles (thirty per cent of all documents) for our content analysis. Of these documents, we rejected 573 news items that contained the search words but were not actually about the proposed Charter, leaving a final sample of 1,382 stories dealing directly with the topic.

Two reasons justify our decision to focus our analysis on print news. Firstly, in Quebec and Canada, television and radio are not required to keep public and accessible archives of their news reports and broadcasts. This situation complicates the constitution of coherent and exhaustive corpuses of their newscasts. Some archives may be accessible temporarily online, but the entire body of news items remains inaccessible. Further, transcripts of television and radio newscasts are not all readily accessible to researchers. Thus, only transcripts of newscasts from the national public broadcaster, CBC-Radio-Canada, are entirely accessible in digital databases for consultation. Private broadcasters are not mandated by law to provide these documents to the public. This limited availability to broadcast news items therefore dictated that we limit our analysis to print news, which was entirely accessible through public databases. Secondly, during the reasonable accommodation debate of 2006-2007 in Quebec, all major news

organizations, including newspapers, launched into an intensive and competitive race for scoops and exclusives. They engaged important resources in developing in-depth reports and features devoted to covering the issue extensively. This trend was less apparent in broadcast media coverage, which seemed to have followed the intensive treatment that print media was largely driving. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the conclusions from our analysis should be specifically associated to print media in Quebec, not its entire media industry.

The period covered by the study is book-ended by two key moments marking the introduction and development of the issue of the Charter of Values in public debate. Firstly, on 14 August 2012, during a campaign event in the second week of a hotly contested provincial election, PQ leader Pauline Marois promised that, if her party was elected, the provincial government would present a bill to create a Charter on secularism in Quebec. Secondly, on 7 April 2014, following a difficult electoral campaign in which the incumbent government largely promoted its proposed Charter, the PQ lost power to the Liberal Party of Quebec (LPQ),<sup>2</sup> which later killed the project. Our analysis focuses on media coverage dedicated to the issue of the PQ's proposed Charter on secular values, later renamed on the day of its official presentation on 9 September 2013, as the *Charter of Quebec Values*.

News items were coded manually by a team of three coders using a coding scheme containing seventeen variables. A series of three pre-tests were carried to ensure intercoder reliability. Following each pre-test, disagreement in coding was discussed; ultimately, the level of intercoder agreement reached 89.6%. The date, the type of news items, the centrality of the issue in the item as well as the main theme covered in association with the issue were among the variables coded in order to get a better sense of how the issue was framed in the coverage and of the evolution of the strength and magnitude of the potential different waves of coverage. The unit of analysis is the news item in its entirety.

## Results

Our chronological analysis of the print media coverage on the issue of the Charter of Quebec values, combined with our content analysis of the main themes that frame this coverage, allow us to confirm the manifestation of a media tsunami. As Figure 7.1 reveals, an initial event – the seismic shock – generates successive waves of intense coverage through time, with each wave more important than the initial one.

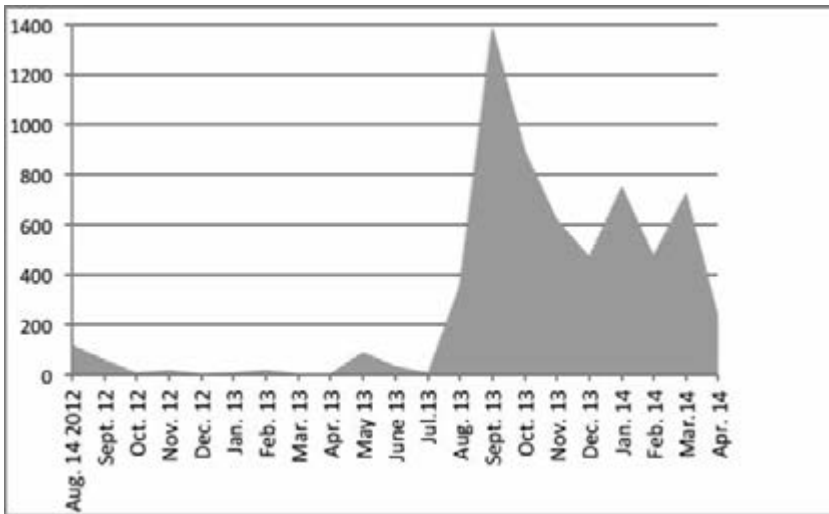


Figure 7.1. Media Tsunami on the Charter of Quebec Values, 2012-2014

This initial shock happened on 14 August 2012, when Pauline Marois promised during her electoral campaign that she would implement a charter on secular values if her party won the election. During the following two months, the first wave of coverage on the project (comprising 176 news reports) hit the province. Then, from October 2012 to April 2013, the coverage of the issue died down, which is a key component of the tsunami model (the lull between the waves). During this quiet, receding period, news coverage focused on other political issues such as the Marois government’s summit on higher education and its management of the budget deficit. During this six-month period, only sixty-seven articles related to the Charter project were published. The item remained on the media agenda, but did not receive intensive coverage. Then, in May 2013, the second major wave of the tsunami hit, with 126 articles. However, it is the third wave that generated by far the most coverage. This massive surf happened following the introduction of the bill in the Quebec National Assembly, from September to December 2013, and comprised 3,385 news items on the issue. The magnitude of this wave represents a proportion of coverage that we had not yet witnessed in any of our previous analyses of media amplification of diversity and religious accommodation in Quebec. The fourth and fifth waves of January (754 articles) and March 2014 (728 news items), though weaker than the third, are nevertheless massively larger than the initial one of August 2012. The aggregate data does indeed confirm the theoretical model of the media tsunami.

As both media hype and media tsunami hypotheses state, the trigger element in the model – in this case, Marois' electoral announcement of a projected Charter on secularism – prepares public debate and brings attention to issues associated to identity politics or accommodation of diversity, which will become central frames in the following waves of coverage.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, our data reveal that commentaries and hard news articles were published in relatively similar proportions throughout most of the period of coverage on the issue, which may indicate the media's active involvement in creating, feeding and amplifying the importance of the question in the political debate. This is a central component of both models of media amplification.

Another central element of both models is the presence of an archetypal image that summarizes the issue and eventually completely dominates news coverage during the amplification process. In our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation issue, this archetype was the kirpan, a ceremonial dagger Sikh men carry under their clothes for religious purposes. In the Charter of Values tsunami, the dominant image changes from one wave of coverage to the next. Public discussion over the Charter of Values project quickly centred on a secondary issue, which was the presence of a large crucifix above the throne of the President of the National Assembly, Quebec's provincial legislature. When Pauline Marois announced her promise to create a Charter on secularism, she was accompanied by a star candidate, Djemila Benhabib, an outspoken pro-secularism activist of Algerian descent, well known for her very critical positions against radical Islam. She had been an advocate for the institution of a Charter on secularism, but also for the removal of the crucifix from the legislature building.

The place of the crucifix in the National Assembly then became a central focus in the news coverage of the Charter issue, mainly because Pauline Marois disagreed with her star secularist candidate on this question. Marois believed that the Christian symbol should remain, to remind Quebecers of their Roman Catholic heritage, different from the historically largely protestant Anglo-Canadian community, something she therefore defended as being part of Québécois identity. This position was supported by numerous nationalist Quebecers who did not see a contradiction between the presence of a Christian religious symbol in the National Assembly and the dispositions contained in a future Charter that would limit individual religious expression in public service and public institutions. Therefore, in the initial phases of coverage, the crucifix became the archetypal object associated by some to national French Québécois identity and history, a symbol of cultural resistance towards the 'Other'.

However, in the successive waves of massive coverage following the quiet period of October 2012 to March 2013, the archetypical crucifix is replaced by the Charter itself. During this second portion of the tsunami, the archetypal image that will be largely repeated in public discourses (the politicians' as well as the media's), could be described as the 'holy trinity' of religious head coverings: the Sikh turban, the Muslim hijab, and the Jewish kippa. Yet, this religious trio seems to have been brought into the news following the important framing associated previously to the crucifix. They all are strong cultural and religious symbols that do prime explicitly the difference between the French Québécois majority associated with the crucifix and (some) religious minorities present in Quebec, reduced stereotypically to elements of clothing. The initial phase of coverage of the Charter, following the election campaign of August 2012, will therefore impose a polarizing frame opposing culturally the 'Us' of Québécois of Catholic heritage to the 'Them' of members of religious minorities. We believe this frame was fuelled by the initial public discussion on the presence of the crucifix, a fundamentally religious symbol, in political institutions of contemporary Quebec. It evolved later in a conversation including the archetypal symbols of those Quebecers of different religions trying to integrate into Quebec society.

A long period of reduced coverage followed the initial shock wave of August 2012. The question of the Charter, which is being developed by the government in cabinet meetings and within the newly formed ministry of Democratic Institutions and Citizen Participation (Lebel 2016), somewhat recedes from news coverage. Over this six-month period, the few articles dedicated to the issue will address it indirectly, in coverage of other social questions associated to diversity and identity, notably processes of immigration integration, secularism and the religious neutrality of the State, or fears expressed by the minority of English-speaking Quebecers regarding the Charter project. The sparse news coverage mostly mentions the Charter when highlighting the apparent difficulties a minority PQ government will face in trying to pass this piece of legislation in the National Assembly.

In May 2013, a second wave of coverage was launched when the minister in charge of the Charter, Bernard Drainville, announced that parliamentary debate on the proposed legislation would be postponed to the fall parliamentary session. During this period, numerous news items mentioned the past crisis of reasonable accommodation and depicted the upcoming Charter as a possible solution to end the administrative practices in public services that caused so many polarizing reactions in 2006 and 2007. Additional coverage was also dedicated to the question of secularism and religious neutrality of the state, a theme introduced by the press during the preceding quiet



period. Finally, this second wave saw an increase in commentary and op-ed coverage, with fifty-two per cent of all news items dedicated to the question of Charter being written from a critical or analytical point of view.

The most impressive wave of coverage hit Quebec from September to December of 2013, with 3,385 news items published in the thirteen dailies. The period began with the official presentation by Premier Marois and Minister Drainville on 9 September of the first draft of the bill to be introduced in the National Assembly. The data gathered from our sample of news items reveal that fifty-six per cent of articles are hard news and forty-four per cent op-ed pieces. Numerous articles focused on explaining the dispositions of the Charter and the scope of its application. News organizations also relayed the positions and opinions of socio-political actors and organizations regarding the Charter project, hence 'creating', 'producing', or 'driving' novel news content derived from the presentation of the Charter itself.

The important magnitude of this wave might be explained by the fact that the Charter of Values finally came to fruition. From a vague idea presented as an election promise, it was officialized and became concrete with the presentation of the first draft of the bill. At this stage, the public was already aware of the project because the previous media waves had introduced negative and positive frames towards the idea of a Charter. However, this new massive wave was fuelled by an actual political event, the official presentation of the dispositions and rules to be enacted by the Charter and outlined in the bill. The combination of these two factors (a 'non-event' that has already been framed by the media and a real political event) might explain why the issue reached such a high level of coverage.

Our initial media tsunami model stated that waves would gain in force and magnitude from one to the next. This is not precisely the situation we witness in the present case study. However, the fourth and fifth waves of coverage on the chapter are still much stronger than the initial one. Hence, the last phase of this media tsunami may have been less important than the massive third wave that hit in the fall of 2013, but it is still an extremely powerful period of news coverage with 754 news items in January 2014 and 728 articles published in May 2014. The fourth massive surf corresponds to the coverage dedicated to the public hearings in parliamentary committee on the Charter project. The consultation was initiated by the government to provide citizens and organizations with a forum to share their opinions on the project. Our data indicate that sixty-five per cent of articles were factual in nature during the fourth wave. Once again, coverage was massively focused on presenting the points of views and positions defended by the participants to the government consultation.

The final wave coincides with coverage of the election called by Premier Marois on 5 March 2014. Her party tried to prime the Charter as the ballot issue. During the next thirty-five days, coverage of the topic focused largely on the decision of the minority PQ government to call the election to get the majority of seats it needed to get the Charter passed in the National Assembly. In other words, the Charter was not discussed so much as an issue in itself, but rather as an electoral strategy. Coverage in this period seems again to be largely factual, with seventy-five per cent of items in our random sample being hard news in content. Coverage mentions the Charter as an electoral issue of importance for the PQ, but also refers to numerous polls gauging public support during the campaign for the proposed Charter.

## Discussion

Our analysis of the different waves of coverage dedicated to the project of a Charter on secularism reveals another example of a media tsunami on an issue of national identity and diversity in Quebec. However, in this case, the tsunami was driven initially by the electoral agenda of a political party. Contrary to the reasonable accommodation debate of 2006-2007, which had largely been the creation of the media, this new episode in contemporary identity politics was driven by politicians, largely for electoral gains. Throughout the process, the PQ was the catalyst for the tsunami: each wave was associated with the coverage of an announcement or event the party willingly, and strategically, initiated.

However, as Figure 7.2 indicates, coverage went well beyond those scripted partisan events and proposals. The vast majority of news items coded for this project (ninety per cent) did not have the Charter as their central focus. They referred to it contextually as one component of other broader social themes. In doing so, the media used the issue of the Charter to produce news, which confirms our theoretical model. Only ten per cent of the coded content focused precisely on the dispositions of the Charter project and its implementation. Rather, we found that coverage focused dominantly on three broader themes:

1. The Charter as an electoral instrument (233 items, 11%)
2. Opposition to the Charter (167 items, 9%)
3. Management of socio-cultural diversity in Quebec (163 items, 8%).

The tsunami may have been driven by partisan events and politicians' actions, but these numbers indicate that the media quickly put them

aside to generate coverage on other related socio-political issues and the reactions they generated in civil society. The PQ's project of a Charter of Values was but one element in a much broader conversation on diversity and identity in province. Of course, one can argue that the coverage of the debate was quite heterogeneous because the media presented different points of view regarding the Charter. Some news articles framed the Charter as legitimate, but others depicted it as a dangerous political fabrication instrumentalized by a populist formation for electoral gain. However, we think that the coverage of this issue remained very homogeneous in terms of the density and the magnitude of articles observed throughout all media outlets. Although the traditional media hype hypothesis poses that there is little coverage dedicated to dissent during a media wave, we believe that, in this instance, the vast amount of news items covering issues indirectly related to the Charter may have created an amplified and erroneous public impression that Quebec was experimenting yet another social crisis over diversity and identity. In other words, those massive news waves, reporting events, opinions and incidents often affiliated but rarely directly related to the Charter contributed primarily to the impression that a social crisis regarding the management of cultural and religious diversity was actually happening in Quebec. Hence, throughout this massive media coverage, the actual Charter project is not just depicted as an issue on its own, but rather as the solution to an important ongoing 'problem' of reasonable accommodation practices.

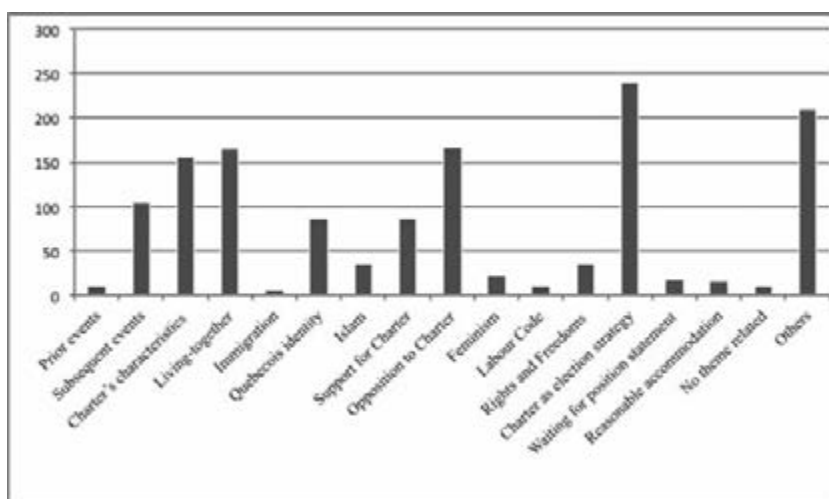


Figure 7.2. Central theme of news items, Quebec 2012-2014

As we have stated in our previous analyses of the reasonable accommodation debate:

In fact, what the media tsunami model reveals, is that the media can contribute, by bringing public attention on an emergent issue through a massive and homogeneous coverage over a short period of time, to generate in a population the impression that major social crisis is developing. Prior social conditions such as apprehensions, prejudice or ignorance may also contribute to the creation of social crises. However, through their coverage of events, media outlets can trigger these conditions and become catalysts and drivers of these crises (translated from Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau 2010a: 439).

## Conclusion

Our analysis of the news coverage dedicated by all thirteen Quebec dailies to the Parti Québécois project of a Charter on secular values confirms the media tsunami hypothesis. Five waves of coverage were identified from August 2012 to April 2014, and as the model predicts, each wave that followed the initial shock was larger than the first. Coverage was concentrated and massive across all media organizations.

Considering this characterization of how the Charter story played out in the media, what are the social consequences of such a phenomenon? In his model of media hypes, Vasterman (2005: 509-510) outlines four negative repercussions of media amplification for the quality and diversity of information available to citizens. Firstly, he notes that the coverage dedicated to an issue is disproportionate in comparison to its actual relevance and newsworthiness. The media therefore focuses an undue attention to certain issues and create an inflated coverage that is not supported by actual events.

Secondly, the amplified coverage of an event ends up not being dedicated to facts and current events, but rather to a parallel reality made of similar past cases and reactions to coverage. In doing so, the media feed and create the event themselves and stop covering factual situations. Something we witness also in this study by the large coverage dedicated to indirect issues the media associated to the Charter. The third problem Vasterman relates to media amplification is the disconnection between the massive proportion of coverage given to incidents reported in the news and the actual number of incidents happening in real life. Hence, any event of a similar nature to a reported incident is given ample media attention, which contributes

to the public impression that an important social problem is developing. Finally, the ultimate consequence, resulting from the previous three, is that media amplification artificially manufactures social crises: 'The media themselves play a central role in the development of the event, the issue, the social problem or the scandal, because they create this massive news wave, which has all kinds of consequences for the social actors involved' (Vasterman, 2005: 510).

These four social consequences of media amplification become even more problematic when considering media effects on public opinion formation. Since the 1960s, numerous studies have established important media effects on public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1988; Patterson, 1993; Entman, 2004). According to Zaller (1992, 2003), citizens neither have the time, the competence, nor the means to keep informed of public issues being debated and to evaluate the quality of the information they may be exposed to. According to Zaller's burglar alarm model, citizens will therefore surf the wave and turn their attention to the events that make the most noise in the media. Their critical assessment of issues – and of the news coverage of events – is limited and they will therefore assimilate the dominant elite discourses presented to them by the press. Zaller reminds his readers of the importance for citizens to have access to diverse news sources that provides in-depth analysis of events to limit the domination of elites. However, the media also depend on elite sources to gather information. In conjunction with the sense of false reality created by media amplification, the quality of information that citizens get access to is definitely far from ideal. In his critique of Zaller's model, Bennett poses that media amplification is actually the journalistic norm, thus presenting a deformed image of reality to the public: 'The news, in fact, is sounding burglar alarms all the time' (2003: 131). If the media is sounding the alarm constantly by amplifying coverage, how can citizens recognize important issues and turn their limited attention to them? Furthermore, if the press depicts events according to a single, uniform frame and by marginalizing minority opinions, the public will have difficulty evaluating properly how events unfold and making enlightened decisions. In the event of a media hype or a media tsunami, citizens are faced with a truncated image of reality. Therefore, the news media, the societal watchdog, does not present them with useful, true, verified and diversified information (Vasterman, 2005: 525-526).

In Quebec, from August 2012 to April 2014, the province's daily newspapers generated a media tsunami when covering the PQ's proposed Charter of secular values. They produced a homogeneous coverage mostly focused on the archetypal images of turbans, hijabs, and kippot worn in public services,

which represented the menace of immigration on the French-speaking (and of Catholic descent) Quebec majority. They mostly covered the Charter project indirectly with a broader focus on issues of diversity management and of national identity. They also framed the Charter as either a solution to the reasonable accommodation 'problem' or as an electoral instrument for the Parti Québécois. Commentary from columnists and pundits were abundant, but the coverage mostly presented the reactions and opinions of citizens, political actors, and organizations on the project.

Our analysis helped identify the coverage components related to the project of a Charter of secular values. However, we did not study the impact of the media tsunami on the formation of public opinion regarding the proposed Charter. Still, based on Vasterman's conclusions, one could argue that Quebec's daily newspapers may have contributed to the public perception on this emergent issue, often remote from the daily lives of the average Quebecker, especially outside the Montreal area where the province's immigrant population is largely concentrated. Following the previous media tsunami over reasonable accommodation practices in 2006-2007, which had clearly raised a crisis of perception over the issue of cultural diversity in the province, this new episode of media amplification presented Quebeckers yet again with the impression that there was indeed a significant problem with diversity that the Charter could alleviate.

Using for the second time a case study associated with an issue of diversity and identity, we confirm our media tsunami hypothesis. But what are the variables that contribute to the manifestation of this sort of media amplification process? Why are journalists turning their attention so massively and uniformly towards specific social issues? According to Vasterman (2005; Vasterman et al., 2005), the nature of events does not explain why media hypes are triggered. As other cases studied in this volume indicate, some amplification concerns mundane incidents such as isolated cases of violence while other hypes focus on exceptional events, such as natural disasters or pandemics. However, building on conclusions from previous studies on priming and agenda-setting effects of the media (Entman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1988; Soroka, 2002, 2006) or on gatekeeping and news selection procedures (White, 1950; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Cassidy, 2006), we believe on the contrary that media amplification processes, such as media tsunamis, will be triggered by extraordinary events and issues breaking from the daily experience of reporters and their publics, and that appear to question – some would say endanger – institutions, social order or basic needs in the population, such as physical security or integrity.

Both the issues of reasonable accommodation and of the Charter of secular values, that were largely framed by the press in Quebec as issues of diversity and identity, fall in this category of 'threatening' social issues. Prior studies on media waves were carried on cases of violence (Fishman, 1978; Brosius & Eps, 1995; Vasterman, 2005) and of sanitary crises, terrorism acts or natural disasters (Vasterman et al., 2005). These events and issues are all directly related to those primary needs of individuals and may trigger very strong emotional and psychological reactions. In his controversial 2007 article, Robert Putnam stated that diversity and cultural pluralism in post-industrial democracies presented challenges to social solidarity by stimulating mistrust in both host and immigrant populations. This climate of social malaise could also be considered as a priming condition to media amplification. It may become especially salient in culturally homogeneous societies such as Quebec, where the majority of the population shares a common heritage, yet remains a minority group within the larger North American geopolitical ensemble. Therefore, the issues of reasonable accommodation and of the project of a Charter of secular values were not only confronting the French majority in Quebec to issues of diversity and immigration integration. They may have also stimulated historic fears of cultural endangerment related to its minority status and the survival of a French society in North America.

By lifting the veil on the coverage dedicated to the project of a Charter of secular values in Quebec, this study contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of media amplification. However, we believe further analyses of other instances of media tsunamis could help advance knowledge on the nature of incidents, events and issues that contribute to the manifestation of this model of journalistic coverage.

## Notes

1. We studied news items published in all thirteen daily newspapers in Quebec. Six are owned by Groupe Capitales Médias (*Le Soleil*, *Le Quotidien*, *Le Nouvelliste*, *La Voix de l'Est*, *La Tribune* et *Le Droit*) and are published in major urban centres outside of Montréal. *La Presse* is owned by Gesca and is published in Montréal, the largest city in the province. Three are owned by Québecor Media (*Le Journal de Montréal*, *Le Journal de Québec* as well as the free daily *24h*, distributed in public transit in Montréal). Montréal's English daily *The Gazette* is owned by Postmedia. *Le Devoir* is an independent daily produced in Montréal and distributed across the province. Finally, *Métro*, is a free daily provided to commuters in the greater Montreal area and is owned by Transcontinental.

2. Although it may be difficult to identify all of the variables explaining the PQ's electoral defeat of 2014, many commentators and political analysts did not relate it to the Charter of secular values. Some have rather pointed to the perspective of a potential third referendum on Quebec's independence – a possibility when this political party forms government – that would have scared voters away from the PQ (see Bock-Côté, 2014; Noël, 2014; Pelletier, 2014).
3. It could be argued that the previous public debate over reasonable accommodation, and especially the intense media coverage that was dedicated to it, could have contributed just as equally to bringing public attention to this question of diversity.

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## About the authors

**Colette Brin** is a Professor at Université Laval's Département d'information et de communication and the Director of the Centre d'études sur les médias. Her research and teaching focus on recent and ongoing changes in journalistic practice, through policy and organizational initiatives, as well as journalists' professional discourse. She recently co-edited *Journalism in crisis: Bridging theory and practice for democratic media strategies in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2016). Prof. Brin coordinates the Canadian study for the Digital News Report (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) and served on the advisory panel for the Public Policy Forum's report on the media, 'The shattered mirror', published in January 2017.

**Thierry Giasson** is a Professor of Political Science at Université Laval and he is the Director of the Groupe de recherche en communication politique (GRCP). Dr. Giasson is also a member of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship (CSDC). His research focuses on partisan and citizen uses of online technologies, as well as on the effects of political communication and marketing practices on political engagement in Québec and Canada. He recently co-edited *Permanent campaigning in Canada* (2017) and *Political elites in Canada. Power and influence in instantaneous times* (2018) at UBC Press, where he co-edits with Alex Marland (Memorial) the series *Communication, Strategy and Politics*. His work has also been published in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *Politique et sociétés*, the *Canadian Journal of Communication* and the *Journal of Public Affairs*.

**Marie-Michèle Sauvageau** holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Ottawa where she is also a part-time professor. She is currently working on the political participation of immigrants and new citizens within political parties in Quebec. Dr. Sauvageau's research has been funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fonds de recherche du Québec: Société et Culture and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program.



## 8. How a small-scale panic turns into an unstoppable news wave about mass mugging on the beach

*Gonçalo Pereira Rosa*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

An incident on a Portuguese beach in 2005 was built and distorted in the national media as an instance of a new crime, replicating known parameters of the Brazilian ‘arrastão’ (mass mugging). This chapter aims to discuss news values, organizational routines, self-referential production standards and bias and prejudice in newsrooms. The chapter suggests that, when in progress, a news wave – built with the contributions of major mass media organizations – is a near unstoppable force and any arguments against it tend to be dismissed.

**Keywords:** media waves, risk society, mugging, crime in the news, distortion

History volumes of media-driven panics and hoaxes (for example, Bartholomew & Radford, 2012; or Pereira Rosa, 2015) tend to refer the most embarrassing episodes to the distant past. One would say that journalism shortcomings, like the gullibility of accepting Orson Welles’ 1938 Martian landing or the 1835 moon hoax, were long buried in layers of objectivity and professional standards. Using a 2005 Portuguese case study as a model, this chapter tries to reflect on modern dangers of self-referential journalism practices and real-time pitfalls that provide opportunities for news waves taking place – either based on actual facts or in dangerous rumours.

Research on news waves began in the late twentieth century and has broken exciting new ground, analysing hypes generated by rumours or disproportionate events and reflecting on our addiction to media systems

to obtain information and reinforce our own mythology about right and wrong and the proper functions of our societies.

### The case study

At 4.40 pm on 10 June 2005, LUSA, the Portuguese news agency, reported that, at 3 pm, at least 500 adults and youths, gathered in informal gangs, had entered Carcavelos Beach, a popular summer refuge for Lisbon's population. According to the report, gangs stole and assaulted whoever resisted them, quickly generating terror amongst bathers. Hours later, the story was developed by several radio and television networks. The structure of the incident was reframed: from that moment, it was described by the media as an imitation of the mass muggings in Brazilian beaches, popularly known as 'arrastões'. According to the information that was rapidly spread, the robbery implied organization and planning skills by the muggers.

In the following hours, all national news outlets covered the incident. Alleged eyewitnesses and police forces echoed the unprecedented event. The word 'arrastão' was first used to define the event during the evening news on the SIC television network.. Shortly after, at 9 pm, a bulletin was sent from the Lisbon Metropolitan Police Command to all mass media, in which the word 'arrastão' was used. Photographs taken by the owner of a commercial establishment were used as documentary proofs and gave an additional element of context: the majority of those involved, according to the visual proofs, were of African origin.

What really happened was later summarized: a group of a few dozen black individuals arrived on a packed beach on a summer holiday. Their presence, along with other black youths already swimming or laid down in the sand, caused discomfort to the usual white bathers. A police patrol appeared on scene and panic started. A few hundred individuals – black and white – started to run away: some fled the scene fearing police excess; others ran without any given cause. The photographs of this moment caused the subsequent distorted perception.

After 11 June, however, the police authority tried to introduce in the debate elements of contradiction to the thesis that was gaining momentum at the time. According to the interviews and bulletins produced by the police – practically ignored in the news media during the first week – no indications of organized crime were found: there were no complaints or arrests compatible with a mugging involving five hundreds individuals,

and the photos divulged at the time were taken when the police arrived, showing mostly bathers running away.

From the outset, the main political leaders at the time spoke about this event accepting and shaping the mass mugging already proposed by the 'actors of social control' (Cohen, 1972: 33) – the media and, to some extent, the police.

On 17 June, a report by journalist Nuno Guedes (*A Capital*) challenged for the first time the information provided six days earlier, but the news story received little resonance. A presidential visit to the Cova da Moura neighbourhood (an area in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon inhabited by large numbers of people of African origin and with a reputation for high crime and social deprivation) tried to cool the social temperature, but tension remained inflamed. A nationalist right-wing protest was held in Lisbon on the following day.

The first clear turning point for this frame happened on the first day of July. An investigation by journalist Diana Andringa produced the television documentary 'Era uma vez o arrastão', which dismantled the foundations of the media wave of the previous month. The reporter interviewed police agents, political leaders, representatives of immigrant communities, and eyewitnesses. It was aired on national television. It would take a couple of months before the publication of a report by the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIME, 2006) confirmed the distortion produced between what happened in Carcavelos and the reporting about the event.

## Media wave

This chapter tests the hypothesis that the first echoes of the Carcavelos event had the capacity to create an unprecedented media wave in Portugal for two weeks, closely following the model stages described by Vasterman (2005) when analysing the extraordinary crime news narratives in the Netherlands.

We suggest that the unanimity between news outlets, the consensus among primary definers, the volume of news coverage, the construction of a perception of damage to public order, and the exaggeration or distortion of the incident as representative of an ethnic group's behaviour, contributed to an escalation of this hype. It is equally suggested that this kind of journalistic unanimity is due to a resonant key incident – strong enough to fulfil news values needs and ideologically plausible for the majority of the audience.

Answering Vasterman's challenge (2005: 527) to produce more empirical research in order to understand the dynamic of these media waves and their capacity for producing exaggeration and distortion, we use this study to substantiate the model, providing an additional element: once underway, a media wave follows its unstoppable dynamic, integrating dominant frames to strengthen the news package and neglecting the frames that undermine it.

From the sociology of journalism's point of view, we accept the premise that any news is a social construction of reality, subject to complex forces and deep cultural constraints, often reflecting the ideology and causes of the most powerful social actors (Hall et al., 1978).

Under this model, we try to demonstrate that news coverage in these circumstances was highly concentrated in a short period of time, and the mass mugging was the predominant framework during a considerable period of that coverage, even serving as a prototype for interpreting similar occurrences. We analyse the predominant official sources in the journalistic speech about the incident and the degree of unanimity between them. With this background in mind, we introduce the criminal statistics for the year 2005 as a layer reference in relation to what it may be possible to suggest is the degree of distortion present in journalistic representations. Finally, we try to determine to what extent, and when, the predominant frame was challenged in the published texts.

## **Fear and terror in the media**

The case of mass mugging at Carcavelos Beach explored the weaknesses of journalistic routines in respect of events that fall into the category of news Best (1999) defined as 'random violence'. News about incidents of random violence, like those resulting from a narrative constructed on the Carcavelos mass mugging, are usually marked by three claims: they have no detectable patterns; the actions do not seem to make sense to most of the community; and they represent a serious sign of a deterioration of public order.

Due to their unexpected nature, generating concern and fear, events of random violence become a target for intense coverage news, as they metamorphose unique tragedies (incidents) into typical examples (instances) of a broader and deeper social problem (Best, 1999: 15; Kielbowics & Scherer, 1986). The classification of an unknown problem with fearful examples democratizes risk as it makes the threat universal and generates a peak of social concern (Fumento, 1990).

Any society shares perceptions of what to fear and what it can do to prevent it. The perception of a degradation of public order – even when criminal statistics do not reflect this – is therefore particularly dramatic. As Altheide and Michalowski (1999: 477) wrote, fear ‘involves an interaction between an individual and a situation, but it can drastically alter how we deal with the situation and, ultimately, the nature of the situation itself’.

Integrated in the general frames through which crime is narrated in most contemporary media systems, fear becomes an instance of speech. It becomes the lens through which we judge the majority of incidents that are presented to us by the media, hence contributing to the progressive worsening of security concerns.

Cohen (1972) was one of the first authors to investigate the capacity of media speech to produce moral panics. Promoted by institutional social actors, one event may be enough for a social agent or group to be defined as a threat to social values and interests, in as much as it is presented in a stylized and stereotyped form by the media (Cohen, 1972). The moral barriers are inhabited by publishers, politicians, and other social actors, and the significance of the event can be amplified. ‘The mass media, in fact, devote a great deal of space to deviance: sensational crimes, scandals, bizarre happenings and strange goings on’, he wrote (*op. cit.*).

This is not just for entertainment or to fulfil some psychological need for either identification or vicarious punishment [...] [It] is a main source of information about the normative contours of a society. It informs us about right and wrong, about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture and the shapes the devil can assume. (Cohen, 1972: 8).

In Cohen’s study design, crime was researched whenever a journalistic deviation occurred, in what Ferrell (1995: 27) called the anchorage of the meaning of criminality ‘in the style of its collective practice’. Cohen approached the media from a circular perspective, assuming the intensive news coverage had an impact, which, in turn, produced reactions in society, and further impacts on future coverage. The media, he said, invented ‘folk devils’, which have become stereotypes of each crime, usually exaggerated and distorted. Words or photographs – once neutral – symbolize the deviation in journalistic speech (Cohen, 1972: 39-45), under the assumption that what happened in the present can be repeated or worsen in the future. Social agents or stigmatized groups are often built represented as a collective mass of individuals, typified in a folk category, regardless of the layers of culture, ethnicity, or economy a community may be built upon. Ferrell researched



further and concluded that several modern crimes are actually inscribed on the correlation between youth, culture, and crime itself, because youth cultures are 'primary settings for the production of alternative style and meaning, and therefore [are] the primary targets of legal, political and moral authorities, threatened by the audacity of these cultural alternatives'. (Ferrell, 1995: 35)

After the pioneering work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) postulated the growing role of the media in defining public agendas, successive investigations have focused on the journalistic fascination for crime news. Hall et al. (1978) documented how crime news legitimizes the ideological prejudices of primary definers and interests that each news media serves, and often expresses trends or 'concern peaks' that criminal statistics do not confirm.

Sacco (1995) reported on the usefulness of crime news – virtually inexhaustible – to newspapers, as compensation elements that can fulfil larger or smaller 'news holes', according to the newspaper's daily agenda. Snow (1983), on the other hand, investigated communities that were subject to intensive crime news and he found that a large portion of individuals included sceneries and words associated to the news reports they were exposed to in their speech definitions.

Althaide and Michalowski (1999) discovered that the word 'fear' and other synonyms are now much more frequent in journalistic texts than in the past, while Banks (2005) concentrated his efforts on the importance of local contexts beyond media as modulating forces of crime news interpretation for each audience.

The notion that fear and terror are important pieces of contemporaneous journalistic reports is common to most of these papers. And 'when fear is the prevailing framework for looking at social issues, the other competing frames and discourses lose out' (Althaide & Michalowski, 1999: 476).

Similarly, the amplification of a social problem to the detriment of others, through its exaggerated representation, produces a non-negligible effect. The public may overestimate the frequency of an incident and therefore misinterpret reality (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

## **Frames and journalistic practices**

The impact of any message is measured, above all, for its contribution to defining the position in society of each social agent involved. In a way, from this perspective, the definitive sense of any text is transformed by the collective interpretation made by social agents of all available texts (Snow,

1983). It comes as no surprise that the majority of modern texts available are news reports. Therefore, since the pioneering Goffman research (1959), there has been a current of sociology of journalism analysing the processes of news interpretation, as well as the narrative structures behind it.

The cultural meanings inherent in the constructed narratives about social problems have earned different names, but in this chapter we will use Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) definition of frames. The inherent frames of any news or succession of news invoke powerful images from the rhetorical point of view, shared with a significant percentage of audiences that provide a common sense to the narrated incidents by the media. Each social problem, or even each news story, appeals to what Gamson and Modigliani (*Ibid.*: 3) designated as 'interpretative packages'.

In their proposal, each frame is socially constructed. Hilgartner and Bosk (1998) had set the field of news as a strong symbolic battleground between possible interpretations of reality. In this arena, the best interpretative frame, the one that collects more supporters or more symbolic capital, has more chance of thriving and, therefore, of being passed on to the audience. Gamson and Modigliani established that some frames evoke profoundly mythic themes or reflect wide cultural resonances and are, therefore, used often. Other authors, such as Wolfsfeld (1997), considered that the media chooses, traditionally, the most favourable frames for authorities, except in incidents in which these institutions cannot influence the process of news production, in which case, other pressure groups fulfil this role.

In news about crime, the media repeatedly appeal to more profound cultural frames. Swindler (1986), moreover, defined culture as society's toolbox, a diverse collection of ideas that may be invoked whenever necessary. In moments where reality is constructed based on our fears, it is likely that the narrative appeals to society's deeper doubts. As a result, there is a constant effort for referent framing, and the natural marginalization of other interpretive frameworks (Noelle-Neuman & Mathes, 1987).

Equally important – and with clear implications for the Carcavelos mass mugging case – is the role of sources. Journalists cannot report on all events through direct experience and so they are forced to resort to the recollections of sources. Although the productive routines identified, for instance, by Tuchman (1972) define several defence mechanisms, often a source has a leading role in news production, providing exclusive information, qualifying the event or comparing it to other previous events. Manning (2001) considered, moreover, that those sources that are in the position of labelling a key event have a considerable impact on media coverage, as happened in this case study.

## Media waves about crime

A media wave about crime may be generically described as a 'sudden increase in the criminal activity, increases that demand explanation' (Best, 1999: 34). But there is a substantial difference between any media wave about crime and a continuous volume of media coverage dedicated to a particular occurrence. The media wave demands a generalization beyond the details of the case and does not exempt the characterization of the incident as an instance of a new trend or a broader social problem (Ibid.: 35).

In the investigation produced on these peaks of dense media coverage, Best (1999), Vasterman (2005), and Brosius and Eps (1995) identified the indispensable condition to any media wave: the occurrence of a melodramatic event, a 'key event' (in the Brosius and Eps model), which allows for the definition of the issue within known borders, thus presenting a sequence of events as relatively unprecedented and, at the same time, evoking cultural resonance with the audience.

From social psychology, Brosius and Eps (1995: 396) retrieved the concept of the prototype, a mental unit that organizes and guides our construction and understanding of social reality. The prototype is an ensemble of recognizable attributes shared by objects, people, or events. When asked by a social agent to appoint a tool, the authors remind most people choose a hammer or a saw, taking the particular instrument as the prototype of the whole group. To some extent, that is the function of the key event, summing up a category of actions and gathering them under the same label.

Apart from the key event, a media wave is also characterized as generating a snowball effect: when there is a dramatically increased report of a crime type, it is likely that other victims will report it to the authorities, and the problem will actually be exacerbated. At the same time, journalists format their event selection criteria to include the new type of crime (Fishman, 1980; Hall et al., 1978). Ironically, similar events – that weeks before would not have had space in the media – may gain additional relevance in the eyes of reporters.

A media wave creates an intensification of news reports and modulates future coverage of this theme. As Vasterman puts it (2005: 517), 'one result of media wave will be an expansion of the definition of the problem'. It is a well-known truth within sociology that the more broadly a term is defined, the more people or instances there are that fit within it.

Although refusing to compare the statistical crime rates with news stories built about them, Vasterman created a model for identifying media waves about criminal activities, hence explaining the role they play in

defining frameworks and social amplification. In the formation of a media wave, we have seven factors:

- (i) In a media wave almost all journalistic outlets cover the incident, leading to overproduction;
- (ii) The issue is shaped as a symbol of the acute deterioration of the problem. When the media wave is spurred by a new type of crime, all similar incidents – or even those that can be adapted to the problem's definition – gain new visibility and receive feeding news coverage. The media wave feeds on itself because news organizations are self-referential and therefore monitor the production of competitors and incorporate it, imitating their own content in a circular movement (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997; Ramonet, 1999). Manning called these cycles 'media loops', characterized by the increasing tendency to show an image in another context, reframed, constantly recycled, reproduced in new contexts and re-experienced (Manning, 1998: 26). In media waves about crime, this journalistic mimicry may contribute to increasing the frequency of certain crimes or to the reporting of previously hidden crimes.
- (iii) A media wave, according to Vasterman, is also defined by the influence of several official sources, originating from authorities, whose contribution journalists accept. The unanimity between primary definers about what the event was and what it means is fundamental to giving credibility to the journalistic construction and generating the media wave. A media wave is only built if the event is interpreted in the light of dominant frames.
- (iv) A factor inherent to the media wave concept lies in the disproportion between the newsworthiness of the event at the beginning of the wave and the relevance attributed to it in the following days and weeks. This is why we believe the analysis of criminal statistical data can help to strengthen the conviction that the relationship between the number of incidents reported and the real frequency of these incidents is distorted in a media wave.
- (v) Also according to Vasterman's model, a media wave is not produced from the multiplication of minor incidents. It demands a resounding key event, with the capacity to fulfil the criteria of journalistic selection (the news values) and infiltrate the agenda. The reactions by political parties or other interest groups, which frequently lead to political decisions, are important news values in the initial coverage.
- (vi) Although it may work as a prototype from that day forward, the media wave inevitably reaches saturation point. That is the moment

when its promoters deem its potential exhausted and journalists redefine the selection criteria. The saturation can be caused by the slowing down of the news wave about that particular crime, by the media's refusal to address it further, or, as is happening frequently in our societies, a new crisis emerges and hides the previous ones in the shadows.

- (vii) To these six factors, we add an additional circumstance: once the news coverage is in this process, attenuating information, corrections, and any other challenging content will tend to be ignored. Until saturation point is reached, the media wave only integrates the information compatible with the dominant frame. In this picture of increasing repetition, the snowball gains velocity downhill, from the moment of its definition and acceptance by audience and journalists.

## The project

We developed seven lines of research on news reports built in the press with regard to the incidents of 10 June 2005 in Carcavelos: (i) initially, we intend to test the notion that the dominant frames in the news consisted of a robbery by several hundred people, copying the mass muggings on Brazilian beaches; (ii) we also submit to scrutiny the claim that the ethnicity of potential assailants was an important element of news and allowed for a strengthening of the framework of the mass mugging; (iii) In this context, we sought to analyse the weight of representatives of immigrants or descendants of immigrants as journalistic sources, especially in the early days following the incident; (iv) assuming that the photographs taken by a local entrepreneur helped formulate the dominant framework, we measured the number of days on which they were published; (v) in a media wave such as this one, it is undeniable that the early days have a higher journalistic glow than the following weeks. Accepting this premise, we tried to measure the space the press devoted to the issue, and what weight the articles containing the first denials carried as they dismantled the frameworks of the mass mugging; (vi) recognizing that the main frame might have been built through semantic resources that associated the incidents to latent fears and terror in society, we estimated the variation of articles that called upon the vocabulary of fear, using expressions such as 'terror, fear, panic, horror, violent, or vandals', as well as others with the same semantic charge; (vii) finally, we test the hypothesis that these incidents of

June 2005 may reflect, as several journalists and political leaders defended, a real increase in criminal data.

## Methodology

The project began with a content analysis of all articles published in the daily, weekly, and monthly Portuguese press between 11 June and 15 July 2005. We used the database of the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities as well as the authors' archives.

We defined *article* as any individual newspaper item dedicated to Carcavelos incidents, with or without title, with or without a byline, and which can be placed under one of the four major journalistic genres – news, report, opinion, or interview. Under the principle of mutual exclusion, each article was coded in a single category.

In the analysis, we coded the following categories: *journalistic genre* (news, report, opinion, or interview), *mass mugging as framework* (percentage of articles that framed the events as a replica of a Brazilian mass mugging), *colour or ethnicity* (percentage of articles that mentioned colour or ethnicity of the robbers), *immigrants as source* (percentage of articles that used statements by immigrants or immigrant descendants), *photos* (ratio of articles that used the photos taken by the owner of a commercial establishment at Carcavelos Beach, which were widespread in the media and helped to visually build the frames of the mass mugging), *disassemble* (percentage of articles that disassembled the frame of the mass mugging) and *fear in the news* (percentage of articles that used the vocabulary of fear to narrate events).

As Gamson established (1992: 179), any news story may express more than one frame. The identification of the frame is a qualitative effort, which depends heavily on the author's experience and the nature of this project. We decided, therefore, to identify the predominant framing detected in each article, neglecting other accessorial frames found in the same text.

We divided the articles into six periods of time, marked by events that branded the news in those weeks. A first group was made up exclusively of materials published the day after the incident; the second covered the period between 12 and 16 June, since it was on the following day, 17 June, that the first challenging report was published; the third block included the period between 17 and 23 June, a week of huge controversy marked by the presidential visit to Cova da Moura and the nationalist oriented protests in Lisbon; the fourth block analysed those articles published between 24 and

30 June, when criticisms of the media's mistakes were echoed; the fifth block studied the articles published between 1 and 8 July, a period characterized by early dissemination of journalist Diana Andringa's research and the results of her documentary; finally, the analysis focused on the articles published between 9 and 15 July, during which the events at Carcavelos were mentioned purely as a questionable example of the media's performance.

Exclusively content analysis-based research is useful but incomplete. To detect strategies not reported in the news, we also interviewed the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, seeking to realize the extent to which the social construction of mass mugging reflected the latent fears of the section of Portuguese society that associates immigration with crime, a view still echoed in daily news reports (Ferin & Santos, 2006).

We believe the examination of a wider range of media support could have produced different results, especially if it had included the content of television news. Correia (1996), moreover, documented the influence of television. The main news programs replicated a specific construction of this event, while later taking decisive turn to criticism of this frame. However, sociological research suggests that newspapers are still, in association with personal experience, the outlets with most influence over public opinion in complex and time-consuming issues (Marques, 2005: 57).

## Discussion

By imposing the results of our analysis on the model suggested by Vasterman for defining the dynamics of news waves, it is legitimate to conclude that the Carcavelos events produced a media wave. Between 11 June and 15 July, 150 articles were produced in the Portuguese press about this issue. As is the case with the majority of media waves, the first two weeks represented the most intense period (seventy-four per cent of the total articles), with the number of articles increasing as the frame of mass mugging was building.

All national publications highlighted the event and, although this article does not discuss television content, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the amplitude of journalistic coverage also extended to this platform with identical unanimous parameters. In the first twelve days of the sample, ninety-nine articles (of a total of 109) used the frame of mass mugging to interpret the occurrence. The metaphor itself was quickly assimilated by strength of association to a previous Portuguese known precedent: the mass muggings on Brazilian beaches, providing journalists with a 'story of convergence' (Correia, 2006: 206).

Date	Articles	News or reports	Columns or interviews	Articles using mugging as frame	Articles referring to colour, ethnicity	Articles with emigrants as sources	Articles using the photo	Article using the vocabulary of fear	Articles denying the mugging frame
11.06.2005	15	12	3	15 (100%)	6 (40%)	0	9 (60%)	14 (93%)	0
12-16.06.2005	31	20	11	29 (93%)	23 (74%)	2 (64%)	6 (19%)	24 (77%)	2 (6%)
17-23.06.2005	63	44	19	59 (93%)	48 (76%)	15 (23%)	10 (15%)	42 (66%)	12 (19%)
24-30.06.2005	15	8	7	10 (66%)	13 (86%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	8 (53%)	3 (20%)
01-07.07.2005	12	5	7	9 (75%)	5 (41%)	0	2 (16%)	2 (16%)	5 (41%)
08-15.07.2005	14	8	6	14 (100%)	5 (35%)	0	7 (50%)	1 (7%)	13 (92%)

Table 8.1. The Carcavelos mugging in the printed press (11 June–15 July 2005)



More than a journalistic initiative, the construction and promotion of the media wave came from institutional sources, endowed with more symbolic capital. It was the massive use of these sources that provided the primary definition for the event (Hall et al., 1978) and hence modelled the future interpretation.

In the days following the event, there was complete unanimity among an important group of political definers. Amongst the political agents, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the leaders of the two most powerful political parties in opposition and the Mayor of the city of Cascais promoted the framework of mass mugging, conceiving it as an act of random violence, and accepting or promoting the definition of this incident as organized crime. They provided reporters with the necessary cohesion to strengthen the original frame, particularly because they represented a broad ideological spectrum. The representatives of other parliamentary parties were not heard. Other agents of social control, such as the spokesmen for the police or television criminologist Francisco Moita Flores joined this unanimity.

We argue that journalists's resistance to listening to immigrants or descendants of immigrants also played a part. These were the individuals that could rebut the charges that were being made against them. Very few journalists sought alternative sources to the dominating discourse. Throughout the news coverage of the incident, the voices of victims were not heard (twenty-three per cent of articles in the journalistic production phase). It is likely that an implicit bias was also at play, restricting access to media forums. Indeed, the Portuguese press has been known to restrict access by people of African origin to its pages on specific occasions, like sporting events or entertainment content (Ferin & Santos, 2006). Even the clarification between immigrants or individuals already born in Portugal was not made at any point in a process of 'othering' the foreign and portraying them as scapegoats.

We also identified an essential element to the construction and acceptance of the framework of the mass mugging in the widespread use of the photos taken by an observer, illustrating the time of arrival of the police and the ensuing panic. On the day after the incident, nine out of fifteen articles written on the subject integrated these images. They served as visual proof and gave credence to the frightening version of a mass assault. Ironically, in the event disassembly stage, half of the sample articles continued to reproduce the images, as if the visual testimony mitigated the mistakes.

In the linguistic field, and taking the example of the media wave on other crime incidents, the language used was part of what we call the 'vocabulary of fear'. Given an occurrence that had irrefutable news value, journalists spared no adjectives. On 11 June, the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* described 'moments

of terror' and 'young people spread panic'; *Correio da Manhã* reported that 'two shots into the air spread panic' and that the robbers 'sowed panic'; *Jornal de Notícias* used, in different headlines, 'violence', 'panic' and 'terror'; *Público* described 'youth gangs created panic' and 'mass mugging swept the sand'; *24 Horas* mentioned 'hundreds of vandals attack bathers and create panic'.

Until the end of July, the incident was systematically built according to this semantic framework. More than half of the articles called upon these marks of terror and fear, which helped to cement the suggested frame. It is naturally debatable whether the audience absorbed terror in their interpretation of the event, but one incident that took place on 20 June deserves to be mentioned: passengers on a train to Sintra experienced panic sparked by the sound of alarming cries, which were interpreted as another mass mugging in process; terrified passengers dived out of the carriages (*Jornal de Notícias*, 22 June 2005). For some, at least, the mass mugging was visibly assimilated in their daily lives.

In the footsteps of Vasterman's model, the Carcavelos incident was equally used as a prototype during the following weeks, reproducing the dominant frame to define apparently similar instances. This incident worked as a key event, introducing to the agenda the concern for criminal cases of random violence.

At the height of journalistic production on the risks of the new mass muggers and the way the authorities prepared for the new threat, two examples justify the above. On 12 June, journalists reported a possible copycat event at a beach in the Algarve (a summer destination in the south), mistaking a small beach incident for a symptom of a new potential mass mugging. On 17 June, and in the following days, SIC television broadcast images captured by surveillance cameras on trains in Greater Lisbon (without identifying the date of recording). They were selected to illustrate acts of delinquency by young African men. The relevance of these incidents to the Carcavelos 'mass mugging' was null, but the television network and some newspapers took advantage of the predominant framework – suburban young people, mostly from ethnic minorities, are potential authors of acts of random violence – and added under this category incidents out of context that would have been previously ignored. As Thompson (1995: 117) noted, 'by making images and information available to individuals located in distant locations, the media shape and influence the course of events, and indeed, create events that would not have existed in their absence'.

Like Vasterman concluded in his case study, news construction of this event also extrapolated conclusions not supported by crime statistics, suggesting a breakdown of public order. Although several newspapers echoed

Years	Crimes of physical violence	Street robberies with contact to victim	Street robberies without contact	Crimes against public peace *	Total of crimes
2005	686	5,518	11,413	101	384,975
2004	777	6,247	11,606	163	416,420
2003	895	6,377	10,552	139	417,383
2002	842	5,958	10,970	129	391,599
2001	862	5,373	10,613	208	372,170
2000	805	5,515	9,008	90	363,294
1999	896	5,741	7,804	85	362,589
1998	954	4,635	5,614	118	341,122
1997	959	6,252	5,706	153	321,644
1996	958	5,504	5,690	138	322,255
1995	933	6,902	5,793	94	326,829

Table 8.2. Incidents of four type of crimes, 1995-2005

Source: Legislative Policy and Planning Office of the Ministry of Justice, 2006

\* These include terrorism or terrorism association; riots; insubordination or public instigation of crime; criminal association; and others against public peace. The group violence, quoted in 2005 newspaper articles, is not a statistical category.

an increase of these indicators, claiming they reflected a significant deterioration of public order, detailed analysis of official indicators produced by the Legislative Policy and Planning Office of the Ministry of Justice confirm no indicator of this type of crime reached a peak in 2005.

Instead, with the exception of street robberies (with unknown perpetrator), the remaining categories had significantly lower numbers in 2005 than in previous years, reflecting a positive evolution of criminal data in clear contradiction to the news content (see Table 8.2).

We verified a clear disproportion between the relevance of the Carcavelos event and the content of the news coverage generated by it. Indeed, a key aspect in the media wave construction was precisely the use of crime data as grounds for the mass mugging frame.

The statistics, as Sacco (2000: 205) estimated, are important

rhetorical devices in the social processes by which crime and (other social) problems are constructed and maintained. Such statistics are used to press claims about the pervasiveness and scope of new problems and therefore about the need for urgent social action.

Days after the occurrence in Carcavelos and after news reports voiced criminal statistics, slogans in a nationalist protest replicated the same content, proving that the numbers had sunk in and were being integrated into speech, strengthening the vocabulary of fear and proving Howitt's suggestion (1982), according to which the occasional victimization statistics report can ignite public anxiety.

News coverage about the Carcavelos event reached saturation point on 23 June, twelve days after the key event, with 109 articles, while the next fifteen days the newspapers offered twenty-seven articles, in total 150 (see Table 8.1). Without new information and with the probable weakening of the commitment of key definers, journalists ended the coverage of the Carcavelos mass mugging.

Strongly self-referential, the news coverage systematically reproduces the same framing, reducing the opportunity of conflicting interpretations. In this case, the unanimity of the early days was not challenged until 16 June, when a police spokesperson drastically reduced the estimated number of assailants and the damage actually caused. On 17 June, an article was published in *A Capital*, contradicting the thesis until then undisputed. But throughout June the dominant frame was always the mass mugging. By the time the denials and corrections gained weight in the news, the media wave was already fading.

According to the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, 'the police officers themselves recognize that they tried to correct the initial estimate immediately on 10 June, before the TV news. However, no one wanted to hear. The story was already framed and no one bothered to crosscheck it with other sources' accounts, to question the hasty analysis of two or three characters or even submitting it to a common sense judgement. When the media wave finally began to run out of steam, there was a willingness to find other centres of attraction. And it turned out that the police had something to say. There were other sources. The official data did not correspond to the largest mass mugging in the world. Unfortunately, however, the damage was already done'.<sup>2</sup>

The media wave took shape in news and reports, but, in the disassembly stage, the main actors came from outside the journalist sphere, including ombudsmen, politicians, and other civil society agents. In a way, the mass mugging was challenged in the opinion columns and not so much in the news items.

Regardless of the corrections that some newspapers included, the mass mugging never ceased to be the dominant frame. On 18 June, in *Público*, Eduardo Dâmaso epitomized the conclusion shared by many media professionals: 'Reducing the size of what happened in Carcavelos to "thirty or forty" people involved in the assaults is an absurd simplification of those who refuse to see the obvious'. Speaking to the *Jornal de Notícias* of 22 June, the minister António Costa also confirmed that it was 'indifferent to the seriousness of the matter the actual size of the mass mugging!'

Indeed, despite the police rebuttal of the initial thesis of a mass assault, our content analysis shows that the phrase 'mass mugging' continued to be used in many of the journalistic texts. By the end of the sample, it seems obvious that for the Portuguese journalists, with more or less people involved, with or without planning or organization, with or without official complaints or registered injuries, Carcavelos was the scene of a mass mugging. Even in the last week of the sample, at a time when the Carcavelos events were only mentioned because of Diana Andringa's documentary, the expression was still firmly present in the journalistic lexicon, leaving clues that for the audience, the size of the incidents had been crafted according to the first proposed frame.

Moreover, as Castro (2006) warned, the word entered the vocabulary and even exceeded the initial resonance. On 4 July, *Correio da Manhã* explained in a headline that, with a new beach vigilance system, the police were 'Ready for mass muggings'.

It is legitimate to argue that during the formation of a media wave, official sources and journalists are prone to ignoring or minimizing the elements that may contradict the already set frame. The media wave feeds on the consistency and cohesion of key players, dismissing the arguments that rebut it.

## Conclusion

The mass mugging incident collates several news values irrefutable to the Portuguese newspapers, involved in a daily battle for leadership in a short and competitive market. It was an unexpected event, occurring on the

capital's doorstep, involving a high number of people. It spurred a response from the main political sources and produced an event and subsequent copycat events of high emotional depth.

The unanimity between news organizations is another noteworthy factor. In a field as self-referential as journalism, a new event is rapidly integrated into cross-media agenda and exhaustively repeated. In the maelstrom promoted by the desire to beat the competition, the stages of reflection and fact checking are shortened and widespread journalistic representations become fragmented and distorted. Carcavelos happened in a world before the take-off of social media. It could be argued that the same set of events would be subject to an even bigger amplification in the Facebook and Twitter era, but one can only hope that these same tools could also provide quicker and irrefutable counter-proofs to the dominant discourse.

Could the media wave happen without consensus among primary definers? It is unlikely. The use of the legitimacy of official sources is an unconscious defence, held up by journalists in response to accusations of irresponsible reporting or, worse, malpractice. It is not surprising that the dominant frame was not contested in the media during the first stage of the news coverage. Although other social agents had a different story to tell, news organization did not feel the need to listen to alternative voices to what seemed consensual amongst official sources that defined the event.

Built around the deviant behaviour of an ethnic group already stigmatized, represented in an incorrect and fragmented way, the media wave about the mass mugging swallowed up the timid attempts at rebuttal until it reached saturation point.

Although this chapter does not discuss the information reception, it is likely that the Portuguese public integrated this new instance into their mental framework. On 29 July, more than a month and a half after the Carcavelos incident, the newspaper *Meios e Publicidade* published a survey of editors, coordinators, journalists and editors-in-chief working in the national media. More than half of respondents (fifty-three per cent) argued that journalists had not misbehaved in relation to the story of the mass mugging, reflecting the deep-rooted idea that if one obeys the professional standards accepted by the majority of the community, then journalistic practice is self-assessed with merit.

As journalism is revolutionized by the concept of the never-ending deadline in online journalism, social media, television and radio, the adaptation of professional routines to a new era of real-time journalism will feed further events like this. Journalism's sociology should address

media waves fed by unanimity and fragile consensus as a by-product of the information abundance. This phenomenon reveals a frightening predisposition to information circularity and the flighty representation of minority groups, associated a priori with deviant behaviours, which justifies more attention by researchers. Surette's recent work (2015) on performance crime in the age of new media also suggests that attention-seeking offenders of the twenty-first century will place additional stresses on the criminal system, generating changes in law enforcement and ultimately on crime perception itself.

Sociology will find in media waves a promising and relevant field of research. Future inputs can be produced by studies that acknowledge the power of social media as unanimity generation mechanisms. New media mixes content from legacy media with personalized and high-speed content, thus changing the way the public creates its narratives of law-breaking or law surveillance (Surette, 2015). The tools through which citizens become information producers should now be researched in order to assess to what extent a time interval marked by a media wave and the corresponding consensus frames in the media actually exists.

## Notes

1. It was the only time during this process that the police authorities referred to the incident as 'arrastão', or mass mugging.
2. Author's interview with the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities, February 2010.

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## About the author

**Gonçalo Pereira Rosa** (PhD) is a member of the Research Centre for Communications and Culture of the Portuguese Catholic University since 2008, Gonçalo Pereira Rosa investigates the representation of the risk society in the news media. He is the author of four books about the rise of environmental organizations in the Portuguese society (*Quercus nas Notícias*, 2005), the history of journalism's exclusive stories in Portugal (*Parem as Máquinas*, 2015 and *O inspector da PIDE que Morreu Duas Vezes*, 2017), and the news framing of the swine flu pandemics (*A Gripe e o Naufrágio*, 2015). He currently teaches a class on investigative journalism and is editor-in-chief of the *Portuguese National Geographic Magazine*.

### **III.**

## **Impact on issues, crises, and public opinion**



## 9. Dynamics of media hype: Interactivity of the media and the public\*

*IkJae Chung*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### **Abstract**

This chapter tries to integrate two theoretical components, media hype and social issue amplification, to understand the dynamics of social issue evolution in the internet environment. Due to the growing role of the public online, the amplification process is changing. By analysing a risk issue related to a new high-speed railway tunnel project in South Korea, the interactivities between the media and the public are explored using online data from major newspapers and messages on websites of public and non-profit agencies in the country. The results show that neither the media alone, nor the public by themselves can make a social issue develop into a 'storm'. Extended media coverage can, however, attract strong public concern and vice versa, amplifying the issue.

**Keywords:** media hype, issue amplification, risk communication, online interactivity

### **Introduction**

There is not enough media space for all the accidents or social events in our daily lives. Many social issues receive no print or online media attention. It is natural to expect that mega-stories such as the September 11 attacks, the 2011 Japan Earthquake, and international economic crises attract extended media coverage. However, some local issues highlighted by newspapers or online media quite often develop into news stories with nationwide interest. It is not unusual for a minor problem, once exposed to media, to trigger intense public concern far beyond its real impact. An unusually heightened level of media coverage is described as a media frenzy (Sabado, 1991) or

media storm (Boydston, 2014). Extended media coverage can attract strong public concern and vice versa; or, they work together to create a hoopla (Abbott, 2001). Individuals and organizations with a vested interest in an issue provide more information to the media; then the media is inclined to intensify their attention to the issue and widen their focus on similar issues.

The idea of media as information providers and agenda-setters is hardly new. Focused media coverage can have a strong impact on public awareness and reaction to social issues by transmitting and sharing information about them. However, it is not easy to find empirical analyses for explaining interactivities of the media and the public in the process of making a hype. This chapter reviews the role of online media and newspapers in communicating and shaping social issues by applying the 'media hype' conceptual framework (Vasterman, 2005) to an environmental controversy over a tunnel construction for a high-speed railway project in Seoul, South Korea (hereafter Korea). It is not intended to answer the basic question of whether mass media make public agenda or policy change, but rather explores the interactive dynamics of mass media and the public converging on the environmental risk issue under a special communication environment in which the issue was hyped by media and amplified by the public. This chapter examines not-fully-answered questions in risk communication; specifically, how does a risk issue develop into a hype? How does mass media work in a dynamic process of amplifying social attention to the issue? The answers to these research questions are elaborated by using time-series data from reply comments or talkbacks attached to major newspaper articles and messages uploaded onto websites of public and non-profit agencies in Korea.

## **Theoretical background**

This chapter is based on two theoretical components, media hype and social issue amplification, to understand the dynamics of social issue evolution in the internet environment. The former highlights the role of media in communicating and transmitting information about a key event to the general public. In particular, media hype underlines media's active role in defining and constructing social problems. The latter focuses on the process of amplifying social issues as the public and social stations' interact with each other leading to intensive attention and concern for them. However, neither the media alone, nor the public by themselves can cause any social issue to develop into a 'storm'.

The role of the media is increasingly influential in the public agenda-setting process because most of our understanding and knowledge about social issues or public problems comes not from direct personal experience, but from diverse online and traditional media. Existing research shows that the effects of media as information providers and agenda-setters are minimal for those social issues that individuals have direct experience of. However, they have a significant effect on issues that people have no knowledge of or experience only indirectly, because the public has a need for information and orientation in this regard. The media is more influential on those who perceive an issue as personally relevant or interesting (Thomson & Dininni, 2005). This means that mass media do not simply disseminate information and cover the reality as it is; rather, they add additional meanings to information or create a story acting as a 'meaning-making institution' (Finlay & Faulkner, 2005). In particular, extended and focused media coverage not only attracts strong public attention, but also leads to amplified social concern over the issue in question (Chung, 2011; Kapserson, 1988; Vasterman, 2005). There is a positive feedback loop, or a reinforcing relation between mass media and the public in producing an unusually heightened level of media coverage and social attention.

With regard to risk communication, in particular, the existing research has focused on mass media as a contributing factor in amplifying risk (Bakir, 2005; Eldridge et al., 2003; Flynn et al., 1998, 2001; Susarl, 2003). According to survey results by Frewer et al. (2002) for genetically modified (GM) food in United Kingdom, people's risk perception was significantly influenced by the volume and the content of media reporting. Risk perception associated with GM foods was amplified as reporting levels reached the highest level. In particular, a novel hazard with limited information tends to influence public perception through the risk amplification process, more than an established hazard that people are already exposed to or familiar with. Diminished media coverage was followed by a lower level of risk perception with regard to GM foods. Public perception of 'unfriendly' places like nuclear facilities is intensified by media reports on accidents. People's negative perceptions, avoidance behaviour, and distrust of the facility's management lower property values near the facility site (Flynn et al., 1998, 2001). In addition to newspapers (Murdock et al., 2003) and broadcast media (Bakir, 2005), dramatized portrayals of risks and disasters in movies and television shows have an influence on public awareness and perceptions about risks (Bahk et al., 2000; Leiserowitz, 2004).

In the internet environment, where the volume and the scope of risk messages are much larger than in the traditional media, a small number

of active message writers, even one-person web campaigns, can effectively mobilize public attention for a risk (Rodrigue, 2001; Krinsky, 2007). Due to its universal accessibility and interactive openness, talkbacks and comments on media messages provide a large public space for active participation, which can lead to policy changes as a result of issue amplification (Chung, 2011). However, empirical examination of risk amplification is rare because it is not easy to predict whether a risk event triggers amplification or not, and because planned data collection assessing risk perception is difficult without prior knowledge of the risk event (Frewer, Miles & Marsh, 2002: 701). In particular, it is very difficult to analyse the process of risk amplification and changes in risk perception because risk events, media attention, and risk perception interact with each other contemporaneously.

As the media dependency model underlines the interrelation between the media and the public (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), it is hardly surprising that most of our knowledge and information is acquired through mass media. Mass media as information providers or transmitters not only cover or report the real world as objective incidents, but also create or make social issues as subjective construction. Journalism's self-interest and professional practice in the business area could result in disproportional coverage of a certain issue. Vasterman (2005a) reviews a series of acts of senseless violence through an analytical lens of media hype, which is defined as a self-reinforcing process of media in reporting a specific event. Abnormal news waves caused by media hype contradicts the assumption that the amount of media coverage indicates the importance of a social issue (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995: 389).

A media-generated news wave, or self-inflating media coverage, can attract intensive public attention and have a significant influence on the agenda-setting process. Furthermore, policymakers who, influenced by media hype, take hasty actions could find that their policies are built on quicksand (Vasterman, 2005a: 510). However, other studies show that media hypes have limited and diffuse impact on the process. Media hypes gain minimal, if any, political influence insofar as they are used strategically by politicians to forward their agenda (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009). Based on five case studies, Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008: 254) argue that they could not find any convincing evidence that media hypes cause political action at the national level. Media hypes were most politically significant in providing political actors with windows of opportunity to present themselves and their policies. Instead, the media function like a lighthouse, shedding light on existing political activities (Ibid: 255).

## Key event

The national project to build a tunnel through Mt. Cheonseong began in 2002 and was completed in 2010. The 13.3 km-long tunnel carries the high-speed railway that links Seoul, the capital city, and Busan, the second largest city on Korea's southeastern coast. The project was interrupted at least four times by environmental groups asserting that the construction and the high-speed train would harm the mountain ecosystem, including thirty endangered species. In particular, an active environmentalist, a Buddhist nun named 'Jiyul', argued that the project posed a threat to the salamander habitat as it would result in the marshes on the mountain drying up. She participated in four hunger strikes since the tunnel construction began in June 2002. Environmentalists' activities, such as a class action suit on behalf of the salamander, candlelight vigils, marathon prayers, and petitions against the construction not only delayed the project, but also led to serious socio-political conflicts between government authorities and social groups over the environmental impact and risks of the project. According to a report from the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a socio-economic cost of over two billion dollars was incurred as a result of the project delay.<sup>2</sup>

The tunnel construction was a key event that received intense media attention leading to an unusual wave of news within a short period. In particular, the suspension and subsequent resumption of construction triggered an escalated media report on possible environmental risk and counter arguments, and fuelled public concern and social conflict, which, in turn, fed media coverage. In this reinforcing process, online and offline media played critical roles in inducing the upward spiral of media attention for the key event. A series of increasing media hypes showed the amplification process of risk issues. Contrary to assessments by government authorities and experts, the environmental risk from the construction was exaggerated, and became a particular focus of public concern that caused diverse secondary social, political, and economic consequences (Chung, 2011; Kaspersen et al., 2000: 235). The Supreme Court finally rejected the environmentalists' appeal in June 2006.

## Research data

Research data were collected from the online edition of *Chosun Daily*, a major newspaper with the largest daily circulation of over 2.3 million,<sup>3</sup> and online message boards of public and non-profit organizations' websites, such as the President's Office, Ministry of Environment, Green Korea United, and



Organizations	Observations (January 1, 2003-June 30, 2005)	
	Chosun Daily	3,319 comments
Office of the President	27,141 visits	(567 posts)
Green Korea United	5,842 visits	(84 posts)
Buddhist Environmental Solidarity	21,747 visits	(334 posts)
Ministry of Environment	5,119 visits	(83 posts)

Table 9.1. Data collected from online media and websites\*

\*The website addresses of the organizations from which data were collected are: [www.chosun.com](http://www.chosun.com) (*Chosun Daily*); [www.president.go.kr](http://www.president.go.kr) (President's Office); [www.greenkorea.org](http://www.greenkorea.org) (Green Korea United); [www.budaeco.org](http://www.budaeco.org) (Buddhist Environmental Solidarity); and [www.me.go.kr](http://www.me.go.kr) (Ministry of Environment), respectively.

Buddhist Environmental Solidarity (Budaeco), which were related to the tunnel construction and its environmental impact (Table 9.1). Green Korea United is the largest non-profit organization in the country engaged in environmental protection. Buddhist Environmental Solidarity is a religious organization supporting environmental activists. Newspaper readers' opinions, uploaded to online newspaper articles, and visitors' comments posted on the message boards of government agencies and non-profit organizations, were collected in order to review the amplification process of social attention for the project. An analytical focus is placed on the total numbers of 1) comments or talkbacks attached to newspaper articles; and 2) visits to or clicks on message posts on the websites of public or non-profit organizations, rather than those of newspaper articles and message board posts. While newspaper articles and message posts are influenced by newspaper editors and a limited number of active post-uploaders, readers' comments and post visits are assumed to represent society-wide attention or public concern for the issue.<sup>4</sup>

### Public attention for the tunnel project

The social attention for the project or the public concern about the risks involved with the tunnel construction, as measured by newspaper readers' comments and citizens' visits to website posts, shows an amplifying pattern over the observation period. The total number of newspaper articles and website posts, when aggregated monthly, shows a similar intensifying trend (Figure 9.1). It shows a strong correlation ( $\rho = .97, p < .0001$ ). This research covers the time frame from 1 January 2003 to 30 June 2005.

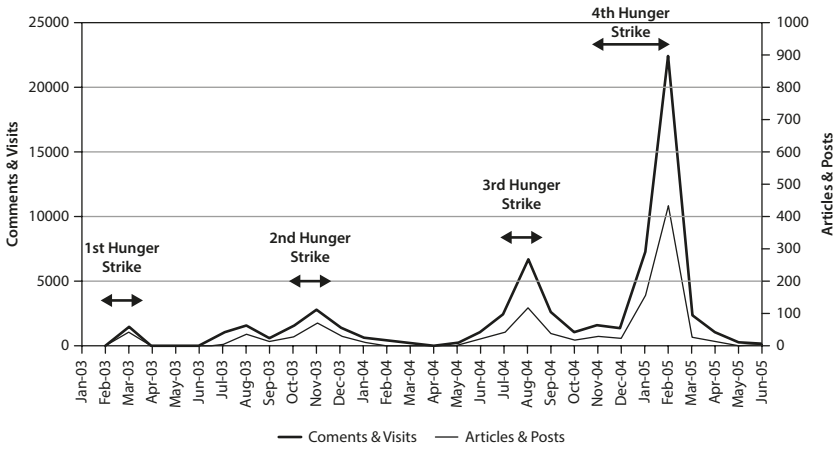


Figure 9.1. Amplification of Public Attention\*

\* The figure was modified from the original version (Chung, 2011: 1888).

Environmentalists' voices against the tunnel construction have been heard since the project was initiated in 1992. However, they were unable to attract public attention until, in particular, the previously mentioned environmental campaigner Jiyul embarked on active anti-construction activities, including hunger strikes in early 2003. Her hunger strikes triggered and intensified public concern about the issue over the period. Indeed, the highest level of each attention wave corresponded with a hunger strike. The last and the longest 100-day hunger strike, from December 2004 to February 2005, induced the largest volume of newspaper articles, opinions, message board posts, and website visits. After this period, the numbers declined rapidly; that is, the public attention and the social concern about environmental risks faded.

### Interactivities of mass media and the public<sup>5</sup>

Public attention measured at each social station, or online newspaper and website of individual organizations shows a distinctive pattern, different from the overall amplifying process of aggregated public attention. In order to compare public attention to each station, the number of readers' comments on newspaper articles and the number of visits to each organization's website were standardized into z-scores (Figure 9.2).

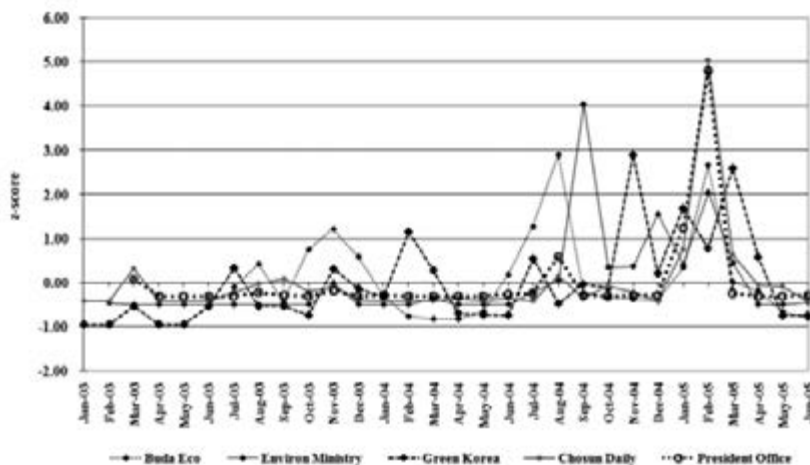


Figure 9.2. Public attention for individual social stations\*

\*The original version of this figure appears in Chung (2011: 1890).

In early 2003, the public paid limited attention to the tunnel construction project. The Buddhist organization, Budaeco played a watchdog role in terms of protecting the environment near the construction area. As a local and religious organization, Budaeco kept working with major actors against the project.<sup>6</sup> Its website reflected the activities as well as voices of environmentalists. For example, a minor surge of online visitors' concerns appeared on the website in August 2003 when Jiyul and other activists began an action campaign against the construction. The initial attention seen at Budaeco was followed by waves of public attention with increasing intensity. The public attention on Budaeco's website preceded that seen later on the website of the Ministry of Environment. Budaeco achieved its highest level of public attention during Jiyul's third hunger strike in August 2004. This, in turn, induced intense attention for the Ministry's website in September 2004. However, at this stage, the tunnel had still not fully developed into a national issue. Once Budaeco initiated and amplified public attention in this early period, the level of public attention for its own website began to dwindle. This implies that the website worked as a trigger, raising extended social attention and provoking government action to protect the environment.

As mentioned, the public attention for the Budaeco website shifted to the website of Korea's Ministry of Environment. The number of visits to the Ministry's website reached its highest level in September 2004 when the Ministry was preparing the final Environmental Impact Assessment

report on the construction. A surge of website visits represented a strong message, asking the administration responsible to preserve the mountain's ecosystem. Just after the Ministry's official announcement that the tunnel would not have a serious impact on the ecosystem, environmentalists, including Jiyul, began a fourth hunger strike in October 2004.

Dissatisfied with the Ministry's formal stance on the tunnel construction, the public no longer relied on the Ministry to stop the project and protect the ecosystem. Instead, Green Korea United, a nationwide non-profit organization with the largest membership in the country, took over an active role, leading activities against the construction. The number of opinion posts and the number of visits to posts on Green Korea's website reached a peak in November 2004. The appearance of a leading environmental organization in the public discussion arena and the convergence of public attention on its website signified a significant change in the risk communication about the tunnel construction. It represented not only a reaction against the Ministry's final decision, but society-wide concern for and pressure against the project.

As the level of public attention for Green Korean increased, as measured by an increase in the number of visitors to its website, and as Jiyul's fourth hunger strike approached 100 days, the number of newspaper articles and comments in response to them also increased rapidly. The peak of public concern on Green Korean's website was followed by highly amplified public attention for the online newspaper, *Chosun Daily*. Jiyul's prolonged hunger strike induced nationwide concern and diverse activities such as candlelight vigils, religious prayers, resolutions by legislators, and, indeed, hunger strikes by other organizations' members. These activities resulted in social attention reaching its highest level on February 2005. Highly amplified public attention for *Chosun Daily* reflected a society-wide sense of urgency. The volume and the content of comments in response to news articles pressured the president to stop Jiyul's fast-to-death behaviour. The pattern of attention amplification on the President's Office website was clearly matched by that on *Chosun Daily*.

Public attention measured on each station's website showed different patterns in terms of time and intensity. Budaeco and Green Korea United had attracted social attention since the early period. In particular, the public attention for Budaeco reached its highest level earlier than the others, in August 2004. Public attention for *Chosun Daily* and the President's Office remained at lower levels throughout most of the period, until February 2005, and then rapidly increased to the highest level of all organizations reviewed in this study. The temporal sequence of the peak of attention for

each station was Budaeco in August 2004; the Ministry of Environment in September 2004; Green Korea United in November 2004; and *Chosun Daily* and the President's Office in February 2005. In contrast to an amplifying process, the social attention for Budaeco, Ministry of Environment, and Green Korea United showed a pattern of ascending impulse waves followed by descending ones.

### **Analytic framework for media hype**

This study applies the analytical framework for media hype to those periods in which the level of public attention is relatively high or amplified, as measured by the number of newspaper readers' comments and number of visits to websites. The framework is partially modified from the existing one as suggested by Vasterman (2005: 522) and the categories have been rearranged in consideration of the research focus of this study. The early framework was intended for generic research on communication; in particular, the media's role in self-reinforcing the process of news production. This means that it is not entirely suited to analysing the interactivities between mass media or online newspapers and the public's response, in the form of news messages regarding risk issues.

The major components or categories of media hype remain unchanged; however, the orders of sub-categories have been adjusted. News articles are classified into two main categories: incident-related news and thematically related news. The first category covers factual reports about actual events, i.e. the key event and similar events. Items included in the 'similar incidents' sub-category are simplified into 'related incidents'. The second category comprises news articles that are thematically related to the key issue or similar incidents. Thematically related news is sub-categorized into source-generated and media-generated reports. The order of sub-categories under 'thematically related news' was transposed.

The sequential location of sub-categories from left to right is: key event; similar incidents; source-generated news; and media-generated news. The last sub-category includes items that are not based on the real event or incidents, but on issues generated or made by media. In addition to rearranging sub-categories, classifications and examples under sub-categories were modified or added to meet the research purpose of this study. In order to reflect public agencies' activities in relation to the risk issue, for example, government policy changes are included in the 'source-generated' sub-category under 'thematically related news'.

### Analysis of media hype

During the research observation period from January 2003 to June 2005, as plotted in Figure 9.1, there were four times when the level of public attention was relatively high; that is, the public concern about the tunnel construction project was amplified four times, as measured by the number of newspaper readers' comments and people's visits to websites. The analytical lens for media hype is applied to three of these four peaks in the public attention during which the online newspaper, *Chosun Daily*, intensively covered the issue. One major characteristic of a media hype is 'intense media coverage' of a specific issue (Vasterman, 2005). However, the concept of 'intense coverage' is so relative and subjective that it is not easy for analysts to make a clear decision on the level of coverage intensity (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009: 190). This research analysed those months yielding ten or more news articles. In this case, there were three hypes in the news coverage: March 2003, August 2004, and January and February 2005.

Of 158 newspaper articles with 3,319 readers' comments, collected to analyse the amplifying process of public attention for the tunnel project, a total of ninety-seven articles with 2,198 comments falls into three hypes: twenty-one articles with 202 comments in March 2003; twelve with 154 in August 2004; and 64 with 1,842 in January and February 2005 (Table 9.2). All articles included in these three hypes were read by three reviewers<sup>7</sup> to classify them into the categories explained in Figure 9.2. Of the twenty-one articles in the first hype, two articles are classified as 'incident-related news' and nineteen articles as 'thematically related news'. The second hype includes twelve articles, of which one is incident-related and eleven articles are thematically related. The third hype with the largest number of observations comprises three incident-related news articles and sixty-one items of thematically related news. During all three hype periods, thematically related news heavily outnumber incident-related news. More

	<b>March 2003</b>	<b>August 2004</b>	<b>Jan. &amp; Feb. 2005</b>	<b>Total</b>
	Articles / Comments	Articles / Comments	Articles / Comments	
Incident-related News	2 (9.5%) / 18 (8.9%)	1 (8.3%) / 13 (8.4%)	3 (4.7%) / 3 (0.2%)	6 / 34
Thematically related News	19 (90.5%) / 184 (91.1%)	11 (91.7%) / 141 (91.6%)	61 (95.3%) / 1,839 (99.8%)	91 / 2,164
Source-generated news	15 (78.9%) / 56 (30.4%)	4 (36.4%) / 38 (27.0%)	15 (24.6%) / 321 (17.5%)	34 / 415
Media-generated news	4 (21.1%) / 128 (69.6%)	7 (63.6%) / 103 (73.0%)	46 (75.4%) / 1,518 (82.5%)	57 / 1,749
<b>Total</b>	<b>21 / 202</b>	<b>12 / 154</b>	<b>64 / 1,842</b>	<b>97 / 2,198</b>

Table 9.2. Media hypes and issue amplification

than ninety-three per cent of news articles are classified as 'thematically related news' in all periods.

As the number of news articles in each hype fluctuated over time, so do the numbers for incident-related news and thematically related news. Moreover, the predominance of 'thematically related news' was also intensified throughout the period. The proportions of 'thematically related news' for the three identified hypes are: 90.5%; 91.7%; and 95.3%, respectively. As expected, the proportion of 'incident-related news' declines continuously from 9.5% to 8.3% and then to 4.7%. Within 'thematically related news', in particular, the proportion of 'source-generated news' rapidly decreases over the period. On the other hand, the proportion of 'media-generated news' shows a steady increase from 21.1% in the first hype to 63.6% in the second and 75.4% in the last.

### Public response to media hype

In comparison with media hype as measured by the number of news articles, the number of comments on or replies to news articles as an indication of public response shows a different distribution across the categories. Of 2,198 comments attached to ninety-seven news articles in three hypes, a total of thirty-four comments (1.5%) was uploaded to six incident-related news articles and the remaining 2,164 comments (98.5%) are attached to ninety-one thematically related news items. The proportion of comments to thematically related news (98.5%) is higher than those for news articles (93.8%). During the third hype, in particular, the proportion of comments assigned to thematically related news (99.8%) is much higher than those posted in response to news articles (95.3%).

The disproportional distribution of comments becomes intensified for the sub-categories under 'thematically related news'. While the proportions of 'source-generated news' in three hypes are 78.9%, 36.4%, and 24.6%, respectively, those of comments uploaded to the news articles are 30.4%, 27% and 17.5%, respectively. For 'media-generated news, the proportion of news articles increase from 21.1% to 63.6% and 75.4%; and in terms of comments on these articles it starts at 69.6% in the first hype and reaches 82.5% in the third hype.

## Discussions and conclusion

Online newspaper and the website message boards of social organizations work as an open arena for risk communication. The internet provides social stations and the public with an efficient means of information sharing and public participation. Without the internet, it is difficult for the public to recognize a risk issue and to express their opinion on it (and in general). Interactions between social stations clearly demonstrated a process of amplifying public attention for the environmental risks related to construction of the tunnel. The peak level of public attention for social stations differed. A growing surge of public concern moved consecutively from Budaeco, the Ministry of Environment, Green Korea, *Chosun Daily*, and the President's Office. The sequential order of attention waves implied ripple effects of the amplification process in which public attention spread out, having a wide impact on society, beyond that of the key event. The online newspaper played the role of a conduit in this process, connecting society-wide attention represented by Green Korea to the political agenda, represented in this case by the President. It also worked as an opinion reservoir, open for public participation through online comments or talkbacks. Mass media, specifically online newspapers in this study, must be a major social station in the issue amplification process, as emphasized by Kasperson (2000). However, in this case, the analytical framework of risk amplification could not fully explain the specific functions or activities of mass media in the amplification process.

How do online newspapers, more than just a conduit or a reservoir, make and shape issue waves? The research framework of media hype (Vasterman, 2005a) sheds light on this question. According to analyses of three consecutive hypes, not only the number but also the proportion of 'thematically related news' dominated those of 'incident-related news'. As the level of social attention increases or is amplified, the dominance of the former becomes more obvious. In the 'thematically related news' category, in particular, both the number and the proportion of 'media-generated news' increased rapidly, while 'source-generated news' decreased throughout the three hypes. This reconfirms that the media has a strong influence in terms of describing the reality of an issue and transmitting information about it by 'creating stories'.

An academic reason for studying 'media hype' is based on a familiar expectation that a media-generated news wave, or self-inflating media coverage, can attract intensive public attention. This can distort our perception of reality and go against the correspondence assumption (Kepplinger



& Habermeier, 1995). The research outcome in this chapter shows that the proportions of newspapers are different from those of comments attached to them throughout the three hypes. The proportion of comments on thematically related news is much higher than those for news articles. In particular, the disproportional distribution of comments becomes even more intensified for the 'thematically related news' sub-categories. This means that more public attention or reaction converges on 'media-generated news' than on 'incident-based news'. Media hypes that are generated from self-inflating or self-referential news coverage could be accelerated by positive feedback loops underlying interactivities between mass media and the public. Higher media coverage leads to intense public attention; at the same time, focused public attention induces strong media attention with a larger volume of news articles.

A longitudinal comparison of three media hypes using data from newspapers, website posts and online comments provided an empirical background for explaining the dynamics of media hype. The analytical focus of this chapter on interactivities of the media and the public could add extra findings to the existing media hype research, which emphasizes a self-reinforcing process of media coverage. In an online communication environment, in particular, the public attention for or reaction to media hype must be a critical factor in explaining the how a media hype starts and what the process of media hype is. The case reviewed in this chapter is in a specific part of the world with its own socio-cultural characteristics. These research findings have limitations in terms of being able to be generalized to other places and cases. However, a review of media hype through the interactive dynamics of the media and the public are certainly applicable as an empirical back-up to future research.

## Notes

1. According to the social amplification of risk framework, amplification stations can include scientists, individuals, social groups, institutions, the mass media, politicians, public agencies, and opinion leaders that generate and transmit risk information via communications channels (Kasperson et al., 2000).
2. Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry published a report titled 'Evaluation of National Project Failed or Delayed' on May 2005.
3. For a newspaper article to be selected for this research, at least two of the three search terms or Mt. Cheonseong, Jiyul and high-speed railway should appear in its title or story. Of 166 articles that satisfied this search criterion,

- 158 articles were selected, and comments attached to them were reviewed. The same process was applied to selecting stories from online message boards on the websites of public and non-profit organizations.
4. Another reason to count the number of opinions, instead of visitors, to newspaper articles is that the number of visitors clicking each article is not available from the newspaper company. An interview with an editorial board member of the newspaper revealed that the total number of people visiting the newspaper remains consistent everyday, unless special issues or accidents take place that attract extra public attention. Thus, the number of newspaper readers' opinions attached to individual articles is assumed to be indicative of the level of public attention for an issue.
  5. Chung (2011) provides an empirical analysis of interactivities among social stations in detail.
  6. Budaeco began its website service in July 2003. Data about website messages before this service was established is not available.
  7. Three reviewers were the author of this paper and two doctoral students whose academic major was in public policy analysis, and who understood the research purpose and the theme of this study. The Inter-coder test results supported their categorization works with Average pairwise per cent agreement: 94.25%; Krippendorff's Alpha, 0.912; and Fleiss' Kapp, 0.913.

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## About the author

**IkJae Chung** is Professor at the Department of Public Administration, Seoul National University of Science and Technology and Research Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration and Policy, Rockefeller College, State University of New York at Albany. He is also Director of the East Asia Program, Center for Policy Research, Rockefeller College, State University of New York at Albany.



## 10. Why and how media storms affect front-line workers

Scandalized Danish crèches as an example.

*Pernille Carlsson and Christian Elmelund-Præstekær*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

Although media scholars often claim that news coverage impacts perceptions, and scholars of public administration stress the importance of public agencies' image in case of media storms, no one has studied if and how such storms affect public bureaucracy or, more specifically, front-line workers. We fill this lacuna by reviewing theoretical arguments for why and how media storms might be consequential at the street level of public services. We complement the arguments with an empirical illustration examining how the experience of pre-school teachers increased cross-cutting pressures in the aftermath of a media storm about the quality of Danish crèches. In sum, we argue that scholars of media effects and public administration will benefit from bridging the divide between the two disciplines.

**Keywords:** front-line workers, media storm, media effects

### Introduction

Modern democracies are mediatized, which means that societal actors have adopted the media's logic and that communicative considerations are an integrated part of politics (Hjarvard, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). Consequently, a vast number of approaches has been employed in the study of media effects (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011); but while many studies analyse direct and conditioned effects on public opinion and policymaking (Potter, 2013; Vliegthart & Walgrave,

2011; Weaver et al., 2004), we know very little about the media's possible effects on the implementation of public policy. This lacuna is surprising given the classical argument that street-level bureaucrats are the ultimate policymakers (Lipsky, 1980): if the media prompts bureaucrats and front-line workers to act differently than they would otherwise have done – which, we argue, is a likely scenario – the media have uncharted societal consequences.

There is no doubt that the public administration has been mediatized over the past decades. Ample scholarly evidence illuminates the ways in which public institutions have adapted to the media's logic in order to brand themselves, set the public agenda, or execute effective crisis communication (Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). Other strains of the literature investigate how public agencies – and individual employees at various levels in these organizations – exercise a range of blame avoidance strategies to protect their organizational reputation in times of intense negative media coverage (e.g. Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Hood, 2010). This wealth of studies investigates the relation between public administration and the media, but most scholars study how public agencies can utilize the media or affect media content to ensure certain organizational goals. We know surprisingly little about the reverse relationship, i.e. how (critical) media coverage affects public agencies, their procedures, and their employees (for a rare exception see Wilmar et al., 2014).

In this chapter, we take the latter approach and discuss how and why media storms might affect the work-life of front-line workers. Evidence holds that media storms affect mass political behaviour (Trumbo, 2012) and, to some degree, public policymaking; but, at the same time, it is suggested that such storms 'affect decisions or procedures in the (local) bureaucracy [but] the question of any possible effects on the administrative level [is left] open to future studies' (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008: 250).

Despite the fact that scholars of political communication predominantly study media effects at the mass and (political) elite level, it is highly plausible that the media is also influential at the street level of public administration. Unlike elected politicians, front-line workers have scarce resources and little experience with the media scrutiny of their work (Hood, 2010: 31). Moreover, existing studies find 'remarkably strong emotional and social effects of negative press reports on the subjects of such articles' (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007: 352; see also Wilmar et al., 2014), so, even though individual public employees might not be criticized in the news, one might suspect that critical media coverage of their work and/or institution affects them negatively.

We believe that both the public administration literature and the field of political communication can benefit from joining theoretical and empirical forces. The two have developed in isolation (Korthagen & Klijn, 2014), but by combining them it will be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that shape public service delivery as well as a deeper understanding of the media's societal role. Apart from providing a general argument as to *why* media storms might be influential at the street level (section 1), we also theoretically discuss *how* media coverage more precisely is expected to affect front-line workers (section 2). In addition, we provide an empirical illustration of our theoretical arguments as we explore whether a media storm about Danish crèches affected pre-school teachers working there and, if so, how (section 3). Following our theoretical propositions, we study pre-school teachers' individual thoughts about the media storm and we explore the relation between the pre-school teachers and a) intermediate management and b) parents. In the final section (4), we conclude the analysis and consider the future promise of a happy marriage between political communication and public administration.

### Why would media storms affect front-line workers?

Defined broadly as 'an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (event or issue) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time' (Boydston et al., 2014: 6), a media storm has the potential to blow over all kinds of societal issues; not only in relation to e.g. public crisis management in natural disasters like the Hurricane Katrina, but also in relation to man-made scandal like political and administrative power abuse, and self-referential media coverage without an underlying real-world problem. Common to the various types of storms is that they often relate to the *implementation*, rather than the *formulation* of public policy because they are triggered by concrete problems or discoveries – not by governments promoting a legislative bill or a political solution to an abstract societal problem. In effect, media storms often focus on alleged implementation failures, e.g. the police's failure to combat street crime (Vasterman, 2005) or carers' failure to take care of the elderly (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008). The focus on implementation failure might be one reason why existing studies do not find policy effects of the analysed media storms: in their study of five media storms about the quality of Danish public care of the elderly, Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008: 262), for instance, conclude that the storms 'did not bring about new policies, increases of budgets, dismissal



of ministers, changing laws or other types of regulations'. Opposition MPs might ask questions to the responsible minister and the government might order reports and evaluations, but such activities remain symbolic. In general, an absence of effects on policymaking is not surprising if storms pinpoint problems in the implementation of a given public policy: why should politicians alter (national) legislation if a problem arises from (local) implementation errors? In such cases, it is more likely that possible effects of media storms are to be found at the street level. We now consider in more detail just *how* a media storm can be expected to affect front-line workers.

### **How could media storms affect front-line workers?**

Policy implementation is a complex phenomenon shaped by multiple and rather diverse factors. In an effort to synthesize an overall, integrated model, Winter (1994) highlights six major factors: 1) policy design; 2) implementing organization; 3) management; 4) target group; 5) individual discretion on behalf of the street-level bureaucrats; and 6) external environment. In our theoretical model, we do not include the first two factors as they are considered constants during a specific media storm. Below, we will discuss the latter four factors.

According to Lipsky (1980: 3), street-level bureaucrats (or front-line workers) are 'public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their job, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work'. Such workers are situated at the bottom of a hierarchical system, ultimately controlled by publicly elected officials. Moreover, they have limited resources at their disposal and these characteristics induce cross-cutting pressure because higher echelons in the organization may demand different, better and more services, which cannot always be realized with the resources allocated. This pressure is known to induce a sense of inadequacy at the street level, and it is a potential trigger of work-related stress for the individual worker (Kaufmann & Kaufmann, 2008). Not only do front-line workers have political principals and intermediate managers, they also face the target group on a daily basis – and this group is as likely as their superiors to demand more and better service (Lipsky, 1980), which only increases the pressure.

The cross-cutting pressure on the individual front-line worker is likely to increase when the organization or services is intensively discussed in the mass media. The reason is straightforward; mass media attention is guided by problems, conflicts, misconduct, and scandals (e.g. Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Consequently, public service institutions and agents are predominantly in

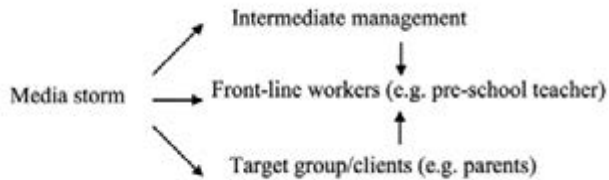


Figure 10.1. A simple model of how a media storm affects front-line workers

the spotlight when something is wrong and needs to be fixed – and such a fix most likely involves more, better, or at least different efforts on behalf of the front-line worker. The negativity bias of the media is empirically substantiated by a study of the framing of public organizations in Swedish and Australian media, which found ‘more negative than positive news stories and [that] the negative stories tend to stick, for instance by sparking off numerous follow-up stories’ (Schillemans & Jacobs, 2014: 152). Moreover, positive – or more precisely, neutral – news was predominantly routine news about planned events or official statistical information promoted by public agencies themselves and not by journalists.

Given this background, we suggest that the cross-cutting pressure increases in the wake of a media storm. To develop a deeper understanding of this interaction, we aim to figure out exactly why the pressure intensifies. Events in the environment need to be adopted by actors in the implementation system and drawing on the above cited works, Figure 10.1 provides a simplistic illustration of how the different actors potentially respond to the environment (i.e. a media storm) and induce pressure on the front-line worker. First, the media storm might affect the worker directly. Second and third, the media storm may affect the worker indirectly by prompting either the managers or the target group to demand more or better efforts. We discuss each of the three possibilities in greater detail below.

### Does a media storm affect the front-line workers directly?

A classical argument is that cross-cutting pressures and diverging expectations prompt front-line workers to activate coping strategies. The list of such strategies is long and includes, e.g. limitation of service demand, creaming, standardization, and goal displacement. These expectations derive from rationalistic assumptions about human nature and can be summed up in two overall strategies, i.e. shirking and sabotage (Brehm & Gates, 1997).

The underlying rationalistic concept of personal interest does not capture, however, the entirety of interest guiding workers at the street level in the public sector. Brehm & Gates (1997) argue that front-line workers are not solely driven by higher salaries and less work, but also by functional and solidary interests. The functional interest is proven to be particularly strong, and it prompts the individual to *work* rather than *shirk*, because the nature and content of the job represents an intrinsic value. The social interest arises because one's efforts at the job provide social acceptance and a collegial community. In sum, the complex interest configuration may prompt front-line workers to rethink their work in order to optimize performance when a media critically assesses the state of their field of work. In short, we expect that:

E1: Front-line workers experience increased cross-cutting pressure during a media storm in their field, because the storm conflicts with their functional and solidary interests

### **Does a media storm affect the front-line worker indirectly through managers?**

It is well-established that the large degree of professional discretion makes front-line workers difficult to lead – managers simply do not know exactly what problems and solutions exist, nor do they know how the subordinates behave (May & Winter, 2009; Riccucci, 2005; Sandfort, 2000). Brehm & Gates (1997: 27) conclude that management has little effect on the managed, and that 'effective supervision depends on the characteristics of subordinates, not on the characteristics of their supervision'. Thus, front-line works may (only) be led when instructions resonate with the functional and solidary interests of the workers themselves. On this basis, we do not expect that intermediate management increases the cross-cutting pressure on the front-line workers during a media storm. Our second expectation thus reads:

E2: Front-line workers do not experience an increased demand on behalf of managers during a media storm in their field

### **Does a media storm affect the front-line worker indirectly through the target group?**

Finally, our model suggests that a media storm may affect the front-line worker indirectly through the target group. Studies indicate that the target

group is capable of affecting public service employees, e.g. by asking critical questions in the course of the everyday interaction (Nielsen, 2006). This interaction is moderated by the frequency of interaction and the resources of the target group (Nielsen, 2002). First, since frequent interaction decreases the information asymmetry – the target groups simply have more insight into the working of front-line workers – it increases the chances to open a dialogue between the two. Second, it takes resources, i.e. time, engagement, and a minimum of knowledge about the public service in question, to confront professional front-line workers. On this basis, our final expectation reads:

E3: Front-line workers experience increased cross-cutting pressure during a media storm in their field because the target group criticizes the status quo

### An empirical illustration

To empirically illustrate the viability of our central argument, we conduct a case study of a media storm about the quality of Danish crèches (*vuggestuer*). Almost ninety per cent of Danish children are enrolled in crèches at the age of one year ([www.dst.dk](http://www.dst.dk)). At the age of three years, the children move to kindergartens (*børnehave*) where pre-school education is continued until primary school begins at the age of six. All these institutions are public, and the few private ones rely on public subsidies.

### The case

The media storm was triggered by one of the major newspapers, *Berlingske*. A journalist quoted PhD student Ole Henrik Hansen in a print article on 29 April 2012. The quote was from his speech at a major convention for pedagogical professionals, where he presented preliminary conclusions of his research. Ole Henrik Hansen accused Danish crèches of being ‘free marijuana and complimentary drinking-chocolate institutions’ where children are left to themselves in ‘loveless storage’. He criticized the pre-school teachers of confusing the concept of ‘free play’ with absence of adults and structured daily activities. To demonstrate the point, *Berlingske* mentioned a video clip that later the same day was aired by the national television news broadcaster *TV2*. In the video, a fourteen-month-old boy picks up a bus from the toy box and hides behind an adult to escape a bus theft about to be committed by an older boy. Then, another child starts crying and the small boy moves in

front of the adult – according to Ole Henrik Hansen he tries to say, ‘I know you need to go but will you please protect me and my bus?’ Without looking at the boy, the adult pushes him aside and the older boy snatches the bus.

Ole Henrik Hansen argues that the biggest problem is that the boy does not react to the bus theft; he simply acknowledges the loss and leaves. The situation teaches the boy that he is the kind of guy that toys are taken from because he is not strong enough to protect it or able to attract the possible helper’s (the adult’s) attention. The result, according to Ole Henrik Hansen, is that children in similar situations shut down emotionally and that their brain development might be negatively affected. Moreover, Ole Henrik Hansen argues that better budgets will not solve the problem – it primarily has to do with the attitudes of the pre-school teachers that need to spend more time with the kids instead of gossiping with each other. Pre-school teachers also need to provide a structured environment in which the physically and psychically strong kids do not dominate the weaker.

After the trigger article in *Berlingske*, other media followed suit, and the next day Ole Henrik Hansen’s name appeared in more than 100 news products across the Danish media landscape. Thus, our case clearly has the characteristics of a media storm when defined as ‘an explosive increase in news coverage to a specific item (event or issue) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time’ (Boydston et al., 2014: 6).

## Data and method

We conducted seven qualitative interviews with pre-school teachers in seven crèches situated within Odense, a major Danish municipality. Since the data that triggered the media storm derives from Copenhagen, it is important for us to study the possible effects in a different city; thus, we are able to explore general effects in the entire pre-school sector and not merely local effects. Danish crèches are run by the municipalities and, consequently, management, organization, and economic viability vary across crèches in different municipalities. To eliminate possible effects of such non-media factors, we focus on one municipality only. Also, we chose a relatively large one to ensure a certain amount of within-case variation. In this regard, it is important that we include pre-school teachers from different crèches because the commitment of (and thus the pressure induced by) the parents may vary between crèches – parents in wealthy and well-educated areas of the city are likely to engage more in discussions about the pedagogical service than parents from areas with lower socio-economic status.

Interviewee	Age	Graduation year	Education	Size of institution*
PA	37	1999	BA in social education, language councilor, Diploma in social education	30 (0)
PB	53	1983	BA in social education	24 (23)
PC	40	2002	BA in social education	12 (59)
PD	57	1977	BA in social education	31 (55)
PE	43	1996	BA in social education	26 (0)
PF	59	1988	BA in social education	11 (42)
PG	57	1982	BA in social education, language councilor	22 (33)

Table 10.1. Overview of interviewees

\* Some child houses are so-called combined houses including both a crèche and a kindergarten. The size of the latter is indicated in parenthesis.

Since we are interested in learning about perceived cross-cutting pressures of the pre-school teachers, we opt for semi-structured qualitative interviews. This type of interviews allows us to a) focus on the specific aspects of everyday work-life that we consider important due to our theoretical discussion, and b) to explore aspects, thoughts, and feelings among the pre-school teachers that we did not consider a priori. Semi-structured interviews thus allow us to combine theory-driven expectations about *which* aspects of work-life are affected by a media storm and an explorative investigation of *how* these aspects are affected. To structure the interviews, we compiled an interview guide based on the theoretical discussion above. The interview guide as well as a full transcript (in Danish) of the interviews is available upon request.

The municipality of Odense is divided into four districts, and the city has a total of twenty-seven crèches. These twenty-seven crèches are umbrella organizations, and each of them consists of four to seven so-called child houses, which are the actual organizational unit to which children are admitted. To recruit interviewees, we established contact with leaders of several of the twenty-seven crèches, making sure that we included some from all four districts. We relied on those leaders to pick pre-school teachers employed in different child houses – we ensured that we did not talk to more than one person per house. We acknowledge that this procedure might induce a leadership bias, but we were not allowed to contact individual pre-school teachers directly. Moreover, we promised the interviewees anonymity to make sure that no one would worry about possible controversial

statements. We found that seven interviews provided a rich and saturated (Kvale, 2004: 109) empirical material and thus we did not go on to conduct any more. Table 10.1 provides an overview of the interviews conducted.

## Analysis

We began our interviews by asking general questions about the daily work in the crèches and especially about cross-cutting pressure and the degree of individual professional discretion felt by the pre-school teachers. We did so to get the conversation going and to establish a base line to which we can compare the special situation arising during the media storm. It is evident that our interviewees feel a large degree of professional discretion and that they are able to structure their work and prioritize between different goals – for example, one interviewee ‘can suggest activities myself – a trip out of the house, down in the basement for gym [...]. For example, we saw a course in baby signs. That could be amazing so we decided to enrol. When we came back we all agreed that we should do this and we’ve used it ever since’ (PA). However, the professional discretion operates within certain boundaries. Economic limitations and bureaucratic demands play a central role and prevent pre-school teachers from performing at their best. One states that demands ‘from above in terms of cutbacks [...] and more and more documentation [entail that] one does not have the opportunity to do the job as good as one would like’ (PB). Also, all interviewees mention the public awareness of their work, which reassures us that our theoretical model pinpoints the most central elements regarding the creation of cross-cutting pressures, namely, pre-school teachers’ professional ethos, their managers, and the parents.

When evaluating the possible impact of the media storm, a prerequisite is that our interviewees are aware of it. It is indeed the case. We asked an open question about whether they could think of something in their organizational environment or in the public debate that imposed special challenges on their ability to do their job as they would like. Four out of seven interviewees pointed to the media storm in question as such an event. We showed the storm’s trigger article to the remaining three, and they all immediately recalled the content of the storm: ‘I remember that story. Wasn’t it the one where some video showed that a pre-school teacher did not see a child?’ (PD). In conclusion, we suggest that the media storm was salient to all interviewees. We now turn to the central question; did the storm intensify pre-existing cross-cutting pressures and why did it possibly do so?

*Expectation 1: The media storm's direct impact on pre-school teachers.* We find empirical support for our expectation that the front-line works – in our case, pre-school teachers – experience increased cross-cutting pressure during the media storm because it conflicts with their functional and solidary interests.

Initially, one might conclude that the interviewees simply rejected the critical content of the media storm as several interviewees appeared rather confident in their daily practices. One said that, in her team, they said to one another that ‘we don’t take this one to the heart, right? Because we know that we do a great job’ (PG). But still, the same individual reports to be ‘hurt on my professionalism when I think I perform and work like a beast and the result is criticism [...] Then you get hurt – what is it they want?’ Such a statement shows that the media storm is not simply ignored – rather, it conflicts with the functional as well as the solidary preferences of the pre-school teacher: she displays doubt about which expectations she is supposed to meet while she intends to do her best. In the end, the media storm made her reflect over her practice: ‘of course some things also sank in. The thing he said about how we should organize better because we are merely firefighting and stuff. We reflected over that and said we must organize our work better and take a stand and be more aware of the way we do things’(PG). In fact, the media storm did not only prompt an intellectual reflection, but also actual action: ‘we tried to make a new structure in the house, but it didn’t work out. But [today] we are much more conscious and we plan our work. We didn’t do that so much before’ (PG). In sum, the evidence suggests that the pre-school teacher’s professional interest in doing a good job conflicts with the criticism levelled in the media storm.

The media storm had a similar constructive effect on several other interviewees. They describe the public debate as a positive and relevant contribution that provides an opportunity for reflection: ‘in some way or another I kind of like that somebody stirs things up a bit, asks questions and has focus on us. It makes me think as well; does he have a point? What is my stand in this regard? Is there anything I can do differently? We are captured by a zoom lens and thus one gets a sharper pair of glasses to look at one self in the company of the kids’ (PC). One of the other pre-school teachers said that ‘such episodes are actually great to watch’ (PF) because it makes certain issues salient; in particular, it prompted her to pay special attention to the less self-promoting children. This problem was related to the physical layout of the crèche and the demand for multiple rooms that allow pre-school teachers to split the children up into smaller groups. Inspired by the media storm, she even ‘had a male social-educator assistant, we had



at the time, to install a table in the bathroom so we could go out there and do something with the bigger kids and shield them in their play every now and then' (PF).

While several interviewees thus took action, and changed their practice or institution in order to achieve a better balance between their functional preference and reality, others guarded themselves by underlining that the problems pinpointed in the media storm were not apparent in their practice or institution. But still most of these interviewees acknowledged that the media storm 'definitely made us more aware of the benefit of smaller groups' (PE). One interviewee, however, seems rather unaffected: 'we are sure that all kids are seen, hugged and that everybody gets something from each of us. We don't feel affected by the media storm [...] This is because we work a lot with these issues [...] I can say that because we do a lot to make sure that the children come first' (PA). The media storm simply did not apply to her because the problems discussed in the storm were already solved or at least handled within her institution. We suggest that this particular interviewee did not react to the storm because it did not conflict with her functional preference. She happens to be the only interviewee who completed higher education (a social education degree), and we suggest that this may reinforce professional self-assurance and thus function as a shield against media storms – an issue we return to in the concluding section.

For now, our general conclusion is that the media storm increased the cross-cutting pressure imposed on the individual front-line worker, but it also made workers adjust their practice in a constructive way, guided by professional knowledge.

*Expectation 2: The media storm's indirect impact on pre-school teachers via management.* Our overall conclusion is that management seldom acts in ways that reinforce the cross-cutting pressure on the pre-school teachers. Thus, we find at least some empirical support for the expectation that front-line workers do not feel the heat from their managers during the media storm.

Only one interviewee experienced management intervention, and she pointed to a new way of organizing age groups: 'I imagine that it is a consequence of that [the media storm] because our manager said – when I asked why we have to change something that works – that we should not be the last ones riding the wave. At that point I just felt, well, poor argument, right?' (PE). The instance made the pre-school teacher realize that she was part of a hierarchical structure that forced her to adhere to new rules that conflicted with her conception of best practice. Thus, the media storm

indirectly intensified the cross-cutting pressure in the interviewee's daily work. This pressure is especially evident because the new organization made the interviewee insecure about what she could do differently: 'at any rate, I think they should have used more professional arguments in favour of the reorganization before it was implemented. I had a hard time figuring out what I should act on. What is it I must do differently? What is expected of me?' (PE). As a note of caution, we should underline that we cannot be certain that the reorganization in fact was a consequence of the media storm – it is merely assumed by the interviewee.

None of the remaining interviewees mentioned any management interference; to the contrary, some report that their manager was completely on their side: 'Our daily manager doesn't think that things are as he [Ole Henrik Hansen] described them' (PF). Other interviews delivered clear-cut answers like: 'no, I don't think that was the case' (PC) when we directly asked them if managers had mentioned the media storm in relation to local performance. It is, however, important to remember that some of the institutions are combined institutions, meaning that that the crèche is only a part of the entire institution. Managers thus had multiple focus points that might distract their attention. For instance, one interviewee said that her local manager was 'not a crèche kind of guy so he didn't really go into it' (PB). Another reason why intermediate management was absent in street-level discussions about the media storm was the simple fact that one of the houses was in-between managers at the time of the media storm.

In sum, only one pre-school teacher reported that management took action in the aftermath of the media storm. The rest either reported that managers did not say or do anything, or reported that local managers were on the employees' side during the storm. Against this backdrop, we are confident in concluding that the empirical material supports our theoretical expectation, namely that media storms do not affect front-line workers indirectly via their managers.

*Expectation 3: The media storm's indirect impact on pre-school teachers via parents.* We now turn to the second indirect route for a possible impact of the media storm as we explore how pre-school teachers perceive parents' reactions to the storm. Overall, the empirical evidence does not support our expectation that media storms affect front-line workers this way, since parents generally did not level criticism against either individual pre-school teachers, or their local institution.

Only one out of our seven interviewees mention the issue of critical parents. This particular pre-school teacher underlines that parents were

sometimes dissatisfied and questioned the commitment of her and her colleges as well as specific things they do. Parents indeed affected her work-life, and she reports spending time talking to them explaining why things are done in certain ways. Besides this general picture, she also told that the amount of worried parents increased during the media storm: 'we had many parents who came to asked about their kids; how they thrive. They also had a hard time leaving the child – also because he [Ole Henrik Hansen] specifically said something about, can't remember exactly what, but about daddy and mommy abandoning the children down here and that it was a kind of child neglect' (PC). The parents did not demand anything new or different, however, the interviewee merely thinks 'that they needed to be reassured that everything was okay and that we took care of their children' (PC). In short, the media storm prompted some parents to ask questions they would not otherwise have asked – at least not at that particular point in time. Such questions did not alter anything in the everyday practice of the crèche, but they might have added to the cross-cutting pressure on the specific pre-school teacher.

The remaining interviewees did not experience critical or concerned parents. In fact, several pre-school teachers had the opposite experience as they told about supportive parents displaying a great deal of confidence in the local institution and the pre-school teachers they knew personally: 'our parents said that he [Ole Henrik Hansen] should come here and see for himself, because it's just not that way here! [...] We very much feel that they have confidence in us, that they think we do our job well and that we are there for their children' (PE). The general impression is that parents had no quarrels with the pre-school teachers and their local institution. Since 'parents of today are demanding; they come in with sick kids and complain if you call them to tell that the kid has been crying all morning' (PB), a couple of interviewees argued that parents would have said something if they felt that the problems discussed in the media storm applied to their institution: 'if there were any dissatisfaction, parents would address it. But no, I know what I do is okay and I have good contact with the parents and they keep coming with their children' (PD).

Despite this rather positive tone, one might be sceptical as the parents' positive view does not square completely with the reflective and somewhat critical view of the pre-school teachers themselves. In fact, the pre-school teachers themselves were sceptical and looked for reasons why parents were so positive. Some underlined that parents only knew their local crèche, where everything was okay, while others pointed to a sort of false consciousness among parents: 'parents are under pressure and today's parents are not

good at asking about the pedagogical work we do. It's more the practical stuff – e.g. that a slipper is missing' (PB). Another interviewee phrased her suspicion more clearly: 'perhaps parents don't wish to acknowledge it [potential problems]; if you leave you kids in a crèche you want the best for them. It'll have huge consequences for the parents if they feel they leave their children somewhere that they think isn't okay. And that's why I think they try to find the positive in it' (PF). The interviewees, in other words, suspected that parents were so busy and keen on believing that it was in the best interest of everybody to leave their children in crèches that they held on to this conception and refrained from critical reflection *even* during a media storm that pinpointed relevant issues.

Our study does not allow us to investigate parents' thoughts, and we cannot conclude if the pre-school teachers' suspicion about the effect of parents' busyness and dependence upon trouble-free care of their children is correct. We leave this for future studies. We can conclude, however, that parents do not intensify the pressure on pre-school teachers to perform during the media storm. In this sense, the media storm was inconsequential at the street level.

## Conclusion and discussion

While existing studies show that media storms do not affect policy formulation, we argue that such storms affect policy implementation. Our pioneering case study supports this theoretical idea. In particular, it suggests that Danish pre-school teachers do not merely reflect on, but also adjust their practice as a consequence of a media storm in order to satisfy their functional preference for doing their job well. Furthermore, our case study suggests that neither reflections, nor adjustments are due to intensified pressure from pre-school teachers' superiors or the target group. We are thus witnessing a direct, rather than an indirect, effect of the media storm at the front-line workers. Our perhaps most interesting finding is that pre-school teachers approach the media storm constructively; rather than shielding themselves by employing coping strategies, they perceive the media storm as an opportunity to figure out whether they could do an (even) better job.

These empirical lessons learned reinforce our central argument that both the political communication and the public administration literature have something to gain by studying media effects at the street level. Our case study also illuminates the benefit of exploring the direct route (the functional and solidary interests of the front-line worker) and the indirect

routes (the pressure of intermediate management and the target group) of media effects. We do not have the empirical data to draw final conclusions about the media-bureaucracy interaction, but we demonstrate the fruitfulness of further exploration of this uncharted territory.

One way ahead would be to investigate the factors that condition media effects at the street level: First, it would be important to study the moderating effect of proximity. While we studied universal effects in the pre-school sector, we suggest that larger effects would be found locally, for instance among employees in a hospital ward in which insufficient hygiene gives rise to a media storm. Second, the degree of professional discretion varies significantly across the public sector (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998), and it might matter to the size of the media effect. While our case – we argue – is illustrative for the pre-school sector, it might also be indicative of the wider social sector; at least e.g. elderly care and caring for people with social problems entails ample room for professional judgement. Our case, however, might not be illustrative for the entire public sector; front-line workers characterized by a strong professional ethos (e.g. doctors at hospitals), by adherence to scientific evidence (e.g. engineers in infrastructure offices), or by dense legal regulation (e.g. caseworkers in labour market administrations) might be less susceptible to media storms. Third, the nature of the media storm is likely to condition its effect across all sectors. In our case, the media storm revolves around research findings, which might enhance the effect of the storm because of the scientific nature of the information. In other cases, media storms arise from political disputes, publicity craving news organizations, or implementation failure in isolated instances (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008). Such storms might dominate the media agenda but only marginally affect front-line workers if they do not recognize the severity of the issue. Finally, to further develop the understanding of the street-level consequences of media storms, it would be important to interview not only front-line workers, but also their intermediate managers, the responsible elected officials, and the target group.

In sum, it is clear that future studies will be able to take bigger empirical leaps than the present chapter, but they will hopefully benefit greatly from applying the approach suggested in this chapter, i.e. the theoretical marriage of the scientific fields of political communication and public administration.

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## About the authors

**Pernille Carlsson** holds a Master's degree in political science. Her main interest is on public administration and management and more specifically on public sector innovation as well as effects of media storms on public administration.

**Christian Elmelund-Præstekær** holds a PhD in political science and is Head of Department at the Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark. His primary field of interest is political communication broadly defined and he have studied the nature and effects of media storms as well as parties' campaign communication and agenda-setting hereof. His work has most recently appeared in scientific journals such as the *European Political Science Review*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Party Politics*, and *Social Policy & Administration*.





## 11. Media hypes and public opinion

Human interest frames and hype fatigue

*Audun Beyer and Tine Ustad Figenschou*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

This chapter investigates how news audiences perceive media hypes, a topic largely unexplored in extant studies of news hypes. It first elaborates on normative perspectives regarding how citizens should keep informed and relate to the news. Second, it analyses a survey study of a representative sample of the population on their evaluations of media performance during and in relation to a highly salient media hype. It explores how the audience evaluate media performance and what aspects of the hype coverage they emphasize. It finds that the public is overwhelmingly critical towards the media coverage, particularly on the scale (volume) and scope of the news hype, and perceived media bias.

**Keywords:** public opinion, survey, human interest, hype, media criticism

The study of media hypes has largely been concerned with the study of news content and news work, understood as the sociology of news organizations and news workers. From this literature, we already have important knowledge of what characterizes media hypes (see Vasterman, 2005; Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009): Media hypes tend to materialize suddenly as news waves triggered by some key event (Vasterman, 2005, 515-516). Further, some form of ‘interaction between the media and social actors’ characterizes media hypes according to Vasterman (Ibid.), meaning that this interaction itself becomes part of the hype, and thus receive substantial coverage as the hype unfolds across media outlets. However, what currently lacks in the literature concerning media hypes is the study of *how such coverage affects public opinion and how news audiences perceive such hypes*. This chapter contributes some

theoretical perspectives concerning this relationship, discussed through empirical evidence that illuminates the question of how publics evaluate media hypes.<sup>1</sup>

First, we introduce the concepts of media hypes and public opinion with reference to a *normative* perspective of what news should be. Throughout the history of media research the question of what publics actually need to know to be considered *informed citizens* has been highly salient (Christians et al., 2009). While there is in no way a clear consensus on this important question, different perspectives highlight different roles for publics, and accordingly, they put different demands on what journalism should be. In the present chapter, we discuss media hypes with reference to Zaller's (2003) distinction between the *full news standard*, and the *burglar alarm standard* of news quality, while also making reference to Michael Schudson's (1998) notion of the *monitorial citizen*. Secondly, we present a case concerning a highly salient news media hype from Norway, and a survey study asking a representative sample of the population of their evaluations of media performance during and in relation to the media hype. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for future research concerning public opinion and media hypes, highlighting the need for normative perspectives to be included in discussions of this relationship.

## The quality of news and demands on citizens

What do citizens need to know to be considered informed enough to participate in democratic societies? This question has probably been discussed for as long as the concepts of democracy, citizens, and public opinion has been around. Michael Schudson (1998) refers to Walter Lippmann when he concludes, that 'if democracy requires omnipotence and omniscience from its citizens, it is a lost cause' (Schudson, 1998: 310). On a general level, it is hard to disagree with this statement, but it does not necessarily follow a distinct view of the normative standard of news quality from such a general statement. Schudson's aim is not, however, to develop such a standard, but he introduces a concept that is later picked up by Zaller (2003), when he tries to envision a normative standard of news quality. This is the concept of *the monitorial citizen*, as opposed to *the informed citizen*. The monitorial citizen, says Schudson, 'engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering' (Schudson, 1998: 311). Schudson's point seems to be that most people do not need to proactively seek out information, but that this not means that they always will be inactive. Rather, they will be

'poised for action if action is required' (Ibid.). Thus, it will be the task of the news media, and journalism, to get their attention in case action is needed.

In some ways this is the point of departure for John Zaller (2003) when he attempts to formulate a standard of news quality that is actually possible for both the news media to deliver, and for the public to be attentive to. Zaller starts out by arguing that the vast majority of scholars, including W. Lance Bennett and Thomas Patterson, seem to say that the quality of news should be judged by what he calls the *full news standard* (Ibid.: 110). The full news standard is a historically developed standard of news that, according to Zaller, is best viewed through several phases. In an early phase of American democracy, the view of citizens' roles was indeed very far from today, and this was also the case with the demands on news. For instance, Schudson argues that to be informed in the late 1790s meant only to know who the candidates were and their character (Schudson, 1998: 72, as cited in Zaller, 2003: 112). At least for the next fifty years or so elections were not 'viewed as occasions for informed deliberation' (Zaller, 2003: 112). It was mainly partisanship that defined the relevant citizen role in the context of elections. During and towards the end of the 1800s newspapers became available for a much larger part of the electorate, but, even then, Zaller claims, their main aim was to mobilize along party lines. As parties' role declined over the turn of the century however, there was a turn towards independent journalism, with a growing aim to report neutrally. Thus, the role of citizens also changed, from eager partisan, to independent thinker, who demanded pure facts from the journalistic institution, and then could make up a mind of their own, a development that took place in Europe in the 1970s onwards.

It was in this context the full news standard emerged, where educated people could follow the main topics of the day. It is, however, worth recalling how the information available in the 1920s probably was drastically different from our own time. One could make the argument that the amount of information available was of a relatively small size, actually making it possible for people to stay relatively well informed on the most important matters of the day. Today, the amount of information surpasses any human capacity for information processing, in a multi-flow, multi-media hybridized media landscape (Chadwick 2013). Zaller's argument is that critics of the modern news institution, who use the full news standard as their benchmark, do not take into account that this standard must be considered to be a historically situated norm, a norm that the society of today bears very little resemblance to. Thus, the criticism lingers on a norm and professional ideal that is impossible to live up to today, for both journalism and citizens.<sup>2</sup>

As an alternative to the full news standard, Zaller proposes a new standard, based on Schudson's ideal of a monitorial citizen. Zaller calls this standard *the burglar alarm*. The burglar alarm standard of news quality takes into account that, in today's society, knowledge within sub-fields has become highly specialized. Thus, the cognitive capacity of the human mind means that the ideal of being fully informed must be left behind, as people have to 'make do with satisficing, heuristics, and similar effort-saving techniques' (Zaller, 2003: 119). This standard should lead journalists to, in Zaller's words, 'cover non-emergency, but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining' (Ibid.: 122), a popularized, more active journalistic style (see also Deuze, 2005; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Van Zoonen, 2005). The burglar alarm metaphor becomes relevant as such news coverage, according to Zaller, should 'penetrate every corner of public space so few could miss it' (Zaller, 2003: 122).

Media hypes can be *one* possible effect of a news journalism operating by this standard. The burglar alarm further lingers on what Zaller refers to as *positive media frenzies*, characterized by intense and dramatic stories that saturate media coverage between different outlets and formats, and are suited to 'break the fog of disjointed news' (Ibid.: 121) and to engage the public. An argument against Zaller's new ideal (that, according to Bennett, (2003) is already a reality) is that it will lead to prioritization of news stories that are dramatic; that it takes a spectacular single event as a starting point; and that it focuses on strong stories with a clear protagonist. This was indeed the case in the media hype discussed in the following sections of this chapter. In this hype, the media's human-interest framing and repeated criticism of the government and immigration authorities make it an illustrative case for discussing how the audience reacts to and evaluates media hypes during the peak of the coverage, adding to the research regarding how audiences evaluate the results of a coverage adhering to the principles of a burglar alarm standard. In the next sections, we will discuss how the public views such coverage, as we report findings from a case study of one real-life media hype.<sup>3</sup>

## Public opinion concerning media hypes<sup>4</sup>

Scholars will no doubt continue the normative debate on what constitutes good enough news and well-informed citizens also in the future. In the context of media hypes and public opinion, however, it is not irrelevant what publics themselves think about news coverage that satisfies most of the criteria for a

media hype. In this section, we therefore report and discuss some of the findings from a study that analysed a media hype (content analysis of mainstream media during the hype), as well as public opinion (a representative survey conducted immediately after the hype had ended). The survey consisted of both closed and open-ended items, including relevant background and control variables, as well as respondents' evaluations of the involved actors, the media included. Before we discuss the findings from this survey, we briefly introduce the case that developed into a massive media hype.

## The case

Madina Salamova, alias 'Maria Amelie', was a young female immigrant who became the public voice of irregular immigrants through her autobiography *Illegally Norwegian* published in 2010. Maria Amelie and her parents applied for asylum in Norway in 2002 when she was seventeen years old. The application was denied, and the family had been living illegally in Norway since 2003. Maria Amelie's arrest in January 2011 and her subsequent deportation to Russia caused massive protests, unprecedented media coverage, open conflict within the coalition government, and, consequently, change to the national immigration legislation (labelled 'Lex Amelie').

Maria Amelie was presented as an idealized, deserving media victim. Firstly, she was a fairly known face. In contrast to the non-personified, masses of denied asylum seekers, who are deported from Norway every day, she had published a book about being an irregular immigrant and had become a public face for an ongoing campaign to improve rights for irregular immigrants through public talks and media interviews. She was vulnerable. Maria Amelie was a young, fair-skinned female, and she thus easily evoked empathy and a supposed need for protection. As demonstrated in the literature on mediated 'victims' (Höijer, 2004; Horsti, 2013; Moeller, 2002), women and children are regarded as the most vulnerable and 'worthy' victims. Third, she was a hardworking, self-made success. Although she had been living in hiding, she had managed to complete an MA, had secured an internship with the national oil company, and had managed tours and music festivals. Against all odds, she was the personification of an immigration success story: fluent in Norwegian, well educated and hardworking, and possessing several attractive job offers. Finally, she was relatively better connected compared to other irregular immigrants (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014) and had established an impressive personal network of intellectuals, writers, journalists, and activists through her work, voluntary work

and activism. After twelve intense days, a devastated Maria Amelie was deported to Moscow on 24 January, but was able to return as a legal expert work migrant on 16 April of the same year.<sup>5</sup>

### The case turns into a media hype

The Maria Amelie story was covered intensively in Norwegian news media, and a content analysis<sup>6</sup> of the six most important national newspapers and two TV channels, showed that during the twelve days from Maria Amelie's arrest to her deportation these national newspapers published 405 articles, an average of thirty-three small and large articles every day, and the two TV channels aired no less than seventy news items in the same period, making the story one of the most covered issues in Norway in modern times. The key event that set off the media hype occurred when Maria Amelie was arrested by five police officers after giving a public speech based on her book. The arrest caused massive criticism, sparked unprecedented media attention, and dominated news headlines throughout the twelve-day period (Beyer & Figenschou, 2012). When she was arrested, the broad network of NGOs behind the ongoing *No one is illegal* campaign, numerous student organizations, artists, and intellectuals, mobilized on social media platforms, organized demonstrations, and criticized the government in the media (Ihlen, Figenschou & Larsen, 2015). Maria Amelie's network of asylum advocates and media professionals had greater media access and higher media competence compared to the supporters of other irregular immigrants. In particular, her boyfriend at the time, working as an assistant in the op-ed section at the leading leftist daily, tirelessly defended her case and acted as her spokesperson when she was detained. Her advocates employed well-documented strategies in their campaign to let her stay in the country (Ellermann, 2006; Every & Augoustinos, 2008). They foregrounded similarities between her and other Norwegians and de-ethnicized (Horsti, 2013) her public image. Thus, the story is a typical example of the man-against-the-system narrative (Johnson-Cartee, 2005), frequently used in Western news media coverage of immigration<sup>7</sup> (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). During the news hype, the in-depth, dramatic coverage of Maria Amelie's story seemed to be sufficient for the media, which did not expand its coverage beyond the key storyline. The content analysis of the coverage showed that it was almost exclusively framed as a human-interest story, focusing on the drama of the unfolding events, zooming in on the one chosen individual, and portraying her struggle in a highly emotional manner.<sup>8</sup>

The coverage was thus very similar to Vasterman's definition of a media hype, with a 'sudden materialization of a news wave' (Vasterman, 2005: 515) that arose quickly and then faded away. Media hypes are characterized by a coverage that is disproportionate to the relevance of the key event but, when established, it feeds itself and develops a life of its own (Ibid.: 509). To some extent, the case triggered a broader debate, as one third of the news items included substantial information about the issue of irregular immigration in general (definitions, statistics, living conditions, etc.), but only five per cent of the coverage was solely thematic. Second, the 'interaction between the media and social actors' (the campaign and her supporters) led to increased coverage of both social action and the reactions from social actors (Ibid.: 516). Where the Maria Amelie coverage differed substantially from Vasterman's (2005) definition, however, was the lack of comparable incidents and related news to the key event, as the media remained primarily focused on her story. As the story gained importance, other irregular individuals and rejected asylum seekers were introduced in about five per cent of the newspaper articles and seventeen per cent of the television coverage. Even though the stories of these individuals were as dramatic and strong as the Maria Amelie story, however, the media presence of the other immigrant individuals was ephemeral as they only appeared in the news once or twice (Beyer & Figenschou, 2012). The primary media narrative, and subsequently also public debates, statements and political claim of supporters, focused on the 'exceptional' case rather than the larger group of irregular immigrants (Ihlen, Figenschou & Larsen, 2015).

### **Assessments of media performance compared with other involved actors**

A large part of the coverage of this particular case was concerned with repeated criticism of the government and immigration authorities, by the media as well as by other social actors that were quickly included in the media hype. This makes it an illustrative case for discussing how the audience reacts to and evaluates media hypes during the peak of the coverage. Against this background, we first asked how respondents evaluated the performance of key actors/institutions in the case, including the media?

Evaluation of performance concerning the issue was first measured with a closed item that asked respondents to state how well different actors had performed, from 1 (very badly) to 5 (very well). As mentioned above, the government received a lot of criticism in the media during the news



serial, but it was regarded as the institution that performed best in the survey, with a mean score of 3.1. Overall, the government was the only actor that averaged more positively than negatively in audience evaluations of performance. Also, the immigration administration and the police, the institutions responsible for the arrest of Maria Amelie and the resolutions leading to her arrest and deportation, were criticized quite harshly in the media. The audience, however, gave them both a mean score of 2.9 on how well they had performed concerning the case. The political opposition, while quite invisible in much of the coverage, received a mean score of 2.9.<sup>9</sup> The media were evaluated as having the lowest performance, with a mean score of 2.5. This indicates how many members of the audience were indeed quite critical of how the media covered the issue and the prioritization that was given by the media when it comes to coverage of the issue. We further explored who were most critical of the media and how different background variables might explain the variation when it comes to respondents' evaluation of the media. Audience members' use of the media could be thought of as a key variable, as increased exposure to news media might contribute to some sort of fatigue over the extensive coverage. We constructed a regression model to explore this further and also added other relevant background variables such as gender, age, education, and attitude towards immigration (see Beyer & Figenschou, 2014: 1953 for regression model). All the standard variables showed a significant contribution to the model, but none of the media-use variables produced significant effects: Women were more positive about media performance than men. Older people were also more positive. People with a stricter attitude to immigration were more negative towards the media than people with a more liberal view. Respondents with higher education were also more negative towards media performance. In essence, the audience was more critical about the media than other involved parties, but there is no sign that this critical attitude had much to do with the level of media use. It is interesting that we see no effect of media use, as one could expect those more exposed would grow more tired of the issue. That said, media use does not necessarily equate with issue exposure in this case. This issue was everywhere for the two weeks the hype lasted, and even media users with low use would almost certainly encounter this story several times as it dominated headlines in TV news, newspapers, and online news, as well as in debate programmes and online discussion forums.

The respondents' attitudes towards immigration need some further elaboration: One of the important references that the media made in the early days of the coverage of the case was that the government and the

immigration authorities were out of step with the general public opinion. The media made reference to various demonstrations and media-initiated surveys<sup>10</sup> that allegedly showed that a majority supported Maria Amelie and wanted her to be allowed to stay in the country. It should, however, be noted that after only a few days there was a swing in public opinion, and more people then said that she should not be granted permission to stay in the country, a view more in line with public opinion on immigration policy in general.<sup>11</sup> This might be understood in terms of some kind of adjustment; when the story broke in the media, many people instinctively reacted with sympathy towards the woman, but as people had more time to learn about the case they might have seen the need to adjust their standpoints. For partisans with a fairly restrictive view on immigration in the survey, we find evidence of a form of the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985), as they rate the media more harshly than others with different views on immigration. We also see that those respondents planning to vote for either the right-wing Progress Party or the Labour Party view the media more critically than other voters. The Norwegian Progress Party has had a clear issue ownership and a strict policy on immigration issues, and the Labour Party was the main government party at the time, which also held certain issue ownership and had been quite strict on immigration (Karlsen & Aardal, 2011). Finally, we find that respondents who wanted Maria Amelie to stay in the country were much more positive in their evaluation of media performance than those who wanted her to leave: Among those who wanted her to stay, two thirds were either positive (one third) and neutral (one third) in their evaluations of media coverage, in contrast to those in favour of evicting her, over seventy per cent of whom were critical of the role played by the media (see Beyer & Figenschou 2014: 1954, Figure 11.1 for details).

### Scale, scope, and biased media

One body of literature claims that a highly dramatic, intense, and sensational coverage is what is needed to get people interested in political matters and that the human-interest frame may contribute to increased political knowledge among disinterested members of the public (see, among others, Jebri et al., 2013; Van Zoonen, 2005; Zaller, 2003). Here we have a potent example of such coverage, and we also have respondents' own evaluations of and comments on this coverage as it peaked in the media. When evaluating the media's performance, we first ask if people are *mainly critical, neutral, or positive in their evaluations of the media's performance?* Second, we look

more into what aspects people highlight as most important in their evaluations of media performance. Here we emphasize how the audience reacts to and evaluates a real-life media hype played out in the media, and we aim to go beyond the studies that explore how frames are mirrored in respondents' thoughts (Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999), by explicitly asking respondents to evaluate the coverage in their own words.

As demonstrated above, many respondents are fairly critical of the coverage. About two thirds of the respondents were critical of the coverage on a general level, seventeen per cent were coded as neutral evaluations, and thirteen per cent were coded as giving mainly positive evaluations when they formulated their view of the media coverage in their own words. As a final step, we will look into *what* people were critical about and what they thought of as positive with regards to the media coverage. These are the aspects of the media coverage that the respondents mentioned when asked to write their views on the media coverage of the case. The respondents were not given any keywords, or guided on what to emphasize in their evaluations; in other words, these evaluations were the first that came to their mind, and thus, arguably, the most salient aspects in their evaluations.

The clearest criticism of the media is the *volume of the coverage*. Analysing the responses, we find that almost half of the respondents formulate a critique regarding the scale of the coverage. Without being asked to state anything about the scale, they say that the coverage was too extensive – that there was too much coverage altogether. This is the clearest and most specific evidence of a critique of the hype that developed during the two intensive weeks. However, it also points to an implicit critique of the human-interest framing, as the story was entirely framed within the human-interest frame, a point substantiated by the other aspects of the criticism, discussed below.

The respondents also referred to *the scope of the coverage*, in this case particularly to how this single case was used. Thirteen per cent of respondents stated they were critical of the use of this single case, often by juxtaposing it to other relevant immigrant cases, or even to the more general issue concerning irregular immigration. While this may not seem a very large proportion, we must keep in mind that the respondents were not given any keywords to focus on in their evaluations.

The last main finding from the open item was related to the belief that the media operate with *some kind of bias*. While it is not a new finding that the public has opinions about media bias, it is notable that as many as one in five stated that the media were biased in this case. The reason for this finding may be due to several factors. The media received criticism during

the coverage for taking sides on the issue, and some respondents may have picked up this criticism. It is also probable that the scale of the issue may have led to this kind of criticism, as the amount of coverage was so large that it led to decreased coverage of other issues. Lastly, the concept of bias may be an inherent effect of human-interest coverage in itself, because the way such framing works makes it harder to cover individuals in a balanced way (Benson, 2013; Steimel, 2010). The concept of bias is also related to the aforementioned hostile media phenomenon, and, in this case, where there are signs of an unbalanced coverage, we might have observed the relative hostile media effect that can be observed when respondents are given strongly slanted stories (see Gunther, Christen, Liebhart & Chia, 2001 for a study on unbalanced news content). Moreover, ten per cent of the respondents reacted to the *sensationalist* and *emotional* media coverage of the Maria Amelie story. Only a very small minority stated that they were satisfied with the media coverage in the open-ended question (two per cent).

## Discussion and conclusion

So, what does this contribute to our understanding of media hypes and public opinion? The notion that audiences are critical towards the news and even view the news as biased is not novel (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997: 209-213). However, in the context of media hypes, and with the perspectives of *the full news standard* and *the burglar alarm standard* present, it must be noted that our findings suggest that public opinion is more in line with the former than the latter when asked to evaluate what was quite clearly a media hype.<sup>12</sup> This holds even for respondents that were sympathetic to the case itself and supported Maria Amelie's right to stay in the country. In the following section, we provide several tentative explanations for this situation, based on the respondents' own qualitative evaluations of media performance.<sup>13</sup>

### The exhausted public

This explanation points to several factors that are due to the massive coverage as well as the fact that some of the media, arguably, were slanted in their coverage of Maria Amelie. First, due to the massive, almost repetitive coverage, many people may have experienced some sort of *compassion fatigue* (Moeller, 1999). This may partly involve the human-interest framing of the story, and partly the fact that it became a media hype. Almost half

of the responses stated that the coverage had got out of hand regarding the sheer scale of it all. As one respondent put it: 'It was too intense; we lose interest and get bored of it all' (Resp. no. 541). Elaborating further, others offered explanations to why the media might have behaved like they did: 'It is overexposed – they made a mountain out of a molehill. It's easy for the media to portray one sweet, young girl as a victim. It's a good story. It sells newspapers and attracts viewers' (Resp. no. 75).

Both these responses clearly criticize the hype aspect of the case. Also, the notion of a burglar alarm standard, operating by creating positive frenzies of coverage that no member of the public can miss, seem to become tiring for these respondents. Steimel (2010) also notes that the human-interest frame itself may lead to evaluations that imply that the media does not fulfil its role as an objective party, because other perspectives than the ones pertaining to the case itself in many cases are downplayed. Regarding the media hype explanation, the massive coverage might have led people to view the issue as slanted and to feel the scale of coverage got out of hand. Respondent no. 434 puts it like this: 'Completely hopeless. [The media] are sensationalist, they downplay the facts, and they play on emotions in one individual case without conveying the wider consequences of changing the law'. This view of the media as biased was not uncommon among respondents. Both the widespread use of the human-interest frame and the scale of the coverage might have contributed to this, but one should not neglect the fact that parts of the media coverage also discussed possible bias in the media (so-called meta-debate) during the intense twelve days the story lasted.

### **Public opinion was misunderstood by the news media**

The critical evaluations of the media may imply that the perceived public support for Maria Amelie, frequently reported in much of the early coverage of the issue, may have been a misrepresentation by the media. From the content analysis we know that media elites such as in-house analysts/commentators, the editors, and the most profiled reporters, were very critical of the authorities' handling of the case. This criticism dovetailed with a broader criticism of the Norwegian government at the time – that it had become distanced from the public and did not understand its popular foundation. The sentiments represented by vocal media elites, and others who were personally involved in the story, might thus have overemphasized how broad and deep this condemnation was and how representative it was of public opinion. Perhaps it was the 'chattering classes' (the media elites and the cultural elites) that were out of touch with the people, not the

immigration authorities. Several respondents also seem to acknowledge a view that the media was out of touch with a volatile public opinion in these matters. Respondent no. 487 put it like this: 'The media coverage was exaggerated and biased. First everyone sympathized with her, and then they turned against her. The fifty other Russian asylum seekers that were deported were only mentioned in one, tiny news brief'.

### **The timing of the survey**

Finally, it is worth considering the timing of the survey. While support for Maria Amelie was probably higher in the early stages of the coverage, it was probably at its lowest in the first days after she had been sent back to Russia. Maria Amelie and her supporters had repeatedly warned that it would be dangerous for her to go back to Russia. Whenever she was asked about Russia in interviews, she fought back tears and stressed how terrified she was to be sent back. However, when she was sent out of the country, there were journalists on the airplane with her, and more journalists met her in Moscow. In the following days she and her boyfriend were interviewed on the streets and cafes of Moscow, often in a joyful mood, and there was little evidence of this being a particularly dangerous location for her. Thus, some members of the audience may have felt that they had been manipulated. Some of the respondents might also have been influenced by the coverage following her deportation to Russia. Respondent no. 558 voices a quite critical opinion: 'Exaggerated! One-sided. It was portrayed as if the migration authorities are incompetent and stupid, when they have in fact treated her case fairly [...] They have portrayed Maria as incredibly sweet and sympathetic, and I doubt she is [...]'

### **Limitations and future research**

The case of Maria Amelie provided an excellent opportunity to perform an investigation into how the public evaluates media hypes. The story turned into an example of media hype that has few parallels in Norwegian media when it comes to the amount and intensity of the coverage. At the same time, the individual-against-the-system story represents a recurrent, frequently used script in the coverage of immigration both in Norway (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014) and internationally. However, the unique characteristics of this study also pose some limitations for generalization. In the following we address these limitations and suggest how future research may try to disentangle the effects of human-interest framed media hypes.

First, the use of a single-case approach can never lead to generalizations to a broader population. What these extreme cases can do is to make the mechanisms involved in cases of media hype more clear. In the case reported here, the inability of the media to move beyond the human-interest frame makes an interesting contribution that should be explored further. As we note below, what should be addressed in future research is how one should disentangle the different effects of media hype, framing, and the nature of the case itself.

Second, the public opinion data used in the study is cross-sectional, and a follow-up study to check whether attitudes were long-term or rather more ephemeral was not possible to perform. Since the evaluation of media hypes should be studied in a real-life context, making experiments more difficult (but by no means impossible), the desired design could have involved a follow-up survey, either with a sample of the same respondents, making it a panel study, or by performing a new survey altogether. However, the time frame and economic considerations made such endeavours impossible at the time. Future research should definitely try to employ some sort of longitudinal perspective to the study of evaluations of real-life media hypes.

Third, as the hype was laden with a human-interest narrative, it proved hard to disentangle the effects of the hype itself and the framing of the story. The data suggest, however, that it was the volume of coverage that was the main reason for people's negative impressions of media performance. We have reason to believe that it was indeed the powerful combination of the hype and the human-interest framing that caused such critical evaluations, but the design does not allow us to conclude on this point. Later studies should try to disentangle these effects by providing stimulus materials in controlled experiments that make us able to obtain a clearer view of what actually happens when people evaluate coverage that involves media hype.

## Notes

1. Note: An earlier version of this study was published as 'Human-interest fatigue: Audience evaluations of a massive emotional story', *International Journal of Communication*, 8 (2014): 1944-1963. The study was part of an international research project, Mediation of Migration (University of Oslo, 2011-2014), where Beyer and Figenschou were postdoctoral fellows.
2. See Waisbord (2012), among others, for a comprehensive discussion of professional journalism, professional ideals and professional codes of conducts.

3. We argue that a real test of how public opinion views media hypes needs to be conducted in a real-life context. Of course, valuable insight might also be provided from more general survey items on what people would like journalism to be. However, a salient example of a real-life exemplar of a media hype as the one reported here is preferred.
4. The empirical evidence is largely based on Beyer and Figenschou (2014). Information about methods and measures relating to the data and the analyses can be found by consulting this earlier work.
5. The government and immigration authorities firmly and repeatedly stressed that the family had been treated correctly according to the law, that the decision was irreversible, that the law is equal to everyone, and that Maria Amelie had to return to Russia. Behind the scenes, however, the coalition government pushed to change the national immigration legislation on skilled expatriate workers (people with expert competence, who already have a job offer and are in possession of the correct identity papers), making it possible for Maria Amelie to apply for a work permit once she got her papers.
6. The content analysis was performed by manually checking all the relevant national and regional media in from Maria Amelie's arrest, to her final deportation to Russia. Basic variables such as outlet, format (news/op ed.), length, quoted sources and their affiliations were mapped. Further, we coded for the presence/absence of several aspects of the human-interest frame (focus on the individual case; focus on feelings; visual information pertaining to the individual case; personal or private information about the individual [beyond information directly relevant to the case]) (see Beyer & Figenschou (2014) for more details regarding method).
7. As a result of massive media coverage, a selected few idealized victims occasionally become national icons (Rosello, 1998). These high-profile cases such as the American stories of Elian Gonzalez (1999-2000), Elvira Arellano (2007), and Jose Antonio Vargas (2011), the Maria Amelie story in Norway (2011), and the 'sans papiers' protesters (1996) in France, receive massive coverage over limited periods of time, helped by different types of support groups and networks.
8. About one in five news items were very emotional, one in five included highly emotional images and one in ten included private information about Maria Amelie (Beyer & Figenschou, 2012).
9. It should be noted that the distribution of answers on the opposition variable was very different from the other actors, as almost half the respondents selected neither good, nor bad (3).
10. In an opinion poll for the largest popular newspaper (*VG*), conducted by InFact on 15 January 2011, sixty-one per cent stated that Maria Amelie should be allowed to stay in the country, whereas twenty-seven per cent wanted her deported to Russia.
11. On 21 January, InFact conducted a follow-up poll in which forty-eight per cent argue she should be deported and forty per cent support her right



- to stay in the country. These findings are highlighted as ‘the people have turned against’ Maria Amelie.
12. The media hype discussed in the previous sections was also, we would argue, a key example of journalism operating by a burglar alarm standard.
  13. It should be noted that we are concerned with the critical opinions here, and that several respondents also voiced supportive opinions of both Maria Amelie and the media coverage.

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## About the authors

**Audun Beyer** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research in Oslo. He received his PhD from the University of Oslo in 2012 on the topic of news coverage of elections. His research interests are political communication, news framing, empirical research methods and public opinion formation. His research is published in international journals including *Communication Research*, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, and *Scandinavian Political Studies*. He has received awards from the International Communication Association (ICA) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

**Tine Ustad Figenschou** is Associate Professor in Media and Communication at Oslo and Akershus University College, Oslo. Her research interests include media and marginalization, government communication, mediatization processes, journalism and political communication. She has published widely in international journals, including *The International Journal of Press/Politics*; *Media, Culture & Society*; *Journalism Studies*; *Journalism*, and is the author of *'Al Jazeera and the global news landscape: The South is talking back'* (Routledge, 2013).

## 12. News waves generating attentionscapes

Opportunity or a waste of public time?

*Marianne Paimre and Halliki Harro-Loit*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

This chapter uses the perspective of ‘attentionscape’ to explore news waves as resources for public debate. News waves can make events, social problems, or people significant, but are they an opportunity or a waste of public time? On the basis of a case study on a drug trafficking issue in Estonian media (over twenty years), we analysed an event that triggered the initial news wave and smaller news waves about the same topic in subsequent periods. What were the discursive consequences of such an extensive use of public attention? Our study showed how intensive media coverage of a drug smuggling case acted as a catalyst for discursive changes and the introduction of new issues in drugs representation in Estonian news media.

**Keywords:** news wave, attentionscape, discursive change, catalyst

### Introduction

In the course of news processing (selection, framing, focusing) journalistic discourse constructs its specific reality. A lot of news acts as wallpaper in everyday life, attended to inadvertently (Martin, 2008). In this smooth and multifarious news stream, some newsworthy events and topics are covered more intensively and remain on the agenda for longer than a day. In other words, news media constantly creates ‘news waves’ of different sizes, which vary greatly with regard to type, construction, and impact.

Journalism studies provide more or less elaborated concepts for different types of news waves where the media plays a significant role in framing and social amplification of a certain event or topic: *media events* that have most often been characterized by live television broadcasting (Pantti & Sumiala 2009, 2002; Katz, 1998; Dayan & Katz, 1992), *mediated scandal* (Kepplinger, Geiss & Siebert, 2012; Ekström & Johansson, 2008; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004; Thompson, 2000, 1997; Lull & Hinerman, 1997; Rowe, 1997), *media hype* (Vasterman, 2005; Vasterman et al., 2005), key events that trigger waves of news (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995).

Katz (1998) points out that different types of 'media events' (live transmission of mega-event in broadcast, with high dramatic or ritual significance, e.g. Olympic Games, world football contests, state weddings or funerals, anniversary ceremonies, etc.) demand attention from hundreds of millions of people who sit in front of the television (1998: 231). Hence, any 'media event' certainly creates a strong social amplification. Although the 'media event' itself is not a news wave, it usually brings with it a news wave and most certainly captivates the attention of many people for certain events and ideologies. Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien (2008: 248) claim that media hype and media scandal are related concepts although media hype is broader as it also includes a very steep news wave and not just stories on corrupted elites, inappropriate sexual behaviour, or economic failures. In addition to the *mediated scandal* and *media hype*, a 'recycling effect' in relation to a certain topic could produce news waves of smaller amplitude on a daily basis. The nature of such *pack journalism* originates in the economic logistics of journalism: it is cheaper and easier to refresh or rewrite an existing story than to start from the stage where you need to find and attach value to certain news (Lund, 2002: 83, 86-87). The self-referential nature of journalistic performance is an inductive factor for any type of news wave.

In sum, besides *mediated scandals* and *media hype*, the media produce news waves that do not represent explicitly a moral conflict. The media also do not create the impression that a situation has deteriorated into a real crisis. A key issue in this argument is the level of coverage frequency, which, in this case, is defined as 'intensive'. The term 'intensive' is always relative (Elemlund-Praestekar & Wien, 2008: 253), as the news waves are different in size and durability. Boydston, Hardy, and Walgrave (2014) introduced a notion of 'media storm' – a sudden surge in news coverage of an item, producing high attention for a sustained period across multiple media. Concurrently, in case of some other events the temporal intensity of reporting is spread more evenly.

Independently of the type of news wave, there is one common feature of different news waves – the ability to draw, to a greater or lesser extent, the public's attention. The notion of an attention economy, posited by Davenport and Beck in 2001, suggests that the scarce resource is not information, but 'attention'. In modern, information-saturated society, visibility and attention means economic profit. Branding, marketing, image-making, and political communication all rely on attention. Hence, if a news media devotes more space or time than 'average' to a certain topic, event, or person, it is important to ask what this resource is being used for. From the point of view of critical political economy, one can further ask: does this attention serve public interest, or does it waste the rare and limited resource of social attention? Vasterman contends that intensive media attention can bring to the fore different perspectives on the problem at hand, because the more extensive use of journalistic time (airtime) and space enables the exploration of different aspects in greater detail (Vasterman, 2005: 509, 516). Lull and Hinerman (1997: 29) claim that '[...] the *discursive* [italics not in original] implications of media scandals are paramount. [...] They encourage public discussions of sensitive, controversial issues'.

In this study, on the basis of a case study on a drug trafficking issue in the Estonian media (over twenty years), we analyse an event that triggered the initial news wave and smaller news waves about the same topic in later periods. We shall interrogate the discursive consequences of such an extensive use of public attention: to what extent, once the new issues were introduced, did the discursive turns occur?

### News wave-generated attentionscape

As previously stated, in the information era the biggest factors encompassing media competition are the (available) free time and the attention span of the public, consumers, or citizens. Attention is the most scarce recourse (Nylund, 2009; Skågeby, 2009; Davenport & Beck, 2001). Some events have great social impact and public attention independently of the media coverage (such as natural disasters, wars, riots, and anniversaries of national importance, etc.), whereas other events, social problems, people, or facts have a chance to become significant only as a result of the *attentionscape* the media provide. The notion of *attentionscape* captures the central feature of news waves: intensive and attention-attracting coverage of a certain topic or event (at the expense of other topics or events) in news media during a

certain period of time. In other words: the news waves draw a majority of the available attention that news media can attract to one topic.

There are various *scapes*, such as landscapes, cityscapes, and seascapes, which mark the spatial features of past and present activities. A *timescape* perspective stresses the temporal features of living (Adams, 1989: 10). The notion of an *attentionscape*, generated by news waves, enables us to take in the political-economic approach (Hardy, 2014: 8) concerning the news waves: attention as a public resource that could be used either in the public interest or in the commercial needs of the medium. As Davenport and Beck argue: '[...] we're all producers of information, seeking the attention of consumers. But we're all information consumers as well, with only limited amount of attention to bestow upon the world. [...] But remember that if attention goes one place, then it can't go another' (2001: 11). Hence, one can ask: if a news wave is, for example, a media hype by nature – e.g. it draws a lot of public attention to bagatelle problems – is this a waste of public resources?

Concurrently, one should take into consideration that, in the era of social acceleration, the information is increasingly transmitted in ways that allow for short attention spans (Rosa & Scheuerman 2009: 10). Also the increasing number of information channels and the media market increasingly being structured into smaller segments, disperses the public attention. Hence, the possibility of attention aggregation by the news waves – especially if the news waves are created by the synchronic attention to one topic by various channels – is important for social cohesion, in case, via these attentionscapes, the general public are getting exposed to low profile or unnoticed problems (Karppinen, 2007: 15, 16).

As Bodystun et al. (2014: 510) argue: '[...] a media storm may in some cases be a prerequisite for the media to draw the public's attention to underlying issues (a question left for future study), media storms are a highly skewed and unbalanced attention generator'. In sum, the notion of *news wave-generated attentionscape* provides an opportunity to handle the relations between news media and society from the aspect of use and/or misuse of public attention as a valuable resource.

Secondly, the notion of attentionscape reveals other features of news waves that are useful for deconstructing media performance: the temporal intensity and framing. As previously mentioned, media storms draw just one type of attention: intensive and in a short period. Media scandals have temporal 'tails'. Some news waves re-actualize certain topics from time to time. As Kepplinger and Habermeier contend: a key event allows for similar subjects and events to cross the media threshold with relative ease and speed in the future (1995: 509).

In order to reveal the complexity of temporal intensity and framing we propose the two-dimensional model of news wave-generated attention-scapes. Temporal intensity (first dimension) contains the number of articles, posts, and/or comments that are published and disseminated within certain amount of time in one or many media channels (e.g. per day). Synchronic coverage of one topic by various channels increases temporal intensity. This dimension is quantitatively measureable. One should also take into consideration the diachronic coverage of the topic: actualization and re-actualization of certain issues in the course of longer period.

The framing prominence (second dimension): length of stories; prominence in programme or layout; number and significance of speakers; variety of perspectives and discourses that are presented in texts. This dimension demands combined method of quantitative and qualitative text and discourse analysis.

These two dimensions could be represented differently in different cases: some issues get synchronic attention by various mediums in a short time span, while the other issues are kept on the news agenda by a single channel during a long period. Some news waves become increasingly significant in the course of time, when media re-actualizes the topic after certain period and, finally, the event becomes a key event (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995).

In what circumstances is the *attentionscope of news* substantial? As Wien and Elemlund-Praestekar (2009: 190) point out in their analysis of media hype: 'The concept "intense coverage" is always relative, and operationally we decided to pick all days yielding 10 or more articles'. While the attention-scope of news could be local, regional, national or global, the question about the number of reports depends on the size of the media market. For example, concerning the Estonian tiny media market a coverage over five prominent articles accompanied with hundreds of comments by the audience members within one or two days can create a substantial attentionscope providing the framing also supports the importance of the topic.

In addition to the quantitative aspects, the qualitative analysis of the media wave-generated attentionscope enables us to analyse the *discursive change* (e.g. Kuo, 2007) and discursive turn(s) concerning the reported topic. Discursive change in the context of media waves is related to the introduction of a new topic to the public or a modification in the reporting, e.g. expansion of original topic via additional sub-topics, change in the selection and number of used sources, or the diversification of voices. For example, Shehata (2007: 133), focusing on event-driven news, claims that dramatic events triggering significant media coverage actually increase the opportunities for marginalized groups to voice their concerns. The



*discursive turn* is a change in the vocabulary (Mansouri-Zeyni & Rahebi, 2014: 548). Framing, the particular ways those issues are presented and the ways issues are formulated (McCombs et al., 1997: 7), includes the possible discursive turn(s).

### **News wave's potential to generate a discursive consequences: *Change and turn***

A news wave is usually triggered by a *key event* (genuine event, interview speech, official warning, shock disclosure) that receives more attention than usual (Vasterman, 2005: 513, 514). For whatever the reason that certain issue creates substantial public attentionscape, one has to ask about the consequences.

Various authors have been analysing the consequences of different types of intense news coverages (e.g. Kepplinger, Geiss & Siebert, 2012; Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Kepplinger, 2000; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). We posit the importance of distinguishing the discursive and real consequences. *Discursive consequences* can be: introducing a (new) topic to the public agenda; the possibility of *marginalized discourses* and *sub-discourses* coming under public scrutiny; and finally, *the discursive turn*; that is to say, a change in the mode of talking about a certain topic during the time the event-triggered issue is on the public agenda. We claim that the discursive turn depends on a variety of 'voices' (e.g. ordinary people and experts – who all bring along their way of representing the topic) increasingly aggregated into the mediated debate. Along with the explosion of talk on a certain topic over time, some vocabulary loses its significance and is replaced, while other aspects are preserved.

As public interest is being served, it is essential to examine the 'catalyst effect' the press exerts upon problem definition, re-definition, and decision-making on social issues (Heikkilä & Kunelius, 1997: 71,78). From the point of view of different interest groups in society, knowledge concerning the different nature of news waves would be helpful to promote new knowledge and topics onto the public agenda as well as the side effects and risks of media hype. Concurrently, the steady flow of daily news is not suitable for introducing issues to the public that require either a specific vocabulary or some prior knowledge. First, issues are less newsworthy than events (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991: 221) and secondly, the news content should be brought to the 'maps of meaning', which already form the basis of existing cultural knowledge (Hall et al., 1978, 1999: 251). Hence, by means of intensive

and extensive news waves that create attentionscape, citizens, experts, spokespersons, and journalists are increasingly dragged into a discourse that they would not have chosen in advance.

Proceeding from the analysis of different types of political scandals, Thompson provides more elaborate ideas about the different impact possibilities of a mediated scandal. Although he admits that there is not an extensive body of literature on the consequences of mediated scandal (Thompson, 2000: 233, 234), he outlines four theories on the consequences of mediated scandal that could be applied both to the real and discursive consequences. Thompson's four-theories approach (applicable to any news wave) enables us to understand in what circumstances the news-generated attentionscape has the potential to result in discursive consequences.

- 'no-consequence theory': beyond the entertainment value and temporary inconvenience, scandals have no lasting significance and tell us nothing of any enduring value about social and political life (Ibid.: 234);
- 'functionalist theory of scandal' claims that consequences are essentially conservative and serve to reinforce the norms and conventions that are transgressed by the activities in question (Ibid.: 235);
- 'trivialization theory' says that the media's preoccupation with scandal tends to undermine the quality of public discourse and debate, focusing people's attention on relatively trivial matters, while the important issues are pushed to the margins of the public sphere (Ibid.: 238);
- 'subversion theory of scandal' turns the trivialization theory on its head. The approach argues that scandal enriches the public debate by calling into question the dominant norms of journalism; here, journalistic texts are seen as cultural forms with their own distinctive kinds of symbolic richness (Ibid.: 241-245).

Thus, Thompson points to three elements that might create barriers that limit the scope of discursive consequences, even if the attentionscape created by a news wave is substantial: entertainment without moral aspects; conservative approach to the issue (no change in vocabulary); dominance of trivial aspects over important issues to the public. Thompson also points to one element that has the potential to effectuate the discursive consequences: dominant norms (views) are challenged.

## **Method and sample of the case study: The discursive turn in Estonian media reporting on drugs**

In order to analyse a news wave (as a case study) on drug reporting in Estonia, we propose to use three sets of categories:

The first two sets of categories capture the news wave-generated attention-scape: quantitative number of texts, posts, and comments that are published and disseminated during the different phases of news waves (dimension of temporal intensity) in different type of channels (or in mainstream, national, or local media channels – depending on what the focus of the research is).

The second set of categories include framing prominence and here the combination of quantitative and qualitative coding is required: length of stories; prominence in programme or layout; number and significance of speakers.

The third set of categories – discursive consequences – should capture a variety of perspectives and discourses that are presented in texts while the news wave expanded in time: speakers and vocabulary.

Hence, in order to monitor the transformation that takes place in the course of the public debate, we propose to use a combined method of content analysis (Berger, 1998; Riffe et al., 1998; Harro-Loit, 2000) and discourse analysis of media texts (Van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b, 1993; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Bell, 1998).

Initially, we examined how the drugs discourse was constructed in the Estonian press. The aim was to identify both the major and concurrent topics, as well as to identify those occasions that the media coverage consisted of more than five articles and remained on the agenda for more than a week (minimal potential for news-generated attentionscape). On a macro level, the analysis of intensively covered events or issues concerning drugs enables the examination of which news waves construct one or another sub-discourse and helps to predict which ones might be the next key events, i.e. the ones that will be referred back to when a similar event occurs in the future.

For the present study we use the results of content analysis based on twenty-five newspapers and magazines published in 1993-1995, which allowed us to formulate a database of 328 articles concerning drug issues. As a result of this content analysis, the high profile arrest of Estonian drug traffickers in Thailand as a key event, was selected for further analysis. In the summer of 1995, four Estonian citizens were arrested at Thailand's international airport for drug smuggling and the Estonian media was alarmed at the possibility that these four would be sentenced to death. The Thailand case was also the news wave with most substantial attentionscape on the drug issue in the 1990s.

The second stage of research was dedicated to locating all the articles about the Thai case that were published in Estonian newspapers with a national circulation in 1995-2005. The quantitative analysis of the case embraces 161 articles in the main newspapers and magazines in Estonia. We analysed articles that featured in the news, opinion, editorial, interview, readers' letters and features sections. Initially, fifty-one articles were published in newspapers and journals in 1995; a further fifty-six appeared while the four Estonians were in the Bangkok prison between 1996 and 2002; their return, from Thailand to prison in Estonia in 2003 generated a further thirty-five articles in the main dailies and their freedom (release from Estonian prison) caused the last nineteen articles to appear in the media between 2004 and 2005. All the articles were encoded according to the established encoding procedure and subsequently analysed. We were concerned with such features as: the subject matter; the angle of approach and vocabulary used to represent the topic; the identity of the dominant spokesperson; the roles and labels attributed to the parties involved; who covered the topic; and whose comments were solicited by the journalists and attitudes towards particular events.

### **Context of the case study: Estonian drug discourse before 1995**

In the Soviet era, addiction to illicit drugs existed, but mainly among specific groups with easier access (medical staff, prisoners, etc) to illegal substances. Like poverty, prostitution, and homosexuality, illicit drugs were considered a vice of capitalist ideology and were, therefore, a taboo that was not discussed in the Soviet press (Meylakhs, 2009). In response to changes in the prevailing political environment at the end of the 1980s, the Estonian media started to speak more about illicit substances (e.g. *Noorte Hääl*, 7 February 1987; *Aja Pulss*, January 1987; *Horisont*, May 1987; Noorus, November 1987; *Vikerkaar*, January 1987, etc.). Nevertheless, even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the readiness to fully comprehend various drug-related risks remained modest (Ahven, 2000; Narusk, 1999).

In the 1990s, after regaining independence, Estonian society changed quickly. New social problems (e.g. social inequalities, HIV, drugs, etc.) started to spread, but they lacked political and media attention. With regard to illicit drugs, during the 1980s, there were, on average, 7.7 registered addicts per 100,000 inhabitants. By the beginning of the 1990s, the indicator had increased twofold (e.g. in 1992 the figure was already fifteen registered addicts per 100,000 inhabitants) (Lagerspetz & Moskalewicz, 2002: 179).

However, the public did not consider issues of drugs a serious problem in the first half of the 1990s; indeed, it was ranked only eleventh of fourteen social problems detailed in the population survey *Eesti 93* (Narusk, 1999: 78).

Use of illicit drugs was an exciting new topic for the emergent tabloid press at the beginning of the 1990s. As this new media promoted a hedonistic lifestyle, represented through stories of international movie stars and musicians, drug use by celebrities featured frequently. For instance, 146 stories out of 304 (forty-eight per cent) published in the tabloid papers in 1994 contained the word *narkootikum* (drug) or named some of the narcotic substances involved in the entertainment industry (Paimre, 2013, 1999: 36, 86). There was little media talk about drug dealing or drug offences, especially related to Estonia and Estonians until 1995. For example, in 1993-1994, there were only five stories published in the national daily *Eesti Päevaleht* and three in the national daily *Postimees* that featured 'drug-related crime in Estonia' as their main focus. Several arrests of Estonian drug traffickers failed to cause much of a scandal, e.g. even the involvement of a top civil servant in the drug business made it to the news only once (*Post*, 5 January 1994). Thus, Estonians perceived the drug problem as 'not theirs' at the beginning of the 1990s (Paimre, 2013).

Our content analysis revealed that the intensity of reporting on the topic increased considerably from the summer of 1995. Whereas in 1993 there were only fifty-four articles that occasionally mentioned drugs in the Estonian media and 103 in 1994, the aggregate number of articles in 1995 rose to 171. Judging by the frequency and intensity of the coverage, two events merit the label of 'key events' in 1995: the Thailand drug trafficking case (fifty-one articles in the Estonian language printed media) and the so-called poppy war (forty-five articles) (see also Paimre, 2016). In the course of the next ten years, an additional 110 articles were published concerning the Thailand case. Further analysis of such 'news waves' indicated that the 'Thai scandal', which broke in July 1995, became the key event that exerted considerable influence on the future drug discourse.

### **Arrest of Estonian drug couriers in Bangkok: A key event that caused a news wave**

On 21 June 1995, Thai authorities arrested four Estonians at Bangkok airport attempting to smuggle almost six kg of heroin out of the country. According to Thai laws, they faced either a life sentence or the death penalty. Estonian national daily *Eesti Päevaleht* published the first news about the case on

27 July 1995. The framing of the first article about this case was designed to capture a lot of attention. The headline claimed: 'Four Estonians could be executed in Thailand'. The next day, all the major Estonian dailies reported the incident on their front page. Hence, both the framing of the topic and the intensity of the coverage drew attention. The titles were eye-catching, e.g. *Postimees* (28 July 1995) trumpeted: 'Four Estonians and a Czech were caught with ten kilos of heroin in Bangkok trying to transport the drug out of the country: The detainees could face the death penalty'.

Concerning the temporal intensity, during the following two weeks, more than twenty-six articles appeared on the event in the Estonian press. This was a significant amount, especially considering that only one article (*Postimees*, 19 June 1995) focusing on Estonia's drug problem had been published in the first half of 1995. During July and August, a total of thirty-five articles on the Thai case were published in the Estonian press, of which seventy-five per cent were located on the first four pages of the edition. The length of the majority of the articles exceeded 2,500 characters. This indicates that initial temporal intensity of the attentionscape was very high.

This begs the question, why did this incident cause such intensive press attention? Firstly, it was shocking to Estonians at this time that one could receive the death penalty or life imprisonment for smuggling a substance. Drug smuggling was not perceived as a crime at that time. People had generally heard very little about illicit substances. We can conclude, then, that the dramatic situation of such a harsh punishment for a crime of misfortune was the main factor behind the strong media response and the cause of a news wave that had all the makings of a good scandal.

In order to create a news wave, especially in the instance of a scandal, the media requires a moral conflict or something that is unexpected or shocking; concern for both individuals and the public therefore inspires widespread interest. This case, which took place abroad, allowed the use of the 'Us' and 'Them' (nationality) discourse. Our discourse analysis revealed that being Estonian was portrayed as being opposed to crime, but, simultaneously, naïve of the elements of the crime, which led to an understating and ignoring of the severity of the matter. The application of Thai laws to 'Us' seemed disproportionately harsh and, in the early stages of the case, the media even petitioned the president of the Estonian Republic to intervene:

When asked by the *Daily Postimees* yesterday whether in the case the Estonian citizens are sentenced to death, he will appeal to the Thai authorities and seek their pardon President Lennart Meri responded [...]

'I am certain that if possible, I shall most certainly address a petition to the Thai government' (*Postimees*, 28 July 1995).

There was even a justifying of the criminal activity of the arrested Estonians. Travelling to an exotic place, enjoying life, and earning extra money were understandable values to the people of Estonia in a period of political transition, as an article in a popular magazine illustrated:

You cannot imagine, but it is quite possible to live 'here and now', for the present moment. You wish to have this and that and still more – and then someone will offer you a chance to make your dreams come true [...] (*Elu Pilt*, September 1995: 9-11).

Parallel to the discourses of 'Us' and 'naïvety', the discourse of 'Them' could be detected in a distant, southern hemisphere country in a strange culture with different rules (*Postimees*, 28 July 1995; *Arter*, 18 December 1999; *Õhtuleht*, 22 May 1999). Thailand was occasionally portrayed negatively, as a barbaric country:

People from all over Thailand had gathered near the prison walls. There were only a couple of properly dressed people among the crowd of thousands. No wonder that the main source of income for these people is exactly the thing their relatives have been put in jail for. (*Postimees*, 18 December 1999).

After having spent some time here, we have become convinced that many are involved in the recreational services and drug peddling. (*Õhtuleht*, 22 May 1999).

As previously stated, the temporal dimension of a news wave's attention-scape enables us to look for changes in discourse. In this case, over the course a number of months, the discourse of sympathy started to change. Whereas initially the press portrayed the Estonian traffickers as victims of an Eastern legal system and only four of the initial fifty-one articles (eight per cent) actually mentioned the astronomical sums involved in international heroin trade in 1995 (*Postimees*, 28 July, 29 August 1995, 26 October 1995; *Õhtuleht*, 15 August 1995), during subsequent coverage drug trafficking as a crime received more attention.

The attentionscape of the news wave includes the number and prominence of 'voices' and perspectives. The present analysis of the 'voices'

(journalists as authors plus politicians, experts, police, organizations, and involved people who are quoted or referred to) revealed that during the opening phase of the coverage, journalists introduced high-level authority figures as speakers. The first 'breaking news story' on 27 July includes the only quotations of the leading inspector of Estonia's Department of Interpol and The Commissar of Drug Department of Central Crime Police. Already on 28 July, some high-profile Estonian politicians, including the president, were asked to comment on the incident (*Postimees*, 28 July 1995; *Päevaleht*, 28 July 1995).

Subsequently, newspapers published comments from officials of the Foreign Ministry (in seventeen articles in 1995), lawyers (eight articles) and medical doctors (seven articles). *Postimees* published two opinions of readers (2 August and 10 August 1995). Police officers (twenty-two articles) were the most often used commentators by the press. The role of law enforcement officials, (Interpol, Central Criminal Police) was relatively more important than the experts from social authorities (drug abuse preventers, the Social Ministry, Health Ministry, etc.). The initial intensive media coverage also indicates that the newspapers attached a lot of importance to even the most minute of details and were consequently awash with unreliable information. Comments from respected authorities appeared alongside the opinions of anonymous commentators.

During the coverage in 1995, the diversity of spokespeople grew as well as the diversity of opinions. The views among journalists about the 'victims' started to vary. Some journalists explicitly started to speak about crime and the 'drug mafia' (e.g. *Õhtuleht*, 5 August 1995). Journalist Ülo Veldre wrote in *Postimees*:

As those arrested have not denied their participation in smuggling, whatever contraband, then for the public they are criminals [...]. Why did the Estonian state take on the additional obligation to arrange better defences for the criminals? How does this effect the image of the Estonian state when it arranges the defence of 'drugs mafia'? [...] (*Postimees*, 29 August 1995).

The fact that the spectrum of the voices widened, the opinions of journalists started to vary, and that by autumn, the case was being called a serious drug crime, indicates that the discourse of drug smuggling changed considerably during the coverage of the case in 1995. As already said, one feature of a substantial attentionscape is an enlarged forum of 'speaking voices' that also extend the perspectives of discussion.



In December 1995, the biggest dailies proclaimed on their front pages that the Thai court had sentenced the four Estonians to prison terms, one to forty years, one to fifty years, and two to life imprisonment (*Sõnumileht*, 8 December 1995; *Postimees*, 8 December 1995). Subsequently, press attention for the Estonian drug smugglers decreased dramatically (e.g. only four articles were published about the life of the drug prisoners in Thailand during 1996).

Thus, in the summer of 1995, a drug problem that had been previously neglected by the press, suddenly created a substantial attentionscape. Initially, the story was overflowing with compassion; however, as the coverage progressed, discourses of crime and international drug trade developed as journalists began to realize the seriousness of the problem.

News waves that create a substantial attentionscape, both those that do not leave a significant social and/or discursive imprint and those that act as a catalyst for discursive change, tend to result in a delayed aftermath. This was the case with the Thai event. In September 2001, the Estonian parliament ratified the Estonian-Thai agreement on exchange of prisoners and in September the following year a request for the surrender of its citizens was submitted to the Thai authorities. In 2003, the four prisoners returned to serve the rest of their sentence in Estonian. All four have since been released.

Fifty-six articles (an average rate of eight per year) were published during the seven years of their imprisonment between 1996 and 2002. By contrast, their homecoming generated a further thirty-five in 2003, and finally, their staggered release between the autumns of 2004 and 2005 generated a final wave of nineteen articles. Throughout the Estonians' imprisonment in Thailand, the press never enquired about either their daily routines or thoughts about returning to Estonia. Media interest was maintained via the occasional interview with the parents of the prisoners (*Eesti Ekspress*, 25 March 1999; *Eesti Naine*, November 1999) or as a result of a visit by an Estonian to the Thai prison (*Sõnumileht*, 2 September 1999). The delayed aftermath occurred after seven years. In 2003, the media greeted, even celebrated, their return from Thailand to Estonia at Tallinn international airport with reporters, cameras, and microphones. Probably with a view to increasing sales, tabloids expressed sympathy and human interest when reporting about the characters of the Thai case (see e.g. *Õhtuleht*, 29 January and 10 August 2005). Some years ago, one of the above-mentioned Estonian drug couriers published a book about life in the Thailand jail (Bernhardt, 2012).

The main aspects reflecting the discursive turn were the transformation of the vocabulary (drug smuggling was no longer mentioned by journalists

as an accident, but as a crime, and the drug-trafficking discourse started to converge with the crime discourse) and that the chorus of 'voices' became more complex, which reflected the development of the drug trafficking discourse.

In 1995, a change in the public discourse about drug issues can be noticed. Politicians, who had previously denied that the country had an illicit drug problem, now had to acknowledge the issue. In 1997, a national programme for prevention of drug addiction was set up. A noticeable upswing in the awareness of the general public concerning illicit drugs was registered by the end of the 1990s (Narusk, 1999).

### **Diachronic dimension of the drug trafficking discourse in Estonia media: Three substantial attentionscapes and discursive consequences**

During the 2000s, Estonians were arrested for offences relating to illicit drugs all over the world. Only a few cases created a substantial attentionscape, e.g. in 2000-2007, the national papers and the weekly *Eesti Ekspress* covered a large-scale cocaine smuggling scheme (approximately seventy articles appeared). The case received a great deal of media attention due to the fact that the story involved the scandalous involvement of more or less well-known public figures, in addition to an Estonian businessman, and incorporated an 'Us and Them' element as the smuggling ring was orchestrated by local entertainers of African descent. It was the second attentionscape on drug issue in the Estonian press. In contrast to, and due to the Thai case, the scale and sums involved in the smuggling scheme were important themes (*Eesti Ekspress*, 14 January 2004, 1 October 2003).

Towards the end of the summer of 2007, the press published twelve stories about Estonian drug traffickers getting caught in Latin America in 2006-2007. On 14 August 2007, the national daily *Postimees* wrote that, since the autumn of 2006, the number of Estonian drug smugglers apprehended in Latin America had surged. In 2007 alone, twelve Estonian drug couriers were arrested in that part of the world. In sum, some twenty-two young Estonians, between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six, were waiting for sentencing or were already serving time in Latin American prisons by 2007 (*Postimees*, 14 August 2007). However, getting caught did not result in much media attention, as evidenced by the fact that only nine articles were published in the two biggest Estonian national dailies, *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees*, in this regard. This is a small number compared to the Thai case,

which was reported by the same two national dailies on thirty-nine occasions in 1995. The human aspect and sympathy for compatriots outweighed the crime even in the Thai news. Concurrently, an article in *Eesti Päevaleht* (6 July 2008), which begins with statistics collected by the Foreign Ministry on how many Estonian 'drug mules' are caught and serve sentences abroad, reflects the next turn in the drug (trafficking) discourse (i.e. why people become couriers, how does smuggling work, etc.).

In October 2013, two Estonian girls were apprehended with a huge amount of cocaine in Peru. This was the third news-generated substantial attentionscape in the Estonian media concerning the drug trafficking. On 6 October 2013, the arrest was headline news in all major Estonian newspapers, on the radio and TV news, and on internet news portals. New aspects of drug smuggling were introduced, i.e. poverty and youth unemployment. The girls were represented as naïve victims of the drug mafia. However, despite the fact that they are still in the jail in Peru, the media subsequently lost its appetite for covering the case.

This begs the question, what have the benefits of these attentionscapes been? Have they, in fact, mainly been a waste of people's time? It can be assumed that the audience has received information on drug trafficking as a crime and drugs as a social problem. For example, by the end of the 1990s, an upswing in public perception concerning drug issue was noticeable in Estonia. A public opinion survey reflected that, in 1998, the working-age population in Estonia ranked illicit drugs as the fourth major societal problem after crime, poverty, and unemployment (Narusk, 1999:107). There were changes in the political agenda in relation to drugs, too. As previously mentioned, in 1997, a national program for the prevention of drug addiction was set up. The Thailand case had been a significant factor in raising awareness among the media, public, and politicians for the problem of drugs in the 1990s. In this regard, the attentionscape was beneficial and had a 'positive' social impact.

Clearly, naïve drug couriers are newsworthy. Even if the media focus on the gullibility and bad luck of the couriers in their coverage of drug smuggling cases, the public learns something from these representations. Public opinion surveys indicate that people generally do not tolerate drug crime, including drug trade. In 2004, people in Estonia considered drug trafficking an equivalent crime to violence, rape, and murder (Moral, 2004: 2).

## Conclusions

The Thai case was a catalyst for discursive change and a turn in how the Estonian news media presented the issue of drugs. Although initially the media was only interested in covering the dramatic narrative of the arrest of Estonian drug smugglers in 1995, the debate captured enough attention to develop different storylines (legacy, drug trafficking, etc.) as a by-product of this story. Diachronically, this story presents an interesting case, in which the different news waves produced three attentionscapes, spread over nine years.

With regard to the discursive turns, our case study refers to the double effect of the news waves on the issue of drug trafficking in the Estonian media: on one hand, the substantial attentionscape triggered by the Thai case changed the Estonian drug-trafficking discourse, especially in 1995. A major discursive turn then saw the introduction of crime-related vocabulary. On the other hand, the sub-discourses that constructed drug couriers as victims remained (albeit marginally) until 2005.

In sum, after the Thai case, the presentation of drug-related issues in the media increased considerably. If the current discourse is compared to the beginning and middle of the 1990s, the change is indicated by the fact that today an article on drug-related issues is published on an almost daily basis. Even if the common features of these items are brevity, individuals getting caught or being imprisoned, and mostly Estonian internal cases, the drug discourse is being maintained in the public arena without creating substantial attentionscapes in news flow.

*All translations of Estonian language media texts into English, regardless of content and meaning, are the responsibilities of the authors*

## Note

1. Four dailies (*Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Eesti Sõnumid* and *Õhtuleht*) and *Eesti Ekspress* as the major weekly

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### About the authors

**Halliki Harro-Loit** is Professor of Journalism at the University of Tartu, Estonia. She has published studies on media history, media accountability, media policy, discourse analysis. Her recent book *The curving mirror of time* (2013) presents her latest research interest on time and temporality in journalism and communication studies.

**Marianne Paimre** received her PhD degree in journalism from the University of Jyväskylä (in Finland) in 2013 studying representations of illicit drug issues in the Estonian press. She has worked as the Head of Information Centre of the Estonian Foundation for Prevention of Drug Addiction. Currently she is a lecturer at the School of Law, University of Tartu, Estonia. She has published several articles on representation of drugs in the media.





## **IV.**

# **Interactivity: The role of social media**



# 13. Modelling issue-attention dynamics in a hybrid media system

Annie Waldherr

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## Abstract

Phenomena such as media hypes or issue-attention cycles are well studied for the traditional mass media. Today, however, traditional mass media play together with new actors in a hybrid media system. What does this imply for the dynamics of public issue attention? Should we expect more or less, higher or lower waves of attention? In this chapter, these questions are approached theoretically. Following a short review on the state of research, we will explore some extensions to an existing agent-based model of the media arena. Results show that hybridization of the media arena reduces the probability of waves of collective attention, and that specific patterns of public attention are critically influenced by the level and the diversity of attention thresholds.

**Keywords:** news waves, media hypes, issue attention, hybrid media system, public sphere, agent-based model

## Introduction

Phenomena such as news waves (Geiß, 2011; Waldherr, 2014), media hypes (Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009), or media storms (Boydston, Hardy & Walgrave, 2014) are well studied for the traditional mass media. Recurrent empirical patterns such as the issue-attention cycle have been identified (Brossard, Shanahan & McComas, 2004; Downs, 1972; Luhmann, 1970; Nisbet & Huges, 2006), and a number of self-reinforcing mechanisms have been studied that are able to explain these patterns (Waldherr, 2014).

However, today's public sphere is undergoing fundamental structural changes. Traditional mass media are still major actors in public discourse, but play together with new media, new communication channels, and new actors in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). As there are only low thresholds for participation, public discourses on the web are potentially more diverse. They give voice to a greater number and variety of speakers, which is both welcomed for providing a high potential for participation and criticized for creating a cacophony of voices (Dahlgren, 2005; Friedland, Hove & Rojas, 2006; Sunstein, 2001). More people than ever before can potentially participate in public communication on different scales: from personal encounters to a mass public, communication is essentially connected horizontally and vertically (Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman & Etling, 2015; Castells, 2008; Neuberger, 2009).

What do these structural changes imply for the ongoing dynamics of public attention? Do they lead to more or less, shorter or longer, higher or lower waves of attention? In this chapter, these questions are approached theoretically. First, the state of research is reviewed to describe the major structural changes of the public sphere and possible effects on public attention dynamics. Based on this review, we will explore some extensions to an *agent-based model of the media arena* (AMMA) that was developed in prior work (Waldherr, 2012, 2014). From the results, reasoned hypotheses are derived that may serve as guidance for future empirical studies on issue dynamics in online communication.

## Structural changes of the public sphere and possible consequences

New media on the internet offer more public spaces with easier access than ever before and more personalized communication environments (Bennett & Manheim, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002; Pariser, 2011). Unlike traditional print and broadcast media (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) with its spatial restrictions and fixed publication schedules, the web's carrying capacity is virtually unrestricted. Thus, internet communication bears the potential for a higher diversity of speakers to participate in public discourse (Dahlgren, 2005; Friedland et al., 2006; Sunstein, 2001). The various public web spaces are interconnected via hyperlinks to an integrated 'networked public sphere' (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2008; Neuberger, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006).

According to Chadwick (2011, 2013), the rise of digital media has led to a hybridization of the media system and its emerging news cycles. While

traditional media and political elites are still powerful in controlling the news flow, non-elite actors increasingly participate in constructing news via online media. In a hybrid media environment, old and new media actors closely interact across different platforms: 'Political information cycles work on the basis of cross-platform iteration and recursion, loosening the grip of journalistic and political elites through the creation of fluid opportunity structures with greater scope for timely intervention by online citizen activists' (Chadwick, 2011: 8). This leads to a stronger influence of the public on public attention dynamics, and to a greater diversity of sources in public discourse (see also Lotan et al., 2011).

However, more participants in the public arena who are able to publish as many messages in real-time as they wish to also heavily increase competition for audience attention (Buhl, Günther & Quandt, 2016; Chadwick, 2011). In this 'hypercompetitive environment' (Chadwick, 2011: 18) only a few prominent actors attract major attention (e.g. Adamic & Huberman, 2000; Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010; Pastor-Satorras & Vespignani, 2007).

Furthermore, boundaries between private and public communication are blurring as particularly social media are also used for sharing more private information. In online networks, any information meant only for a small circle of recipients might quickly diffuse to a mass public (boyd, 2010; González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer & Moreno, 2013).

In sum, the public arena appears to be more crowded, diverse, competitive, and unpredictable than ever. What do these fundamental structural changes imply for the dynamics of public attention? Do we have to expect changing patterns of public issue-attention, and, if so, in what respect? To date, there are only few studies explicitly dealing with patterns of online public attention dynamics and even less studies comparing attention dynamics both in new and traditional media.

Cacciatore et al. (2012) found different dynamics for traditional media and blogs. Their study on print and online news coverage on nanotechnology yielded that particularly blogs are likely to devote continuous attention to a certain news topic, even after its disappearance from the traditional news agenda. The authors concluded 'that the cyclical pattern of news in traditional media formats may not be a necessity online' (Cacciatore et al., 2012: 1054).

Lörcher and Neverla (2015) reported a similar observation in a study on attention dynamics towards the climate change issue in different online arenas. Their results suggested 'arena-specific attention dynamics' (Lörcher & Neverla, 2015: 30). Online discussion arenas (e.g. lay discussion fora) showed more intense, but also more continuous issue attention over the

course of time, whereas issue attention in mass media (e.g. online news and comments) as well as in discussion arenas induced by mass media (e.g. comments on news) was more volatile and showed higher peaks of attention.

While the results of these studies should lead us to expect less pronounced waves of attention of lower amplitudes online, studies on social media communication found different patterns. Based on five case studies, Pang (2013) proposed that social media hypes exhibit the typical anatomy of media hypes described by Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer (2009) with one huge wave following a triggering event and two to three smaller follow-up waves.

Neuman and colleagues examined the long-term development of the jobs issue over the course of one year using big data from traditional and social media, the latter encompassing blogs and tweets. They found a basic pattern of waves of attention similar to news waves in traditional media, but issue dynamics 'are more volatile and spike more dramatically up to three times the daily average volume' (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang & Bae, 2014: 200).

Accordingly, in a study on diffusion patterns among twenty-eight German online news sites, Buhl, Günther, and Quandt observed abrupt surges and bursts in attention dynamics for a majority of ninety-five issues under study: 'in these cases, the timing of publication decisions among the various newsrooms in the news-site ecosystem is extraordinarily narrow' (2016: 15).

As this short review shows, empirical results on issue-attention dynamics in a hybrid media system are not only sparse, but also inconsistent. While some studies found less pronounced spikes for attention dynamics in blogs and discussion fora (Cacciatore et al., 2012; Lörcher & Neverla, 2015), others observed more volatile dynamics with abrupt and massive bursts of attention (Buhl et al., 2016; Neuman et al., 2014; Pang, 2013) in social media than in traditional media. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to further explore under which conditions we should expect which patterns with a theoretical agent-based model.

### **The agent-based model of the media arena (AMMA)**

The approach of agent-based modelling and simulation has proven particularly valuable for theory development. The idea is to grow macroscopic patterns from the bottom up in a virtual society to find plausible explanations: 'If you didn't grow it, you didn't explain it'. (Epstein, 2006: 51) This way, agent-based computer models allow for experimenting with theoretical assumptions and help to understand what fundamental mechanisms drive the dynamics leading to empirically observed phenomena (Hedström, 2005).

In the scope of this approach, we can explore issue-attention cycles as macro patterns dynamically arising from the interactions of societal actors in the public sphere.

In the following, a condensed description of the original agent-based model of the media arena (AMMA) as developed and reported by Waldherr (2012, 2014) is given.<sup>1</sup> The model integrates the main drivers of news waves as identified by empirical research. It is not meant to mirror a specific media system or a specific issue, but to represent fundamental principles of public communication in a virtual media system. The following description is structured along the model's core assumptions for version two of the model as this model proved sufficient to generate the typical issue-attention cycle. This model version contains only journalists and neglects the role of issue sponsors who seek to influence attention dynamics by initiating (pseudo-)events.

*The media arena is a public communication space with limited carrying capacity.* The basic setup of the model is chosen according to the ideas of public arena models (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). The media arena is modelled as a public space where 100 randomly distributed agents (*journalists*) interact with each other and with objects (three *topics* and a random number of *events*). Communication in this space is global, i.e. everything that happens can be perceived by everybody. The space is restricted in size and in the number of agents and objects it encompasses to symbolize the limited carrying capacity of the media arena. It is only two-dimensional, but wrapped to a torus, so that top and bottom as well as left and right edges are connected with each other. It represents a symbolic topic space where proximity signifies thematic similarity between topics and events, and thematic preferences of agents concerning topics and events. To keep the model simple, it contains only three topics.

*Time proceeds on a discrete time scale in reporting days.* In the simulation, the main procedures of the model are repeated many times in a specific order until the simulation stops. One such loop of actions is called a time step and in the AMMA represents a reporting day with the following actions: A random number of events happen and are randomly attributed to a topic. Then, the journalists move around. Each journalist chooses one interesting event, and reports it.

*The higher the news value of an event, the higher is the probability of journalists reporting the event.* A core assumption of news selection theory is that events have inherent characteristics making them more or less attractive to the mass media. The different news values attributed to events by journalists



are explained by news factors such as proximity, conflict, or prominence (for a comprehensive review see Eilders, 2006). In the AMMA, events are given abstract news values indicating their reporting probability: The higher the news value of an event, the higher are its chances to be reported.

Kepplinger and Habermaier (1995) have shown that the news value of an event is not independent from the topic it is attributed to. Therefore, the AMMA also incorporates topics, which are defined as larger categories of meaning. To distinguish news values of topics from news values of events, the notions topic value and event value are used. For reasons of abstraction, one event is solely attributed to one topic in the AMMA. The arithmetic mean of event value and the respective topic value make up the news value of the event.

*The more (less) journalists report a topic, the more the related topic-value increases (decreases).* The influence of topic values on news values is modelled in a positive feedback loop. According to Kepplinger's and Habermaier's (1995) theory of key events, it is assumed that topic values are not static, but develop dynamically over time. Key events gathering a lot of media attention heighten the value of associated topic categories and lead to more reports of related events. The underlying mechanism is intermedia agenda-setting (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008): Journalists observe each other and often follow the reporting choices of their colleagues.

*Journalists do not report events with news values below their attention threshold for the related topic.* Threshold models of public attention (Elmelund-Praestekaer & Wien, 2008; Krassa, 1988; Neuman, 1990) state that there are perception thresholds in public attention. New issues remain unnoticed until they reach a critical 'takeoff point' (Neuman, 1990: 172). In the AMMA, these thresholds are modelled as individual attention thresholds of journalists towards topics. They define the minimal required news value of events of a topic to gather the journalist's attention and be considered for reporting.

*A journalist's attention threshold for a topic increases (decreases) with each day (not) reporting that topic.* Collective attention towards issues tends to exhaust after a certain timespan (Downs, 1972; Luhmann, 1970; Neuman, 1990; Vasterman, 2005). Accordingly, in the AMMA, attention thresholds of journalists adapt dynamically over time: The threshold of a reported topic rises logarithmically while the thresholds of unreported topics fall exponentially.

*Journalists prefer reporting topics they are closer to.* With this assumption news bias is introduced into the model: If journalists have to select between several interesting events of high news value, they prefer the closest of these events. Communication researchers repeatedly found that individual attitudes of journalists play into the selection and framing of news (Entman, 2007; Hagen, 1993; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). As journalists move around

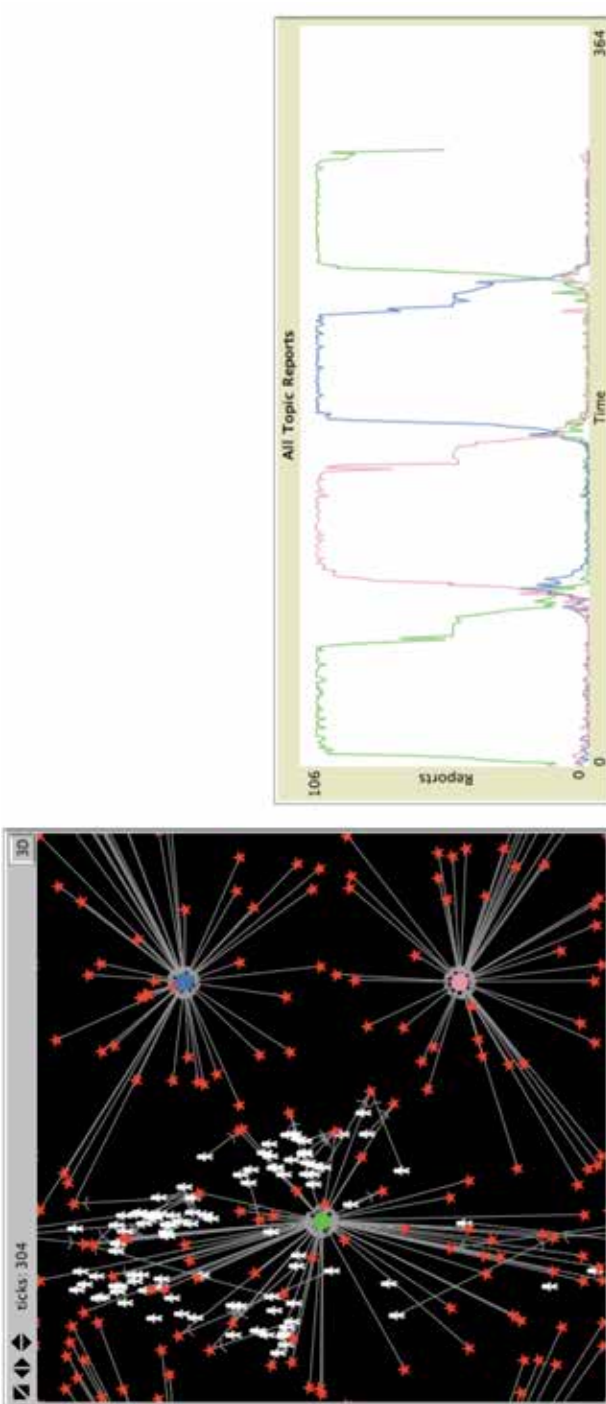


Figure 13.1. Stylized attention dynamics in the traditional media arena

Notes: NetLogo model view of the AMMA as developed by Waldherr (2014) with 100 journalists choosing events to report. The plot shows emerging news waves on three competing topics (green, blue, and red). Topics are placed at equal distance in a two-dimensional topic space on a torus. Circles represent topics, stars events and persons journalists. Links between events and topics signify topic attribution. Links between persons and events indicate reports. Variables and parameters are set according to version 2, experiment 2 (unobtrusive issues) of the AMMA (see Waldherr, 2012).

during the simulation, these topic preferences are not static, but might change over time and can be interpreted as professionalization effects of journalists in specific fields.

*Journalists differ in their adoption speed of rising topics.* Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) conferred the concept of opinion leadership to the media system: They found some newspapers to have a pioneering role regarding new issues and others following up later. The AMMA adopts this idea and combines it with Rogers' (2003) widely known diffusion typology, which also estimates empirical ratios for five types of innovation adopters according to a normal distribution. For reasons of abstraction, Rogers' five categories are merged to only three types of journalists: *pioneers* (sixteen per cent, comprising Rogers' innovators and early adopters), *leaders* (thirty-four per cent, early majority), and *followers* (fifty per cent, late majority and laggards). The three types of journalists differ in their speed as well as in the height and development of their attention thresholds. Pioneers move faster than the other journalists, and their attention thresholds are generally lower, which allows them to pick up new trends faster than all other journalists. Followers move more slowly, and their attention thresholds are generally higher so that they are the last to report on an upcoming issue. Leaders are the default type of journalists with medium speed and attention thresholds.

As has been shown in previous work (Waldherr, 2012, 2014), these assumptions are sufficient to generate issue-attention cycles of the typical pattern that have been found in numerous empirical studies (cf. Figure 13.1). In simulation experiments of the original model, heterogeneity of speakers in the media arena proved as particularly critical for generating this typical pattern. Therefore, it is worthwhile to further explore issue-attention dynamics under the conditions of ever increasing heterogeneity in a hybrid media system.

## Extending the AMMA

To account for the hybridization of the media arena, we add two major extensions to the model, which we explore step by step.

*Step 1: Increase carrying capacity of the arena and heterogeneity of agents.* We increase the number of agents in the arena to increase its carrying capacity. In their big data study of twenty-nine US issues, Neuman et al. (2014: 199) found that social media posts on specific topics outnumbered traditional media documents by a ratio of three to one. This gives us a rough empirical anchor to increase our number of agents in the media arena by 300 more agents in addition to the 100 journalists in the original AMMA.

These agents are also designed to be more heterogeneous with respect to their main attributes. The levels of attention thresholds and speed are no longer strictly tied to specific types of journalists, but distributed randomly according to a normal distribution.<sup>2</sup> Like Rogers (2003), we just assume that these traits are normally distributed. Apart from these changes, all agents in the model behave exactly as the journalists described above.

For reasons of abstraction, we also keep the discrete time scale of the model. However, the pace of public communication has increased dramatically with social media and online news. Thus, it is not reasonable anymore to assume that one time step equals a reporting day. It rather represents an hour or even only a couple of minutes.

*Step 2: Introduce heterogeneous vision.* In addition to the changes of step one, we now also vary vision among agents as another source of heterogeneity. In the original AMMA, every agent is able to perceive events in the whole arena (global vision). In this scenario, the majority of 300 agents (seventy-five per cent) are modelled as individual citizens with restricted local vision. They can only perceive and report events occurring in their neighbourhood up to a radius of four patches. At the same time, 100 (twenty-five per cent) journalists act with global vision, perceiving and potentially reporting every event that is happening in the NetLogo world.<sup>3</sup>

With this variation of vision, we account for the fact that many non-journalistic actors in the public arena (such as bloggers or micro-bloggers) may specialize on specific topics that they report on. They may not monitor the whole topic space the way journalists of mainstream general-interest media do.

Note, however, that in this scenario we only vary vision, not outreach of agents. Topic values are still updated collectively, i.e. each report, no matter of who is counted in the collective reporting value for the topic, and this topic value partly determines the news values of related events. The news values, in turn, are modelled as objective event attributes, and not only subjective views. Thus, we assume that there is a collective understanding about what topics are newsworthy at a specific point in time. This takes into account that citizens are informed through the mass media about what the main topics at a certain point in time are. Moreover, the social web offers popularity cues such as trending topics, views, shares, and likes that allow agents to observe the choices of others.

In turn, individual agents with local vision are allowed to influence topic values with the same weight as journalistic agents with global vision. This acknowledges the fact that gatekeeping is no longer an exclusive task of journalists, but a collective effort (Friedrich, Keyling & Brosius, 2016). For

example, Welbers and colleagues report evidence for an increasing influence of audience metrics on journalistic news selection criteria (Welbers, Van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruigrok & Schaper, 2016). Analysing the print and online editions of five national newspapers from the Netherlands over the course of six months, they found that storylines of the most-viewed articles had higher chances to be subsequently reported.

Despite the increasing audience influence, the fundamental mechanism of gatekeeping and news selection is still working, Harcup and O'Neill (2016) conclude from an up-to-date literature review on news values in the digital age. Also, bloggers and social media users have to decide what posts to read, to like, to share, or to comment on. Often their selection criteria do not differ much from those of journalists (Eilders, Geißler, Hallermayer, Noghero & Schnurr, 2010; Wendelin, Engelmann & Neubarth, 2017), although there are some specific criteria that enhance 'shareability' on social media (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016: 7), such as humour or irony (see also Büttner, 2015).

Also, the main assumptions concerning the agents' adaptive behaviour and self-reinforcing mechanisms are still appropriate according to recent studies (Büttner, 2015; Lotan et al., 2011). So far, there is no evidence suggesting that co-orientation and issue fatigue have vanished in the digital world. Furthermore, there are reasons to assume that ubiquitous popularity cues facilitate adaptive behaviour of journalists and other communicators in online public spaces.

### Patterns of issue attention in a hybrid media system

In this section, the results of a series of simulation experiments with the extended versions of the AMMA are reported. As we do not have empirical information on the exact distribution of attention thresholds, we experiment with the parameters of the normal distribution. Thus, we vary *mean* and *standard deviation* of the minimal attention thresholds for both scenarios of the extended AMMA.

For the *mean of minimal attention thresholds*, we define three levels. The medium level of  $m=0.14$  corresponds to the mean in the original AMMA, based on Rogers' (2003) assumed distribution of innovation adopters. We vary the level slightly to examine how sensitive the system reacts to a change of the level of attention thresholds. The low value of  $m=0.1$  corresponds to the leader value in the original AMMA, whereas the high value of  $m=0.2$  corresponds to the follower value in the original AMMA. The mean level of minimal thresholds has to be interpreted in a sense that the average

agent never takes notice of events with a news value below the threshold. He only pays attention to events that promise a certain probability of being reported by the other agents.

The *standard deviation of minimal thresholds* determines how diverse the population of agents is with respect to the level of attention thresholds. We vary the standard deviation between a lower value of  $sd=0.05$  to model a more homogeneous population and a higher value of  $sd=0.1$  to generate a more heterogeneous population.

Varying those two parameters in the described way results in six design points for each scenario of the simulation study. Figure 13.1 shows the typical patterns of public attention dynamics for the three competing issues in the model for every design point. Each coloured line indicates the simulated number of reports of an issue over the course of time. The typical patterns have been chosen from a total of ten runs for each design point to be able to check whether patterns change significantly due to stochastic influences. However, this was not the case. Instead, we find that the patterns of attention dynamics change considerably with the changes in parameters. Each combination of parameters yields a uniquely different and stable typical pattern.

*Scenario 1: Increased carrying capacity and heterogeneity of agents.* Concerning length and shape of the issue cycles, pattern (a) in a population with high attention thresholds and high threshold diversity corresponds most closely to the cycles of the original AMMA (cf. Figure 13.2). However, due to the increased heterogeneity of attention thresholds the waves develop more smoothly and manifest a decreased slope. Also, dynamics are more volatile in the second stage of each cycle.

This basic pattern is also stable when decreasing the level of thresholds to a medium (b) or low (c) level, but volatility rises considerably with decreased attention thresholds. As a result, the models produce longer cycles of issue attention with two (b) or even three (c) waves of attention. The pattern of design point (c) most closely resembles the stylized pattern of a social media hype proposed by Pang (2013) with three subsequent peaks after the first boom of attention in response to a triggering event.

If we also decrease threshold diversity, the basic pattern of competing issue-attention cycles is still observed for the medium (e) and low (f) threshold level. However, under these conditions the increased homogeneity of agents leads to more abrupt and steep bursts of attention, while at the same time volatility stays high. For condition (f) with both a low threshold level and low diversity attention cycles are also shorter compared to the corresponding design point (c) with high threshold diversity.

If low threshold diversity is combined with a high threshold level (d) no pronounced waves of issue attention emerge. Over the course of the simulation, no topic is able to absorb major parts of the population of agents into the self-reinforcing dynamics. Rather all topics are reported quite constantly with random event-driven day-to-day changes and only small spikes of attention, all of them attracting less than a quarter of the population of agents.

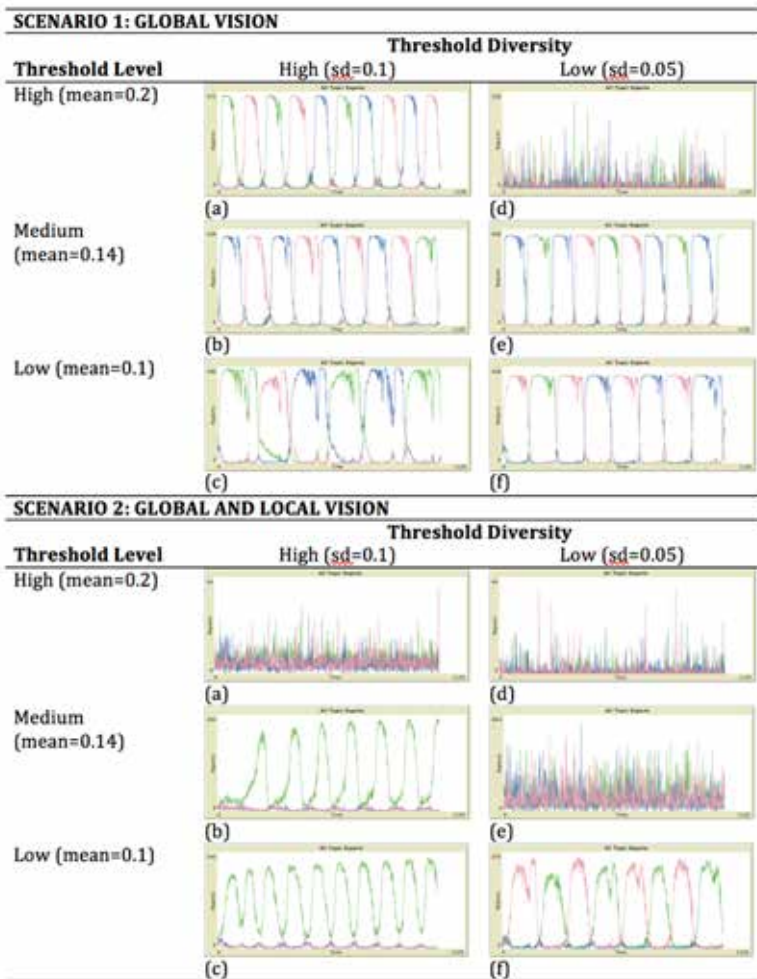


Figure 13.2. Patterns of issue attention in a hybrid media system  
 Notes: Plots show the typical pattern of issue dynamics of three competing topics (green, blue, and red) for each experimental condition. Each simulation runs for a total of 1000 ticks. The typical patterns have been chosen from a total of ten runs for each design point.

*Scenario 2: Introduce local and global vision of agents.* The alternately recurring waves of attentions for the three different topics that have been characteristic for scenario 1 are no longer observed in scenario 2 (see figure 2). Here condition (a) with high thresholds and high diversity shows a pattern of issue dynamics without waves of attention. All topics are reported with quite the same probability over the course of the simulation. Occurring spikes of attention are short and generally only attract approximately up to five per cent of the population.

When also lowering diversity of the thresholds (d), the general level of attention even decreases and shows less spikes of attention. A similar pattern is observed under condition (e) with medium threshold level and low diversity. Here, the general level of attention to the topics rises, but explicit waves do not occur either. Thus, local vision combined with high attention thresholds and low heterogeneity makes waves of shared public attention less likely to appear.

On the contrary, medium (b) to low (c) attention thresholds and high threshold diversity generates waves of issue attention again. However, waves only occur for one topic with the most advantageous starting condition, and they expose a slightly positive trend. Each new wave is of slightly higher amplitude than the preceding one. As the agents only perceive events happening within their local range of vision, only the topic with the most agents initially staying close to it has chances to profit from the self-reinforcing dynamics eventually leading to a wave.

A less extreme, but similar pattern is produced under condition (f) with low threshold level and low threshold diversity. Here, agents only hop between two topics over the course of the simulation. The waves itself are more volatile than in conditions (b) and (c), many of them showing two subsequent peaks of attention in one cycle.

For the three scenarios generating waves of collective attention under the conditions of a hybrid media system, it is worth looking into the specific patterns of journalists' and citizens' attention (see Figure 13.3). Across these three experimental design points, journalists are leading uprising issue attention in the first stage of the attention cycle. They are closely followed by citizen reports soon outperforming journalists in the number of reports. This is consistent with findings showing that the bulk of communication on blogs and in social media is follow-up communication on issues brought up by the media first (e.g. Leskovec, Backstrom & Kleinberg, 2009; Nuernbergk, 2014).

The only experimental condition favourable to citizens leading mass media attention is a combination of low attention thresholds with high threshold diversity (c). Here, we can observe that citizen reports lead most uprisings of issue attention closely before the mass media. Under all conditions, the mass media lose interest in an issue first. This corroborates



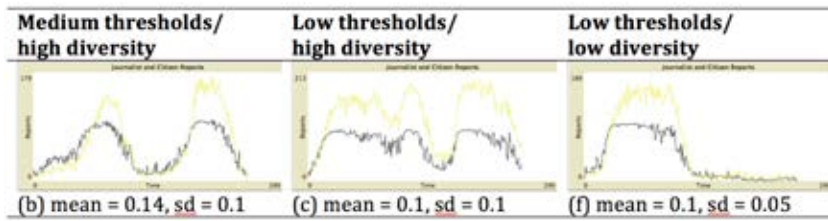


Figure 13.3. Patterns of journalists' and citizens' attention in a hybrid media system  
 Notes: Plots show the typical pattern of issue dynamics of journalists' (black) and citizens' reports (yellow) for three experimental condition in the hybrid media scenario (2; global and local vision of agents). Each simulation runs for a total of 250 ticks. The typical patterns have been chosen from a total of ten runs for each design point.

findings of a Twitter study by Copeland, Hasell, and Bimber (2016), who empirically found a considerably longer issue-attention span of tweeting citizens than of the mass media.

## Discussion

Results of the simulation study show that there is no simple answer to the question of which pattern of attention dynamics to expect in a hybrid media system. A whole spectrum of patterns emerges across the different design points of the simulation experiments. Not only the structural changes to the model matter for attention dynamics. The patterns are also critically influenced by the level and the diversity of attention thresholds, i.e. how actively users share news and how heterogeneous vs mainstreamed users are in their decisions to share.

Some generalizations may be tentatively drawn from this first qualitative exploration of the model. They are formulated as hypotheses that will need empirical investigation in the future:

*H1: Increased heterogeneity of agents leads to increased volatility of issue dynamics.*

*H2: Lower attention thresholds lead to increased volatility of issue dynamics.*

Either one or the other condition applies to all of the scenarios of the extended AMMA. All simulated patterns expose higher volatility, but in a variety of patterns. Volatility generally rises with increasing heterogeneity of agents and lowering of attention thresholds. Both conditions are very

characteristic of the conditions on social media platforms such as Facebook. The high number of users necessarily increases heterogeneity of actors participating in public and semi-public discussion, and the ease of sharing messages and popularity cues such as likes with friends effectively lowers attention thresholds for issues. This leads to more positive feedback loops of attention resulting in higher overall volatility of issue attention.

*H3: Higher levels of attention thresholds lead to less volatile issue cycles, and above a certain point minimize the probability of waves occurring at all.*

The occurrence of waves obviously highly depends on the activity of social media users. It will be interesting to further explore the exact tipping points in the model, where the system stops to produce waves. How sensitively users react, how eager they are to share critically influences how explosively the overall system reacts. In this respect, future research has to more deeply explore the specific affordances of social media platforms: What prerequisites do users need to communicate on a platform? What popularity cues are offered by the platform? And how do filter algorithms influence which messages get shared with whom? These specific conditions are likely to produce specific patterns of attention dynamics. In addition, there might also be cultural differences in user activity on social media in different countries, which might explain differences in empirically observed issue attention dynamics.

*H4: Global vision facilitates adaptive behaviour leading to recurring hypes.*

This is what we experience in the online news ecosystem (Buhl et al., 2016) or on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, which offer a number of popularity cues to users to enhance a shared understanding of what is newsworthy or worthy to be shared (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016; Lin, Keegan, Margolin & Lazer, 2014). Global vision allows communicators to quickly change their focus of attention and hop from one topic to the other. Especially steep bursts of attention are to be expected in quite homogeneous populations such as the online news ecosystem or Twitter publics that are dominated by journalists.

*H5: Local vision combined with higher thresholds and lower diversity reduces the probability of waves.*

These conditions may be characteristic of the blogosphere, where actors focus continuously on a topic and are less susceptible to the activities of

others, such as the results of Cacciatore et al. (2012) as well as Lörcher and Neverla (2015) suggest. In its extreme specification, this condition is a representation of a fragmented public with no common issues.

*H6: Local vision combined with lower thresholds and higher diversity leads to a lock-in of attention on certain topics.*

This phenomenon might be described as a collective ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser, 2011). Local vision leads agents to stick to their favourite topics. Combined with a generally low level of attention thresholds and higher threshold diversity in the population this may lead to ever repeating waves of attention to the same topics or a restricted set of topics (such as the European refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016). This pattern may be fostered by personalized algorithms, which determine the individual user feeds of posts on social media.

In this series of simulation experiments, it could be shown that the level and diversity of attention thresholds are sensitive parameters in the model. Surprisingly, all of the observed patterns currently theorized and observed by media and communication scholars (such as increased volatility, abrupt bursts, multi-modal peaks, and fragmentation) could be generated with the same set of assumptions by only slightly varying the level and diversity of attention thresholds. More sensitivity analyses should follow in the future to identify the exact tipping points where the system experiences phase transitions from one macro-pattern to the other. Also, it has to be further examined whether other parameters such as agent speed or range of vision critically influence model behaviour.

More assumptions of the model may be adapted for future studies. An important extension would be to introduce social network ties between agents to represent the networked public sphere. This implies that agents will be only influenced by reporting decisions of their link neighbours at a single time step. In such a model, the influence of different network topologies on attention dynamics could be explored.

Future empirical research should more explicitly investigate the link between attention thresholds of communicators and resulting attention dynamics in online and social media. Also, more comparative research between specific public arenas with certain characteristics is needed. This also includes comparisons of different social media platforms as well as cultural contexts. Big data from different social media platforms in different countries could be systematically compared to simulation runs of the model to develop micro-explanations of the empirically observed macro-patterns.

## Notes

1. The model is implemented in *NetLogo*, an open-source modeling environment for building agent-based simulation models, based on the computer language Logo. The tool is available at: <http://ccl.northwestern.edu/netlogo>. The *NetLogo* model of the AMMA and a detailed documentation are available at: [www.openabm.org/model/4110](http://www.openabm.org/model/4110)
2. Speed is normally distributed with mean = 1 and sd = 1. Minimum attention thresholds are normally distributed with mean = 0.1 or 0.2 and sd = 0.05 or 0.1 depending on the settings of the simulation experiment (see figure 2).
3. Here we draw again on the 3 to 1 ratio reported by Neuman et al. (2014).

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### About the author

**Annie Waldherr** is Assistant Professor for digitized public spheres at the University of Münster. In 2011, she received her PhD for her work on the dynamics of media attention from Freie Universität Berlin, where she was also research associate from 2010 to 2016. Before, she researched and taught at the University of Hohenheim. Her major research interests are in political communication, online communication, dynamics of the public sphere, and computational social science. Her work is published in international journals such as the *Journal of Communication*, *Social Science Computer Review*, and the *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*.





## 14. You won't believe how co-dependent they are

Or: Media hype and the interaction of news media, social media, and the user

*Vivian Roese*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

Social media have reshaped the way we consume information. Their influence is even growing as users of social media outlets grow to retrieve their news from them. Classical news media attempting to reach their audience thus have to adapt to the rules of social media outlets, and therefore to their algorithm and aspects of shareability. At the same time, regular users are able to create what Roese calls accidental media hypes. She illustrates the co-dependency between social media, news outlets and the users. Furthermore, while the notion 'media hype' is often associated with scandalous news and high news value, Roese demonstrates that an accidental media hype can be triggered by any kind of emotion, regardless of its actual news value.

**Keywords:** social media, news media, shareability, viral potential, algorithm, accidental media hypes

Social media have gained in importance to a high degree over the last years, and their influence is even growing. Other than classical mass media such as print media, radio or TV, social media enable the user to interact and communicate, to create and share content digitally. This main characteristic allows regular users to create media hypes comparable to news waves generated by news media.

How do social media, news media and the public interact? How co-dependent are they, and what are the consequences for each party?

In the following, the impact of social media on both news media and the regular user will be addressed, before introducing the viral potential of user-generated content and the structure of accidental media hypes. Aspects of social media as news providers will be introduced, as well as the limitations of social media through their algorithm. Finally, a conclusion will be made about the question how co-dependent social media, news media, and the users really are and might possibly be in the future.

## How social media changed news media

Imagine two shops next to each other in a random street, selling the same products: One shop owner relies on staying inside waiting for customers to visit his store whenever they have a question or want to buy anything. The other shop owner is out there on the boulevard where everyone meets, selling some of his products there, talking to the people and inviting them to come and visit his shop for more: It goes without saying which shop owner is more likely to succeed.

Now, if you regard a newspaper as this shop, its news articles as products and the boulevard as social media, it should come as no surprise that social media are a vital part of news media business.

Social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, or Instagram are the market places where gossip, breaking news and media hypes spread. Facebook alone has had 1.55 billion active users in 2016, each spending at least twenty minutes a day reading the latest news in their timeline (Statista, 2016a; ComScore, 2015). This exceeds the population of China or India, and would make Facebook the biggest country in the world if it were a country. What is more, these populations are growing: The number of active social network users worldwide is expected to be around 2.72 billion by the year 2019, about a third of the world population (Statista, 2016b).

This has not always been the case, however: Years ago, social networks were often regarded as optional platforms for RSS feeds. Today, social media rather function as the meeting place where the audience is to be *found* by news media. They are platforms where the audience exchange news and show each other the latest pieces of information they are willing to share and recommend. Providing such a meeting place with high connective activity is what distinguishes social media from conventional media (Van Dijck, 2013: 62 f.).

Consuming the latest news and updates of friends in a newsfeed like that of Facebook, for example, has thus dramatically changed the way users

gather information, as well as how journalists write articles and address their audience.

## **How social media changed the user**

Social media are a powerful tool for all types of group dynamics and crowd psychology. They profoundly changed the way the world is connected, make human behaviour visible in an online context and empower regular people to be the media themselves. At the same time, the dark side of this power is that gossip and lies can be spread to a destructive extent: The World Economic Forum listed digital misinformation as one of the biggest threats to global society (World Economic Forum, 2016). Also, the speed in which news are now distributed is historically unparalleled (Ibid.).

Taking a look back to the days when there was no such thing as social media at all: How did we get access to the latest news, breaking news, or simply gossip? How long did it take until a message made its way from sender to receiver through media in general? Without social media, the audience largely depended on classical news media, such as print, radio, or TV. Before the access to internet was common at all, breaking news were usually not delivered to the audience instantly, but when the next newspaper issue or news broadcast was due. Even teletext news were quicker. In fact, classical print newspapers still today face the dilemma of distributing the latest news only one day after they were covered by online media, radio, or TV (Büttner, 2009: 19).

Furthermore, one major aspect is shareability: This does not only mean that the technical requirements given by social media enable information to spread in the first place. Moreover, it means that the user is an active carrier of information, engaged in sharing and recommending content to friends in their network. It is the user, as some sort of private gatekeeper, who decides how newsworthy and shareworthy a piece of information in their newsfeed is. This is what makes content go viral: Shareability is the number one currency in social media, and a major ingredient for creating a media hype. Thus, the regular user is able to participate in the production and diffusion of news (Lee & Ma, 2012: 331). Everyone can publish their own thoughts without any institutionalized gatekeepers (Veletsianos, 2016: 74). This theoretically enables every user of social media to actively create and influence media storms and media hype: They are all connected, as part of a network where news can spread like a virus.

## The viral potential of accidental media hypes

To outline the viral potential of information posted in social media, Primbs exemplifies: Take one message and post it to 1,000 subscribers. Apart from the fact that it is very unlikely to reach all of the 1,000 readers due to filtering algorithms, in the best of cases, your message will be read by an audience of 1,000 people. If this audience had only 100 followers each and shared or retweeted it, your message would be read – again, in the best of cases – by 100,000 people, and so on (Primbs, 2016: 62).

However, shareworthy content can deviate from classical agenda-setting or journalistic standards; or, as Matejic puts it: 'Far from being critically discreet about what they share, the general population are in it for the LOLs, the awe factor, the weird-but-true and freaky curiosities of life' (Matejic, 2015: 107). In effect, there are indeed countless cases of Facebook entries or Tweets made by the average user that have gone viral, shared by thousands, until the incident was even covered in the international news media. They rather happen to become media hypes, without initially intending to.

In media sciences, the notion 'media hype' is generally associated with that of the political media scandal, mostly evoking emotions such as outrage and protest. Also, it is commonly assumed that the topics of media hypes are rather relevant and of high news value (Wien & Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009: 183 f.).

However, in recent studies, I have analysed the phenomenon of natural, user-generated news waves that I call 'accidental media hypes' (Büttner, 2015). Apparently, they can be triggered by any kind of deep emotion, not just outrage and protest. Also, they are closely linked to the impact social media have on them, providing the breeding ground for these hypes, and reinforcing them.

In effect, provided this user-generated content triggers deep emotion, it has the potential of going viral and becoming a media hype – regardless of meeting journalistic agenda-setting standards (Ibid.: 342). Moreover, average users may have even more power than marketers with expensive viral campaigns: The majority of social media users is more likely to support the 'honest user next door' rather than marketing campaigns where the user senses that their support is solely a means to an end. Thus, viral marketers seek to even hide the product behind the message they seed in social media, in the hope that it will go viral as naturally as a media hype that happens by chance (Ibid.: 313).

## Everyday stories

To exemplify, platforms like 'Love What Matters' invite users to actively share what has recently moved them the most. One of these everyday stories went viral in 2016: A simple snapshot of an elderly husband trying to pick the right make-up colour for his elderly wife. This information would have probably never been covered in classical news or news agencies.

However, since it was posted on Facebook on 17 February 2016, this picture has received 1.3 million likes, almost 490,000 shares, and about 96,000 comments. The majority of comments revolved around users being deeply moved (Facebook, Love What Matters, 2016). When journalists realized this seemingly meaningless snapshot did matter to a large audience worldwide, even causing a social media hype, it was subsequently covered by international media (Breaking News, 2016). This news coverage accelerated the media hype; however, it was the user who created it, without necessarily intending to.

## The flower bucket hype

The picture of the elderly couple gone viral is one example, but can, at the same time, be explained with public interest. In my studies, however, I focused on one of the biggest early social media hypes in Germany that appeared rather peculiar: an internet phenomenon that neither was of high news value, nor was the actual news of public interest, nor did it evoke outrage and protest. It dealt with a meme called 'Blumenkübel-Hype' ('flower bucket hype'), which shall be introduced below.

## The story and its viral journey

The news of this hype was merely that a flower bucket had fallen over outside a retirement home in a small village in Germany in August 2010 (*Münstersche Zeitung*, 2013). I chose this rather un-newsworthy issue so that the success of the media hype could be explained not just in terms of relevance, and so that I could thus examine the nature of viral dynamics that defy obvious explanations.

This news article was first published online in a regional newspaper and soon spread on Twitter. From there, it developed such powerful dynamics that it became a media hype that kept the entire German media landscape

busy for days. On Twitter, this message evolved to be the fourth most requested Trending Topic on Twitter worldwide (Meedia, 2016).

How can a message this irrelevant and non-scandalous become such a big issue? After all, it defied common agenda-setting and journalistic standards – and was never meant to be a media hype or an internet meme in the first place. There are several factors, yet the basic reason is social media, not necessarily news media, accelerating the hype.

The incident itself appears like a farce that actually unmasks the tragicomic mechanisms with which local papers sometimes attempt to draw attention to their products in times of newspaper crises: 2 August 2010, one of two flower buckets fell over outside a retirement home in Neuenkirchen, a small town in western Germany. No one was injured, there were no eye-witnesses, and no one knows how it happened. The editor-in-chief of the local paper *Münstersche Zeitung*, however, regarded this as newsworthy: After all, the police were involved, and the paper had pages to fill. The subsequent article bears the headline ‘Big flower bucket destroyed’, and is written as if it were a shocking news report of national importance (*Münstersche Zeitung*, 2013).

The author thus used the exaggerating means of the yellow press, attempting to enrage the reader and draw attention to a paper that was struggling to survive (Büttner, 2015: 292). Contrary to popular belief, these were not the actions of the rather inexperienced intern who had written the article, instead it was a deliberate decision by the editor-in-chief to ‘jazz the story up’, as he admitted in an expert interview (Büttner, 2015: 292).

Unfortunately, his intentions backfired: As soon as this story was published online, users started to ridicule it. First, a local news reporter neutrally retweeted the article on Twitter, which again was retweeted by a follower ironically titling it ‘Top News of the Day’ (Twitter, 2016a). An influential journalist eventually retweeted the message to his then 10,000 followers (Twitter, 2010b). This functioned as the tipping point for the subsequent hype (Gladwell, 2002). From then on, users on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube defied and made fun of the way the press attempted to manipulate them: The news was met with amusement. At the same time, they evoked some degree of protest, resulting in irony and the fun of outdoing each other’s jokes. On 5 August 2010, the hashtag ‘#Blumenkübel’ was the nation’s number one trending topic on Twitter, and ranked number four in trending topics worldwide. Ironically, when the news media realized there was a hype going on in the social media that was making fun of the way they often report, they reported on it.

From that moment, the social media hype made it into the classical news media. Marketers also exploited the hype to advertise their products, which decelerated the dynamics in the same way as extensive news coverage did (Meedia, 2016).

### The structure of this media hype

In general, this accidental media hype lasted about three weeks, from 3-21 August 2010. This three-week period supports the findings of Kwak et al. and Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer regarding the duration of media hypes (Kwak et al., 2010: 585 f.; Wien & Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009: 195 f.). However, the notion ‘flower bucket’ has also become a synonym for irrelevant news among the German Twitter scene.

After reproducing each step of the media hype with a detailed discourse analysis, an attempt was made to reconstruct the stages of this hype in a diagram (Jäger, 2001: 99).

The hype cycle describing the stages of the ‘flower bucket hype’ revealed the following development (Figure 14.1):

A diagram of the page impressions between 3-6 August 2010 concerning the article revealed the same dynamics as this hype cycle (Büttner, 2015: 271). Moreover, a diagram of the search term ‘Blumenkübel’ on Google again showed the same shape (Ibid.).

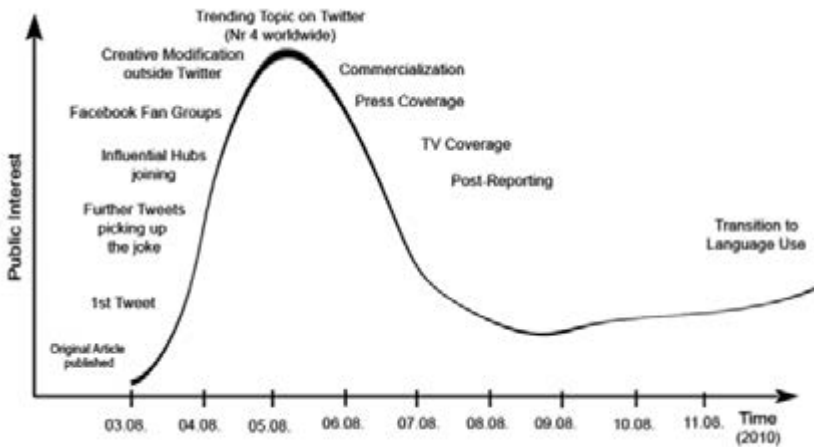


Figure 14.1. Reconstructed hype cycle of the ‘flower bucket hype’



The shapes of these hype cycles have a high degree of similarity to the Gartner Hype Cycle (Fenn & Raskino, 2008). According to this theory, every innovation goes through five stages (Ibid.: 15): The 'innovation trigger'; the 'peak of inflated expectations'; the 'trough of disillusionment'; the 'slope of enlightenment'; and the 'plateau of productivity' (Ibid.: 8 ff.). According to my studies, it is thus likely that an accidental media hype can develop into the shape of the Gartner Hype Cycle.

### **What the experts say**

In order to compare theoretic results with the practical expertise of news makers and creators of media hypes, qualitative guideline-based expert interviews were subsequently conducted in this study. The experts were both involved and uninvolved in this news wave. All of them stated that this hype happened out of sheer coincidence, otherwise it would *not* have been this successful. This corresponds with the observations made reconstructing the shape of this specific hype cycle: As soon as the public media and PR firms tried to get involved and benefit from the hype, it thwarted its dynamics.

All of them said that irony, sarcasm, and mockery are common stylistic devices in social media in order to criticize, as was the case in the 'flower bucket hype' (Büttner, 2015: 318 f.). This supports the findings of Maynard and Greenwood, which state that user-generated content is frequently enriched with irony and sarcasm (Maynard & Greenwood, 2014: 4238 f.). Moreover, according to Pehlivan et al., irony can even help make a subversive message go viral in social media in a way that a direct message cannot. Thus, they speak of viral irony (Pehlivan et al., 2013: 172).

### **The result of the study**

As a result, an accidental media hype that diffuses in social media must not necessarily be of high news value or of a scandalous nature in order to become an influential news wave. Moreover, a major trigger to a media hype is that the subject matter must evoke strong emotions. However, it can be triggered by more emotions than mere outrage – as is the case in scandals – but also by positive reactions, such as being highly amused, or deeply moved. In effect, a joke or irony may also trigger emotions such as amusement, identification can evoke pride of belonging to a group, or good

news can bring happiness or relief. After all, people have always liked to share exciting news with their friends and neighbours.

This supports the results of a psychological study by Berger and Milkman: According to them, positive content as well as content evoking high arousal is shared more often than negative content or low-arousal news (2012: 192 f.). Positive news that trigger deep emotions can thus have even *more* viral potential of becoming a media hype than a scandal does.

Also, in times of user-generated content, re-assessing hitherto agenda-setting standards should be considered, as should acknowledging the power the reader has through mutual communication via social media. In effect, to a certain degree, social media offer more democracy, and a platform for each user to have their say.

### **Social media as news providers**

To the user, the lines between social media and news media seem to be blurring: According to the Digital News Report, the percentage of people drawing their news from social media is generally increasing, especially among eighteen to twenty-four year olds (Digital News Report, 2015a). For this report, the behaviour of social media news consumption was analysed in twelve countries, that is USA, UK, Germany, France, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Brazil, Japan and Australia (Digital News Report, 2015b). Evaluating data from four years, the report says social media are the only news provider growing rapidly, other than TV, online, or print – even though they are, at the same time, regarded as the least reliable sources of news (Digital News Report, 2015c). The most popular social network for receiving, sharing, and discussing news right now is Facebook, with forty-one per cent accessing this platform for news and sixty-five per cent for information in general. Facebook is even growing through constant innovation, and is YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Google+ are following suit (Ibid.).

However, social media networks such as Facebook are just the places where people meet. If that place should one day be somewhere else, then this ranking may look completely different.

In terms of referrals and engagement, Facebook and Twitter are today the most important social media platforms for news. However, while more than sixty per cent of Twitter users visit Twitter to actively search for the latest news, Facebook users tend to bump into news on their newsfeed while actually checking what their friends are doing (Ibid.).

In my study, I too asked the experts about the growing importance of Facebook and Twitter as sources for news, and whether these platforms could ever be compared to a public news agency (Büttner, 2015: 318). All but one stated that social media could never be compared to a news agency as the latter gives confirmed, valid information. Social media and their users, they said, did not have to meet journalistic standards and thus often provide unreliable gossip rather than facts (Ibid.). However, in April 2016, Twitter switched categories in the App store, from category 'Social Networking' to 'News'. Once there, Twitter instantly went to number one in the news app rankings, followed by Reddit, another social media platform (TechCrunch, 2016).

In effect, although a majority of social media users, experts or not, state that social media are not a reliable source of information, they increasingly retrieve their news from social media. Moreover, Twitter and Reddit can officially call themselves a 'News App', alongside CNN or The New York Times – despite being social media platforms with user-generated content that does not meet journalistic standards. The lines appear to blur here, and innovations shape the way media are perceived: According to a study conducted by Microsoft, the growth of digital technology appears to influence how much consumers trust media in general. Forty per cent of French, thirty-nine per cent of Americans, and thirty-one per cent of Germans say new technology has a negative influence on media, while only fourteen per cent of Indians and eighteen per cent of Chinese would approve of this statement (Statista, 2016c).

## Restricted by algorithms

There are also limitations and restrictions that social media bring to the average user, news media, and even social media, as they are subject to and influenced by the algorithms of these platforms.

## What is a social media algorithm?

According to Napoli, social media algorithms are extensions of the functions originally associated with traditional media. To producers of media, algorithms serve as demand predictors and content creators (Napoli, 2013: 13 ff.). The Facebook algorithm, for example, is an automated filter that functions as a gatekeeper for the newsfeed we see when we log onto Facebook.

Lewis and Westlund argue that these developments offer opportunities to news media that they still do not make enough use of: Living in an era of

big data, media companies have never before had such a chance to analyse who exactly their audience is, and what they want. With big data, revised business processes could lead to new value creation (2015: 458).

To consumers, however, algorithms are capable of forming groups and even shaping reality, mediating both what traditional news users consume via social media as well as their social interactions and relations (Napoli, 2013: 13 ff.).

### **How does the algorithm work?**

According to Facebook, the algorithm is necessary due to the growing amount of content pouring in: Without it, they argue, the average user would see 1,500 to 15,000 stories in their newsfeed and would soon be put off. In effect, Facebook filters the most relevant content and offers about 300 stories instead (Facebook Business, 2016a). But how does the algorithm attempt to find out what each user regards as relevant content? This procedure is rather obscure, yet there are certain factors that are regularly mentioned, such as affinity, weight, and decay: While the affinity factor measures the interaction between the user and the page owner or content provider, the weight factor measures the engagement, the amount of likes, shares, common photos, tags, and events. The decay factor calculates the time decay between when a post was published and when a user was last logged in. Other indicators are the type of content, the viral potential, user interest, content quality, connection speed, or for how long the user stopped scrolling through the newsfeed to watch a post, even if they do not click the link to it (Allfacebook, 2016). If all these factors are considered, an average organic post reaches about sixteen per cent of Facebook fans (HubSpot, 2016). However, Facebook is happy to enhance visibility if page owners are willing to pay for improved target groups (Facebook Business, 2016b). Facebook changes its algorithm on a regular basis. In 2017, for instance, Facebook announced it was upgrading longer videos with higher completion rates and posts of immediate interest, while rather downgrading posts with lots of negative feedback (Facebook Newsroom, 2017a).

### **What the algorithm means for news media**

News media are subject to all of these factors and thus have to adapt their way of journalistic writing to social media standards: In order to reach their

audience, they offer their news under the conditions of social media platforms. In effect, social media keep influencing the ways journalists tell stories and create their online articles. At the same time, they change the reading behaviour of the audience: Regarding the limited attention span of the user scrolling through their infinite newsfeeds, social media content is often short, precise, and 'snackable', like a short video clip, a gif, or Tweet. Other than print, online articles can contain embedded videos, Tweets, online polls, sound files, links, or sharing buttons: whatever enriches the information given and makes it interactive and shareable via social media (Hooffacker, 2016: 126).

Before these articles are posted on Facebook or Twitter, they are often adjusted to enhance engagement: Headlines are often altered and optimized by social media editors in order to generate more clicks and page views. A good social media editor knows how to alter a headline in order to generate more reactions, shares, or organic reach – and thus, enhance the viral potential of an article. This does not necessarily mean cheap click-baiting. In fact, Facebook algorithm devalues click-bait, and rather measures time spent reading an article before returning to the Facebook newsfeed (Facebook Newsroom, 2016b).

Yet, why do news media play this game in the first place? Taking part in social media and, at the same time, being visible, is economically vital to them: Over the past decade, many news media have struggled to migrate from print to digital – a process full of crises and 'creative destruction' (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015: 305). This transformation was a crucial first step, the entrance ticket to participating in the discourses on social online networks. In fact, many publishing houses have come a long way from realizing that it is the social media platforms where the action happens, not necessarily their homepage. Moreover, with the rise of instant articles on Facebook or Snapchat's Discover function, homepages for news media seem to lose importance to such a degree that experts discuss the trends of 'homeless media' (Medium, 2016). Also, with new media, the status of professional journalists has weakened over the years as they can no longer claim exclusivity over news production (Carlson, 2015: 9).

In effect, news organizations simply cannot afford to neglect social media if they are interested in surviving (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015: 196). When algorithms enable social media platforms to set the rules for transmitting information from sender to receiver, it can make news media vulnerable. After all, Facebook and Google have what they do not: The user is already there.

This development is what Poell and Van Dijck regard as rather critical: According to them, algorithmic logic outdoes traditional editorial logic based on journalistic standards (2015: 188). They even warn that the constituted

independence of news media is in danger when algorithm can deprive professional journalists of their editorial autonomy: the power to select content, regardless of initial user interest. This, they argue, may prevent journalism from functioning as the Fourth Estate (Ibid.: 197). Also, new journalistic trends of news distribution are often merely the result of what new type of content is rewarded by the algorithm, such as live broadcasting, or providing video content in general (Ibid.: 194). News producers thus also run the risk of selecting stories with the potential to trigger social media engagement or social media buzz, rather than choosing the information that might be more important, but also more boring (Ibid.: 193).

Besides, the economic competition among news media selling the same information often leads to choosing the news that might sell better, that is commercially more interesting, or triggers more emotion (Vasterman, 2004: 267). This competition bears the risk of a growing boulevardization of news, even without social media (Landmeier & Daschmann, 2011: 177).

## What the algorithm means for social media

Ironically, in terms of trending topics, Facebook appeared not to rely solely on metrics: According to a document presented by *The Guardian* in 2016, Facebook employed an editorial team to help determine trending news and support the algorithm. According to this document, Facebook followed the gatekeepers of journalism in order to enhance their quality: According to *The Guardian* (2016), 'Facebook [...] relies on old-fashioned news values on top of its algorithms to determine what the hottest stories will be to the one billion people who visit the social network every day'. Furthermore, *The Guardian* published a list of 1,000 worldwide 'trusted' news organizations that are supposed to help Facebook employees find trending topics (Ibid.). The guideline for the Facebook editorial team advised: 'The editorial team CAN inject a newsworthy topic [...]' (Ibid.). As to estimating the importance level of a topic ranked 'National Story', Facebook advised their editorial team to 'measure by checking if it is leading at least five of the following ten news websites: BBC News, CNN, Fox News, The Guardian, NBC News, The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Yahoo News or Yahoo' (Ibid.). The document was later confirmed as real by Facebook's vice president of global operations, who stated: 'Facebook does not allow or advise our reviewers to systematically discriminate against sources of any political origin, period' (Ibid.). Apparently, the editorial team was later dismissed without replacement (Business Insider, 2016).

However, at least in the case of Facebook and their agenda-setting, there appears to be an interdependence between news media and social media: According to this document, Facebook relies on the agenda-setting standards of journalists in order to balance the algorithm they are subject to.

## **What the algorithm means for the public**

Through social media, users are able to and make frequent use of critical articles at the point where they appear: be it in comment boxes underneath the articles or on social media platforms. With the rise of social media, suddenly being in dialogue with thousands of readers – who, moreover, regard themselves at eye level with news media – is a rather new situation that has come as quite a surprise to some publishing houses. Also, as a result of my study, tendencies towards a new agenda-setting approach were regarded necessary, one that requires a more mutual relationship between the media outlet and the user (Büttner, 2015: 336).

However, while classical media tend to have lost credibility to some degree over the past years, internet sources such as social media have gained more credibility (Hackel de-Latour, 2015: 123). This raises the question: How come users grow to trust the news they receive in social media more than information from classical sources?

One major aspect may be the algorithms that subtly alter and amplify media perception: For this phenomenon, Eli Pariser created the notion 'filter bubble': People have always consumed media based on their interest, he argues. However, the algorithm brings three dynamics most consumers are unaware of: First, each user has their own filter bubble according to their specific preferences, which rather separates people. Second, the filter bubble is created by metrics that are invisible and opaque to the public. Users may think what they see on Google or Facebook is exactly what everybody else sees. However, according to Pariser, it is hard to see how biased the bubble is while being in it. Third, no one actively chooses to enter the filter bubble. While in classical media, people make choices about what programme to watch or what paper to read, personalized filters approach the user whether they want it or not (Pariser, 2011: 9).

What is more, this filter bubble reinforces dynamics that have been apparent in social media before, or even in group psychology in general: Users tend to aggregate in groups of interest, which fosters confirmation bias and segregates them from other groups.

The risk of social amplification and biased awareness through media consumption has previously been described in the case of media hypes (Vasterman, 2004: 264). In social media, the algorithm adds up to these dynamics: According to a study conducted by Del Vicario et al., selective content exposure generates the formation of homogeneous echo chambers. These echo chambers of like-minded people provide a breeding ground for information to spread, and thus for creating media hypes.

In addition to homogeneity, another key driver for the diffusion of content is polarization (Del Vicario et al., 2015: 554). Polarization can cause deep emotion, which again is another key factor for reinforcing media hypes. As a result of the study, people are more willing to share content that approves what they already think. Metrics-driven solutions encourage the user to read and share opinions they agree with anyway. They share it to like-minded peers in their cluster, who again prefer to like or share the content that comes from this very cluster, and rather ignore the rest (Ibid.: 557). It is concluded that algorithmic solutions are not the best option in this case as they can reinforce confirmation bias and digital misinformation (Ibid.: 558).

If we now regard the way algorithms calculate user interest, it becomes clearer why perception often deviates: Imagine being in a filter bubble personalized for only you, browsing through your newsfeed. A friend of yours shares a story. You are interested in the things your friend regards as shareworthy, so you stop browsing and read the title, or maybe even click the link to the content. The algorithm notes your reaction towards the shared content. It is now likely to offer you similar content, and filters content you may also like. You will find more and more content and peers with the same views, opinions or lifestyle choices, more blog articles that support your world picture – and less that do not. As a result, the personalized information your newsfeed offers you not only differs from that of others, it can strongly deviate from what news media currently report on, simply because they have a different agenda than your algorithm, and different journalistic standards. At the same time, you may wonder why the media do not report on all the issues you are reading about in social media all the time – they even seem to get worse! It appears almost obvious to conclude it is the news media who want to downplay and hide certain issues from the reader.

Moreover, if the initial content your friend shared in the first place was, for whatever reason, a piece of misinformation, then you and your peers are in danger of receiving more and more misinformation of that kind. At the same time, you will be likely to confirm to each other how right you are, and how wrong the others are. These dynamics were shown in readers of



both science and conspiracy news (Del Vicario 2015). They may also explain why users grow to trust the news they receive in social media more than information from classical sources.

In Germany, the lack of trust in journalists has grown to a rather remarkable extent over the past years: Recent surveys reveal that forty-four per cent of Germans believe German media outlets are controlled by a political and economic elite and would thus often knowingly report untruths (DW, 2016). The notion 'Lügenpresse' ('lying press') is commonly used to describe the mistrust of journalists and their work. The strong and widespread reaction to a minor regional news article in the aforementioned 'flower bucket hype' is a symptom of this scepticism.

In effect, if algorithms not only suggest what users may like, but also things they may not yet know, such as opposite views, there may, in fact, be no way out of the echo chamber – rather, it might be expanded.

## Conclusion

To conclude, being closely connected to each other through social media functions as an accelerant to media hypes: It helps spread the news to an extent that previously was not possible before without social media.

This interconnectivity also enhances interdependence: News media are economically dependent on social media and its users. Social media are economically dependent on the users and, to some extent, on news media. The users appear to be dependent on social media as part of their everyday lives and sources of information. They are also dependent on news media to deliver verified facts based on journalistic standards. However, in order to create media hypes, news media are not even necessarily needed anymore, as examples of accidental media hypes show. In these cases, they are important in terms of picking up social media topics and then investigating, validating, and presenting them, also as part of the hype cycle. Moreover, future media hypes are increasingly likely to occur in social media.

For further studies, it may be interesting to examine how users would respond to different algorithms and expanded filter bubbles in the long term, offering unexpected views and opinions rather than those that only confirm their world view.

Finally, if the newspapers, like the shops that line the boulevard, should ever step outside or even leave their shops for good, becoming homeless media, it seems they are welcome to join the action that is going on on the boulevard called social media – albeit not necessarily as the hosts of this party.

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## About the author

**Vivian Roese**, née Büttner, studied at Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder, Germany. She holds a Bachelor degree in Cultural Sciences, a Master degree in Intercultural Communication, and a PhD in Media studies. First scientific publications dealt with an analysis of British and German press coverage of the inauguration of Barack Obama as US president (Tectum Verlag 2009). In her dissertation, *Akzidentielle Medienhypes*, Roese analysed the origins and dynamics of accidental media hypes (Springer VS, 2015). For this study, she was nominated for 'Women in Media Award' by German Publishing House Axel Springer SE. Roese works as a freelance journalist and social media consultant in Berlin, with a focus on viral news, memes and social media journalism.

## 15. From racial hoaxes to media hypes

Fake news' real consequences.

*Andrea Cerase and Claudia Santoro*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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### Abstract

Racial hoaxes are becoming a popular discursive strategy to disguise racism, as well as a powerful means for triggering waves of fake news and outraged comments both on mainstream and social media. Built on grounds of plausibility and consistency with existing narratives, racial hoaxes may remain latent for a long time, and periodically emerge when negative stereotypes can be framed as actual news stories. Racial hoaxes have relevant political and social implications: spread across multiple channels, they can foster exclusionary discourse on immigration, migrants, refugees, and other minorities, with concrete consequences on people and policies. In particular, far-right movements embrace hoaxes as a great opportunity to advocate their claims and legitimate their calls for violent action.

**Keywords:** media hype, racial hoaxes, exclusionary discourse, fake news, refugees, far-right movements

### Theoretical background

Racial hoaxes are becoming a popular discursive strategy to disguise racism. This concept has mainly been used in US legal and criminological fields, aimed at exploring the connection between racial stereotypes and related practices in policing, and shifting criminal responsibility from a white offender to a fictional black predator (Russell, 1998). Nonetheless, this concept could be scrutinized from wider social and communicational perspectives, looking at how racial hoaxes are created and circulated, and how they affect ethnic relations. The concept also provides powerful

insights into study how prejudices and stereotypes are objectivized, and how hostility tales turn into social action. Moreover, racial hoaxes should be a relevant matter for communication studies, since they involve both mainstream and digital media, and have relevant consequences on public.

In the age of populism, since one of the worst concerns of common people is regarding security, immigrants and minorities tend to be held responsible for crimes, poor levels of safety, and any deterioration of urban and social environment. Moreover, research has shown that media coverage can negatively affect attitudes towards immigration and immigrants (Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009). Given a general negative orientation towards minority members, the rise of crime-related news can easily turn into a discourse of threat, fear, and danger, until 'the original facts quickly became obscured in a tide of outrage and condemnation' (Moore, Mason & Lewis, 2008: 20).

Both in Europe and Italy, any single news concerning immigrants, refugees and minorities is likely to trigger a chain of reactions and interactions, building up huge news waves in the media or rapidly spreading social epidemics on social media.' As traditional media grab people's attention on certain events, social media are the field to express outrage, public discontent, and even open manifestations of blatant racism.

In addition, the virality of social media like Facebook and Twitter sometimes may be intentionally amplified by click-baiting strategies used by newsmedia, aiming at catching users' attention through a misleading presentation of headlines and leads (Chen et al., 2015).

## Racial hoaxes and media hypes

In order to provide a definition of 'racial hoaxes' for the purposes of this chapter, one may begin from Katheryn Russell's criminological perspective (1998: 70). Enlarging her reflection, authors propose a definition of racial hoaxes as:

An intentional attempt to produce, circulate or boost: an allegation of a crime; a threat posed against someone's health, security or safety; a violation of social norms; a challenge to social hierarchies or any other supposed deviant behaviour. Such attempt aims to spread outrage, blame and social exclusion. It targets an individual or a group because of race, ethnicity or religion, while fostering hate and discontent.

Although racial hoaxes are not founded, both politicians and mainstream media are likely to include them in their political or debating agenda, building a new kind of media hype, based on plausible – yet fake – news, rather than on real events. A strong characterization of refugees as economic opportunists occurs both in Italy and in other European countries, along with strong hostility in media discourses about immigrants and refugees (Cerese, 2013; Holmes & Castaneda, 2016). Such hostility themes are likely to be applied to other ‘disturbing’ minorities, such as the Roma, from time immemorial subjected to social exclusion and racial control (see Sigona & Trehan, 2009).

Maneri (2013, *infra*) found outrage to be a key characteristic of both media hypes and moral panic theories. Media play the role of guardians of public interests, articulate public discontent, attract audiences, and establish publicly their agenda-setting power (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). This helps media sell scandals and outrage to their audience as well-packed stories, in an ‘easy-to-open’ package, with a clear characterization of the characters and a spectacular plot (Ruigrok, Scholten & Vasterman 2007: 4). Since the early attempts to build a media hype theory, the role of outrage in boosting news waves is sharply recognized (Vasterman, 2005). Afterwards, further researches found a somehow circular relation between media hype and the social outrage, which is triggered and re-inflated by media hypes (Vasterman, Scholten & Ruigrok, 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Cerese, 2011a).

Both racial hoaxes and media hypes are clearly propelled by outrage, used as combustive agents to trigger the self-inflating dynamic of both phenomena. An outraged public urges news desks to a wider coverage of certain issues, while outraged users express frustration and anger sharing contents on social media.<sup>2</sup>

## **Towards a qualitative approach**

The first aim of this chapter is exploring how racial hoaxes develop within media hypes, while comparing their dynamics. Since its first steps, theory has been developed within quantitative approaches, by using methodologies such as content analysis. Most empirical studies begin with or contain a ‘snapshot’ of media waves, drawn as time-series to measure the variations in amplitude of media coverage (news stories) over the time (Vasterman, Yzermans & Dirkzwager, 2005; Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Giasson, Brin & Sauvageau, 2010; Cerese, 2011a; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013).



Other researchers combined quantitative (content analysis) and qualitative (discourse analysis) methods, to explore how news wave can trigger change in general discourse on a specific issue (Paimre & Harro-Loit, 2011; Maneri, 2013). Others investigated internet environment, introducing a mixed method to support an in-depth analysis. The need to improve awareness about a certain phenomenon led authors to put under scrutiny narratives, contexts and key activities to recognize main features of social media hype: online statistics have been combined with qualitative approach to better understand reasons beyond dynamics of such waves (Pang, 2013).

Maneri (2013) suggested extending the analysis to qualitative dimensions of the hype, as internal discursive dynamics, also highlighting difficulty in measuring abstract concepts such as disproportionality, concern, and consensus, which play a central role in media hypes production. He also urged considering power and consensus as key dimensions to investigate both media hypes and moral panic. Investigating racial hoaxes, and their related media hypes, should also draw on critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1992, 2000; Reisigl & Wodak, 2005).

Racial hoaxes are part of a wider discourse on power distribution in a racialized society, grounding on different strategies to maintain a racialized status quo, which may become evident as hostility themes (Leudar et al., 2008) and news frames (Bruno, 2014). Racial hoaxes work when felt plausible, and when they appear consistent with pre-existing discourses, narratives, and news frames. Therefore, such exploratory research aims at investigating qualitative conditions under which fake news concerning racial issue can turn in a (social) media hype.

With the aim to assess impact of racial hoaxes in public debate and political agendas, authors collected eighty-five cases, which took place in Italy between March 2014 and October 2016. Cases were retrieved them from Facebook and Twitter queries, search engines (Yahoo and Google news), printed media, news aggregators and anti-hoaxes specialized blogs. Each case collected news, graphics (memes), social media content and reactions, related trigger events, news follow-ups, data about sharing and queries, both in mainstream and social media.

Each racial hoax case was verified and analysed, in order to 1) identify trigger event and original source; 2) collect data about reach and sharing (when available); 3) retrieve any relevant detail about the incident; 4) collect data about media coverage and consonance; 5) retrieve Google Trends data (if available); 6) describe and explain any interactions between media and social media; as well as 7) relevant social and political reactions resulting from the hoax.

Hoaxes were categorized according to their topic: (1) 'health threat'; (2) 'economic threat'; (3) 'criminal threat'; (4) 'other/not classified'. In sixty-six out of eighty-five cases, it was possible to include the hoaxes in one of the first three above-listed categories. The dominating topics were, respectively, economic, criminal, and then health threats, providing a reasonable base to ground some generalization and explicative hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, authors present three case studies. Each of them belongs to one of the topics used to classify the case set: diseases spreading (health threat), parasitism and welfare exploitation (economic threat), and inclination to commit crimes (criminal threat). The case studies resumed and synthesized common features and dynamics emerging from a wider sample of incidents. The selected cases were chosen for their suitability with the above-mentioned definition of racial hoax, therefore real news, stories that were impossible to verify, and comments were excluded.

The recognition was mainly oriented to achieving a better understanding of racial hoax dynamics, and shared characteristics of hoaxes and media hypes. Therefore, this exploratory research included a qualitative analysis on discourses, specific narratives, news frames, and particular racial hoaxes.

## Analysis

The cases study presented distinctive features in terms of relevance (reach), longevity, match with pre-existent discourses, role of news media – which not only adopted hoaxes, but sometimes even generated them – and reactions of media, society, and politicians. The analysis found that racial hoaxes appeared to follow some features of media hype theory, of which they emphasized certain elements and characteristic. In particular, considering risk and security as dominant narratives in contemporary media (Altheide, 2002), they were often retrieved as trigger factors able to ignite a Media hype. In other cases, risk appeared as a grounded dimension, as a threat posed against natives' welfare. In addition, outrage was a distinctive pre-condition to propagate a media hype, creating premises to talk about racial hoaxes as a sub-category of media hypes, since fake news were used to trigger outrage by exploiting social media virality. When consistent with some particular pre-existing news frame (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Van Gorp, 2007), a racial hoax can meet with the conditions to trigger and reinforce a massive content sharing on social platforms and a huge wave of outraged comments, following up previous information, news events, and situations.

## The Ebola hoax

A first topic regarded disguised racist attitudes following worries about alleged threats against public health. Cultural approaches to risk highlighted how fear about health risks may turn into a moral justification for exclusion of discriminated categories. According to Mary Douglas, prejudice and biases against 'others' are objectified as a risk (e.g. contracting an illness). As such, risks are de-politicized and presented as apparently neutral advice on the need to keep a community clean, safe and free from harm (Douglas, 1966, 1986, 1997). Furthermore, cleanliness is a recurring argument in ethnographic studies on stigmatization. Thus, immigrants, refugees, and Roma are frequently blamed for their alleged uncleanliness and poor hygiene (Rochira, 2014). Such well-established stereotyped representations tend to be turned into allegations of being infected or immune carriers of some weird and scary infectious disease (Resigl & Wodak, 2005).<sup>5</sup>

The internet was the favourite channel for conveying false warnings about dangers of diseases transmitted by immigrants, including rumours about Ebola, which were retrieved in five out of eighty-five cases.<sup>6</sup> From such a Foucauldian perspective, risk and disease might be also analysed as means to exert a disciplinary power on migrants and refugees. Hinting at alleged risks of disease allows for the legitimizing of control regimes and restriction in access policies.

One of the cases originated from 6 August 2014, when the Italian right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale* published news of an Ebola-infected Spanish missionary coming back home from Western Africa. The daily suggested that immigrants arriving in Lampedusa could spread Ebola too. Promptly, Matteo Salvini, leader of the Northern League party, commented on his Facebook fan page: 'Ebola disease arrives in Spain, first case in Europe, but Renzi<sup>7</sup> and Alfano<sup>8</sup> still continue with *Mare Nostrum*'.<sup>9</sup> Both *Il Giornale* and Salvini posed the question as a possible risk, rather than a real event. Even so, their behaviour highlighted how traditional media and politicians can play a crucial role in triggering a racial hoax, subsequently amplified on social media. Next, a man posted a message on his Facebook profile, containing two images of people with Ebola. Graphics pictured a haemorrhagic crisis, warning about scientists' fear for three cases, which had supposedly occurred in Lampedusa.<sup>10</sup> The Italian Postal Police rapidly shut down this man's Facebook profile, but they also had to remove such content from profiles of over 27,000 Facebook users, who, in the meantime, had shared it. A few hours later, Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin had to release an official statement in Parliament, clarifying and reassuring

about the health conditions of immigrants staying in Lampedusa's shelters. Three days later, local associations of hoteliers in Lampedusa and Linosa announced civil and criminal legal action against those who had spread this false and alarmist news, which caused disappointment and outrage among Lampedusa's inhabitants. The associations also announced a ten million euro claim for damages, given a sudden wave of cancellations of bookings after the hoax spread.

This case presented a number of relevant insights for the future development of media hype theory. Furthermore, the involvement of politicians and a minister appeared to be consistent with Elmelund-Præstekær and Wien's additional reflections about the role of political actors in media hype debate. This case also underlined a relevant connection with the 'social amplification of risk' theory, whose theoretical relevance has been recognized by Vasterman and other media hype scholars (Vasterman, 2005; Vasterman, Yzermans & Dirkzwager, 2005; Vasterman, Scholten & Ruigrok, 2008; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). The case suggested how social media may have a prominent role as a 'social amplification station' (Kasperson et al., 1988, Kasperson & Kasperson, 1996), able to magnify a real or alleged risk.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it also showed how risk arguments can be manipulated for a hidden political agenda, exploiting public concerns and fears to disguise racism and support far-right and populist issues. A recall to various forms of risk (e.g. health, environment, food, crime) may be also retrieved in apocalyptic narrative and imagery of populism (see Heller, 2002; Edwards & Gill, 2002; Power, 2007).

### The thirty-five euros hype and hoax

Economic threats (and risks) represent another argument used to justify speeches and policies against migrants and asylum seekers. Systemic factors, such as the financial crisis, increased social conflicts and the rise of right-wing populist issues in politics are 'exploited' to ride discontent and turn outrage into social discrimination towards immigrants, refugees, and minorities at large, depicted as 'undeserving beneficiaries of the welfare state' (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). Unsurprisingly, thirty-one out of eighty-five corpus cases concerned alleged abuse of welfare by target groups.

Commencing from March 2014, news about migrants being paid thirty-five euros per day by the Italian government spread quickly. The news storm (over 10,000 news articles retrieved from Google News) built on a long-existing hostility tale of immigrants exploiting national welfare, but was fuelled by data regarding sustenance costs of asylum seekers. As

media hypes, hoaxes are more likely to occur when they fit with the overall discourse on a particular topic, and confirm pre-existing beliefs.

Traditional media published articles about the real costs of immigration, specifying that the figure of thirty-five euros originated from estimations formulated by immigration centres on the average costs of asylum seekers' stay.<sup>12</sup> The press also reported that these resources came from European and national funds allocated to asylum, and that assisting asylum seekers and refugees is compulsory under international treaties and guaranteed by the Italian constitution.<sup>13</sup> However, even debunking contributed to keeping the hoax alive, as data retrieved from Google Trend showed.

The media hype about costs of immigration inflated because of historical, social, and discourse-related features. It conveyed well fears regarding lack of resources connected to the financial crisis, but it also built on the typical dichotomy 'us' vs 'them'. In fact, based on these arguments we ('us') are not the problem: 'they' are stealing public money and are taking advantage of our welfare system. Moreover, the use of numbers is a common persuasive strategy in news discourse. Such racial hoaxes strive to displace focus from racial inclinations towards (unfounded) claims for economic rationality and justice.<sup>14</sup>

Building on the pre-existing news frame of migrants as a threat for national economy, this case study presents peculiar characteristics. Certain media (including traditional ones) started building on the (untrue) fact that the government gave migrants (including undocumented, economic, and European migrants, not only asylum seekers and refugees) thirty-five euros per day.<sup>15</sup> Within the media hype of immigration costs, this fake news triggered a media hoax, aimed to polarize immigration debate and reinforce public racist or intolerant attitudes. Outrage motivated individuals circulating the hoax. Reasons motivating the success of the related media hype resulted amplified and reinforced. Numbers were used as a discourse strategy to present reliable sources and impressive figures, thus creating a sense of danger.

Whereas media coverage has shown attenuation, this media hoax was reinforced by hundreds of social media memes and articles, also national media. The hoax generated social reactions, which were covered as news and kept reinforcing the hype, along with other hoaxes founded on economic threats. The pretended revolt of refugees demanding to have plasma TV displays in their rooms, and refusal of food provided by immigration centres are news stories repeatedly covered by online portals and printed media in the monitored period. Any time there is the chance to reinforce this argument, the (fake) issue is recalled by certain media outlets, as if its hype would never decrease. The hoax is often used to compare immigration

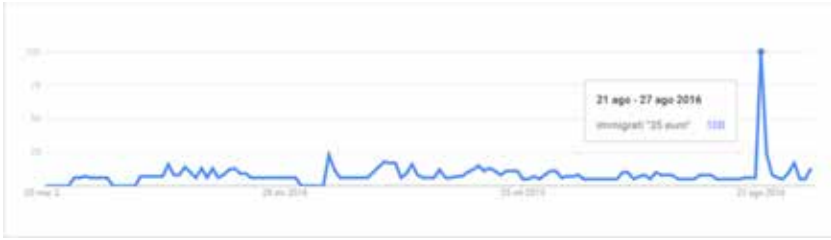


Figure 15.1. Search queries for immigrants + 35 euro (March 2014–October 2016)

resources and money assigned to other categories (as poor people, elderly, or those affected by earthquakes), which belong to the ‘us’ category, widely represented as unprivileged, threaten group.

Consequently, the belief that migrants receive thirty-five euros per day to stay in Italy influenced a broad audience, and – for many people – it converted in common-sense knowledge. Following diverse degree of truthfulness and credibility, (user-generated) social media posts, and news stories contributed transforming fake (yet credible) news in what is considered a fact by many people. Figure 15.1 illustrates such Karstic tendency, also highlighting a peak in correspondence with the immediate aftermath of Amatrice’s earthquake,<sup>16</sup> when a further version of such racial hoaxes hyped on social media.

### Racial hoax and purported crimes

Summarizing a broader debate, Palidda (2011) observed that migrants and minorities criminalization appears as a common feature both in European and non-European countries (North America, Australia, Japan<sup>17</sup>). Mainstream media seem to play a specific role in such a process of social construction of migrant and minority members as a criminal threat, and Italy is no exception. Researches on moral panics and news waves concerning immigrants’ crimes highlighted impressive points of contact with the results of Stuart Hall’s studies, dating back over forty years (Hall et al., 1978). Other researchers observed how, since the 1980s, the Italian media’s portrayal of migrant and minority members has crystallized in a freeze frame where they still appear as criminals, suspected or victims of crimes (Binotto, Bruno & Lai, 2016). Racial hoaxes take advantage of such representation to convey any kind of fake news, even if only vaguely consistent with this news frame.

The cases corpus includes news of Romanian gangs giving people ‘spy key holders’ in order to follow their movements, of sexually harassing young

children, of a Japanese tourist reacting to an attempted robbery by bashing three Roma boys, of migrants arrested for throwing stones at a school, and countless similar cases. Such incidents recurred in twenty-six of the eighty-five hoaxes, following the relevance of blaming and scapegoating in such a discriminating strategy.

At the end of August 2015, G.L., a twenty-year-old student from Caltanissetta (Sicily) was charged with inciting racial hate. Italian Police authorities closed his website, *senzacensura.eu* (*nocensorship.eu*), for publishing fake news about immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. The content concerned gruesome and defaming situations: the perfect clickbait for both racists and scared citizens. Typical headlines of fake news were 'Nigerian man rapes mother and daughter. The husband throws acid on his penis'; 'Catania, 15 y.o. burnt alive by immigrants: massacred for being Christian'; or 'Immigrant rapes a 7 y.o. little girl. Her father tears off his testicles and make her swallow them'. With this last article alone, the Sicilian boy 'received 500,000 hits, and earned 1,000 euros', as he declared in an interview to *L'Espresso* magazine. He added, 'The purpose of my business was to draw attention to my site, aimed at gaining with banner ads and users' hits' (Di Fazio, 2015), confirming that 'social networking is not about affirming something as truth but more about making truth through endless clicking' (Lovink, 2011: 44).

In June 2016, regional newspaper *Il Tirreno* (from Tuscany) published an article attempting to calm the rising wave of hysteria following a hoax about Roma people being child kidnappers, which was spread on social media, but affected the whole community. Such urban legend, dating back centuries, is widely known across Europe, although it had no basis in recent Italian judicial history, with the sole exception of a single, disputed case in Ponticelli (Naples) in 2009 (see Clough Marinaro & Sigona, 2011). Then, a Facebook post triggered the racial hoax and media hype. In a short text, a certain Federico wrote about an alleged attempt to kidnap two kids in a supermarket in Prato. The children were said to have been found in a bathroom, with their heads shaved, 'ready to be carried away by Gypsies'. 'Spread the word among as many people as you can to raise the alarm', he warned. The news story reported two other alleged cases in Montemurlo, another little village close to Prato, including denials from the police and storeowners. Nonetheless, this fake news kept circulating, and some websites re-published the false alarm several days after the police's press release. Once again, a racial hoax, leaning on a false, yet consolidated belief, spread from rumours, was revamped by Facebook, resulting in real-life events triggering a media hype. Social media were used to inflate mainstream media attention. Research highlights how in thirty-one out of eight-five

cases, the mainstream media intervened to blame, debunk, or deny a racial hoax, in a bid to calm the rise of public worries about the consequences of fake news or rumours circulating on the internet.

Racial hoaxes may also spread with no direct involvement from mainstream and social media. They run by word of mouth, and may be reintroduced and inflated through social media. They may create worrying real consequences, such as the siege of and serious threats against a refugee shelter in Lamezia Terme (Calabria). In September 2015, a local elder claimed to be a victim of aggression, robbery, and torture by three young immigrants. While police investigated, rumours circulated in town, and some local politicians revamped them on Facebook. Despite the official notice released by police explaining that no evidence of crime was found, and that the elder was suspected of having simulated it, a shouting crowd surrounded the refugee shelter, hurling racial slurs and death threats towards immigrants and shelter personnel.

### **Findings: Recurrent actors, forms, and structures**

In the entire case corpus, media played some role in the racial hoax cycle. In fifty-nine of eighty-five cases, the racial hoax provoked a media reaction: national and regional printed newspapers, online media, journalistic blogs, or other digital outlets joined the conversation. Among them, websites such as Voxnews.info, Imolaoggi and Tutticriminideglimmigrati (all immigrants' crimes) played a distinctive role in launching fake news on the internet, either entirely making it up or distorting features of an existing media hype. Although this matter has not been covered in this chapter, these kinds of web portals have explicit boundaries with far-right and racist movements (Ballone & Sasso, 2015). National or regional printed newspapers also joined the fray: intervening in twenty-two out of sixty-one incidents, but mostly to blame manipulation, correct inaccuracies, and debunk racial hoaxes. In various cases, national news desks covered media hoaxes to the point of generating media hype. They attacked the Italian comedian and political activist Beppe Grillo who, on his blog, published a fake picture of a victim of terrorism in Zimbabwe, but presented the dead man as a victim of Ebola. At other times, the media covered fake news as if they were real: they reported on Roma looters arrested for stealing from ruined houses after Amatrice's earthquake, which turned out to be completely false. All the main newspapers propelled fake selfies of supposed Islamic State fighters shot in crowded public places in Italy. In three cases, coverage appeared to be tied to a massive



and sudden wave of outrage and fear, which resulted in a significant social media hype. The analysis logged various attempts to monitor and counter racial hoaxes, and to belie and deconstruct them. However, anti-hoaxes web portals, articles from the web and printed media, stances by editorial boards, journalists, and intellectuals can be considered as 'articles on related topics' and 'opinions' that revamped the media hype's dynamics.

Twenty-five cases covered by national and regional newspapers involved political actors. Their role ranged from being authors of the racial hoax, facilitators of a climate in which the hoax originated (like Salvini in the Ebola hoax case study), attempting to ride the hype to influence political debate,<sup>18</sup> feeding the hoax, or, being forced to intervene to debunk a hoax and stop its effects (like Minister Lorenzin in the Ebola case). Most of the time, politicians intervened to condemn a hoax, and usually do not comment on openly fake racial hoaxes. However, the analysis carried out showed that even with the kind of hoaxes that remain confined to blogs and social media, far-right groups interacted to exploit the generated outrage.

Social reactions have been observed in fifty-three out of eighty-five collected hoaxes. They ranged from random, disorganized, and outraged comments, mass content-sharing, the creation of social media protest pages and groups, online and offline petitions, request for damages deriving from the hoaxes (both from groups and individuals), and enquiries to press associations, anti-discrimination bodies, and police forces.

Racial hoaxes' most recurrent structure was the news story that copy journalistic language and formats. Sometimes they borrow (or imitate) the name of a famous newspaper or a press agency. They adopt conspiracy theories and present 'news they are attempting to hide (about immigrants [...])'. In doing so, they try to present themselves as an information source and as advocating natives' interests against threats posed by migrants, refugees, and minorities (or other targeted people). Such fake news encompassed newsworthiness criteria, journalistic rules, and tabloids' rhetoric forms. Exaggeration was aimed at worsening representations of the minority/target group. The exploratory research and analysis confirmed that racial hoaxes adopted the moral panic structure, by targeting 'folk devils'. As media hypes, hoaxes appeared to be sensation-seeking and fearmongering. They were more effective when leaning on pre-existing and shared discriminatory narratives, also consistent with strengthened hostility themes.

Themes such as risk and security generated or intervened in media hypes, confirming that diseases and threatening 'others' have become moral imperatives for both individuals and institutions (Garland, 2003; Lupton, 2006; Tulloch, 2008). Hence, analysing risk discourses also means

considering the underpinning relations of power and domination, since risk relates to ‘a problem of justice, faith, power, or money’ (Zinn, 2008: 185).

Commodification of outrage<sup>19</sup> clearly emerged as a strategy to (intentionally) propagate the hype. It was observed that fake news about immigrants, refugees, minorities is intended to be a kind of magic wand for objectivizing, justifying, and supporting discriminating or openly racist attitudes. Racial hoaxes provide a symbolic resource for expressing anger, disdain, and hostility towards minorities.<sup>20</sup> In the last quarter of a century, outrage has become a sort of *lingua franca* in public discourse, able to permeate political debate, media outlets, and journalistic standards (Proteus, 1992). Inciting racial hoaxes, political actors exploit outrage to grow audiences and manipulate them for political purposes.

A final consideration relates to the longevity of certain hoaxes. In some cases (as for the thirty-five euros hoax), the racial hoax’s cycle never decreased and it assumed national interest. In other cases, even when a hoax was debunked (by specialized websites, media, and political actors), after three to five months, some ‘online editors’ used it as a source and re-launched it as actual news, pointing to a troubling development in the current information environment.

## Conclusions

Considering media hype as a category for describing features and dynamics of a media-generated news wave, hoaxes have the distinctive feature of adding false information. In forty-two of the eighty-five analysed cases, (fake) news triggered dynamics of media hype, with different extents, lengths, and size. In others, hoaxes intervened at a later stage, to distort, manipulate, and exploit the media hype. Thirty-four social media hypes encompassed a classic media hype. Occasionally, (twelve out of eighty-five cases), racial hoaxes remained confined to social media and dedicated websites, failing to enter the media hype structure and dynamics.

The analysis suggests that the media hype theory can be used to explain the dynamics behind hoaxes, provided that 1) the majority of incidents triggered short social media hypes, even if they only last a few days, the process tends to replicate in a short time and scale the five stages described by Vasterman (2005); and 2) many racial hoaxes follow a Karstic trend, with sudden rises and falls of attention, and a long latency between two peaks: people’s attention is likely to surface because of media attention for a particular issue or topic. Moreover, the same hoax recurred many times over months and years.

Whereas the media hype theory (Vasterman, 2005) assigns the ability to develop a new storm to media (and their functioning), in racial hoaxes the attempt to spread false information is attributable to particular actors, i.e. right-wing politicians, populist actors and – on social media – specific Facebook and Twitter profiles. In the case studies examined, the actors used outrage as a tool to maximize diffusion on social media environment, even using clickbaiting or explicit incitement to share content. Virality does the rest, amplifying racial hoaxes' circulation. Sometimes, authors managed to inflate hoaxes and overcome gatekeeper-journalistic barriers. Even when unmasked, digital and traditional media picked up and reported on hoaxes, intensifying an existing media hype.

In other cases, racial hoaxes did not trigger a media hype, but rather intervened at a later stage. Fake news may intervene when media coverage extends to other similar events and topics (Vasterman, 2005), adopting the hype theme and mocking journalistic formats in order to appear realistic. Surfing existing media hype, fake news created a racial hoax, with its own cycle. In the majority of cases examined, traditional media presented hoaxes as fake news and discussed them in a critical way. In some cases, right-wing and regional media, adopting the hoaxes' sensationalist and confirming nature, reported them as real news. In all cases, the racial hoax boosted and extended the hype, postponing its attenuation. Racial hoaxes even transformed fake news into tangible social reactions.

It is not easy to determine whether press campaigns aimed at tackling lies and restoring journalism reputation and credibility effectively counter racial hoaxes. Sometimes, they risk amplifying their diffusion and consolidation. They may reinforce the specific frame of reference, which unavoidably leads to feeding the news wave, also reinforcing the newsworthiness of the news theme and consolidating racial hoaxes as plausible truths (see Vasterman, 2005: 515).<sup>21</sup>

Racial hoaxes have the potential to affect public opinion because people regard them as a source. Even when a racial hoax is obviously, comically, false, it circulates on blogs and social media, and, without the quality filters traditionally supplied by mainstream media outlets (Lee, 2016), in some cases it becomes public. As media hype theory suggests, being based on fake news does not impede hoaxes from triggering a storm of outraged reactions (such as content sharing and comments). These, in some cases, can flow on both digital and traditional media. The analysis originated a reflection on causes that may determine why some hoaxes remain confined to internet discussions, while others break through to the public domain. The variables observed in the case corpus suggested that the adoption of

discourse strategies and journalistic formats assigned visibility to some hoaxes, which were covered by news media. Furthermore, the case-set hinted that hoaxes including political actors in the conversation had more durability.

Hoaxes erode media credibility when they are reported as 'real news'. Because of unchecked sources, such incidents may result in an additional deterioration of journalistic standards in southern Europe (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004), already exhausted by organizational pressure, fast-paced newsrooms and the need to embrace infotainment news values. This means jeopardizing journalistic standards, privileging images instead of ideas, emotions rather than rational analysis, and avoiding the complexity of real life. It also dramatizes and exaggerates news presentation to attract new public (see, among others, Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Reinardy, 2010; for the Italian case see also Cerase, 2011b).

Racial hoaxes' most significant facet, however, regards their political and social implications: they have concrete consequences for target groups, people, and policies. In particular, far-right movements embrace hoaxes as a great opportunity to patronize their claims and legitimate their calls for violent action.

The current media hype on fake news seems focused on a theoretical debate, referring to the clash between governing elites. However, dealing with this topic as a philosophical dispute regarding the epistemology of the news, or concerning the ethics of propaganda, may be misleading. In fact, such an approach does not take into account fake news' real consequences, and the related effect of maintaining the racial status quo, as proved by the considered case catalogue.

Racial hoaxes are a relevant subject for further research, since they fully enter the process of construction of social problems, able to affect both politics and ethnic relations in communities and other social environments.

## Notes

1. In Italy, UNAR (the national agency against racism and discrimination), confirmed the link between racism and the internet. Of 990 verified cases of racial discrimination filed by UNAR in 2014, 24.9 per cent concerned hate speech, which motivated 12.4 per cent of 2009 incidents. The internet had a leading role in such processes: public instigation of racial hate on social media represented 89.2 per cent of complaints concerning media collected by the Agency (UNAR, 2014). Similar situations have been found in other European countries, as emerged during research carried out within the European project LIGHT ON (Boileau, Del Bianco & Velea, 2014).

2. According to Vasterman (2005), media hypes are characterized by: 1) presence of a key event (trigger event); 2) event originates a wave of news with a rapid growth and a significantly slower attenuation; 3) wave encompasses a strong consonance between different news outlets and media; 4) media coverage extends to other similar events and topics; 5) such coverage tends to generate social reactions, which are, in turn, covered as news (Vasterman, 2005). In addition, these media hypes are likely to cause significant interactions between political actors, who tend to strategically exploit opportunities to influence public debate and decisions making process (Elmelund-Præstekær & Wien, 2008).
3. Hoaxes themed on 'terrorism' have been considered a sub-category of 'criminal threat', while other topics such as 'identity', counting only a few cases, were assigned to other / non-classified.
4. For each hoax the analysis also considered (1) date; (2) title; (3) media on which was shared; (4) link; (5) whether national media diffused it; (6) whether local media diffused it; (7) reach (in terms of users); (8) trigger event; (9) longevity; (10) pre-existent discourses; (11) if media reacted; (12) how media reacted; (13) if there were social reactions; (14) which social reactions; (15) if politicians engaged in/reacted to the hoax; (16) topic; (17) if was part of /generated a media hype; (18) if it was originated from/generated a social media hype.
5. For a detailed account see, among others, Gallisot, 1985. As regards Italy, discourses and rumours about alleged and real cases of tuberculosis, scabies, AIDS and other diseases have been recorded by Italian academic sociologists since the end of 1980s (see Ferrarotti, 1998: 108) and regularly spread via media outlets.
6. Contagious diseases were cited in other eight out of eighty-five incidents.
7. Italian PM in charge at that time.
8. Italian Ministry of Interiors at that time.
9. Mare Nostrum was an Italian Government search and rescue naval and air mission to patrol sea and rescue immigrants in the Mediterranean. For further detail, see Massey & Coluccello, 2015.
10. Lampedusa is the Southern Italian island, which is the first destination for migrants' boats arriving from Northern Africa and Middle East.
11. The Social Amplification of Risk Framework suggests looking at the communication process in wider sense, expanding analysis to any message conveyed from any source, by any channel, with no restrictions on direction flow, amplitude, and related audience, also taking into consideration messages conveyed unintentionally.
12. In Italy, local authorities that want to join the *Sprar* (the system of shelter for refugees and asylum seekers) have to present a proposal and financial plan. Operating expenses for the migrant, valued on average at around thirty-five euro per capita per day, therefore, may be subject to variations.
13. In the monitored period, some media outlets tried shedding a light on the benefits deriving from migrations, such as income deriving from

the sector dedicated to immigration management, percentage of GDP deriving from foreigners-owned business, and contribution made to the national pension fund from migrants in Italy. However, these articles represented an exception and mainly appeared on traditional and specialised media.

14. Reflecting on denial of racism, Van Dijk noted that the latter 'is part of a strategy of personal, institutional or social impression management and ideological self-defence; it also is a form of socio-political management. It helps control resistance, and at the same time makes political problems of an ethnically or racially pluralist society more manageable. In sum, denial is a major management strategy' (Van Dijk, 1992: 97).
15. Under the aforementioned Sprar system, these funds are given to cooperatives, which support municipalities in the reception management. The estimated thirty-five euros covers expenses for food, housing, buildings cleaning and maintenance; only two and an half euros go to asylum seekers.
16. On 24 August 2016, a violent earthquake (M 5.9) struck Central Italy, causing 297 victims and razing to the ground Amatrice, Accumoli, Pescara del Tronto and other villages.
17. By the criminalization of migrants, we mean all the discourses, facts and practices made by the police, judicial authorities, but also local governments, media, and a part of the population that hold immigrants/aliens responsible for a large share of criminal offences'. (Palidda, 2011: 23).
18. Sometimes this resulted in paradoxical consequences. For example, in January 2016, internet trolls tweeted a famous photo of Jim Morrison, which caught the attention of the right-wing politician Maurizio Gasparri, who claimed that the picture was of Goran Hadzic, a criminal charged with over fifty robberies in Northeast Italy. Following the politician's 'what a shame' reaction, a huge wave of dismay and hilarious comments spread virally.
19. According to the definition proposed by Sobieraj & Berry (2011: 20) the term *outrage* is 'a particular form of political discourse involving efforts to provoke visceral responses (e.g. anger, righteousness, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents, who may be individuals, organizations, or entire communities of interest (e.g. progressives or conservatives) or circumstance (e.g. immigrants)'.  
 20. As an example, similar *patterns of justification* (see Wodak, 2005) have been observed in protests in Tor Sapienza (Rome), Casale San Nicola (Urban area of Rome) and Gorino (a little village near Ferrara).
21. When authors wrote this chapter, between August and September 2016, they were unaware of the success that fake news and hoaxes would gain, starting from November 2016. Fake news became the topic of a new media hype, following and confirming Vasterman's media hype model adopted in this chapter.

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### About the authors

**Andrea Cerase** (PhD) is a media and culture sociologist, who has been working over the years on topics such as discrimination, racism and media portrayals of minorities. He has been a Research Fellow at La Sapienza University of Rome and also taught as adjunct lecturer at Florence and Sassari Universities. He also carries on research activities on risk communication, risk issues, journalism and applied social network analysis.

**Claudia Santoro**. Following her post-graduate degree in communication systems and international relations, Claudia Santoro has been studying the social implications of migrant and minorities (mis)representation within various transnational and national projects, which she designed and managed. Covering communication and research roles, she also works on integration and anti-discrimination with the Italian organization Progetti Sociali, and collaborated with various UK-based NGOs.

# 16. Reputational damage on Twitter #hijack

Factors, dynamics, and response strategies  
for crowdsourced campaigns

*Augustine Pang, Jeremiah Icanh Lim Limsico, Lishan Phong,  
Bernadette Joy Lopez Lareza, and Sim Yee Low*

Vasterman, Peter (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm. News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises, and Public Opinion*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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## Abstract

Twitter has afforded organizations a platform for crowdsourced campaigns using hashtags. However, it is susceptible to hijacks (Roncero-Menendez, 2013). This chapter seeks to examine the factors, dynamics and response strategies for such hijacks. Five international cases which have generated media interest were analysed. Findings revealed that public anger, wrong timing, and weak hashtags led to hijacked campaigns. Hijacks tended to peak within hours of the launch, aggravated by influential Twitter users, internet activists, and online media interest. Response strategies employed by organizations include replacement of hashtags. This chapter proposes the SMART (Scan-Monitor-Advocate-Respond-Timing) framework to manage such hijacks. This chapter is arguably the first empirical study examining the risks of Twitter hashtag campaigns.

**Keywords:** Twitter, hijack, reputation, crowdsourced campaigns, response strategies

## Introduction

Global social media use has increased exponentially. An earlier projection predicted that by 2016, the number of global social media users is expected to hit 2.13 billion, up from 1.4 billion users in 2012 (Statista, n.d.). Organizations have jumped on the social media bandwagon and leveraged social

media platforms as a key communication and marketing tool to reach out to their key stakeholders, whether to share information about their existing and upcoming products and services, or cultivate relationships (Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015). In a survey conducted among senior executives from the United States, the use of social media is found to be increasing among organizations (Thompson, Hertzberg & Sullivan, 2013). More than ninety per cent of marketers surveyed placed high value on marketing on social media (Stelzner, 2014), and more planned to increase spending on social media. Social media has become a phenomenon that organizations cannot ignore as it has 'rapidly become the de facto modus operandi for consumers' (Mangold & Faulds, 2009: 359).

One of the ways organizations utilize social media is through crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is likened to an open call for an undefined and large community or 'crowd', such as users of a social media platform, to participate in specified tasks or activities (Miller, 2011). An example is Go Daddy receiving huge social media exposure at low costs when it turned to social media (Zuk, 2010). The winning entry was aired by Go Daddy during ABC's Indianapolis 500 telecast (Ibid.).

Being one of the top social media platforms with 288 million monthly users worldwide by the fourth quarter of 2014 (Statista, n.d.), microblogging service Twitter has become one of the key platforms for social media campaigns. Its features lend itself to generation of conversations around trending topics and issues of interest, and its key hashtag ability allows conversations to be tracked easily by both organizations and users. Twitter allows users to broadcast short, text-based status updates (up to 140 characters) called 'tweets'. A user can choose to subscribe to other users' tweets by 'following' them. Twitter also allows users to repost a tweet from another user ('retweet') in order to share information or highlight their interest in and agreement with the issue presented in the tweet. Tweets can be indexed, shared, and spread, using such features as hashtags and hyperlinks (Strachan, 2009), fostering interaction between users at an extremely rapid pace (Jones, 2013; Potts & Jones, 2011). Saffer, Sommerfeldt, and Taylor (2013) found that an organization's level of Twitter interactivity influences the quality of relationship with its stakeholders. While it is easy to create a hashtag to be used as part of a social media campaign, there were instances when organizations saw their campaign hashtags hijacked by users for other purposes, whether to attack the organization, spread negative stories, or even for parody. For instance, UK-based Waitrose supermarket chain found itself on the receiving end of negative contributions by its customers when it launched a #WaitroseReasons Twitter

campaign inviting its customers to share reasons for shopping at Waitrose (Smithers, 2012).

Most research on Twitter thus far has largely focused on the messages and its users (see Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015; Pang, Shin, Lew, & Walther, 2016; Williams, Terras & Warwick, 2013). This study examines the risks of hashtag hijacks in Twitter crowdsourcing campaigns to unearth the factors and dynamics of hashtag hijacks. We propose strategies on how organizations can respond. It is hoped that the strategies identified can help organizations manage hijacked campaigns in a systematic and strategic manner.

## Literature review

### Social media as platforms for crowdsourced campaigns

The advent of social media has provided organizations and individual users a diverse set of tools and channels for disseminating messages and eliciting feedback, often in real time and with extensive reach. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified the social media into six categories, namely: blogs, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn); virtual second worlds (e.g. Second Life); collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia); content communities (e.g. YouTube, Flickr); and virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft). Social media enables dynamic interaction among organizations, groups and individuals, allowing them to act as passive and active participants in online conversations, and as concurrent producers and consumers of internet content (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012).

The rich feedback mechanisms embedded in social media platforms serve as open channels for crowdsourcing. According to the *Financial Times* (n.d.), even the individual act of clicking web links while searching for information in the internet can be considered as contributing to a crowdsourcing activity, since search engines such as Google monitor and aggregate the number of clicks that webpages receive and use these as basis for ranking its search results.

As social media is primarily used for communicating and connecting with others ('Social media as the path', 2016), it enables swift distribution of product details, cost-efficient market adoption of a product or service (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009), this subsequently leads to the rise of social media marketing. Social media marketing is also an organization's strategic and systematic use of social media platforms, online communities, and social networks to convince stakeholders that its causes are meaningful,

appealing, and useful, so as to establish its reputation and brand (Sisira, 2011). A social media marketing campaign is only successful if it is resistant, durable, and exhibit growth potential (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). However, this is only possible if a social media campaign possesses the right messengers, message, and environment.

### **Successes in the use of social media**

One of the strategies for attracting crowdsourced ideas is soliciting inputs on product development from customers, with the chance of winning a prize offered as an incentive for participating. Smith (2012) considers the campaign by Citroen UK, which engaged its Facebook followers by enabling them to participate in deciding the final design of the upcoming Citroen C1 Connexion car, as one of the success stories in corporate crowdsourcing. The car manufacturer received more than 24,000 crowdsourced designs, with the winning model unveiled for sale to the public in 2013 (Hall, 2013). A more recent example is the Airbnb campaign in early 2015, wherein a total of 100,000 Airbnb hosts worldwide were each given a ten-dollar bill as part of the company's #OneLessStranger campaign. The money was earmarked for random acts of kindness for strangers, and the participating hosts were encouraged to upload a photo or video of their experience, using the hashtag bearing the campaign name, across various social media platforms (Shankman, 2015).

Organizations can motivate crowds by providing more information to encourage participation and limiting details to preserve strategic competitiveness; through public collaboration and sharing of sensitive customer information on social media; terminate the campaign when there is dissatisfaction with the inputs (Zuk, 2010).

### **Social media campaigns gone wrong**

Despite the benefits of social media crowdsourcing campaigns, there exist pitfalls. Crowdturfing, where multitudes of cheaply-paid abettors are amassed to disseminate nasty links on social media, influence search engines, and organize factitious grassroots initiatives (Lee, Tamilarasan & Caverlee, 2013), is one. The term is a combination of 'crowdsourcing' and 'astroturfing' (Wang et al., 2012). Lee, Tamilarasan, and Caverlee (2013) identified social media manipulation (56%), sign up (26%), search

engine spamming (7%), vote stuffing (4%), and miscellany (7%) as types of crowdturfing campaigns.

The irony is that even as social media lends greater visibility to organizations, it also contributes to increased scrutiny by stakeholders due to its inherent characteristics that enables viral and instantaneous word of mouth (Thompson, Hertzberg & Sullivan, 2013). Organizations face greater challenges in protecting their brands in the virtual sphere as social media further perpetuates online brand abuse, posing threats to organizations (Gillin, 2012; Howell, 2007; Hesseldahl, 2007; Thompson, Hertzberg & Sullivan, 2013). With user-generated content as a main feature of social media, organizations are susceptible to online reputation attacks that are intentionally launched by external parties like dissatisfied customers, unhappy employees and malicious competitors via social media (Mitchell, 2009; Shullich, 2012). Subversive activities online can cause 'brand ambush' (McAwesome, 2014: 39). Such activities to discredit an organization could undermine corporate social media campaigns, exacerbating reputational damage instead of reaping positive publicity. Some activities that can undermine a campaign or an organization include,

**Brand activism.** Activism can be defined as 'groups of people acting together in order to achieve a common goal' (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014: 367). Although activism is not a new phenomenon, Web 2.0 has allowed the proliferation of online anti-brands communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Van den Hurk, 2013). Social media has provided more efficient means for activists to disseminate their message to a wider or global audience, to rally supporters, and to better organise themselves around a movement, which aided activists in their efforts to target organizations (Murthy, 2013; Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014; Van den Hurk, 2013). The network of online communities or activists could evolve around a certain brand, forming brand communities or anti-brand communities with individuals acting as social activists to project their opposition against brands or organizations (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Socio-political activism is common on the Twitter platform, and one good example cited is the anti-government 'Arab Spring' movement in the Middle East and North Africa which took place between late 2010 and early 2011 (Murthy, 2013). With Twitter, microbloggers are able to efficiently rally communities using the searchable function of hashtags (Zappavigna, 2014).

**Parody accounts.** Parody accounts occur when 'someone assumes the online identity of another entity' (Wan, Koh, Ong & Pang, 2015: 1) with the former intending to represent the latter satirically. Parody accounts cause confusion among social media followers by posing as the official accounts



of organizations and perpetuating untrue information (Wan et al., 2015). Social media followers may be misled into associating the parody accounts as the official accounts of the organizations thereby weakening organization messages, as well as the connection between the authentic accounts and their followers (Ibid.). In addition, it could also ride on developing events and promote follower's recall of negative events which reinforces negative impressions of the organizations (Ibid.). Parody accounts on Twitter are prevalent occurrences commonly triggered by significant events (Van den Hurk, 2013).

**Spamming.** Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest are increasingly targeted by scammers as the sharing features provide an efficient means for spamming (Wang, Zubiaga, Liakata & Procter, 2015). Unsolicited content that are present on online social networks are defined as social spam (Wang et al., 2015). According to statistics, the first half of 2013 saw a 355 per cent growth in social spam among social media sites (Nguyen, 2013). Social spamming which can manifest in many forms that includes posting of unrelated contents, fraudulent or malicious hyperlinks on social media platforms which leads to malware or phishing sites. (Ramos, 2012; Mitchell, 2009; Wang et al., 2015). It will undermine the credibility of the social media accounts or organizations, causing embarrassment or even a loss of followers on social media platforms.

### **Online firestorms: Negative WoM**

MarketingPower (2010) defined word-of-mouth (WoM) as the sharing of information among consumers, friends, co-workers, or acquaintances that is able to significantly affect consumers' attitudes, behaviour, reduce decision-making time and risk, and influencing decisions to switch brands seven times more effectively than print advertising (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). With the proliferation of web technologies, E-WoM (electronic word-of-mouth) can generate marketing buzz for organizations (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). The increase in marketing efforts encouraging E-WoM can give rise to the phenomenon of online firestorms, defined as 'sudden discharges of large quantities of negative word-of-mouth that spreads rapidly through online social networks' (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014: 1) that contain negative feedback or complaints against a person, group or organization (Pfeffer et al., 2014).

When online firestorms take place on these social media platforms, the instant waves of negative WoM can cause significant damage to an organization's reputation (Ibid.).

## Twitter

Twitter ranks as the fastest social media platform with the highest turnover of information. The short message length and ease of use allows for information to travel faster than other media channels (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). Twitter users can easily read and reply to tweets from users they follow, and they can also search for discussions on topics through keyword searches known as 'hashtags' from users they may not necessarily follow (Chaudhry, 2014). By coding each tweet with a hashtag, users are able to sift through the massive quantity of messages on Twitter to find information related to a topic and contribute to that discussion publicly (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt & James, 2015). Organizations launching crowdsourced campaigns on Twitter explicitly create and share their own unique hashtags (Gruber et al., 2015) in order to drive user participation and engagement (Bar-Joseph, 2014). These organizations promote these hashtags either through tweets from their official Twitter account or through paid placements on the Trending topics sidebar on the Twitter user interface to fuel greater interest and attention from the public (Gruber et al., 2015).

However, there is the risk of hashtag hijacking in the use of Twitter. Hashtag hijack is a process wherein a hashtag being promoted by an organization on Twitter is used outside of its intended purpose (Roncero-Menendez, 2013). Frequently, these hashtag hijacks are incited by detractors and typically result in compromising the intended goals of the campaign (Campbell, 2013).

This study thus seeks to examine:

RQ1: What are the factors that can expose an organization's Twitter hashtag campaign to being hijacked?

RQ2: What are the dynamics that can occur during Twitter hashtag hijacks?

## Method

Case studies are empirical inquiries with the aim to investigate a 'contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context' and address a 'situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2009: 18). According to Swanborn (2010), case studies are also useful for research containing broad questions about a social phenomenon in a situation where not much information and knowledge is available and a multiple-case study allows for a higher chance of separating

the general (relevant) features from the specific (irrelevant) features of a case. For this study, we adopt a multiple case study method, similar to that used by Pang, Nasrath and Chong as it allows for 'detailed documentation of a relatively new phenomenon' (2014: 102).

### Data collection

Five Twitter hashtag hijack cases were selected. These cases were selected as the campaigns resulted in a huge number of negative tweets within a short amount of time, and also generated significant online media coverage. An international mix was also considered for the selection of cases to ensure diversity, in order to enhance the robustness of the findings (Stacks, 2010).

**#qantasluxury (Australia, November 2011):** Qantas Airways announced a Twitter competition titled 'Qantas Luxury', asking people to submit tweets with the hashtag #qantasluxury describing their dream luxury inflight experience for a chance to win a pair of Qantas first class pyjamas and a toiletries kit. This contest was held days after the airline walked away from contract negotiations with its unions, and a month after thousands of passengers were left stranded when the company had to ground its entire fleet. Thousands of tweets were sent with the #QantasLuxury hashtag from passengers who were unhappy with the airline or who had experienced the disruption themselves.

**#AskBG (United Kingdom, October 2013):** British Gas decided to hold a simple question and answer session via Twitter with the hashtag #AskBG on the same day it announced the increase in residential gas prices by nearly ten per cent. However, given that winter was approaching, customers vented their frustration against the company's decision by hijacking the campaign with tweets protesting the increase.

**#McDStories (United States, January 2012):** McDonald's introduced the hashtag #McDStories with the intention of encouraging Twitter users to share positive stories about their experiences with the brand. However, the hashtag was laden with unpleasant stories from customers as well as activist entities protesting the company's treatment of animals.

**#SunnySideOfLife (Maldives, July 2012):** Maldives Tourism Board (MTB) attempted to get #SunnySideOfLife to trend worldwide by inviting stakeholders from the tourism industry, the local community, and holidaymakers to use the hashtag as part of efforts to attract international tourists into the country. However, the hashtag was hijacked by locals, particularly supporters of former president Mohamed Nasheed, who claimed he was removed

from office via a coup. Domestic issues such as illegitimate government leadership and police brutality were raised.

**#fap2012 (Philippines, July 2012):** Franchise Asia Philippines created the hashtag #fap2012 as part of promoting the 2012 staging of the annual event organised by the Philippine Franchise Association. The hashtag was hijacked by users who related it with another meaning of 'fap', which in internet terminology refers to the sound made during male masturbation.

Two sets of data were collected for analysis.

**Data set 1.** Tweets containing the hijacked hashtag for each case were retrieved using Twitter's Search API, which can be used to find relevant tweets archived in its servers. This data collection method is deemed more effective compared to similar tools such as Topsy, whose search algorithm only allows a display of maximum 100 tweets for each search filtered by the timeline (Sullivan, 2010). As the active period for a trending topic on Twitter typically lasts for a week or shorter (Kwak et al., 2010), with fifty per cent of the overall traffic (Burton & Kebler, 1960) taking place within hours or even minutes (Wu & Huberman, 2007), this study analysed tweets published within two days of the launch of the twitter campaigns.

**Data set 2.** Online media articles about the twitter hashtag hijacks for the five cases were retrieved for analysis by conducting a Google search using relevant search terms such as #qantasluxury and #McDstories.

## Findings

The first research question examined the factors that expose the organization's Twitter hashtag campaign to being hijacked.

### Wrong timing

British Gas launched its #AskBG hashtag campaign on 17 October 2013, the same day it announced the increase in its residential gas prices by 9.2 per cent. When the company announced the price hike, it was at the onset of winter, a time when energy consumption of households typically increase, further underscoring the #AskBG campaign's ill-timed launch (Gard, 2013). Tweets highlighting the consequences of the hike include posts like @SqueekyMango's post '#AskBG @BritishGas 24,000 people died cos of cold homes last year, how many do you think will die this year with price increases so huge?'

Wrong timing similarly heightened the risk of hashtag hijacks for Qantas' #qantasluxury campaign. It was only in the previous month that the airline had faced off with labour unions and grounded its entire domestic and international fleet, a crisis still fresh in the minds of thousands of affected passengers as well as the public. As a result, tweets referencing the crisis hijacked the social media contest. For example, Twitter user @GroggsGamut posted '#QantasLuxury- when the passengers arrive before the couriers delivering the lockout notices do,' while @the-aaron-smith tweeted that '#qantasluxury is chartering a Greyhound bus and arriving at your destination days before your grounded Qantas flight.' On top of that, the Twitter contest and the accompanying hashtag were launched the day after the airline broke off its negotiations with three labour unions, resulting in the tweeting of criticisms against Qantas as an employer as part of the hijack (Taylor, 2011), such as user @Gump5000's post stating that #qantasluxury was 'giving yourself a pay rise whilst grounding your whole airline and taking local jobs offshore.'

Wrong timing was also evident in the hijacking of the MTB's #Sunny-SideOfLife initiative, for the campaign duration coincided with the United Nations committee hearing on the worsening state of human rights in the country (Siddique, 2012), in tweets such as, 'Maldives summoned to UNHRC on 12/13 July – Human rights and freedoms at an all time low in the #maldives #SunnySideOfLife' by @anuahsa.

### Ill-conceived selection of hashtags

Poor choice of hashtags increase the likelihood of hijacks as these give Twitter users more leeway to dictate the theme of the tweets and wrest control of the campaign away from the organization. For example, #McDStories was conceived for sharing positive stories about the organization, but online users used the ambiguous hashtag for their less palatable McDonald's experiences and views (Hill, 2012). Twitter user @vegan shared that 'My memories of walking into a McDonald's: the sensory experience of inhaling deeply from a freshly-opened can of dog food.' Another user, @hypekills1226, posted about 'Doing it in the parking lot of mcdonalds'.

The #AskBG hashtag turned out to be counterproductive, as it generated hard-to-answer 'questions' – often with sarcasm and mockery of the organization – that hardly provided British Gas with the opportunity to explain itself, provide answers, and enlighten customers on issues. User @FelicityMorse asked @BritishGas if they had 'found a way to channel angry customer feedback into electricity?' while @LeeJamesVincent asked 'which

items of furniture do you, in your humble opinion, think people should burn first this winter?’

The #SunnySideOfLife hashtag reflected insensitivity to the prevailing political context. The apparent disconnect with reality allowed the hashtag to be exploited. As pointed out by user @hashimex, ‘Maldives is not #SunnySideOfLife today. It is not safe to travel to Maldives when a coup govt (sic) is in power’. The case of #fap2012 resulted from the organisers’ failure to ensure appropriateness of words. It turned out that ‘fap’ in internet terminology relates to male masturbation (UrbanDictionary.com, 2002). Hence, instead of discussing the franchising event, the resulting tweets focused on sexual innuendos such as @kelfable’s ‘I refuse to believe the people behind #fap2012 didn’t see this coming. In the eye’ and @chuckiedreyfus’ ‘Will stiff competition be one of the topics of #fap2012?’

### Simmering issues and anger

Organizations embroiled in past or concurrent issues appear to suffer from greater vulnerability to hijacked Twitter campaigns. McDonald’s long history of crises involving issues such as unfair labour practices, food safety concerns, accusations of animal rights violations and alleged links to obesity and other health risks provided online users plenty of fodder to create tweets that contributed to the hijack (Friedrich, 2013; Mattera, 2015). User @SkipSullivan, in reference to the unhealthy meals served, wrote, ‘One time I walked into McDonalds and I could smell Type 2 diabetes floating in the air and I threw up’.

Anger and objection to the volatile political and peace-and-order situation at Maldives compromised the #SunnySideOfLife campaign launched by the MTB. While the MTB was not directly responsible for the political crisis, its status as a state-run agency may have attracted the attention of citizens unhappy with the Maldivian government. Dissatisfaction with the organization prompted stakeholders to take advantage of available opportunities to voice out their complaints. These included @MidhathMahir, who posted ‘#Maldives #SunnySideOfLife where dictators rule and police brutality in abundance. Welcome!’ Qantas faced irate customers who used it to attack the organization for grounding its entire fleet. @timwattsau wrote, ‘#qantasluxury was being abandoned at Heathrow for 4 days in the snow with no customer support while trying to get home to 8mo pregnant wife!’

While #AskBG served as an attempt to ‘present a human face to customers’ (Marston, 2013) in light of the price hikes, customer dissatisfaction and public anger over the issue overshadowed the company’s good intentions

and bold initiative to reach out to its clients with questions and concerns regarding its decision. In a stinging tweet, @ClwbCardiff said '@British-Gas #AskBG Given that over half of operating profit, £544 million, was made from residential energy supply in 2012, why so greedy???'

### Activist groups

Activist groups may similarly pounce on the chance to advance their causes. The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has long been pushing for the improved handling of chickens and other farm animals used for McDonald's' food supplies (PETA, n.d.), and the #McDStories campaign gave PETA another channel for attacking the fast food chain. Using its official Twitter account, PETA posted '#McDStories: Liquid chicken nuggets <http://t.co/S6YB4Lun>Who's hungry for @McDonalds?' in reference to its assertions that the company is using mechanically separated chickens.

Activism also played a role in the hijacking of the #SunnySideOfLife campaign. In February 2012, Mohamed Nasheed resigned as president of Maldives. Nasheed then claimed the decision was part of a coup and made at gunpoint (Hull, 2012) which served as the basis for the #mvcoup hashtag launched by supporters of the former president. However, after the MTB launched its tourism-inspired hashtag, activists capitalized on the opportunity to spread their criticisms of the current leadership and used #SunnySideOfLife alongside #mvcoup, such as @SabraNoordeen who said 'In the #sunnysideoflife the #mvcoup regime uses tourist dollars to hire PR companies to gloss over brutality against its citizens'.

The second research question examined the dynamics that can occur during Twitter hashtag hijacks.

### User-generated content

Online content created and shared by social media users generated greater awareness and interest towards the hashtag hijacks. Shortly after the launch of the #qantasluxury campaign, a parody of the film 'The Downfall' (2004) with subtitled dialogue casting Adolf Hitler as Qantas' CEO Alan Joyce was uploaded onto YouTube to ridicule the airline's social media faux pas (Godelnik, 2011). The link to the video was retweeted many times and went viral quickly, garnering more than 50,000 views in about a week (Godelnik, 2011). One user @judithcantor tweeted 'A gold parody of #QantasLuxury. Someone

was very quick with this <http://youtu.be/QTcWpIWzZnQ> PIWzZnCatherine-G9grijofmcmanusmcTimOnTwtrmOnTwtr' while @OutOfOrdr shared 'Hitler reacts to #QantasLuxury <http://t.co/sWxqoCAePIWzZnQ>' (Nigam, 2011).

Creative expressions of dissent over British Gas included 'memes' or photos with catchy captions or satirical changes to the corporate logo. User @IDS\_MP tweeted 'Love the new Logo @BritishGas #AskBG' and shared the parody logo of British Gas where the slogan was changed from 'Looking after your world' to 'Freezing pensioners, not prices!' It garnered 581 retweets. User @BiscuitAhoy suggested '#AskBG Maybe change the advertising on your website? Pic.twitter.com/NuCFDRq5hY' showing a pseudo advertisement with a tagline, 'We're totally ripping you off but it's ok because we're smiling as we do it :) #ItsAllAboutTheShareholders'. In the case of #SunnySideOfLife, ongoing demonstrations by political activists and police action on the protestors fuelled tweets accompanied with photos and videos showing police brutality to gain the attention and sympathy of the international community towards the socio-political situation in the Maldives (Siddique, 2012; Smith, 2012). User @RayyaHussain tweeted: 'please come to #sunnysideoflife and help renew our illegal governments stock of pepper spray with your money', followed with photos showing a police using pepper spray on a man, and a person with a blood shot eye.

### Participation by influencers and disgruntled stakeholders

Social media influencers' involvement attracted further attention. Axel Bruns, a researcher specializing in social media and citizen journalism at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, tweeted, 'Planes that arrive intact and on time because they're staffed and maintained by properly paid, Australian-based personnel #QantasLuxury'. Celebrity Chucky Dreyfuss was among those who participated in the hashtag hijack of #fap2012 while social media expert Carlo Ople blogged about the blunder. Other than influential individuals, PETA also made use of the #McDStories hashtag as a convenient channel to share their concerns and to add social pressure on MacDonald's by tweeting accusations about McDonald's meat handling/recovery practices (Rush, 2014).

Online activists hijacked the hashtags to champion their social causes. Twitter users started an online petition on Change.org requesting for British Gas executives to 'forgo their huge salaries and bonuses and live off the basic state pension of £110.15', (M.A., n.d.), as well as posted a link to a media article about the CEO's £2m bonus. Before the hashtag campaign for #SunnySideOfLife commenced on 12 July 2012, Maldivian pro-democracy



activists conspired to hijack the campaign by calling upon local sympathizers to join in the online tirade against the government. User @AdduHaanee tweeted, 'We are going to hijack #SunnySideofLife and show the world how sunny it is, in time of coup #DraftingTweets'.

The presence of disgruntled stakeholders was overwhelming. #QantasLuxury spurred a tremendous number of tweets referencing Qantas' service disruption and recent battle with the unions. User @headoncollision tweeted '#QantasLuxury is getting unlimited drinks to compensate with the possibility of missing connections, cancellations, or randomly landing'. 'CEO bonus – 2 million dollars. Worker demands – \$1 pay rise per hour. Epic fail of the #qantasluxury twitter campaign – priceless!!' commented @woopjack. British Gas was bombarded with scathing tweets such as '@BritishGas #AskBG What is the best temperature to thaw an elderly relative at and what seasoning would you use with one?' posted by @TechnicallyRon. '@BritishGas When the choice is between food, heat or a roof over your head which one would you choose? #AskBG #disability#poverty' questioned @VoiceofT\_Reason. McDonald's was lambasted over its poor service and food quality. User @healthy\_food tweeted 'I ate a @McDonalds cheeseburger a few years ago and got a food poisoning so bad that I had to get hospitalized'.

### Parody Twitter accounts

The #qantasluxury, #McDStories and #SunnySideOfLife hashtags saw parody Twitter accounts that joined in the conversation with satirical or sarcastic tweets. Parody accounts arising from #qantasluxury were @FakeQantasPR, @AlanJoyceCEO as well as @qantasluxury. #McDStories had its own share of fake accounts @McDStories and @McDConfessions which attempted to detract from the original hashtag handle. As for #SunnySideOfLife, there was only one parody account @SunnySideofLife posting sarcastic tweets targeted at the government and the police.

### Media attention

The hashtag hijacks were quickly reported by media soon after the onset of the hijacks, attracting greater attention. For example, in the case of #qantasluxury, *The Herald Sun*, a local paper based in Melbourne, published an article titled, 'Qantas attempt at Twitter promotion a PR disaster' (Casey, 2011) within hours of the hashtag hijack. The hijack of #SunnySideOfLife was also reported in online media within the same day. One example is the article titled 'Maldives tourism campaign backfires as Twitter shows

darker side of island life' (Siddique, 2012) published by *The Guardian* which highlighted the socio-political predicament in Maldives.

## Discussion

The question remains, what can organizations do to manage their hijacked Twitter hashtag campaigns. To answer that question, we first seek to examine what the organizations involved in the cases had done.

### Formal withdrawal

For the #AskBG and #McDStories cases, the hashtag campaigns were formally withdrawn by the organization immediately after the hijacking began. British Gas and McDonald's subsequently issued formal statements on the hijacking to the press and through their official Twitter accounts (Gard, 2013; York, 2013; Raven, 2013; Hill, 2012; Lubin, 2012; Thomases, 2012). For the other two cases, the #SunnySideOfLife and #qantasluxury cases, the hashtags were never formally withdrawn, and the controversies were not explicitly addressed by the MTB or Qantas in their subsequent tweets (Siddique, 2012). The Philippine Franchise Association, the organiser of Franchise Asia Philippines, similarly refrained from formally addressing the #fap2012 controversy ('A classic case of Twitter hashtag hijacking #FAP2012', 2012).

### Responses vary

The tone of the response messages of the organizations to the hijacks varied depending on the severity of the public's response. For example, British Gas adapted a serious and defensive tone in its press statements, stating that the Q&A session it organized was the right thing to do and was in the best interest of its customers (Gard, 2013; York, 2013; Raven, 2013). It also responded in a formal manner to the tweets using the #AskBG hashtag, but it was unable to keep up with the deluge of messages triggered by the hashtag campaign and hijack. Meanwhile, McDonalds employed a direct and blunt approach to quelling the hijack instigated by PETA. Through its official Twitter account, the company said that '@peta That posting is absolutely FALSE McNuggets are NOT made from mechanically separated chicken. Only USDA inspected white meat'.

## Replacement of hashtag

In two of the cases, the organizations introduced a different hashtag in order to divert attention away. Franchise Asia Philippines changed their event hashtag to #FranchiseAsia ('A classic case of Twitter hashtag hijacking #FAP2012', 2012). McDonald's came out with a new hashtag campaign #LittleThings to highlight its new menu item of Chicken McBites (Hill, 2012; Lubin, 2012; Thomases, 2012). British Gas and Qantas did not replace the hashtags; the MTB continued to use the hashtag (Siddique, 2012).

## Towards a more strategic use of Twitter

Findings from RQ<sub>1</sub> illustrated that a variety of situational factors had contributed to the increased risk of a Twitter hashtag campaign being hijacked. The hashtag campaigns for #AskBG and #qantasluxury were poorly timed, amidst events that have caused public backlash against the companies. In the cases of #McDStories and #SunnySideOfLife, public sentiments were overwhelmingly negative towards them.

Twitter has been observed to be associated with recent cases of online firestorm as its microblogging characteristic allowed voluminous communication within a short span of time (Pfeffer et al., 2014). In the study by Pfeffer et al. (2014), the cases of #McDStories and #qantasluxury were highlighted as examples of how Twitter has provided a fertile platform for online firestorms to spread. Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2006) observed that the speed and convenience of internet has expedited and enhanced consumerism activism strategies. The evidence presented in the hijacks of #McDStories, #qantasluxury and #AskBG attest to our findings.

Murthy (2013) argued that there is a link between Twitter and a wide spectrum of socio-political activism. This was manifested in the case of #SunnySideOfLife. Activists and sympathizers criticized the campaign for promoting an image of the country that was in stark contrast to its existing social-political predicament, and their anger towards the current government culminated in a swift socio-political movement on the social media platform to champion their cause. The lack of experience and knowledge in the use of social media in marketing campaigns precipitated the hashtag hijacks. Failure to consider sensitivities and circumstances surrounding the operating environment of the organization, current difficulties or impending crises, as well as pre-existing relations with stakeholders before

launching a hashtag campaign runs the risk of it triggering hijack assault, resulting in reputational damage (Campbell, 2013).

The use of an open-ended hashtag such as #AskBG or #McDStories also increase the likelihood of a hijack as it provides opportunity for the public to determine the theme of their responses and to wrest control of the campaign from the organization. 'Self-serving' type of hashtags which attempts to coax voluntary and positive reviews proved to be most susceptible to being hijacked (Campbell, 2013). Meanwhile, as with the #fap2012 case, a poorly conceived hashtag attracted the wrong attention.

The findings for RQ 2 suggested other dynamics at play. In particular, the participation of activists and influencers would extend the hashtag campaign to users beyond the organization's intended target groups. Activists fervent in championing their causes fanned online sentiments to exert pressure on their targets in the case of #SunnySideOfLife and #AskBG. Customers and members of the public who are disgruntled towards the organization would also propel them to contribute negative or sarcastic entries instead of positive comments (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014). The presence of such parody accounts (Wan et al., 2015) which looked similar to the official accounts created further confusion among social media followers.

Research has shown a correlation between the spread of online firestorm and media coverage on both social media and traditional media (Pfeffer et al., 2014). In the five cases studied, evidence showed that online media coverage appeared quickly upon the hashtag hijacks. Web 2.0 has empowered consumers to participate in creating and sharing of content (Săvulescu, 2014). Twitter users showcased their creativity and humour in crafting internet memes, witty one-liners and other variations of online media content that mock, ridicule or downright criticize the organization, which can cause reputational damage.

### **Applying the SMART approach to Twitter campaigns**

It is thus pertinent for organizations to consider and be prepared to manage potential negative backlash in Twitter campaigns. Based on the above findings, we recommend applying the SMART approach in planning and managing a Twitter hashtag campaign. This practical approach is adapted from Siah, Bansal and Pang's (2010) New Media Crisis Communication Model.

## Scan the environment

Before making the decision to launch a Twitter hashtag campaign, the social media team should scan the environment it is operating in and get a good sense of the public sentiment towards the organization, its products or services, and also the current national or domestic issues that may be faced by the country it is operating in. Twitter campaigns, in particular those making use of hashtags to crowdsource for public contribution of stories and images, should be launched only when public sentiment is found to be neutral or positive. For example, NYPD's #myNYPD campaign backfired when it was launched during a period when public support for the police department was declining (Tumulty, 2014) and after the fatal shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson.

## Monitor responses 24/7

Upon implementation of the Twitter campaign, the team must monitor closely how Twitter users respond. While it is the hope that the Twitter community would participate favourably, it cannot afford to disregard the risk of online firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Close monitoring would allow the team to quickly respond and adapt the campaign to avoid potential hijacks. In the case of #qantasluxury, if the team had conducted close monitoring, it would have picked up warning signs such as, @wolfcat's 'ROFL... well this hashtag is not working out how they planned #QantasLuxury'.

## Enlist advocates

To encourage positive response to the Twitter campaign, the organization should also call on influencers, who can be individuals or organizations to advocate on behalf of the organization. Their participation would help boost and spread positive word about the campaign, which may in turn dilute negative comments and potentially prevent attempts to hijack the campaign. Good relationships with such advocates need to be cultivated (Pang, Tan, Lim, Kwan & Lakhanpal, 2016). For example, for UNICEF India's 'Awaaz Do' (which means 'lend your voice' in Hindi) campaign, the team engaged influencers to help spread positive word about the initiative to send eight million Indian children back to school. One such advocate is Bollywood icon Priyanka Chopra whose tweet 'Every child has a right to

education but many are denied. Lend your voice to the #awaazdo campaign, log on to [www.awaazdo.com](http://www.awaazdo.com) and show your support' was subsequently retweeted by many other Twitter users as well.

### **Respond fast, but not without care**

A well-thought through response plan for Twitter campaigns should be prepared. This would enable the team to be ready to respond quickly to criticisms or negative comments about the campaign or the organization. Ignoring such comments may lead to greater dissatisfaction and unhappiness from the online users, creating negative word-of-mouth that pose potential damage to the organization's reputation (Damayanti, Rodrigues, Chua & Pang, in press). This can be seen from how the team in DiGiorno Pizza responded quickly with an apology after a wrong move in tapping the trending #WhyIStayed to promote its pizzas, before checking that the context for this hashtag was actually domestic violence (Griner, 2014). DiGiorno Pizza averted a potential social media crisis by not only quickly deleting the offending tweet, and issuing an apology, but also posted a personal response to dozens of Twitter users who were offended by them.

### **Timing**

Finally, it is important to consider the right timing to launch a Twitter campaign. This is closely linked to the results of the environment scan on public sentiment towards the organization and the climate it is operating in. Organizations should not shy away from making painful but necessary decisions to postpone the launch of the Twitter campaigns, or tweak the mechanism and choice of hashtags if the move will help the organization avert backlash from the Twitter users.

### **Conclusion**

This study analysed five cases of Twitter campaigns whose hashtags were hijacked, examining the factors, dynamics of hijacks and how the organizations responded. There were a few limitations to this study. First, only tweets generated within the first two days of the hashtag hijack were analysed. An analysis of the tweets generated during the entire period of the hijack may offer further insights into areas such as the lifecycle of a

hashtag hijack. Second, besides online media articles, print media coverage as well as official press releases could also be analysed for how crises generated online gained further credibility offline (Pang, Nasrath & Chong, 2014). Third, while the cases were drawn from an international pool, tweets communicated in the respective native languages were not analyzed. This may provide further insights, particularly local sentiments. It is hoped that this study can help organizations find the best way to connect with their stakeholders using social media, particularly Twitter, avoid having their campaigns compromised, and know what to do in the event that they do.

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## About the authors

**Jeremiah Limsico** (MMC) is Assistant Brand Manager at Procter & Gamble Singapore, handling Ariel/Dynamo, the regional flagship detergent brand for P&G's #1 business globally. His work involves translating local consumer insights into actionable brand building communication strategies across digital, TV, print, and OOH mediums to drive sales and market share. He has a Master of Mass Communication degree (2015) from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and a bachelor's degree in Business Management (with honors) from the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines (2009).

**Bernadette Joy Lopez Lareza** (MMC). Devoted her decade-long career to government service, including nine years in media affairs at the Philippine Social Security System (SSS), a state-run pension fund with over 34 million members. She served as Senior Communications Analyst and Officer-in-Charge of the News and Documentation Team at SSS. She is currently part of the ministerial correspondence team of the Department of Planning and Environment in New South Wales, Australia. She earned an undergraduate degree in journalism (with honors) from the University of the Philippines Diliman (2007) and a graduate degree in Mass Communication from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore (2015), both under scholarships.

**Phong Lishan**, (MMC) started her communications career as a content producer in the private sector, before moving on to Nexus, a department under Singapore's Ministry of Defence, where she has been involved in public communications efforts for more than eleven years. Lishan has been involved in the conceptualization and implementation of the national 'Total Defence' campaign, a multi-pronged communications initiative. Currently, she leads the Online Engagement branch, where her responsibilities include the strategic and long-term planning of leveraging online and social media platforms to reach out to and engage with key stakeholder groups. She has a Master of Mass Communication degree (2015) and a bachelor's degree in communication (with honours), both from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

**Sim Yee Low** (MMC), is a public relations practitioner with a broad background in publicity, branding and communication strategies, media relations and issues management. She has extensive experience in managing stakeholder relations, having worked with diverse stakeholders in her previous role as Public Relations Manager with an industry leader in town management. She was also involved in managing customer service for a business unit and has conducted customer service training for front-line employees. She has a Master of Mass Communication degree (2016) from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

**Augustine Pang** is a Professor of Corporate Communication (Practice) at Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. He specializes in crisis management and communication; image management and repair; media management, and corporate communication management. Augustine graduated with his PhD from the Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri. Besides contributing to leading textbooks like the *Handbook of international crisis communication research* (2016, Wiley-Blackwell), *Handbook of crisis communication* (2010, Wiley-Blackwell), *SAGE handbook of public relations* (2010), *Handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility* (2011, Wiley-Blackwell), and *Handbook of research on crisis leadership in organizations* (2013, Edward Elgar), he actively publishes in international refereed journals like the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, amongst others.



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