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Did we make it to the news? Effects of actual and perceived media coverage on media orientations of communication professionals

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to assess the mass media orientations of communication professionals: Is past media coverage for their organization related to the way communication professionals currently evaluate the importance of the media for their organizations? Following the debates on mediatization and reciprocal effects of media coverage, we assume that the amount and the tone of media coverage matter for the media orientations of communication professionals. In our analysis, we discern between *actual* and *perceived* characteristics of media attention. A quantitative content analysis was used to analyze the actual characteristics of media coverage for public and for-profit organizations as well as non-profit organizations. A survey was conducted to analyze the perceptions of coverage and mass media orientations of Dutch communication professionals working for those organizations. For public organizations, actual media favorability and perceived visibility turned out to be important predictors of the media orientation 'attention seeking'. The organizations were rather homogeneous in their relations between actual and perceived media coverage and the media orientation 'strategic impact'. This orientation was best predicted by volume of coverage, the substantiality of issues that were covered, and perceived visibility. Our results point at the importance of taking perceptive data into account when predicting media orientations.

The amount and tone of media coverage about organizations varies widely between different organizations. Some companies show, whether intended or not, high levels of visibility, whereas some small public sector organizations can be considered as 'media virgins' (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Capriotti, 2007; Deacon & Monk, 2001; Schillemans, 2012). Several studies have examined factors that can account for these differences, such as the type of organization, its domain, its organizational capacity, and its media strategies (Capriotti, 2007; Reich, 2010). Even more interesting than focusing on differences in media visibility and the tone of coverage is the analysis of their consequences.

Media coverage of an organization influences its reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990: 252; Kioussis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006). A favorable reputation can contribute to organizational stability, performance, profit, and legitimacy (Luoma-aho, 2008: 448). Media coverage can thus benefit a reputation, but the other side of the coin is that intensive media scrutiny or negative coverage can also have negative effects on the reputations of businesses (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Secondly, media visibility is alleged to improve the relations with stakeholders, as it can reduce information asymmetry between members of the organization and its stakeholders (Brammer & Millington, 2006). An organization that has (positive) coverage in the news media can also benefit from that medium's legitimacy. The media thus fulfill a third-party endorsement role (Carroll, 2010). Visibility can also make organizations more sensitive to social and political stakeholders. Organizations that are in the spotlights are more likely to

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experience social pressure and might feel a greater need to adapt their behaviour to the demands of stakeholders (Brammer & Millington, 2006; Meznar & Nigh, 1995: 180; Salancik, 1979: 391).

Research on the consequences of organizational media coverage often treats organizations as unitary actors. However, we want to move beyond organization-level consequences and are interested to study the relations between media coverage about an organization and its communication officials. Two theoretical perspectives provide a rationale to study this topic. At first, studies on reciprocal effects of media coverage show that subjects of media coverage can be affected by media messages about them (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007). Consequently, reciprocal effects are generally analyzed with a focus on individual effects (such as emotions that a person experiences) as a consequence of media coverage about that specific person (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007). We expect that the reciprocal effect also occurs for coverage about the organization a person works for, since how employees see the organization is influenced by their thoughts of how others see the organization (Hatch & Schultz 2002, 2009). This effect is shown for members of the organization that are not involved in media relations (Jacobs, 2014; Kepplinger, 2007; Korn & Einwiller, 2013; Schillemans, 2012). We can however expect this effect to be even stronger for communication officials, as they are specifically appointed to manage the relations with journalists. It is part of their job to monitor media coverage about their organization and to set up communication strategies to manage relations with stakeholders and the media. Therefore we do not only focus on the relations between characteristics of actual media coverage and media orientations, but we also analyze the perceptions communication professionals have of these characteristics of media coverage and their relation with media orientations.

Secondly and on a more general level, we can expect that mediatization processes play a role in the way communication professionals carry out their work. ‘Mediatization’ refers to the incorporation of media logic in the functioning of organizations. This might lead to organizational adaptations, such as the change of internal procedures and the allocation of responsibilities (Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjørnsrud, Ustad Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014). ‘Media pressure’ is considered as an important factor in the work of career bureaucrats (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014) and the media meet “organizations that are increasingly sensitive to any type of public attention”, to use an understatement (Pallas, Jonsson, & Stranegård, 2014). We consider the wider debate on ‘mediatization’ as a starting point for this research and focus on a specific form of it, namely the media orientations of communication professionals. Our research problem can be seen in the light of mediatization studies, as we are interested in whether actual and perceived media coverage are related to how communication professionals in organizations think about the media.

Communication professionals are the most interesting subjects for studying the consequences of media attention. It is their daily business to work on external communication strategies and media relations. In their work, these employees are guided by a variety of factors, such as their professional identity and their organization’s identity (Cornelissen, Carroll, & Elving, 2009). Next to that, we expect that their orientation towards the media plays a role in how they carry out their work. ‘Mass media orientation’ refers to the (perceived) importance of media coverage about the organization for the work of communication professionals as well as for their organization in general (Rödder, 2009; Weingart, 1998; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). We expect that the way communication professionals are oriented towards media influences their communication strategies. We take this assumption as a starting point to analyze the relation that precedes this one: The relation between media visibility and mass media orientations. Therefore, our research question is: *What is the relationship between both actual and perceived media coverage about an organization on the one hand and the mass media orientations of communication professionals in those organizations on the other?*

Research on organizations in the news often focuses on one type of organization (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Capriotti, 2007; Schillemans, 2012; Verhoeven, 2016). Organizations do however differ in fundamental ways due to their goals, ownership and funding (Boyne, 2002) and we wonder whether that is related to differences in coverage and media orientations. We therefore discern between three types of organizations: private organizations (firms), public sector organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These organizations differ in several aspects, e.g. their goals (profit vs. public service), strategies to reach those goals, institutional position, funding, and relations with stakeholders (Boyne, 2002). They also face varying levels of media attention (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Capriotti, 2007; Deacon & Monk, 2001). For that reason, one of our sub questions is related to the issue of organizational diversity: To what extent do our findings differ between types of organizations?

1. Media orientation: a reciprocal mediatization effect

In public relations research the mass media, and more specifically instances of mass media coverage about organizations, are oftentimes considered as influenced by the work of communication professionals. Examples of PR-driven media effects include studies on media framing (e.g., Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012) or agenda setting (e.g., Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Very little, in contrast, has been said so far about how mass media influence the work of communication professionals (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). The concept of mediatization offers a valuable perspective that can help to approach this understudied part of public relations research.

Mediatization is a heavily debated concept (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2010; Hjarvard, 2008; Schillemans, 2012). Its core assumption is that societal actors, as in our case organizations, adapt themselves to the logic of the media (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). Media themselves can be considered a social institution that interacts with other institutions (Hjarvard, 2008). In the last years, mediatization has received increased scrutiny (Brants & van Praag, 2015). The concept has been subject of numerous empirical and theoretical analyses (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Schillemans, 2012; Strömbäck, 2008; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). It is however also criticized for being a ‘container concept’ that is used to cover several different operationalizations (Sartori, paraphrased in: Deacon & Stanyer, 2014), in which ‘causes’ and ‘consequences’ are difficult to discern (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). Or, as Brants and van Praag state it: “the phenomena that they cover and the empirical proof of their existence and growing

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