

## **Complex decision making as a source of infotainment**

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Iris Korthagen, MSc, BA  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
[korthagen@fsw.eur.nl](mailto:korthagen@fsw.eur.nl)

### **Abstract**

In many policy processes nowadays a variety of actors is involved which results in complex decision making processes, since these different actors have various perspectives on the problem and the matching solutions. Such complex processes are difficult to grasp in short reports in newspapers or on television, especially since journalists have to deal with increasing time pressures and demands to make news items more entertaining. This leads to biases in the construction of the policy processes. In this study we examine whether the biases of fragmentization, dramatization, personalization, the authority-disorder bias and the negativity bias can be found in media reporting on complex decision making processes in the Netherlands.

We conducted a quantitative content analysis on media reports on five complex water management projects in the Netherlands. We found that in these media reports stories are often fragmented, dramatized and unfavourably towards the project, and frequently an authority is blamed for not taking appropriate measures. Certain actors take advantage of these biases more than other actors: media attention for oppositional politicians and interest groups in particular relate significantly to the media biases.

## 1. Media biases and the construction of controversial policy processes

Much decision making nowadays takes place in governance networks: a variety of actors is involved in the policy making processes. In these governance networks there is no consensus about the problem or solution and there is much uncertainty around the knowledge on these (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Hisschemöller & Hoppe, 1995; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). The different actors involved in the policy process have dissimilar interests; as a result, many perspectives on the problem and solution exist. Because these policy problems are contested, often they will be publicly discussed in media. In public administration much attention is paid to the decision making processes, but not to the construction of those processes in media.

Is the discussion in media representative for the complex decision making processes? We argue that the especially the complexity of these decision making processes conflicts with news reporting practices. Bennett (2009) describes 4 information biases in the current news reporting, based on research of Patterson (2000). The news is more personalized, dramatized, fragmentized and there is an authority-disorder bias in the news (Bennett, 2009). In short, the biased news story gets a human face, reveals a lot of conflict, doesn't discuss the context of the issue and claims action is needed from an authority to solve the problem. The following fragment from a media report in our study is illustrative (Brabants Dagblad, August 24, 2004) on the case of Noordwaard: *"When the touring car comes closer, the excitement increases within a small group of people on the corner of Steurgat-Galeiweg-Kooike in Werkendam. One of those people is Adri Vermeu, who just positioned his tractor with trailer across the road. (...) The touring car [with the Minister for Transport] has to stop. Vermeu wants to make clear to her that not everybody is happy with the plans in this region.(...) Sacrificing the region for water management purposes means the end of practically all twenty agricultural businesses in that area."* The disagreement of the farmer with the project plans leads to a conflict situation, which point to the personal drama of the twenty agricultural businesses and plea for action of the minister.

The biases stem from time pressures journalists experience and the competition for the attention of the news consumer (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Davis, 2007; Bennett, 2009). As a consequence, wicked policy issues will be simplified and enlivened by these biases: complex decision making will be a source of infotainment. In addition, the distribution of media attention for the stakeholders will be unbalanced as certain actors' behavior does fit to the information biases better than others'. We argue that especially the behavior of opponents as oppositional politicians and interest groups matches with the framing of infotainment.

### **Research questions and relevance**

In this study, we examine the media reporting in newspapers and on television about five important water management projects in the Netherlands, which can be characterized as wicked problems (van Buuren, Edelenbos & Klijn, 2010). Firstly, we want to know to what extent the information biases in media framing exist in reports on the water management policies. We, secondly, investigate how the biases in the news relate to the coverage of the involved actors.

In communication studies, media studies and political science, quite some research has been done on these news biases. However, most of this research concerns more general trends in media reporting (Patterson, 1993, 2000; Bennett, 2009) or is connected to elections (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof and Oegema, 2006). Yet, in this study we are interested in the media coverage of long term complex policy processes: we focus on ten years of media reporting on five comparable projects, in which various public, semi-public and private actors are involved.

It is important to research the news around policies because the increase of infotainment has consequences for the information citizens get out of the news. McChesney (2000) even argues that the media have become an *anti-democratic* force because of the above described developments: the commercialized media do value entertained news consumers more than informed citizens.

In our study, we also explicitly link the infotainment biases to the coverage of certain actors, which is a new application of the theory around the information biases. This investigation may lead to questions around the empowerment of certain actors in the media and in democracy by the information biases. After all, we know that media can affect issues on the political and policy agenda in the form of agenda setting (Cobb and Elder 1983, Baumgartner, Jones, & Leech 1997, Cook et al. 1983, McCombs 2004) and framing (Scheufele 1999, Fisher 2003). Thus, media attention can be an important source of power, especially for outsiders.

### **Paper outline**

This paper is organized as follows. We start with an elaboration on wicked problems in section 2.1. Afterwards, we discuss the media biases in section 2.2. At the end of the theoretical part of this paper we link these two, by developing hypotheses on the construction of complex decision making processes in media reports in section 2.3. In the third section we pay attention to our data collection (section 3.1), our method of analysis (section 3.2) and the conceptualization (section 3.3). Next, we present our analysis, by first discussing the existence of the biases in the media coverage of the water management policies (section 4.1) and secondly we relate these biases to the oppositional politicians and interest groups in the policy processes (section 4.2). Lastly, we report our main conclusions based on our findings, in section 5.

## **2. Theory: wicked problems in the media**

### **2.1 Wicked problems**

Many policy problems can be characterized as “wicked” problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). Wicked problems can be contrasted to tame problems. Tame problems can be defined with the knowledge available; moreover, there is consensus towards the solution. On the contrary, wicked problems are ill-defined and solutions to the problem rely on negotiation between different actors. Planning problems are a good example.

As a result, wicked problems particularly differ from other policy problems with regard to the high level of uncertainty surrounding these policy issues. Koppenjan & Klijn (2004) distinguish three sources of uncertainty: the substantive uncertainty, the strategic uncertainty and the institutional uncertainty. Substantively, a final formulation of a problem is not possible and one true solution does not exist (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In contrast, many involved actors see many different problems and will subsequently propose various solutions. Because so many actors have their own perceptions of the situation they will adopt different strategies to pursue their goals, this leads to strategic uncertainty. The interactions of the strategies lead to certain problem formulations and influence the problem solving process (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004). Thirdly, wicked problems can be typified by institutional uncertainty. Because the policy issues are often played out in a network with people from different organizations, administrative levels and other networks, the interaction between actors is even more complex. The interaction of actors will be partly restricted by the different institutional regimes of the involved actors and also other networks.

These wicked problems have implications for policy making. There must be a broader participation of affected parties, directly and indirectly, in the policy-making process (Mason & Mitroff, 1981: 13). A network structure is therefore a better structure to facilitate the interactions between the different involved actors, than, for instance, top-down-structures (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004; Weber & Khademian, 2008). In networks the interactions between actors are more horizontally organized, while the interdependencies between actors are leading. In governance networks cooperation between all kinds of actors takes place, such as governmental institutions, interest groups or private enterprises. A high level of conflict exists in the networks, because there is little agreement between the actors with regard to the problem or solution (Weber & Khademian, 2008). Policy games between these actors are played out: the conflicting views and interests are negotiated to come to policy measures. When actors are open for the contribution of other actors, this will lead to processes of reframing

and learning, and innovative solutions can be discovered subsequently (Schön & Rein, 1994; Hirschmüller & Hoppe, 1995; Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004).

All things considered, the policy making process in networks is very complex in nature. When journalists have to report on issues around these decision making processes, they must reduce this complexity, because the item must be comprehensible and fit within the limit of words or minutes journalists have to work with. Moreover, the current competition between the various media outlets has led to more information biases in the news reporting.

## **2.2 Information biases**

News outlets stand under enormous pressures nowadays. Especially print media in general (except for the free newspapers) see a decrease in printing and coverage ratio in the Netherlands (CvdM, 2005). This decreasing trend is also noticed in other countries in Europe and in the US (McChesney, 2000; Davis, 2007; Aldridge, 2007: 29), due to high competition. This competition between the different outlets is related to the increase in the number of media outlets on television and on the Internet. In reaction, (print) media have to become more efficient, and several measures are therefore taken. One of these measures is that publishers are clustered together in larger conglomerates. On the regional level in the Netherlands for instance, this has led to more daily press monopolies and fewer television broadcasters (Vergeer, 2006). Besides this, journalists have to deal with rising daily pressures as a consequence of the competition (Davis, 2008: 43). They have to work more efficiently: in less time they need to work on more news items. At the same time, news items need to attract enough news consumers to be able to compete for advertisers among all other media outlets. Both the time pressure on the journalist and the competition for the news consumers lead to more infotainment around us (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Davis, 2007; Bennett, 2009). News items contain more entertainment value, on the one hand to simplify a complex story; on the other hand to make the story more attractive.

Several studies conclude that currently certain trends in the reporting exist. Stories simplify and liven up the complex reality, by their focus on conflicts or individual drama. Bennett (2009: 40), for a large part based on research by Patterson (2000), describes four biases in the construction of reality by media: the personalization bias, the dramatization bias, the fragmentation bias and the authority disorder bias. Besides this, Patterson (2000) sees a bias towards negativity in the news. These trends in the framing of news can also be found in other studies on media content (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Strömbäck & Sheheta, 2007; Bennett, 2009).

The personalization bias refers to the framing of stories in human interest stories. It brings a human face or emotional angle to the presentation of an issue (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2009). This media preference for personalized human-interest news creates a “can’t-see-the-forest-for-the-trees” information bias, argues Bennett (2009: 41): it makes it difficult to see the actual institutional picture that lies beyond the actors who are caught in the eye of the news camera. The personal story does hardly ever contain a more in-depth analysis of the case.

The second bias, the dramatization bias, is the emphasis on crisis and conflict in stories rather than on continuity and harmony (Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2009). News dramas downplay complex policy information, the workings of government institutions, and the bases of power behind the central characters (Bennett, 2009: 41). Journalists tend to describe the situation at hand in terms of conflicts, with winners and losers (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Strömbäck & Sheheta, 2007).

Thirdly, the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger context is called the fragmentation bias (Valkenburg & Semetko, 2000; Patterson, 2000; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007; Strömbäck & Sheheta, 2007; Bennett, 2009: 42). In this ‘episodic’ framing journalists describe issues in terms of specific events; they do not place them in their more general context (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007).

Fourthly, the news is preoccupied with order, as journalists question whether authorities are capable of establishing or restoring the order (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Bennett, 2009: 43). This bias in the framing of news is known as the authority-disorder bias. At the same time, the attitude of media towards authorities is shifted from a more favourable stance towards an attitude where media are more suspicious to authorities (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof and Oegema 2006; Bennett, 2009).

Furthermore, the news tends to be more negative in general. The majority of the American public perceives the news as “depressing” and “negative” (Patterson 2000). However, Brants en van Praag did not find an increase in cynical tone in the Netherlands, studying the content of media reports in general from 1986 till 2003.

These biases indicate the increase of infotainment in media reporting (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Patterson, 2000; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Bennett, 2009).

### **2.3 A biased journalistic construction of complex decision making processes**

Altheide (2004: 294) argues that given the time pressure, an orientation on infotainment is quite useful for journalists to cover a complex event which involves various facets and numerous possible interpretations. News dramas can simplify and enliven the complex policy processes. In the same line of argument, Davis (2007) claims that wicked policy processes are either avoided by journalists, or drastically reshaped to fit the journalistic norms.

We can typify the water management projects under study as complex projects, encountering wicked problems. Many actors are involved in these projects, including mandated and oppositional politicians from local, regional and national government, interest groups, Water Boards, private investors and research institutes. All these actors have different perspectives on the case, which makes the process complex. Hence, we expect biases media reports on these complex water management policies. Our first hypothesis reads therefore as follows:

*1. The media reports on the water management policies contain the following information biases:*



*a. the personalization bias; b. the dramatization bias; c. the fragmentization bias; d. authority disorder-bias; e. negativity bias.*

Not only do we expect these biases in the news around complex decision making processes, but we also think these biases are more related to certain actors within the networks. The biases have an important influence on who will get access to the public and how those actors' public images are formed (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). They consequently lead to a selection of certain perspectives on the wicked problems by media, and thus a biased framing of the complex issue. We foresee positive relations between the biases and oppositional politicians and with the interest groups in particular. The behaviour of these groups of actors fit the biases better than other groups of actors. The media are at the same time likely to be a rather more important source of power for outsider than for insider groups (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Sireau and Davis, 2007: 135).

#### Information biases and the oppositional politicians

Politicians and journalists need each other in the news cycle: politicians need publicity on their stand points and journalists need news issues about politics. More and more politicians are advised by communication professionals to strategically postulate their statements in order to receive media attention. Political actors therefore adapt more and more to the needs of media with regard to timing, location, and the framing of the message so it becomes newsworthy (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Kepplinger, 2002; Schulz, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). This has led to the "spectacularization" of political communication formats and of the political discourse itself (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251). Politicians increasingly speak in sound bites (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011), catchy phrases which fit in the limited space politicians get in media. An example of such a sound bite of an oppositional politician in one of our cases (IJseldelta-Zuid) is: *"For the umpteenth time we witness a showcase project of politicians which costs hundreds of millions of public funds"* (in Nieuw Kamper Dagblad, 12 September 2009). This sound

bite fits to the information biases really well. It contains conflict (dramatization bias), because it assaults policies of politicians. Besides this, it generates feelings of outrageousness: it talks about the loss of public funds, which connects easily with the personalization bias. Thirdly, it berates the political action by claiming the project is not valuable for the general public but only for the politician himself, this forms a part of the disorder-authority bias. Negativity dominates; the project is framed as a mere showcase, which costs a lot of public money.

Oppositional politicians in particular need media attention to change the problems on the agenda, so we predict that reports on them will be more biased than reports on other actors, which is stated in hypotheses II.

*II. Media attention for oppositional politicians is positively related to the information biases.*

#### Information biases and interest groups

Interest groups also need media attention in order to be heard by other actors. In this study, interest groups can be roughly divided in three categories: interest groups of citizens of the concerned region, interest groups of farmers and interest groups with concerns for the environment or the landscape. To get publicity these interest groups pursue the same strategies that oppositional politicians use for making and shaping the news (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). Terkildsen, Schnell and Ling (1998: 45) found that the success in structuring issue information is often more related to journalistic norms than to actual pressure group strength. Important media-imposed criteria that influence this success are spokesperson accessibility, rules of issue simplicity, drama and event-oriented coverage (Terkildsen, Schnell, Ling, 1998: 58). Interest groups not only make use of bold statements, they also organize actions against policies. Such a protest is not successful unless it is covered by media (Lipsky, 1986). For instance, in the case of Wieringerrandmeer farmers went to the building of the Provincial Council on their tractors with banners with protesting slogans. This event suits the information biases well. The protest is an indication of a conflict between the farmers and the Provincial Council, so this fits in the dramatization bias. Moreover, the protest makes it possible to

give the issue a human face (personalization bias). A quote from a report from Trouw (18 march 2008) illustrates this: *“Van Loon is ‘inwardly mad’, because he cannot make a living out of only half of his company. ‘Good solutions need to be developed, otherwise they have a problem’ he says determined. It is quiet for a while. ‘Or we have’, he continues.”* It is clear that the protest is directed to the authorities of the Provincial Council, which suits the authority-disorder bias. The negativity bias is also fed. Hence, journalists will report on these protest events.

Although for the interest groups mainly personal interests are at stake and not their public image – as is more the case for the politicians – they also need the media to pursue their goals. Hence, we predict that the reports on interest groups are also more related to the information biases than the reports about other actors.

*III. Media attention for interest groups is positively related to the information biases.*

The data and methods we used to tests these hypotheses are described in the following section on methodology.

### **3. Methodology**

#### 3.1. Data: five water management cases

To examine the role of information biases in the construction of wicked problems we studied the media reports on five water management cases (IJsseldelta-Zuid, Lent, Noordwaard, Wieringerrandmeer and Zuidplaspolder) in the Netherlands. These cases have been studied extensively with regard to the decision making processes (Van Buuren, Edelenbos & Klijn, 2010), which is useful for the interpretation of the results of this study. In all cases actors deal with water management issues, preventing areas against floods. The task of water management is in all cases combined with more planning activities such as housing, the development of recreational areas or infrastructure, which makes these cases complex projects. Decision making on these projects takes place with many different actors – public as well as private – which have different perspectives. Besides this, the knowledge on the issues is limited and

contested. Van Buuren et al. (2010:16) therefore characterize the water management issues as wicked problems.

The media reports about those projects stem from newspapers and television. Although there are more different media outlets, the norms of media overall, such as standard of newsworthiness, are highly similar among media outlets (Strömback & Dimitrova, 2011: 33). The selection of news paper reports started at the database of Lexis Nexis Academic NL. We searched for media reports in the period of 1 January 2000 till 1 January 2011 with the name of the case<sup>1</sup> as the search term. A disadvantage of the database of Lexis Nexis Academic NL is that not all regional newspapers can be found from 2000 on. For instance, in the database the reporting in the selected newspapers for Wieringerrandmeer started even in 2007. This may lead to small biases in the material. Reports are decided to belong to the universe (population of media reports) only when more than one paragraph<sup>2</sup> was written on the concerned water management project. When the universe of media reports comprised more than 150 items, we took a random sample per project<sup>3</sup>. Besides these news paper reports, we searched for television items about the water management projects at the website from the Dutch institute for television and radio (<http://portal.beeldengeluid.nl/>) and on the websites of regional broadcasters. We did not sample the television items, because of their small amount. This resulted in a sample of 556 media reports. Out of these media reports, 59 reports come from national news media (10,6%), while 497 reports stem from regional media (89,4%). Besides this, most news about the projects is written down in newspapers: 520 reports stemmed from daily papers (93,5%) against 36 items from television programs<sup>4</sup> (6,5%).

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<sup>1</sup> “IJsseldelta-Zuid”, “dijkteruglegging Lent”, “Noordwaard”, “Wieringerrandmeer” and “Zuidplaspolder”

<sup>2</sup> Or when the report itself was just one paragraph: when the report was written about the water management project.

<sup>3</sup> In between 150 and 300 reports: the sample consists of the first of every two reports; in between 300 and 450 reports: the sample consists of the first of every three reports; in between 450 and 600 reports: the sample consists of the first of every four reports, etcetera.

<sup>4</sup> However, we must remark that it is quite recent that regional television programs can be found on the Internet. The earliest item of regional television is from March 2006, and the date regional broadcasters started their broadcasting on the Internet may even differ per outlet. This may lead to small biases in the analysis.

### 3.2. Method: Quantitative content analysis

For each media report an established coding scheme was used to typify the report. Five teams of trained coders executed the coding of the news reports, with the help of an extensive coding instruction. We executed two tests of reliability in and in between these teams. We used conformity tests to test the reliability of coded data. When the conformity is 0,90 or higher this will lead to a reliability score above 0,80 on all types of reliability measures (Wester & van Selm, 2006). On the one hand, the stability of the coders is tested. The stability of the coders is on average 0,94, this indicates a generally high stability. On the other hand the inter-coder reliability is tested, his agreement is averagely 0,90. Hence, we conclude this data set can be seen as reliable: there is not much 'noise' hampering accurate statistical analysis on these data.

However, it is not only important that coders agree on codes. The coding must also be valid. We therefore based the coding scheme mainly on items from the coding system of Patterson (2000), and used his instructions. We especially used the codes which represented the biases Bennett (2009) later on denominates. Besides these codes, we developed an item in which the most important actor in the report was identified. The categories of this item (23 actors in total) were based on the case study research (van Buuren et al., 2010). In the statistical analysis we derived dummies from this variable. We elaborate on the conceptualization behind the codes in the following subsection.

### 3.3 Conceptualization

Although the biases in the news are differently conceptualized in different studies we use the coding scheme of Patterson, because it is more complete than much other studies which have a more fragmented focus on certain biases (see for instance Brants & Neijens, 1998; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Brants & van Praag, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof and Oegema 2006; Strömback & Sheheta, 2007). Moreover, the codes of Patterson (2000) can be easily translated to the biases Bennett (2009) describes.

Patterson (2000) conceptualizes human interest framing in several aspects. Human interest stories use a human example or put a "human face" on an issue or problem or

go into the private or personal life of an actor (Patterson: 2000: 25). Another characteristic of a human interest frame is that the journalist employs adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of sympathy, empathy or outrage. As Patterson (2000), we use a four-item scale from 'high human interest content' till 'no human interest content'. We recoded the item to get an increasing ordinal scale.

The extent to which a journalist dramatizes his report can be measured by the item of the amount of conflict the story contains. The conflict frame is based on the way the story is presented, not on the topic of the story (Patterson, 2000). There are three categories: substantial level of conflict; some conflict (not merely incidental) and no conflict (or so slight as to be inconsequential). We also recoded this item to get an increasing ordinal scale.

Another bias in media records is the ignorance of the context of the story (Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2009). In an episodic frame the story is mainly described in the context of a particular event only; the story does not go much beyond that specific event. In contrast, in a thematic frame, the story itself is mainly placed in a broader context that deals with its meaning or implications for society or describes a trend that goes beyond this single event: the story places the issue in a broad or abstract context (Patterson, 2000:25).

The fourth bias, the authority-disorder bias, can be conceptualized by the action frame (Patterson, 2000). When the story implies there is a need for action or suggests action should be taken the action frame is present. We combined this item with another code: the attribution of responsibility. Who/what needs to take the action or is responsible for the issue? Categories of Patterson (2000: 25) are: not applicable (no action frame present); government; a group, or collective, or community in society or private institution; private individual. When the story implies a need for action and the government is given the responsibility for that, the authority-disorder bias is present.

In addition to the four categories of Bennett (2009) we use negativity as a fifth bias. There are 6 categories used to typify the main tenor of the report: clearly negative/unfavorable; more negative or unfavorable than positive or favorable; balanced mix

between negative and positive; more positive or favorable than negative or unfavorable; clearly positive/ favorable; neutral story, no positive or negative (Patterson, 2000: 25-26). To simplify this, we added the sixth category to the third. For this research we coded whether the report was favorable or unfavorable *towards the water management project*.

## **4. Biases in the media coverage of the water management projects**

### **4.1 Biases in the news**

Using the above described items from the coding scheme of Patterson (2000), we examined to what extent the biases are present in the media reports on the concerning water management projects. We sum up the frequencies below:

- *Fragmentization bias*. We see this bias clearly in the media reports around the complex projects. In only 21,6% of the items the story is placed in a broader context, while in 78,4% the story does not go much beyond the specific event.

- *Dramatization*. Also the dramatization bias can be found in the reporting under study. Most of the media records contain a certain amount of conflict: 33,1% encloses a substantial level of conflict, 30,9% of the reports encloses some conflict. Somewhat more than a third (36,0%) of the media reports about the water management projects are not framed in conflicts at all.

- *Personalization bias*. However, in our data set most of the reports are not personalized at all (54,5%). Only 11,0% of the stories are highly personalized and 12,2% of the media messages is moderately personalized. The remaining 22,3% of the media reports contains only slight human interest content. Thus, the personalization bias does not appear often in the reporting on the water management projects.

- *Authority disorder bias*. Fourthly, to what extent do the messages imply a need for action? In more than half (51,8%) of the media reports describe that certain aspects of the project plan need to be changed. Obviously, the responsibility of solving the problems is mostly attributed to the government, this is the case in 95,1% of the media reports in which is plead for change. The authority-disorder bias – so, there is a need for

action described for which the government is claimed to be responsible – is present in 49,3% of all media reports. The authority-disorder bias is present in almost half of all media messages around the water management projects.

- *Negativity bias* As the results show, the dominant attitude in the report towards the project was most of the times negative: we found a negative attitude towards the project in 48,0% of the media reports. In 32,2% the reporting was neutral. Journalists reported favorably about the projects in 19,8% of their reports.

## **4.2 Actors and biases in the news**

Our next interest is how the actors and biases in the news are interconnected. Can statistical relations be drawn between groups of actors and the biases in the news? Before we describe our results on the relation of oppositional politicians and the interest groups with the information biases, we discuss which actors were important in the news reports on the water management projects.

### **Main actors in the news**

We made different groups of actors; these groups have different interests with regard to media attention. The first group, mandated politicians, consists of politicians in leading positions on all levels of government in the Netherlands: aldermans, mayors, delegates from the Provincial Executive, ministers, and the Prime Minister. The second group – oppositional politicians – is composed of politicians in oppositional positions on all levels of government: municipal councilors, provincial councilors, and Members of the Lower House. The third group, named as governmental institutions, comprises governmental layers in the Netherlands: municipality, province, the central government and the Water Authority. In the concerning news items is not made explicit from whom in the governmental institution the message is coming exactly (often it will be general communication from the governmental institution). The fourth group – interest groups – is formed by inhabitants and farmers of the region and by environmental



organizations. The fifth group is the project organization. The sixth group consists of private investors, research institutes and other actors.

As we can see in the histogram, the interest groups are mostly (30,1%) the main subject of the media reports, in comparison with the other groups of actors. The interest groups are followed up by the mandated politicians, which are in 21,4% the main subject of reporting. On the third place are the governmental institutions, 14,6% of the media items

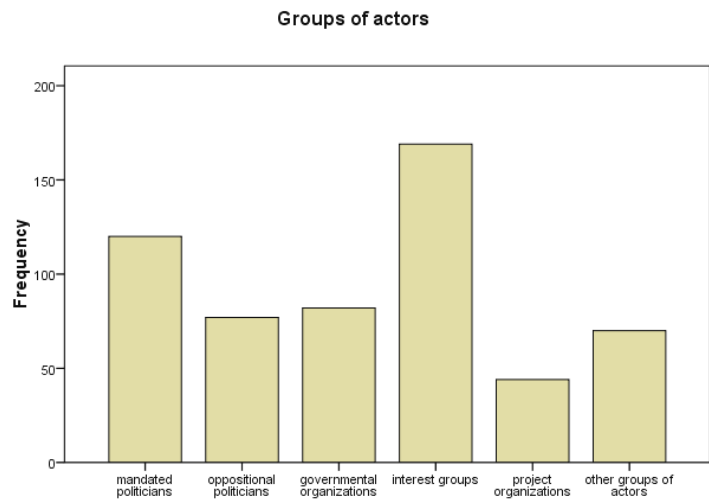


Figure 1. Media attention for the different groups of actors

are about them. The oppositional actors are in 13,7% of the media messages the most important actor of the news. Only 7,8% of the media reports focuses on the project organization. The rest category 'other groups of actors' gave rise to 12,5% of the media messages.

### **Oppositional politicians and the information biases**

The next step is to take a closer look at the statistical relations between the selected groups and the media biases. In line with our hypotheses II and III, we look at the statistical relations between the reporting on oppositional politicians and the information biases. We made dummy variables for these groups in order to be able to use association measures for ordinal variables. With these measures we not only get information on the strength of the relation, but also on the direction of the statistical relation. We use the Spearman's rho, which is the most used non-parametric test for correlations (Field, 2009).

We saw already that the fragmentation bias is frequently present in the reporting on the water management projects, but it appeared not to be linked to oppositional

politicians more than to other groups. In contrast, we see some media biases – dramatization ( $r_s = 0,122$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ), the authority-disorder bias ( $r_s = 0,126$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ) and the negativity bias ( $r_s = -0,100$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ) – do relate to the reporting on oppositional politicians. However, these relations are not that strong in all cases. Moreover, we see an even opposite relation with the personalization bias as expected: the reports on oppositional politicians are slightly less personalized than reports on other actors ( $r_s = -0,088$ ,  $p < 0,05$ ).

Table 1. Correlations between the information biases and the media attention for oppositional politicians.

	All cases (N=556)	IJsseldelta- Zuid (N= 100)	Lent (N=100)	Noordwaard (N= 93)	Wieringer- randmeer (N= 117)	Zuidplas- polder (N=146)
Fragmentization ↔ oppositional politicians	<b>-,033</b>	,148	-,096	,098	-,205*	-,014
Dramatization ↔ oppositional politicians	<b>,122**</b>	,234*	,158	,142	,152	,193*
Personalization ↔ oppositional politicians	<b>-,088*</b>	,063	-,194	-,028	-,260**	-,011
Authority-disorder bias ↔ oppositional politicians	<b>,126*</b>	,060	,212*	,169	,119	,059
Tendency ↔ oppositional politicians	<b>-,100*</b>	-,291**	,015	-,206*	,044	-,100

In conclusion, we cannot completely confirm hypothesis II. The media attention for oppositional politicians is related to the dramatization bias, the authority-disorder bias and the negativity bias. Though, we did not find a relation with the fragmentization bias and the personalization bias is even negatively related to the attention for oppositional politicians.

### Interest groups and the information biases

Again, we see no relation between the fragmentization bias and, for now, the interest groups. Conversely, all the other media biases can statistically be coupled to the reporting on interest groups. When the news report is about interest groups, we see more often the personalization bias, as when other actors are in the centre of the

attention ( $r_s = 0,318$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ). Also the news items on interest groups are more often framed as a conflict than news items on other actors, as is indicated by the Spearman's rho of 0,296 ( $p < 0,001$ ). In addition, reports on interest groups relate positively to the authority disorder-bias ( $r_s = 0,119$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ). Furthermore, the reporting on interest groups tend to be more negative than the reporting on other groups of actors, as is demonstrated by the Spearman's rho of -0,263 ( $p < 0,001$ ).

Table 2. Correlations between the information biases and the media attention for interest groups.

	All cases (N=556)	IJsseldelta- Zuid (N= 100)	Lent (N=100)	Noordwaard (N= 93)	Wieringer- randmeer (N= 117)	Zuidplas- polder (N=146)
Fragmentization ↔ interest groups	<b>-,022</b>	-,135	,054	-,090	-,013	,120
Dramatization ↔ interest groups	<b>,296***</b>	<b>,446***</b>	<b>,202*</b>	<b>,257*</b>	<b>,336***</b>	<b>,320***</b>
Personalization ↔ interest groups	<b>,318***</b>	<b>,416***</b>	<b>,406***</b>	<b>,388***</b>	<b>,253**</b>	<b>,235***</b>
Authority-disorder bias↔ interest groups	<b>,119**</b>	,091	,130	,057	,127	<b>,232**</b>
Negativity bias ↔ interest groups	<b>-,263***</b>	-,207*	-,346***	-,226*	-,235*	-,365***

\*\*\* Correlation is significant at a 0,001 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

When we look at the relations in all different cases we see the same relations between the biases and the media reporting on interest groups. In all cases the media reporting on interest groups fits more to the infotainment standard (except for the fragmentation bias) than reporting on other groups. Furthermore, the relations between the information biases and the interest groups are stronger than the correlations between the biases and the oppositional politicians.

To sum up, hypothesis III is mostly confirmed: Media attention for interest groups is positively related to the information biases, except with regard to the fragmentation bias.

## **5. Opponents in decision making are the source of infotainment**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

We conclude that most information biases were clearly present in the media reports on the water management projects in the Netherland. Many reports were fragmented, dramatized and unfavourable towards the project, and many claimed for action of a governmental authority (authority-disorder bias). However, in only a few reports the personalization bias was found. Nevertheless, we conclude that complex decision making is often simplified and enlivened by the information biases Patterson (2000) and Bennett (2009) describe. Complex decision making can be a source of infotainment. While news consumers get to some extent entertained, reading or viewing news reports on water management policies, we can question at the same time to what extent they get really informed on the actual decision making process. After all, there is a trade-off between the information value and the entertainment value (McChesney, 2001).

Furthermore, the biases have an important influence on which actors get access to the public: we doubt the balance of the reporting towards the different perspectives of actors. The biases do relate more to certain actors in the decision making process than to others. To some extent media attention for oppositional politicians is related to the information biases. However, the correlations do not hold for all cases. In complex policy processes politicians do not always have an equally active or inactive role in the decision making process around the wicked problems, in contrast with their active role in policies around tame problems. The information biases do correlate more consistently to the media attention for interest groups. The interest groups mainly seem to take advantage from the biases: they received the most media attention, in comparison to the other groups of actors. Oppositional politicians stay in that respect a little bit behind. The media biases seem to make it easier for outsiders – especially interest groups – to attract media attention. This can be an important source of power for them to influence the agenda or frame the issue at hand. Journalists, on the other side, seem to exploit the contributions of interest groups in the context of the water management projects. They often use the perspective of interest groups to shape their

storylines, which enables them to create the infotainment around the complex policy processes. In literature about media often the media biases and politics are linked (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Kepplinger, 2002; Schulz, 2004; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). We show that in complex decision making processes the link between interest groups and the biases is even more present.

## **5.2 Implications for further research**

Now that we have seen that interest groups receive most media attention in comparison to other groups of actors, and that this is related to journalistic practices nowadays, we may think of the implications. It would be interesting to study the effects of this media attention for interest groups on their actual influence on the decision making process. Are they really able to set the agenda or frame the issue in the governance networks?

One remark on this study is that the media reports on the projects were mostly coming from regional media outlets. Regional media partly function under different mechanisms, since their audience consists of a smaller target group, formed by the citizens of the concerned region. This may have contributed to the abundance of media reports about the interest groups, which include many action groups of citizens and farmers out of the region. Research on complex projects which received more attention from national media would provide us the insight whether the relations between interest groups and the information biases also exist on a national level.

Another remark concerns the type of media outlets. Interactive forums, sites as facebook or blogs may function with other norms, so we can not generalize our findings towards these interactive media. It would be interesting for further research to see how in these media complex policy processes are described, which actors are active on these websites, and whether this has some agenda setting or framing function.

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