2 Power over the Agenda

The narratives produced by the media, especially those constructed around one or more images, do create a reality effect which impacts not only on the public at large, but also on policymakers. Those narratives constitute a mediated reality which interferes with the policymaking process because they affect the mental image of a given issue through which policymakers interact and on the basis of which they take decisions. As a consequence, this study distinguishes between three different effects caused by media power over the political agenda: (1) a direct cognitive and emotional effect of television news on the agenda of policymakers, which refers mostly to the private dimension of their media consumption; (2) a direct cognitive effect on policymakers perception of the issues at stake which pertains both private and public dimensions of policymakers lives; and (3) an indirect effect which refers to politicians’ concerns about the agenda setting effect on public opinion and which can be seen as relating to policymakers’ institutional roles.

Here, the concept of Agenda Building is preferred to that of Agenda Setting as it is understood as a collective process with some degree of reciprocity between the media and the political system. This was first introduced by Lang and Lang (1981) to overcome a contradiction within the Agenda Setting theory which, at the same time, attributes too little and too much influence to the media by neglecting the fact that the political elite is the most important source of information for the media. Moreover, Agenda Building concerns not only the issue (level 1), but also the way in which the issue is constructed through subissues, possible causes, and proposed solutions (level 2), as well as the information about subissues, pros and cons, people, and groups which are connected to that (level 3).

It is worth noting that a difference has been made in the literature between the ability of television and the press to influence the agenda
of their audience. From the research conducted by Patterson between 1976 and 1980, it has emerged that on the one hand newspapers have a high-profile influence which would cause agenda setting ‘vertically’. This means that newspapers present information in a precisely structured form which allows readers to identify specific themes and place them in a hierarchy. On the other hand, television has a low-profile influence which would cause agenda setting ‘horizontally’. This means that television would give the audience cognitive tools to understand situations. This difference conforms with the argument made in this book about the specificity of television and the centrality of the image. The reason for this dissimilarity in fact stems from the different communication format of the two media: while, on the one hand, newspapers disseminate information by articles, editorials, and in-depth analyses, on the other hand, television propagates ideas through a speedy flux of words and images and by mixing different and distant events up on the screen. However, the present volume disputes the assumption that while the impact of the former is strong, that of the latter is weak: they are just different. Some very sophisticated theories – like those by Michalski and Gow (2007), Hammond (2007), Ignatieff (2001), or Der Derian (2001) – can ultimately be described as attempts to understand the media’s role in the postmodern transformation of war that are very much based on an equation between the media and television and not between the media and the press. In fact, these theories are based on the idea that the specific characteristics of media narratives are involved in the identification and construction of relevant political issues and the characteristics they list clearly refer to television and not to newspapers.

The methodological challenge is created by the fact that when an issue is high on the media agenda, this would most probably be important for politicians too. In fact, the process of Agenda Building can only be understood through an extensive and attentive discourse analysis across time which detects differences in the narrative produced by the media, on the one hand, and politicians on the other. In doing so one can see if and how the issue moves upward through the two agendas and distinguish the cases where media coverage affects the definition and the position on the agenda of a given issue from the cases where the media only mirror, or ‘index’, the political agenda.

Diverging from what is a classical methodology for investigating agenda setting, this chapter does not try to establish causation between the media agenda and the political agenda by simply measuring the correlation between the categories of policymakers and the issues on the media. Rather, it triangulates the interviewees’ interpretations about the