More than proximity and harmony. Dimensions of the relationship between local politicians and journalists in German cities

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When we ponder the relationship between politicians and journalists, the national level and capitals like Berlin will be our first area of focus. However, one can consider that the relations between the political and journalistic elites on the local level also influence reporting and the public, as well as decision making and decisive actions. So far, in contrast to internationally comparative research (e.g., Pfetsch, 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2010), little attention has been paid to the local level. This is problematic as comparative research has shown that at least distinct patterns of the politics-media relationships can be regarded as strongly context-dependent. We therefore cannot transfer findings on the national level to the local level with its specifics. For example, competitive structures differ from those on the national level and the number of political actors and journalists is much lower. This also holds true for the political actors’ degree of professionalization. Moreover, local political actors and journalists can be citizens of the same municipality, so there is a certain degree of proximity in spatial terms. Finally, there is a need for exploring the relationships between political actors and journalists as the conditions under which both sides act have rapidly changed in recent years, for example press concentration in terms of local newspaper monopolies in cities has increased (Baugut & Reinemann, 2013). This paper therefore aims to analyze the current state of politics-media relations on the local level. The theoretical basis of this paper is the concept of the local culture of communication and empirically it is based on a survey of more than 600 journalists and politicians on the local level of government.

Theoretical background

The study draws on the concept of political communication cultures. Developed by Pfetsch (2004) on the basis of Blumler & Gurevitch (1995), political communication cultures are regarded as a process of interaction between political and media actors vis-à-vis a common public audience. The interactions are based on orientations, attitudes, and norms of political actors and journalists. This subjective dimension is assumed to be affected by structural contexts of the political and media system (Pfetsch & Esser, 2014). The aggregated attitudinal patterns are called ‘political communication culture’ (Pfetsch, 2004). They can be analyzed at the subnational, national or supranational level. Generally, the relationships be-
tween political actors and journalists can be described on different dimensions. Given extant theoretical and empirical work on the politics-media relationships, we propose 5 dimensions:

(1) **proximity vs. distance**

The proximity vs. distance-dimension seems to be extremely relevant on the local level (Baugut & Reinemann, 2013), as content analyses showing that local elites dominate political news coverage (e.g., Ekström, Johansson, & Larsson, 2006) raise concerns that relationships between both sides are too close. In order to embrace the complex term ‘proximity’ we distinguish between different levels: On a professional level, proximity means a high density of contacts and journalistic access to important political information (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2010). On a personal level, proximity between political actors and journalists can be characterized for example by mutual trust and friendships (Kepplinger & Maurer, 2008). On a cooperative level, single politicians and journalists can be preferred when it comes to the exchange of publicity against authoritative information. Moreover, proximity can occur if journalists give advice to politicians (Baugut & Grundler, 2009). On a policy-level, the political preferences of political actors and journalists can coincide to a certain degree (e.g., Arzberger, 1980). We therefore ask:

**RQ1**: Are media-politics relations on the local level characterized by proximity or distance?

(2) **harmony vs. conflict**

Our second dimensions deals with the general question whether the local media-politics relationships are rather characterized by harmony or conflict. More specifically, the objects of conflicts matters as well. We ask:

**RQ2**: Are the media-politics relations on the local level rather characterized by harmony or conflict?

(3) **non-publicity vs. publicity**

Third, the culture of background talks seems to be an important dimension on the local level, as content analyses point to a lack of profoundness (e.g., Pätzold, Röper, & Volpers, 2003). As we know much more about background talks on the national level than on the local level, we want to find out:

**RQ 3**: Are the media-politics relations on the local level rather characterized by non-publicity or publicity?

(4) **seclusiveness vs. responsiveness of the politics-media milieu**

As both politicians and journalist can be regarded as elites who are supposed to work in the public interest, it is important to know whether – as sometimes said
with respect to the national level (Baugut & Grundler, 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2014) – they constitute a secluded politics-medial milieu lacking responsiveness to the audience. We therefore ask:

*RQ 4: Are the media-politics relations on the local level rather characterized by seclusiveness or responsiveness?*

**(5) dependency vs. autonomy**

The relationships between political actors and journalists are often described by the exchange of publicity against access to information (e.g., Davis, 2009). In order to consider the power relations we ask:

*RQ 5: Are the media-politics relations on the local level rather characterized by dependency or autonomy?*

**(6) differences between actors**

As political actors and journalists can basically differ in their perceptions of those dimensions of local political communication cultures, we ask:

*RQ 6: In how far do the actors differ in their perceptions of the local media-politics relations?*

**Method**

Between March and July 2014 we conducted a quantitative paper-pencil survey. The sampling procedure included two steps: First, we randomly selected every second of the 104 urban municipalities in Germany (*N* = 52). These are cities largely independent from surrounding county boroughs that hold more political competences than smaller cities. Second, we identified the relevant actors described above via a journalist database and the city’s official websites. This led to 1,191 actors including 280 mayors and department heads, 52 city spokespersons (“city administration”), 530 city councilors, and 328 journalists. 626 actors participated which represents a response rate of 52.6 % with no substantial differences between the groups of actors. In order to find out whether our data represent our dimensions, we conducted a PCA of our 26 Items (mostly 5-point-scales). This led to a 7-factor-solution including our dimensions.

**Findings**

*RQ 1: The relationship between journalists cannot simply be described as close or distant. With regard to cooperative proximity, the majority of actors (city administration: 63%; city councilors: 62%; journalists: 56%) agree that journalists who report favorable on a politician receive interesting information more often. Furthermore, at least according to most actors on the political side there is a close relationship between politicians and journalist with similar political views. The*
actors significantly differ in their perceptions of friendships and non-transparent contacts, fewer journalists agree upon this. Compared to proximity on a professional and cooperative level, relationships are rather distant on a personal level.

**RQ 2**: 45 percent of the actors perceive a harmonious relationship between politicians and journalists, whereas 21 percent perceive the relations as rather characterized by conflicts. 34 percent say that the relationships are partly harmonious and partly characterized by conflicts. Perceptions differ among the three groups to a similar extent. Possibly, conflicts can be explained by the finding that only a small minority of actors (11%) say that politicians and journalists hold the same stance toward the most important issues in the city. Compared to the city administration (19%) and city councilors (19%), only 3 percent of the journalists perceive the accusation of not having kept discretion as an object of conflict.

**RQ3**: Concerning background talks, a lack of temporal resources for those non-public contacts is according to the actors rather a problem for journalists (28%) than a problem for politicians (14%). Moreover, only 11 percent of the actors of the city administration and 13 percent of the city councilors say that media coverage shows where journalists got their information from. This points to the significance of background talks. However, almost half of the journalists (48%) perceive themselves as being transparent in that matter.

**RQ4**: Political actors and journalists strongly differ in their perception in how far they are oriented towards citizens. While the majority of members of the city administration (69%) and councilors (53%) say that politicians deal sufficiently with the concerns of citizens, only one third of journalists agree. Vice versa, more journalists (61%) than members of the city administration (42%) and city councilors (32%) say that journalists deal sufficiently with the concerns of citizens. Disregarding the problem of social desirability response that is likely given the norm of responsiveness, our findings do not point to a secluded politics-milieu on the local level.

**RQ5**: A large majority of political actors (city administration: 79%; city councilors: 77 %) and journalists (75%) regard politicians as dependent on journalists. In contrast, politicians and journalists differ in terms of their perception of journalists’ dependency on politicians. Whereas most political actors (city administration: 70%; city councilors: 58%) think that journalists are dependent on them, journalists (49%) perceive themselves to be more autonomous. All in all, even on the local level we see a very high inter-dependency between the actors.

**RQ6**: Considering the actors’ perceptions across our five dimensions there is no consistent pattern. However, we find the tendency that city administration and city councilors more often agree, while journalists tend to answer in line with professional norms such as distance, responsiveness, and autonomy.
Apparently, the politics-media relationships on the local level cannot be undisputedly described as close, harmoniously or secluded but seem to depend on the context. Thus, we can only talk about the local political culture of communication on a very limited basis. This is why our future analyses will focus on the impact of structural conditions (like the competitive structures of the political and media system) on the dimensions of local political communication cultures.

References


