Egos, Elites and Social Capital:

Analyzing Media-Government Relations from a Network Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the relations between government communication and the media in Germany from a perspective of social network analysis, focusing especially on aspects of social capital.

So far, media-government relations have predominantly been considered elite phenomena. Government communicators preferably pursue their communicative and political interests through connecting with high ranking journalists from established (offline-) media outlets. Such connections guarantee the accumulation of high amounts of social capital and lead to the formation of dense and relatively closed networks (Kocks, 2016).

Technologically induced changes are however often attributed with the potential to erode established patterns and structures of political communication (Chadwick, 2011; Wright, 2012). In an age of digitization and media abundance, it becomes questionable if established communicative patterns still persist. Which connections define networks of media-government relations in the digital age, and in how far are structures of social capital altered under such conditions?

In this paper, we seek to enquire into these questions focusing on the communication networks of the most senior government communicators from the federal government in Germany. We identify their recent partners of (professional) communicative exchange and evaluate the regularity of their contact with these. Further dimensions within the analysis operationalize social capital and focus on the perceived connectedness of these contacts and on their agenda-setting capabilities.

Findings indicate networks that are still coined by structural conservatism. Central positions are occupied by established offline-media outlets – actors that would always have been considered promising for the accumulation of social capital in such networks. Integrated online media outlets mostly constitute the online-variants of leading offline outlets. The integration of new actors (e.g. bloggers) is a scarce phenomenon. Networks in media-government relations are still largely coined by a ‘classic’ set of actors; highly predictable through reflections on theoretically defined and established dimensions of social capital. For that matter, they remain an elite phenomenon.
1 INTRODUCTION

Media-government relations, understood here to be the interaction between government communication and political journalism, have often been considered a very exclusive variant of political communication. Government communicators predominantly pursue their (and their organizations’) communicative and political interests through connecting with leading political journalists from established (offline-) media outlets, utilizing the media as a form of political arena (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016), and vice versa serve as central sources for the political coverage provided by these journalists. These exclusive arrangements are considered mutually beneficial (Burgert, 2009). Accordingly, media-government relations have so far often been described as elite phenomena.

The proliferation of digital means of communication – the digitization of political communication – has however repeatedly been described as a process that could potentially alter the conditions for these exchanges and thereby erode established patterns and structures (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This assumption is not undisputed (Wright, 2012), yet questions surrounding an opening of networks of political communication in general and of media-government relations in particular remain salient.

So far, several studies have indicated that established structures and patterns of interaction often persist under the conditions of digitization (e.g. Davis, 2010a; Heinze, 2012; Kocks, 2016). However, in a field that is facing constant changes under the conditions of the ever accelerating process of digitization, this does anything but put a halt to a need for further research.

In network research, the perspective of social capital has long served as a powerful paradigm (Jansen & Diaz-Bone, 2011). From this theoretical perspective, network ties serve as a means to secure benefits for those that maintain them (Portes, 1998). From an economical point of view, actors profit from their connections to other actors rich in resources, these connections become their social capital. Understanding media-government relations from a network perspective, it is to assume that dimensions of social capital function as an explanatory factor here as well.

Here, our interest focuses on the media actors that government communicators approach and maintain contact with in their day to day work. Which contacts do they select and how are their networks constructed? Which resources do these contacts (potentially) provide for the government communicators (and their organizations)? Do established dimensions of social
capital – in particular those regarding potentially provided resources – still apply or has
digitization diminished the importance of these factors?

In the following, we first contextualize our approach with regard to existing research focusing
on the relations between (external) political communication and the media, in particular under
the conditions of technological change. We then reflect on dimensions of social capital, their
explanatory value for networks in the field of political communication and the potential
implications that digitization might have for these. Subsequently, we present findings from a
social network analysis based on interviews with leading government spokespersons from
Germany’s federal government. We conclude with a discussion of networks in the field of
media-government relations, their layouts and their boundaries and reflect on the explanatory
value of established dimensions of social capital for these. In doing so, we seek to analyze
media-government relations from a network perspective.

2   STATE OF RESEARCH

Especially in Germany, government communication as a particular form of political
communication is characterized by a high degree of formalization and comparatively severe
legal constraints (Gebauer, 1998; Kocks & Raupp, 2014, 2015b; Sanders, Canél, & Holtz-
Bacha, 2011; Vogel, 2010). It has sometimes been labelled an under-researched area of
political communication (Canél & Sanders, 2012). The latter finding partially reflects on a
level of interactions (i.e. media-government relations) which have so far been researched
tentatively, especially with regard to the effects of digitization on them. Yet, despite the fact
that political media relations in general are a comparatively young field of research (Raupp &
Kocks, 2016), there are some studies enquiring into the (communicative) relations between
political actors, political communicators and the media.

Interactions analyzed include those between political actors and the media (e.g. Davis, 2010a;
Ross, 2010; Schwab Cammarano, 2013; Schwab Cammarano, Donges, & Jarren, 2010; Van
Aelst, Sehata, & Van Dalen, 2010) and those between political communicators and the media
(e.g. Burgert, 2009; Heinze, 2012; Pfetsch & Mayerhöffer, 2011; Wenzler, 2008). The
majority of studies do not utilize social network analysis as a means of approaching these
interactions and relations. There are however a few which make recourse to this perspective
when enquiring into political media relations under the conditions of digitization, either
focusing on political communicators (e.g. Kocks, 2016; Kocks & Raupp, 2015a) or on
political journalists (Krüger, 2013; Nuernbergk, 2016). In these studies, network analysis is either grounded in interview data, social media connections or membership data of clubs and associations.

Studies on the interaction of politics, political communication and political journalism indicate that it is generally perceived as mutually beneficent; journalists gain valuable information and elevate their medium’s competitive position, politicians and political communicators profit from the agenda-setting capabilities of prestigious media outlets (Burgert, 2009; Maurer, 2011). In some cases, journalists additionally function as sources of background information for political actors (Davis, 2009). Accordingly, the interaction between journalism and political communication often tends to be dominated by elite actors (Davis, 2009; Heinze, 2012; Maurer, 2011).1

While journalists often tend to provide more favorable coverage towards opposition politicians, they tend to stick to high ranking politicians – often from the executive level of government – when it comes to the formation of their communication networks (Davis, 2009). With the professionalization of political communication, professional spokespersons become an increasingly important group in these interactions and networks (Lesmeister, 2008; Pfetsch & Mayerhöffer, 2011; Schwab Cammarano et al., 2010).

The fact that the interactions between political communication and media tends to be mutually beneficent does however not necessarily imply an inherent lack of conflict; as a matter of fact they are often described as being characterized by a constant competition for leadership in which patterns of power often shift and in which it is not always clear who is actually leading and who is lead (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Reich, 2009; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006; Van Aelst & Vliegenthart, 2014).

The so far few actual network studies approaching interactions in media relations in Germany generally confirm these findings. On a level of personal contacts between political communicators and political journalists they often indicate a network structure that is largely shaped by what could be described as a form of structural conservatism; patterns of interaction (analyzed in 2012/13) often appear fairly traditional in so far as they are mostly coined by relatively few established actors. This holds true for both political parties and

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1 Admittedly findings have to be differentiated between national contexts here. While studies show a high degree of elite-elite interaction in all political fields in inter alia Germany (Kocks, 2016; Pfetsch & Mayerhöffer, 2011) and the UK (Davis, 2009), findings are less unanimous for Switzerland (Wenzler, 2008) and New Zealand (Ross, 2010), where empirical research has found significant differences in terms of the predominance of this form of interaction between fields of politics.
governmental bodies (Kocks, 2016; Kocks & Raupp, 2015a). Analyses of networks surrounding leading political journalists conducted in 2010/11 draw a comparable picture; based on common membership in associations and clubs, they are very well connected to leading representatives of the political system and of political communication in particular (Krüger, 2013). Recent studies on the interaction of political journalists on Twitter show that these do often interact with leading political communicators and representatives but to an even higher degree with other leading journalists, often rendering these Twitter-conversations a form of closed expert discourse (Nuernbergk, 2016).

A brief overview over the empirical state of research concerning political media relations in general and media-government relations in particular illustrates that the interactions coining these fields of political communication have so far often been seen as fairly exclusive and mutually beneficent arrangements between leading communication professionals. Yet they take place in a field in a state of flux with changing technological conditions and sets of actors. This – and the political and societal importance of this field – calls for further research on media-government relations under online conditions.

3 BACKGROUND AND OPERATIONALIZATION

The interaction between political communication and political journalism (i.e. political media relations) and more particular the one between government communication and political journalism (i.e. media-government relations) is a salient field of research. Yet so far, there is no such thing as a unitary theory of media relations, the field is rather characterized by a multitude of diverse approaches and, at least in some instances, it sometimes also suffers from a lack in theorization (Raupp & Kocks, 2016).

Theoretical Considerations

So far, research has approached the interactions between politics, political communication and the media from a variety of different theoretical perspectives. Journalism-centered approaches have focused on the journalistic side of the interaction and on the effects that political communication has on media content. In this context, approaches subsumed under the notion of sourcing focus on the relationship between the media and their sources, on the vital function that central political communicators have for the foundation of political coverage
Approaches concentrating on gatekeeping draw a stronger focus on the patterns of selection prevalent among political journalists. From this perspective, the interactions between political communication and journalism are primarily coined by the communicators’ attempts to overcome media thresholds and by journalists who function as gatekeepers guarding access to the limited commodity of mainstream media coverage (Shoemaker & Reese, 1993; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009). Technological change has given new momentum to such debate due to the major alterations it potentially brings for both sides involved in the interaction (Bruns, 2009; Neuberger & Quandt, 2010). The indexing-hypothesis again focuses on the role of journalism in political media relations, this time bringing the role of elites into the equation. It argues on the predominant or sole representation of elite political discourse in the mainstream media (Bennett, 1990; Castells, 2013). It has previously been implemented to analyze networks in political media relations in Germany (Krüger, 2013).

Other approaches do not draw their main focus of attention on the journalistic side of political media relations. They have inter alia argued that analyses of political media relations would have to incorporate a stronger elite perspective (e.g. approaches towards critical elite theory), conceptualizing both parties involved as (positional) elites and analyzing their interests and strategies from this point of view (Davis, 2003). This perspective that has also been implemented to analyze networks in political media relations in Germany (Kocks, 2016). They have furthermore argued for a concentration on the relationship management of the actors involved (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) or on the strategies utilized to build media agendas (Lang & Lang, 1981). In how far the latter are altered under the conditions of digitization has lately become a salient question of research (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008).

This brief selection of approaches illustrates the diversity of theoretical perspectives in media relations research; there is no unitary theory of political media relations. However new structural conditions call for new (complementary) theoretical perspectives. Network analysis and network perspectives have recently gained importance in political communication research; the relational dimension of communication has shifted into the focus of interest (Castells, 1996, 2011; Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Raupp, 2011).

It has been argued that approaches focusing on dimensions of social capital would potentially be fruitful in the analysis of network phenomena (Burt, 2000), since these allow for a theoretical linkage between actors and the structures into which they are embedded (Jansen &
Diaz-Bone, 2011). In a basic understanding, social capital can be defined in terms of the ability of actors to secure benefits for themselves through becoming members of social structures such as networks (Portes, 1998). In an economic understanding, it is through maintaining ties to actors rich in a variety of resources that an actor can potentially access (shares of) these resources, accumulating a form of capital understood as social capital (Bourdieu, 1992; Lin, 2001). Accordingly, the ties maintained to resource rich actors become an important asset for an actor, the network membership itself a desired resource (Bastié, Cussy, & Nadant, 2014).

The nature of the desired resources potentially becoming available through the benefit of network membership varies with the specific fields that a network is created in. While access to information is often regarded as an almost universal resource (Burt, 2010), others are more specific, inter alia to the fields of business and economics, which has been subjected to a comparatively large number of network studies and approaches (Bastié et al., 2014; Javakhadze, Ferris, & French, 2016), or to networks created in local communities and sub-populations (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008). There is no general consensus on what being well-connected really means (Burt, 2000); the evaluation of the quality of sets of ties is again dependent on the specific field of analysis. The same holds true for questions surrounding differences between strong and comparatively week ties, which can both be understood as desirable, depending on the individual context in which they exist (Granovetter, 1973, 1983).

Accordingly, analyses of networks of communication from a perspective of social capital demand definitions of the assets potentially available through network ties. What is it that grounds the social capital that political communicators can potentially accumulate through connecting to certain actors from the field of political coverage? Which ties lie in their assumed interest?

Operationalization: Social Capital in Networks of Media-Government Relations

In accordance with the understanding of social capital as the ability to secure benefits derived from the resources of other actors within one’s network, we take for potentially valuable assets of actors from the field of political coverage into account: the size of their audience, the frequency with which they are cited by other (important) media outlets, their agenda setting capability and their connectedness within the political field.
Political communicators seek to reach large audiences, inter alia to secure popular support and their democratic legitimacy. Mediatized democracy implies that such audiences are primarily reached through the mass media (Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). Therefore the size of a medium’s audience has to be considered a direct asset potentially available to those political communicators that have ties with this medium in their network. This renders the size of an audience a dimension of social capital in our operationalization.

Political communicators can furthermore seek to broaden their audiences by getting messages into various media outlets and channels without directly communicating with these, trying to influence their agenda through other channels such as their own social media presences (Sweetser et al., 2008) or, more importantly here, through communicating with (few) influential and well cited media outlets (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). The more such a source is cited, the better for the political communicator tied to that source. This renders the citation index value of an actor from the field of political coverage.

In accordance with these two dimensions, the agenda setting capability of an actor from the field of political coverage is to be understood as a potential asset available to those that maintain ties to this specific actor. Media agendas have often been proven to have the
potential to directly influence public agendas which are of elevated importance for political actors (McCombs & Bell, 1996). Even though one might have to include further (intervening) factors into this equation (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), the overall importance of the agenda setting capability of an actor from the field of political coverage for political communicators is apparent.

Last but not least, networks allow for access to the contacts of one’s contacts; maintaining a lot of (not even necessarily strong) ties to a variety of (well connected) actors broadens one’s scope and efficacy (Granovetter, 1983) and yields further (structural) profits (Portes, 1998). Accordingly, the connectedness of actors from the field of political coverage is also to be understood as a valuable resource potentially available to those actors that maintain ties with them.

**Research Questions**

As indicated, this paper seeks to enquire into the networks that define media-government relations in Germany. It seeks to identify the constellations of actors that are prevalent within these networks and to find out about the potential ascent of new actors into them under the conditions of digitization. Therefore the first research question focuses on a primarily descriptive analysis of communication networks in media-government relations:

RQ1: *Which actors and connections define the communication network surrounding government communicators in Germany?*

Subsequently established dimensions of social capital as discussed in the previous theoretical section are in the focus of interest. Here we seek to analyze their explanatory value in the analysis of communication networks in media-government relations under the conditions of digitization:

RQ2: *In how far do established dimensions of social capital still function as an explanatory factor for an actor’s access to and centrality in these networks of government communication?*
Here the analysis focuses on four dimensions of social capital potentially accumulated through maintaining ties with actors from the field of political coverage: audience size, citations, (perceived) agenda setting capability and (perceived) connectedness. Arguably, these dimensions could be considered determinants of tie selection in a ‘classic’ understanding of how the media sphere functions in contemporary democracies. The question however is whether or not this still holds true under the conditions of digitization, a process that has been attributed with a variety of potentials to alter established structures and patterns of communication (Chadwick, 2011; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Wright, 2012).

Both audience numbers and citations can be measured objectively and the data is widely available, also to those political communicators that seek to build network ties to actors from the field of political communication. For our operationalization, we can make recourse to the same (objective) data. The agenda setting capability and connectedness of an actor is harder to determine and in many cases a question of perceptions inter alia shaped by organizational backgrounds and the political field a communicator is active in (Kocks, 2016). Accordingly, we operationalize agenda setting capability and connectedness both in terms of perceptions (i.e. ‘perceived agenda setting capability’ and ‘perceived connectedness’) and evaluate them by analyzing (subjective) perceptions.

4 EMPIRICAL STUDY

To enquire into German government communications and media-government relations under the conditions of digitization in particular, we conducted telephone interviews with leading government communicators. The following is to briefly discuss our methodological approach and to then present some key findings of our enquiry into media-government relations from a network perspective.

Methodology

Our interviews were conducted as computer-assisted telephone interviews with leading government communicators and spokespersons between 09/2015 and 02/2016. These interviews focused on both their perceptions of technological and organizational change under the conditions of digitization and on their (professional) communication networks. Since the analysis of communication networks involves potentially sensitive information and is
therefore to be considered demanding in terms of research ethics (Kadushin, 2005), we allowed the interviewees to opt out of this bloc of questions during the interview.

We first sampled on an organizational level, identifying the communication departments of 14 ministries and the federal communication office as relevant organizations. We then contacted these asking for interviews with their leading communicators and spokespersons. Ten ministries and the federal communication office agreed to participate; two of these gave us more than one interview. Network data was provided by ten interviewees, four interviewees decided to opt out of this bloc of questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governmental Body</th>
<th>n(interviewees)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA (Foreign Office)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMBF (Federal Ministry of Research and Education)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMF (Federal Ministry of Finance)</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMFSFJ (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (Federal Ministry of the Interior)</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPA (Federal Information Office)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMUB (Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMVI (Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMVg (Federal Ministry of Defence)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMWi (Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMZ (Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development)</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMEL (Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNG (Federal Ministry of Health)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMJV (Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMAS (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tab. 1 Sample of governmental organizations/ interviewees.**

To collect the network data grounding this analysis, we first asked the interviewees to name around ten individual or organizational actors out of the field of political coverage (e.g. individual journalists or bloggers, media organizations or blogs) with whom they had recently been in contact. We proceeded with the list of contacts derived from this step, first asking the interviewees to indicate the frequency of their contact with these actors. This was operationalized on a five point scale ranging from 1 (less than monthly) to 5 (several times a week). Subsequently we asked them – again utilizing their list of contacts – to indicate whether or not they deemed these actors a) well connected within the political field and b) influential agenda setters who could significantly influence topics and timing of public discussions.

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2 The Federal Ministry of Finance and the Federal Ministry of the Interior offered additional interviews with the coordinators of their online-communications/ their digital public relations to provide further information on their communication activities in the online-sphere.
The data derived from this bloc of four network analysis questions first lead to individual ego-networks for each interviewee, showing the individual set of contacts from the sphere of political coverage, the frequency of contact with these actors and perceived connectedness and agenda setting capabilities. In the next step, this individual network data was aggregated to create a network representing all informational ties analyzed (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013). Since the analysis focuses on uni-directional inter-group ties (i.e. ties from government communicators to actors from the field of political broadcasting), this was designed as a two-mode network.

Data grounding the assumed dimensions of social capital is collected in the network interviews (hence the questions concerning perceived connectedness and agenda setting capabilities) and subsequently through research on circulation numbers (respectively page visits or viewer shares) and ranks within the generally accepted citation index of Media Tenor.

**Findings**

In accordance with our first research question concerning the composition of communication networks in the field of government communication, we firstly seek to identify the various nodes present in the analyzed network: Which actors from the field of political coverage are identified as recent contacts by governmental communicators? Which organizational background do they have?

![Pie chart showing media contacts named by the interviewees by sector](image)

*Fig. 2 Media contacts named by the interviewees by sector; (not weighed by number of mentions); n=41.*
Taking into account all actors from the field of political coverage named by the interviewees, we find that a large share of these contacts is from a background of offline journalism. With only four contacts from a background of online magazines and newspapers and a further four contacts from a background of weblogs and videoblogs, online actors make up less than a fifth of the list of contacts from the field of political coverage named by our interviewees.

Around a fourth of the contacts is from the field of news broadcasting, either public service (n=4) or commercial (n=3). Five contacts are from a background of news agencies while 17 can be labelled as newspaper and magazine contacts, among these 15 from a German and two from an international background. Last but not least, there is one independent journalist in the list of contacts.

Translated into a social network structure, the interview data on contacts from the field of political coverage yields the following picture:

![Fig. 3 Media-government relations as a network; node size adjusted according to degree based centrality (n=51); circles: governmental bodies, squares: actors from the field of political coverage, light grey squares: blogs or independent journalists; 2 mode network; visualization according to geodesic distance; to ensure the anonymity of interviewees three contacts have been de-labelled.](image)
Central ranks in this network of media-government relations are occupied by large quality newspapers, news agencies and television newscasts. Furthermore there are also a weekly political magazine, its online variant and a tabloid newspaper in a focal position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Media Actor</th>
<th>Centrality (Indegree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</td>
<td>.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen</td>
<td>.600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 4    | ARD – Das Erste  
Der Spiegel  
dpa – Deutsche Presse-Agentur                                                                                                                                 | .500                   |
| 5    | RTL  
Bild  
Spiegel Online  
Reuters                                                                                                           | .400                   |

Tab. 2 Media actors ranked by their (degree-based) network centrality.

Germany’s two large quality newspapers (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) occupy the most central ranks here, followed by two public service newscasts, a weekly political magazine and a news agency. On the fifth rank we find a commercial newscast, Germany’s leading tabloid (*Bild*), a large online magazine and another news agency.

The analyzed network of media-government relations is clearly dominated by a set of actors that could be described as well established in the German media landscape. Quality
newspapers, television newscasts and political magazines play a focal role here, the same holds true for news agencies and Germany’s major tabloid newspaper.

In comparison to that, new actors like online magazines or weblogs play a comparatively smaller role in the analyzed network. One large online media outlet (Spiegel Online) admittedly occupies a rank within the top ten here – though within a considerable distance from high ranking quality newspapers – yet the rest of Germany’s online media landscape appears rather marginal. At a first glance the network structure found here shows a high degree of structural conservatism, often showing constellations of actors that were already prevalent in a pre-online age.

In a next step, we then seek to incorporate the various forms of capital that actors from the field of political coverage potentially provide to those that maintain network ties to them. Firstly, this regards the two (objective) dimensions of audience and citations. We measure audience either in circulation numbers (newspapers and magazines), viewer share (TV newscasts) or page visits (online media).³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Media Actor</th>
<th>Centrality (Indegree)</th>
<th>Circulation⁴</th>
<th>Viewer Share⁵</th>
<th>Page Visits⁶</th>
<th>Citation Rank⁷</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
<td>.900</td>
<td>382.050</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>252.676</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Zweites Deutches Fernsehen</td>
<td>.600</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.720.000</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>ARD – Das Erste</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4.990.000</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Der Spiegel</td>
<td></td>
<td>833.000</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dpa – Deutsche Presse-Agentur</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>RTL</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.140.000</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>&lt; 20³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bild</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.997.319</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spiegel Online</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>206.340.000</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>02⁹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reuters</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 3 Ten most central media actors, their audiences and their citation-ranks.

³ Unfortunately, there is currently no data available for the news agencies in the network.
⁴ For newspapers: average copies sold per day in the first quarter of 2016; for the weekly magazine ‘Der Spiegel’: average copies sold per week in 2015; source for both: de.statista.com (accessed 09.06.2016).
⁵ Average daily viewer share of the channel’s main newscast (ARD Tagesschau im Ersten; ZDF heute journal; RTL aktuell); source: de.statista.com (accessed 09.06.2016).
⁶ Accumulated page visits in May 2016; source: de.statista.com (accessed 09.06.2016).
⁸ Read: RTL was not ranked among the top 20 sources in this ranking.
⁹ While ranked separately for different political fields; Spiegel Online is subsumed under Spiegel-group in the general group-based ‘Media Tenor’-ranking. Spiegel Online ranks among the top 20 in being cited on the fields of domestic security and international politics; source: de.mediatenor.com (accessed 10.06.2016).
As the data illustrates, all central media actors in the analyzed network of media-government relations have a large audience. The two quality newspapers on the first and second centrality rank have the largest circulation numbers in their market, the same holds true for the weekly political magazine *Der Spiegel* and the tabloid newspaper *Bild* (which at the same time is still Germany’s best-selling daily newspaper). The newscasts of both public service broadcasters enjoy the highest viewer share of all German newscasts; *RTL* provides the commercial newscast with the largest audience. The online magazine *Spiegel Online* is on the second rank of Germany’s most visited news websites (beaten online by the online variant of *Bild*).

In terms of citations by other media outlets, most actors in this list also occupy high ranks. *Bild* and *Der Spiegel* are the most cited sources in the 2016 citation ranking. The two quality newspapers (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*) are also ranked in the top ten tier of this index. *Spiegel Online* is not ranked independently in all dimensions of this citation ranking, yet it is proven to be one of the most cited sources in various political areas by individual sub-rankings of the MediaTenor-ranking. The two public service newscasts are ranked in the top 20 of media sources cited in 2016. Only the commercial newscasts produced by *RTL* is not occupying one of the top ranks here. There are no individual numbers available for the two news agencies, yet *dpa - Deutsche Presse Agentur* is the leading provider of such services on the German media market (with a market share of over 52% in 2010)\textsuperscript{10} which indicates some importance in this regard.

In a further step, we now incorporate perceived agenda setting capability and connectedness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Media Actor</th>
<th>Centrality (Indegree)</th>
<th>Agenda Setting Capability?</th>
<th>Connectedness?</th>
<th>Av. Contact Frequency?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Süddeutsche Zeitung</em></td>
<td>.900</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</em></td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen</em></td>
<td>.600</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>ARD – Das Erste</em></td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Der Spiegel</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>dpa – Deutsche Presse-Agentur</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>RTL</em></td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Bild</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Spiegel Online</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Reuters</em></td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Tab. 4} Ten most central media actors, their agenda setting capability and connectedness; additionally: frequency of contact, operationalized on a five point scale.

\textsuperscript{10} Source: de.statista.com (accessed 30.06.2016); the newest data available is unfortunately the dataset for 2010.
We first focus on the agenda setting capability that our interviewees attribute to actors from the field of political coverage: In how far do they consider their media contacts able to influence public discussion about politics and political topics? Do they consider them able to shape the public agenda? As the data shows, most media contacts are described as potentially influential agenda setters by the interviewees. Opinions are somewhat divided on one quality newspaper, the commercial newscast provided by RTL is not considered an influential agenda setter by those that maintain network ties to it. We then focus on perceived connectedness. Do the interviewees deem their media contacts well connected within the political field, especially in their own political field? As the data shows, most media contacts are described as well connected by all interviewees that maintain ties to them. In the case of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 88% agree while opinions are more divided on the newscast of RTL, which is only described as well connected by half of the interviewees maintaining network ties with it.

Setting aside these potential assets available through network ties, we take the contact frequency between political communicators and actors from the field of political coverage into account. This is operationalized on a five point scale ranging from 1 (less than monthly) over 2 (monthly), 3 (every two weeks) and 4 (each week) to 5 (several times a week). On average, interviewees claim to be in contact with both news agencies and Bild several times a week and at least once a week with both quality newspapers, weekly magazine Der Spiegel and its online magazine Spiegel Online and the public service newscast produced by ARD. Values are slightly lower for the public service newscast produced by ZDF. Only the commercial newscast produced by RTL stands out again with an average of 2.5 (i.e. ranging between monthly and every two weeks).

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Media-government relations in Germany are still very much coined by routines and patterns that have shaped the field in previous decades. In accordance with the majority of empirical studies enquiring into similar interactions (i.e. political media relations), we find a high degree of what could be labeled structural conservatism. While technological change greatly affects structural conditions, it hardly alters the interactions defining the field.

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11 Despite the ordinal scale level of this five point scale, we chose to indicate means for an improved overview and a high degree of comparability.
Without a doubt, digitization is to be considered an important factor in contemporary political communication. Analyzing the output of public government communication, we now find a high degree of digitized communication. Governmental actors communicate professionally and regularly through a variety of digital channels (Murphy, Kocks, & Raupp, 2016). The last years have clearly seen a drastic increase in that; earlier studies still found a rather cautious adaptation of digital channels by governmental actors (Kocks, Raupp, & Schink, 2014), often attributed to a rather peculiar legal situation potentially hindering the widespread adaptation of new means and forms of communication (Kocks & Raupp, 2015b). This picture has changed: the output of public government communication is now highly digitized.

However, when we take the network level of analysis into account another picture emerges. As our findings illustrate, communication networks in the field of media-government relations are still largely coined by a high degree of structural conservatism. Political communicators overwhelmingly opt for leading journalists from established media outlets when communicating with actors from the field of political coverage. Online media outlets play a comparatively smaller role and weblogs are still largely marginal. Here, we find a replication of established patterns of interaction in the online-sphere.

In our second research question we tried to enquire into the explanatory value of established dimensions of social capital for the communication networks of media-government relations. Do traditional explanations still function under the conditions of digitization? As our findings show, this is the case. The media and its political coverage are often described as having a double function for the political sphere: to provide information and to provide a platform, an arena in which arguments and positions can compete, inter alia for public interest and support (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). In a traditional understanding, circulation numbers (as a predicator of audience size), citation-indexes, (perceived) connectedness and (perceived) agenda setting capabilities could be seen as important factors in the latter regard, i.e. as assets serving political actors utilizing the media as an arena. Additionally, well connected actors from the field of political coverage could also serve as valuable sources of information for their counterparts in political communication (Davis, 2009). As we can see here, most actors from the field of political coverage that are central in the network of media-government relations rank high on all of these dimensions. High values in them mostly serve as a great predicator of network centrality here; these dimensions still persist to function under the conditions of digitization.
So how do these findings relate to the existing research on political media relations under the conditions of digitization? Which further implications do they have? As most studies on the interactions of politics and the media show, they have so far been considered exclusive phenomena. Digitization was then often framed as a process potentially altering these conditions (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This assumption is however not undisputed and there is increasing evidence that many patterns of offline communication get in fact replicated under online conditions (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2007; Schweitzer, 2011), ultimately leading to a state of ‘normalization’ (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Resnick, 1998). While findings are somewhat ambiguous for pure social media networks (Nuernbergk, 2016; Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2014) – which sometimes show at least some degree of integration – there is evidence that networks of communication in general tend to be far more structurally conservative (Kocks, 2016; Kocks & Raupp, 2015a) with interactions mostly dominated by already established actors and very limited integration of any new actors (Davis, 2010a, 2010b). The findings of the present analysis relate to this, also bringing forward the picture of a fairly structurally conservative network of media-government relations. The drastic change of technological conditions is not replicating on a level of network ties. Under these conditions, it is apparent that established dimensions of social capital – often considered effective explanatory factors under ‘classic’ conditions – would still have a high explanatory value here.

Yet one has to be cautious against any over-interpretation of these findings. There is sound evidence that media-government relations in Germany are in fact a continuing elite phenomenon coined by structurally conservative networks of communication and it is also apparent that the criteria that influence the centrality of an actor are very much persistent. It is however important to note that the media outlets represented on the central ranks of the network analyzed here are in fact quite diverse in terms of inter alia their political background and their target audience. The inner core of the media-government relations network analyzed here is quite heterogeneous. Furthermore, communicative network ties in this field have to be interpreted cautiously when it comes to direct influence (Neuberger, 2014). Close interaction does not necessarily imply (illegitimate) influence.

What we find here is a dense and persistent network of media-government relations in Germany. Technological conditions are largely altered while basic patterns of interaction most often remain the same. Egos, elites and social capital are (so far) not rendered superfluous under the conditions of digitization.
Literature:


