Informal political communication cultures: Characteristics, Causes, Effects.

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Abstract

This paper theorizes the widely unexplored informal communication between political actors and journalists. As the crucial characteristic of this type of communication we consider its potential influence on media coverage and political decision-making being non-transparent. The relevance of informal communication between political actors and journalists is initially illustrated by a case-study that explored informal communication during the health-care negotiations of the German Grand coalition in 2006/2007. The findings draw attention on crucial characteristics of informal communication in the German capital. This raises the question how structural conditions and individual characteristics of political actors and journalists shape informal communication in one country. Accordingly, we propose the concept of informal political communication cultures which stresses that the orientations of political actors and journalists towards backstage processes are context-bound. Against this backdrop, we present a model to analyze the characteristics, causes and effects of informal political communication cultures. The center of the model is comprised of four dimensions that enable to characterize informal political communication cultures: proximity vs. distance between political actors and journalists; non-publicity vs. publicity through indiscretion or arranged leaks; cooperation vs. conflicts between political actors and journalists; seclusiveness vs. responsivenss of the politics-media milieu. Potential factors influencing the characteristics informal political communication cultures are systematized by differentiating between the macro-, meso- and micro-level of both the political and the media system. On the macro-level, especially competitive structures appear to have an impact on the characteristics of informal political communication cultures. On the meso-level, editorial resources and resources for political public relations seem to matter. On the micro-level, individual characteristics like the professional experience of political actors and journalists appear as influential. Concerning the effects of informal political communication cultures we assume they have an impact on different levels of political action, not at least in terms of informal negotiations that have to deal with the legitimacy-efficiency dilemma. We expect that the more an informal political communication culture is characterized by proximity, publicity, coopera-

tion, and a secluded politics-media milieu, the stronger the media impact on informal negotiations. In summary, our model and derived hypotheses aim to stimulate research on the informal side of the politics-media relationship, which is necessary to provide a deeper understanding of the mediatization of politics.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag theoretisiert die weitgehend unerforschte informelle Kommunikation zwischen politischen Akteuren und Journalisten. Als entscheidendes Merkmal dieses Kommunikationstypes betrachten wir, dass potenzielle Einflüsse auf Medienberichterstattung und politisches Entscheidungshandeln intransparent sind. Die Relevanz informeller Kommunikation zwischen politischen Akteuren und Journalisten wird eingangs anhand einer Fallstudie illustriert, welche die informelle Kommunikation während der Verhandlungen zur Gesundheitsreform der deutschen Großen Koalition 2006/2007 untersuchte. Die Befunde lenken das Augenmerk auf entscheidende Merkmale der informellen Kommunikation in der deutschen Hauptstadt. Dies wirft die Frage auf, wie Strukturbedingungen und individuelle Merkmale von politischen Akteuren und Journalisten die informelle Kommunikation in einem Land prägen. Entsprechend schlagen wir das Konzept informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen vor, das betont, dass die Orientierungen von politischen Akteuren und Journalisten gegenüber Prozessen auf der Hinterbühne kontextabhängig sind. Vor diesem Hintergrund präsentieren wir ein Modell zur Analyse der Ausprägungen, Ursachen und Folgen informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen. Das Zentrum des Modells besteht aus vier Dimensionen, die die Beschreibung der Merkmale informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen ermöglichen. Nähe vs. Distanz zwischen politischen Akteuren und Journalisten; Nicht-Öffentlichkeit vs. Öffentlichkeit durch Indiskretionen oder vereinbartes „Durchstechen“; Kooperation vs. Konflikt zwischen politischen Akteuren und Journalisten; Geschlossenheit vs. Responsivität des politisch-medialem Milieus. Potenzielle Einflussfaktoren auf die Ausprägungen informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen werden systematisiert, indem zwischen Makro-, Meso- und Mikroebene sowohl des politischen als auch des Mediensystems unterschieden wird. Auf Makroebene scheinen insbesondere die Wettbewerbsstrukturen die Ausprägungen informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen zu beeinflussen. Auf der Mesoebene erscheinen redaktionelle Ressourcen und Ressourcen für politische PR relevant. Auf der Mikroebene erscheinen individuelle Merkmale wie die Berufserfahrung politischer Akteure und Journalisten einflussreich. Was die Folgen informeller politischer Kommunikationskulturen betrifft, nehmen wir an, dass diese auf mehreren Ebenen politisches Handeln beeinflussen, nicht zuletzt im Rahmen informeller Verhandlungen, die das Legitimitäts-

Effektivitäts-Dilemma bewältigen müssen. Wir gehen davon aus, dass sich der Medieneinfluss auf informelle Verhandlungen umso größer gestaltet, je stärker eine informelle politische Kommunikationskultur durch Nähe, Öffentlichkeit, Kooperation und ein geschlossenes politisch-mediales Milieu geprägt ist. Insgesamt zielen unser Modell und davon abgeleitete Hypothesen darauf ab, die Erforschung der informellen Seite der politisch-medialen Beziehungen anzuregen, was unabdingbar für ein tieferes Verständnis der Medialisierung der Politik ist.

1 Introduction

The relationship between political actors and journalists is crucial for the democratic process, as their interactions can have a major impact on the substance and structure of the political public sphere (Habermas 2006: 416). The relations between journalists and politicians are grounded in communicative processes between those actors. Some of those communicative processes take place in situations that are characterized by a rather formal setting. These situations are planned, follow certain fixed rules, occur in the context of repeatedly held events, the use of standard language is common, and the situations have a more or less official character. The public may predominantly perceive this side of the politics-media relationship, as accordant interactions like interviews or press conferences can become transparent by media coverage. However, a lot of communication between politicians and journalists does not have the characteristics mentioned above. Politicians and journalists can also meet spontaneously and off the record, they can act beyond role expectations, and the content of their communication can remain invisible to the public. Communicative processes like these are often described with the label ‘informal’ (Lesmeister 2008; Wewer 1998; Jarren and Donges 2011). They are regarded as crucial by the actors involved but have not received the attention they deserve from political communication scholars (Lesmeister 2008; Baugut and Grundler 2009). Therefore, the causes, characteristics, and effects of informal communication like background talks during political negotiations are still unexplored. That is the reason why we want to take a closer look here at this often neglected, but nevertheless

highly important type of political communication. Doing so, we will predominantly take the perspective of communication science on the informal side of the relationship between political actors and journalists.

One reason for the lack of research on informal political communication may be the definition problem, as informal and formal communication are interconnected. As a consequence, the core of informal communication is hard to identify. On the one hand, informal communication can be regarded as only a by-product of formal interaction. On the other hand, background talks can have a formal character like in the so-called "background circles" in the German capital, where politicians and journalists meet planned, repeatedly and under specific rules (Lesmeister 2008; Baugut and Grundler 2009). Against this backdrop, it is at first essential to define informal political communication.

A second reason for the lack of research on informal communication between political actors and journalists may be its non-publicity. Announcements of meetings or documentations of informal communication are rare. Research that tries to illuminate the backstage of the politics-media relationship may collide with the actors' interest in keeping some aspects of informal communication non-public. Thus, to "research informal arrangements is generally a greater challenge" (Christiansen and Neuhold 2012: 2).

A third reason for the lack of research on informal communication may be its rather unexplored relevance. Although research on the relationships of journalists and political actors has increased (e.g. Pfetsch 2001; Pfetsch 2004; Barnett and Gaber 2001; Davis 2009; Aelst, Shehata and Dalen 2010), the effects of certain characteristics of their relationships still remain an open question. A closer look on potential effects may for example lead to the question of how informal contacts are connected with the intensively discussed mediatization in politics (e.g. Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Stromback and Esser 2009). But further research is needed here.

The overall lack of research on informal political communication seems problematic, as there may be intransparent processes

that are not in accordance with the public functions of politicians and journalists. These are the "two types of actors without whom no political public sphere could be put to work" (Habermas 2006: 416). So in light of normative democratic theory, especially the deliberative paradigm that calls for publicity and transparency as the basis for reasonable outcomes, informal communication is under critical observation. As "transparency has become pervasive as a prescription for better governance" (Hood 2007: 192), backstage processes need to be justified.

Considering the research deficits and the normative background mentioned, we aim to introduce a model for investigating the characteristics, causes and effects of informal political communication between political actors and journalists in this paper. This requires a clear understanding of what is meant by informal political communication. For this purpose we will present the concept of an 'informal political communication culture'. As we regard the characteristics of informal political communication cultures as strongly context-bound, we will discuss potential influencing factors and illustrate their likely importance with empirical findings. After that we will point out that the characteristics of informal communication between political actors and journalists may be an important variable for explaining mediatization effects on political negotiations that are informal, i.e. occurring outside established committees and procedures (Mayntz 1998: 59). On the basis of the model we will develop some hypotheses that could be a starting point of a research program that would provide a deeper understanding of what informal political communication is all about.

2 Informal political communication – definition and functions

There are numerous attempts to clarify the term 'political communication' (e.g. Schulz 2008; Norris 2001). Generally, it "involves interactive processes of information as well as formal and informal modes of message flow" (Pfetsch and Esser 2012: 26). Despite that reference to the informal mode, a concept of infor-

mal political communication is still missing. Regarding politicians and journalists as the main actors, three types of informal communication can be differentiated based on the kinds of actors involved: (1) communication between political actors and journalists; (2) communication among political actors; (3) communication among journalists.

In this paper we will focus on the first type and aim to clarify its relevance not least by asking, how this type can have an impact on the second type in the context of negotiations: Firstly, we will point out what can be meant by informal communication between political actors and journalists. Secondly, we deal with the strategic objectives of this informal communication. Finally we focus on the second type of communication and clarify what informal communication among political actors can mean in the context of negotiations.

2.1 Informal political communication between political actors and journalists

Generally, informality is associated with non-publicity or closed doors (Lesmeister 2008; Auel 2006: 264). The communication between political actors and journalists can be more or less public, depending on whether and how journalists present the content of their communication with political actors in the media coverage. Given the aforementioned continuum between public and non-public communication, a closer look at both ends of the spectrum might help to illustrate the characteristics of formal and informal communication.

The live-interview on TV can be regarded as a completely public interaction. Both sides interact on the assumption that the exact content of their communication is transparent in terms of media coverage. Therefore they are aware of being observed by the public and geared to norms as well as to public needs. A crucial norm, especially for journalists, is distance. Relationships at the proscenium can be characterized by this role expectation or at least corresponding presentations (Saxer 1998; Hoffmann 2003; Kepplinger 1994). Further norms can be derived from the theory of communicative action and the ethical principles of discourse

that should affect communication in the public sphere (Habermas 1985a; 1985b). Communicative action refers to validity claims (like truth, rightness and sincerity), which means the actors seek to reach a common understanding and to coordinate actions by reasoned arguments. In contrast to that, strategic action means putting pressure on each other, for example by threatening or wooing with one's own power. Public communication between political actors and journalists is expected to be in accordance with communicative action, which for example means that politicians do not publicly threat to cut journalists off from information (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 86). Conversely, journalists do not publicly woo politicians with the power of their medium in order to get newsworthy information.

So on the one hand, public communication can be regarded as formalized by norms and role expectations. These can be more or less internalized by the actors, however, if not, external social control due to the awareness of public observation can strengthen these norms. On the other hand, public communication can be regarded as formalized by public needs, which is not necessarily the same. In an increasingly commercial media system, constraints like the need for entertainment have to be taken into account (Saxer 2007). This may also explain the dramaturgy of interviews and other situations of public communication between political actors and journalists. Against the backdrop of public norms and needs, the actors are interested in institutionalizing their public communication. Forms of public communication like interviews, press conferences and press releases and (pseudo-) events are therefore planned, ritualized, repeatedly occurring, and following certain fixed rules. What these forms of communication have in common is their transparency concerning the formation of media coverage. Thus, referring to the concepts of input- and output-legitimacy as they are discussed in the context of governance (Mayntz 2011: 143; Pannes 2011: 56), formal political communication can be regarded as contributing to 'input-legitimacy'. Output-legitimacy refers to how formal political communication affects the interaction's outcome, the quality of media coverage. According to political journalists the quality would be at risk, if they had to limit their communication to for-

mal interactions (Lesmeister 2008; Hoffmann 2003; Baugut and Grundler 2009). In a highly competitive environment with media searching for the scoop, politicians will be careful about talking publicly about their real positions and strategies.

In contrast to a live-interview at the other end of the spectrum, an unreported private meeting for confidential background talks can be regarded as a completely non-public interaction. Both sides interact on the assumption that the exact content of their communication is intransparent. Therefore, it is rather possible that actors deviate from norms, so their scope of action is enlarged, which is a characteristic of informality (Pannes 2011). Thus, situations of informal communication (like background talks at spontaneous meetings in the parliamentary quarter, at politicians' journeys abroad, or at politicians' visits to editorial offices) may lack distance between both sides. The invisibility of informal communication does not mean that it cannot affect media coverage or even the political process. However, the way it potentially affects the public outcome of work on both sides, media coverage and political decisions, is not transparent. That is why informal contacts appear dubious from a deliberative democratic point of view. However, this type of communication may enrich media coverage and therefore contribute to output-legitimacy (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 316-322). Even if journalists cannot report on their communication with politicians exactly and in detail, they receive background knowledge that may affect their work positively. How informal communication and thereby influenced media coverage affect political negotiations should be object to further research we will explore later.

This distinction between public and non-public communication is expressed by the stage metaphor that research on the politics-media relationship has adopted (Goffmann 1959; Saxer 1998; Hoffmann 2003). It points out that actions differ depending on whether they are observed or not. Concerning informal political communication between political actors and journalists, the metaphor is both useful but misleading. On the one hand, it points out that informality is a characteristic of the backstage. This means the impact of informal communication on media coverage and political processes is not transparent. On the other

hand, the metaphor neglects the continuum between formality and informality described by the degree of publicity. For example, formal interviews can be accompanied by informal agreements on the questions of an interview or the way it will be published. Press conferences and formal political events are often only attended due to the possibility of background talks (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 149; 243). However, informal background talks can be accompanied by an official statement or can become public by indiscretion. Moreover, political actors can leak information that is published by journalists, although the source of information often remains intransparent. So metaphorically speaking, there is a more or less transparent curtain between front stage and backstage.

There is not only a continuum between public and non-public, but also between institutionalized and non-institutionalized informal communication (Lesmeister 2008: 48). Institutions can be defined as rule systems that "operate as relative fixtures of constraining environment and are accompanied by taken-for-granted accounts" (Jepperson 1991: 149). On the one hand, background talks can occur spontaneously, especially in capitals where the parliamentary institutions and numerous editorial offices are located in the same quarter. On the other hand, background talks can be planned, repeatedly held, carefully selecting its members and following certain fixed rules. This is true for the so-called "background circles" in the German capital (Hoffmann 2008; Lesmeister 2008; Baugut and Grundler, 2009). One of them consists of a few long-experienced journalists who alternately invite leading politicians to their living rooms (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 256). This illustrates how characteristics of formal and informal communication can be interwoven.

Formal communication is often described by the characteristics 'public' and 'institutionalized' on the one side of a continuum, while the characteristics 'non-public' and 'non-institutionalized' mark the informal side (Lesmeister 2008: 48). However, a strong institutional character of background talks should not be regarded as changing the core of informal communication. Instead, the crucial characteristic of informal communication, its non-publicity, can be so essential for the actors, that

they institutionalize their non-public communication. Figure 1 illustrates ideal-typically the characteristics of formal and informal communication.

***Figure 1**: Formal and informal political communication between political actors and journalists*

Formal political communication ("proscenium contacts")	**Informal political communication ("backstage contacts")**
Communication is transparent (concerning the exact content and the actors involved), e.g. - Press conferences - Press releases - Interviews	Communication is intransparent (concerning the exact content or the actors involved), e.g. - Private one-on-one conversations - Talks in background circles - Text message from ongoing negotiations
⇩	⇩
Actors are geared to norms (e.g. distance)	Actors can deviate from norms (e.g. proximity)
⇩	⇩
Institutionalized communication	Flexible communication
⇩	⇩
Transparent impact on media coverage and political decisions (rather input-legitimacy)	Intransparent impact on media coverage and political decisions (rather output-legitimacy)

2.2 Strategic objectives

Strategic objectives of informal communication are closely connected with the previously described characteristics. They have been identified in qualitative interviews with political actors and journalists (Hoffmann 2003; Lesmeister 2008; Baugut and Grundler 2009; Rinke, Schlachter and Agel 2006). Political actors predominantly use the backstage to impart information and interpretations. This seems to be especially true for times of political negotiations on complex issues, when political actors recognize a journalistic lack of specific policy knowledge and therefore feel the chance to influence the journalistic point of view (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 297). Due to the non-publicity of these contacts, political actors can openly explain their views and constraints in the negotiation process. This may avoid an actor-observer-bias, which means that journalists (do not) explain political actions by private motives instead of taking political constraints into account (Kepplinger, Ehmig and Hartung 2002: 51).

Moreover informal communication between negotiators and journalists can be seen as a way to balance transparency and efficiency of negotiations (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 307). Transparency means, journalists, regarded as representatives of the public, get information and may control the negotiations at least this way. Efficiency means, confidential information cannot affect the negotiations, but may reduce dysfunctional wild guess by the media. Another option for action enabled by non-publicity is to create and foster close relations. Leading political actors can offer journalists proximity to power and preferential treatment in terms of exclusive information. In return for that, politicians may be interested in information journalists have for example about political competitors (Davis 2009: 213). Moreover they can benefit from journalists as seismographic advisors for how the audience would react on political positions (Lesmeister 2008). Finally, journalists can be "sparring partners" for political actors that want to test the persuasiveness of their arguments (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 321).

Journalists predominantly use the backstage not only to gain deeper insights into political issues and the politicians' personalities, but also to get exclusive information or interpretations (Lesmeister 2008: 170). This may help them to forecast political developments or to verify information (Baugut and Grundler, 2009: 317). These motives potentially enrich media coverage and therefore seem to justify the lack of transparency an input-legitimacy respectively. However, achieving these objectives may require close relations with political actors and the aforementioned reciprocity that is not transparent.

2.3 Informal political communication among negotiators

Informal communication processes can also refer to communication among political actors like backstage decision-making of political negotiators. Research on governance, dealing with non-hierarchical, consensual decision-making involving public and private actors, draws attention on settings beyond parliamentary institutions and constitutional arrangements. These new informal settings can be regarded as the place for specific modes of com-

munication, such as ‘arguing’ and ‘bargaining‘ (Elster 1991; Saretzki 1995). While ‘bargaining’ aims to achieve a compromise between different stable interests of actors that threat, warn and promise, ‘arguing’ means “transformation of preferences through rational deliberation” (Elster 1998: 6). The latter is expected to be supported by informal negotiations (Eising and-Kohler-Koch 1999; Scharpf 1993). One reason for this may be that informal negotiations are more likely to exclude the public and therefore might prevent the media logic from pervading decision-making. Studies suggest that the quality of discussion can depend on whether political negotiations are public or non-public (Meade and Stasavage 2006). Paradoxically, characteristics of deliberation and arguing that normative democratic theory places in the public sphere (Habermas 1989) seem to be more likely when the actors do not expect that their communication will become public (Benz 1998; Baugut and Grundler 2009). Although this seems to be especially true for informal negotiations, informal political communication is not confined to the mode of ‘arguing’. Empirically, lots of informal negotiations will be characterized by a mixture of arguing and bargaining (Holzinger 2004). Actors preferring the latter mode of communication may be as well interested in the exclusion of the public. This way, compromise is more likely, as the clientele’s public pressure on negotiators’ mutual trust and willingness to compromise is limited (Schrott and Spranger 2007). So, informal political communication can also be regarded as the processes of bargaining and arguing within informal negotiations that try to avoid or to minimize the implementation of media logic within the political process.

3 Informal communication between political actors and journalists at work – a case study

In the following, we aim to illustrate the potential relevance of informal communication between political actors and journalists by findings on the long and conflicted informal health-care reform negotiations of Germany’s grand coalition in 2006/2007. A closer look on these negotiations seems to be relevant for at least

two reasons: Firstly, they were accompanied by intensive media attention and informal communication between political actors and journalists. Secondly, the process and the results of the negotiations were extremely criticized by both journalists and the different parties involved in the political process (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 265-266). This raises the question, whether informal communication between political actors and journalists had dysfunctional effects on the negotiations.

Methodologically, the first author and another co-author interviewed 32 journalists and political actors in Berlin, among them the main negotiators or their spokespersons. In the first part of the interviews actors were generally asked about their relationships in the German capital. In the second part they were asked about media impact on the informal health-care negotiations. Firstly, we will describe the setting of these negotiations that seems to have enabled strong media impact. Secondly, we will look at the politics-media relations during these negotiations and focus on informal communication and its effects. Against this backdrop, we finally ask which general characteristics and conditions of the politics-media relationship in Berlin led to the extraordinary relevance of informal communication.

The situation of the negotiators was as follows: In their coalition agreement of 2005 the conservative parties (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) had to admit that their health-care concepts “were not to be brought into accordance easily” (CDU, CSU and SPD 2005: 102). As a consequence, informal negotiations of 16 health-care politicians from the federal and state-level had to effect a compromise. Before the negotiations began, the coalition emphasized their meaning by calling the reform the ‘litmus test’ for the success of the grand-coalition. Numerous meetings took place in Berlin for three months and finally led to basic agreements for the following formal political process (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 265).

Some of the setting characteristics (location in the capital; high number and heterogeneity of actors; high frequency and duration of meetings; no exit-options) appear to be astounding, as they can be seen as preconditions for strong mass media impact on negotiations (Schrott and Spranger 2007). Our interviews draw atten-

tion to two reasons for this setting: On the one hand, the negotiators might have expected partly positive media effects, especially on the willingness to compromise, or the possibility to enforce their own political positions (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 273; 283). From this view, the setting appears to be an anticipatory action to bring about media coverage (Kepplinger 2007). On the other hand, interviews suggested that the actors were basically aware of potential dysfunctional media effects, but felt restricted in avoiding them. Such attempts would not have been in accordance with political constraints. For example, those constraints can require the integration of heterogeneous actors that might use the media to enforce their positions (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 272; 298-301). Besides these political constraints, the following patterns of relationships between negotiators and journalists appear to be a crucial factor that can make the intrusion of media logic into the political process almost unavoidable.

The health care-negotiations were characterized by a high intensity of politics-media interactions. However, the communication between negotiators and journalists was predominantly informal, as it took the politicians a long time to effect intermediate results that could be presented in formal media statements, press conferences or press releases. Instead, the negotiators focused on two kinds of informal communication: These were indiscretions by leaking information to journalists about the ongoing negotiations, and background talks with journalists (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 281). In the actors' review, indiscretion in order to affect the negotiations by media coverage was a major problem at all stages of the negotiations. On the one hand, information was leaked, because the negotiators attempted to exert political pressure on each other. This happened mostly in order to get public support for a specific political position, as no agreement appeared possible. Moreover, this was also successfully played in order to avoid a potential agreement (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 279-291). For example, negotiators destroyed a compromise at the last minute by informing journalists via text message. As a consequence, one negotiator who wanted to destroy any compromise by numerous indiscretions was excluded from the health-care negotiations. Considering the journalistic

point of view, insights into informal negotiations were attractive as they promised exclusive information. This can be traced back to the quite high media competition in the German capital and the importance of exclusivity to media organizations.

Concerning background talks, negotiators did not only use them for non-public information. Moreover, being aware of journalists' major interest in exclusive information, some actors used the label 'confidential' for messages they intentionally wanted to have published. Negotiators being blamed for leaks could justify that they only had background talks with journalists and that they could therefore not be held responsible for leaks. Although there might have been cases in which negotiators were surprised to discover journalists' indiscretions, the interviews suggest that political actors are mostly aware of potential leaks of background information as a consequence of strong media competition. Moreover, political actors often mentioned to have such background talks only with journalists they regarded as trustworthy and therefore cooperated with them (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 228).

The core question is in how far this kind of informal communication between political negotiators and journalists affected the health-care negotiations. According to the interviewees' perceptions, indiscretions and background talks had an impact on the duration and substantive political results of the negotiations (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 267-271). These impacts can be regarded as a consequence of the mode of informal communication among the negotiators (see 2.3). The mode was affected by political actors that had to anticipate in how far their actions might become public by indiscretions. This means they had to fear that their willingness to compromise would have been interpreted as surrendering a position. As a consequence, arguing, i.e. the "transformation of preferences through rational deliberation" (Elster 1998: 6) was seen as practically utopian. Instead, some of the interviewed political actors described the mode of communication within the health-care negotiations as a bargaining theatre. This means the negotiators' threats and warnings behind closed doors were primarily addressed to the media in order to get public support for certain positions. Thus, in accordance with previ-

ous findings (Daele and Neidhardt 1996; Meade and Stasavage 2006: 123) the willingness to compromise in terms of giving up a political position was reduced the more the mass media logic affected the political process. This prolonged the time the negotiators needed to effect any compromise.

Determining media impact on the substantive results is difficult, as the actors' perceptions differ and there are numerous intervening factors like political constraints. However, it can be asserted that the final compromise solution was launched via background talks (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 286). Finally, it is remarkable, how the interviewed Berlin actors took a similar view assessing the outcome of the health-care negotiations. Almost all of the interviewed political actors and journalists criticized the reform, one of them even called the compromise a "shame" and "one of the worst decisions ever made in German politics" (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 266). These opinions refer to the results of negotiations that were characterized by intensive informal communication. This might suggest it had an impact even on the substantive results. However, the political actors did not blame the journalists for any dysfunctional media impact (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 272). Instead, they rather pointed to political contextual factors (especially ideological policy differences) that interacted with media factors (especially their interest in exclusive information). This interactive view also is in line with our proposed research on how characteristics of (informal) communication between political actors and journalists affect informal negotiations. Because 'it takes two to tango', not only one side can be blamed for dysfunctional media impacts on negotiations.

Against this backdrop, a closer look at the general characteristics of the relationship between political actors and journalists may help to explain the intrusion of media logic in the health-care negotiations. Our interviews suggest that the actors involved in informal communication had relatively close relations and therefore frequent contacts. This contact was either a result of long-term cooperation and mutual trust or part of the negotiators' interplay of proximity and distance. This means the negotiators temporarily provided exclusive information, dependent on the

news coverage of the journalists. If news coverage was not supportive, journalists were kept distant from exclusive information (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 217). On the other hand, journalists lured negotiators with the prospect of media coverage in exchange for exclusive information (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 327). Therefore, due to the competition on both sides political actors with access to exclusive information as well as prominent journalists working for influential media strategically used the interplay of proximity and distance in terms of give-and-take. Informal political communication can be regarded as a part of this competitive-driven enterprise. Under these circumstances, informal communication became relevant enough to affect the negotiations because journalists collaborated with negotiators by publishing their information from the ongoing negotiations or from background talks. As it is typical for informal communication, this often did not happen transparently, because the sources of information were not revealed. This way, negotiators could not be blamed for their information strategies. Contrary to this, the negotiators complained about dysfunctional media impact in general, while on the other hand they reported on individual cases in which they made strategic use of indiscretions. This may illustrate that their close, cooperative relationships with journalists tempted negotiators to reinforce their political positions through informal communication. As a consequence the media logic inevitably intruded into the negotiations.

4 Characteristics of informal political communication cultures

Previous findings and the potential relevance of informal political communication illustrate the need to characterize and ground it theoretically (Lünenborg and Berghofer 2010: 25; Dalen and Aelst 2012; Lesmeister 2008; Baugut and Grundler 2009). As informal political communication between political actors and journalists seems to be essential and contextual, something we call an ‘informal political communication culture’ may emerge. The term is derived from the concept of political communication

culture that was introduced by Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) and amplified by Pfetsch (2004). Political communication is regarded as comprised of a structural and a cultural dimension. The structural dimension refers to institutional conditions, located at the macro- and meso-level of both the political system and the media system. The cultural dimension at the micro-level of actors deals with their subjective action orientations, norms, attitudes, and values (Pfetsch 2004: 345). Political communication can be seen as the interplay between the actors' behavior and structural conditions. This view enables comparative research to focus on contextual conditions of different countries and correspondent actor orientations. Against this backdrop, we define 'informal political communication culture' as the empirically observable orientations of political actors and journalists that drive their non-public communication.

In the following, we present dimensions that describe crucial characteristics of informal communication between political actors and journalists. The dimensions are derived from theoretical approaches like the concept of political communication culture (Pfetsch 2004) as well as from corresponding empirical findings, not least from the case-study presented above (e.g. Baugut and Grundler 2009; Kepplinger and Maurer 2008; Pfetsch and Mayerhöffer 2011). These findings and examples that will be presented refer predominantly to the German federal level. All their totality, they characterize the informal political communication culture in the German capital Berlin.

4.1 Proximity vs. Distance

The politics-media relationship can be described by the extent of proximity or distance. Types of political communication cultures are classified by combining this dimension with the question of whether the political logic (political rule as primary goal) or the media logic (media attention as primary goal) is dominant (Pfetsch 2004: 353). A definition of proximity and distance, however, remains a deficit in almost all studies. Moreover, it is hard to find a "yardstick for 'appropriate' proximity or distance" (Pfetsch 2004: 352) in the relationship. When Sarcinelli

(1998: 225) calls for empirical research that permits statements about the normatively appropriate proximity, he indirectly calls for a look at the effects of a distant or close relationship. The positive connotation of distance may result from the autonomy paradigm and views on the media as a fourth estate and public watchdog (Westerbarkey 1995: 152; Schudson 2003). Especially the Anglo-American tradition emphasizes the need for journalistic autonomy and a neutral stance that controls powerful sources (Davis 2010: 68). Accordingly, 'power distance' is regarded as a basic dimension of a journalist's role perception (Hanitzsch 2007: 372), which may vary between a watchdog or lapdog position. However, proximity to political sources may also be a prerequisite for getting in-depth information that is necessary for journalists to fulfill a watchdog function. A German journalist stated: "Anyone who generally demonizes a certain proximity between politicians and journalists needs to explain to me, how else stories should be written that look behind the scenes or deliver smart analyses or explanations" (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 197). Concerning the aforementioned health-care negotiations, journalists and political actors emphasized the complexity of the negotiated issue: A political actor, well-known for his specialist knowledge in health-care issues: "Journalists usually have no expertise, which is especially true for complex fields of expertise like the health-care policy. Journalists are definitely smart, but mostly ignorant" (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 217). As there was a lack of official explanatory statements during the health-care negotiations, intimate talks with politicians became crucial for media coverage. This suggests that proximity as a characteristic of an informal political communication culture is linked with potential media effects on negotiations.

As distance between political actors and journalists is expected in formal contacts, informal interaction enlarges the scope of action by allowing proximity. Proximity is for example indicated by the frequency of private, amicable contacts, mutual advisory service, and common political-ideologically motivated goals. Qualitative interviews with politicians and journalists in the German capital suggest frequent informal contacts at private meetings, background talks in exclusive circles, or on a politi-

cian's journeys abroad (Baugut and Grundler 2009; Hoffmann 2003; Lesmeister 2008). Moreover, numerous events organized by political and media organizations, lobbyists etc. create room for more intimate talks and discussion (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 254). As the policy field of health-care can be regarded as extremely shaped by various lobbyists (e.g. Kamps 2012: 17), it does not surprise that the aforementioned health-care negotiations were accompanied by intensive informal communication. These informal contacts of proximity seem to be characteristic for capitals in which the paths of numerous politicians and journalists with long working experience intersect on a regular basis (Davis 2009: 210-213). Professional relations may switch over to friendship, which is documented by qualitative as well as by quantitative research: A well-versed political journalist in Berlin noted: "And from my point of view, it is not alright to address each other with the familiar ‚du' ["you"], to invite each other to family celebrations, for example birthdays, weddings, namely politicians inviting journalists and vice versa, as it often occurs with these kinds of contacts. This is, where bondage begins" (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 201). Typically, the norm of distance is illustrated by the tendency to neglect one's own proximity, but to blame *other* actors for keeping not enough distance (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 203). This evidence is supported by a survey of parliamentary correspondents in Berlin: 44 percent of them agree with the statement that 'There are more friendships between politicians and journalists than the public suspects' (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 177). This seems problematic from the audience's point of view, as the same percentage of journalists agrees with the statement 'One can only judge coverage of politicians correctly, if one knows whether the author is a friend or an enemy of that politician' (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 177). Remarkably, comparative research suggests substantial differences among European countries concerning the question 'Do you consider at least one politician to be your friend'? (Dalen and Aelst 2012: 519). In the UK, almost 60 percent say 'Yes'. That is why Dalen and Aelst (2012: 519) use the term of the "'informal' British journalist". Contrary to that, only seven percent of the Danish political journalists and only 12 percent of

their Swedish colleagues consider at least one politician to be their friend (Dalen and Aelst 2012: 519). These differences draw attention to different informal political communication cultures and raise the question of their causes that we will discuss below.

While friendship indicates stable proximity, contacts like meetings for lunches and dinners draw attention to a strategic, temporary use of proximity. The strategic usage is illustrated by the following statement of a German political journalist: "One instrument of power is admitting proximity, for example inviting to a joint lunch or dinner in a private setting. Or asking for advice: 'How would you decide in my position?' That's when it becomes very dangerous." (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 325). This kind of deviance from public role expectations appears to be a characteristic of informality.

4.2 Publicity vs. Non-Publicity

The second dimension describes the extent to which informal communication between political actors and journalists is invisible to the public. Although we defined informal contacts as non-public, there may be a continuum between non-public and public due to selective insights into the backstage. Both sides can arrange for these leaks, as the aforementioned case study suggested, or they can be interpreted as a journalistic indiscretion. In some cases, journalists might be doubtful how to make use of the information received. Accordingly, more than one in five German parliamentary correspondents say 'I have been reproached for publishing information that was meant to remain secret' (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 175). Conversely, qualitative interviews with political actors and journalists suggest that confidentiality works (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 228). This finding can be explained by different forms of background talks to which the interviewees referred to: Background circles comprised of numerous journalists searching for exclusive information are primarily regarded as the place for indiscretion. As a consequence, politicians cautiously deal with information or even use the label 'confidential' for messages they intentionally want to be published (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 317). Therefore, one-on-

one conversations have become the true place for confidential background talks (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 228). However, this means that only a small minority of prominent journalists has the opportunity to join ‘real’ background talks. This is problematic, because in interviews almost all German journalists surveyed emphasize the significance of confidential background talks, by calling them ‘vitally important’ and ‘essential for freedom of opinion and for the fulfillment of the watchdog-function’ (Baugut and Grundler, 2009: 256).

4.3 Cooperation vs. Conflict

The third dimension asks whether the informal communication between political actors and journalists is rather characterized by conflict or cooperation. As Nimmo (1964) pointed out, the relationship can range from co-operative (described by common goals and low conflict), through compatible (characterized by increasing tensions), to competitive (affected by mutual suspicion and mistrust). A large body of research has found harmonious-symbiotic aspects of the politics-media relationship as well as frictions due to mutual attempts to dominate each other (Gans 1979; Bartels 1996; Hoffmann 2003; Stromback and Nord 2006). In this context, the image of a dance can be used, illustrating cooperation as both sides strive for the exchange of positive publicity against authoritative information. On the other hand, it draws attention to potential conflicts about who leads the dance. Accordingly, most of the German political actors and journalists perceive the relationship as ‘partly harmonic and partly affected by conflicts’ (Pfetsch and Mayerhöffer 2011: 54). However, there is a remarkable difference in perceptions: Twice as many journalists as politicians say the relationship is ‘affected by conflicts’ (Pfetsch and Mayerhöffer 2011: 54). Probably, journalists who are expected to keep their distance from politicians are more sensitive to conflicts, while media relations are just one of many tasks for politicians who have speakers who settle conflicts. These general perceptions, however, do not tell us much about the question whether they rather refer to formal or informal communication. Thus, an answer requires a closer look at the

sources of conflicts. According to almost half of the parliamentary correspondents, conflicts result from being blamed 'for reporting wrong information about a politician or a political incident' (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 175; Pfetsch and Mayerhöffer 2011: 56). Another frequently mentioned source of conflicts are 'attempts of politicians to bring pressure to bear on me' (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 175). It can be assumed that disputes like these are predominantly a task of informal communication, as role expectations call for distance between politicians and journalists. Whether informal communication is able to settle conflicts or even exacerbates them, remains an open question that is relevant for understanding the general relationship climate.

4.4 Seclusiveness vs. Responsiveness of the politics-media milieu

Finally, informal political communication can be characterized by investigating whether it contributes to a responsive or closed politics-media milieu. A milieu can be regarded as a social institution affected by roles and rules (Jarren, Altmeppen and Schulz, 1993: 155-156). As both politicians and journalists are public servants, an elite milieu lacking responsiveness to the public appears to be problematic. Qualitative interviews with political actors and journalists show that they have a critical view on the seclusiveness of their interactions in capitals. They describe it by terms like 'spaceship', 'microcosm', 'politics-media-village' etc. (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 222). In order to discover a responsive or secluded politics-media milieu one should focus on the following variables: the existence of norms that drive the relationship; the willingness to make the relationship transparent; the actors' coorientation; their role and audience perceptions. Evidence for a politics-media milieu in Berlin is given by rules and sanction mechanisms that seem to be widely accepted (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 225-232). Important rules are for example agreements about the use of information by the journalists (e.g. free, publishing without naming the sources, confidential). Potential sanctions can be applied by limiting or closing off access, for example by excluding journalists from background talks or by

ignoring a politician in the media coverage. Paradoxically, the rules and sanction mechanisms also refer to the informal communication, drawing attention to a continuum between informality and formality. This can be interpreted as an indicator for the importance of informal communication that is systematically formalized.

Concerning the willingness to transparency, both sides mostly agree that the audience does not have an adequate picture of their relationship (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 234-235): A seasoned political journalist stated: ”It is not only that they do not know anything about it, they actively have a wrong idea. Out of this, the general perception emerges: Politicians and journalists form one caste.” (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 235). However, the journalists’ opinions about transparency differ. Some endorse transparency in terms of meta-coverage, some do not see efficient means of transparency, and there is also worry about negative consequences of transparency. For example, a journalist with close contacts to politicians says: ”I find the idea of telling recipients more about how the things they are being served have been made honorable. But I speak to the contrary: Sometimes it may be better for the gourmet, if he does not know how the sausage has been made and what has been added to it.” (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 236). Besides the one group that basically supports the idea of more transparency, there is another one that opposes it. As much as one quarter of the German parliamentary correspondents agree with the statement ‘Friendships between politicians and journalists are none of the public’s business. They are their private matter’ (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 177). About another quarter is undecided. One half of the journalists does not agree (Kepplinger and Maurer 2008: 177). Taking into account that a social acceptability bias exists due to the democratic desirability of transparency, there is a remarkable anti-transparency group. It probably mirrors the perceived importance of informal communication.

The variable of the actors‘ coorientation can be regarded as comprised of three parts: coorientation (1) among journalists, (2) among political actors, (3) between both sides. Different types of coorientation can be differentiated with a two-dimensional typol-

ogy (Reinemann 2004). One dimension refers to the following modes of interaction and communication: interpersonal; indirect (via mass media); and purely cognitive (or virtual). The other one refers to the question about whether coorientation occurs between actors from the same news organization or party, or whether coorientation occurs among actors from different news organizations or parties. The degree of coorientation is expected to depend on the competitive situation of the political system and the media system. Competitors who strive for prestige within the politics-media milieu may intensively observe each other (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 224). Findings on the media use of German political journalists suggest the major significance of other media as sources for everyday journalistic work (Reinemann 2004: 868; Lünenborg and Berghofer 2010: 25). Contacts with the audience take only about half an hour a day on average, relatively little time compared to other routines (Lünenborg and Berghofer 2010: 22). Accordingly, the role perception of German political journalists is rather passive. For example, only about 40 percent want to 'support the cause of the disadvantaged' (Lünenborg and Berghofer 2010: 39). Even less want to 'give common people the chance to express their opinions on issues of public interest' (Lünenborg and Berghofer 2010: 39). Regrettably, there is no representative data that would allow for a comparison of parliamentary correspondents with all political journalists. However, qualitative interviews with parliamentary correspondents suggest extraordinary vague images of the audience and passive role perceptions (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 334-366). This may be traced back to the high coorientation in the highly competitive capitals that create a secluded politics-media milieu. With regard to the aforementioned health-care negotiations, a well-versed German journalist complained about colleagues who oriented themselves strongly towards their peers and preferred to show off with information from informal talks with politicians instead of explaining the basics of the complex reform (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 224). And a German politician in Berlin added: "Somehow all of this here spins around itself. That is such a self-referencing system, because of the lack of feedback from the citizens, the journalists orient themselves towards their colleagues.

Many often only move within the same circles of people. And then you somehow just test things out with your colleagues. Journalists have frequent exchanges amongst each other, which in return, has the effect that ideas are multiplied and spread. And then everything is located in this cosmos here, and is being passed back and forth between journalists and politicians“ (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 224). Thus, a high amount of informal communication seems to be characteristic of strong coorientation. Considering our findings, informal political communication appears to be a part and promoter of a secluded politics-media milieu.

5 Contextual factors influencing informal political communication cultures

As our case study suggested, the characteristics that describe informal political communication cultures can be regarded as context-bound. Previous research on informal communication has drawn attention to a variety of contextual factors (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Norris 2011; Humphreys 2011). In the following, some potential contextual factors are systematized by differentiating between the macro-, meso- and micro-level of the political communication system. According to the concept of political communication culture (Pfetsch 2004), we differentiate between political and media factors on the various levels. These potentially influencing factors are derived from empirical data and theoretical considerations. They have to take into account that political communication cultures can emerge at sub-national, national, and transnational levels (Pfetsch and Esser 2012: 31). Since comparative studies on informal communication between political actors and journalists are just at the beginning, we want to propose our hierarchical model as a basis for future research. Hypotheses will be presented as examples in order to illustrate potential findings.

5.1 Macro-level

At the macro-level, the structure of competition, including the number of actors, seems to be especially relevant (Aelst et al. 2010). On the political side, one can distinguish political (sub-) systems that have a rather competitive structure from political (sub-)systems with a consociational character. While the former ones are characterized by the application of the majority rule and party competition the latter ones are consensus-oriented and often have proportional party representation (Lijphart 1984; 1999; Lehmbruch 1996; Czada 2000). Accordingly, on the media side, the degree of competition among (and not least within) news organizations seems to matter. Especially the discussion about deregulation and the commercialization of news calls for research on the effects of competition on interactions between politicians and journalists (McManus 2009; McNair 2000). There is already some evidence that shows that competitive structures shape the politics-media interaction. First, the number of MPs or parliamentary groups that compete for media attention can have an effect on the amount of (informal) contacts between both sides (Aelst et al. 2010). However, this number should be considered in proportion to the number of journalists or media organizations that compete for informal contacts with journalists. The UK is typically regarded as a country with strong competitive structures on both sides (Lijphart 1999; Humphreys 2009). Correspondingly, comparative research on eight West European countries shows the closest informal relationships in the UK (Dalen and Aelst 2012: 519). About one third of political journalists ‘have lunch with politicians’ at least once a week; one quarter ‘gives politicians advice on their jobs’; more than the half ‘considers at least one politician to be a friend’. In contrast, only one quarter of political journalists has such ‘friendships’ in Belgium, a country with a far less competitive media landscape and a consensual political culture (Dalen and Aelst 2012: 519). The stronger the competition, the more the backstage may be the place for attempts to gain competitive advantage. Besides, in interviews actors often explain problematic patterns of their relationships by

referring to competition and economic pressures (e.g. Baugut and Grundler 2009: 196; Lesmeister 2008: 109).

Against this backdrop we hypothesize as follows, concerning the dimensions of informal political communication.

The stronger the competition on the political and the media side, the more informal communication is characterized

(a) by proximity. Both political and media competition appear as a condition for the attempts of the political actors to influence media coverage through the interplay of proximity and distance. Vice versa, journalists might compete for proximity to their sources (*Proximity vs. Distance*);

(b) by publicity through arranged leaks. Publicity through indiscretion seems to be more likely as well, because competing journalists are tempted to publish confidential information from background talks in order to obtain exclusive reports (*Publicity vs. Non-Publicity*);

(c) by an interplay of conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, competition might make the actors more sensitive to the other side's deviance from norms and role expectations. On the other hand, competitive pressure on both sides may be reduced through cooperation (*Cooperation vs. Conflict*);

(d) by a secluded politics-media milieu. Both political and media competition can be regarded as a condition for the coorientation of the competitors. Gaining prestige within the community of competitors can then be more important than audience orientation and responsiveness. As the actors use the backstage in order to gain a competitive advantage, their willingness to make the relationship transparent is restricted. Instead, they introduce rules and exclusive circles for informal communication (*Seclusiveness vs. Responsiveness*).

The impact of media competition on the characteristics of informal political communication can be estimated by comparing the situation in the former German capital Bonn with the more competitive setting in Berlin. A prominent politician involved in the health-care negotiations drew attention to the link between

competition and conflicts: “Competition is higher here, expectations in terms of circulation and audience rating etc. are higher and in so far, the hunt for scoops or pre-published news is higher than in Bonn. And thus (…) there may not be such a basic foundation of trust like there was before. Another prominent politician who was involved in the health-care negotiations even described the media competition as a “war“ that had been getting worse in Berlin (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 196).

5.2 Meso-level

Concerning the meso-level, editorial resources (size of editorial staff, financial strength etc.) of the news organizations seem to be relevant on the media side. The amount of resources seems to be connected with the number of prestige media whose journalists may have specific working conditions (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 157-162). Taking those into account for example, means considering their impact on the time journalists are able to spend on informal communication with politicians. Actors that lack time may regard informal communication as inefficient, as they are usually restricted in reporting about it. On the political side, the focus is on the actors’ resources, constraints and working conditions due to their membership in a party or parliamentary group. For example, resources for public relations in terms of spokespeople affect the frequency of contacts MPs have with journalists (Aelst et al. 2010). Generally, however, the influence of organizational resources is still unexplored. Nevertheless, we cautiously hypothesize the following:

Proximity vs. Distance: The fewer organizational resources exist on the political and on the media side, the less informal communication is characterized by proximity. Because few resources are expected to reduce the actors’ time for informal contacts, the condition for intimate relationships cannot be fulfilled. Moreover, a low amount of resources on both sides might hinder the interplay of proximity and distance.

Cooperation vs. Conflict: The fewer organizational resources exist on the political and the media side, the stronger informal

communication is characterized by cooperation. Fewer resources seem to increase the dependency on the other side. Therefore, harmonious collaboration appears as a solution for actors who have to cope with difficult working conditions.

Publicity vs. Non-Publicity: The fewer organizational resources exist on the media side, the stronger informal communication is characterized by non-publicity through the absence of indiscretion. Leaking information from confidential background talks may bring with it the danger of conflicts which may require resources.

Seclusiveness vs. Responsiveness of the politics-media milieu: The fewer organizational resources exist on the media side, the stronger informal communication is characterized by a secluded politics-media milieu. Actors with fewer resources have to make news decisions under circumstances of high uncertainty. They might feel a stronger need for coorientation. Informal communication is thereby limited to a few symbiotic contacts. As they are working, actors may not be willing to make those contacts transparent, but rather even stabilize them by rules.

In our interviews, an example for the impact of organizational resources on the politics-media relationships is given by a prominent journalist who said that journalists of prestigious media with strong editorial resources could risk conflicts with politicians. With regard to politicians‘ journeys abroad, an important setting for informal talks, he noted: “The fear of sanction that results in ‘bite inhibition’ is only a danger to him who needs to be concerned not to be invited the next time (…) The A-league of papers from Spiegel to Bild does not need to worry about that. No matter if I write bad about the chancellor during or after a journey abroad, Bild will always come along” (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 231).

5.3 Micro-level

On the micro-level, individual characteristics and motives have to be taken into account on both sides. Especially the professional experience seems to have an impact on the characteristics of informal communication between political actors and journalists. Research on this relationship in five Western European countries suggests that the more years MPs are in parliament, the more contacts they have with journalists (Aelst et al. 2010). Against this backdrop, we state the following partly self-evident hypotheses:

Proximity vs. Distance: The longer the professional experience of political actors and journalists, the stronger informal communication is characterized by proximity.

Publicity vs. Non-Publicity: The longer the professional experience of political actors and journalists, the stronger informal communication is characterized by non-publicity through the absence of indiscretion, or the stronger informal communication is characterized by publicity through arranged leaks.

Cooperation vs. Conflict: The longer the professional experience of political actors and journalists, the stronger informal communication is characterized by cooperation.

Seclusiveness vs. Responsiveness of the politics-media milieu: The longer the professional experience of political actors and journalists, the stronger informal communication is characterized by a secluded politics-media milieu.

In our interviews, the impact of individual characteristics on the politics-media relationships is illustrated by a journalist who mentioned job rotation as a good way to avoid a seclusive politics-media milieu. However, journalists with a long professional experience might be irreplaceable due to their special knowledge and intensive informal relations to political actors.

6 Effects of the characteristics of informal political communication cultures

Research on informal communication between political actors and journalists develops its full relevance through taking a closer look at its effects. Our aforementioned case study illustrated that informal communication can have an impact on informal negotiations. Further description of these influences intends to enrich the research on the mediatization of politics. Mediatization in the context of negotiations can be regarded as the intrusion of mass media logic into the political process (Marcinkowsi 2005). On the one hand, this intrusion can make negotiations transparent, which contributes to their (input-) legitimacy. On the other hand, the intrusion can impede the efficiency of the negotiations, as "the rationales of media publicity and political negotiation are incompatible" (Spoerer-Wagner and Marcinkowsi 2010; 2011; Marcinkowski 2005). A consequence may be attempts to avoid or to minimize this intrusion of media logic. Those attempts should additionally be considered as mediatization effects. In that sense, one can assume that the tendency to "go informal" also is a consequence of the assumption of political actors that too much media attention will negatively affect their negotiations. Therefore, we propose to define the mediatization of negotiations broadly as the meaning of media, media logic or media coverage for the perception and action of negotiators (Reinemann 2010).

Theoretically, influences of informal political communication cultures on political action can be direct and indirect. Direct influences refer to the informal communication between political actors and journalists, indirect influences are exercised through media coverage as a result of informal communication. This is illustrated by the following quote of a prominent German politician: "There are close friendships. TV and print media journalists gather in specific pubs to play skat. If you know them, you can find interesting constellations, and then you will not wonder why in the morning at six o'clock RTL news has information that no one else has" (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 252). Generally, direct and indirect influences can be distinguished according to the level (micro-, meso-, macro-) of political action they refer to.

On the *micro-level*, the characteristics of informal political communication cultures can have an impact on the single negotiators' political action and on media relations during the political process. Effects might refer to: the overall extent of the negotiators' media relations; whether the negotiators prefer formal or informal communication with journalists; the stage and the state of the negotiations at the point when the negotiators engage in media relations; whether negotiators have coordinated media relations or not.

The actual patterns of media relations may depend on the objectives of the negotiators. They may use the media relations in order to develop a specific position or in order to reinforce a specific position:

As it is typical for the process of bargaining (Elster 1991), there might be political constraints that do not allow the deviance from a certain position. If so, the characteristics of informal political communication cultures may have an impact on how negotiators try to enforce their fixed positions by media relations. For example, it can be assumed that the overall extent of media relations is higher, the more the informal political communication culture is characterized by seclusiveness. This means the actors are strongly co-oriented by focusing on every detail of the negotiations and media coverage. Moreover, it can be assumed that the extent of media relations is at a higher degree, the more the informal political communication culture is characterized by proximity, (arranged) publicity, and cooperation. Given this combination, negotiators may be tempted to use their close contacts with journalists to enforce their positions with assistance from the media coverage. This might be especially true for the early stages of negotiations when actors do not see their own interests realized. However, if the informal political communication culture is rather characterized by conflicts and publicity in terms of indiscretion, negotiators might prefer formal, concerted communication with journalists.

If negotiators do not have fixed positions, as it is typical for the process of arguing (Elster 1991), their positions may be partly formed by their media relations. For example, the positions may depend on how journalists react to it in informal talks, which ne-

gotiators then can use to test their persuasiveness and the potential public response to their position. It can be assumed that the more the informal communication culture is described by proximity and cooperation, the more political actors try to benefit from journalists as such advisors on public opinion. Because such an advisory service is not in accordance with journalistic norms, it will be limited to informal communication cultures which are strongly characterized by mutual trust to keep the communication non-public. This kind of informal communication does not lead to media coverage, but has an indirect effect on negotiations.

On the *meso-level*, the characteristics of informal political communication cultures may have an impact on the negotiation institutions. Such effects may, for example, refer to: the level of formalization; the location of the negotiations (distance to mass media attention); the number and heterogeneity of the negotiators; frequency and duration of the meetings; the existence of exit options; the object and intended outcomes of the negotiations. As mentioned above, the characteristics of negotiation systems can be an anticipatory reaction aimed at avoiding the intrusion of media logic before the start of informal negotiations. For example, it can be assumed that the more the informal political communication culture is characterized by distance, publicity and conflicts in consequence of indiscretion, the more the negotiation institution has characteristics that are meant to avoid or to minimize the intrusion of media logic. Research on what the nature of those characteristics are, is still in the early stages. Findings based on the comparison of different negotiating institutions suggest that the following institutional characteristics impede the mediatization effects: high level of formalization; low level of public openness; no exit-options for the actors involved in the negotiation processes (Schrott and Spranger 2007). Only few negotiators, not informing the press about time and place of the negotiations seems to be a potential reaction on a specific informal political communication culture. That is how the details of the German corporate tax reform were negotiated in 2006 by only two actors: the Prime Minister of the State of Hesse, and the Federal Minister of Finance (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 301-302).

Future research should take characteristics of the politics-media relationships into account, as it can be assumed that mediatization effects depend on how political-institutional factors interact with media factors (s. Figure 2).

On the *macro-level*, potential effects on the outcome of the political process refer for example to: the mode of communication between the negotiators (the willingness to compromise: arguing vs. bargaining); the duration of negotiations; the substantive results of negotiations; the balance between (input-)legitimacy and efficiency (Elster 1991; Baugut and Grundler 2009). Against the backdrop of our case study, it can be assumed that the more an informal political communication culture is characterized by publicity, the more negotiations are characterized by the bargaining mode. For example, Meade and Stasavage (2006) suggest in another context that negotiating actors give less deviating opinions when they know they are to be published. Effects on the duration and substantive results of negotiations might be the stronger, the more the informal political communication culture is characterized by proximity, cooperation, publicity, and seclusiveness. Given this combination that tempts negotiators to form or to reinforce their positions with assistance from the media, negotiations might become a struggle within the media, as well as behind closed doors. Finally, the legitimacy-efficiency dilemma raises the question of which characteristics of an informal political communication contribute to (input-)legitimacy rather than to efficiency. Non-public communication and distance between political actors can be regarded as a prerequisite for efficiency. In how far publicity through leaks or indiscretions contributes to legitimacy in terms of transparency appears doubtful, as there will be only selective insights into the political process. The seclusiveness of the politics-media milieu seems to be the most problematic characteristic. On the one hand, a strong coorientation between negotiators and journalists can be interpreted as an intrusion of media logic that impedes efficiency. On the other hand, a strong coorientation within an elite politics-media milieu impedes legitimacy just as well.

The potential impact of informal political communication cultures on negotiations calls for empirical research. Temporarily, we hypothesize as follows.

Proximity vs. Distance: The stronger informal communication is characterized by proximity, the stronger is the mediatization of informal negotiations.

Publicity vs. Non-Publicity: The stronger informal communication is characterized by publicity, the stronger is the mediatization of informal negotiations.

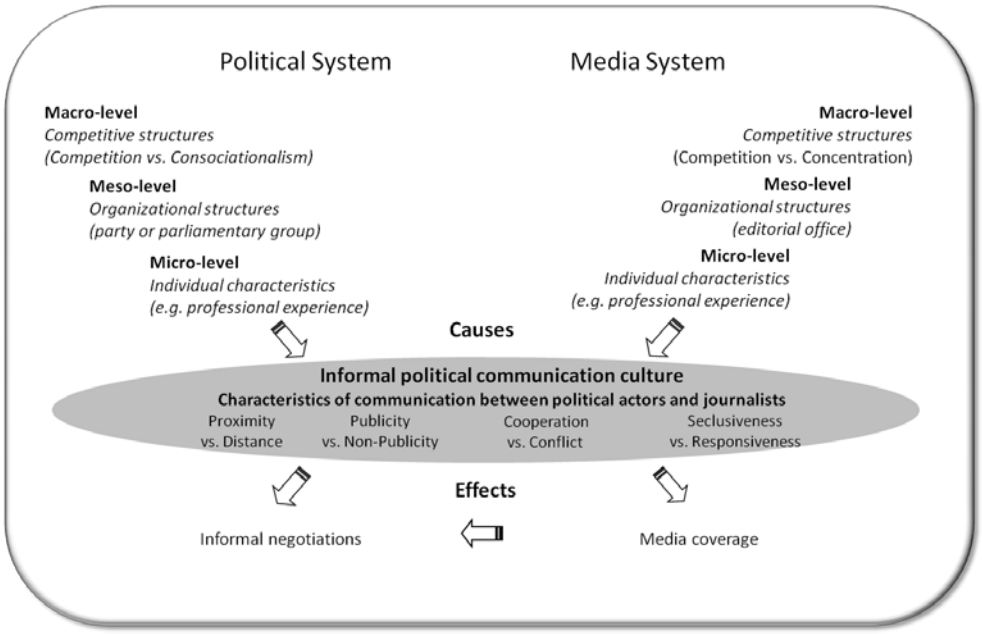
Cooperation vs. Conflict: The stronger informal communication is characterized by cooperation, the stronger is the mediatization of informal negotiations.

Seclusiveness vs. Responsiveness of the politics-media milieu: The stronger informal communication is characterized by seclusiveness of the politics-media milieu, the stronger is the mediatization of informal negotiations.

The aforementioned health-care negotiations have been presented as an example for the impact of characteristics of the politics-media relationships on the mediatization of politics. Especially the publicity in terms of numerous leaks or indiscretions enabled dysfunctional media impact on the mode and substantive results of the health-care negotiations. A journalist sums up as follows: “I think that in the case of the health-care reform a little less excitement, a little more trust and unity, that is negotiation behind closed doors, would have occasioned more reasonable results“ (Baugut and Grundler 2009: 275).

As a summarization, Figure 2 presents an overview on the aforementioned causes, characteristics and effects of informal political communication cultures.

***Figure 2**: Causes, characteristics, effects of informal political communication cultures*



7 Conclusion

Our starting point was the lack of research on informal communication between political actors and journalists. This can be traced back not only to the definition problem and the invisibility of informal communication, but also to its unexplored relevance. Against this backdrop, we firstly defined this type of communication between political actors and journalists. As its crucial characteristic we considered that potential influences of informal communication on media coverage and political action are non-transparent. Our case-study drew attention on how informal communication between political actors and journalists can affect informal negotiations, for example the mode of communication among the negotiators. Such an influence appeared as a consequence of specific characteristics of the politics-media relationship in the German capital Berlin. If this is the case, then one can ask about the causes for those characteristics. For this purpose, the concept of informal political communication cultures appears helpful for further research, as it stresses that the orientations of political actors and journalists towards backstage processes are

context-bound. Against this backdrop, we propose research on the characteristics, causes and consequences of informal political communications. Especially the perception of dysfunctional mediatization effects in the area of conflict between legitimacy and efficiency raises the question what kind of politics-media relationships are responsible for this fact. When problematic relationships are identified and traced back to causes like the degree of media competition, the regulation of press markets would be better empirically based. Moreover, further advantages and disadvantages of political systems with rather competitive or consociational characteristics could be identified by a closer look on how these characteristics function in combination with characteristics of the media system. Thus, research on informal political communication appears as an important intersection between political science and communication science. As we previously stated, because 'it takes two to tango', interdisciplinary work is both necessary and promising.

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