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Jan Niklas Kocks

Political Media Relations Online as an Elite Phenomenon

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Jan Niklas Kocks
Berlin, Germany

Dissertation Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, 2015

This Thesis was created in the context of the DFG-Research Unit 1381 'Political Communication in the Online-World', Subproject 6 'Media Relations Online', which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

ISBN 978-3-658-13550-8 ISBN 978-3-658-13551-5 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-658-13551-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016935978

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

The present thesis is the result of over three years of research in the field of political media relations in the online sphere. At this point, I would like to thank those that have contributed or otherwise supported me in this process.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Dr. Juliana Raupp for her supervision and support, for constructive critique and the provision of the necessary freedom to develop my thoughts and ideas. I would also like to thank my second assessor Prof. Dr. Aeron Davis for his helpful feedback.

The DFG-funded research group 'Political Communication in the Online World' provided me with the opportunity to conduct the research underlying this thesis. I would like to thank all its members for the interesting and helpful discussions and their constructive feedback. In particular, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Gerhard Vowe, Prof. Dr. Patrick Donges, PD Dr. Marco Dohle, Dr. Uli Bernhard and Paula Nitschke for their reviews, comments and critique.

My colleagues at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies have been helpful and supportive throughout the process. Here I would especially like to thank Kim Murphy, Charlotte Schnöger and Tina Stalf.

Finally I would like to thank my family and especially my wife Angelica Lanzilotti for all their support during these years.

Jan Niklas Kocks
Berlin, December 2015

*Dedicated to my grandfather Werner Kocks (*1923).*

Abstract (English)

Political media relations have long been considered a type of political communication taking place between a few professional communicators. Journalists from leading media outlets provide political coverage and professional spokespersons employed by leading political organisations provide them with the necessary information. So far, the arrangement has been exclusive and mutually beneficial for both sides. However, it has been argued that digitisation could have the potential to alter such structures and interactions. Technological change would thereby foster new and potentially less exclusive arrangements in the field of political media relations.

Against a background focusing on both the debate on digitisation and its implications and on theoretical reflections grounded in sociological elite theory, this thesis enquires into the effects of now almost ubiquitous online media on political media relations and especially on patterns of interaction in this field.

It first analyses the ways in which leading political journalists and spokespersons perceive digitisation in terms of technological, organisational and political change. This step focuses on the perspective of the communicators directly involved and potentially affected by digitisation. To what extent do they consider digitisation an important process and what effects do they see? Do they perceive changes in the structure of communication networks and which role do they attribute to new and formerly marginal actors? The first analysis explores focal political communication professionals' perceptions of digitisation, seeking to answer these questions.

The second analysis then focuses on actual adaptations of digitisation on an individual and an organisational level. This step enquires into the actual nature of political media relations in the online age as a potential elite phenomenon. To what extent have leading political organisations adapted to new technological opportunities? Are communicative exchanges between political spokespersons and journalists digitised and if so to what extent? How has digitisation affected communication networks, especially regarding their in- or exclusiveness?

The thesis employs a combination of content analyses, semi-structured interviews with 16 political spokespersons and 29 political journalists and social network analysis. Findings indicate that digitisation is generally considered to be an important process affecting political organisations and media outlets as well as individual communication professionals. Journalists in particular perceive strong effects of technological change, yet remain ambiguous in predicting future developments. Political spokespersons on the other hand are often less critical about potential implications, considering digitisation to be a process benefiting new and formerly marginal actors.

Analyses of adaptations show that political media relations are in some regards highly digitised. Political organisations show a high degree of activity online, targeting both professional journalists and the general public. However, at the same time their communications are predominantly unidirectional, often replicating established patterns of communication. Actual communicative exchanges on an individual level are hardly digitised and individual communicators opt mostly for established means. This is also replicated on a level of network ties. Communication networks in the field of political media relations largely appear structurally conservative; they are mostly dominated by established political actors and large offline media outlets.

In accordance with theoretical considerations and some preceding studies, empirical analyses draw a picture of political media relations in the online age as an elite phenomenon. Communication networks are still characterised to a large extent here by exclusive arrangements.

Abstract (German)

Politische Media Relations sind lange als eine Form von politischer Kommunikation betrachtet worden, die vornehmlich zwischen einigen wenigen professionellen Kommunikatoren vonstattengeht. Journalisten führender Medien leisten politische Berichterstattung und die professionellen Sprecher leitender politischer Organisationen stellen ihnen die dazu notwendigen Informationen bereit. Bis dato ist das Arrangement exklusiver Natur und für beide Seiten gleichsam vorteilhaft.

Es ist jedoch argumentiert worden, dass der Prozess der Digitalisierung das Potential haben könnte, solche Strukturen und Interaktionen zu verändern. Technologischer Wandel würde dabei neue und potentiell weniger exklusive Arrangements im Bereich der politischen Media Relations befördern.

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht die Effekte der beinahe omnipräsenten Online-Medien im Bereich der politischen Media Relations, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Interaktionsstrukturen in diesem Feld. Sie tut dies vor dem Hintergrund der sozialwissenschaftlichen Debatte um die mögliche Implikationen der Digitalisierung und darüber hinausgehenden elitentheoretischen Reflektionen.

Sie analysiert dabei zunächst die Perzeptionen führender politischer Journalisten und Sprecher im Hinblick auf technologischen, organisationalen und politischen Wandel. Dieser Schritt fokussiert auf die Perspektive der direkt involvierten und potentiell betroffenen Kommunikatoren. Inwieweit sehen sie Digitalisierung als einen bedeutsamen Prozess an und welche Effekte nehmen sie wahr? Sehen sie Veränderungen in den Strukturen kommunikativer Netzwerke und welche Rolle schreiben sie in diesem Zusammenhang neuen und zuvor marginalen Akteuren zu?

In einem zweiten Schritt analysiert sie Adaptionen der Digitalisierung auf individueller und organisationaler Ebene. Dieser Schritt untersucht die Natur politischer Media Relations im Online-Zeitalter als ein potentielles Elitenphänomen. Inwieweit haben politische Organisationen neue technologische Möglichkeiten adaptiert? Sind kommunikative Austauschprozesse zwischen politische Sprechern und Journalisten digitalisiert und wenn ja, dann in welchem Umfang? Wie hat die Digitalisierung kommunikative Netzwerke beeinflusst, insbesondere im Hinblick auf deren In- oder Exklusivität?

Die vorliegende Arbeit basiert auf einer methodologischen Kombination aus Inhaltsanalysen, teilstandardisierten Interviews mit 16 politischen Sprechern und 29 politischen Journalisten und Sozialer Netzwerkanalyse. Die Befunde indizieren, dass Digitalisierung generell als ein bedeutsamer Prozess betrachtet wird, der politische Organisationen und Medien ebenso betrifft wie individuelle politische Kommunikatoren. Insbesondere Journalisten nehmen starke Effekte techno-

logischen Wandels wahr. Sie bleiben dabei jedoch ambivalent in ihren Einschätzungen zukünftiger Entwicklungen. Politische Sprecher sind häufig weniger kritisch was die potentiellen Implikationen der Digitalisierung angeht, sie betrachten den Prozess häufig als förderlich für neue und zuvor marginale Akteure. Analysen von Adaptionen zeigen, dass politische Media Relations in einigen Bereichen hochgradig digitalisiert sind. Politische Organisationen zeigen ein hohes Maß an Online-Aktivität; ihre Kommunikationen zielen dabei sowohl auf professionelle Journalisten wie auch auf die allgemeine Bevölkerung. Zugleich sind diese jedoch zumeist unidirektionaler Natur und replizieren etablierte Kommunikationsmuster. Kommunikative Austausche auf Individualebene sind hier kaum digitalisiert; individuelle Kommunikatoren setzen zumeist auf etablierte Kommunikationskanäle. Dieser Befund repliziert sich auch auf der Ebene der Netzwerk-Kanten. Kommunikative Netzwerke im Bereich der politischen Media Relations erscheinen zumeist strukturkonservativ; sie werden vornehmlich von etablierten politischen Organisationen und großen Offline-Medien dominiert.

In Übereinstimmung mit theoretischen Überlegungen und einigen vorangehenden Studien zeichnen die empirischen Analysen ein Bild politischer Media Relations im Online-Zeitalter als Elitenphänomen. Kommunikative Netzwerke sind dabei noch immer vornehmlich durch exklusive Arrangements geprägt.

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**Visualisations for Fig. 1 and 3 were made by C. Schnöger*

List of Abbreviations

AA	Auswärtiges Amt [Governmental Body; *Foreign Office*]
ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Association of Public Service Broadcasters]
BMELV	Bundesministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Verbraucherschutz [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Customer Protection*]
BMF	Bundesministerium der Finanzen [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry of Finance*]
BMFSFJ	Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth*]
BMG	Bundesministerium der Gesundheit [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry of Health*]
BMU	Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety*]
BVerfGE	Entscheidungen des Bundesverfassungsgerichtes [Official collection of verdicts by the German Constitutional Court]
BMWi	Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Technologie [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology*]
BMZ	Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung [Governmental Body; *Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development*]
CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interview
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union [Party]
CSU	Christlich Soziale Union [Party]
DLF	Deutschlandfunk [Public Service Broadcaster]
DPA	Deutsche Presse-Agentur [News Agency]
FAZ	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung [Newspaper]
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei [Party]
FR	Frankfurter Rundschau [Newspaper]
GII	Global Information Infrastructure
GG	Grundgesetz [German constitution; *basic law*]
ICT	Information and Communication Technology [also utilised in plural: ICTs]
KSTA	Kölner Stadtanzeiger [Newspaper]
M	Arithmetic Mean
NRZ	Neue Ruhr Zeitung / Neue Rhein Zeitung [Newspaper; regional branch of WAZ]
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NW	Network
RTL	RTL Television [TV Channel, belonging to Rundfunk Television Luxemburg]
SD	Standard Deviation
SNA	Social Network Analysis
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands [Party]

SZ	Süddeutsche Zeitung [Newspaper]
TAZ	Die Tageszeitung [Newspaper]
VoIP	Voice over IP
WAZ	Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung [Newspaper]
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen [Public Service Broadcaster]

1 Introduction

Political media relations, understood here to be the interaction between politics and political journalism, have long been considered a type of political communication taking place between relatively few professional communicators. Journalists working for leading media outlets provide coverage both on current developments and on long term policies, and professional spokespersons, inter alia working for governmental bodies and major political parties, provide them with the necessary information for that coverage.

The involved spokespersons want to generate (favourable) coverage for their organisations and to keep them present in the public debate, in order to ameliorate their position in the democratic competition. So far, the best way to do so has arguably been by engaging in communicative exchange with journalists working for leading media outlets. Professional journalists on the other hand seek to provide quality (political) coverage, thereby ameliorating their medium's competitive position in the media market. Here it can be argued that the best way to do so has been to engage in communicative exchange with political spokespersons working for leading political actors such as governmental bodies or major political parties. The arrangement is an exclusive one and it generally benefits all parties involved.

It has been argued however that processes of technologically induced media change could alter the conditions here. Digitisation, the proliferation of new communicative possibilities, could change structural conditions and patterns of interaction within the field of political communication, thereby fostering new arrangements.

With the online media now almost ubiquitous, the question is in how far political media relations in Germany have been affected by these processes of digitisation. Which role do new communicative possibilities play for the communicators and organisations involved? Through which channels do they engage in communicative exchange and in how far are their communication networks affected by this? Are political media relations still to be understood as predominantly exclusive arrangements – an elite phenomenon for that matter – or have new and formerly marginal actors found access to this field of political communication?

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J.N. Kocks, *Political Media Relations Online as an Elite Phenomenon*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-658-13551-5_1

The present thesis seeks to enquire into political media relations in the digital age in Germany and to thereby find answers to these questions. It asks about the perceptions leading political communication professionals have of digitisation in their field and about the ways in which these professionals and their specific organisations actually adapt to digitisation.

Considering leading political communication professionals positional elites in the field of political media relations, the value of communication, communicative adaptations and related communicative strategies is initially reflected and discussed based on a foundation of sociological elite theory.

The thesis then first seeks to enquire into the perceptions political communication professionals have of digitisation. Political spokespersons and communication managers working for federal governmental bodies and leading political parties and political journalists working for major media outlets are questioned regarding the ways in which they perceive changes occurring in political communication due to the process of digitisation. To what extent do they see patterns of interaction affected by the proliferation of new means? Do they see strategic changes within their own sphere or in neighbouring fields? What about new actors entering their communication networks? Are politics as such affected by digitisation and if so to what degree?

Subsequently it seeks to analyse actual adaptations of digitisation by the actors in question and – in the case of political spokespersons and communication managers – also by their specific organisations. How are governmental bodies and leading political parties represented in the online sphere? Which tools do they employ and to what extent do they adopt new communicative possibilities? Through which channels do journalists and spokespeople interact with each other and how are their communication networks constructed under online conditions? Do new and formerly marginal actors play any substantial role in these?

On an organisational level, the present thesis focuses on federal governmental bodies and leading political parties (i.e. those that were represented in parliament in the 2009-2013 legislative period) and on major media outlets. The individual communication professionals either account for the communication of the political actors in question or provide political coverage as high ranking political journalists. As indicated, they can be considered a positional elite. Their perceptions and adaptations of digitisation are the main focus of interest here.

The following subchapters will give some additional information on the concept of the present thesis, provide a brief initial rationale for the perspective taken and also supplement some terminological clarifications as well as provide a description of the underlying research model. The second chapter then focuses on media source relations in political communication, enquires into the ongoing debate on the possible effects and implications of digitisation and briefly dis-

cusses the state of research on political media relations in the digital age. It thereby provides background and contextualisation for the following research. The third chapter elaborates on the elites defining political media relations and seeks to draw implications from elite theory. Subsequently, the fourth chapter presents two empirical studies, the first one focusing on perceptions of digitisation. Here individual perspectives on digitisation are measured and analysed. Then actual adaptations of digitisation are taken into account. Adoptions of new communicative possibilities are analysed here, both with regard to organisational presences and individual communicative exchanges. A conclusive fifth chapter then summarises, compares and critically discusses the findings from all preceding analyses.

Conducted in the context of the DFG-funded research project 'Media Relations Online' (2011-2014), the present thesis seeks to enquire into the changes political media relations face under the conditions of digitisation, focusing on those actors that have so far shaped the field. It seeks to clarify the validity of the notion that political media relations online are an elite phenomenon with regard to the situation in contemporary German political communication.

1.1 Concept

Why should political media relations and the potential changes induced by digitisation be approached from a perspective focusing on elites? Where does the rationale for a framework that considers political media relations online as an elite phenomenon lie? The following aims to answer these questions and thereby simultaneously provides a rationale for the perspective employed.

From a strictly normative perspective on political communication, there are two extreme models of communication: one refers to (authoritarian) societies dominated by elites and the other is generally connected to contemporary (egalitarian and pluralistic) democracies. These models are in contraposition and describe opposing poles in the world of political communication (Mills, 1963, p. 355; F. R. Pfetsch, 2012, pp. 458-460).

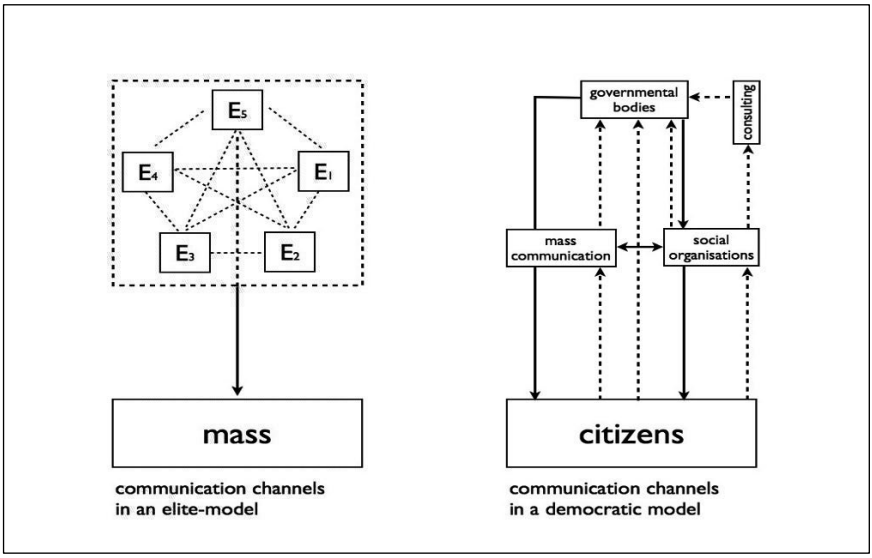

Fig. 1: Political communication in an elite model and in a democratic one; own translation of a model by F. R. Pfetsch (2012, p. 458).

On one side, there are elite groupings communicating with each other. Here one finds constant dialogue and mutual exchange of arguments; issues of political and societal salience are subject to constant and open debate. These groupings basically constitute a sphere of their own, a sphere in which political communication takes place and from which power is exercised. Non-elite actors are excluded from this sphere; visible or invisible boundaries keep them away from political debate and deliberation, from the exercising of power. Whenever communication from the elite-sphere is addressed at them, it is strictly unidirectional and characterised by manipulative and mobilising intentions, aiming at exercising control over them rather than fostering any kind of mutual exchange or participation.

In contraposition to this, there is a pluralistic democratic model. Here public discussion is regarded as a key element. Political institutions, actors that are central to the political field as such, foster communicative exchange with the electorate, with members of the various groupings in society. The formation of political opinion is exercised in constant dialogue; there is mutual exchange between institutions, civil society and interest groups on a regular basis. Boundaries between the sphere of institutionalised politics and its civil counterpart are

practically non-existent; people are entitled to have their say in the way in which the entities they inhabit are governed and in the policies that are implemented and exercised.

On the one hand, there is a negative extreme; a model that is extremely far away from every contemporary understanding of how power is to be exercised and communicated. On the other hand, there is a model in which the normative ideals of modern democracy are fulfilled, in which participation and transparency are fostered, in which the people (here to be understood as the democratic sovereign) can have their say and are to be heard.

Of course, these models and their contraposition are more of a normatively coined theoretical conceptualisation than an actual empirically observable reality. The model focusing on elites and inter-elite communication describes the realities in authoritarian states and there is good reason to underline the fact that people were and are deprived of basic democratic and communicative rights in these systems. And yet given both historical facts as well as theoretical implications (inter alia from elite theory), one could doubt the unanimous existence of total communicative segregation in these systems.[1] Far from being entitled to openly have their say, strata of the population are heard by the ruling classes at least on some occasions; some kind of communicative exchange is fostered not least to uphold the current (undemocratic) distribution of power, to keep the authoritarian elites in position. The strictly unidirectional form of communication in which the mass is only subject to manipulation is arguably more of a gloomy scenario than a description of communicative realities.

The opposed model of political communication in democratic systems postulates the absence of (communicative) boundaries between the sphere of the ruling institutions and the electorate. It states that mutual exchange between the various actors in this field is actually existent and executed on a regular basis and therefore negates the notion of a segregated elite in the field of political communication. This scenario comes close to the normative ideals of modern and pluralistic democracy which is to be inclusive and discursive, in which participation and transparency are goods that are to be actively fostered. Again, it is important to underline that it is more of a normatively coined theoretical conceptualisation than an actual empirical observation of the reality of political communication in contemporary democracies.

Early on theorists such as Michels (1949) have described inherent tendencies towards oligarchy, towards a segregation of elites in democratic bodies such as political parties. Critical approaches towards elite theory (e.g. Hartmann, 2004a;

[1] In this context see inter alia the reflections on conceptualisations of inclusive political communication in the authoritarian socialist GDR by Kocks and Raupp (2014c).

Krysmanski, 2004; Mills, 1956) have pointed out that one could actually find segregated circles of (political) elites in modern democracies such as the United States or Germany, circles that refrain from mutual exchange with the broader population, thereby excluding larger strata of the electorate from processes of deliberation, collective decision-making and opinion formation. Democracies have, according to this argument, the tendency to yield ruling classes: institutions, organisations and individuals that do exercise the largest share of political power despite constituting a minority. According to this argument, relevant political communication does take place predominantly between members of these ruling groups. They (and their circles of communication) become alienated from the general electorate. With regard to the situation in Germany and its old capital Bonn, such developments have often metaphorically been described with the notion of 'Raumschiff Bonn' ('Spaceship Bonn'), to express the growing distance between the (political) elite 'up there' and the people 'on the ground' (Strobel, 1991).

Even though negativism and the popularity of anti-political resentments in general might have contributed to such considerations, it is clear that there has been a common perception of a gap between those governing and those governed; a feeling of exclusion from processes of political discussion and participation among strata of the general population. Bourdieu (1997, p. 182) once metaphorically described politics and the communications surrounding them as a game of chess conducted between experienced players in front of a purely passive audience and indeed, political communication and political media relations in particular were long understood to be communicative exchanges between small groups of leading communication professionals from politics and the media.

The proliferation of new (digital) means of communication – often subsumed under the notion of digitisation – was then initially regarded as a process that could potentially alter these communicative patterns. Theoretically, the boundaries between (previously) central communicators and the rather more peripheral ranks could be bridged and the inclusion of fringe actors into (political) communication networks – which according to an argument brought forward by Luhmann (1995, pp. 237-264) was indeed one of the decisive resources in contemporary society – could be achieved. Political communication in general and political media relations in particular would cease to be elite phenomena.

Especially early accounts on digitisation – and those brought forward by communication professionals rather than by scholars – were often arguing in such directions (e.g. Morris, 2001; Trippi, 2004). From this perspective digitisation was considered to be a phenomenon that could erode established patterns of power in the fields of politics and political communication (Coleman & Blumler,