

Journalist-source relations and the deliberative system: A network performance approach to investigating journalism's contribution to facilitating public deliberation in a globalized world

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Abstract

Journalist-source relationships and interactions are interpreted in this study as crucial mechanisms for linking different arenas in a deliberative system. To unravel these source networks, 106 semi-standardized interviews with journalists as well as PR professionals from government delegations and NGOs were conducted on-site three UN climate change conferences between 2010 and 2013, and an online survey was administered during the conference in 2015. The analysis shows that most journalists maintain close relationships with their home country delegation. However, journalists experienced in climate conference coverage also maintain more direct and informal relations to delegations from other countries and to NGOs while less experienced journalists exhibit loose and more formally mediated relationship to these actors. Moreover, journalists focusing on commentary rather than on event-related reporting have the most variegated and informal networks, thus opening the deliberative system to diverse perspectives and unknown voices more than others. Government delegations vary strongly in their tendency to approach journalists while environmental NGOs interact with journalists primarily to attract media attention in order to indirectly influence decision makers in national delegations.

Keywords

Journalist-source relations; network performance; transnational communication; deliberative systems; in-depth interviews; online survey; climate change conferences

Introduction

Recently, a number of scholars of deliberative democracy have turned their attention from processes of discussion in singular arenas or discrete institutions to various sites, forums and actors that contribute to public deliberation (Christiano, 2012; Dryzek and Hendriks, 2012; Goodin, 2005; Neblo, 2015; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). Renewed attention has been paid to different forms of connections between informal environments of discussion and formal institutions of decision-making; and mechanisms of transmission of claims and ideas across distinct sites (Boswell et al., 2016; Maia 2017a, 2017b; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Mendonça, 2016; Niemeyer, 2014). There is a long tradition asserting the importance of the media content as a base for societal debate and political decision-making (Ferree, et al., 2002; Fossum and Schlesinger, 2007; Maia, 2012; Wessler et. al. 2008). For a systemic approach to deliberation a crucial challenge is to better understand how media messages are produced, by taking into consideration the nature of interconnection, interdependence, and division of labor between parts of the system. What is still missing is a systematic analysis of how journalists' interactions and practices are related to agents that perform specific roles in the deliberative system.

This article makes an innovative effort to disentangle journalist-source relationships, focusing on various actor groups with their often contradictory objectives. It aims at mapping the complexity of the mediation process within a transnational negotiation

event – the global climate change conferences held annually by the United Nations (officially called Conferences of the Parties [COPs]). Since analysis of the media content cannot easily tell us how journalists actively interact with other agents to build news stories, this paper will present results from an in-depth interview study with journalists as well as with communication professionals from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government delegations. The interviews were conducted during the COPs in Cancún (2010), Doha (2012), and Warsaw (2013). The qualitative data are complemented by data from a standardized online survey, which was conducted during the conference in Paris (2015).

The UN climate change conferences provide a good case for this research for several reasons (Lück et al., 2015). The COPs constitute exceptional communicative circumstances, since they are first of all political summits during which representatives from all over the world have continuously negotiated climate change-related issues for several decades now, sorting out historical and future responsibilities for causing and solving the problem. The conferences are also central points of mobilization for civil society as well as special (economic) lobby groups and organizations, which all try to reach out to policy makers in order to make their interests heard. The picture is completed by the strong media attention that accompanies the conferences (Schmidt et al., 2013). Thousands of journalists from all over the world follow the events on-site

and contribute decisively to which information reaches publics and audiences outside the event.

By bridging the classical field of journalism studies on the one hand and deliberative system theory on the other, this study presents two major contributions. First, it unpacks the network through which journalists gain background information and interpret complex issues to build news stories. Hence, this research helps studies on deliberation to move further away from simplified notions of media agents as mere transmitters of information who merely provide the arena for societal actors to deliberate on relevant issues. Second, in most studies on political communication concerned with journalist-source relations, the broader context of practices and particular preconditions preparing the way for public deliberation and decision-making is yet rarely investigated. Our own research, by analyzing basic elements of collaborative production of media content, contributes to shed some light on less visible patterns of background interactions between various agents in a transnational environment. This has important implications for understanding distinct types of collaboration that produce non-linear knowledge for news construction within a deliberative system.

The deliberative system: connectivity, division of labor, and cooperation

Research on deliberative democracy has taken a systemic turn, by emphasizing the need to observe deliberation as a practice occurring across a multitude of spaces and

institutions (Christiano, 2012; Dryzek and Hendriks, 2012; Goodin, 2005; Neblo, 2015; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). By expanding the notion of deliberation as a society-wide process, scholars have recognized roles for everyday talk, political activism, the media, and other important actors and practices that contribute to shape democratic discussion and decision-making (Boswell et al., 2016; Maia, 2012, 2017a, 2017b; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Mendonça, 2016; Niemeyer, 2014). Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 4) conceptualize a system as “a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole”. The idea of a deliberative system can be applied to nation states as well as to transnational processes, including international or supranational decision-making bodies.

The systemic approach requires the analysis of connections (or lack of connections) between institutions and locations; and attention should be paid to the role of various actors that can offer distinct contributions at different phases of a deliberative process. In this context, scholars have searched for processes and mechanisms that link together sites of a deliberative system. In their empirical study of different policy programs, Boswell et al. (2016) speak in terms of “transmission of ideas and claims” across sites and institutions. Mendonça (2016, p. 171) discusses the role of bureaucrats, the media, and activists as “potential inducers of connectivity that link different processes and arenas of communication”. A promising step in this research agenda is to investigate the

relationships and practical interactions among actors with distinct functional roles within a deliberative system.

Before developing our argument about the journalist-source relations, two questions must be clarified. With the systemic turn, scholars have stressed that a deliberative system entails a division of labor (Christiano, 2012; Dryzek and Hendriks, 2012; Goodin, 2005; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Yet this does not mean that each part of the system performs independent actions or fulfils certain functions exclusively or optimally. As Mansbridge and colleagues (2012, p. 5) argue, “the same function may be distributed across various subsystems”. This idea signals the need to observe with more accuracy how journalists establish interactions with other actors, who are linked to different parts of a deliberative system. Since actors such as political representatives, experts, the media, and social movement organizations or NGOs have different interests and goals, closer attention should be paid not only to the functional division of labor but also to processes of collaboration (in particular situations) within a deliberative system.

Furthermore, the division of labor, conceived in systemic terms, requires us to think about how knowledge production, information, and interpretation of current events are distributed among different agents – political representatives, administrators, parties, large pressure groups, activists, and other social actors – in different cases. Considering the social distribution of knowledge, Bohman (2000, p.50) argues that “the advantage of the division of labor is to make each social actor dependent on the actions of many

others, so that the outcome of the collective enterprise depends on the necessary actions of others that cannot be immediately controlled or predicted with certainty". This means that no single actor or group of actors can acquire all relevant social knowledge for solving complex problems; and such knowledge is constructed through ongoing cooperative enquiry. In the case of climate change related issues, journalists (as well as communication professionals from NGOs and government delegations) may not be in a position to assess the speakers' inputs during the COPs and scrutinize problems or solutions outside their own domain. In this sense, the constant interactions of journalists with various actors build a complex communicative structure which needs to be disentangled to understand global and national media debates on climate change around and outside the COPs meetings (Anderson, 2009). The next section draws on the literature and previous studies on journalist-source relations in order to systemize what we already know for our own empirical approach.

Coproducing climate change news

The question "Who leads the tango?" (Strömback and Nord, 2006) summarizes the field of research that tries to disentangle power relations and interdependencies between journalists and their sources. Scholarly discussions often move between certain poles, e.g., describing the relationship from an adversarial versus an exchange perspective (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1981), as either symbiotic or cynical (Brants et al., 2010), or as characterized by either mutual trust or suspicion (Mancini, 1993). Most researchers

conclude that one cannot define the relation in such definite terms but rather needs to acknowledge overlapping and coexisting developments and forces. Blumler and Gurevitch (1981) have therefore already pleaded to identify “the main forces and mechanisms of interaction controlling these relationships [...] in comparative political analysis, both across different societies and across different political situations and time periods within the same society.” (p. 470). Hence, we argue that the focus needs to move away from trying to define the relationship in one or the other way, and toward the conditions under which journalist-source relationships take what shape. Which circumstances and factors facilitate which kind of relationship? And which conclusions can be drawn for the role of journalism in society and the consequences for democracy and public debates?

The COPs provide a good case for investigations that engage in these questions. The transnational production setting entails certain contextual parameters, which “facilitated the emergence of a remarkable constellation between political PR professionals and journalists that essentially dissolved traditional boundaries between both sides and challenged their typical distribution of tasks” (Adolphsen, 2014, p. 164). In this context, Adolphsen (2014) introduces the notion of *networks of coproduction*, “in which political PR professionals and journalists [do] not hesitate to work hand in hand and cooperatively construct the worldwide image of the summit” (ibid.).

Hellmueller (2014), too, engages in such questions and recently proposed to conceptualize journalism culture in transnational settings by moving beyond comparing them based on national contexts. For journalists working in transnational settings, the theoretical conception needs to be more specific in order to explain the content and slant of the published news. To grasp the different influences, Hellmueller (2014) proposes a threefold distinction between evaluative, cognitive, and performative aspects of journalism culture. Studies of journalism culture (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2011) or political communication culture (Pfetsch, 2014) mostly focus on the *evaluative level* by investigating epistemologies and professional role perceptions. Similarly, in their heuristic model for structuring coproduction processes, Lück et al. (2015) point to the significance of social and cognitive preconditions for journalist-source relationships, with cognitive preconditions referring to actors' own role perceptions, their perception of the role of other actors, and their notions of the target audience. Social preconditions on the other hand refer to an actor's professional networks and personal media use.

This, however, may not be sufficient to explain how journalists in transnational settings work and produce their output. Hellmueller (2014) therefore suggests to also regard perceptions and interpretations on the *cognitive level*. These interpretations may concern the assessment of the credibility of sources, which can have consequences for more or less favorable coverage and the establishment of media frames concerning these sources. Such interpretations are mainly derived from interpersonal factors such as

perceived homophily (e.g., perceived similarities of political and moral values) and cultural resemblance, as Hellmueller (2014) argues, while for example organizational constraints only play a secondary role in the transnational setting.

However, Lück et al. (2015) also show that organizational factors should not be overlooked when trying to explain journalist-source relationships. The authors' dimension of professional orientations includes structural factors such as the organization an actor works for or the professional specialization of an actor (e.g. the specialization on political or environmental journalism), which prove to be consequential in explaining the contact networks of journalists. Similarly, as a third important theoretical aspect for the analysis of transnational journalism cultures, Hellmueller (2016) draws attention to the *performative level* of journalism, focusing on journalists' actual interactions with politicians, their methods of reporting, and the structure of the news-gathering system as a whole. Such a performative element is also found in the heuristic of Lück et al. (2015) and their manifestation dimension which contains behavioral patterns such as actual interaction and presentation strategies.

The models from Hellmueller (2014) and Lück et al. (2015) clearly show that the evaluative dimension on which many studies about journalism cultures focus is not enough when trying to explain news production and information collection as a result of interactions in a transnational setting. This paper therefore focuses on the performative aspects. We investigate which networks journalists maintain and what the interactions

between journalists and their sources actually look like. We also offer explanations for the observed differences in network performance based on actors' professional backgrounds and discuss the consequences these distinct networks and interactions likely have on news content.

Diverse actors – contradictory objectives

The three actor groups on which this paper focuses not only have their own roles and objectives but may also differ internally in terms of certain resources, power, and strategies. This section investigates the preconditions and objectives different actors bring into the constellation on which relationships and interactions are built. This is an important basis to understand the contributions to the communicative output within the deliberative system.

Journalist-politician relations

Journalists have to engage with sources to get first-hand information in order to fulfill their task. But, of course, politicians have their very own objectives, too. At the same time, both groups can offer something to the respective other that they need to fulfill their respective objectives:

“The mass media offer politicians access to an audience through a credible outlet, while politicians offer journalists information about a theater of presumed relevance, significance, impact, and spectacle for audience consumption.” (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1981, p. 476)

But objectives are even more diverse. As summarized by van Aelst et al. (2010), politicians try to interact with media not only to address publics but also to influence peers, to get information from journalists about relevant political developments, to use journalists' expertise in the field to test their own ideas, or to damage political opponents. It is therefore oftentimes a question of performance that asks: how well do journalists manage to balance closeness that is necessary to obtain information with independence – in the sense that they do not become a tool for their sources' enforcement of vested interests? Rinke et al. (2006) show in their study about journalists in the political center of Berlin that journalists differ in their approaches. Their own role perception can directly influence their contact to sources and their coverage. Those journalists of the type “distance keeper”, for example, who insist most fiercely on their independence, have the least direct contact to politicians and write less neutral (but more critical) articles. Journalists of the type “networker”, for example, maintain diverse informal contacts to politicians while their coverage is neither predominantly negative nor positive in its valence¹.

Studies such as the ones from Rinke et al. (2006), Davis (2009), Hoffjann and Lohse (2016), or Hellmueller (2014) have a clear focus on journalist-politician relationships in centers of political power, where the setting and routines are more constant, certain rules and procedures more established, widely known and accepted, and contacts usually more long-lasting than in our case of the COPs. The temporal and spatial

intensity of the two weeks of the conferences is a crucial characteristic that accounts for some important differences. Contacts have to be (re-)established immediately on the spot in order to get access to information. Negotiations proceed constantly on different tracks, each of which observers need to follow with regard to the content as well as to the (geo-)political interests of the actors involved. Beyond that, one of the most important characteristics of the setting is the extensive inclusion of diverse actors from civil society (e.g., NGOs, labor unions, and religious organizations), science, and business. All of these have their own interests and objectives and play specific roles which may not even correspond with those of the same kind of actors. How do actors cope with that complex situation in this extraordinary setting with respect to their own role perceptions and objectives?

From earlier studies, we know a few things about what may determine the relationship between journalists and other actors in general and especially in transnational environment such as the COPs. For example, van Aelst et al. (2010) focus on Members of Parliament in Great Britain as political communicators, showing that politicians with higher rank and more experience also have more media contacts. Also, those political actors with professional support for public relations are able to maintain more and closer media contacts. In the COP environment, particular factors other than structural power seem to play a role, too. State actors can gain attention for different reasons, even if they do not have the primary power to influence outcomes. De Águeda Corneloup and

Mol (2014), for example, emphasize that also less powerful actors such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) can be exceptionally successful in pursuing their agenda by forming discourse coalitions with other states or non-state stakeholders. They can develop “moral leadership” and follow the communicative strategy of “shaming other states with different discourses, positions, and interests” (p. 292).

The study by Lück et al. (2015) has already revealed that the journalistic beat, the type of media journalists work for, and journalists’ perceived target audiences are important factors in explaining journalists’ approaches towards NGOs at the COPs. Whether a journalist mainly works in the political, environmental, or economical section of a medium is decisive for decisions about whom to approach for information. Less specialized political reporters, for example, more often seek scientific expertise while reporters from the business section need information about the implications of certain decisions for specialized markets.

The role of certain preconditions of journalists for explaining journalistic performance (interactions as well as reporting methods) is also pointed out by Hellmueller (2014) who shows in her study on domestic and foreign correspondents in Washington D.C. that the access to sources is allocated unevenly among different journalists. Foreign correspondents have more difficulties to get in direct contact with US politicians and need to rely on other media’s coverage for their own reporting. Beyond that, personal experience, homophily, and the own role perceptions shape journalist-source

relationships and therefore influence the gatekeeping process and thus co-determine what kind of information finds its way into the news.

Journalist-NGO relations

NGOs also might pursue different aims and therefore follow different strategies which is important to consider when trying to determine the role of NGOs for journalist-source network performance. Gough and Shackley (2001) distinguish three main NGO strategies: (1) creative policy solutions, (2) knowledge construction, and (3) lobbying/campaigning. Nasiritousi et al. (2014) refer to a more differentiated typology of NGO activities with nine dimensions: “influence the agenda, propose solutions, provide information and expertise, influence decisions and policy makers, awareness raising, implement action, evaluate consequences of policies and measures, represent public opinion, and represent marginalized voices” (Nasiritousi et al., 2014, p. 5). Whichever strategy a NGO focuses on will probably result in different approaches towards journalistic actors and therefore also influence the performative level of journalistic-source interaction.

Structural factors that shape the communicative strategies of NGOs are identified by Powers (2014): “form of funding, relationship to state, organizational dynamics, and desired audiences and impacts” (p. 103). Powers also emphasizes that NGOs do not mechanically follow one specific media logic but rather correspond to diverse media logics and adjust their strategies according to their aims. Some NGOs, for example,

target the prestige press to reach out to political elites while others primarily focus on the general news media for educational or fund-raising purposes. In another study, Powers (2016) also highlights that NGO power can differ quite strongly. Within the battle to achieve publicity, 10 percent of the NGOs in his sample manage to attract 90 percent of the news coverage. NGO representation in the media is therefore dependent on an NGO's strength and resources.

The literature review could show that the three actor groups not only have their very own roles and objectives but may also differ internally in terms of resources, power, and strategies. This may have consequences for the performative level, especially interaction patterns between journalists and sources as well as journalistic reporting. It is therefore impossible to offer a blanket assessment about general journalist-source relationships or one single evaluation for network performance. Instead, the following analysis will try to disentangle different forms of interaction, rather than groups of actors *per se*, due to varying circumstances within the same transnational news production setting. By characterizing the interaction between those crucial actor groups at a major political event we hope to elucidate the conditions under which national and global media debates are likely to emerge.

Method

Data collection

The empirical analysis is based on 106 semi-standardized interviews with journalists as well as NGO and state delegation PR professionals, which were conducted at the UN climate change conferences in Cancún, Mexico (November 29 to December 10, 2010), Doha, Qatar (November 26 to December 8, 2012), and Warsaw, Poland (November 11 to November 23, 2013)². This qualitative data was supplemented by an online survey at COP21 in Paris, France (November 30 to December 12, 2015), where 40 completed data sets could be compiled. This survey data is used to complement and validate individual insights from the semi-standardized interviews. A team of up to three researchers attended the above named conferences and also collected personal observations and anecdotal references³ from on-site the COPs, gaining extensive knowledge about conference settings and proceedings. Access to the conferences was gained through accreditation as an official observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Interviews lasted between fifteen and forty-five minutes, and were mostly conducted in English. Some were conducted in German. All but one interview with a state representative were digitally recorded. For the one not digitally recorded notes were taken during the interview and complemented by memory-based minutes right after the talk to also capture impressions of reactions⁴. To obtain candid answers, most interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity so that individual quotes

from the interviews presented in this paper cannot be traced back to individual interviewees.

Sample

All in all, the team collected 50 interviews with 30 journalists from nine countries (Germany, the United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, Britain, Mexico, Qatar, Poland) as well as six journalists from transnational news agencies (Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg News). Twenty eight interviews were conducted with 16 representatives from transnational NGOs (Climate Action Network, Friends of the Earth, Climate Analytics, Global Call for Climate Action, Greenpeace International, One World, Oxfam and WWF International), twenty six interviews with 20 country representatives from eight countries (Germany, the United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, Mexico, Qatar, China), and one interview with a representative from the European Union. One interview with a representative from the UN climate secretariat furnished further background information⁵.

The primary country sampling focused on journalists and country delegation representatives from one politically and economically important democratic country in each of the five major continents (Germany for Europe, the United States for North America, Brazil for South America, India for Asia, and South Africa for Africa). Germany and the U.S. represent highly influential players in the industrialized world, while Brazil, India, and South Africa are important emerging countries that engage

strongly in climate politics and are members in the BRICS alliance (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). We chose democratic countries for our primary country sample to study interactions relatively uninhibited by state censorship and coercion, and in order to minimize structural variance in our sample. Beyond that, we included interviewees from the host countries of the respective COPs (Mexico, Qatar, and Poland) because media from host countries play a strong role in distributing images and information on “their” COP and are thus central nodes in interaction networks. British journalists were added because *The Guardian* was regularly named as an extremely important information source for journalists by many respondents of all actor groups.⁶ We focused on media outlets that are important agenda-setters and leading media in their respective country or world region. This included representatives from the national press as well as from TV and radio stations. Many of the interviewed journalists also provided content for the websites of their respective outlet. The NGO interviewees came from globally acting NGOs and NGO umbrella organizations where we could expect professional PR attempts and strategies that aimed at influencing public opinion as well as policy makers.

Qualitative interview guides

Distinct interview guides for all three actor groups were developed deductively based on relevant literature and subsequently improved through team discussions before the conference in Cancún. They contained several questions for each aspect of interest such

as, among others, source networks and forms of interaction, framing consistency, information selection criteria, target audiences, and event evaluations⁷. All interview guides were again reviewed before the conferences in Doha and Warsaw to account for experiences that were made at previous conferences. In this way the team could go into detail on specific issues that needed further clarification or elaboration after the initial steps of the analysis. This was, for example, the case for the specification of respondents' contact to others, which was recorded more precisely in the Doha questionnaire than it had been in Cancún.

Additional standardized online survey

As the interviews result in strong empirical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1994), we decided to use the Paris conference in 2015 for further validation of previous findings by conducting an online survey aimed at all three actor groups. The questionnaire covered all aspects that had previously been part of the semi-standardized interviews and, when possible, resorted to previously used questionnaire items. However, data collection proved to be difficult during the conference in Paris which was larger and much busier than the previous conferences⁸. These circumstances resulted in a small additional sample: 22 questionnaires from government representatives (of which 13 were fully completed), 23 datasets from journalists (16 completed), and 23 datasets from NGO representatives (eleven completed). For the small size of the dataset, we – by far – cannot claim anything like representativeness of the whole population of

conference participants. The data from the questionnaire was therefore not analyzed statistically but used to complement the qualitative data.

Analytical strategy

The 106 interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with the help of the software MaxQDA. We followed suggestions made by Mayring (2015) for qualitative text analysis and identified all statements that concerned a specific aspect of interest, then summarized and paraphrased these statements in several steps to reduce complexity and arrive at the essential information. Our analytical strategy leaned on the process-tracing approach by George and Bennett (2005): “The process-tracing method attempts to identify the intervening causal process—the causal chain or causal mechanism—between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable.” (p. 206). Working with the qualitative as well as quantitative data material, our aim was likewise to assess the network performance and identify decisive factors that help understand different journalist-source relationships in a transnational setting. Process tracing allowed us to find connections between certain characteristics of the actors and the relationships among each other that ensue from these different characteristics.

Results

During the two intensive weeks of the COPs, all actor groups are keen to pursue their specific goals. Although these goals can of course differ between actors of the same actor group, everyone is somehow in need of the respective other – either for information or representation. What the actual interaction looks like is influenced by certain structural factors and resources of individual actors (*preconditions*) as the following paragraphs will show in more detail.

Journalists' professional experience and network building

Preliminary findings suggest that journalist who had experience in covering the COPs had developed more informal and closer relationships with delegates and NGO representatives and therefore could rely less on official channels and formal requests to press offices. The findings, supported by both the qualitative and quantitative data, are not surprising since it takes time to build networks. Those journalists who have attended more than two prior conferences have a wider network available. They struggle less often with a lack of access to information. The survey data disclosed an interesting additional point. It shows that those journalists who are on their first or second COP more often approach sources (political or NGO alike) indirectly through email or social media messaging. Journalists with more experience (three COPs and more) use the more direct ways (formal and informal) of press conferences, background briefings, hallway chats, or even sitting together for lunch or dinner. However, within the group of

less experienced journalists, it seems that there are two types who cope differently with the situation. Some of the less experienced journalists concentrate completely on making contact to government actors and do not spend any time trying to make any other contacts. The other group seems to compensate for the lack of first-hand information from political sources by approaching NGO representatives in particular (see Figure 1).

Another detail is striking when it comes to the scope of the networks. Many journalists in our sample maintain particularly close relationships with the delegation from their home country. The less experienced journalists also reported that they approach representatives from their home country delegation for information first. Again, over the years, contacts become closer and more informal. Journalists attend the regular press briefings, which delegations set up especially for the domestic press. Additionally, they use shortcuts (e.g., email lists, telephone, and SMS lists). The prevalence of contacts from one's own country supports Hellmueller's (2014) more general result about the significance of homophily when it comes to building networks, also in a transnational setting.

When national journalists reach out to other delegations, they often try to go the official route by contacting press officers or attending press conferences and directly talking to people afterwards. Success varies and seems to depend on the targeted delegation to a certain degree. Some interviewees reported that some delegations are more easily

approachable since they want to spread their messages widely. Other delegations keep a rather low profile; the example most often named for a delegation that is hard to access is China. However, the official way of approaching delegations is not very satisfactory for many journalists. One reporter told us that he gets really angry when press conferences only disseminate platitudes. Several other journalists indicated that especially press conferences are used by officials to express biased or incomplete information in complicated ‘COP talk’, which is of not much use in the absence of off-the-record background assessments and balanced information from other actors.

Network structures of news reporters versus opinion writers

Several journalists in our sample indicated that they concentrate more on commenting than on factual reporting of current events. According to our observations as well as the qualitative and quantitative interview data, these journalists differ in their networks and forms of interaction from journalists who concentrate on news. It seems as if these “commentators” more often *mingle* with very different kinds of people. In the semi-standardized questionnaire journalists were asked for three government delegations and three NGOs that they find most interesting and to whom they maintain the closest contact. Journalists who concentrate on commenting mostly answered this question quite unspecifically. They either pointed out that they cannot pick individual delegations, indicating instead that they maintained a wide network, or they named far more than three contacts, showing the diversity of people to whom they talk. This

applied for example to journalists from the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, the British newspaper *The Financial Times*, or the US specialized news agency *ClimateWire*. Journalists who concentrate on opinion coverage also use the more informal conduits of communication. More often than the others, they indicated that they talk to politicians and NGO representatives in the hallway, call them, or have lunch or dinner with them. Press conferences and official interview appointments seem less useful for these journalists.

As reported earlier, Lück et al. (2015) found that the contact between journalists and NGOs is influenced by the section that a journalist is affiliated to, namely whether he/she belongs to the news/current affairs section, the environmental, or the business section. When it comes to contact with politicians, this factor does not seem to be as decisive (at least when comparing general news reporters and environmental reporters). Here the distinction between focusing on commentary or news is more revealing, since both political and environmental reporters usually have a strong focus on getting first-hand information from the delegation of their home country when they concentrate on covering the actual events rather than on commenting.⁹ “Commentators” with their variegated and informal networks seem to exploit the advantages of the wide-ranging division of labor in the deliberative system of the COPs, which Bohman (2000) highlighted, particularly well. In such networks no single actor can assume hegemonic

interpretive authority, and new ideas are more likely to emerge from unexpected quarters.

Delegations' contact to domestic journalists

Communication objectives of state delegations differ from each other and so do their communicative strategies. Adolphsen (2014) provided a comprehensive analysis of the different strategies of state delegations and NGOs during COP16 in Cancún. For the purposes of this paper it is especially relevant to sort out which strategies have which consequences for delegations' relationships and forms of interaction with different types of journalists.

All respondents of our survey predominantly named domestic media when asked for direct contact to media representatives. Targeting their own domestic audience is a key focus for many political communicators. Our survey data from the Paris conference clearly shows that the domestic audience and national public are by far the most important target groups for state delegation representatives, followed by targeting other government delegations and international audiences. This is in line with information we have gathered from the qualitative interviews. Holding regular press briefings with domestic journalists is common for most delegations. One of the closest contacts was observed between the Indian delegation and the Indian press corps. Interviewees (journalists as well as delegation representatives) told us about regular informal meetings and a well-functioning mailing list that provides information quickly across

the two groups. For the Indian PR staff it is important that the Indian people understand the issue and its implications. The Indian delegation's communication usually centered on core people such as the Indian Minister for Environmental Affairs to whom Indian journalists were granted easy access.

The South African government even paid for South African journalists to come to the conference in Cancún and the communication staff of the delegation provided a heavy dose of information and sound bites for broadcast, print, and online usage for journalists on-site as well as for those media at home who could not send someone. This was part of the strategy to raise awareness about climate change as a major threat to the South African people and the country's development, but also to attract attention (within the own country) for the fact that COP17 was to be held in Durban the year after Cancún. In Warsaw, there were no South African journalists present at all, so the communication team mainly tried to provide information for the media back home.

German and US representatives also told us about regular meetings and informal contacts to domestic journalists who were on-site. It was mostly leading national media (in the US, especially newspapers) to which these communicators keep close contact and for which they primarily provide material. In Doha, Germany provided easy access to its environmental minister on-site, maintaining a list for short text messages with which journalists could be informed on short notice.

Delegations reaching out to international media

A Brazilian press officer explained that it is often easier to talk to domestic journalists since they already have suitable context knowledge. Reaching out to international media is nevertheless deemed very important: “[It is] our task, our challenge to try, for the international press, to have this big picture about Brazil and about the people living in the Amazon.” The Brazilian strategy over the years aimed at broadly displaying Brazil’s fight against climate change. Therefore, their media outreach is quite broad with daily press conferences as well as extra efforts to place messages in more specialized media. Building and maintaining relationships to news agencies and well-known international media outlets (Associated Press, Reuters, Dow Jones, Bloomberg, Al Jazeera, The Guardian, BBC, and The Independent) has also been of high priority for Brazilian communicators throughout the years. Even inviting international journalists to press trips to Brazil was named as one strategy to build and maintain contact to journalists.

Most other delegations, however, are less outgoing when it comes to contacting non-domestic media. Although countries like Germany, India, and South Africa want to present themselves internationally, their efforts to proactively target international media are more limited by comparison. They distribute their countries’ positions, offer press briefings and interviews but, first and foremost, they try to make sure that they are accessible upon request and able to provide information as it is needed.

It is more difficult to assess the US strategy in this respect. It seems that for US communicators, broad international outreach is nothing that needs to be strategically

pursued but that happens along the way when targeting a few major outlets (such as news agencies like AP, ClimateWire, Reuters, but also The Guardian or The Times of India)¹⁰.

China represents a special case in this study¹¹. It is the country in our sample that is most reluctant when it comes to press contacts. The Chinese delegation does monitor the international media closely in order to find out how China is represented but feels that the international media is not objective towards China. One of the Chinese representatives told us that they do not have permanent contacts to international media but try to answer requests and provide information when approached. However, deeper engagement with media seems to need caution and thoughtful planning which is also done in advance before the beginning of the conference. During the conference, the Chinese communication staff tries to react to current developments. They provide written background information and occasionally join press conferences of the BASIC countries. A representative summarized the Chinese objectives for the COP communication: “protecting the image of China is one of the purposes of our team [and] to broadcast the information to provide the information rather particularly related to China, the Chinese delegation, or China’s performance in the COP.” The rather conflictual relationship between the Chinese delegation and the media was also expressed by this informant in another statement: “I think for every COP, there are two

battlefields. One is for the negotiation and another one is for the medium, on the media side.”

Preliminary conclusion on journalist-delegation network performance

Before moving on to the third actor group, we want to point to the main aspects that explain network performance of journalists and delegations at the COPs. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships and approaches between the groups.

[Figure 1 about here]

Within the transnational setting, it is remarkable that we mainly find two types of relationships: (1) established, direct, informal contacts, and (2) looser (or less established), indirect, formal contacts. Which kind of contact is characteristic for a specific relationship depends on several factors. Very generally, most journalists maintain relationships of the first type with representatives from the delegation of their home country – even more so if they are experienced and have covered several COPs on-site already. Since most delegations primarily target their domestic audience, they offer easy access to information for journalists from their countries. Less experienced journalists need to establish contacts first and they try to get information mainly through indirectly and formally approaching their sources.

Relationships to foreign delegations are mainly characterized by contact of the second type. This applies to more and less experienced journalists equally (though foreign

delegations are usually less in the focus of less experienced journalists). In the final step we show how NGO communication fits into this picture.

NGOs' aims and media contacts

Lück et al. (2015) have already given detailed insights about journalist-NGO relationships at the COPs. They emphasized the importance of the distinction between mobilizing and lobbying on the one hand as well as the outreach of a NGO (whether global or rather national in scope) on the other hand for explaining the NGO communication strategies. Our data from the online survey in Paris can add a few things to these findings. It first of all underlines the importance of lobbying. When asked for target groups, policy makers and delegations are the ones that NGOs assign the highest priority, followed by their own members, international publics, and their own national public, in this order. NGOs' main objectives are: representing the interests of their members and stakeholders, representing the voice of civil society, setting the agenda for specific issues and aspects of climate change, and influencing the political process in line with the organization's demands. Reaching these aims and target groups is primarily done through media work. Contact to media has a higher significance for the work of the respondents than contact to delegations. This is underlined by a high approval of the statement that it is important to attract media coverage to reach policy makers, while for example the statement that most publicity is achieved through direct protest action is far less approved by the respondents of the survey. The uppermost arrow in Figure 1

highlights this lobbying approach with which NGO representatives (a) try to maintain close and direct contact to the media in order to (b) indirectly reach delegations and policy makers.

Two thirds of the NGO respondents in the survey classify their NGO as ‘international’ rather than ‘national’ or ‘regional’ in their outreach. However, when directly asked to name media contacts most of them indicate contact to media from their respective home country or at least international media and news agencies that operate in the language of their home country.

The responses of the participants in the online survey also give some more hints about the importance of different forms of interaction with journalists. In the order of approval, arranged interview appointments are the most common form of interaction, followed by email contact, meetings over lunch/dinner/coffee, and hallway chats. Communication through social media, at background briefings, or via telephone plays a secondary role. Press conferences are least important for the NGO representatives in the survey.

These results add to our understanding of how NGOs work and which role they play at the COPs. In order to reach their primary aims and influence policy making according to their visions, they use indirect ways through the media to make their point of view heard by policy-makers. They adjust to the logic of the one actor in order to influence the other.

Conclusion

Within the theoretical considerations on deliberative democracy and communicative division of labor our approach presented in this paper aims at disentangling journalist-source relationships by tracing connections between the concrete professional goals of an actor, the communicative strategy they develop, and the relationships they actually maintain. These aspects of journalist-source relations are highly relevant for understanding a functioning deliberative system which requires differentiation as well as integration among its parts. While a division of labor is expected and desired, the role performed by media professionals within the deliberative system is still hardly investigated. This article therefore provides a more complex picture of the division of labor and the collaborative interactions between journalists and political actors in a transnational setting.

Following a systemic approach to deliberation, our analysis demonstrates that the entire cognitive burden for making sense of issues related to climate change or interpretative decision-making does not fall only on media professionals. Knowledge and information are distributed among different agents located in distinct parts of the deliberative system. Discussion on matters of climate change are highly abstract and involve very complex issues, such as assessing expected damage in the future, defining the best kinds of policies for mitigating negative consequences, allocating responsibilities for those most responsible for causing the problem, and sorting out those likely to suffer most

from climate change. Thus, the production of news requires a great deal of interpretation. Since a single politician, an expert, a pressure group, or an activist cannot have a full understanding of the issues at stake and will oftentimes offer partial, often self-interested views, journalists resort to a set of agents with similar roles or overlapping expertise to gain background information and reach understandings on key questions debated at the COPs.

Our study illustrates different patterns of journalist-source relations. Journalists establish several collaborative activities with delegations and a set of NGOs, rather than interact with single subjects or unanimous groups. Results from our in-depth interview study and quantitative survey supplement also revealed that journalistic experience as well as journalists' focus on either fact or opinion reporting have traceable consequences for the number and intensity of contacts they maintain as well as for the forms of interaction with their sources. The more experienced a journalist is, the wider his/her network and the more international the contacts, while less experienced journalists mainly try to establish contacts to their homeland delegation or to compensate missing interaction with delegations with NGO contacts. The more experienced journalists are, on the other hands, the more informal forms of interaction are used frequently. If the contact is established once, it is easier to get a quick word in the hallway or meet for a background briefing over coffee. On the other hand, it is the distinction between journalists who mainly report the fact-based news and those who

concentrate on commenting the events that has consequences for the network performance. Journalists for whom commenting plays an important role also have wide but sometimes also more indistinct networks. They more or less *mingle* around and try to get people's assessments through direct but informal ways. By their turn, delegations and NGOs selectively interact with different types of journalists and create distinct strategies to reach domestic and international publics. Target audiences play an important role for both groups. Communicative strategies are adjusted accordingly, which also affects the forms of interactions they maintain to journalists.

The UN climate change conferences allowed us a focused view on journalist-source relations. Building on the theoretical considerations by Hellmueller (2016) and Lück et al. (2015), our analytical instrument takes the transnational setting into account in which interactions are limited in time and therefore quite intense. All actors need to adjust quickly to the setting and find ways to pursue their professional goals. Communicative strategies need to be developed quickly and networks have to be (re-)built immediately. With the theoretical considerations on different levels and aspects of coproduction within the transnational environment in mind, the process-tracing approach allowed us deep insights into central moments of journalistic work and their contributions to the distributed process of public deliberation.

The different forms of network performance highlighted in this paper may certainly have consequences for deliberative systems. While those journalists who managed to

build wide networks to several national and international actors from state delegations and NGOs may provide a broader scope of information, less experienced journalists who try to figure out the events for themselves may also contribute important information with a clear focus for audiences to comprehend the events as they proceed. Though informal contacts may lead to suspicion about the independence of journalism, such contacts are probably most valuable for getting information, assessments and arguments behind the official statements. They might help to reveal ideas and aspects not heard otherwise, and therefore could also provide the public with necessary insights to better understand events and processes and come to informed opinions.

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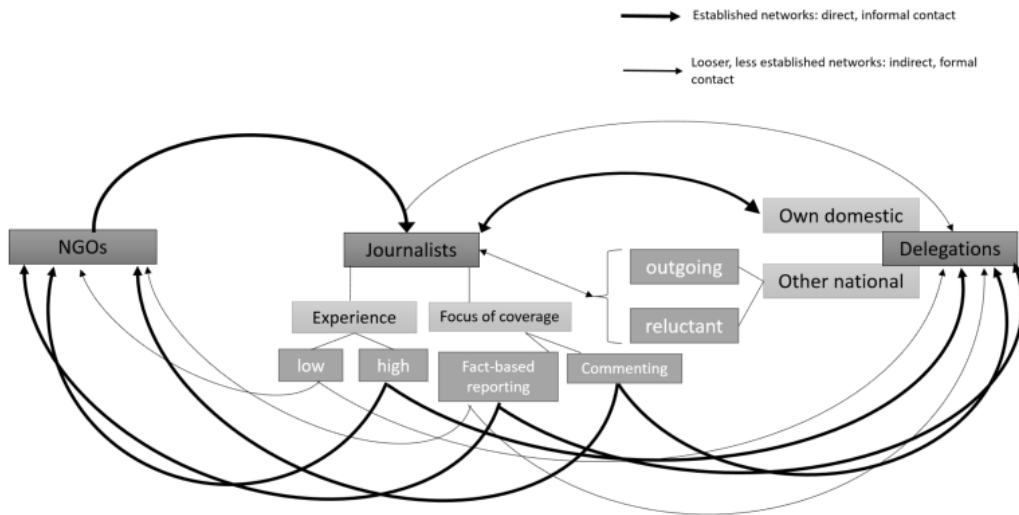
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Figure 1 Actor network performance at the UN climate change conferences



Notes

¹ Other types named by Rinke et al. (2006) are journalists who are primarily “status oriented”, “attached to their home region”, or “orientated towards political effects”.

² In some exceptional cases, telephone interviews were conducted soon after the conference had ended.

³ The collection of personal observations and anecdotal references was rather used to supplement the data collection via interviews than as an original data collection method. Researchers used an observation guideline when attending events at the conferences, e.g. press conferences, photo opportunities or protest actions of NGOs, in order to note participating actors and theoretically interesting aspects which could later be useful background information and an aid to memory to understand and interpret statements from the interviews. Beside formal characteristics of the event, other aspects particularly emphasized in the observation guideline were hints for coproduction, forms of visualization, aspects of consonant or dissonant framing, and signs of transnationality.

⁴ Of course, notes and memory-based minutes are not as accurate as transcribed voice recordings, even though they were taken with the utmost care by a senior researcher. Being aware of this, researchers nevertheless did not want to exclude the information gained from the interview with this state representative from the analysis to avoid missing data and the lack of important details about the country’s communication efforts at the COP.

⁵ The number of interview partners and actual interviews differ since some people were interviewed more than once over the years. In Cancún, some NGO and country representatives were interviewed before, during and/or after the conference in order to conduct information about how communicative strategies evolve and are adjusted while the event proceeds. All in all, five NGO representatives, five country representatives and nine journalists were interviewed more than once. In an online appendix (<http://climate.uni-mannheim.de/Downloads/>), we provide a more detailed list for every country (delegations and journalists), news agency, and NGO with the numbers of persons and interviews.

⁶ As an exception in the group of country delegations interviewed, China was added to the sample at the last COP studied (Warsaw, 2013) despite its authoritarian political system because China had in the meantime emerged as the major counterpart to the United States of America in what seemed to become a newly bipolar international policy regime.

⁷ Our interview guides are provided in an online appendix at <http://climate.uni-mannheim.de/Downloads/>

⁸ Email recruiting before a COP has always proved difficult since it is hard to determine who will actually be responsible and on-site the conference. Partial lists of participants (for state representatives only) were provided by the UN climate change secretariat towards the end of the

conference in Paris. Journalists and NGO representatives had to be recruited on-site. Email addresses were collected throughout the conference from press material, business cards, and internet searches in order to send out the email invitation for the study, in addition to face-to-face contact. But since in Paris the high level segment of the COP (in which ministers and heads of states directly negotiate with each other) was scheduled at the beginning of the conference rather than at the end, which would have been the usual procedure, all actors were deeply involved in their work right from the beginning with even less time than usual for participating in an academic study.

⁹ Five people in our interview study report primarily for business media or business sections. All of them have a clear focus on those countries that have the biggest economic impact. Their movements and decisions are followed closely since these may influence markets (e.g., oil prices, carbon markets) in the short term as well as in the long run. The EU, the US, China, Saudi Arabia (or the Arab Union or Gulf States), India and Brazil are the countries which are most often named as especially important to follow and contact. These journalists also emphasized that it is most relevant for them to get the different views and statements. When it comes to forms of interaction, they therefore seem to use the whole repertoire from formal requests and attending press conferences to informal hallway chats.

¹⁰ One of our American interviewees told us one year that she does not have much contact to non-US media. If any, then she provides the wire services Reuters, AP and AFP who have an international outreach. Another year, a US representative named a few specific names of valued contacts from international media with whom she had regular contact. Beyond that, she finds it easy to place the US statements since the media is present on-site and interested in the US position.

¹¹ Mexico and Qatar, both countries hosting the COP, also represent special cases with very individual objectives. While the Mexican communication centers on the buzzword of “transparency”, Qatar mainly tries to present itself as a reliable business partner to the world. Due to limitations of space as well as to their rather exceptional role, both cases cannot be presented in more detail here.