Different roles, different content? A four-country comparison of the role conceptions and reporting style of political journalists

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Abstract
The relation between journalistic role conceptions and news content is central for the understanding of differences in journalistic cultures. Previous research has shown that the professional roles of individual journalists can influence their behaviour and that occupational socialization leads to similar role conceptions within countries. This article therefore studies the relation between cross-national differences in role conceptions and news content. A survey among political journalists in Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain (N = 425), combined with a content analysis of political coverage in these countries (N = 1,035 newspaper articles) shows that role conceptions vary more across countries than within countries. Spanish political journalists see their role as more sacerdotal and partisan than their colleagues in northern Europe, while British journalists are most entertainment oriented. These differences in role conceptions are reflected in the reporting style of political news.

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Introduction

A growing body of literature is concerned with the question of how journalistic cultures differ across countries. Such studies generally take two approaches. On the one hand, survey-based research addresses the different ways journalists see their roles (e.g. Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Weaver and Willnat, forthcoming). On the other hand, we can distinguish a line of research which looks at the actual news content that is produced (e.g. Benson and Hallin, 2007; Esser, 2008). Both types of studies generally assume a relation between the way journalists in a country see their roles and news content in this country. Studies of cross-national role conception variation presumes that variation in role conceptions causes variation in content (Patterson, 1998: 30), while cross-national studies of content speculate that content variation is caused by variation in role conceptions (De Vreese et al., 2001). The relation between role conceptions and news content is crucial for the understanding of the origins and consequences of differences in journalistic cultures. In the words of Donsbach (2008), role conceptions ‘can have a strong influence on journalists’ professional behaviour and thus can explain differences between news cultures’.

However, the study of role conceptions by means of journalism surveys and the study of news content by means of content analysis are generally not combined (Weaver and Löffelholz, 2008: 6). Pioneering studies by Köcher (1986) and Patterson and Donsbach (1996) have included news scenarios in journalism surveys and shown a relation between role conceptions and news decisions, both at the individual level and the aggregated country level. But such studies are still exceptions and, especially, studies combining journalism surveys with content analysis are lacking (for exceptions see Scholl and Weischenberg, 1998; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Studies of journalistic cultures generally study either role conceptions or news content.

Following recommendations by Esser (2008) this article therefore studies cross-national differences in journalistic roles in combination with news content. In other words: what is the relation between the way journalists in a particular country describe their role and the way they do their work? This question is addressed by combining a survey among political journalists in four European countries (N = 425) with a content analysis of political coverage in these countries (N = 1035 news items). The role conceptions of Danish, German, British and Spanish political journalists are compared with the content they produce along three dimensions (pragmatic–sacerdotal, impartial–partisan and information–entertainment), each addressed later.

The merits of international comparative journalism research are widely acknowledged (e.g. Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Donsbach, 2010; Esser and Pfetsch, 2004). Only by comparing journalistic cultures in different countries can we see what makes each of these cultures special and thereby ‘render the invisible visible’ (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 76). Our comparative design will show whether cross-national differences in content reflect cross-national differences in roles. However, cross-national
comparisons do not provide a rigid test for causal relations in the same way as experiments or large N-studies (Donsbach, 2010: 168). Smelser (1976: 157–158) therefore speaks of ‘systematic comparative illustration’ rather than of comparative analysis. This does not mean that comparative analysis should not aim to seek for explanations and search for meaningful relations. In this comparative study of roles and content, we search for regularities and ‘on the basis of prior research or theory (…) place causal interpretations on those observations’ (Jackman, 1985: 172). Studies showing a relation at the individual level are ultimately a prerequisite to explain similar relations found at the macro-level studies. This study therefore builds on journalism studies of the professional attitude–behaviour relation at the individual level and extends these to explain the role–content relation on the macro level.

**Linking journalistic roles and content**

The study of journalistic role conceptions goes back to Cohen’s (1963) study of the conceptions of the roles of foreign correspondents. Later, studies by Johnstone et al. (1976) and Weaver and Wilhoit (1986) led to numerous survey projects which describe how journalists around the world see their professional tasks (see Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Weaver and Willnat, forthcoming). Several studies go beyond descriptive accounts of the way journalists within a country see their role by studying role conceptions as a dependent variable. This has provided insight into the effect of personal, organization and societal factors on role conceptions (Zhu et al., 1997). Such studies have given valuable insight into newsroom socialization and the professionalization of journalism. For most scholars, however, the rationale for studying role conceptions is based on the assumption that journalists’ role conceptions influence their work. For example, Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 103) argue that professional roles have direct influence on news content, since these ‘determine what the communicator thinks is worth transmitting to his or her audience and how the story should be developed’.

The relation between attitudes and behaviour is not only presumed theoretically, but also supported empirically. This is not only the case for journalism studies, but also for communication research more broadly. A meta-study of communication research looking into the attitude–behaviour relation by Kim and Hunter (1993) convincingly showed a strong relation when controlling for methodological differences. The relation was particularly strong for attitudes which are of great relevance for the individuals. Professional role conceptions have great attitudinal relevance for journalists, since they define the identity of the journalistic profession. We can therefore expect that these professional attitudes have some impact on journalists’ behaviour. Several journalism studies have indeed shown a relation between professional role conceptions and news content. An experiment by Starck and Soloski (1977) showed that articles by journalism students who have participant role conception include more analyses and interpretations than articles by students who see their role as neutral reporters. Culbertson (1983) showed a relation between the role conception of newspaper journalists and the emphasis they place on particular journalistic practices. He found that journalists who preferred the role of providing interpretation also preferred
investigative reporting over local news. Based on a survey among Danish journalists, Skovsgaard et al. (2011) showed that role conceptions influence the way journalists operationalize the objectivity norm. When comparing role conceptions of journalists and what they see as their best journalistic work, Weaver et al. (2007: 233) conclude that ‘journalist’s support for a particular professional role occasionally seemed to have a modest association with the kind of story he or she chose’. In a similar study in Germany, Scholl and Weischenberg (1998) found a significant correlation between the roles of individual journalists and their content. By aggregating their findings, Scholl and Weischenberg were even able to show a relation between roles and content at the national level.

Studying the relation between roles and content at the national level can be justified, since single country studies of journalists generally describe a homogeneous journalistic profession, with limited variation between the role conceptions and ethical standards among journalists working for different news organizations (e.g. Deuze, 2002; Skovsgaard et al., forthcoming). Role conceptions are shaped through professional experience and learned on the job (Breed, 1955). Socialization takes place not only within but also across news organizations. Donsbach (2010: 157) sees role conceptions as a characteristic of journalists as an occupational group and Weaver and Wilhoit (1996: 138) argue that the role conceptions of individual journalists are influenced by ‘journalism’s majority culture’ of the country they work in.

We can expect that role conceptions will be particularly homogeneous for political journalists who are central in this study. Occupational socialization is especially influential among journalists covering the same subject, like the political beat. Journalists working in a beat tend to express similar points of view and report from the same perspective (Schudson, 2003: 139), a phenomenon described earlier as pack journalism (Frank, 2003). Through the interaction with their competitor-colleagues on the job and outside work, these beat journalists develop ‘commonly shared perspectives’ (Donsbach, 2004: 142), which influence the news decisions. Despite growing globalization, journalistic professions are still nationally organized. Political journalists work in beats around the institutions of national government and parliament. Newspapers and television channels compete for audiences within national borders. Based on these considerations we expect to find strong similarities in role conceptions within countries and differences across countries, which will be reflected in news content.

An empirical study comparing the role conceptions of journalists in China, Taiwan and the United States supports the expectation that role conceptions vary more across countries than within. Zhu et al. (1997: 84) came to the conclusion that ‘societal factors had the strongest impact on journalists’ views about media roles, the organizational factors had a significant, but weak impact and the individual factor has virtually no impact’. Although one can expect that the role conceptions of the Danish, German, Spanish and British political journalists included in this study vary less than the roles of journalists in the United States, Taiwan and China, the first hypothesis expects that cross-national differences remain important, even among European countries:

H1 The country in which political journalists work has more influence on their role conceptions than organizational and individual factors.
Roles and content: Three dimensions

As with role conceptions, political news content also shows strong similarities between news outlets within countries (Cook, 2005; Esser, 2008; Sparrow, 1999). Cook (2005: 64) summarizes the similarities in work practice by stating that the ‘transorganizational agreement of news processes and content suggest that we should think of the news media not as a set of diverse organizations, or even a batch of individual institutions, but collectively as a single social institution’. These similarities in content are strongest for news outlets which aim at similar audiences and which rely on similar types of funding (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010). Since previous research suggests that both journalistic roles and content vary more across countries than within countries (Donsbach, 2010: 167) and since previous studies have proven that roles and content are related at the level of the individual journalist, the main expectation of this study is that there is a relation between roles and news content at the national level. This expectation is supported by the findings of two pioneering comparative journalism research projects. Using news scenarios, Köcher (1986) and Patterson and Donsbach (1996) went beyond studying the relation between attitudes and news decisions at the individual level and convincingly showed that the same relations were present when news cultures were compared. We want to add to the external validity of these findings by comparing role conceptions with news decisions as they are expressed in news content.

To test the link between journalistic attitudes and behaviour at the macro level, we compare the role conceptions of political journalists in Denmark, Germany, the UK and Spain with the reporting style of political news along three dimensions: first, the status of political news (pragmatic versus sacerdotal); second, the degree of partisan commitment (impartial versus partisan); and, third, the approach to the audience (information versus entertainment). Similar dimensions has been used in previous journalism surveys, observational studies or content analyses (De Vreese, 2001; Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Semetko et al., 1991; Weaver and Willnat, forthcoming). These dimensions are relevant, furthermore, because of their potential effects on audiences. The more pragmatic the approach to politics the greater the likelihood of applying news frames such as conflict and game, which in turn may impact on political cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Partisan commitment may influence the attention and tone towards different politicians, which in turn affect vote preference (Hopmann et al., 2010). Entertainment features in news may entice and excite audiences but may also decrease electoral participation (Adam and Maier, 2010).

Pragmatic–sacerdotal

The first dimension is the pragmatic–sacerdotal approach to politics. Journalists with a sacerdotal role conception believe national politics and politicians should be treated with respect ‘as if imbued with a degree of sacredness’ (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 50). Since national parliament and government are fundamental for the functioning of a democratic society, sacerdotal journalists consider these institutions newsworthy by definition (Semetko et al., 1991). Journalists with a pragmatic journalistic role conception do not automatically attribute such a special status to national politics. When deciding
whether and how national politics should be covered, they apply the same selection criteria and news values as they would apply to any other topic.

Whether journalists have a pragmatic or sacerdotal role conception is expected to be related to two aspects of the reporting style of national politics. First, the dominant role conception will influence the overall visibility of national politics in the news. Because national politics has a special status in countries where journalists predominantly have a sacerdotal role conception, political news will be covered extensively and will often be visible on the front page. Second, in countries where a pragmatic role conception is dominant, journalists will base their news coverage more on news values. Pragmatic journalists do not treat news about politics as inherently relevant, but will try to make political news attractive to the audience by framing politics in terms of conflict or by presenting politics as a game (Patterson, 1993). We expect differences in focus on conflicts and game framing to be a consequence of either a dominant pragmatic or a dominant sacerdotal role conception in countries. The two hypotheses about the influence of a pragmatic versus sacerdotal role conception on news content are therefore:

H2a The more sacerdotal the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the more visible national politics will be in the news.

H2b The more sacerdotal the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the less news about national politics will be covered with a conflict or game frame.

Impartial–partisan

Second, a relation between journalistic roles and content is studied on the impartial–partisan dimension. Journalists can have a partisan role conception and believe that the political line of the medium should guide their work, or see their role as impartial and aim to give a balanced account of events. Journalists who have a partisan role conception believe it is acceptable for journalists to take sides in political disputes, while impartial journalists aim to present balanced coverage (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). A partisan role conception can lead to coverage bias or statement bias (D’Alessio and Allen, 2000: 135–136). Coverage bias refers to imbalance in the visibility of politicians in the news. If politicians belonging to a certain political party systematically receive more coverage than politicians from other parties, coverage is biased towards this political party. Statement bias refers to the tone of coverage in favour or against political parties or blocks. News is considered to be balanced when positive and negative evaluations are represented equally. Partisan bias should be distinguished from structural biases (Hoffstetter, 1976: 34). If all media outlets are consistently negative of one party or political block, this is likely to be due to general news routines. In the four countries under study, broadsheet newspapers generally have a distinct political profile, which is expressed in the editorials, opinion pieces and columns (Tresch, 2009). These political profiles are also recognizable in the political preferences of readers of these newspapers (Seymour-Ure, 1974). Whether the political leaning of the newspaper is also visible in news coverage is expected to depend on the dominant role conceptions of journalists. Thus, the following hypotheses will be tested:
H3a The more partisan the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the more news about national politics will have a partisan coverage bias.

H3b The more partisan the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the more news about national politics will have a partisan bias in tone towards politicians.

Information-entertainment

The third dimension along which roles and content will be compared is the information-entertainment dimension. Journalists can, on the one hand, see their role mainly as information providers, who give the audience the type of information they need to make informed democratic decisions. On the other hand, journalists can see it as their role to provide the audience with the entertainment and relaxation they desire. Differences between these two ways of seeing the journalistic role are expected to be reflected in different topics in focus (Esser, 1999). Where journalists see it as their role to provide information, political news will focus more on hard news, while political journalists who want to entertain will focus more on ‘sex, scandals and infotainment’ (Kublin, 1997, in Esser, 1999: 292). In this study we look, in particular, at two entertainment topics: scandals and politicians’ private lives.

First, an entertainment orientation is expected to be reflected in more scandal coverage. In the literature, a desire to capture a large audience with ‘lively, entertaining news’ is mentioned as one of the reasons for scandal coverage (Thompson, 2000: 78–79; Tumber, 2004). Esser (1999) sees scandals as an indicator of the level of tabloidization of broadsheet newspapers. Scandals sell, especially those involving moral outrage over the behaviour of politicians in powerful positions. A second indicator of information versus entertainment journalistic style is the focus on the private life of politicians (Brants and Neijens, 1998: 153). Purely information-oriented journalists will not cover the private life of politicians, but only portray them in their official function. On the other hand, in journalistic cultures where entertainment is more important, the private life of politicians gets more attention in the news (McNair, 2009). This leads to the following two hypotheses about the influence of cross-national differences in role conceptions on content:

H4a The more entertainment oriented the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the more news about national politics will focus on scandals.

H4b The more entertainment oriented the role conceptions of political journalists in a country, the more news about national politics will focus on the private life of politicians.

Design

To test our expectations, a survey among political journalists is combined with a content analysis of political news in two broadsheet dailies from each of Denmark, Germany, the UK and Spain. The historical developments of the media in these four countries varied widely, resulting in different structural characteristics of these media systems today and different journalistic cultures. Spain belongs to the polarized pluralist media system, the
UK to the liberal media system, and Germany and Denmark are respectively a large and a small country belonging to the democratic corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Studies of role conceptions among news journalists (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Köcher, 1986) have shown that journalistic roles vary between countries belonging to different media systems. One can therefore expect that role conceptions will also vary across the four countries in this study, which makes them suitable cases to study the relation between role conceptions and content cross-nationally.

**Survey**

To see how role conceptions vary across countries a survey was conducted among 425 political reporters in Denmark, Germany, the UK and Spain. Political journalists are defined as ‘journalists who report, analyze or give commentary on national politics’ and operationalized as the members of parliamentary press galleries or unions of parliamentary journalists. Newsrooms were contacted to update lists with members of these unions. Focusing on parliamentary journalists rather than general reporters gives the advantage of functional equivalence, since these journalists all report about similar sources: government and members of parliament. Between November 2007 and February 2009 the surveys were distributed in each of the four countries. Response rates of the targeted population were 31 per cent in the UK, 32 per cent in Germany, 57 per cent in Spain, and 74 per cent in Denmark. Checks of representativeness showed that the characteristics of the group of respondents match the characteristics of the research population well.

Respondents answered five questions asking the level to which they agreed or disagreed with statements indicating different role conceptions, on a 5-point scale. Questions were translated into Danish, German, English and Spanish by native speakers and discussed with political and communication scientists from each of the four countries. Two questions measure a *pragmatic versus sacerdotal* role conception: (1) national politics is newsworthy by definition; and (2) mass media should report about national politics in full detail. Both Cronbach’s alpha (0.43) and bivariate correlations (r = 0.28) for these two questions were below acceptable levels. These two questions will be treated as separate dimensions of a pragmatic versus sacerdotal role conception and will not be combined into a summative index. The *impartial–partisan* index summed the score for the agreement with the statement that: (1) The medium I work for has a specific political colour which guides me in how to do my work; and (2) In the news section, my medium keeps a neutral position in partisan or policy disputes (reversely coded). The bivariate correlation of the two items is 0.42 across the four countries. The *information–entertainment* role was measured with one standard question used in journalism studies around the world (Weaver and Willnat, forthcoming). Factor analysis showed that the answers to these questions are indeed structured along these three factors, explaining respectively 20, 27 and 18 per cent of total variance.

**Content analysis**

Newspaper content was analyzed for two constructed news weeks in the period 8 December 2007 until 8 February 2008. This period started a month after the national
elections in Denmark, and finished one month before national elections in Spain. According to Riffe et al. (2005), constructed weeks are more representative than consecutive days or randomly selected samples. Newspaper journalists had different role conceptions from television journalists, especially on the partisan dimension (see below, for similar findings see Donsbach and Patterson, 2004). Therefore, we compare the news content of two broadsheet newspapers per country with the role conceptions of print journalists. For each country two elite newspapers were included which are traditionally associated with a left and right political leaning: Politiken (59 articles) and Jyllands-Posten (82) for Denmark, Süddeutsche Zeitung (141) and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (173) for Germany, The Guardian (80) and The Daily Telegraph (75) for the UK, El País (144) and ABC (147) for Spain. Elite newspapers are a common object of cross-national comparative research since they have comparable positions in the media markets (Benson and Hallin, 2007; Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007). Tabloid newspapers were not included since there is no Spanish tabloid. No regional or local newspapers were included, since secondary analysis of our survey data showed that the role conceptions of journalists working for these outlets were similar to journalists working for national newspapers.

We included all news items about national politics in the analysis. Editorial, opinion pieces and columns are not included since these are article types which are most likely to reflect the political leaning of the newspaper (Tresch, 2009). Since the study addresses the relation between the role conceptions of political reporters and the content they produce, only news items appearing in the news section are included in the analysis.

Visibility of political news was operationalized as the proportion of stories on the front page which cover national politics (compared to the total number of stories on the front page). Coders coded whether the story was framed in terms of conflict (focusing on disagreement between politicians) (De Vreese et al., 2001) or presented politics as a game (focusing on a politician winning or losing) to allow testing of Hypothesis 2b. For each article, coders coded the political affiliation and number of quotes for up to five national political actors (members of governments, members of parliament and other politicians) and the overall tone towards these actors. The presence of coverage bias was measured by comparing the visibility of political actors belonging to the largest left leaning and right leaning political party (Brandenburg, 2006). The presence of statement bias was measured by comparing the mean tone towards politicians of these two parties. The tone can range from positive (when the emphasis in the story is on the actor’s merits, successful solutions, solved problems or abilities) to negative (when the emphasis is on the actor’s failures, unresolved problems or inabilities). As in Brandenburg (2006) and Schuck and De Vreese (2008), a scale was built measuring the mean tone, based on the news items in which politicians were evaluated either positively or negatively. The scale can range from −1 (when all evaluative statements about a political party were negative) to +1 (only positive evaluations). To test Hypothesis 4a, coders coded whether the main topic of the story was a scandal and the story involved allegations of wrongdoing, disgrace or moral outrage. Finally, the coders coded whether the news item focused on the private life of politicians rather than presenting them as political spokespersons.

Coders who were native speakers or had a high proficiency in one of the four languages coded the material. Before the start of the coding, coder-trainer tests were done on the level of the news item in the English working language to assess whether coders
with different language background had sufficient understanding of the English codebook (Peter and Lauf, 2002). After the coding was finished, intercoder reliability tests were done for coder pairs in each of the four countries, with a sample of at least 10 per cent of the material. Intercoder reliability scores ranged from 0.70 for conflict and game framing in Spain to 0.97 for coverage of private life in Germany and the UK (Holsti’s method).

Results

To test Hypothesis 1, we ran regression models (not shown) to compare how much variance in role conceptions is explained by (1) the backgrounds of the journalist, (2) the type of news organization they work for, and (3) the country they work in. Regression models which only included individual characteristics of the journalists (gender, journalism education and professional experience) showed that the influence of these individual factors was negligible with a maximum explained variance (adjusted $R^2$) of 2 per cent. When type of news organization was added to the regression model, the explained variance increased. When the country was added to the regression analysis including the background variables and medium type, the percentage of explained variance increased further to 14 per cent for the pragmatic–sacerdotal role, to 9 per cent for the information–entertainment role and to 33 per cent for the impartial–partisan role. In sum, including the country in the regression model led to the highest increase in explained variance, which is support for Hypothesis 1. In line with Zhu et al. (1997), we find that the country level has more influence on role conceptions than organizational or individual factors.

To classify the dominant role conceptions in each of the four countries under study, the mean scores of political journalists in these countries on the three scales are compared (Table 1). The regression analysis reported above showed that medium type did have an influence on role conceptions, especially on the impartial–partisan dimensions. Therefore cross-national differences in the roles of print journalists will be compared to newspaper content. For each of the three main dimensions, role conceptions differ cross-nationally. Danish and Spanish journalists have more sacerdotal conceptions of their role than British and German journalists. Spanish print journalists have a significantly more partisan role conception than their colleagues in northern Europe. British journalists attach most attention to providing entertainment. These cross-national differences in role conceptions will be compared to the dominant reporting style in political coverage in the four countries to test Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4.

Pragmatic–sacerdotal

While the survey showed that both Spanish and Danish journalists have a more sacerdotal role conception than their colleagues in Germany and the UK, in the content only Spain stands out in comparison to the other three countries (Table 2). National politics is
Table 1. Role conceptions of political journalists working for newspapers in Denmark, Germany, the UK and Spain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic (1) – sacerdotal (5)</td>
<td>3.35 a (0.85)</td>
<td>2.71 b (1.00)</td>
<td>2.66 b (0.97)</td>
<td>3.73 a (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartial (1) – partisan (5)</td>
<td>1.90 a (0.83)</td>
<td>2.78 b (0.80)</td>
<td>2.82 b (1.00)</td>
<td>3.36 c (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information (1) – entertainment (5)</td>
<td>2.60 b (1.04)</td>
<td>2.94 a (0.95)</td>
<td>3.34 b (1.00)</td>
<td>2.14 c (1.13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N (minimum) | 46 | 92 | 33 | 22 |

Note: Mean score on scales from 1 to 5 with standard deviations between brackets. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at p < .05 in the Tukey honestly significant differences comparison.

Table 2. Indicators of a pragmatic versus sacerdotal reporting style in coverage of national politics in Danish, German, British and Spanish broadsheet newspapers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visibility of national politics</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of stories¹</td>
<td>N (news items)</td>
<td>Conflict frame² (%)</td>
<td>Game frame² (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denmark</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politiken</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jyllands Posten</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankfurter Allgemeine zeitung</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spain</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El País</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ¹Percentage of stories on front page (for 14 newspaper issues). ²Percentage of news items which use conflict or game framing.

more visible in Spanish dailies than in broadsheets in northern Europe, especially for ABC, where more than 63 per cent of the stories on the front page deal with national politics. For the other indicators of a pragmatic versus sacerdotal reporting style, Spain also stands out. Spanish broadsheets have the smallest percentage of news stories using the conflict and the game frame, while the use of this frame hardly varies between Germany, Denmark and the UK. The differences in use of conflict frames and game frames between Spain and the other three countries are statistically significant (conflict: $\chi^2 = 75.269$,}
In sum, partial support was found for Hypotheses 2a and 2b. On the basis of the three measures for a pragmatic versus sacerdotal reporting style, we can conclude that the sacerdotal role conception is reflected in the content in Spain, but not in Denmark.

Impartial–partisan

The survey showed that Spanish journalists have a more partisan role conception than their colleagues in northern Europe. To test whether this is reflected in the news content, the ways newspapers with different political profiles cover the largest left-wing and right-wing political party are compared. Looking at the visibility of different parties, we see no proof of a partisan bias in any of the four countries (Table 3). Within countries, left-wing newspapers and right-wing newspapers do not vary in their treatment of the largest party on the left and right side of the political spectrum. On the basis of Hypothesis 3a, one would expect Spanish newspapers to have a partisan coverage bias. This hypothesis is not supported.

A second way in which partisan role conception can be reflected in newspaper content is in the tone towards different political parties. Coders assessed for all political actors whether they were presented in a positive, neutral or negative context. In all countries and outlets, the presentation of most political actors was neutral, and if politicians were evaluated, this was mostly negatively. For each newspaper the tone towards the largest left-wing and right-wing party are compared (Table 4). The treatment of the largest left-wing and right-wing party varied significantly for Spanish newspapers *El País* and *ABC*. In Spain, partisanship manifested itself in a negative bias towards opposing parties, but

### Table 3. Visibility of largest left-wing and right-wing party in Danish, German, British and Spanish broadsheet newspapers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N (political actors)</th>
<th>Attention for left-wing party</th>
<th>Attention for right-wing party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denmark</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Politiken</em></td>
<td>135</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jyllands Posten</em></td>
<td>216</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Süddeutsche Zeitung</em></td>
<td>272</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</em></td>
<td>356</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Guardian</em></td>
<td>196</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Daily Telegraph</em></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spain</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El País</em></td>
<td>320</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ABC</em></td>
<td>368</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Attention for left-wing and right-wing party is the percentage of all political actors who belong to either the largest left-wing or right-wing party. 1Left-wing parties: Denmark: Socialdemokraterne; Germany: SPD; UK: Labour; Spain: PSOE. 2Right-wing parties: Denmark: Venstre; Germany: CDU/CSU; UK: Conservative; Spain: PP.

$p < 0.05$, df = 1; game $\chi^2 = 41.535$, $p < 0.05$, df = 1). In sum, partial support was found for Hypotheses 2a and 2b. On the basis of the three measures for a pragmatic versus sacerdotal reporting style, we can conclude that the sacerdotal role conception is reflected in the content in Spain, but not in Denmark.
not in a positive evaluation of the party with which these newspapers are aligned.

Politicians belonging to (left-wing) PSOE receive almost neutral treatment in left-wing newspaper *El País*, while they are predominantly presented negatively in right-wing newspaper *ABC*. For politicians belonging to (right-wing) PP we see the opposite pattern. In newspapers in northern Europe there was no significant difference in tone towards left and right-wing politicians (independent sample t-tests). This was either due to a negative tone towards all politicians (in the British newspapers), an on average almost neutral treatment of both parties (for German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), or a low number of items in which politicians were evaluated (for Danish newspaper *Politiken*).

**Information—entertainment**

The survey showed that British journalists stand out as the most entertainment oriented. The content analysis (Table 5) shows that British journalists give more attention to scandals than journalists in Germany and Spain (χ² = 4.724, *p* < 0.05), but not compared to Danes (χ² = 0.215, ns). For the second indicator (coverage of private life), ‘sleazy Britain’ (Canel and Saunders, 2006: 27) stands out in comparison to the three other countries. In all the Spanish coverage there was only one newspaper article featuring the private life of a politician. In Denmark and Germany there is only limited focus on politicians’ private lives. Differences between the UK and continental Europe are significant

---

**Table 4.** Tone towards largest left-wing and right-wing party in Danish, German, British and Spanish broadsheet newspapers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left-wing party¹</th>
<th>Right-wing party²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denmark</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Politiken</em></td>
<td>0.0ₐ (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jyllands Posten</em></td>
<td>−0.4₃ₐ (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Süddeutsche Zeitung</em></td>
<td>−0.0₄ₐ (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</em></td>
<td>−0.4₅ₐ (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Guardian</em></td>
<td>−0.4₅ₐ (0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Daily Telegraph</em></td>
<td>−0.5₆ₐ (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spain</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>El País</em></td>
<td>+0.0₆ₐ (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ABC</em></td>
<td>−0.7₁₉ₐ (0.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The mean tone towards a party is based only on news items in which politicians were evaluated either positively or negatively and can range from −1 (all evaluations negative) to +1 (all evaluations positive). Mean scores in the same row which do not share subscripts are significantly different at *p* < 0.05 (independent sample t-tests).¹Left-wing parties: Denmark: Socialdemokraterne; Germany: SPD; UK: Labour; Spain: PSOE. ²Right-wing parties: Denmark: Venstre; Germany: CDU/CSU; UK: Conservative; Spain: PP.
This supports Hypothesis 4b. Combining the coverage of scandals and politicians’ private lives, we can conclude that the UK stands out as most entertainment focused, which is in line with their role conceptions.

**Discussion**

This article studied the relation between cross-national differences in role conceptions and news content. The survey of political journalists showed that the role conceptions of political journalists vary more across countries than within countries. Spanish political journalists were most dissimilar from their colleagues in Denmark, Germany and the UK. They saw their role as sacerdotal rather than pragmatic and partisan rather than impartial. These distinct Spanish role conceptions were reflected in the reporting style of Spanish newspapers, where news about politics was more visible, less often framed in terms of conflict or as a game, and had a partisan tone towards politicians. British journalists stand out as most entertainment oriented, both in their role conceptions and the content they produce.

The distinct role conceptions of Spanish and British journalists resonate with the characteristics of the media systems they work in. The sacerdotal Spanish journalistic culture goes back to the democratic transition period where Spanish journalists felt it was their task to support the new democratic regime and to help the Spanish population ‘internalize fundamental norms of democratic behavior’ (Gunther et al., 2000: 51). The partisan role conceptions can be explained by the partisan cleavage in Spanish society, which is deeper than in other countries. This is reflected in audience segmentation along partisan lines and the need for journalists to compete over partisan audiences (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). A second reason is the less autonomous position of the Spanish journalists and, in particular, pressure from owners who want to use the media to have an impact on the political process (De Miguel and Pozas, 2009). The commercial and competitive nature of the liberal media system (McNair, 2009) is reflected in the entertainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Scandals (%)</th>
<th>Private life (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Politiken</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jyllands Posten</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Süddeutsche Zeitung</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>The Guardian</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>El País</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1Percentage of news items which cover scandals or the private life of politicians.
orientation of British journalists. This is further support that role conceptions form a vital link between media systems and news content.

Differences between the three Northern European countries were not always reflected in the content. For example, the sacerdotal role conceptions of Danish journalists did not lead to more attention for political news and less conflict framing. These findings should be interpreted in acknowledgement of some limitations which may have influenced these results. First, while Spanish journalists are clearly outsiders, the cross-national differences in role conceptions and content between Denmark, Germany and the UK are not that strong. Future studies should compare the relation between roles and content by comparing countries with more distinct media systems and journalistic cultures. A second reason why relation between roles and content was less clear might be the intervening influence of other factors in the political system or political culture. Such alternative explanations are inherent in cross-national comparisons and can only be addressed by repeating this study and conducting similar studies in more countries. Thirdly, due to privacy concerns, it was not possible to assure that the journalists filling out the survey were exactly the same journalists as the ones who wrote the news items which were included in the content analysis. This is an increasingly common problem for journalism surveys as a result of stricter privacy rules (Weaver and Löffelholz, 2008: 6). Other studies with a different design which combined roles and news decisions of the very same journalists have demonstrated stronger effects (Köcher, 1986; Patterson and Donsbach, 1996). A possible fourth limitation, inherent in any cross-national comparative content analysis, is the use of standardized measures in order to make findings in different countries comparable. As a trade off, this gives the disadvantage that indirect measures had to be used to classify the reporting style along the pragmatic–sacerdotal and the information–entertainment dimensions. Single country studies could observe the news values of certain stories more directly and study the characteristics of scandals which are covered more in depth. Not being able to do this complicated the comparative analysis. Future studies might compare the reporting style applied in covering concrete issues or scandals. Alternatively, we recommend that a more qualitative approach be taken, based on observations in news organizations, to see how news values are applied and how journalists decide which issues to cover (e.g. De Vreese, 2001). Such newsroom observations can provide more insight into the mechanisms through which role conceptions influence content.

While acknowledging these limitations, we believe that our comparative study has led to further insight into the differences in journalistic culture and to the importance of role conceptions as explanation for these differences. The finding that the role conceptions of Spanish journalists stand out in comparison to the roles of journalists in northern Europe, and that this is reflected in content, goes against criticism of the study of journalistic role conceptions by means of survey. Critics claim that when journalists are asked about their role, they give idealized answers which often reflect the Anglo-American journalistic model of critical, objective journalists, but bear little relation to actual work practice (Josephi, 2005). To some extent it may be true that when asked about their role conceptions, journalists do not describe their actual work practice, but rather pay ‘lip service’ to the researchers and give desirable answers (Weischenberg et al., 2006: 98). However, this comparative survey has shown that what journalists expect researchers want to hear varies across journalistic cultures and represents different normative ideals. When asked about their role conception in this study, some Spanish journalists indeed saw their role

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to be impartial pragmatists. For these journalists, who do not follow the dominant role conceptions within their journalistic culture, there will be a wide gap between theory and practice. However, this article has shown that when the roles and content of Spanish journalists are seen in comparison to the roles and content of journalists in northern Europe, Spanish journalists adhere least to the Anglo-American watchdog model both in ideals (roles) as in practice (content). This shows that cross-national differences in journalistic culture remain relevant, despite homogenization of media systems and journalistic convergence (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In this respect the findings presented in the article are in line with the conclusion of Donsbach and Patterson (2004: 267) that ‘Western news systems are more alike than different, although their differences are important and consequential.’

Acknowledgement

We wish to thank Klaus Schönbach, Peter Bro, Jesper Strömbäck and two anonymous reviewers for helping us to improve the article.

Notes

1 These response rates are comparable to other surveys among journalists (e.g. Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Weaver and Willnat, forthcoming).
2 For all countries representativeness was checked by comparing distribution of gender and medium type of the respondents with the target population of the survey. For Denmark, Germany and the UK the respondents were representative for the population in terms of gender distribution and type of medium they work for. Spain showed an under-representation of print journalists. This was taken into account in the analysis as medium type was included as one of the independent variables in the explanatory analysis. In the description of the role conceptions per country (Table 1), the role conceptions of print journalists only are compared.
3 Cronbach’s alpha per country: Denmark 0.53, Germany 0.43, UK 0.40, Spain 0.62. Bivariate correlations per country: Denmark 0.36, Germany 0.28, UK 0.25, Spain 0.45.
4 This dimension is closely related to the neutral-advocate dimension used by Donsbach and Patterson (2004: 265), with the difference that in our study we are only interested in whether the journalists support a political party, while Donsbach and Patterson’s dimension also includes advocating a group or ideology.
5 Bivariate correlations per country: Denmark 0.42, Germany, 0.29, UK 0.48, Spain 0.52. The scores for different media types were compared as an external validity check, showing that journalists working for press agencies scored lowest on this scale, while print journalists scored highest.
6 The factor analysis used was a principal components analysis, with varimax rotation, using Kaiser Criterion to determine the number of factors. Factor analysis in each of the countries separately revealed the same three factors.
7 Since the Süddeutsche Zeitung did not have a Sunday edition, for the German newspapers the constructed news weeks consist of 12 issues. For the other newspapers the samples consisted of 14 issues. The Observer was included as Sunday edition of The Guardian and The Sunday Telegraph was included as Sunday edition of The Daily Telegraph. The weeks before and after Christmas were excluded from the sample as political activity was minimal during this period.
8 Political leaning is meant here as the political profile which is expressed in the editorials, opinion pieces and columns (Tresch, 2009) and visible in the political preferences of readers (Seymour-Ure, 1974).
Because of privacy concerns it was not possible to match the response of journalists with news items on the individual level (Weaver and Löffelholz, 2008: 6). News items about national politics were operationalized as items in which at least one of the following terms is mentioned within a national context: ‘parliament, government, minister, ministry and/or the name of a politician (member of parliament or member of government) and/or the name of a national political party or national party leader or member’.

To measure whether the medium in which journalists work influences their role conception, dummy variables for print, press agencies and commercial broadcasting were included in the analysis, with public service broadcasting as baseline.

The pragmatic–sacerdotal dimension in Table 1 is based on the question ‘Mass media should report about national politics in full detail’. Answers to the other question measuring a pragmatic–sacerdotal role conception did not differ cross-nationally. This question is therefore not reported.

Country differences between use of conflict and game framing were not due to differences in story length. The German and Danish newspapers included relatively many short news items of fewer than 200 words. When short articles were excluded from the analysis the difference between Spain and the other countries remains significant.

References


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