

## Government news management - strategic communication in comparative perspective

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**Government News Management -  
Strategic Communication in Comparative Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

The approach of governments to public information has changed from a rather traditional press release policy - based on interpersonal exchanges between politicians and journalists - to a professionalized and specialized process of strategic communication controlling the flow of news. In the light of this general development, news management is one practical solution for governments to strategically communicate their messages and use the media to further their political and policy goals. The paper explores news management of governments in modern mass democracies from a variety of angles. What is news management? Does news management matter and if so, how is it related to the political process? How is news management organized and how does it vary across different countries? Our assumption is, that the variation in news management, its styles and outcomes across different political systems depend on a series of contextual factors, originating in the political system, the media system and the media culture. The main objective of the paper is to analyze news management and compare the context in which it occurs in three Western democracies: the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. The central argument we propose is that media centered news management is most likely to occur in the United States due to the context of a presidential system, a highly commercialized media system, and the predominance of adversarial journalism. On the other hand, political news management is expected to be the dominant type of strategic communication in Great Britain and Germany. Both European countries not only have parliamentary political systems and strong party governments in common, but also kept a political press and a rather strong public sector television. They also tend to feature a less adversarial working relationship between the government and the media.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Der Beitrag exploriert den Begriff des News Managements als strategische Option der politischen Öffentlichkeitsarbeit von Regierungen in modernen Massendemokratien. Was ist News Management? Welchen Stellenwert hat News Management im politischen Prozeß? Wie ist News Management institutionell verankert und wie variieren die Stile des News Management in unterschiedlichen Ländern? Die Annahme des Papiers ist, daß die Stile des News Managements von einer Reihe von Kontextfaktoren abhängen, die im politischen System, dem Mediensystem und der Medienkultur verankert sind. Der Beitrag analysiert die Ausprägungen des News Management von Regierungen auf der Basis einer Typologie von Mazzoleni für die USA, Großbritannien und Deutschland. Durch den Vergleich läßt sich zeigen, daß die Typen und das Handlungsrepertoire der Informationspolitik nach strukturellen und normativen Kontexten des Regierungssystems und des Mediensystems variieren. In den USA herrscht ein medienorientierter Stil von News Management vor, der durch die Kontextfaktoren eines präsidentiellen Regierungssystems, einer fast vollständig kommerzialisierten Medienlandschaft sowie der Philosophie des „adversarial journalism“ zu begründen ist. Demgegenüber dominieren in Großbritannien und Deutschland politische Stile des News Management, die mit den Kontextfaktoren eines parlamentarischen Regierungssystems und einer starken Rolle politischer Parteien sowie durch die Existenz einer politischen Presse und eines öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunks in Zusammenhang gebracht werden können.



# Government News Management - Strategic Communication in Comparative Perspective

Barbara Pfetsch

## 1. Introduction

In the early 80s scholars and critics began to maintain that the growth of government and the media have come to a point which would change the nature of the political process. "Big government" and "big media" were thought to have launched a new stage of the development of modern democracy: The so called "media democracy"<sup>1</sup> (Orren 1986:9) is characterized by (1) the media taking over some of the vital functions of political parties and moving into the center of the political system (McLeod et al. 1994); and (2) by adapting the institutions and practices of politics and government to the central role of mass media, particularly television (Gurevitch/Blumler 1990). Media democracy is not only held responsible for deficits in mass politics<sup>2</sup>, but also for changes in institutions, styles and strategic behaviors in political communication, such as the growth of press operations and the professionalization of political public relations (Orren 1986:3). Not surprisingly, political communication research has devoted increasing attention to the modernization and professionalization of election campaigns (Farrell 1996; Swanson/Mancini 1996). Media democracy however not only affects the short periods of intensive political mobilization but also the „permanent campaign" between the elections:

"Indeed, campaigning and governing can no longer be viewed as separate phases of the democratic process. American politics is increasingly characterized by the "permanent campaign" ... in which politicians and interest group leaders engage ...in continuous efforts to orchestrate, amplify, and inject the presumptive voices of American people (read 'our people') into the formulation and management of national policy. Policy making occurs in a context of permanent, professionally-managed, and adversarial campaigning to win the

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<sup>1</sup> Other authors have labeled this stage of democracy "media politics" (Arterton 1985): "mediated politics" (Bennett 1988). for more labels see Blumler/Gurevitch (1995:3).

<sup>2</sup> Examples of the consequences of media democracy for mass politics are "the decay of politics" (Entman 1989, Sabato 1991). the decline in social trust (Putnam 1995) and changes of the political and electoral process at large (Ranney 1983).

support of those publics upon whom the survival of the political client depends. " (Dionne et al. 1997:10).

The underlying assumption of the permanent campaign is that chief executives seem to assume that in order to govern successfully, they must proactively determine the public agenda by controlling the media agenda (Bergsdorf 1986:3; Blumler 1990:107, Linsky 1986). In this context, news management appears as one of the practical solutions for governments and other political actors to strategically communicate their messages and use the media to further their political and policy goals.

This paper explores news management of governments in modern mass democracies from a variety of angles. What is news management? Does news management matter and if so, how is it related to the political process? What is the difference between governments and other political actors who try to manage the news? How is news management organized, how does it function and how does it vary across different countries? The main objective of the paper is to conceptualize and analyze news management and compare the context in which it occurs in three Western democracies: the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Thus, while the general objectives of strategic communication might not vary across governments and countries, the institutional setting of political public relations, the media system and the political system environment of its practice - and therefore the meaning of news management in political communication in general - might be quite different. Our assumption is, that the variation in news management, its styles and outcomes across different political systems depend on a series of contextual factors, originating in the political system, the media system and the media culture. In order to understand the nature and core practices of news management in political communication we need to take a comparative approach.

The approach of governments to public information has changed from a rather traditional press release policy - based on interpersonal exchanges between politicians and journalists - to a professionalized and specialized process of strategic communication controlling the flow of news. In the light of this general development, which Gurevitch/Blumler (1990) labeled "the modern political publicity process", news management has different functions

and appears in different forms and action repertoires. As to the general types of strategic communication, we draw a distinction between *media* centered news management versus *political* news management. It is further proposed that the particular shaping of news management depends on the institutional, political and media context of each country. We investigate these variations in the US, Great Britain and Germany. The choice of countries under comparison was made for two reasons. All are highly developed Western democracies. The environment of government communication varies, however, due to different political systems (presidential and parliamentary), the makeup and role of the executive (single party government and multi-party government), and the formal and informal institutions of government communication. Moreover, these countries differ in terms of the structure and the culture of their media systems.

The central argument we propose is that media centered news management is most likely to occur in the United States due to the context of a presidential system, a highly commercialized media system, and the predominance of adversarial journalism . On the other hand, political news management is expected to be the dominant type of strategic communication in Great Britain and Germany. Both European countries not only have parliamentary political systems and strong party governments in common, but also kept a political press and a rather strong public sector television. They also tend to feature a less adversarial working relationship between the government and the media.

## **2. News Management and the Democratic Process**

The effort to conceptualize news management in the political process must start with the role of public opinion as the eventual target of government communication. Although there are a variety of meanings (Herbst 1993), the (Anglo-American) literature basically defines public opinion as

„the political values, attitudes, or opinions of the general public of a country or other political unit, usually understood to include voting patterns or other political behaviour... In the light of the central importance of ‘the people’ in democracy, ... public opinion and its



influence on political decisions must be considered in evaluating the extent of democracy in any political system“ (Finifter 1995: 1027).

In democratic theory, the salience of public opinion in the democratic process is linked to the responsiveness, the transparency and the legitimacy of government. While in most modern liberal democracies, the norm of popular sovereignty is achieved formally through competitive elections, at the substantive level it is fulfilled through the responsiveness of the decision makers to public opinion<sup>3</sup>. Among the sources of policymakers to find out about public opinion are poll data and the media (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996). Case studies show (Linsky 1986; Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996) that government officials and policymakers often infer the public agenda from the media agenda. They take the amount of the media attention given to an issue as an indirect expression of public opinion and interest in the issue.

Public opinion is not only relevant regarding the democratic norm of responsiveness, but also with respect to the transparency of decisions and policies as well as the legitimization of politics. The communication function of government is most neutrally labelled with the term public information. Under the umbrella of public information, the executive communicates its decisions and policies to the public and legitimizes its actions. In most countries, public information is institutionalized in special government agencies that have the task to explain innovations and policies and communicate information in the public interest. However, under the conditions of intense political competition and increasing volatility, the aspect of legitimization and maintenance of political power during the tenure of office is probably the most important motive of governments for monitoring public opinion. As chief executives aim at maintaining and increasing popular support in the light of the next electoral contest, they intend to influence public opinion for political purposes. The objective of minimizing the discrepancies between the actions of government and public opinion is hardly ever a realistic outcome of these efforts, as the communication is mediated through the mass media.

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<sup>3</sup> Responsiveness comprises the adequate response of the governmental system to the messages and needs of its members (Etzioni 1968:504). Empirically it is a category that measures the congruence between the actions of political actors and public opinion (Miller/Stokes 1963).

From the point of view of the government the media have several functions. In the process of influencing public opinion, first, the executive is obliged to inform the citizens about its agenda and policy solutions. The media due to their range and size of audience are the most effective channels of transmission. Second, through constructing the political reality that is visible for the citizens and that shapes people's daily contact with politics they create the symbolic environment for political participation and the political discourse. The media not only serve as links between the government and the citizens. Politicians, bureaucrats and policymakers learn about each other's activities through the media (Linsky 1986). Third, almost thirty years of empirical research has proven, that the mass media are powerful in setting the public agenda (Rogers/Dearing 1993; Dearing/Rogers 1996). Moreover, we know from research on priming and framing, that by highlighting issues and neglecting others the media set the standards by which political actors are being evaluated among the audience (Iyengar/Kinder 1987). These findings have two consequences: It is in the governments vital interest, that the political issues on the public agenda parallel with the priorities of its political agenda. And from the executive's point of view, only those issues should be stressed in the media that shed a favorable light on its performance. Finally, the media are increasingly recognized as political actors in their own right (Page 1996). Through actively engaging in the political deliberations they have the potential to voice opinions and "to try and change the beliefs and policy preferences of mass and/or elite audiences" (Page 1996:20). Moreover, media might function as an early warning system for conflicts and problems that the political parties refuse to incorporate in their platforms. It follows from those functions that media have become a crucial strategic factor in the communication of the government and from this point of view it is not surprising that politicians seem to believe that controlling the media and using them for their own political purposes would be an effective solution for communicating with the public.

The objective of controlling the issues on the public agenda by shaping the media coverage makes news management an important element in government communication. However, the increasing practice of news management is corroborated by another set of factors in the realm of knowledge production and technical and material resources. As Manheim (1997) points out, communication management has made a significant difference in political

communication only since the social science and the humanities have achieved a high standard in the knowledge about communication and mass communication - knowledge of how decisions in the mass media and politics are made, how messages are designed and framed and how audiences respond to those messages.

„With this knowledge has come an increasing ability to manage communication settings and, through them, communication effects in strategic ways. Researchers are now beginning to find evidence that this communication management can be highly effective in shaping public perceptions of political leaders and political systems, and in mobilizing or demobilizing popular pressure on governments as they render specific policy decisions“ (Manheim 1997: 63).

The knowledge about communication management and the resources to implement this knowledge in politics make news management a serious strategic option in public information of governments. The resources refer to both, human resources in terms of communication experts, media advisors and pollsters as well as to technical and financial means which are necessary for managing communication.

Against this background, we can conceptualize news management as strategic variant of public information whereby political actors manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda. It is a top down process of communication whereby the media are the means and targets while the strategies are determined by the political objectives of the specific actor. In the case of government, practices of news management may be aiming at both informing the public about its policies and legitimating its decisions. The prime motive however can be seen in the executive's political goal of producing popular consent and therefore retaining or increasing political power.

The conceptualization of news management which we have introduced signifies clearly the perspective of the political actors. It is important to note that the communication goals of chief executives, politicians and policymakers to manage the contents of the news media do not equalize either with standardized rules nor with any prediction or fixation of the success of such efforts. News management must be seen as a process and as a result of the interplay

of actors in the political system (politicians and their spokespeople) with actors in the media system (journalists). Both systems work according to their own logic and rules and the communication takes place only within the constraints of each systemic environment. It has been argued in the context of the discussion of the advent of the information society that the explosion of communication channels and the increasing commercialization of media increases the self-referentiality of mass communication and journalism (Marcinkowski 1993; Jarren 1994). In the interplay between the political actors and media no group submits to the logic of the other. As a consequence, we cannot expect that the outcome of news management accounts for the precise intentions of the actors and the desired effects. Nor can we assume that incidents of congruence between the government agenda and the media agenda are causally related to news management. News management then is a process with high risks and uncertainties. It is a management of contingencies for political actors, for even if they feed the media with information they have no control over the actual news coverage: Kingdon (1984) views the communication patterns in governments adapting to the "garbage can model of organizational choice". Policy making and the communication thereof is seen as organized anarchy of problems, policies, and politics. The media agenda on the other side is highly dependent on situational factors and inner organizational arrangements, and more often than not the media contents is the result of unintended consequences instead of planned and well intended actions.

### **3. Government as Actor in News Management**

All actors in the political sphere compete for favorable media attention including the executive, political parties, parliamentary fractions, interest and advocacy groups, social movements, individual politicians and political entrepreneurs. The chances of achieving media attention depend on the role and the position of the actor, their resources and their objectives. Compared to parties, interest groups and the opposition, there are various reasons why the government has better chances for its messages to pass the media filter. The most obvious reason lies in the role of the executive as a decision making body. As Miller (1991:60) puts it: „Government actions are inherently more newsworthy than an

opposition's arguments". Governments are active in setting national priorities and proposing policy innovations, taking collectively binding decisions, and implementing them in their programs. As to the politics aspect, governments constantly work on legislative and political coalition building. Finally, the leadership function is expressed in the executive's role of crisis management, in maintaining international commitments and entertaining foreign relations.

Another reason for the governments favorable starting position in news management is the availability of state resources and institutions for public information. As every government is obliged to inform the citizens, modern executives are in command of institutions and roles to prepare and disseminate official information. These official publicity agencies are filled with civil servants and specialists of public information working in intelligence, media communication and policy consulting (Kingdon 1984). Although most agencies of public information are obliged to act non partisan and pursue their information task in a politically neutral way, they are the most precious resource of news management.

An indicator for the leading position of the executive compared to other branches of government like the legislative branch and the juridical branch is media attention. For the US, Graber (1997:270-272) found, that the television news coverage of the three branches of government is quite unevenly distributed. The figures for 1994/95 show that the evening network news ran an average of 107 stories per month about some aspect of the presidency. This amounted to roughly 25 percent of all political news stories. The numbers for Congress and the Supreme Court were considerably lower with a monthly average of 24 Congress stories and a monthly average of 5 Supreme court stories. All in all, roughly 80 percent of all news stories about the three government branches are devoted to the executive. The lead in media attention of the executive also materializes compared with the opposition. As for Germany, an analysis of the four major public and commercial network news (Pfetsch 1996:444) reveals that approximately 30 percent of the air time devoted to political institutions and actors is reserved for the self-portrayal of political actors. About 45 percent of those statements stem from the executive, while only 12 percent originate in the parliament.

The bias in media attention for the government in office gives it a huge potential to determine overall communications. The advantageous status seems hard to compensate for by the other branches of government and the opposition. These political actors (and the political parties in particular) might draw on financial and human resources like pollsters and communication experts, but they do usually not have access to the same amount of official public information resources. And in terms of media attention, political actors like the legislative branch or the parties in opposition must compensate for the disadvantages of their role by either an extraordinary message, outstanding personnel or spectacular actions.

#### **4. Communication Strategies and Action Repertoire of News Management**

##### *4.1 Media Centered vs. Political News Management*

The modernization of technical means of media communication and the advent of the modern political publicity process has the consequence that formerly close personal ties between press secretaries and journalists have been replaced by political marketing methods and strategic communication planning<sup>4</sup>. The professionalization implies not only the use of communication specialists but also the introduction of a general set of rules and knowledge derived from political marketing. Jarol Mannheim (1997) describes the essential professional dynamic that powers the strategic management of communication as an iterative process in which messages are shaped, tested, evaluated and revised until they encourage the desired effects. This process involves (1) to establish objectives and communication options, (2) to sense the environment, (3) to select and implement the communication option most likely to achieve the desired objective and (4) to assess the effectiveness of the communication. While it seems easy to define the general political objectives of news management, it is more difficult to find an encompassing pattern as regards the choice of communication options for governments when managing the news. However, if we look at public information policy as "permanent campaign" and at government news management as a specific type of political

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<sup>4</sup> Historical examples for a public information operation based on rather close personal ties between press secretaries and journalists are the Roosevelt presidency (Steele 1985) in the US and the early period of the Federal Republic of Germany under the Adenauer government (Hoffmann 1992).

message production, we are able to draw some parallels with campaign communication. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (1987) identifies two basic patterns of political message production. The "*media logic*" is guided by the "values and formats through which ... events and issues are focused on, treated, and given meaning" by journalists and media organizations (Mazzoleni, 1987:85). The focus is to promote a particular kind of presentation and understanding compatible with media formats, news values and logistics of news organizations. The "*party logic*" draws on the structural and cultural assets that govern the communication and the objectives of the political parties. The focus is to strengthen the parties as institutions and to mobilize and integrate the voters within their subcultural ties. For government communication, however, the message production is determined by the aim of informing the public, legitimizing decisions, mobilising public and political support, creating trust in its performance, and by the executive's need to make its message compatible with the institutional prerequisites of the political process (Sarcinelli 1994). Within this framework, the focus is to retain political power and legitimate the executive's decisions.

If we apply the dichotomy of Mazzoleni (1987) to patterns of message production in news management, we are able to differentiate between *media-centered* news management versus *political* (or *party-centered*) news management as two general types of strategic communication. In *political* news management the strategic political objectives are in the center of the strategy and the media are the means but not the ends of the action. Political news management aims at orchestrating the 'political game' among the political elites and concerns the political competition within the governmental system. The practical task of such news management would be to shape the message according to the political objectives of the executive vis a vis the other political parties and to maximize the political aspects in message production while minimizing the adaptation to the media. By contrast, *media centered* news management focuses directly and only on creating positive news coverage and popular support for which the media audience is a surrogate. "The new media logic (uses) the techniques of political marketing. It is oriented towards strategic target groups, perceives voters as consumers and is eager to offer a symbolic product, which is constructed and marketed on the basis of the empirical knowledge of the opinions, diffuse

emotions, and the moody and changeable electorate." (Plasser et al. 1996:86). The practical task of this variant of news management would be to subject any political message to the formats, the news values and the logistics of the media in order to maximize the chances of (positive) news coverage, while the substance of the message is secondary.

An second distinction which we can adopt from campaign studies is that communication varies as to whether the object of the message is a candidate or an issue. Even though a sharp distinction is quite artificial and hard to draw, the differentiation of messages as to its central object is a useful heuristic tool that also structures the communication options of government news management. We can distinguish the personalization of politics by setting apart those messages that focus on the *person* of the chief executive or other leading government figures, i.e. cabinet ministers, from those messages that focus on the *issue* or policy which is to be communicated. These distinctions produce a typology of news management given in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Typology of News Management and Action Repertoire*

<b>Strategy of News Management</b>	media centered	political
<i>Object of the Message</i>		
person is the message	image management visualization	political attacks negativism
issue is the message	pseudoevents drama and action	dethematization framing/spin-controlling

#### 4.2 Action Repertoire

Much of news management of governments owes to the routinized institutional and personal channels of exchange between public information workers and journalists. Regular press conferences, briefings and social events provide fertile grounds for stabilizing the



"working relationship", even if both groups have a critical relationship as regards their professional norms and political objectives. These routinized contacts provide the portfolio for the proactive measures of news management, that akin to stimulate positive news coverage of national leaders or governments. In the political message production, there are a number of rhetoric and symbolic actions that might help launching an issue. While there is no encompassing list of the proactive behaviors in news management, Plasser et al. (1996:90) point to a number of activities that are intended to serve the projected aims: (1) Personalization of politics or image management; (2) dramatization of politics or pseudoevents; (3) political attacks and negativism; (4) framing and spin-controlling and de-thematization.

If we discern this action repertoire according our two dimensions of news management (strategy of news management and object of the message) we can categorize those behaviors in their strategic context (see Figure 1). The media centered strategy which focuses on individual government members ends up in practices that stress the personalization of politics and leadership. This technique draws on the media format of visualization and the fact that people are much easier to visualize than rather complicated policy proposals. Moreover, the exploitation of personality features caters to the human interest dimension of news reporting. Very often, in such a strategy the head of the government is portrayed as a political star and politics is seen as a game between individual persons instead of a political competition.

The second media centered technique of news management focuses on issues and includes the staging of pseudoevents. Daniel Boorstin (1987) has coined term pseudoevents for such synthetic events that are only staged to stimulate media reporting. The timing and location of the event, the logistics and the presentation can be designed according to the formats, the selection criteria, and the logistics of news reporting. Pseudoevents "turn into managed and manufactured news. Their acceptance, however, makes their occurrence no less real than the spot news of an assassination attempt or a declaration of war. What makes them real or urgent is their surfacing in the public consciousness". (Denton/Woodward 1990:152). The

staging of pseudoevents however does have an instrumental character, they are means to achieve the political goals of the actors.

Very often, the distinction between personalization and pseudoevents blur, as news managers try to combine both image management with some sort of action or pseudoevent. Such occasions are very often symbolically loaded, as political leaders use public appearances to show their connection with "the people".

"Examples include bill signings, the greeting of foreign guests, the honoring of a group or individual, and the commemoration of a historical or seasonal event. Some of these appearances border on the trivial, for example, when a president congratulates the baseball team winning the World Series. But they demonstrate the importance of the president's role as chief of state domestically, just as foreign travel demonstrates it abroad. These appearances offer presidents the opportunity to project an image of caring and concern to the nation as a whole through television and newspaper coverage. " (Ragsdale 1996:151)

The political strategy of news management concerning individuals tends to draw on the media's preference for negative news (Patterson 1996). This inclination is used by news managers to launch messages that attack the political opponent or put the opponent into a negative light. Such a strategy might - as governments are concerned - occur more often in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems. Thus, in Great Britain and in Germany, the political process includes direct confrontations of ministers and opposition leaders in parliamentary sessions and committees. Such occasions are frequently used to criticize the performance of the opponent publicly; on the other hand, negative evaluations can be spread using off-the-record-statements or leaks.

The political strategy of news management concerning issues refers to the control not only of the salience of issues but also their definition. As Denton/Woodward (1990:42) note: "Political contests are really contests of competing definitions of situations. Winners are those who successfully articulate the definition of situation held by the majority or those who successfully create a potent definition of situation held by the majority of voters." The creation of definitions of issues points to processes of framing in order to mobilize public consensus and to spin-controlling in order to influence the media coverage. If it is not possible for whatever reasons to control the message, another technique that belongs into

this category is de-thematization that - as diversionary tactic - intends to divert from substantial issues (Plasser et al. 1996).

Framing refers to a structure of meaning and significance of a political message while spin-controlling aims at influencing the version of the story politicians like to give to the media. Even through the frames that are pushed are closely linked with the contents, the media and the situation, in the public discourse they refer to the general processes of "consensus mobilization" (Klandermans 1988). Framing comprises processes of interpretation of social problems, whereby the issue is interpreted, its causes and those responsible for the problem solution are marked and their own actions are positively evaluated (Gerhards 1992:308). For an executive it is particularly important to demonstrate performance and (actual or symbolic) leadership in problem solution. Very often, governments use their position to point out and define just those problems to which they have already developed a ready solution (Kingdon 1984: 98).

Efforts of spin-control refer to the depiction of the issue in the interaction of news managers and journalists (Jones 1996). A practitioner defines spin-control as "... a flexible technique that can be used not only to 'fix' the results of happenings (or interviews, debates and so on) after the event, but also to manage expectations of an event yet to take place" (Bruce 1992:141). Most likely spinning includes the simple pattern of stressing the importance of features that are most attractive to target publics or target media and avoiding the features that are deemed to be undesirable from the point of view of the government (Denton/Woodward 1990:92). Efforts of spinning can be regularly observed after major political developments, when journalists are often desperate to speak to authoritative sources capable of giving them an instant interpretation of what has happened (Jones 1996:123). Another example for spin-controlling is the election nights news coverage when electoral defeats are interpreted as victories in front of television cameras. Finally, the spectacle of spin doctors competing for attention can become a news event in itself (Jones 1996:169). While framing and spinning deal with the interpretation and depiction of issues, de-thematization tries to avoid communication about the core issue. Instead the technique refers to a shift from substantial issues to other aspects of the problem. Communication

about the substance of the topic tends to be replaced by the discussion of political strategies, coalition building, the style and the rhetoric of the leader, and media performance.

## **5. Environmental Factors Affecting News Management**

Theories suggest fairly general objectives and action repertoires of news management. Even if we find common characteristics of news management in various countries, they need not necessarily have the same meaning across different political systems. In campaign communication, the existence of common practices of campaigning in different countries, such as the use of campaign professionals and big international marketing firms, has long been interpreted as a general trend towards the "Americanization" of political communication (Swanson/Mancini 1996). Negrine/Papathanassopoulos (1996) and Farrell (1996) point out, political communication processes are not at all uniform but highly affected by a series of environmental factors across and within different systems; It is a realistic assumption that the exact nature of news management varies across different countries and over time. From all the potential factors affecting news management we shall discuss three aspects of the political environment that might contribute to different styles of political communication and as a consequence have a potential impact on the prevalent type of news management. As we deal with government communication we look first at the basic differentiation as to role of the executive and compare the presidential system with the parliamentary system. We might assume that the higher the independence of the chief executive from the parliament, the more personalized and media driven is his or her public information strategy. The second set of factors which might be responsible for different meanings of news management lies in the structure of the media system and refers to the organization and regulation of mass communication in each country. We might assume that the higher the commercialization and competition in the press, the more the media centered type of news management prevails, while a partisan press and public service television might foster political news management modes. The last element is the media culture that shapes the interaction and relationship between political actors and the news media. Political news

management should occur more frequently in systems characterized by consensual roles between journalists and politicians, while media centered news management might be more frequent in adversarial media cultures.

### *5.1 Political System Factors*

#### Presidential versus parliamentary System

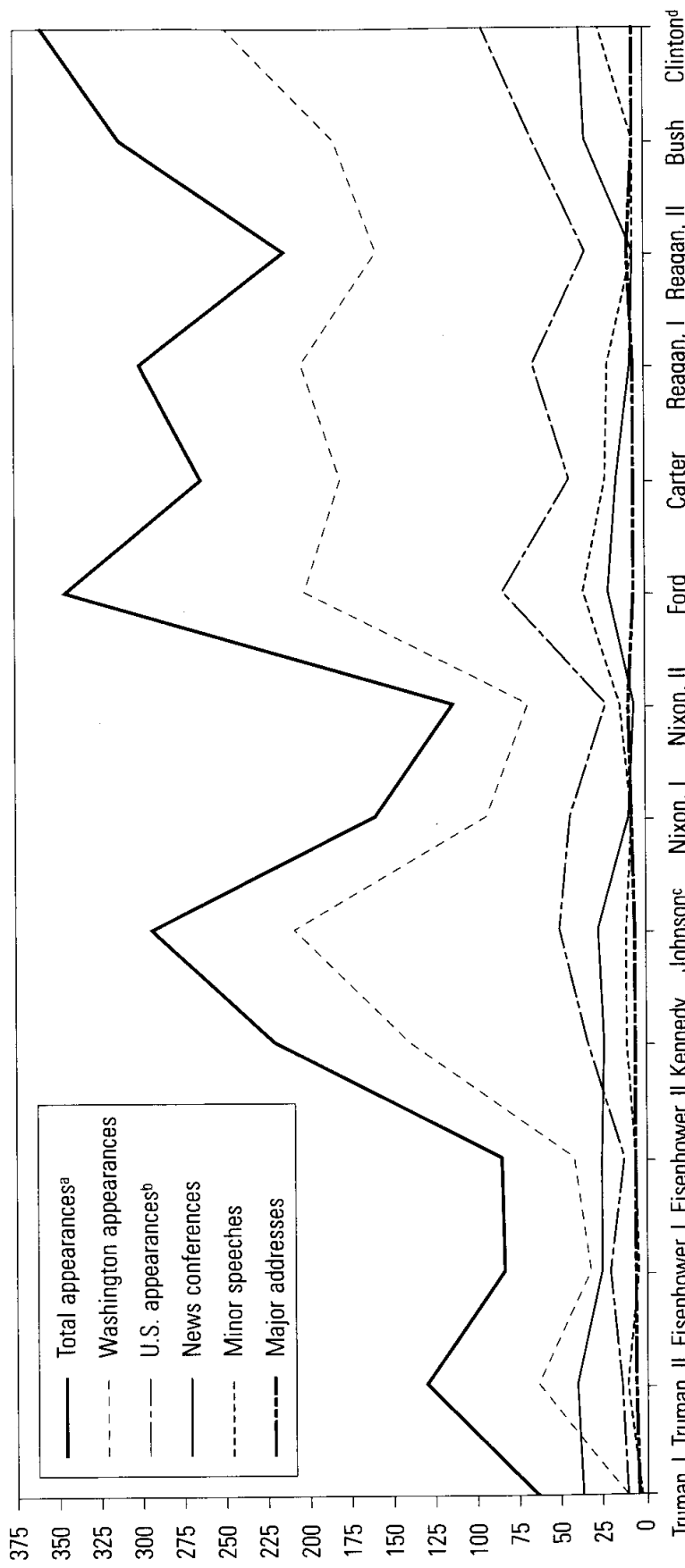
When comparing political communication in the United States with Britain and Germany, it is fairly obvious that government communication in a presidential system with low party cohesion in the legislature, as in the United States, is focused on the chief executive. Since the president is chosen independently from the legislature and stays in office for a fixed term, his government information policy must not take into account the groups in the legislature. Therefore, the president can use the White House agencies for the political marketing of his person and his policy proposals without looking back at the support of the majority of Congress. This also means, that instead of relying on the support on strong party fraction in the legislature, strategic communication should be much more directed at mobilizing the general . Kernell (1986) argues, that the media strategy replaces the negotiations between the executive and Congress. And Denton/Woodward (1990:198) note, that the key instrumental goal of the modern president is "maintaining public support" which means that the officeholder must actively engage in "the politics of prestige". The value of public support reveals that a presidents has an incentive to manage or otherwise control how he is portrayed in the media. Due to this situation a president surrounds himself with communication specialists who manage his image and public support for his performance. Leon Panetta, the former chief of staff of President Clinton, gives an account of the presidential event management:

„... when I came in as Chief of Staff ... I thought (what) was important to do is to create a focus for the President each day ... If he can use the bully pulpit effectively with a clear message for that day, that's the most effective thing that presidents can do. And so what we did was we created a focus. What was the event, what was the message that we wanted to get across that day that fit the agenda that he was trying to implement on the Hill. And so part of the discussion in the morning was what is that focus today, how do we want to get the message out, is the event properly prepared, are the releases done, have we done all of the background work, is the statement done for the President ..." (Panetta 1997:164-165).

The report reveals that the personalization of politics through "presidential messages from the bully pulpit" and the creation of pseudoevents around the issues of legislation characterize the news management of US-Presidents. Indeed, as Ragsdale (1996:180) shows (see Figure 2), the politics of public appearances of the President which basically consists of symbolic events in Washington that are easily available to the national media in the capital has become an increasingly frequent means of government communication in the postwar period of contemporary America. Those events largely appeal to symbolic leadership, for instance when the President meets with a particular community to commemorate a local event, meets civic groups or surveys damage caused by natural disasters (Ragsdale 1996:151), with a similar role to the function of Heads of State like the Queen in Britain. Those events are streamlined in terms of the media formats and the visual quality of the pictures.

By contrast, the institutional arrangements in parliamentary systems with a separate Head of State tend to support communication strategies that aim at orchestrating the debate between the parties and in the parliament. In Germany, where two or more parties form a coalition government depending on the support of the parliamentary fractions, the efforts of the chancellor to set the media agenda clearly aim at positioning his administration as political leader within the coalition government and vis a vis the opposition parties. This complex situation means that in addition to controlling the media, the communication strategy has to solve two problems: Internally, it is difficult in a coalition government for one party to stress the own "positive" performance without provoking the other coalition partner (Reineke 1988:30). Internal rivalries in the cabinet mean that the coalition parties in the government want to make their mark and develop their own public information strategy (Reker 1995). Externally, the logic in the political contest against the opposition parties define the strategies of news management. The news management in such a situation with strong parties under high competition means to focus on issues, so the major activities lie in the thematization and dethematization, framing, and spin-control. Those behaviors are well planned political activities which must be seen as a reaction to the issues and events of the

Figure 2: Number of Domestic Public Appearances by President, Truman to Clinton (yearly averages)



Source: Lyn Ragsdale, *Vital Statistics on the Presidency: Washington to Clinton* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1996), 180.

<sup>a</sup> Includes major addresses, news conferences, minor speeches, Washington appearances, and U.S. appearances, but not political appearances.

<sup>b</sup> Nonpartisan appearances before groups outside the vicinity of Washington, D.C.

<sup>c</sup> Includes full term from November 1963 to January 1969.

<sup>d</sup> 1993–1994 only.

opposition parties that are observed carefully. In Germany, it is not so much the daily response to public opinion data or the creation of highly visible pseudoevents that govern news management. Instead, the political response to the statements of the coalition partner and the political opponents vis a vis the media is the crucial characteristic of strategic communication. In this constellation the media are used as vehicles to influence the discourse within the governmental system.

The news management of the British executive includes features of both strategies. On the one hand, news management in Britain as well as in Germany consists of making sure that all the ministers speak with one voice (Ingram 1991). But since the electoral system guarantees a single party government, the leadership of the Prime Minister is usually not contested in the cabinet. This also means that the political messages as well as the public information policy is organized in a politically coherent way. News management in such a situation can be very political and much more focused on the issues of the governing party. On the other hand, the role of the Prime Minister as political leader allows for a personalization of politics at the same time. This means that the press secretary and the communication experts around the PM are orchestrating and coordinating various news management activities which include all measures of the political strategy like attacking the opponent, defining the agenda of public information and spin-control .

## *5.2 Communication Roles and Institutions of Government News Management*

If we look at the institutions and communication roles of news management, in all three countries, we find a division of labor regarding the regular day-to-day relation of government spokespeople and the media and the more strategic and political aspects. The most prominent role of official government communication is formally occupied by the press secretary. As Seymour Ure (1991:383) points out, the functions of modern press secretaries comprises at least four communication roles: that of spokesman, advisor on media relations, agent, and manager. From a comparative point of view, we shall see that the role interpretation of the press secretary as well as the forum for informal and interpersonal exchanges between government spokespeople and the media vary in each country. The informal roles of strategic communication are usually held by a small circle of



advisors who decide on the strategy of news management and the reactions to the issues and opinions raised in the media. Those positions are usually located at the heart of the executive office (the White House office of communications in Washington, the Chancellor's office in Bonn; Downing Street No. 10 in London). Each governments moreover entertains a more or less political apparatus of government public relations which varies in different countries as to the degree to which professional political marketing methods are used to further government policies.

In the US, there is a division of labor in the White House between the press secretary's office and the office of communications. The press secretary's role is defined by his potential to successfully place the president and his message in the national media on a daily basis. Under the Reagan administration the access to the President was quite restricted, which meant that the press secretary was highly visible. And even if President Clinton is less reluctant to meet with journalists in person<sup>5</sup>, his press secretary appears on television regularly. The chances for getting the message across are favorable, because his interaction with journalists is frequent and close (McCurry 1996). The accredited correspondents practically cohabit in the White House, so that the national press corps members are at the disposal of the press office for briefings, announcements and freshly breaking information any time. When the White House office of communication<sup>6</sup> was established, it signaled the growing trend towards tighter control of White House communication through a centralized approach to information management. (Gilmore/Brown 1994:2). Today, the office is in charge of managing the presidential image through long-term public relations planning and strategizing. It works on managerial and proactive tasks like designing strategies for presidential policy announcements, long term image-building, and creating popular support thereby targeting media outside the Washington news scene (Maltese 1992). Owing to new satellite techniques and other direct communication channels, the office of communication has become particularly valuable when setting up self produced news stories from the White House and free interviews with officials for local news stations.

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<sup>5</sup> According to his press secretary, Michael McCurry (1996:8), President Clinton encountered the press between January 1995 and March 1996 578 times which makes for an average of 39 times per month.

<sup>6</sup> The office was established during the Watergate affair because President Nixon felt he was not treated fair in the national press corps (Maltese 1992: 26).

By contrast to the US, the press secretary's office in Germany witnessed a high fluctuation of personnel and none of the spokesmen in the Kohl government have gained public visibility or political significance. Officially, the press secretary to the Chancellor has two functions. He officially speaks for the coalition government by answering to the national press corps three times a week. And he is the head of the Federal Press and Information Office of the Federal government which is a rather bureaucratic operation for official public information and government intelligence. Due to its size (700 civil servants) and bureaucratic nature the agency is rather ineffective as to proactive strategic communication. However, the press secretary is responsible for implementing the decisions in news management that are taken by the more powerful communication roles in the Chancellor's office. In the center of the Chancellor's administration a small group of communication advisors, political analysts and speechwriters monitor the findings of opinion polls, work on framing political issues and decide on the communication strategies towards the media on a daily basis (Fuchs/Pfetsch 1996).

The tasks of the press secretary to the Prime Minister in Britain refer to managerial work, when news management is defined as "ensuring that nothing is allowed to get in the way of the story the Government wants to get over" (Ingram 1991:188). Since the Thatcher era, government communication is highly centralized in the PM's office and integrated through a system of internal reporting to ensure that Number 10 was fully abreast of all key developments within the government. Bernard Ingram (1991:188) describes his job as press secretary as obligation to coordinate the timing and the coherence of government messages. This meant to ensure (1) that the cabinet spoke with one voice; (2) that each cabinet member was aware of what the other was doing; (3) that the Government did not come out on any one day with more than one major statement of policy (Ingram 1991:188). The British case is a paradigmatic example for the fact that news management must be seen as only one option in an encompassing communication strategy whose measures extend beyond the simple news operation of the executive. During the Thatcher years, the Central Information office, whose purpose is to explain government policy and to communicate information of genuine public interest, was transformed "from relatively restrained

government publicity" (Scammel 1995:230) into a machinery of marketing for the promotion of controversial policies. Within a short period, government had become one of the biggest advertisers in the country<sup>7</sup>, with expenditure for publicity increasing from \$60 million to \$225 million (Scammel 1995:204). Thus, news management was facilitated by implementing marketing techniques and accompanied by huge paid campaigns. With the large scale use of professional political marketing the government's efforts to manage the news not only profited from the material resources but also from the use of external communication experts.

While the press offices and public information agencies must be seen as formal institutions of government communication, another pivotal dimension of news management is the use of interpersonal networks that have developed between government officials and journalists. Those communication networks are venues of steady interaction and contact which in the end contribute to the formation of trust among the actors and eventually to the emergence of common cultures of political communication where information is exchanged for publicity. We have seen that the interaction between journalists and press officers is quite close in Washington because of the cohabitation of the press corps in the White House. Functional equivalents to this cohabitation are the Parliamentary Lobby at Westminster and the background circles in Bonn.

In Britain, the most important arrangement for the managed disclosure of news and information is the Lobby. This consists of about 150 selected journalists who have privileged access to Westminster, enjoy briefings by the Prime Minister's press secretary twice a day and socialize on a regular basis with government officials. The Lobby is a useful tool for political management of the news because its central principle is the non-attribution of sources. The exchange of information and the setting of the agenda is facilitated because the news reports could claim to present information from high level sources or sources close to Downing Street without attributing it to a specific person (Jones 1996). Another function

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<sup>7</sup> The issue accounting for most of the growth in spending was the funding of television advertising and marketing of the governments privatisation measures (Scammell 1995:207; Shaw 1994:8).

of the Lobby is to impart information and offer journalists "guidance" as to additional background or the interpretation of the message (Boyce 1982:90).

The German functional equivalent to Lobby in Whitehall are the "Hintergrundkreise" in Bonn. Although the neutral label as "background circle" pretends that the purpose of those clubs of journalists who regularly invite politicians or their spokespersons would be the exchange of background information, it provides a most useful opportunity of strategic news management. The circles are divided along party political lines of the journalists or represent a certain type of media or constitute a selection of regional outlets. They are not only important as platform of continuous exchange and possibility of socializing in a less official form. As regards media agenda setting they are a most helpful tool for infusing issues and opinions into clearly defined target media without giving the information an official label. For government officials these circles are often used as opportunity to test new issues by launching the information and waiting for the reaction of journalists.

### *5.3 Media System Factors*

#### The Commercialization of the Media System

In the interaction with the media, government communication clearly reacts to the prerequisites of the media system in many ways while at the same time journalism is also shaped by the political traditions of a society. One crucial indicator as to how strongly the media observe political rules is the politicization of the media which might occur either through a highly partisan press or strong political leanings in newspapers. As to television, the strength of the public service pillar in the electronic media system might serve as an indicator of how much the media are subjected to the logic of the political system. On the other hand, in Western mass communication systems which are basically subject to the market principle, both press and electronic media increasingly obey commercial rules. In addition, the modern mass communication systems have undergone profound changes due to technological innovations and the deregulation of media markets which have led to a rapid proliferation of media outlets, new media and the fusion of mass communication

media and personal computers. This development not only contributes to the explosion of messages but also intensifies the competition among the media.

Regarding the political consequences of this development, Entman (1989) argues that competition in the media market and in the political market bolster each other to the effect that political elites necessarily and increasingly must manage the news in strategic ways:

"competition in the economic market enforces cost minimization and profit maximization, which means news organizations must depend upon elites and make news attractive to the largest number of consumers... the media system encourages elites to fashion rhetoric and take actions that accord with journalistic values and limitations rather than with responsive public policy". (Entman 1989:20).

From this perspective, we can compare the media systems in the US, Britain and Germany and predict the likely character of strategic communications. An international comparison of media systems in OECD countries (Voltmer 1997), shows that the press system in the US is characterized by the complete absence of a partisan press, instead there is internal diversity concerning their political leanings. In Germany, the proportion of unbiased newspapers is also quite high, however, there is a slight right wing bias in the print media system over all. By contrast to Germany and the US, the press system in Great Britain is characterized by a high degree of partisanship with a strong right wing bias on the aggregate level. A similar pattern is visible if we compare the commercialization of the electronic media system in the three countries. The indicator that Voltmer (1997) in her comparison of the OECD countries suggests is the strength of the public service logic in the broadcasting system. Not surprisingly, we find that commercialization of the electronic media is strongest in the US with hardly any public service channels. Germany again takes a position in the middle between the US and Great Britain with a strong public service television which is however partially financed by commercial advertisements. The lowest degree of commercialization is evident in the UK with a strong position of the BBC which is exclusively funded by public revenues in its terrestrial services.

If we look at media system factors as environment of news management political actors in the US have no choice but drawing on the commercial logic of the press and television. By

judging from the degree of the commercialization of the media system and the logic of competition among the media, it is most obvious that strategic communication follows the orientation of the media system. It is most likely then, that the dominant pattern of government news-management in commercial systems is the media centered approach. By contrast, both European countries feature a pillar of a strong public service broadcasting. British newspapers moreover reveal a strong partisan bias. This means that commercial media systems enhance the tendency of a personalized media centered news management strategy in the US compared with a greater focus on political issues or ideological positions in the public service broadcasting in Britain and Germany.

### Media Cultures

Lastly media cultures - defined as subcultures of the national political culture (Semetko 1996:52) - provide the framework for the reporting of politics and the context in which the relationship between political actors and journalists emerges. Two dimensions of the media culture might influence news management: (1) the role definition of journalists in the political sphere, (2) the orientations of journalists towards political institutions. The role definition of journalists implies that their behavior is influenced by their professional organizational context and the socially defined expectations which govern them (Blumler/Gurevitch 1986:75). Thus, professional roles can range from models like neutral transmitter of politics to interpretative or even openly adversarial styles of news reporting. The second indicator consists in the orientations towards political institutions. Blumler/Gurevitch (1986: 89) contend that "journalists react to all special groups and institutions, not only via news-value criteria, but also according to the degree of respect (or lack of it) to which they are regarded as entitled by the dominant value system." The orientations of newsmakers towards the political system might vary from respect and appreciation for the political system (even though individual office holders are criticized) to general orientations of cynicism and distrust.

Regarding the link between professional role definitions or orientations towards the political system and news management we might infer from the contexts to the potentially positively sanctioned types of news management. The assumption would be that the higher the

cynicism and distrust in the media, the more political actors have to engage in media centered news management. As higher the risks and contingencies of news reporting from the point of view of political actors the more they have to adapt their messages to the media logic, simply in order to maximize control of the media agenda. On the other hand, the more journalists respect the political institutions and the more journalists comply with traditional professional norms of impartiality and neutral description the more political actors can work with the media. This also means political news management styles have a higher chance of being effective.

If we compare the countries under discussion with regard to the journalistic orientations towards political institutions and office holders we find the US and Great Britain at opposing poles. For the US, Patterson (1996) finds that news reporting during the past few decades has changed tremendously from the traditional descriptive style to an interpretive style. This approach to news reporting is filled with a profound negativism towards any political institution and incumbent. The study shows that American journalism can be characterized by a general and unleashed anti-politics bias which refers to all institutions of the governmental system including the President. The interpretative style puts the journalists in the role of a political analyst and legitimizes their power to completely control the news message (Patterson, 1996:102). Moreover, the interpretative style goes hand in hand with adversarial and arrogant attitudes towards political institutions and attack journalism (Sabato 1991).

"(Journalists) constantly question politician's motives, methods, and effectiveness. This type of reporting looks like watch dog journalism but is not. It is ideological in its premise: politicians are assumed to act out of self-interest rather than also from political conviction. Journalists routinely claim that politicians make promises they do not intend to keep or could not keep even if they tried." (Patterson 1996:103).

The American media culture is characterized by a journalism that has increasingly been negative in the coverage about Congress and the presidency. Patterson (1996) maintains that the media's constant anti-politics messages has weakened the government. From this perspective, it is no surprise that political actors in general, and the executive in particular, try hard and invest huge resources and intelligence in media centered styles of news

management. In other words: If the media culture is shaped by a general tone of mistrust towards political institutions and by adversarial role models in news making then the efforts of news management might be to try harder to influence the media.

The British and German media cultures differ quite substantially from the US-American role model, at least Americanization does not seem to be a straightforward positive model in Europe. The British media culture for example does not reveal the same features of anti-politics bias as the American. Regarding their attitudes towards political institutions, Blumler/Gurevitch (1986:89) found that in the past the central institutions of the state and government used to receive an almost reverential treatment in the British media. However, the "sacerdotal orientation towards institutions *qua* institutions", which might attract the respect to which they are entitled "by virtue of their symbolic embodiment of the value system of society" does not preclude a critical, even hostile media stance towards the policies and personalities of such institutions (Blumler/Gurevitch 1986:89). Unlike the United States where politicians and political institutions as such have been automatically viewed with suspicion as potentially corruptible, until today "Britain's political sphere enjoyed considerable respect and her politicians tolerably assured status" (Blumler et al. 1996:66). As to the norms of professionalism, British broadcasters seem to adhere to traditional media professionalism in news reporting, which stresses their impartial, nonpartisan objective roles. Broadcasters understand themselves as people in the middle between the government and the governed (Blumler/Gurevitch 1986). The social responsibility tradition of news makers as actors for the public seems still prevalent, even if tendencies of change towards a more independent critical force and perceptions of declining respect have been identified in the British press recently (Blumler et al. 1996:67).

The German media culture must be distinguished from the British and American models insofar as journalism has long been defined as a political profession instead of a professional craft (Donsbach 1993:300). The attitudes towards political institutions among journalists who basically view themselves as actively being involved in the political discourse are twofold: On the one hand, journalists are obedient vis a vis state institutions and the government. Observers even criticize political journalism as obsequious to government



announcements and official statements. On the other hand, German journalists tend to take a political position insofar as they emphasize the political conflicts within and between the political parties and take sides for one or the other actor instead of stepping back in a distant or neutral mode of reporting. Regarding the definition of journalistic roles, German newsmakers tend to show professional motivations like missionaries (Donsbach 1993:291). The political role interpretation of journalists means that it is legitimate that they advocate their own political values and ideas or side openly with one of the political parties or to infuse their convictions in the political debate.

To conclude we would expect political strategies of news management to prevail in Britain and Germany, although for different reasons. In Germany, journalists would be expected to actively side with or oppose the government's messages but not cast doubt about their appropriateness or legitimacy. In Britain by contrast, we would expect political strategies of news management to prevail because media culture in broadcasting and the broadsheet (but not tabloid) press is still characterized by high professional standards of impartially reported debates in the media, respect for political institutions and a number of outlets for highquality discussion of political problems and civic-minded journalism (Blumler et al. 1996). Judging from the media culture dimension, we see that strategies of news management can be expected to vary according to its systematic context, so that patterns found in the United States cannot necessarily be applied to other political systems.

## **6. Conclusion**

From the discussion of government news management we draw two general conclusions: First, news management can be conceptualized as strategic variant of public information whereby governments manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda. It is a top down process of communication whereby the media are the means and targets while the strategies are determined by the political objectives of the specific actor. In the case of government, practices of news management aim at both informing the public about its policies and legitimating its decisions. The prime

motive however can be seen in the executive's political goals in the political competition and the creation of popular consent which decides on the chances of retaining or increasing political power. Taken this general notion, in the countries reviewed in this paper, we find quite similar agencies and communication roles that engage in feeding the media and managing government press relations, government public relations and political marketing, and experts in political strategizing regarding the framing of issues and the setting of the media agenda. The discussion shows that the formal and informal structures and institutions of government news management are functional equivalent in the US, Britain and Germany. Even though the degree of professionalization and specialization varies across nations we can assume to find similar structures in other highly developed Western democracies.

Second, the main argument of the paper however refers to the environmental context of the political system, the media system and the media culture that makes for different approaches, strategies and objectives of news management. Thus, we find that the media centered strategy of news management prevails in the US, while the political strategy seems to structure political communication in the European political systems of Britain and Germany. The argument that the political and media environments determine the meaning and effects of strategic communication however must lead us to closely scrutinize these factors for the diagnosis of future political communication. Thus, both the political systems and media systems in Europe have been undergoing profound changes. Due to processes of (post)modernisation, political systems witness the weakening of political ties, increasing volatility and dissatisfaction with political actors on the level of mass publics which all in all tend to undermine the formerly central role of party organizations and other political intermediaries. Media systems in Europa cope with the consequences of profound technological changes and internationalization which increase commercialization and competition between the media and lead to the specialization and fragmentation of audiences and desintegrated publics. From this scenario, one could infer that the environment of government news management is becoming more and more conducive to the purely media centered style of communication. This perspective gains significance since social science and humanities are constantly producing the knowledge of how news management techniques can be refined and perfected in their effects. Changing contexts,

knowledge and resources of strategic communication might contribute to changes of only news management styles, however, it is also possible that they affect the meaning of political communication in modern Western democracies in general, thereby producing completely different styles not only of communication but of the production of politics.

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