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The Theoretical Potential of Website and Newspaper Data for Analysing Political Communication Processes

Britta Baumgarten & Jonas Grauel [*]

Abstract: *»Das theoretische Potential von Webseiten und Zeitungen als Datenquellen für die Analyse politischer Kommunikationsprozesse«*. This article compares the strengths and weaknesses of websites and newspapers as data sources for the analysis of political communication. Both are characterised as process-generated data and thus share various advantages and disadvantages but vary in detail. We argue that the theoretical potential of these data types in analysing political communication is unequal. We highlight the differences of the sources in production bias, selection bias, access to data and in the extent to which those two types of data can be classified. Based on these fundamental characteristics, we claim that the specific qualities of the data types recommend them for some kind of questions while disqualifying them for others. While websites tend to be more suitable for analysing interpretive frames of individual actors for political issues rather than political discourses, weak rather than strong actors, and for case studies with a narrow time frame rather than longitudinal analysis, the strengths of newspapers tend to be the reverse. Still, whether to use newspapers, websites, other data sources or a combination of sources depends largely on specific aspects of the research question. Our overview of characteristics and possibilities of websites and newspapers should help the reader to take these factors into account.

Keywords: Websites, Newspaper Analysis, Political Communication, Process-Generated Data.

1. Introduction

In everyday life, websites are widely used as a source of data on all kinds of question, and journalists make large use of them (Machill, Beiler and Zenker 2008). Astonishingly, the use of websites as primary data for research questions in the social sciences has remained restricted. In this paper, we compare the advantages and disadvantages of this "new" data source over the classical newspaper. We argue that the theoretical potential of these data types for ana-

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lysing political communication is unequal and has to be taken into consideration in research design. We restrict our perspective to research questions addressing the positions, statements or claims[1] of social actors within public discourses.[2] This perspective could be described as part of the "political communication" approach (Jarren, Sarcinelli and Saxer 1998), which conceptualises public opinion and political decision making as influenced by the communication activities of actors with differing access to the public. To concentrate on the communication of these actors contributes to understanding political decision making. Within this focus on political communication, two objects of investigation are taken into consideration: structure-oriented questions about how discourses develop (see: Keller, Hirseland, Schneider and Viehöfer 2003; Koopmans and Statham 1999) and actor-oriented questions of how one or more political actors build and use interpretive frames (Baringhorst 2004; Johnston and Noakes 2005; Scheufele 2003). These different objects of investigation make different demands on the data source. Following this notion, we discuss the usefulness of websites and newspapers for the investigation of discourses and interpretive frames.[3] We especially aim to highlight the strengths of websites, but at the same time to raise awareness for their weaknesses and to show cases where the classical tool of newspaper analysis is more appropriate. We are interested only in the websites of political actors, like NGOs, governmental organisations or political parties[4] and in off-line newspapers in which political actors express their views.

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[1] A political claim is defined here as "any intervention in the public domain whose realisation would affect, positively or negatively, the interests, rights, and identity of an object population (which may be the same as the author of the claim)" (Giugni 2008: 252).

[2] As with all process-generated data, multiple perspectives on newspapers and websites are possible and the choice of perspective has methodological consequences: Newspapers are perceived in at least three different ways, a) as actors in their own right, b) as arenas for public discourses and c) as a window to reality itself because they report historical facts (Baur and Lahusen 2005). Websites can also be seen from different angles, for example as artefacts or expressions of social processes which carry specific social meanings and thus allow the values, norms, opinions, expectations and aspirations of groups of people to be reconstructed (Pauwels 2005: 609; Reichertz and Marth 2004) or as spaces in which societal actors make claims or statements or state positions addressed to the public in order to clarify their position and to make their interests heard within broader discourses (Singh and Point 2006; Swan and McCarthy 2003). The multiperspectivity of process-generated data makes a full comparison of different data types very complex, since the specific problems and possibilities of each data type can vary with the perspective the researcher adopts.

[3] We draw this distinction between interpretive frames and discourses on the basis of actor-oriented vs. structure-oriented approaches. Authors who reconstruct discourses by analysing the interpretive frames of different actors (for an overview see Baringhorst 2004: 76; Scheufele 2003: 84-86) can be said in our classification to adopt a discursive approach because they are interested in how discourses develop in interplay between different claims.

[4] As data sources we exclude online-archives, online discussion forums, and wikis. The complexity of these sources demands a specific treatment that cannot be outlined in this short article. On these sources see Sidler (2002), Westermayer (2007) and Wright and

In chapter 2, we present arguments why process-generated data in general and websites and newspapers in particular are useful for studying political communication. Chapter 3 highlights methodologically relevant aspects that differ between the two data types: Since process-generated data are usually biased, we assess characteristics of the data types that might lead to bias. Some bias usually results from the production process itself *(production bias)*, other might occur when data is lost over time *(selection bias)* (Baur and Lahusen 2005). We also focus on the problems of *accessing relevant data* and possibilities for *classifying it*. After having introduced the main differences on these aspects in general, we present two case studies in chapter 4 that deal with interpretive frames of political issues from organisations that aim to make their positions heard in the public sphere. They both combine framing approaches (Benford and Snow 2000) and discursive approaches. Apart from these similarities, the cases differ greatly in theoretical interest. While the first case study asks how weak actors strategically shape their communicative strategies with regard to the discourse, the second is interested in changes in the interpretive frames of strong actors over time. The first case assumes relatively stable discursive structures, in keeping with studies following the concepts of Foucault (see: Foucault 1981; Keller 2004). The second case, in contrast, has long-term changes of discourses in mind and asks how actors conceptualised as having the power to influence discourses change their framing – and thus cause changes in the public debate. These case studies show the concrete advantages and disadvantages of the respective data source for specific theoretical interests. We seek to generalise the strengths and weaknesses of both data sources for a selection of major research questions in the field of political communication in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 gives a general overview of which data source is useful for what kind of research question and why.

2. Why Do We Need Process-Generated Data for Studies on Political Communication?

Studies on political communication are concerned with how discourses develop and many ask more specifically how social actors shape public communication in order to make themselves heard within the public sphere. Often we deal with complex studies about changes in an issue over time and/or the interplay between diverse actors. Various channels of communication can be considered. A political campaign, for example, includes posters, directly speaking with politicians, spots on TV, interviews, protest events, and letters to the editor. Depend-

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Street (2007). Nor are we interested in the specific forms of cyber protest (see della Porta and Mosca 2005) that, while belonging to the field of political communication can be reconstructed neither by analysing websites alone or newspapers.

ing on the channel of communication, some data are more likely to be stored than other. To use process-generated data here means to have a pre-selection in any case. Internal decision processes on external political communication are typically also not documented.[5] But process-generated data are still the first choice in many cases in the field of political communication, as we will see below.

If we are interested in how political communication is organised in detail, what discursive events it refers to and what actors are taken into consideration while bringing up a claim, we have to work with naturally occurring data (Silverman 2007: 59). Process-generated data provide data on social actors' interpretive frames of political issues. These details can not be provided by interviews because interview data is always shaped by the interviewee, the interviewer and the interview situation (Silverman 1993; O'Rourke and Pitt 2007). Furthermore, if we are interested in political communication in a long-term perspective, additional problems arise. Naturally, past communication can be reconstructed neither by observation nor by interviews. Interview partners might be dead, untraceable, unable to remember all relevant details, or view past events from a current perspective. The dynamics of discourses cannot be grasped through interviews, since they are phenomena that transcend the individual (Baur and Lahusen 2005). Political communication is also at times to be considered a sensitive topic. Interviewees from political organisations often play power games if telling the "truth" about the motives behind public claims might give an unfavourable impression of them. Potential informants might answer strategically or refuse to give interviews at all (Baur forthcoming). Consequently, process-generated data are often the only type of data available. What is more, some of the shortcomings of interviews or observation can be handled by the (additional) application of methods dealing with non-reactive process-generated data.

3. Different Characteristics of Website and Newspaper Data for Political Communication Studies

3.1 Production Biases

How strongly and in what direction a chosen data set is biased depends partly on the characteristics of the data source but also on the perspective adopted

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[5] Some websites, however, do contain forums specifically created for internal exchange (see Westermayer 2007). These forums can be used for the reconstruction of processes of internal decision-making, but have to be treated with caution: They are only one among many and might be biased if internal decisions not deemed suitable for public observation are systematically excluded. Also, access to a forum is restricted at least by the technical skills needed to access it, so that specific groups in the organisation might be excluded.

(Baur and Lahusen 2005). For our perspective on newspapers and websites as carriers of political communication, we have to ask a) which of the positions that actors want to be publicly known reach the media we use as our data sources and b) what barriers or rules exist that might exclude some claims and include others. In more simple terms, what claims can be found on websites and newspapers, which are filtered out and why?

We find a main difference between websites and newspapers in the role of third actors. While website content is largely unfiltered by gatekeepers and mostly shaped by the authors' intentions, newspaper data are highly pre-structured and selective.

There is a wide literature on media selection criteria (see: Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz 2005). Journalists, but also the editorial offices of newspapers are gatekeepers to newspaper discourses. But they do not perform this function at random. What is written in newspaper articles is highly dependent on the specific purposes of press organs, the institutionalised routines of the media, the formats of single articles, newspaper sections and newspapers. Further-more, the institutional environment of the media has an influence: its political allegiances, institutional politics, political cycles, and economic pressures (Lahusen and Baur 2005; Oliver and Maney 2000). The form and the place of events also influence what is reported, e.g., scandals and protests have a high newsworthiness regardless of the actors involved and events in central areas are more likely to be covered than those in the periphery (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz 2005). The strong gatekeeping to newspapers affects the principal quality of newspaper articles as a data type for social science research. As a result of the factors named above, debates in newspapers are biased, so that certain claims are more likely to be represented in newspapers than others. Further-more, newspapers control not only the selection of claims but also how they are presented, how much space is given to reporting on actor's claims, the exact wording (e.g., direct or indirect speech), and the context in which claims are placed. These alterations might add a "qualitative bias", because claims in newspaper articles might differ from the formulations the original actors would have chosen to communicate their concerns and not always fully reflect what the claim-makers intended to say.

Finally, any kind of political communication is always filtered by the author with a public in mind. In newspapers, social actors cannot address their target groups directly but have to shape their claims for the purposes of journalists. Organisations might issue press releases or give interviews to journalists. They might also make up events, like spectacular protest activities in order to attract the media. The journalists themselves have to shape their articles according to the reader's interests, according to their institutionalised routines and their environment. While websites have to address only one kind of audience (the reader), claims in newspapers depend on the journalists' and on the readers' interests.

In contrast, this "double-faced structuration process" (Baur and Lahusen 2005: 8) between social actors and the media is mostly absent on the internet (Döhring 2003: 268). The barriers to placing public claims on websites are rather low (Hargittai 2000: 236). Any private person or organisation is allowed to run a website and publish content on it. For actors from industrialised countries, the resources and knowledge needed to run a website can be relatively easily attained, so that actors seriously interested in making themselves known online are seldom restricted by cost factors. But this does not mean that barriers generally do not exist. Many states try to remove certain content like extreme-right propaganda from the web and, in undemocratic regimes, positions critical of government may be difficult to publish without sanctions. Still, in most cases it can be expected that actors will not be stopped from publishing claims by third parties (White 1950; Sorapure, Inglesby and Yatchisin 1998). The authors of websites themselves decide what they put online. But this decision depends on their expected audiences and the aims of the websites. As the internet allows multiple publics with different interests (Poor 2005), the authors of public websites can never be sure about their audience (Moes 2000). Some websites are nevertheless rather specifically directed to a specific audience (Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann 2008: 169). For professional organisations, this has led to differentiated websites in which several subsections address different audiences, e.g., the different stakeholders of a firm (Keck 2007). Perhaps more important than these internal divisions is the existence of other channels of communication. Websites seldom depict the entirety of communicative acts because they are specific channels of communication with their own audiences. These channels are interconnected as della Porta and Mosca suggest regarding what they call *offline* and *online environments*: "Since they are more and more integrated and overlapping, human activities such as protest also take place in both environments" (della Porta and Mosca 2005, 186; see also Kneip and Niesyto forthcoming). Depending on what aims the organisation under investigation is pursuing, publishing political claims on websites can be counterproductive.[6] Actors thus decide not only about the content of communication but also about how it is framed and channelled. What is published on organisational websites is often controlled internally and the interests of (possible) alliances have to be taken into consideration.

We conclude that the absence of third actors who filter the content of a website does not mean that there are no production biases at all.

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[6] Even though this might be clear from the arguments made above, it should be noted that the same is true for newspapers as well as for other channels of communication.

3.2 Selection Biases

Process-generated data are usually produced at earlier points in time than when they are analysed. Data selection biases occur if parts of the data originally existing are deliberately destroyed, not preserved, or if data carriers decay (Baur and Lahusen 2005: 18). How strong the data remaining at a certain point in time are biased thus depends on the physical qualities of the data carriers (paper may rot and burn, and hard drives also do not last forever) and the active measures taken by humans to preserve the data. Therefore, selection biases usually increase the further we go into the past. Between different data types there are differences in the measures taken to preserve data and therefore how fast data becomes biased, as our examples of newspapers and websites show.

Baur and Lahusen argue that data destruction has been only a minor problem for newspapers at least over the past 100 years. In most European countries, copies of newspapers are archived by publishing companies or public agencies like libraries and state archives (Baur and Lahusen 2005: 19). This makes newspapers a valuable source for longitudinal analysis. The problem that researchers face is thus mostly not that copies are generally unavailable but where they are available (see chapter 3.3).

For websites, the situation is entirely different: Due to the huge size and fluidity of the web, archiving the web in its full extent is considered to be hardly possible (Luzar 2004: 162; Rössler and Wirth 2001: 281). Older versions of websites are often no longer available because not even the owners have stored them. Thus, longitudinal analyses are often possible only if the researcher starts to store websites today so changes over time can be investigated later. Offline browser software like "Web-Recherche"[7] or "HTTrack"[8] has been developed to assist this storage. Nevertheless, there are also possibilities for going back into the past: Perhaps the most interesting access to old versions of websites is provided by the "Internet Archive (Wayback Machine)", which is currently the world's largest database (Panos 2003). It contains snapshots of websites since the year 1996 and changes on the sites are documented. Websites are collected by a WebCrawler (Alexa). To access the stored pages, the exact URLs or search engines can be used. Also, related websites within the archive may be found via hyperlinks as "all links on the retrieved page are active, and are pointing to the appropriate pages archived during that same time period" (Panos 2003: 345). Still, the "Internet Archive" contains only a selection of publicly accessible sites and owners are allowed to exclude their websites from the archive (Panos 2003). Moreover it still faces problems with showing dynamic sites (Murphy, Hashim and O'Connor 2008; Rössler and Wirth 2001: 282), which make up a growing proportion of all websites (Luzar 2004: 192-

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[7] See: http://www.macropool.de/de/produkte/web-recherche/index.html.
[8] See: http://www.httrack.com/.

193; Seibold 2002: 45). For research on political communication, this means that many older claims might no longer be traceable. Retrospective longitudinal analyses of claims made before 1996 is not possible at all.

3.3 Access to Data

Access to newspapers depends on the kind of newspaper we are interested in and on the period of concern. While some newspapers, e.g., the Süddeutsche Zeitung in Germany, has made recent volumes dating back to the 1990s available on CD-ROM or in archives, other newspapers are available only in specific archives that the researcher needs to know before collecting data. In comparison to websites, newspapers provide better access to older data, as we have seen.

While older versions of websites might no longer be available, recent websites are publicly available by definition. Still, gaining access to sites is not always unproblematic: To determine which websites should be included in the study, the researcher cannot rely on the web alone. There are no lists or archives that give a full account of all existing websites, and given the large number of websites and the constant appearance of new sites and disappearance of others, such a list would not even be possible (see Luzar 2004: 185). The possibilities of obtaining a total overview of the material in question are limited. This makes sampling, as well as a complete inventory count difficult. Data selection by open search via search engines mostly brings biased results (Hargittai 2000; Vaughan and Zhang 2007) because even the best search engines cover only a minority of all websites available (Hargittai 2000: 239; Luzar 2004: 185). Comparing the internet to conventional media, Hargittai states that portals like Yahoo or Google work like gatekeepers: "gatekeeping activity still occurs, but now takes place at the level of product exposure" (Hargittai 2000: 236). She claims that a lot of websites are available in principle but not easily accessible for web users.[9] This problem becomes more virulent the less information the researcher possesses about the websites. In some cases, search engines are not the right way to access data at all. For example, in Germany illegal websites or sites harmful to minors are excluded by search engines (Machill, Beiler and Zenker 2008: 594).

Links between the websites of different actors provide alternative access to data (Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann 2008: 144). But this mode of data gathering carries the risk of excluding sites with few links to other sites.

For these reasons, specification of the universe via online sources is not possible (Rössler and Wirth 2001: 288). A way to bypass this problem is to narrow the universe to an extent that all websites relevant to the question can be checked manually using on- or offline sources (Luzar 2004: 186).

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[9] On the functioning of search engines see also Introna and Nissenbaum (2000).

After choosing the websites to be included in the study, further decisions have to be made. Which parts of a website should be analysed? For research questions with a political communication perspective it would be advisable to look out for parts that contain political claims or self-presentations by the actor that might influence his position as a speaker. Assigning parts of websites to thematic fields is a complex process, which requires expert judgement on the part of the researcher (Luzar 2004: 239). However, to limit the huge amount of work in quantitative studies, technical solutions sometimes applied in newspaper analysis (Reason and García 2007: 307-309) may also be used for websites, e.g., text retrieval programs searching for buzzwords.

Moreover, websites are usually multi-medial, providing the researcher with different configurations of communication, like text-based or audiovisual material, hypertext or animations. It must therefore be decided which elements are to be included in the study (Moes 2000; Rössler 2002: 296). We claim that this decision depends strongly on the specific research interest and the subject matter. As graphics, colours and design are used by social actors as carriers of meaning (Meier 2005; Reichertz and Marth 2004), these elements are of interest for political communication studies. For example, Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto include many elements like hyperlinks to other protest actors or "culture jamming" graphics[10] in their analysis on websites of anti-corporate campaigns (Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto 2007), because these elements can be connected with social practices like mobilisation and issue networking on which the study focuses. In contrast and as a consequence of her research question and subject of investigation, Baumgarten (2008) decided to include only text-based material (see chapter 4.1). Still, websites cannot be read from beginning to the end like a book (Moes 2000). Moreover, reading hypertext involves subjective decisions on when to go on reading or to skip reading the text behind a certain link. The researcher therefore influences the research topic by reading hypertext (Moes 2000).[11]

In comparison to newspapers, websites provide access to a much wider range of material, which on the one hand is an advantage: the researcher is not restricted to text (and maybe one picture) but has access to a variety of communicative means. On the other hand, the researcher is forced to select and sometimes to apply different methods for the different kinds of data available.

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[10] "Culture jamming is the artistic strategy of civil disobedience: Fakes, Adjusting and Semiotic Sniping are the new subversive strategies in the realm of signs and the war for the reconquest of public space" (Waldvogel 2004, cited in Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto 2007: 48).

[11] Screens being split into frames for example leads to the following questions: Do we have to code navigating frames again if they appear on every site? How to deal with windows that pop-up? And how deep does the coding need to go into the structure of the website (Rössler 2002: 301)?

But access to data is not the only problem a researcher has to face when using websites. There is also the problem of classification.

3.4 Classification of Data

Websites and newspapers vary in the possibilities they offer for classifying the data they present. Especially for quantitative studies on political communication and longitudinal studies, it is necessary for several reasons to classify both sampling units and units of analysis. To design reasonable sampling strategies, it is important to connect sampling units with a point in time (see Baur and Lahusen 2005). It is also important for sampling that we can clearly classify what is a unit of analysis. Finally, units of analysis should be classified by author and date, so we can relate different acts of communication in discourse to each other.

Newspapers are comparatively easy to classify. Single issues are traditionally defined as sampling unit while single articles, paragraphs, sentences or words can be chosen as units of analysis (Luzar 2004: 172). Single issues of newspapers are published in a regular pattern, e.g., daily or weekly, so the researcher knows exactly the intervals at which data is produced and can bring this knowledge into his sampling strategy. The researcher may further sample specific sections of newspapers that are easily detected by topic and location within the newspaper (e.g., politics, business or sports). The date and author of articles are usually stated and the boundaries of single articles are clearly marked by empty spaces between articles. The variance of data sources is restricted to text and pictures. The text nevertheless varies according to its purpose within the newspaper (e.g., dossier, letter to the editor). As far as classification is concerned, newspapers hence provide a data source well suited for most research questions.

Websites, in contrast, are often not dated. The data presented on websites might have been produced a long time before it was put online and where no date is given for website documents, only the date of the online publication is certain. The fluidity resulting from irregularly changing websites is a problem for classifying data. As long as the location of the website has not changed, we can at least be sure to have the most recent version of a website and to know the date when it was last modified.

Nor can we say for sure who has produced the content of web pages. For this reason it is often difficult to judge the quality of the data presented (Sorapure, Inglesby and Yatchisin 1998). Regarding units of analysis, the researcher faces the problem of missing physical borders (Moes 2000; Rössler 2002; Luzar 2004: 172). There are often links to other pages and the researcher has to decide whether these sites still belong to the dataset or not. The proposed solution by Rössler (2002: 301) to define borders according to coherence in

layout, content and aesthetics is practicable except for sites that show no inner coherence.

For some research questions, like those focussing on the quantification of claims by different actors (Koopmans and Statham 1999) or the detailed reconstruction of discourse development over time (Keller 2004), websites could be well suited in the future. As already digitalised data, they provide great opportunities for quantification and network analytical questions. But to our knowledge the technical means for analysing these sources is not yet sufficiently developed (see also Luzar 2004).

For other questions, the possibility of data classification is less important. If we are interested in more stable aspects of political communication, like the worldviews of actors or networks of cooperation, to know the year of publication is often acceptable. For questions about claims by institutions, it is not always necessary who within the institution produces a given claim. In these cases, websites may be the first choice of data due to their strengths in other aspects.

4. Case Studies

In this chapter we present two case studies in the field of political communication, which provide examples for research based on process-generated data. The studies vary widely in their focus of research, research topics, and data sources. The aim of this chapter is to show why in the first case websites were better suited while in the second case newspaper articles were the first choice. These examples illustrate when and how websites and newspaper analysis can be used in practice while the decision between websites and newspapers is discussed on a more generalised level in chapter 5.

4.1 Using Websites to Reconstruct the Interpretive Frames of Weak Actors for Political Issues[12]

The first case study[13] is concerned with interpretive frames for political issues of actors representing weak interests. It examines how organisations of the unemployed try to influence the discourse on unemployment. In sum, the study found that organisations of the unemployed as weak actors use discursive structures in order to attain small changes in favour of their constituencies rather than trying to change the structures.

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[12] The characterisation of actors as "weak" refers to their marginalised position within the discourse (see Gerhards 1997) as well as to the limited support of claims and issues raised by these actors (see von Winter and Willems 2000).
[13] The study was conducted for a PHD in communication studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen (see: Baumgarten 2008).

Theoretically, the study combines Reiner Keller's sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis (see: Keller 2004) with the framing approach used in social movement studies (see: Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston and Noakes 2005), and applies them to an analysis of the communication of marginalised actors representing weak interests (Neidhardt 1994; von Winter and Willems 2000). It links the perspective of the discourse with that of the actor. It is not the depiction of the discourse as such that is the primary interest of the research, but the question of how weak actors strategically shape their communicative strategies – especially their interpretative frames – with regard to the discourse. Discourses are conceived as frameworks on which the actors align their actions. The work is conceptually oriented on the Foucaultian tradition (see Foucault 1981), which emphasises the power mechanisms of discourse: not everything said within a discourse will necessarily be heard, the subjects are at least to some extent constituted by the discourse, and not everyone has access to the relevant arenas. The case study follows Keller's approach to discourse analysis in that it treats discourses as negotiation processes between actors, which are connected to certain structures, though not determined by them. In contrast to Foucault, it is assumed that how subjects behave is determined not only by external conditions but also depends on the actors' interpretation of these external conditions (Reichertz 1999). To properly understand power mechanisms, it is important to focus on the actor level, observing how, in a given situation, they pursue their interests and seek to change existing structures.

To reconstruct interpretive frames of political issues the case study concentrated on text-based material. Websites were used as a data source among other sources of information. Furthermore, various forms of communication were collected on the websites. Beside the internet-specific content, resources like flyers, letters to political decision makers, public statements, newspaper articles, legal advice sites and reports on campaigns can be found. Other data sources, like newspaper articles, literature on the unemployment discourse, but also classical literature on existing norms and values, were used in order to capture the broader discourse in which the actor's communication is embedded.

The process of reconstructing actors' interpretive frames for political issues in relation to broader discourses was conducted in two steps. The texts of organisational websites were collected and fixed as text documents. The actors were selected to include different levels of interest representation (local, regional, national) and different organisational backgrounds. The time frame was restricted to the content of websites online in December 2004. Since the discursive structures were conceptualised as relatively stable, a longitudinal approach was not considered necessary.

The study was interested in politically active organisations. Having their own website was considered a sign for a high level of activity. Thus – not just for practical reasons – organisations without a website and those without politi-

cal statements on their websites were excluded from the study. Further indicators for political activity were visibility in newspapers, links with other organisations' websites and references to these actors in interviews. Altogether a sample of websites of 21 organisations was chosen. The amount of text in each varied from less than ten to more than a hundred pages.

The first step was to read the whole website of each organisation carefully. The actors' communication of ideas, knowledge, thoughts and claims were coded by a scheme developed during the coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The next step was to consider the references to the broader discourse. These can broadly be distinguished into references to stable discursive structures, values etc., references to other actors within the discourse, and references to discursive events. Because of their marginalised position in the discourse and the weakness of their interests, the actors under investigation have to align to the discursive structures and look for opportunities within them. They could try to break with the structures in order to attract attention. But this attention would not imply – but rather impede – support. In the case of organisations of unemployed this path was not chosen.

To sum up why websites were considered as one useful source of data: the claims of marginalised actors seldom appear by definition in newspapers, because they are filtered out by third actors. In this case, websites are by far the preferred data source because data is better available. With regard to production biases, the specific style of the websites was favourable for the study. They were used not only for self-representation but for the coordination and documentation of political activities and included a wide range of documents of off-line communication. Selection biases were considered of minor importance, as the study was not interested in data before 2003. Data selection concentrated on the most active and thus probably most visible organisations. It was supported by an off-line list of organisations. For theoretical sampling, the universe does not need to be specified in detail. The question of which parts of the websites to analyse was also easy in this case. The websites were small enough for the researcher to read their entirety and to apply sampling strategies according to principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Furthermore, given the research question and the material presented on the websites, the study concentrated on text-based material only. Websites did not turn out to be disadvantageous with regard to classification of the data. The exact date was not needed since structures were assumed to be relatively stable. References to discursive events were mostly explicit and could thus be reconstructed using the information collected off-line. The reconstruction of authorship was not a problem because the case study was concerned with collective (not single) actors. In addition, claims on the websites were assumed to be approved by all members. Further claims by other actors on the websites were marked as such and could be singled out.

The use of websites as a data source for the study of political communication is surely seldom as unproblematic as in this case. Nevertheless, a range of theoretical assumptions had to be made to avoid facing the disadvantages of websites as data.

4.2 Using Newspapers from an Archive to Reconstruct Long-term Changes in Communication by Strong Actors

The second case study examines the changing picture of coordinated capitalism as constructed by actors in public debates.[14] For this purpose, the interpretive framing by actors engaged in debates on Germany as a business location in national newspapers' business news coverage was analysed.[15] The research question was whether German economic actors still feel obliged to the institutions of the "Rhenish", coordinated capitalism (Albert 1993) or if their self-conception has shifted towards the liberal type of capitalism in the last decades. The Varieties of Capitalism approach was used as theoretical background (see: Hall and Soskice 2001) to analyse the relevance of different ideal types of capitalism for the self-conception of the German economy over time. The underlying assumption was: if economic actors apply positively connoted frames like affluence, job creation and individual freedom to institutions of liberal capitalism and use their negative counterparts to frame claims on institutions of coordinated capitalism, this indicates a change in their view of how "good" capitalism should be organised. In sum, the study shows that, in the course of time, the actors investigated speak more and more clearly and with one voice of coordinated capitalism as "congealed" or "sclerotic" and of liberal capitalism as "flexible". This finding affirms the thesis of the self-conception of the German economy shifting from the core institutions of the Rhine model towards liberal, US-American capitalism as a new model for development. A second finding was a shift in how German economic actors publicly criticise political institutions. While rather objective and pragmatic criticism of institutions

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[14] The study was conducted as a diploma thesis for a degree in sociology at the University of Bamberg (see: Grauel 2005).

[15] The actors analysed (German trade associations, representatives of firms, business journalists, economic research institutes and economic politicians) could be described as a rather broad capital-side discursive community (Schwab-Trapp 2001: 270/271). It was assumed that these actors shaped the public picture of German capitalism to a great extent over the period under study. Other actors engaged in these debates (e.g. labour unions, workers councils, leftist politicians) were deliberately excluded from the study for two reasons: These actors were only marginally represented in the empirical material, which can be partly traced back to the hegemonic position of the capital-side actors in the discourse, including the gatekeeping function of the newspapers and possibly also the archive. Thus, the study did not reconstruct a discursive structure in total but focussed only on the capital side. Nonetheless, from a discursive perspective, the framing of the most influential discourse community was analysed.

dominated in the 1980s, a shift to a sweeping and radical critique of German mentality and culture was apparent during the 1990s. On this basis of these findings, the case was made that public debates might in the long run be a factor for convergence between types of capitalism. While public debates do not directly lead to institutional changes and path dependency remains largely intact, the results do at least document a change in a central societal field that probably has consequences for the organisation of German capitalism because public pressure on decision makers is increased.

The empirical basis was 244 articles published in German newspapers between 1982 and 2004, drawn from the press articles archive at the "Hamburg Institute of International Economics" (HWWA).[16] The sample consisted of all articles filed under the category "international competitiveness" with the regional code "Germany" in ten selected years.[17] This corpus of articles proved to be a very rich source with regard to the research question, since the debate on international competitiveness, revolving around the factors which influence the economic success of Germany, brought many statements on capitalistic institutions.

To reconstruct changing frames, a hermeneutic and qualitative strategy was chosen that combined elements of qualitative discourse analysis and grounded theory: All articles were first read carefully and actors' claims coded in an open scheme, which included the topic or institutional sphere addressed in the claim, benchmarking comparisons with other countries that were drawn, evaluating "metaphors" and addressees of claims. Secondly, the dynamics of the debate were reconstructed by describing the devolution of thematic contents and interpreting the frames applied to different institutional spheres over time.

In brief, newspaper articles can be considered valuable data for the present case for the following reasons. When choosing newspaper articles as a database for political communication analysis, it has to be kept in mind that only claims successfully entering the arena can be analysed. Generally, it may be argued that strong actors are usually well represented in newspaper discourses because they have resources to bring their claims into the media (e.g., through professional public relations) and their statements are seen as newsworthy by journalists. Thus, the risk of powerful actors being excluded from the debates is low. However, on the issue of German economic actors' self-conception, the jour-

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[16] 1982 was chosen as starting point for the analysis since in the literature it is named as the year of the first intensive public debates about Germany as a location for business (see: Löbbe 2002: 22).

[17] From 1970 to 2005, the staff of the HWWA read several hundred German newspapers every day out of which all articles on companies and industries were archived. Furthermore, selected articles on a large variety of economic topics were archived and categorised thematically, the selected category "international competitiveness" being one of them. The HWWA was closed on the 31.12.2006, the archive of press articles is now part of the "Deutsche Zentralbibliothek für Wirtschaftswissenschaften" (www.zbw.eu).

nalist gatekeeping is indeed a problem, since journalists might systematically select certain kinds of claims due to media routines and attention cycles (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz 2005: 400/401) or distort the "true" attitudes of actors towards capitalistic institutions by simplifying or foreshortening the original claims. Websites or other material published by the actors themselves could hence be a valuable extension.

Selection biases are a problem for most long-term studies, and were also present in the second case study. At HWWA, not all articles that the staff identified with the category "international competitiveness" were archived, but only those that added something "new, interesting or important" to the debate. Which articles had these qualities was up to the staff to decide, who presumably changed over the years. But since the aim of the study was only to reconstruct broad changes in the debates, this is no major argument against the chosen sample. Due to the staff selection criteria it can be assumed that a rather broad range of claims is to be found in the archived articles, so that there is little risk of important currents in the debate being overlooked. The good accessibility of articles, which were sorted into categories, was a major practical advantage of the HWWA archive, since it facilitated the selection of thematically relevant articles. The availability of issues dating back to 1982 was another important advantage.

The possibility of classifying the data by date and author was also an important criterion. Classification by date was necessary to order the analysed claims within the time-span, enabling changes in framing over time to be traced. Classification by author was needed to differentiate between the actors of the discourse community in favour of the capital side (whose claims were under study) and other actors (whose claims were not analysed). The actors were named in the articles but the journalist can often not be avoided as co-author.

The case thus shows that the theoretical potential of newspaper articles lies in the possibility of tracing back political communication processes over a considerable time-span without selection biases being too much of a problem. Production biases are a problem since certain claims might are systematically excluded, but this is less of a problem for strong actors.

5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Newspaper Articles and Websites for Political Communication Studies

The specific characteristics of different types of process-generated data recommend them for certain kinds of questions while disqualifying them for others. The case studies have shown some advantages and disadvantages in using the different kinds of data. In this chapter we go beyond these two examples to discuss general possibilities and restrictions in using the two types of data for questions regarding political communication.

We argue that the different theoretical potentials of the data sources makes the choice of data dependent on the perspective of the research question as well as on the research subjects. In this chapter we outline the possibilities of the two data sources for the two different objects of investigation: actor-oriented approaches to interpretive frames of political issues and structure-oriented approaches concerned with discourses. Furthermore, we focus on general limitations of the two data sources depending on the choice of the research subject, namely strong or weak actors.

5.1 Actors' Interpretive Frames of Political Issues

How actors strategically frame issues is a major research perspective in social movement studies (Johnston and Noakes 2005), while some studies in the field of communication science pursue the question of how journalists frame issues (Scheufele 2003). Framing also plays an important role in the analysis of campaigns (Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto 2007). If we want to know in detail how actors communicate interests and positions, author filters (chapter 3.2) need to be investigated. But any further filters are to be treated as possible causes of bias. While newspapers are an ideal source for examining journalists' frames, they do not seem the optimal source for most other framing issues. As we have seen, journalists modify and displace actors' original messages (Ortiz, Myers, Walls and Diaz 2005). Sources that allow actors to speak in their own words, unfiltered by gatekeepers and journalists are thus better suited for analysing interpretive frames that actors use to make themselves heard in discourses. Websites provide this kind of data. Here only the authors themselves and the internal control of their organisation filter the data, and the internal filters of organisations help us (at least in the case of professional organisations) to gather their official positions and claims. As interpretive framing of political issues often takes place in global networks, it is easy for the researcher to collect data on the various organisations that participate in shaping an issue – be it a Council of the European Union, a globally active nongovernmental organisation or the WTO.

The advantages of using websites over newspapers in reconstructing the interpretive frames of political issues are fewer filters, good access to the data, the possibility of collecting data from different communication channels, and the non-reactivity of this method. The internet is a useful tool for gathering data on current framing by organisations and individual actors or that over the past decade. For older frames, newspapers are the alternative and can sometimes be combined with publications by actors or documents (letters, transcripts of parliamentary debates etc.). However, collecting this additional material is often much more difficult and time consuming.

For some kinds of quantitative study, websites are not suitable due to difficulties in accessing and classifying the data. The quantitatively oriented re-

searcher is thus forced to decide between avoiding the problem of filters and a properly defined sample.

If we are examining public claims, we have to ask which such claims might not be found on websites and why. If, for example, we are interested in actors' interpretive frames, we obtain only a partial picture from websites, since a communication strategy implies placing communication in channels where it is most effective. What data is presented on websites is influenced not only by strategic decisions but also by institutional routines determining the structure of the site. Professional websites often refer to a catalogue of criteria a "good" website must fulfil (Machill, Beiler and Zenker 2008; Silberer and Rengelshausen 2000). These standards might exclude political communication completely or restrict selection, which causes further bias.

The different choices of data in the two case studies reflect these problems. In case one, websites were chosen because they lacked the filter applied by newspapers and because, in this specific case, websites also provided access to data on a great variety of off-line activities. In case two, the time frame of the research question spoke against using websites. Furthermore, the present websites of some actors under investigation tend to exclude political communication. Newspapers are accordingly the more suitable data source.

In sum, if the political communication of organisations is analysed, both newspaper articles and websites as sources for public claims might show bias due to the author's interpretive frames of political issues. For newspapers, a further bias might arise due to the media's gatekeeping function, and this problem should be reflected in the choice of data source. Nevertheless, if other perspectives are applied on newspapers and websites, the extent of bias can differ.

5.2 Political Discourses

The social sciences are interested in discourses as mechanisms for the social construction of reality (or the perception of reality).[18] From a power oriented perspective, contention about the privilege of interpreting issues is interesting, because a specific interpretation of an issue promotes certain political decisions (Gamson 1988; Keller, Hirseland, Schneider and Viehöfer 2001).

As far as access to data is concerned, discourses are difficult to capture, because they extend beyond the borders of specific media types.[19] The question of the appropriate sources for analysing public discourses arises, and how differ-

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[18] For an overview of the use of the Foucauldian notion of discourse in Europe see Diaz-Bone, Bührmann, Gutiérrez-Rodrígez, Schneider, Kendall and Tirado (2008).

[19] There are for example various ways to take influence on political decisions apart from the media, like lobbying. Only the successful attempts to shape politics this way appear as political decisions in the media – often without information about the actors behind the decisions.

ent sources can be combined.[20] If we follow the characterisation of discourses as thematically coherent, interreferential bundles of text (Fraas and Klemm 2005: 3), we are interested not only in the texts but in how they interrelate. Discourses develop within various arenas, which differ in terms of accessibility[21] and communicative adequacy. The claims of actors have to be related to those of other actors. The different discursive approaches agree on their interest in dominant frames (many are also interested in dominant actors). This information can only roughly be gathered from websites.[22] The influence of a frame on the debate and the reasons for success and failure in publicising an issue are among the main questions researchers pursue. Only in exceptional cases can this information be culled from websites, if authors explicitly refer to specific events. The extent to which the internet itself can be considered an arena for public discourses is a further methodological question not yet resolved. The actors involved in a specific discourse seldom read the websites of all the other actors involved. Furthermore, the lack of gatekeeping is problematic, because everybody is able to put claims online. The researcher thus has to find a way to interrelate different claims and evaluate their impact on the discourse. Technically these challenges cannot yet be mastered.

Newspapers, in contrast, – if we are examining media discourses – can be seen as discursive arenas because they consciously stage themselves as such. Journalists often explicitly establish links between various actors' claims. But even if claims are not explicitly interrelated, newspapers can be perceived as a specific arena for the exchange of claims. Journalists select claims and order them by issue and in time (and often in space). Only successful attempts to shape politics in this way appear as claims or political decisions in the media. The major newspapers are also read by political decision makers (Herzog, Rebentorf, Werner and Weßels 1990: 74). Newspapers are therefore a good source for data on research questions concerned not solely with the communi-

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[20] To operationalise discourses for the social sciences often the focus is set on actual debates on specific issues (see: Keller, Hirseland, Schneider and Viehöfer 2003). Some studies on political discourses focus explicitly on actors and their influence on the debate (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann 2008). In order to catch discourses various kinds of data are used and often combined (see: Keller, Hirseland, Schneider and Viehöfer 2003). Mass media are often used as data in discourse analysis (see: Schäfer 2008: 370-371). Sometimes newspaper analysis is combined with other data sources like interviews and desk research (Hajer 2003; Giugni and Statham 2005). Further there are studies that already combine newspaper analysis with websites (Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann 2008).

[21] Out of a perspective on social problems Hilgartner and Bosk describe institutional arenas serving as "'environments' where social problems compete for attention and grow" (1988: 56).

[22] Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann (2008) for example take the placement of a website in the results of the search engine Google as an indicator for important actors within a specific debate. However, this indicator does not work for single claims of actors, as the rank is dependent firstly on the actor and not on the single claim.

cation strategies of individual actors but focusing on the structure and dynamics of public discourses. They provide good access to data that are classified and complete (regarding the newspaper itself) and thus also well-suited for quantitative studies.

As the analysis of political discourses mainly draws on text-based material, newspapers appear at first glance to be well-suited. However, newspapers are only one arena among many (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Using newspaper data alone accordingly means that only this arena is captured, not the whole media discourse – raising the question whether one arena can be taken as representative of others,[23] and whether single newspapers can be considered to represent the totality of the discourse in the printed media.

Another point of criticism is that newspapers select issues according to their own criteria (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 65) and, in extreme cases, create news waves on specific topics or stories (Vasterman 2005), which methodologically implies a kind of overrepresentation of issues. Usually one can expect to read about dominant debates, but, given the limited space in newspapers, issues, too, are subject to selection. This is a disadvantage for researchers investigating less dominant discourses. Despite all the problems mentioned above, websites might in this case remain the best possible sources available.

The first case study sought to relate actors' interpretive frames to discursive structures, but owing to the limitations of websites as a data source it did not reconstruct these structures from websites but from a variety of other sources. The second case study can be seen as a mixture of the actor- and the structure-oriented approaches, since it aimed to analyse framing by certain actors within a discourse, but also showed how certain frames become established over time within the discourse community.

5.3 Actors of Interest

Not only the unit of analysis but also the research subjects of interest determine whether newspapers or websites are the better suited data source.

We assume that websites are better suited for studying the interpretive frames of political issues of less dominant actors, simply because they seldom appear in mainstream newspapers. Because of their discursive position they lack access to many dominant discourses. In contrast, organisations are able to publish all the claims they wish on their websites.

Politically active actors that seldom appear in the mainstream media are very likely to use websites for their communication, because the production

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[23] Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann (2008) have found many similarities between internet discourse and media discourse in their research on the discourses on genetically modified food. The internet discourse here is operationalised by sampling the primary 30 hits by the search engine Google, based on the idea that this reflects the search strategies of people seeking information on an issue on the internet.

costs of websites are rather low. If actors belong neither to the group of political decision makers nor have the resources for lobbying but aim to influence political decision making, they have to enter the media (Zimmermann 2007: 168; Baringhorst, Kneip and Niesyto 2007: 49). To the extent that actors are unable to place claims in the mass media, the internet provides an alternative channel for communicating their claims and consulting with their alliances (Waterman 1992; Kahn and Kellner 2004: 89).

Newspaper analysis, in contrast, is a tool well suited for the analysis of elite discourses (Baum and Lahusen 2004; Koopmans and Statham 1999). It is useful for analysing media discourses, as we deal with the original data that appear in the media. If we are interested in how an issue is constructed, the media reflect a great part of this process: The mass media pick up claims from dominant actors and transport these claims as "published opinion" (Pfetsch and Bossert 2004). This makes the media discourse contribution important for the discourse in general and newspaper analysis is one important access to this media discourse. In this context, the selection bias of newspapers mentioned in chapter two is an advantage for the researcher. A selection of claims by newspaper gatekeepers reflects the dominant discourse much better than a selection of websites by the researcher. It helps classify the data as relevant claims.

6. Conclusion: Websites or Newspapers?
A Final Overview of Characteristics and Possibilities

After having introduced relevant characteristics of websites and newspapers as data for political communication and possible research directions we conclude with an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the two data sources for research on political communication. We argue that the data source best suited depends on the research question and should be carefully considered before collecting data. We focus on the three characteristics presented in chapter 3 and relate them to the different research perspectives introduced in chapter 5.

How production biases affect our research depends on our perspective. We have to think about what kinds of filter are wanted by the nature of the research question and which filters should be avoided. Especially when investigating communication by weak actors, the problem must be kept in mind that these actors rarely appear in newspapers.

Selection bias mostly depends on the age of the data source. Newspapers (at least the major dailies) allow us to go back easily for around a century without facing great losses. At the present time, websites are less frequently stored and access is sometimes limited by technical problems. Careful consideration needs to be taken of these biases in choosing a data source.

The different ways of accessing data influence our decision on the data source in many ways. The differences in website accessibility and possible biases arising when websites cannot be found need to be taken into account.

For longitudinal studies we have to consider the novelty of the internet as a medium. For the analysis of long-term changes over decades, as in the second case study, websites are completely unsuited, but this might change in the future with the probable development of internet archives. Access to different configurations of communication via websites can be a big advantage but it poses additional methodological questions about how to deal with these different sources. The same applies to the characteristic fluidity of websites, which forces us to store the data but at the same time allows changes to be analysed over time.

As websites in many cases are not dated, we face a classification problem. This can be a major obstacle to discourse analysis, because we do not know how to relate claims on websites to other claims. Sometimes, as in the first case study, it is possible to reconstruct connections between discursive events and interpretive frames of political issues by further investigations using additional sources. Nevertheless these are time consuming tasks which allow only some links to be reconstructed. Furthermore, information on the author of a document on a website is often lacking. In the case of an organisational website, we never know who speaks on behalf of the organisation and whether the other members agree on a specific claim placed online.

	Websites	Newspapers
Production bias	- not filtered by 3rd actors - filter dependent on author and internal decisions of the organisation	- filtered by 3rd actors, media interests and actors who originally posed a claim
Selection bias	- dependent on website, but usually bigger than the selection bias of newspapers	- dependent on newspaper/ archive, but usually lower
Access to data	- uneven accessibility of websites - fluid: changes over time on the same site, disappearance of sites	- stored in archive - fixed
Classification of data	- date and author often not identifiable - irregular updates, irregular amount of data per update	- date and author known - regular publishing, similar amount of data in every issue
Possibilities to use this form of data	- actor oriented approaches - interpretive frames of actors/ campaigns, self representations - weak actors, strong actors - longitudinal analysis only from 1996 (often much later)	- structure oriented - discourse analysis, especially media discourses - strong actors - longitudinal analysis in retrospective

Generally, the researcher has to put a lot more effort into the preparation of the data in order to fix it. Newspapers, on the other hand, are always dated; they appear regularly and have often existed for a long time. These characteristics make them an ideal source for longitudinal studies and enable the researcher to apply sampling procedures (see Baur and Lahusen 2005).

This article, having considered the different characteristics of websites and newspapers as data, has sought to show, on a very general level, the differing theoretical potential of the two sources. We suggest that websites tend to be better suited for actor-oriented research questions dealing with the investigation of interpretive frames, weak actors and a very restricted time frame. Newspapers, in contrast, are better suited for structure-oriented approaches like the reconstruction of discourses, a focus on strong actors. They also allow us to go back in time many decades.

The following figure shows a short overview of characteristics of websites and newspapers and the possibilities for using them as data sources in research on political communication.

In conclusion it must be said that there is no single "perfect data source" for the analysis of political communication. Of the two sources under study, each has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the research question. Websites can provide data that cannot be captured by other means, but this data is often not valuable for specific – mostly quantitative – operations. So the researcher has to decide carefully which data source is best suited for the research question and also think about complementary combinations of sources.

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