

Over-responsibilised and over-blamed: elected actors in media reporting on network governance. A comparative analysis in eight European metropolitan areas

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This article contributes to the study of democratic problems related to governance networks, by focusing on the role of the media. Two main rivaling hypotheses are examined. The functionalist hypothesis postulates that the media accurately inform the public about policy actors and their responsibilities, independent of these actors' institutional status. The media-bias hypothesis postulates an attention bias towards elected policy actors, resulting in reduced public visibility of non-elected policy actors. The analysis uses standardised data on decision-making processes and newspaper content relating to public transport and economic promotion policies in eight western European metropolitan areas. Findings are that the actor mix of governance networks is quite accurately reflected in newspaper reporting. However, elected actors are more often presented as responsible for policies ('over-responsibilised'), and they are more often blamed for policy failures than other actors ('over-blamed'). The extent of this media bias depends on commercial pressure on media outlets. We also show that variations of this general pattern are linked to different types of media systems found across the cases under scrutiny.

key words network governance • democratic accountability • political communication
• metropolitan areas

Introduction¹

Since the mid-1990s, scholars in the field of public administration have increasingly focused on processes of public-policy making in which the traditional state authorities do not play the central role. Such 'governing without government', as Rhodes (1996, 65) has called it, is based on self-organising, inter-organisational networks as a mode of coordination distinct from state and market. Later on, the term of network governance was coined to define 'public policy-making and implementation through a web of relationships between government, business and civil society actors' (Klijn, 2008,

511). Empirically, governance networks have been studied in a wide range of fields (see Pierre, 2000), ranging from local and urban policy, over public sector reform, to international relations. Research on governance networks has also focused on a broad array of theoretical topics. At the outset, it was mainly concerned with the novelty of governance networks, exploring their formation, their distinctive characteristics compared to states and markets, as well as their potential contribution to policy effectiveness and efficiency. More recently however, a 'second generation of governance network research' (Torfing, 2005, 311) has enlarged the agenda to include more general and overarching questions. This notably entails a growing interest in normative issues, that is, the 'democratic problems and potential of governance networks' (Sørensen, 2005) related to the tensions that exist between governance networks and the 'workings of the traditional institutions of representational democracy' (Klijn, 2008, 520). In this respect the democratic quality of governance networks is often criticised as problematic with respect to democratic accountability (Papadopoulos, 2003). They involve corporate, private or civil society actors who make a substantial contribution to policy-making, but cannot be held accountable by citizens via mechanisms of electoral control. The upshot of empirical research on this question, however, is that there is no general rule. Indeed, the democratic accountability of governance networks is seen to depend on their 'anchorage' in representative institutions and democratic practice (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005).

This article aims to contribute to this debate on the democratic accountability of governance networks. In doing so, we will shed light on a dimension that has been overlooked in this debate so far: the public sphere. Indeed, analyses of the democratic implications of governance networks have been characterised by a somewhat narrow institutional perspective, neglecting the processes of political communication that are crucial, in mass democracies, for the accountability of policy actors to the public. More precisely, we will show that the media play an important and independent role in ensuring democratic accountability in governance networks, and that specificities related to the workings of the media system provides a crucial key to understanding the democratic implications of governance networks more generally. We will do so by focusing on area-wide governance in eight European metropolitan areas which, as we will show, provide exemplary laboratory cases for the study of governance networks. We proceed in four steps. The second section develops the theoretical perspective and lays out the main research question and hypotheses. The section after that gives an overview of the cases, research design and data. This is followed by a section presenting results on the involvement of different types of policy actors in decision-making about metropolitan policies, their visibility in media reports on these policies, as well as the public attribution of responsibility for policy failures and successes. The final section wraps up the main findings and discusses their implications.

The role of the media in (metropolitan) governance networks

The organisation of governance in metropolitan areas is at the core of a long running scientific debate (see Kübler, 2003; Feiock, 2004; Savitch and Vogel, 2009; Lefèvre and Weir, 2012). The basic problem is that metropolitan areas are very fragmented spaces. They have grown by spatial extension, independently from institutional boundaries, and therefore span over large numbers of local jurisdictions. For a long time, territorial institutional reforms have been viewed as the privileged way to

overcome the challenges to effective policy-making resulting from the 'geopolitical fragmentation' (Zeigler and Brunn, 1980) of metropolitan areas. Since the 1990s, however, research on metropolitan governance has increasingly emphasised the role of policy networks in ensuring area-wide governance at the metropolitan scale (see Van den Berg et al, 1993; Lefèvre, 1998; Savitch and Vogel, 2000; Heinelt and Kübler, 2005). Indeed, many metropolitan areas across the world have seen a strengthening of area-wide governance capacity by relying on governance networks, that is, non-hierarchical forms of coordination and cooperation, where policy-relevant actors act on the basis of agreements reached by negotiation. Some observers argue that these governance networks have led to a 'new regionalism' (Savitch and Vogel, 2000) in metropolitan areas.

Similarly to other instances of governance networks, the workings of new regionalism in metropolitan areas have raised the question of its democratic quality (Heinelt and Kübler, 2005). Case studies examining institutional mechanisms of democratic control over metropolitan policy-making (Kübler and Schwab, 2007; Zimmermann, 2014) suggest that, while network governance increases inclusiveness of metropolitan policy-making by involving civil society actors, it results in blurred democratic accountability and reduced citizen control, as policy responsibility is diluted among a large variety of policy-actors not all of whom are electorally accountable. When area-wide governance relies on governance networks, democratically elected local councillors lose grip, and input-legitimacy is reduced (Plüss, 2013). Koch's historical study on the change of mechanisms of institutionalised democratic control indeed shows that functional cooperation in metropolitan policy-making was often paralleled by a retreat of electoral (and/or direct democratic) politics due to 'depoliticisation and technocratisation' (Koch, 2011, 224). The main problem with governance networks in metropolitan areas thus seems to be that it reduces democratic accountability of policy actors, as decision-making increasingly involves actors from outside the 'democratic chain of delegation' (Bergman et al, 2000) that goes from citizens to public administration via parliament and government. New regionalism, thus, seems to have an in-built democratic deficit.

The information function of the media in democracies

The focus on the institutional mechanisms of democratic control in governance networks, however, overlooks the non-institutional dimension of public accountability. Democratic accountability not only depends on the existence of institutional procedures of citizen control by which voters can hold decision-makers accountable – renew their mandate or remove them from office. Democratic accountability is also conditional to voters' ability to express satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with policy performance, identify decision-makers and attribute responsibility for policy success or failure to political actors. Hence, democratic accountability is constructed in processes of communication that help citizens form their opinion about policy performance and connect their appreciation of those whom they consider responsible. In mass democracies, these communication processes are not of an immediate and inter-individual nature, but are mediated by the mass media. Citizens can hold decision-makers accountable for their actions only when mass media provide information about policy decisions and their outcomes. Thus, besides the institutional dimension, there

is also a ‘communicational dimension’ of democratic accountability, relating to the public sphere as one of the foundations for democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1992).

According to Bovens ‘[a]ccountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences’ (2007, 450). In this regard, the link between representatives and the electorate involves a communicational relationship. But because representatives cannot directly communicate to the electorate, the mass media are the forum where candidates can conduct a dialogue with the electorate. This not only happens in the run-up to elections, but also between them. While elections are held on a regular basis (for example, every four years), communication on policy performance and/or responsibility of decision makers is not limited to any particular period. Although there might be peaks of communicational activity at the time of elections, the media can and do inform on policy failures or successes continuously and independently of elections. Even though such information is politically relevant only in relation to some more or less distant moments of electoral control, the media are largely independent from electoral cycles and can thereby play the role of holding decision-makers accountable for their acts in periods between elections.

Moreover, accountability of decision-makers also implies an evaluation against norms of conduct or standards defined by legal, administrative or professional forums (Bovens, 2007, 456). In the media any actor of public interest can be held accountable with regard to a broad range of standards, triggering sanctions by the relevant forum – or influencing actor behaviour in anticipation of these sanctions. Decision-makers, be they elected politicians, appointed officials or independent agencies, can be held accountable for the violation of legal norms, malpractice or incompetence – independently from elections. The media contribute to the legal, administrative or professional accountability of decision-makers by revealing violations of norms to a wider audience (for example, through investigative journalism). They ‘serve as citizens’ eyes and ears to survey the political scene and the performance of politicians’, as well as to ‘act as a public watchdog that barks loudly when it encounters misbehaviour, corruption, and abuses of power in the halls of government’ (Graber, 2003, 143). The unwritten laws of political culture can force decision-makers to resign following ‘public pressure’ – even long before a violation of norms or standards has been legally established. Although the media do not have formal sanctioning power, they can ‘name and shame’ political actors: clarify who is responsible for what and foster public opinion about adequate sanctions.

The media, on the one hand, take up a role of an autonomous ‘accountability forum’ (Bovens, 2007) that have the potential to hold actors accountable to the public independently from electoral processes. On the other hand, the media also serve as a platform that make actors’ behaviour and their responsibilities visible and thereby help other forums to hold them to account. This means that the media provide an additional – communicational – channel by which public accountability of governance networks can be ensured beyond their ‘democratic anchorage’ (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005) in mechanisms of electoral control. From a functionalist perspective (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990), we can argue that the media have the function to inform the public adequately about (metropolitan) politics and policy-making. This assumption is plausible, in that the public is interested in knowing who is in charge of metropolitan policy-making and who is responsible for policy success and failure. Media reporting

will thus be driven by the quest to provide the audience with an accurate picture of the policy-making reality, and therefore seek to adequately cover those actors who are effectively relevant in policy-making. The media will make those actors visible to the public, and provide the information necessary to evaluate their performance. Given the often complex nature of governance networks, this will be no simple task. But provided with adequate means, the media will eventually fulfil their democratic function to provide the public with information about who is responsible for what, irrespective of policy actors' anchorage in formal democratic institutions and practice. Based on this functionalist perspective, we can formulate the hypothesis that the media adequately mirror decision-making and policy responsibilities in network governance. In other words: the media can reduce the formal democratic deficit of network governance, if they play their role appropriately.

Media logic and media bias

This is, however, quite a normative perspective about the role of the media in processes of political communication. The media are far from being neutral reporters of reality. As Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) have argued, the media are not simply a mediating or intermediary agent whose function is to bridge the relation between a communicator and an audience as a substitute for interpersonal exchange. In reality, the media is a system composed of a multiplicity of competing actors who have their own preferences and (commercial) interests. The media thereby add a specific bias to the information they process and to the political content they communicate (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999, 250–53).

Communication scientists have captured this bias through the concept of 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow, 1979) focusing on the conditions that shape the process of news production. Given that not only their resources but also public attention is limited, mass media have to be selective on the events they report. Only 'newsworthy' events are covered, according to 'news value' criteria (for example, proximity, conflict, drama, personalisation), determined by journalists' worldviews and media production routines. With respect to politics, journalists can therefore be expected to have an attention bias towards decision-makers who are directly elected or who are under the control of elected politicians who bear the responsibility for their acts. Elections are institutionalised moments of power struggle and of public attention. Individuals standing for election are therefore of higher news value to journalists compared with actors who are not elected or who operate outside the democratic chain of delegation. As a consequence elected actors are likely to receive more media attention than non-elected actors, independently from their actual importance in policy-making processes.

Moreover, media logic can also be expected to influence the tone in which news is reported. Journalists and editors assume 'good news is no news' and tend to report on problems rather than on solutions, on conflict rather than cooperation, and on scandals and failure rather than on success and performance (Lengauer et al, 2012). Media bias can mean that media actors 'exaggerate their control functions and focus excessively on the negative aspects of politics' (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999, 252). The ways in which media logic plays out differs across types of media outlets, mainly depending on their sensitivity to commercial success. The more news organisations are financially dependent on large audience figures, the stronger the media logic will bias the content of the news they report as they seek to maximise audience shares. This

is the reason for the ‘tabloidisation of news’ (Esser, 1999) observed as a consequence of commercialisation.

In sum, we can hypothesise that media reporting about metropolitan policy-making will be biased in specific ways. Assuming an attention bias of the media towards ‘newsworthy’ elected actors, we would expect that policy actors operating outside the democratic chain of delegation will be less often the subject of media coverage on metropolitan policy-making, even if they play crucial roles in governance networks. In addition, we can expect that negativism will prevail in media coverage on metropolitan policy-making, that is, that actors are more often blamed for failures than praised for success. This is particularly likely with media outlets that are under commercial pressure, that is, large audience media such as tabloid newspapers. The media bias hypothesis therefore suggests a more tainted picture of democratic accountability of network governance in metropolitan policy-making. Not only does it mean that, due to media bias, media reports on metropolitan policy-making will be far from an accurate portrait of the actors involved, or of their responsibilities and merits. It also links the bias in this picture to the formal institutional arrangements, and notably the democratic anchorage of policy actors. Media attention bias towards elected actors will make non-elected policy actors even less visible, and reduce the public’s ability to hold them accountable for their acts. If there is media bias, the media cannot be expected to compensate the institutional democratic deficits of governance networks.

Media system effects

The ways in which the media report on politics varies across national contexts, however. In their seminal comparative study Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that national media systems can be classified into three broad types. One of the core differences between the types relates to ‘political parallelism’, that is, the extent to which the media are integrated into party politics. In the so-called Polarised Pluralist Model, found in Mediterranean countries, the media are closely tied to factional politics and are often used by parties to communicate and debate their positions. The so-called Democratic-Corporatist Model is found in North and Central European countries, and is characterised by professional journalism rooted not so much in political parties, but rather in various segments of the civil society. The Liberal Model, which is found in the USA as well as in Great Britain, has the strongest tradition of non-partisan, professional journalism portending an ethos of political objectivity. An additional distinction between the three models relates to the degree of commercialisation, which is particularly high in the Liberal Model – especially in the print media sector.

The distinction between the three types of media systems is important with respect to the media bias hypothesis that we have formulated, as different media systems can be expected to foster different kinds of media bias. Due to high political parallelism, we can expect the media in Polarised Pluralist systems to portend a strong attention bias towards elected actors who, in most cases, pertain more clearly to party elites than non-elected actors. And due to stronger commercial pressures, we can expect the media in Liberal systems to be particularly biased by media logic, resulting most notably in stronger negativism in the coverage of policy-making processes.

Summary of hypotheses

Two rivalling hypotheses have thus been formulated. The first, functionalist hypothesis argues that media reports on governance networks will make policy actors visible to the public, and report about their responsibility according to these actors' effective involvement in policy-making, and independently of the institutional status of these actors. The second hypothesis assumes that media logic leads to biases in the content of media reports on governance networks, resulting in an attention bias towards elected (rather than non-elected) actors, as well as in negativism in news reports on these actors. Additionally, we have qualified the media bias hypothesis in two ways. On the one hand, we expect media bias to be stronger in media outlets that are under high commercial pressure. On the other hand, we expect the media system context to play a role, in the sense that we expect a stronger attention bias towards elected actors in Polarised Pluralist media systems, and negativism to be stronger in Liberal systems.

Research design and data

The aim of the analysis presented in this article is to measure variations in media reporting on metropolitan policy-making, and explore to what extent these variations are related to differences in the institutional 'democratic anchorage' (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005) of governance networks. The core question here is whether media reports on policy actors differ depending on these actors' location inside or outside the democratic chain of delegation, that is, whether or not a policy actor can ultimately be held accountable by the citizens in elections. More precisely, we distinguish between three different types of actors: elected actors, non-elected actors as well as an intermediary category of mixed actors. The term 'elected' is understood rather broadly: the category of 'elected actors' includes actors who are either directly elected by voters or accountable to an elected actor and therefore part of the democratic chain of delegation. Non-elected actors are those who are appointed to their position by other mechanisms than democratic election, and who are not accountable to any elected actor. The mixed category represents collective actors (for example, organisations or firms), in which both elected and non-elected actors exercise some form of control. Actors that do not fit any of these three categories (for example, parties, experts, citizens) are subsumed under the residual category of 'others'.

Case selection: public transport and economic promotion policies in eight European metropolitan areas

Two fields of metropolitan policy-making were selected for the empirical analysis: public transport and economy promotion. Both are paramount to the development of metropolitan areas and can be seen as exemplary fields for metropolitan policy-making more generally (see Brenner, 2003). Public transport is a key infrastructure for urban regional development, as it secures territorial connectivity and accessibility. Activities in economic promotion are equally important to metropolitan development, as their goal is to attract new businesses to a metropolitan area, and/or strengthening existing economic clusters.

The empirical investigation was conducted in eight large metropolitan areas in western Europe (Bern, Zurich, Berlin, Stuttgart, Paris, Lyon, London and

Birmingham), selected with the objective to maximise variance on the main two independent variables of interest (Table 2).

First, this is the mix between elected and non-elected actors involved in metropolitan policy-making. As the precise nature of this mix is difficult to establish *ex ante*, the more general institutional set-up of metropolitan governance arrangements was used as a proxy. At present, metropolitan areas across the world have followed mainly two distinct institutional models: metropolitan government or new regionalism (see Kübler and Pagano, 2012). The metropolitan government model focuses on hierarchical decision-making, centralised planning and public bureaucracies: elected actors can be expected to play a crucial role here. The new regionalist model emphasises flexible coordination based on governance networks: non-elected actors can be expected to be more important in these settings. The eight metropolitan areas under scrutiny therefore represent these two main institutional models (see Heinelt and Kübler, 2005; Lefevre, 2009). While new regionalism prevails in Bern, Berlin, Paris and Birmingham, consolidated metropolitan governments operate in Stuttgart (Verband Region Stuttgart), Lyon (Grandlyon), London (Greater London Authority) and Zurich (the canton).²

Second, the eight metropolitan areas under scrutiny were drawn from national contexts representing the three different media system types identified by Hallin and Mancini (2004): the United Kingdom (Liberal media system), France (Polarised Pluralist media system), as well as Germany and Switzerland (Democratic Corporatist media system).

Variables, method and data

The empirical study entailed the investigation of three variables: the involvement of elected, non-elected and mixed actors in decision-making processes, the visibility of these actors in media reports, the attribution of responsibility to these actors as well as the tonality of these attributions of responsibility. The first variable was investigated via case study evidence, the remaining two draw on standardised media content data.

Involvement of actors in decision-making processes

In order to identify the mix of actors involved in metropolitan policy-making, we examined strategically significant decision-making processes in the two policy fields in each metropolitan area. In the field of public transport, we focused on the formulation of the most recent (in the year 2010) metropolitan transport strategies. In the field of economic promotion, we investigated the setting up of economic promotion agencies operational in the year 2010. Qualitative documentary evidence on these decision-making processes drawn from publications, newspapers and websites was standardised using the Actor Process Event Scheme (APES) software tool (Widmer et al, 2008). The APES tool systematises information on decision-events and the actors involved in these on a time scale extending over the whole decision-making process. On this basis, the number of actor participations in decision events can be computed, and then further analysed to determine the involvement of different types of actors for the decision-making processes under scrutiny. Overall, the 16 decision-making processes that were investigated (one for each policy field in the eight metropolitan areas) yielded a total number of 611 actor participations in decision events.³

Standardised media content analysis

Our analysis of media reporting uses content data from locally relevant newspapers. For each metropolitan area, three newspapers with high circulation figures, as well as a head office located in the metropolitan area were selected. Among those, two quality newspapers were selected, as well as one large audience newspaper, ideally a tabloid – the exception is Lyon, where only one locally relevant newspaper was found (see Table 2).⁴ The distinction between quality and large audience newspapers is important as quality newspapers are less exposed to commercial pressure than are tabloids, in which we expect a stronger media bias as they ‘produce all news and information with an eye towards its “saleability”’ (Esser, 1999, 292).

For the collection of newspaper content data we followed the research strategy and coding scheme developed by Gerhards et al (2007). In a first step, the digital archives of the selected newspapers were used to identify articles reporting on the fields of metropolitan policy-making (that is, public transport and economic promotion) in the year 2010. The large sample of articles thus identified was then reduced via stratified randomisation to 200 articles for each metropolitan area (100 per policy field). The content of these 1,600 articles was coded in their original languages (German, French and English) by a team of five student assistants, according to a standard coding procedure. Tests of inter-coder reliability yielded results comparable to other studies working with similar coding schemes.⁵

Visibility of an actor in media reports is measured on the basis of his or her mentions in the media articles (on the whole, 9,062 different actors were mentioned at least once in the whole sample of articles). Attributions of responsibility to actors, were captured on the basis of statements in which someone (the attribution addressee) was made responsible by someone (the attribution sender) for a given policy decision or outcome (the attribution subject) in a positive or negative assessment (the attribution type) (see Table 1). Overall, 1,224 attributions of responsibility to identifiable addressees were found, of which 688 were classified as negative and 536 as positive.

Table 1: Public attributions of responsibility: coding examples

Text example attribution subject	Attribution sender	Attribution addressee	Type of attribution
‘The Mayor’s policy successfully contributed to the quality of local transport in our city.’	Journalist	Mayor	Positive attribution of responsibility
‘The Mayor accused the Parliament of undermining his efforts to promote the local transport of the city by holding back money.’	Mayor	Parliament	Negative attribution of responsibility

The subsequent analysis is based on contingency tables and bivariate statistics. Unless otherwise stated, the threshold for statistical significance is defined at $p < 0.05$. Table 2 presents an overview of cases and data.

Table 2: Summary of cases and data

	Switzerland		Germany		United Kingdom		France	
Metropolitan area	Bern	Zürich	Berlin	Stutt-gart	Birming-ham	London	Paris	Lyon
Institutional setting*	NR	MG	NR	MG	NR	MG	NR	MG
Media System**	DC	DC	DC	DC	LIB	LIB	PP	PP
Actors in decision-events	64	36	36	126	114	130	59	46
Newspapers***	Bund BZ 20m BE	TA ZSZ 20m ZH	BMp BerlZ MAZ	StZ StN NürZ	BEM BP SN	Guard Indep LES	Paris Figaro Croix	Progrès
News Articles	200	200	200	200	200	200	200	200
Actors mentioned in news articles	1376	1014	1085	1546	838	1222	1186	804
Attributions of responsibility in news articles	121	99	151	167	155	225	233	73

* Governance Type: NR = New Regionalism, MG = Metropolitan Government

** National Media System: DC = Democratic Corporatist, LIB = Liberal, PP = Polarized-Pluralist

*** Newspapers: Bund = 'Der Bund'; BZ = 'Berner Zeitung'; 20m BE/ZH = '20Minuten Bern / Zürich'; TA = 'Tages-Anzeiger'; ZSZ = 'Zürichsee Zeitung'; BMp = 'Berliner Morgenpost'; BerlZ = 'Berliner Zeitung'; MAZ = 'Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung'; BEM = 'Birmingham Evening Mail'; BP = 'Birmingham Post'; SN = 'Solihull News'; Guard = 'The Guardian'; Indep = 'The Independent'; LES = 'London Evening Standard'; Paris = 'Le Parisien'; Figaro = 'Le Figaro'; Croix = 'La Croix'; Progrès = 'Le Progrès'.

Empirical findings

Involvement, visibility and accountability of elected and non-elected actors: overall results

In spite of the differences in the institutional set-up, elected actors prevail in all eight metropolitan areas (Table 3). They are the dominant actors in decision-making processes, they are the actors whom the media make most publicly visible, and they are the ones to whom most attributions of responsibility are addressed. Nevertheless, non-elected actors are clearly present in all three domains; roughly a quarter of the actors involved in policy-decisions, visible in media reports, and addressees of public attributions of responsibility are non-elected actors. This seems largely commensurate with the functionalist hypothesis: media reports seem to provide quite an accurate picture about the policy actors and their responsibilities in metropolitan policy-making.

We also see, however, significant differences between the distributions of the types of actors across the three domains. Elected actors are more present in decision-making, and they are more often addressees of public attributions of accountability than they are made visible in media reports. The opposite is true for non-elected actors. While their presence in decision-making is comparable to their visibility in media reports, they are less often addressees of responsibility attributions. This suggests that media reporting on metropolitan policies, although it does make non-elected actors and

Table 3: Frequencies of actor types involved in policy-decisions, mentioned in media reports, and as addressees of responsibility attributions (all eight metropolitan areas)

Actor types	Involvement (in decision-making)	Visibility (actor mentions in media reports)	Responsibility (Addressees of responsibility attributions)
Other	50 (8.2%)	1260 (13.9%)	90 (7.4%)
Non-elected*	151 (24.7%)	2403 (26.5%)	249 (20.3%)
Mixed	47 (7.7%)	592 (6.5%)	131 (10.7%)
Elected**	363 (59.4%)	4807 (53.0%)	754 (61.6%)
N =	611 (100%)	9062 (100%)	1224 (100%)

Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions (overall): $X^2 = 111.04$, $p < 0.001$

* Chi-square test for goodness of fit (non-elected actors): $X^2 = 16.24$, $p < 0.001$

** Chi-square test for goodness of fit (elected actors): $X^2 = 17.55$, $p < 0.001$

their roles in decision-making publicly visible, focuses on elected actors when it comes to qualifying the role of different policy actors, that is, praise for what went well or blame for what went wrong. Non-elected actors are not generally less exposed to media attention than elected actors, compared to their involvement in decision-making processes. But non-elected actors are less often addressees of attributions of responsibility, unlike elected actors who appear as the media's preferred targets when it comes to assess the ways in which policy issues are dealt with.

Looking at the tone of media reports, Table 4 shows that negative attributions of responsibility are more frequent (56.2 per cent) than positive attributions of responsibility (43.8 per cent). Actors to whom responsibility is attributed in media

Table 4: Positive and negative public attributions of responsibility according to types of addressee

Addressee actor types	'Praise' (positive attr. of resp.)	'Blame' (negative attr. of resp.)	Total
Other	40 (44.4%)	50 (55.6%)	90 (100%)
Non-elected*	144 (57.8%)	105 (42.2%)	249 (100%)
Mixed	49 (37.4%)	82 (62.6%)	131 (100%)
Elected**	303 (40.2%)	451 (59.8%)	754 (100%)
N =	536 (43.8%)	688 (56.2%)	1224 (100%)

Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions (overall): $X^2 = 26.110$, $p < 0.001$

* Chi-square test for goodness of fit (non-elected actors): $X^2 = 19.82$, $p < 0.001$

** Chi-square test for goodness of fit (elected actors): $X^2 = 3.98$, $p < 0.001$

reports are more often blamed for policy failures than praised for policy success. Interestingly, the ratio between blame and praise is reversed between non-elected actors and elected actors. Non-elected actors receive more praise than blame, while elected actors receive more blame than praise.

This indicates a media bias in reporting about elected and non-elected actors. Indeed, elected actors appear twice as often as non-elected actors in newspaper articles, but are made responsible three times as often. Moreover, elected actors are blamed more often than are non-elected or mixed actors. However, in the absence of detailed case study evidence on the exact role of the various actors in decision-making processes, we cannot be sure that this is a result of media bias in reporting. It could well be that, although non-elected actors are present in decision-making processes, elected actors were decisive and that the media thus reported adequately on their role and distributed blame and praise in an accurate way. But if we differentiate according to the type of newspaper (quality versus large audience newspapers) we see that both the responsabilisation of elected actors and the predominantly negative tone of media reports on them is a result of media logic related to commercial pressure in the media market. Indeed, there is a difference in both the visibility/responsibility ratio and the blame/praise ratio of elected actors across the two types of newspapers: these ratios are more unbalanced in large audience newspapers than in quality newspapers (Table 5).

Table 5: Visibility/responsibility and praise/blame ratios of addressees according to types of newspaper

Addressee actor types	Large audience newspapers		Quality newspapers	
	Visibility/responsibility ratio	Praise/blame ratio	Visibility/responsibility ratio	Praise/blame ratio
Other	15:6	58:42	14:8	41:59
Non-elected	28:17	52:48	6:7	60:40
Mixed	7:14	37:63	26:22	38:62
Elected	50:63	37:63	54:61	41:59

Effects of national media systems

Comparing the importance of the different types of actors in each of the three domains across the different media systems, Table 6 confirms the general pattern previously identified. In all three media systems, elected actors are the dominant actors in decision-making, are those that the media make most visible in their reports, and are those that are most frequently attributed responsibility for policy failure or success. Similarly, in all media systems, non-elected and mixed actors are made visible in media reports to an extent that is commensurate with their involvement in decision-making processes. Finally, in all three media systems, the level of responsibility attributions to elected actors is higher than their involvement in decision-making or their visibility in media reports would suggest. The results of the Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions within each media system show that these findings are statistically significant.

Table 6: Frequencies of actor types involved in policy decisions, mentioned in media reports, and as addressees of responsibility attributions, according to media systems

Actor types	Democratic corporatist			Polarised pluralist			Liberal		
	Involvement	Visibility	Responsibility	Involvement	Visibility	Responsibility	Involvement	Visibility	Responsibility
Other	23 (8.8%)	691 (13.8%)	58 (10.8%)	5 (4.8%)	175 (8.8%)	9 (2.9%)	22 (9.0%)	394 (19.1%)	23 (6.1%)
Non-elected*	45 (17.2%)	1219 (24.3%)	101 (18.8%)	30 (28.6%)	536 (26.9%)	50 (16.3%)	76 (31.1%)	648 (31.5%)	98 (25.8%)
Mixed**	15 (5.7%)	424 (8.5%)	86 (16.0%)	13 (12.4%)	79 (4.0%)	36 (11.8%)	19 (7.8%)	89 (4.3%)	9 (2.4%)
Elected***	179 (68.3%)	2678 (53.4%)	293 (54.5%)	57 (54.3%)	1200 (60.3%)	211 (69.0%)	127 (52.0%)	929 (45.1%)	250 (65.8%)
N =	262 (100%)	5012 (100%)	538 (100%)	105 (100%)	1990 (100%)	306 (100%)	244 (100%)	2060 (100%)	380 (100%)

Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions (within democratic corporatist media system): $X^2 = 109.275$, $p < 0.001$

Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions (within polarised pluralist media system): $X^2 = 126.270$, $p < 0.001$

Chi-square test for homogeneity of proportions (within liberal media system): $X^2 = 198.716$, $p < 0.001$

Chi-square test of independence (involvement across media systems): $X^2 = 45.560$, $p < 0.001$

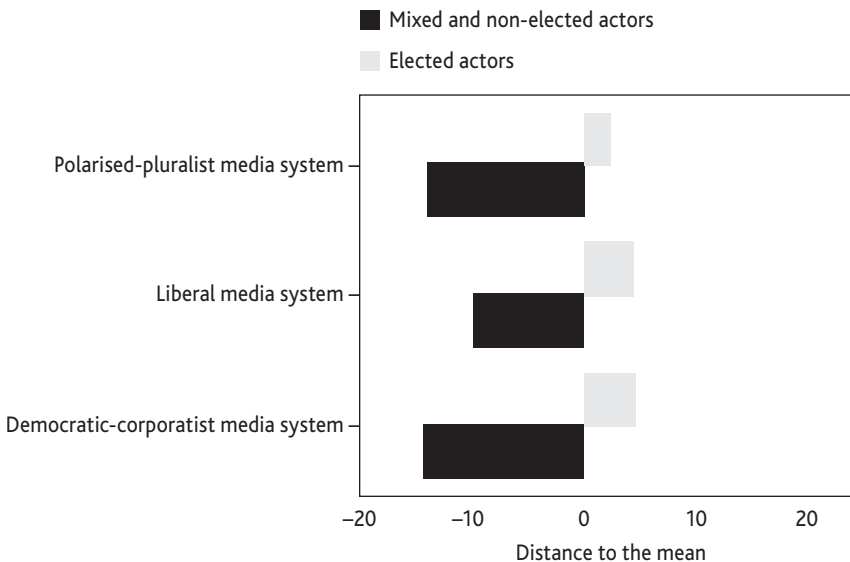
Chi-square test of independence (visibility across media systems): $X^2 = 214.377$, $p < 0.001$

Chi-square test of independence (responsibility across media systems): $X^2 = 73.406$, $p < 0.001$

There are nevertheless two important variations of this general pattern between the three media systems. First, media visibility of the four actor types is significantly different across the three media systems. More precisely, the media visibility of non-elected and mixed actors is more pronounced in the democratic-corporatist and the liberal media systems, than in the polarised-pluralised media system, where the media focus on elected actors is much stronger. The media in the polarised-pluralist media system therefore do have a stronger attention bias towards elected actors, compared to their counterparts in the other two media systems. Second, the attributions of responsibility to the different types of actors differ significantly across the three media systems. Indeed, the tendency of media reports to attribute responsibility predominantly to elected actors is clearly less pronounced in the democratic-corporatist media system, than in the other two. It is particularly strong in the liberal media system, where elected actors are much more frequently attributed responsibility for metropolitan policies compared with their involvement in decision-making or with their visibility in media reports.

Looking at the tone of responsibility attributions, the general pattern is confirmed for each of the three media systems: negative attributions of responsibility are more frequent than positive ones, and the praise vs blame ratio is particularly unfavourable for elected actors. However, this pattern varies significantly between the three media systems ($X^2 = 26.110$, $p = 0.000$). This is nicely shown in Figure 1, giving a sense of ‘over-blaming’ of elected actors, that is, their likeliness to be more often blamed for policy failures than other actors.⁶ The values in the figure represent the difference between the blame/praise ratio of each actor category from the overall blame/praise ratio found in the cases under scrutiny. A positive value means that an actor is more often blamed than the mean, a negative value means that he/she is more often praised than the mean. While elected actors are generally over-blamed and non-elected and mixed actors are somewhat over-praised, over-blaming of elected actor is less

Figure 1: Blaming of policy actors in media reports compared to the mean blame ratio, according to types of media system (across the 16 cases)



pronounced in the polarised-pluralist media system, and over-praising of non-elected and mixed actors is less pronounced in the liberal media system.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to explore the role of the media in relation to the democratic implications of governance networks. In order to do this, two main rival hypotheses – a functionalist and a media-bias hypothesis – were formulated and tested on the basis of empirical data on the involvement of different types of policy actors in decision-making processes in eight European metropolitan areas, their visibility in media reports, as well as the responsibility attributed to them in these reports for policy success or failure.

The overall findings show that neither of the two hypotheses can be rejected in globo. The functionalist hypothesis postulates that, in democracies, the media fulfil a basic information function which will lead to a public coverage of policy actors and an assessment of their responsibility that adequately mirrors their effective role in policy-making, independently from their anchorage in institutional mechanisms of democratic control. The findings do not contradict this hypothesis. Indeed, non-elected actors and mixed actors, as well as elected actors are made publicly visible in the media reports in a way that is commensurate with their effective involvement in policy-making. It appears that the media can keep up with the complexity of network governance to a remarkable extent. The media therefore seem to play a somewhat compensating role with respect to institutional deficits of democratic control in network governance. However, while no media bias towards a particular type of policy-actor could be detected with respect to their visibilisation in media report, a bias was found with respect to the attribution of responsibility to different types of policy actors. Unlike non-elected actors or mixed actors, elected actors are clearly in the focus of the media when it comes to attributing responsibility for policy success or failure. We have shown that this is linked to the degree of commercialisation of news outlets, therefore suggesting that a bias due to media logic is at work here. Elected actors are clearly ‘over-responsibilised’ in the media, compared to their real involvement in decision-making processes, or compared to their visibility in media reports. And elected actors are also ‘over-blamed’: responsibility for policy failures or problems is more often attributed to them than to other types of actors. It seems that it is mainly in combination with blame for policy failure that elected actors appear to be more newsworthy to the media than non-elected or mixed actors. In this respect, the media do not play a compensating role with respect to institutional democratic deficits of network governance. Very much to the contrary: they can be seen to reinforce these deficits.

This general pattern, however, was found to vary across different media systems. Over-responsibilisation of elected actors is particularly pronounced in the polarised pluralist media system, while over-blaming is particularly noticeable in the liberal media system. In media outlets drawn from countries with a democratic-corporatist media system, both over-responsibilisation and over-blaming is less manifest. This suggests that the aptitude of the media to compensate institutional democratic deficits of network governance differs across media systems. In polarised-pluralist media systems, journalists and media organisations seem to have less experience in understanding or scrutinising the role of hybrid or private policy actors in metropolitan

policy-making, hence their focus on elected actors as the main target for accountability claims. In the democratic-corporatist systems, the media seem to have a better understanding of the variety of actors involved in policy-making, scrutinise their role and also assign accountability to them. Finally, in the liberal system, the traditional watchdog journalism, combined with commercial pressure on media outlets, leads to an exacerbated negativism.

Our findings have implications for the debate on the democratic quality of governance networks more generally. Indeed, we have shown the relevance of the communicational dimension of democratic legitimacy in this debate. But the role of the media in democratic accountability of network governance seems to be a sword that cuts both ways. On the one hand, the media do contribute to making policy actors visible to the public, independently from their anchorage in democratic institutions. On the other hand, a media logic is at work when it comes to assessing and qualifying the responsibility of these policy actors, biasing the reports in a way that makes electorally controlled actors the primary target of accountability and blame – particularly so in polarised-pluralist and liberal media systems. This could exacerbate the challenges that governance networks pose for the legitimacy of the democratic political system more generally. Whether this is the case, however, depends on the role that media reporting on actors of policy-making plays for assessment by the citizens and for their electoral decisions. Hence, the results of the research reported in this article suggests that, in order to deepen our understanding of democratic implications of network governance, the next logical step consists in exploring the effect that exposure to different media reports on network-based policy-making has on citizens' assessment.

Notes

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² In the case of Zurich, the spatial extension of the metropolitan area coincides more or less with the boundaries of the canton, that is, the second tier subnational authority, which has thereby become a functional equivalent to a metropolitan policy fields studied here (Jouve, 2003; Kübler, 2004).

³ A detailed description of the method as well as the results of a more fine-grained analysis on the actors involved in these decision-making processes can be found in Christmann (2014).

⁴ In the absence of existing typologies for regional newspapers, our distinction draws mainly on circulation figures. 'Large audience newspapers' are those with the highest circulation figures in their metropolitan area. Clear tabloids could thus be identified and were retained for the analysis: *20 Minuten (Bern and Zurich)*, *Le Parisien*, the *London Evening Standard*, *Solihull News*. In Berlin and Stuttgart, the archives of the regional tabloids *Berliner Tageszeitung (BZ)* and *Bild Stuttgart* were not accessible for digital analysis. Hence, the

next largest regional newspapers *Berliner Zeitung* (for Berlin) and *Nürtinger Zeitung* (for Stuttgart) were chosen for the category 'large audience' newspapers.

⁵ Full details of the method used for the media content analysis (in particular: on the selection of articles, coding procedures and reliability checks) are published in Hasler (2014).

⁶ For the sake of graphic representation, the two actor categories of mixed as well as non-elected actors were collapsed, and the categories of 'other actors' was omitted.

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