

Bristol, 3rd November 2008

Journalists' Perceptions of Summits of the European Council

- The Cases of Austria, Finland and Germany -

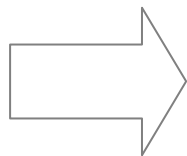
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Previous Research Results

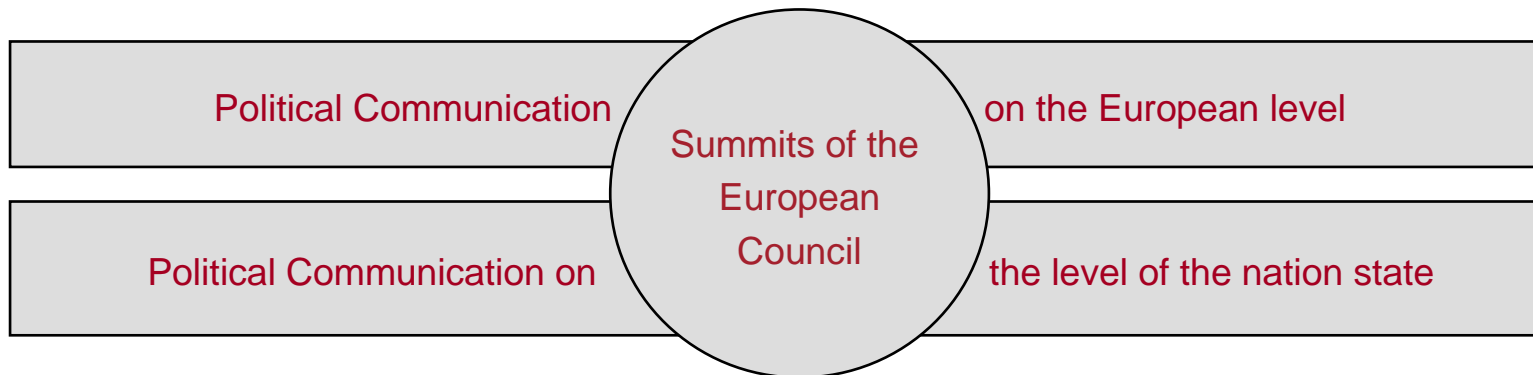
- Similar role perceptions of German and British EU correspondents despite different background media cultures.
- Media and politics on a European level are described as less interdependent than in the national context.



Political and media representatives have established a unique culture of political communication.

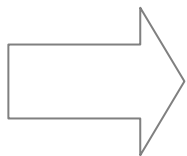
Previous Research Results

- The EU is a “sui generis” case
 - Main insight: Theories about the interplay between media and politics (macro level) and the interplay between political PR experts and journalists (micro level) developed in context of the nation state are not applicable to the EU level.
 - However, political communication in the European Council seems to be an exception from everyday political communication in Brussels.



Why Summits of the European Council?

- Content analyses have shown that the coverage of European affairs peaks at summits of the European Council.*
- The majority of the Brussels correspondents and journalists from the capitals of the Member States attend the meetings.
- It can be expected that governments
 - use the opportunity to present themselves on an international level.
 - stage “success stories” for their voters at home.



This unique setting allows to analyse political communication in-between the European and the national level

*(e.g. Peter and de Vreese 2004, Peter et al. 2003)

Research Questions

- Does the relation between media and politics change at summits of the European Council?
- What are the features of communication between journalists and political actors at summits of the European Council?
- What are the dynamics inside the press corps, especially between EU correspondents and colleagues from the Member States?

Method and Selection of Interviewees

Semi-Structured Expert Interviews & Participant Observations

- **Interviews (n=38):**
 - GERMAN, FINNISH, and AUSTRIAN JOURNALISTS
 - Journalists working for: press, television, internet, and news agencies
 - Brussels correspondents (n=24) and correspondents from the capitals (n=14)

- **Participant observation:**
 - At KEY EVENTS for 'European communication'
 - Summit of the German Presidency in Brussels (6/2007)
 - Background briefing at the German embassy in the run-up to the ECOFIN council of the Portuguese Presidency (11/2007)
 - Two midday briefings of the European Commission (10/2007)

First Tentative Results

Cultural Differences

- The culture of communication in the European Council changes every six months with its Presidency.
- Moreover, journalists report differences in the style of communication of the Member States at summits.

First Tentative Results

Political Communication Strategies

- Summits of the European Council are used for the self representation of national politicians to get favourable media coverage back in their home countries.
- Journalists describe that summits as not transparent for the media. Despite the spatial proximity to the politicians in the Council building, they describe a “vacuum of information”.
- The negotiations and the voting in the European Council and the Council of Ministers are in most cases not public. This allows governments to use Brussels as a “scapegoat” to communicate unfavourable facts to the citizens.

First Tentative Results

Political Communication Strategies

- Exception: European successes become national successes while a country is holding the Presidency. Therefore, many communicative aims from the national and the EU level become identical. The “blame game” stops for six months.
- In the run-up to summits, governments often try to manage expectations. Journalists emphasised that the German Presidency did everything to lower the expectation before the summit in June 2007.
- While negotiations in the Council are taking place behind closed doors, conflicts are often personalised and staged as duels between heads of governments for the media and the public.

First Tentative Results

Political Communication Strategies

- Strategies of news management and 'spin-doctoring' can be applied effectively because:
 - Briefings of different countries take place simultaneously.
 - Most of the time they are held in the language of the respective Member State.
 - Whether journalists can cover more than one briefing depends on their resources. If they cannot, different national positions can only be compared with delay.

- Politicians use media during summits to put public pressure on negotiation partners
 - Information is leaked intentionally to the news agencies in order to influence negotiations.

First Tentative Results

Dynamics Inside the Press Corps - National Level

- EU-correspondents use different sources of information than journalists who are not socialised into the Brussels news environment.
- Many of the interviewees reported conflicts between the home and Brussels-based journalists, because there are different perceptions of the relevance of upcoming events and topics.
- Brussels correspondents from all three countries reported that during the Presidency of their home country their home editors printed stories that were not very relevant from the view of EU experts.

First Tentative Results

Dynamics Inside the Press Corps - International Level

- Especially at summits, Brussels correspondents work closely together with their international colleagues. They exchange information to avoid a spin by the national spokespeople. In this way, they can cross check information they get from their government.
- Journalists who travel to summits and are not part of the Brussels network often have a hard time getting the same information as insiders do. They are sometimes excluded and lack orientation in the labyrinth of sources.
- The collaboration between correspondents in Brussels and in the national capitals (Berlin, Helsinki, Vienna) intensifies during Summits, especially in the country holding the Presidency.

Conclusion

Back to the Research Questions

- The relation between media and politics in the course of European Councils differs from everyday EU communication. Politics and media are highly interdependent at these events.
- Political actors stage summits according to media rules. They use methods as news management and Spin Doctoring.
- Journalists apply counter strategies.
- Differences between Brussels-based correspondents and national political journalists lead to the assumption that a “European culture of journalism is evolving.”

Policy implications

For Politicians and Spokespeople

- **POLITICS:**

- National governments should make their political role on an EU level transparent: They should stop the “blame game.”
- The summits of the European Council should take place in the Member State holding the Presidency.
- Negotiations and conflicts between Member States should be transparent for the press: Less marketing and more transparency is needed.

Policy implications

For Media Organisations and Journalists

- **JOURNALISTS:**

- Should not underestimate their audience.
- Should improve their knowledge about political processes in the EU.
- Should not treat the EU as “a topic” among others but as level of political decisions which is often crucial for domestic policy.
- Should collaborate with journalists in their home office on daily basis.
- Intensify international collaboration with journalists from other Member States.

- **MEDIA ORGANISATIONS:**

- Should base more correspondents in Brussels.

Thank you for your attention!

Literature

- Peter, Jochen, de Vreese, Claes H., 2004, “In Search of Europe – A Cross-national Comparative Study of the European Union in National Television News”, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9(4): 3–24
- Peter, Jochen, de Vreese, Claes H., Semetko, Holli A., 2003, “EU Politics on Television News. A Cross-National Comparative Study”, *European Union Politics*, 4(3): 305–327