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# Mass media and bureaucracy-bashing: Does the media influence public attitudes towards public administration?

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## Abstract

At least part of the academic literature on public administration asserts that the mass media is responsible for the somewhat negative popular image of administrative agencies. Through negative reporting about the (mis-)behaviour of civil servants or about public administration as a whole, the media shape stereotypes in the collective mind of the citizens. However, while the ascribed role of mass media reporting is plausible, these effects have not yet been empirically verified. This article summarises the scientific discussion about the relationship between public administration and the mass media. Furthermore, it adds to this discussion by simultaneously examining both media usage and attitudes towards administrative agencies in Germany through a secondary analysis of data spanning nearly 30 years.

## Keywords

Attitudes, mass media, media usage, public administration, stereotypes, trust

## Introduction

Public administration is often criticised for its work. Despite all attempts to perform its tasks more effectively, the image of public administration and civil servants remain mostly unfavourable in many countries. This general observation holds true also in Germany, where the work of the public administration and civil servants has been routinely criticised. Nevertheless, the evaluation of public administration in Germany is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the majority of people criticise

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public administration for being clumsy; on the other hand, civil servants are recognised as dutiful, trustworthy and capable (see the annual survey from the German Civil Servants Federation Deutscher Beamtenbund (DBB), 2007–2015). These outcomes indicate, somewhat ironically, that negative attitudes towards the public administration as a whole are correlated with positive personal experiences with the members of the civil service (Grunow, 2003).

What are the reasons for these ambivalent findings? As Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) point out, criticism of bureaucracy is based on stereotypes that filterout information and experiences that are inconsistent with our image of bureaucracy. However, this hypothesis simply gives rise to further questions about the sources of our perceptions of bureaucracy. In addition, to personal contacts with the administrative agencies and discussions about these contacts in our social interactions, it is possible that the mass media and their reports about public administration and civil servants influence our perception of the civil service as a whole (Van de Walle et al., 2008). Unfortunately, there are almost no empirical studies that have examined, much less confirmed, this proposition.

That negative media reporting can influence our attitudes towards political institutions is an established empirical fact (see e.g. Brettschneider, 2005; Cappella and Hall Jamieson, 1997 or the broad variety of research on agenda setting, see Chapter 'Attitudes towards Public Administration'). There is a long history of research on the effects of media on society and politics (see Curran, 2002). The media's relationship to public opinion and citizen behaviour is also well studied (Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Norris, 1996; Uslaner, 1998). However, none of these studies have considered the relationship between media coverage and attitudes towards government bureaucracy. Yet following from existing research it is very plausible that the media has influence also on citizens' attitudes towards public administration. In addition to the direct influence bureaucratic outputs have on our attitudes towards bureaucracy, it is possible that the mass media indirectly influence our perception of administrative outputs such as decisions, approvals, etc. (see Figure 1).

Some outputs of public administration are selected by the media, which then interprets and presents them in format consistent with the media's constraints (e.g. time available) and mission (e.g. increasing their audience). If the media really influence (negatively) our attitudes towards public administration, it could be harmful for both public administration and the political system as a whole. This phenomenon has been usefully examined through the Receive-Accept-Sample-Model (RAS) by Zaller (1992). For Zaller, the greater a person's level of political awareness, the more likely he or she is to receive these messages. Also, the greater a person's level of awareness, the more likely he or she will be able, under certain circumstances, to resist (or accept) information that is inconsistent with their basic values.

Based on the results of early political culture research (see the "Civic Culture-Study" by Almond and Verba, 1965), a good relationship between the citizens and a bureaucracy is important if the overall political system is to secure acceptance and legitimation from the people (Gabriel, 1993, 2005; Grunow and
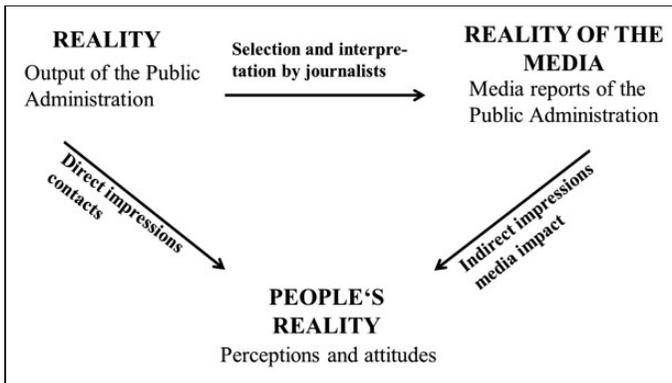
**Figure 1.** Research model.

Strüngmann, 2008). However, there are no empirical studies examining whether sceptical attitudes towards bureaucracy could also be a healthy thing for democracy, such as the 'critical citizen' of Norris (2011). Nevertheless, because of their relatively frequent contact with administrative agencies – in comparison to other institutions of the political system – to a considerable extent people come to know democratic governance mostly through public administration (Derlien and Löwenhaupt, 1997).

This also has practical relevance for, for example, public-oriented measures of administrative modernisation, such as those in New Public Management. These concepts, which concentrate upon the customers' satisfaction with public administration, can only be successful if the citizens' attitudes toward public administration develop positively and if these positive attitudes are reinforced by positive contact with bureaucrats. However, it is possible that mass media coverage could undermine this if it ascribes negative roles/traits to the bureaucracy and this in turn has a negative impact on the peoples' perception of public administration. Empirically, however, these effects are not yet verified.

In the present article, I analyse the relationship between public administration, mass media and the population on the basis of representative survey data collected between 1980 and 2010. First, we look at the civil service's present evaluation by the German people. Afterwards, I consider several studies dealing with the relationship between public administration and the mass media and their specific shortcomings. Subsequently, the survey data and the operationalisation of the items selected for inclusion in the analysis are presented. Lastly the results are presented followed by a discussion of the limitations and implications of my findings.

## Media effects and the construction of reality

'Influence [...] in all senses of the word is understood as all modes of changes in individuals and in society which are – mostly in interaction with other

factors – caused by media messages' (Pürer, 2014: 367). It is not possible to find single sources for media effects because many factors are always involved. There are indirect interactions between media reception, interpersonal communication, personal experiences and individual attitudes. These complex interactions between these factors can be best accounted for by using the concept of the construction of reality. 'The world outside' and 'the pictures in our head' (Lippmann, 1922, reprinted 1947) do not match. An *objective* reality is always determined by a subjective bias. People who are not able to form their own impressions of an objective reality have to inform themselves through mass media or interpersonal communication. In addition, many people use mass media to verify their personal impressions. Subjective perceptions often precede media portrayals. Mass media have to select from a wide range of possible presentations, meaning they can only show an extract of reality. Therefore, they construct their own media reality (Reinhardt, 2005: 39). This media reality influences public reality (see Figure 1). It is therefore appropriate to consider 'mass media as instances of interpretation, which are actively involved in the construction of reality' (Keppler, 2005: 95).

Media affect the public understanding of reality. Mass media tell us what is real or unreal, what is relevant or irrelevant. Different studies have indicated that reality perception corresponds more strongly with the media reality than with the objective reality (Brettschneider, 2005). As Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1973: 32) has shown, this effect is enhanced especially by uniformity (consonance) in media reporting. Consonance is an important factor in the perception of media reporting. This factor influences our selective perception of media reality. If media reporting is perceived as consonantly negative, the opinion towards the object reported on, here public administration, could also be consonantly negative.

Consonance leads to cultivation effects which remain stable in society for a long time (Jäckel, 2005: 82). Therefore, constant negative reporting about public administration may lead to a negative public attitude towards bureaucracy and administration regardless of their actual performance.

## Attitudes towards public administration

The critical public attitude toward administrative agencies is a part of the general disaffection with government. Caiden (1991) already identified 175 'bureaupathologies' in a meta-analysis of the scientific literature on public management. These 'bureaupathologies' went from A for 'abuse of authority' to X for 'Xenophobia'. This 'public maladministration' 'lowers the reputation of public administration and leaves a bad taste in people's mouth', as well as creating the impression that the administration has become distant from the citizens (Greiffenhagen and Greiffenhagen, 1992). However, the empirical foundation of these studies is not very reliable because the underlying data usually include no questions on attitudes towards democracy; instead these surveys merely focus on the general aspects of civil servant service (such as time for processing, friendliness, etc.). This ultimately leads to a distortion of our conclusions on perceptions of administration because

the image garnered from local citizen surveys is incomplete and one-sidedly positive (Grunow and Strüngmann, 2008).

In their study, Feick and Mayntz (1982) examined citizens' attitudes toward public administration much more comprehensively and systematically. First, the study compared the citizens' contact to and their attitudes towards the administration. The study basically assumed that the formation of attitudes towards the administration is primarily based on the experiences with that administration. However, the relationship was found to be non-linear and fragile. On the one hand, negative attitudes of the population towards the civil service rarely were influenced by positive experiences with the administration; on the other hand, negative experiences with bureaucracy had a more sustainable (negative) influence on the attitudes towards administration than positive experiences had a (positive) impact on trust in the civil service (Derlien and Löwenhaupt, 1997; Klages et al., 1983). Kampen et al. (2006: 387) aptly described the relationship of trust between citizens and the administrative agencies as follows: 'Trust comes on foot and goes away on horseback'.

In addition to direct contact with administrative agencies, experiences of the individual in their social environment and the image of bureaucratic actions delivered by the (local) media also influence this situation. Thus, media coverage shapes the citizens' perceptions of the political system's institutional output, such as the output of the parliament or the government (Brettschneider and Rettich, 2008; Gabriel and Vetter, 1999). Their attitudes towards these institutions of the political system usually reflect the media's portrait of reality – filtered and processed through the individual predispositions.

Contact with administrative agencies, however, is more frequent and more direct than contact to other institutions of the political system. Indeed, about 80% of German citizens have direct contact with the public administration at least once a year, while approximately one-quarter of them interact every month (see DBB, 2007–2015).[1] The citizens' attitudes towards public administration should therefore depend largely upon their direct experience (see above). These attitudes should concur with the impressions of 'the' administration provided by the media coverage on public administration if the population perceives and considers this media coverage as credible.[2]

## Mass media, public administration and the population

Mass media determine reality, e.g. by agenda setting. Agenda setting pushes special news and occasions to the centre of our attention. A broad variety of agenda setting literature has been published in the past decades (see the meta-study of Princen, 2015 or Rogers et al., 1993). However, the topic of 'public administration' has yet to be seen as relevant in the agenda-setting research. Yet the approaches used for news reporting, such as 'negativism' and 'personalisation', might create a media-determined reality of administration behaviour different from 'real' administration behaviour. Journalists tend to report about problems rather than about

solving problems, and about persons mistreated by an administration rather than about people who have benefited (Kepplinger, 1998: 56ff). As found by Kepplinger, this reality as presented by the mass media influences individuals' perceptions of reality. Before I analyse the question whether media reality influences public reality, it is necessary to first examine the following questions: How much is published about public administration in which media outlets and how is the given information received?

## Media reports and attitudes towards public administration

Media coverage of public administration was first scientifically analysed at the end of the 1970s. The analysis focused both on a juridical perspective and on the changing relationship between media and administration (Ahlers et al., 1979; Jarass, 1986). The juridical perspective stresses that the mass media mainly act as a check and balance on the public administration, just as it does for other political institutions as the 'fourth estate'; the media is to inform the public about the actions of public administration. Yet sometimes the public administrations are under an obligation to maintain secrecy, which makes cooperation with the local media difficult (c.f. Machura, 2005: 123ff).

Some studies have examined the question of whether negative reporting about public administration influences attitudes towards bureaucracy. Contrary to von Hase (1979), who argued that there is no such influence, Geisler (1979) claimed that there are stereotypes about public administration that develop based on opinions as well as on the mass media's reporting (see also in von Hase, 1979: 41 and Geisler, 1979: 18). Therefore, stereotypes are '[. . .] relatively independent of experiences and are mostly influenced by communication in the media and the peer groups'. In other studies, both Dehnhard (1987) and Feick and Mayntz (1982) supported Geisler's thesis that media reporting has an important impact on negative attitudes towards public administration.

For Wolling (1999), the bad press administration receives is explained by the Video Malaise Hypothesis, a concept which Robinson (1976) introduced to political science. Regarding the Video Malaise Hypothesis, mass media focus mainly on single negative occurrences without giving the background or context. News media concentrate their necessarily short and simple reporting on corruption, social conflicts and on 'sloppiness in the administration' (Wolling, 1999: 57). Because mass media outlets try to outdo each other with 'bad news', media consumers get a negative image of politics and political institutions, which in turn may eventually lead to a loss of confidence in institutions and in administration. For the most part, these studies do not account for the media usage of their sample or examine the media reporting through content analysis. Nevertheless, they do provide some initial evidence that – besides personal experience and social contacts – mass media may have an impact on people's attitudes towards public administration.

Only the two studies from Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) and Röber and Boeker-Woehlert (1990) analyse media reporting on public administration in

Germany by using content analysis. Röber and Boeker-Woehlert analysed the reporting of seven Berlin newspapers over a period of two months at the beginning of 1988. They found about 2,500 articles that included some remarks about public administration. Then they searched for some bureaucratic stereotypes in the newspapers. Finally, they discussed the differences between the newspapers. They could not find many negative articles about public administration. As they could not prove the thesis that critical attitudes towards public administration are influenced by newspaper reporting, they assumed that the reason for the bad public image of administration and bureaucracy could be found in 'pre-journalistic factors' instead (Röber and Boeker-Woehlert, 1990: 11; like the 'political predispositions' in Zaller, 1992). However, media reporting is able to enhance and reinforce these factors, even if it is not causal of public perceptions.

   More significant is the study of Grunow and Strüngmann (2008). Grunow and Strüngmann analysed media reporting on public administration in five newspapers in the years 2001 and 2006.[3] Additionally, they conducted a survey in North Rhine-Westphalia about the attitudes towards public administration.[4] About 9% of the newspaper articles covered public administration in both study years. Moreover, nearly every second article was set in the local part of the newspapers, 38% covered local administration. About 70% of all the articles had a negative bias towards public administration and every third article used negative stereotypes to characterise public administration. This number was even higher in the large audience newspapers (*Berliner Zeitung/BZ* and *Hamburger Abendblatt*; two out of three articles).[5]

   Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) used the social-psychological construct of 'stereotypes' to interpret their results. Following Smith and Mackie (1995), they argue that the media have the biggest impact on founding and reinforcing stereotypes. Because the mass media usage stereotypes like 'lazy civil servants' or 'bureaucratic monster', they function as a promoter of the public 'criticism of the authorities' (Geisler, 1979: 34). Therefore, the mainly negative reporting about public administration might be 'a source for negative attitudes towards bureaucracy [...and...] could contribute the public criticisms of bureaucracy' (Grunow and Strüngmann, 2008: 133).

   Thus these studies of Geisler (1979), Röber and Boeker-Woehlert (1990), and especially Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) show that there could be a media reporting impact on attitudes towards bureaucracy. However, they could not empirically prove that media reporting determines public attitudes towards administration (negatively). Even Grunow and Strüngmann could not show any empirical relationship between media usage and attitudes towards public administration. What they lacked was detailed survey questions about the actual media usage (i.e. consumption) of the people and about how credible they think different kinds of media are. In addition, the selected newspapers might not represent the actual media usage of the population in North Rhine-Westphalia. The quality national German newspapers *FAZ, Süddeutsche* and *taz* might be read regularly, while the local newspapers *Berliner Zeitung* and *Hamburger Abendblatt*, both not published in North Rhine-Westphalia, might not be.

In addition, the previous studies focused mainly on only one or two points in time. Therefore, they were not able to clearly define whether the found correlations were trends or just snapshots of the perception of administration in the population. Therefore, the present study will examine at several time points using longitudinal data in order to determine if there is a link between media usage on the one hand and the people's attitudes towards public administration on the other hand.

## Media usage behaviour

In order for there to be a media reporting effect, there first has to be media usage. The development of media coverage and media usage from 1980 to 2010 is shown in Table 1 before the focus shifts to the coherence between media usage and the public evaluation of administration.

In Germany, mass media as a whole is consumed more frequently than in nearly every other western country. Yet, in comparison to other countries, the consumption of news media in Germany is in the midfield (see Blekesaune et al., 2012; in comparison to the frequent news media usage in Sweden, see Strömbäck et al., 2013). The average time spent daily on media usage in Germany increased steeply from five to seven hours between 1980 and 2010 and has continued to increase. This increase can be attributed to the greater amount of spare time people have acquired over the last 30 years as well as to the mass media's dual broadcasting system,

**Table 1.** Daily media usage

Range of coverage in %

|            | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Television | 77   | 72   | 79   | 83   | 85   | 89   | 86   |
| Radio      | 69   | 76   | 76   | 74   | 85   | 84   | 79   |
| Newspaper  | 64   | 61   | 50   | 53   | 54   | 51   | 44   |

Media use in minutes per day

|            | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Television | 125  | 121  | 135  | 158  | 185  | 220  | 220  |
| Radio      | 135  | 154  | 170  | 162  | 206  | 221  | 187  |
| Newspaper  | 38   | 33   | 28   | 30   | 30   | 28   | 23   |
| Total      | 298  | 308  | 333  | 350  | 421  | 469  | 430  |

Note: Till 1990, just the states of former West Germany, people aged 14 or older were questioned. Sources: Zubayr/Geese (2009: 172), ARD/ZDF-Langzeitstudie Massenkommunikation (van Eimeren/Ridder, 2011) and Brettschneider (2005: 711).

introduced in 1984 in Germany. People now spend more time watching television, whereas the time allocated to reading newspapers has not changed (see Table 1).

Especially newspapers have seen a decline in their coverage and use since 1980 (Busemann and Engel, 2012; see also for the USA, Schönbach et al., 1999). Nevertheless, newspapers are 'still alive'. In contrast to TV and radio, newspapers play a special role for information supply. In 2010, about 32% of people used the daily newspaper for information – a higher proportion than for television, radio or the internet (see also for Sweden, see Strömbäck et al., 2013). As Elvestad and Blekesaune (2008) show, the average time spent reading newspapers in Germany (23 minutes per day) is in the bottom quarter of all European countries (between Ireland at 53 min/per day and Greece at 16 min/per day). Studies on watching TV News in several European countries have come to similar results (Aalberg et al., 2013). In Germany, the average time watching TV News in 2010 was 38 minutes per day (between 28 minutes in Switzerland and 55 minutes in Denmark).

## Hypothesis

As we have seen above, some studies have claimed that mass media reporting about public administration is primarily negative. By extension, the mass media reporting is thus responsible for critical attitudes towards bureaucracy. Thus, I will first test the following hypothesis:

> H1: People following politics through TV news and newspapers evaluate public administration more critically.

As already mentioned, there is evidence that besides personal experience and social contact in one's environment, mass media may also have an impact on attitudes towards public administration. The study of Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) showed that, at least for several time points, there seems to be a relationship between newspaper usage and attitudes towards public administration. Their study also showed that nearly 10% of all newspaper articles cover public administration. About 70% of these articles had a negative bias towards public administration. Only a few studies have dealt empirically with the media reporting of public administration using content analysis of newspapers (Grunow and Strüngmann, 2008; Röber and Boeker-Woehlert, 1990). Both studies claimed these media had a negative influence on attitudes towards bureaucracy. Therefore, I formulate the second hypothesis as follows:

> H2: People who read newspapers evaluate the public administration differently than people who do not read any newspapers.

'Daily newspapers are the priority mass media to get regional information' (Mende et al., 2012: 7). Nearly 60% of the mass media consumers in Germany get their local information from the newspaper, followed by radio (37%) and television

(33%). Newspapers are also considered to be very reliable and in reading them, users concentrate on local articles (85% read local articles, as of 2010 (Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger e.V. (BDZV), 2011/2012)). Moreover, nearly 10% of local reporting deals with public administration (Grunow and Strüngmann, 2008). Newspapers are regarded as sophisticated, objective and credible. In addition, readers consider them to have high competence and an essentially critical perspective. As Lauf (2001: 233) concluded, "More than watching television or listening to the radio, daily newspaper reading enhances political interest and knowledge, local political participation and a more integrated understanding of political issues."

Even if it has not yet been empirically substantiated, it is rather plausible that when people think about public administration, they tend to think about their *local/regional* administrative agencies. So if the news criterion 'physical closeness' is very important for recipients (Mende et al., 2012: 5), one can assume that reading newspapers plays a specific role for shaping attitudes towards public administration. The surveys inquired about the use of in several different ways (see Table 2). It may be that the boulevard media reports more often on scandals in the public administration and so their use potentially influences attitudes towards the civil service more negatively. Thus in addition to questions about the reading of (local) newspapers there are also questions about reading daily newspapers and the most widely read daily (boulevard) newspaper *BILD*.

While many of the above studies have claimed attitudes towards public administration are the result of the negative influence of media reporting, some other previous studies have focussed on testing the correlation between contacts with public administration and attitudes towards bureaucracy (Derlien and Löwenhaupt, 1997; Feick and Mayntz, 1982). Yet no study has simultaneously tested for both the contact and the media usage propositions. Therefore I will test the following hypothesis:

> H3: Direct contact with public administration has more influence on the trust in public administration than media usage.

As mentioned above, about 80% of German citizens have direct contact with the public administration at least once a year, while about one-quarter of them have monthly contact. The assumption is that direct contact weakens the media's influence on people's attitudes towards public administration because of the more *direct* experience that social contact offers in comparison to media usage.

## Data and operationalisation

For the analysis this study draws on data from several surveys. Herein, attitudes towards public administration are operationalised differently, which offers benefits for comparative analysis. Most surveys asked about the 'trust in the local administration and/or local government'. One survey dealt explicitly with the trust in civil

**Table 2.** Used data

| Data | Attitudes towards Public administration | Media use | Year | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Evaluation, connotation and satisfaction with public administration | | | | |
| Civic culture | Subjective bureaucratic competence | Reading the political content of a newspaper (scale: 1 "nearly daily" to 4 "never" | 1960 | 955 |
| Political resonance | Subjective bureaucratic competence | Frequency of following politics in newspapers and TV (days p.week) | 1995/1996 | 2.036/2.094 |
| Living in East Germany | Satisfied with public administration today and a few years ago | Frequency of following politics in newspapers and TV | 1995 | 1.506 |
| Eurobarometer 65.2 (EB) | Connotation with "Public Administration" (scale: 1 "very positive" to 4 "very negative") | Frequency of following politics in newspapers, radio and TV (scale: 1 "every day" to 5 "never"); Reading a newspaper (three times a week or more) | 2006 | 1.526 |
| Trust in public administration | | | | |
| WVS | Trust in civil service (scale: 1 "trust very much" to 4 "no trust at all") | Reading a newspaper (scale: 1 "4–6 editions per week" to 2 "less than 4–6 editions per week") | 1981 | 1.305 |
| Polit. attitudes in Germany | Trust in public administration (scale: 1 "no trust at all" to 5 "trust very much") | Frequency of watching TV news and reading the political content of a newspaper (scale: 1 "regular" to 5 "never") | 1994 | 4.114 |

**Table 2.** Continued

| Data | Attitudes towards Public administration | Media use | Year | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political Resonance | Trust in Local Public Admin (scale: 1 "no trust at all" to 7 "trust very much") | Frequency of watching TV news and reading the political content of a newspaper (days per week) | 1996 | 2.094 |
| WVS | Trust in Civil Service (scale: 1 "trust very much" to 4 "no trust at all") | Frequency of following politics, frequency of watching TV | 1997 | 2.028 |
| Political Attitudes | Trust in public administration (scale: 1 "no trust at all" to 5 "trust very much") | Frequency of watching TV news and reading: local newspapers, national news-papers, BILD-Zeitung (days a week) | 1998 and 2002 | 3.337 |
| | | | | 3.263 |
| WVS | Trust in civil service (scale: 1 "trust very much" to 4 "no trust at all") | Frequency of watching TV | 1999 | 1.953 |
| Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID) | Trust in civil services/ public administration[a] (scale: 1 "no trust at all" to 11 "trust very much") | Frequency of watching TV news, reading the political content of a newspaper (scale: 1 "every day" to 4 "less than 1 per week") | 1999 | 2.968 |

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** Continued

| Data | Attitudes towards Public administration | Media use | Year | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| EB 48.0, 51.0, 54.1, 55.1, 56.2 | Trust in Civil Service (scale: 1 "tend to trust" to 2 "tend not to trust") | Frequency of reading news-papers (scale: 1 "every day" to 5 "never") | 1997/99 2000/01 | 2.007–2.086 |
| WVS | Trust in Civil Service (scale: 1 "trust very much" to 4 "no trust at all") | Frequency of using newspapers last week (1 "used", 2 "not used") and frequency of fol-lowing politics on TV/radio | 2006 | 1.992 |
| ALLBUS | Trust in Local Public Adm. (scale: 1 "no trust at all" to 7 "trust very much") | Reading newspapers (how often? "1 to 7 days a week"), fre-quency of watching news on TV | 2008 | 3.404 |

[a]Countries should select the appropriate expression for "civil service", e.g., public administration.

servants. This will allow the analysis to examine whether the surveyed persons judge the actors 'civil servants' differently than the institution of 'public administration'. Additionally, in one survey the respondents were asked about their associations with 'public administration' in general.

One special aspect that must be considered and operationalised is the feeling of 'bureaucratic competence' (see Derlien and Löwenhaupt, 1997: 428). Bureaucratic competence means the feeling that there is 'fair treatment of the citizens by the authorities'. The data available allows for the examination of the connection between media usage and perceptions of 'bureaucratic competence'. The bureaucratic competence is measured using the items 'Citizens have many possibilities to defend themselves against the decisions of civil services', 'You should better not tangle with the civil service, even if you are in the right' and 'In contact with public administration you feel treated like a number'. A strengthening of bureaucratic competence entails a reduction in the 'counter distance', the 'perception of one's own role when in contact with authority' (Derlien and Löwenhaupt, 1997: 428). Thus, the items of the multidimensional construct of 'subjective bureaucratic competence' correlate with the general satisfaction with administrative contact.

As already mentioned, a full and proper analysis of the question of whether media usage influences people's attitudes towards public administration should contain a survey with questions about the media usage of the respondents. Moreover, in addition to media usage, a full explanation would require questions also on perceptions of the credibility of the reporting on the civil services. However, these kinds of surveys have not yet been carried out. Therefore, the analyses will be limited to the available data on attitudes towards the public administration as well as questions about media usage (see Table 2).

## Results

### The population's general perception of media reports about public administration

The media reporting about public administration is the one side. However, *if* and *how* people perceive the media reporting is the other side (see Figure 2). According to surveys conducted by the German Civil Servants Federation DBB (2007–2015), typically 50 to 60% of the Germans reported that they 'heard or read something lately about the public service or the officials.' The proportion of the population having heard or read about the public service increased during the investigation period. Those who had read generally negative reports about public administration actually decreased, yet the perception among the public sector's workers remained stable: Between 50% and 60% perceive media coverage of the public service as 'not objective'. Thus while public officials estimate there is more negative reporting, at least public perceptions do not reflect this.[6]

Obviously, civil servants consider the media coverage of their own professional field as non-objective. This can be explained not only by their personal interest and
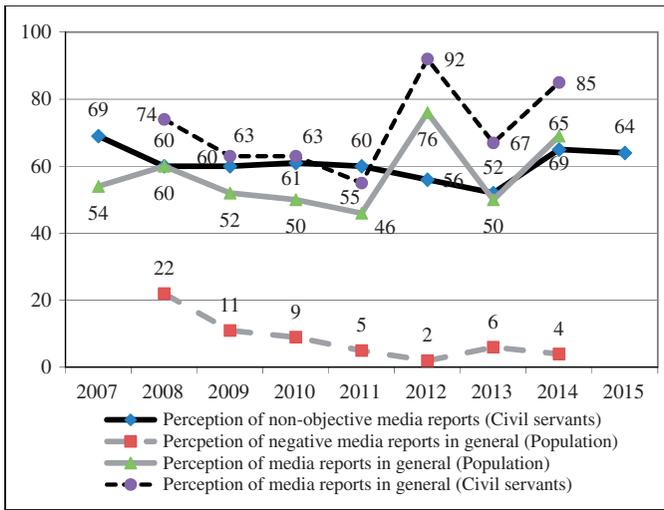
**Figure 2.** Perception of the Media Reports. Notes: Sample size of the telephone surveys: Population: N = 2.001–2.073; Civil servants: N = 1.001–1.045. Source: Surveys from the German Civil Servants Federation 2007–2015; Question wording: Perception of media reports in general: "I heard or read anything lately about the public service or the civil servants" (agreement or rejection). Perception of negative/non-objective media reports: The media coverage of the public service is 1 "objective and neutral" or 2 "not objective and rude".

investment in public administration, but also by their other background experience; compared to the general population they have more direct experiences with administrative action.

As already mentioned, with the data used herein the causal relationships between media usage and attitudes towards public administration cannot be ascertained. Because of the different coding used for both the media items and the items regarding the attitudes towards administration – some are two-point-scaled, four-point-scaled, five- or seven-point-scaled – most of the following analyses are based on bivariate analyses in the form of correlations over time. Only for one cross-sectional analysis was it possible to use several items in a Multivariate Analysis, here in a Regression Analysis.

*Media usage and the association with public administration.* Since the beginning of the 1970s, the Eurobarometer has been used to gather data on the association citizens of Europe have toward different terms. In addition to terms such as 'globalization', 'reform' or 'company', the Eurobarometer-Survey (65.2) from 2006 confronted the citizens with the term 'public administration'. The survey also asked about their news consumption. Looking at this data, only reading the news in the daily news-paper significantly correlates with a specific association to 'public administration' ($r = .10$; $p < .01$; Pearson Correlation Coefficients (double-side)). Specifically, the

**Table 3.** Bureacratic competence and media use

| | 1959/60 | 1995 | | 1996 | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Reading/Watching articles about Public Administration in… | Newspaper | Newspaper | TV news | Newspaper | TV news |
| Bureaucratic competence | | | | | |
| Citizens can oppose | — | .07** | .02. | .07** | .02 |
| Don't mess with authorities (even when you are in the right) | — | -.08** | -.02 | -.08** | -.01 |
| Feeling treated like a "number" | — | -.06** | -.03 | -.06** | -.07** |
| Getting serious consideration (responsiveness) | -.09** | -.04 | -.03 | -.04 | -.06 |
| Trust in equal treatment (fairness) | -.06* | -.03 | -.07** | -.03 | -.05 |
| Evaluation of service aspects | | | | | |
| Civil servants are friendly | — | .09** | .09** | .09** | .11** |
| Too long processing time for subsequent applications | — | -.01 | -.03 | -.01 | -.04 |
| General evaluation of the performance of administration | — | .03 | .06** | .03 | .04 |
| N | 955 | 2.036 | | 2.097 | |

Notes: Scale from 1 ("I do not agree at all") to 7 ("I agree entirely"). Media use: Frequency of watching TV news and reading political issues in newspapers. Presented are the Pearson correlation coefficients (double-side). Level of significance: **p < .01; *p < .05. Source: Data: Civic Culture 1959/60; Political Resonance 1995 and 1996.
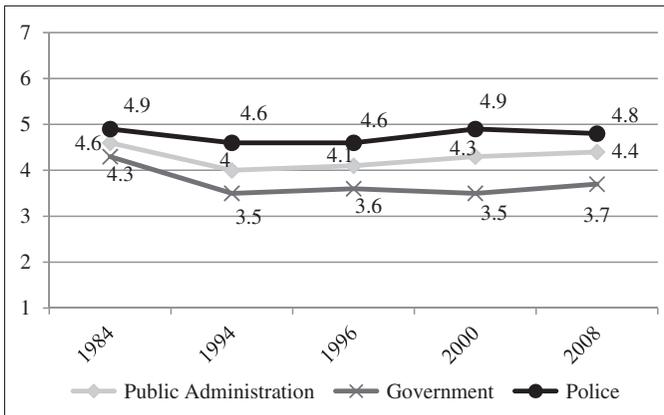
**Figure 3.** Trust in Public Administration, Federal Government and the Police. Notes: Presented are the arithmetic means. Scale from 1 ("I do not trust an institution at all") to 7 ("I have complete trust"). Sources: ALLBUS 1984, 1994, 2000 and 2008; Political Resonance 1996.

more often people read the news in the newspaper, the more positive their associations with the term 'public administration' are.

Derlien and Löwenhaupt (1997: 426ff.) analysed the role of bureaucratic competence plays in the overall assessment of public administration. Table 3 below shows the relationship between bureaucratic competence and media usage in Germany over time. The results show that in 1960 and in the middle of the 1990s the attitudes towards public administration and bureaucratic competence were related to media usage. The individual's perception of being able to defend him- or herself against the government rises with the frequency of newspaper reading. Theoretically consistent with this result, the perception of being 'treated like a number' and the idea that it is 'better not to mess with the authorities' decreases with an increase in newspaper reading.

These results are consistent with the results of the correlation between media usage on the one hand and the citizens' feeling of political competence ('Internal Political Efficacy') on the other hand (see Pinkleton et al., 1998). People with high political self-efficacy think that they understand political topics well. They take an active role when discussing political issues in a group. People who gather a lot of political information from the newspapers have more political self-efficacy than those for whom a newspaper is an insignificant source of political information.

*Media usage and trust in public administration.* Trust in the administration seems to have been a relatively stable dimension over the 24 years for which we have data. Figure 3 shows the trust in the administration and the trust in two other executive institutions, the police and the Federal Government. Trust in administrative agencies is slightly weaker than trust in the police, but stronger than trust in the Federal Government.

**Table 4.** Correlation Media use and trust

| | 1981 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999/1 | 1999/2 | 2002 | 2006 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Follow the news about politics | – | – | – | – | – | – | – | .13** | –. | – | – |
| Newspapers | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Reading newspapers in general | –.07** | – | – | – | – | – | – | – | – | .03 | .03 |
| Frequency of reading political issues in (local) newspapers | – | .05* | .08** | .04 | – | –.02 | –.13** | – | .06** | – | – |
| Frequency of reading BILD-Zeitung | – | – | – | – | – | .03 | – | – | .02 | – | – |
| Television | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency of watching TV in general | –.08** | – | – | – | –.02 NS | – | – | – | – | – | .04* |
| Frequency of watching TV news | – | .05* | .11** | .10** | – | – | –.05** | – | – | – | – |
| Frequency of watching TV news (public) | – | – | – | – | – | .02 | – | – | .03 | – | –.05* |
| Frequency of watching TV news (private) | – | – | – | – | – | .01 | – | – | –.01 | – | .01 |
| N | 1.297 | 4.114 | 2.036 | 2.085 | 2.026 | 3.337 | 2.695 | 1.947 | 3.263 | 937 | 2.335 |

Sources: WVS: 1981 and 2005; DFG: 1994, 1998 and 2002; KSPW: 1995 and 1996; CID: 1999(I); EB: 1997, 1999(2), 2000, 2001(1/2); ESS 2002/03; ALLBUS: 2008. Presented are the Pearson correlation coefficients (double-side). Level of significance: **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

**Table 5.** Explaining trust in the Jobcenter

| | M1 Beta | M2 Beta | M3 Beta | M4 Beta | M5 Beta | M6 Beta | M7 Beta |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Civil servants are friendly | .33** | .22** | .19** | .18** | .17** | .17** | .16** |
| General evaluation of administration | | .19** | .17** | .16** | .15** | .15** | .15** |
| Responsiveness | | | −.14** | −.11** | −.10** | −.10** | −.09** |
| Trust in equal treatment (fairness) | | | | −.10** | −.10** | −.09** | −.09** |
| Too long processing time | | | | | −.08** | −.08** | −.07** |
| Frequency of watching TV news | | | | | | .07** | .07** |
| Contact to job centre | | | | | | | −.05* |
| F | 194,854 | 121,999 | 93,585 | 74,803 | 62,107 | 53,681 | 47,033 |
| Constant (B) | 2.5 | 2.3 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 3.2 |
| $R^2$ | .11$^a$ | .13$^a$ | .15$^a$ | .16$^a$ | .16$^a$ | .17$^a$ | .17$^a$ |

Notes: Level of significance: $**p < .01$; $*p < .05$; "Contact to job centre" is used as a dummy variable (1: Contact; 0: No contact). The item "Reading newspapers".
Source: Political Resonance 1995 (N = 2.036).

Identifying the factors that explain trust in public administration is a relatively weak area in international research. Only a few studies have dealt with this topic or with long-term comparison (Van de Walle, 2007; for the long-term comparison see Van de Walle et al., 2008). In Germany, currently only studies of single points in time (Gabriel, 2009; Rölle, 2009) have examined this issue.

As Table 4 shows, the surveys contain several different questions measuring the usage of newspapers in the investigation period. Despite the lack of data, the results show that frequent media usage is in general associated with higher administrative trust (with some exceptions in 1981, 1999/1 and 2008). This applies to the general use of newspapers and TV as well as the specific use of local newspapers and TV news. Unexpectedly, reading boulevard newspapers – like the *BILD* – does not influence trust in public administration significantly in either direction.

In a final step, I analyse the relationship between media usage, contact with the administrative agencies and the trust in public administration. This does, however, make comparability between the results of this analysis and the previous ones impossible. This relationship can be analysed through the examination of a concrete public administration, in this case the Jobcenter (see Table 5). The same items as in Table 3 were used as independent variables.

As the results of the multiple linear regressions in Table 5 show, contact with the labour administration influences the trust in the Jobcenter negatively but weakly. The frequency of watching TV news also influences trust in the Jobcenter significantly, but positively. The item 'Reading newspapers' was excluded from the analysis. However, more relevant are the factors 'Civil servants are friendly' and 'General evaluation of administration'. One should mention that in all models the explanatory power of the regression models is rather weak ($R^2$ between .11 and .17). This means that there are other, more powerful unexamined factors that better explain trust in the Jobcenter. However, these factors are out of the scope of this paper's subject (for more explanatory factors for trust in public administration see Gabriel, 2009 and Rölle, 2009).

## Conclusion

Some parts of the public seem to see Germany's public administration rather negatively. Stereotypes such as 'lazy civil servants' or 'clumsy bureaucrats' seem to be present in the population's collective memory. Some consider the civil servants themselves as partly responsible for their negative image, while still others assume that the negative media reporting is responsible for the negative image. It seems plausible that mass media play an important role. However, this assumption has not been empirically substantiated, as the administrative sciences literature has nearly completely ignored the mass media, while the few exceptions based on survey data do not focus on media usage and media reporting.

Due to its use of secondary databases, this contribution had to adopt a restricted research focus. Thus the present article could not answer the question of whether mass media reporting is responsible for the critical attitudes towards public

administration. Instead the research focussed on finding correlations between people's media usage and their opinion towards public administration. The key results are summarised as follows:

1. People following politics through TV news and newspapers feel *more* bureaucratically competent and evaluate public administration *less* critically.

   Reading newspapers and watching TV for political information correlate with a 'good' relationship to public administration. The intensive coverage and consumption of political topics seems to influence the user's development of a conception of their own role in the political process. The citizens' political self-awareness is particularly high when they read the newspapers for information purposes. Conversely, it is rather low when they read them primarily for entertainment (Vetter and Brettschneider, 1998). These results match those of Zaller (1992). People seem to react critically to media messages about the public administration only to the extent that they have concrete knowledgeable about the bureaucracy. If this knowledge is positive or negative but not 'on the top of the head', they lead to a positive evaluation of public administration.

2. The second hypothesis was confirmed and could even be further specified: People reading newspapers evaluate public administration *not just differently but more positively* than people who don't read any newspaper.

   Taking these results into account, the assumption that the media has a negative influence on people's attitude was not confirmed. Therefore, negative media reporting does not, or only slightly, influence attitudes towards public administration. People reading newspapers regularly have high political self-efficacy and, due to their high political interest, they have a firm opinion which is not influenced easily. It could also be shown that this group trusts strongly in public administration. The results again match those of Zaller (1992). As Zaller remarked, the more aware people are, the more likely they are able to state opinions, and the more likely they are able to state opinions that are ideologically consistent with their predispositions. There may thus be some stable 'bureaucratic predispositions' that lead to a better evaluation of bureaucratic outputs.

   People use the boulevard press mainly for entertainment, not for political information. The political self-awareness of people using boulevard media is rather low. Therefore, one can assume that media reporting has a stronger impact on this user group than on information-oriented readers. As Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) showed, nearly every article about public administration in boulevard newspapers has a negative bias; so reading boulevard newspapers influences attitudes towards public management in a more negative way. Nevertheless, a significant correlation between reading the yellow press (e.g. *BILD*) and trust in public administration could not be found (see also Christmann et al., 2015). What might be the reasons for this result? Perhaps the negative reporting about public administration simply

does not receive attention given the competing news about celebrities or human disasters. Another possibility is that the negative reporting only confirms, and does not influence, the generally negative attitudes of the boulevard press readers.

3. Following politics in the media has a mostly positive influence on trust in public administration. Yet in comparison to direct contact to public administration (in this case: Jobcenter), watching TV has a weaker influence on trust.

Moreover, within the construct of "contact" we can identify further specific factors that influence trust. These factors are the specific evaluation of the civil servants as friendly, the general attitudes towards public administration and the feeling of the administration's responsiveness. These three factors seem to be as decisive as specific contact items and general items.

As Grunow and Strüngmann (2008) showed, about 70% of all the articles had a negative bias towards public administration and every third article used negative stereotypes to characterize public administration. Along with the German railway (Deutsche Bahn) the administrative agencies seem to be one of the favourite actors to scapegoat in Germany. Yet we have to ask: Why do the media report on public administration in the way that it does? 'Bad news is good news' may be one reason. To find more satisfying reasons we can turn to mass communication approaches applied to media performance and the German media system. McQuail (1992) pointed out there are some links between the structure and performance of the mass media system. In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky (2010) also postulated that size and concentrated ownership are two of many relevant factors that one must consider in order to explain a mass media system. Since 1980 there has been a clear process of concentration in the German media landscape, especially at the local level. In many municipalities there is only one newspaper, and administrative agencies depend on, or can be the victim of, this one local newspaper's reporting. A consequence of the dependence is that there is no 'battle for good investigative journalism' at the local level. The local newspapers influence, through their transparency function, administrate activities and tend to overstate some of its actions in the process, but who controls the local newspapers that in their search for audiences tend to overstate some of the public administration's actions?

In addition to the questions of the structure and performance of local mass media, one must also ask what are the main tasks and the open questions for the future research agenda? First of all, there are almost more open questions than there are answers. The question about the influence of the media on people's attitudes towards the administration cannot be answered without solving some of the methodical and conceptual problems. For this we need a systematic content analysis of media coverage about different levels and the protagonists of the public administration. Many more surveys, held over an extended time period and with very focussed questions, are required before we will be able to examine all the assumption concerning the media's impact on public perceptions of the public administration. Surveys must be representative and must include differentiated

questions about the specific forms of media usage. In addition, people should explain their impression of the media's reliability. Overall, precise data on a person's media usage is necessary as this is the missing link between the media coverage on the one hand and public perception and attitudes on the other.

Furthermore, the operationalisation of attitudes has to be improved. To date, just a few standardised questions concerning perception and trust in administration are available. Furthermore the (expected) role of the internet and new media/social media also will have to be included in future research (see Im et al., 2014).

Another important starting point of the inquiries presented is the empirical evidence that the same persons are at the same time critical about 'bureaucrats' yet satisfied with friendly staff members and good service. The explanatory factors behind these seemingly internally inconsistent beliefs need to be explored in future research. Furthermore, the role of peer-to-peer communication is still unclear and should be included in the multi-factor explanation in a more detailed way.

At this point we can draw only the following conclusion: Media coverage may not influence people's attitudes *directly*. Moreover, it may be that the subjective perception of public administration is objectively 'wrong'. Nonetheless, it becomes real in action and is therefore an important object to consider in scientific study and in practice. Like all institutions, public administration ought to be interested in getting to know what the press reports about them and what people think of these reports and subsequently about the administration. Only following such an analysis can a sound communication policy be planned, implemented and evaluated. By improving their communication management administrative agencies can then improve their own outcomes and thus gain the public support necessary for successful task performance over the long term.

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## Funding

## Notes

1. Unfortunately, there are no data available about the frequency and intensity of discussions about public administration within people's social circles.
2. Following Grunow and Strüngmann (2008: 124) and a broad section of the literature, I use the terms 'public services', 'civil service' and 'public administration' synonymously. People in general also do not differentiate between these terms.
3. The three national newspapers. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)* and the *taz*, as well as the *Hamburger Abendblatt* (Hamburg evening paper)

and the *Berliner Zeitung (BZ),* were subjected to a content analysis. Of the 1,740 articles which focused on public administration, a sample of 174 articles was extracted for further studies.

4. In the preliminary survey 'Citizens and the Administration', conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia, 150 people were interviewed orally and 1,493 online (see Grunow and Strüngmann, 2008: 125 ff.).
5. See this term in Christmann et al. (2015).
6. Because of the lack of data availability actual extent, beyond perceived extent, cannot be established.

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