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Hard and Soft News – A Twofold Approximation to a Key Concept in Journalism Research

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SUMMARY

The concept of hard and soft news (HSN) is regarded as one of the most important concepts in journalism research. Despite this popularity, two major research voids can be assigned to the concept. First, it lacks conceptual clarity: the concept gets used interchangeably with related concepts such as sensationalism, which has led to fuzzy demarcations of HSN. Also, it is still not agreed on of which dimensions the concept is composed. Second, little is known about the factors that influence the production of news in terms of their hard or soft nature. The present dissertation casts a twofold glance on the HSN concept – it aims to assess the conceptual status of the concept and production of hard and soft news.

At the outset, this dissertation delineates the theoretical base for three manuscripts in total and presented considerations on concepts in social sciences in general and hard and soft news in particular as well as the production of news, particularly of hard and soft news. The first paper proposed a theoretical framework model to distinguish HSN and related concepts. Based on a literature review of in total five concepts, this model suggested a hierarchy in which these concepts can be discerned according to their occurrence in media content. The second paper focused on the inner coherence of the HSN concept in its most recent academic understanding. The results of a factorial survey with German newspaper journalists showed that, indeed, four out of five dimensions of the HSN concept comprised what the journalists understood by it. Hence, the most recent academic understanding is to a great extent coherent. The third study shed light on the production of HSN, focusing on the influence of individual journalists' and audience's characteristics on whether news was presented in hard or soft way. The findings of a survey with simulated decision sce-

narios among German print journalists showed that the HSN dimensions were susceptible to different journalistic influences and that a perceived politically uninterested audience led to a softer coverage. The dissertation concluded with connecting these findings with the considerations on concept evaluation and the production of news. Implications for research on and with the concept of HSN were presented, before concluding with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Hard and Soft News – A Twofold Approximation to a Key Concept in Journalism Research

1 INTRODUCTION

When talking about hard news, one may think of stories about recent election results, bankruptcies of national companies, or societal problems like poverty among the elderly. Soft news on the contrary is associated with news about tearful celebrity weddings (or breakups), the car accident down the road, or the proverbial man that bit a dog. The underlying distinction – the concept of hard and soft news – is, by now, known for almost 70 years in practical journalism and journalism research (Russell, 1954). Not long after, the terms found their way into research about journalism (Adams, 1964; Tuchman, 1973).

In academia, hard and soft news is regarded as one of the most successful concepts at the intersection of political communication and journalism research (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012), applied to answer a broad range of research questions. For instance, the concept is referred to when analyzing news content, often with the aim of detecting, the much frowned upon, increase in soft news (Patterson, 2000). These enterprises are often connected to discussions about media performance (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2016; Humprecht, 2016). Also, studies investigate the effects of hard news and soft news consumption (Bas & Grabe, 2013; Baum, 2002, 2003, 2007; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014; Prior, 2003). Others are interested in hard and soft news from a gender-research point of view: they discuss,

for example, if the gender of journalists is an explanation for hard or soft news reporting, asking in surveys and content analyses whether or not female journalists cover seemingly soft news like stories about celebrities, arts, or education more often than their male counterparts (Lavie & Lehman-Wilzig, 2003; North, 2016). Again others use the concept to scrutinize how journalists categorize incoming news, by applying this distinction between types of news (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Tuchman, 1973). Recently, researchers have started using the concept in the context of social media and mobile news consumption, analyzing, for instance, whether hard news or soft news is preferred by the mobile users (Chan, 2015; Shim, You, Lee, & Go, 2015).

The success of the concept, though, should not blind us to the fact that hard and soft news is of contradictory nature – in many ways. Hard and soft news is contradictory with regard to the effects it is ascribed to have on the audience. Some stress, that watching or reading soft news does not provide the citizens with the information that they need to understand ongoing political or societal events. As a consequence, they cannot base their behavior, e.g., voting, on deliberated decisions (Prior, 2003). Others, though, argue that soft news brings news about relevant societal events to those that otherwise would not be in touch with such information at all (Baum, 2002; Zaller, 2003). Recipients acquire knowledge of these events along the way when consuming soft news (Baum, 2003).

Moreover, hard and soft is contradictory with regard to the question, whether we can observe a trend toward softer news in the news media. While some studies could demonstrate an increase of soft news, for example, in the 1980s and 1990s in the US (Patterson, 2000) and Germany (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005), other could not find such trends (e.g., Schönbach, 2000; Scott & Gobetz, 1992). The question about

news becoming softer or not is strongly connected to the fear of soft news consumption being dangerous for democratic societies: Media that focuses on soft news – so the assumption of democracy theorists – cannot fulfill their ascribed role in society (Patterson, 2000). Neither does softer news provide citizens with sufficient information about societal developments and phenomena to function in democracy, nor does it engage citizens politically, nor does it control those in office (de Vreese, Esser, Hopmann et al., 2016; on the general discussion about the role of news media in democracies, see Graber, 2003; Strömbäck, 2005).

These contradictions might be conditional upon one major problem: hard and soft news is incongruous with its status in communication research. It is, on the one hand, described as “a key concept” (Reinemann et al., 2012, p. 223; see also Lahav, 2009; Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). On the other hand, there is no shared understanding of hard and soft news – neither in academia nor in practical journalism education. The verdict with regard to the conceptual status quo of HSN is damning: “There is actually no gold standard as for how to define soft versus hard news” (Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, & Aalberg, 2012, p. 66), “hard news versus soft news: an oversimplified dichotomy” (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014, p. 702), or “studies regarding ‘soft’ news/‘hard’ news suffer from a possibly significant methodological weakness: the gross way of measuring ‘soft’ news” (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010, p. 41) are only some of many criticisms. Contradicting findings of the effects of hard and soft news consumption and in content studies on the occurrence of hard and soft news in news coverage could potentially be explained by this lack of conceptual clarity.

The contradicting nature of HSN becomes especially problematic against the backdrop of the normatively laden question about the effects of hard and soft news consumption. Opposing findings, as described above, have led to heated discussions

whether there is “any good in soft news” (Prior, 2003, p. 149; see also for an overview of this dispute). Consequently, these discussions have resulted in – equally normatively guided – the question about the quality of news and as of how the news media *should* report political and societal phenomena (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2016). However, this question is hard to answer when bearing in mind that very little is known in HSN research about the factors that influence why the news media report hard and soft news *in the first place* (Reinemann, Stanyer, & Scherr, 2016). Instead, rather broad changes in the current media environment are mentioned. Among the often blamed scapegoats, we can find commercialization, the beginning of private broadcasters in Europe, or the advent of the Internet and online news (Boczkowski, 2009; Esser, 1999; Sparks, 2000) – without actually testing these assumptions empirically with, for example, longitudinal content analyses. Only few studies, so far, have focused on concrete factors like the set-up of media organizations or media systems that influence hard and soft news production and have scrutinized these factors empirically (Brekken et al., 2012; Photiou, Maniou, Eteokleous, & Ketteni, 2018; Reinemann et al., 2016).

The dissertation at hand will address the expounded shortcomings of research on and with the concept of hard and soft news – the conceptual fuzziness and the lack of knowledge on factors influencing hard and soft news production. This approach proceeds on the assumption that approximation to an academic concept can happen in four ways (Hartleb, 2011; specifically for journalism research see also, Zelizer, 2004): First of all, conceptual fuzziness – as it can be assigned to the concept of HSN – can be approached with the so called process of *concept explication*. This theoretical approximation to an academic concept aims to extend the understanding of a concept based on, for example, comprehensive literature reviews (Chaffee,

1991). The goal of the concept explication is to render an academic concept more utile for the application in empirical research. Second, *phenomenological studies* try to describe instantiations of real-world referents of academic concepts, i.e., one tries to describe the occurrence of the phenomenon in question by analyzing societal entities. Content analyses on the occurrence of hard and soft news can be regarded as such phenomenological studies (e.g., Patterson, 2000). Third, studies should focus on the *effects* of these phenomena which represent a focus in HSN research (e.g., Baum, 2002; Baum & Jamison, 2011; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014; Prior, 2003). Lastly, the approximation to an academic concept also entails *causal analyses* of why phenomena occur by applying the concept in empirical studies. As to HSN, only few studies have focus on this fourth way of approaching an academic concept. So far and as delineated in greater detail above, empirical studies on the causes of why news is produced as hard or soft news are rare. While phenomenological studies on the occurrence of hard and soft news in news content as well as studies on the effect of hard and soft news consumption have gained a lot of scholarly attention (for an overview, see Reinemann et al., 2012), the first and the last step are characterized by a lack of theoretical and empirical studies; the present dissertation aims to counteract this lack.

To achieve this, I will – literally and figuratively – bring the concept of hard and soft news back to its roots – the newsrooms – and back to those professionals who work with hard and soft news regularly – the journalists. To understand why this might be fruitful for answering the research questions, we first need to cast a glance at the origins of hard and soft news. The terms of hard and soft news have first

immersed in practical journalism (Russell, 1954)(Russell, 1954).¹ And until today, we can find the word pair of hard and soft news in textbooks for future journalists that teach the differences between hard and soft news that need to be taken into account when writing or filming a hard or soft news piece (Hooffacker & Meier, 2017; Sova, 2002). The origin of hard and soft news shows what can be asserted for journalism research in general: its strong interconnections with practical journalism and journalism education (Josephi, 2009; Zelizer, 2009). While some describe the relationship between these three fields as difficult “rife with various and sundry complication” (Zelizer, 2009, p. 29; see also Haller, 2004), recent work stresses that practical journalism and journalism research can and should mutually enrich and reinforce each other (Raabe, 2008, 2016). Models and concepts in communication research – so the assumption – can benefit from critical evaluations against the practical use and understanding of professionals: these evaluations help “avoid the mistake of referring from the theoretical model to the reality of analysis” (Raabe, 2008, p. 378; own translation, IG), and, thereby, missing this practical understanding. This perspective is taken upon in the present dissertation when addressing the two essential way of approximating to an academic concept: the theoretical approximation to the concept of hard and soft news by assessing the utility of the most recent conceptualization as well as the causal analysis of the factors that shape the news with regard to its hard and soft nature.

¹ As late as in 1954, Russel listed the – back then – neologisms “Among the New Words” of the English language. The dictionary with the same name published by the journal *American Speech* released monthly a report of words that had found their way into English parlance and, also, noted where the words were discovered. Russel (1954) traced back the first appearance of hard and soft news to practical journalism: *Newsweek*, an US-American weekly journal, used the terms as early as in 1948; *Harper’s Magazine*, another US-American journal, spoke of hard news in 1953.

The present thesis aims to improve our understanding in both fields. This is not only relevant against the backdrop of problems that are associated with fuzzy concept in research, such as opposing results on one and the same research question or difficulties of accumulating knowledge about hard and soft news over time (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). Having a profounder knowledge about the concept of hard and soft news and the production of those news is also crucial for practical journalism and societies as whole. With regard to the first, only if scholars base their inquiries on a consentaneous understanding of concepts and, therefore, underlying societal phenomena, they can transfer their findings convincingly into practical journalism where the differences between hard and soft news reporting is, for example, taught to future journalists (Hooffacker & Meier, 2017). The latter refers to the quality of news which is often describes as to decline with an increase of soft news (Plasser, 2005) and, consequently, to be harmful to democratic societies (Nguyen, 2012). This claim is grounded in the earlier illustrated assumption that soft news does not provide citizens with that knowledge that they, for instance, need to cast their ballot based on informed decision making processes (Prior, 2003). Therefore, even if the – let alone – difficult inquiry about of which quality news has to be to provide citizens with enough information to be a functional member of a democratic society was agreed on by scholars and societies, only the knowledge about the driving forces (soft) news coverage would enable societies in general and journalism in particular to counteract those forces when one or the other way of reporting contradicted what we regarded as the desirable quality of news.

Based on the two research voids, I will take on a twofold approach in the present dissertation. The concept-based focus work on HSN will help us overcome definitional shortcomings and make the concept more useable for further research. The –

production-based focus on HSN production will help us gain more insight in factors influencing the process of hard and soft news reporting. To reach these goals, the dissertation comprises two main components. The synopsis that frames the research papers consists of two parts. Part I will – after this introduction – acquaint with the subject matter of this dissertation – the concept of hard and soft news. After pointing out what to understand by concepts in social sciences in general (Chapter 2.1, 2.2), I will elaborate on the development of HSN in academia and its shortcomings (Chapter 2.3). Then, the theoretical considerations of factors influencing the production of news content will follow (Chapter 3). In Part I, also the precise guiding research questions for the thesis will be stated which will be summarized in Chapter 4. The following Part II aims to answer these research questions: it entails the fieldwork of this dissertation (Manuscripts 1, 2, and 3). The third part of the synopsis will complete the dissertation, concluding the work by summarizing and discussing all results, presenting limitations, and implications, for academic journalism studies and practical journalism as well as by pointing out future research directions.²

² The references of Part I, and III will be at the end of the synopsis, the references of part II at the end of each paper, keeping the formatting style as required by the particular journal.

2 CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS ON HARD AND SOFT NEWS

The following part will, firstly, illustrate what social sciences understand by concepts in general. This will be done by mostly referring to literature about theoretical considerations on concepts and concept explication that was put forward in political science (Sartori, 1984). To understand what concepts in social sciences entail, why they are required for research, and which characteristics concepts have to have to be utile for research, is necessary to delineate before focusing on HSN particularly. These theoretical considerations will allow – as a second step – to scrutinize the concept of hard and soft news in greater detail, i.e., to describes its components and composition, to name specific shortcomings, and to illustrate ways to assess these shortcomings, before the empirical and theoretical fieldwork of the present dissertation will propose ways to counter them.

2.1 Concepts in Social Sciences

Concepts in social sciences are understood as “theories about fundamental constitutive elements of a phenomenon” (Goertz, 2006, p. 5). They help categorize objects or phenomena in the real world and make statements about the logical relations among and between these objects. An academic concept is composed of four aspects: 1) the societal phenomenon referred to; 2) the attributes that define this phenomenon; 3) the term which is used to signify the phenomenon and its ascribed attributes (Gerring, 1999)³; 4) Indicators, i.e., the measurement or operationalization of the concept (Gerring, 2015).

³ From a linguistic point of view, the term (*symbol*) is chosen to symbolize a real-world object (*referent*) which is represented as a concept in the human mind (*reference*) (Ogden & Richards, 1923).

Furthermore, concepts have real-world referents, i.e., they are linked to – concrete or abstract – objects in the real world (McLeod & Pan, 2005). They are described by certain characteristics that they have in common with this real-world referent. For example, the concept hard and soft news can be linked to its real-world referents of news items that show certain characteristics which are constitutive for the *concept* of hard and soft news. If, for example, emotional and opinionated reporting is regarded as constitutive for soft news, we would link a newspaper article that shows these characteristics to the mental concept of soft news that a researcher or journalist has.

Concepts can be described with regard to their multidimensional and multilevel character (Collier & Mahon, 1993; Goertz, 2006; Sartori, 1984). Multidimensionality denotes the fact that most concepts are not determined by one characteristic but several that together define the concept (Goertz, 2006). With regard to the multilevel nature of concepts, Goertz (2006) differentiates three levels on which we can describe concepts: on the top level, we find *basic level concepts* that are used in broad theories. They can be further specified, for example, by adding adjectives. One level down, on the *secondary level*, we find these more specified concepts whose dimensions constitute basic level concepts. Finally, on the *indicator level*, concepts are so specific that they can be used directly for data collection. The multidimensional character of concepts becomes obvious at the secondary level of concepts where several dimensions are used to describe the higher ordered basic level concept. Munck and Verkuilen (2002), for example, used the metaphor of “*leaves of the concept tree*” (p. 13, emphasis in original) when they referred to different dimensions and indicators of the concept of democracy that was the subject matter of their analysis. The authors

stressed that it is possible to add further leaves and branches to concept trees to extent Goertz' (2006) threefold approach.

Concepts are essential to social sciences: "before we can investigate the presence or absence of some attribute in a person or a social situation, or before we can rank objects or measure them in terms of some variable, we must form the concept of that variable" (Lazarsfeld & Barton, 1951, p. 155). The importance of concepts in social sciences is based on the following rationales: first, it is impossible to pose research questions and to find answers to these questions without concepts. Researchers – like any other humans – cannot make sense of a world that based on concepts without referring to their own conceptual categories (Schaffer, 2016). Second, concepts are also relevant to counteract – if desired – the phenomenon they represent. Consequently, the relevance of concepts is not of pure "academic prestidigitation" (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012, p. 490; own translation) but also determined by societal demands.

Despite this relevance of concepts, several scholars criticize that concepts, especially in social sciences, lack clarity and rigor (Collier & Gerring, 2009; Collier & Mahon, 1993; Gerring, 1999; Goertz, 2006; for (political) journalism, see also Esser, Strömbäck, & Vreese, 2012). Gerring (2015) even spoke of a "seemingly endless conceptual muddle" (p. 113) that social scientists face when applying concepts in research.

Several problems can be discerned in this context that contribute to this "muddle". On the one hand, concepts are often used synonymously, i.e., various concepts are referred to when describing one and the same phenomenon (Gerring & Barresi, 2003). Sartori (1984) calls this situation a "many words-one meaning" (p. 37) relationship. On the other hand, we can also observe the reverse relationship between

concepts and phenomena: one term is used to denote several social phenomena or entities. The concept is polysemic (e.g., Gerring & Barresi, 2003). Furthermore, concepts can change their meaning over time and in different academic fields and sub-fields (Gerring, 1999). This can lead to “conceptual travelling” (Collier & Mahon, 1993, p. 845) or “conceptual stretching” (Sartori, 1970, p. 1037). The first refers to the application of a concept to new and further cases that, so far, have not been counted as instantiations of the particular concept. The later denotes the process of subsuming news cases to a concept that do not fit (see also Collier & Mahon, 1993). A last problem that is also connected to the use of concepts over time and in different fields, is the lack of coherence of the attributes that are regarded as constitutive of a concept and, consequently, of the operationalizations and measurements of concepts (Esser et al., 2012; Gerring, 2015).

The consequences of these problems are manifold. Ambiguous use of concepts, unclear conceptual borders, and inconsistent inner structures are cumbersome to research since they hinder exchange of knowledge within one scientific community: It is almost impossible to compare results of studies and to cumulate knowledge without a common understanding of concepts and underlying phenomena (Esser et al., 2012; Gerring, 2015; Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). Especially meta-analyses that are essential for detecting and explaining societal developments would benefit from a standardized understanding of key concepts. Also, they are also poisonous to communication between academia and society (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). If experts cannot communicate their results to laymen by using coherent vocabulary, the results might not reflect in society or expert fields like practical journalism.

2.2 Criteria of Goodness of Concepts

To counteract such problems, the process of concept explication provides rules as for how to develop new concepts and how to evaluate and improve existing concepts (Chaffee, 1991).⁴ Gerring (1999) provided a framework of eight specific criteria to assess the goodness of concepts and concept explication (*Table 1*). His approach is particularly suited for the evaluation of an already existing concept which is one of the aims of the dissertation at hand.⁵ These eight criteria of goodness of concepts will be delineated in the following, before linking them with the concept of hard and soft news to assess the academic utility of HSN. Denoting the shortcomings of HSN in a systematic way, will – as a following step – allow proposing ways to account for them in the fieldwork part of the present dissertation (Manuscript 1 and 2).

⁴ Next to concept explication, also the terms concept formation Gerring (2001) or concept specification (Schnell, Hill, & Esser, 2008) are used. Several approaches can be taken upon in this process. For example, procedural models suggest working on concepts in a step-by-step approach of development which, among others, includes such steps like literature review, meaning analysis, or reviews of tentative definitions Chaffee (1991). Other researchers provide guidelines that state criteria for evaluating these steps: Sartori (1970) was one of the first, who elaborated on concept formation. He sat out twelve rules for concept formation that should be taken into account when building or re-building a concept.

⁵ It is not agreed on yet which steps comprise the process of concepts formation and which criteria should to be exactly referred to when evaluating existing concepts. Rather, the proposed criteria of goodness resemble a “shopping list” (Hartleb, 2011, p. 110). The approach by Gerring (1999) was used in this dissertation due to its rigor and applicability for the assessing a concept in communication science (see also, McLeod & Pan, 2005).

Table 1. Criteria of goodness of concepts

Criterion	Explanation	Denoted aspect of concepts ^a
Familiarity	Degree to which a term is familiar to laymen population and specialized communities	Term
Resonance	Degree of memorability of the chosen concept/term	Term
Parsimony	1) Shortness of chosen term 2) Amount of adhered attributes	Term Attributes
Coherence	Degree of internal consistency of attributes and instances that are subsumed under the concept	Attributes
Differentiation	1) Degree of distinctiveness of attributes that are subsumed under the concept 2) Degree external boundedness of concept	Attributes
Depth	Amount of shared attributes of instances that are subsumed under the concept	Attributes
Theoretical Utility	Degree of utility of concepts in theory building	Application
Field Utility	Degree to which reconceptualization enhances utility of neighbor concepts	Application

Note. Table adapted from Gerring (1999)

a) Aspects refers to the abovementioned four elements a concept comprises (Gerring, 1999).

Familiarity denotes the degree to which a term, i.e., the chosen name of a concept – the *symbol* (Ogden & Richards, 1923) – is known amongst laymen population and specialized communities (Gerring, 1999). With regards to the concept of hard and soft news, the terms should be familiar to journalists as the producers of news and communication scholars as those scientists who use the concept of HSN in their research to attest the concept a great degree of familiarity.

Resonance also refers to the chosen term for a concepts and describes the ability of a concept to cause a “cognitive click” (Gerring, 1999, p. 370). Since concepts are abstracts abbreviations of more complex real-world referents, a concept is the better

the quicker individuals can link the abstract term to its referents. Similar to familiarity, HSN would be resonant if, for instance, journalists mapped the terms of hard and soft news quickly with hard and soft news items, for example, in newspapers.

Parsimony refers to two aspects of concepts. On the one hand, it appertains to the term that was chosen for a concept. The shorter the term is, the better it is (Gerring, 1999). On the other hand, also the attributes that specify a concept should be chosen parsimoniously, i.e., concepts should not be defined by too many characteristics.

Furthermore, *coherence* is one of the proposed eight criteria of goodness. It describes the inner structure of a concept and is regarded as one of the most important aspects of a utile concept (Gerring, 1999). The coherence of a concept is high if the attributes that specify the concept belong together and build a linked group; in other words, the internal consistency of a concept is high. If the characteristics of a concept do not group together logically, the concept “itself is virtually meaningless” (Gerring, 2015, p. 68).

Differentiation assesses the degree to which a concept can be distinguished from its neighboring concepts: clear concepts are characterized by precise borders to other concepts within the same larger semantic field, “that is, the constellation of related concepts and terms” (Collier, LaPorte, & Seawright, 2012, p. 222). Hence, differentiation is about the “*between-concept* hypotheses” (McLeod & Pan, 2005, pp. 38–39; emphasis in original), i.e., about assumption on how concepts within a semantic field are related. Collier et al. (2012) suggested to show relationship of related concepts in a hierarchical framework that stresses that there is a logical, hierarchical order to the concepts. Coherence and differentiation are interrelated since “a concept

cannot be internally coherent unless it is distinguishable from other concepts” (Gerring, 2015, p. 127).

Additionally, the *depth* of a concept is relevant for its utility. The more real-world referents can be subsumed under the concept, the greater the depth of a concept and the more useful it is. In contrast to familiarity, resonance, and parsimony to some extent, the three criteria of goodness – coherence, differentiation, and depth – refer to the attributes of a concept and not to the term that was chosen to represent the concept.

Finally, the two utility criteria of *theoretical utility* and *field utility* entail the usefulness of concepts when applying them, either in theory building or in improving related concepts. Theoretical utility describes how useful the concept is within its area of application and in relation to other concepts of the same semantic field. The theoretical utility of concepts is enhanced when concepts within a field can be organized in hierarchical frameworks since concepts gain sharper borders and inner coherence from their position in the such frameworks (Collier et al., 2012; Gerring, 1999). This is strongly interconnected to the criterion of differentiation. Field utility, in contrast, is characterized by the ability of concept explication to also improve related concepts when working on a particular concept. Gerring (1999) called this ability “peripheral, ‘spillover’ redefinitions” (p. 382). Taking the example of the HSN concept, the field utility of the concept would increase if its re-conceptualization affected also related concepts like sensationalism or tabloidization. Hence, both theoretical utility and field utility do not only refer to the concept one works on but also assess the utility of concepts by including related concepts to the perspective (Tausendpfund, 2018). Both goodness criteria seem in particular utile for concepts that are

often used synonymously which can be attested to the concept of hard and soft news (Chapter 2.3.3).

When assessing the utility of academic concepts by checking these criteria of goodness there are three possible outcomes (Chaffee, 1991): 1) the concept can be attested theoretical and empirical utility and can be used in future studies. 2) The concept requires revision. For example, further constitutive dimensions need to be gathered through an additional literature review. 3) The concept has to be abandoned due to its flaws (see also, Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). The following subchapter will apply the goodness criteria of concepts to HSN. Combining these considerations with results of the empirical and theoretical work of this thesis (Manuscript 1 and 2) will allow rendering a judgment on how to proceed with the concept of hard and soft news.

2.3 The Concept of Hard and Soft News

After having set forth the theoretical base of concepts and the evaluation of concept, I will now turn to HSN as a scientific concept, explicating its academic development and current status in communication research as well as pointing out conceptual shortcomings and ways to counter them.

2.3.1 Dichotomous and One-dimensional Conceptualizations

For more than half of a century communication scholars have made use of the concept of hard and soft news by now: the first use in Anglo-American empirical communication research dates back to the 1960s (Adams, 1964; Fosdick, 1969). In the German-speaking area, Padrutt (1967) used the term soft news – and not the German translation – when describing the press in Switzerland. Ever since, the terms did not

only find their way into everyday journalistic language; they also became a central concept in communication science, getting used for various research purposes (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012).

The first studies using the HSN concept referred to the simplest way to distinguish hard from soft news, hearkening back to one singular characteristic of a news item (e.g., Adams, 1964). In most of these one-dimensional understandings, researchers name the topic of a news story as the differentiation criterion. This idea refers to the very first papers that used the terms of hard and soft news. Adams (1964), for example, categorized stories about politics and government, war, or economics as hard news. Soft news, in contrast, comprised topics such as accidents, entertainment, or public moral problems. Others proposed similar lists (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Brekken et al., 2012; Chan, 2015; Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Fosdick, 1969; Gerstner, 2018; Nam, 1970; Tuchman, 1973). Another differentiation criterion is the timeliness of an event (Carroll, 1985): events that need to be reported immediately are hard news, whereas for soft news there is no time frame to publish it. Understandings of HSN based on topics or timeliness imply a dichotomous character of hard and soft news: news is either hard *or* soft; there is no in-between.

Such one-dimensional understandings of hard and soft news contradict Goertz' (2006) claim that concepts are always multidimensional, i.e., that they are determined by *several* attributes. Indeed one-dimensional and also dichotomous conceptualizations of HSN have been subject to criticism by communication scholars. First, the proposed lists with topics to differentiate hard from soft news are not agreed upon. Hence, different authors categorized topics differently. While most authors, for instance, seem to agree on news about politics and economics being hard

news (e.g., Adams, 1964; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Curran et al., 2009; Hamilton, 2004; Nam, 1970; Tuchman, 1973), other topics do not get categorized consensually. Accidents and disasters, for example, are regarded as either hard news (Hamilton, 2004; Nam, 1970; Patterson, 2000), or soft news (Adams, 1964), or are categorized into a third class (e.g., as sensational news, van Aelst & de Swert, 2009). For others, crime could be either hard news or soft news depending on whether or not it was put into a broader societal context (Curran et al., 2009).

Putting news into more than two categories leads to the second criticism. Research indicates that dichotomous conceptualizations might be an “overly simplistic ... categorization” (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010, p. 38). How news is categorized is not a question of a kind but rather of a degree (Baum, 2002). For example, Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky (2010) suggested the intermediate category of “general news” between hard and soft news. Yang and Oliver (2004) used a continuum for rating news stories (see also, Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014).

Various researchers have pointed out that hard and soft news can not only be distinguished by referring to one dimension, e.g., the topic of a story, but also to the packaging of news, i.e., *how* the news is told (Brekken et al., 2012; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). These multi-dimensional understandings will be scrutinized in the following.

2.3.2 Multidimensional Understandings of Hard and Soft News

In one-dimensional understandings of hard and soft news, definitions are either based on which stories are told or on how they are covered. However, many definitions proposed in the extensive literature on hard and soft news do not fall into one

of these two categories. Rather, these definitions see hard and soft news as mixture of content and form, implying a HSN concept that consists of *several* dimensions.

As early as in Tuchman's (1973) seminal paper, the used conceptualization of HSN hinted at a multidimensional understanding: „Indeed, the same event may be treated as either a hard or a soft news story" (p. 114). Consequently, she first provided a definition of hard and soft news based on one dimension (namely topics), then also listed relevance, newsworthiness, and factuality as further dimensions within the realm of event-inherent characteristics. In the same vein, Scott and Gobetz (1992) drew upon topics and timeliness to distinguish hard and soft news.

Also news item inherent characteristics, i.e., characteristics referring to *how* stories are covered, are further dimensions that are referred to for differentiating hard and soft news. Patterson (2000) was one of the first the referred to an entire bundle of attributes to define HSN: "It [soft news; IG] has been described, for example, as news that is typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news" (p. 4). Reinemann et al. (2012) spoke of a "specific set of characteristics combined in news items" (p. 223) in this context. In a comprehensive literature review, they compared studies on HSN with regards to the dimensions the authors referred to. Reinemann et al. (2012) could show that

"only a quarter of the studies follow a one-dimensional approach to distinguish between hard and soft news - most of the studies use at least two dimensions. The most elaborate approach is presented by Baum (2002, 2003, 2007). He uses almost all dimensions that can be found in the literature. Most of the studies (83%) use the topic dimension to identify or to differentiate between hard and soft news and at least half of the studies (54%) use the style dimension, followed by characteristics of news production (42%), a reception perspective (29%) and news focus (21%)" (p. 226).

Based on this observation and the definitions and conceptualizations they had collected and compared, Reinemann et al. (2012) offered a re-conceptualization of hard and soft news. They suggested to distinguish harder and softer news based on three dimensions: *topic*, *focus* (i.e., emphasis of the specific aspects of topics), and *style* dimension (i.e., visual and verbal presentation). The authors refrained from using a list of topics which could be either hard topics or soft topics. Rather, they defined the topic dimension by the level of political relevance of the event a news item covers. For example, the more decision-making authorities are mentioned in the news item, the more politically relevant the story, and, thus, the harder the news is. The focus dimension comprises two sub-dimensions: thematic versus episodic framing and public versus private relevance. Episodic framing illustrates an issues with specific examples, or event oriented reports; thematically framed news report an issue in broader and more abstract terms (see also, Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999). The relevance dimension distinguishes whether the consequences of an issue are stressed either for an individual or for the society as a whole. Also the style dimension has two sub-dimensions: impersonal versus personal reporting and unemotional versus emotional coverage. The first distinguishes hard and soft news based on the degree of journalistic involvement: the more an author of a news item states his or her personal opinion on an issue, the softer is the news. The latter discriminates between hard and soft news based on the degree of emotionality. The more emotions are depicted – verbally or visually – the softer is the news. Reinemann et al. (2012) proposed to use the dimensions separately or altogether and to build an additive index when applying the concept in research. By doing so, one could create a continuum ranging from harder to softer news.

In the sense of the framework by Goertz (2006), this re-conceptualizations is of multilevel and multidimensional nature. The basic level concept of HSN is specified by the secondary concepts of topic, focus, and style which in return are further specified by the third level concepts of framing, relevance, opinion, and emotions. Figure 1 shows the concept tree of HSN in its most current understanding.⁶

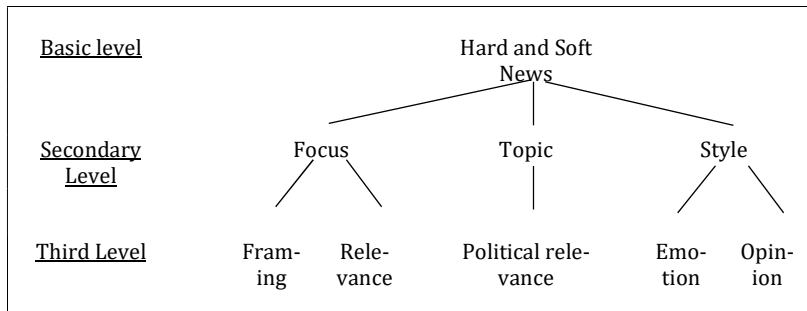


Figure 1. Concept tree of hard and soft news based on Reinemann et al. (2012)

Although more studies these days revert to multi-dimensional understandings of HSN, there are still several deficits to the concept. Indeed, researcher adjudicate upon HSN rather harshly, criticizing “the gross way of measuring ‘soft’ news” (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010, p. 41) or claiming that “it is hard to think of other concepts that are so important and popular and at the same time so poorly defined and theorized” (Lahav, 2009, p. 1). Hence, I will in the following elaborate on the overall conceptual deficits of HSN as an academic concept, reasons for these shortcomings, and

⁶ Goertz (2006) suggested as the third level already indicators of a concept that can be used for research immediately. Following Munck and Verkuilen (2002), I included a third level first, since the dimensions on this level require further operationalization by indicators (see appendix of Reinemann et al. (2012)).

how to address them, connecting these aspects with the goodness criteria of concepts elaborated above (Chapter 2.2).

2.3.3 Deficits of Current Hard and Soft News Conceptualizations

The shortcomings of concepts that have been described for social sciences in general can be also attested to the concept of HSN. Two areas of problems can be discerned that refer to the criteria of goodness of concepts in social sciences. The first denotes the goodness criterion of differentiation, i.e., the demarcations to other, related concepts (Gerring, 1999). When studying hard and soft news, one automatically comes across other concepts that are related to the concept of hard and soft news. HSN is only one concept of a whole family of concepts and approaches that are recurred on to describe changes in the way media covers (political) events and to determine the effects of such news on recipients. Related concepts are, for example, tabloidization, infotainment, or sensationalism (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). These concepts are not only applied for similar research questions; they also show large overlaps of with respect to their constitutive dimensions and their multidimensional nature (Landmeier & Daschmann, 2011; Leidenberger, 2015; Uribe & Gunter, 2004). For example, tabloidization is characterized by changes between broadsheet and tabloid media, for instance, in range, i.e., a trend toward more human interest topics and less political content (Djupsund & Carlson, 1998) or in style, i.e., the way of addressing the recipients by using, among other, a more “street talk”-like (Esser, 1999, p. 293) or a more emotional way of reporting (Skovsgaard, 2014). Similar definition of the concepts within the same semantic field, reduce the extent to which hard and soft news can be differentiated from those related concepts.

Second, the goodness criterion of differentiation is endangered by what Sartori (1984) or Gerring and Barresi (2003) referred to as synonymous use of HSN, i.e., using various terms for describing one and the same phenomenon. Reinemann et al. (2016) pointed out the problem of synonymy explicitly; despite their warning words, they suggested using the concepts of hard and soft news and “softening of news’, ‘tabloidization’ and ‘growing infotainment’ as synonyms” (p. 234; see also, Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). Indeed, researchers have already followed this suggestion and used the conceptualization of HSN by Reinemann et al. (2012) as their base for research on – so their concept labeling – tabloidization (Magin, 2017; Magin & Stark, 2015).

Third, as pointed out earlier (Chapter 2.3.2), HSN denotes media content in the form of single, for example, newspaper items, or TV reports. However, especially research on the effects of soft news does often not assess the influence of consuming single items but of entire news shows (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014; Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017; Taniguchi, 2011) or soft news media (Baum, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007). Hence, the concept of HSN – in particular the soft component of it – is used polysemously for phenomena which others describe as, for example, infotainment (Brants & Neijens, 1998; Jebiril, Albaek, & Vreese, 2013) or politainment (Dörner, 2001). We can also regard this polysemantic use of HSN as conceptual travelling and the consequential conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1984). Getting applied to new cases, i.e., entire shows or outlets as well as other branches of the news media, transfers the concept into a news realm of application which may result in “distortion” (Collier & Mahon, 1993, p. 845).

Synonymous and polysemic use contradicts strongly the goodness criterion of differentiation. The concept of HSN seems to be fuzzy at its borders due to getting

confused und used interchangeably with related but – assumingly – different concepts. The lack of clear demarcations of HSN and differentiations to other concepts might be explained by the similarities within the conceptual family, which can be summarized under term of softening of news (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011), i.e., a change in the way the media reports ongoing societal and political events. The overlap of concepts like tabloidization, infotainment, or politainment becomes obvious when looking at how these concepts are defined and how they get operationalized (Reinemann et al., 2012): The similarities to conceptualizations of HSN are striking but are the concepts all the same? In other words, what can we say about the differentiation of these concept? The first research question of this dissertation, hence, focuses on the “*between-concept hypotheses*” (McLeod & Pan, 2005; emphasis in original) about the relationship of HSN and other concepts in its semantic field, tackling thereby the goodness criterion of differentiation (Gerring, 1999). The first research question that will be focused on in the first Manuscript of this cumulative dissertation (Chapter 5), thus, asks:⁷

RQ 1: How can the concept of hard and soft news be distinguished from other, related concepts?

The second problem that can be assigned to the concept of hard and soft news refers to the goodness criterion of coherence that Gerring (1999) considered the most important criterion for a utile concept. The literature on hard and soft news offers various definitions and operationalization (Reinemann et al., 2012). One-dimensional and multi-dimensional understandings exist next to each other, one (yet) not outplaying the other (Chapter 2.3.1, 2.3.2). Additionally, it is still not agreed upon

⁷ The research questions that are presented in the synopsis should be regarded as guiding research questions for the overall dissertation (numbered with Roman numerals). The exact wording and subordinate research questions will be presented in each paper in Part II of this dissertation (see, also Table 11).

which dimensions exactly comprise the concept. Two paths could be taken at this point to improve the coherence of HSN. On the one hand, one could come up with his or her own conceptualization of HSN, following, for example, the rules for concept explication by Sartori (1984) or by Chaffee (1991; see also footnote 4). On the other hand, one could refer to the existing (re-)conceptualizations and test them for their coherence. This testing can indicate whether the process of concept explication is – for now – finished with satisfying results.

In this dissertation, the second path is taken. One big step towards inner coherence was the literature review of existing literature on HSN and the resulting re-conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012). Their three-dimensional understanding can be regarded as the status quo in HSN concept explication since it condenses what researchers over the period of more than 20 years have understood by the concept. Against the call of standardization of instruments (for HSN in particular: Esser et al., 2012; for news content research in general: Wirth & Kolb, 2012), I, thus, refrain from yet another conceptualization of HSN but rather focus on examining the re-conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) in terms of its coherence.

A first idea about the empirical usefulness – and the coherence as one aspect of this usefulness – can give us studies that have applied the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) so far. Despite around 220 cross-references on Google Scholar⁸ for this paper that can be regarded as a milestone in the history of research on HSN, only very few studies have actually applied the conceptualization empirically and tested the concept for its empirical utility. Magin and Stark (2015), as one of very few authors, used the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) in the context of

⁸ Google Scholar was checked for papers (including theses, working papers, and conference proceedings) that referred to the paper by Reinemann et al. (2012) (retrieved 23.02.2018).

a content analysis of quality and tabloid newspapers in Germany and Austria.⁹ The authors conducted a principal component analysis of the indicators of the HSN concept they used in their content analysis. The results showed that the style dimension decomposed into two dimensions – a visual and verbal style dimension. Although this a valuable result and the principle component analysis a solid methodological approach to check the coherence of the HSN concept, once again, the value of the study by Magin and Stark (2015) is limited since they used – to some extent – different indicators.

Given the success of the latest conceptualization of HSN (Reinemann et al., 2012) but the lack of tests for the most important goodness criterion of coherence, the second research question of this dissertation that will be focused on in the second Manuscript (Chapter 6) asks:

RQ II: How coherent is the concept of hard and soft news in its most recent understanding?

To answer this research question, I will bring back the concept of hard and soft news to the newsroom and assess whether the journalistic understanding of hard and soft news is mirrored in the academic one. Taking upon this approach is not only out of historic sentimentality since the terms of hard and soft news emerged first in practical journalism (Russell, 1954). It also proceeds the assumption that professional practical insight can help review critically theoretical modelling of academic communication phenomena (Raabe, 2008).

⁹ Despite explicitly referring to this conceptualization, the author did not follow exactly the suggested operationalization. For example, the focus dimension was measured with the indicators references to private life or to the physical appearance of the mentioned politician in the newspaper article. These indicators resemble strongly those of the concept of personalization (Adam & Maier, 2010). However, Magin and Stark (2015) did not discuss this.

So far, I have only elaborated on academic concepts that are used in social sciences. In this context, hard and soft news is an *experience-distant concept*, i.e., “one that specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer ... – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims” (Geertz, 1974, p. 28). Thus, the academic concept of hard and soft news can be applied in research on news, for example, when aiming to describe changes in the way the news media covers political and societal events.

However, all humans – including journalists – use of concepts on a daily base; these concepts are so called *experience-near concepts*, i.e., concepts that are mentally formed and used through handling their real-world referents on a regular base (Geertz, 1974; Schaffer, 2016). Concepts help humans to categorize objects in the world and to treat them appropriately (McLeod & Pan, 2005; Sloutsky, 2010). Hard and soft news is inasmuch such an experience-near concept as journalists have acquired it, for example, through the process of professional socialization (Bergmann, 2010). Hence, journalists have learned what to understand by hard and soft news. This knowledge enables them in their daily work to treat objects, i.e., news items, that share characteristics with the journalists’ conceptual understanding of hard and soft news as it is appropriate for hard and soft news. This was already described in Tuchman’s (1973) seminal study on news making routines: Journalists categorized incoming news based on their understanding of hard and soft news into two categories: news that they had to be edited immediately (hard news) or those that did not require immediate action (soft news).

The first focus of the dissertation at hand concentrates on the experience-distance concept of hard and soft news, aiming, in a first step, to theoretically demarcate it from related concept, and in a second step to cross-validate it by bringing back the

academic experience-distant concept to the newsroom: This will allow for mapping the experience-near and experience-distant understandings of HSN in order to validate the latter, the academic concept.

For the second focus of the dissertation, the last step of the approximation to a concept will be concentrated on: Next to theoretical concept explanation, phenomenological studies on real-world objects, and studies of the effects of these real-world objects on individuals, causal analyses of why objects or phenomena occur are crucial (Hartleb, 2011).¹⁰ For this purpose, it is important to illustrate, first, how hard and soft news as real-world referents in form of hard and soft news items – as we can find them in the news media, for example, in newspaper or TV news casts – are produced by journalists and the news media and which factors influence this production of news. Once again, I will bring back hard and soft to the newsroom and focus on journalistic influences on this process, this time, though, not tackling the academic concept of hard and soft news but the real-world objects of *hard and soft news items* in a causal analysis of factors that influence their production.

¹⁰ In terms of linguistics, scholars apply the concept (or *reference*, according to Ogden and Richards (1923)) of “hard and soft news” to the *referent* of “hard and soft news items” in form of real-world objects like newspaper articles by referring to the term (or *symbol*, according to Ogden and Richards (1923)) of “hard and soft news”.

3 HARD AND SOFT NEWS PRODUCTION

After having set forth what we can understand by HSN as an academic concept and the problems associated with it, I will in the following proceed with another essential part in approximation to a concept in social sciences: the analysis of causes of why the underlying societal phenomenon occurs or objects can be observed. To do so, the following chapters will illuminate how news is produced, and which factors influence this process of news production in general, applying these aspects on hard and soft news specifically.

3.1 Theoretical Background on News Production

With the sociological shift in journalism research, it became agreed on that news is not just found, selected, and transmitted by journalists, but that news is “socially constructed” (Tuchman, 1980, p. 2). Hence, authors spoke of “Manufacturing the News” (Fishman, 1980), “Making news” (Tuchman, 1980), or “news production” (Schudson, 1989) when referring to the process of news generation. These titles of academic monographs and journal articles already indicate that journalists are not mere gatekeepers or transmitters of news, but that they are newsmakers that actively *produce* news.

This process of news making can be distinguished into several steps. Domingo et al. (2008) proposed five steps that they described as common for every news production process: 1) access and observation, 2) selection and filtering, 3) processing and editing, 4) distribution, and 5) interpretation.¹¹ Although this analytical grid was originally used to study participatory journalism, the authors stressed that “it helps

¹¹ The single steps should not be understood as strictly sequential; rather, they can take place in iterative loops.

us identify the basic communication principles that constitute *all* types of public communication” (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 328; emphasis in original) and it has shown its theoretical utility in several occasions (e.g., Hanitzsch & Hoxha, 2014; Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2017; Westlund & Lewis, 2017). Hence, the grid can be also applied to the production of hard and soft which will be the subject matter of Chapter 3.2.

The first two steps of access and observation as well as selection and filtering comprise what Bantz, McCorkle, and Baade (1980) termed story ideation, i.e., process of story idea generation. Here, journalists decide *which* story to cover (Hanitzsch & Hoxha, 2014). On the one hand, journalists can generate ideas for news stories proactively through observations, for example, of their private environment. On the other hand, they can develop ideas for news stories reactively, i.e., through selecting and filtering information they get delivered. Press releases or press conferences are example for this kind of story ideation.

The third step in the process of news production – processing and editing – describes the actual process of news item creation, e.g., writing up the print article or assembling video segments to a TV news report (Bantz et al., 1980). That it, in this stage of news production, the journalists face the decision *how* to tell the story. Hanitzsch and Hoxha (2014) distinguished two sub-steps: story narration denotes the perspective from which the news is reported as well as to how it is framed. Story presentation includes such aspects like choice of sound bites or which component of the news story is emphasized. Following the process of news production to this point,

journalists had to take two decisions so far: what story to tell and how to tell it. Engelmann (2012) spoke of *primary* (what to tell) and *secondary news decisions* (how to tell and present) in this context.¹²

The fourth step of news production – distribution – refers to the question how news is spread. Traditionally, this happened, for example, directly through the circulation of newspapers or a two-step-flow of communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Most recently, the audience also helps to distribute news digitally by recommending news reports on social network sites (Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, & Salaverría, 2016).

Finally, the last step of interpretation is characterized by being only partially accomplished by journalists. While most of the interpretative work is done by the recipients, journalism already offers in its news “interpretation patterns by providing comments and opinions” (Domingo et al., 2008, p. 331).

3.2 The Production Process of Hard and Soft News

After having set forth theoretical basis for the process of news production, we can now apply the 5-stepped grid to hard and soft news production.

Once again and as expounded in Chapter 2.3.2, the most recent academic understanding of the concept of hard and soft news comprises three dimensions (Reinemann et al., 2012): topic, focus, and style. In first two steps of news production, journalists are concerned with the ideation of stories, i.e., either get ideas for stories by observing their environment or by selecting and filtering information that they get

¹² In this dissertation, secondary news decisions or story narration and presentation interchangeably when referring to aspects of how to arrange news.

presented from sources. In this phase, journalists have to face and to take the decisions *which* story to cover. Hence, primary news decisions have to be taken (Engelmann, 2012). This decision refers to the topic dimension of HSN.

In the next step of news production, journalists process and to edit the news. That is, after deciding which story to cover in the step story ideation they are concerned with how to tell (story narration) and how to present news (story presentation) which are both downstream secondary news decisions (Engelmann, 2012). The first secondary news decisions can be connected with the focus dimension of HSN that describes whose perspective is stressed in a news item. The second downstream decision comprises the style dimension of HSN in which journalists, for example, decide whether or not to report in an emotional way. *Figure 2* summarizes the different steps of news productions and combines them with the decisions journalists have to take in each step as well as with the HSN dimensions that are affected.¹³

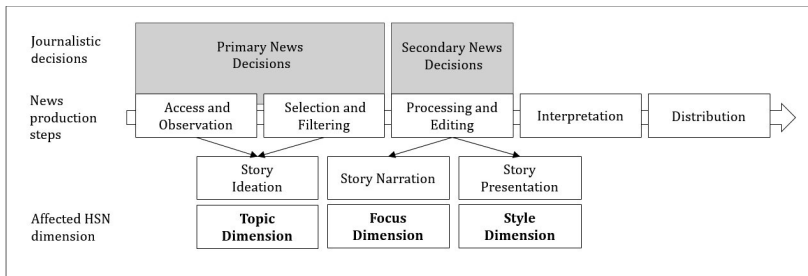


Figure 2. Five steps of news production and affected HSN dimensions

¹³ The fourth and fifth step of news production cannot be linked to a specific component of hard and soft news and will not be considered in the fieldwork of this dissertation. However, they will be discussed in the context of future research on HSN (Chapter 8.2).

The process of news production in general is complex and dependent on manifold influencing factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). In the following passage, I will, therefore, elaborate on a way to discern these factors systematically, before applying the presented scheme to organize those factors that influence the production of hard and soft news (Chapter 3.4).

3.3 Theoretical Background on Influences on News Production

Factors that influence journalism in general and media content in particular are unmet (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). To organize and systemize these factors, several models have been proposed. In a synopsis of the most important models, Hanitzsch (2009) listed seven different approaches. All of them have in common that they put the influencing factors on media content in a hierarchical order, reaching, for example, from the individual journalist to cultural aspects. However, the models differ with regard to the number of levels on which the influencing factors are located as well as with regard to the kind of levels. That is, while all models see characteristics of individual journalists as influential, others do not describe factors on a societal level as influencing media content (Preston, 2009; Whitney, Sumpter, & McQuail, 2004).

Probably the most popular model is the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). They proposed five levels on which they organized forces on media content influence “both separately and in conjunction with each other” (Reese, 2001, p. 178). The levels range from macro-level to a micro-level: the ideological level, the extra-media-level, the organizational level, the routine-level, and the individual level.

On the most macro-level of *ideology*, we find those factors that are considered to be incorporated in the societal, cultural, and ideological context in which news is produced. Reese (2001) comprised these factors under the term of “cultural air” (p. 183). The set-up of the media or political system and country-specific professional standards are examples for factors on this level. In the revised version of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model, the ideological level is called societal system level (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

Subsequently, the *extra-media-level* is located. It summarizes factors that are external to journalism but exert influence on its products nevertheless (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This influence is based on the assumption that media organizations are depended on other societal actors and that the dependence on to these actors exert influence on the journalistic content. Examples for these extra-media-actors are political actors like parties, PR workers, or other media organizations. Once again, the extra-media level was renamed in the revised version of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model, now called level of social institutions to account for the fact that journalism is embedded in a *net* of systemic players and not just individual actors (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

On the *organizational* level influencing factors are anchored that stem from the set-up of the media organization itself or parts of it, which produce the respective news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Depending on what one is interested, the organizational level can be understood as single newsrooms, media organizations, or even larger groups of companies (Reese, 2001). The ownership of media organizations is one example for factors on the organizational level, e.g., private versus public broadcasters.

Journalists are not only embedded in an organizational context but they also experience constraints in form of “ongoing, structured, deeply naturalized, rules, norms, procedures” (Reese, 2001, p. 180) that are comprised in the *routine level* of influences. Examples of these routines are the norm of objectivity or considerations about the audience, e.g., if it is politically interested or not (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

Finally, on the lowest level, we can find the *individual level* of journalists where the characteristics of individual journalists as potential influencing factors are located. Among these individual factors, we can name professional attitudes or education of journalists that shape news content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Also non-professional trait, like gender or race, are of interest on this level (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

The following chapter will now use the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) as a scaffold to scrutinized the influences on hard and soft news production that have been described in the HSN literature so far.¹⁴

3.4 Influencing Factors on Hard and Soft News Production

Given the conceptual deficits that have characterized research on and with the concept of HSN so far, studies that analyze factors influencing the production of hard and soft news are difficult to compare. The following literature review will only include those studies that either referred explicitly to the conceptualization by Reinemann et

¹⁴ The Hierarchy-of-Influence Model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) was chosen as a scaffold for this part of the dissertation since it is the most popular and mostly referred to model in the context of models that order forces on news content (Hanitzsch, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

al. (2012)¹⁵ or used the terms hard news, soft news, or hard and soft news and defined it as a multidimensional concept that, at least, shared two dimensions with conceptualization of Reinemann et al. (2012). This is based on the fact that this dissertation rests upon a multi-dimensional understanding of HSN due to its academic development (Chapter 2.3.2). Hence, studies that have analyzed influencing factors on only one dimension are not of interest at this point.

On the most macro level, the societal system or ideological level, researchers are interested in factors that stem, for example, from the set-up of the media system or the economic situation in a country (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Hence, comparative studies are prevailing. Several studies took into account factors on this level and analyzed their influence of HSN production. For example, Reinemann et al. (2016) compared the news coverage of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers as well as of public service and commercial broadcasters in 16 countries content analytically. Referring to parts of their own conceptualization (topic and style dimension), they found that economic factors and factors that are associated with the media market in the countries were the strongest predictors for new coverage: the worse the economic situation of a country, the harder the news coverage. Since the researchers built a HSN index of the dimensions they used, the influence of macro-level factors on the single dimensions cannot be stated.

Magin (2017) also referred to the HSN conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) but used the single HSN dimensions and a HSN index in her content analysis. Comparing the coverage of elite newspapers in Austria and Germany over the course of 60 years, she could show that changes in the media market (penetration of the

¹⁵ Since Reinemann et al. (2012) suggested using the terms of hard and soft news and, e.g., tabloidization, synonymously, the literature review includes also studies that analyzed one of these other concepts but used the HSN conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012).

Internet as well as market shares of tabloid newspapers, and commercial TV) influenced the HSN index as well as the individual dimensions. Yet the index and the individual dimensions were prone to different factors. For example, the overall HSN index was only influenced by the market shares of private broadcaster: the higher the market shares, the softer the news. The focus dimension, on the other hand, was positively influenced by market shares of tabloid newspaper, i.e., the higher the market share, the more the focus dimension tented toward the soft end of the scale. A similar study set-up was applied in the study by Magin and Stark (2015). They also compared Austria and Germany with regard to the coverage of four elite newspapers. Only referring to the individual HSN dimensions (Reinemann et al., 2012), they could find differences between the countries for the focus and style dimensions. However, the authors did not analyze which differences between the two countries exactly contributed to the differences in hard and soft news coverage between Germany and Austria.

Similarly, Brekken et al. (2012) compared the topics and framing of TV and newspaper news items in six countries and concluded that there was more hard news in terms of topics and framing in the US than in Europe. Again, the authors could only speculate about the exact driving factors of these differences; for example, they presumed Obama's inauguration and a financial crisis in the US to have influenced the US news coverage that showed a trend toward harder news. Photiou et al. (2018) were in particular interested in the effects of such a financial crisis on HSN coverage. They analyzed news coverage of five newspapers with different political leaning in Cyprus and found that a financial crisis in the year 2014 made news coverage more emotional. The topics, yet, did not change significantly. In summary, these studies on the influence of macro-factors on HSN showed that especially the economic situation

of a country effects HSN production, yet which factors exactly influences which stories are told and how they are told are presented is still open to discussion.

Following the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model, the extra-media-level is now of interest. Surprisingly, there is, to the best of my knowledge, no research on the influence of factors like the government, or advertisers on hard and soft news so far.

The studies presented above in the context of macro-level influences also inquired how characteristics of media organizations effect HSN production. Here, researchers are mostly interested in differences between tabloid and broadsheet newspaper as well as public and commercial broadcasters (Brekken et al., 2012; Reinemann et al., 2016). Indeed, the type of media organization influenced whether news was hard or soft. For example, Reinemann et al. (2016) found, once again referring to an index of several HSN dimensions, that news coverage of tabloid newspapers and commercial broadcasters was softer than coverage of elite newspapers and public broadcasters. Similarly, Brekken et al. (2012) described tabloid newspapers news to be mostly framed episodically compared to news in elite and regional newspapers in all six countries they focused on in their study. This was also observed for the topics of the news in four out of six countries with, once again, tabloids reporting more soft news than elite and regional newspapers. Comparing newspapers with different political leaning, Photiou et al. (2018) could neither find differences in terms of framing of news nor of topics. In contrast, Magin (2017) reported dimensional differences in softer news coverage between elite newspapers, which represented the entire political spectrum with regard to their individual political leaning. While all newspapers became softer with regard to the style dimension, only the Austrian socialist party-press newspaper became softer in all three analyzed dimensions (topic, focus, style). Studies that analyzed the effect of organizational characteristics, hence, showed that

the type of media organization (e.g., tabloid vs. broadsheet/elite newspaper) could influence HSN production.

Once again, there are no studies, so far, that have investigated how factors on the routine level and on the individual level influence news coverage with respect to their narration and presentation, i.e., whether they show characteristics of hard or soft news. This is rather surprising given that factors on all levels on the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model are assumed to influence news content in general (Reese, 2001). Both routine level and individual level factors have been acknowledged by journalists in surveys (e.g., Hanitzsch, 2009; Hanitzsch et al., 2010). Furthermore, secondary news decisions, that is journalistic decisions how to tell and present news, is assumed to be more susceptible to factors on the individual level than to influences on higher levels in the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model (Engelmann, 2010, 2012; Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). Also, on the routine level the audience gains increasing importance in the questions of influence on news content. This happens not only in academia where the journalistic audience became more and more relevant in journalism studies (e.g., Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Journalists, too, acknowledge the influence of their readers and viewers – imagined or actually received – on journalistic behavior and, consequently, on news content (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Hermans, 2004; Lowrey & Woo, 2010).

Recognizing these academic voids in research on HSN production, the production-based focus of the current dissertation will account for the influence of audience images as an important representative for the routine level and on individual characteristics of journalists on HSN production. This is also in line with the general orientation of this dissertation that aims to bring back hard and soft news to the news-

rooms and at focusing on journalists as the producers of hard and soft news. In Chapter 3.1, I elaborated on the different production steps of HSN and on which decisions journalists have to take during these steps. In the context of hard and soft news, primary selection decisions of which topic to cover, and secondary selection decisions of how to tell and present a story are relevant. Actor-centered approaches like gatekeeping theory have analyzed primary selection decisions and have led to a vast corpus of studies (for an extensive overview of gatekeeping research, see Shoemaker and Vos (2009)). Thus, the production-based focus of this dissertation will specifically regard secondary news decisions and ask the following research questions, which will be focused on in the third Manuscript (Chapter 5):

RQ III: How do individual and routine level factors influence HSN production in terms of secondary news decisions?

The previous chapters have set out the theoretical background for the dissertation at hand and posed the research questions I aim to answer in, in total, three studies. Before these studies get presented, the following chapter will interlink the theoretical considerations.

4 INTERIM CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK ON FIELD WORK

The present dissertation focuses on hard and soft news – as an academic concept and its application in the realm of influences on HSN production. This is based on the rationale that there four way to approach an academic concept: theoretical considerations on concept explication, phenomenological studies on the occurrence of the real-world referents of concepts (societal phenomena), studies on the effects of these phenomena, and finally analyses of the causes of these phenomena to occur (Hartleb, 2011). The following empirical and theoretical studies of this dissertation will focus of the first and last aspect of concept approximation, based on the rationale that 1) contradictory results on research on the occurrence and effects of hard and soft news might be dependent upon the fuzzy conceptual status of HSN. 2) So far, few studies have tackled the causes for whether the media and journalists produce news in form of hard or soft news. Hence, as a field of application of HSN the context of hard and soft production and journalistic influence on this process were chosen.

In Part I, I have laid the theoretical foundations to tackle these two foci. *Figure 3* shows how they will be addressed in the following Part II of the dissertation. Manuscript 1 and 2 will be dedicated to the conceptual improvement of the concept of hard and soft news. In the *realm of academia*, this is done by proposing a theoretical framework model to distinguish HSN from other concepts that are used to describe changes in media coverage (Chapter 5). The *realm of transfer*, subsequently, brings the academic concept to practical journalism and tries to answer the question how the academic concept is reflected and what journalists understand by it (Chapter 6). Manuscript 3, then, focuses on the *realm of production* and inquires how journalistic

characteristics and audience images influence HSN production with respect to secondary news decisions (Chapter 7).

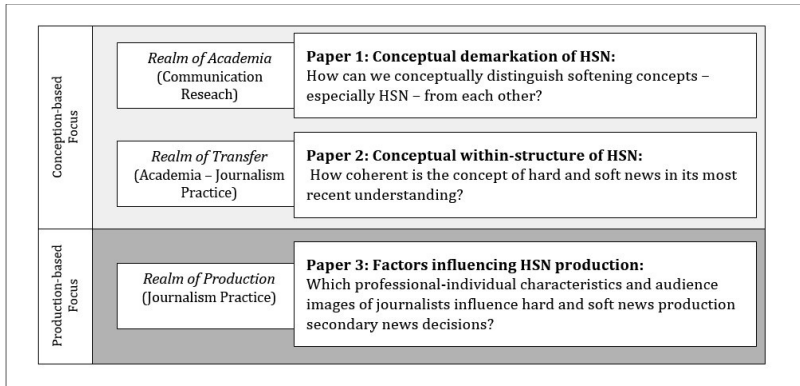


Figure 3. Outline for the manuscripts

5 MANUSCRIPT 1: THE SOFTENING OF JOURNALISTIC POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Otto, L., Glogger, I., & Boukes, M. (2017). The softening of journalistic political communication: A comprehensive framework model of sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidization. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 136-155.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the scholarly popularity of important developments of political communication, concepts like soft news or infotainment lack conceptual clarity. This article tackles that problem and introduces a multilevel framework model of softening of journalistic political communication, which shows that the 4 most prominent concepts—(1) sensationalism, (2) hard and soft news (HSN), (3) infotainment, and (4) tabloidization, as well as, additionally, (5) eroding of boundaries of journalism—can be distinguished in a hierarchical model. By softening, we understand a metaconcept representing developments in political journalism that are observed on different levels of investigation, from journalism as a system (macrolevel) down to single media items (microlevel).

Keywords: journalism, soft news, tabloidization, sensationalism, infotainment

**The Softening of Journalistic Political Communication:
A Comprehensive Framework Model of Sensationalism, Soft news, Infotainment, and Tabloidization**

Certain trends in political news coverage, often labeled with buzzwords such as sensationalism, tabloidization, infotainment, or soft news, have been accused of weakening the media's role to educate citizens by politicians, journalists, and scholars alike, thereby, impairing people's skills needed to fulfil their democratic duties. For example, German President of the Parliament Norbert Lammert (2011) stated: "There is an overwhelming trend in the media to prefer entertainment over information, visuals over text, headlines over facts, and captions over analyses" (p. 160, own translation). In the same vein, journalists have noticed a significant change in political news coverage. As early as 1992, U.S. journalist Carl Bernstein (1992) remarked that "for more than fifteen years we have been moving away from real journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid info-tainment" (p. 24).

These observations are well-known in political communication research, where scholars refer to concepts like depoliticization, infotainment, popularization, sensationalism, soft news, or tabloidization when describing changes in the way that the media cover politics. Despite the common core of these concepts, they differ with regards to, for example, research traditions, the type of media the studies are conducted on, or the levels of analysis: from specific media items on the microlevel to journalism as a system on the macrolevel. Notwithstanding these differences, the concepts are often used interchangeably and in a fuzzy manner in the current litera-

ture (Leidenberger, 2015; Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2011). This article hopes to bring conceptual clarity to this range of concepts, offering future research to use them more consistently.

Against this backdrop, this article introduces the conceptual framework model of softening of journalistic political communication. Based on Chaffee's (1991) suggestion for concept explication, we define "softening" as a higher-order concept to describe changes in political journalism that manifest on different levels of investigation ranging from changes on the level of the journalistic system itself all the way down to specific characteristics of news item features. Under the umbrella¹⁶ term of softening, we place the lower-order concepts of eroding of boundaries, tabloidization, infotainment, hard and soft news (HSN), and sensationalism in a hierarchical order. Softening varies crosssectionally, that is, between different given units (e.g., between private and public broadcasters), and processually, that is, across time for a given unit (e.g., a public broadcaster before and after private broadcasters have been introduced) (see also Chaffee, 1991).

Searching the scientific database "Communication & Mass Media Complete" (CMMC) for keywords associated with changes in political journalism, the terms soft/hard news, infotainment, sensationalism, and tabloidization were found to be the four most prominent concepts in the field. Taken all four together we found more

¹⁶ In communication research there are, of course, other higher-order concepts like, for example, Americanization or mediatisation that are—to some extent—similar to softening. However, softening is different from these concepts and thus has to be distinguished from them. Softening and Americanization share the idea of pooling different concepts and systematizing different characteristics and changes of political communication. However, Americanization (a) lacks the idea of different levels and (b) has a strong focus on campaigning and the coverage of political campaigns, while softening applies to all forms of journalistic coverage (e.g., Brettschneider, 2009). The core characteristic of mediatisation, in contrast to softening, is the application of a "media logic" in politics. Thus, mediatisation rather describes changes of the political system while softening refers to changes in the journalistic system (e.g., Strömbäck, 2008).

than 600 articles and papers.¹⁷ Moreover, the literature research shows that academic interest in the topic is unbroken: Over 25% of the publications since 1960 were published after 2010. Some prominent scholars have even described the investigation of this development in the media as “the most dominant topic in political communication research” (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005, p. 21, own translation).

Despite the lively discussion and impressive body of research, there is a common problem in reference to the conceptualization of all the mentioned concepts: They lack scientific clarity. It seems that journalists, politicians, but also scholars have an “intuitive understanding” (Reinemann et al., 2011, p. 2) of the development they want to describe. Yet for HSN, for example, “no commonly accepted definitions exist” (Baum, 2002, p. 92; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2015). Similarly, Esser (1999) describes tabloidization as a “diffuse” (p. 291) concept, and Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett (2001) state that “the very use of the term sensationalism as if it were precisely defined deserves further scrutiny” (p. 636).

At this point, it is almost trivial to argue why this fuzziness is highly problematic. Without clear definitions and a clear-cut differentiation of concepts, it is hard to compare empirical results on the mentioned phenomena, which leads to artifacts and (apparently) contradictory results (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). More often than not, scholars hardly define the kind of media (e.g., political satire, talk shows) or

17 On the basis of the list of current trends in political journalism (Landmeier & Daschmann, 2011; Leidenberger, 2015; Umbricht & Esser, 2016), the database was checked for sensationalization, scandalization, emotionalization, common people narrative, privatization, popularization, human interest news, dramatization, soft news, hard news, infotainment, sensationalism, and tabloidization, searching for books, book chapters, and journal articles (including book reviews) since 1960. We first excluded non-English or non-German articles on the basis of titles and abstracts. When a book chapter included one of the search strings, the edition was not counted. Also, articles which dealt with topics not directly related to our research interest were excluded (e.g., infotainment as a term used in the car industry to describe in-vehicle audio or video entertainment hardware devices).

characteristics of media (e.g., visualization, personalization) that they study, but rather summarize the existing literature under one term (e.g., soft news or infotainment), thus lumping very different formats, topics, characteristics, and developments together. Even worse, without a common understanding of these highly important concepts, researchers will not be able to formulate general assumptions on the development they want to describe or the effects of exposure to such media content they would like to predict.

One of the core problems in both theoretical and empirical work on the aforementioned concepts is the confusion and disregard of different levels of softening. This means that concepts like tabloidization or infotainment take place on very different levels of investigation of analyses, but that this does not become clear from the current literature. To tackle this problem, we introduce a conceptual framework model of softening of journalistic political communication. Although a model is always a simplification of reality and other scholars might perhaps have highlighted other aspects, the current literature lacks such a comprehensive conceptual framework and our model may be the first to fill this gap.

Our multilevel model proposes a way to distinguish the four most prominent concepts of changes and developments in political journalism—sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidization—by taking into consideration the levels of investigation. To do so, we will first show why these levels are important when systemizing communication content in general. Thereafter, we will present the conceptual framework model, including reviews of the four concepts. Finally, we develop a research agenda that shows future paths for research in order to more structurally understand the processes, the reasons for, and the consequences of the softening of journalistic political communication.

Investigating Political Communication on Different Levels: From Single Sentences to Journalistic Systems

As changes in political communication are ephemeral and elude direct observation, media content is of particular scholarly interest. Here, communication manifests itself and becomes observable. By referring to media content, researchers try to make inferences about change processes (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). However, the spectrum of what can be referred to as media content is extensive, ranging from, for example, single sentences to entire TV shows. Accordingly, there are different levels on which to investigate political media content. In the following, we suggest a hierarchical way to do so using the examples of an evening TV news show and a newspaper. This hierarchy will later provide levels to locate the different concepts within our framework model.

On the lowest level of investigation, the focus is on the microstructure of media content. In a newspaper, this could refer to single sentences as parts of a whole article. Thinking of evening newscasts, we may consider the length of politicians' verbal statements in news items or the characteristics of visual elements inserted into news items. Therefore, we call the lowest level of investigation the *within-item level*.

The next higher level of investigation comprises entire news items. For newspapers, this would be individual articles; for newscasts, news items would be short film clips, pretaped interviews, or live connections to correspondents. On this level, items are self-contained entities, which are characterized by one main topic. Due to its focus on entire (news) items, we call this level of investigation the *item level*.

Such individual news items are a part of, for example, a newspaper issue or a television news show. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) regard the functions of media

outlets as one way to build categories to distinguish one media outlet from another. For example, researchers often refer to the assumed dichotomy of information and entertainment as distinct functions in the context of television (for an overview, see Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001) and speak of different genres, ranging from information-oriented to more entertainment-oriented ones. As the assumed functions of outlets are attributed to entire TV programs or newspapers (and not, for example, single news items), we will call this level of investigation the *genre level*.

On the next level of investigation, the type of media is considered. First, we can distinguish between print, radio, television, and online media. However, type of media also refers to the differences within these four broad categories, for example, how they are financed (e.g., for television, public vs. commercial ownerships; for print, by a mix of subscription and ads vs. purely by ads). Regarding television, especially in countries with a dual broadcasting system (i.e., as in most European countries), the introduction of commercial broadcasters has stimulated academic interest in the differences between market- and public-service oriented media (see e.g., Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2010). We call this the macrolevel *type of media level*.

So far, we have looked at media content on the levels where they are manifested and become observable. However, changes in political journalistic communication can also be regarded from a more abstract, theoretical level. Here, the eroding of boundaries of journalism gains center stage with the question whether “the system ‘journalism’ blurs content thematically more and more with entertainment and public relations (PR), organizationally with management, marketing, and technology, societally with global entertainment industry” (Weber, 2000, p. 9, also see Baerns, 2007; Russ-Mohl, 1999). As such, journalistic practices have changed dramatically.

For example, former boundaries between journalism and PR regularly dissolve when journalists rely more on press releases from governments, NGO's, and corporations than on their own journalistic research (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). Given this perspective on journalists' work from a macroperspective, we propose to call this level *system level*.

We thus conclude that there are different levels of investigation that researchers can focus on when analyzing changes in political communication. In line with media content research, we call these levels (a) within-item, (b) item, (c) genre, (d) type of media, and (e) system level. This hierarchy of levels will now serve as a scaffold on which the four concepts sensationalism, HSN, infotainment, and tabloidization will be anchored according to their level of investigation.

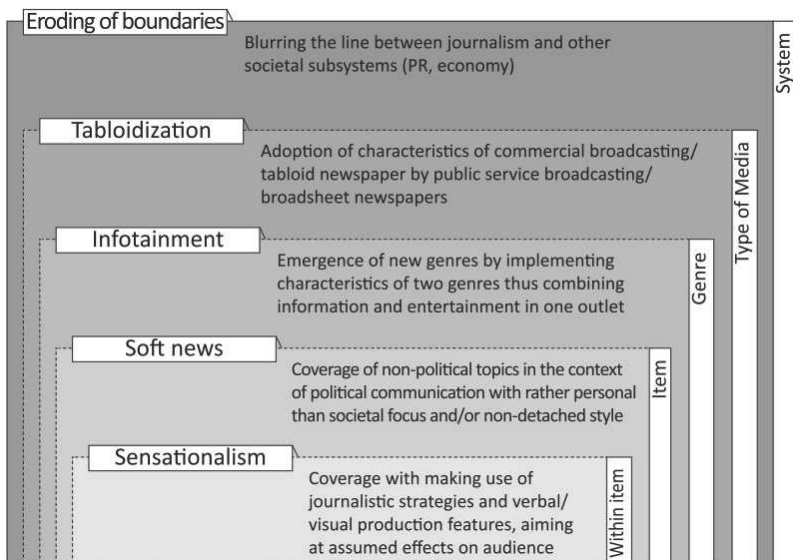


Figure 4
Multilevel framework model of softening of political communication

To demonstrate how the most important concepts can be distinguished, we introduce the framework model of softening of journalistic political communication (see Figure 4). Here, each of the aforementioned levels of investigation comprises one hierarchical layer in the model of softening of political journalistic communication. Following the literature search in CMMC, we will introduce the concepts that have gained the most attention in the field of communication research—sensationalism, HSN, infotainment, and tabloidization—in greater detail and anchor them on their respective level of investigation.

The framework model follows a “Matryoshka doll-principle,” meaning that characteristics focused on in the lower levels of investigation can be part of the higher level(s). For example, when looking at the type of media level, the lower levels, such as the genre level or the item level, could be part of an analysis to detect changes on the level of media types. The dotted lines in Figure 4 indicate that the levels are not enclosed concepts but higher levels can encapsulate lower ones.

The following descriptions of the concepts of interest to this article do not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, they focus on their definitions, research strands and traditions, and—consequently—the level on which these concepts can be observed and analyzed in media content. Following our line of thought in the previous section, we elaborate on these concepts on an increasing level of investigation—from specific item characteristics to broader patterns in media types.

Production Features and Journalistic Strategies: Sensationalism as Softening at the Lowest Level of Investigation

Sensationalism represents a very prominent, intensively studied concept (over 176 publications since 1960 in CMMC) with a very long research tradition (Grabe et al.,

2001; Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). As mentioned above, clear definitions are often lacking, but many scholars refer to sensationalism as “a characteristic of the news-packaging process that places emphasis upon those elements that could provoke an effect on the human sensory system” (Uribe & Gunter, 2007, p. 208).

When taking a close look at the definitions in the literature of sensationalism, it is apparent that scholars do not only concentrate on the content of sensationalist news but especially focus on the recipient’s side or effect side of sensationalist news. Hence, sensationalist news is news that may affect recipients by provoking arousal, emotions, or empathy (Bas & Grabe, 2015; Grabe et al., 2001; Graber, 1994; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2008) is able to attract the attention of the recipient naturally (Davis & McLeod, 2003), and consequently may impact memory performance or learning (Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003; Grabe, Lang, Zhou, & Bolls, 2000). Researchers have identified content (i.e., sensationalist topics or news values) and style characteristics (i.e., sensationalist production features) that contribute to these effects and thus constitute arousing news, a term that is sometimes used synonymously for sensationalism (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008).

When comparing sensationalism to the other concepts, the literature reveals a further unique feature of this concept, namely the strong focus on production features. Many studies aim to investigate certain production or language features to distinguish sensationalist from nonsensationalist news articles. These production features refer to editing techniques (e.g., number of camera shots, story duration), camera perspectives (zoom-in, eyewitness camera), and auditory features like sound effects (Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008; Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). Furthermore, scholars have focused on linguistic features in news

coverage (Burgers & de Graaf, 2013).¹⁸ The focus in research on sensationalism is thus mostly on very specific features that are found within a news item. Summing up the conceptualizations of sensationalism, one could underline the effect-side and the focus on production features as unique characteristics of the research on this concept.

Given these characteristics of sensationalism, we place sensationalism at the within-item level at the bottom of the framework model presented here (see Figure 4). This level has at least two different dimensions that we call production features (i.e., visual and auditory editing, language features) and journalistic strategies (e.g., person-centered reporting).¹⁹ Consequently, sensationalism represents a specific kind of journalistic coverage aiming at triggering certain recipient reactions (attention, emotions) by using specific sensationalist production features within a single news item.

Hard and Soft Topics and Characteristics: Softening at the News Item Level

The concept of HSN—which in our model is mostly situated at the item level—has advanced over time, from being presented as a mostly one-dimensional, dichotomous idea to a multidimensional concept. Maybe the most commonly used differentiation between HSN lies in the topic of a news item (Tuchman, 1973). While news about topics such as politics, economy, culture, or societal problems is often understood as hard news, all other topics, particularly news on disasters, crime, sex, or gossip would be soft news topics (Baum, 2007); others simply differentiate between

¹⁸ This is not to say that language features are not taken into account in soft news studies or tabloidization research; for example, Patterson (2000) investigates the complexity of the language and self-references as well as references to collectives in his work on HSN.

¹⁹ By dimensions we refer to groups of characteristics or indicators that are related and thus constitute one dimension.

policy issues (hard news) and events or topics that cannot be associated with a certain policy (soft news) (Scott & Gobetz, 1992). However, this is precisely where the discussion about the classification of topics begins. Taking disasters as an example, Patterson (2000) regards them as hard news—as the recipients need this information directly to get a picture of the world—others define disasters as a typical soft news topic because they are not directly related to policy issues (Scott & Gobetz, 1992). A distinction between hard news and soft news topics is often also made by linking the topic to the gender of reporters—with male journalists covering hard (e.g., politics) and female journalists soft topics (e.g., health) (Cann & Mohr, 2001).

Furthermore, scholars have extended the understanding of HSN by using these terms even when talking about entire formats. While the main evening news is mostly seen as hard news, talk shows, political satire, or “fake” news formats are mostly regarded as soft news (Holbert, 2005). However, this understanding faces similar problems as the topic dimension (i.e., distinguishing hard from soft news formats). Additionally, it remains sometimes unclear which criteria are used as a basis for categorizing different formats (see e.g., Baum, 2002; Prior, 2003).

The main reason that scholars use the news item’s topics or formats to separate HSN is the assumption that certain topics are presented in a certain hard or soft news “way,” thus inferring from the subject of the news to the journalistic presentation of it (Reinemann et al., 2011): It is, for example, difficult—yet not impossible—to think of a purely hard news story about the birth of a baby seal in a zoo. Vice versa, some political topics are rarely presented in a soft news manner. However, most of the topics can be located somewhere in between these extreme examples and contain soft as well as hard news characteristics (Boczkowski, 2009; Lehman-Wilzig &

Seletzky, 2010). Following these considerations, scholars came up with classifications of HSN characteristics rather than classifying entire topics as being purely hard or soft.

One of these characteristics is the focus of the journalistic presentation. By this term, we mean the differentiation between a focus on policy or on personal conditions in political reporting (Jebriil, Albaek, & De Vreese, 2013; Patterson, 2000). Several terms have been used to describe this development where people in general, or political leaders in particular, become the main anchor of interpretation and evaluation in political reporting: personalization, which refers to the question whether politicians become more prevalent vis-à-vis political issues or parties (e.g., Adam & Maier, 2010); episodic and thematic framing, indicating differences concerning the personal or societal focus of a journalistic depiction of a political issue (Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999); or human interest framing, as in focusing on an individual who is personally attached to the covered political issue (Boukes, Boomgaarden, Moorman, & de Vreese, 2015).

Another dimension used to distinguish hard from soft news can best be described as an objective versus subjective category or the degree of journalistic involvement in political reporting. Objective reporting is associated with hard news, whereas using the author's point of view or showing a partisan bias is understood as a soft news characteristic (Reinemann et al., 2011).²⁰

Scholars have criticized two main aspects of the HSN conceptualizations. First, dichotomous conceptualizations do not take into account that most of the news is not purely hard or soft. Content analyses have found that most news is not either hard or

²⁰ Please note that the dimensions and characteristics of soft news presented here represent the most commonly used operationalizations of that concept. Others regard negative reporting as an inherent feature of soft news or tabloidization (Semetko & Schoenbach, 2003).

soft, but that there is a rather big amount of “news-in-between” these extremes (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010, p. 43). Scholars thus came up with (one-dimensional) continuous measures and definitions of soft news (e.g., Yang & Oliver, 2004). Second, it is stressed that it is not one characteristic that distinguishes hard from soft news but rather a whole set of characteristics, leading to multidimensional conceptualizations of HSN.²¹ Following these considerations, Patterson (2000) was the first author who explicitly spoke of a “set of story characteristics” (p. 5; emphasis added by authors). According to him, soft news is “typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less time-bound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news” (Patterson, 2000, p. 4). More recently, Reinemann et al. (2011) offered a reconceptualization of HSN distinguishing HSN based on three dimensions: (a) topic (i.e., levels of political relevance), (b) focus (i.e., thematic versus episodic framing and public versus private relevance), and (c) style dimension (i.e., impersonal versus personal and unemotional versus emotional reporting).²²

If researchers are interested in detailed analyses of journalistic strategies, foci, and journalistic framing in the context of HSN, they would refer to it on the item level. Take as an example episodic and thematic framing: Scholars refer to this phenomenon when comparing single news items in a content analysis or experiment (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Furthermore, HSN implements a further dimension lying on a higher level of investigation in our framework

²¹ By dimensions we mean theoretical dimensions that comprise the concept in question that, in turn, are composed of indicators. However, throughout the literature on the concepts, these terms do not always seem to be used in a socioscientific understanding but rather substituted by indicator, characteristic, or category. For example, McLachlan and Golding (2000) refer to indicators of tabloidization, while Landmeier and Daschmann (2011) calls the same ones characteristics that are determined by other indicators.

²² The current manuscript further develops this idea into an even more comprehensive multidimensional and multilevel concept. While Reinemann et al. (2011) suggested using the concepts of softening of news, tabloidization, and growing infotainment synonymously, here the differences are emphasized more strongly by adding different levels of investigation the concepts can be placed in.

model—namely the event or topic dimension (i.e., societal relevance of the event and its timeliness). We have discussed the characteristics and problems of this dimension earlier; however, it is still a crucial indicator of softening distinguishing soft news from sensationalism.²³

Taken together the concept of HSN entails the idea of analyzing different topics presented with specific journalistic strategies comprising focus and style dimensions at the item level of investigation.

Mixing Genre Characteristics: Infotainment as Softening on the Genre Level

One level higher than HSN, which deals with individual news items, we place the concept of infotainment, which looks at media outlet characteristics. According to Thussu (2007), the neologism infotainment — a portmanteau word of “information” and “entertainment”—first appeared in the late 1980s. Similar to its scholarly siblings HSN, tabloidization, and sensationalism, infotainment is a concept that is intensively studied but poorly defined and used with little precision (see Brants & Neijens, 1998; Jebri et al., 2013). Infotainment serves to describe “a cluster of program types that blur traditional distinctions between information-oriented and entertainment-based genres of television programming” (Baym, 2008, para. 1). Such hybrid TV outlets contain content and style elements of both sides of the spectrum. However, in the current literature it is still not clear which particular elements are constitutive criteria of infotainment programs.

²³ As these considerations on the two lowest levels show, we do not conceptualize the single model boxes as closed entities. Instead, given the overlapping dimensions of the concepts, these boxes are permeable.

Due to this rather broad understanding, it is hard to speak of a singular genre when talking about infotainment. Holbert (2005), for example, offers a nine-part grid of different infotainment programs differentiating between implicit and explicit reference to politics as well as the content being primarily or secondarily political. Also taking into account the “information” side of infotainment, Brants and Neijens (1998) have introduced an infotainment scale covering a wide range of programs. The scale runs from information to entertainment and accounts for (a) topic, (b) format, and (c) style characteristics of a particular television programs.

On the topic dimension, the spectrum ranges from television programs that mainly deal with factual political information to those programs that primarily rely on human interest topics (Brants & Neijens, 1998). The information end of the style dimension comprises such aspects as a professional presenter or objectivity, while the entertainment end is characterized by informal and empathetic style elements dominating a program. Format characteristics range from less conversation or lack of participating audiences on the information side to more conversation or participating audiences at the entertainment side.

Given the understanding of infotainment as a hybrid genre that contains elements from both information and entertainment programming, the conceptualization of infotainment is mainly a static one; it does not, per se, entail a process component that occurs over time. The term infotainment does not involve changes of journalistic reporting over time as it is lacking the “-ization” ending like for example tabloidization. Also, with few exceptions (e.g., Bernhard & Scharf, 2008; Jebiril et al., 2013), investigations about infotainment focus rather on television than on newspapers (see Boukes et al., 2015; Xenos & Becker, 2009).

From the (theoretical) operationalizations of Brants and Neijens (1998) and Holbert (2005), it is obvious that infotainment programs can, to certain degrees, be informative and entertaining in nature. Empirical work, however, in many cases still makes the rough division between news programs and entertainment on the basis of the dichotomy of information and entertainment. Among others, Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) strongly challenge such a strict distinction: “[T]he opposite of news is not entertainment, as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called ‘entertainment’ is often neither” (p. 162).

To stress the most important aspect in the line of our considerations, infotainment comprises entire programs. As a term that describes the merging of programs into a new genre, infotainment is a concept in political communication that is located on the genre level. It describes a development where the dualism of entertainment and information is dissolved, leading to a new hybrid media genre that represents a mix of formats. Consequently, scholars analyze how features from entertainment media, such as narrative content or humorous punch-lines, and elements from information media, such as anchormen or the focus on purely political topics, can be found in infotainment shows.

In conclusion, the multidimensional concept of infotainment describes a particular genre of media outlets (mostly TV programs, and rarely print media) that is the result of mixing elements from information outlets and entertainment-oriented outlets. Infotainment is thus located as the genre level of investigation, and can be used to categorize media outlets, such as television programs, newspaper, print magazines, or radio shows.

A Spillover of Characteristics: Tabloidization as Softening on the Type of Media Level

On the next higher level, the type of media level, we anchor the concept of tabloidization. Similarly to the concepts mentioned above, tabloidization lacks an agreed-upon definition (Barnett, 1998; Bird, 2009; Sparks, 2000). Looking back in history as well as at the etymological roots of the term, however, contributes to a better understanding. In the late 1880s, tabloid was a British pharmaceutical trademark, a concentrated and easy-to-swallow form of medicines (Esser, 1999). Soon, the term was used for newspapers of a particular size that, for example, commuters could easily read on trains.

Today, tabloidization is characterized by two aspects: (a) it is a process that takes place over time (Esser, 1999) and (b) this process is characterized by spillovers of values from the popular to traditional news media (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Sparks, 2000).²⁴ Similar to the lack of an agreed-upon definition, how to measure this process is also still under academic scrutiny. Esser (1999) suggests that tabloidization “should best be studied with a multi-dimensional approach” (p. 293). Accordingly, most researchers agree on at least three dimensions that characterize the process of tabloidization (Esser, 1999; Landmeier & Daschmann, 2011; McLachlan & Golding, 2000): changes in range, form, and mode of address.

Range refers to changes in content, for example, a shift from political to human interest topics (Djupsund & Carlson, 1998; Schönbach, 2000) or a decline of foreign news relative to domestic news (Kolmer & Semetko, 2010; McLachlan & Golding,

²⁴ This notion has been challenged lately. Also tabloid media themselves are now in the focus of academic research (Uribe & Gunter, 2004).

2000). Changes in form of presentation comprise tendencies toward shorter stories, more pictures (Djupsund & Carlson, 1998), and simpler vocabulary and syntax (Schönbach, 2000). Finally, changes in the mode of address, also labeled as style (McLachlan & Golding, 2000), are understood as a different way of addressing the viewer or reader, for instance, by a tone that becomes more “street talk”-like (Esser, 1999, p. 293). Especially mode of address has been extended by numerous indicators, such as a reporting with an emphasis on emotions (Skovsgaard, 2014) or personalization (Esser, 1999; Landmeier & Daschmann, 2011; Uribe & Gunter, 2004). However, such indicators do not contribute to the conceptual clarity and more precise definition of the tabloidization phenomenon: There is no consensus on which indicators would constitute the individual dimensions.

Although the term tabloid was originally coined for newspapers, studies on tabloidization are no longer restricted to this medium (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004). However, the focus of scholarly considerations on tabloidization differs depending on the researchers’ origin (Esser, 1999). In the US, academics are mainly concerned with newspapers; European researchers mainly concentrate on TV. Here, the introduction of commercial broadcasting fueled research activities especially in the 1990s (Bruns & Marcinkowski, 1997): Tabloidization has been analyzed on the level of entire programs (Weiß, 2007) as well as on the level of individual news items (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005).

Based on these considerations, we conclude that the focus of tabloidization goes beyond the individual media outlet or single news items, and allows, for example, comparisons of news coverage on public service and commercial broadcasting channels or the adaption of features and characteristics of tabloid newspapers by broad-sheet newspapers. These media types possibly contain more than one outlet

(e.g., talk shows and news programs); these, in turn, consist of different media items, which we have described earlier.

In short, the multidimensional concept of tabloidization comprises a spillover of topics, forms, and styles from the popular to traditional news media, and is therefore anchored on the type of media level.

Eroding of Journalism's Boundaries: Softening on the System Level

Softening, when understood as a higher-order concept in journalism, cannot only be detected in media content that journalists produce but also in political journalism itself. Whereas this article has so far described changes that are at least labeled with terms that are familiar in academia, it has not yet clearly labeled, but regularly refers to, the development of eroding journalistic boundaries. Here, softening comprises a blurring of the line between journalistic and other societal systems, for example, PR, economics, or the audience. Since to our knowledge, no term has been coined for the softening on this level, we suggest the term eroding of boundaries in accordance with other researchers (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Loosen, 2015).

With regards to eroding boundaries between journalism and PR, for example, Baerns (1985) determination model points out the strong influences of PR on journalistic topics. The model of intereffication (Bentele, Liebert, & Seeling, 1997) stresses, on the other hand, that one system would not be able to operate without the other; both sides are continuously adjusting their communicative and organizational actions based on the requirements of the respective other one. Citizen journalism (e.g., political blogs) can be regarded as yet another erosion between journalism and the audience, where the journalistic system and the laypersons' environment collide (Bruns, 2006; Fröhlich, Quiring, & Engesser, 2012).

One of the main reasons for such developments are financial crises in journalism that increasingly lead to a merging of journalistic content creation with PR strategies, goals, and sources (Dinan & Miller, 2009). In order to create a “buying mood” (McManus, 1995), journalism incorporates, for example, special sections in their outlets to attract advertisers (e.g., travel, lifestyle; Curtin, 1999; Lewis et al., 2008). Take as an example native advertising (advertorials as paid content that mimics journalistic articles), which clearly blurs the line between journalism and advertising. These examples make it apparent that softening on this macrolevel can influence the lower levels that in particular refer to media content.

Summing up, eroding of boundaries describes a macrolevel development of political journalism characterized by the dissolving of journalistic system’s boundaries, leaving it prone to the influence of other societal systems.

Conclusion and Constraints of the Model

The higher-order concept of softening put forward in this paper comprises general changes in journalistic political communication on different levels of investigation. The four most prominent concepts in the field represent the particular forms of softening on each of these levels, extended by eroding of boundaries on the system level. Looking at the various definitions and description of these concepts, one cannot neglect the similarities of the four concepts. However, we believe that the differences pointed out earlier are big enough to regard the concepts separately. Differences in main media and research foci are rooted in different scholarly interests and cultures and should—in the long run—support rather than impede advances in research on various concepts in political communication. Moreover, we have pointed out that the

levels of investigations are an additional way to distinguish the concepts since we believe that the concepts operate on different hierarchical levels.

The model of softening of journalistic political communication serves a three-fold purpose. First, it helps to decide which concept to choose when investigating a particular change in political communication. If, for example, a scholar is interested in investigating the adoption of commercial news shows' features by a public broadcaster, then softening on the level of the media type, which relates closely to tabloidization, would be the preferred concept. Second, the model provides a systematic overview of the concepts and shows the relationship among the different concepts. Third, it could serve as a basis for a new research agenda for both research on media content and media effects.

The model represents the levels of investigation we have referred to earlier. It is important to note that the levels presented here are far from comprehensive. However, from our point of view, these are the most important levels considering where most of the empirical research has been done in the field of communication science. It is, for example, possible to think of lower levels than the within-item level. Someone could be interested in the development of single words, which would refer to a lower level of analysis. The same notion is true for different concepts and dimensions of concepts. It would also be possible to link some other concepts to the levels in the model.

The model should, of course, be interpreted as an overview rather than as a detailed discussion of one or two concepts. The framework model should be understood as a model to think with rather than to work with immediately: We do not deliver operationalizations for the four concepts at hand. Instead, we provide a scaffold for planning studies in the realm of political journalism, since the framework model

provides one way to distinguish the different developments. That, in turn, could help to clear the field and to reduce overlap of the concepts discussed herein.

Despite the model's conceptual character, it is important to mention the implications of ordering the concepts in hierarchical levels for future operationalizations. Some concepts, especially the higher ones, can hardly be operationalized without referring to news characteristics on the lower levels. Thus they do not represent mutually exclusive research procedures. If, for example, a researcher studies the concept of tabloidization, it is hard to avoid taking into account sensationalism indicators or the presence of soft news topics.

Toward a Common Understanding and Theoretically Grounded Research

Agenda

In this article, we suggest a multidimensional and multilevel framework model showing the relationship between the most important concepts used in the literature. As we will show in this last section, it is hard to conduct content analytical research and media effect studies without a common ground for these concepts.

Regarding content analytical research, we should mention different research strands. First, studies seek to describe developments of media content over time or across outlets. Hereby, scholars try to identify general developments and analyze the impact of contexts or events on media content, such as the advent of commercial broadcasting in Europe since the 1980s that triggered research on tabloidization (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). However, without a common understanding of tabloidization—without focusing on the same level of investigation on which tabloidization would take place and agreeing on what, consequentially, would be the right unit of analysis—the state of research remains in its chaotic

stage. Second, inconsistencies in instruments make it almost impossible to conduct meta-analyses. Although great relevance has been attached to the four concepts, there are literally no meta-analytic assessments: There is a huge gap between attributed relevance of the concepts and systematic reviews.

The same holds true for effect studies. Meta-analyses are essential to create a broader understanding of the effects that the softening of political communication may have. Needless to say that single studies—especially cross-sectional ones—are only able to investigate a small number of softening characteristics, and this is a big step away from creating the knowledge to draw firm conclusions regarding the consequences of softening for democracy. To do so necessitates many more studies that systematically examine the different aspects that accompany this softening, and take into account a wider range of dependent variables. Finally, concerning the normative implications and effects side of softening, most scholars need to define and explicitly refer to the normative background they are working with (Althaus, 2012). By doing so, they should realize there are alternative views on what an ideal democracy, and the role of the media in it, would look like.

Even if scholars may not completely agree with our idea of the concepts, we strongly encourage researchers to define precisely and differentiate the concepts they are working with: This also includes avoiding the interchangeable use of terms without explanation, grounding hypotheses only on literature that applies exactly to the phenomenon under study, and being very specific about the content characteristics in which one is interested. In contrast to natural sciences, social sciences often face the “problem” of dealing with terms from everyday language. This, however, should not lead scholars to rely on intuitive understanding. Quite the contrary, the investigation of such terms calls for exact definitions and conceptualizations. In doing

so, communication scholars will be able to conduct comparable studies, accumulate knowledge, and eventually make scientific progress. We hope the multilevel framework model of softening of journalistic political communication contributes to this for the research on the various trends in political news coverage.

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6 MANUSCRIPT 2: JOURNALISTIC VIEWS ON HARD AND SOFT NEWS

Glogger, I., & Otto, L. (under review). Journalistic Views on Hard and Soft News: Cross-Validating a Popular Concept in a Factorial Survey. Submitted for Publication to: *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of the concept of hard and soft news, researchers regularly criticize the vague definitions and inconsistent conceptualizations. Following claims for standardization of concept in journalism research, this paper aims to cross-validate the most recent understanding of the concept. We conducted a factorial survey with newspaper journalists to probe the question as to which of the theoretically assumed dimensions of the concept are referred to by journalists to distinguish hard from soft news. We find the dimensions “topic,” “relevance,” “framing,” and “opinion” to exert influence on journalists’ understanding of the concept.

Keywords: Cross-validation, factorial survey, hard and soft news, journalism

Journalistic Views on Hard and Soft News: Cross-Validating a Popular Concept in a Factorial Survey

“Hard and soft news” is considered as one of the most important academic concepts to describe changes in the way the media covers (political) events. The terms, however, are not of scientific origin, but they first emerged in practical journalism. In her work-sociological study Tuchman (1973) not only found that journalists used the terms of hard and soft news to categorize incoming news stories, she also introduced these terms to academia, which have been widely used as the concept of hard and soft news (HSN) ever since – albeit with surprising implications. Although researchers have worked with and on the concept for almost five decades by now, there is still “no gold standard as for how to define soft versus hard news” (Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, & Aalberg, 2012, p. 66); yet, a wide range of understandings exists throughout the literature: While some researchers only refer to the topic of news items to distinguish hard from soft news (Brekken et al., 2012; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2012), others claim that the concept comprises more or different dimensions, like the degree of emotionality or the use of sensationalist verbal or visual features (Curran, Salovaara-Moring, Coen, & Iyengar, 2009; Patterson, 2000). Yet others use the term of soft news when talking about entire news shows (Baum, 2002; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014).

It is almost trivial to point out why manifold conceptualizations and vague definitions are prejudicial to good research (for a general discussion, see Chaffee, 1991; for HSN in particular, see Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). For example, (longitudinal) content analyses show that soft news reporting has increased in the last decades (Donsbach & Büttner, 2005; Patterson, 2000). Such results often go hand in

hand with normative reminders of how dangerous politically uninformed voters are for democracy (Currah, 2009; Patterson, 2000). Others, in contrast, do not find such results, and disagree with a trend toward softer news (Schönbach, 2000). However, what do these studies tell us about hard and soft news if the underlying concept and its measurement are inconsistent?

Acknowledging such problems, scholars have recently offered clarifications and re-conceptualizations of HSN. Otto, Glogger, and Boukes (2017) suggested a theoretical framework model that pointed out the differences between HSN and related concepts like sensationalism or infotainment to strengthen the demarcations of these concepts. Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2012) extracted the main denotations and mostly used dimensions of the concept in a systematic review of the HSN literature, offering a three-dimensional understanding of HSN as a conclusion that accounts for the content and the presentation of news. Our study sets off with this most recent conceptualization of hard and soft news and aims to cross-validate it. This is relevant since, first, researchers call for the standardization of concepts in journalism research (Esser, Strömbäck, & Vreese, 2012). Only when studies are based on equivalent conceptualizations and measurements, it is possible to compare, for example, results of the amount soft news in media coverage. We regard the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) as the right step toward this standardization. Second though, the conceptualization – despite its theoretical rigor – has, so far, only been tested very few times for its empirical usefulness, mostly as by-products of content analyses (e.g., Magin & Stark, 2015). Therefore, assessing the utility of this conceptualization before using it in further studies is required.

To evaluate the conceptualization of HSN by Reinemann et al. (2012), we go back to the roots of the concept and focus on what journalists understand by hard

and soft news. To be more precise, we are interested in which of the theoretically assumed dimensions by Reinemann et al. (2012) comprise newspaper journalists' understanding of HSN. This journalistic perspective on HSN has recently been neglected. It is not only of historic interest as to what journalists think about the concept – due to the origins of the terminology – but also valuable for HSN research. Asking journalists about their HSN understanding can provide academia with insights whether the theoretically assumed dimensions comprise coherently what academia understands by HSN. This approach allows for cross-validating the important concept by comparing the academic understanding and the understanding of the practical field in which the terms emerged. It also follows the rationale that professional practical insight can help critically review the theoretical modelling of academic communication phenomena (Raabe, 2008): If journalists' understanding of HSN differs from the academic one in terms of constitutive dimensions, it might be indicated to revisit the most recent academic conceptualization of hard and soft news.

To evaluate the concept, we decided to investigate the composition of HSN by conducting a factorial survey with newspaper journalists. This method, which is rather unknown in communication science (Reineck, Lilienthal, Sehl, & Weichert, 2017), combines the advantages of classic experiments and surveys (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). German local newspaper journalists were shown fictional news items that were composed by those dimensions that researchers named as being constitutive of HSN. Hence, we applied a method that allowed us for bringing back a once-journalistic concept to the field of origin in a scientifically controlled way. This supports the idea of cross-validating HSN as an academic concept in its field of origin.

In the following, we elaborate on HSN as a concept in journalism research, describing its academic development from a one-dimensional to a multi-dimensional

concept. Here also, conceptual shortcomings – and how this study can address them – will be scrutinized. Finally, the applied method will be delineated in greater detail along with the results.

The Concept of Hard and Soft News

Presumably the first reference to hard and soft news, as confirmed by documents, dates back to the 1950s, when Russell (1954) listed the term “Among the New Words” of the English language. In this dictionary of neologisms of English, the words “hard news” and “soft news” were described as being found first in practical journalism: Newsweek, the US weekly journal, had used the term “hard news” as early as in 1948. Not long after, the historian Mott (1952) referred to hard and soft news while elaborating on news in the US. In communication research, the first conceptualization of HSN goes back to the 1970s, when journalists who were interviewed stated in the seminal work on newsroom routines by Tuchman (1973) that they referred to the topic of an event or report to decide whether the event required to be reported immediately (hard) or not (soft). Consequentially, most early definitions and conceptualizations use the topic of news items to distinguish hard from soft news: While news about politics, economy, or societal problems is understood to be hard news topics, all other topics – particularly news on disasters, crime, or gossip – are called soft news topics (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Patterson, 2000); others simply differentiate events and news items that are related to policy issues (hard news) from events that cannot be associated with a certain policy (soft news) (Scott & Gobetz, 1992).

However, this one-dimensional (topic) dichotomous (hard versus soft) definition leads to at least three problems: (1) Some topics cannot be categorized as hard

or soft per se, leading to the assumption (2) that there exists an “in-between” or “general news” category (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Others even suggest that a continuum from harder to softer news is required (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014). (3) Most topics, even about politics or the economy, can be presented either in a hard or soft way. For example, the arrival of two Chinese pandas in the zoo of Berlin, which would be considered a purely soft topic, can be presented either as a story about the Chinese government strengthening the political relationship with Germany by making this traditional gift (hard) or as a story about the cuteness of the animals (soft). If we follow these considerations – such that we rather deal with a continuous concept that also comprises more than only a topic dimension – one has to come up with a multidimensional conceptualization for replicable and relevant studies.

Multi-Dimensional Understandings of HSN

Taking this idea into account, more recent conceptualizations account for the multi-dimensional and continuous structure of HSN: Characteristics referring to how stories are covered are regarded as further dimensions that represent the concept. In this context, umpteen characteristics have been listed to distinguish hard news from soft news. Based on a literature review of studies that referred to the concept of HSN, Reinemann et al. (2012) described five groups in which these characteristics of HSN can discerned.

Next to (1) the topic dimension, (2) *news production*, for example, comprises indicators like timeliness. News that needs to be disseminated as quickly as possible is regarded as hard news while soft news is less urgent (Boczkowski, 2009). (3) Characteristics of *news style* are, for example, the format of news or the way news is presented: Among other, sensationalist features are used to distinguish hard from soft

news (Patterson, 2000). The more sensational or the more a journalist states his or her personal opinion on the subject matter, the softer is the news. (4) The next group summarizes characteristics of *news focus*. Communication literature offers various concepts that describe whether news emphasizes either the human or the policy aspect of ongoing societal events and phenomena (Patterson, 2000). On the one hand, research in the field of personalization has, inter alia, investigated whether or not politicians have become more prevalent in political reporting in comparison with reporting on (hard) political issues or political parties instead (for an overview see Adam & Maier, 2010). On the other hand, the dichotomy between episodic and thematic framing describes differences concerning the personal or societal focus of a journalistic depiction of a political issue: While episodic framing presents an event or social phenomenon by offering a specific case, thematic framing place issues in a broader societal context (Iyengar, 1991). (5) Characteristics that are offered in HSN definitions or operationalizations can be combined in the dimension of *news reception* which describes, among others, the function of news (Reinemann et al., 2012). Soft news, for example, is often described as more entertaining than hard news (Scott & Gobetz, 1992).

Status Quo: A Threefold Understanding of HSN

Although multi-dimensional understandings of HSN can be regarded as a first step toward more conceptual clarity of the HSN concept, one major problem remains: It is still not agreed as to which dimensions exactly comprise the concept, and how the dimensions are structured in relation to each other (Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). Reinemann et al. (2012) addressed this shortcoming of HSN by suggesting – as a

quintessence of the extensive literature – a threefold multidimensional re-conceptualization of the concept of HSN. They suggested distinguishing harder from softer news based on three dimensions: Topic, focus (i.e., emphasis of the specific aspects), and style (i.e., visual and verbal presentation). Topics are distinguished by levels of political relevance, e.g., the presence of decision-making authorities in the news item. The other two dimensions entail two sub-dimensions each: The focus dimension comprises the sub-dimensions thematic versus episodic framing and societal versus individual relevance. Episodic framing indicates that events or social phenomenon are reported by examples, e.g., “covering unemployment by presenting a story on the plight of a particular unemployed person” (Reinemann et al., 2012, p. 238) while thematically framed news illuminate an event or social phenomenon more broadly, for example by offering official statistics. With regard to the sub-dimension of relevance, the significance of an event can be emphasized for either an individual or for the society as a whole. Finally, style dimension comprises the following sub-dimensions: impersonal versus personal reporting and unemotional versus emotional coverage. The first distinguishes the degree to which the author of a news items poses his or her personal opinion on the reported event. The latter denotes whether or not emotions are conveyed in the news item. This can be accomplished by “verbal, visual or auditive means that potentially arouse or amplify emotions among audience members” (Reinemann et al., 2012, p. 238). Reinemann et al. (2012) suggest that the topic dimension is superior to the other ones.

Whether or not this conceptualization is theoretically appropriate and empirically utile has only been partially tested so far. Literature on the goodness of concepts in social sciences helps us systemize the few attempts that have been made to

test the utility of the concept. Gerring (1999) lists eight criteria of goodness for concepts, of which differentiation and coherence were addressed so far in testing the state of the art understanding of hard and soft news.²⁵ Differentiation describes how well a concept can be discerned in theory and through operationalization from related concepts. This has been tackled by Otto et al. (2017), who pointed out that hard and soft news, and related concepts like tabloidization or infotainment, can be distinguished by a level of investigation, i.e., each concept can be detected on different levels of analysis, for example, when conducting content analyses. Coherence, i.e., the inner structure of concepts and the appropriateness of its constituting attributes, is the most important quality criterion (Gerring, 1999). It was assessed – to the best of our knowledge – only once. Magin and Stark (2015) used the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) for a content analysis for news coverage in two countries and checked the empirical utility of the concept with a factor analysis. They confirmed the multidimensional structure of the HSN concept and the dimensions of topic, focus, and style were described. However, they found the style dimension to decompose into two sub-dimensions – visual and verbal style. Furthermore, they found that the emotionality dimension – in the conceptualization of Reinemann et al. (2012) a sub-dimension of style – to load on the focus dimension.

Following calls for concept standardization in journalism research (Esser et al., 2012), we aim to contribute to this standardization by assessing the inner structure of the most recent conceptualization of HSN. We decided to assess the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) since, first, other studies often only offer vague information about which dimensions are exactly used (Baum, 2002; Patterson,

²⁵ Further criteria for the goodness of a concept in social sciences are familiarity, resonance, parsimony, depth, theoretical utility, empirical utility (Gerring, 1999).

2000; Prior, 2003). Second, the conceptualization draws on an extensive and systematic literature review that includes 24 studies published internationally since 1990. One could, therefore, argue that it is the quintessence of what scientists understand by HSN. To assess whether the conceptualization of HSN is coherent, i.e., whether the proposed dimensions comprise the concept in the assumed way, we bring back the concept of HSN to its field of origin – the journalistic newsroom. To be precise, we seek to inquire whether the theoretically proposed dimensions of the concept of hard and soft news comprise journalists' understanding of hard and soft news to assess the coherence of the concept, i.e., whether the theoretical dimensions comprise the journalistic understanding of the concept in the way it is assumed.

As pointed out earlier, the most recent conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) was evaluated once (Magin & Stark, 2015); our approach sets forth a different way of evaluating this conceptualization by assessing journalists' HSN understanding. We decided on this approach not only because of historic reasons since the concept of HSN is, after all, of journalistic origin (Russell, 1954). More important, we believe that considering journalists' understanding of hard and soft news will enable the cross-validation of the academic concept in a profession that handles hard and soft news on a daily basis. Mapping the concept understanding of professionals who use the real-world referents of concepts, i.e., hard or soft news in the form of actual news items, with the concept understanding of those who apply the concept in research will help the latter assess the theoretical utility of the concept.

Methodology

To answer our research question, we conducted a factorial survey among German local newspaper journalists. In a factorial survey – also called a vignette study – participants are presented with hypothetical descriptions of objects or situations, and are asked to evaluate these descriptions or state their opinions and behavioral intentions, based on the situations or objects described (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; Rossi & Nock, 1982). These descriptions are called vignettes and are systematic combinations of the characteristics of a given object or situation. Although not commonly used in communication research (for a review of fields of applications, see Wallander, 2009), these special surveys are, in particular, suitable for the study of semantic concepts (Henn, Dohle, & Vowe, 2013). Furthermore, factorial surveys allow for analyzing the impact of the characteristics of an object separately that are strongly correlated in reality (Wallander, 2009). Factorial surveys are well-suited to communication research, since vignettes can easily be built like real media content (Reineck et al., 2017), thereby simulating the link between mental concepts (e.g., HSN as a concept) and their real-world referents (e.g., hard and soft newspaper articles).

Experimental Procedure and Stimuli

Based on the multidimensional HSN conceptualization (Reinemann et al., 2012), we constructed vignettes in the form of newspaper articles in which these dimensions were systematically varied. First, the topic was manipulated: Youth unemployment in Spain was used as a hard topic; a neglected dog was the soft counterpart. The focus dimension was divided into two sub-dimensions: relevance and framing. The relevance dimension was operationalized by describing the consequences of the topic

either to be relevant for the society as a whole or for a single individual; framing was either episodic or thematic. We also used both sub-dimensions of the style dimension in the vignettes. Opinion was manipulated to be either stating the author's opinion or reporting without this personal opinion. Finally, we operationalized emotionality by using either emotionally laden or neutral pictures. This procedure resulted in two short article fragments, two for each dimension. We adapted these fragments to each of the two topics (see Table 1 for the exact operationalization). For example, in the hard topic vignettes societal relevance was operationalized by the following: "The bad labor market situation was also harmful for Spanish society. Spain lacked inner coherence, said CCOO leader Luis Ortega Sanchez: 'I've noticed a loss of reputation and trust in the democratic institutions and values of Spain'" (own translation). Individual relevance, in contrast, was operationalized by the following: "The young Spanish José Campos Ramón suffers the consequences of the bad labor market situation every day. He works as a waiter to make ends meet; rarely, he earns more than 500 Euros per month. He moved back to his parents' place in his children's room. 'I am paying off the student loan on the never-never'" (own translation).

Table 2
Operationalization of the HSN dimensions

Sub-dimensions	Levels	Operationalization for hard topic	Operationalization for soft topic
Topic	Hard/soft	Story about unemployment	Story about neglected animals
Relevance	Societal consequences emphasized	Youth unemployment has negative consequences for morality of a society	All tax payers have to pay for animal shelters for neglected dogs
	Individual consequences emphasized	Youth unemployment has negative consequences for an individual (no income)	New owners have to pay for neglected dogs
Framing	Thematic framing	Story is told by referring to unemployment figures	Story is told by referring to statistics about abandoned pets
	Episodic framing	Story is told by referring to Juan, an unemployed adolescent	Story is told by referring to "Benno", an abandoned dog
Opinion	Opinion-free reporting	Author does not express any personal opinion	Author does not express any personal opinion
	Opinionated reporting	Author expresses disbelief that a new unemployment program would be beneficial	Author expresses disbelief that a campaign against neglecting animals would be beneficial
Emotionality	Neutral picture	Picture of an office in an unemployment center	Picture of a sign "animal shelter"
	Emotional picture	Picture of yelling young people at a demonstration against unemployment	Picture of a sad neglected dog in an animal shelter

The article fragments of each dimension were presented to regular newspaper readers in a pretest ($n = 67$; age: $m = 29.33$, $SD = 8.16$; gender: 62.7% female; occupation:

43 % student; 51% full-time employed)²⁶. These participants were shown the article fragments that composed the vignettes in the final study and asked to rate them on 7-point scales of which their respective two extreme poles represented the poles of each HSN dimension. For example, with regards to the opinion dimension the extreme pole labeling was “the author of this text expresses his or her personal opinion (1)” and “the author of this text does not expresses his or her personal opinion (7)”. The results showed that each fragment differed significantly from its counterpart.

Measures

The independent variables are the five HSN dimensions topic, relevance, framing, opinion, emotionality, all of which were operationalized dichotomously. The dependent variable in the factorial survey was the evaluation of each vignette. Participants were asked for each presented vignette to indicate whether the news item was rather hard news (1) or soft news (7) from their point of view on a 7-point Likert single-item scale ($m = 3.55$; $SD = 1.76$).

The control variable of the perceived mass-market orientation of the journalists' newspaper was assessed on a 7-point Likert one-item scale, asking the participants whether they perceived their newspaper as being mass-market oriented (tabloid newspaper) (1) or upmarket oriented (quality newspaper) (7) ($m = 5.44$; $SD =$

26 We conducted the pretest with regular newspaper readers (at least three days a week; online or print) that were recruited on online platform surveycircle.de, where survey participation is rewarded with virtual points that enhance the importance of one's own study on this platform, as well as by inviting communication students of a German university. We informed in advance that only those individuals could participate who read news regularly. Five participants were excluded because they did not fulfill this requirement. We decided on a non-journalistic sample for the pretest because of the described difficulties to gain journalistic participants (e.g., Engelmann, 2012; Steindl, Lauerer, & Hanitzsch, 2017).

1.26) (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2016). We grand-mean-centered the control variable.²⁷

Procedure, Data Collection, and Participants

Varying five (sub-)dimensions with two levels each yielded 32 vignettes. We built eight d-efficient sets of four vignettes each, following the recommendations for set-building and for the maximum size of the sets, to preclude learning and exhaustion (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). Participants were asked to evaluate only one randomly assigned set in which vignettes were presented in a randomized order; then the questionnaire with socio-demographic and occupational questions followed. Due to dropouts in the factorial survey, the vignettes were evaluated between 9 and 22 times.

We contacted journalists through the PR-tool Zimpel, a database e-mail addresses of individual journalists and newsrooms in Germany that enabled the filtering of addresses. This regularly updated database has been already used in other survey with journalists (e.g., Obermaier, Koch, & Riesmeyer, 2015; Post, 2015). We chose manually only those contacts that worked as professional journalists for a German speaking daily local newspaper (print and online) and had an individual e-mail address (excluding generic newsroom addresses).²⁸ We then invited 1,500 individuals

27 Because of the set-up of the study, centering of the level-1-predictors was not necessary since each dimension was rated equally often by the participants. Hence, there was no within- and between-cluster variability which is normally accounted for when centering level-1-predictors (Enders, 2013).
28 We focused on local newspaper journalists since they represent the largest group of journalists in Germany (Steindl, Lauerer, & Hanitzsch, 2017) and the local newspaper – understood as newspapers with a geographical area of distribution and scope – dominating the German newspaper market in terms of circulation (Pürer, 2015). Broadcasting journalists were deliberately not included in the sample since we aimed to ensure external validity by using print vignettes. Extending the sample by journalists who work mainly with different kinds of news content – for example, audiovisual content – would have, thus, required corresponding stimuli. This could not have been realized within one study but might be regarded in future work (on the suitability of factorial surveys for audiovisual content, see Auspurg & Hinz, 2014).

(randomly selected) by e-mail to participate in the study via a link. Data collection took place from April to June 2017.

In total, 138 journalists participated in the study, of which 132 answered the questions required for our analyses, resulting in 528 single vignette evaluations. The participants worked for 64 different newspapers. 34 percent of the participants were female, journalists were on an average 48 years old ($SD = 11.17$), had been working in the profession for 22 years ($SD = 11.26$), and 19 years ($SD = 11.48$) for their current employer. Participants worked in a wide range of departments: local/regional news: 54%, politics: 19%, culture: 5%, sports: 8%, online: 2%, all departments: 7%, others: 5%.

Statistical Procedure

Since every participant evaluated four vignettes, these evaluations were not independent, but clustered at respondent level. The consequent nested data structure comprised, thus, two levels: 1) the level of the vignettes on which the dependent variables of the HSN dimensions were located; 2) the level of the participants in which dependent variable, i.e., the evaluation of the vignettes, were clustered. On this level, also the control variable of the perceived mass-market orientation of the newspaper was located on this level. Due to this clustered data we conducted multilevel modeling and estimated a random intercept model with fixed effects for the predictors (level 1) and random effects for residual variance of the levels (level 1 and 2).²⁹ The models were estimated by applying maximum likelihood estimation.

²⁹ The Breusch-Pagan-Test failed to confirm that the residuals of the full model were normally distributed. To account for this, we decided for random intercept models with Huber/White/sandwich estimators using the `xtmixed, vce(robust)` command in Stata 14.0 (Hoechle, 2007).

Results

To answer the research questions, we follow a twofold procedure. First, we report the results of the vignette evaluations, comparing the vignettes that the participants in our study regarded as most hard and soft with those vignettes that were assumed to be hard and soft based on the theoretical considerations presented above. As the second step, we take the characteristics of the vignettes into account and determine their influence on the vignette evaluations.³⁰ This will help us show which of the HSN dimensions comprise journalists' understanding of hard and soft news.

By looking at the mean evaluation score of each vignette, we can determine which vignette the participants regarded as the hardest and softest respectively. The vignette with the lowest score ($m = 1.84$; $SD = 0.19$) represents the news items that the journalists regarded as rather hard news. This vignette is a news item about youth unemployment, presented in an opinion-free way, thematically framed, and emphasizing the societal relevance. The picture, however, was operationalized as an emotional one; hence the vignette does not equal the theoretically assumed hardest news item for which we expected an unemotional picture. The vignette with the highest score represents the news item that journalists evaluated as rather soft news ($m = 5.78$; $SD = 0.44$). It is a story about neglected animals, stressing the individual relevance of topic, episodically framed, and conveying the author's personal opinion. The picture was unemotional; hence, the item does not show the combination of characteristics that we assumed for the theoretical soft prototype.

³⁰ To check if set effects occurred we included the set ID as independent variables in the model. Neither did they yield significant results, nor did the other results change fundamentally. We, hence, decided to report the model without the set ID.

We decided to build our final model in a step-by-step approach (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). This allows for the determination of the intra-class correlation (ICC) of the random coefficient-only model (Table 2, Model 0). The ICC states the proportion of the total variance that is accounted for by the clustered structure of our data and indicates whether or not multilevel modeling is required in the first place. Around 87 percent of the total variance is explained by the HSN characteristics. Hence, it is mainly the situation, i.e. the news items and their characteristics, which explain journalists' evaluations. The remaining 13 percent of the total variance could be explained by level-2-characteristics, i.e., characteristics that lay in the respondents themselves. Since we are interested in which HSN dimensions comprise journalists' understanding of the concept, we will focus on the level-1-characteristics in the following.

To now answer our research question, i.e., which of the theoretically assumed dimensions comprise journalists' understanding of HSN, we conducted multilevel modeling, taking the HSN characteristics into account (Table 2, Model 1). We found that four out of five dimensions have a significant effect on the vignette evaluations. Items about the "soft" topic (abandoned pets) are more likely to be evaluated as soft news than items about the "hard" topic (unemployment) ($b = 1.11, p < .001$). News items that emphasize an individual relevance are more likely to be rated as soft news than items focusing on the societal relevance ($b = .21, p = 0.03$). Equally, news items that are episodically framed are more likely to be regarded as soft news than a thematically framed item ($b = 1.52, p < .001$). The last significant HSN dimension is opinion. If the author of a news item explicitly expresses a personal opinion, the items are more likely to be evaluated as soft news ($b = .43, p < .001$). The dimension emotionality does not yield significant results ($b = .06, p = .63$).

The results show that the framing dimension has the strongest effect on the HSN evaluation, followed by the topic dimension. The control variable of the perceived mass-market orientation of newspapers did not influence the dependent variable significantly.

Table 3
Influence of HSN dimensions on journalists' vignette evaluations

	Model 0	Model 1
<u>Fixed Effects</u>		
Constant	3.55***(0.09)	1.88*** (0.14)
HSN Dimensions (Level 1)		
Topic		1.11*** (0.13)
Relevance		0.21* (0.09)
Framing		1.52*** (0.10)
Opinion		0.43*** (0.12)
Emotionality		0.06 (0.12)
Control (Level 2)		
Mass-market orientation		0.02 (0.07)
<u>Random Effects</u>		
Residual variance		
Message (level 1)	2.71	1.47
Journalist (level 2)	0.39	0.70
ICC (in %)		
Level 1	87.40	67.78
Level 2	12.60	32.22
AIC	2090.81	1860.88

Note. $n_{evaluation} = 528$, $n_{participants} = 132$. Answer to the questions: "Please indicate whether the news item was rather hard news (1) or soft news (7) from your point of view" (7-point Likert scale). Unstandardized coefficients are displayed; robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This paper aimed to contribute to the understanding of the concept of hard and soft news, which is regarded as one of the most popular concepts in journalism research.

Our study set off with two problems: First – despite its popularity – it is still not agreed as to how to define and measure the concept of hard and soft news (Brekken et al., 2012; Reinemann & Scherr, 2012). Second, there is a need for a standardization of concepts in social sciences in general (Gerring, 2015) and in journalism research in particular (Esser et al., 2012). We cross-validated the most recent conceptualization of HSN (Reinemann et al., 2012), by conducting a factorial survey with the producers of hard and soft news – journalists. To be precise, we tackled the most relevant quality criterion of concepts in social sciences – coherence – (Gerring, 1999), by assessing which of the theoretically assumed dimensions comprise journalists understanding of hard and soft news.

Indeed, we found that four dimensions of the HSN concept influenced whether journalists regarded presented news items rather as hard news or rather as soft news. Aligning these results with the theoretical proposed dimensions of the HSN concept, we can conclude that the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) is, to a great extent, coherent, i.e., the four dimensions group together. However, this cannot be said about the dimension of emotionality, since it did not exert a significant influence on journalists' evaluation of the vignettes. This could imply two things. On the one hand, this finding might indicate that the emotionality dimension might not be a constitutive element of the HSN conceptualization. On the other hand, this might be caused by the operationalization of emotions in our factorial survey. The emotionality dimension was the only one operationalized by pictures, following one of several suggestions by Reinemann et al. (2012) of how emotions get conveyed in news items. Further research is necessary to determine whether or not the emotionality dimension is constitutive of the HSN concept or if our findings were caused by the operationalization of the emotionality dimension at hand. Therefore, the following

studies could consider using affective vocabulary or describing explicit emotions to operationalize the emotionality dimension by word choice, equivalent to the other dimensions.

Since four out of five dimensions had a significant influence on the evaluation of the vignettes, we can also see that journalists have a multi-dimensional understanding of hard and soft news. This reflects the modern academic view (Patterson, 2000; Reinemann et al., 2012).

Furthermore, we found that of all the dimensions, the framing dimension has the strongest impact. This contradicts the suggestion by Reinemann et al. (2012) to regard the topic dimension as superordinate. Against the backdrop of participants not basing their evaluation of the vignettes on the emotional picture, this portends a hierarchical order of the dimensions within the concepts. Indeed, the literature of concept explication and evaluation in social sciences states that it is crucial to “ensure the vertical organization of attributes” (Munck & Verkuilen, 2002, p. 12). These attributes – i.e., the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the HSN concept – might not be coequal. Hence, some of these are a stronger indicator of hard or soft news, respectively, than others.

At this point, several limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, we cross-validated the concept of HSN only by aligning the understanding of hard and soft news of German print journalists of local newspapers with the most recent academic understanding. Against the backdrop of the importance of local newspapers in the German news market (Pürer, 2015), this was appropriate. However, this choice limits the generalizability of our finding since we assessed only the concept understanding of one group of journalists. Although our sample resembled the representative sample of a survey among German journalists with regard to gender and age

(Steindl et al., 2017), journalists working for news media of different channels (e.g., broadcasting journalists) and for different types of media (e.g., tabloid media, online newspapers) might have another understanding of hard and soft news since the organizational socialization is described to influence what professionals understand by certain terms (Bergmann, 2010). These journalists might also vary with in respect of their attitudes and routines (e.g., Skovsgaard, 2014). In this study, we could at least partially account for this by introducing the control variable of the perceived mass-market orientation of the newspapers. The majority of the surveyed journalists perceived their newspaper as a rather quality newspaper – not surprising, given that the sample comprised only local newspapers. It is plausible, though, to find differences in the HSN understanding between journalists of pronounced tabloid and quality newspapers. Hence further studies should also assess the HSN understandings of journalists who work for, e.g., TV, tabloid media, or pure online media.

Second, this limitation holds also true for journalists of other language areas. While the term “hard and soft news” is common in the German-speaking area (Hooffacker & Meier, 2017; Padrutt, 1967), journalists in other regions refer to hard and soft news in local language (e.g., *noticias duras y blandas* in Spanish, Ortells Badenes, 2015; for a discussion of the universality of concepts, see Sparks, 2018). Future studies could extend the scope and aim to cross-validate the concept of hard and soft news also in different (journalistic) language cultures.

Third, while the factorial survey provided us with high internal validity and enabled us to systematically analyze the influence of the theoretically assumed dimensions, it is also accompanied by some weaknesses. We operationalized the dimensions dichotomously. However, one can easily think of polytomous operationalizations, for example, of various topics that can be arranged on a continuum from

hard to soft news. In fact, researchers have already talked about a HSN continuum (Boczkowski, 2009; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014). The use of such continua for the HSN dimension for further cross-validations of the concept will enable us to determine whether HSN comprises, indeed, continuous dimensions.

Finally, the evaluation of the vignettes as “hard” or “soft” was operationalized with one item as there is no scale available to account for this concept. Although such one-item measures are common for factorial surveys (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014), they are accompanied by some psychometric problems like insufficient reliability (see e.g., Furr, 2011).

What do our results now mean for further studies resorting to HSN? They indicate that: (1) A multi-dimensional understanding of HSN seems to be more appropriate than a one-dimensional one. Further studies should, therefore, better refrain from one-dimensional approaches. (2) Our results can also be seen as a further hint of the appropriateness and coherence of the conceptualization of HSN in the understanding of Reinemann et al. (2012). Further research should take this into account, following the claims for a more consentaneous understanding of such an important concept.

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7 MANUSCRIPT 3: SOFT SPOT FOR SOFT NEWS?

Glogger, I. (under review): Soft Spot for Soft News? How Journalistic Characteristics and Audience Images Influence Hard and Soft News Coverage. Submitted for publication to *Journalism Studies*.

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Abstract:

A trend towards softer news is often explained with macro-developments like commercialization. Based on the assumption that media content is also affected by the characteristics of individual journalists, this paper investigates the impact of such factors on hard and soft news coverage. Focusing on journalistic role conceptions and quality criteria as well as audience images as examples of these factors and resting upon a multi-dimensional understanding of the concept of hard and soft news, we conducted an online survey with simulated decisions scenarios among German newspaper journalists to assess the impact of these aspects on hard and soft news coverage. Findings indicate that – indeed – these factors affect whether journalists present news in a hard or soft way. Yet, the degree of influences differs, depending on the dimensions of the hard and soft news concept we look at.

KEYWORDS audience image; hard news; journalistic quality; role conceptions; soft news

Soft Spot for Soft News? How Journalistic Characteristics and Audience Images Influence Hard and Soft News Coverage

A trend in journalistic news coverage towards softer stories – for example, about royals or cute puppies, reported with an emotional appeal – is often associated with the normatively laden consequences for democracies, which pose two opposite positions: consuming soft news is either feared to “dumb down” societies (Nguyen 2012) or as a great chance for those who would otherwise not to get in touch with news (Baum 2007). Given these strong assumptions from two sides, researchers are keenly interested in why the news media and journalists resort to soft news reporting. One can follow models of influence on news content to distinguish the factors at different hierarchical levels, which are assumed to have caused a medial preference of soft over hard news (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Commercialization in general, a more competitive media environment due to the advent of private broadcasters in Europe, or the Internet are named as the factors at a macro-level (Lischka 2014; Patterson 2000). The news media – so the reasoning – reacts to declining audience shares by providing more soft news. On the meso-level (organizational level), we find more driving forces of a softer coverage: structural differences between the types of media organizations are counted among these factors. For example, studies show the differences in the amount of soft news coverage between private and public broadcasters as well as tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (Brekken, Thorbjørnsrud, and Aalberg 2012; Aalberg, van Aelst, and Curran 2010).

Models that track influences on news content in a hierarchical order, however, tell us that next to the aforementioned macro-factors, journalistic attitudes, values,

and what journalists imagine their audience to be can influence news creation (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). These micro-level and routine-factors have been neglected so far in explaining why hard or soft news is preferred by the media in general and journalists in particular. In the paper at hand, we are thus interested in knowing whether journalists, as the individual creators of news, have a “soft spot” for soft news, and asking whether and how journalistic attitudes influence if journalists report in hard or soft ways.

To our knowledge, no study, so far, has looked at characteristics of individual journalists on hard and soft news (HSN) reporting, despite (1) several reminders to scrutinize these characteristics (Donsbach 2004; Zhong and Newhagen 2009), (2) the fact that the way events are covered (in a hard or soft way) is assumed to be rather influenced by journalistic than by organizational features (Reinemann and Baugut 2014; Engelmann 2012; Tanikawa 2017), and (3) journalists themselves acknowledging great influence of their own beliefs and conceptions of their audience on news content (Worlds of Journalism Study 2016).

Given the abundance of journalistic traits, views, and attitudes that are assumed to influence news content (for an overview: Reinemann and Baugut 2014) and various academic definitions of the HSN concept (Reinemann et al. 2012; Otto, Glogger and Boukes, 2017), we took two decisions for the current study. First, we limited the influencing factors to three aspects. For the individual level, we are specifically interested in journalistic role conceptions that are some of the factors at the micro-level with the greatest influence on news content (Reinemann and Baugut 2014); we are also interested in journalistic quality standards, which are assumed to have changed, too, in the context of altering media environments (Plasser 2005). Furthermore, we decided on audience images as a part of the routine-level as a trend toward

softer news is often associated with a consumer-oriented model of news (Patterson 2000). In a situation of economic pressure, the assumed preferences of recipients become increasingly important for news-making (Lowrey and Woo 2010). Audience images have also been shown to influence what journalists understand by HSN (Glogger, under review). Hence, what journalists assume their recipients to expect from news coverage can be also regarded as a crucial factor that influences hard and soft news.

Secondly, following modern understandings, HSN is a multi-dimensional concept that does not only comprise what a news item is about (topic dimension) but also how news is presented. Four presentational dimensions can be distinguished: the framing of the news item, whether the societal or individual relevance of the topic is emphasized, the degree of the author's expressed personal opinion, and the level of emotionality of the report (Reinemann et al. 2012). Our study will focus on these presentational dimensions of HSN since 1) the selection of topics has already gained much attention (for example, in the tradition of gatekeeper studies) (Shoemaker et al. 2001), and 2) journalists seem to be particularly free of other influences when it comes to decide how to cover a story (e.g., how to frame a story) (Reinemann and Baugut 2014; Engelmann 2012).

Hence, we enquire about the influence of journalistic role conceptions, quality criteria, and audience image on HSN coverage in the form of the manner in which topics are covered, i.e., framed, relevance wise focused on, opinionated, and emotionally laden. To answer these questions, we administered an online survey in which we asked German newspaper journalists to take selection decisions on news content that represented the four presentational dimensions of the HSN concept, i.e., the journalists could decide on a hard or a soft way of reporting. Combining these decisions

with information on the individual characteristics and audience images of journalists will broaden our understanding not only of the influences of these attitudes on HSN coverage in general but also of the individual dimensions that comprise the modern understanding of HSN. This is not only of academic value, but also insightful for journalistic education, enabling the educators of future journalists to be aware of the factors that shape a journalistic preference for soft news and – if normatively desired – to counteract these preferences.

In the following, we elaborate first on HSN as an academic concept before looking at the factors on a micro- and a routine-level, which have already been described to influence the way journalists cover events. Finally, we set out our method and results, concluding with a discussion.

What is Hard and Soft News?

To describe the changes in the way the media covers politics, researchers often refer to the concept of HSN. Coined for academic use by Tuchman (1973), it was first understood as a one-dimensional concept, for example, only referring to topics to distinguish hard from soft news. While news about politics or economics was considered as hard news, stories about celebrities or crime were seen as soft news (Baum 2007). However, this mono-dimensional view was challenged when researchers added also the way news is presented to separate hard and soft news (Boczkowski 2009; Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2010; Patterson 2000). Reinemann et al. (2012) were the first to scrutinize various existing HSN definitions and proposed a multi-dimensional conceptualization as a result of their literature review. First, they described the topic dimension. In contrast to other understandings (Aalberg, Brekken, and Thorbjørnsrud 2010), the topic is not determined by the mere core subject (e.g.,

culture or sports) but by the political references of stories. The more, for example, policy plans are mentioned, the harder the news is. Second, the focus dimension comprises two sub-dimensions. Framing comprises the extremes of thematic framing and episodic framing (Iyengar 1991). For example, a news item about child poverty can cite official statistics about this problem (thematic) or portray affected children (episodic). Relevance distinguishes whether the societal or the individual consequences of an event or phenomenon are described. For example, the consequences of child poverty for the society as a whole or for individual children that cannot afford healthy nutrition could be stressed. Third, the style dimension comprises how a news item is written or filmed. Once again, two sub-dimensions can be discerned. The opinion dimension refers to the degree of opinionating by the author. The emotion dimension considers the degree of emotionality of the news. This multi-dimensional HSN understanding has been tested in content analyses and surveys, and was proven to be functional (Glogger and Otto, under review; Magin and Stark 2014; Reinemann, Stanyer, and Scherr 2016).

Which Factors Influence Hard and Soft News Coverage?

A trend towards softer news is often seen as a reaction to recent changes in the media environment (for example, commercialization or economic pressure due to new competitors in the news market) (Plasser 2005). However, only a few studies have, so far, empirically investigated the driving forces behind softer news reporting empirically. Using their own HSN conceptualization, Reinemann, Stanyer, and Scherr (2016), conducted the content analysis of news for different types of media outlets in 16 countries, tackling the meso-level influences of the media organizations and the

macro-level impacts of media and political systems as well as the economic well-being of states on HSN coverage. The findings showed, for example, that economic crises lead to harder news. Referring to the same conceptualization, Magin and Stark (2014) used a content analysis of Austrian and German newspaper coverage, focusing on the impact of the meso-level factor of the self-image of media organizations and the macro-level factor of the market structure in both countries. The results indicated a weak influence of both on HSN.

Such studies are not only rare but they have also failed, so far, to take two aspects into account: first, the individual characteristics of journalists are known to influence news content (Shoemaker and Reese 1996) and second, the HSN concept comprises two journalistic decisions. Journalists not only have to decide which story to cover in the first place but they also have to meet the challenges of how to cover it. The former refers to the topic dimension of the HSN concept; the latter denotes the dimensions of focus and style. Engelmann (2012) uses the term of *secondary news decisions* in this context. After deciding what to cover (primary news decisions), these stylistic and focal considerations come into play. Engelmann (2012), and Reinemann and Baugut (2014) argue that both of these news decisions differ with regard to the factors that influence them. As set out earlier, we will focus on these secondary decisions, i.e., how news is presented – hard or soft.

We will, in the following passage, first look at the factors that impact secondary news decisions in general, before elaborating on the factors that influence secondary decisions in the realm of HSN in particular.

Factors Influencing Secondary News Decisions

Reinemann and Baugut (2014) describe the factors that affect primary and secondary news decisions in general, following the logic of the models like the hierarchy-of-influence model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) (for an overview of similar models, see Hanitzsch 2009). While macro-aspects like the set-up of the media system or meso-factors like the types of media organizations are more influential on primary news decisions (i.e., which event to cover), downstream secondary news decisions are, according to assumptions, more prone to be affected by micro-level factors. Here, individual professional characteristics are relevant (Reinemann and Baugut 2014; Engelmann 2012; Tanikawa 2017). Role conceptions or ethical standards are examples of these individual professional influences.

The model by Reinemann and Baugut (2014) only distinguishes between the three levels on which influences of news-making are located. Other models of influences on news-making, however, propose further levels (Reese and Shoemaker 2016; Shoemaker and Reese 1996), in which the routine level is of interest with respect to secondary news decisions. These routines “[...] embody considerations about the audience, what it will find acceptable and interesting [...]” (Reese 2016, para. 14). We believe that these journalistic audience conceptions are relevant for secondary news decisions, especially in the context of HSN, since a shift from hard to soft coverage is often associated with stronger journalistic orientation toward the audience (Loosen and Schmidt 2012; Boczkowski and Peer 2011; McManus 1994; Worlds of Journalism Study 2016). Hence, we extended the assumptions by Reine-

mann and Baugut (2014), and added journalists' images of their audience to be influencing factors. The manner in which these factors impact secondary HSN decisions will be subject to the following section of enquiry.

Individual and Routine Level Influences on Secondary HSN Decisions

Thus far, no study has analyzed how individual journalistic characteristics specifically manifest themselves in HSN reporting specifically. Hence, we refer to the studies that have focused on how journalistic characteristics and audience images impact the individual HSN dimensions.

Individual Professional Factors

Reinemann and Baugut (2014) name journalistic role conceptions as some of the most influential micro-level factors on news decisions. Role conceptions are "referred to as the generally held teleology, or end purpose, of journalism" (Plaisance and Skewes 2003, 834) and have been shown to have an impact on various professional journalistic behaviors and, therefore, also news content (Starck and Soloski 1977; Scholl and Weischenberg 1998; Weaver et al. 2009).

To our knowledge, no studies, so far, have connected journalistic role conceptions and secondary HSN decisions. However, we can state that it seems that those roles have gained more importance for journalists, which refer to stronger recipient orientation and entertainment orientation of news-making – both motives that are also associated with a shift toward softer news (Steindl, Lauerer, and Hanitzsch 2017). Other studies can, yet, show that there is a connection between role conceptions and the process of frame building as an HSN sub-dimensions since "journalists

mostly frame their coverage in line with their personal interpretations of what is at issue” (Brüggemann 2014, 64). While not targeting thematic and episodic framing, in particular, but focusing on conflict framing, Bartholomé, Lecheler, and de Vreese (2015) found that active conflict frame setting is associated with interpretative journalistic role conception – yet this influence is limited by other professional norms, such as factuality (Szabó, Kormos, and Zagyi 2016; van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albaek 2012). Others found similar results for different generic frames (Strategic framing: Dekavalla 2016; Framing in general: Castelló and Montagut 2011).

While looking at the interplay of role conceptions and other HSN dimensions, studies can be regarded as sparse – at best. Given the assumption that the soft poles of the HSN dimensions – individual relevance as well as opinionated and emotional reporting – are often associated with more entertaining reporting, we can refer to the results of a survey conducted among journalists (van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albaek 2012): journalists with a greater entertainment role orientation, reported by most heavily on presumably entertaining stories (for example, scandals and private information). Based on these considerations, we ask our first research question as follows:

RQ1.1: How do journalists’ role conceptions influence secondary HSN decisions?

Increasing commercialization and market pressure are often associated with a shift of journalistic foci (Plasser 2005; Altheide 2002; Curran et al. 2009): following commercial logic rather than news logic to cater assumed the recipients’ interests would put new quality criteria into action. Instead of basing journalistic behavior on leading criteria, such as objectivity or facticity, entertainment orientation might supersede (Karidi 2017). The consequences of a shift of journalistic quality criteria could be the preference of soft over hard news. To our knowledge, no study has

looked at the influence of the professional characteristics of quality standards on secondary HSN decisions. We, therefore, ask:

RQ1.2: How do the quality criteria of journalists influence secondary HSN decisions?

Routine-level Factor of Audience Images

A preference of soft over hard news is also regarded as an answer to the assumed recipients' preferences (Patterson 2000). Indeed, journalists have increasingly acknowledge what they think is relevant to their audience (Boczkowski and Peer 2011; Loosen and Schmidt 2012). Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) assessed the influence of a reference group on journalistic news-making, which, among others, included the recipients. They found a medium perceived influence of this reference group on German journalists. Once again, there is no study that has tackled the question of how the images of the audience influenced secondary HSN decisions. Yet, for example, Brüggemann (2014) claimed that audience feedback, i.e., more than only a perceived image of recipients, might influence the journalistic framing practice. Accounting for these considerations, we ask:

RQ 2: How do journalistic audience images impact secondary HSN decisions?

Method

To answer the research questions, we conducted an online survey among German print journalists. We used a professional PR-database that offers individual e-mail addresses of German journalists and newsrooms and allows for filtering contacts by

media organizations. We excluded generic newsroom addresses and saved the individual e-mail addresses of the journalists that worked for the daily German-language newspapers, of which we randomly selected 1,500 addresses. We sent the journalists a link to the survey via e-mail. Data collection took place from April to July 2017. 193 journalists completed the questionnaire.

Design of Secondary News Decisions and Procedure

Based on the conceptualization of HSN by Reinemann et al. (2012), the secondary HSN decisions in our study were operationalized with short decision scenarios (one for each dimension). Each of the scenarios contained two short text snippets – each representing one of the opposing poles of the respective dimensions. For example, one snippet conveyed the opinion of the author (soft pole), while its counterpart was written in a neutral way (hard pole). The emotion dimension was operationalized by pictures (Reinemann et al. 2012). To account for the fact, that the topic of news items is also regarded as being constitutive for HSN, these snippets were adapted for two topics: unemployment (hard) and abandoned pets (soft) (Table 4). In total, the participants were confronted with eight scenarios.

We pre-tested the decision scenarios with regular news consumers ($n = 67$; age: $M = 29.33$, $SD = 8.16$; gender: 62.7 % female), showing that the extreme poles of the HSN dimensions differed significantly from each other.

Table 4
Operationalization of secondary HSN decisions

Dimensions	Levels	Unemployment story	Neglected pet story
Framing	Thematic framing	Story is told by referring to unemployment figures	Story is told by referring to statistics about neglected pets
	Episodic framing	Story is told by referring to an unemployed adolescent	Story is told by referring to a neglected dog
Relevance	Societal consequences	Youth unemployment has negative consequences for morality of a society	Taxpayers have to pay for animal shelters for neglected dogs
	Individual consequences	Youth unemployment means poverty for an individual	New owners have to pay for neglected dogs
Opinion	Opinion-free reporting	Author does not express personal opinion	Author does not express personal opinion
	Opinionated reporting	Author expresses disbelief that a new unemployment program would be beneficial	Author expresses disbelief that a campaign against neglecting animals would be beneficial
Emotions	Neutral picture	Picture of an office in an unemployment center	Picture of a sign "animal shelter"
	Emotional picture	Picture of angry young people at a demonstration against unemployment	Picture of a sad, neglected dog in an animal shelter

The participants were presented with the scenarios one after another, first for the presumably hard, then for the soft topic. Before they saw the first pair of snippets, a headline was presented to indicate the general topic of news. The participants were instructed to read the snippets and to decide which snippets represented best the way they would cover a story on unemployment and abandoned pets, respectively.

Measures

Dependent Measures

In our study, the dependent variables are the secondary HSN decisions. The journalists were asked to take eight decisions each, i.e., for four dimensions in two topics, resulting in $N = 1,464$ decisions in total (binary coded: 0=hard pole of dimension, 1=soft pole of dimension). Table 5 shows the distributions of the four HSN dimensions and a combined HSN decision that comprised all eight decisions.

Table 5
Distributions of the dependent variable

		<u>Topic: Unemployment</u>		<u>Topic: Neglected pets</u>	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Framing	Thematic	24	13.11	59	32.24
	Episodic	159	86.89	124	67.76
Relevance	Societal	41	22.4	138	75.41
	Individual	142	77.6	45	24.59
Opinion	Opinion-free	176	96.17	177	96.72
	Opinionated	7	3.83	6	3.28
Emotions	Neutral	3	1.64	13	7.1
	Emotional	180	98.36	170	92.9
		<u>Both topics</u>			
		<i>n</i>	%		
Combined HSN decision	Hard poles	631		43.1	
	Soft poles	833		56.9	

Independent Measures

A questionnaire followed the decision scenarios, including questions about role conceptions, quality criteria, audience images, and perceived influences by superiors and colleagues on secondary news decisions as control variables.

Journalistic role conceptions. We assessed the role conceptions of journalists with a scale by Obermaier, Koch, and Riesmeyer (2015), which was amended by one item for the entertainer role (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2012). In total five roles were assessed as follows: disseminator: “informing the audience as neutrally and precisely as possible” ($M = 6.37, SD = .99$), interpreter: “analyzing and interpreting complex issues” ($M = 6.81, SD = .42$), adversary: “criticizing grievances in society” ($M = 6.26, SD = .90$), populist mobilizer: “getting involved for disadvantaged people in society” ($M = 5.03, SD = 1.48$), and entertainer: “providing relaxation and entertainment for the audience” ($M = 5.10, SD = 1.34$) on a 7-point Likert-type scales (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

Journalistic quality criteria. Furthermore, we asked participants which of the following aspects was – from their personal point of view – important for high journalistic quality: coverage of topics of the men on the street ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.27$), and emotionality ($M = 4.86, SD = 1.47$) on a 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = not important at all to 7 = extremely important), based on quality criteria proposed by Arnold (2009).

Conceptions of recipients. The audience images were measured by semantic differentials. We focused on two images which, we assumed, an influence on secondary HSN decisions. First, we asked about the perceived political interest of the recipients (politically interested/politically not interested) (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2012) based on the rationale that it is mainly the politically disinterested that withdraw from hard news (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg 2010) ($M = 3.12, SD = 1.14$). Second, we assessed the perceived preference of recipients for hard and soft

news, respectively (preference for hard news/preference of soft news; Authors, under review) ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .90$). Both items were measured on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = agree to left pole to 7 = agree to the right pole).

Control variables. Reinemann and Baugut (2014), and Engelmann (2012) assume that secondary news decisions are less influenced by editorial and newsroom control. To account for the fact that this assumption has not been tested empirically, we also controlled for the perceived influence of superiors and colleagues on the combined HSN secondary decision (built with a sum score of control variables for individual dimensions) and on individual dimension decisions (Table 6).

Table 6
Control variables

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Max</i>	α
Colleagues:						
Framing	182	3.05	1.70	1	7	-
Relevance	180	3.15	1.66	1	7	-
Opinion	181	3.11	1.65	1	7	-
Emotion	182	2.58	1.58	1	7	-
combined HSN	179	11.87	5.41	4	27	0.87
Superiors:						
Framing	182	2.73	1.61	1	7	-
Relevance	180	2.67	1.54	1	7	-
Opinion	181	2.63	1.61	1	7	-
Emotion	182	2.74	1.80	1	7	-
combined HSN	180	10.73	5.57	4	28	0.83

Participants

In total, 183 participants were included in the study. Out of these, 31 percent indicated their gender as female. On average, the participants were 48 years old ($SD = 10.56$) and had worked for 18 years ($SD = 10.5$) as journalists. The participants held various levels of responsibilities in their organizations (senior editors: 3 %, middle

management: 26 %, editorial staff: 67 %, trainees: 3 %) and stated different beat affiliations (local news: 55%, politics/economics: 17%, sports: 9%, culture/ society/education: 7%, others: 12%).

Results

Firstly, we will take on a global approach and test whether journalistic roles conceptions (RQ 1.1), quality criteria (RQ 1.2), and audience images (RQ 2) have an influence on whether the participants decided for the presumably hard or soft pole of the combined HSN concept. Secondly, we will evaluate the dimensions individually.

Combined Secondary HSN Decision

Every journalist took eight secondary HSN decisions. To account for the resulting nested structure of the data, we conducted a logistic regression with cluster-robust standard errors to assess the influence of the independent variables on the combined secondary HSN decision. In order to check whether there were differences between the four dimensions and the two topics, we added them as independent variables to the model.

The results show that the topic and the HSN dimensions had a significant influence on the combined secondary HSN decision (Table 7). Firstly, the topic yielded a rather surprising result: the story about neglected pets – the presumably softer story – had a bigger chance of being reported with the hard poles of the HSN dimensions than the story about unemployment, which is, allegedly, the harder topic ($B = -1.88$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 0.15, 95% $CI = (0.11-0.22)$).

Furthermore, the individual HSN dimensions had a significant influence on the dependent variable. With respect to the dimensions of relevance and opinion, the

participants were more likely to decide on the hard pole of the dimensions than for the reference dimension of framing (relevance: $B = -1.47, SE = 0.21, p < .001, OR = 0.23, 95\% CI = (0.15-0.35)$); opinion: $B = -5.34, SE = 0.46, p < .001, OR = 0.005, 95\% CI = (0.00-0.01)$); the emotion dimension had a greater chance of being reported by deciding on the soft pole than framing ($B = 2.08, SE = 0.29, p < .001, OR = 0.005, 95\% CI = (4.56-14.09)$). Since the odds ratios are not intuitive, we plotted the predictive margins of the combined secondary HSN decision for the four dimensions. Figure 1 shows that the opinion dimension had the least chance of getting reported by using the soft pole, i.e. by stating one's own opinion on the topic.

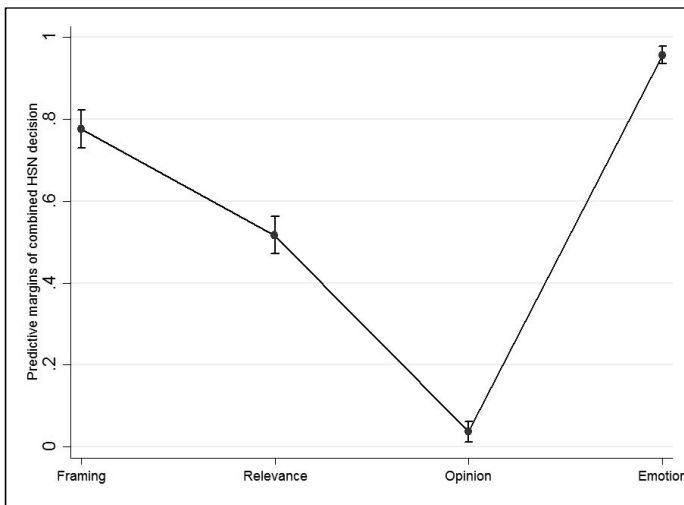


Figure 5
Predictive margins of dimensions with 95% CIs

With regard to the individual professional characteristics, we find that the entertainer role and the quality criterion of emotionality significantly influence the combined secondary HSN decision. Journalists that agreed on the entertainer role

showed a bigger chance to decide on the soft poles of the combined secondary HSN decision ($B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .02$, $OR = 1.18$, $95\% CI = (1.03-1.36)$). Similarly, journalists that assigned greater importance to the criterion of emotionality to journalistic quality showed a greater chance to decide for the soft poles ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .002$, $OR = 1.27$, $95\% CI = (1.09-1.47)$).

Moreover, we find that both audience images had a significant effect on the combined secondary HSN decision. If the journalists perceived their readers to be more politically uninterested, the chances were higher for deciding on the soft poles ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .007$, $OR = 1.29$, $95\% CI = (1.07-1.55)$). Equally, if the journalists assumed that their readers were more interested in soft news, the odds taking a soft secondary news decision increased ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .03$, $OR = 1.28$, $95\% CI = (1.03-1.60)$).

As assumed by Reinemann and Baugut (2014), neither colleagues nor superiors significantly influenced the secondary HSN decisions.

Table 7
Logistic regression for combined secondary HSN decisions

	<i>B (SE)</i>	Odds Ratio (95% CI OR)
Constant	2.49*** (0.24)	12.06 (7.57-19.20)
Topic (Reference: unemployment)	-1.88*** (0.19)	0.15 (0.11-0.22)
Dimension (Reference: framing)		
Relevance	-1.47*** (0.21)	0.23 (0.15-0.35)
Opinion	-5.34*** (0.46)	0.00 (0.00-0.01)
Emotion	2.08*** (0.29)	8.01 (4.56-14.09)
Role: disseminator	0.16 (0.11)	1.17 (0.94-1.47)
Role: interpreter	-0.11 (0.27)	0.90 (0.52-1.53)
Role: adversary	-0.17 (0.12)	0.84 (0.67-1.07)
Role: populist mobilizer	0.09 (0.07)	1.09 (0.96-1.25)
Role: entertainer	0.17* (0.07)	1.18 (1.03-1.36)
Quality: men on the street	-0.08 (0.08)	0.92 (0.79-1.09)
Quality: emotionality	0.24** (0.08)	1.27 (1.09-1.47)
Recipients: pol. interest	0.25** (0.09)	1.29 (1.07-1.55)
Recipients: HSN	0.25* (0.11)	1.28 (1.03-1.60)
Control: colleagues	0.02 (0.02)	1.02 (0.98-1.05)
Control: superiors	0.02 (0.02)	1.02 (0.98-1.06)
<i>N</i>	1,392	
McFadden's <i>R</i> ² :	0.52	

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

The results of logistic regression on the combined secondary HSN decisions shows that the single HSN dimensions had a significant and varying effect on the dependent variable. Hence, it is worthwhile to individually assess the secondary HSN decisions for each dimension. Given the unbalanced class distribution of the dependent variable for the opinion dimension (both topics) and the emotion dimension (employment topic only) (Table 2), we had to refrain from further analyses of the complete opinion dimension and of the emotion dimension for the story about unemployment. Since

we are not interested in the differences between the two topics, e.g., the framing decision for the topics of unemployment and pet separately, we will assess the secondary HSN decisions for framing and relevance for both topics in one model, applying logistic regressions with cluster-robust standard errors to account for the fact that the participants made two dependent decisions for the dimensions.

Secondary HSN Decision of Framing

For the secondary HSN decision of the framing dimension, we find that the topic had a significant influence on the dependent variable (Table 5). Once again, this result is surprising: the story about neglected pets had a greater chance of getting framed thematically than the story about unemployment ($B = -1.30$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.27$, $95\% CI = (0.17-0.43)$). Furthermore and in line with the result for the combined HSN decision, there was a significant effect of the quality criterion of emotionality on the secondary HSN decision of framing: if journalists assigned greater significance to this criterion to journalistic quality, the chances that they decided for episodic framing were greater ($B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .009$, $OR = 1.39$, $95\% CI = (1.09-1.77)$).

Research Question 2 asked about the influence of journalistic audience images on secondary HSN decisions. For the framing dimension, we find that the perceived political interest of newspaper readers influenced whether the participants decided on thematic or episodic framing. Similarly to the combined HSN decision, the results show that the chances for episodic framing were greater if the participants perceived their recipients to be less politically interested ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.16$, $p = .043$, $OR = 1.38$, $95\% CI = (1.01-1.88)$). No influence of superiors and colleagues on the framing decision was found.

Table 8
 Logistic regression for secondary HSN decision of framing

	<i>B (SE)</i>	Odds Ratio	(95% CI OR)
Constant	2.15*** (0.23)	8.58	(5.50-13.38)
Topic (Reference: unem- ployment)	-1.30*** (0.24)	0.27	(0.17-0.43)
Role: disseminator	0.21 (0.15)	1.23	(0.92-1.65)
Role: interpreter	0.13 (0.38)	1.13	(0.54-2.39)
Role: adversary	-0.14 (0.22)	0.87	(0.57-1.33)
Role: populist mobilizer	0.03 (0.13)	1.03	(0.80-1.33)
Role: entertainer	0.15 (0.12)	1.16	(0.92-1.47)
Quality: men on the street	-0.02 (0.14)	0.98	(0.75-1.29)
Quality: emotionality	0.33** (0.12)	1.39	(1.09-1.77)
Recipients: pol. interest	0.32* (0.16)	1.38	(1.01-1.88)
Recipients: HSN	0.27 (0.19)	1.31	(0.91-1.90)
Control: colleagues	-0.06 (0.10)	0.94	(0.77 1.15)
Control: superiors	0.10 (0.13)	1.10	(0.85-1.43)
<i>N</i>	354		
McFadden's <i>R</i> ² :	0.13		

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Secondary HSN Decision of Relevance

Taking on the same approach as observed for the dimension of framing, we will now focus on the secondary HSN decision of relevance (Table 6). In line with our earlier results, our findings show that the topic had a strong influence on whether the participants decided on stressing on societal or individual relevance. We see that the story about neglected animals had a greater chance of getting reported with a focus on societal relevance –presumably the harder pole of the dimension ($B = -2.73$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.06$, $95\% CI = (0.04-0.11)$).

Against the backdrop of journalistic role conceptions being one of the most influential micro-level factors on news decisions, our findings now provide evidence that suggests this also holds true for the relevance decision, with the two role conceptions yielding significant effects: the role of the adversary and the populist mobilizer. Journalists that were consentaneous to an adversary role, had a greater chance to stress on the societal relevance of a topic ($B = -0.46$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .013$, $OR = 0.63$, $95\% CI = (0.44-0.91)$). In contrast, journalists that adhered to the role of a populist mobilizer had a greater chance to decide the emphasis for the individual relevance of a topic ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .024$, $OR = 1.27$, $95\% CI = (1.03-1.57)$).

While no other independent variable yielded significant results, the control variable of perceived colleague influence had a significant effect on the relevance decision. Higher perceived influence of colleagues leads to a greater chance of stressing on individual relevance ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .018$, $OR = 1.25$, $95\% CI = (1.04-1.51)$).

Table 9
Logistic regression for secondary HSN decision of relevance

	<i>B (SE)</i>	Odds Ratio	(95% CI OR)
Constant	1.48*** (0.21)	4.40	(2.93-6.60)
Topic (Reference: unem- ployment)	-2.73*** (0.27)	0.06	(0.04-0.11)
Role: disseminator	0.27 (0.14)	1.31	(0.99-1.73)
Role: interpreter	-0.32 (0.39)	0.73	(0.34- .56)
Role: adversary	-0.46* (0.19)	0.63	(0.44-0.91)
Role: populist mobilizer	0.24* (0.11)	1.27	(1.03-1.57)
Role: entertainer	0.17 (0.10)	1.19	(0.97-1.45)
Quality: men on the street	-0.10 (0.12)	0.90	(0.71-1.15)
Quality: emotionality	0.04 (0.08)	1.04	(0.88-1.22)
Recipients: pol. interest	0.22 (0.12)	1.24	(0.98-1.58)
Recipients: HSN	0.12 (0.17)	1.13	(0.82-1.57)
Control: colleagues	0.22* (0.09)	1.25	(1.04-1.51)
Control: superiors	0.09 (0.10)	1.10	(0.90-1.33)
<i>N</i>	350		
McFadden's R^2 :	0.29		

Note: Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Secondary HSN Decision of Emotion

Finally, we will focus on the emotion dimension. In contrast to the dimensions of relevance, the results of logistic regression show no influence of journalistic role conceptions on emotion decision (Table 7). Yet we find two quality criteria and the audience image of political interest to exert a significant influence on the dependent variable. If journalists attached importance to the quality criterion of “topics of the men on the street”, the chance to decide on emotional reporting decreased ($B = -0.81$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = .021$, $OR = 0.45$, $95\% CI = (0.22-0.88)$). Reversely, if journalists reported

the quality criterion of emotionality to be important, the chance to decide on emotional reporting increased ($B = 0.88, SE = 0.29, p = .002, OR = 2.42, 95\% CI = [1.38-4.23]$). Such a trend can be also observed for the perceived political interest of the recipients. If they get perceived as politically uninterested, the chances to decide the emotional way of reporting were greater ($B = 0.83, SE = 0.39, p = .031, OR = 2.30, 95\% CI = [1.08-4.90]$).

Table 10
Logistic regression for secondary HSN decision of emotion

	<i>B (SE)</i>	Odds Ratio	(95% CI OR)
Constant	3.74***(0.59)	42.03	(13.18-134.01)
Role: disseminator	0.36 (0.32)	1.43	(0.77-2.67)
Role: interpreter	-0.45 (0.92)	0.64	(0.10-3.89)
Role: adversary	0.79 (0.56)	2.21	(0.74-6.64)
Role: populist mobilizer	-0.48 (0.34)	0.62	(0.32-1.21)
Role: entertainer	0.18 (0.27)	1.19	(0.70-2.02)
Quality: men on the street	-0.81* (0.35)	0.45	(0.22-0.88)
Quality: emotionality	0.88** (0.29)	2.42	(1.38-4.23)
Recipients: pol. interest	0.83* (0.39)	2.30	(1.08-4.90)
Recipients: HSN	0.19 (0.35)	1.21	(0.60-2.42)
Control: superiors	-0.16 (0.29)	0.85	(0.48-1.52)
Control: colleagues	0.32 (0.29)	1.37	(0.77-2.43)
<i>N</i>	177		
McFadden's R^2 :	0.31		

Note: Standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Discussion

A trend in news media toward softer news has, so far, been explained with macro-aspects like the commercialization. Based on the rationale that media content – especially how news is presented – is also affected by factors of lower levels of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model (Shoemaker and Reese 1996), this study focused on the influence of micro- and routine-level factors on whether journalists decide on a hard or soft way of reporting. In an online survey, combined with simulated news decision scenarios, we focused on the influence of journalistic role conception, quality criteria, and audience images as examples micro- and routine-level factors on HSN creation.

Indeed, we found that all the factors were influential – yet to different extents. Overall, three role conceptions influenced secondary HSN decisions. For the combined HSN decision, the results showed that a stronger orientation toward the entertainer role increased the chances of reporting in a soft way. This goes hand-in-hand with the assumption that softer news is more entertaining (Reinemann et al. 2012). Journalists that want to entertain their audience do it by providing more entertaining news (van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albaek 2012). For the framing dimension, we found two different role conceptions to be important: the adversary role and the populist mobilizer role. While journalists, who see themselves in the duty of standing up for the “men on the street” showed a greater chance of stressing on the individual relevance of a topic, journalists that aim to criticize the elites adhere to the societal relevance of a topic, i.e., they refrain from adopting an individual perspective. These findings emphasize two points about role conceptions: 1) the entertainer role is only influential for the global secondary HSN decision. This indicates that the individual soft poles of the HSN dimensions might not be seen as entertaining per se, but only when

they are regarded altogether. 2) The dimensions are not equally susceptible to the influence of the same role conceptions; instead, specific role conceptions individually influence the secondary HSN decisions of the dimensions.

For our second research question, we found that journalistic quality criteria exert varying influence on secondary HSN decisions. If journalists regarded emotionality as important for good journalism, there was greater that they decided on the soft pole in the combined secondary HSN decision as well as in the framing and emotion decision. For the two later decisions, this is very plausible: individual as the carriers of emotions and the depiction of emotions are focused on when the journalists ascribe great importance to emotionality in reporting. While this sounds almost tautological, this is a relevant result since it is the first time that such assumptions were empirically assessed. Certain findings, though, are surprising. For example, for the emotion dimension, we found that journalists that rated “topics of the men on the street” to be important for high journalistic quality had a lower chance for picking the emotional picture. Given the focus on the individual, who is more associated with emotions than a neutral picture that displays inanimate objects, we would have expected the reverse result. Furthermore, this quality criterion did not influence any other secondary HSN decisions – despite their focus on individual humans for the soft pole. The incongruence between quality criteria and quality enactment might be similar to what Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos (2013) described as a gap between conception and enactment in the case of journalistic roles. A certain mental conception of a standard – be roles or quality criteria – does not always reflect identically in terms of behavior. Further research that, for example, incorporates further quality criteria is required in this context.

The last research question inquired the influence of audience images. The finding that suggests that editors are acknowledging recipients' preferences has also been reflected in our results (Loosen and Schmidt 2012). The perceived lack of political interest of readers, in particular, is an influential factor. This is in line with the research that describes the soft news preference of recipients who are less interested in political news (Prior 2003).

In this paper, we did not only assess the individual HSN dimensions but we also took a global approach, since the conceptualization of HSN regards all the dimensions to be constitutive for hard and soft news. This revealed relevant insights into the nature of the concept as we found that the topic of a news item and the different HSN dimensions influence whether journalists report in a hard or a soft way. This demonstrates three things. Firstly, it is – next to journalistic traits – also the contextual situation of the presented news item that impacts the secondary HSN decision. This is in line with an analysis of the journalists' understanding of HSN, where it was mainly the characteristics of the news reports that determined this understanding (Glogger & Otto, under review). Secondly, Reinemann et al. (2012) proposed four dimensions of the HSN concept that comprise how events are reported. However, they did not state whether there are differences between the dimensions, i.e., if some are more likely to be reported by deciding on the soft pole than for others. Our findings demonstrate these differences. Although we could not analyze the opinion dimension, we could see that this dimension had the lowest chance to be covered with soft pole, i.e., by stating the journalist's own opinion. This result is not surprising, given that separating fact from opinion is a core principle of professional journalism (Schudson 2001). Further studies could assess the opinion dimension in journalistic (laymen) populations where such standards have started to dissolve (e.g., blogs, see

Singer 2005). Third, the presumably softer topic – a story about neglected pets – had a greater chance of getting reported in a hard way. This shows that topics are not essentially hard or soft (Authors, 2017). In addition, this result might have been a consequence of the characteristics of our sample which mostly comprised local journalists. What political national journalists consider a soft story, is the daily “hard” business for journalists who regularly cover such stories. Further studies, thus, should focus on journalists from different media organizations and beats.

In spite the results we have achieved, several limitations need to be addressed. First, our sample only included newspaper journalists. Since the quality criteria and role conceptions are also formed through the process of organizational socialization (Schein 2003; Hanitzsch 2006) and recipients differ, further studies should tackle these aspects. Studies could also include organizational factors to shed light on the interplay between various levels as proposed by the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Additionally, we operationalized the HSN dimensions dichotomously with two poles. However, HSN is often described as a continuum (Boukes and Boomgaarden 2014). This holds also true for the topic dimension where some researchers put “general news” (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2010, 37) between the two poles. Secondary HSN decisions could be simulated in future studies by using several snippets that are located on continua and are designed for more topics. Similarly, we chose three factors which we assumed to influence HSN decisions. Our results confirmed this selection but we cannot rule out that other micro- and routine-level factors are relevant in HSN making as well. Further studies could account for this limitation by also assessing different professional and also non-professional characteristics, such as education or individual traits (Donsbach 2004). The last limitation addresses the applied method. Although the simulation of secondary

HSN decisions with text fragments was fruitful and although these fragments resembled actual content to ensure external validity, we forced on the participants having to take a decision in an artificial situation. Journalists rarely have to choose from provided journalistic (not PR) content; rather, they create it. Newsroom observations with, for example, the digital tracking of the actual creation process could help gain further insight into this process (Perrin 2007).

In summary, our findings indicate that the individual characteristics and audience images of journalists influence secondary HSN decisions. In the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (2016), almost two-thirds of German journalists stated that such personal beliefs impact content – a result that is reflected in our findings. Hence, it seems that journalists are aware of their soft spot for soft news; yet, it is for others to discuss the normative consequences for societies if the soft spot manifests in soft content.

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8 DISCUSSION

Hard and soft news is one of the most important concepts at the intersection of political communication and journalism research and is applied in various fields of studies – ranging from feminist approaches (North, 2016), over effect studies (Baum, 2002; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014; Prior, 2003), to media content analyses (Patterson, 2000; Reinemann et al., 2016). This scholarly attention is all the more surprising when bearing in mind the two major voids that are ascribed to the concept: first, its conceptual status was criticized frequently (Lahav, 2009; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Reinemann et al., 2012), pointing out a lack of differentiation and coherence. Second, we still do not know much about why hard and soft news is produced (as an exception see, Magin, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2016). The aim of the present dissertation was to address both voids carrying out 1) conceptual work on HSN in two manuscripts and 2) one study on the influences on the how news is presented in terms of hard and soft news characteristics (*Figure 3*).

The theoretical foundation for reaching these aims was laid in the first part of the synopsis. Firstly, I delineated what can be understood by an academic concept and how criteria of goodness of concepts in social sciences are *not* met by many HSN conceptualizations. Secondly, I illustrated factors that influence the production of hard and soft news in terms of secondary news decisions by referring to the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Against the backdrop of these theoretical considerations, I posed the following, overarching research questions for the dissertation at hand:

RQ I: How can the concept of hard and soft news be distinguished from other, related concepts with regards to their ascribed attributes?

RQ II: How coherent is the concept of hard and soft news in its most recent understanding?

RQ III: How do individual and routine level factors influence HSN production in terms of secondary news decisions?

To answer these research questions, I adopted a point of view of journalism studies that puts focus on those who write hard and soft news – print journalist: both empirical work on the academic concept of HSN and on the production influences were carried out empirically by studying attitudes and behaviors of German print journalists (Manuscript 2 and 3). A theoretical paper completed this dissertation (Manuscript 1). The manuscripts will be summarized in the following, pointing out the main contribution of the studies for the dissertation at hand.

8.1 Summary of the Manuscripts

In Paper 1, I focused on the goodness criterion of differentiation of the concept of HSN, i.e., its demarcation in relation to similar concepts. By deriving the core meanings, fields of application, and constitutive dimensions of the concepts of eroding of boundaries, infotainment, tabloidization, HSN, and sensationalism, we could show theoretically that these concepts do not only differ with regard to their meaning and fields of application. I also demonstrated that the concepts are distinguishable due to the level of investigation on which studies on the particular concepts are located on. As a result of this and the comprehensive literature review, I suggested a hierarchical framework model, in which the concept of HSN was placed on the item level of investigation, i.e., it is a phenomenon that we can observe best in entire news items.

While the framework model is useful for demarking the concept of HSN against related concepts, i.e., the between-concept relation were pointed out, it does not, though, shed light in particular on the within-concept nature of HSN (McLeod & Pan, 2005). Hence, the goodness criterion of inner coherence has not been addressed so far (Gerring, 1999). This was subject of the second paper of this dissertation. Manuscript 2 focused on the inner coherence of HSN in its most recent understanding by bringing it back to its origin – the journalistic newsroom. To assess this criterion of goodness that is regarded as the most important (Gerring, 1999, 2015), I asked German print journalists which of the theoretically proposed HSN dimensions contribute to their understanding of hard and soft news to cross-validate the academic concept in its environment of origin. The findings indicate that the most recent conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) is to a large extent coherent, i.e., the theoretically assumed dimensions comprise the concept. Only one dimension – the dimension of emotionality – did not significantly influence whether the journalistic respondents evaluated presented news as hard or soft news. I explained this unexpected finding with the operationalization of emotionality: this dimension visually was operationalized visually while other dimensions were operationalized by word choice. Contradicting the assumption by Reinemann et al. (2012) that the topic dimension has the strongest influence on whether news is regarded as hard news or soft news, the framing dimension was found to do so. This indicates that there might be hierarchy among the HSN dimension, some of them being more determining for hard and soft news than others.

Next to these results, the manuscript advanced the methodological advances in research on concept explication and evaluation by applying a factorial survey which has been rarely used in communication science so far (for exceptions see, e.g.,

Helfer, 2016; Helfer & van Aelst, 2015; Vos, 2016). The results of the study underline the applicability of this method in communication research, especially in the context of assessing an academic concept (see also, Henn, Dohle, & Vowe, 2013).

Manuscript 1 and 2 represent the concept-based focus of this dissertation in which I aimed to assess the most recent conceptualization of hard and soft news. As a following step, the concept could be put in action and used in an empirical setting. The choice of this “setting” was based in two rationales: first, the theoretical and empirical approximation to conceptual clarity of a concept can take place in three areas. Next to concept explication and concept evaluation and phenomenological studies about which real-world referents to subsume under a concept as well as effect studies, this approximation also entails causal analyses of why phenomena occur (Hartleb, 2011). Hence, factors that influence HSN production are of interest. Second, very little is known empirically about the reasons why the media and journalists decide for hard or soft news reporting. Therefore, the third manuscript focused on the production of hard and soft news and forces that influence HSN production. In particular, I was interested in how factors of the individual and routine level influenced secondary news decisions, i.e., how journalists tell and present stories. As example of influencing factors on these levels, I chose journalistic role conceptions, and quality criteria as well as the audience image of journalists, based on the importance of these factors in prior research.

Indeed, these factors exerted influence whether journalists decided for a hard or soft way of reporting. This underscores the assumption by Reinemann and Baugut (2014) and Engelmann (2012) that decisions on how news is presented and told are susceptible to individual characteristics of journalists. In detail, I found that journal-

ists did not decide equally in the four secondary news decisions of how to tell (framing and relevance dimensions) as well as how to present a story (opinion and emotionality dimensions); journalists were least likely to report in an opinionated way. This mirrors one core principles in journalism to separate fact and opinion. Also, the four HSN dimensions that comprised the secondary news decisions were to a different degree susceptible to the influences of journalistic role conceptions, quality standards, and audience images. The research question of Manuscript 3 was novel insofar as factors on lower levels on the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model were concerned in the context of HSN production. Table 11 summarizes the results of the individual studies.

Table 11
Key findings of the manuscripts

Manuscript 1: Otto, L., Glogger, I., & Boukes, M. (2016). The softening of journalistic political communication: A comprehensive framework model of sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidization. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 136-155.

Focus	Realm	Precise Research Questions	Method	Take home message
Concept-based focus	<i>Realm of Academia</i> (Communication Research)	RQ: How can the concept of hard and soft news and related concepts be distinguished?	Theoretical Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Related concepts of eroding of journalistic boundaries, tabloidization, infotainment, HSN, and sensationalism are not the same - Conceptual framework model of "softening of political communication" provides an aid to distinguish these related concepts - Conceptual framework model regards the concepts to be hierarchically ordered - HSN is located on the item level of investigation

Manuscript 2: Glogger, I., & Otto, L. (under review). Journalistic Views on Hard and Soft News: A Factorial Survey on Journalists' Understanding of a Popular Concept. Submitted for Publication to: *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*

Focus	Realm	Precise Research Questions	Method	Take home message
Concept-based focus	<i>Realm of Transfer</i> (Academia - Journalism Practice)	RQ: Do the theoretically proposed dimensions of the hard and soft news concept comprise journalists' understanding of hard and soft news to indicate coherence of the concept?	Factorial Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Journalists' understanding of hard and soft news mirrors the academic understanding: coherence of the concept can be attested - Only emotion dimension does not contribute to journalists' understanding of HSN: dimension has no significant influence on evaluation of vignettes - Hierarchy of HSN dimension is likely

Manuscript 3: Glogger, I. (under review): Soft Spot for Soft News? How Journalistic Characteristics and Audience Images Influence Hard and Soft News Coverage. Submitted for publication to *Journalism Studies*.

Focus	Realm	Precise Research Questions	Method	Take home message
Production-based focus	<i>Realm of Production</i> (Journalism Practice)	<p>RQ1.1: How do journalists' role conceptions influence secondary HSN decisions?</p> <p>RQ1.2: How do the quality criteria of journalists influence secondary HSN decisions?</p> <p>RQ 2: How do journalistic audience images impact secondary HSN decisions?</p>	Survey with simulated decisions scenarios	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dimensions are not equally susceptible to the influence of same factors - Role conception: 3 role conceptions influenced secondary HSN decisions - Quality criteria: emotionality as journalistic exert influence on secondary HSN decisions - Audience image: perceived lack of political interest of readers is an influential factor

Note. Numeration of the research questions are based on the numeration in each manuscript.

8.2 Implications for Hard and Soft News Research

The present dissertation laid two foci in research on hard and soft news: the concept-based focus targeted the shortcomings of HSN as an academic concept, and the production-based focus concentrated influences on the production of hard and soft news. The contributions of the findings of the dissertation at hand will be discussed for both research strands in the following chapters, first delineating the implication for HSN as concept, second for HSN as news item and the production of these items. Also, implications for the triangle of journalism research, practical journalism, and journalism education will be emphasized. The chapter concludes with discussing the limitations of the individual research papers and overall dissertation as well as with identifying future research directions.

8.2.1 Implications for the Academic Concept of HSN

With regard to the conceptual focus of this dissertation, anchoring the concept of HSN in the framework model of “softening of political communication” was a major contribution of Manuscript 1. This framework model can be regarded a first step toward conceptual clarity of HSN in its semantic field. By pointing out the – despite the un-neglectable similarities – differences between the concepts, I aimed to prevent future synonymous and polysemous use of HSN and its conceptual siblings (Gerring, 1999; Sartori, 1984). The different level of investigations can guide future research to pick, for example, appropriate units of analysis in content studies when being interested in a particular phenomenon. By anchoring the concept of HSN on the item level, I indicated on what further research should be focused – entire news items, for example, in the form of newspaper articles or news reports. This suggestion should be

taken into account when conducting content analyses or effects studies on the consumption of hard and soft news. Both research strands suffered from inappropriate application – theoretical and methodological – of the concept of HSN. So far, this has hindered further accumulation of comparable findings since the concept was used as a polysemously (soft news also comprising entire news shows, e.g., Baum, 2002, 2007; Boukes & Vliegthart, 2017; Edgerly, 2015) and synonymously (e.g., for tabloidization, Magin, 2017; Magin & Stark, 2015), thereby, preventing conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1984).

The hierarchical framework model proposed in Manuscript 1 also included four other concepts in the semantic field of concepts that are mainly used to describe changes in the way the news media covers ongoing events. Hence, another quality criterion of concept explication was addressed via the model. Field utility states that concept explication – in the best case – also improves related concepts (Gerring, 1999). This was accomplished by developing the hierarchical framework model since it 1) strengthened the demarcations of the further concepts that suffer from similar shortcomings like HSN (e.g., for tabloidization, see Esser, 1999; Leidenberger, 2015). 2) The framework model provided what Collier et al. (2012) regarded as best for related concepts: a taxonomy that now allows for differentiating the five concepts hierarchically. Consequently, the suggested model in Manuscript 1 can also guide research on the related concepts by stating their level of investigation. We, now, do not only know on which level of investigation to anchor the concept of hard and soft news and, consequently, on which level of abstraction to place research (e.g., single items versus entire news show as units on analyses (for the understanding of HSN as entire news shows, see Baum, 2002; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014)). This also holds true

for the other four concepts that were scrutinized in Manuscript 1 and organized hierarchically in the proposed framework model. Taking the example of infotainment, it was placed at the genre level of investigation, indicating that the concept describes a merging of programs into a new genre. Research on infotainment, thus, should refrain from assessing single news items when, for example, being interested in the effects of infotainment (e.g., Bernhard, 2012). 3) All concepts of interest in the hierarchical framework model were put under the higher-order concept of “softening of political communication”. Higher-order concepts are important since they can guide and organize subordinate concept and research with and on the concepts, respectively, by stressing the common denominator of those concepts (Gerring, 2015).

Being able to distinguish the concept of HSN from other concepts in the same semantic field is only halfway of the first step toward conceptual clarity. In Manuscript 2 I, therefore, focused on the inner coherence of the concept in its latest academic understanding by cross-validating it in practical journalism as the field of origin of hard and soft news. This study was – to the best of my knowledge – the first that assessed the utility of the concept of HSN exclusively by focusing on the concept, i.e., the evaluation of the concept was not a mere by-product of an empirical study (e.g., Magin & Stark, 2015). Based on the findings of the study, coherence can be ascribed to the proposed conceptualization of HSN by Reinemann et al. (2012). The dimensions of HSN and their combination in actual hard and soft news content is reflected in German print journalists’ mental concept of HSN. Hence, the proposed dimensions group together in the way Reinemann et al. (2012) theorized it, and the mental concept of those who operate with hard and soft news (experience-close concept) could be mapped with the more abstract scientific concept of HSN (experience-

distant concept) (Schaffer, 2016). This can be concluded from the results of Manuscript 2 despite the fact that the emotion dimension did not contribute to the journalistic HSN understanding. Based on the findings of the factorial survey, one can only speculate that this finding is based on the operationalization of the dimension: while every other HSN dimension was manipulated verbally, the emotion dimension was operationalized by the means of pictures.

Next to quality criteria of concepts, the empirical work of this dissertation also tells us more about the concept of HSN (Manuscript 2 and 3). First, the findings underscore the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. The historic epitome of the development of HSN as an academic concept showed that nowadays most researchers describe it as a multi-dimensional concept (e.g., Patterson, 2000; Reinemann et al., 2012) (Chapter 2.3.2). This understanding is also mirrored in the results of the two studies on journalists in this dissertation. On the one hand, the journalists referred to all but one dimensions of the conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) when evaluating whether the presented news items were hard or soft news from their point of view. This means that their mental representation of hard and soft news is also multi-dimensional. On the other hand, the results of the third manuscript also point into this direction. When assessing the secondary news decisions in a combined approach, i.e., regarding all journalistic decisions as the dependent variable in the regression model, we could see that *all* dimensions and not just one influence the decision. The dimensions were, by far, the strongest indicators in the model (Table 7).

Second, the results of Manuscript 2 and 3 also show that topics are not *per se* hard or soft which was often implied in one-dimensional understandings of the concepts (e.g., Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Curran et al., 2009; Gerstner, 2018). Rather,

news items can be hard or soft based on the combination of their attributes, in other words, the dimensions of the concept. The factorial survey with journalists could show that the topic dimension did not have the strongest influence on the vignette evaluation, contradicting the assumption that this dimension is superior to the others (Reinemann et al., 2012). Furthermore, the journalists, which participated in the study presented in Manuscript 3, were more likely to report the presumably *softer topic* about neglected animals by deciding for the *hard poles* of the single dimensions.

8.2.2 Implications for Research on the Production of Hard and Soft News

The second focus of this dissertation set off with the criticism that not enough was known about the forces that influence whether news was reported as hard news or soft news. In Manuscript 3, I therefore, concentrated on the factors that influence HSN production, in particular secondary HSN decisions, i.e., how news is presented and told (Domingo et al., 2008; Engelmann, 2012; Hanitzsch & Hoxha, 2014).

In most studies, so far, meta-developments like commercialization or the advent of the Internet were proposed as driving forces for a possible trend toward softer news (Esser, 1999; Patterson, 2000; Sparks, 2000). Such assumptions, yet, were in most cases not based on empirical studies; hence, we were lacking empirical proof for drivers of a softer coverage. Against the backdrop of first empirical assessments of macro- and organizational forces (Magin, 2017; Magin & Stark, 2015; Reinemann et al., 2016), the results of the dissertation at hand amended our knowledge on influencing factors on HSN production 1) by assessing factors that have not been scrutinized yet and 2) by testing assumed influences empirically. By doing so, I followed recent requests to focus on the interplay of individual journalistic characteristics and news decisions (Donsbach, 2004), especially to emphasize individual short-

term influences on decisions in the production of news (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014).

The findings of the empirical study in Manuscript 3 suggest two major implications for research of the production of HSN in terms of secondary news decisions. First, individual professional characteristics of journalists, indeed, influence secondary news decisions; this is in line with the assumptions by Reinemann and Baugut (2014) and findings by Engelmann (2012) and strengthens the claims for also including influences on the lower levels of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996) (Donsbach, 2004; Zhong & Newhagen, 2009). Second, also a routine-level factor was found to influence secondary HSN decisions: the image of the audience the journalists had. Especially, the perceived political interest of the readers influenced how journalists told and presented the news stories. The importance of perceived characteristics of the audience in the study at hand underlines a recent focus on audience perception in journalism research (Loosen & Dohle, 2014; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012) and the acknowledgement of the influence of audience images by journalists themselves (Worlds of Journalism Study, 2016). Both aforementioned findings support the idea of various forces that are anchored in the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model “operat[ing] simultaneously at different levels of strength in any shaping of media content” (Reese, 2001, p. 179). This assumption comes with implication for further research which will be discussed in Chapter 8.3.

The results of the production-based focus of this dissertation can also be regarded in connection with the findings of the concept-based focus of the second manuscript. This allows for drawing further conclusions on the concept of HSN. The findings of Manuscript 3 indicate that both individual characteristics and audience images of the journalists exert *varying* influences on the secondary news decisions for the four HSN dimensions. That means, that different factors influenced, for example,

how the journalists decided in the framing decision situation compared to the dimension of relevance. As shown in Manuscript 2, the theoretically proposed dimensions of the HSN concept are mirrored in journalists' understanding of hard and soft news. However, I also found in this study that the dimensions exert varying influence on the evaluation of the presented news article when asking journalists if they regarded them as rather hard or rather soft. Combining the findings from the Manuscripts 2 and 3, it might be advisable to think that there is a hierarchy of the dimensions in the most recent conceptualization of HSN. That is, that one or several dimensions determine more strongly whether news is regarded as hard or soft news compared to other dimensions.

8.2.3 Implications for Journalism Research, Practical Journalism, and Journalism Education

Both emphases of this dissertation – the concept-based focus and the production-based focus – were addressed against the backdrop of bringing back hard and soft news to the newsroom, i.e., I adopted a journalist-centered approach throughout the empirical studies (Manuscript 2 and 3). In Chapter 0, I have stressed the interrelation between journalism studies, practice, and education, and this dissertation will also use the “opportunity to contribute to debates beyond the discipline of journalism, media, and communication studies” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 14) and propose implications for all three fields.

Manuscript 2 allowed not only for cross-validating the HSN concept. It also extended our knowledge with regard to concepts building in practical journalism. To my knowledge, this study was the first one that assessed what journalists understand by a certain concept which is relevant to the professional field and academia. Re-

search on journalists, among others, focuses on professional attitudes like role conceptions (e.g., Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado, 2015; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2009; Weaver & Willnat, 2012), values (e.g., Gans, 1979; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003), or behaviors (for instance, gatekeeping; see, e.g., Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). What journalists understand by a certain concept is a new strand of research interest that could be fruitful for journalism research. First, assessing what journalists understand by concepts to cross-validating those concepts, which are used in both practical journalism and journalism research (e.g., fake news), could help gain further insight in concepts that are experience-distant to academia. Second, knowing more about which dimensions comprise certain concepts in practical journalism and how these concepts are mentally constructed is also relevant for studying *journalistic behavior*, for instance, news decision-making. Journalists have to take constantly decisions: if a source is trustworthy; if press releases are interesting for publication; how to comply with the journalistic rule of objectivity in their next report. To take these decisions, the journalists need to have acquired concepts of objects – in other words, mental representations of these objects and of the categories they belong to. The concepts enable journalists to decide whether an object is member of a category, based on its perceived attributes and to handle the object of matter respectively (McLeod & Pan, 2005; Sloutsky, 2010). Taking the example of objectivity, journalists can only decide what objective reporting means if they have already acquired a mental representation of objectivity. Hence, studying how these mental representations form would allow for a deeper insight in journalistic behavior.

Results of the factors influencing the production of HSN could also be of interest for journalism education. In Manuscript 3, it was described how individual characteristics of journalists and the journalistic perception of the audience can influence

secondary news decisions – decisions that every journalist has to face regularly. Although journalists seem to be aware of their own traits influencing news content (e.g., Worlds of Journalism Study, 2016), journalism educators could sensitize the future journalists already during their professional training for these influences. Especially in the context of HSN, this might be appropriate if the potential increase of softer news is regarded as trend in media coverage that needs to be counteracted.

Putting the results of Manuscript 3 in a wider context, the findings on the production of HSN, i.e., which factors influence whether news is told and presented as hard or soft news, also become relevant for practical journalism and its relationship with its audience. Softer news is often described as more entertainment-centered and audience-friendly news that is deployed to attract more recipients (Umbricht & Esser, 2015). In this dissertation, I assessed which news journalists thought their readers would prefer (hard or soft news) and how politically interested they perceived them. Such images about the recipients arise from various sources, e.g., letters to the editors, or reader surveys (Müller & Hohlfeld, 2013). Recent work on what the audience expects from news and what journalists *think* the audience expects from news has been shown to differ (Costera Meijer, 2007; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2017). Hence, practical journalism might question – or at least be aware of – the orientation towards *perceived* audience images in HSN production and bear more in mind the actual expectations of the audience.

8.3 Limitations of the Dissertation and Directions for Future Research

Despite the demonstrated strengths of the dissertation at hand, limitations should not be kept back. The limitations concentrate on four interrelated aspects: 1) the concept-based focus, 2) the production-based focus, 3) the methodological approaches

that were taken in this dissertation and 4) consequently, the generalizability of the findings. Based on the limitations and implications pointed out in Chapter 8.2, also an outlook for future research will be given.

With regard to the first aspect, the chosen criteria of goodness of a concept in social sciences represent a limitation of present dissertation. First, the lists of goodness criteria are not agreed on; there is no infinite list one could align with the academic concept of interest. Rather, in literature of concept evaluation and concept explication several ideas of what comprises a good concept and how this can be tested exist next to each other (for a critique of this status on concept evaluation, see Hartleb, 2011). Hence, the approach by Gerring (1999) I decided on in this dissertation is only one of many. Future research could also refer to other lists of goodness criteria (Gerring, 2015; Hartleb, 2011; Sartori, 1984).

Second, only two aspects of the goodness of an academic concept were tested: differentiation and coherence (Gerring, 1999, 2015; Hartleb, 2011; Sartori, 1984). However, different authors propose various criteria against which a concept could be evaluated. Hence, the present dissertation assessed only some of the characteristics of a good concept. For example, in Manuscript 2 the dimension of emotion did not significantly influence the evaluation of vignettes. While I argued in the course of the respective manuscript that this was result was found probably due to the operationalization of the dimension, one could argue that the concept of HSN in latest understanding is not parsimonious – another criterion of good concepts (Gerring, 1999). That is, that the emotion dimension might not be integral for the concept. The very few empirical evaluations of the current HSN concept also hinted partially at some dimensions or different dimensions being constitutive for the concept (Magin

& Stark, 2015; Reinemann et al., 2016). Further evaluations of the conceptual goodness of HSN could tackle this limitation theoretically and empirically. Qualitative content analyses might detect further dimensions. Quantitative content analyses of news of various media outlets and types of media (radio, TV, online) with subsequent factor analyses could extend our understanding of the inner coherence of the HSN concept.

This proposal for further research is linked to another limitation that needs to be address: it was not part of this dissertation to test empirically the proposed conceptualization by Reinemann et al. (2012) on news content. Chaffee (1991) stressed the importance of empirical evaluation of concepts. While this was done to some extent by Reinemann et al. (2016), the current dissertation refrained from this since the focus was to assesses the conceptual state of HSN theoretically (Manuscript 1) and by cross-validating it (Manuscript 2). A next step could now be to test it empirically in the way it was proposed above. This holds also true for the framework model proposed in Manuscript 1 which, so far, has not been assessed empirically. Quantitative content analyses of the five concepts of interest could demonstrate if the theoretically derived hierarchal structure can be also found in media content. Such a study would strengthen the demarcations of the scrutinized concepts as well as assess the usefulness of the higher-order concept of softening of political communication.

Moreover, I evaluated the concept of hard and soft news by using a conceptualization that was proposed by other researchers (Reinemann et al., 2012). Although this was reasonable based on the quality of thorough literature review by Reinemann et al. (2012), one may argue that – since I brought back the concept of HSN to its origin in practical journalism – assessing journalists' own understanding of hard and

soft news might have had more benefits for the further development of the concept. This journalistic understanding of hard and soft – assessed in, for example, a qualitative approach – could have been align with the current academic understanding to evaluate the differences between these two. Results of a comparison between an academic concept and its extra-academic equivalent might have been fruitful, too, for the future of HSN research. This limitation touches upon the question whether to (cross-)validate an existing conceptualization or to redefine it with the goal of proposing a “modified definition” (Chaffee, 1991, p. 43). The present work decided to do the first. However, cross-validating and modifying an existing concept is not a mutually exclusive endeavor. Rather, it is an iterative process (Chaffee, 1991). Against the backdrop of ongoing changes in practical journalism and journalism research as well as calls for accounting for these changes (Esser, 2016), future studies could follow an approach in which the current status of the concept of HSN is tested for the need of modification. This could be done either by assessing journalists’ own understanding of HSN and comparing with the academic one or by gauging the academic understanding of HSN, for example, with a comprehensive literature review similar to Reinemann et al. (2012) or replicating the factorial survey of this dissertation with communication scholars. Henn et al. (2013) followed such an approach to examine the scholarly understanding of political communication.

Thinking one step ahead and leaving the scope of HSN, the literature on concept explication, especially from political science, that was referred to in the current dissertation, has been shown to be fruitful for a concept in communication research; this could inspire communication science for a better (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Gerring, 2001) treatment of their concepts, following the claims by many scholars that concept and concept explication is the heart of social sciences (Gerring, 2001;

Goertz, 2006). The conceptual work of this dissertation might have been only the start for further efforts in improving concepts in the semantic field, i.e., for concepts that are referred to describe changes in media coverage. Taking the concept of tabloidization as an example, one could think of a similar methodological approach to improve the concept: after a comprehensive literature review aiming at the extraction of the core meaning and constitutive dimensions the concluding conceptualization could be followed by cross-validating it with journalists or managing personnel of media organizations. This population might be of interest for such a study since tabloidization is assumed to be driven by an economic imperative on the news organizations (Esser, 1999; McLachlan & Golding, 2000). As emphasized in Chapter 2.2, clear concepts are crucial to research since they allow for comparing results, for accumulating knowledge, and for transferring this knowledge into relevant parts of societies – in the case of HSN and related concepts into practical journalism. Theoretical profound concepts render possible meta-analyses and time-series analyses which are in particular of interest when analyzing concepts and underlying phenomena that represent a development over time (see Manuscript 1). Time-series analyses specifically allow “to predict future values of a time series, and to allow for the optimal monitoring and control of a system’s performance over time” (Yanovitzky & van Lear, 2008, p. 93) which would be valuable against the backdrop of normatively lead discussion about news media quality and ways to counteract undesirable trends.

The second area of limitations and further directions for research derives from the production-based work of this dissertation. In Part I, Chapter 3 delineated the process of news production and showed that it comprises several steps. Manuscript 3 focused on the actual composing of news in terms of hard and soft news as well as factors influencing this process. On the one hand, this reduction to one step

of the process of news production represents a shortcoming of the dissertation since it excluded the other steps. Further studies should focus on the other stages in the process of news production. Especially the phase of hard and soft news distribution becomes increasingly interesting against the backdrop of changing means of news distribution (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). The dissemination of news through the recipients on social network sites is a new phenomenon that could also be interesting for the HSN research. A first study, for example, assessed the distribution of sensationalist news – a related concept – on social network sites (Kilgo et al., 2016). The findings of a content analyses of news posted on Facebook and Twitter combined with the users' reactions to these posts in form of shares, comments, and likes indicated that the user of these sites did not react differently to sensational compared to non-sensational news.

Manuscript 3 also focused on influencing factors that stemmed from the individual and the routine level of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This approach was chosen based on a) the rationale that especially lower level factors influence how news is presented and b) on the fact that higher level factors like characteristics of media organizations have, at least, gained some scholarly attention (Magin, 2017; Magin & Stark, 2015; Reinemann et al., 2016). However, news is assumed to be influenced by forces on all levels of the Hierarchy-of-Influence Model simultaneously (Reese, 2001; Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). Therefore, future research could assess these forces all at once which would require data collection from news organizations that differ with regard to their business model (for example, tabloid and broadsheet newspapers) and their type of media (for

example, TV and radio). Comparative approaches could even compare the factors influencing HSN production – from step of access and observation, selection and filtering, processing and editing, distribution, to interpretation – that derive from different set-ups of the media or political system. Such studies, however, should bear in mind the difficulties of acquiring sufficient journalistic participants from different organization (see, e.g., Engelmann, 2012; Steindl et al., 2017) and pay attention to appropriate methodological procedures. Multilevel modelling like applied in Manuscript 2 would be the means of choice (general introduction: Bickel, 2007; for communication studies in particular: Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006).

This outlook brings us to the next block of limitations: methodological shortfalls. In total, two different research methods were applied. Both, the factorial survey and the survey with simulated decisions scenarios showed their appropriateness based on the findings of Manuscript 2 and 3. However, two concerns need to be expressed with regard to the operationalization of hard and soft news in both studies. First, hard and soft news was in both empirical studies operationalized dichotomously, for example, by only two topics or the two extreme poles of the framing dimensions. Polytomous operationalizations were rejected for reasons of research efficiency. The dichotomous approach contradicts the assumption of hard and soft news being a concept that should be measured on a continuum (Boczkowski, 2009; Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2014; Yang & Oliver, 2004). Following studies – might it be concept- or production-based work – should account for this and operationalize the individual dimension of HSN more fine-grained.

Second, the findings of Manuscript 2 showed that the participating journalists did not refer to the emotion dimension to make up their evaluation of the vignettes. As discussed earlier, this might be caused by either the fact that the participating

journalists – since they were *print* journalists – did, indeed, not regard the depiction of emotions as a constitutive dimension of the concept; or they did not regard the picture that was used to operationalize the emotion dimension as part of the vignettes to be rated. Reinemann et al. (2012) stated that “[e]motional news items use verbal, visual or auditive means” (p. 238); I followed this suggestion when operationalizing the emotion dimension and used a picture to depict emotions. However, by doing so, the operationalization of the emotion dimension differed from the other dimensions that were manipulated verbally. Although the instruction that the journalists were given for the evaluation of the vignettes referred to the “following news item” and the news item itself was designed like real newspaper article (see Appendix A), it cannot be excluded that item demand characteristics hinted the journalists at only basing their evaluation on the written text (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), thereby threatening internal validity. Future studies could refer to other means to operationalize the emotion dimension, e.g., verbally.

One goal of this dissertation was to bring back the concept of HSN to the newsroom where hard and soft news originated and still is produced. Hence, journalists were the population that was assessed to answer the research questions; to be more precise, newspaper journalists of mainly local German newspapers. This choice is legitimate against the backdrop of the importance of local newspapers in Germany (Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger, 2018; Pürer, 2015). However, it poses a limitation to the present dissertation since it reduces the external validity of the findings. First, the understanding of concepts that are relevant for an occupation are learned through the process of professional and organizational socialization (Bergmann, 2010). It, thus, can be assumed that journalists that work different types of media organizations differ with regard to their understanding of HSN. Only studies

that extend the journalistic participants to, for example, TV or radio journalists could tell us what journalists in general understand by the important concept. This holds also true from journalists from media organizations with different degrees of market orientation. Journalists from tabloid media, which show a greater share of soft news (Brekken et al., 2012), might also differ from quality media colleagues.

Second and strongly interrelated with the aforementioned limitation, news decisions are also dependent on organizational factors (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). As suggested above, studies on influences on HSN reporting should be conducted with a more heterogeneous sample of journalists that differ with regard to their education, socialization, and current organizational culture. Once again, it can be assumed that journalists from different types of media and with different business models decide differently when it comes to secondary HSN decisions. For instance, given the different target audiences and a lesser up-market orientation, one could expect journalists of tabloid newspaper to decide more likely for a soft way of reporting (de Vreese, Esser, & Hopmann, 2016).

Limitations that addressed the operationalization of hard and soft news and the population of interest in the empirical studies reduce the generalizability of the findings of the dissertation at hand. Although the vignettes used in Manuscript 2 and the text snippets used in Manuscript 3 were written and designed like journalistic content to increase external validity (see Appendix A and B), one should be aware that the results of journalists' understanding of HSN are only valid for German print journalists of local newspapers and should not generalize the results to journalism in general. The generalizability of the findings is reduced since journalists from different types of media vary with regards to their values, and attitudes which are reflected in concept building (Bergmann, 2010) and news production (e.g., Maier, 2010;

Reich, 2015). Only further studies that accounted for the shortcomings of this dissertation will allow us to generalize the findings of the studies to a greater extent.

8.4 Final Remarks

A trend toward softer news is often associated with pessimistic views about the performance of news media, asking the question whether or not the news media can stand up to their roles in democratic societies (Patterson, 2000). Those news about tearful celebrity weddings (or breakups), the car accident down the road, or the proverbial man that bit a dog – so the fear – can neither provide citizens with the information they need to take deliberate voting decisions, nor does it interpret the decisions of politicians or criticize those in power. De Vreese, Esser, Hopmann et al. (2016) bemoaned to “have little reason to be optimistic about today’s media performance, let alone tomorrow’s” (p. 2). Yet, they described empirical evidence provided by communication research as they only way to bring – at least – some hope into such pessimistic views on news media performance: empirical evidence that can be only obtained “when grappling some serious challenges that are related to a lack of conceptual clarity” (de Vreese, Esser, Hopmann et al., 2016, p. 2).

The three research papers of this dissertation aimed to take upon these challenges and approximated the concept of hard and soft news in two ways. But what do the results of manuscripts tell us about the status quo of the concept and its future in communication research? Are the prospects bleak? Or can it rise to the challenge of proving the empirical evidence that is needed to discuss media performance – now and tomorrow? After all, abandoning a concept would be *one* way to handle a concept if it lacks definitional clarity and empirical usefulness (Chaffee, 1991; Reinemann & Scherr, 2012).

The results of the present work, however, point at another direction. The most recent academic understanding has shown to be discriminable from its conceptual siblings. It has demonstrated its coherent inner structure. And in an applied setting, it underlined its empirical utility and the causal analyses illuminated driving forces behind the phenomenon of hard and soft news. Having shown this and, by doing so, coming a step further away from its non-contradictory nature, the concept hard and soft news legitimates its status as a “key concept” (Reinemann et al., 2012, p. 223) in journalism research. It is to further research to treat the concept correspondingly. This, in the long run, would allow lifting discussions about news performance and about how to counter driving forces of an undesired performance on a solid scientific base as demanded by de Vreese, Esser, Hopmann et al. (2016).

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APPENDIX

A. VIGNETTES

Jugendarbeitslosigkeit in Spanien weiterhin hoch

Madrid - Trotz leichter Besserung nach der Wirtschaftskrise bleibt die Arbeitslosigkeit in Spanien besonders bei jungen Menschen nach wie vor hoch. Die Arbeitslosenquote unter Jugendlichen liegt aktuell bei 44 Prozent, wie das Statistische Amt der Europäischen Union am Dienstag mitteilte.

Folgen der hohen Arbeitslosigkeit sieht die Gewerkschaft Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) nicht nur für die Wirtschaft. Die schlechte Arbeitsmarktsituation sei auch schädlich für die Demokratie. In Spanien fehle nun der innere Zusammenhalt, so der CCOO-Vorsitzende Luis Ortega Sanchez. "Ich sehe einen Verlust des Ansehens und des Vertrauens in die demokratischen Institutionen und Werte Spaniens." Der Dringlichkeit dieser Probleme sei er sich bewusst, betonte Ministerpräsident Mariano Rajoy in seiner jüngsten Regierungsansprache. Seine Partei wolle nun gezielte Fördermaßnahmen vorgehen, die die hohe Jugendarbeitslosigkeit vorgehen.



Arbeitsamt im katalanischen Reus (fyc).

Figure A 1. Theoretically hardest news vignette.

Zahl der ausgesetzten Haustiere gestiegen

Dortmund- Wenn Kinder an Benno's Käfig vorbeilaufen, wedelt der Mischlingshund aufgeregt mit dem Schwanz. "Vielleicht hatten seine Besitzer auch Kinder", sagt Tierheimleiterin Denise Müller. Genau weiß die Dortmunderin das nicht. Benno wurde ausgesetzt an einem Rastplatz gefunden. Wie dem Rüden gehe es rund 70.000 Tieren jedes Jahr, Tendenz steigend, so der Deutsche Tierschutzbund.

"Die Folgen dieser Verantwortungslosigkeit spürt vor allem der neue Besitzer", betonte Günther Becker, Tierschutzbund-Vorsitzender. Viele der ausgesetzten Haustiere seien traumatisiert. "Auf das neue Herrchen kommen dann hohe Kosten und viel Arbeit zu." Für die nächsten Ferien plane der Tierschutzbund deshalb eine Aufklärungskampagne.

"Tierbesitzer müssen sich ihrer Verantwortung bewusst gemacht werden", so Becker. Höchste Zeit, finden wir. Bleibt zu hoffen, dass die Kampagne Wirkung zeigt.



Benno wartet auf neue Besitzer (fyc).

Figure A 2. Theoretically softest news vignette.

Jugendarbeitslosigkeit in Spanien weiterhin hoch

Madrid - Trotz leichter Besserung nach der Wirtschaftskrise bleibt die Arbeitslosigkeit in Spanien besonders bei jungen Menschen nach wie vor hoch. Die Arbeitslosenquote unter Jugendlichen liegt aktuell bei 44 Prozent, wie das Statistische Amt der Europäischen Union am Dienstag mitteilte.



Jugendliche Arbeitslose demonstrieren in Madrid (fye).

Folgen der hohen Arbeitslosigkeit sieht die Gewerkschaft Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) nicht nur für die Wirtschaft. Die schlechte Arbeitsmarktsituation sei auch schädlich für die Demokratie. In Spanien fehle nun der innere Zusammenhalt, so der CCOO-Vorsitzende Luis Ortega Sanchez.

wusst, betonte Ministerpräsident Mariano Rajoy den Verlust des Ansehens und des Vertrauens in seiner jüngsten Regierung. Seine Partei wolle mit Fördermaßnahmen nun gezielt gegen die hohe Jugendarbeitslosigkeit vorgehen.

Figure A 3. Empirically hardest news items according to participating journalists.

Zahl der ausgesetzten Haustiere gestiegen

Dortmund - Wenn Kinder an Benno's Käfig vorbeilaufen, wedelt der Mischlingshund aufgeregt mit dem Schwanz. "Vielleicht hatten seine Besitzer auch Kinder", sagt Tierheimleiterin Denise Müller. Genau weiß die Dortmunderin das nicht. Benno wurde ausgesetzt an einem Rastplatz gefunden. Wie dem Rüden gehe es rund 70.000 Tieren jedes Jahr, Tendenz steigend, so der Deutsche Tierschutzbund.



Das Tierheim in Dortmund (fye).

"Die Folgen dieser Verantwortungslosigkeit spürt vor allem der neue Besitzer", betonte Günther Becker, Tierschutzbund-Vorsitzender. Viele der ausgesetzten Haus-

tiere seien traumatisiert. "Auf das neue Herrchen kommen dann hohe Kosten und viel Arbeit zu." Für die nächsten Ferien plant der Tierschutzbund deshalb eine Aufklärungskampagne. "Tierbesitzer müssen sich ihrer Verantwortung bewusst gemacht werden", so Becker. Höchste Zeit, finden wir. Bleibt zu hoffen, dass die Kampagne Wirkung zeigt.

Figure A 4. Empirically softest news items according to participating journalists.

B. TEXT SNIPPETS

Table B 1

Operationalization of the texts snippets in Manuscript 3

		Unemployment	Pets
Focus: Framing	Hard	Trotz leichter Besserung nach der Wirtschaftskrise bleibt die Arbeitslosigkeit in Spanien besonders bei jungen Menschen nach wie vor hoch. Die Arbeitslosenquote unter Jugendlichen liegt aktuell bei 44 Prozent, wie das Statistische Amt der Europäischen Union am Dienstag mitteilte.	Mit dem Ende der Sommerferien zieht der Deutsche Tierschutzbund Bilanz: Rund 70.000 Tiere seien in diesem Jahr bereits ausgesetzt worden. Dies bedeute einen Anstieg um rund zehn Prozent. Meistens treffe es Hunde und Katzen, doch auch Exoten wie Vogelspinnen seien keine Ausnahme mehr.
	Soft	"Hoffnung habe ich keine mehr." José Campos Ramón hatte seit seinem Uniabschluss vor drei Jahren noch nie einen festen Job. "Wir jungen Menschen in Spanien profitieren nicht vom aktuellen Aufschwung", sagte der 26-Jährige. Damit ist der Madrilene einer von rund 44 Prozent aller jungen Spanier, die im Moment ohne Arbeit sind.	Wenn Kinder an Bennos Käfig vorbeilaufen, wedelt der Mischlingshund aufregt mit dem Schwanz. "Vielleicht hatten seine Besitzer auch Kinder", sagt Tierheimleiterin Denise Müller. Genau weiß die Dortmunderin das nicht. Benno wurde ausgesetzt an einem Rastplatz gefunden. Wie dem Rüden gehe es rund 70.000 Tieren jedes Jahr, Tendenz steigend, so der Deutsche Tierschutzbund.
Focus: Relevance	Hard	Folgen der hohen Arbeitslosigkeit sieht die Gewerkschaft Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) nicht nur für die Wirtschaft. Die schlechte Arbeitsmarktsituation sei auch schädlich für die Demokratie. In Spanien fehle nun der innere Zusammenhalt, so der CCOO-Vorsitzende Luis Ortega Sanchez. "Ich sehe einen Verlust des Ansehens und des Vertrauens in die demokratischen Institutionen und Werte Spaniens."	"Die Folgen dieser Verantwortungslosigkeit der Besitzer trägt auch der Steuerzahler", betonte Günther Becker, Tierschutzbund-Vorsitzender. Städtische Tierheime seien von den Kommunen finanziert. "Hierfür zahlen wir also alle."
	Soft	Die Folgen der hohen Arbeitslosigkeit spüren junge Spanier wie José Campos Ramón täglich. Der Madrilene hält sich mit Kellnerjobs über Wasser, selten kommt er auf mehr als 500 Euro im Monat. Er ist wieder in sein Kinderzimmer bei seinen Eltern eingezogen. "Den Studienkredit stottere ich mit Kleinstbeträgen ab."	"Die Folgen dieser Verantwortungslosigkeit spürt vor allem der neue Besitzer", betonte Günther Becker, Tierschutzbund-Vorsitzender. Viele der ausgesetzten Haustiere seien traumatisiert. "Auf das neue Herrchen kommen dann hohe Kosten und viel Arbeit zu."

Style: Emotionality

Hard



Das Arbeitsamt im katalanischen Reus.



Das Tierheim in Dortmund.

Soft



Junge Arbeitslose demonstrieren in Madrid.



Benno wartet auf neue Besitzer.

Style: Opinion

Hard

Der Dringlichkeit dieser Probleme sei er sich bewusst, betonte Ministerpräsident Mariano Rajoy in seiner jüngsten Regierungsansprache. Seine Partei wolle mit Fördermaßnahmen nun gezielt gegen die hohe Jugendarbeitslosigkeit vorgehen.

Für die nächsten Ferien plane der Tierschutzbund deshalb eine Aufklärungskampagne. "Tierbesitzer müssen sich ihrer Verantwortung bewusst gemacht werden", so Becker.

Soft

Der Dringlichkeit dieser Probleme sei er sich bewusst, betonte Ministerpräsident Mariano Rajoy in seiner jüngsten Regierungsansprache. Seine Partei wolle mit Fördermaßnahmen nun gezielt gegen die hohe Jugendarbeitslosigkeit vorgehen. Höchste Zeit, finden wir. Bleibt zu hoffen, dass es nicht nur leere Versprechen sind.

Für die nächsten Ferien plane der Tierschutzbund deshalb eine Aufklärungskampagne. "Tierbesitzer müssen sich ihrer Verantwortung bewusst gemacht werden", so Becker. Höchste Zeit, finden wir. Bleibt zu hoffen, dass die Kampagne Wirkung zeigt.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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Date of Birth: 25. Dezember 1981, in Frankenthal/Pfalz
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Education

2011-2013 Dual Master Program "International Cognitive Visualization" at the University of Koblenz-Landau (Germany), University of Grenoble (France), and California State University, Chico (USA), degrees: Master of Arts; Master of Education (with distinction)

2002-2007 Communication science, social anthropology, and sociology at the University of Münster (Germany); degree: Magister Artium (1.0)

Winter term 2005 Erasmus semester at the University of Alicante, Spain

1992-2001 Wilhelm-von-Humboldt-Gymnasium, Ludwigshafen (Germany), degree: Abitur (1.5)

Academic Positions

Since 2013 Research associate at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Institute of Communication Psychology and Media Pedagogics:

- June 2013-December 2014: project member of "Televised Debate in the run-up to the 2013 German federal election" (Project of German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES))
- October 2017 to March 2018: project member of "Influences of camera shots on the impact of negative messages" (Project of the Research Focus "Communication, Media and Politics – KoMePol")
- Since January 2015: PhD-student

Teaching Experience

Bachelor level:

- Internal and external organizational communication
- Media system in Germany
- Theories of media effects and media reception
- Journalism studies

Master level:

- Introduction into persuasion
- Internal organizational communication
- Evaluation of internal organizational communication
- Colloquium for thesis students

Publications

Maier, M., Retzbach, J., Glogger, I., & Stengel, K. (forthcoming in 2018). *Nachrichtenwerttheorie*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Otto, L., & Glogger, I. (forthcoming in May 2018). Hard and Soft News. In Dimitrakopoulou, D., Geertsema-Sligh, M., Hanusch, F., Sehl, A., & Vos, T.P. (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*.

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Maier, J., Faas, T. & Glogger, I. (2014). Das TV-Duell. In R. Schmitt-Beck, H. Rattinger, S. Roßteutscher, B. Weßels, C. Wolf, I. Bieber, M.S. Blumenberg, J.E. Blumenstiel, T. Faas, A. Förster, H. Giebler, I. Glogger, T. Gummler, S. Huber, M. Krewel, P. Lamers, J. Maier, J. Partheymüller, T. Plischke, J. Roßmann, A. Schäfer, P. Scherer, M. Steinbrecher, A. Wagner & E. Wiegand. *Zwischen Fragmentierung und Konzentration. Die Bundestagswahl 2013* (pp. 281-292). Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Conferences

Glogger, I., & Otto, L. (2018, May). *Journalistic Views on Hard and Soft News: A Factorial Survey on Journalists' Understanding of a Popular Concept*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), Prague, Czech Republic.

Glogger, I. (2018, May). *Hard and soft news – a twofold approximation to a key concept in journalism research*. Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Research Focus "Communication, Media and Politics – KoMePol". Dannenfels, Germany.

- Maier, J., Otto, L., & Glogger, I. (2018, May). *Influences of camera angles on the impact of negative messages*. Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Research Focus "Communication, Media and Politics – KoMePol. Dannenfels", Germany.
- Glogger, I. (2017, July). *Re-defining the Concept of Hard and Soft News: A Factorial Survey on Journalists' Understanding of a Popular Concept*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Cartagena, Colombia.
- Glogger, I. (2017, February). *Harter Kern, weiche Schale? Eine Neumodellierung des Konzepts der Hard und Soft News und ihr empirischer Einsatz zur Analyse von Fernsehnachrichten*. Paper presented at t Doktorand*innen-Workshop Fachgruppe Journalistik/Journalismusforschung of DGPK, Würzburg, Germany.
- Otto, L., Glogger, I. & Boukes, M. (2016, June). *The softening of journalistic political communication - A critical review and a comprehensive framework model*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), Fukuoka, Japan.
- Glogger, I., Otto, L., & Maier, M. (2015, July). *Personalization 2.0? – A traditional concept of political communication in the new setting of social media*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Montreal, Canada.
- Glogger, I., Otto, L., & Maier, M. (2015, July). *The softening of journalistic political communication – a critical review of concepts and a new framework model*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Montreal, Canada.
- Glogger, I., Otto, L., & Maier, M. (2014, December). *Personalizing Twitter – the personalization of political online communication in the German election campaigns 2013*. Poster presented at the GESIS Computational Social Science Winter Symposium, Köln.
- Otto, L., Glogger, I. & Maier, M. (2014, May). *Personalizing Twitter – the personalization of political online communication in the German election campaigns 2013*. Paper presented at the 64th Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), Seattle, USA.
- Otto, L., Maier, M., Glogger, I. (2014, May). *Image or issue-orientation – a question of mode of information processing in televised debates?* Poster presented at the 64th Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), Seattle, USA.

Further Work Experience

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 2011 | PR manager, Foundation „sozialgenial – Schüler engagieren“ Volks- und Raiffeisenbanken, Münster (Germany) |
| 2008–2010 | Trainee for PR, University of Applied Sciences, Münster (Germany) |
| 2004–2008 | Freelancing journalist, Westfälische Nachrichten, Münster (Germany) |

EIDESSTATTLICHE ERKLÄRUNG

Hiermit erkläre ich eidesstattlich, dass ich, Isabella Glogger,

- die Dissertation selbst angefertigt habe und alle Hilfsmittel in der Dissertation angegeben habe,
- dass die Dissertation noch nicht als Prüfungsarbeit für eine staatliche oder andere wissenschaftliche Prüfung eingereicht wurde und
- die gleiche oder eine andere Abhandlung nicht bei einer anderen Hochschule als Dissertation eingereicht habe.

Bei gemeinsam verfassten Publikationen habe ich folgende individuelle Beiträge erbracht:

Otto, L., Glogger, I., & Boukes, M. (2016). The softening of journalistic political communication: A comprehensive framework model of sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidization. *Communication Theory*, 27(2), 136-155.

- Literaturrecherche
- Verfassen von Teilen des Manuskripts (40%)

Glogger, I., & Otto, L. (under review). Journalistic Views on Hard and Soft News: A Factorial Survey on Journalists' Understanding of a Popular Concept. Submitted for Publication to: *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*

- Planung, Durchführung und Analysen
- Verfassen des Manuskriptes (Kapitel "The Concept of Hard and Soft News" wurde gemeinsam mit dem Co-Autor verfasst)

Karlsruhe, den 22. Mai 2018