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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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

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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—(a) sensationalism, (b) hard and soft news (HSN), (c) infotainment, and (d) tabloidization, and, additionally, (e) 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.

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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).

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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 literature (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 umbrella¹ 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 cross-sectionally, 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 than 600 articles and papers.² 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 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

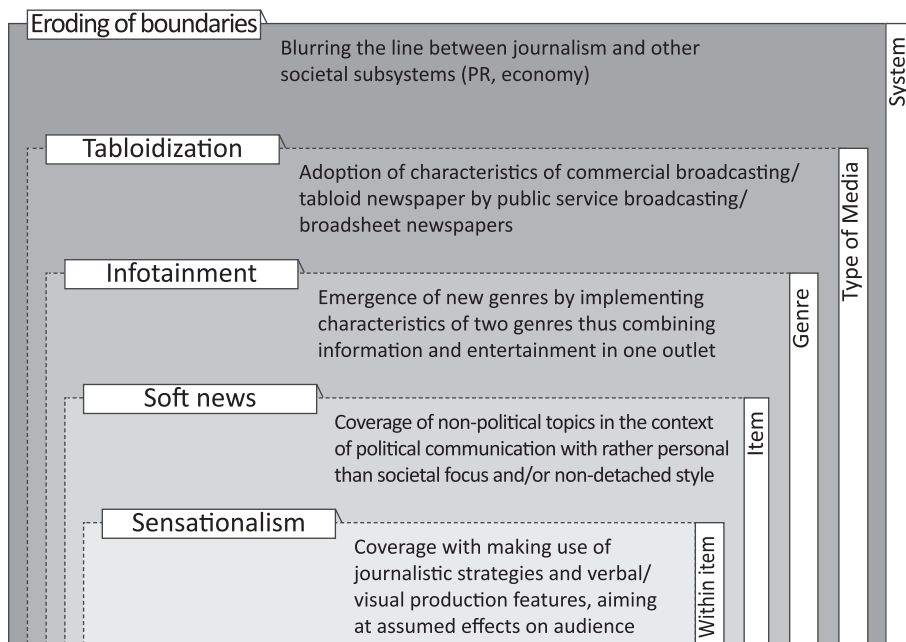


Figure 1 Multilevel framework model of softening of political communication.

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.

Softening of journalistic political communication: A multilevel, multidimensional framework model

To demonstrate how the most important concepts can be distinguished, we introduce the framework model of softening of journalistic political communication (see Figure 1). 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 1 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 at investigating 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).³ 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 1). 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).⁴ 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 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 (Jebril, 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).⁵

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 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.⁶ 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, Reineann 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).⁷

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 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.⁸

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; Jebril 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.

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; Jebril 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).⁹ 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, 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 broadsheet 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 threefold 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.

Notes

- 1 In communication research there are, of course, other higher-order concepts like, for example, Americanization or mediatization 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 mediatization, in contrast to softening, is the application of a “media logic” in politics. Thus, mediatization rather describes changes of the political system while softening refers to changes in the journalistic system (e.g., Strömbäck, 2008).
- 2 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).

- 3 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.
- 4 By dimensions we refer to groups of characteristics or indicators that are related and thus constitute one dimension.
- 5 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).
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 This notion has been challenged lately. Also tabloid media themselves are now in the focus of academic research (Uribe & Gunter, 2004).

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