Suspicious minds: Explaining political cynicism among political journalists in Europe

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Abstract
Critics claim that journalists spread a cynical view of politics, as their relation with politicians is characterized by mistrust and hyper-adversarialism. To gain insight into how cynical journalists themselves are about politics and how this can be explained, this article investigates the role relationship between politicians and journalists in four European countries with different political communication systems. The empirical basis for the study is a survey of over 400 political reporters from the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain. Compared to their colleagues in Northern Europe, Spanish journalists have the most cynical view of politicians, which can partly be explained by feelings of political pressure. Journalists are cynical when they have a negative view of the role of spin doctors and believe that politicians use the media as a podium where they can be in the spotlight. The possible influence of journalists’ political attitudes on news content is discussed.

Keywords
cross-national comparison, journalist–source relations, political cynicism, political journalism, survey

Political journalists play an important, but contested role in democracy. Political coverage has been criticized for reinforcing what has come to be known as ‘the spiral of cynicism’: because of their negative reporting styles and cynical approach towards politics, journalists
are blamed for decreasing levels of trust in government as well as increased political
cynicism among readers and viewers (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; De Vreese, 2005).
Critics condemn the ‘increasingly hostile and irresponsible tenor of political journalism’
(Barnett, cited in McNair, 2009: 244). Exposure to negatively framed news about politics
is presumed to lead to lower levels of political engagement and lower levels of trust (e.g.
Patterson, 2000). Empirical proof for this presumed causal relationship between negativ-
ity in political news and decreasing trust in politicians is however far from conclusive
(see Norris, 2000; for different findings see Avery, 2009; De Vreese, 2005). The impact
of news on levels of trust seems – at least – to be contingent on the type of news outlet,
the news content and prior levels of trust.

Despite the inconclusiveness of the debate around whether an increasingly negative
reporting style influences voters’ attitudes, studies in different European countries have
indeed shown support for the claim that political news has become more critical, using
game frames and exposing the (media) strategies of politicians (see, for example, Brants
and Van Kempen [2000] for the Netherlands; Schulz and Zeh [2005] for Germany).
Explanations for the negative framing of politics have been sought in commercial pres-
sures within news organizations (Patterson, 2000), political PR culture and adversarial
journalistic culture (Esser and Spanjer, 2005) or differences in the political and media
systems (Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007: 800). Considering the wide interest in the spiral
of cynicism and its causes, it is surprising that there are hardly any studies which try to
study another possible antecedent of cynical coverage: the attitudes of journalists. Do
they themselves have a cynical attitude towards politicians, and how are these attitudes
influenced by their relation with politicians? The relative absence of knowledge about
this subject contrasts with the large body of literature which has investigated the political
leaning of journalists as a possible antecedent of bias in political reporting (e.g.
Henningham, 1995; Patterson and Donsbach, 1996).

Studying the interaction between journalists and politicians should be a first step to
understanding the intertwined relations between media and politics (Cook, 2005: 13).
Brants et al. (2010) argue that to understand the occurrence of a spiral of cynicism
between media content and political perceptions of the audience, researchers should
focus on the spiral that precedes this: the spiral of mutual mistrust between politicians
and journalists. Their study showed that Dutch politicians have a cynical attitude towards
journalists, with dissatisfaction with their portrayal in the media and the agenda-setting
power of the media as main explanatory variables. Political cynicism among political
journalists in the Netherlands was relatively low, however, and no discernible factors
explained variation of political cynicism among journalists (Brants et al.; 2010: n. 7).

Studying the attitudes of political journalists from a comparative perspective might
help to come closer to identifying independent variables which can explain variation of
political cynicism. The democratic-corporatist media system, to which the Netherlands
belongs, is characterized by a strong public service tradition, a relatively high level of
journalistic autonomy and mutual consensus building and might therefore not be the most
likely case to find high levels of cynicism among journalists (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).
A hyper-adversarial journalistic approach towards politicians is still the exception rather
than the rule in the Netherlands and election coverage still focuses mainly on substantive
issues (Brants and Van Praag, 2006). The relation between journalists and politicians might be less harmonious and journalists more cynical about politicians in countries belonging to the liberal media system, with a more developed PR culture (Esser and Spanjer, 2005), or countries belonging to the polarized pluralist media system, which is characterized by clientelistic relations between media and politics (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). To study the influence of source professionalization and political pressures on the level of cynicism among journalists, a comparative perspective is required as these characteristics are strongly related to the political communication system journalists work in.

In sum, studying the relation between journalists and politicians and its influence on political cynicism among journalists provides insight into another possible antecedent of negative framing and a hyper-adversarial reporting style, next to explanations at the level of the news organization or the journalistic beat. We therefore study the journalist–source relation by means of a survey among political journalists in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain. Before going more deeply into the historical context of the relations between media and politics in each of these countries, we present a general framework for the understanding of role relationships between journalists and politicians.

**An ambiguous role relationship**

Political journalists and politicians are commonly perceived as mutually dependent actors (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995), whose behaviour is guided by both their own role conceptions and their perceptions of the role of their counterparts. According to role theory, they continuously adapt their behaviour to the (expected) behaviour of the other. While each actor in the role relation primarily strives for her/his own benefit, to a certain extent the goals of journalists and politicians are similar and the two actors need each other. Politics without the media is no longer thinkable and politicians need publicity to communicate with their peers and potential voters (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Journalists working under increasing time pressure are dependent on politicians to fill the daily news hole (Cook, 2005).

The conflictive and at the same time overlapping goals lead to an uneasy or ambiguous relationship which can be classified according to the degree of harmony (Nimmo, 1964). In a cooperative relation the two actors share common goals and the level of conflict is low. In such a harmonious situation, the relation can be described as symbiotic (Gans, 2004), when ‘two dissimilar organisms living in mutually beneficial relationship, each bringing something essential to the whole’ (Merritt, 1995: 48). In a competitive relation journalists and politicians stand opposed to one another and pursue conflicting goals. Davis’s (2009) study of the relation between UK MPs and parliamentary journalists confirms the complexity of the relationship in which antagonism and exchange exist side by side, which is reflected in political coverage:

For most interviewees, most of the time it was a relationship of cautious co-operation that benefited both sides. At the same time, conflict and mistrust were common and either side was capable of, and frequently did, damage the other. This in turn was reflected in news coverage that could be either too compliant . . . or too aggressive. (Davis, 2009: 210)
In the ambiguous relationship between journalists and politicians, trust is an important factor, which in practice translates into mutual understanding and respect for formal and informal rules (Mancini, 1993). According to Larsson (2002), interpersonal relationships in general, and the relation between journalists and politicians in particular, benefit from situations where the relationship is balanced, and both sides are willing to make an investment in and a commitment to the relationships. If journalists do not perceive politicians to respect the roles of the journalists, the necessary balance in the relation is not present and the relationship is guided by mutual suspicion, mistrust (Van Aelst and Aalberg, 2009) and cynical attitudes towards one another (Brants et al., 2010). On the basis of this framework for the understanding of role relationships between journalists and politicians, we formulate hypotheses about the influence of political pressure and source professionalization on political cynicism among journalists.

**Political pressure and source professionalization**

Professional autonomy of political journalists and the possibilities to fulfil their democratic functions are important conditions for a balanced relationship between journalists and politicians. Whether these conditions are fulfilled largely depends on the political context in which journalists work, in particular the level of political pressure (Mancini, 2000) and source professionalization (Esser and Spanjer, 2005).

First of all, professional autonomy requires that political journalists can do their work in the absence of political pressure (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). The autonomy of journalists is one the central elements of journalistic professionalization. In countries where journalism knows a tradition of professionalization, the work of the journalist is defined by the professional ideology of journalists (Deuze, 2003), rather than by the interests of other actors. Such an autonomous position can be the result of institutionalized self-regulatory mechanisms like press councils, codes of ethics and journalistic unions, or can be the result of a commercially profitable press which does not require financial support from actors outside the media (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). When self-regulatory press mechanisms are not institutionalized and the media are financially dependent on (political) actors from outside the media, the relation between journalists and politicians is characterized by dependence rather than equality. In such a situation, political actors and other actors with a political agenda might have a direct influence on the work of journalists through instrumentalization. This can, for example, be noted in the influence of the party in government on politicized public service broadcasting organizations (Díez Nicolas and Semetko, 1995). Apart from the direct influence of politicians, the work of journalists can also be influenced by the more subtle pressures of a clientelistic relation of multimedia conglomerates or a close relation between editors and political leaders (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Feelings of dependency and pressures from political actors may lead to frustration among political journalists about politicians, since they are not able to do their work according to their own professional norms.

**H1:** Political journalists are more cynical towards politicians when they perceive political pressure to influence their work.
Second, for journalists to live up to their professional standards requires politicians to be open in their communication, and available for questions. Access of journalists to politicians may vary considerably. In a highly competitive news environment, newsworthy politicians will simply lack the time to address all journalists individually. In such cases journalists will be addressed in more controlled settings like press conferences or have to rely on spokespersons who act as gatekeepers. Limited availability for journalists may be a strategy which politicians apply when they are reluctant to face critical journalists as they are afraid of possible mis-steps. Part of a professionalized political campaign can be a bypass strategy where politicians avoid answering critical questions by appearing in entertainment or local media (Rosenstiel, 1993), while their spokespersons are put forward to face critical questions of beat journalists. Such tactics by politicians have lead to an ‘irritated journalistic reaction’ by political reporters from traditional mass media (Brants, 1998: 331).

**H2:** Political journalists are more cynical towards politicians when they believe spin doctors and spokespersons complicate their work.

Third, for journalists to hold politicians to account, politicians should take political journalists seriously, be open in their communication and respect the roles of the journalist. During both election and non-election times, it is important for politicians to do well in the media. Being able to communicate in a media-savvy style and transmitting a positive image are important criteria which determine whether a politician can climb high in the party hierarchy (Van Aelst et al., 2008). In this regard, one can speak of permanent campaigning in non-election times. Politicians shape their messages, and to some extent their policy, according to ‘media logic’, and take a proactive approach towards journalists (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Journalists can benefit from such a proactive approach by politicians who are able to explain their political messages and decisions in short soundbites. However, journalists may become cynical about politicians when they believe that the search for media attention is at the expense of their political work. When politicians talk about their private life in entertainment shows, frequently organize press events with little inherent news value, or walk out of a debate in parliament to give a live interview on television, the motives for politicians to appear in the media are not so much their wish to facilitate the democratic functions of the press, but rather their *media salacity:* ‘the politician’s repeated attempts and ultimate drive to get the camera’s attention’ (Brants et al., 2010: 30). Journalists have reacted negatively to politicians who try to gain media attention by frequently organizing press conferences without providing real news (Ansolabehene et al., 1993). Journalists may generally become cynical about the political competences of politicians when they feel that politicians see media coverage as an end in itself and would do anything to be in the spotlight.

**H3:** Political journalists are more cynical towards politicians when they perceive politicians to be driven by media salacity.

**Design, case selection and measures**

A cross-national comparative study of countries where the relation between the mass media and politics differs allows us to gain more insight into the underlying causes of political cynicism among political reporters. We test whether political pressure on the
one hand and a negative perception of the professionalization of political communication on the other hand can explain levels of political cynicism among political journalists working in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain.

**Case selection: Different contexts, different relations?**

Due to different levels of integration between the political and the media system, and different levels of professionalization of news management by politicians, British, Danish, German or Spanish journalists meet politicians in diverse contexts (Pfetsch, 2004). These differences are likely to influence the role relations between journalists and politicians and thereby cynicism among journalists.

Although British newspapers traditionally had a partisan leaning, economic and formal ties with political parties were less common than in Southern and Central Europe (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 221). Traditionally the journalistic approach towards politicians in Great Britain could be described as respectful and sacerdotal (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001). Over the years, through increased competition and technical developments, the environment in which political journalists work became much more dynamic. Audiences fragmented as the amount of communication channels increased. The number of parliamentary journalists increased substantially (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). During this period the link between voters and political parties became weaker. As the electorate became more volatile, the importance of election campaigns and the necessity to reach potential voters through the media increased. Countries belonging to the liberal media system were the front runners when it came to the professionalization of political communication (Negrine et al., 2007) and the UK was the first European country in which communication by political parties and government professionalized, often copying successful examples from the US (Esser et al., 2001).

A reaction to the increased professionalization of political communication in Britain has been a fight back strategy by journalists in the shape of metacommunication: ‘a self-referential reflection on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism’ (Esser et al., 2001: 16).

In the democratic-corporatist media system, to which Denmark and Germany belong, the political and media systems were traditionally much more closely integrated than in the UK. Until the 1960s it was not uncommon for the head of a political party to be at the same time the head of the corresponding newspaper. Through the years, because of the growing importance of television and a more volatile audience, the grip of political parties on the media diminished and the political and the media systems became less integrated, thus giving journalists a more independent position vis-a-vis politicians. At the end of the 1960s, the relation between journalists and politicians was no longer dominated by political parallelism, but rather by ‘critical professionalism’ (Djerf-Pierre, 2000). As a result of this change, political colour no longer defined the relationship between parliamentary journalists and their sources. Over time, just like in Great Britain, the general reporting style and approach of journalists towards politicians became less sacerdotal and more critical (Brants and Van Praag, 2006).

As in the UK, doing well in the media has become more and more important for politicians in democratic-corporatist countries. The success of the political campaign
and government communication of Tony Blair inspired many political parties in
democratic-corporatist media system countries, who also professionalized their
political communication (Esser et al., 2001). However, the strong corporatist tradi-
tion in these countries, combined with a multi-party system and a tradition of consen-
sus, operates as a moderating factor which limits the extent to which politicians apply
political communication practice (Brants and Van Praag, 2006). Although the politi-
cal communication systems in which Danish and German journalists work show
large similarities, scale may make an important difference. While the Danish parlia-
mentary press corps consists of about 100 journalists, this number in Germany is
more than six times higher (see Table 1). This difference in size might make politi-
cians less easily accessible in Germany than in Denmark.

Of the four countries under study, the biggest differences probably exist between jour-
nalists working in Spain and their Northern colleagues. Spanish democracy and press
freedom are still relatively young in comparison to the other countries. On the one hand,
journalists seem to have adapted their view on their role in society to this situation
(Martín Algarra and González Gaitano, 1997). Their role conceptions have become more
in line with the normative role conceptions found in the professional journalism model,
favouring a more distant position towards authorities and moving ‘from the traditional
partisan-ideological paradigm towards a more adversarial-nonpartisan one’ (Canel and
Pique, 1998: 318). On the other hand the political and media systems are in practice still
closely integrated. The work of journalists is still characterized by dependence rather
than autonomy and is very much shaped by persisting instrumentalism and close ties
between editors-in-chief and political parties (Papatheodorou and Machin, 2003).

The global trend of professional news management and staging of tightly controlled
news events has also been observed in Spain (Sampedro and Seoane Pérez, 2008). The
reaction of journalists however has not been in line with the reaction in other countries,
since the tone towards politicians remains sacerdotal rather than pragmatic and news
during political campaigns is more often based on events initiated by politicians than in
other countries (Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008). News management by politicians is
becoming more professional in Spain, while political journalists have not yet found the
right response to this.

In sum, journalists in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain encounter different
levels of political pressure and source professionalization. We expect these differences to
influence the role relations between journalists and politicians and thereby political cyn-
icism among journalists.

Method
We investigate the influence of political pressure and source professionalization on cyn-
ical attitudes among journalists by means of a survey among political reporters. We
combine questions from different survey projects among (political) journalists (Brants
et al., 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2008; Weaver, 1998) with additional questions. Questions
were translated by native speakers and pretested in Denmark by a group of 80 journal-
ism students and by 10 general reporters. To make sure that the questions apply well to
the situations of the countries under study, the questions were checked by and discussed
with scholars in the field of political and communication science who are familiar with political communication in the respective countries.

The population under study consists of political journalists working in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain. Our populations are defined as ‘journalists who report, analyse or give commentary on national politics’ and operationalized as the members of parliamentary press galleries or unions of political journalists (see Table 1). Newsrooms were contacted to update lists of members of these unions. By focusing on political journalists rather than general reporters, we have the advantage of functional equivalence, since these journalists all report about similar sources: government and members of parliament. Since the populations under study are rather small, we opted for surveying the population as a whole rather than drawing a sample. Journalists were contacted by letter and email, inviting them to fill out either a paper or online version of the survey. We used several strategies to increase response rate like incentives and multiple follow-up contacts.

Response rates of the targeted population range from 31 percent in the UK to 74 percent in Denmark. These response rates are comparable to other surveys among journalists (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996; Weaver, 1998). Not all characteristics were known for the populations of the different countries, so different representative checks were included for each country (see Table 1). For all countries we checked representativeness by comparing distribution of gender and medium type of the respondents with the whole population. This was fine for the UK, Denmark and Germany. Spain showed an underrepresentation of print journalists. In the analysis, medium type was included as a control variable to minimize the influence of this underrepresentation.

### Table 1. Characteristics of surveys among political journalists in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain

|                | UK                      | Denmark     | Germany     | Spain                   |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Population     | Press gallery/ Register of Journalists’ Interests (281) | Presseloge (96) | Bundespresse-konferenz (620) | Asociación de Periodistas Parlamentarios, (116) |
| Respondents (number and response rate) | 87 (31%) | 71 (74%) | 201 (32%) | 66 (57%) |
| Time of survey | June 2008–January 2009 | November 2007–March 2008 | April 2008–July 2008 | October 2008–January 2009 |
| Closest national elections | May 2005 | November 2007 | September 2005 | March 2008 |
| Remarks about representativeness | Representative for gender; type of medium, membership lobby and press gallery | Representative for gender and type of medium | Representative for gender and type of medium | Representative for gender; print journalists overrepresented, radio underrepresented |
Measures
To measure our dependent variable ‘political cynicism’, we used a four-item scale used by Brants et al. (2010), which is based on a political cynicism scale used in several election studies. Respondents indicated on a five-point scale to which degree they agreed with the following statements: Politicians promise more than they can deliver; It is easier to become a member of parliament thanks to political friends than because of competence; Ministers are mainly focused on their own interests; Politicians do not understand what is happening in society (overall scale $\alpha = .70$).\(^1\)

The journalists indicated ‘how much influence political pressure has on their daily work’ on a scale from 0 (no influence) to 10 (large influence) to measure feelings of political pressure.\(^2\) This allows us to test whether political pressure leads to a cynical attitude towards politicians (hypothesis 1).

To test hypothesis 2 we measure the journalists’ perception of the role of spin doctors in political communication by asking journalists to indicate on a five-point scale whether they disagree or agree with the statement that ‘spokespersons and other communication specialists inhibit journalists in their job’.\(^3\)

We used two items measured on a five-point scale (Brants et al., 2010) to construct a media salacity scale which allows testing hypothesis 3: ‘It is more important for a politician to get covered in the media than to work hard; Politicians would do anything to get attention from the media’ (overall scale $r = .54$).\(^4\)

Analysis
To see how levels of political cynicism among journalists differ between countries with varying political communication contexts, we first compare the mean scores of the political cynicism measure for the four countries. Second, we test the three hypotheses in one combined ordinary least square (OLS) regression model including the four countries to test our hypotheses and see whether political pressure, perception of spin and media salacity lead to political cynicism among journalists. Finally, we conduct OLS regressions for each of the four countries to test the hypotheses in each country separately to study differences within countries. In these regression models we include control variables which can potentially influence the attitude of journalists towards politicians, like frequency of contacts and journalistic experience.\(^5\)

Results
Table 2 shows differences in political cynicism between British, Danish, German and Spanish political journalists. Danish political journalists score lowest of the four countries on each of the four items and on the combined political cynicism index ($M = 2.85$). This score is below the middle position of the index, indicating that levels of cynicism are not elevated. The mean score of political cynicism in Germany ($M = 3.28$) and the UK ($M = 3.16$) is significantly higher than in Denmark, but not far from the middle position of the scale. The relatively low level of cynicism among British political journalists is noteworthy, since criticism about hyper-adversarialism and a negative journalistic approach towards politicians is particularly common in the liberal media system.
The Spanish journalists are the most cynical; they score significantly higher on the combined scale than the three other countries ($M = 3.62$). They agree significantly more than journalists in Northern Europe that politicians own their job to knowing the right people and those politicians do not understand what is happening in society.

Can political pressure, perceptions of spin doctors and media salacity explain variation in political cynicism? To answer this question and test the three hypotheses we run a regression analysis with the political cynicism index as a dependent variable. Table 3 shows the results of a test of the hypotheses in one regression model for the four countries combined. Each of the hypotheses is supported. Feelings of political pressure lead to higher levels of political cynicism, supporting hypothesis 1. In line with hypothesis 2, a negative perception of spokespersons is related to a more cynical attitude. Hypothesis 3 is also supported: political journalists who agree more that politicians are driven by media salacity are also more cynical about their political competences. Of the control variables only experience is significantly related to political cynicism, with more experienced journalists showing lower levels of cynicism (see Discussion). Gender and frequency of contact do not have a significant influence on cynicism.

With the feeling of political pressure and the reaction to professionalization of political communication, we seem to have identified important factors explaining cross-national differences in levels of political cynicism. After controlling for these variables, the difference between cynicism among British, German and Spanish journalists is no longer significant. Only Danish journalists are still significantly less cynical than their colleagues abroad.

Table 4 tests the hypotheses in separate regression models for each of the four. This gives further support for the three hypotheses. In each of the four countries, our models confirm that the perception that politicians are driven by media salacity breeds cynicism.
### Table 3. Explaining political cynicism among political journalists in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain in one combined regression model

|                      | Coefficient | SE  |
|----------------------|-------------|-----|
| **Country (baseline = UK)** |             |     |
| Denmark              | -.337***    | .092|
| Germany              | .020        | .073|
| Spain                | -.178       | .105|
| **Medium type (baseline = press agency)** |             |     |
| Print                | -.119       | .092|
| Broadcast            | -.104       | .092|
| Political pressure   | .044***     | .013|
| Spokespersons inhibit journalists | .100***     | .026|
| Politicians' media salacity | .294***     | .036|
| Frequency of contacts| -.012       | .030|
| Years' experience    | -.009**     | .003|
| Gender: male         | -.021       | .059|
| Intercept            | 2.276***    | .216|

Notes: The coefficients represent unstandardized betas and their significance in four separate OLS regression models predicting the political cynicism index. Missing values are replaced by mean values. Adjusted $R^2 = .31$. $N = 425$. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

### Table 4. Explaining political cynicism among political journalists in the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain in four separate regression models

|                      | UK         | Denmark    | Germany    | Spain      |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| **Medium type (baseline = press agency)** |             |     |    |    |
| Print                | .012 (.201)| -.072 (.227)| -.028 (.160)| -.223 (.190)|
| Broadcast            | -.063 (.193)| -.181 (.241)| .135 (.160)| -.363 (.180)*|
| Political pressure   | .087 (.026)**| -.028 (.035)| .039 (.021)| .033 (.027)|
| Spokespersons inhibit journalists | .059 (.050)| .068 (.056)| .119 (.041)**| .096 (.078)|
| Politicians' media salacity | .249 (.065)***| .332 (.084)***| .297 (.056)***| .448 (.135)**|
| Frequency of contacts| -.029 (.064)| .041 (.112)| -.006 (.047)| -.010 (.069)|
| Years' experience    | -.007 (.005)| -.014 (.006)*| -.016 (.005)**| .004 (.008)|
| Gender: male         | -.013 (.139)| .179 (.132)| -.048 (.090)| -.119 (.153)|
| Intercept            | 2.391 (.385)**| 1.625 (.702)*| 2.209 (.317)***| 1.431 (.729)|
| Adjusted $R^2$       | .26         | .24         | .23         | .22         |
| N                    | 87          | 71          | 201         | 66          |

Notes: The coefficients represent unstandardized betas with standard errors and their significance in four separate OLS regression models predicting the political cynicism index. Missing values are replaced by mean values. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
For political pressure and a negative perception of spokespersons, most of the coefficients point in the directions expected of the bases of our hypotheses 1 and 2. Not all coefficients are statistically significant, however. In Denmark and Germany more experienced political journalists are significantly less cynical.

Discussion

In this article we investigated the relation between political journalists and politicians to explain political cynicism among political reporters. Journalists who feel they are under more political pressure in their work are more cynical about politicians. Cynicism is higher when spokespersons and communication specialists inhibit journalists in their work and when journalists believe politicians see media attention primarily as an end in itself rather than a side effect of their political function. Our findings underline the importance of historical contexts for the understanding of the complex journalist–politician relation. Corroborating the findings of Brants et al. (2010) in the Netherlands, these findings do not seem to indicate that the professional critical stance towards politicians in the democratic-corporatist countries has turned into a cynical, mistrusting attitude. In Denmark and Germany, the overall level of political cynicism among political reporters is close to the middle position. While claims of hyper-adversarialism and cynical reporting are mostly expressed in an Anglo-American context (McNair, 2009), the level of cynicism is highest in Spain, where journalists remain much more cautious and sacerdotal in their approach towards politicians (Strömbäck and Luengo, 2008). Compared to their British colleagues, Spanish journalists more often agree with the claim that politicians use the media to put themselves in the spotlight. This might be due to the fact that this media salacity among politicians is newer in Spain than in other countries. De Vreese and Elenbaas (2010) have shown that after a peak around 1997, media coverage about spin doctors in the UK decreased drastically. This seems to indicate that journalists in the UK have become more used to professionalization of political communication and accept spin doctors and media salacity as a feature of the way politics works.

An alternative interpretation for the relatively low levels of political cynicism among British parliamentary reporters might be that they have become too compliant. A cynical attitude towards politicians is to some extent a prerequisite of journalists who want to fulfil a watchdog role. Members of the parliamentary press gallery in Britain have been accused of developing overly close relations with the politicians they are supposed to cover critically (Davis, 2009). The fact that the MP expenses scandal in the UK in 2009 was uncovered by journalists from outside the press gallery might be proof that the close contacts between parliamentary beat journalists and politicians limit the possibility for journalists to remain critical and independent. Additional analysis (not reported here) did not show a difference in levels of cynicism among members of the press gallery and other political journalists in Britain. Still, the finding that cynicism is low among more experienced political reporters in Denmark and Germany might be interpreted as showing that journalists working in the parliamentary beat lose their critical distance. On the other hand, higher levels of cynicism among younger reporters might show that a new generation of more distrusting journalists is emerging across Europe. This is a question only future studies might answer.
Future studies also need to address to what extent these (cynical) political attitudes of journalists influence their news content. This remains an empirical question. Applying psychological theories to decision-making, Donsbach (2004) has argued that journalists’ predispositions influence news decisions, especially when journalists working in packs share the same attitudes. (Quasi-)experimental studies have shown that attitudes towards subjects can influence the way individual journalists write about these subjects (Patterson and Donsbach, 1996; Starck and Soloski, 1977). Since pack journalists often follow each other when they face uncertain situations and often share similar attitudes, the influence of these attitudes on news decisions may even be ‘multiplied’ (Donsbach, 2004: 152). Following this reasoning, levels of cynicism should be important for the way political journalists frame politics.

This being said, proof of a relation between journalists’ predispositions and news decisions comes mainly from highly controlled (quasi-)experimental designs. In everyday journalism practice, predispositions of (packs of) journalists are only one among several factors explaining the way politics is framed. Other factors like the commercial and news value of negative stories, or the sometimes opposing views of beat journalists and their editors in the newsroom, play an intervening role (Gavin, 2001: 303–5). The current study showing that the relations between journalists and politicians leads to cynicism among reporters is a first step towards understanding the influence of these relations on political coverage. A second step would require combining surveys among journalists with content analysis of political coverage.

All in all, these findings underline the importance of the political communication system and its historical context for the understanding of the complex relations between journalists and politicians and cynicism among journalists. It shows that politicians need to take into account the potential negative consequences of political pressure and source professionalization on their relation with political reporters. Otherwise they might find themselves caught in the trap of a malfunctioning and mistrusting relationship from which they cannot escape.

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Notes
1. Political cynicism scale per country: UK: $\alpha = .58$, $M = 3.16$, SD = .57; DK: $\alpha = .49$, $M = 2.85$, SD = .56; DE: $\alpha = .73$, $M = 3.28$, SD = .66; ES: $\alpha = .72$, $M = 3.62$, SD = .67.
2. Mean scores on political pressure variable per country (0 is low, 10 is high): UK: $M = 2.06$, SD = 2.12; DK: $M = 1.87$, SD = 1.69; DE: $M = 1.69$, SD = 2.03; ES: $M = 4.21$, SD = 2.92.
3. Mean score on spin doctor variable per country (1 is positive perception, 5 is negative perception): UK $M = 2.99$, SD = 1.09; DK: $M = 2.86$, SD = 1.10; DE: $M = 2.76$, SD = 1.04; ES: $M = 3.58$, SD = 1.02.
4. Media salacity scale per country (1 is low, 5 is high): UK: $r = .42$, $M = 2.87$, SD = .85; DK: $r = .39$, $M = 3.07$, SD = .76; DE: $r = .44$, $M = 3.30$, SD = .80; ES: $r = .48$, $M = 4.41$, SD = .56).
5. Contacts: One item reaching from (1) never to (5) (almost) daily: In an average month, how often do you have contact with a politician? (UK: $M = 4.29$, SD = .87; DK: $M = 4.79$, SD = .56; DE: $M = 3.77$, SD = .91; ES: $M = 4.30$, SD = 1.08).
Medium type: respectively print, broadcast and press agency (UK: 40.2 – 49.4 – 9.2 percent; DK: 66.2 – 26.8 – 7.0 percent; DE: 46.8 – 45.8 – 7.5 percent; ES: 33.3 – 42.4 – 24.2 percent).

Experience in journalism: measured in years (UK: $M = 19.40$, $SD = 11.29$; DK: $M = 13.70$, $SD = 10.15$; DE: $M = 18.67$, $SD = 8.09$; ES: $M = 18.23$, $SD = 9.23$).

Gender: female = 0, male = 1 (percentage male: DK: 71.8 percent, DE: 70.5 percent, UK: 76.50 percent, ES: 59.0 percent).

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