Title of deliverable: D 6.1 Extensive content analysis study on the coverage of stories on corruption

A comparative research on the print press coverage of corruption

Due date of deliverable: 30 June, 2016
Actual submission date: 30 June, 2016

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Organization name of lead beneficiary for this deliverable: UNIPG, UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PERUGIA

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1. Premises

The title of a frequently quoted article, “A free press is bad news for corruption” (Brunetti – Weder, 2003), illustrates in a very convincing way the main assumption directing the research carried on within Work Package 6 “Media and corruption”. Many other studies support the same thesis (Treisman, 2000; Chowdhury, 2004; Lindstedt and Naurin, 2010, Worthy and McClean 2015): a press system acting in a free manner without limitations and controls imposed by powers of any kind, be it political, economic or religious, may successfully curb corruption. Obviously, this applies to every kind of news media, including print press, television and new media, even if our present research is limited to print press.

News media may curb corruption in tangible and intangible ways (Stapenhurst, 2000). Within the ideal model of western journalism, the investigation and the disclosure of corruption cases represent one of the main ingredients of the so-called “watch-dog role” that the press system is supposed to play. Through this role, it carries out very tangible and immediate functions in the struggle against corruption, bringing to light behaviours that contrast with public ethics and interests. So-called “investigative journalism” may have a principal place in revealing to public opinion behaviours that illegally favour private interest over the public one (Ettema – Glasser, 1998). At the same time, news media may have an important role in diffusing and reinforcing a shared political culture and a more general idea of the common good that may prevent corrupt behaviour. As Rick Stapenhurst puts it, “Most often, though, journalism’s effects as an impediment to corruption are probably less tangible and more indirect than the preceding examples might lead one to believe. The craft must be seen not merely in terms of the direct impact it has had in specific instances of “sleaze” or corruption, but also in the context of the broader role that journalism plays in society” (Stapenhurst, 200, p. 8). Corruption may be defeated not only with repression but also with prevention through the diffusion of a shared idea of being part of a community that clearly sees corruption as an enemy to be defeated. The role of news media in this action of diffusion is essential.

In this study, we only deal with the possible tangible ways through which news media may curb corruption. We study, in a comparative perspective, what sorts of representations of corruption emerge from the print press coverage. We analyse what the main components of these representations are, what the mostly frequently quoted topics and actors are and how they relate to the surrounding social and political contexts. It should be noted that ours is a study on news media representations and not on the factual level of corruption in the investigated countries, even if, as we shall see later on, there is a relevant association between the amount and the type of news media coverage and the perception of corruption as measured by Transparency International and as
suggested in other studies (Mungiu Pippidi, 2015). There is no doubt, indeed, that a larger coverage of corruption may determine a higher level of perception of corruption. However, once more, this is not a factual level of corruption. Our data on news media representations also seem to confirm more general discussions and interpretations on the level of corruption in each country, which are stressed in many studies and reports, including the ANTICORRP deliverables.

Indeed, as Davide Torsello writes, “corruption is conceptualized by citizens mainly in two ways: from the evidence and scandals exposed through national and local media, and through common and direct experiences” (Torsello, 2014, p. 3). In contemporary societies, the media play a major role as agencies of socialization. They are important in contexts of corruption, as they are the main instruments through which most people have some kind of perception of corruption, of what it is, of who practices it, of how it is practiced and how widespread it is.

2. News media as mirrors

There is a high level of homogeneity between the results emerging from Computer Assisted Content Analysis (CACA) and the results emerging from Human Assisted Content Analysis (HACA). Our HACA sample seems to be highly representative of the totality of articles that have been published in the selected period.

From both studies, we can derive an initial important result as to the way in which newspapers cover cases of corruption (and related topics) and personal figures involved in corruption activities. Newspapers are mirrors of the context in which they develop. This is an obvious observation that emerges very clearly from our data. Newspapers reflect the situation on the ground and their reporting is very much dependent on what is going on in the surrounding context. However, at the same time, as we shall discuss in the next section, journalism representations are not just reflections of what is happening in specific countries; they also depend on structural, cultural and procedural dimensions that influence “mirroring” activity. Therefore, we can assume that news media mirror the situation within which they develop. However, at the same time, they should be understood as social constructions affected by conditions that, in some way, may be defined as independent from the surrounding context.

We found a great variety of specific topics and specific persons. They vary country to country and period to period, reflecting factual events and cases involving specific persons. In other words, the coverage of corruption changes significantly country to country. The national reports included in this deliverable give evidence of this diversity and the different corruption stories covered in each
country. In this sense, the analysis of the coverage can reveal something about real corruption in each specific country.

Nevertheless, similarities also emerge among the observed countries. In all countries, most of the coverage of corruption is born out of the activity of the judiciary. In large part, this also depends on the complexity and the length of the trials that are often organized in several steps; they arrive to an end after many years, and thus, a single story returns to the front pages of a newspaper several times. This finding seems to suggest a minor role of the journalistic investigation in curbing corruption, contrary to the expectations that entrust the news media with a major surveillance role. Very rarely (with minor exceptions in United Kingdom, Slovakia and Romania), the news story derives from an investigation carried out by the journalists themselves. Moreover, it has to be stressed that frequently, as many studies (Gross, 2003; Ledeneva, 2006; Mungiu Pippidi, 2010), including the case study conducted within the WP6, have found, journalistic investigation is carried out with very instrumental aims to attack political and business opponents or to defend close political and public figures. Our findings suggest that journalistic investigation does not play important tangible functions against corruption.

Another important similarity ties all the investigated countries together. A very large majority of stories we investigated deal with grand corruption. Petty corruption, with the partial exception of Hungary and particularly Romania, occupies a very minor place in the journalistic coverage, and these stories appear essentially in tabloid papers. As already mentioned, this has to do with the specific feature of most of the print press, which is that it is addressed to a reader who, very often, is an active part of the decision process where grand corruption occurs. These readers are therefore very much interested in these stories. Petty corruption is rarely covered; it has little direct impact on the public sphere within which newspapers circulate. It is only covered in papers such as tabloids, which address a particular type of reader, “the everyman, who most of the times is not part of the sphere of decision makers”.

A sort of common dictionary definition of corruption also emerges from our research. In the language of journalism, which seems to be the case for all the countries we investigated, the term “corruption” has a very general meaning, indicating general situations and evaluations, for example, “a corrupt country”, “a corrupt politician”, etc. On the contrary, when describing specific cases of corruption, words such “bribe” and “kickback” are more often used and mostly with a negative tone. “Embezzlement” is also frequently used but often with different meanings depending on the country. It appears very often in the pages of Hungarian newspapers indicating a vast range of behaviours that in other countries are referred to in a different way.
The words “clientelism”, “favouritism”, “nepotism” and “familyism” rarely appear in the pages of the newspapers; they are used in Italy and sometimes in Slovakia where both these two attitudes seem to be a recurring topic of public debate. When the word “collusion” appears, it has little to do with the sphere of corruption (for example, “collusion with terrorists”, etc.).

Metaphors are frequently used in the articles we investigated. They depict corruption in a very negative manner while being connected to different domains (for example, corruption is a “disease”, a “plague”, it has a “bad smell”, etc.). In this way, it becomes something familiar that does not deserve any specific reaction.

3. News media as social constructions

If newspapers reflect real events occurring in different countries, at the same time, they are social constructions being affected by a plurality of factors that seem to work independently from the factual events of the specific country and that are connected to the nature of news media themselves. In particular, two main factors have emerged: news media market segmentation and political affiliation. We talk of “political affiliation” but in several countries this phenomenon overlaps with the economic interests of media owners. In simple terms, it is not just a matter of ideology (even if in some countries this is still an important differentiating feature); in many cases, behind news media ownerships, there are “vested interests” that also relates to the coverage of corruption topics. In this regard, mostly in connection to news media in Central Eastern Europe, authors have talked of “political capital” to designate the overlap of media, business, and politics (Sparks, 2000). Duncan McCargo (2012) uses the term “partisan polyvalence” to stress how often the media, especially in East Asia, respond to a number of different interests among which the diffusion of news is not the most important. Obviously, ours are data on the content of the news and we can only speculate on the reasons for a particular type of news coverage.

We offer the following example as a clarification of what we mean when we state that the news media are social constructions. If one assumes that the amount of coverage is a good indicator of the factual level of corruption one would have to conclude that after Italy, the United Kingdom is the most corrupt country among those we studied, as the number of retrieved articles on corruption is second after Italy and is much higher than in the other countries. However, the large number of articles on corruption that we found in the British coverage has to do with factors that have little to do with the actual level of corruption in the country and instead depends on the specific niche audience British newspapers cater to.
Indeed, news media market segmentation and, therefore, the newspaper genre as well, is an important factor that affects the way in which corruption is represented in the different newspapers; this factor seems to also affect dailies in different countries. In this regard, a striking difference emerges between business and tabloid newspapers. The former are mostly addressed to a community of entrepreneurs and high officials in business administration with interests that often go beyond national borders (this is the case of the readership of the British *The Financial Times*, in particular). These dailies devote particular attention to anticorruption activities and to anticorruption legislation more in particular. More than focusing on single cases of corruption, they choose to approach corruption in general terms stressing, in particular, the level of corruption that entrepreneurs can expect when investing in foreign countries. The so called “feature articles”, in other words, articles that describe a situation or a problem rather than narrating a story, characterize these dailies independently from their country of origin. The large number of articles that we retrieved in the British newspapers derive mostly from articles that describe corruption abroad and not domestic corruption.

Tabloid newspapers, which address the so-called “everyman”, offer a completely different representation of corruption. First, they generally do not care too much about corruption and related topics. Indeed, in each country, these papers publish a smaller number of articles on this topic. When they cover corruption topics, they take a “scandal” oriented approach. More so than the other papers, they focus on single cases of corruption, stressing in particular the role of a single person who often becomes the story himself. The few cases of petty corruption that were retrieved in the course of our study were proposed by tabloid papers, confirming in this way their particular orientation towards news that could have some interest for “common people”. Corruption in sport, mostly in football, represents another specific focus of the tabloid papers. In some way this is obvious, as the attention to sport together with gossip, entertainment, etc., constitutes the very specific characterization of tabloid papers worldwide.

Political affiliation (in the most general and vague meaning of this word, as already stressed) is another important dimension affecting the way in which print news media deal with corruption. Rather than a leftist or rightist way to cover corruption stories, a high level of political instrumentalisation emerged, particularly in certain countries (Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania). News on corruption, mostly at election time, are used to attack political opponents of the daily or to defend politicians close to the newspaper. There is no leftist or rightist way to do this; it depends on the specific positioning of the paper in the domestic political arena. The frequent political instrumentalisation of news on corruption can also be proven by the most frequent focus on the agent rather than on the client of the corruption exchange. Indeed, most of the times the agents are
political figures or public officials linked in some way to politics. Focusing on their role and on the particular political figure rather than on the one who bribes, makes for a good occasion to enter into the political arena with a story that very often presents high level of visibility and exceptionality. As already stated, the political instrumentalisation of the news media represents a recurring feature in the relation between news media and politics in most countries in Central Eastern Europe, which has been largely discussed in the existing literature. Our data confirm this feature.

In some cases, political segmentation is replaced by market segmentation and by competition among newspapers. Such is the case of the United Kingdom, where political affiliation is weaker than in the other observed countries. Here, the market competition between The Guardian and The News Corporation newspapers (The Times and The Sun) has affected the way in which corruption and related topics have been covered in the period under investigation.

4. New and established democracies

New democracies are more exposed to the risk of corruption. There seems to be a sufficient agreement among scholars about this (Treisman, 2000). Political instability also seems to have negative consequences on the level of corruption. On the contrary, more established democracies with a well-rooted framework of laws seems to be more successful in curbing corruption (Chowdhury, 2004; Gounev – Ruggiero, 2012). Our data suggest that the distinction between new and established democracies also affects the coverage of corruption in a meaningful way. Indeed, two groups of countries with similar features as to the coverage of corruption emerge from our study. One group includes two Western European, established democracies: the United Kingdom and France. In the other group, and even with differences among them, we included what could be named the “new democracies” of Central Eastern Europe (Hungary, Romania, Slovakia) and Italy, which presents several characteristics that are featured among the democracies of Central Eastern Europe. In particular, Italy can be said to resemble new democracies because of the dramatic changes that took place as a result of the “clean hands” scandals of 1992 and the almost complete disappearance of the old political parties in the following years. Since then, the Italian political system has not yet found an established structure (Almagisti – Lanzalaco – Verzichelli, 2014). New democracies have also been defined as “transitional” democracies, particularly regarding the media system (Voltmer, 2013). Other scholars have spoken of “post transitional democracies” (Valenzuela, 1990). These countries arrived to democracy in the last part of the last century; their political system and the most general context of rules, both formal and informal, are often unstable and volatile.
In new democracies, the coverage of corruption focuses mostly on single cases of domestic, political and public administration corruption, and little attention is devoted to corruption involving business companies. Single political figures and administrators are at the core of journalistic stories. Indeed, more than in other countries, the focus of the news in this group is placed on the agent rather than on the client. The agent, usually the politician or the public administrator, is the only person who is brought to public blame. In these countries, the coverage of corruption seems to respond to a logic of instrumentalisation: in other words, it is very likely that the large amount of coverage devoted to political and public administration corruption depends on the actual high level of corruption in the country but at the same time, this specific focus is inserted within the political struggle within which the news media system itself is deeply involved. The coverage of cases of corruption is taken as an occasion to enter the political debate and to affect it. Businessmen and corporations (not directly linked to politics) play a minor role in all the stories that were investigated. Less attention is devoted to them when compared to the world of politics and vested interests.

Little attention is devoted to news of corruption in foreign countries, if not in neighbouring countries, as occurs in Hungary and Slovakia. Only two foreign leaders appear frequently on the pages of the newspapers in new democracies: Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin. The latter is often associated to the high level of corruption in Russia while Berlusconi can be taken as a “landmark” in stories on corruption and related behaviours.

Especially in Romania and Slovakia, and mostly in tabloid news outlets, there are frequent stories on corruption in sport. These are mostly stories related to domestic sports, especially football. In Slovakia, there are several articles dealing with corruption in sport in neighbouring countries.

As already stated, literally speaking, Italy cannot be defined as a “new democracy”. Nevertheless, the coverage of corruption in this country shows many similarities with other new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, also because of the high level of political instability beginning with the big “Bribery City” scandal in 1992. In Italy, the focus of the stories we investigated is essentially on domestic, political and public administration corruption, as in the other new democracies. The number of stories on corruption at the local level is what differentiates Italy from most of the other countries. These stories soon become matters of national political struggle and stay on the front pages for long periods.

Latvia is a sort of outlier in the group of new democracies for a variety of reasons. First, it is the only country (including established democracies) where the number of stories on corruption decreases in a substantial measure in the period of our investigation. This seems to depend
essentially on the changes in the news media system. Fewer pages are devoted to a single issue leading to less space for the stories and less resources for journalistic investigation. More than in other countries, newspapers have devoted a substantial amount of attention to anticorruption legislation and the role of national anti-corruption agencies, KNAB in particular, which have nevertheless lost much of their initial importance over the years.

The coverage of corruption in new democracies (with the obvious exception of Italy) has been affected by the EU enlargement for several reasons. Indeed, news media report not only on cases of corruption but on anti-corruption initiatives as well. Even if our investigation began in 2004 (when most of the CEE democracies accessed the EU), in the following years there has been a progressive decrease of many of those anti-corruption policies that had been adopted in view of EU accession, and this is in some way reflected in the coverage. However, there have been important exceptions to this progressive decrease of media attention towards anti-corruption legislation. They are represented by the Radicova government in Slovakia, while in Latvia the initiatives of KNAB have attracted much attention from the news media; Hungarian governments have adopted important anti-corruption initiatives at different moments (2003, 2009, etc.). It therefore seems possible to talk of “waves” of coverage on corruption and anti-corruption initiatives. In certain periods, they frequently reach the front page of the newspapers, while in other periods, depending on several external factors, corruption topics stop attracting journalistic attention.

The prevailing political focus of the coverage of corruption in new democracies may depend also on the fact that in these countries the news media face a general weakness of the so-called intermediary, social organizations. Also because of their young age, parties are weak and so are the unions and other social organizations; in many cases these are volatile organizations with very poor ideological and cultural roots. Not rarely they are established in occasion of the election campaigns to disappear right away. In many cases these are very “personalized” organizations, constructed around single figures of politicians who, often, have vested interests in different economic fields (Zielonka, 2015). The general decline of ideological politics, that in new democracies appear more pronounced than elsewhere, increases the importance of what John Thompson defines the “politics of trust”, that is people become more concerned with the character of the individual, with their trustworthiness and leadership (Thompson, 2006). Because of the weakness of other intermediary organizations, news media have a main role in the construction of “politics of trust” and the news on corruption stories are major occasions to weaken and destroy the reputation of political figures that not rarely, as already said, behave in different social fields including politics. The coverage of corruption stories not only mirrors the situation on the field but becomes an active and important part of the political struggle.
The representations of corruption that emerge from the analysis of the coverage in the so-called “established democracies” (United Kingdom and France) are completely different. The focus of the stories is not on domestic corruption; rather, mostly in UK, it is on corruption abroad and international corruption. When the names of domestic political leaders appear on stories devoted to corruption this is due to their statements or initiatives in favour of the adoption of anti-corruption legislation. Otherwise, most of the stories on corruption that appear in the British and French newspapers are focused on the description of the level of corruption in foreign countries and on cases of corruption involving foreign political leaders.

Business corporations appear very often in the stories we analysed. British and French corporations (BAE, Thales, etc.) make it to the news but so do foreign corporations involved in large international cases (Siemens, etc.). When describing these stories, the focus is no longer on single actors, as is the case with the stories on political corruption, but on the institutions, the organizations at large. In other words, there is no need to attack a specific person in particular.

Much attention is devoted to stories on international corruption in sports, mostly in British newspapers, including corruption in Formula 1, corruption in FIFA, corruption in the Pakistan cricket Federation, etc.

These particular representations of corruption depend on several factors that affect news making. First, it is important to consider the international relevance of both France and the United Kingdom and the extent of their interests, both economic and political. London, in particular, is a very important business capital and its stock exchange plays an important role worldwide. Many corporations that appear in the corruption stories in the UK are listed at the London stock exchange and therefore are placed under the control of the Serious Fraud Office (SFO), an independent government department operating under the superintendence of the attorney general that investigates several crime areas, mainly corruption and bribery.

Moreover, some of the analysed newspapers, such as The Financial Times, The Guardian and Le Monde, are internationally important newspapers with a readership that extends beyond national borders. The attention to international corruption and corruption abroad surely depends on these factors as well. None of the newspapers in the new democracies that we investigated has such a wide circulation, thus, they are more inclined to look mostly at domestic corruption.

In this sense we believe that the representations of corruption that have emerged from our study reflect the level and the particular type of corruption in the countries where these news outlets are published. However, there are also other factors that direct the news selection and that affect the representations that emerge from this research.
5. Study limitations

Despite that ours is a very large study of corruption coverage and that the amount of articles that we investigated is impressive (183,491 articles with CACA and 12,742 articles with HACA), this study presents several limitations. Initially, we encountered some difficulties in retrieving the articles to be investigated. We were forced to use on-line versions in Hungary; we could not include Latvia in the Computer Assisted Content Analysis and the Romanian articles were limited to the period 2009 – 2013. Moreover, the print press system varies enormously country to country, with newspapers that vary in number of pages, periodicity, etc. and this may affect our outcome. Differences in newspaper circulation may be another distinguishing feature.

As is well known, the availability of sources is a very frequent difficulty in most comparative social research (Bruggeman et al., 2014; Livingstone, 2003).

Other limitations to our study derive from the differences in the judiciary systems and mostly in language. Identical actions are interpreted differently in different countries; moreover, there are differences in the language and in the words used to indicate a same behaviour. Translations are difficult and are often not able to grasp the same meaning in all the investigated countries. This is mostly the case with computer assisted content analysis and with the dedicated software we used which, as with other similar software, determines other limitations regarding grammar, spelling, etc.

The best example of all these difficulties may be the case of the British Members of Parliament expenses, which exploded in 2009 and received broad coverage in the British press for a long period. Our study retrieved a very small number of stories devoted to this case because it was treated under different words from the nine keywords that we used to select our corpus. This was a very important case of unlawful behaviour that does not appear among the most frequently covered cases.

For the sake of honesty, it should be mentioned that these difficulties are very frequent in large comparative studies such as ours (Blumler – McLeod – Rosengren, 1992).
References


ANTICORRP is a large-scale research project funded by the European Commission’s Seventh Framework Programme. The full name of the project is “Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption”. The project started in March 2012 and will last for five years. The research is conducted by 20 research groups in fifteen countries.

The fundamental purpose of ANTICORRP is to investigate and explain the factors that promote or hinder the development of effective anti-corruption policies and impartial government institutions. A central issue is how policy responses can be tailored to deal effectively with various forms of corruption. Through this approach ANTICORRP seeks to advance the knowledge on how corruption can be curbed in Europe and elsewhere. Special emphasis is laid on the agency of different state and non-state actors to contribute to building good governance.

Project acronym: ANTICORRP
Project full title: Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption
Project duration: March 2012 – February 2017
EU funding: Approx. 8 million Euros
Theme: FP7-SSH.2011.5.1-1
Grant agreement number: 290529
Project website: http://anticorrp.eu/