Media and National Accountability in the European Union
An explorative study on the impediments EU - journalists encounter when fulfilling their accountability role towards national governments

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ABSTRACT

In Western democracies, mass media are the main means through which citizens receive information regarding the European Union. Although national ministers play an important role at the EU level, citizens are not always aware of the national ministers' activities within the Council. Since citizens mainly experience politics through the media, which act as mediators between the politicians and the public, this paper conceptualizes the media as an accountability forum. The research aims to explore the impediments EU-journalists face in fulfilling their watchdog role towards national governments. By conducting 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews in two EU member states Germany and Italy, this research explores the impediments journalists face at the structural and individual level. The findings revealed that although there is an increasing homogenization of the informational impediments, journalists seem to experience differences due to preferential treatments. Finally, organizational impediments such as political and economic pressure, and the way journalists conceptualize their role, also affect how and what they decide to report.

1. Introduction

Accountability means that voters know, or can make good inferences about, what political parties have accomplished in office and reward or punish them accordingly (Stokes, 2005, p. 316). Many citizens, nonetheless, still encounter difficulties in understanding who should be held responsible and accountable for decisions taken within the European Union (EU) (Holzhacker, 2007, p. 259). Improving institutional clarity and levels of information is thus essential for citizens ability to appropriately attribute responsibilities at the EU level (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). A lack of transparency during decision-making in the EU multi-level system is not only a concern for the citizens, but it further facilitates blame-shifting mechanisms from national politicians to the EU. It is common to criticize the EU for unsuccessful policies generated at the Union level, while taking credit for those that succeed. Such practices represent one of the main challenges for the EU's democratic legitimacy (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Hood, 2007; Schmidt, 2013, p. 11).

This research focuses on the media as an important mechanism of democratic accountability, because in Western democracies, political communication occurs primarily through the media (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Entman, 2005; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; McNair, 2000, p.1; Meyer, 1999). Cook (2005) identifies five specific needs of democracy that the news media system can fulfill: representation, deliberation, conflict resolution, accountability, and information dissemination. The last two functions refer to the press's role in monitoring those in power, the government, and giving citizens the information needed to participate effectively in decision-making about public affairs (Meyers, 2010, p. 41). According

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to liberal theorists, media are the fourth estate: "an independent guardian located in civil society and counterbalancing the power of the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches in the government" (Norris, 2008). The media, therefore, serves as an interlocutor between the politicians and the public to ensure democratic accountability through a watchdog role (Norris, 2014). The core of this journalism paradigm is that journalists should play an investigative and supervisory role towards politicians on behalf of the public (Waisbord, 2000). Media accountability does not only allow citizens to exercise their democratic right to participate in the EU's decision-making process and hold their national representation accountable. Media accountability can further potentially improve EU legitimacy and discourage national politicians from blaming Brussels.

This paper focuses on the impediments that prevent the media from informing the public sufficiently when reporting from Brussels on national ministers. Therein, the purpose of the research is to better understand the institutional and operational elements that affect EU journalists' effectiveness as accountability forums. Cornia (2010) and Raeymaeckers et al. (2007) argue that some structural, geographical, economic, and politics-related obstacles may influence the EU news flow. Raeymaeckers et al. (2007) further elaborate that the longer journalists stay in Brussels, the more they can distance themselves from their national perspective (p. 107). Moreover, Cornia (2010) states that when "the context of the political journalism shifts from the national to the supranational and international dimension, the journalistic practices and cultures of the European countries could also, at least theoretically, change and homogenize" (p. 368). It thus remains unclear which are the impediments EU-journalists face when fulfilling their accountability role towards national governments.

This paper aims to fill the gap in the empirical understanding of what is causing EU-journalists to report and frame news in a specific way. The research question addressed within this paper is the following: "What are the impediments that EU-journalists encounter when fulfilling their accountability role towards national governments?". The research is structured as follows. The first section provides an overview of the previous literature on watchdog journalism and the EU- media relationship. The second section justifies the analytical approach used to further explore the research problem. The third section investigates the impediments highlighted within the interviews conducted for this research. Therefore, to address this question, two exploratory case studies of Italian and German journalists based in Brussels have been conducted. Finally, some reflections regarding the implications of the findings are made.

2. Literature review

The role of the media as a watchdog has been mainly studied at the national level. Previous research is dominated by either comparative case studies that focus on the different journalistic cultures and how these cultures result in different media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), or studies that solely focused on a specific field of application of investigative journalism like corruption (Berti, 2019; Camaj, 2013; Gerli et al, 2018; Rocarolo, 2002). Hanitzsch et al. (2010), for instance, sufficiently explain the several conceptualizations of journalists' role, looking at common theoretical denominators, and exploring their variation across nations in eighteen countries. Regarding the watchdog role, their findings reveal that journalists across the world pay high regard to the normative ideals of detachment, providing political information, and acting as a watchdog of the government (Hanitzsch et al., 2010, p.280). Mellado (2014) expands upon journalists' roles and operationalizes how different professional roles can manifest in journalistic performance. According to her, the watchdog role is one of the six roles that journalists can

perform and is strictly connected to the relationship journalists hold with those in power (Mellado, 2014, p. 600). Whereas her watchdog role operationalization in seven different aspects is useful when conceptualizing 'watchdog journalism', Mellado did not elaborate on the factors that may hinder the fulfillment of this role. Ripollés et al. (2014), by contrast, affirm that acting as a watchdog requires journalists to have independence and professional autonomy. The fulfillment of the watchdog role is based on an adversarial relationship between the media and politicians (Ripollés et al., 2014, p. 27). Journalists therefore may face many impediments to fulfill this role. At the national level, such impediments can be the consequence of political factors (Besley et al., 2002; Gerli et al., 2018; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Johnson, 2014; Meyers, 2010; Rippolés et al., 2014), the legal environment in which media operate (Besley et al., 2002), economic pressures (Meyer, 2010), patterns of media ownership (Besley et al. 2002; Johnson, 2014; Meyers, 2010), practices adopted by individual media companies (Johnson, 2014), and methods and traditions of investigative journalism (Besley et al., 2002; Hanitzsch & Mellado 2011; Reich & Hanitzsch, 2013). These studies conclude that media practice and discourses change from one national context to the other. Nevertheless, none of the previous literature comprehensively assesses which impediments persist among national journalists that move to Brussels and work at the EU level. This aspect is particularly interesting to explore considering the growing literature on Europeanization of EU-journalists (Cornia, 2010; Statham, 2008).

Apart from mapping the diversity of journalistic cultures and performance, another strand of the literature explored how such cultures affect watchdog journalism practice at the national level by looking at the news coverage (Cornia et al. 2009; Rippolés et al., 2014). These studies raise valuable arguments according to which journalists' cultures affect how news are covered by the media. Nonetheless, by focusing on national reporting and not on the author of the news, previous studies assume that there is a causal link between the role a journalist fulfills and the content they write. Content that, according to this line of thought, should mirror the journalists' attitude (Mellado, 2014). This approach ignores how journalists conduct their research and the challenges they may face when reporting. As argued by Mellado (2014), in some contexts, despite the intention to report certain news, the journalist lacks the freedom to directly question, criticize or denounce those in power.

The role of the media at EU level has been analyzed by looking at the impact media can have on European integration, the creation of a European public sphere, and EU democratic legitimacy (Anderson & McLeod 2004; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Meyer, 1999; Trenz, 2008). Whereas most of the previous literature assessed the communicative performance of the EU institutions as a single body (*maybe actor*) (Gleissner & De Vreese, 2005; Lecheler, 2008; Meyer, 1999; Raeymaeckers et al., 2007; Statham, 2008), this research differentiates between the European Commission (EC), the European Parliament (EP), and the Council[2]. Moreover, although some studies focus on the EC (Meyer 1999; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Anderson & Price, 2008), the EP (Anderson & McLeod, 2004), or the Council (Laursen, 2013), none of them comprehensively analyzed the EU institutions' relevance in compensating for the lack of high-level information that should come from the national ministers. This strand of the literature analyzes the communicative performance of the EU institutions and can be useful in exploring the impediments that may arise at the EU level regarding communicative functions. Nonetheless, by focusing on the visibility of EU issues in news coverage and the emerging similarities in national news reporting, previous studies do

[2] The Council of the EU is referred to as the Council throughout the rest of the paper

not comprehensively investigate the impediments EU-journalists encounter when reporting. Given that most of the previous literature focused on news coverage and ignored the importance of letting the authors of the news express themselves, this research only focuses on the news production process and routines.

Baisnee (2002), Cornia (2010), Martins et al. (2012), Raeymaeckers et al. (2007), and Statham (2008) successfully shifted the focus of the literature from the object, the news, to the subject, namely national journalists based in Brussels. Martins et al. (2012) reflect on the implications of the EU institutional environment for the flow of information**.** Their findings point to one potential hurdle journalists face in holding their government accountable over European affairs i.e. the lack of information from the Council (Martins et al., 2012). However, their results risk becoming outdated as the data was gathered over a decade ago and refers to the low communicative profile of the Council only as a whole. Overall, their research offers a relevant starting point for this paper. The authors sufficiently explored the differences between the EC, EP, and the Council regarding availability and accessibility of information, yet they fall short in considering other impediments journalists face to fulfill their accountability role. Two shortcomings of Martins et al. (2012) are that, first they do not mention how each institution contributes to fulfilling the lack of transparency of the Council. Second, they did not elaborate on the role of the different institutions as sources to corroborate or critique the account given by the national governments. This research, therefore, aims to explore the impediments EU-journalists encounter when fulfilling their accountability role towards national governments and hence what is causing them to report in the way they do.

3. Theoretical Concepts and Approaches

This section concentrates on the theoretical concepts and approaches used in this paper. Since citizens receive information about the EU mainly through the media, this paper focuses on the media as an accountability forum and it defines accountability as a "relationship between an actor and a forum" in which the former can be held to account by the latter (Bovens et al, 2018, p. 9). Within this research, the actors are the national ministers, whereas the forum is EU-journalists and ultimately the citizens.

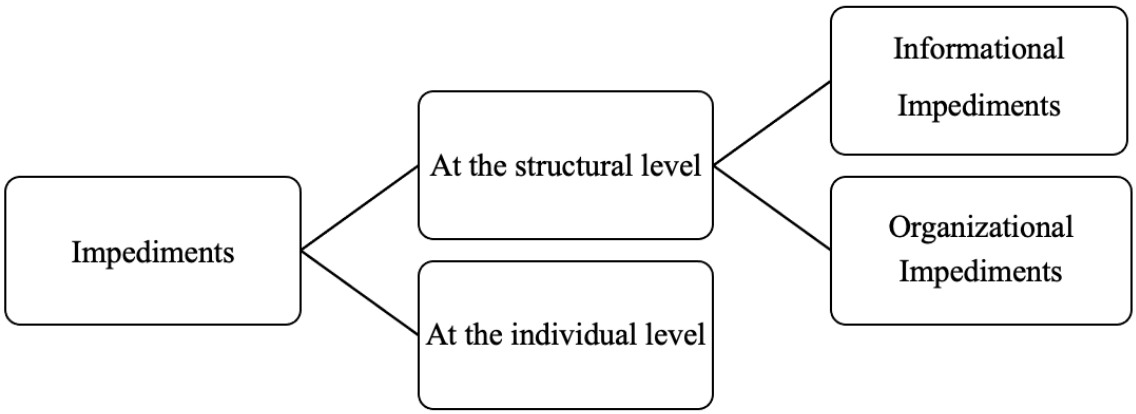
Accountability encompasses three phases: information phase, debating phase, and consequences phase (Schillemans, 2011). First, since this study is exploring the impediments that inhibit EU journalists to be accountability holders, the focus is on the information and debating phases, in which the concept of transparency plays a core role. Transparency is defined as "the availability of information about an actor allowing other actors to monitor the workings or performance of this actor" (Meijer, 2014, p. 6). Second, it is important to clarify that the performative component of journalism can be analyzed by either looking at the news production process or the news product as an outcome. The former approach analyzes all the actions performed before the output such as adherence to organizational routines, interaction with sources, or styles of data-gathering. The latter approach conducts media analyses and assesses the performance of a journalist based on how they framed the news (Mellado, 2014, p. 597). This research only focuses on the former approach and analyses the impediments journalists encounter in producing news, since most of the previous research undermined this approach.

Although this paper follows an explorative approach, to review the theoretical assumptions regarding the impediments, EU journalists encounter when fulfilling their accountability role toward national governments, it is important to first address how other scholars approached this topic (Gadamer, 1994). Drawing on previous literature on watchdog journalism and EU journalism, impediments have been grouped under two main categories: impediments at the structural level and impediments at the individual level. Impediments at the structural level refer to external factors that influence the EU journalists'

practices, whereas impediments at the individual level refer to personal factors that contribute to the journalists' outcome. Figure 1 below provides a concrete illustration of the impediments.

The first category is divided into two sub-clusters: informational and organizational impediments. On the one hand, informational impediments refer to impediments EU-journalists face when gathering information at the EU level. Organizational impediments, on the other hand, refer to impediments rooted at the domestic level such as commercial pressure, political pressure, and how the media react to these pressures.

Figure 1: Author's conceptualization of the impediments



The first sub-cluster, informational impediments, has been elaborated drawing on the literature on the EU qualitative aspects of political communication. According to this literature, three content-related dimensions should be present in political communication: the issue dimension, the procedural dimension, and the accountability dimension.

Table 1: Political communication's dimension by Meyer (1999)

The issue dimension	What issues are being discussed, what are the arguments involved and what is about to be decided
The procedural dimension	At what stage of the decision process are the issues under discussion? What are the means, actors and access points to influence the outcome of the process?
The accountability dimension	Who is advocating what? Who is responsible for a decision taken or the implementation of a policy?

Without these three dimensions, there can be no personal accountability vis-à-vis the public (Meyer, 1999). EU information-provision further needs to be objective, accurate, usable for news items, and based on specialist knowledge. Moreover, this paper considers the political communicative qualities that the EU needs to have a clear political line, being transparent, being open to discussion (Statham, 2008). For the

first sub-cluster, informational impediments, I combined the operationalization by Meyer (1999) and Statham (2008) of the EU's communicative performance. In this research, nonetheless, this framework is applied not to the EU as a whole, as previously done, but separately to the EC, EP, and the Council. Moreover, previous literature on EU correspondents mentioned the creation of an informal network as a necessary step in gathering relevant information at the EU level (Martins et al., 2012). This aspect has thus been included within the informational impediments. This research, therefore, aims to assess the relevance of the information coming from the EU institutions to support or corroborate the account given by the national ministers regarding what they achieve at the EU level.

The second sub-cluster, organizational impediments, draws on the literature on watchdog journalisms' impediments at the domestic level. Scholars had already identified political, legal, socio-cultural, and commercial impediments that may affect journalists' accountability role (Besley et al., 2002; Cornia, 2010; Gerli et al., 2018; Gleissner & de Vresse**,** 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Meyers, 2010; Neveu, 2002; de Vreese, 2005; Raeymaeckers et al., 2007; Reich & Hanitzsch**,** 2013; Ripollés & Castillo, 2013; Rippolés et al., 2014; Terzis, 2008). Nevertheless, given the limits of this research, only two sub-dimensions are operationalized: political and commercial pressure.

Finally, individual impediments are included in the organizational sub-category. Previous research (Mellado, 2014) extensively addressed how journalists perceive their role affects how they report the gathered information. Therefore, this paper takes the EU-journalists' role conceptualization into account, and it pays attention to writing activities used by EU journalists, that may hinder or improve the attribution of responsibility among the EU and the national governments. This operationalization has additionally guided the structuring of the interview guide.

Table 2: Analytical Framework

1. IMPEDIMENTS AT THE STRUCTURAL LEVEL	
1.1 INFORMATIONAL IMPEDIMENTS	OPERATIONALIZATION
A. Formal Institutions	- Transparency of the decision-making process - Access to documents - Assessment of quality of information of the EC, EP, and the Council
B. Informal Network	- Relying on informal sources for relevant information - Leaked documents
1.2 ORGANIZATIONAL IMPEDIMENTS	OPERATIONALIZATION
A. Political Pressure	- Complaints from national politicians - Political pressures to edit written articles
B. Commercial Pressure	- Limiting editorial policies - Influences of the editor
2. IMPEDIMENTS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL	

EU- journalists' preferences	- EU-journalists' conceptualization of their role - EU-journalists specify the differences between EU and Member States' competencies when writing articles

Source: Author's elaboration

4. Methodology

4.1 Case selection

As the literature review has highlighted, empirical studies on watchdog journalism only applied a media analysis approach. Such studies can help to answer the question of *how* EU-journalists' professional roles materialize in journalistic output. However, unlike previous papers, this research focuses on the actors of the news, the journalists themselves, and the reasons *why* they report certain news in certain ways. Qualitative inductive research entails an extensive analysis of the data; therefore, given the time constraints, the analysis focuses on journalists from two Member States: Germany and Italy. The selection of two cases, rather than a single case study helps us to develop a more in-depth understanding of the analyzed phenomena than a single case can provide (Mills et al., 2010). Yin (2009), indeed, argues that multiple case studies are ideal for building theories. Moreover, multiple case studies enable the generation of "more robust theory because the propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27).

The research design is a small-N case study, and the selection of the countries employed the idea of a diverse case selection (Gerring, 2007). Italy and Germany have been selected as illustrative cases, given the fact that they present highly different institutional and cultural contexts. One the one hand, Italy, which belongs to the Mediterranean model is classified under the polarized-pluralized system where levels of political parallelism and state intervention are high, and there is a tradition of opinionated journalism (Cornia 2010; Hallin & Mancini 2004; Roncarolo, 2002). On the other hand, Germany is classified under the democratic-corporatist model, where the high degree of political parallelism has recently decreased and there is a co-existence of press freedom with state regulation (Gattermann & Vasilopoulou, 2010; Kuhn & Neveu, 2003; Mellado 2014). Furthermore, according to the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, which assesses the countries' level of freedom of the press, Italy is in the 41st position, the lowest European state in the ranking. On the other hand, Germany is 13th (RSF, 2021), which highlights a significant difference in the level of freedom journalists experience in the two respective countries. Although focusing on two similar countries, such as Italy and Spain, would have resulted in better insight into the impediments Mediterranean model media face, focusing on two different models enhances the external validity and generalizability of our findings.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data has been collected through in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews combined with content analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of EU-journalists regarding the impediments they face in fulfilling their accountability role. Qualitative interviews are mostly applied in exploratory studies and suit the goal of this research because they enable the researcher to portray a context in greater complexity and depth (Minichiello et al., 1990). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable

the researcher to keep an open approach regarding the impediments EU journalists face. Secondary sources have been used for triangulation. They were gathered online via academic journals and selected based on their relevance for our research, and a primary source, the International Press Association (IPA) (2010) code of conduct has been consulted to understand how the attribution of information works at the EU level.

Since the research aims to explore the impediments EU journalists face when reporting on national ministers from a multilevel system such as the EU, the sampling was based on one criterion: the journalists had to be either Italian or German and based in Brussels. Although the list of the EU-accredited journalists is not public, the countries' permanent representation (PR) have access to it. The list of Italian journalists provided by the Italian PR was used to identify the interviewees to contact. The list of German journalists was retrieved from the latest "Journalisten Deutscher Medien in Brüssel" list on the internet. A total of 77 invitations were sent by email, with a total of 21 follow-up emails. The final research sample consists of 26 journalists, of which 15 are Italian and 11 German. To create a more diverse sample, journalists from both big and small size media companies have been interviewed. The sample is balanced in terms of the type of media, nonetheless, most of the interviewees are men, this aspect may thus be addressed in further research.

An interview guide including a topic list and possible interview questions was developed in English and subsequently translated by researchers in Italian and German. Thus, the interview results are consistent and comparable, which ensures the replicability of the findings. For transferability issues, the interview guide can be received on request. Given that interviews were semi-structured, and some questions were more open-ended than others, the research further includes inductive codes, "generated from the issues of importance to participants themselves, which may be different from those anticipated by the researcher and mentioned in our initial codebook" (Hennink, et al., 2011, p.218).

Interviews were recorded to analyze responses in greater detail (Alsaawi, 2014). They were conducted via Zoom or Skype between April and May 2021. The language used was Italian or German, and all interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were then anonymously transcribed either in Italian or German and subsequently translated into English. To analyse the data, interviews were coded, which is the main activity in qualitative data analysis (Hennink et al., 2010, p.216). This paper conducted a systematic qualitative content analysis and abductive coding is used since the research question is open-ended, but theory-informed (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

As this research applies an interpretive approach, it is subject to the risk of bias. Being an Italian researcher there may have been some cultural bias when analyzing data coming from Italian journalists. Nonetheless, this research addressed this limitation through triangulation of data. Methodological triangulation further enhances the credibility and validity of the findings (Dandashly, 2020). Moreover, when conducting interviews, the risks of preconceived biases or assumptions that may influence data analysis are higher compared to quantitative research. As suggested by Tufford and Neuman (2010), bracketing has been used and notes were taken during data collection and analysis thus minimizing the risk of biases. Finally, as the interviews were conducted in Italian and German, limitations of the translation are considered; for instance, the term "accountability" does not have a proper translation in Italian. Nevertheless, having conducted the interviews in the mother tongue of the journalist put the interviewee more at ease.

5. Findings

This section first analyzes the informational impediments journalists face at the EU level, assessing the relevance of the EC, the EP, and the Council as sources to either back up or corroborate information given by national ministers. Second, impediments at the organizational level are discussed. Impediments founded at the individual level have been integrated in this section because journalists' conceptualization of their role influences how they cover the news.

5.1 Informational impediments

5.1.a The European Commission (EC)

The first two impediments EU-journalists face when receiving information from the EC is the lack of politicization of the message released and the lack of administrative capacity. In line with Cornia's (2010) findings, all EU-journalists agree that the EC speaks with a united voice. However, the interviewees noticed that the information journalists officially receive during the EC's midday briefing, the press meeting officially held by the EC every day at midday, is rather insufficient. Particularly, G4 perceived that the EC's midday briefing as a propaganda event rather than a time for journalists to fulfill their accountability role. Conversely, other journalists did believe that the EC was able to provide some inputs and useful information, but only to journalists who work for news agencies and are in need of immediate news to write their daily articles (I24, I25). Yet, most of the EU-journalists interviewed said that the daily briefings are a catastrophe because the EC only presents the results, rather than the decision-making process that led to them (G3, G4, I17, I20). G7 further highlighted the complexity of the EC by arguing that it is hard to attribute responsibility and understand who is allowed to be named in the news coverage and who is not. Moreover, I24 stated that when commissioners were in the Breydel building (temporary building of the EC between 1991 and 2004), journalists could easily access the commissioners' offices, meet with them, and leave the building with the useful dossiers; now, in the new EC's building, access to the commissioners' offices is denied (I24). I14, I24, and I26 further complained about the time needed to deal with the EC bureaucracy and have a meeting with a commissioner. Indeed, by the time journalists receive the approval of the appointment, they have usually already written the story (I14, I24, I26). These administrative impediments render timely access to information difficult.

The second impediment EU- journalists face is that a lack of valuable information discharged officially by the EC leads journalists to rely mainly on informal sources of information. Formal sources can rarely be used to back up stories, so journalists' accounts can easily be contradicted by the actors involved. The analysis highlights that EU- journalists do not have access to the legislative proposals prior to their publication, indeed, EU-journalists only gain access to information once the proposal is published, and the EC's midday briefings rarely develop upon individual Member States' positions. As a result, journalists fail to understand which Member State supported or opposed a certain legislative proposal. According to I14, the EC started to be less transparent with the Barroso Commission (2004-2010), and subsequently, with Barroso II (2010-2014) the EC even cut some informative sources. He says:

> At first, when I moved to Brussels, we had around 30 copies of the internal press conference of the EC with a summary in English for each Member State. Now, that is not the case anymore and Box Europe, which used to translate the articles of other countries has been closed. (I14)

Some journalists further agree on the tendency of the EC spokesperson to not answer critical follow-up questions asked during the midday briefing; sometimes rather than answering the question, they just repeat previously given statements (G2, G4, G6, G8, G9, I14, I23, I26). G4 further affirmed that the situation had become worse due to the pandemic. This goes against Meyer's (1999) view that emphasizes the importance of press conferences as a means for journalists to ask probing questions to then explain policy issues to the public.

I24, nonetheless, commented that when journalists are writing a scoop, they tend to never ask direct questions regarding it during the midday briefing. His logic is informed by the concept of the free rider, whereby a journalist might retire from asking a specific question in fear of the tactical knowledge being shared and the risk that the other journalist uses this for their own work. Given the high competition among media in Brussel, journalists prefer to not ask questions formally, but rather focus on obtaining an official confirmation of the information gathered informally (I20, I24). Some interviewees stated that they attend the EC briefings only for the informal talks after the press conference once journalists can receive background valuable information off-record (G1, G2, G4, G6, I16).

5.1.b The European Parliament

The main impediment EU-journalists encounter when receiving information from the EP is that there is always the risk for the information to be one-sided and solely disclosed for propaganda purposes. Differently from the EC case and consistent with previous research (Martins et al., 2012) the EP is considered the most transparent and politicized institution. As stated by all the interviewees, within the EP there is the national government's opposition and, given the contrasting interests at stake, it is easier for documents to be leaked in this forum. Furthermore, Members of the EP are the only ones directly elected within the EU, therefore they aim for media exposure. Both the Members of the EP and the media seek to maximize their interests from this reciprocal relationship based on information exchange and public attention (Fengler & Mohl, 2008). Nonetheless, I21 mentioned the presence of the negative correlation between the level of accessibility and the usefulness of the information received, pointing out a drawback in the EP's role as a relevant source. In fact, this interviewee perceived the EP as the easier institution to access, however, he also believed that the information given was less valuable (I21). Yet, I16 argued that the EP is adjusting to the standards of the Council and, as I15 also pointed out, another pressing issue concerns the EP's negligence in releasing the information of the trilogues (I15). Still, if journalists need a MEPs' comment on an issue, the EP plenary is extremely helpful by allowing journalists to meet all the MEPs and offers them an opportunity to exchange information (I26). However, as G1 said:

> Every side tries to present their side as "the correct one". It is, therefore, crucial to always show the other side of the topic, to understand the variety of views of others and their interests.

In addressing this, I16 stressed the importance of journalists to triangulate their sources and consult at least three different sources on the same issue. As a result, the EP's accessibility is arguably greater than the EC's. However, the value of the information exchanged is questioned by some respondents.

5.1.c The Council

The first impediment EU-journalists face when receiving information from the Council, as it was for the EC, is the professionalization of political communication. All EU-journalists interviewed, in line with the previous literature (Meyer 1999; Martins et al, 2012), agreed that the Council is the least transparent

and most difficult institution to access. First, contrary to the EP plenary where journalists experience the meeting firsthand, all the information journalists receive from the Council has already been filtered by someone else (I13). Journalists find that the major challenge is to discover the coalitions and discordances within the COREPER and therefore understand which country supports or opposes certain legislation (G2, G3, G11, I21). Indeed, the Council formally presents information through a briefing held by its spokesperson, which usually occurs before the Council meetings. However, none of the interviewees referred to the Council spokesperson as an important source. The reason for this can be partly found in Laursen (2013)'s research, which explains the inability of spokespersons to disseminate information without compromising professional secrecy and impartiality (p.779). Accordingly, I21 reported that if the spokespersons leak documents, that information is no longer under the spokesperson's control. I14 affirms that the Council's spokesperson never comments on single-country, and he further underlines the "digging" needed by journalists to ascertain the positions of the different countries. Moreover, the Council preparatory bodies are the ones that usually take decisions in the Council, and most of the technical meetings they hold are hardly accessible to journalists (I15, I23). Despite the importance of understanding what national ministers accomplish in Brussels, the Council is not an accessible forum to gain access to such information. This, in turn, complexifies comparing statements and positions upheld by these ministers at the national level with what they campaigned for in Council negotiations

The second impediment EU-journalists face when receiving information from the Council is of an administrative nature, due to a lack of administrative capacities. Journalists can receive documents from the Council press office by sending a freedom of access request (FOIA). However, it usually takes around fifteen days for the office to answer, and some delays can amount to two months (I24). As Žuffová (2021) pointed out with an increasing insistence on timeliness in journalism, submitting a FOIA request and waiting for more than a month to obtain information is not an option for every journalist (p.4). Most of the time, when journalists obtain the document, they have already published the article (I15, I18, I19, I21). Moreover, the Council press office often refuses these FOIA requests (I21). I13 further pointed out that preferential treatments are made whereby the Council does not communicate anything relevant unless the journalists belong to a renowned media company. As stated by all the interviewees, the more prominent the media company, the more information a journalist working for that firm gathers. As stated by G7 and G8, perhaps only the biggest broadcaster gets information beforehand from the Council. Indeed, I21, who is employed by a big news agency, affirmed that sometimes it happens that he receives the Council pre-conference document one or two hours before the meeting.

The third impediment EU-journalists encounter when receiving information from the Council is due to the national ministers themselves. Contrary to the MEPs, who need media visibility, the chance to meet with the ministers only depends on their willingness to do so (I14). Sometimes, EU-journalists do not even encounter the national ministers in the Council because ministers have different entrances and exits compared to journalists. As indicated by I12 and I14, if a journalist is lucky, they can ask the ministers a brief question in the so-called 'VIP corner'. Distinctive patterns, nonetheless, emerged among the behavior of German and Italian ministers in Brussels. Whereas German ministers, if present in the Council, occasionally do background talks with the journalists before or after the Council meetings (G1), Italian ministers are frequently afraid of engaging with the press (I17, I24). As I24 added, usually, Italian ministers just release a few quick statements because Italian journalists are informed about both what is going on at the national and European levels. I22 additionally mentioned the language barrier of Italian

ministers to communicate in English, and this limits their active participation in the Council meetings. Furthermore, as stated by I24, before the Ecofin, Treasury Directors of other countries often hold briefings with the journalists, whereas the Italian Treasury Director has never done it. Italian politicians, therefore, are less likely to leave statements when in Brussels.

The fourth impediment EU-journalists encounter when receiving information from the Council is due to the scarcity of relevant information received officially either from the Council spokesperson or the national ministers. Among journalists there was general agreement that to reconstruct the Council internal dynamics, consulting their national PR and one of the other countries is essential. In line with previous findings (Martins et al., 2012), the information coming from the Member States' PRs is deemed as more useful to find out the national positions within the Council as compared to the information coming from the Council press officers. Nevertheless, as noted by Meyer (1999), although the PRs provide the media with information about who advocated what, this information is not attributable to politicians but to unnamed "diplomatic sources". According to the International Press Association (IPA) code of conduct, which has further been accepted by the EU institutions, "background" information cannot be attributed at all. All EU-journalists, indeed, stressed the obligation of keeping their informal sources anonymous. However, guaranteeing anonymity becomes an issue when journalists need to fulfill their watchdog role. Journalists, therefore, are continuously conducting a cost-benefit analysis. First, they need to avoid causing unjustified harm (Meyers, 2010, p. 18). Second, they need to evaluate when they can prevent or reduce harm when such harm is fully justified, and how to explain their choices both to those they harm, namely who gave the EU-journalists the information, and to the citizens they serve (Meyers, 2010, p. 10).

To sum up, the main impediment is that due to a lack of information coming from formal settings in general, journalists rely mostly on informal sources. Since the information, which is received from informal sources cannot be attributed, without the personalization of political debate and decisions, political accountability remains unattributable. All journalists agreed on the fact that in Brussels there is an oversupply of information. The main issue is not about the quantity of information, but the quality, and how journalists receive it. Finally, some journalists said that more transparency in the Council would facilitate their job (G2, I15, I19, I21). At the same time, if all the information was transparent, Brussels-based journalists would not be necessary (I21). According to most of the EU-journalists, it is the nature of the Council to not be transparent because, as I19 said, if intermediaries' documents were to be published then the decisions would be taken in another venue because the Member States need to reach compromises through bargaining.

5.1.d Informal Channels

The last informational impediments EU-journalists face is that they mostly rely on informal sources. These elements cannot be attributed to any source, and it may not be reliable because each actor leaks information to pursue their own agendas. At EU level, the same information is endorsed by more actors at the same time, hence there are different channels to access it. I24 stressed that although both the Council and the EC's documents are formally off-limits, some media often managed to receive them (I24). Working documents regarding the Member States' position are usually sent to journalists informally either by their national PR, interest groups, or MEPs (I18, I21). If a journalist is interested in a specific dossier, they can further contact NGOs that are monitoring the issue (G5, G7, G10, G11, I14, I15).

In Brussels, there is always someone with a political interest to leak information. Nonetheless, all the EU-journalists agree that, given the many interests involved, they cannot always rely on the leaked

documents. First, journalists need to understand why an actor is leaking that specific document at that specific time. All the interviewees are aware that if they just consult the PR of their country or the personnel of their national ministers, the information received may contain biased elements and show only a partial view. G10 and I21 considered ambassadors as second-level sources because they mainly share their opinions, thus influencing journalists' work which may then be biased by the ambassadors' interests. The most reliable sources are the neutral ones, namely information coming from people that are not in the spotlight (I21). Indeed, as J21 denoted, people in the spotlight have their agenda and if journalists only consult them, follow their hints, and report their information, they risk becoming propaganda tools.

5.2 Organizational Impediments

Although freedom of the press entails responsibility in fulfilling its democratic duties, such responsibility also falls on media owners and citizens who create the conditions under which journalists act (Meyer, 2010, p. 49). This section explores some external factors that influence the journalists' accountability role by looking at the political and commercial pressures they face. Since differences between Germany and Italy emerged, this section first focuses on Italy, then on Germany. Individual impediments are further integrated to explore how the German and Italian approaches to news coverage differ.

An impediment Italian journalists face is that due to political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and a lack of communication between national and EU journalists, the latter perceive that they do not have any responsibility for what is decided in the editorial office in Rome or Milan. None of the EU-journalists feel political pressure ex-ante reporting. Yet, ex-post, many journalists affirmed to have experienced external pressures such as calls from politicians asking to edit some articles. One journalist had issues with the Italian treasury (I24) and I19 even shared that he had to change media companies because of such external pressures. Although most of the Italian interviewees considered external pressures to be constant (e.g I24), journalists never let these pressures influence their stories if those are factually correct. I22 mentioned that once he found a "scoop" which the media company decided not to publish by stating that "they used the story in another way." A few days later, the "scoop", which was not a "scoop" anymore, had been directly leaked by the ministry, suggesting that the media company notified the ministry in advance (I22).

The second organizational impediment Italian Brussels-based journalists face is that sometimes politicians have leverage on the media companies. How external pressures are coped with further depends on the media company (I19). According to respondents, political pressures exist because of the mismatch between the version of news reported by national politicians to Italy-based journalists and what Brussels-based journalists know because of their proximity to the EU institutions and the other member states (I18). Considering that ministers are on average responsible for almost 35% of all EU claims being made in national public debates (Koopmans, 2007), double-checking the information received from national ministers represents a real challenge. Nonetheless, I12 and I16 explicitly stated that EU-journalists already must cover many different issues, therefore, they have limited time and cannot 'fact-check' each statement made by the national ministers. In addition, every time Italian ministers go back to Italy, they convoke all the Italian journalists and do their propaganda. The mismatch between what national ministers release at the national level and how they behave in practice at the EU level is hence one of the main issues to tackle. I24 specified that many times, with Berlusconi, it had happened that the national ministers

would criticize the decisions taken by the Council when Italy voted in favor or retained. Moreover, Italian citizens are more likely to believe their national ministers (I23) and since journalists based in Italy do not verify the information nor contact Brussels-based journalists, frequently, the news written by journalists based in Italy prevails (I24). The nature of the editor affects the media coverage, independently of the information gathered by Italian journalists at the EU level. Italian media directors sometimes may even ask EU journalists for specific news, the media directors' inputs, therefore, are seen as leverage for pure propaganda purposes and are editorial choices that disregard concrete situations (I15, I21, I23, I24).

The third organizational impediment Italian Brussels-based journalists face is commercial pressure. Some industrial groups have leverage over media companies that depend too much on external funds. Consequently, these media cannot always expose themselves and be accountable; this ultimately affects the credibility of the newspaper (I15, I24, I26). If a media company economically depends on an investor who has strong relationships with industrial groups or companies that buy a lot of advertising for the newspaper, there are some practices media companies implement to secure these funds. First, the media company double-checks the information that is published to ensure it avoids criticism towards its investors (I15). Second, if the media company has compromising information on them, it can either call the industrial group and suggest them to share their view on the issue or wait for the other newspapers to report on it and then write a short article on the issue on the last page (I12). Yet, I14 understands that if a media company has a relevant source of funding it cannot risk losing it. To sum up, a lack of funding of the Italian media, which is too dependent on public or private funding, leads them to be less accountable when these investors are involved in a story. This impediment is related to the fact that in Italy, many newspapers do not have a separate governance system (I23).

Few German journalists confirmed that they prefer to follow a more neutral approach when writing news. As long as they do not scrutinize politicians, they do not receive any political pressure. A lack of an adversarial relationship between the politicians and journalists does not allow journalists to fulfill their accountability role (Norris, 2014). In this case, the impediment is not the political pressure, but rather not conducting independent research and depending exclusively on the information received informally through the politicians. G1 affirms that in Brussels there are two types of reporting: a journalist can either report in a constructive way or criticize politicians and jeopardize the relationship with them. Some German journalists explicitly said that they do not like the term 'watchdog', they rather perceive themselves as 'service providers'; their responsibility is to inform the citizens and explain to their audience about lawmaking in the EU so that the audience can have its own opinion upon the matter (G2, G5, G10). Nonetheless, G3 further stated that once a commissioner came to him and said: "If you are hostile to us, then our motivation will not be great to speak with you". G8 affirmed that he does not feel any pressure because he is working for a small media company and politicians do not care about small newspapers since they have a small reach. Thus, German journalists, although acknowledging the importance of being distant from the actors they are supposed to scrutinize, follow a more neutral approach. Few German journalists affirmed that if they receive complaints from politicians, they prefer to adjust the story, rather than displease any actor involved in the news and lose contacts (G5). To sum up, according to German journalists, in Brussels there is rarely investigative journalism because journalists do not conceptualize themselves as 'watchdogs' and they depend too much on their informal sources.

Finally, both Italian and German journalists referred to the importance of always specifying the division of competencies (e.g., specifying that health is an exclusive competence of the Member States) and always making a distinction, between the EU institutions, for instance, the Council, and national

ministers (I13, I24). As G11 claimed, journalists always need to start from zero, as they cannot expect any knowledge from the audience when reporting about complex EU decisions. This approach is useful to better help citizens to attribute responsibilities between the national and European level.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper identified a few issues that need to be addressed. First, at the informational level, the findings reveal that professionalization of political communication does not allow EU journalists to receive relevant information formally. The consequence is that the information released by the EU institutions is presorted, and no crucial dialogue is allowed. Second, the lack of transparency of working documents and the administrative burden of sending FOIA requests, do not allow journalists to identify in time the position of the different countries during negotiations. Third, the data showed that big-size media companies are in a privileged position and information is unevenly distributed, depending on journalists' reputation and the medium for which they work. This obstacle is rooted in hierarchical differences, both at the media level and at the journalists' level (Raeymaeckers et al., 2007, p. 115). Finally, since most of the information is given off the record, attributability of responsibility is most of the time hard to achieve because EU journalists need to guarantee the sources' anonymity to protect the sources' position. This mechanism, which is integral to the function of journalism, creates interdependence between the journalists and the politicians, highly undermining the journalists watchdog role.

At the organizational level, the research shows that differences among countries remain. Italian media are commercialized and thus less independent, both politically and financially, compared to German media. Nonetheless, whereas Italian journalists often engage in disagreements with national politicians because of the news they write, German journalists employ a more neutral approach and refrain from raising political dust. Italian journalists, compared to German journalists, are more subjected to receive unfounded inputs regarding EU news from their editors based in Italy. Finally, few German journalists did affirm that they do not perceive themselves as watchdogs but rather as service providers, and as mentioned before, this affects how they cover the news.

The research offered insights into the origins of impediments EU-journalists face when fulfilling their accountability role towards national governments. The analysis showed that journalistic cultural practice persists at the EU level. There is a growing homogenization of impediments at the informational level, as, in Brussels journalists depend on the same supply of sources. However, media output is still influenced by organizational factors, which vary from country to country. In the case of Italy, these organizational factors, such as political and commercial pressures constitute an important impediment to journalists' coverage of news and performance of their accountability role.

Given that part of the sample refers to administrative and organizational capacity issues not only from the media company, but also from the EU institutions, this research reveals that administrative capacity constraints push for informalization. Nonetheless, further research is needed to assess to what extent an increase in transparency of the decision-making process will in practice improve accountability. Increased transparency may, indeed, prefer informalization strategies to avoid public and media scrutiny. Moreover, for transparency to enhance accountability it is indispensable for the actors to be capable of processing the information (Meijer, 2010). Hence, although transparency and openness are often cited as

remedies for accountability problems, these elements seem necessary but insufficient to secure media accountability.

In conclusion, this research raised some relevant aspects that can be used as a starting point for quantitative studies or large-N case studies. Although this paper made a significant contribution to the academic debate surrounding EU political communication and EU correspondents, further research is needed. The sample of this paper consisted of 26 EU-journalists; therefore, these preliminary findings cannot accurately be interpreted for a generalized population (all EU-journalists). However, focusing only on two Member states allowed the findings to be more detailed.

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8. Annex

Table 1: German EU-Correspondents

German EU-Correspondents	Start Brussels:	Occupation field
G1	2019	Newspaper
G2	2019	Newspaper
G3	2009	Newspaper
G4	2020	Newspaper
G5	2020	Radio
G6	2016	Newspaper
G7	2017	Radio
G8	2008	Freelancer
G9	2015	Newspaper
G10	2019	Radio
G11	2018	Newspaper

Table 2: Italian EU- Correspondents

Italian EU-Correspondents	Start Brussels	Occupation field
I12	2011	Internet
I13	2016	News Agencies
I14	2007	Newspapers and Magazines
I15	2016	Internet
I16	2016	TV networks
I17	2016	Newspapers and Magazines
I18	2016	News Agency
I19	1985	Newspapers and Magazines
I20	2009	Free lancer
I21	2011	News Agency
I22	2011	News Agency
I23	2018	News Agency
I24	2001	News Agency
I25	2018	Internet
I26	2017	Free lancer