

LOST: WATCHDOG



ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH LOCAL AND REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dutch decentralization in the social domain has given more tasks and autonomy to the local government. This necessitates proper accountability processes for two reasons. First of all, to check if policy turns out to be effective and to see if governmental actors appear to misbehave in some way. And secondly, to assure that citizens are sufficiently informed about what their municipality is doing concerning these very sensitive and influential topics in the social domain (in line with Arnold, 2006).

Local and regional media are ideally present to trigger, report and assure formal and informal accountability processes, and work as an accountability forum in itself (in line with Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016). However, the deterioration of regional and local journalism (Kik & Landman, 2013) raises the question if local and regional media are able to fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning the decentralization in the social domain.

In this research we have used a mixed methods approach to get a complete overview of the workings of local and regional media in relation to the municipality's new tasks in the social domain. We have examined:

- The amount of news articles written by local, regional and national newspapers regarding the new tasks in the social domain;
- Differences between municipalities: the influence of size and region on the quantity and quality of the news articles;
- The quality of the local and regional news articles for accountability purposes;
- The concrete roles of local and regional news media in (formal) accountability processes;

The outcomes of this research show that local and regional newspapers have a complicated relation to fulfilling their accountability tasks on a local level. On the one hand, their role has increased since the decentralization and most municipalities can consume a range of different news outlets and news formats. On the other hand, we believe the role of local and regional media is not steady enough to rely on as an accountability mechanism. And, we doubt that the quality of the articles is sufficient to make an actual impact on formal or public accountability processes. We conclude that the local media watchdog is missing.

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PREFACE

Het is klaar!

Mijn studietijd zit erop.

Het waren mooie jaren,

wellicht komt er zelfs nog eens een vervolg op –

Maar voorlopig even niet.

(Misschien tot uw grote verdriet);

deze scriptie blijft eendelig.

Lieve vrienden¹²³, familie, scriptiebegeleiders⁴ en geliefde⁵, bedankt.

Zonder jullie hulp stond er nog geen letter op papier.

En kijk eens aan. Nu rest mij alleen nog te zeggen:

veel leesplezier!

¹ ResMates, ik schaar jullie onder vrienden inmiddels.

² Een bijzonder woord van dank aan Omar Kavafoglu voor het overnemen van diverse diensten bij ProDemos.

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⁵ Randy, dit gaat over jou!

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 TRANSFER OF TASKS, TRANSFER OF ACCOUNTABILITY?

In the year 2015 a 'very big' decentralization in the so called 'social domain' was implemented in The Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, 2013). This decentralization moved tasks from national to local governments. Municipalities are now individually responsible for youth policy, employment and income and elderly care (Rijksoverheid, n.d.b). This decentralization of tasks asks for proper checks and balances. However, these checks and balances might be a problem. Arno Visser (2016), president of the Court of Audits, summarized:

'Accountability is often forgotten in the distribution of tasks. Central government allocates tasks and budgets to municipalities, who use these resources according to their own insights and needs. This may result in differences between municipalities. Who then, is accountable for these differences: national government or local governments? The National Audit Office wants to be able to explain transparently which policies are financed by tax money and whether those policies have been carried out satisfactorily. This is impossible without appropriate accountability mechanisms.'

We are interested in the accountability gap Visser describes. More precisely, we are interested in the role of local and regional media in relation to this gap. Not only tasks have moved away from the national government to local government, but monitoring functions also partially moved away from parliaments to independent regulators, societal organizations and the news media (Jacobs and Schillemans, 2016:23). The Court of Audits fears for quality differences between municipalities. Reliable accountability mechanisms to signal these differences are therefore necessary. Ideally, local and regional media can be the first in line to signal complications. Media can play a key role in networks as the prime 'connection mechanism' between different entities monitoring governments (Peters, 2016).

Have the local and regional stepped into the accountability gap Visser describes and are they currently providing checks and balances for the decentralized tasks? In the next paragraphs, we will introduce the puzzle we have found between the

transfer of tasks, responsibilities and accountability on the one hand and the current state of local/regional journalism on the other.

1.2 ACCOUNTABILITY BY THE MEDIA

As indicated, former national and provincial responsibilities transferred to municipalities in 2015. Municipalities are currently administratively and financially responsible for three administrative areas that can have major influence on the lives of many citizens, namely youth policy, employment & income and elderly care (Rijksoverheid, n.d.b). We will refer to these three administrative areas as 'decentralization topics'. The coalition agreement of cabinet Rutte II (2012:40) stated that municipalities will have wide-ranging discretion to coordinate the implementation of tasks, and to do more tasks with less money.

This governance transition has given municipalities responsibility for important topics such as: when is the care of elderly done by professionals and when by volunteers? And, if the municipality has decided to give some tasks to volunteers, how will we assure that the quality is good? How do we organize youth mental care? How do we arrange day care of people with a protracted illness? And, as a final example, how do we help people who have run up debts? These topics demonstrate that municipalities currently have an enormous influence on the lives of many (vulnerable) people.

This asks for proper checks and balances. Ideally, media fulfill a watchdog function when they keep the government alert and watch out for citizen's interests (Waisbord, 2000). A stronger version could even be that local media as an accountability forum (Bovens, 2007; Magetti, 2012). This is when they force leaders to provide argumentation for their actions (Norris, 2014; Entman, 2005). In relation to the decentralization topics we find it very interesting to see which roles local and regional media fulfill in relation to accountability.

In this research, 'accountability' is defined as a process wherein an actor (a person or an organization) is evaluated and judged by an accountability forum in the light of possible consequences (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016:24). For example, when an agent of a healthcare organization harms a patient, the agent can be called to account – 'why have you made this mistake?'. And, secondly, the agent can also be *held* accountable, this refers to penalizing certain behavior – 'you may not

independently visit patients this month.'. Accountability thus involves an element of retributive justice in making the guilty pay for their wrongdoing (Mulgan, 2003:9). Bovens et al. (2014: 1-20) summarize the accountability process as the following:

'Accountability processes start with an information phase wherein all information on an actors' doing is collected. Accountability processes end with a phase in which the accountability forum passes consequential judgement on the actor, sometimes supported by formal sanctions'.

For municipalities, there are multiple accountability mechanisms, such as the municipal council filing written questions to which the mayor and aldermen must respond or when the municipal council tables a motion. And, since the national government is the formal supervisor of what municipalities do in the social domain (Rijksoverheid, n.d.c.), there might also be an accountability process between municipalities and the national government. More informal accountability processes, such as the website www.waarstaatjegemeente.nl also exist. This website compares the current state of municipalities in various policy areas. And lastly, there are accountability processes by the media.

Accountability by the media is a topic of interest because its working is relatively underexplored and the role of the media is diverse (Schillemans, 2016:24). This diversity takes the shape of several roles the media has, as indicated by Jacobs and Schillemans (2016). First, independent journalists cover council meetings and policies that might lead administrators to critically evaluate their decisions and policies. Second, independent journalists ask critical questions when policy does not turn out to be effective or when governmental actors appear to misbehave in some way (Schokker & Schillemans, 2016). Consequently, an administrator must account for his decisions to the media. Third, the media writes about political parties, asking questions and presenting alternative policy options. This helps keeping citizens and other interested parties informed, which can trigger other informal accountability processes. And fourth, the media trigger accountability processes within a municipality, such as council members asking critical questions to an alderman based on information from a newspaper article.

To check if the quality of the articles is sufficient to call municipalities to account, two standards exist. These two standards developed by John Zaller (1992) and used by Arnold (2006). The standards assess the sufficiency of news coverage and are called

the Full News Standard and the Burglar Alarm Standard. These standards will be elaborated on later in this research.

In sum, media can trigger formal and informal accountability processes and function as an independent accountability forum on their own. The media can thus be important for accountability at the local administrative level in various ways. Standards exist to assess if coverage is sufficient for accountability. Since the local administrative level has received more tasks and responsibilities due to decentralization, it could be that it has had impact on the work and priorities of local journalism, regional journalism or even national journalism.

1.3 CURRENT STATE LOCAL AND REGIONAL JOURNALISM

Doubts exist whether accountability by the media is proficient in municipalities. Empirical reports from 2013 and 2014 by the Dutch Journalism Fund point in this direction. The reports state that the supply of local and regional newspapers continues to shrink. In the past multiple local newspapers per region existed, but now there are just a hand-full in total (Kik & Landman, 2013). Monopolization of local and regional newspapers (since 1987) is also worrisome because it has led to less diversity and supply of regional and local news (ibidem).

The Dutch government, however, still counts on the watchdog function of journalists. Schillemans and Schokker (2016) put forward an evaluation report by GRECO (2013) which shows that the Dutch government does not think an ethical code of behavior is necessary for politicians because ins and outs of politics are constantly monitored by journalists. The Dutch government thus relies on journalists to critically monitor politicians in order to have a well-functioning political system. According to the Dutch government (2017), the lack of local and regional newspapers is partly relieved by online journalism, like bloggers and civil journalists. However, earlier research pointed out that these online developments are still in its infancy (Landman et al., 2015). It is therefore doubtful whether new media initiatives have developed into media watchdogs of local government.

1.4 GOVERNANCE PROCESSES CAST A CLOUD OVER ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESSES

BY THE MEDIA

Even if we assume that the decentralization has had a positive impact on local and regional journalism, it is uncertain whether the responsible actors can be properly identified by the media and held accountable for their actions. Hasler et al. (2016) have shown that in governance processes comparable to the recent decentralization in the social domain, in which various actors have a role in the implementation of a policy, elected actors are often 'over-responsibilized'. Which means that their role looks significantly more crucial in the media compared to their real involvement in decision-making processes. And additionally, elected actors are often 'over-blamed'. Responsibility for policy failures or problems is more often attributed to them than to other types of non-elected actors. The decentralization process could thus complicate the finding of responsible actors and put more pressure on electorally controlled actors due to the blurring of clear, strict lines of command and accountability, which are typically seen as ideal for public services (Strøm, 2000). Since 2015, collaborations with psychiatrists, health care organizations and youth coaches are the municipality's responsibility, but how can municipal administrators and citizens be abreast of these current affairs if the media cannot find the responsible actors?

1.5 THE PUZZLE

The decentralization in the social domain has given more tasks and autonomy to the local government. This necessitates proper accountability processes for two reasons. First, to check if policy turns out to be effective and to see if governmental actors appear to misbehave in some way. And secondly, to know if local and regional newspapers report on the activities concerning the decentralized tasks of municipalities to establish whether citizens are sufficiently informed about what their municipality is doing for these very sensitive and influential topics (in line with Arnold, 2006).

Local and regional media are ideally present to trigger, report and assure formal and informal accountability processes, and work as an accountability forum in itself (in line with Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016). However, the deterioration of regional and local journalism raises the question to what extent and whether accountability

processes are triggered and provided by the media in every municipality. And, if a municipality indeed has local and regional media that have stepped into the 'accountability gap', how have they dealt with the decentralization topics? Can they find the responsible actor or are elected officials indeed over-blamed and over-responsibilized?

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The problem we have described in the former sections lead to the following research question:

To what extent are local and regional media able to fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization in the social domain?

The tasks in the social domain refer to the decentralization topic: youth policy, employment & income and elderly care. The research question will be answered in three sub-questions. First, we are interested to see to what extent local and regional media are reporting about topics concerning the decentralization in all municipalities. Although our research particularly focuses on regional and local journalism, we figured that there is a possibility that there has been a change in the focus of national newspapers as well. Have they written more about the decentralized topics? And how do they compare to the local and regional newspapers? Therefore, we also examined the extent national newspapers have been reporting about topics concerning the decentralization.

- 1. What is the number of news articles written by local, regional and national newspapers between the years 2000 and 2016, per municipality, regarding the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?*

This first sub-question will give us an overview of all news articles concerning the new decentralized topics per municipality for a longer period. We can map how many articles appeared per year per municipality. Most importantly, this will allow us to see whether the decentralization of tasks has led to a noticeable change in patterns of reporting. The overview furthermore enables us to compare between municipalities, which leads us to the second sub-question:

- 2. Is a larger municipality an indication for a higher number of news articles?*

By answering the first sub-questions we will gain an overview of the quantity of news articles which will be a good start for developing explanations for differences such as size. However, it does not tell us anything about the quality of the articles. We do not know if more articles mean that journalists are simply writing reports of the council meetings, or if they actively do research. Or, if local and regional media are pointing out the right responsible actors. The following sub-questions will therefore focus on the content of the articles and the accountability roles the media fulfill. We will compare the content of local and regional of a sample of news articles from 25 municipalities to see what they did in terms of accountability roles:

3. *Which accountability roles do we see in regional and local news articles concerning the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?*

The answer to this sub-question allows us to see what accountability roles the local and regional media fulfill and who they see as responsible actor. The combination of sub-question 1 and sub-question 2 allows us to assess which accountability roles local and regional news media fulfill, and helps us to compare between municipalities. However, until now, the analysis does not tell us anything about the quality of the news articles itself. We do not know whether the quality of the articles is sufficient to hold municipalities to account for decisions they have taken on decentralization topics. The final sub-question is therefore:

4. *Is the quality of news articles written by local and regional media sufficient to hold municipalities to account concerning decisions they have taken on decentralization topics in the social domain, namely youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?*

The answer to the third sub-question will be given according to the transparent accountability standards of John Zaller (1992). In chapter 4 we will elaborate more upon these standards.

After answering these sub-questions we will know the extent, the accountability roles and the quality of the news articles concerning the decentralized topics. The combination of these questions will enable us to answer our main question.

1.7 WHY ARE THESE QUESTIONS RELEVANT?

First, these research questions are theoretically relevant. According to Djerf-Pierre & Pierre (2016) the role of the media in governance is particularly neglected in studies of local government. This is a problem because the media fulfill important monitoring functions (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016) we currently might not be fully aware of. Furthermore, Faguet (2014) argues that accountability is a gap in the literature concerning decentralization processes. Especially empirical evidence of the effect of decentralization on accountability is missing, which leaves us unaware of the effects of decentralization on accountability mechanisms. This study dives into both theoretical gaps because it helps us understand what accountability roles local and regional media fulfil in this shift in governance to the local level. It also allows us to empirically investigate the relation between media and accountability. In the past, research has been done into the connection between media and accountability (Magetti, 2012; Norris, 2014, Arnold, 2006). And, Schillemans and Jacobs (2016) have theorized the connection between news media on the one hand and public accountability on the other. However, empirical evidence of the relation between media and accountability on a local and regional level is ample. This research will therefore map media-provided checks and balances surrounding local government officials.

Secondly, the research questions are practically relevant because the answers provide an insight into the current working of local and regional media and how the media have responded to the decentralization. It will give a clear idea of the coverage of decentralized topics, which could be relevant for the evaluation and improvement of the quality of the decentralization process. By studying differences between municipalities, this research will also give an insight into how policy changes – such as decentralization – affect democratic processes such as informal and formal accountability processes triggered by the media.

1.8 HOW THE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED

The answer to the research question will be answered in three layers. This three-layered approach is inspired by Arnold (2006), who has done similar research. Arnold analyzed the extent to which local American newspapers reported on the activities of local representatives in Congress to establish whether citizens were sufficiently informed about what their representatives were doing and, thus, could hold them

accountable for their actions or lack of. Arnold examined the content and frequency of coverage, the reasons for differences in coverage and the extent to which the variations affect the public's knowledge and awareness. The central idea of his research is the same as our research: check if and how local (and regional) newspapers provide checks and balances to the ones in power. However, Arnold's research perspective differs from our research. Where Arnold focusses on the public's knowledge and awareness we will take a broader perspective and also examine the impact of local and regional news articles. This allows us to map a more specific relation between public accountability and the news media.

The research starts off with an introduction to decentralization and local journalism. Next, we will explain the relation between media and accountability. These chapters hand us the theoretical expectations we will be testing. Our three-layered design will be explained in our method chapter. In our concluding chapter, we will answer the research question, reflect on the outcomes and discuss consequences. In figure 1 the structure of this research is visualized.

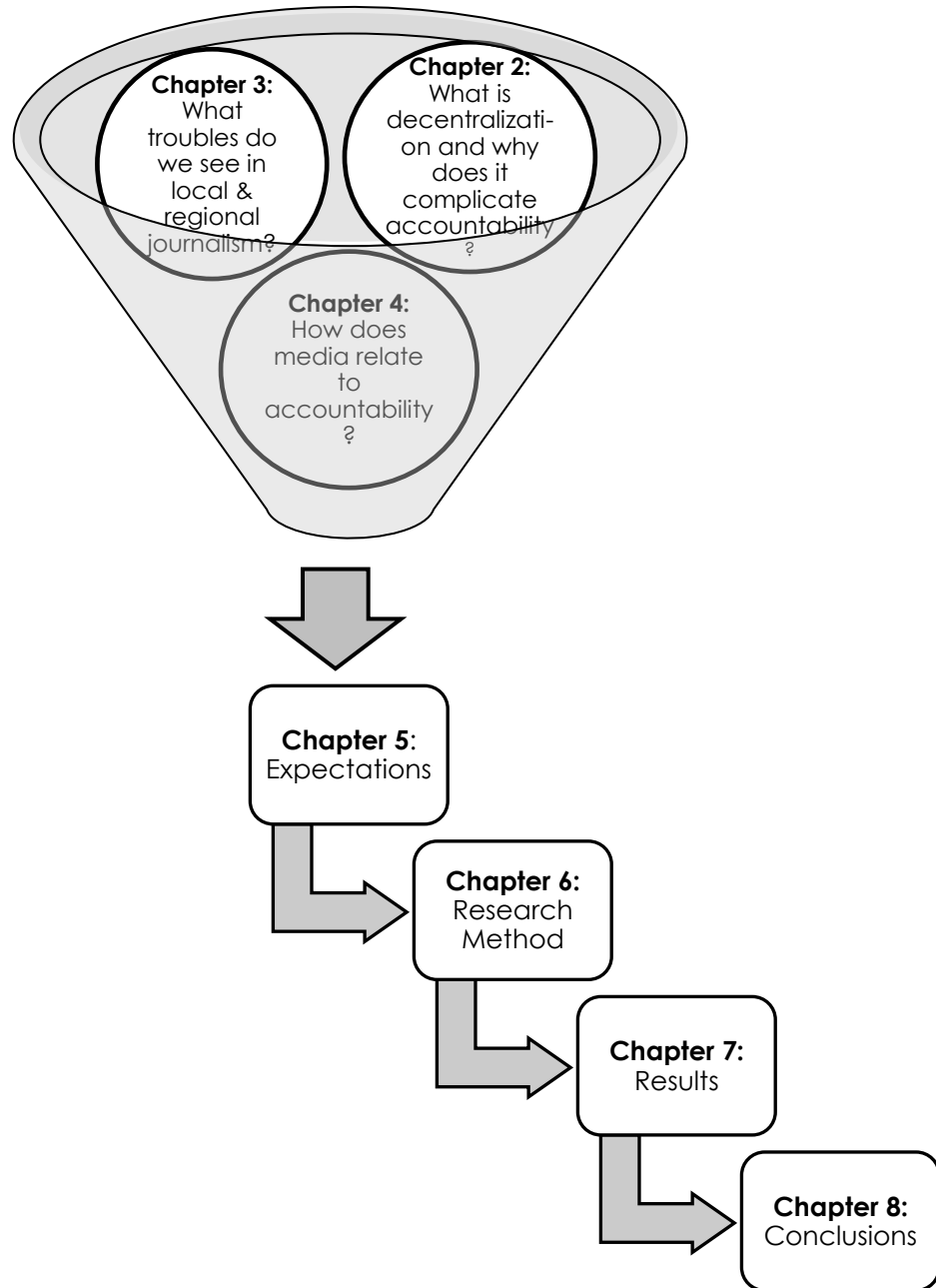


Figure 1: Research process

2 DECENTRALIZATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

Decentralization in broad terms concerns the transfer of specific functions of the central (or national) government to regional or local (state/provincial/municipal) government (Faguet, 2014). This chapter is a meta-historical excursion to understand the scope of the specific decentralization in the social domain. This chapter contains a brief overview of the Dutch polity, a brief introduction into the theory behind decentralization and an overview of the consequences of the recent decentralization in the social domain.

Within the social domain, the Dutch welfare state has a tradition of highly institutionalized relations between a historically weak central state and strong civil society organizations (Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012:616). This indicates that there has always been involvement of civil society organizations on a policy level, which is considered part of the unique Dutch "polder model" (Visser & Hemerick, 1997). The transfer of responsibilities to a local level, close to the people and organizations, is not an odd decision in this light. However, the decentralization in the social domain is an unprecedented transfer of responsibilities from central level to local level.

Furthermore, the recent decentralization in the social domain is an important case because it is a partial decentralization (for examples see: Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012). A partial decentralization means that policy autonomy (task responsibility) or risks of policy failure and success (accountability) stay at the level of the national government. In this chapter, we will therefore shed light on the scope and complexity of such a decentralization and the problems that might arise with such a partial decentralization in the light of accountability.

2.1 POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands are a decentralized unitary state. There is a national government, but there are also provinces, municipalities and water authorities who have autonomous powers (Breeman et al., 2016). According to Zwaan (2017:221) the current structure facilitates a central role for the national government. However, this does not mean that there is no debate about what is the right scale and structure of the Dutch administration. There is an on-going debate concerning the scale of decentralized territories, especially municipalities, water authorities and provinces

(Zwaan, 2017:231). Decentralization in the social domain is therefore part of a broader, on-going, decentralization debate.

Although there is discussion about decentralization, there have not been major changes to the basis of the territorial division of administrative powers in the Netherlands. The basis is a three-layered system: a national layer, a provincial and a municipal layer. It was Thorbecke (1798-1872) who designed this system during the revision of the constitution in 1848. Therefore, this three-layered system is referred to as the 'House of Thorbecke' (Raijmakers, 2014). On the website of the Dutch national government (n.d.a.) is explained what tasks the different layers are concerned with, which we will now briefly summarize.

The national government consist at the moment of eleven ministries, agencies, inspections and High Councils of State. All organizations are concerned with the making of national policy, the carrying out of these policies and supervision on the working of these policies. There are twelve different provinces and they are responsible for policy on a regional level. Their responsibilities consider for example regional spatial planning projects, regional infrastructure projects and regional economic policies. The 388 municipalities are concerned with tasks directly concerning the lives of their inhabitants such as garbage collection, handing out passports, zoning planning, public housing, and local infrastructure projects.

There are two additions to the House of Thorbecke that are not of importance for our research, but that are important for the sake of understanding the full system. We will briefly name them. First, there are 24 water authorities who are concerned with water management in a certain district. For example, maintaining the dikes and taking precautions against floods. And second, there are public bodies (*Openbaar lichaam*). This is a form of collaboration between certain areas, groups or persons guided by public law. Examples are the three Caribbean municipalities (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba), 25 safety regions and several professional organizations (Zwaan, 2017:222).

2.2 WHY INTRODUCE DECENTRALIZATION?

As stated before, the Netherlands have a long history of tripartite involvement. Raijmakers (2014:19) shows that discussions concerning the scale and distribution of responsibilities have also been around for a long time. Reoccurring arguments for

decentralization are historically driven. Such as, the Dutch have a conservative attitude of holding on to the values of the past and commitment to the spreading of power in order to protect acquired freedom prevail. Arguments can also be economically driven. Such as, decisions are best made at the level on which problems arise, this leads to more efficient (and thus cheaper) and effective policy and greater political and social participation of citizens. Or, arguments are legislatorial motivated. Such as, local authorities would be more responsive to local conditions and needs and it is better to distribute power to guarantee values of diversity, freedom and independence (Raijmakers, 2014:293).

Following the lines of argumentation, we have seen several forms of decentralization in The Netherlands. Since the 80's there has been a merge of several municipalities, there have been inter-municipal collaborations, regionalization's such as the forming of metropolitan regions and safety regions and various transfers of tasks and responsibility from national to provincial and municipal level such as welfare policies (1987), housing for education (1997) and the law for work and social welfare (2005). Decentralizing tasks in the social domain to municipalities in 2015 is the latest decentralization.

On an international level decentralization takes place as well. It happens in all parts of the world: Bolivia, Cambodia, Ethiopia, France, Indonesia, Japan, Peru, South Africa, South Korea, Uganda and the UK (Faguet, 2014:2). According to Faguet (2012), the strongest theoretical argument in favor of decentralization is that it will improve the public accountability and responsiveness of government by altering its structure so as to increase citizens voice and change the deep incentives that public officials face. And indeed, the argument to increase citizens voice and change the deep incentives that public officials face has been a motivation for the Dutch government to decentralize (Giebels, 2016). Other arguments for decentralization that are used around the world, are that it aims to reduce abuse of power, that it improves political stability and that it increases political competition by creating smaller arenas that politicians view to control (Faguet, 2014).

For this research, the improvement of public accountability through decentralization is especially interesting. Faguet (2014) argues that decentralization can be a key factor driving improvement in public accountability. Before decentralization accountability ran downward to the citizens who consume local public goods and

services. Central officials are ultimately beholden to national electorates. Local officials thus face strong pressure to behave in line with the central government, although local citizens' needs may tell them otherwise. This changes with decentralization. Faguet (p.5) states that tenure and career prospects of local officials now come in the hands of the citizens (and in the media, as we would argue) because topics are now, more than before, locally arranged. This enhances accountability. However, accountability can be undermined if the relatively smaller scale of local government is more susceptible to be captioned by elites such as landowners or employers. Dangerous examples are big interest groups financing a local campaign or employers pressing their employees to vote in a particular way, to distort policy-making in their own favor. In the light of this finding by Faguet, local and regional journalism to increase transparency seems to be very urgent to check if these parties do not become unwanted sources of influence.

In the next section, we will have a closer look at the specific decentralization in the social domain, where more specified consequences and worries will be presented.

2.3 CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2015 DECENTRALIZATION

Since 2015 the Dutch municipalities are responsible for the decentralized topics. During this decentralization both the relevant funds and responsibilities were transferred from national or provincial to (mainly) the municipal level (Zwaan, 2017). The decentralization was a complex operation as the following example illustrates. The decentralization of youth care only involved the full transfer of:

- Formerly provincially arranged youth care;
- Secured youth care formally directed by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport;
- The coordination of youth mental health care;
- The coordination or execution of youth care for the mentally challenged;
- Youth protection and youth rehabilitation formally directed by the Ministry of Security and Justice;

**This list is based on the coalition agreement of cabinet Rutte II (2012:24)*

The idea of the decentralization fits within the aspiration of cabinet Rutte II to make citizens more self-supporting and participative (Zwaan, 2017:238). The line of reasoning for the cabinet is to make the set of rules and arrangements less complex

for municipal citizens. People with multiple problems now only have to face one contact point and know where to go when they run into problems. The group that uses the decentralized services is very big. 1,8 million people from 1,5 million households used an arrangement from youth care, elderly care of work & income in 2013 (SCP, 2016:117). Furthermore, the group that is using these services is very vulnerable: people are old, very ill, young, have debts or have a disability (SCP, 2016:117). This urges a good quality of services. However, there are concerns about the quality of the services due to the upscaling and lack of expertise. Zwaan (2017:248) summarizes this critique in the following paradox. If the scale of municipalities and their range of duties is expanded throughout the years, how can municipalities be sure that their decisions are truly effective and taken with an eye on the place where the problems arise? Especially considering the lack of expertise that municipalities might have concerning the new tasks.

The financing is relatively simple, but it concerns a lot of money. Municipalities receive one budget from the national government through the municipal fund. This fund had a total budget of 27 billion, and 17,7 billion was reserved for work & income, youth and social support (SCP, 2015). The budget for the decentralized topics is thus enormous. According to the national government the fact that there is only one fund makes it easier for municipalities to account for their policies and spending's (Rijksoverheid, n.d.b). These are effectiveness and efficiency arguments. The fact that it is only one budget creates room for tailor-made policy solutions and will avoid bureaucracy and extra administrative costs (Rijksoverheid, 2013). According to the Netherlands Bureau of Economic Policy Analysis (2015) this model is also risky. Municipalities have a lot of freedom to spend the money according to their own insights, which might not necessary according to the way the money is intended to spend. The national government hands municipalities one budget to finance all the tasks in the social domain, there is no obligation to spend the money to these tasks. The Netherlands Bureau of Economic Policy Analysis (2015) warns that there is no guarantee that municipality's will really spend the money to the decentralized tasks.

And this is a luxury problem compared to other practical problems that have arisen with decentralization. There are complaints that the funding is not enough: the children's helpline is the responsibility of the national government again, since some municipalities did not want to pay for their services anymore. And, due to

investments some municipalities cannot afford the expenses for youth care and elderly care. And, youth mental care is coping with big financial deficits which causes long waiting lists (Van Steenbergen & Vriesema, 2017).

2.4 WHY HAS THE RECENT DECENTRALIZATION COMPLICATED ACCOUNTABILITY?

We can report that the latest decentralization causes concerns: theoretical and practical. But there are more problems. As we have mentioned in the introduction, Arno Visser stated that municipalities are free to spend the funds they receive from the national government according to their own insights and needs. However, consequently, there might be a difference in quality between various municipalities (Visser, 2017). The Ministry of Home Affairs also stated that the Netherlands must not reach legal inequality because one municipality has a more generous policy than another (Trouw, 2017). We can see this inequality as a result of the incomplete or partial decentralization (Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012:615). There has been a decentralization of policy autonomy (decentralized task responsibility), but not a decentralization of policy failure and success (decentralized accountability). We have seen, for example, that there was a problem with the financing of personal budget (persoonsgebonden budget). Old, ill or handicapped people could (and still can) apply for a personal budget to buy their own care. However, many people did not get their personal budget in time. This had to do with the fact that municipalities and the agency responsible for the payment of the personal budgets, the Social Insurance Agency (Sociale Verzekeringsbank), were not ready for the major governance reforms (Stokmans & Wester, 2017). The responsible minister was then called to account to the parliament. This example shows that although the municipalities are financially and for the execution of policies responsible. Failure and successes are still a national responsibility. According to Bannink and Ossewaarde (p.597) 'The decentralization of policy autonomy only is aimed at the increased utilization of local information, but it may lead to overemphasizing local issues at the cost of central-level concerns: the self-regulation paradox'. This theory would explain the quality differences stated by Arno Visser. Municipalities are focused on local topics, but it is unclear who keeps track of the central-level concerns such as quality differences.

2.5 MAIN POINTS OF THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we have seen the scope of the decentralization in the social domain. We have learned that the decentralization can be an improvement to public accountability because decisions about public goods and services are taken right under their nose and the representatives know their electorate. Decisions can be tailor-made. The system makes citizens more self-supporting and participative. However, there are also dangers: elites who use their power in favor of their own good, quality differences between municipalities or even legal inequality between municipalities.

In a democratic system, such doubts can be examined by the media indirectly or directly holding municipalities to account for the quality of these new decisions. We will discuss the state of local and regional journalism to see if they are theoretically up for this task.

3 THE STATE OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL MEDIA & DECENTRALIZATION

The previous chapter illustrated several questions concerning the current decentralization. One could ask if municipalities make effective decisions, if there is enough transparency in the policy making process, if decisions are taken with an eye on the place where the problems arise, if municipalities have enough expertise to do their new tasks, if the funds are sufficient and if there are quality differences or legal inequalities between municipalities. There are concerns about decisions taken within one municipality, but also concerns considering the quality of decisions between municipalities. To check if municipalities are doing their new decentralized tasks in a correct way, we need journalists from national, regional and local papers. But are there still local and regional journalists? In this chapter, we will present the state of the current regional and local journalism.

3.1 JOURNALISM IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL AREAS

Why are journalists needed? Because a working democratic system is really helped by a well-informed citizen and a broad public debate with a wide scope of opinions (RMO, 2014). Journalists let the people know what is going on, reflect diverse opinions and might activate citizens (implicitly) to participate in the public debate (Hermans & Hietbrink, 2014:56). However, in regional and local media there are strong worries that this part of the democratic system does not work properly (Kik & Landman, 2013). Djerf-Pierre and Pierre (2016:61) argue that some local governments operate in the 'media shadow', a concept developed by Nord and Nygren (2002). Operating in the media shadow indicates that 'not all municipalities are of interest to the media; particularly the national media tend to pay only scant of attention to what some see as the political hinterland' (Djerf-Pierre and Pierre, 2016:64). The authors indicate that local and regional newspapers are not present in every municipality. Especially municipalities located next to metropolitan regions find it hard to attract media attention from all sorts of news outlets.

3.1.1 Differences between municipalities

In 2013 and 2014 research has been done by the Dutch Journalism Fund into the state of local and regional journalism. This research was thus done *before* the

decentralization in the social domain. The straightforward conclusion of both reports is that in municipalities with a population below 50.000 one will find little local news – both general news and news concerning local politics – and this holds for offline and online news (Landman et al., 2015). This outcome is based on two times a one week counting of all news within a municipality, both offline and online. A third of the municipalities with a population below 50.000 did not show any local news at all within this week. Other municipalities with a population below 50.000 just had a quarter of the news that bigger municipalities with a population above 50.000 had, despite the number of news channels such a municipality has. It is important to know that 46 percent of the Dutch population lives in such a small municipality. The conclusion of Landman et al. is that in municipalities, with a population below 50.000 citizens, journalism does not live up to the standards necessary to make up checks and balances of what the municipality is doing. This implies that about a quarter of the Dutch municipalities runs the risk of not having a well-functioning fourth estate (Landman et al., 2015).

3.1.2 Online news

Another interesting finding of the Dutch Journalism Fund, is the fact that there is much more offline news compared to online news. Especially background information is scarce in online news. According to Landman et al. (2015:2) over 90 percent of the online news consists of short updates that only report the strict necessities of events. On a local level, offline news is considered still very important for gathering information. Therefore, it is important to focus on local and regional newspapers.

3.1.3 Light news dominates

Furthermore, Landman et al. found that light news often predominates the regional news, without showing both sides of a story. Maybe not even because newspapers do not want to report the whole story, but because they do not have the time or the personnel to cover the full story. Especially in smaller municipalities (<50.000 inhabitants) there is a big lack of news concerning the workings of the local administration. This also has to do with the fact that regional media report less about what has been going on in municipalities below 50.000 citizens compared to bigger municipalities. And, to make things worse, the loss in reporting about small local councils is only scarcely compensated by local media. In small municipalities, there

are only incidentally journals, local stations or 'hyperlocals' – webpages that contain only news from the local community or the local administration. Landman et al. (2015:4) state that this is not a sustainable way of local news reporting.

However, according to the report by Landman et al. people do seem to be interested in topics concerning local policy such as health care & welfare, nature & environment and infrastructure (Landman et al., 2015:49). This result is based on a survey spread in 26 municipalities, with approximately 200-350 responses per municipality. This finding could be a sign of a positive development in local or regional journalism since the decentralization in the social domain.

3.2 THEORETICAL ACCOUNTABILITY HOLE IN LOCAL MEDIA RESEARCH

Landman et al. interestingly do not explain what the necessary standards are to make up checks and balances of what the municipality is doing. Landman et al. name accountability, but do not explicate what is needed to hold an official accountable by the media and what accountability roles the media can fulfill. The question to what extent municipalities can be held accountable by the media remains still unanswered. Also, the question what role the media takes when holding a municipality accountable remains unanswered. Moreover, the consequences of the lack of accountability by the media are not addressed by Landman et al.

Our research will therefore map the differences in accountability roles between municipalities. It could be that one municipality has only reporting journalists while other municipalities have more investigative journalism. It will be interesting to see these differences and the consequences regarding these different roles.

3.3 MAIN POINTS OF THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we have set out the main worries about the functioning of the regional and local media. First, the Dutch Journalism Fund has observed that in small municipalities (population below 50.000) one will find little local news. Secondly, there is a concern called 'media shadow'. It could be that municipalities located next to metropolitan regions find it hard to attract media attention at all since the bigger metropolitans already have the spotlight on them. Third, regional news is dominated by light and soft news, so probably not extensive coverage about the local administration. Especially in small municipalities is this probably not

compensated by local journalism, although the interests from citizens in topics such as health care, welfare or environment is there.

Still, offline sources form a bigger and more extensive part of the local news service. In relation to accountability, where we will tap into in the next chapter, it seems more useful for us to focus on offline news sources such as newspapers. In chapter 6 we will explain this decision more thoroughly.

4 Accountability and the media

In chapter 2 we have seen that big changes in governance, such as the decentralization in the social domain, evoke questions concerning the quality of the new decisions taken by the municipalities. As illustrated in chapter 3, in a democratic system these questions can be assessed by the media indirectly or directly holding municipalities to account for the quality of these new decisions. We want to know exactly how an official is held accountable by the media and if the current local and regional media are up to this task. In this chapter, we will therefore set out a theoretical framework in which we indicate how the media can hold actors accountable and what standard of journalism is sufficient to fulfill this task.

4.1 WHAT IT ENTAILS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE WATCHDOG

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2015) opens his book *Local Journalism, 'The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media'*, with a motivating insight on local journalism. Nielsen argues (p.1) that local journalism is *terrible*. It is frequently seen as superficial and deferential, as skirting controversy, and as catering to advertisers and affluent audiences over the wider community. However, he argues that local journalism is also *terribly important* as it provides information about local public affairs, it holds local elites at least somewhat accountable and it provides a forum for discussion, and it ties communities together. Although local journalism is in some respects indeed *terrible*, decentralization has made it especially important to hold local administrators to account in local affairs as we have demonstrated in the previous chapters.

Research has shown that local journalism plays a big role in publicizing what local authorities are doing (Ekström et al., 2006) and this leads to critical debate and scrutiny, especially in those communities where local elites disagree amongst themselves (Tichenor et al., 1980). Brunetti and Weder (2003) also indicate that news coverage helps to reduce government corruption, which is underscored by the findings of Faguet (2014), who claims that transparency can reduce the influence of elites in local government. Corruption? But, we do not have corruption in The Netherlands, right? Well, only February this year we have seen that Royal Commissioner Jacques Tichelaar stepped out of line when influencing the decision for redesign of the national monument 'Huize Tetrode' in the city of Assen. Tichelaar

arranged that his sister-in-law could do the redesign, instead of giving the assignment to somebody else. This was discovered by an investigation of the regional newspapers *Dagblad van het Noorden* and national newspaper *De Volkskrant*. After their investigative journalistic report, council members of the Provincial State started to ask questions, after which Tichelaar had to resign. This recent example demonstrates the importance of journalism to create transparency and control to avoid corruption.

The role of media in a democratic society is therefore to act like a 'watchdog', keeping the government alert and are watching out for citizen's interests (Waisbord, 2000). If government does things that are out of line, the media can step in and put a spotlight on these decisions or actors. The media can directly or indirectly call councilors or other parties in the municipality to account for decisions they have taken. The media thus fulfill specific accountability tasks in democracies, which we will set out in the next section.

4.2 ACCOUNTABILITY AS A VIRTUE AND A MECHANISM

Accountability is a booming, yet fragmented, concept since different authors use different and own definitions of accountability (Bovens et al., 2014). Bovens (2010) signaled two different uses in literature on accountability: accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism.

Accountability as a virtue is used to positively qualify the state of affairs of the performance of an actor (Bovens, 2010:949). This is a normative concept, helping to decide if behavior of actors is desirable. It is not easy to develop a standard definition for public accountability as a virtue because the desirable standards will vary across organizations, systems and perspectives according to Bovens (2010:950). The other use of accountability is accountability as a mechanism. This reading refers to accountability as 'a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor might face consequences' (Bovens, 2010:951). In our research, media can thus serve as an accountability forum and the municipality as an actor. An alderman might be called to account by the council because a local newspaper wrote an article about a certain policy not working out, which can lead to an adjustment in the current policy or -in a worst-

case scenario- to the stepping down of the alderman. This research will elaborate both on accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism.

Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) have indicated that they use accountability as a mechanism because they are not necessarily interested in providing a normative assessment of the role of the media. Rather, they want to empirically examine what roles the media have in public accountability. Since it our theoretical aim to examine the roles of local and regional media in accountability we must examine accountability as a mechanism. However, researching the state of local and regional journalism in accountability processes also dives into societal problems. We are eager to know if the state of local and regional journalism is currently good enough to fulfill accountability tasks. The societal relevance of this research asks for a normative assessment as well, we will therefore also look at accountability as a virtue.

4.3 MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY AS A MECHANISM

The media can play multiple roles when looking at accountability as a mechanism. In the introduction, we already briefly named the four functions media can fulfill when talking about accountability based on Schillemans and Jacobs (2016). These functions can be labeled as spark, trigger, amplifier and accountability forum and are summarized in table 1. In this section, we will explain all four functions thoroughly since we will use them to answer our research question.

Media can function as a spark by simply reporting what is going on in a municipality. The authors explain that the reporting alone is not enough to trigger accountability processes. To become an actual accountability fire, fuel is necessary. Fuel can be provided when a councilor asks questions possibly because the media wrote about it. Media can be an accountability forum themselves, reporting critically what an organization does, often based on independent research. This report might then have consequences for the councilor or alderman about whom the report is written. A negative story in the newspaper might urge an organization to hold a press conference or release a press statement in which an explanation for their behavior or decision is given. When an explanation is not good enough, more media attention might follow. But the media can also function as a trigger for formal accountability processes such as the parliament calling a minister to account. On a local level Schokker and Schillemans (2016) examined ten affairs in 2014 in which an alderman left because of integrity issues. Their analysis showed that local media often report

extensively about integrity issues and in some cases the media even worked as an accountability forum or triggered political accountability such as the council calling an alderman to account. A final role of the media is to function as an amplifier. Jacobs and Schillemans (p.27) explain that this is the reporting of formal accountability processes. According to the authors 'media then magnify and potentially amplify the effects of formal accountability'.

Trigger	Reporting critically what is going on, which leads to formal accountability processes.
Amplifier	Reporting about formal accountability processes.
Accountability Forum	Reporting critically what is going on, often based on independent research. Actor must account to media.
Spark	Reporting only what is going on.

Table 1: Accountability roles

However, these processes do not only come into force when there is direct media attention. There is also *felt* accountability. This is the perceived expectation that someone's actions will be evaluated. The impact of *felt* accountability is basically the same as the concept of actual accountability (Hall et al., 2015). The *idea* that you should account for your decisions (to the media) can therefore also be seen as a form of accountability. The impact of felt accountability is demonstrated by the following quote from a representative in Zwolle:

Recently I spoke to a councilor of the Dutch municipality Zwolle. At their council meetings there is often not a single journalist present. 'Is there a difference when a journalist is present or when there is not?', we asked. 'Well', he said, 'people get a bit sharper when there is a journalist present, when you know there is someone listening carefully and will ask critical questions'.

(Personal communication, October 2016)

The *idea* that a journalist is present during council meetings can already create the feeling that councilors might have to account for their decisions, and thus they act stricter and advised.

When assessing the different roles of the media in accountability processes the theory by Jacobs and Schillemans will be used. Unfortunately, the impact of *felt* accountability is harder to assess – although possibly very valuable – due to the fact that we cannot measure what council members would have done differently when

a journalist was present during a council meeting compared to when a journalist was not present. We do expect, however, that the presence of a journalist often leads to a news article. Therefore, we might assume that a higher level of news articles might lead to a higher level of felt accountability as well.

4.4 MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY AS A VIRTUE

Arnold (2006) indicated that extensive coverage of a representative's positions and actions increases the chances of an accountable government. The more informative articles are written about what a representative voted, why they voted in that way, how other people evaluated a representative's performance and if a representative is campaigning to be elected (again), the better one can hold a representative accountable (Arnold, 2006:10). However, when is the information given by journalists enough? What is the minimum level of coverage necessary to create an information environment sufficiently rich to keep representatives on their toes? These questions ask for another approach, namely from the accountability as a virtue perspective because we want to assess the quality of local and regional media.

In this respect, we can learn from Arnold. Arnold uses two standards developed by John Zaller (1992): the Full News Standard and the Burglar Alarm Standard, summarized in table 2. The Full News Standard provides citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all the major issues of the day, including the performance of top public officials. This is voting information, campaigning information and other factual accounts. In contrast, the Burglar Alarm Standard focusses on a few issues that others have identified as particularly important. The idea is that these few issues attract the attention of what Arnold calls 'professional watchdogs', such as party officials, electoral challengers and interest groups who in turn can make a fuzz. Opinion coverage, for example, is a signal that a newspaper is meeting the Burglar Alarm standard, because these pages can be used to sound the alarm and rally groups who are not so attentive to politics (p.91).

Full news standard	Basic information necessary to form and update an opinion.
Burglar alarm standard	Signaling issues that others have identified as important.

Table 2: Two standards for accountability as a virtue

Arnold uses both standards because this helps local newspapers to further increase the prospects of accountable government because they both inform and empower local opinion leader. This will also be the standard for our research. We believe a municipality can be held accountable for topics concerning decentralization if media report the factual accounts of decisions (voting information, performance information and policy information) to meet the Full News Standard, but also issues that others have indicated as important in order to meet the Burglar Alarm Standard.

4.5 MAIN POINTS OF THIS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we have specified the relation between media and accountability on a local level. Ideally media in a democracy works as a watchdog, looking out for the interests of citizens. To assess the way local and regional media work as a watchdog we will be looking at their relation to accountability processes in two ways: accountability as a virtue and accountability as a mechanism. Accountability as a virtue is a normative concept used to positively qualify the state of affairs or the performance of an actor (Bovens, 2010). In our research accountability as a virtue is assessed by examining the quality of news articles by local and regional newspapers by two standards: the Burglar Alarm Standard and the Full News Standard (Zaller, 1992). Accountability as a mechanism refers to the sec accountability process: the relation between actors and a forum, where the forum forms judgements and consequences (Bovens, 2010). Accountability as a mechanism in our research is assessed by looking at the specific roles of local and regional news articles in the accountability process: do they trigger or amplify formal accountability processes? Do news media serve as an accountability forum themselves? Or are they only reporting what is going on? Theoretical expectations on these matters will be presented in the following chapters.

5 IN SUM: FORMULATING THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

We want to examine to what extent local and regional media hold municipalities to account for topics concerning the decentralization in the social domain. Based upon the historical and theoretical overview of decentralization in general, the state of local media and the relationship between media and accountability theory, we can formulate some cautious expectations on our research questions.

5.1 THE NUMBER OF NEWS ARTICLES

The first sub-question concerned the number of news articles written by local, regional and national newspapers between the years 2000 and 2016, per municipality, regarding the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care.

We see two conflicting expectations in relation to this research sub-question. First, due to a rise in responsibilities on a local level one would expect that the local/regional media have followed and are producing more articles. This would indicate that there are differences in the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by local and regional newspapers. However, this expectation conflicts with the reality of the degeneration of local/regional newspapers. According to Landman et al. people do seem to be interested in topics concerning local policy such as health care & welfare, nature & environment and infrastructure, but there might be simply not enough money to innovate and hire more personnel. This would indicate that there are no differences in the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by local and regional newspapers.

However, in the national media several harmful stories have been written which have raised the expectation that national papers might have partly taken over the role of local and regional newspapers. A quick search on LexisNexis already tells us that national newspapers, De Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, Trouw, Het Financieele Dagblad and the NRC Next published 237 articles concerning 'decentralization' in the year 2015 and 197 articles in 2016. Although the decentralization was a big national event, this finding already indicates that the decentralization in general has the attention of big national newspapers. We will therefore expect a rise in the

number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by national newspapers.

5.2 SMALL MUNICIPALITIES & MEDIA SHADOW

The second sub-question concerns the size of the municipality: is a bigger municipality an indication for a higher number of news articles? We expect that there are differences in the representation in local and regional media between municipalities with a population below 50.000 citizens (small municipalities) and municipalities above 50.000 citizens (big municipalities) based on the report by the Dutch Journalism Fund (Landman et al., 2015). In small municipalities, we expect to find little local and regional journalism compared to bigger municipalities and we expect to find that small municipalities are also less present in regional newspapers. The decentralization might not have had a direct effect on these expectations, but has made the difference between small and big municipalities more relevant.

Secondly, a theoretical sidetrack in relation to this sub-question is the media shadow expectation. We expect that some municipalities will be located in the media shadow. Particularly the municipalities next to metropolitan regions will probably find it hard to attract media attention from all sorts of news outlets. Municipalities in the media shadow will therefore attract less media attention compared to municipalities of comparable size.

5.3 ACCOUNTABILITY ROLES

The third question concerns the accountability roles: what roles do we see in regional and local news articles concerning the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?

We have the four roles developed by Schillemans and Jacobs (2016): trigger, amplifier, spark and accountability forum. Although there have been cases where media have been acting like an accountability forum and trigger (Schokker & Schillemans, 2016), it is possible that these to be mainly the high-profile integrity cases in which an alderman was forced to step down.

Based on the reports by the Dutch Journalism Fund we there are possibly many descriptive news articles (sparks) from local and regional newspapers. The reason being that newsrooms do not have the capacity to do more critical investigative

journalism. However, we do not have very clear expectation for the accountability roles, just hints. Therefore, we will keep these roles very open.

5.4 QUALITY OF THE NEWS ARTICLES

The forth sub-question concerns the quality of news articles written by local and regional media. Is the quality sufficient to hold municipalities to account concerning decisions they have taken on decentralization topics in the social domain?

Again, based on the practical reports by the Dutch Journalism Fund we are inclined to answer this sub-question with 'no', except for a few high-profile cases. However, when explaining the quality of news articles, we should also keep other factors in mind besides the size of the local government. There could be differences between municipalities.

We believe media concentration to play an important role in both the quality of local journalism. A pluriform range of media outlets, i.e. less concentration of media outlets, might make journalists strive for 'the best article' and 'to be the first'. This could enhance the quality (and quantity) of local/regional journalism. We thus expect differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high, compared to where the diversity in media outlets is low.

Another factor at play could be the nature of the subject under examination. Like a person can be photogenic, a subject can be mediagenic. We expect that some subjects will get more media attention than other subjects, these could be high-profile cases such as integrity cases Schokker and Schillemans (2016) examined.

Finally, because of the blurring of clear, strict lines of command and control, it might be the case that the responsible actors cannot be found. We expect to find that the media are pointing more to elected officials compared to other parties such as health care organizations and employment parties when mistakes are made. Pointing to each other as the responsible party might also create more discussion, and thus create different media attention and possibly different types of articles. In figure 2 all are expectations are visualized.

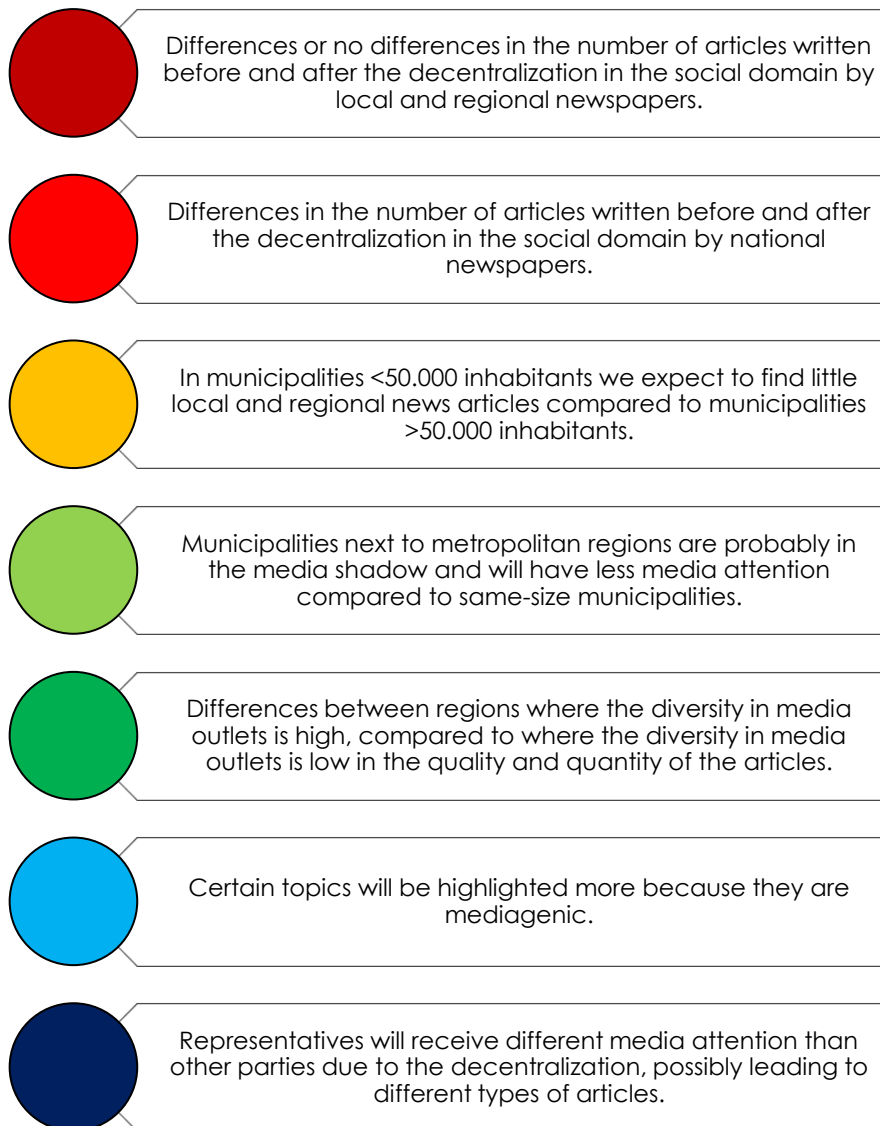


Figure 2: Theoretical expectations

6 HOW ARE WE GOING TO RESEARCH THIS?

The goal of this research is to examine to what extent local and regional media are up to fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization topics in the social domain. To answer this main research question, this research is split into three parts, each part will explain different sub-questions. In this chapter, we will explain precisely how and why our research is done.

6.1 EXPLAINING THE STRUCTURE OF OUR RESEARCH

Part one of this research will dive into the question to what extent local and regional media are present in municipalities and will analyze the effect of the size of the municipalities. We will do an examination of the difference in the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by local, regional and national newspapers. We will also compare different sizes and regions of municipalities to check if the size or regional (metropolitan region or not) of a municipality matters.

In the second part, we will assess the quality of our sample of news articles. To what extent are these articles good enough in terms of public accountability? For this part of the research we will use the accountability standards by Zaller (1992) and Arnold (2006). To assess the quality of the articles thoroughly we will pay extra attention to the expectations of media concentration, mediagenic topics and blurring lines of responsibilities.

The final part will be describing the accountability tasks. We will analyze what accountability roles local and regional media play when writing about the decentralization topics. The model developed by Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) will be used to describe the accountability roles because it gives us a clear indication of the actual role of the media in the accountability processes within a municipality. For practical reasons this part will come last, so we can continue on the articles and content-analysis of the assessment of the accountability standards. Table 3 presents a structured outline of our research.

Part	Sub-question	Expectation
1	What is the number of news articles written by local, regional and national newspapers between the years 2000 and 2016, per municipality, regarding the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences or no differences in the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by local and regional • Differences in the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by national newspapers.
1	Is a bigger municipality an indication for a higher number of news articles?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In municipalities <50.000 inhabitants we expect to find little local and regional news articles compared to municipalities >50.000 inhabitants • Municipalities next to metropolitan regions are probably in the media shadow and will have less media attention compared to same-size municipalities.
2	Is the quality of news articles written by local and regional media sufficient to hold municipalities to account concerning decisions they have taken on decentralization topics in the social domain, namely youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high, compared to where the diversity in media outlets is low in the quality and quantity of the articles. • Certain topics will be highlighted more because they are mediagenic. • Representatives will receive more media attention than other parties due to the decentralization, possibly leading to different types of articles
3	What accountability roles do we see in regional and local news articles concerning the topics youth policy, employment and income and elderly care?	<u>No clear expectations:</u> possibly many sparks and in high profile cases accountability forum or triggers.

Table 3: Outline result section

As stated in the introduction, our threefold method is based on a study by Arnold (2006). Arnold analyzed the extent to which local American newspapers reported on the activities of local representatives in Congress in order to establish whether citizens were sufficiently informed about their representatives and, thus, were able to hold them accountable for their actions or lack thereof. Arnold has looked into four important issues: (1) He found out how frequently local media outlets cover members of Congress. (2) He examined the content of press coverage of individual legislators. He examined if citizens had the information they need to hold representatives accountable for their actions in office. (3) He compared new outlets to each other to find out how they differ in coverage of Congress and its members. (4) He attempted to discover whether differential coverage of local representatives has affected citizen's political knowledge.

Although similar to a large extent, there are several differences between this research and Arnold's research. First, this research takes place in The Netherlands not in the United States of America. Both the Dutch political system and the media system might have differences compared to the American systems, which is why it is important to adapt Arnold's research method to the Dutch context where possible. For example, Arnold can include 16,950 newspapers, which is why he needs to draw a sample. The Dutch system only has 24 regional newspapers, 10 national papers and a bunch of local newspapers (in our sample 152). Second, Arnold examined individual members of Congress. We will be looking at policy topics concerning the decentralization in various municipalities. And, third, Arnold looked at the to what extent citizens can hold their representatives accountable from a newspapers perspective. Because we want to examine the specific relation between local government, media and accountability we will use a municipal perspective. However, in structural terms, Arnold's methodological structure is used for our research as well.

6.2 NEWSPAPERS ONLY

Many people have asked if online sources are part of this research. Online sources will not be part of this research due to the fact that it is hard to map all local websites and local social media initiatives within the time scope of this research. We will therefore focus on newspapers only. In terms of accountability research this does not necessarily have to be a problem since Landman et al. (2015) have concluded that

there is much more offline news compared to online news, which is why it is probably more interesting to look at offline news. Furthermore, McCombs (2005:544) has indicated that media agendas run quite parallel, which is why leaving out television news or online sources such as social media is not necessarily problematic.

6.3 METHOD PART 1: THE NUMBER OF NEWS ARTICLES

The first layer is a media analysis of all local, regional papers and national papers.

6.3.1 Time frame

In this layer, we have checked if topics concerning youth policy, employment and income and care for the chronically ill in municipalities have had more media attention in 2014, 2015 and 2016 compared to the years before (2000 - 2013). The year 2014 is an interesting year because municipal elections took place. For this reason, we include this year in the decentralization years. The longer period of seventeen years is essential, because it enables us to determine the patterns that have been there throughout the years. For example, in 2005 the law for work and social welfare was already introduced. If it turns out that more responsibilities for municipalities lead to more local/regional news articles, we will see an upward trend in news articles.

6.3.2 Search terms

Local, regional and national newspapers can be found in LexisNexis. Search terms are both general and policy-specific. For youth policy for example the following terms are used 'jeugdbeleid', 'jeugdzorg', 'jeugdhulp', 'jeugdbescherming', 'jeugdreclassering' and 'pgb'. The complete list of all search terms (22 in total) can be found in attachment 10.1. These search terms have arisen from a news scan concerning ten municipalities from various sizes and regions. The municipalities Laren, Hilvarenbeek, Dantumadiel, Neder-Betuwe, Waddinxveen, Bergen, Landgraaf, Zutphen, Gouda and Amsterdam were scanned on LexisNexis (local newspapers) for news concerning the decentralization in 2015-2016. From this quick scan the most relevant topics could be discovered. On LexisNexis, the search terms can be combined. These search terms will be used per municipality (and sometimes even per year) because LexisNexis cannot show more than 3000 results. For the biggest municipalities, we could not count the articles by hand, which is why we asked a

programmer to build a 'counting-device'⁶. This device automatically added up the number of local/regional news articles.

6.3.3 Sample municipalities

Since there were 391 municipalities until 2016, as sample is drawn. The sample contains 112 municipalities from various sizes (also see attachment 10.4). We have rank-ordered all municipalities according to size and then selected every third or fourth municipality. So, the biggest municipality is chosen, then the fourth biggest municipality, next the seventh biggest municipality, etc. We checked if all parts of the country are covered to avoid an overrepresentation of one specific region in the sample. In figure 3 you can see the coverage of our sample.



Figure 3: Coverage of our sample

⁶ The counting device is still available via: <http://meerhof.nl/rixt/>

Some municipalities are 'created' between 2000 and 2016, which is why we did not have data from every year. If a municipality did not have data of all 17 years, we have excluded this municipality from our dataset (list wise deletion) for this first step of the research process. For this reason, originally, there were 112 municipalities in our sample, however, some municipalities merged or changed their name. This means that we could not find 17 complete years of news articles for those municipalities. Therefore, we left the incomplete municipalities out and used a total sample of 107 municipalities.

6.3.4 Sample newspapers

Our initial sample of 112 municipalities contained news articles from 152 different local newspapers. Unfortunately, very small local newspapers are not included in the LexisNexis database. Local newspapers that are included are 'the bigger ones' such as the Parel van Brabant, Ons Eiland or Oost Gelre. This has consequences for our results since very small local newspapers are not represented.

However, regional newspapers (22 in total) can be used as an indicator for small municipalities. The idea is that big topics will namely be covered in regional media since their role is also to compare between municipalities. Arnold (2006) also had this problem and dealt with it by examining the local newspapers he did have, of course we did examine the local newspapers we did have.

6.3.5 Programs & calculations

We used two programs (Excel and SPSS) to calculate descriptive statistics, correlations, do T-tests and do a regression analysis. Excel has been the standard program for the descriptive statistics and the regression analysis, but for correlations between groups we transferred the dataset from Excel to SPSS since this is an easier program to examine correlations and do T-tests. In attachment 10.2. we included a list of concepts, definitions and precise measurements. In attachment 10.5. the outputs of our SPSS calculations can be found.

6.3.6 National newspapers

For this part of the research we had to look at national newspapers as well. For national newspapers, we did not look for articles about the decentralization in general, but specifically about decentralization in one municipality (or a collaboration between municipalities). This will be done by combining the name of a municipality with the search terms on decentralization. The result of this first analysis

will be a list per municipality concerning all news of the past 17 years, per newspaper (local, regional and national). This way, we can trace if national newspapers really write more articles on decentralization subjects, and if this is true for all municipalities.

6.4 METHOD PART 2: THE QUALITY OF LOCAL/REGIONAL NEWS ARTICLES

In 2016, 391 municipalities existed. This makes it impossible within our scope of time for all municipalities to check what has been said in the newspapers. Therefore, we have drawn a sample of 25 municipalities and we will only look at local/regional news articles of the year 2016. This leaves us with a sample of 370 news articles.

6.4.1 How is this sample drawn?

We have followed Arnold's (2006) example of how to draw a representative sample. We rank-ordered the 100 municipalities of part 1 according to population size, and then selected every fourth or fifth municipality. This left us with a sample of 25 municipalities from various sizes and regions (see figure 4 and attachment 10.4). This was important because the idea is that the size of the municipality matters and we want to examine the difference between regions.



Figure 4: Qualitative data sample

This still left us with a sample of more than 2000 articles in total. For this reason, we applied a maximum of 20 news articles per municipality. If more than 20 news articles about the decentralization were published by local/regional newspapers, we randomly choose 20 articles, using the Google tool to select a random number. This way, all articles written for one municipality had an equal chance to be included in our sample.

6.4.2 Specifics content analysis

The content analysis examined what has been said in local and regional media, if local and regional media publish enough information to hold a municipality accountable according to the Burglar Alarm Standard and the Full News Standard. Arnold (2006) used a variety of information: size, location, prominence, and centrality. We have done the same, but considering the Dutch context our codes turned out different than the ones Arnold has used. This is why Arnolds codes were used as 'guidelines'.

We have coded the format, location, centrality, reporters, content and valence of each article:

- The format of the article was typified as 'news', 'background', 'commercials', 'events', 'columns' and 'opinion articles'.
- The location of the articles was assessed by looking at the page the article was published on and the length of the article.
- The centrality of one of the decentralization topics (youthcare, work&income, elderly care) in the news articles was also assessed. In line with the research by Arnold we have examined the centrality of the decentralization topics in two ways: objectively and subjectively. For the objective measure we have observed where in the news article the decentralized topics were mentioned (headline, first paragraph, first three paragraphs, or other). For the subjective measure we have assessed the role of the decentralized topics in the article. Was it the principal subject of the story, was it the secondary topic, only mentioned on a list or used as an example or was it an incidental subject. The final category contains hits that only a computer would notice (Arnold, 2006:68). In our research we observed the example: referring to GGZ while actually referring to a building that had this same abbreviation.

- The reporters were assessed by looking at the author of our articles from LexisNexis. Unfortunately, most local newspapers did not mention an author in LexisNexis.
- The content of our articles was an intensive process of reading and coding. To help us structure our research we have used Arnold's approach of writing down a principal role for the decentralization topics. By this we mean the function of the specific decentralization topic in the text. Was the decentralization topic used to explain why a municipality executed a certain policy? Or was it used to lance a new policy plan by an opposition party? For some articles, there was a second role as well. For example, expressing the view on the current policy, but also releasing a new policy program. Arnold (2006) eventually came up with the following codes: expressing policy positions, representative's positions on actual roll-call votes, representative cosponsoring or endorsing bills, taking position on bills and expressing the view on the matter. We used these codes as guidelines - or, sensitizing concepts as Boeijs (2010:13) would put it -, but kept our eyes open for context-specific codes. See attachment 10.6 for a code tree.
- The valence of the article is important because it shows the way the decentralized topics are portrayed. One could easily argue that this category is very subjective, which is why we have followed Arnold and left the division very simple: articles are labeled 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral'. Positive articles are articles that only highlight one side of a story and are rather positive in their central line: 'Rijswijk is a beautiful municipality', 'the participation law is making people energetic', 'care giving (mantelzorgen) is a good thing'. Negative articles are articles that highlight one side of the story and are negative/critical in their central line: 'the municipality does not handle its tasks well, the pressure of the budget cuts is too high, ICT-arrangements concerning the decentralized tasks are a disaster'. Neutral articles either highlight both sides of a story, or are merely informative.

To make sure the coding was done objectively Arnold used research assistants. We did not have that option, unfortunately. For this reason, we made this dataset in English (although the titles of the news articles are Dutch). It will be an extra attachment to this research so anyone can check if the dataset is coded in a proper fashion.

The result of this analysis is an assessment of the quality of the news articles in relation to accountability. We were able to check differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high, compared to where the it is low. We were also able to see if some topics are mediagenic and which parties received the most media attention.

6.5 METHOD PART 3: ACCOUNTABILITY IN REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEWS ARTICLES

For the third analysis we continued on the sample of articles of 25 municipalities (with a maximum of 20 articles per municipality). The whole sample thus again represents 25 municipalities of various sizes since the idea is that the size of the municipality matters. In the previous analysis, we have already set out various content information concerning the news articles, so we can see if it is a news article or an opinion article. For the next step, we will examine if these articles have led to any accountability action in the municipal councils. We are thus interested in the empirical role of the media in public accountability.

To investigate this empirical role of the media in public accountability, we looked for 'traces' of follow-up accountability on media stories in the municipalities in line with the research by Schillemans and Jacobs (2016) and explained by Jacobs (2014). We practiced Jacobs method of checking formal written questions asked by council members from the 25 municipalities during the year 2016, available on websites of the municipalities. In these questions, we searched for references to messages written by local and regional media outlets and checked if there is a parallel between the timing of the media article and the questions asked. We have only looked into written questions since not all municipalities had records of their council meetings. Especially smaller municipalities did not have a very transparent online documentation.

This research method enabled us to categorize all news articles into one of the four categories: trigger, amplifier, spark or independent accountability forum.

First of all, there were news articles that triggered formal accountability processes such as the filing written questions. We have typified an article as 'trigger' if an article matched such a formal accountability process (handing in written questions). In practice, we have typified all articles that have a similar subject as the subject of the

written question, when the article is written in the period (one month) **before** the question was asked.

Next, there are articles that work as amplifiers to accountability processes, they expand the attention for formal accountability process such as handing in written questions. We have typified articles as an amplifier if the subject of the article matches the subject of the written question and the article is written in the period (one month) **after** the question was asked.

Then, there's the media acting as an accountability forum of their own. Jacobs (2014) writes that the such news articles should have a critical nature. For us, this category meant that aldermen, the mayor or council members had to account to the media as well. We have labeled an article as an accountability forum when a written question specifically refers a certain news article. After all, the news article is in this case the start of the accountability process. It is a sign that council members acknowledge the relevance of the article: the aldermen/mayor now must explain to the journalists who has written the articles and to the council member asking the question.

Finally, there are sparks. These are articles that reported about what is going on in a municipality. They do not (directly) lead to formal accountability processes. These are articles that did not match any subject of written questions or where written questions with a similar topic were asked later than a month.

Together, the classification system of Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) gives us an overview of the impact of the local and regional news articles in our sample (see table 4).

Trigger	News Article → Written questions (without specifically mentioning the news article)
Amplifier	Written questions → News Article
Accountability Forum	News Article → Written questions (specifically mentioning the news article)
Spark	News Article only

Table 4: Accountability classification system

6.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THIS METHOD

We had to cope with a few challenges during this research. First, this research uses a mixed methods approach. The first step of the research is quantitative, the second and third step qualitative. The danger of this approach is that the result will basically be two separate researches. To avoid this from happening we used our sub-question structure throughout our research. The necessity of this structure is very simple: every step builds forth on the outcomes of the former step.

Secondly, we had to take a sample. By including municipalities of various sizes (N=112) and looking at a long period (17 years) we believe our quantitative dataset to be generalizable to the total number of municipalities. This will improve the validity of the quantitative part of the research. Combined with the qualitative data (N=370 articles) we believe this research can explicate the role of context and coincidence. The combination of methods improves the external validity. The theoretical findings might therefore also say something about other local newspapers in relation to accountability.

Third, it is hard to guarantee the reliability and validity of the qualitative part of the research. For quantitative part of the research we can replicate this study precisely. Our dataset is available on LexisNexis and the method is explained in this research. This highly improves the reliability: anyone who wants to replicate or continue this study, can do exactly so. For the qualitative study, however, replication might be a challenge. Therefore, we have taken a few measures to assure a higher reliability and validity of this part of the research.

First, we built on methods that have already been tested. Our step 2 method is developed by Arnold (2006) and our step 3 by Schillemans and Jacobs (2016). Our findings can therefore be compared to the findings these researchers had. Although especially Arnold's research takes place in a very different context, we make our research more reliable because we can do data triangulation (Silverman, 2011:369). We can check if the outcomes by Arnold and Jacobs are in accordance with our research. This will lead to a higher validity of the research. For each relevant section, we have written down in our result section in what way the results overlap with, or collide with the results by the authors who used this method before.

Building forth on the earlier-used methods also helps the reliability of our research. It creates a structure that is tested before and can be replicated again. We have tried

to write down clearly what exact steps were taken in the research, the dataset is again available on LexisNexis and the data file with the coding on our can be given to everyone interested in doing this kind of research (Bryman, 2012:390). Although it is qualitative research, the dataset is stable (news articles in the past cannot be changed). Replication will probably lead to slightly different patterns since we cannot prevent researcher bias. One researchers will always see different topics and roles for the decentralized topics than another researcher. However, we believe that our measures (steady and tested structures and data triangulation) prevent different theoretical outcomes.

7 MAPPING THE RESULTS OF OUR ANALYSES

In this chapter we present the outcomes of our research. In three parts, we will answer each sub-question. Our results show a surprising result: the outcomes are mixed, but portray a clear image to what extent local and regional media can fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization in the social domain.

7.1 THE NUMBER OF NEWS ARTICLES

In the following paragraphs, we will look at the number of news articles written by local, regional and national newspapers between the years 2000 and 2016. This is a starting point and will help us to examine the current state of local, regional and national newspapers in relation to the decentralization topics. Secondly, we will test if a bigger municipality is an indication for a higher number of news articles and if regional differences (media shadow) might be an explanation for a lower number of articles. This is important because it will show us the differences in local/regional media per municipality. The SPSS-outputs can be found in attachment 10.5.

7.1.1 The number of articles before and after the decentralization

First, we have checked the number of articles written before and after the decentralization in the social domain by local and regional newspapers. In absolute numbers, it is more than clear that there is an increase in local and regional news articles concerning the decentralization (see figure 5).

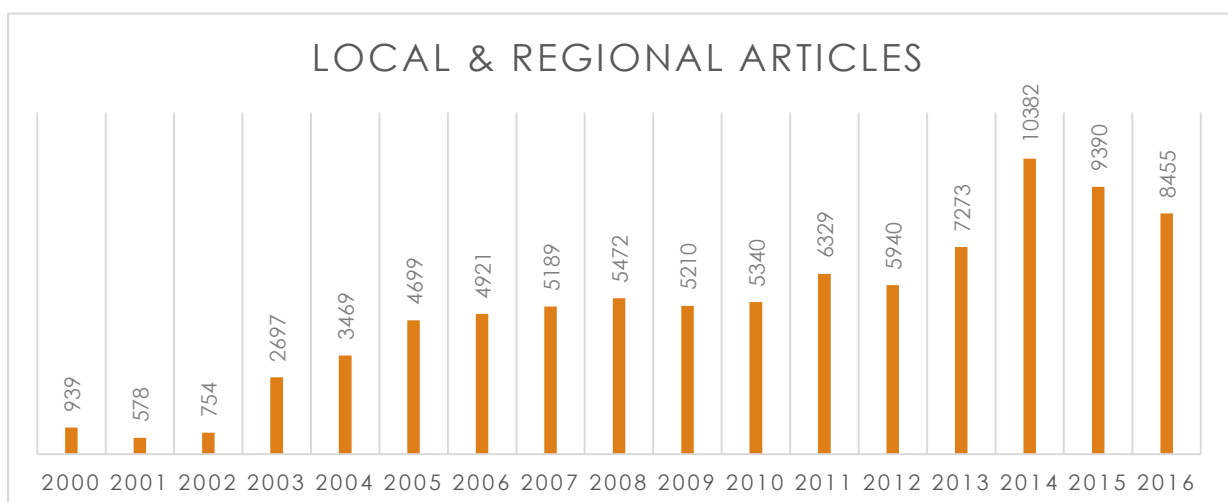


Figure 5: Total local and regional news articles through the years

On average, there is a difference of approximately 50 articles per year. Adding up all news articles from the years 2000-2013 and 2014-2016 and dividing it by the number of years in the sample, we can see the average number of articles per year. For the period before the decentralization (2000-2013) this average number was 39 local/regional news articles, compared to 81 local/regional news articles per year in the period after the decentralization (2014-2016). The difference between these two groups (before and after the decentralization) is significant ($t=0.002$; $p<0.05$).

The number of local/regional news articles writing about the decentralization topics is much higher after the decentralization than before. There is an increase of 80 percent. At first sight the local/regional watchdogs thus seem to have followed the officials in power. However, note that 70 percent of the articles is from regional newspapers, not from smaller local newspapers. A list of all regional newspapers is included in attachment 10.2. These list is retrieved per e-mail from Quint Kik, researcher at the Dutch Journalism Fund (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek).

7.1.2 National newspapers versus regional/local newspapers

What happens with respect to national newspapers? Do we see a similar trend? Our expectation is to also see a difference for national newspapers since the decentralization. And this is correct, the average number of national news articles is '12' per year before the decentralization, and '18' per year after the decentralization. This is an increase of 40 percent, but the difference between before and after is not significant ($t=0,481$; $p<0,05$). The impact of the decentralization is thus visible, but not as visible as for local and regional news articles.

The national journalism results do show a similar trend (figure 6). Since the decentralization there has been an increase in news articles regarding topics that concern (an element of) decentralization. This might seem obvious: municipalities have more power, so there is more to write about. And there is big increase in local and regional news articles concerning decentralization compared the national articles. This might be completely against the trend Kik and Landman (2013) signaled: that there is a decline in regional and local journalism. However, it could also be that the decentralization was a trend break: only the change in administration gathered media-attention. In 2015 a downward trend started. If this trend continues we will reach the older levels of journalism again. It will be interesting to see what happens in three years.

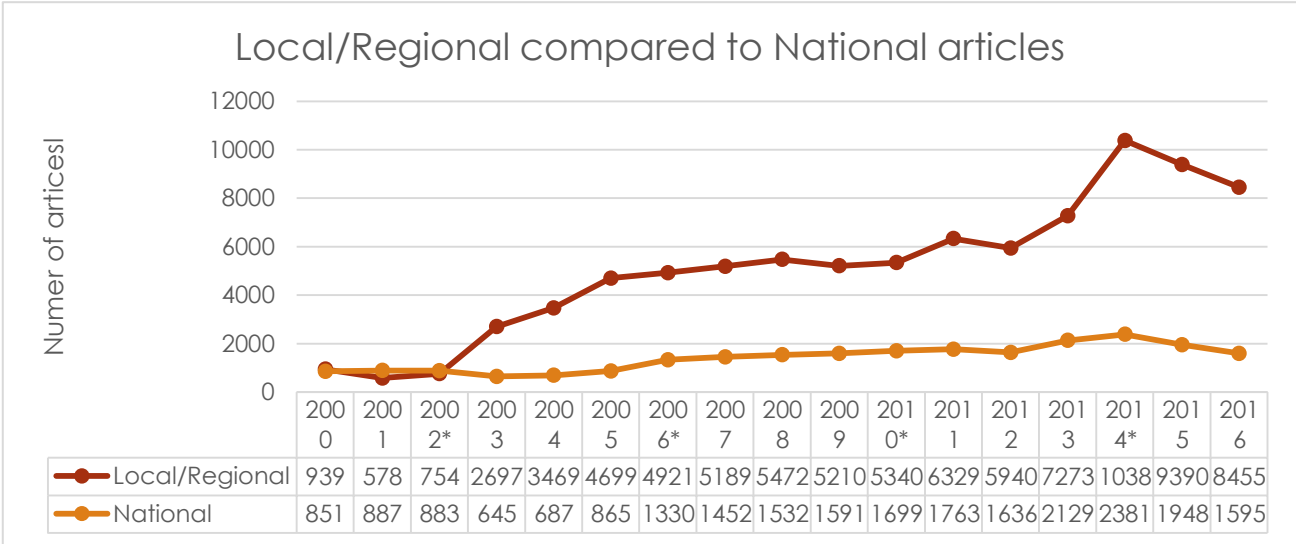


Figure 6: Local/regional compared to national news articles concerning the decentralization topics

7.1.3 The role of the number of inhabitants

What about the role of number inhabitants? Do we see an increase in articles when a municipality is bigger? Our expectation is that there is a difference in the number of local/regional news articles between municipalities above and below 50.000 citizens. And indeed, we see a difference between these two groups.

We observe a strong correlation between the number of articles written in local and regional newspaper between 2000 and 2016 and the number of citizens ($r=0.702$; $p<0.01$).

In table 5 we can also see that the average number of local and regional news per municipality articles is higher for municipalities above 50.000 citizens compared to

municipalities below 50.000 citizens. These results support the expectation that the size of the municipality matters: the bigger the municipality, the more news articles are written in local and regional news media outlets.

	Average number of local/regional news articles (2000-2016)	Number of municipalities in the sample	Standard deviation
Municipalities below 50.000 citizens	497,49	88	888,714
Municipalities above 50.000 citizens	2234,63	19	2711,624

Table 5 : Comparison municipalities on citizens

7.1.4 Media shadow

We stated the expected that not all municipalities are of interest to the media: some municipalities might find it hard to attract media attention, especially municipalities located next to metropolitan regions. These municipalities are expected to lie in the so called 'media shadow' of the bigger metropolises. Our precise expectation was that municipalities next to metropolitan regions are probably in the media shadow and will have less media attention compared to same-size municipalities.

To investigate the media shadow concept, we start by defining what we see as a 'metropolitan region' in The Netherlands. Based on figure 7 we can argue that there are two real metropolises in this sample: Utrecht and Amsterdam (the two extremist outliers in population and amount of news articles). We have pointed out municipalities close to these two metropolises: Amstelveen, Ouder-Amstel, Oostzaan, Aalsmeer, Haarlemmermeer, Heemstede, Bloemendaal, Wijdmeren, Gooise Meren, Utrechtse Heuvelrug, Baarn, Amersfoort, Nieuwkoop and Alphen aan de Rijn. All these municipalities are no further than 25 kilometers away from one of the two metropolises. If these fourteen municipalities all score below the linear line, we know that they score below average. This would support the expectation that some municipalities lie in the media shadow of bigger metropolises. And indeed, except for Amersfoort, all municipalities score far below average (-66%). The media shadow expectation is thus very plausible.

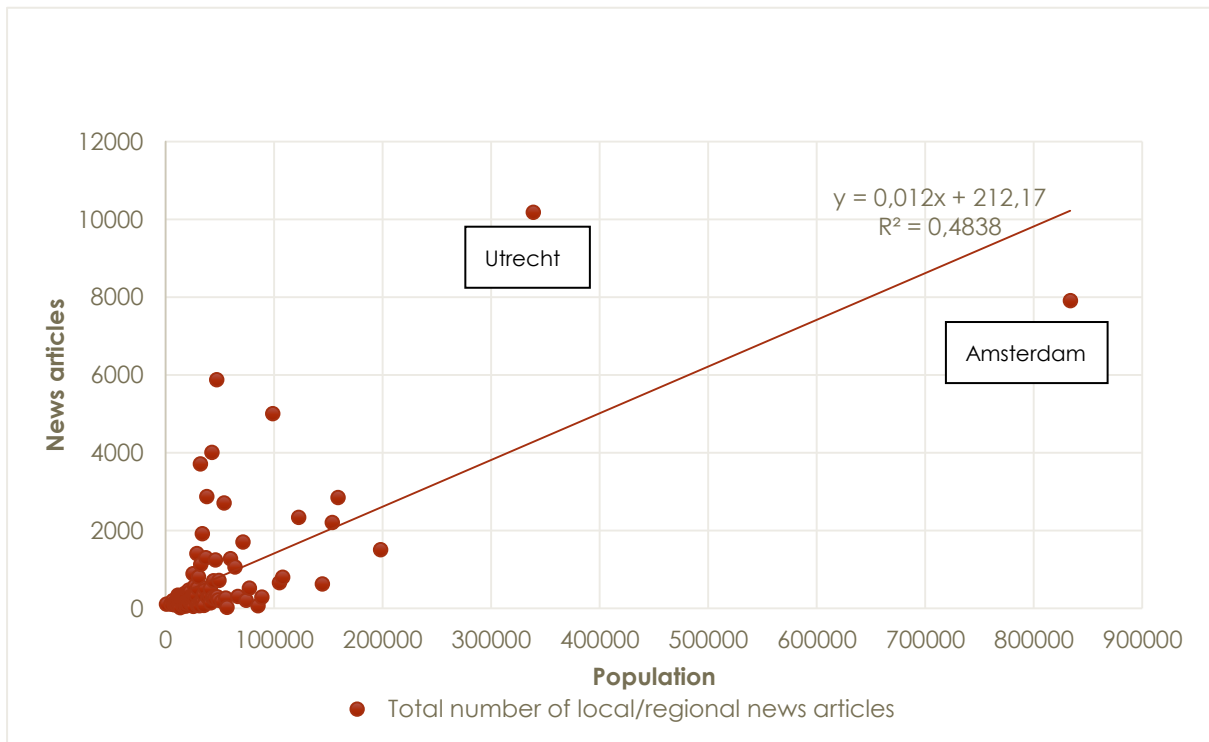


Figure 7: Regression analysis

7.1.5 Regional differences: media concentration

Another possibility for the difference between big and small municipalities is the number of news outlets. If there are differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high, compared to where the diversity in media outlets is low, we know that it is not necessarily the size of the municipality that is important, but the presence of multiple newsrooms. To form clear 'regions' we have sorted our municipalities into provinces. Although we have checked if all parts of the Netherlands were covered, we found that unfortunately this sample does not contain any articles for the province Drenthe. For each province, we have checked the average number of outlets (different local/regional newspapers) per region. As you can see in figure 8, the most outlets are in the province Flevoland. This is a distorted picture since this province only contained two municipalities: Almere and Dronten. Furthermore, there are no surprises here. In areas in the country where the population is highest, the number of outlets is also higher.

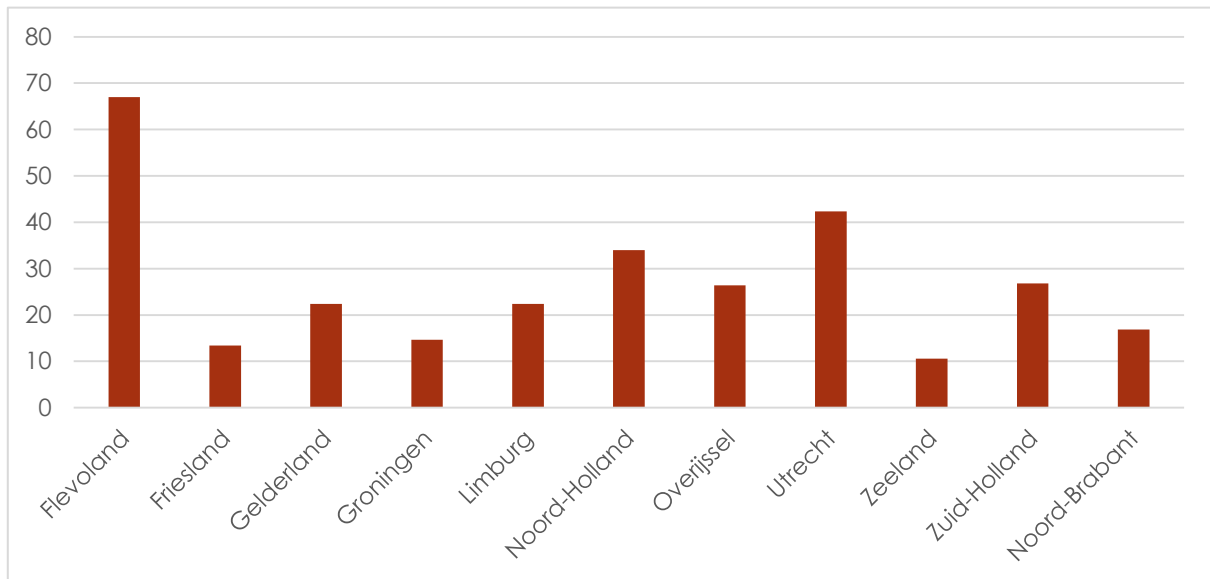


Figure 8: Average number of outlets per region (outlets/municipalities per region)

The expectation, however, is that the number of articles is highest where the number of outlets is the highest. Therefore, we have checked if there is a correlation between the number of local/regional news articles (2000-2017) published per citizen and the number of outlets. This turned out not to be the case ($r = -0,213$; $p = 0,539$). We have found no evidence for the expectation that the number of articles is higher when there are more media outlets. In Arnold's (2006) analysis this was also a very important outcome. He found that newspapers that compete with each other publish fewer articles about local representatives than do similarly situated newspapers that enjoy local monopolies (Arnold, 2006:200). In this light it is interesting to see if we see differences in the quality of news articles in these areas.

7.1.6 What have we learned until now?

Until now we have learned that there are big differences in the number of news articles written before and after the decentralization. These differences are strongly visible at local and regional level and a little bit on a national level. However, it seems to be a trend break instead of a steady rise. In terms of accountability this could indicate that watchdogs are alert there when there is a high-profile event such as a change in power. We have also learned that it is the size of the municipality that matters, not necessarily the presence of multiple news outlets. We can say: the more citizens, the more local/regional news. And we cannot say: the more news outlets, the more local/regional news. Competition between newspapers does not seem not a necessary ingredient for a higher number of news articles. And finally, we have found evidence for the 'media shadow' expectation. Municipalities

close to (<25 kilometers) Utrecht and Amsterdam had significantly less news than average.

7.2 ACCOUNTABILITY ROLES IN REGIONAL AND LOCAL NEWS ARTICLES

Now that we know the number of articles, we will zoom in on the quality of the local and regional news articles: is the quality sufficient in terms of the Burglar Alarm Standard and the Full News Standard to hold municipalities to account concerning decisions they have taken on decentralization topics in the social domain? As told in the method section, for this analysis we drew a sample according to the method described in the method section that contains 370 articles, of 25 different municipalities.

We have examined the articles thoroughly on format, location & length, centrality, content and valence. This focus helps us examine if our expectations turn out to be true. In the previous chapter, we have seen that the amount of newspaper outlets does not matter for the quantity of local/regional newspapers, but maybe it does for the quality of the articles? It will be also interesting to see if certain topics are more highlighted because they are mediagenic. And, we will assess which parties receive the most media attention, we expect the municipal representatives. We will first describe the outcomes of the content analysis of the articles and then assess both standards of accountability.

7.2.1 Format

The first task was to examine the type of articles that were published in the local newspapers. In figure 9 you can see that 73 percent of the articles are classified as **news**. These are articles that are written by an independent journalist that contains objective information about initiatives, policy plans, etc. This category differs from **background** articles, which are mostly interviews or coverages of (a group of) people. **Commercials** are mostly advertisements for medical aids or other articles with the clear aim of selling something. **Events** are a specific category in this respect because these are articles written to 'sell' a specific gathering. These articles are written to inform people about what is going on, where it takes place and what time the event takes place. And finally, we there are **columns (3)** and **opinion (17)** articles.

These categories do not differ much: both show a clear opinion about a certain topic. However, a column is mostly written by journalist or someone who is working for the newspaper and an opinion article is a letter to the editor. Most opinion articles were written by average citizens, as far as we could deduce from the articles. There is only one letter to the editor written by a local council member (SP) from the municipality Hoogezand-Sappemeer and two letters to the editor written by experts, namely a professor and a psychologist. The types of coverage were evenly spread among municipalities: for example, there were no municipalities that only had events or only commercials.

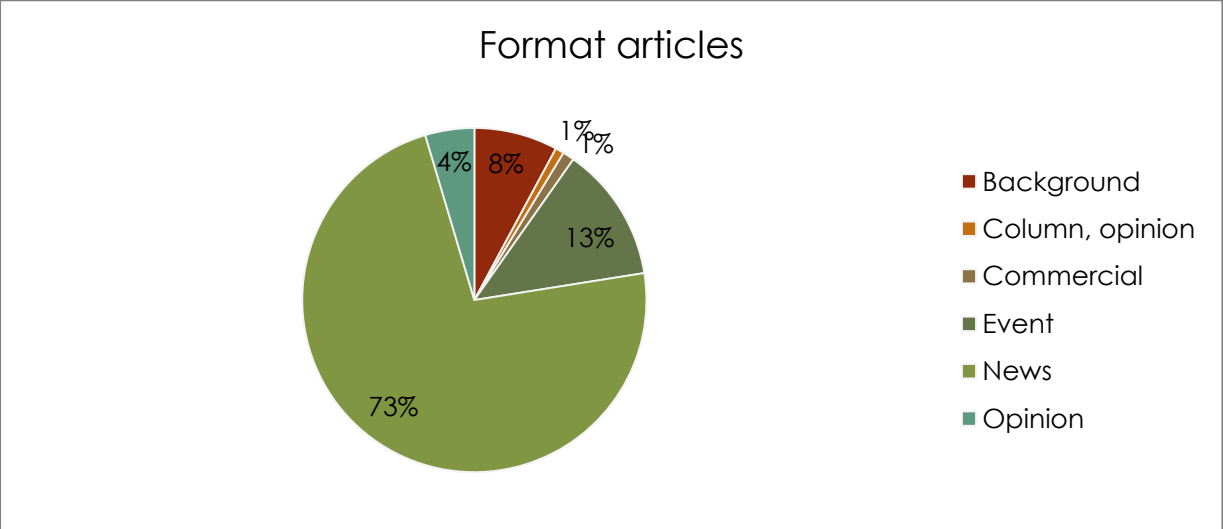


Figure 9: Format articles in local & regional newspapers

There are interesting differences between local and regional newspapers. Local newspapers had only a total of 43 news articles, while regional newspapers wrote 226 news articles. Local newspapers reported 25 events, while regional newspapers reported 24 events. Also, the number of background articles and opinion articles was much higher for regional newspapers (25 and 15 against 2 and 2). This is an interesting difference because it seems to say that regional newspapers do more 'critical journalism' and do better job at engaging citizens. This is a sign that regional newspapers might be doing a better job at reaching the Burglar Alarm Standard: signaling issues that others have identified as important.

7.2.2 Location & length

How prominent were the news articles on the decentralization topics? Do these articles disappear at the back of a local newspaper? Or, are the decentralization topics front page material? And how long are the articles? Just a few lines, or

multiple pages? This information is interesting because it tells us something about the relevance of the information according to news editors. A more prominent place in a newspaper, the more relevant it must be for the public.

Unfortunately, we could not retrieve the location of articles in local newspapers, only the regional papers. Based on the data we had, in 13 percent of the cases the decentralization topic was placed on the front page. On average the news articles in our sample are placed on page 7; articles concerning the decentralization topics seem to be not considered extremely important. However, with a standard deviation of 6.3 and a median of 5 there might be more to it. And indeed, when we compare the newspapers we see big difference. Both *Dagblad van het Noorden* (average page 20) and the *Leeuwarder Courant* (average page 22) do not give much prominence to the articles about decentralization. Also, *Het Parool* (15), *AD/Groene Hart* (13), the *Twentsche Courant Tubantia* (9) and *De Stentor* (8) score above average. This is interesting. Some newspapers thus seem to indicate that they pay more prominence to the decentralized topics than others. Getting back to the municipalities these newspapers match the municipalities *Deventer* (8), *Aalten* (8), *Amsterdam* (10), *Hoogezand-Sappemeer* (19) and *Marum* (20)? We have to know more before we can tie any conclusions to this finding.

There is another method to discover the prominence of the articles: the length. On average, there are 388 words per news article. The longest articles are written in *Hoogezand_Sappemeer* (449), *Deventer* (480), *Zandvoort* (508), *Aalsmeer* (524), *Amsterdam* (688), *Onderbanken* (722) and *Horst aan de Maas* (892). In figure 10 we see that *Aalten* (325), *Heerde* (178) and *Marum* (297) have not very long articles. These municipalities also do not score high on prominent placement of the articles.

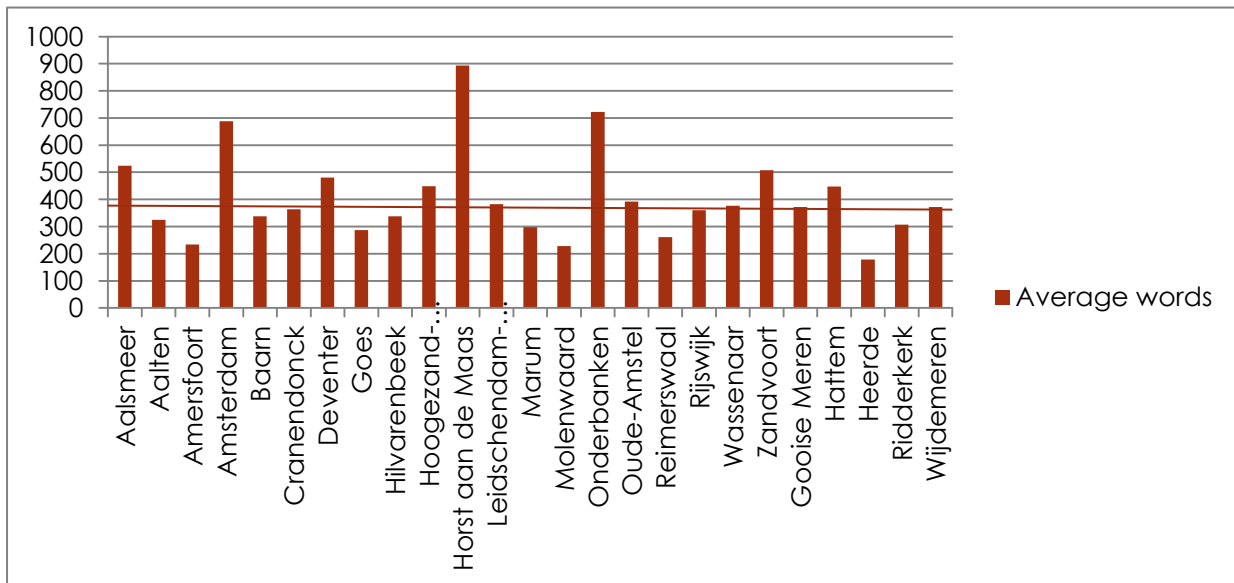


Figure 10: Average amount of words per article per municipality. Line is total average (388).

It is risky to draw any conclusions from this analysis, especially since the sample is so small due to the lack of local newspapers. Let just state here what we see: the size of the municipality does not necessarily seem to matter (Onderbanken, Ouder-Amstel and Zandvoort are among the smallest municipalities in our sample) for the prominence and size of the article. However, we state this very carefully, this results seem to indicate that some newspapers (Dagblad van het Noorden, Leeuwarder Courant, Twentsche Courant Tubantia and De Stentor) pay on average less prominence to the decentralization and they put a greater emphasis on bigger municipalities. This would be in line with our expectation that there are differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high (Holland, Utrecht), compared to where the diversity in media outlets is low (Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel). In areas where the diversity in media outlets is low the prominence and size of the articles is also low.

7.2.3 Centrality

How central were the decentralization topics in the articles? It could be that news articles only laterally wrote about the decentralized topics. For example, they interview an elderly woman about her daily activities and she criticizes the quality of care facilities provided by the municipality. It could also be that a journalist writes a critical article about a new youth care bill that is about to be discussed by the municipal council. As we have explained in our method-section we have looked at centrality in two ways: objective and subjective. For the objective measurement, we looked at the placement of the decentralized topic in the news articles. For the

subjective measurement, we looked at the role of the decentralized topic in the news article.

For the objective measure, we observe that 15 percent of the news articles named one of the decentralized topics in the headline, 24 percent named one of the decentralization topics in the first paragraph, 25 percent named one of the decentralization topics in the first three paragraphs and 35 percent names the decentralization topics in another paragraph.

The more subjective measure had the following results. Approximately 26 percent of the articles had one of the decentralization topics as a main topic, 37 percent of the news articles had one of the decentralization topics as their secondary topic, 33 percent of the articles mentioned a decentralization topic only in a list or used it as an example and 15 percent of the articles was an accidental hit that only a computer notices.

Articles where the decentralized topics were the main topic, covered various subjects. For example: why there is money left on the WMO-budget, the costs of the personal contribution for health care services, the understaffing of home care organizations (thuiszorg) and the fact that there is a company for people who fall under the participation law. Articles that used the decentralization topics as an example or on a list, discussed diverse topics (getting a new mayor, a new building for the GGZ, interviews with people who do volunteering) and casually brought up one of the decentralization topics. Often this topic is named in one sentence only and the reporter did not ask any follow-up questions.

Arnold (2006:71) found that especially articles with a secondary topic were surprisingly relevant. We therefore had a critical look at articles that named decentralization as a secondary topic.

The articles that had a decentralized topics as secondary topic tapped into various main topics. There was promotion for certain events, information about collaborations between organizations and municipalities (to improve elderly care, to promote e-health, organization places for disabled people to work) and there was old-fashioned 'reporting'. These reporting news articles were the most interesting for our research. They would report about a certain happening or event, but in the article there was important information for to hold municipalities accountable: the

police has searched a house because of a PGB-fraud case, not enough beds for homeless people, nuisance due to psychiatric patients. These articles all start with a news report, but also (critically) discuss the current arrangements provided by the municipalities. Some articles even discussed the whole set up of what has been changed during the decentralization.

We can thus conclude, in line with Arnold (2006), that articles that had the decentralization topics as second topic are similarly informing and critical to a similar extent as articles who had the decentralization topics as a first topic. This is interesting because it can be a sign that local/regional newspapers are living up to the Full News Standard: receiving basic information necessary to form and update an opinion.

7.2.4 Reporters

Arnold also examined who wrote the local news articles. We did this as well, but unfortunately for 50 percent of the articles the reporter was unknown to LexisNexis. For the other half of the articles we examined, we registered coverage for 24 municipalities. Only two municipalities, Marum and Heerde, had one reporter (but also only one article found with a known reporter). The rest of the articles all had two or more reporters.

Not surprisingly the bigger municipalities Amsterdam and Deventer both had fourteen reporters. On the one hand this is a good score: there is diversity and attention of multiple reporters for a certain municipality. On the other hand, we have included all articles that contained one of the decentralization topics. We are therefore unsure if the reporters are really specialized in the decentralization, or that they stumbled across a topic that had something to do with decentralization.

Moreover, one can also discuss the necessity of having a specialized reporter: is specialization necessary to write high-quality articles? According to Arnold (2006:73) some degree of specialization is necessary to cover a subject (in his case a representative) well. Our findings are unfortunately too lean to be able to support or contradict this theory. On the one hand, a small municipality such as Aalten (27.041 citizens) has four reporters and indeed scores below average articles when looking at word count and page. On the other hand, it has different news formats (events, news, opinion and background) and several articles that critically evaluate the

policy of the municipality. We are thus not able to draw conclusions about the role of specialization in relation to the quality of the articles.

7.2.5 Content

What was the content of the articles in our sample? Which decentralization topics did they cover? What was the focus of the articles? In attachment 10.6 we have added a code tree that is relevant for this paragraph.

There were eleven principal roles to detect for the decentralization topics. First of all, we have observed the category 'policy call to the government'. This role was found for news articles that urged a municipality or the national government to do something. These calls for the government were often from organizations. For example, youth organizations in Hoogezand-Sappemeer requested to put the quality of youth care on the political agenda. Another example is an appeal to the municipality Cranendonck to put social workplaces back to business. However, within this category it could also be that a municipality calls on the national government for action. An example of such an article is the municipality Goes. They bundled powers with two other municipalities and send a letter to a committee that is involved in arranging the future of health care in the province Zeeland. The news article reports about this letter.

Secondly, we have observed the category 'expressing view'. This category contains news articles wherein a certain view on the decentralized topics was expressed. Please note: expressing view only, concrete proposals are part of a different category. Examples of the 'expressing view category' are numerous. It could be a policy expression by an organization. For example, the police in Leidschendam-Voorburg commented on the current policy on mental health care – 'the budget cuts in mental health care have led to a rising number of homeless people'. Or, another example, a health care organization in Amersfoort is arguing about the personal budgets. According to the health care organization since the decentralization they seem to be lower than the years before, preventing them from doing their work well. However, the category 'expressing views' is broader than organizations only. It also contains policy expressions by the municipality itself. In Hoogezand-Sappemeer an alderman argued that the topics youth care, home care (thuiszorg) and the WMO are topics that must be handled with care. In Amersfoort, a local representative has asked critical questions to the alderman to express his view

on the current policy for spending money intended for decentralized tasks: 'spending this money on the library is not okay, it should go directly to schools'. For parties in the municipality expressing views in newspapers is a nice way of expressing their concerns on the current policy. Political party CDA in Baarn expressed their concerns about elderly people. According to the party, elderly people do not use the necessary amount of care anymore because they are scared for financial consequences. Finally, the expressing views-category contains letters to the editor. For example, in Goes a woman wrote a letter to the editor to express her concern about the current state of elderly care. In 71 percent of the time, the 'expressing view category' was combined with a second role. Often to release a new policy plan. This seems to be a logical structure: the current policy is –in the eyes of the writer of the article- insufficient, so something should be changed.

This brings us to the next category: 'policy plan'. This category contains releases of concrete policy plans by an organization, a citizen or by a political party. We will give three examples. In the municipality Goes, we see a news article giving the stage to a cyclist federation who want the municipality Goes to connect cycling policy to healthcare policy. In Amsterdam, there is an alderman (D66) who wants to inform young people better about their health insurance to prevent young people getting in debts because of their health insurance. And, in Aalten, several local representatives have united against the appointment of a fourth alderman. According to them, the decentralization tasks are already carried out, so a fourth administrator is not necessary.

Besides a 'policy plan', there can also be a 'policy defense'. This is often an alderman or a representative from the municipality defending the current policy to criticism. In Leidschendam-Voorburg the alderman from a local party defended why citizens are going to pay more taxes in the upcoming year: 'people will pay more, but will receive better care'. And in Wassenaar an Alderman (D66) defends the new decentralized arrangements in response to criticism by two council members from political parties CDA and VVD.

The decentralization topics are often used as an excuse to make certain decisions. In this case the decentralized topics are used as an 'explanation' to undertake certain actions or make certain (policy) decisions. This category is mainly used by municipalities and (care) organizations. In Baarn for example, the care organization

Lyvore had to make budget cuts, but this was due to the decentralization. In Amersfoort, the buildings of the GGZ are up for sale: due to the decentralization a lot of care is provided at home, these buildings are unnecessary now. And, in Aalsmeer the municipality is very satisfied with the policy concerning work and income: the transition of tasks has been successful and due to decentralization there are better functioning employment programs.

A category that is used by the government only is the category 'policy announcement'. This category contains one-sided stories of a municipality undertaking certain actions such as: rewarding caregivers (mantelzorgers), helping caregivers by letting them park cheaper, creating an organization that will help people who cannot find a job in a regular way and announcing stricter checks for people who use a personal budget.

Some articles used a specific case to underscore the successfulness of certain decentralized policies, or to explain that the decentralization has led to changes. This category is called 'example case'. For example, in the municipality Goes the Rabobank is now working together with the social organization Betho to get 'people who are distanced from the labor market' to work. And, in Deventer a woman used the current work of the GGZ as an example for why she was helped with her depression. These examples are very concrete, often they do not specifically talk about the role of the municipality, but they have to do with policies created by the new decentralization.

There are also articles that are used 'merely to inform'. These are articles that are merely factual. Examples are: a member of the house of representatives visiting a new fused political party in Aalten to discuss the new decentralization tasks; a care organization in Amsterdam going bankrupt; a woman in Baarn organizing her own home care organization; developing a youth care program that helps people with their financial troubles in Deventer and, lastly; in Goes people have demonstrated to a journalist from BN/De Stem what it is like to live with a personal budget. These articles are written by objective journalists and are meant to inform 'the people at home' about what is going on. In terms of public accountability these articles might be very useful. Some news articles were combined with the opinion of a council member or contain a view by a citizen on the local policy, but these views were

clearly separated in the article as 'the response of an alderman/representative/citizen'. These articles are mostly neutral and objective.

There are three categories left: the accidental hit, the promotion and the recruitment. The accidental hit contains articles that came up in the search results but do not necessarily have to do with the decentralization. For example: an interview with a woman who used to be a caregiver (mantelzorger) in her younger years. The promotion contains articles that inform the public about events that are going on. For example, an information gathering about care giving (mantelzorgen). And the recruitment is about recruiting new people for certain tasks: youth care, home care, volunteers, etc.

We see that the most news articles are about expressing a certain view on a topic. Approximately 24 percent of these articles consisted of a view expressed by a representative or an alderman. For this category, it turned out not to be true that representatives receive more media attention than other parties such as health care organizations, care givers or citizens.

Especially organizations seem to have an interest in joining the media debate. We have seen several care organizations, the cyclist federation, employment organizations and unions. Although it is hard to know which part of a news articles directly comes from organizations, our guess would be that these organizations have an almost equal share in debates surrounding the decentralization compared to representatives. Also, only a handful of articles reported about formal accountability processes such as questions in the municipal council or voting behavior. It could be that this information is neglected because it is not media-genetic. This type of information might be too somnolent to write about.

Statistics of the percentage of principal and secondary roles of the decentralization topics are given in figure 11 and 12. Approximately 42 percent of the articles expressed a view as secondary role. This can be explained by the fact that often two sides of the story are reflected, so there will be two times 'expressing view'. And, often a policy call to the government or a policy plan will be supported by the expressing of a certain view on the current policy. Just as, the other way around, informing articles and expressing views are often supported by a concrete policy call or a policy plan.

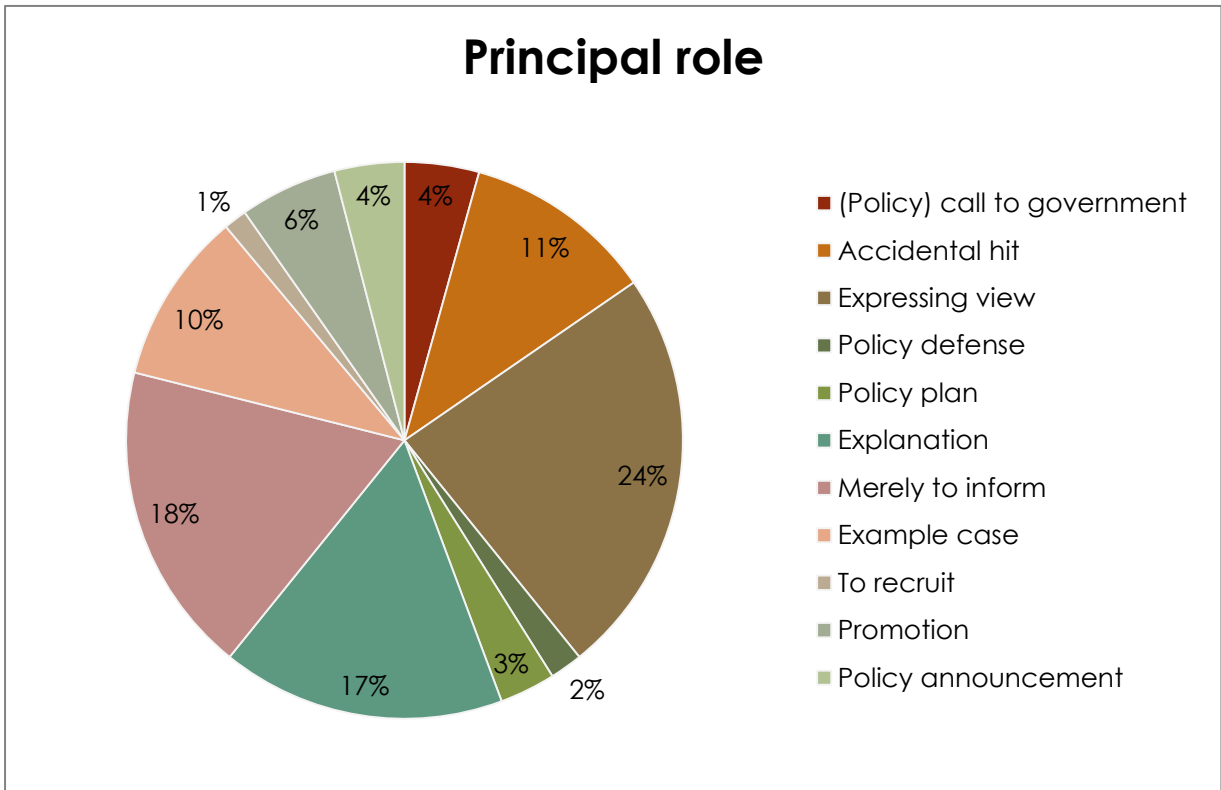


Figure 11: principal role of the decentralization topics in local/regional news articles

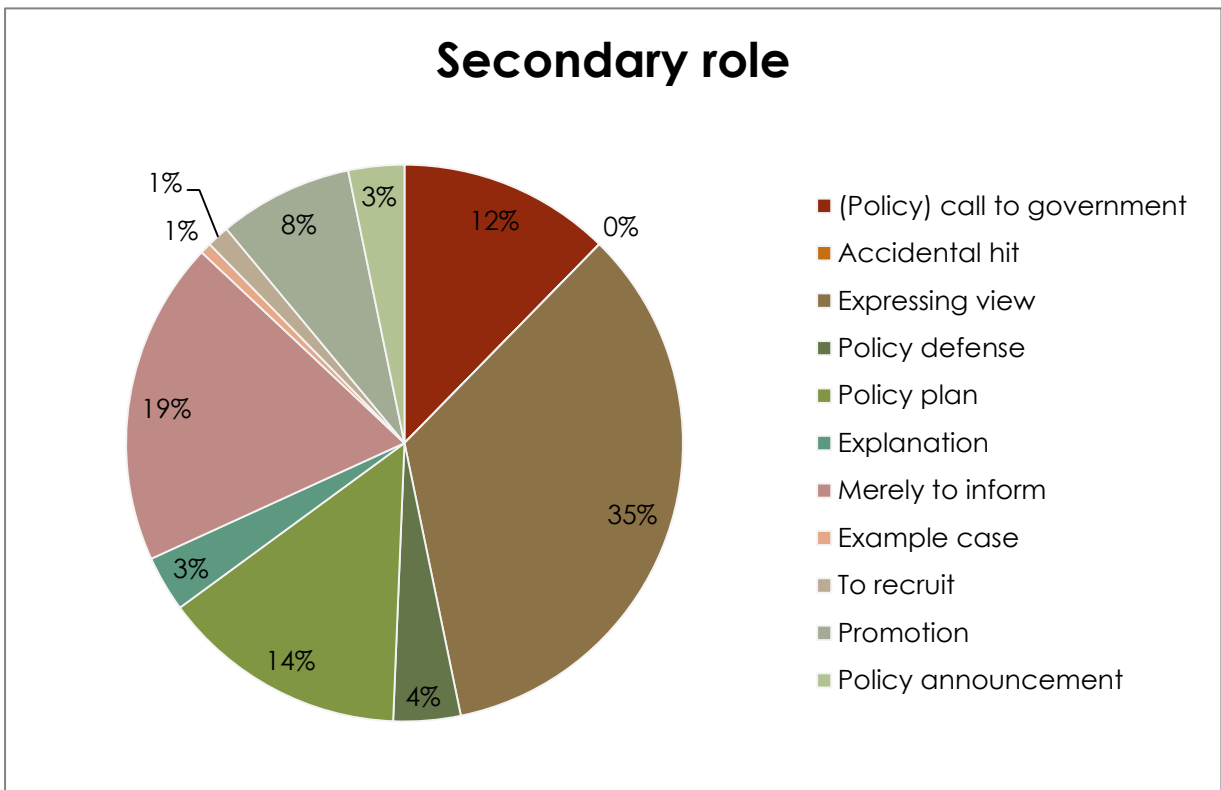


Figure 12: secondary role of the decentralization topics in local/regional news articles

7.2.6 Valence

Most the articles had a neutral valence (268 articles, 72 percent), the amount of negative and positive articles is almost the same, 49 and 43 articles (13 and 12 percent), and there is an equal spread of colored articles over various sizes of municipalities.

Table 6 represents a more complex picture of the valence of the coverage in local and regional newspapers. In this table, we see that most of the opinion articles had a negative valence. This makes sense, if you write a letter to the editor, you are most certainty not too happy about something. Also, not surprisingly is that the overwhelming majority of the news articles is of neutral valence.

Tone	Background	Column, opinion	Commercial	Event	News	Opinion
<i>Positive</i>	6	1	2	1	39	2
<i>Neutral</i>	19	1	2	46	193	7
<i>Negative</i>	4	1			37	8

Table 6: valence of coverage in local/regional newspapers in absolute numbers

However, approximately 28 percent of the news articles is rather colored, both positive and negative. This is interesting since the objectivity norm should guide journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts (Schudson, 2001:150). This could indicate that local/regional journalists do not always stick to the norm to be neutral. When we have a closer look to the content of the articles this seems to be a valid theory. Most news articles contain only the story that the decentralization arrangements have led to problems or to budget cuts. These news stories are very critical to the municipality, often without reflecting their part of the story. The positive stories are from municipalities that are 'doing well' and successfully implemented decentralized policies.

7.2.7 Assessing accountability standards based upon what we have learned so far

In the previous chapter, we have examined the quantity of national, regional and local newspapers in relation to the decentralization in the social domain. We already observed that there are differences between municipalities: bigger municipalities have often more coverage than smaller municipalities and municipalities that lie in the 'media shadow' of big municipalities have below-average coverage. In this chapter, we have zoomed in on municipalities of different sizes to assess the quality of the coverage. Is the quality sufficient to hold municipalities to account for their

decentralized tasks? To answer this question, we have used two standards: the Burglar Alarm Standard for coverage and the Full News Standard.

All the decentralized topics were brought to notice by the articles of the local and regional newspapers. There was not one topic neglected but some topics received more attention in one municipality than the other. In one municipality care giving (mantelzorg) could be a well-presented topic and youth care in another municipality. The mediagenic expectation therefore not necessarily seems to be true for decentralization topics, but there might be certain 'high-profile discussions' in a municipality. The persons who were mediagenic turned out to be especially organizations, health care organizations mainly seem to find their way to the microphone. This could be an explanation for the fact that much of the articles could be typified as 'expressing view'.

All the municipalities also had variations in the types of news articles that were written. However, local journalism seems to focus more on events instead of news. This could be an indication that newsrooms of local newspapers are understaffed or focusing on other topics instead.

The evidence in this chapter suggest that some municipalities are indeed meeting the Full News Standard, at least if we assume that it is not always necessary to know the voting behavior of political parties. People in most municipalities can regularly read reports of different policy positions concerning the decentralized topics (from organizations, the municipality, independent journalists and citizens) and on a wide range of issues and events. This is enough information to form an update or an opinion. However, for some municipalities with a lower number of media outlets it is questionable if they always meet the Full News Standard. This conclusion comes from differences between regions where the diversity in media outlets is high (Holland, Utrecht), compared to where the diversity in media outlets is low (Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel) in the prominence and length of the articles.

Also, opinion articles and columns are almost only found in regional newspapers, scarcely in local newspapers. Local newspapers have on forehand failed to reach this standard. To fulfill the Burglar Alarm Standard, newspapers should make their opinion pages available to those who are critical on the decentralized topics, helping the ordinary citizens to form a position (Arnold, 2006:123). And yes, there were opinion articles and written letters to the editor. The majority of them being

critical. However, not much opinion articles were written (only 7 percent of the total number of articles, if we include columns) and solely in regional newspapers. We do not interpret this as 'extensive opinion coverage', which is necessary to meet the Burglar Alarm Standard. We therefore assume that no municipality has fully met the Burglar Alarm Standard, at the very most touched upon meeting the standard for one specific topic a year. This is worrisome since, according to Arnold (2006:9), editorialists, columnists and letter writers can help citizens interpret issues. The scarce amount of opinion articles could indicate that citizens are not involved enough to write an opinion article or that they are using to another (social) medium to express their opinion. It could also be, witness the fact that are only 3 editorial columns, that most editors do not like opinion columns and letters to the editor and that they will not put them in the newspaper.

7.3 THE IMPACT OF LOCAL/REGIONAL NEWS ARTICLES

In this chapter, we will discuss the impact of the news articles on the formal accountability process of answering written questions in the municipality. This impact is discussed by means of a typology developed by Jacobs and Schillemans (2016). At the end of this chapter we know the accountability roles that regional and local news articles fulfill concerning the topics youth policy, work & income and elderly care.

Our newspaper sample is categorized into 'sparks', 'amplifiers', 'triggers' and media acting as an 'accountability forum' in their own right. As you can see in table 7, most of the articles are typified as 'sparks' (approximately 92 percent). Jacobs and Schillemans (p. 27) argue that this metaphor indicates that the news articles *may* lead to a fire, but that it needs additional fuel from an external source. In our case these were articles that reported what was going on in a municipality, without being able to trace it back to written questions. Except for two, all local news articles can be placed within this 'spark-category'. This suggests that especially the local articles in our sample did not have any impact on the formal accountability process of handing in written questions.

Code	Absolute numbers	Relative numbers
Spark	286	92,26%
Amplifier	16	5,16%
Trigger	8	2,58%
Accountability forum	0	0%

Table 7: Classification system media & accountability roles

Approximately 5 percent of the articles could be categorized as 'amplifier'. In these cases, the newspapers reported about questions being asked in the municipality, or, they wrote an article about the same subject as a written question handed in one month earlier. This category is important because it informs citizens about formal accountability processes. Local and regional media magnify these processes and could potentially amplify the effects of these formal accountability processes. Unfortunately, in our sample the articles did not magnify the formal accountability processes up to an influential extent.

Only 2,5 percent of the articles are typified as 'triggers'. These are written question that had the same topic as an earlier published the news article. Triggers could indicate that council members have based their questions on these news reports. Unfortunately, both regional and local news articles (at least the ones in our sample) did not seem relevant enough to trigger formal accountability processes, or councilors did not use the local/regional news articles as input for their written questions. We only found eight triggers in total. The triggers tapped in to different topics such as: resistance against a fourth alderman, the outsourcing of tasked concerning the participation law, a lack of beds in a shelter for homeless people and the celebration of national day for care giving (nationale matelzorgdag).

We have seen that the creation of a 'spark' seems to be the most important role of both regional and local newspapers. Our conclusion is therefore that most local/regional news articles do not seem to be very threatening to decisions concerning the decentralization topics in municipalities. With care, we state that the media might write about the decentralized topics, but does often not have consequences for the formal accountability processes. We say this with uttermost care because we have only analyzed the written questions, not for the other formal accountability processes such as questions asked during a debate or the handing in

of motions. Furthermore, our sample did not contain all local/regional news articles for the year 2016. The findings of Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) indicate a similar result. The authors also did not find much empirical weight to the critical role of local/regional media as an accountability forum. The actual critical role of local/regional media thus seems to be largely missing.

8 WHAT CAN WE ASSUME BASED ON THIS RESEARCH?

In this chapter we will first present our most important conclusions for each sub-question. This will result in answering our main research question: *'to what extent are local and regional media able to fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization in the social domain?'* Secondly, we reflect on our research and the outcomes. This will result in some interesting points for discussion and a view recommendations for future research.

8.1 CONCLUSIONS

8.1.1 The number of news articles

At first glance we were surprised by the considerable increase of local and regional news articles since the decentralization. Significantly more local and regional news articles appeared after the decentralization than before. The increase of local and regional news articles is even larger than the increase of national news articles. However, the devil's in the details. When we take a closer look, the decentralization was a trend break. We see an enormous rise in 2014, followed by decreases in the years 2015 and 2016. We therefore highly doubt if local and regional newspapers can structurally provide checks and balances for the new decentralized tasks. The quantity of local and regional articles should therefore be monitored closely if the government wants to be sure that citizens have the proper information to be self-supporting and participative.

8.1.2 The larger the municipality, the more news articles?

More details show a strong correlation between the number of articles written in local and regional newspaper and the number of citizens. The more citizens, the more local and regional news. Interestingly this does not depend on the number of news outlets. In line with Arnold (2006), we have found that local and regional newspapers who experience more competition from other newspapers do not produce more news articles. Furthermore, we found strong evidence for the media shadow concept by Nord and Nygren (2002). Municipalities close to (<25 kilometers) Utrecht and Amsterdam had significantly less local and regional coverage than average. Except for the municipality Amersfoort, which is in line with the fact that a bigger municipality leads to more local and regional news.

8.1.3 **Quality local and regional news articles**

Zooming in on the local and regional news articles we are able to spot more interesting differences. We used the Burglar Alarm Standard and the Full News Standard (Arnold, 2006; Zaller, 1992) to assess the quality of news for 25 municipalities. Is the quality sufficient to hold a municipality accountable for decisions concerning the decentralization topics?

As it turns out, the articles in most municipalities meet the Full News Standard (but only if information about formal accountability processes is not taken into account), but not the Burglar Alarm Standard. People in most municipalities can regularly read reports of different policy positions concerning the decentralized topics (not only from representatives, but also from health care organizations, unions, journalists and citizens) and on a wide range of issues and events. However, in municipalities where there are not many news outlets - only one or two newspapers - the news articles were shorter and given a less-prominent position. For these municipalities it is unsure if they meet the Full News Standard. The Burglar Alarm standard is not structurally met by any municipality, except for maybe a few high-profile cases (examples: PGB-budgets or volunteer aid). It is often not clear what others (in opinion articles or columns) have commented on the decentralization.

Topics did not turn out to be extraordinary mediagenic, but there were organizations that turned out to be especially mediagenic. Mainly health care organizations seem to find their way to the microphone.

Although most municipalities meet the Full News Standard, there are remarks to be made. First, although most news articles seemed to be neutral, 28 percent of the news articles is rather colored (positive or negative valence). This could be a threat to the ideal of independent and objective journalism (Schudson, 2001). Second, regional newspapers were more news-driven than local newspapers. Local newspapers seemed to be more event- and activity oriented. This is bad news for the length and critical content of the articles. The role of local newspapers is therefore further away from the watchdog ideal of the Dutch government than regional newspapers. A third remark is that seventeen percent of our sample of local and regional newspapers initially contained a response wherein the decentralization is used as an excuse to undertake a certain action or make certain policy decisions. These responses were often from municipalities and health care organizations.

Sometimes these articles also contained a critical examination of this 'explanation', but in most cases journalists let them free of critical examinations. For future research it would be interesting to see why this 'excuse' is often not critically examined. Maybe the newsrooms are understaffed and do not have the capacity to do intensive research (in line with Kik and Landman, 2013)? Or, maybe the governance processes have blurred the clear, strict lines of command and accountability, making it hard for journalists to find 'the truth', or at least find the relevant actors (in line with Hasler et al., 2016).

8.1.4 Accountability roles

All in all, our first analyses lead to confusing conclusions. On the one hand, we criticize journalists of local and regional journalism because they can be colored and adopt views of others without question. On the other hand, a citizen lacks the opinions and criticisms by other parties to form his/her own opinion. These colliding views actually touch upon the most central problem: local and regional newspapers seem to lack actual influence on formal accountability processes.

Our final analysis on the accountability roles by the media (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016) shows that the large majority of the local and regional news articles did not have any follow-up in written questions nor caused a stir. Only a few regional news articles had a small influence on the formulation of written questions in a municipality. And only a few (especially regional) newspapers believe formal accountability processes, such as asking written questions, to be important enough to share with the public. Furthermore, we have not found empirical weight to the critical role of local/regional media as an accountability forum. The actual critical role of local/regional media thus seems to be largely missing. This is in line with the findings by Jacobs and Schillemans (2016). Although ideally the local and regional media have a watchdog function (Waisbord, 2000), it is not exercised by working as an independent accountability forum.

8.1.5 To what extent are local and regional media able to fulfill accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization in the social domain?

Local and regional newspaper have a complicated relation to fulfilling their accountability tasks on a municipal level concerning decentralization in the social domain. On the one hand, their role has increased since the decentralization and most municipalities can consume a range of different news outlets and news

formats. This is an indication that they have jumped in the 'accountability gap'. On the other hand, we believe the role of local and regional media is not solid enough to rely on as checks and balances. An actual watchdog, keeping the government alert (Waisbord, 2000) is missing. We doubt that the quality of the articles is sufficient to make an actual impact on formal or public accountability processes.

8.2 LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Before we move on to scientific contributions and interesting topics for future research we want to discuss the limitations of this research.

First, this study has examined the relation between local and regional media and accountability in The Netherlands. The outcomes of this research are possibly context-specific and can be different for local and regional news media in other countries. However, the media shadow hypothesis and the accountability roles by Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) have been tested before. Our conclusions concerning these two concepts therefore build on previous researches. This makes the our findings more robust.

Secondly, the findings for analysis of the accountability roles by the local and regional media could have been expanded. Within our brief scope of time available, we were unable to examine the impact of more articles on formal accountability processes besides the written questions. This affects the reliability, more specifically the stability, of our research. If this study is replicated it would be good to expand the sample of news articles and the scope of formal accountability processes.

Third, the quantitative part of this research focused on a specific time period (2000-2016) even as the qualitative part of this research (2016). The findings – and especially the influence of online journalism – could change within a few years. It would be interesting to replicate this study (and expand it) in the future.

8.3 FOR FUTURE RESEARCH INTO ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE MEDIA

This research brought forth some interesting insights and it has given us ideas for future research. In the following paragraphs we will share these insights and ideas.

8.3.1 Theoretical findings and suggestions

First, this paper provides more grip on the role of media in governance processes, which was often neglected on a local level (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre 2016). We have found that local and regional newspapers fulfill monitoring functions to a certain extent, but that their actual influence on formal accountability processes seems to be missing, this is partly in line with the earlier findings of Jacobs and Schillemans (2016). Regarding the decentralization it seems that local and regional news media have followed the ones in power to some extent. In the (election) year before the decentralization there was more local and regional news, but since then media attention has decreased.

For the future, it would be interesting to monitor the attention of local and regional news media for these decentralized topics to see if the change in media attention is sustainable. The outcomes of this research could be compared to the relation between decentralization processes and the media in other countries. Another interesting finding to follow upon is the influence of the quantity of reporters. Arnold (2006) indicated that some degree of specialization of reporters is necessary to cover a subject well, but our findings show that a multitude of reporters can be good for the diversity of news formats. Finally, we believe it would be good to expand our research and study also the quality of online news media and their impact on municipal accountability processes. We do not expect to see very different theoretical outcomes, but our research shows that there is room for more opinion coverage based upon which people can discuss. Maybe social media are providing such a platform? This would indicate that the Burglar Alarm Standard would be valid for online news media.

8.3.2 Room for improvement: help media research

To simplify research into media and the local administration we came up with two practical improvements. The first improvement being LexisNexis. Although we highly appreciate the fact that there is an online database filled with local, regional and national news of such a long time, the workings of the program are outdated. Especially for large numbers of articles –necessary to spot patterns in news services– the program is too slow and limited. This blocks research of the kind of we did. It would help if LexisNexis had a build-in program for statistics and analysis of news

articles. It could be similar to StatLine⁷, the program used by Statistic Netherlands (CBS). The second improvement is for municipalities. We had trouble finding written questions for some municipalities, especially the smaller ones. The visibility of formal accountability processes increases transparency for municipalities and would enormously help to track and trace media influence on these formal accountability processes.

⁷The analysis tool of Statistics Netherlands: <http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/>

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10 ATTACHMENTS

10.1 SEARCH TERMS

1. Decentralisatie
2. Jeugdhulp
3. Jeugdzorg
4. Jeugdhulpverlening
5. PGB
6. Persoonsgebonden budget
7. Jeugdbescherming
8. Jeugdreclassering
9. Jeugdbeleid
10. Jeugdwet
11. Participatiewet
12. WMO
13. Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning
14. Beschermd wonen
15. GGZ
16. Geestelijke gezondheidszorg
17. Wijkverpleging
18. Wet langdurige zorg
19. Ouderenzorg
20. Werkgelegenheidsbeleid
21. Mantelzorg
22. Sociaal Domein

10.2 REGIONAL NEWSPAPER TITLES

1. Dagblad van het Noorden
2. Leeuwarder Courant
3. Friesch Dagblad
4. Haarlems Dagblad
5. Leidsch Dagblad
6. Gooi- en Eemlander
7. Noordhollands Dagblad
8. AD Rotterdams Dagblad
9. AD Haagsche Courant
10. AD Utrechts Nieuwsblad
11. AD Amersfoortse Courant
12. AD Drechtsteden
13. AD Groene Hart
14. PZC
15. BN DeStem
16. Brabants Dagblad
17. Eindhovens Dagblad
18. Gelderlander
19. Twentsche Courant Tubantia
20. Stentor
21. Parool
22. Barneveldse Krant
23. Dagblad De Limburger
24. Limburgs Dagblad

10.3 LIST OF MEASUREMENTS

Concept	Definition	Measurement	Source measurement
<i>Small municipality</i>	All municipalities <50.000 inhabitants	Rank-order municipalities in our sample according to number of inhabitants	Theory from Landman et al., 2015. List municipalities: CBS, 2015
<i>Big municipality</i>	All municipalities >50.000 inhabits	Rank-order municipalities in our sample according to number of inhabitants	Theory from Landman et al., 2015. List municipalities: CBS, 2015
<i>Before the decentralization</i>	The years before the decentralization took place	Select the news articles from the years 2000-2013	LexisNexis, local/regional news 2000-2013.
<i>After the decentralization</i>	The years after the decentralization took place	Select the news articles from the years 2014-2016	LexisNexis, local/regional news 2014-2016.
<i>Metropolitan region</i>	Municipalities that score way above average in population and the amount of published news articles	Select outliers regression analysis: Utrecht and Amsterdam	List municipalities: CBS, 2015 LexisNexis, local/regional news 2000-2016
<i>Media Shadow</i>	Municipalities that are no further than 25 kilometers away from one of the two metropolises.	Select municipalities in regression analysis: Amstelveen, Ouder-Amstel, Oostzaan, Aalsmeer, Haarlemmermeer, Heemstede, Bloemendaal, Wijdmeren, Gooise Meren, Utrechtse Heuvelrug, Baarn, Amersfoort, Nieuwkoop and Alphen aan de Rijn	List municipalities: CBS, 2015 LexisNexis, local/regional news 2000-2016
<i>Media outlets</i>	Different local/regional newspapers	Different local/regional news outlets in our sample of the 112 municipalities.	LexisNexis, local/regional news 2000-2016
<i>Mediagenic</i>	Subjects that get particularly more media attention than other subjects	Compare topics of the 370 articles in our sample	LexisNexis, local/regional news 2016

10.4 SAMPLE LIST

The yellow samples are used for part 2 and 3 of this research. The municipalities are ordered according to size (CBS, 2015).

1. Schiermonnikoog
2. Terschelling
3. Baarle-Nassau
4. Onderbanken
5. Strijen
6. Oostzaan
7. Vaals
8. De Marne
9. Marum
10. Mill en Sint Hubert
11. Rijnwaarden
12. Doesburg
13. Hattem
14. Menterwolde
15. Kapelle
16. Kollumerland Nieuwkruisland en
17. Aalburg
18. Ouder-Amstel
19. Texel
20. Lopik
21. Woudrichem
22. Hilvarenbeek
23. Heeze-Leende
24. Eemsmond
25. Heumen
26. Staphorst
27. Zandvoort
28. Waterland
29. Olst-Wijhe
30. Druten
31. Heerde
32. Midden-Delfland
33. Dantumadiel
34. Rhenen
35. Alblasserdam
36. Cranendonck
37. Bunschoten
38. Zundert

39. Woensdrecht
40. Reimerswaal
41. Bloemendaal
42. Lisse
43. Nuenen
44. Oldebroek
45. Wijdereen
46. Sluis
47. Oud-Beijerland
48. Maasdriel
49. Baarn
50. Stein (L.)
51. Voorschoten
52. Dongen
53. Weststellingwerf
54. Wassenaar
55. Kaag en Braassem
56. Geldermalsen
57. Heemstede
58. Aalten
59. Nieuwkoop
60. Culemborg
61. Sint-Michiëlsgestel
62. Winterswijk
63. Molenwaard
64. Halderberge
65. Opsterland
66. Boxtel
67. Aalsmeer
68. Oldenzaal
69. Epe
70. Tynaarlo
71. Schouwen-Duiveland
72. Hoogezand-Sappemeer
73. Montferland
74. Edam-Volendam
75. Bronckhorst
76. Goes

77. Veghel
78. Geldrop-Mierlo
79. Dronten
80. Nijkerk
81. Horst aan de Maas
82. Etten-Leur
83. Steenwijkerland
84. Veldhoven
85. Ridderkerk
86. Harderwijk
87. Zutphen
88. Hollands Kroon
89. Utrechtse Heuvelrug
90. Rijswijk (ZH.)
91. Pijnacker-Nootdorp
92. Oosterhout
93. Smalingerland
94. Gooise Meren
95. Hardenberg
96. Veenendaal
97. Capelle aan den IJssel
98. Gouda
99. Leidschendam-Voorburg
100. Schiedam
101. Nissewaard
102. Amstelveen
103. Deventer
104. Westland
105. Alphen aan den Rijn
106. Maastricht
107. Haarlemmermeer
108. Amersfoort
109. Apeldoorn
110. Almere
111. Utrecht (gemeente)
112. Amsterdam

10.5 SPSS OUTPUT

Descriptive statistics local/regional news articles before and after the decentralization.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Before decentralization 2000-2013	106	,21	540,29	39,1435	79,90587
After decentralization 2014-2016	106	6,00	873,67	81,4874	135,22532
Valid N (list wise)	105				

One sample T-test of the group local/regional news articles after decentralization compared to the mean (39) of the group before the decentralization.

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 39

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
After decentralization (2014-2016)	3,212	110	,002	40,40841	15,4746	65,3422

One sample T-test of the group national news articles after decentralization compared to the mean (11.64) of the group before the decentralization.

One-Sample Test

Test Value = 11.64

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
After decentralization (2014-2016)	,706	111	,481	5,99095	-10,8143	22,7962

Correlation between the population of a municipality and the number of local/regional news articles in a municipality.

Correlations

		TOTAL 2000-2016	Citizens
TOTAL 2000-2016	Pearson Correlation	1	,702**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	107	107
Citizens	Pearson Correlation	,702**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	107	107

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Comparing the average number local/regional news articles from municipalities <50.000 citizens (0) to municipalities >50.000 citizens(1).

Report

TOTAL 2000-2016

Compare means 50.000	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
,00	497,49	88	888,714
1,00	2234,63	19	2711,624
Total	805,95	107	1530,262

Descriptive statistics national news articles.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
TOTALNATIONAL	107	2,00	11775,00	222,4766	1198,69186
Valid N (listwise)	107				

Compare average number of national news articles before and after the decentralization.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
National news articles before decentralization	105	,07	649,29	12,1673	66,58146
National news articles after decentralization	107	,00	895,00	18,3863	91,77358
Valid N (listwise)	105				

10.6 CODE TREE

We went from the initial codes by Arnold (2006) to codes that turned up in our articles. As you can see most codes originated from codes by Arnold. The codes on the far-right were made up by us.

Initial codes by Arnold (2006)	Policy positions	Representatives positions on actual roll-call votes	Representative cosponsoring or endorsing bills	Taking positions on bills	Expressing view on matter	X
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Eventual codes by Riemersma (2017)	(Policy) call to the government	Explanation			Expressing view	Merely to inform
	Policy defense					To recruit
	Policy plan					Promotion
	Policy announcement					Example case