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Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics

Jesper Strömbäck

Two concepts that have been used to describe the changes with regards to media and politics during the last fifty years are the concepts of *mediation* and *mediatization*. However, both these concepts are used more often than they are properly defined. Moreover, there is a lack of analysis of the *process* of mediatization, although the concept as such denotes a process. Thus the purpose of this article is to analyze the concepts of mediated and mediatized politics from a process-oriented perspective. The article argues that mediatization is a multidimensional and inherently process-oriented concept and that it is possible to make a distinction between four phases of mediatization. Each of these phases is analyzed. The conclusion is that as politics becomes increasingly mediatized, the important question no longer is related to the independence of the media from politics and society. The important question becomes the independence of politics and society from the media.

Keywords: *mediated politics; mediatization; press politics; media logic; political logic*

In the weeks leading up to the 1962 Swedish election, the party leaders of the five major parties were asked to comment on the importance of television, the new medium introduced only a few years earlier. The leader of the Conservative Party said that “television has strong suggestive powers,” but also that “we in the Conservative Party will continue to rely on our devoted and determined field workers.” The prime minister, Tage Erlander of the Social Democrats, said that “television is important. But I doubt it will replace other media.” The leader of the Liberal Party, Professor Bertil Ohlin, concluded that “politics can be presented to the people more effectively and, with the help of pictures and diagrams, more informatively than through lectures” (quoted in Petersson et al. 2006: 34).

Almost fifty years later, it is easy to conclude that the impact of television on politics and society was seriously underestimated and misunderstood by these politicians. Although parties still make use of members and volunteers, their importance is indeed reduced compared to the situation in the early

1960s. Nowadays, the media have become the most important source of information for most people in advanced democracies around the world. This might be particularly true with regards to television, as noted by Gunther and Mughan (2000: 402): “Everywhere, television has become the preeminent, if not overwhelmingly dominant, source of national and international political news for the majority of the population.”

However, it would be difficult to argue that television has contributed to a presentation of politics that is more informative than newspapers and, indeed, than lectures. It is even questionable whether television has contributed to a more informed and knowledgeable electorate, at least with respect to factual and substantive information (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Petersson et al. 2006; Popkin 1994).

Two concepts that have been used to describe the changes with regards to media and politics during the last fifty years are the concepts of mediation and mediatization. According to several observers, politics has become mediated (Bennett and Entman 2001; Nimmo and Combs 1983) and mediatized (Kepplinger 2002; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Schulz 2004). This is a process not unique to politics; rather, all experiences from the micro level of identity formation to the macro level of politics and society are purportedly increasingly mediated and mediatized (Altheide and Snow 1988; Cottle 2005; Hjarvard 2004; Jansson 2002; Meyer 2002).

However, both concepts are used more often than they are properly defined. Moreover, there is a lack of analysis of the *process* of mediatization, although the concept as such denotes a process. Thus the purpose of this article is to discuss and analyze the concepts of mediated and mediatized politics from a process-oriented perspective. The article will argue that mediatization is a multidimensional concept and put forward the hypothesis that it is possible to make a distinction between four different phases of the mediatization of politics.

Mediation and Mediatization: A Preliminary Analysis

When discussing the mediation and mediatization of politics, many observers tend to be critical. The present situation when politics is mediated and mediatized is implicitly or explicitly compared to some kind of golden age—the exact timing of which is conspicuously absent in most accounts—when politics was more true to its ideals, when people were more civic-minded, or when the media facilitated, rather than undermined, the way political communication and democracy work. This tendency is most obvious in, but not restricted to, the pessimistic accounts of Habermas (1984) and Bourdieu (1998). Whether pessimism is warranted should however be considered an empirical-normative question. It should not be part of the definition of *mediation* and *mediatization*.

The importance of separating conceptual, empirical, and normative issues is highlighted by Blumler and Kavanagh's (1999) analysis of what they call the three ages of political communication. For example, it might be the case that the political debates were more substantive and less influenced by the media in the first age of political communication—roughly during the 1950s—but on the other hand, people tended to be less politically interested and voted on group-based loyalties. Thus they were less likely to follow the political debate and to be open to the arguments put forward. Was that situation better than the present one, and if so, from what perspective? Perhaps the deliberative quality of the public political debate was higher, but not with regards to inter- or intrapersonal deliberations (Elster 1998). If so, how should the deliberative quality of political discussions on different levels be weighed against each other, if a trade-off is necessary? Different models of democracy, furthermore, have different normative implications for the media and journalism; hence how we evaluate the media depends on what model of democracy we ascribe to (Strömbäck 2005).

Any definition of *mediation* and *mediatization* should thus be nonnormative (Hjarvard 2004). A distinction should furthermore be made between these two concepts. Conceptually speaking, mediated politics does not equal mediatized politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). On the most general level, *mediated politics* refers to a situation in which the media have become the most important source of information and vehicle of communication between the governors and the governed (Asp 1986; Bennett and Entman 2001; Nimmo and Combs 1983). In such a situation, people depend on the media for information about politics and society in a broad sense of the words, just as politicians and other powerful elites depend on the media for information about peoples' opinions and trends in society, and for reaching out to people. Stated differently, the media *mediate* between the citizenry, on one hand, and the institutions involved in government, electoral processes, or, more generally, opinion formation, on the other. Politics could thus be described as mediated whenever the mass media are the main channels through which politics is communicated and when, as a consequence, the depictions of "reality" that are conveyed through the mass media presumably have an impact on how people perceive "reality."

From this, it follows that the mediation of politics is an old phenomenon. How old is an empirical question, which is difficult to answer due to the lack of empirical research prior to World War II. We do know, however, that the rise of newspapers contributed to the creation of the nation-state as an imagined community (Anderson 1991) and to the democratization processes during the nineteenth century. The phenomenon of mediated politics is thus older than theories about the phenomenon, although some observers in the early twentieth century offered analyses that are still highly relevant today. One prominent example is Lippmann (1997: 18), who, in his classic *Public Opinion*, wrote about how the human being "is learning to see with his mind vast portions of

the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember.” This was, of course, due to the invention of the media.

In any case, *to assess whether politics in a particular society is mediated or not*, it really does not matter whether the media landscape is dominated by radio, newspapers, television, or the Internet. Nor does it matter whether the media are independent from or controlled by government or political actors, such as political parties, or what professional norms and values guide journalists in their work. What matters is whether the mass media constitute the most important channels for information exchange and communication between people and political actors. Mediated politics should thus be understood as something different from politics experienced through interpersonal communication or directly by the people.

What has changed during the last few decades is, then, perhaps not so much that politics has suddenly become mediated; rather, what has changed is that the intensity of mediated experiences has increased and that the (experienced or actual) relevancy of institutions, events, and processes beyond people’s own reach has increased. The latter, in turn, is an effect of numerous other processes, including the expansion of the welfare state, the rise of the industrial and service economy, and, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the informational economy (Castells 1996) and advances in transportation technology. In this context, the media have also played an immensely important role, making us more aware of institutions, events, and processes beyond the borders of our local, regional, and national communities. The media have thus contributed to a deterritorialization of human experiences and perceptions (Thompson 1995). However, to conclude that we are—or perceive ourselves as—more dependent on events and processes beyond our own reach, and hence on the media for information about such events and processes, is conceptually something different than a process of mediation.

In other words, the concept of mediated politics is basically a descriptive and rather static concept that refers to whether or not the media constitute the most important channels for information exchanges and communication between the people and political actors.¹ From a descriptive point of view, it is still an important concept, and it does capture an important aspect of politics in modern societies. However, it fails to capture the dynamics of modern political communication processes and how they have evolved over time. That is why the concept of mediatized politics is important but also different from the concept of mediated politics.

The Concept of Mediatized Politics

The concept of mediatization is an inherently process-oriented concept. As noted by Schulz (2004: 88), “mediatization relates to changes associated with

communication media and their development.” Similarly, Hjarvard (2004: 48) writes that “mediatization implies a process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (like work, leisure, play etc.) assume media form,” whereas Jansson (2002: 14–15) writes that “mediatization of culture is the process that reinforces and expands the realm of media culture.” The definition of Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 249) is also process-oriented: “Mediatization denotes problematic concomitants or consequences of the development of modern mass media.”

However, although most observers make use of a process-oriented definition of *mediatization*, few have attempted to specify how this process has evolved, theoretically or empirically (but see Kepplinger 2002). Most jump from a process-oriented definition to the present state of affairs, where politics, tourism, and identity formation purportedly are mediatized. There are exceptions, however, such as Hjarvard (2004), who makes a distinction between weaker and stronger forms of mediatization, and Schulz (2004), who operationalizes mediatization as a process of extension, substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation. A third, and in this context crucial, exception is Asp and Esaiasson (1996: 80–81), who write that “the medialization of politics can be seen as a three-stage process in which there is a development toward increasing media influence.” This influence can be exerted over people’s perceptions and over political institutions, respectively.

However, the proper conception of “media influence” in this context is not self-evident. On one hand, the literature on media effects clearly shows that the media can exert considerable influence over their audiences (Iyengar and McGrady 2007; Preiss et al. 2007), for example, through the processes of agenda setting (McCombs 2004), framing (Iyengar 1991), and cultivation (Shanahan and Morgan 1999). On the other hand, the main focus of the majority of these theories is on the media’s effects on individual perceptions and opinions. Thus they depend on a causal logic, in which it is possible to divide the world into dependent and independent variables (Schulz 2004: 90). They also assume that media effects are based on the content of media messages, rather than the media or communication format (Altheide and Snow 1991: 3). As a consequence, the media effects theories largely fail to appreciate the interactions, interdependencies, and transactions at a system level and with regards to how the media shape and reshape politics, culture, and people’s sense making. These theories also largely fail to recognize the reciprocal effects of the mass media on the subjects of media coverage (Kepplinger 2007). In other words, the media effects literature is important but also insufficient for understanding the process of mediatization. As noted by Schulz (2004: 90), “mediatization as a concept both transcends and includes media effects.”

What is thus required is a conceptualization of media influence that is sensitive to and recognizes the interactions and interdependencies of media systems,

institutions and actors, political systems, culture, and sense making (Cook 2005; Dahlgren 2004; Hallin and Mancini 2004) as well as reciprocal effects of the media (Kepplinger 2007), beyond content-based media effects at the individual level and with respect to the audiences.

In this context, the concepts of media logic versus political logic are essential. According to Altheide and Snow (1979, 1988, 1991), media logic is or has become a dominant way of perceiving social and public affairs. In defining the term, they write,

media logic consists of a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication. Format becomes a framework or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena. (Altheide and Snow 1979: 10)

Although elusive, this definition lays the groundwork for a less abstract definition, according to which media logic can be taken to mean the dominance in societal processes of the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people's attention. These storytelling techniques include simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization (Asp 1986; Hernes 1978), visualization and stereotypization, and the framing of politics as a strategic game or "horse race" (Mazzoleni 1987; Patterson 1993).

The concept of political logic is less developed, and this is an area where more conceptual work is thus warranted. Nevertheless, at the heart of any conceptualization of political logic lies the fact that politics ultimately is about collective and authoritative decision making as well as the implementation of political decisions. This includes the process of distributing political power, through elections or other venues; the processes of decision making; and the question of power as it relates to "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell 1950). According to Meyer (2002: 12), political logic consists of both a policy dimension—"the effort to find solutions for politically defined problems by means of programs for action"—and a process dimension—"the effort to gain official acceptance of one's chosen program of action." In both these dimensions, the primary actors are parties and politicians, located in political institutions, and the primary focus is on issues—that is, societal problems and suggestions with respect to how these can or should be addressed (Patterson 1993).

Put differently, political communication in a particular society can, to a significant extent, be governed mainly by either media logic or political logic

(Mazzoleni 1987; Meyer 2002). In the former case, the requirements of the media take center stage and shape the means by which political communication is played out by political actors, is covered by the media, and is understood by the people. In the latter case, the needs of the political system and political institutions—in particular, parties, but also governmental agencies as well as democracy as a set of norms and procedures—take center stage and shape how political communication is played out, covered, and understood. In the former case, what people find interesting and what is commercially viable for media companies take precedence. In the latter case, what is important for people to know, as interpreted mainly by political actors and institutions, takes precedence. In the former case, media companies are essentially perceived of as commercial enterprises with no particular obligation apart from catering to the wants and needs of their audiences. In the latter case, media companies are perceived as political or democratic institutions, with some kind of moral, if not legal, obligation to assist in making democracy work (Merritt 1998; Meyer 2002; Patterson 1993; Strömbäck 2005). With respect to the media, the media logic broadly corresponds to what Croteau and Hoynes (2001: 37) label the market model, whereas the political logic broadly corresponds to the public sphere model. However, it is worth reiterating that the concept of media logic so far is more developed than the concept of political logic.

To summarize the discussion so far: The first aspect of the mediatization of politics is the *degree* to which the media constitute the most important or dominant source of information on politics and society. A second aspect is the *degree* to which the media are independent from political institutions in terms of how the media are governed. A third aspect is the *degree* to which the media content is governed by a political logic or by media logic. A fourth aspect, finally, is the *degree* to which political actors are governed by a political logic or by media logic. As political actors are located within political institutions, this aspect also includes some political institutions and how they are governed, although the focus here will be on political actors.

These aspects form the major dimensions that, taken together, determine the degree to which politics is mediatized. From this perspective, the mediation of politics should be perceived of as one, although necessary, part of the mediatization of politics (Figure 1).

Although the four dimensions are highly intercorrelated, the breakdown of the concept of the mediatization of politics into separate dimensions might help clarify the concept in assessments of the degree to which politics in a particular setting is mediatized.

What is important to note, however, is that the process must not be linear or unidirectional across the four dimensions. It is certainly conceivable that the impact of media logic on political actors, located within various institutions, varies, both within and between countries. For example, some political actors



Figure 1

A Four-Dimensional Conceptualization of the Mediatization of Politics

are obviously more powerful than others in terms of their influence over the media's agenda and how the media frame political issues (Bennett 2003; Entman 2004). Hence the media have more influence over some political actors and institutions than others. Variances might occur across time and may also be dependent on the current political situation. For example, in times of war, there is a strong tendency for the media to "rally 'round the flag" and accept the precedence of politics over the media. There might also be differences across countries, depending partly on whether they belong to the liberal, the democratic corporatist, or the polarized pluralist model of media and politics. As shown by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the media in countries belonging to the polarized pluralist model, such as Italy, are more a part of the political system than the media in countries that form part of the democratic corporatist model, such as Sweden, and the liberal model, such as the United States. In addition, the degree to which particular media outlets are governed by media logic should be perceived of as a variable, rather than a constant, to allow for the fact that party-controlled newspapers might coexist with commercial newspapers, just as public service broadcasting might coexist with commercial broadcasting. Consideration should also be given to the fact that societal changes are seldom, if ever, unidirectional.

This is, however, one of the major reasons why the conceptualization of the mediatization of politics as a dynamic process is important: It allows us to investigate and assess the degree of mediatization across time, countries, or other units of analysis.

Four Phases of Mediatization

If the mediatization of politics is conceived of as a dynamic process that allows variations across time and countries, how do we assess the degree to

which politics is mediatized in a particular setting? Inspired by the analysis by Asp and Esaiasson (1996), I suggest a framework according to which it is possible to identify four phases of mediatization. One caveat should be noted, however: The analysis is mainly restricted to Western democracies in the period after World War II.

The First Phase of Mediatization

The first phase of mediatization is reached whenever the mass media in a particular setting constitute the most important source of information and channel of communication between the citizenry and political institutions and actors, such as political parties, governmental agencies, or political interest groups.² This is also when politics is mediated. In other words, the first phase of mediatization corresponds to the concept of mediated politics. As such, it is a prerequisite for subsequent levels of mediatization. It is also a prerequisite for the media's power over their audiences in terms of influencing perceptions, attitudes, and opinions. If people did not consume newspapers, radio, or television, relying instead on their own experiences and interpersonal communication, then the impact of the media at the individual level would be marginal. However, this also depends on whether the flow of information in interpersonal discussions can be traced back to mediated communication, as suggested by the original (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948) and developed (Weimann 1994) versions of the two- or multistep flow hypothesis.

Hence when politics has reached the first phase of mediatization, the depictions of reality as conveyed by the media presumably have an impact on how people perceive reality, and these perceptions arguably matter when people form their opinions. This forces political communicators to take the media into consideration when attempting to shape opinion or react to public opinion, leading to at least some impact of the media logic on institutional actors *or* in the media being controlled by political institutions such as political parties. In general, however, the degree of media independence from institutional actors is likely to be low in the first phase of mediatization, and this phase is consequently not incompatible with, for example, party-controlled newspapers.

Thus, in assessing whether politics has reached the first phase of mediatization, the crucial question is whether the media constitute the dominant source of information and channel of communication between the governors and the governed. The other three dimensions are, relatively speaking, of lesser importance. The first phase—when politics has become mediated—should mainly be understood as a prerequisite for the successive phases of mediatization.

The Second Phase of Mediatization

In the second phase of mediatization, the media have become more independent of governmental or other political bodies and, consequently, have

begun to be governed according to the media logic, rather than according to any political logic. As more autonomous organizations, the influence of the media on the institutional level increases; thus the media logic becomes more important for those attempting to influence the media and its content. The result is that the media do not unconditionally mediate the messages preferred by the different sources. They now make their own judgments regarding what is thought to be the appropriate messages from the perspective of their own medium, its format, norms and values, and its audiences. Stated differently, the autonomy of the media has increased in the second phase as compared to the first phase of mediatization. Consequently, it is likely the case that the process from the first to the second phase of mediatization is also a process of increasing journalistic professionalization, a more pragmatic and less sacerdotal approach to politics, and increasing commercialization (Semetko et al. 1991). Hence the process from the first to the second phase of mediatization will create incentives for political actors to increase the resources aimed at developing their competence in public relations and news management (Manning 2001).

This is not to say that the mass media can ever be totally independent of political influence. From a social systems perspective, the relationship between the mass media, politics, and other groups should be perceived as interactive and characterized by interdependence, rather than by total independence, and the media always have to operate within the boundaries set by legislative and regulatory political institutions; rather, the second phase of mediatization means that the media have become semi-independent, that they largely control their own content, and that they possess resources that can be utilized in what Cook (2005) has termed the “negotiation of newsworthiness” against those who are attempting to influence the news. Political actors and institutions might still have the upper hand, but they cannot control the media or unconditionally use them to further their own interests. As noted by Asp and Esaiasson (1996: 81),

the society or political system is characterized by the media as a communication structure being the dominant source of influence in politics, and also by the actors in the media setting their own stamp on the picture of politics that they mediate via their power of selection and interpretation. The media not only have power over their public, but also have independent power over the picture that influences the audience.

The Third Phase of Mediatization

In the third phase of mediatization, the media continue to be the dominant source of information and channel of communication between different sections of society. What distinguishes the third from the second phase is that the independence of the media has further increased, and that the media in the

daily operations have become so independent and important that political and other social actors have to adapt to the media, rather than the other way around. The media continue to be governed more by media logic than any kind of political logic, and in this phase, political actors must accept that they can no longer rely on the media to accommodate them. If politics and the media were semi-independent and politics held the upper hand in the second phase, in the third phase, it is the media who hold the upper hand. This forces political actors to further increase their skills in news management and so-called spinning (Franklin 2004), and it makes media considerations an increasingly integral part of even the policy-making processes.

The importance of the media in the third phase thus goes beyond single interactions with political actors attempting to influence the news. It also goes beyond agenda setting or framing effects on individuals. What is instead significant is that the media have become so important that their formats, content, grammar, and rhythm—the media logic—have become so pervasive that basically, no social actors requiring interaction with the public or influence on public opinion can ignore the media or afford not to adapt to the media logic. The power of the media is not only the visible power. As noted by Asp and Esaiasson (1996: 81), “the active mechanism is not direct influence, but adaptation.”

This situation is what Altheide and Snow (1991: ix) refer to when they state that “today all social institutions are media institutions.” In such a world, they argue that organized journalism is dead: “First, journalistic practices, techniques, and approaches are now geared to media formats rather than merely directing their craft at topics; second, the topics, organizations, and issues that journalists report are themselves products of media-journalistic format and criteria” (Altheide and Snow 1991: x). In other words, as the media logic has become so important, political and social actors adapt to the media logic, with the consequence that media reports on these political and social actors constitute reflections of the media themselves and their logic. For example, as is known by political actors, conflict and personalization are among the important storytelling techniques that the media prefer when choosing what and how to cover politics. Thus political and social actors will construct events that include a focus on these aspects, which in turn leads to a political world in which conflicts and personalities become more important.

At this point, the distinction between the media world—the depictions of reality shaped by the media logic, and which people have to rely on when forming opinions and attitudes—and the real world, as it is objectively shaped or played out, begins to lose its significance. The mediated reality becomes more important than the actual reality, in the sense that it is the mediated reality that people have access to and react to. This is what Lippmann (1997) referred to when he wrote about the “pseudo-environment” and what Nimmo and Combs (1983) refer to as a “fantasy world.” What is also important is that

in the third phase of mediatization, the mediated realities tend to be self-fulfilling. In the absence of alternative realities, shaped by means of a distinctively different logic to that of the media logic, people act on the mediated realities.

However, there might be resistance in parts of society, even though political and social actors increasingly adapt to the media logic in the third phase of mediatization. The adaptation to the media logic can be made more or less reluctantly and perceived of as a strategic tool, rather than as something natural. As parties and candidates also operate and need to be successful within the political system—they must be able to deliver—they must also take the political logic into consideration (Meyer 2002). The manner in which such a political logic operates depends on a number of factors related to, for example, the electoral system and the balance between the executive, legislative, and judicial powers in a particular setting. Political decision making is also a time-consuming, complex process, and political actors must consider that they might be held responsible for their actions or inactions—or how these are played out in the media.

Thus it is reasonable to expect political actors in the third phase of mediatization to adapt to the media logic, but to do so in such a way so as not to corrupt the political logic more than is deemed necessary. The tension between the media logic and the political logic, or the demands of the media system versus the political system, is hence arguably very real in the third phase of mediatization—just because the media and the media logic are still perceived to be external to the political system and the political logic. At this stage, the latter are attempting to influence the media through adaptation, while simultaneously protecting their own integrity and the demarcation between the mediated and the nonmediated realities.

Between the second and third phases of mediatization, the upper hand has hence switched from the parties to the media, but there are still many political actors who think that the increased importance of the media is not legitimate and that politics should continue to be in command of the interactions.

The Fourth Phase of Mediatization

In the third phase of mediatization, political actors still perceive the media as external, but they also recognize the necessity to adapt to the media logic and their notion of newsworthiness. The insight that the mediated reality matters more than any kind of actual or objective reality becomes more widespread, leading political actors to think about the media not only when campaigning, but also when governing and in the policy-making processes. This development has reached its zenith in the fourth phase of mediatization.

The fourth phase of mediatization is thus attained when political and other social actors not only adapt to the media logic and the predominant news values, but also *internalize* these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the

standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes. If political actors in the third phase *adapt* to the media logic, they *adopt* the same media logic in the fourth phase. Thus, in the fourth phase, the media and their logic can be said to *colonize* politics (Meyer 2002), with political or other social actors perhaps not even recognizing the distinction between a political and a media logic.

A simultaneous development is the breakdown of the distinction between periods when political actors are in their campaign mode and when they are in their governing mode. The transition from the third to the fourth phase of mediatization thus spurs the development of “permanent campaigning” (Blumenthal 1980), the professionalization of politics, in general, and political campaigning, in particular (Farrell 1996; Gibson and Römmele 2001; Plasser and Plasser 2002), and “going public” (Kernell 2007) as an essential strategy of governing. By mobilizing all available resources in the daily battles to influence and shape the news, mainly by accommodating the wants, needs, and standards of newsworthiness of the media, political and social actors might become successful in the short term, but at the same time, their actions reveal the relative insignificance of the political logic as opposed to the media logic. As noted by Cook (2005: 168), “politicians may then win the daily battles with the news media, by getting into the news as they wish, but end up losing the war, as standards of newsworthiness begin to become prime criteria to evaluate issues, policies, and politics.”

Hence, in the fourth phase of mediatization, the dominant source of information continues to be the media. However, the intensity of media experiences is stronger than in earlier phases, and politics and society—from the micro to the macro level—are permeated with the media to such an extent that the media and their communicative output is almost impossible to avoid. In important respects, the mediated realities replace the notion of a belief in objective realities. The significance of the mediated realities is thus inversely correlated to the importance of the distinction between the mediated versus the actual realities. As the latter distinction breaks down, the significance of the mediated realities increases, and vice versa. The media have become as independent from political institutions as any institutions can be from a social systems perspective, where total independence is always impossible. The media content is governed by media logic; that is, the format of the media and the requirement to be successful in the battle for people’s attention, both spurred by and reflected in increasing commercialism, has taken precedence over traditional journalistic norms and values (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Institutional and social actors have come to accept the media logic and its consequences as an empirical reality, as valid in the context of campaigning and governing as, for example, economic trends or threats to the environment or to national security. Thus the media logic and its consequences are perceived as more or less inescapable, although inescapable does not equal unmanageable; rather, it equates to a problem that requires constant attention. This is particularly true for political actors and institutions that, from either a

constitutional or a pragmatic perspective, have to be responsive to the citizenry. Thus presidents, parties, and members of parliament are more affected than courts; members of parliament facing reelection are more affected and vulnerable than those who plan to retire or who have safe seats; and government officials appointed by politicians are more affected than officials appointed through meritocratic procedures. Hence the context matters but does not change the overall importance of the media logic as opposed to a political logic.

Conclusions and Some Further Observations

The process of the mediatization of politics can be described as a process through which the important question involving the independence of the media from politics and society concludes with the independence of politics and society from the media. The four phases of mediatization identified here are somewhat idealized, and as in all processes, the distinctions between the phases are less clear in reality than in theory. However, the purpose at this stage is less to give a detailed description of the situation in any particular setting, but to offer a means of thinking about the process of mediatization that can allow making comparisons across time or countries. The next step should be to operationalize the four phases to allow for empirical research.

In any case, and to reiterate a point already made, the process must not be unidirectional. Although it is unlikely that a society will go from the second to the first phase of mediatization, it is conceivable that a society go from the third to the second or from the fourth to the third phase. It is also possible that different institutional actors in a society have attained different phases, depending on, for example, their power base or institutional strengths and the purpose for which they were created. Some institutional actors are supposed to be responsive to public opinion, and they are arguably more vulnerable to the mediatization of politics than institutions that are not supposed to be responsive to public opinion. The institutional setting is thus important, both within and across countries.

At a general level, it can be argued that the media in democratic countries are always positioned somewhere between the political system and the economic system (Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Hallin and Mancini 2004). The political system forms the institutional and regulatory boundaries within which the media are required to operate, whereas the markets and the dynamics between supply and demand shape what it is possible for commercial media enterprises to do to survive or be profitable (Hamilton 2004). The more independent the media are or become from politics, the more dependent they become on market forces. Increasing independence from politics thus tends to increase commercialism in the media sector. This, in turn, contributes to the process of the mediatization of politics, particularly in those cases when there is only a weak demand for media content reflecting more than commercial considerations.

The main problem associated with the media in this context is that they belong to both the political and the economic systems. While it is a fact that most media companies in contemporary democracies are private and commercial enterprises, it is also a fact that democracy requires some kind of system in which there is a flow of information from the governors to the governed and from the governed to the governors, for public discussions and deliberations and for a watchdog function that is independent of the state (Bennett 2003; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001; McQuail 2003). The media are supposed to provide such a system: The democratic value of freedom of the press resides in the media's capacity to contribute to an enlightened understanding through information dissemination and public debate. In other words, the freedom of the press is not only an end in itself, but also a means toward helping democracy work (Baker 2007).

While this is not the place to develop these arguments, it is still worth mentioning as it points toward the fact that the degree to which politics is mediatized in a particular society partly depends on the institutional setting (Cook 2005; Hallin and Mancini 2004). Thus there is nothing deterministic about the process of mediatization as it relates to politics, at least not with regards to the third or fourth phases of mediatization.

For example, a strong public service broadcasting system can help to create a counterweight toward the commercialization of the media, which is likely to slow down or perhaps even reverse the process of mediatization of politics. The same is true with regards to subsidies to newspapers, which may assist in increasing diversity of sources as well as content, thus contributing to a less monolithic media (Baker 2007). This is not to say that such policies should be pursued. Although I have opinions on this, that is not the important point. The important point is that the degree to which politics is mediatized partly is an effect of political (non-)decisions.

Partly, it is also an effect of whether the citizenry in a particular society hold strong political beliefs or not. Strong political beliefs reduce people's need for orientation and hence their susceptibility to media effects that follow from the media content (McCombs 2004; Weaver 1980). Strong political beliefs also enable those people to be more selective, be attentive, have different perceptions, and retain differing viewpoints, thus acting as a counterweight toward at least some kinds of media effect (McCombs 2004; Zaller 1992).

Thus the causes behind the mediatization of politics are complex and numerous. While these examples are not exhaustive, they serve to underline that (1) the degree of mediatization of politics is not only an effect of the media's behavior and that (2) *if* the mediatization of politics is considered problematic, there might be solutions that (3) are directed not only toward changing the media, but also toward changing the circumstances under which the media operate.

What about the Internet?

In this analysis, I have mainly focused on the traditional news media. But what about the Internet? What are the implications of the Internet in terms of the mediatization of politics? To analyze this, it is important to remember that the Internet encompasses many different media formats and, not least, many different producers of media content, including individual citizens, traditional mass media, and political actors. The Internet is thus not guided by any one logic, but includes many and competing logics. The crucial question, then, is not whether the Internet is important or not for individual citizens, the media, or political actors. The crucial question in the context of the mediatization of politics is rather whether the Internet makes the media more or less (in-) dependent of political institutions, media content more or less governed by political versus media logic, and political actors more or less governed by political versus media logic.

In this context, it is worth noting that although many use the Internet to find information, it is mainly used as a supplement to traditional media such as television and newspapers. Furthermore, to the extent that information or news whose origins are on the Internet has had an impact, this has *mainly* been due to the wider dissemination of the news in the traditional media. Dividing the politically relevant news or views material on the Internet into unique and repackaged material, most of the material that reaches a wider audience is repackaged—thus it does not replace traditional media—whereas most of the unique material only reaches limited audiences. Something similar can be said about the attempts by political and social actors to circumvent the traditional media through their use of the Internet: Theoretically, it is possible to reach out to wider audiences through the Internet, but in the absence of coverage in the traditional news media, this possibility is seldom realized.

Thus the overall conclusion with respect to the implications of the Internet for the mediatization of politics is that so far, the Internet has not made much of a difference (Schulz 2004: 97–98). However, the Internet is still in its infancy, and much might change during the next few years. Thus it would be a mistake not to closely follow how the usage of the Internet develops and how this might change the dynamics of political communication and the process of mediatization. At this stage, it would be as premature to draw definitive conclusions with regards to the Internet as it was when the Swedish party leaders commented on the importance of television in the early 1960s.

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Notes

1. This is not to say that all scholars employ the concept of mediation in a static way. There are those who have a more dynamic approach when using the concept, such as Nimmo and Combs (1983), Nimmo and Swanson (1990), and Altheide and Snow (1988). However, the processes they describe are arguably better captured by the concept of mediatization. See also Paletz's (2001) distinction between mostly mediated, partly mediated, and unmediated media contents.
2. The first and second phases of mediatization in this analysis correspond roughly to the first and second stages of medialization in the analysis by Asp and Esaiasson (1996: 80–81).

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