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Mediatisation and politico-administrative systems in Scandinavia

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Abstract

This conceptual article extends three ongoing scholarly debates on the mediatisation of politics – the risk of media centrism, the tendency to see mediatisation as a linear process, and the preoccupation with elected officials. We argue for the need to identify, foreground, and systematise non-media dimensions of mediatisation processes. We also argue that actors encounter mediatisation as a set of dynamic ideas rather than a fixed logic. With a focus on government agencies and a comparison of the politico-administrative systems in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, this article gives certain attention to politicisation, autonomy, and accountability and suggests that the degree of freedom granted to agencies in Denmark and Norway is relatively limited compared with agencies in Sweden. Consequently, we present two propositions: 1) agencies in Denmark and Norway are less inclined to mediatise, whereas 2) Swedish government agencies will more likely mediatise and show conformity with widely accepted norms regarding media.

Keywords: accountability, autonomy, government agencies, mediatisation, politicisation

Introduction

Research on mediatisation has a long tradition in the Nordic countries, and some of its strongest proponents are from the region (i.e., Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). The concept mediatisation has become widely utilised to understand the role of media in a variety of contexts, and the literature provides at least three different approaches – cultural, materialist, and institutional. These perspectives focus on different matters, but they all refer to mediatisation as a

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structural transformation changing the conditions for actors embedded in different social contexts. One of these contexts is politics, and here, scholars (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Landerer, 2013) have examined why actors – such as parties, ministries, government offices, government agencies, regional boards, and municipalities –have adopted and adapted to an increasing degree to the media logic. Generally, these transformations are explained by changes in the media institutions (Asp, 2014) and differences between media systems (Cushion et al., 2014).

In this conceptual article, we take a slightly different turn. Not to say that our approach is fundamentally different, but our primary interest is in examining the micro-dynamics and political actors' active and skilful responses to mediatisation (Laursen & Valentini, 2015), rather than structural transformations. In addition, we argue for the need to identify, foreground, and systematise non-media dimensions of mediatisation processes as the possibilities for actors to act upon media take place in social contexts where a multitude of forces are at play (Pallas et al., 2016).

Our argument builds on and extends three ongoing scholarly debates. The first is the critique that research on mediatisation has received for its tendency to leave out non-media dimensions when the dynamics and consequences of mediatisation are described and explained. This criticism underscores – among other things – the need to identify and systematise structural, organisational, and professional aspects at play when actors' encounter mediatisation (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). The second refers to the tendency to perceive mediatisation as a linear process where the media logic in a zero-sum game conquers other field-specific logics (Hjarvard, 2008; Scheu et al., 2014; Schulz, 2004). Here, we stress the importance of varieties and emphasise that research must consider mediatisation's ability to evoke different meanings and responses in different contexts (Pallas et al., 2016). Among other things, this means that actors' intentions, skills, and abilities to act must be taken under consideration (Blumler & Esser, 2019; Figenschou et al., 2019). The third debate refers to the preoccupation with election campaigns and elected officials (Falasca, 2014). Here, we stress the need to understand mediatisation under other circumstances and in other realms of politics (Ihlen et al., 2014; Schillemans, 2012).

To contribute to these debates and the criticism they express, we focus our discussions on government agencies (Styrelser in Denmark and Norway and myndigheter in Sweden). These agencies are structurally disaggregated from the political centre but are formally under at least some control of ministers and ministries (Verhoest et al., 2012). This gives us an opportunity to approach mediatisation on an organisational level and, at the same time, discuss the relevance of politico-administrative systems. Particularly, the focus on government agencies allows for a discussion on the importance of rules and relationships between actors in the political system, how different configurations of these aspects evoke different conditions for agencies, and how differences between settings hypothetically create

different motives for agencies to consider media in their day-to-day activities. We argue that the Nordic countries are well suited for approaching such a discussion, partly because they represent a particular media model (Syvertsen et al., 2014), and partly because they show variance in terms of their politico-administrative systems (Verhoest et al., 2012). We focus our argument on three aspects of the politico-administrative systems – politicisation, autonomy, and accountability. We do so because these aspects have a certain importance if we want to understand the agencies' conditions in political settings (Verhoest et al., 2012).

Media systems, mediatisation, and government agencies

Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) point out several qualities characterising the Nordic media system: 1) universally available communication systems; 2) institutionalised editorial freedom; 3) cultural policies for the media; and 4) consensual policymaking and compromises between key stakeholders in the media sector (see also Brüggemann et al., 2014). Other scholars have also identified additional key features of the Nordic media system, for example, the regulative support for extensive access to information (Jørgensen, 2014), the far-reaching professionalisation of journalism, including journalism programmes (Hovden et al., 2016), and relatively easy access to political leaders (Thorbjørnsrud, 2013). Moreover, Nordic media outlets have become more intervention-oriented (Østbye & Aalberg, 2008), often with a pronounced political profile (although not affiliated with political parties) which can be exemplified by the emerging prominence of political commentators.

Recent research shows that the particularities of the Nordic context are at play when government agencies refer to and deal with media (Fredriksson et al., 2015; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Salomonsen et al., 2016; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). What these and other studies also show is the involvement of negotiations, translations, and decisions when agencies are faced with the values, practices, routines, and preferences of media. It is evident that different agencies make different adaptations, and that they act differently in different situations and over time (Pallas et al., 2016; Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). Accordingly, these studies stress the importance of inconsistencies and varieties of values, routines, and practices involved when agencies become mediatised.

Altogether, this research suggests that we need a reconceptualisation of what it is that political actors relate to when they encounter mediatisation. Instead of a coherent media logic with easily identifiable properties, it can be argued that media come in the form of institutionalised ideas (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) that travel across fields as well as between and within organisations. Logics are commonly understood as entities directly derived from – or associated with – categorical institutional structures. In contrast to this, ideas have relatively weak or even loose connections to their structural origins. They are also recognised as varying and under modification as they move horizontally across the social

landscape, from one context to another. Accordingly, there is a variety of ideas of mediatisation for actors to act upon. In addition to this, it is evident that actors make different interpretations, both in terms of which ideas to pay attention to, and how to incorporate them into their identities and activities (for an overview, see Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). This notion is especially important as it helps us understand how mediatisation interplays with not only organisational conditions but also other ideas. As ideas are dynamic, flexible, and transformable, they provide actors, such as government agencies, with worldviews and reasons that are open for interpretation and contestation in relation to other activities, procedures, and practices (Pallas et al., 2016).

Politico-administrative regimes, mediatisation, and government agencies

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are unitary states and parliamentary democracies (Greve et al., 2016). This in combination with a strong étatist, welfare-state, and deep-seated democratic orientation characterises what is conceptualised as the Scandinavian tradition (Painter & Peters, 2010). These arrangements are interlinked with the features Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) carve out as the characteristics for the Nordic media system, and in many ways, the two systems support each other. The politico-administrative systems in the Nordic countries show more profound variations, however.

The Swedish system is organised around and governed by a collegial government that shares responsibility for the ministries. In Denmark and Norway, the systems are organised according to the principle of ministerial governance – that is, each individual minister is responsible for their ministry and associated agencies (Greve et al., 2016). As a result, the relations between the government agencies and their responsible ministers or ministries in the three countries follow different dynamics

The diversities that we suggest are of importance for our understanding of how mediatisation plays out in the context of government agencies, as they hypothetically are decisive for the ways in which the agencies find a motive, the resources, and the space to relate to and deal with mediatisation (Figenschou et al., 2019). Here, we argue that three aspects of the political-administrative system are especially relevant to consider: 1) the degree of politicisation of the agencies; 2) their decision-making autonomy; and 3) the type and extent of accountability that the agencies encounter.

Politicisation

Politicisation takes different forms in the Nordic countries if, by politicisation, we refer to the government's legitimate right to control the bureaucracy, recruitment of ministerial advisers to assist ministers with, among other things, media

issues (Peters, 2016), and informal expectations of neutral civil servants providing political advice (Husted & Salomonsen, 2017).

In Sweden, there are approximately 175 politically recruited advisers [politiskt sakkunninga] and about 35 press secretaries (Regeringskansliet, n.d.). Formally, all press secretaries are employed by a press unit in the central coordinating body of the government [Samordningskansliet]. They answer to the head of this unit although they are physically located in the ministries and are involved in a rather elaborate intradepartmental coordination across executive lines. This is a response to a general recognition of the need for coordination in government offices.

In the Norwegian government offices, there are around 60 politically recruited actors in stand-in, media adviser, and political coordinator roles (Kolltveit, 2016). In most ministries, one or two of the state secretaries or political advisors are responsible for communication, even if the main bulk of media advice is performed by the permanent civil service (Askim et al., 2016). This involvement has increased in recent years, and the communication units have expanded from 50 communication workers in the mid-1990s to about 120 across the 16 ministries in 2017 (Kolltveit, 2016).

Compared with Norway and Sweden, the government office in Denmark has very few politically appointed staff members. Here the permanent secretaries are equivalent to the state secretaries in Sweden and Norway – a role that, in Denmark, is part of the merit bureaucracy. Although restricted by normative requirements, the Danish permanent secretaries have gone rather far in the functional politicisation of their advisory role. Whereas this is generally recognised as valuable across the political and administrative actors in the central government, previous dissatisfaction with the quality of the media related advice was a large part of the explanation for the introduction of formally politicised ministerial advisers [særlige rådgivere] who represent the only type of employees not recruited on the basis of formal merits. Around 20 advisers are positioned in the Danish ministries (Christiansen & Salomonsen, 2018). Although involved in providing media advice to ministers, recent research from one of the traditional minority coalition governments demonstrate (at least compared with Sweden) a very low and ad hoc type of coordination and steering from the centre of the government on media issues (Husted & Salomonsen, 2017). The introduction of media advisers has, as is the case in Norway, been accompanied by an increasing professionalisation of the permanent civil service in terms of also being able to provide media advice (Smith-Udvalget, 2015).

Autonomy

In terms of autonomy, a general distinction can be made between government agencies that are 1) bodies without legal independence but with some degree of managerial autonomy and 2) legally independent bodies with managerial autonomy. Agencies in Denmark and Norway are primarily of the first type, whereas their counterparts in Sweden are of the second type (Van Thiel, 2012).

The Norwegian and Danish agencies are positioned as part of the ministries in the sense of being under the formal responsibility of individual ministers. This means that the formal autonomy of the agencies is somehow more restricted than in Sweden. It further implies that the ministers enjoy a large degree of autonomy in terms of deciding on the formal organisation of the agencies. Hence, although there are differences between individual ministries, this means that the division between politics and administration is not always obvious. Ministers will be held responsible, both legally and politically, and hence also accountable for the majority of decisions in the agencies. Accordingly, the Norwegian and Danish ministers have limited possibilities to distance themselves from sensitive issues (Mortensen, 2014). This further implies that governmental agencies in general are involved in "political" aspects of the ministers' portfolio.

In contrast to their Danish and Norwegian counterparts, Swedish agencies function outside governmental departments. Their autonomy is protected by constitutional law and the ministerial responsibility is then limited. Due to the collegiate nature of the Swedish government, agencies answer formally to the cabinet rather than to a single minister. In addition to this, the political principals (i.e., ministers and ministries) are prohibited from interfering in the agencies' day-to-day activities or decisions regarding any individual citizen or organisation. This means that government representatives have a larger possibility to depoliticise issues and push sensitive issues towards the agencies, compared with Denmark and Norway (Niklasson, 2012).

Formal legal characteristics do not always predict actual ministry-agency relations. In this case, there seems to be some congruity, however – at least as Norwegian agencies report a significant higher degree of experience with politicians interfering in their "routine activities" compared with their Swedish colleagues (Öberg & Wockelberg, 2016). This is not to say that the line is absolute. The increasing formal politicisation of the departmental levels has led to the suggestion that "in general, the boundaries between government departments and agencies have gradually become easier to cross. In practice, the core executive can steer its relationship with the agencies, even with the limited leeway constrained by the constitution" (Lægreid, 2017: 84).

Accountability

Accountability refers to "a communicative interaction between an actor (person or organization) and an accountability forum in which the former's behaviour (in the broadest sense of the word) is evaluated and judged by the latter, in light of possible consequences" (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016: 24). Accountability may be requested by and demonstrated to formal forums (i.e., parliaments or special audit organisations), but informal forums are of equal importance (Bovens et al., 2014). In contemporary societies, the media serve as one of the informal forums – if not the most important one – in which governments provide accounts

of their behaviour to the general public. Further, in most democracies, the media are given principal and constitutionally granted roles to function as watchdogs. That is to say, they are set to scrutinise government organisations critically and thereby expose political and administrative malfunctions, which eventually might trigger and amplify formal accountability processes. The question of who is responsible for causing (or resolving) political and social problems, and who is to be held accountable for political malfeasance and policy failures, is increasingly a subject of struggle within the space of mediated visibility (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016).

Some observations can be made regarding the formal accountability relations of agencies vis-à-vis departments in the three countries. First, the accountability of agencies in Denmark and Norway, due to the rule of ministerial governance, is linked to their parent minister. Each minister is responsible for their own portfolio of agencies and, accordingly, it is the minister in person who is held accountable for the actions and decisions made by the agencies. This opens up the possibility for agencies and their representatives to hide behind their political principals when the responsibility for decisions or events is at stake. Contrary to this, Swedish agencies are formally accountable to the government as a collective. In theory, this means that single ministers are less inclined to take responsibility for separate issues or failures. In addition, ministers are constitutionally restrained from commenting on single decisions made by agencies. The leeway for ministers to distance themselves from the centre, and to avoid scrutiny and critique, is therefore considerable – a opportunity they frequently make use of (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2013).

Negotiated mediatisation – two propositions

The previous sections show that the degree of freedom granted to agencies in Denmark and Norway is relatively limited compared with agencies in Sweden. Largely, the activities of Danish and Norwegian agencies reflect the directives, practices, and preferences of the ministers and their associates, whereas the leeway for Swedish agencies is more pronounced. Taken together, we suggest that these conditions create two distinct contexts for mediatisation, leading us to suggest two propositions regarding the agencies' tendencies and motives to mediatise.

Our first proposition is that agencies in Denmark and Norway are less inclined to become mediatised – especially if we consider which actors will have a decisive role in defining the dominating practices of the media activities of the agencies and how these practices will be interpreted and made sense of in specific settings. There is a tight coupling between politics and administrations in Denmark and Norway. In terms of media, this coupling seems to be reinforced by the increasing level of professionalisation and politicisation of activities related to media characterising the ministries in the two countries (Kolltveit, 2019). There are differences between Norway and Denmark, but in comparison with Sweden, they are relatively small – particularly if we consider the formal status of the agencies

and the legally granted level of managerial autonomy in their relationships to the various parts of their government.

The characteristics of how mediatisation might play out in Norwegian and Danish agencies are likely to be influenced by the preferences of departmental actors embedded in the political agendas of responsible ministers. It is then likely that the ideas of media are packaged into a variety of agendas, reforms, and practices formulated by politics ending up with something combining the media's rationales, agencies' preferences, institutionalised practices and political preferences (Pallas et al., 2016). The local adaptations to the ideas of media can also be expected to show relatively few signs of involvement from media and public relations professionals at the agencies compared with actors having a more explicitly outspoken political orientation – or at least responsiveness. This includes formally politicised actors as well as permanent civil servants. Even if the latter are normatively constrained in terms of preserving their neutrality, they are at the same time normatively encouraged and legitimised to promote the politics of the current government.

Contrary to this, our second proposition suggests that Swedish government agencies will more likely mediatise and show conformity with widely accepted norms regarding media. The level of autonomy and relative distance from political principals provides possibilities for professional media and communication practitioners to have a significant say in introducing media rationales into their organisations (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012). Their profession is not only formally defined as a necessary component of the managerial work at the Swedish agencies; the values and preferences used by this group of professionals are also integrated into operations and preferences of other professions (Pallas et al., 2016). Connecting this development with the pressures coming from the transformation of political governance into governance based on evaluation and feedback suggests that communication practitioners and media professionals might have extensive responsibilities to handle the challenges associated with the evaluative state (Neave, 1998). Accordingly, the consequences of public judgment become an important aspect of the Swedish agencies' activities in general, and their communication activities in particular (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016).

In sum, we argue that it is likely that agencies in the three countries encounter mediatisation in different settings. It is reasonable to believe that ideas of media will primarily make sense, or be evident, at the ministerial and departmental levels in Denmark and Norway – probably with a strong influence from professional political advisors and politically responsive permanent bureaucrats, leaving limited space for the agencies to influence these processes. In the Swedish case – on the other hand – it is more likely that it is the managers and communication professionals occupying the country's agencies who pick up and adapt the ideas of media. Consequently, we can expect a greater tension within the Swedish agencies as the non-media–oriented professions have – at least traditionally – a strong influence on the operations and priorities of their organisations (Pallas et al., 2016).

However, we should be careful about linearity and uniformity in terms of effects and outcomes. The relations between agencies, ministers, and media are complex (Kolltveit, 2019) and – as we learned above – the Nordic media system is still relatively persistent. Despite the challenges that the Nordic media are facing, there is still a strong emphasis on upholding the viable and independent role and function of the media vis-à-vis the political systems. The ongoing politicisation processes in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden have been accompanied by attempts to loosen the interdependence between the media and the political sphere – mostly with an ambition to strengthen the political system. However, the mediatisation literature (cf. Esser, 2013) gives support to an assumption that such a development is not only two-directional but is also influenced by parallel societal developments. That is, as politics and policymaking processes themselves are subjected to mediatisation rationales and pressures, both politics and the media are also, to an increasing extent, incorporating more audience- and market-oriented preferences and practices (Landerer, 2013). We can therefore assume that the processes in which mediatisation is entangled will take place alongside political and market-based mechanisms rather than residing in the organisation and management of individual agencies.

Conclusion

Our aim in this article was to identify, foreground, and systematise a set of dimensions relevant for the configurations of political systems and the positions government agencies are given in such contexts. Thus, we provide guidance for further research on mediatisation – especially in the discussion on how actors relate and respond to different pressures related and parallel to mediatisation.

Our discussion, we would argue, can help with avoiding the pitfalls that research on the mediatisation of politics has a tendency to fall into, primarily because our approach gives certain attention to non-media factors being decisive for how mediatisation is understood and acted upon. We suggest an approach that pays closer attention to conditions, principles, relations, and practices influencing actors in the political system. These factors, in turn, are constitutive for the way political actors understand and deal with different parts of their environment. Accordingly, such an approach can help us better understand what it is that shapes the conditions for government agencies when they act, make decisions, and communicate, and that these conditions cannot be overlooked if we want to grasp how and why mediatisation is (not) given attention. Thereby, we also provide a set of arguments for a reconceptualisation of how actors encounter mediatisation. Among other things, we ascribe actors a more salient role in responding to and dealing with it.

In line with this, we urge scholars to further examine the active and dual role of actors vis-à-vis the norms and values underlying mediatisation, its institutional origins and influence, how it is translated into practice, and how that practice in

turn shapes the institutional environment in which mediatisation takes place (Figenschou et al., 2019). As suggested above, ideas (in contrast to logics) are more shapeless and much closer to actions and changes. Understanding mediatisation from this standpoint can therefore help us surmount the troublesome limitations of many earlier analyses where mediatisation is understood as a zero-sum game where two consistent forces struggle for dominance. Not only can it help with regard to mediatisation's influence on other institutions and actors embedded therein, but also in terms of how mediatisation is reshaped as it enters different organisational contexts.

The application of our framework will allow scholars to explore the linkages between mediatisation and its organisational and institutional environment; however, the true empirical validity of our conceptual reasoning remains to be demonstrated by future research.

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