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Olivier Driessens, Karin Raeymaeckers, Hans Verstraeten, Sarah Vandenbussche

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Abstract

Although the mediatization of politics has attracted increasing scholarly attention, research has paid only little attention to entertainment media, everyday politics and the consequences for politicians. This article addresses these shortcomings by studying politicians' personalization, not as a product of media logic but by looking at politicians' media-related practices and the media's anchoring of practices. Our in-depth interviews with Flemish politicians show that politicians' practices are in many ways organized by the media, but at the same time aim to retain control over them. Practices related to image-building and the constitution of the private-public boundary demonstrate this. We conclude that practice theory offers great potential for mediatization research but needs further empirical application.

Keywords: mediatization, personalization, politics, practice theory, media logic, interview

Introduction

The mediatization of politics has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years. The central research question is how and to what extent the media change politics. In answering this question, theoretical accounts are now more and more tested empirically, with studies on changes of various political aspects, such as parliamentary activity (Kepplinger, 2002), political agenda setting (e.g., Walgrave, 2008), political hierarchy (Daremas & Terzis, 2000), election rhetoric (Håkansson, 1997), and voter behavior (Schulz, Zeh, & Quiring, 2005).

Still, three critical remarks can be made. First, the strong bias toward news (coverage) (e.g., Kepplinger, 2002; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009), ignores the importance of other media formats, especially entertainment, in the changing nature and performance of politics (van Zoonen, 2005). The notions of politainment (Dörner, 2001) and celebrity politics (West & Orman, 2003), which point to the merging of entertainment and politics, make this argument even stronger. Second, specific attention has been paid to elections and campaigns (e.g., Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Schulz et al., 2005), while everyday politics has been somewhat neglected, although they clearly differ (cf. Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009, p. 150). Third, in operationalizing the complex meta-

process of mediatization (Krotz, 2009), scholars have often adhered to the functionalist notions of media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979) and, in the case of politics, political (or party) logic (e.g., Meyer, 2002; Strömbäck, 2008). Yet several authors have criticized the concept of media logic for being singular (Lundby, 2009) and linear (Couldry, 2008; Hepp, 2009). Hence, it obscures both the rich variety of possible media technologies and the multidirectionality of media-related operations in society.

In this article, we depart from the media logic concept and its criticisms to propose practice theory (Couldry, 2004; Schatzki, 1996) as an alternative approach for studying mediatization. We argue that mediatization should not be analyzed through logic but by looking at how people's practices (do not) engage with media (e.g., McCurdy, 2008). However, since practice theory has been developed mainly on the theoretical level, our empirical study is exploratory and only a starting point for further research. We focus on politicians' media-related practices as party members and as individual politicians to get a better understanding of personalization, which is an important manifestation of the mediatization of politics (see Mazzoleni, 2000; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Briefly stated, one of the changes induced by the mediation of politics is an increasing prominence of individual politicians and their personal and private details. Through in-depth interviews with fourteen Flemish[1] politicians and two spokesmen of politicians, we explore what media-related practices politicians perform in constituting the boundary between the public and the private—in relation to both news and entertainment media, in electoral as well as in everyday politics.

Media logic

The engine of mediatization is often considered to be the so-called media logic. David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979) coined this term to explain the increasing media influence in different societal fields by a cultural model instead of a behaviorist model. Inspired by the sociology of knowledge, they argued that media influence should not be conceived as a one-way stimulus but as an interactional process in which several institutions operate according to media logic. This, they continue, "has resulted in the construction of a media culture – a cultural content that emerges from acting through specific media formats" (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 236). They defined media format as "a framework

or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena," and it consists 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" (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 10). These media formats, together with the various media, constitute the form of communication, or media logic.

Several authors have developed their work on mediatization in line with Altheide and Snow's theoretical reasoning. Andrea Schrott (2009) and Stig Hjarvard (2008), for instance, also defined media logic as an orientation frame (see also Lundby, 2009, pp. 102–103), while Christoph Meyer's (2009) operationalization of news media's logic is highly compatible with their notion of media formats. However, while Altheide and Snow (1979) (and others) proposed that different media formats and modi operandi exist underneath one overarching media logic, critics have focused on the singular characteristic of media logic.

Knut Lundby (2009, pp. 104–105) concluded that this singularity obscures empirical differentiation and therefore problematizes the research validity of mediatization studies. A first possibility, then, would be to ponder plural "media logics," discriminating television logic from radio logic or news media logic from entertainment media logic. Yet modern society's media matrix consists of a wide range of (converging) media technologies combined with multiple overlapping genre differences. "A local radio talk show is not the same as a national news broadcast, and a popular television magazine operates differently from a highbrow debate program" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 53). The Internet adds to this complexity with user-generated content and online versions and hybrids of other communication technologies. Thus, it is doubtful whether plural "media logics" would be a good alternative to the singular "media logic." Moreover, the context of their use and of the changes the logics might induce must be factored in. Therefore, scholars should examine mediatization in different context fields (Hepp, 2009, p. 154), since it could demonstrate differences among mediatized fields, such as politics, the arts, or religion, notwithstanding the influence of the same media. Friedrich Krotz (2009, p. 26) added a historical and micro-level dimension to this, in which he asserted that "the "media logic" of TV today is not the same as of a decade ago, and the "media logic" of a mobile phone is quite different for a 14-year-old girl as compared to a 55-year-old banker." With these

examples, Krotz (2009, p. 26) rightly argued against mediatization approaches that adopt the notion of media logic, including Lundby's (2009) Simmelian rereading of Altheide and Snow's definition, in which he stressed social forms and social interaction.

When we focus on the mediatization of politics, we encounter similar problems. Just as it is difficult to validly conceptualize what is exactly the media logic (or media logics) and its possible subdimensions, the definitions of politics and "political logic" are equally not clear-cut (see Dahlgren, 2009, pp. 54–55; Strömbäck, 2008, p. 233). Furthermore, "there are many gray areas between politics and political communication governed by either media logic or political logic" (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009, p. 215). A possibility for overcoming this referential instability and other shortcomings of the notions of media logic and political logic might be a practice turn in mediatization theory and research.

Practice theory

Practice theory has its roots in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hubert Dreyfus, and Charles Taylor, and in social theory, among others the praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, and the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (see Postill, forthcoming; Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 243–244; Schatzki, 2001, pp. 1–2). Because of this scattered input, practice theory's identity is not yet well-established, although Theodore Schatzki (1996; 2001) and Andreas Reckwitz (2002) have made significant contributions in this respect.

Generally, practice theory situates the social not in discourse, or in the mind, or in interaction, but, obviously, in practices. A practice is "a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Schatzki (1996, pp. 91–110) distinguished between dispersed and integrative practices. Integrative practices are constitutive of a social field and are complex. For example, through several interconnected embodied and material practices such as reporting in the field or producing news broadcasts in the studio, the journalistic field is constituted. Integrative practices integrate several dispersed practices (or what Todd May (2001, p. 19) prefers to call skills or abilities), which occur in different social fields, for example, debating, ordering, and

describing. These kind of practices can be different according to the field in which they are performed. The practice of debating, for instance, can vary whether it is performed in the legal, political, or educational field.

Some practices anchor, control, or dominate others (for example, through definitional hierarchy or public rituals) (Swidler, 2001). Nick Couldry (2003; 2004, p. 122) suggested that media can perform this anchoring through their symbolic power in different social fields. Consequently, the central question of the mediatization of politics can be reformulated from "how and to what extent politics is changed by and through media" to "how and to what extent media anchor, control, and/or organize political practices." This permits alternative ways of understanding the role played by media through examination of the open-ended range of practices related to media. These vary from the way media influence the timing and staging of political events, or how politicians perform front-stage behavior as a private or public persona, to how they might try to avoid the media. Indeed, practices of (un)intentionally avoiding or ignoring the media are relevant as well (Couldry, 2004, p. 120), which exemplifies practice theory's ability to evade media centralism.

While it is not yet clear how media-related practices are organized internally and relationally, it is interesting to take them as a starting point, "since it distances us from the normal media studies assumption that what audiences do ("audiencing") *is* a distinctive set of practices rather than an artificially chosen "slice" through daily life that *cuts across* how they actually understand the practices in which they are engaged" (Couldry, 2004, p. 121; italics in original). In other words, practice theory opens up a new way of studying media by sidestepping media studies' ample attention for texts—how are media products (narratively) structured, how are they interpreted, etc.—as well as institutional production structures (cf. political economy) (Couldry, 2004, pp. 117–120).

Personalization

In this article, we focus on the open-ended range of practices carried out by politicians that are organized, anchored, and/or controlled by and through media. However, since the multitude of possible practices performed by politicians falls beyond the scope of one article, focusing on one or more particular practices or on a thematic grouping is necessary. Therefore, we delve into one specific

aspect that is often mentioned in the literature on the mediatization of politics, personalization (e.g., Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008).

Overall, scholars describe personalization as a product of the mutual influencing of media and politics, although there are different views on the outline of this process. Some argue that politicians adopt the media's storytelling technique of personalization and import this in their construction of political events, such as campaigns. In this way, personalities gain an increasingly important status in political culture, which is then also reflected in more personalized news reporting (see Schulz et al., 2005, p. 59; Strömbäck, 2008, p. 238). Stated differently, politics adapts to the "media logic." Gideon Rahat and Tamir Sheafer (2007) challenged this view by considering three different types of personalization: institutional, media, and behavioral (political) personalization. Contrary to other scholars, Rahat and Sheafer conceived of personalization not as a process of media-politics-media (see above) but of politics-media-politics: institutional personalization (e.g., political reforms of the electoral system in favor of individual politicians) results in media personalization (representation), which subsequently increases politicians' behavioral personalization (decline in party activity). However, although it would be more fruitful to present personalization as a non-linear process, in which the multidirectional interaction between media and politics would be recognized, Rahat and Sheafer's typology of personalization offers a good starting point for operationalization.

A more elaborate overview of the different types of personalization is given by Rosa van Santen and Liesbet van Zoonen (2009, pp. 167–169), as they discerned seven types of personalization:

(1) institutional personalization: institutional changes that prioritize individual politicians (cf. presidentialization (Poguntke & Webb, 2005)),

(2) focus on (top) politicians: persons gain media attention at the expense of parties,

(3) party leaders as embodiments of the party: the leader is pushed forward as the figurehead of the party by politicians and/or parties,

(4) individual political competence: individual professional qualities are increasingly scrutinized by the media,

(5) personal narratives: the personal background and emotions of individual politicians are brought into the limelight by the media,

(6) privatization: the private lives of politicians come at the forefront in the media,

(7) behavioral personalization: a tendency towards a decrease of party activity in favor of individual political behavior.

This article cannot examine all seven types of personalization thoroughly. Moreover, practice theory would not offer added value in explaining every type. For example, the second type (focus on top politicians) can be examined accurately through longitudinal quantitative content analysis of media output, whereas practice theory cannot easily demonstrate significant changes in this respect.

Method and data

Several authors (Kepplinger, 2002; Rothenbuhler, 2009; Schrott, 2009) have contended that mediatization can be studied only through longitudinal and comparative research. This implies a large dependency on textual sources (archives, reports, news articles, or broadcasts) to diagnose historical changes or "effects" produced by media. Examples of this can be easily found in the literature on the personalization of politics as well (e.g., Kaase, 1994; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007). However, there is also another side to this process: "Almost as rare as studies on organizational consequences are studies that focus on the effects of the mediatization of the political system for individuals in the role of voters, citizens, or individuals involved in policy making" (Schrott, 2009, p. 45). While Schulz *et al.* (2005) studied voters, we focus on the latter category, politicians. More specifically, we want to gain a deeper insight into the process of personalization by exploring politicians' practices—or their "doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 1996)—with specific attention on their relation to media and media's (lack of) influence on politicians' practices.

Our study is based on in-depth interviews with Flemish politicians. While our reliance on interviews ("discourses") may seem contradictory to a practice theoretical stance ("practices") at first sight, ideas or sayings (discursive practices) are always embodied, and even the simplest activities (non-discursive practices) are not thoughtless. Performing a practice always involves knowing and acting at once (cf. Wenger, 1999, pp. 47–48). Our sample includes 16 Flemish politicians (of whom two interviews were conducted with their spokesmen) and contains diversity in terms of place of

residence, age (from 29 to 57, mean 47.69), gender (4 females and 12 males), political function, and party affiliation. Concerning political function, the sample includes top-level politicians—a former prime minister, four former and three current party chairmen, a chairman of Parliament, and an incumbent minister, all at the time of the interviews (April-May 2009)—as well as lower-profile politicians (senators and members of Parliament who can be described as backbenchers and ex-ministers who have turned more to the background). Concerning party affiliation, all eight major political parties[2] are represented in the sample, including two politicians of the extreme right-wing party Vlaams Belang. This is the reincarnation of Vlaams Blok, whose three core groups were convicted of racism and xenophobia in 2004 (cf. Brems, 2006). Still, in the last regional elections (June 2009), this party ended up as the second biggest with 15.3% of the votes and 21 seats in the Flemish Parliament.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and using a semi-structured questionnaire. Interview topics varied from personalization (with questions on media coverage and representation, the proportion of personal versus party coverage, privatization, personal narratives, etc.) to the politicians' relationship with infotainment media and the differences with quality news media, and their self-presentational management. Due to the tight schedule of the politicians, especially because of the near elections, not all interviews lasted equally long, with some a little less than 30 minutes (on average about 40 minutes). The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed in NVivo through thematic coding, combining deductive coding (van Santen and van Zoonen's (2009) typology of personalization, see above) and inductive coding (themes emerging from respondents' statements). Where possible, we triangulated the data with the media output on the respective politicians. In two cases, a discrepancy was found between these sources. The first case displays different versions on a privacy matter, while the second shows a divergence on whether the politician took the initiative for an interview.

Personalization according to politicians

Our data clearly demonstrate the ambiguity or even ambivalence of mediatization that Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz (1999, pp. 251–252) hinted at. On the one hand, politicians can be seen to perform practices to adapt to the increasing mediation and mediatization of politics ("self-mediatization" (Meyer, 2002, p. 58)). On the other hand, politicians carry out practices that must enable them to retain control at the same time. Examples of this are participating in entertainment programs, blogging, and image-building.

Image-building

Image is something that is constituted by and constituting media-related practices. For example, a number of respondents tried to assemble the image of a hard-working, serious politician—"briefcase politician" (Meyer, 2002, p. 78)—through arrays of activities that are core to the political field (integrative practices), limiting practices related to the popular and the private to a minimum. This, in turn, is productive for the politicians' future media-related practices, as the media are expected to take them more serious as well. However, as some respondents attested, a common strategy in building the image of a briefcase politician is to ask many parliamentary questions to get media attention (cf. Kepplinger, 2002) and a good mark on political journalists' score sheets at the end of the term (behavioral personalization). However, this anchoring of political practices by the media has taken on such proportions that the president of the Flemish Parliament, Jan Peumans (N-VA), launched the idea of limiting the number of questions in commissions and the plenary assembly to improve the debate (Winckelmans, 2010).

Still, our data show that building the image of a briefcase politician is not that easy for every kind of politician, as this female president of a political party suggested:

> I am someone who performs politics in a serious and sincere way, but then they think rather quickly: "oh well, she's a bitch" or something. Because of that, you have to participate in soft media programs to prove that this is not the case, in a manner of speaking. I participate in every entertainment program if it doesn't affect the dignity of my person. But I will never say something about my private life. That, I think, is a dangerous evolution. (female, 34)

This quotation is interesting in many ways. First, it demonstrates that the practices of certain front benchers are (obviously) more anchored by the media than those of less prominent politicians. Second, this quotation exemplifies gender differences of personalization (van Zoonen, 2006) but counters that the importance of style and physical appearance has urged (certain) female politicians to develop a predominantly professional and political public persona. Third, the respondent made a distinction between entertainment programs and private issues. This makes clear that we should not think of personalization only in terms of the private versus the public or the political but should also consider the popular as an inherent aspect (cf. Corner, 2000).

The popular

Although somewhat missing in the typology of personalization we discussed above, the popular (self) seems to be an important facet. Some politicians seem to participate in infotainment and entertainment programs (Brants & Neijens, 1998) not to disclose their private lives but to present a humorous, fun, and "ordinary" persona. For this process, we can borrow the term "humanization" (Holtz-Bacha, 2004, p. 48) here not as a function of privatization but as a type of personalization. In Flanders, the entertainment program that tops the list of many (interviewed) politicians is the very popular television quiz *De Slimste Mens*. People believe that N-VA was one of the big victors in the last regional elections (2009) thanks to the good impression (and the wide media coverage) that Bart De Wever, its president, has left:

> Bart De Wever? He has become famous with, not with his ideas, because nobody knows what he stands for, except for the independence of Flanders. He participates in *De Slimste Mens* and he wins elections. (male, 57)

This success has strongly reinforced the idea of the necessity of performing these kinds of "popular practices" with politicians. In the competition for attention, they want to fight on even terms—or, in other words, the media-related practices of some politicians organize those of other politicians. Notable exceptions to this are the politicians of Vlaams Belang. In the '90s, when Vlaams Blok was growing rapidly, all other parties agreed not to cooperate with this party. This formal agreement,

which was called the *cordon sanitaire*, was also applied in the media (as *cordon mediatique*), to minimize the party's media presence, unless politically relevant. Therefore, the party has been almost completely invisible in popular media formats, although some party politicians have succeeded in attracting attention through privacy disclosure. Since the transformation of Vlaams Blok into Vlaams Belang (see above), the formal agreements have expired, but, interestingly, are maintained informally through politicians' and media professionals' embodied practices. As one Vlaams Belang member of Parliament of said:

> It is not done to treat a member of Vlaams Belang as a person, as a human being or so. However, we could say we now have a little breakthrough with the illness of Marie-Rose Morel, whom is covered in *Dag Allemaal*, but that is an exception on the general rule that we *only* appear in political programs and that our political message cannot be too personalized. (male, 51)

Still, just like other respondents, he would not accept every offer if he were invited. An important criterion in this respect is whether the program affects the politician's dignity as a person. For example, a number of respondents refuse to go on quiz programs due to a lack of sufficient general knowledge, while others are afraid of being ridiculed. Therefore, many respondents participate only when the program or interview allows them to insert a (minimal) political message.

The private

The same rule applies when it comes to the private lives of some politicians (privatization) (cf. van Zoonen et al., 2007). They expose private details only when it is politically relevant (e.g., absence through illness or pregnancy)—or when something is impossible to hide from the media (the extreme weight loss of one respondent). Most respondents, however, are reluctant to disclose their private lives: their families have not chosen public lives, doing so has no (political) relevance, or leads to uncontrollable situations and a downward privacy spiral. What and how much are disclosed (or, to what extent the media control or organize private consumption practices, for example) depend on the politicians' personal definition of private life and its relevancy for politics (or the political anchoring of private practices). The 29-year-old female respondent, for instance, argued that her consumption

practices are private and have no political relevancy, whereas a 57-year-old male member of Parliament thought the opposite. As a Social-Democrat, he said, it would not be appropriate to drive a really expensive and polluting car. For the former, political practices are located in the Parliament and official buildings, whereas for the latter, these practices are not bound to specific places. The importance of places—or "stations" (Postill, forthcoming)—is also illustrated by a former minister's (57, male) organization of interviewing practices. To control his privacy, he gives interviews only in the Senate or in his lawyer's office, and no longer at his home, because each time it resulted in a privacy breach.

The boundary between the public and the private is continuously reproduced by politicians' and journalists' practices, which are, as we have seen, routinized and partly built with tacit knowledge (implicit relations, unspoken rules, underlying assumptions, shared worldviews, etc.). In this way, we can understand a boundary as a "negotiation of meaning" or "a process that is shaped by multiple elements and that affects these elements," which "constantly changes the situations to which it gives meaning and affects all participants" (Wenger, 1999, p. 54). This explains the fierce reactions when journalists' or politicians' practices breach individual or collective boundaries. "When a colleague has gone too far, he also gets comments on it," said a 55-year-old female respondent in this respect.

Finally, another practice for retaining control over media coverage and one's image is to maintain a blog. This allows some interviewed politicians to bypass news gatekeepers and get attention. Others do not need this behavioral personalization, however, as they are much solicited and have the luxury of selecting which invitations to accept. One politician, a then former prime minister, even stated that his team performed practices of media attention-avoidance: "The most important task of my spokesman is to keep me *out* of the media" (male, 49). Obviously, this is an exception, and we have to take it with a grain of salt given his wide array of public and media performances.

Conclusion

In this article, we tried to offer an alternative framework for the theoretical analysis and empirical study of mediatization. This is necessary because much of the existing mediatization research relies on the questionable media logic concept and is often text-oriented through its longitudinal (and in some

cases comparative) character. These problems can be overcome by turning to practice theory, a theory that has been developed mainly in philosophy (Schatzki, 1996) and sociology (Reckwitz, 2002) but is gaining increasing attention within media studies (Bräuchler & Postill, forthcoming; Couldry, 2004; McCurdy, 2008). Studying the media not as texts or as production structures broadens our perspective and draws our attention to practices related to the media (including the avoidance of media) and their role in anchoring or organizing other practices. This makes practice theory particularly relevant for mediatization research.

However, Kurt Lewin's (1952, p. 169) famous adage, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory," has not yet been verified by practice theory. Although our aim has been primarily to illustrate the practice theoretical analysis of mediatization, this empirical study should be considered as a small, yet important, first step. More concretely, through in-depth interviews we explored politicians' media-related practices to gain insight into the process of personalization, which is a manifestation of mediatization. Our results show that, contrary to some beliefs, the media are not a juggernaut rolling over politics, producing a linear and unstoppable mediatization. In many ways and on many occasions, politicians can be seen to perform practices aimed at controlling the impact and influence of the media on the politicians' own functioning and on politics as such. Practices related to image-building and constituting the boundary between the public and the private are examples of this. We have also shown that we should pay attention not only to the private in studying personalization but also to the popular, which is in various ways addressed to get media attention and shape one's image.

Due to the focus on personalization, media have been generally understood here as mass media, especially television. However, it is worthwhile to broaden the scope for changes induced by other communication technologies such as mobile phones or the Internet. For instance, mobile phones have certainly changed practices and relationships between journalists and politicians. Politicians have become more available for journalists, both in time and space, but also inversely, journalists have become much easier to consult with, and the possibilities of strategically leaking information have increased. To conclude, by looking at practices related to media and not at single media technologies, practice theory can offer many new possibilities for mediatization research.

Notes

[1] Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking region in the federal state of Belgium and contains approximately 60% of the Belgian population.

[2] These parties are, in order of number of seats in the 2009 regional elections, CD&V (Christian Democrats), Vlaams Belang (extreme right-wing), Open VLD (Liberal Democrats), sp.a (Social Democrats), N-VA (Flemish Nationalists), Lijst Dedecker (Populist Party), Groen! (Green Party), and SLP (Social Liberal Party)

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