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European Journal of Communication 2013 28: 225

DOI: 10.1177/0267323113475409

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European Journal of Communication

28(3) 225–240

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DOI: 10.1177/0267323113475409

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Abstract

This article traces mediatization in the coverage of election campaigns in Danish and German television news over the past 20 years (1990–2009). The analysis is based on news content analyses focusing on the major candidates in the two countries. Considering that Denmark and Germany are similar but nevertheless different countries, the data show remarkable similarities in the coverage of elections and how it changes over time. Observing the amount of horse-race coverage, personalization, visualization and negativity, most findings fitted the mediatization hypothesis at a first glance. At a second glance, multivariate analyses controlling for important other variables confirmed the notion of mediatization for only three of the five content indicators studied. In addition, the mediatization process apparently stalled in the 1990s.

Keywords

Comparative research, coverage, election campaign, mediatization, political communication

Election campaigns are periods of intense efforts by parties to maximize voter support primarily through the media presence of their candidates and issues. Hence, election campaigns are intensely studied in (political) communication research. Since voting behaviour over the last decades has become increasingly volatile, election campaigning has intensified and the applied methods have been refined (Schulz, 2008: 248). Parties

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and politicians have adapted to the changing political environment not only concerning voter volatility but also to the changing media landscape and increased media power.

In particular, the introduction of commercial television in Western Europe has raised the concern that the quality of political communication is threatened (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). The changes in political communication have been described variously by the terms *mediation*, *medialization*, or *mediatization*. These terms describe processes (not limited to political communication) in which the media and the way in which the media process information – the so-called media logic – become increasingly important for society and its subsystems. Asp (1986: 361) even suggests that the adaption of politicians to the media logic can lead to a ‘spiral of medialisation’.

While theoretical work on mediatization is rich, the attempts to empirically trace mediatization are scattered. In particular, long-term empirical and comparative studies are still rare. Kepplinger (2002) studied how the relationship between the German Bundestag and the media changed in the period 1951–1995 by studying how the parliament works and how the media cover it. While his conclusion is that there are signs of an increasing mediatization, newer research suggests that the changes in the work of parliaments are not necessarily linked to mediatization but rather the result of increasing issue competition (Green-Pedersen, 2010). Elmelund-Præstekær et al. (2011) studied how Danish MPs experience the media over time and showed that politicians today do indeed perceive the media as a more independent actor vis-a-vis the political system. Likewise, Negrine (1999) studied how the relationship between parliaments and the media in the UK and Germany has changed over time. He finds that parliaments are less prominently covered by the media, but this change is not only seen as a result of the media approaching parliaments differently but also because parliaments have changed. Among other things, the executive has become a more prominent actor in politics.

Our aim is to add to the few longitudinal studies by tracing mediatization in the coverage of the Danish and German national election campaigns during the past 20 years. In the first section of the article, the process of mediatization and the forces behind it are portrayed. In the second section, we focus on the indicators for this process in political news coverage as they have been described in previous studies. This discussion leads us to a number of content indicators, which we study in order to determine the degree to which political news coverage is mediatized. In the third section of the article, we present our data and cases, while the results of our analyses are presented in the fourth section. In the concluding section, directions for future research are discussed.

The process of mediatization

In line with Strömbäck and Esser (2009), we understand mediatization as ‘a process affecting all parts of society, either directly or indirectly, albeit to different degrees within or across different societies’. Like others, we deliberately choose the term ‘*mediatization*’ instead of *mediation* or *medialization*, often used as synonyms but describing different roles of the media and society. As Strömbäck has clarified, *mediation* is to be understood as a neutral role of media as a conveyor of information between different parts or actors in a society (Strömbäck, 2008). Mediatization is a more far-reaching process of increasing media influence on society. This process of mediatization implies that

media are independent institutions upon which other parts of society depend (Hjarvard, 2008: 113). As media importance in society increases, the way in which the media depict reality becomes the dominant point of reference for the public discourse.

Schulz identifies four sub-processes of mediatization: *extension*; *substitution*; *amalgamation*; and *adoption* (Schulz, 2004). Similarly, Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011: 34–45) as well as Strömbäck and Esser (2009: 214–216) distinguish four dimensions of mediatization. The first dimension measures the degree to which media are the most important sources for information, while the second dimension rates the degree of independence of the media from (political) institutions. The third and the fourth dimensions are closely linked to media content. Whether the media follow a political logic or their own logic in covering current affairs relates to the third dimension, that is, it deals with the question of who is in control of the agenda. Following the mediatization hypothesis, one would expect a gradual shift of control from the political arena to the media. Finally, the fourth dimension covers the degree to which other societal subsystems follow this logic, replacing their usual rules and ways in which they used to be governed. Theoretically, it is important to distinguish between the last two dimensions. Changes on the third dimension should be traced by analysing media coverage while changes on the fourth dimension affect primarily the behaviour of societal actors – such as politicians.

Neither Strömbäck and Esser (2009) nor ourselves argue that this process of mediatization is to be seen as a deterministic unilinear development. The degree to which the political system in a society is mediatized may vary over time and space (Strömbäck, 2008). It is conceivable that the extent to which media content is governed by the media logic or a political logic might change in both directions. Nevertheless, if indeed it makes sense to speak of a *mediatization*, i.e. a process in a certain direction, one would expect to find evidence of general trends in that direction. If changes in political news coverage from one election to another election are nothing but random walks, one could hardly reach the conclusion that a specific process explains the changes.

Indicators of changes in political news coverage

Presumably, mediatization is such a prominent topic in research because it is often seen as deleterious. To mention one example, Kepplinger (1998, 2000, 2002) speaks of the dismantling of politics. By obeying the media logic, politicians are more concerned with media performance than tackling the country's most important problems. His negative assessment of the role played by the media is in line with other critical accounts of how political communication is changing. For example, Blumler and colleagues speak of a 'crisis in political communication' (Blumler, 1997; Blumler and Coleman, 2010; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999).

The question is, then, how we can measure mediatization of political communication? According to a rich body of literature, we can identify four indicators of the mediatization of political communication. First, the control of the campaign agenda by the media; second, the increasing focus on campaign stories at the cost of substantive issue coverage; third, the personalization of campaigns and coverage; and, fourth, an increasing negativity in news coverage.

Shortly after the agenda-setting hypothesis had been established and empirically tested by Trenaman and McQuail (1961) and McCombs and Shaw (1972), the question of the origins of the media agenda was raised: is the media agenda reflecting the campaign agenda of the parties and candidates, or are the journalists in control of the news agenda? Semetko et al. (1991) were among the first to empirically answer the question and found that American journalists adopted a pragmatic approach to the campaign and focused on own issues, while their British colleagues did much less in pressing their own stamp on the coverage. Mazzoleni (1987) found evidence of an increasing relevance of the media's news values in Italian election campaign coverage and interpreted it as a consequence of a media logic and growing media power in shaping election news. More recent studies also hint at an increased media power over the political agenda (Van Aelst et al., 2008; Van Noije et al., 2008; Walgrave and Aelst, 2006), while others point in a different direction (Brandenburg, 2002; Hopmann et al., 2012a). A process of the political system losing power over the media is not necessarily caused by mediatization. Other factors such as the transition of power from national governments to supranational institutions like the EU also play a crucial role (Van Noije et al., 2008).

Linked to the question of which substantial issues are on the media agenda is the question of which types of issues are covered by the media. As Blumler (1997: 399) has observed, journalists apparently react to politicians' spin by more coverage of the campaign strategies of politicians and polling results, e.g. 'hoopla' and 'horse-race' coverage. Longitudinal studies have not shown a steady increase of such non-substantive issues, their share seems to vary according to the context of the election (Hopmann et al., 2011; Schulz and Zeh, 2006; Wilke and Reinemann, 2006). Nevertheless, we hypothesize:

H1: The proportion of horse-race and hoopla news stories vis-a-vis substantial issues stories on incumbent and his/her main challenger is increasing.

A prominent aspect of mediatization is the so-called personalization of politics (Driessens et al., 2010). Depending on the perspective, this process implies different things: the predominance of top politicians over issues and parties in the coverage, the increasing importance of candidates for voting behaviour or the increasing importance of candidates in party organizations. In short, the production, the coverage and the voting behaviour can be personalized. The first and the last type of personalization are often seen as signs of mediatization. Personalization corresponds to the journalistic criteria for what makes a story newsworthy (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 250; Strömbäck, 2008: 243). Hence, parties adapt to the media logic by placing media-viable candidates in a prominent position (Driessens et al., 2010: 315; Asp, 1986: 360–1).

Empirical studies on the changes in media coverage provided mixed results. Rahat and Sheaffer (2007: 67) see the increasing focus on persons in media coverage of politics as a result of institutional reforms. These institutional reforms, however, are ultimately triggered by a wish to adapt to the media logic (see also Schulz, 2004). Political institutions focus on candidates in order to match the media's growing attention paid to party leaders (Mughan, 2000). Other studies cannot confirm a trend in a specific direction. Johansson found no increase in the focus Swedish television news puts on party leaders in election campaign coverage (Johansson, 2008). Reinemann and Wilke (2007) showed that, in relative terms, the share of the chancellor candidates in the election coverage of German broadsheet newspapers only slightly increased from 1953 to 2005, while the

total amount of election coverage increased dramatically, especially after the introduction of televised debates. Similarly, Genz et al. (2001) found no strong tendencies towards increased personalization in German television news. Nevertheless, their results reveal a specific spotlight on the main candidates.

In short, following the aforementioned studies, an increasing personalization of political news coverage can be measured by assessing the relative visibility of top-ranked politicians in the news. Therefore, the second hypothesis reads:

H2: The proportion of news stories featuring prime minister candidates is increasing.

Another major trend is increasing negativity in political news. Already Galtung and Ruge (1965) have pointed out that negativity is an important determinant of the newsworthiness of an event. This notion has been empirically confirmed in different contexts (Ruhrmann et al., 2003; Schulz, 1976). Moreover, several authors argue that political news is becoming increasingly negative (Blumler, 2001; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Plasser and Plasser (2002: 70; see also Asp, 1986: 360) argue that political consultants are advising politicians to 'go negative' on their opponents in order to meet the requirements of journalistic selection routines and increase their own media presence. Others pass the buck to the journalists, saying that they are increasingly focusing on conflict and criticism in political coverage (Kepplinger, 1998; Patterson, 1993). Blumler (1997: 399) explains the reaction of the journalists by the desire to 'fight back' the attempts of the politicians and their consultants to gain control over the media agenda by crafting events fit to print and cover. Furthermore, there is empirical proof of a growing negativism in election coverage in American television news (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2006) and the German press (Reinemann and Wilke, 2007; Semetko and Schoenbach, 2003). We hypothesize therefore:

H3: The proportion of negative news stories in which the prime minister and his/her main challenger appear is increasing.

Finally, irrespective of which politicians are shown on television, they can be depicted in different ways. In particular, television calls for visuals and sound-bites. Adatto (1990) and Hallin (1992) demonstrated that the average sound-bite of a presidential candidate decreased dramatically from 1960 to 1992. Bucy and Grabe (2007: 668) have shown that this trend continued at least to 2004, with average duration of candidate sound-bites lasting up to 7.7 seconds. Meanwhile, visuals (or 'image-bites') of the candidates are often shown in the media. Strömbäck and Dimitrova (2011) describes a practice of media interventionism also known as 'lip flaps' where politicians are shown talking but their voice is muted and the journalist's voice-over is heard instead. Similarly, showing but not allowing the candidates to talk is interpreted by Esser as an 'anticandidate editing technique' (Esser, 2008: 422). Hence, the final two hypotheses read:¹

H4a: The proportion of news stories in which the prime minister and his/her main challenger are shown rather than speaking themselves is increasing.

H4b: The length of sound-bites is decreasing.

Alternative explanations

Features of election coverage seen as mediatization may be caused by factors not driven by a media logic. These alternative explanations to a certain extent challenge the mediatization

hypothesis. The amount of horse-race coverage and the amount of negativity in campaign coverage may reflect public opinion. If there is a likely chance of a change in government, then horse-race coverage and negativity increase, while a government firmly in the saddle leads to a coverage focused on the incumbents and on issues. Key features of the mediatization hypothesis might therefore be linked to poll standings rather than to changes in the style of political communication. For example, it has been argued that 'changes [in German election campaign coverage] can be seen as resulting not from general media trends, but from changes in the political sphere' (Hopmann et al., 2011: 267). That is, negative stories may simply reflect negative polling data for the party or candidate in question or unsuccessful campaigns (for similar discussions, see Hopmann et al., 2012b; Nevitte et al., 2000).

Data, method and cases

In this study mediatization is traced in content analysis data drawn from television news on German and Danish election campaigns. In particular, we investigate how prime ministerial candidates (*Kanzlerkandidaten*, *statsministerkandidater*) are covered in national prime-time television news in the last four weeks prior to election day. In the German case, the content analyses cover the national election campaigns in 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005 and 2009. The main evening news bulletins of the two nationwide public broadcasting channels (ARD and ZDF) and the two major commercial channels (RTL and SAT.1) were screened for news items at least mentioning one of the two chancellor candidates. The German data have continuously been gathered after each election campaign. The content analyses are based on the same set of indicators. Originally, they were collected for the study of political balance in the election news coverage of German chancellor candidates and its impact on voting (Kindelmann, 1994; Schulz and Zeh, 2007, 2010; Zeh, 2005).

In the Danish study, we included the coverage of the election campaigns in 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005 and 2007 in the main public service and main commercial television news bulletins: *TV Avisen* on the public service channel DR1, and *Nyhederne* on the commercial television channel TV2/Danmark. For economic reasons, however, we were only able to code one major news bulletin on each broadcasting station for the 1994 and 1998 election campaigns. The codebook used in the content analysis of the Danish data is partly based on the German codebook, as the Danish data had also originally been gathered for the analysis of political balance in election campaign news (Albæk et al., 2010; Hopmann et al., 2011).

For each election, the content data were aggregated to the broadcaster level. Table 1 gives an overview of the dependent variables we constructed based on the content data. First, to measure the extent of horse-race coverage, personalization, visualization and negativity we calculated relative proportions of news items for each candidate in each election campaign and on each broadcaster (Germany: 2 candidates $\times$ 6 campaigns $\times$ 4 broadcasters = 48 cases; Denmark: 2 candidates $\times$ 5 campaigns $\times$ 2 broadcasters = 20 cases). Second, as there was no difference in the average length of sound-bites for the two candidates in a specific election campaign, we computed a combined measure of average sound-bite length covering both candidates for each year and television broadcaster. By analysing media content data, we were unable to study the antecedents of the

Table 1. List of indicators for the mediatization of political news coverage and available operationalization in the German and Danish datasets.

Indicators	Denmark	Germany
Horse-race and hoopla	Proportion of news stories on the campaign rather than substantive policy issues	Same
Personalization	Proportion of news stories with prime minister candidates	Same
Visualization	Proportion of news stories with prime minister candidates shown rather than speaking	Same
Length of sound-bites	–	in seconds
Negativity ^a	Proportion of news stories with negative tone towards prime minister candidates	Same

^aThe tone of the news item was assessed by a rating variable: 'What is the general tendency of the item towards candidate X? All aspects of valence are to be taken into account.' Coding alternatives: no clear tendency/ambivalent; mainly negative; mainly positive. Here we calculated the proportion of news items that are 'mainly negative' (for more details, see Albæk et al., 2010; Kindelmann, 1994; Zeh, 2005).

news agenda and whether the locus of power had changed over time (see Asp, 1983; Hopmann et al., 2012a; Van Noije et al., 2008; Walgrave and Aelst, 2006).

In addition, we test for mediatization in a multivariate design applying a set of controls. These are, first, the election year in order to grasp general trends over time. Second, with a dummy variable for the type of broadcaster (commercial or public service) we intend to capture the notion that changes in news coverage are supposedly more prevalent among commercial broadcasters (Schulz and Zeh, 2006: 279). Third, the difference in opinion poll figures for the main incumbent and main opposition parties (percentage points) are included in the regression analyses.² This information will help us to investigate whether news media content merely reflects how successful a candidate's campaign is. Finally, a dummy variable for the two countries in the study serves as the fourth control.

Gurevitch and Blumler made a strong claim for comparative research, above all it serves as 'an essential antidote to naïve universalism' (1990: 308). Furthermore, Denmark and Germany provide us with the opportunity to test whether changes in news content are a result of (common) changes in political journalism or primarily triggered by variation in the political context. First, both countries have a similar setup with respect to broadcasting. They have strong public service television broadcasting established in the postwar period and modelled after the BBC. Later, in the 1980s, both countries experienced a liberalization of their media markets leading to the establishment of commercial television broadcasters (Hjarvard, 1997; Pfetsch, 1996).

Second, Denmark and Germany also have a fairly similar political setup (Ismayr, 2003). In both countries, governments are always coalition governments. Voters can typically choose between two clear alternatives for the position of prime minister, one bourgeois and one socialist (the Danish election in 1994 was perhaps close to an exception, as the Liberals and the Conservatives did not agree on rallying for one candidate).

In sum, from a structural point of view, the media systems and political systems in Germany and Denmark are fairly similar and this study is not comparative in the sense that we see these two countries as most-different cases. Therefore, we would expect similar findings across both countries. Nevertheless, they are two different countries with varying political contexts in which elections take place. Thus, studying both countries will deter us from jumping to the wrong conclusions by confounding country-specific characteristics or trends with general changes in the media-politics nexus.

Results

To provide an overview of the changes in election news coverage in the past 20 years, we graphically depicted the content indicators listed in Table 1 (see Figure 1). First, our data indicate a substantial increase in the proportional attention to horse-race and hoopla stories. However, these changes occurred in Germany, and not in Denmark, where there always has been a fairly high proportion of horse-race and hoopla stories with regard to the incumbent and opponent (see Hopmann et al., 2011). Moreover, the proportions increased primarily in the 1990s, and seemed to have levelled off in the subsequent years.

Second, personalization measured as the proportional attention devoted to the candidates in relation to the total coverage of the news bulletins increased slightly in both countries. This increase was not constant, however. The sharp drop in Germany in 1994 can be explained by the specific context of the campaign. It was, by German standards, a rather long campaign with a duration of eight weeks, and the attention of the news bulletins in the last four weeks diminished (see also Zeh, 2005).

Third, a similar picture of change in the 1990s, but at a lower level, is found for the proportion of negative news stories with regard to the incumbent prime minister or his/her main opponent. Again, we find that the proportions were increasing throughout the 1990s, but then negativity dropped to the initial levels of the beginning of the 1990s. In Denmark, the 2005 election campaign is clearly an outlier. This exception may be caused by an anticipated lack of success. It was no surprise that the oppositional candidate had no chance of winning the election in 2005 and would lose to the incumbent by a substantial margin (a reversed picture with positive news stories on a successful opponent was found in 2001, see Hopmann et al., 2011).

Looking at the muted visualization of the two prime minister candidates, we again found an increase until the late 1990s. Subsequently, Germany and Denmark followed different paths, however. While the proportion of muted candidates increased only slightly in Germany, it actually decreased in Denmark. In addition, the length of sound-bites shows that election news coverage changed substantially in the 1990s but then stayed at a rather stable level (German data only, not shown). Similar to findings from other countries (Adatto, 1990; Bucy and Grabe, 2007; Hallin, 1992), we found that the average sound-bite has decreased from 28 to 13 seconds on public service and from 18 to 11 seconds on commercial television.

In a next step, we computed linear regressions for the five variables of interest mentioned in hypotheses 1 to 4 (see Table 2). Though we have to be careful when interpreting the results given the limited number of cases, these regressions will provide us with a more detailed picture of the antecedents of the changes in news coverage beyond the bivariate descriptives presented in Figure 1. To begin with, as a general note, we see

Figure 1. Changes in the mediation indicators.

Table 2. Linear regressions on the changes in election campaign television coverage in Germany and Denmark.^a

	Incumbent Standardized beta	Main challenger Standardized beta
<i>Horse-race and hoopla stories</i>		
Year of election	.33*	.39*
Commercial broadcaster (= 1)	.18	.16
Incumbent lead in opinion polls	-.42*	-.23
Country (Germany = 1)	-.30*	-.22
R ² / N	.44** / 34	.31* / 34
<i>Personalization^b</i>		
Year of election	.58***	.65***
Commercial broadcaster (= 1)	.05	.15
Incumbent lead in opinion polls	.20	-.20
Country (Germany = 1)	.03	-.03
R ² / N	.32*** / 34	.55*** / 34
<i>Negativity</i>		
Year of election	.15	.54#
Commercial broadcaster (= 1)	.20	.29
Incumbent lead in opinion polls	-.14	.28
Country (Germany = 1)	-.18	.04
R ² / N	.14 / 30	.23 / 30
<i>Muted visualization</i>		
Year of election	.07	.22
Commercial broadcaster (= 1)	.34#	.52**
Incumbent lead in opinion polls	-.07	.11
Country (Germany = 1)	-.01	-.01
R ² / N	.13 / 34	.32* / 34

^aWe stress that the regressions presented are based on small samples limiting the possibilities of taking into account the specific data structure (i.e. the time and country levels). The results should be interpreted as indicative of the absence or presence of relationships.

^bThe dependent variable was standardized per country in order to compensate for slight differences in the calculation of the percentages.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; # $p < .10$. Year of election has been standardized per country to adjust for different time frames of the analyses.

that very similar patterns are found for the two prime minister candidates. That is, their coverage of election campaigns appeared not to be determined by different factors. Second, in most instances we found that there indeed was a trend in a specific direction even when controlling for other possible factors influencing news coverage. This trend is shown by the significant correlations between year of election campaign and the dependent variables. The proportion of horse-race and hoopla stories increased over time (supporting H1). However, as is evident from Figure 1, this change was led by Germany while the level in Denmark has been fairly stable over a number of years. Also, the personalization of election campaign coverage (supporting H2) and (partly) the negativity in campaign coverage increased. In addition, the length of sound-bites

has decreased (supporting H4b). However, no significant increase in the visualization of the candidates was found (not supporting H4a).

Third, we also included the difference in the incumbent's and opponent's opinion poll figures in the regression analysis. As one would expect, this difference played an important role with respect to horse-race and hoopla news stories. The closer the two candidates' parties were, the more focus there was on the horse-race. According to the standardized beta coefficients in Table 2, the lead in the polls had a stronger impact on the amount of horse-race stories for the incumbent than had the year of election. The standardized betas in the regression for the opponent also indicate that the proportions of horse-race stories were negatively influenced by the poll lead, although the correlation is not statistically significant (see Table 2). These findings indicate that a central indicator for the mediatization process is strongly influenced by the specific context of the election and not simply moving in a specific direction independent of real-world indicators.

Fourth, we found some evidence of systematic differences between the commercial and public service broadcasters. The former depicted the two prime ministerial candidates more often in pictures rather than letting them speak for themselves. In a similar vein, commercial news had on average shorter sound-bites (Table 3). But no systematic differences between commercial and public service broadcasters were found with respect to the proportional attention to horse-race and hoopla stories or negativity in the coverage of the two opponents. Contrary to what one may expect, signs of mediatization were therefore not primarily found in commercial news. That is, commercial television was not driving changes in campaign coverage in a specific direction.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 2, Danish television was significantly more concerned with the horse-race and the hoopla of the campaign. This difference between the two countries is surprising. With respect to the overall television news coverage of national election campaigns, Denmark appears to have a lower level of horse-race and hoopla coverage than is found elsewhere (Hopmann et al., 2011).

Finally, negativity of the coverage increased slightly but not significantly at the .05 level. This non-finding on the tone of the stories confirmed previous analyses based on the evaluations of the candidate. With the exception of the 1998 campaign, evaluations were positive for the chancellor candidates in Germany showing no sign of increasing negativity (see Schulz and Zeh, 2005).

In short, we indeed found results pointing to an increasing mediatization of election campaign news coverage. On the one hand, personalization and horse-race coverage were on the increase and sound-bites were shrinking. These changes were predominantly

Table 3. Linear regression for average sound-bite length (Germany only).

	Standardized beta
Year of election	-.45*
Commercial broadcaster (= 1)	-.38*
Incumbent lead in opinion polls	.05
R^2 / N	.36* / 24

* $p < .05$.

a phenomenon of the 1990s. On the other hand, since the anticipated election result was a good predictor for the issue coverage of the candidates we cannot see mediatization independent from the context in which a campaign takes place. In addition, since negativity barely increased and visualization did not increase over time, these indicators failed to fit the general trend of increasing mediatization.

Discussion

Denmark and Germany are rather similar countries with respect to their political and media systems. In addition, as this study showed, television news coverage of election campaigns in the last 20 years also bears considerable similarities – at least when it comes to trends at the aggregate level. This finding can be explained with similar journalistic selection routines and processes. In other words, political journalism in the two countries appears to be influenced by a similar ‘media logic’.

At first glance, the presented results supported the mediatization hypothesis. Though the changes have been limited, three out of five indicators (personalization, horse-race, sound-bite length) nevertheless took the theorized direction, as the descriptive and multivariate analysis showed. At a second glance, the picture becomes more mixed than what one would expect based on recent accounts on the direction of change in news coverage. The increase in horse-race coverage was only documented for Germany and this increase occurred in the 1990s. A similar increase cannot be found in Denmark, where horse-race coverage has always been at a fairly high level. In other words, an increase does not seem to be a common phenomenon. Moreover, negativity failed to pass the test for mediatization in statistical terms. Although the data showed a minor increase in the 1990s, in the entire period we analysed, the proportion of negative news stories on the prime ministerial candidates was not increasing. At least in the Danish case, the news coverage seems to reflect the campaigning practices of the parties, which did not become more negative either (Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). Finally, no increase was found for the visualization of prime ministerial candidates.

More generally, the described changes took place in the 1990s. Subsequently, the process seems to have stalled. This finding raises the question of whether mediatization peaked in the 1990s – at least with respect to effects on election news coverage. Looking at the phases of mediatization formulated by Strömbäck (2008), the question is whether we have reached the fourth stage. Though we looked at a period of about 20 years, the analysed time span may be too short for adequately grasping the entire mediatization process. Possibly, the important changes in the relation between media and politics started in the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Triggered by societal changes dating back to the late 1960s (see the discussion in Elmelund-Praestekær et al., 2011), journalists became less inclined to follow the agenda of the established parties and looked for issues outside the parliamentary debate. Whether the consequences of mediatization changed media content much earlier than assumed or the process has come to a temporary standstill cannot be answered by a single study. It remains to be seen whether future research expanding the timeline of analysis in both directions will deliver similar results.

Adding to this, the electoral context had a substantial impact on the structure of the coverage. This underlines that mediatization is not to be understood as a process detached

from real-world proceedings. Obviously, it is difficult statistically to account for contextual influences on election campaign coverage. For example, the economic state of a country may also have an important impact on the election campaign and its coverage. High unemployment rates or a shrinking GDP could reduce horse-race stories, require more policy coverage and decrease the amount of news items focusing on the candidates.

Finally, some aspects of news coverage may simply change because advances in video and broadcasting technology make them possible. For example, the shrinking sound-bites Hallin (1992) observed may reflect advances in video editing techniques – no more and no less. In 1960, given time and financial constraints, it was difficult if not impossible for television broadcasters to cut Nixon's sound-bites into 10-second pieces. Likewise, the growth of satellite news-gathering devices (SNGs) increases the availability of visuals and directly transmitted stand-ups and therefore the probability of news being visualized (Kirschstein, 1996). This reasoning is not meant to take issue with the mediatization hypothesis as such. Rather, it does remind us of the need to carefully think about the content indicators used to establish the extent of mediatization of politics. Media logic – as defined by Altheide and Snow (1979) – encompasses technology, but it is still a decision of the journalist to exploit the expanded editing techniques broadcasting technology offers.

In short, at best we find mixed evidence pointing to mediatization in election campaign television coverage. On several accounts no evidence was found and, clearly, the specific context still matters substantially for how political news coverage is constructed.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The operationalization used here does not perfectly correspond to Strömbäck and Dimitrova's definition of lip flaps, but we believe it comes close to it.
2. The Danish opinion poll data are kindly provided by Søren Risbjerg Thomsen, University of Aarhus.

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