



## *Mediatisation of European foreign policy*

– a cross-time, cross-national comparison

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According to Media Studies research, the mediatisation (Asp 1986, 1990) of society has occurred at an accelerating pace since the early 1990s (Krotz 2007, 2009; Mazzoleni 2008; Hjarvard 2008, 2009; Schulz 2004; Strömbäck 2008, 2011; Strömbäck & Esser 2009). The theory of mediatisation argues that one result of this development is that politics increasingly operates according to media logic. The purpose of the research project *The Mediatisation of European foreign policy – a cross-time, cross-national comparison* is to investigate the degree to which, and in what way, the premise that politics has adopted a media logic is supported by comparative, empirical analysis of European states' foreign policies.

The possibility of mediatisation implies a dramatic development for foreign policy, which historically has been a secretive policy area. Decisions are made by small, closed groups of experts working outside the public eye (Hudson 2005: 65–ff). In the interest of promoting an image of predictability vis-à-vis foreign powers, farsightedness and stability have been core values of multifaceted foreign policy (Brommesson & Ekengren 2011: chapter 2; cf. Alison 2008: 207). If the mediatisation of politics theory also applies to foreign policy, then this means that foreign policy has adapted to media logic and its narrative technique, which emphasises "simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization, visualization and stereotypization, and the framing of politics as a strategic game or 'horse race'" (Strömbäck 2008: 233; cf. Nord & Strömbäck 2005). A possible consequence

of mediatisation is the individualisation of the substance of foreign policy, i.e. increased attention to the rights, security and fate of individuals. This comes at the expense of the interests of states, which are traditionally at the core of foreign policy. Thus, if the theory of mediatisation is correct, then we are facing a process of change that has the power to alter the most fundamental aspects of states' foreign policies.

Media logic and foreign policy differ from one another in a number of respects. Foreign policy has traditionally been characterized by farsightedness and deliberation of principles. Media logic focuses on that which is sensational and unique about a particular event or person. It willingly exaggerates differences of opinions, turning them into polarised conflicts between two simplified alternatives. It would seem, therefore, that media logic and traditional foreign policy, the latter with its demand for long-term national unity and responsibility in the face of complex processes, are polar opposites.

We believe that a more nuanced view is appropriate. Given the polarising and conflictual nature of media logic, it seems reasonable to expect that it is more likely to flourish in political cultures where conflict is the norm. This insight strongly suggests that political culture ought to influence mediatisation and the extent to which media logic impacts on foreign policy. Furthermore, in a pilot study for this project, we have been able to confirm that degree of change in foreign policy ideology after a change in government co-varies with a state's position on the political culture

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conflict-consensus dimension (Brommesson & Ekengren forthcoming; cf. Elder, Alastair & Arter 1982; Bjereld & Demker 2000). This co-variation also suggests that it is reasonable to assume that the impact of mediatisation and degree of media logic in foreign policy varies with a state's position on the conflict-consensus dimension. This is because media logic and ideology are related. In particular, they both concern non-material conditions for politics.

Such co-variation can manifest itself in different ways. First and foremost we expect that a conflict-oriented political culture creates a breeding ground for sensationalist media logic that promotes disagreement and polarisation. However, it is also possible that a strong consensus culture in foreign policy promotes a homogenous media logic that is shared by all parties. More specifically, media logic in foreign policy can be manifest both as a change in form and as a change in content. As noted in the introductory discussion, a change in form involves simplifying, stereotyping, dramatising and conflict. Change in content involves an individualised foreign policy. This leads to a stronger emphasis on human security and the rights and fate of individuals, as well as to a change in the roll of territoriality due to the rise of trans boundary reporting. We discuss both types of change in greater detail below.

To summarize, we believe that media logic can manifest itself in foreign policy in different ways, and that the way in which it is expressed varies with political culture. A homogenous media logic is promoted in consensus-oriented cultures and a sensationalist-oriented media logic is promoted in conflict-oriented ones. In this project, we study these assumptions at a general level using a multi-case design as well as in-depth case studies using process tracing. This will enable us to contribute empirical knowledge to a field with few empirical case studies (cf. Dettebeck 2005; Strömbäck 2008).

## Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the project is to use a comparative approach to study the degree to which and in what ways European states' foreign policies have assumed media logic. We study whether degree of media logic in foreign policy co-varies with degree of consensus and conflict in foreign policy, and whether media logic in foreign policy is manifest in different ways in different political cultures – both as regards form and content. The project will answer the following research questions:

- To what degree does the impact of media logic vary with different positions on the conflict-consensus dimension?
- In what ways, if any, does media logic impact on the form of European states' foreign policies?
- In what ways, if any, does media logic impact on the content of European states' foreign policies?

## The project's theoretical points of departure

While previous research has emphasized that foreign policy is less politicised, more institutionalised and more dependent on confidence-building measures than other policy areas, there are reasons to question whether this is still true today (Bjereld & Demker 1995; Andrén 1996). If we assume that foreign policy has become increasingly similar to other policy areas, then we should also expect that it is receptive to mediatisation and increasingly follows a media logic (Louw 2005: 252-ff). The lively research being conducted at the intersection of foreign policy analysis and social constructivism supports such an assumption (Houghton 2007). It has shown the influence of ideas, norms, identities and discourses have on foreign policy (ibid; Demker 2007). Based on this research, mediatisation can be seen as a non-material process with the potential to influence foreign policy.

Mediatisation has come to refer to a process in which media develops into an



*independent institution with significant power that permeates other social sectors* (Asp 1986, 1990; Schulz 2004; Hjarvard 2008; Strömbäck 2008; 2011). According to the literature, the media has traditionally been used to simply transmit the message of the elite. Today it has transformed into an actor in its own right. It influences society because other institutions, not least political, consciously or unconsciously adapt their behaviour to media logic and even internalise media forms (Hjarvard 2004: 48; Strömbäck 2008: 239). This implies that political decision making adapts to the media's demands as regards form, norms and rhythm (Strömbäck 2008). In this process, the growth of social media should not be underestimated. It has a destabilising effect on traditional media and makes it difficult for decision makers to control the flow of information. When decision makers lose influence over information it can be assumed that power over foreign policy also changes fundamentally. The example of Wikileaks is revealing. Foreign policy has been forced to adapt to demands raised as a result of the spread of information through a process where new and old channels cooperate and challenge the information prerogative of decision makers. At the same time, decision makers themselves take on the role of media producer, for example foreign ministers that blog and tweet.

The literature on mediatisation has increasingly focused on describing the process of mediatisation (Kepplinger 2002; Hjarvard 2004; Strömbäck 2008; Joyce 2010). The concept has often been used at a meta-level in previous research, which makes it difficult to use in empirical research. This has begun to change due to an increasingly intense discussion of different phases of the mediatisation process. A prominent example of work aimed at describing the process is Jesper Strömbäck's four phases of mediatisation (Strömbäck 2008), which has inspired our analytical framework.

According to Strömbäck, in the first phase

of mediatisation the media surpasses experience and interpersonal communication to become the most important source of information. In phase two, the media, which was previously dependent on political institutions, becomes independent from them. In phase three the content of the media begins to be controlled by media logic rather than political logic, as was previously the case. In phase four, not only the media, but also political actors start to be guided by media logic rather than political logic. The first three phases emphasize the mediatisation of the media. The fourth focuses attention on the mediatisation of politics, but not simply in the sense that the media influences politics – that has already occurred by phase three. Rather, in phase four politics internalises media logic, more or less unconsciously. The media and its logic colonise politics (Strömbäck 2008: 240).

It is largely unproblematic to argue that mediatisation has passed through the first three phases. The important question is whether we also find empirical evidence for phase four. We argue that foreign policy is a critical case. If we can find mediatisation that corresponds to phase four in foreign policy, which has traditionally been a separate and secretive policy area, then we can assume that other policy areas are also mediatised.

As noted above, mediatisation and its media logic have changed the conditions for politics, both form and content. We have already defined what is meant by change in form, and this has also been discussed most comprehensively in the literature. However, mediatisation is not simply a question of form. We believe that the content of politics also changes when it adapts to media logic. We have already mentioned two possible effects: that politics is individualised and that the role of territory changes. We now develop these ideas further.

As noted above, the impact of media logic on politics is to personify, intensify and visualise it (Strömbäck 2008). These are changes in form, but they also impact on content by



individualising politics (cf. Beck 1994; Giddens 1991; Bjereld, Demker & Ekengren 2005). Focusing intensively on particular individuals and particular life stories can promote a complete individualisation of politics. The form adapts to media logic, but content also shifts in the direction of stronger support for the rights and security of the individual (Brommesson and Friberg Fernros 2009; cf. Bjereld, Demker and Ekengren 2005). We link this development to the increasingly prominent human-security approach to security studies. This school of thought emphasises the individual, both as the object of security threats and as the actor who defines what constitutes a threat to security (Hough 2008: chapter 1).

Turning to the changing role of territory, an initial observation is that new communications technology has decreased the importance of distance. Media reports directly from troubled spots around the world. Humanitarian crises mobilise people who are geographically very far away from the crisis itself. Politics can therefore increasingly be expected to deal with questions that are geographically far removed from one's own state. In other words, global politics that transcends territorial boundaries develops (Joyce 2010: 517). If the recipient of the mediated politics is located in his/her own state, questions about developments "far away" can be expected to be portrayed in ways that focus on local or national aspects of the conflict or crisis. The literature refers to this as the domestication of global politics (Clausen 2004; Olausson 2009).

We conceptualise political logic as the opposite to the media logic adopted by foreign policy as a result of mediation. This allows us to study the degree of mediation that has occurred by comparing the two logics. Jesper Strömbäck discusses political logic in terms of:

the fact that politics ultimately is about collective and authoritative decision making as well as the implementation of political

decisions. This includes the process of distributing political power, through elections or other venues; the processes of decision making; and the question of power as it relates to "who gets what, when and how" (Strömbäck 2008: 233).

In other words, political logic includes both a policy and process dimension. The former is about the content of politics, while the latter refers to what we have been calling the form dimension of politics.

Meyer develops the concept of political logic and defines the policy dimension as "the effort to find solutions for politically defined problems by means of programs for action". The programs are often rooted in ideological beliefs or shared principles. Meyer defines the process dimension as "the effort to gain official acceptance of one's chosen program of action" (Meyer 2002: 12; Strömbäck 2008: 233). When politics is driven by a political logic, political institutions define the problem, find solutions and garner support for them. This can be compared to politics driven by media logic, which is characterised by the subordination of politics to the demands of that logic, both as regards form and content. Instead of the winner being chosen in elections or parliamentary negotiations, media logic rewards those who adapt to the demands of the media and win acceptance for their policies in that way.

### Analytic framework

Returning to our discussion about political culture, our previous research leads us to believe that a consensus-oriented political culture is more resistant to changes in form caused by the media (cf. Brommesson and Ekengren forthcoming). This is because we believe that the form characteristics of media logic – simplification, polarisation, stereotyping and the framing of politics as a strategic game – are contradictory to consensus-oriented, farsighted foreign policy. Conflict-oriented political cultures, on the other hand, seem to be in harmony with media

Figure 1. Analytical framework for political logic and media logic in conflict and consensus cultures.

	Political logic		Media logic	
	Conflict culture	Consensus culture	Conflict culture	Consensus culture
Process dimension (form)	Politics is formed in an ideological struggle characterised by clearly polarised principles. The majority wins acceptance for its policies in elections.	Politics is formed in a spirit of pragmatic understanding in which common principles are agreed upon. Policies win acceptance based on their ability to maintain national consensus.	Politics is formed in an intensive, polarised, sensationalist game. Policies win acceptance by meeting media demands that are regarded as the view of the majority.	Media logic's process dimension has difficulty gaining a foothold because of consensus culture's diametrically opposed character.
Policy dimension (content)	The content of politics expresses the majority's ideology and the point of departure is one's own state. Policies can be expected to give rise to antagonisms.	The content of politics expresses a national principle of agreement about the needs of one's own state. The content of policy is expected to be based on farsighted thinking.	The content of politics expresses the demands that, for the moment, dominate the polarised debate. Policy is characterised by a global focus on the wellbeing of individuals.	The content of politics is individualised and globalised and thus responds to the demands of the media. The content of policy emphasises continued national unity.

logic's form characteristics. Thus, we suspect that the form characteristics of conflict culture and media logic reinforce and strengthen their manifestation in politics.

As regards media logic's expected effects on the content of politics, it is not obvious that in this case consensus culture stands in opposition to media logic. Even in consensus cultures the media presents a personified, intensified and visualised view of foreign policy, which we believe can impact on the content of foreign policy. However, when this occurs, consensus cultures ought to provide greater opportunities to reach national consensus about the new foreign policy than conflict cultures do. This is because the former have an institutionalised praxis of getting along and agreeing on a shared view on matters of foreign policy.

Whether a political culture is characterised by conflict or consensus also has relevance for political logic. Looking first at

process, we assume that the political logic in a consensus culture is based on cooperative solutions. The parties involved engage in discussions in order to develop farsighted policy that everyone agrees upon. In a conflict culture the process takes the form of an ideological struggle, most often between two equally strong competitors. The side that wins the majority also wins the right to make policy. As regards the policy dimension, we expect outcomes to vary depending on policy culture. In consensus cultures, both problems and solutions are developed in a spirit of cooperation. In conflict cultures, solutions are deeply ideological and can therefore be expected to lead to a higher degree of antagonism.

Taken together, the literature, our theoretical points of departure and our own previous research findings enable us to specify two dimensions and two logics. The latter are expected to manifest themselves in different ways in consensus and conflict cultures. We

describe these different outcomes in the project's analytical framework. We develop an operationalisation of the different outcomes in the methods discussion below.

### **Project design – plan for conducting the research**

The proposed research project is a cross-national comparison. The first step is a quantitative study of all 27 members of the EU to determine to what extent media logic has impacted foreign policy rhetoric. This will give us an indication of the extent of mediatisation in foreign policy. We will look selectively at foreign policy over the past 20 years in order to make it possible to identify changes over time. We look at EU member states because they operate in a relatively similar context, but manifest significant variation as regards the conflict-consensus dimension (Lijphart 1991, 1999). In addition, a comparison among EU states allows us to test for the possibility of a Europeanisation effect over time. If one exists, differences among member states should decrease over time (Börzel & Risse 2006; Brommesson 2010).

In order to hold contextual factors constant we will analyse the speeches of the 27 states in the UN General Assembly's yearly General Debate, material we have already used in our previously mentioned pilot study (Brommesson & Ekengren forthcoming). The material will be analysed using a quantitative content analysis. The analysis is guided by an operationalised version of the theoretical framework presented above. By operationalising mediatisation theory we also contribute to a field which suffers from a lack of empirical research (Strömbäck 2008: 242). Concretely, we will first look for mediatised logic manifest in the form of personalised, sensationalised, simplified and polarised policy and manifest in content focused on the rights and security of individuals from a border-transgressing perspective. The latter includes, for example, an emphasis on human rights, individuals'

capabilities or individuals as the recipients of various measures. Second, we look for changes in the importance of territory in a geographical sense; in particular we expect a wider geographical focus where politics is mediated. In contrast to this, political logic emphasises farsighted reasoning on principles, primarily from the point of view of the state. In concrete terms, this can include alliance policy, geopolitics or international law. The point is not that political logic excludes questions about human rights, rather that they are considered in terms of a farsighted, strategic perspective.

This first step provides us with an overview of the extent to which media logic has impacted on policy. In order to determine how mediatisation operates and answer questions about how it is manifest in form and content we need to study the mediatisation process more closely using process tracing. This is what we do in the second, more in-depth part of the project. We focus on three states with different political cultures. Great Britain has a conflict-oriented political culture. Finland has a pronounced consensus political culture. Sweden's political culture is between these two, although somewhat closer to consensus (Lijphart 1991, 1999). This variation makes it possible for us to test the importance of the conflict-consensus dimension for the impact of media logic and its manifestation in policy.

The in-depth part of the study will be conducted in four arenas (cf. Sjöblom 1968 for a similar approach). We start with the media arena, in particular the way in which the mass media reports and portrays specific questions of foreign and security policy. We identify the demands directed at political decision makers, explicitly or implicitly, by the mass media. We pay particular attention to the origins of the reporting, that is, whether the media or the political sphere was responsible for the content of demands, the form in which the process unfolded and the rhythm of the reporting. This will allow us to study whether the media, in keeping with mediatisation



theory, increasingly acts as an independent actor and agenda-setter on the basis of media logic, rather than as a transmitter of the messages of political decision makers operating on the basis of political logic. Of course, it is possible that a media other than the one we examine might be the origin of the reporting and portraying of policy (e.g. consider the fact that “old media” often picks up news from social media). In the three other arenas, the parliamentary, government and diplomatic, we study impact and adaptability in questions where media has previously acted on the basis of an independent media logic. The analysis of these arenas is also guided by the analytical framework presented above and focuses on both form and content.

Expressed methodologically, we use process tracing to study the impact of the media arena on the other three. We draw on an understanding of mediatisation as a process in which the media agenda, as formulated by media logic, also shapes the political agenda. Given that the causal mechanisms behind this process of influence are not well specified in the literature, or are at best somewhat fuzzy, the broad approach of process tracing is an appropriate method that allows us to capture and specify various possible mechanisms (George & Bennet 2004: 206).

More concretely, we use several analytical techniques to capture the mediatisation process. In the parliamentary arena we study foreign policy debate using quantitative content analysis and qualitative analysis of ideas. In the government arena we study declarations, decisions and policy documents using the same methods. We also use elite interviews, for example with previous foreign ministers. Finally, we study actual foreign policy actions, beyond policy statements, in the diplomatic arena by conducting a policy analysis based on a combination of structured interviews with bureaucrats and analysis of policy documents. The theoretical purpose of focusing on these three arenas is that we can subject the theory of mediatisation to increasingly

difficult tests. We expect that it is easier for mediatisation to impact on the public, parliamentary arena; more difficult for it to penetrate the governmental arena, and most difficult for it to impact on the strongly institutionalised diplomatic arena (cf. Strömbäck 2008: 241). The different analytical techniques used in the three arenas should enable us to capture a mediatisation process if one is actually occurring. As with the analysis of all 27 EU states, the three-state, in-depth study will also include a comparison of developments over the past 20 years.

As regards cases to be studied using process tracing, we will study policy questions that have traditionally been seen as strongly rooted in principles, but where the potential for mediatisation is good. An example of such a question is the discussion of military action in Libya in the spring of 2011. The intervention was based on the emerging UN norm of the responsibility to protect civilian populations from genocide or ethnic cleansing. It was the first time that the UN Security Council referred to the norm (Brommesson and Friberg Fernros 2011). Furthermore, the intervention touched upon matters of geopolitics and the creation of alliances among Western and Arab states. The Security Council's decision portrayed the revolution in international legal terms and associated it with several important principles. At the same time, media reporting before and after the decision focused on the safety of individuals, possible military actions of different states and individual rebels as liberation heroes. This reporting also had an impact on the political discussion. The case of Libya might be a case of mediatisation in which decision makers abandoned the political logic, with its farsighted considerations about non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states, geopolitics and alliance politics, in favour of a media logic focused on the security and fate of individuals. The case of Libya is one example of several possible cases to be studied.



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