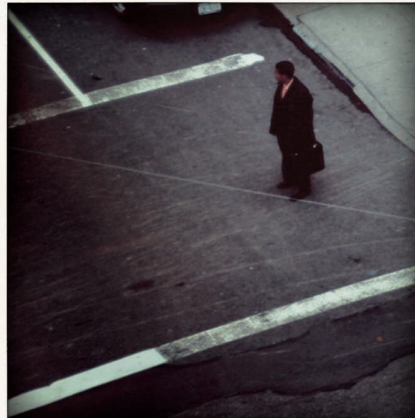


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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The flip-side of mediatised politics: 'Unpackaging' politics to avoid publicity¹

Juho Vesa

1. INTRODUCTION

The media have become an independent and influential institution in politics. They are a central source of political information for citizens, and politicians seek positive publicity in the media to attract the increasing number of floating voters (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). At the same time, the commercialisation and professionalisation of journalism have resulted in the loosening of ties between news media and political institutions and actors, evidenced, for instance, by the demise of the party-affiliated press in many European countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Herkman, 2009). Theories of the mediatization of politics suggest that the mass media's presentation of politics is increasingly governed by media logic, whereas before it was governed more by political, partisan or public logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Brants & Praag, 2006; Strömbäck, 2008: 231-235). The centrality of media logic means that news values and media formats, such as conflict, personalisation, simplification and soundbites, determine which parts and aspects of political processes surface in the news media agenda (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Meyer, 2002: 28-31). As a consequence, the presentation of politics in the media is highly selective. A central argument in theories of mediatization is that this selectivity affects the behaviour of political actors: they adapt to the media logic (Meyer, 2002; Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008). To gain positive publicity, political actors "package politics" (Franklin 2004), i.e. act and speak in a way that fits into media formats and news values. They give statements that fit into soundbites, personalise issues and create conflicts and dramatic media events (Meyer, 2002: 49-99; Hjarvard, 2008: 106; Strömbäck, 2008: 238).

1 I would like to thank the *Kone Foundation* and *Academy of Finland* for funding my research.

I argue that this adaptation is only one side of the story. This is because political actors do not always try to maximise their opportunities to get their views and actions onto the media agenda. Politicians do not always gain from publicity. They might want to avoid publicity in order to avoid being blamed for unpopular decisions (Weaver, 1986). Especially in consensual political cultures, elite actors might see public debate as a threat to effective bargaining and consensus-building (Kantola, 2002; Reunanen & al, 2010; Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski, 2010). I propose that politicians have various means of avoiding publicity that are diametrically opposed to the tendency to adapt to media logic. To avoid media attention, politicians can manage and communicate decision-making processes in ways that reduce their newsworthiness. Politics is 'un-packaged'. This flip-side of mediatization is not equivalent to secrecy or the non-mediatised elite's retreat to closed-door cabinets, which would annoy the increasingly intrusive news media, but is something more subtle. In the chaotic media environment (McNair, 2006), however, these strategies are possible only under specific circumstances.

This argument is backed up with a case study focusing on the Finnish government's State Productivity Programme. I will show to what extent this policy-making process was debated on the media agenda and what kind of strategies the decision-makers used to avoid or calm down public debate over this unpopular policy. Before going into the details of this case, I look theoretically at the factors that influence or determine the degree to which a policy-making process is covered by the news media.

2. NEWS FACTORS IN NATIONAL POLICY-MAKING PROCESSES

According to the mediatization thesis, news values, media formats and storytelling techniques increasingly affect which political events become visible on the media agenda (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 250; Van Aelst & al, 2008: 196; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009: 212-213). After Galtung and Ruge's (1965) research on the news values of foreign news, later studies have confirmed many of the news factors they presented, though not all of them were confirmed and some new ones were introduced (Eilders, 2006). As we are interested in news factors in a national context, the relevant news factors confirmed in many later studies are *continuity*, *prominence*, *personification*, *relevance/reach*, *unexpectedness*, *benefit/success*, *damage/failure* and *conflict/controversy* (Eilders, 2006: 8).² Galtung and Ruge's factor of *unam-*

² I have left out *elite nations*, *elite locations* and *cultural*, *geographical* or *political proximity*, as these are constant in national policy-making processes.

biguity has not been confirmed by more recent studies, but we can add it here, because theorists of mediatization argue that media logic involves simplification (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009: 212-213), and it has also been confirmed empirically that concrete and simple political decisions are more newsworthy than abstract and complicated decisions (Lindbom, 2010). In media logic, formats and storytelling techniques also affect news selection (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009: 213). Many of these formats and techniques, such as polarisation, intensification, personalisation, visualisation, stereotyping, accessibility, drama and audience relevance (ibid.) correspond to the news factor list presented above. For example, political conflicts are newsworthy because they provide drama and are easily polarised. However, in this study we can leave out visualisation, which is specific to TV news (Eilders, 2006: 9).

When looking at individual policy-making processes, we can find news factors on two levels. First, we should look at the *contents* of proposed, enacted and implemented policies and their consequences, and how these are presented in public. We can expect more media coverage of policy options and decisions that are or are presented as simple and unexpected and that have very negative (damage) or very positive (benefit) consequences which are relevant to a large number of audience members. Second, we can look at what kind of *actors* the process involves and how they act. We can expect more media coverage about a policy-making process when it involves conflicts and when prominent political actors are involved in the process, give public statements about the process and take it up on their personal agenda (personalisation). We can leave out the factor of continuity, which means that the media are likely to make news about those topics that have previously been in the news. As we are interested in a single policy-making process, continuity does not explain variations in the intensity of media coverage of the process or why the process becomes a news topic in the first place.

We can assume that, if decision-makers want to avoid publicity in the media, they can, under certain conditions, reduce some of these factors.

3. CASE STUDY: THE FINNISH GOVERNMENT'S STATE PRODUCTIVITY PROGRAMME

The State Productivity Programme was launched in 2003 by the Finnish government, after being initiated and drawn up by the Ministry of Fi-

nance.³ It was forecast that, with the population ageing, the demand for a workforce in the public sector would grow and the supply of a workforce would diminish. Therefore, the argument went, it was necessary to cut the demand for a workforce, at least in the state sector. As the productivity of the state sector was to be boosted at the same time, the current level of public services could be maintained with less staff, it was argued. Improvement in productivity was also seen to be necessary in order to save money and direct resources for those sectors, such as healthcare, which would require additional resources (Ministry of Finance, 2003a).

The programme was launched by the first government of Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (2003-2007), which included the two biggest parties in parliament, the Centre Party (CP) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), as well as the smaller Swedish People's Party (SPP). The programme was especially difficult for the finance minister's party, the SDP, because of the party's strong connection to trade unions. The Ministry of Finance first started to draw up the programme in 2002. In 2005, the government announced that the number of public sector jobs should be cut by approximately 17,500 man-years by 2011. The idea was that, as approximately 35,000 civil servants would be retiring in the same period, the cuts could be made by not replacing those retired employees, and therefore it would not be necessary to make anyone redundant. In 2006, the level of cutbacks was lowered as the government decided that only 9,645 man-years would be cut. The second Vanhanen government (2007-2010) and the Kiviniemi government (2010-2011) included the CP and the National Coalition Party (NCP), while the smaller parties were the SPP and the Greens. The new coalition continued the programme and imposed a new round of cuts of 4,800 man-years in the period 2012-2015, reintroducing some cuts that the previous government had planned but decided to leave out of the programme.

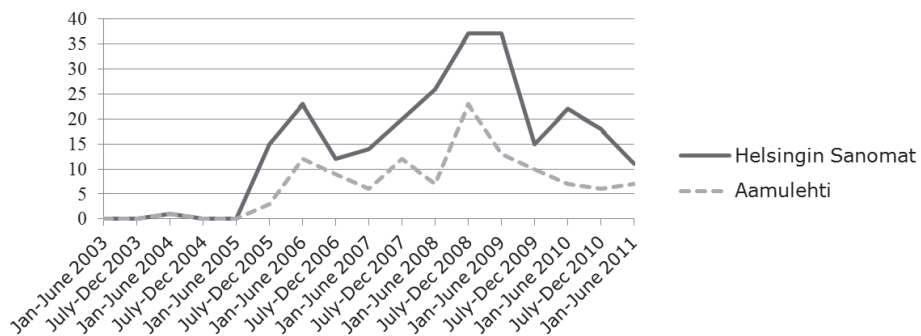
4. VISIBILITY OF THE PROCESS IN THE MEDIA AGENDA

To what extent was the Productivity Programme visible in the media agenda? Newspapers wrote only a few news articles about the productivity programme before the government enacted the first cutback decision in

³ The case study is based on 10 interviews with ministers, ministerial advisers, civil servants and a representative of a trade union; news articles, editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor from the two most widely circulated newspapers, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti*, from the period 2003-2011; and public communication material from the Ministry of Finance and the minister of finance, such as press releases and speeches.

March 2005 (Graph 1). So the programme was almost absent from the media agenda in the preparatory stages of the programme. From autumn 2005 onwards, there was steady but fairly moderate coverage of the process. However, the coverage peaked in both papers in the second half of 2008 and coverage was also high in *Helsingin Sanomat* in the first half of 2009.

Graph 1: News articles mentioning the State Productivity Programme in two newspapers (number of articles)⁴



4.1. CONTENT OF THE POLICY AND ITS PRESENTATION

The content of the Productivity Programme was quite abstract at the policy preparation stage, from 2003 to the beginning of 2005, and it was almost totally excluded from the media agenda. The aim of the programme, to boost productivity, was vague and ambiguous: it could mean many things since there was no consensus about how to improve or measure productivity in the public sector. However, after the cutbacks were decided upon in 2005 and their implementation had begun, concrete and negative examples of the consequences of the decision started to emerge. For example, it was mentioned that certain state organisations had denounced personnel because of the programme (e.g. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 2008a), and that the programme had worsened working conditions (e.g. Audit Committee, 2008). These claims, made by trade unions, parliament committees, research organisations and representatives of state organisations, contributed to the rise of the visibility of the programme on the media agenda. In addition, the overall public image of the programme began to acquire negative associations. This shift can be detected in *Helsingin Sano-*

⁴ I used electronic archives. The search word was *tuottavuusohjelma*, which is the name of a productivity programme in Finnish. I manually counted from the search results the news articles mentioning the State Productivity Programme.

mat editorials. In 2005, an editorial gave its support to the programme, but in 2007 and 2008 editorials criticised the programme (Helsingin Sanomat, 2005, 2007, 2008b).

A certain amount of ambiguity and vagueness became apparent in the public statements of key decision-makers, especially before the cutback decision was enacted. The intention to reduce the number of state employees was not stated explicitly in the press releases issued by the Finance Ministry. Instead, this intention was only vaguely hinted at in 2003 in two press releases which said that the growing retirement rate will increase "*opportunities to introduce reforms that have major workforce effects on personnel*" (Ministry of Finance, 2003b) and allow "*broad structural and operational reforms to be carried out in public administration and services which are adapted to the natural attrition*" (Ministry of Finance, 2003c). These press releases were not covered by the newspapers studied. However, the aim of reducing the number of state employees had been an indispensable element of the programme from the beginning (I2, I8).⁵ And this aim was indeed stated clearly in a publication by the Ministry of Finance in 2003 (Ministry of Finance, 2003a), but in the relevant press release this aim was blurred by bureaucratic jargon (Ministry of Finance, 2003b). Moreover, Finance Minister Antti Kalliomäki said in a rare public statement in 2004 that the programme was "*neither about cutting expenses nor a savings programme*" (Kalliomäki, 2004). So, in the preparation stage, the cutbacks, which later became perhaps the most concrete, criticised and negatively loaded aspect of the programme, were presented in complicated language. However, it is not clear if this ambiguous presentation was an intentional strategy. A civil servant argued in an interview that, quite the contrary, the aim to reduce the number of public sector jobs was openly communicated from the beginning (I2).

Even after the cutback decision had been enacted, ministers reduced the amount of concrete information about the programme. A civil servant estimated in an interview that for every press release published, there were 10 prepared press releases that ministers refused to publish. A civil servant speculated about the reason for this refusal: "*The negative weight is so great that the preference is for nothing exact to be told. Nothing is said that might be seized on and which might at least on some local level lead to negative reactions.*" (I8) A recent survey of the Finnish power elite suggests that this might be common practice. Two-thirds of respondents admitted that

5 I use the codes I1, I2, I3 etc. when referring to the interviews. These codes do not indicate the chronological order of the interviews.

they "*avoid presentation of concrete goals and opinions on issues that are not yet decided*" (Reunanen & al, 2010: 301-304). However, some information about the programme was kept out of public on the basis of the laws that regulate the budget process (I8).

Concerning news factor relevance, we can see that the policy was presented as not very relevant to the general public. As productivity was to be boosted in order to maintain the current level of public services, it was anticipated that the programme would not have any significant consequences to the daily lives of members of the public or state employees. Indeed, even the cutback decision was not in itself particularly relevant to a large number of people, as the cuts did not directly affect anyone. Instead of being directed at specific people, the cuts were directed at jobs (I7). However, the aforementioned problems caused by the implementation of the programme increased the relevance of the programme to state employees.

It is unlikely that unexpectedness was a news factor. The programme was an instance of incremental policy-making, continuing the direction that public sector restructuring had taken in the 1990s.

4.2. RESTRAINING CONFLICTS

There was no public elite-level conflict in the preparation stage of the process. In the cabinet, even though some ministers were sceptical about the programme, they expressed their discontent publicly only well after the cutbacks decision of March 2005. So there were intra-cabinet conflicts in the preparation stage, but these conflicts were kept inside the cabinet. This tendency to self-censor diverging voices and maintain a united front in public before a decision is enacted has been observed in previous research (Kantola, 2002). Prime Minister Vanhanen even urged ministers to keep their opinions out of the media before decisions were agreed upon, because he did not want media attention to intensify latent conflicts in the cabinet (Uimonen, 2011: 333). However, it seems that the decision-making style of the programme discouraged intra-cabinet conflicts. The government as a whole first agreed on an overall level of cutbacks, and then the details about the allocation of the cuts were negotiated separately inside each state sector between the relevant minister and the minister of finance or his Ministry. Details of the cuts were not, therefore, disputed collectively in the cabinet. This is a common procedure in cabinets with fragmented responsibility (Tiili, 2008: 89-92).

However, in 2008 and 2009 there were many public conflicts between ministers. Some ministers argued that the cutbacks should be postponed or even stopped altogether because unemployment was rising due to the economic recession. Many ministers defended their own sectors and fought with the Ministry of Finance. Indeed, the rule of not discussing unfinished issues in public was not so strict in the second Vanhanen government (17).

The opposition parties were not outspokenly critical of the programme during the first Vanhanen government. The main opposition party, the right-wing NCP, for one, was almost silent on the issue, probably because the aims of the programme were in line with its agenda. However, when the visibility of the programme on the media agenda peaked in 2008, there were open conflicts between the government and the opposition. The SDP was now in opposition and kept the issue actively on the parliamentary agenda. It could criticise the programme because the government then in power had brought back some of the cutbacks that the previous government had turned down. The economic recession was also an important factor in the issue's increasing prominence in parliament.

In the preparation stage, a conflict arose between the government and the public sector trade union Pardia. This union made a number of public statements criticising the government, for instance, for excluding unions from the preparation of the programme (Helsingin Sanomat, 2003) and for a conception of productivity that was "*borrowed from industry*" (Helsingin Sanomat, 2004). However, the government did not enter into public conflict with Pardia. Instead, the Ministry of Finance negotiated with the union. The negotiations probably lowered the level of the conflict, and it was not very visible on the media agenda in the preparation stage.

Although the cutback decision was enacted in March 2005, the visibility of the programme on the media agenda did not intensify until that autumn. From then on, the question of the precise nature of the cutbacks caused open conflicts between the Ministry of Finance and many other ministries and representatives of their sectors. Many sectors defended their own turf and succeeded in pushing this issue onto the media agenda. The judiciary, for example, complained that cutting the number of judges and prosecutors would slow down trials. These conflicts were a steady source of media coverage during the whole period observed.

4.3. CIVIL SERVANTS AS SPOKESPERSONS

The key politicians did not have the programme on their public agenda. The ministers of finance and the prime minister, who were the two most prominent politicians involved in the programme, did not proactively promote the programme in public. An interviewee explained that, after careful consideration, the public sector job cuts were seen as the “*least bad*” decision and therefore “*it is politically wise and understandable that no one is eager to say that ‘this is a good decision that we have made’*” (I4). Another interviewee explained that “*a politician is not happy about making noise about unpleasant, nasty things*” (I9). As a result, the programme was not personalised. Prime Minister Vanhanen, who was, according to my interviews, often the most enthusiastic advocate of the programme in the cabinet, only made a few statements to the media in 2008 and 2009, and then in neutral or even critical tones. However, when the opposition questioned the government in parliament, finance ministers always defended the programme. It seems that during the first Vanhanen government the SDP’s finance ministers were less willing to defend the cutbacks in the media than, during the second Vanhanen government, the NCP’s finance minister, Jyrki Katainen, who even wrote a letter to the editor of *Helsingin Sanomat* after the newspaper had criticised the programme.

As the ministers were unwilling to promote the programme in public, Ministry of Finance civil servants filled the void. *Helsingin Sanomat* used civil servants as sources and speakers in many articles. The project leader of the Productivity Programme responded a few times to criticism presented in letters to the editor. An interviewed civil servant stated: “*I believe that ministers were quite happy that it was, after all, civil servants who ran this, and we also did the dirty work with regard to publicity, and we also took the responsibility for this*” (I2). The active public role of Ministry of Finance civil servants has been observed in previous research, and the civil servants even see it as their duty to defend difficult decisions in public (Heiskala & Kantola, 2010: 142-143; Heikkinen & Tiihonen, 2010: 481). However, political actors who were interviewed about this did not admit that this kind of strategy would be used or would be effective. Those civil servants who promoted or defended the programme in public were relatively low-profile officials, while the permanent state secretary of the Ministry of Finance, Raimo Sailas, who has a very high media profile, was silent. According to one interviewee, this demonstrated that Sailas was loyal to those ministers who wished to reduce publicity (I5). The absence of statements by prominent actors might have been one reason why, as

some interviewees noted, journalists saw the programme, at least in the beginning, as a 'grey' administrative process that would not interest the general public.

5. CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that, in the age of mediatization, the selectivity of news media creates an opportunity for political actors to avoid publicity. Using the case study of a Finnish policy-making process, I have demonstrated that policy intentions and options can be presented, conflicts managed and public spokespersons chosen in a way that reduces the newsworthiness of a policy-making process. However, the opportunities to avoid publicity were better in the early stages of the process, when the key decision-makers held a monopoly over information about the policy and there was no public conflict between the government and the opposition. After the policy became a debated and criticised topic on the media agenda, the responsible ministers could not to the same extent present the policy in vague terms, suppress conflicts or maintain a low profile.

I have proposed that the mediatization of politics has two sides: the packaging of politics by publicity-seeking actors, and the unpackaging of politics by publicity-avoiding actors. Further research in different contexts would be needed to confirm that this 'flip-side' to the mediatization of politics really exists.

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