Extended Abstract

Politician and Publicist
Helmut Schmidt as Protagonist and Critic of Mediatization

Mediatization on the micro level

Applying a mediatization approach, this paper examines the interdependent relationship between politics and media at the micro level – thereby using Helmut Schmidt as a very specific example. Helmut Schmidt was chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany between 1974 and 1982 and since 1983 he is co-publisher of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*. The roles of both politician and publisher are combined within his personality and so he seems to be a very interesting example, especially since he is nowadays extremely popular in the German media and well known for his media critiques.

Mediatization in German communication science is conceptualized in a broader and in a more narrow perspective (Neuberger, 2013, p. 222). In contrast to the broader meaning of the mediatization of life in general (Hartmann & Hepp, 2012; Krotz, 2007), the mediatization of politics is understood here as the adoption of media logic (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2010). This has often been regarded as a submission of the political system to the logic of mass media. While focusing on one crucial actor, it becomes obvious that the mediatization of politics can also be initiated by media-conscious politicians.

Material and methods

To analyze mediatization on the micro level, beside third person effects reciprocal effects come into account (Kepplinger, 2007). It is the idea of indirect and second-order media effects (Meyen, 2009) and of the influence of presumed media influence in politics (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Kepplinger (2007, p. 20) considered it “unlikely that decision makers will take part in quantitative studies” and that they “will neither answer surveys nor allow systematic observations”. And he doubted that interesting documents for document analysis might be available (Kepplinger, 2008, p. 329). But within a larger project, funded by the “Helmut und Loki Schmidt foundation” it was possible to investigate Schmidt’s relations to the media, thanks to having access to his private archive in his house in Hamburg and the archive of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Bonn.3 Based on the qualitative analysis of the historical sources and of interviews with Schmidt and other contemporaries, the paper reveals that Schmidt contributed to the mediatization of German politics and that his media critique is grounded on the assumption that mass media are indispensable for the functioning of democracies.

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Results

The findings show that Schmidt, quite early after World War II, wrote articles for social democratic newspapers in his hometown Hamburg and that these articles, from the very beginning, promote the transparency of politics in the public sphere. His early career brought him to the new capital of the western German democracy in Bonn, where he was named “Schmidt the lip” for his frank speeches in parliament. He returned to Hamburg as Home Secretary in 1962 and then and there was involved in a devastating flood disaster and the most important press scandal in German history after World War II until this very day.

During the flood disaster Schmidt cleverly used the media for his own purposes and promoted himself during the crisis. The media helped him to satisfy his policy and he became somehow a shooting star in German politics. A few months later, in the press scandal he stood on the side of the news magazine Der Spiegel, even when the public prosecution department investigated against him. In 1964, he introduced a new press law in Hamburg and declared it to be the most liberal press law in Europe in which especially any forms of occupation, censorship or confiscation be strictly forbidden (Schmidt, 1967).

In the 1970s, extreme left terrorist attacked the Federal Republic of Germany. In September 1977, they kidnapped the President of the German Employers’ Association, Hanns Martin Schleyer, and they were supported by Palestinian groups who hijacked a German aircraft to Mogadishu in Somalia. In this crucial situation the open climate Schmidt and especially his spokesman Klaus Bölling had created towards the press turned out to be extremely positive. Although they knew they were no given all the information (Bölling in an interview with the author, 18th of November 2011), the media acted quite reasonably (Schmidt in an interview with the author, 6th of January 2011).

Nevertheless, Schmidt felt uncomfortable with the growing influence especially of TV in German society. Within the discussions about the installation of private broadcasting in Germany, in the weekly Die Zeit he promoted that every family should switch off TV one day a week (Schmidt, 1978). He failed with this suggestion but made his point in the discussion. After leaving office in October 1982, he became publisher at Die Zeit and already his second article dealt with his negative view of the media coverage of the G7 summits (Schmidt, 1983). In Newsweek (A talk with Schmidt, 1983, p. 68) he stated: “The press has taken over. Three thousand journalists, it’s ridiculous. (…) I would exclude the press. The summits have become media festivals.” He continued with his media critique in the 1990s in his books, anticipating the bad influences of “Rambos, Machos and Killer[s]” (Schmidt, 1998, p. 90).

Discussion

Schmidt’s relations to the media can be discussed within Strömbäck’s (2008) four phases of mediatization of politics. But of course, this analysis of the mediatization of politics with the example of the former German chancellor Schmidt still leaves us with many open questions. But as Kepplinger (2007, p. 20) says: “From an academic
point of view, it is clearly better to get some information, however small, rather than not at all.” Looking at the micro level of individual politicians, it becomes obvious that mediatization can not only be seen as a submission of politics under the media logic. A politician like Schmidt was able to use the media for his own political purposes and to influence the journalistic agenda. Nevertheless, he was aware of the negative influences especially of TV and criticized its role in society.

References