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Katrin Voltmer and Lone Sorensen

## Mediatised transitions: Democratisation in an age of media abundance

September 2016

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## Table of contents

Executive Summary .....	1
1. Introduction .....	2
2. Mediatisation: the changing relationship between media, political power and citizens ....	5
3. Mediatisation and communication technologies.....	9
4. Mediatisation and democratisation .....	12
5. Conclusion .....	19
6. References.....	22

## Executive Summary

This paper applies the concept of ‘mediatisation’ as a theoretical framework to transitional democracies. In doing so it addresses the question of how recent changes in the media environment impact on the dynamics and outcomes of struggles for democratic transition. The argument is based on two propositions: First, mediatisation is best understood as a transformative process that defies clear cause-effect attributions. Second, besides journalistic media as institutions of public communication, communication technologies have also to be considered as a crucial factor that drives the mediatisation of politics, and indeed transitional politics. We conclude by pointing out that mediatisation in emerging democracies is a multi-faceted and often ambiguous process that is shaped by the political, social and cultural context in which it takes place. It thus results in different configurations of the media-politics nexus than in established western democracies, at times serving to strengthen democratic transition, at others to undermine it.

The paper:

- Presents an outline of the concept of ‘mediatisation’, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding how an ever expanding media sphere interacts with and shapes public communication and ultimately the institutional processes of democratic politics. The focus is on aspects of political communication but also brings in technological perspectives of media and communication to broaden the largely institutional understanding of mediatisation in the political communication field.
- Discusses the communicative dimension of democratisation – the way in which the communication environment creates opportunities as well as constraints for democratic transformations and how in turn the transition process re-configures public communication.
- Addresses questions around the quality of emerging ‘fourth wave’ democracies: to what extent they provide spaces for effective participation and allow for a comprehensive mechanism of accountability. We focus on two aspects of this: the transformation of citizenship and how citizens incorporate media and communication technologies in their activism and how this affects grassroots mobilisation; and the transformation of power and how political leaders and governments adjust to ‘media logic’, thereby giving way to new institutional forms of representation.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over the last decades democratic politics has been undergoing dramatic changes, which have not only transformed the institutions and processes of political decision making but also the wider political culture of collective beliefs and practices. Virtually all contemporary democracies struggle with a widening gulf between political elites and ordinary citizens who are turning away from institutionalised politics and their representatives. At the same time, political debates are becoming increasingly polarised with hostile camps pitched against each other, thus leaving little room for political negotiation and compromise. In a growing number of countries, policy deadlock and public anger have paved the way for populist candidates who challenge the liberal idea of an open society and promote seemingly simple, but authoritarian solutions to popular fears.

In this paper, our primary focus lies on new or emerging democracies of the so-called 'fourth wave',<sup>2</sup> that started after the demise of Soviet-led communism in Eastern Europe and quickly spread across the globe, especially Asia and Africa and more recently the Arab world. With the off-set of the 'fourth wave' an unprecedented number of countries embarked on establishing democratic rule. Yet after a period of popular enthusiasm, democratic development in many of these countries is stagnating and even reversing. Given the apparent flaws in many emerging democracies, democratisation scholars have pointed at the growing divergence of democracy (Diamond and Plattner, 2001), indicating a widening gap between new and old democracies. However, what is striking is that the situation in these new democracies resembles very much the description of the current crisis of established democracies: citizens' disillusionment with the integrity and efficiency of existing democratic institutions, polarisation and a politics of zero-sum games, alongside authoritarianism as an emerging alternative to post-transitional chaos and insecurity. Thus, parallel to the divergence of democracy, there is also a movement of convergence at work towards an erosion of the liberal project encompassing both old and new democracies (Vltmer, 2015).

Yet the situation is more complex than that. While both old and new democracies show similar symptoms of crisis, they have to cope with the challenges of a volatile political and economic environment from different vantage points of their development. Transitional

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Jay Blumler, Christian Christensen and Nebojsa Vladislavjevic for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the observation that transitions to democracy are not evenly distributed over time, but occur in clusters, Huntington (1991) introduced the concept of 'waves' of democratisation. According to his historical outline, the first wave took place in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of common suffrage after the French and American revolutions, the second after the end of World War II and decolonisation, and finally the third in the early 1970s with the end of military dictatorships in southern Europe and Latin America. Some authors (see Doorenspleet, 2005; McFaul, 2002) suggest that post-communist pathways of regime change differ from earlier transitions and should therefore be regarded as a 'wave' in their own right.

politics lacks the comfort of relying on a routinised system of procedures and policies that helps to maintain control over the political agenda. Moreover, democratic transitions – albeit desirable and fought for with high costs – are a shock to both institutional structures and the individuals who are living through the upheaval. In the transition process, it becomes frustratingly clear that the other side of the river is further away and more difficult to reach than initially hoped. Consequently, transition as a long-term state of instability makes emerging democracies more vulnerable to both external shocks and internal authoritarian contenders than their established counterparts.

Moreover, democracies of the ‘fourth wave’ also differ from countries that underwent democratic regime changes at earlier points of history. An important feature of recent transitions is that they take place under the conditions of what John Keane (2013) calls “a revolutionary age of communicative abundance ... [that is] structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices” (ibid. 2013, p. 1). Starting in the mid 1980s, technological innovations, accompanied by a fundamental paradigm shift in media regulation, have opened up an expansion of communicative spaces following an unprecedented proliferation of channels and demand-driven forms of public communication. The rise of the internet in the early 2000s and its availability through a broad range of platforms has further accelerated this development and has fundamentally changed the way in which messages are produced, distributed and consumed. This raises the question of what the consequences are of these far-reaching changes in the communication environment on the processes and outcomes of recent transitions. This question lies at the centre of the current paper.

While most of the existing democratisation literature has focused on institutional perspectives of transition, much less scholarship has been devoted to theorising and empirically investigating the communicative dimension of democratisation – the way in which the communication environment creates opportunities as well as constraints for democratic transformations and how in turn the transition process re-configures public communication (Jebril et al., 2013; Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015). Successful democratisation not only requires political, judicial and often economic changes, but also the transformation of public communication that goes far beyond the formal guarantees of freedom of speech and press freedom. By moving the dealings of power from secretive spaces of negotiation into the arena of public scrutiny and popular decision making, the transformation of public communication raises a broad range of issues: who has access to the public arena of debate; how can political leaders move from a language of propaganda to a language of persuasion that addresses citizens as autonomous individuals rather than subjects; how is a national conversation about the past and the future of the country possible in a multi-channel environment? The four countries that are studied in the project ‘Media, Conflict and

Democratisation (MeCoDEM)' – Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa – provide rich empirical evidence to better understand how the new environment of 'communicative abundance' affects fourth-wave democratisations. From South Africa's first post-Apartheid election in 1994 to Egypt's largely failed attempt of democratic transformation, the four MeCoDEM countries reflect the diverse and ambivalent experience of the 'fourth wave'. In all four countries, the media have played a pivotal role in key moments of the transition by shaping the behaviour and perceptions of citizens, activists and elites who were involved in the struggle for change.

This paper sets out to discuss the role of media and communication in the transformation of political power and citizenship in emerging democracies. To do so, we draw on the notion of 'mediatisation', which provides a conceptual framework for understanding how an ever expanding media sphere interacts with and shapes public communication and ultimately the institutional processes of democratic politics. Existing research on mediatisation has almost exclusively focused on established, mostly western democracies with advanced economies and media systems, with some authors even implying that mediatisation is only possible in contexts where the media have developed into actors with highly institutionalised routines and extensive professional and economic resources that allow them to play an independent role in political life (Esser and Matthes, 2013). By applying the concept of mediatisation to emerging democracies where the media's independence is often constrained by a variety of internal and external factors, we aim to add a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted and ambiguous process of the transformative power of media and communication.

The paper starts off with an overview of the main arguments of current mediatisation scholarship, by focusing in particular on aspects of political communication. We also bring in technological perspectives of media and communication to broaden the largely institutional understanding of mediatisation in the political communication field. We then discuss how today's changing communication environment of multi-platform media, networked political action and professional news management has become an integral part of the dynamics of democratic transitions. We argue that even though the concept of mediatisation has been developed in the context of advanced democracies, the process of mediatisation is equally at work in transitional and less democratic circumstances. Moreover, the unique features of 'fourth wave' transitions – their institutional fragility alongside the expansion of citizen politics – can be perceived as the outcome of mediatised democratisation processes.

## **2. Mediatisation: the changing relationship between media, political power and citizens**

'Mediatisation' has become one of the key concepts in Communication Studies but plays a particularly important role in political communication research that is concerned with investigating the changing relationship between political power and the media (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). Alongside this strand of research, a growing body of literature is emerging that views mediatisation as a broader process that affects all social fields, including economics, education, religion, and so on (Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2009; Sa Martino, 2013). Arguably, the use of means of communication has been part of human history from its early beginnings. These general processes of conveying messages and meaning constructions are captured by the term of 'mediation'. In contrast, 'mediatisation' is regarded as a historically new phenomenon that is designed to describe the transformative power of mediated communication which permeates all aspects of social life – from the private sphere to the international arena (Hepp et al., 2015).

In contrast to media effects research that seeks to identify the influence of specified communication variables – features of a text, media types, usage patterns, and so on – on particular manifestations of human orientations and behaviour, the concept of mediatisation aims to understand “the wider consequences of mediated communications on our present cultures and societies” (Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 195). These consequences rarely follow a simple cause-effect logic with a unidirectional sequence of events. Rather, mediatisation involves simultaneous, interactive relationships between changes in the technologies, formats and practices of communication on the one hand, and society and culture on the other.

### *Politics and the media: from interdependence to mediatisation*

In the context of political communication, mediatisation denotes a fundamental transformation in the relationship between political power and the media with far-reaching consequences for democratic politics. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, p. 250) describe mediatised politics as “politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by the interactions with mass media”. In other words, the media are no longer external to politics, a tool that can be used or not, but have become an integral part of politics, thereby remoulding the practices of representation and decision making and even the institutional structures in which these processes take place. In a similar vein, Strömbäck (2008) distinguishes between the adaptation to 'media logic' – or the norms and routines that govern the media's operations (Altheide and Snow, 1979) – and its internalisation by political actors that marks the unique quality of mediatisation. The former is usually confined to adjustments in the daily routines of

news management, like scheduling press conferences to fit editorial deadlines, providing visual material to enhance the chances of coverage, and so on; whereas the latter affects the organisational setup and decision-making procedures of politics. For example, political parties have not only adapted the content of their messages to make them compatible with journalistic news values but have also changed the criteria for selecting their leaders. The imperatives of a streamlined media campaign have also led to a centralisation of party organisations and, as a consequence, to a loss of intra-party democracy and grass-roots participation (for the example of the British Labour Party, see Wring, 1998). Other research shows that mediatisation even affects substantial politics, as policy makers anticipate how particular policy proposals might 'sell' in the media and adjust the timing, but also the content, of policy decisions and in some cases even drop particular policy initiatives altogether (Davis, 2010; Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer, 2010; Schillemans, 2012; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006).

As a consequence, political actors have been forced to develop effective strategies to defend themselves against an ever more intrusive media environment. They have done so by adopting professional PR methods to streamline messages for public consumption, but also by developing more sophisticated methods of secrecy. Professional communication strategists and media advisors have become an indispensable part of any political organisation – from governments to political parties and NGOs. In this process, communication advisors have moved into the inner circles of the decision making process itself, even though many of them come from outside politics with little understanding of the ideological and institutional framework in which politics operates and distinguishes it from the corporate world.

Underlying these transformations is the assumption of a changing power balance between media and politics that has shifted from a state where the media were subservient to their political masters, to an equilibrium between the two actors, and on to 'mediatised politics' that is dominated by 'media logic' – a process that Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) describe as a progression of three consecutive 'ages' of political communication. The above-mentioned definition of mediatisation by Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) as the loss of autonomy of politics vis-à-vis then increasingly pervasive and invasive media points in a similar direction.

While the historical approach of 'three ages' of political communication provides convincing explanations for the rise of mediatisation in western democracies, it also has its pitfalls. The notion of mediatisation progressing over historical 'ages' implies a degree of uniformity and inevitability, which empirically does not exist. As mediatisation interacts with institutional structures, practices and communication cultures, it can be assumed that

different areas of politics merge with 'media logic' to different degrees (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014). Because of its dependence on public support, electoral politics is most vulnerable to the internalisation of 'media logic', whereas policy areas that are dominated by the civil service and a high degree of inertia are better able to detach themselves from unpredictable dynamics of publicity. Thus, layers of highly mediatised politics and traditional, largely unmediated politics coexist, even within the same institution.

Rather than seeing mediatisation as a progressive development, it is better understood as a dialectical process in which the responses of actors can lead to unforeseen outcomes. Indeed, in many cases the consequence of mediatisation is de-mediatisation. It is unlikely that political actors accept the dominance of 'media logic' if this undermines their ability to implement policies and to mobilise popular support in the most effective way. Another outcome of mediatisation that contradicts the initial assumptions of a shifting power balance in favour of the media is a concentration and accumulation of political power – rather than the 'colonisation' of politics by 'media logic' (Meyer, 2002). The strategic responses of politicians to the changing media environment not only aim to neutralise and deflect 'media logic', but more importantly transform it into a resource to control the political agenda. The result is a more centralised, manipulated and elite-driven process of public communication.

#### *The prerequisites of mediatisation*

Three distinct, but closely interconnected developments that set off in the 1980s are believed to have created a fundamentally new media environment, thus accelerating the process of mediatisation: the proliferation of channels, a re-orientation of professional journalism and the transformation of citizenship.

- (1) While broadcasting was characterised by channel scarcity from its beginning, technological innovations such as satellite and cable transmission have led to a rapid proliferation of channels, but also a fragmentation of programmes, genres and audiences. Trans-border communication, made possible by new communication technologies, undermined the significance of the nation state as a communicative space, controlled by national laws and regulatory agencies. The rise of the internet and Web2.0 in the early 2000s shifted the changing boundaries of time and space even further while at the same time challenging the significance and economic viability of legacy media (print, broadcasting). For political actors the new multi-channel environment offers entirely new opportunities of communicating with targeted audiences; but the fragmentation also makes political communication an increasingly unpredictable arena of contested truths and counter-narratives that forces political actors to acquire a new level of sophistication in message management. So far, only a few political elites have risen to the task. For most of them, the new multi-channel

environment is, as Blumler and Kavanagh (1999, p. 215) lucidly describe it, a 'hydra-headed beast' that defies subordination and containment.

- (2) Driven by increased competition and commercial pressures, journalism in Western democracies has taken on a more adversarial stance towards politics. Abandoning a more sacerdotal attitude towards political authorities that had governed the relationship between politics and the media in the decades following the end of WW2, the 'watchdog' role of the media has become more prominent among today's journalists, but so have more aggressive forms of journalism such as sensationalism and scandalisation. McNair (2009, pp. 244–246) even talks about an emerging 'hyper-adversarialism' that breeds negativism and cynicism and systematically prevents deliberative conversations in public communication. This change in journalism has not been without consequences for the relationship between politics and media. Thus, mediatisation involves paradoxical developments of increased interdependency, even symbiosis, between political actors and journalists on the one hand, and a broadening gulf of hostility and mutual mistrust on the other.
- (3) Most of the literature on mediatisation focuses on the relationship between political power and the media, whereas citizens and their preferences merely serve as a target of ever-changing campaign strategies. However, changes in citizens' attitudes and behaviour are closely interrelated with the mediatisation of politics and the changing media environment. Citizens and new forms of citizenship are both drivers of mediatisation and are transformed by it. Over the last decades, demographic and social changes – the dissolution of traditional ties and individualisation, the emergence of a more complex and fragmented society and the acceleration of social and geographical mobility – have re-configured the relationship between citizens and politics. With party identification in decline and a growing level of cynicism towards political authorities, the norms of citizenship have altered dramatically. A growing number of citizens, especially the younger generation, have turned their backs on institutionalised politics. However, as research has shown, this does not necessarily imply democracy is left without citizens. Rather, citizens have developed new forms of political action and organisational forms outside the electoral process to express their views and influence the course of politics, with new social movements being the most visible and effective manifestation of this 'new politics' (Dalton, 2013).

Arguing that political communication cannot be understood without taking the active role of citizens into account, Brants and Voltmer (2011) make a point of introducing citizens into their model of mediatisation. In their view, the relationship between citizens and political communication elites – politicians, journalists – is characterised by a process of de-

centralisation, whereby citizens move into arenas of communication that are outside the control of elite politics. Yet, like party politics and government, the emerging forms of citizenship are also highly dependent on and shaped by the media, in particular internet-based platforms. These new communication technologies not only empower and enable a new repertoire of political action, they have also brought about new organisational forms of mobilisation. It can therefore be argued that the transformation of citizenship is part of a wider process of mediatisation that involves both new dependencies on the 'logic' of mediated communication and new opportunities of voice and action.

### **3. Mediatisation and communication technologies**

Political communication scholars understand mediatisation as an institutional process that involves independent actors who are making strategic choices to shape and manipulate their relationship. In this approach, communication technologies are seen as external to the process. In other words, it is journalism that interacts with and transforms power politics, whereas communication technologies are seen as tools that are used to optimise an actor's communication efforts. The problem of excluding technologies from an understanding of mediatisation becomes particularly evident with regard to the internet. Clearly, the internet is not an institution in the traditional sense like a media organisation; yet at the same time, more than any other medium before, it is transforming political action and political organisations in ways that invite different logics of action; it is arguably even transforming mediatisation itself. To account for such transformations, we need to move beyond an institutional focus in our conceptualisation of both 'media logic' and mediatisation.

Media scholars have convincingly pointed out that what we call 'media' cannot be separated into technologies and content. Instead, both are intertwined and together create a specific 'media logic' that combines (technological) structure and purposeful agency. This is particularly evident in the case of social media where technological affordances and practices of use result in the convergence of the content producer and consumer roles into 'producers'. Silverstone's (1994) notion of 'double articulation' accounts for this interdependency between technology and content. Writing about the medium of television, he argues that the medium is doubly articulated in our everyday lives because we appropriate it both as a material object, which has aesthetic and functional qualities, and as a medium that, through its structure and content, mediates meanings (ibid. 1994, pp. 82–3). In the case of the internet and, more specifically, social media, Klinger and Svensson (2015) argue that we should consider a further two dimensions of 'media logic', in addition to the focus of traditional 'media logic' on the production of content: the distribution of information and practices of use. These three dimensions together help us consider the differences in

how technology and content interrelate in traditional 'media logic' and in what Klinger and Svensson term 'network media logic'. The latter is characterised by inexpensive content production by lay users who also distribute and intermediate popular content and use social media in interest-bound and like-minded peer networks (ibid. 2015, p. 1246).

These characteristics result in political communication that is driven by virality, which rewards emotional and personalised content, and is distributed through personal networks (ibid. 2015, p. 1253). Practices of use that engender a high level of selective exposure are reinforced by, for instance, search engines that employ – unnoticeable to the user – algorithms to personalise search results with the effect that it is now unlikely that two people using the same search term get the same results (Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013, p. 53). 'Network media logic' thus means that what has been hailed as a technology that gives voice to previously powerless actors and access to an unlimited pool of human knowledge increasingly functions like an echo chamber where the chance to encounter unexpected views is systematically reduced (Pariser, 2011). Moreover, while the internet has facilitated the expansion and revitalisation of civil society, it has also empowered extremist politics and promotes polarisation and fragmentation. The internet on its own does not engage the disengaged, neither does its network structure – as often assumed – build political communities and 'enlightened sympathy'. On the contrary, the extreme level of choice leads – paradoxically – to uniformity and avoidance of difference (Mutz and Young, 2011). Where encounters with those who think differently do happen, they are often characterised by a decided lack of civility (Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013, p. 56).

If we recall the definition of mediatisation as a process whereby the media become an integral part of other actors or systems with the effect that the practices of these actors/systems are increasingly shaped by the media's logic of operation, then it is possible to apply the concept of mediatisation to the internet as well. Mazzoleni (2014) extends the theoretical framework of mediatisation to the internet and especially social media. By introducing the term 'Mediatisation 2.0' he describes a situation where "the logic of the traditional media blends with interactive modes of communication" (ibid. 2014, p. 44). 'Network media logic' thus coexists alongside and intersects with traditional 'media logic' in 'hybrid logics' (Chadwick, 2013, p. 207; Klinger and Svensson, 2015, p. 1251) that shape, constrain and enable the production of, and access to, knowledge as well as the options for political action.

Different types of political actors have adapted to 'network media logic' to different extents. Even though institutionalised politics is already deeply affected by the dynamics of digital media, as exemplified by large-scale disclosures of classified documents by the whistle-blowing platform Wikileaks, it struggles to employ the logic of the internet strategically

to its own advantage. And this is not just a generational problem (most current office holders are not 'digital natives' who have grown up with the internet), but lends itself to the mismatch between formalised politics and the liquid, non-institutionalised character of internet politics. Certainly digital media are increasingly being used in mainstream politics, in particular election campaigns (see Bimber, 2014 on how the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns form turning points in this respect); however, with few exceptions, the organisational logic of digital and social media has not saturated mainstream political parties to the extent that traditional 'media logic' has. Rather, digital media largely function as an additional element in a campaign organised around traditional media logic. Although some new parties in Europe form exceptions in this respect – *Podemos* in Spain and the Pirate parties in Iceland, Germany and Sweden successfully use network-based organisational structures (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016), as does arguably Jeremy Corbyn's 'Momentum' campaign for leadership of the British Labour Party – 'mediatisation 2.0' is only slowly reaching the institutions and practices of elite politics.

In contrast, we find a high degree of web-based mediatisation in the arena of citizen politics. In fact, digital media have transformed citizenship into a vivid space of debate, self-governance and political action. Social movements like Occupy or the Arab Spring have highlighted the potential of the internet to mobilise large-scale protests and to forge collective identities across borders (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Much of the literature on these new movements treat digital media as tools that empower citizens to mobilise more efficiently and with greater impact. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) go a step further by arguing that the internet, and in particular social media, have fundamentally changed the strategies of political activists and have brought about new forms of political organisation. The authors make the distinction between the logics of connective and collective action, and we can relate these forms of action to notions of mediatisation2.0 and mediation in the context of contentious politics. Both logics of citizen politics may coexist, often within one and the same group or organisation and may depend on resources and know-how, but also the insight into the power of virtual interpersonal encounters. The logic of collective action uses digital media in a traditional, top-down organisational structure to mediate shared political ideas and collective identities (ibid. 2012). The logic of connective action, in contrast, uses digital media in a way that changes the core dynamics of the action, creating a flat, decentralised structure of organisation that enables the use of personal action frames that are inclusive of different personal reasons for contesting a situation that needs to be changed (ibid. 2012, p. 744). Thus, connective action can be viewed as a manifestation of mediatisation where new media play a transformational role on politics and citizen participation.

To sum up, the current debate on the mediatisation of politics has developed a compelling theoretical framework to understand how a changing media environment shapes the way in which politics is communicated, and even permeates and alters the processes and outcomes of both institutionalised and citizen politics. However, little is known about how different contextual conditions – political systems, media ecologies, communication cultures - modify the degree and impact of mediatisation, and most of the comparative work done on mediatisation so far is confined to a few advanced democracies in Western Europe and North America (see e.g. Maurer and Pfetsch, 2014; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011; Zeh and Hopmann, 2013). We argue that rather than looking at the influence of the media in isolation, it is important to understand mediatisation as a reciprocal and contingent process that can be amplified, but also suppressed, by factors external to the media. As will be shown in the next section, these changes associated with the mediatisation of politics are not only re-configuring democratic politics in established democracies, but have put emerging democracies on a new pathway of transition.

#### **4. Mediatisation and democratisation**

Sensibility to context is particularly pertinent when analysing trends of mediatisation in emerging democracies. Even though new democracies share some of the main problems of transitions, such as difficult institutional choices, social instability and tensions between supporters of the old and the new order, the variation between them is much bigger than the variation between advanced western democracies. This makes it even harder to come to a conclusive judgement of the forms and degrees of mediatisation in emerging democracies. Some of them belong to the poorest countries of the world (e.g. Afghanistan, Mali), others have strong economies that are able to compete in global markets (e.g. South Korea and Taiwan, South Africa from the MeCoDEM sample). Some countries have only weak and inefficient state institutions (e.g. Kenya), while in others democratic change is stifled by an overpowering state inherited from the previous regime (e.g. Egypt). Moreover, many new democracies, especially in Eastern Europe and Africa, have experienced violent unrest and territorial change in the aftermath of the transition (e.g. Serbia from the MeCoDEM sample). Even though an exploration of context-specific variations of mediatisation exceeds the limitations of this paper, we have to be mindful that any generalisations are tentative and require further empirical investigation.

Yet studying mediatisation in new democracies has to start with a more fundamental question: do the media in these countries have the capacity to operate in accordance with their own 'logic' to an extent that forces political actors to adapt to, and incorporate, media strategies into their own strategic and organisational setup? Even though virtually all

emerging democracies have implemented the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in their constitutions, the lack of respect for the autonomy of the media and attempts by political elites to bring the media under their control is endemic. According to Strömbäck and Esser's (2014, p. 13) multi-dimensional definition, media autonomy is an essential part of mediatisation: "without highly autonomous media institutions there would be no mediatization of politics". This would obviously rule out the possibility of mediatisation in any of the MeCoDEM countries, and indeed in most emerging democracies. However, when approaching the relationship between media and politics outside the established democracies of the West, a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of transitional societies is required.

First, even though emerging democracies go through a period of dramatic change, there are also sectors of societies that resist change, resulting in a juxtaposition of old and new institutional structures, practices and beliefs. For the media, the downfall of the old regime frequently unleashes a new sense of freedom amongst journalists, giving rise to an almost anarchic public space of diverse, often extremist voices. Even though the post-transitional honeymoon of free speech is quickly countered by new forms of political control, there is usually no return to the censorship of the old regime. Journalists in emerging democracies look out for new role models to re-construct their professional identity and to reposition themselves vis-à-vis political power. In most cases they look westwards and adopt an understanding of journalism that emphasises the watchdog role and almost cynical attitudes towards politicians. Demonstrating distance from a discredited state and its representatives is vital for journalists in a transitional context who have to secure their own legitimacy with a more critical and sceptical audience. Thus, even though media and journalism in emerging democracies might fall short of the standards of independence that have been achieved by their western counterparts, they have secured a level of autonomy that allows them to shape and interfere with the political debate to an extent that has been unknown before. Not without reason, then, politicians in new democracies perceive the media as powerful and potentially dangerous.

Furthermore, the degree of mediatisation is not only a function of the (relative) independence of the media, but also of the (relative) power of political elites and institutions. During transition – and often for a long time thereafter – the capacity of political actors and institutions to determine the course of politics is considerably weakened, following the collapse of the old mechanisms of power, the loss of legitimacy and lack of experience. This position of weakness might open up opportunities for the media to expand their capacity to shape the public agenda and to exert pressure on power holders. However, like their western counterparts, powerholders try to maintain – or, in transitional contexts, regain – control over

public communication and the interpretation of political reality. One option to do that would be censorship. However, this comes at a high price as it attracts international criticism and almost certainly mobilises internal opposition. Therefore, political leaders with authoritarian ambitions have discovered ‘media logic’ as a resource of power that works with, rather than against, journalistic routines and news values to manipulate public opinion. Vladimir Putin is an example of this two-pronged strategy. While systematically driving critical media out of business, he has also employed cutting-edge campaign strategies – notably based on western know-how – that helped him in the 1990s to win elections in spite of low levels of popularity (Oates, 2008), thus turning mediatisation into a force that impedes democratic development. Another example of authoritarian mediatisation is Hugo Chavez who, as Block (2013) shows, used extensive media performances to establish discursive hegemony in Venezuela. In an environment of media abundance and international news flows, political leaders have to be ‘on air’ and interact with the media in a way that incorporates journalistic formats of discourse. It is therefore not by accident that the resurgence of democracy of the ‘fourth wave’ has triggered a global demand for political marketing and media management (Plasser and Plasser, 2002). Thus, mediatisation has become a force that not only transforms democratic, but also transitional and even authoritarian, politics (Keane, 2015).

In the following, we present some observations about mediatisation – or lack thereof – in ‘fourth wave’ democracies that began the process of political transformation under the condition of media abundance and technological innovation, focusing on the mediatisation of political power and citizenship.

### *Citizenship*

One of the striking features of post-1989 transitions is the prominent role of large-scale popular uprisings in bringing down the old regime, which distinguishes them from the primarily elite-driven transitions of the ‘third wave’ that set off in the early 1970s (in particular Spain, but also Latin American transitions of that period). Arguably, the rise of multi-channel, trans-border broadcasting that operated beyond the control of national governments created powerful ‘demonstration effects’ (Huntington, 1991) that fuelled and accelerated mass demonstrations, in particular in Eastern Europe. Knowing that the whole world was watching, citizens felt encouraged to take to the streets in large numbers hoping that an international audience would create a protective shield against violent crackdown by the state.<sup>3</sup> Trans-border broadcasting was strategically used by the opposition movements to attract international attention. Unlike earlier transitions, which were largely national struggles, the democratisation movements of the ‘fourth wave’ became international events. This is not to

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<sup>3</sup> This assumption materialised in Eastern Europe where it was encouraged by Gorbachev’s call for change, but not for the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square.

say that these revolutionary events were triggered by the new media environment. But the media were crucial contributing catalysts that enlarged and accelerated the impact of the uprisings and to some extent even shaped the outcome of the transition.

Opposition groups quickly learnt to serve the needs of international media for striking images, narratives of 'David and Goliath' and stories that confirmed the West's belief in the superiority of its own system. In particular the rise of the so-called 'colour revolutions' indicate that pro-democracy movements adapted their strategies to 'media logic'. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in the aftermath of the presidential election in 2003 and widespread allegations of electoral fraud is an example of a skilfully orchestrated event that used methods of branding and the PR know-how of foreign advisors to produce powerful images that were reproduced by the media around the world (McFaul, 2007). Other uprisings followed a similar visual strategy, for example Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, the Saffron Revolution in Burma 2007, the Green Revolution in Iran 2009, and so on. Pro-democracy uprisings have become highly mediated events which draw their dynamic from a close interdependency between protesters and (mostly international) media. However, strategies of mediated and internationalised uprisings come at a price. The focus on global media attention often led opposition groups to neglect domestic aspects of their strategy, such as building alliances across groups and with parts of the elites, which might explain – at least to some extent – why some of these uprisings were rather short-lived or were quickly absorbed by powerful elite groups.

Meanwhile, cases of mediated transitions display the transformational effects media can play in the emergence of democracy. New mobile and internet technologies mean that transitional democracies operate not only in an environment of media and information abundance, but in other forms and from sources other than a teleological view of democratisation and mediation might expect. Transitional states are in some cases not only leapfrogging into the problems and dysfunctions of 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy. They are also leapfrogging into a form of mediated democracy which often combines underdeveloped traditional media, in particular the absence of forum media like public service broadcasting, with widespread individualised digital media, in particular cheap mobile technologies. This presents civil society with both opportunities and constraints. The opportunities for political participation of what Diamond terms 'liberation technology' (2010) have been expounded by many, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring: increased information access, citizens adopting the watchdog role where mainstream media are unable to (El-Khalili, 2013), mobilisation and an expanded sphere of participation (Lim, 2013). Yet new communication technologies are not "imbued with some kind of irresistible agency" (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010, p. 44). Arguably, for the first time in the history of

communication media, the same technologies that are used by citizens to mobilise resistance, have also been used for control, surveillance and propaganda by post-revolutionary authoritarian regimes in, for instance, Egypt (El-Khalili, 2013) and Iran (Aday et al., 2010).

Moreover, where technology clearly has played a role in increasing participation in liberation movements, such digital networks often have a short-term effect on politics (Couldry, 2015). Even though digital communication technologies have enabled large-scale mass mobilisation, the nature of ‘network media logic’ means that this is often taking place without any kind of unifying force in the form of leadership, ideas, ideology or long-term strategy. The logic of connective action may result in new forms of mobilisation and potentially increased participation in democratisation movements as was the case in Egypt in 2011 (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, pp. 743–4). But even where a regime is toppled, the personalised frames and networked organisation of connective action fail to equip activists to move into the power vacuum that opens up after regime change and to shape the outcome of the transition. There is no leader to unify a fragmented yet expectant population, no organisation to provide a framework for sustained political actions once ‘normal politics’ returns, no vision to drive them forward towards a common goal. The structural properties of mediatisation 2.0 have further exacerbates the inability – often unwillingness – of anti-regime movements to move from the politics of street mobilisation to the politics of institutional bargaining, thus leaving the situation open to exploitation by individual and collective sources of power that are somehow capable of providing a unifying structure. And more often than not these are those who have already been key players in the old regime. <sup>4</sup>

### *Political institutions*

To understand the new media environment that shapes ‘fourth wave’ transitions, it is useful to remind ourselves of the conditions under which ‘second wave’ (post-WW2) and ‘third wave’ (1970s) democracies set out to establish themselves. Channel scarcity meant that one dominant broadcaster, formerly state-owned and usually only insufficiently transformed into an independent institution, served as the national forum for political communication. In this environment, ‘media logic’ was largely contained, allowing political elites to control the post-transitional narrative without the need to adopt sophisticated media strategies. The low level of mediatisation helped the new political order to stabilise in relative isolation from the public eye. But this also meant that those in power were able to carry on in

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<sup>4</sup> Western democracy aid has often been similarly short-sighted. By focusing on supporting internet activists and their short-term mobilisation power, too little consideration has been given to developing their long-term political skills offline (see Christensen, 2011).

an accountability vacuum, fostering corruption, impunity of crimes committed during the past regime, and inefficiency in post-transitional governments.

In 'fourth wave' democracies the situation is almost reverse. Now, institution building takes place in a multi-channel environment that makes it difficult for political actors to influence public opinion. Even though in most emerging democracies governments have maintained a great deal of control over the main broadcaster, its hegemony and authority is undermined by a plethora of alternative voices of domestic and international origin. Especially the young generation, which in the developing world makes up for the majority of the population, has turned to the internet and social media for information as they put more trust in these sources than in 'legacy media'. Confronted with highly politicised segments of the citizenry and a more pro-active, if not aggressive, journalism, the need for political elites to control the public agenda is even higher than in previous waves of democratisation. To achieve this, old-fashioned means of control and censorship are no longer effective. Instead, political actors – including governments, political parties, but equally civil society groups and political activists – have to adapt to the 'logics' of both old and new media and incorporate sophisticated media strategies even before political institutions and durable organisational structures have been re-built (Voltmer, 2011). Indeed, media strategies often replace the development of organisational structures. Especially actors such as political parties, who depend on mass mobilisation, invest large amounts of resources to professionalise their campaign capacities.

In particular in Eastern Europe this has given rise to the type of elite party (Katz and Mair, 1995) that is built around small groups of elites without significant grass-roots membership. The primary purpose of these parties is to function as electoral machines for candidates, often without offering any ideological vision or meaningful programme of policy. 'Spin' and media strategies are therefore essential for electoral success. However, alongside these media-based parties another type of party plays a key role in many emerging democracies: that of a mass-based party that has its roots in pre-transition times, either as the leading oppositional actor (for example the ANC in South Africa) or as the ruling party of the old regime (for example former communist parties in Eastern Europe). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is another example of an old organisation who were able to use their structural resources to gain power in post-revolutionary Egypt - even though they were unable to secure their position against old elites and the military. What distinguishes these parties from their newly established, elite-centred counterparts is a strong ideological identity, a strong presence on the ground which secures them broad popular support, in particular among the lower strata of society and – most importantly – a low degree of mediatisation. Media strategies remain rather peripheral to the organisational structure and the

communicative practices of these parties, which draw their strength from local networks and face-to-face interaction with their supporters. Thus, mediatisation is an integral part of the transition process of 'fourth wave' democracies and allows new political entrepreneurs to enter the electoral contest. It can also be exploited as a power resource in the volatile arena of post-transitional politics where institutional structures have lost their constraining power leaving the field open to communication-savvy individuals. However, the degree to which this is the case varies significantly across new democracies, depending on the particular features of the political as well as media systems and communication cultures that are rooted in traditional norms and practices of interaction. Thus, large spheres of non-mediatised politics continue to exist, which provide identity and social coherence in times of chaotic change.

The rise of populist politics can serve as an example of the ambiguity of mediatised politics in emerging democracies. It illustrates that mediatised politics provides a way of establishing links between political power and citizens where the institutions of intermediation are weak, while at the same time challenging the politics of liberal democracy. Populism is by no means unique to emerging democracies. Established democracies – from Italy and France to India and Australia – are increasingly seeing the rise of populist parties and even populist leaders entering government positions. But new democracies are particularly vulnerable to populism as they have an acute need for symbolic representation that can provide a simple narrative of 'who we are, where we are coming from and where we are going'. In transitional societies the trauma of dictatorship and civil violence, the (perceived) failure of the new political order to provide the better life people had hoped – and fought – for, and the uncertainty of the future in a globalised world provide fertile ground for populists who construct a notion of the 'heartland' (Taggart, 2000) that can be recreated and that provides hope and comfort to people in times of insecurity and instability.

Populist politics, by framing itself as citizen politics, is thus able to speak to the motivations of a citizenry in democratic transition by emphasising those anti-establishment and anti-institutional motivations that led them to initiate democratisation in the first place. Yet populists construct a notion of the people that at once idolises them by adorning them with the knowledge and capability required for more direct forms of democracy, whilst simultaneously reducing them to a homogenous mass purged of individualised political ideals or agency. Populism thus provides an alternative to mainstream politics in transition by offering a symbolic vision to the people in a simplistic, often spectacular and provocative format that captures the media's imagination. It can take advantage of fragile institutions in transitional democracies to come to power (De la Torre, 2014, p. 7), and once in power further undermines institution building because it disregards, often ridicules liberal institutions

of representation. In doing so, populists rely on an ambiguity constructed through the performance of symbolic representation that allows them to occupy the territory at the edges of mainstream politics where they strike a fine balance between radical sentiment and democratic legitimacy.

The effects of populism on democratisation are likewise ambiguous. Effects have been shown to be stronger in unconsolidated democracies and depend on whether populists occupy a position of power (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). In opposition, populism can have a positive effect on democratisation as it serves to increase political participation, constructs cross-class political coalitions and emphasises democratic accountability. Yet in power, the effects turn negative as populism prioritises majority rule over liberal democratic ideals. The results are a destabilisation of democratic institutions, a challenge to the separation of powers, and eroding trust in the legitimacy of newly established institutions (ibid. 2012). We see these effects in the delegative democracies of Latin America (O'Donnell, 1994) that are only symbolically representative in the form of the personalist leader and often exist in a symbiotic relationship with the media (Veltmer, 2011). An example from the range of countries covered by MeCoDEM would be South Africa and President Jacob Zuma's populist-authoritarian style of government. In either case, though populism is known for being short-lived (see e.g. Taggart, 2000), the last decade has seen many cases of populists sustaining themselves in power (McDonnell and Albertazzi, 2015) by consolidating their message of representation of the (right) people.

## **5. Conclusion**

Over the last quarter of a century, innovations in communication technology have fundamentally changed the way in which information is produced and shared. In fact, it is no exaggeration to talk about a communication revolution that changed human relationships on every level, be it between individuals, between governments and citizens or even between states.

In this paper we set out to explore the impact the new communication environment might have on the politics of the emerging democracies of the 'fourth wave'. To analyse the transformation of the relationship between politics and the media in emerging democracies, this paper draws on the concept of mediatisation as the process of political institutions incorporating the logic of media institutions – their norms and routines – into their own organisational form and decision-making processes. Mediatisation has so far has been exclusively applied to political communication in advanced western democracies and mainly to institutionalised politics. However, we have discussed how mediatisation also plays a role

outside institutional politics, in citizen and contentious politics, and how this often happens through non-institutional media like social media. Broadening the concept of mediatisation to give it a less institutional focus and enable it to account for hybrid and network media logics and the role of different types of political actors also demonstrates how such actors can appropriate different forms of media logic as a resource of power and even change the direction of mediatisation. Mediatisation then also becomes applicable in some emerging democracies. It takes on similar forms as in established democracies – where it is likewise multi-layered and can co-exist with non-mediatised politics – but, because of the particular conditions of transitional politics, it yields different outcomes.

In transitional politics political actors – from protest movements to governments – rely heavily on the media as a central, often exclusive resource to enhance influence and to achieve political goals. Digital communication technologies and media strategies are highly effective tools to mobilise public opinion. But they are more than tools; they also shape and often replace the building of organisational structures. An example of this process is the emerging ‘logic of connective action’ that follows the norms and structures of social media. Individualised participation and the resistance against hierarchical structures have made ‘connective action’ an incredibly powerful way of mobilising citizens, but have widely failed to influence institutional politics in the aftermath of regime changes, as the Egyptian example shows.

Another example is the close interaction between mediatisation and populism. In an increasing number of new (but also established) democracies, representative politics has been challenged by the rise of populist leaders. Arguably, modern populism is a form of politics that flourishes in media-saturated environments. Being highly dependent on the resonance of the media, populist politics shapes its rhetoric, messages and organisation around ‘media logic’. Even though populist leaders in emerging democracies often use exclusionary, nationalist appeals to mobilise support, populism also seeks new forms of connecting directly with citizens and building a sense of community. However, disguised behind anti-elitist rhetoric, political leaders in new democracies have also used symbolic representation and mediated mobilisation to strengthen authoritarian structures of power and indeed a closure of public spaces of expression.

The two examples highlight the ambivalent nature of mediatisation in transitional democracies. Mediatisation of politics has opened up new opportunities for citizen politics, but has also undermined the establishment of sustainable and effective institutions. Mediatisation is a way of challenging political authority, but at the same time serves the authoritarian ambitions of political leaders. Furthermore, mediatisation increases the power of the media in politics and at the same time forces political actors to develop strategies to

instrumentalise and muzzle them. It thus has profound and complex implications for the democratisation process and has created a unique situation for transitions of the 'fourth wave'. The research programme of the MeCoDEM-project seeks to better understand the conditions, scope and consequences of mediatised politics in transitional societies.

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