The mediatization of presidential leadership in France: the contrasting cases of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande

Abstract

This paper applies the concept of mediatization to the French presidential office, with a comparative focus on the two most recent incumbents, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. The central argument is that Sarkozy’s presidential leadership, both symbolically and substantively, was more influenced by media logic than that of Hollande, notably during the first two years of the latter’s tenure. The paper thus emphasizes the relative autonomy of the presidential incumbent as the principal executive actor operating within a significantly bounded national political communication system. In so doing it stresses the importance of agency as a key variable in any assessment of the mediatization of executive leadership, not just in France, but by extension in other established democracies.

Firmly established in political communication literature, the concept of mediatization has been applied to the study of many different aspects of democratic politics, including inter alia election campaigning, populism, political agenda-setting, and party and interest group structures and behaviour (Esser and Strömbäck 2014a). One important dimension of such mediatization focuses on political institutions, organizations and actors, investigating the extent to which these are guided by media logic or political logic (Strömbäck and Esser 2014: 6). This paper examines this dimension with reference to a specific national political institution/actor, the presidency of the French Fifth Republic. In particular, the paper focuses on the two
most recent incumbents, Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–12) and François Hollande (2012–), comparing and contrasting the extent and nature of presidential mediatization during their tenure of office. The paper’s central argument is that Sarkozy’s presidential leadership, both symbolically and substantively, was more influenced by media logic than that of Hollande, notably during the first two years of the latter’s presidential term.

The paper thus emphasizes the relative autonomy of the presidential incumbent as the principal executive actor operating within a significantly bounded national political communication system. In so doing it stresses the importance of agency as a key variable in any assessment of the mediatization of executive leadership in the Fifth Republic. Moreover, while the paper focuses on contemporary France as a case study of presidential mediatization, our contention is that the central thesis regarding the role of agency can equally well be applied to the study of political leaders across a range of established democracies. The paper thus argues for the detailed comparative study of leadership within as well as across national political communication systems to include personal variables, resources allocated to public communication activities, links with media personnel such as owners and journalists, news management strategies and the use of a leader’s private life for political marketing purposes. Taking full account of the political framework, the news media environment and the journalistic culture, such studies would highlight important elements of both commonality and contrast in the mediatization of incumbents of the same national political office.

**Mediatization of executive leadership**
There is no single universally agreed definition of the concept of mediatization (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Schulz 2004; Esser and Strömbäck 2014b). As a reasonable working definition applied to politics, this article understands mediatization to mean ‘a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors have increased’ (Strömbäck and Esser 2014: 6). Mediatization can thus be distinguished from mediation, ‘which refers to the more neutral act of transmitting messages and communicating through different media (Strömbäck and Esser 2014: 4).

In recent years there has been a growing academic interest in the interdependence between the media and executive leadership in established democracies, both from scholars of political communication, who are broadly interested in leadership as a dimension of the phenomenon of mediatization, and from political scientists, who are mainly concerned with the influence of the media as one of several variables in an explanation and evaluation of leadership styles and performance. There is, of course, a significant degree of crossover between these media-centred and leadership-centred perspectives. An indicative, but by no means exhaustive, list of specific areas of study includes executive leaders’ news management activities (Pfetsch 2008), personalization and presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Karvonen 2010), leaders’ performative use of the media (Grube 2013), the celebritization of political leadership (Street 2004; Wheeler 2013), the politics of leaders’ private lives (Langer 2010; Stanyer 2013), leaders’ use of ‘storytelling’ to provide a narrative frame for their actions and policies (Salmon 2007), the capacity of the media to influence the functioning of executive leadership in terms of political and policy freedom of manoeuvre (Helms 2008) and, from a more normative perspective, the impact of the media on the conditions for good democratic leadership (Helms 2012).
With particular reference to the interdependence between the media and presidential leadership in the French Fifth Republic, the news management activities of the executive have formed an important area of historical study (Delporte 2007; Bédéï 2008) along with more recent work on the personalization of elite political leadership (Le Bart 2013). Some individual presidencies have been much better covered than others in academic literature, notably those of General de Gaulle (Bourdon 1990; Vassallo 2005; Brizzi 2014) and Sarkozy (Jost and Muze 2008; Musso 2009; Campus 2010; Kuhn 2010; Neveu 2012).

The French political communication system

The mediatization of the French presidency is shaped by certain structural and behavioural features of the national political communication system. The most important of these are the political framework, news media environment and journalistic culture. It is both particular aspects of these three individual components and the relational interdependence between them that give the French political communication system its particular national specificity.

Political framework

In principle, there are various characteristics of a national political system that may exert an influence on executive communication, such as the nature of party competition, the organization of the state or prevalent societal norms regarding political leadership styles. The institutional framework is one such characteristic (Pfetsch 2008: 80–83). Helms, for instance, emphasizes power relations within the executive, as well as situating the power of the executive branch in the context of the wider political system, in particular in relation to the number and strength of what he
calls ‘counter-majoritarian’ institutions – such as constitutional courts – in constraining the power of the executive in the political process (Helms 2008: 33).

In the Fifth Republic the power of the executive, and in particular the presidency, is crucial to an understanding of the workings of the national political communication system. The 1958 constitution sought to weaken the legislature and concentrate power within the executive in an attempt to provide France with political stability and effective government. While constitutionally there are two key executive office-holders (president and prime minister) in what is in principle a semi-presidential system (Elgie 1999), for most of the history of the regime the president has in practice been the dominant political actor (Bell and Gaffney 2013). This has little to do with the formal constitutional powers of the office. Instead, the process of direct popular election of the president in a single national constituency and the legacy of de Gaulle as the first incumbent in fashioning the office for himself and his successors institutionalized presidential supremacy (provided that, as has usually been the case, the president can rely on a supportive majority in parliament) (Levy and Skach 2008).

The French presidency is, therefore, a very powerful office qua office, independent of the personality of the incumbent, with significant, structurally embedded institutional resources and a notable absence of constraints in the form of ‘counter-majoritarian’ institutions to act as a potential check on presidential freedom of manoeuvre (Duhamel 2009). As such, the presidency has dominated national news media coverage in the Fifth Republic (Kaciaf 2013). Its legitimacy, authority and centrality to the policymaking process have combined to make the presidency a key primary definer in news agenda construction and issue framing.

News media environment
Even in an era of apparently increasing transnationalization of media technology, capital and product (Chalaby 2009), there remain powerful reasons to focus on national media systems as discrete units of study (Flew and Waisbord 2015). The French media system possesses certain nationally specific traits in comparison with the structures and functioning of the media in other established democracies, including its closest European neighbours, in terms of performance, content, ownership, regulation and the role of the state. It is not wholly surprising, therefore, that Hallin and Mancini experienced such difficulty in slotting France along with Italy, Greece and Spain into their typological category of the ‘polarized pluralist’ model of political communication (2004: 89–142).

With regard to the mediatization of politics the most important constituents of media logic within the news media environment are professionalization and commercialization, followed by technological change. Taken together these ‘are considered to be chiefly responsible for a historical process of greater differentiation of the media system from the political process’ (Esser 2013: 167). This section focuses on commercialization and technological shift, two of the most significant changes undergone by the French media system during the Fifth Republic (professionalization is addressed in the following section). Both phenomena have helped alter the relationship between the news media and the political sphere, loosening the previously close ties between the two.

Commercialization is evident in both media structures and content. In the television sector, for instance, no commercial provider existed until 1984; previously the state exercised a monopoly over programming, with three state-run channels in operation for most of the 1970s. In similar vein, while some limited commercial competition in national radio provision had previously been tolerated by the state, it
was also not until the early 1980s that the radio sector was opened up to a multiplicity of stations competing for audiences and revenue. This economic liberalization of broadcasting thus represented a new developmental phase following the first phase of state monopoly (and preceding the third phase of digitization).

Even in this second phase, however, competition between television channels was limited because of the finite number of services available via terrestrial transmission. For most French viewers the era of multi-channel television began only with the nationwide roll-out of the terrestrial digital network in the early 2000s, which also facilitated the emergence of niche channels targeting particular sectors of the population. Growing competition between service providers, a loosening of regulatory constraints and changing audience tastes increasingly exerted an influence on broadcast content, with a greater emphasis on popular entertainment than in what now seems the very staid, state-managed public service output of the 1960s. Political coverage was also affected with politicians appearing in entertainment genres such as chat shows (‘politainment’). There is also some evidence of broadcast news production being driven by economically motivated rationales, especially in the output of private broadcasters, though hard news remains a strong feature of the output of public radio and television.

While the contemporary French media (print, broadcasting and online) are mainly composed of commercial actors, privately owned and operating under market conditions, one should be wary of simply equating economic with political liberalization. Although the state may no longer control political information on television to the extent that it did in the 1960s, government politicians exert indirect pressures on public television managers, while the main commercial channel, TF1, has long been closely associated with support for leading political figures of the French
right such as Jacques Chirac and, more recently, Sarkozy. There is certainly greater formal political independence of the broadcast media from political institutions than in the early years of the regime; but personal and patronage links between the political and media spheres continue to be a notable feature of the national political communication system, particularly evident during the Sarkozy presidency. In addition, through its control of the licence fee system the state remains a key source of funding for public broadcasting, while in the press sector a generous system of state financial subsidy established after the second world war was strengthened by Sarkozy in 2009.

The two most obvious manifestations of technological change in the news media in recent years have been the expansion of the broadcast media as a result of digitization and the development of online services alongside legacy media to form a hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2013). The main impact of digitization for broadcast news provision has come from rolling news channels, such as LCI and BFMTV, whose contribution was such a notable feature of the 2012 presidential campaign. Although audiences are relatively small, the rolling news channels are both an important platform for politicians and information source for other media. Their contribution to the mediated public sphere has helped maintain the position of television as the single most important medium of political information for French citizens, ahead of the press, radio and internet combined (TNS Sofres 2015: 20).

In online media the main changes in terms of supply have been the spread of the use of Twitter by political actors and the impact of independent news websites, notably Mediapart, which has been instrumental in revealing a variety of political financial scandals in recent years. The main change in terms of demand has been the increased use of the internet as a source of political information for citizens, second
behind television. Fifty per cent of citizens who use the internet as their main source of news access the websites of legacy newspapers, while only 21 per cent rely on social media (TNS Sofres 2015: 21). As a result, reported readership of newspapers, in their print and online versions, has remained stable over the past five years, even if print circulations continue to decline (TNS Sofres 2015: 35). Only 13 per cent of citizens have confidence in the information circulating on social media, while 71 per cent do not have confidence (TNS Sofres 2015: 23). In short, the content of legacy media, whether distributed online or not, still dominates French citizens’ diet of political information.

**Journalistic culture**

The third feature of the national political communication system consists of the journalistic culture, where attention is shifted away from the structural and operational features of the news media environment towards the norms, values and rules that govern the interdependent relationship between leading political actors, journalists and citizens. The concept of journalistic professionalism has been analyzed in terms of four different dimensions: growing autonomy from outside influences and control over one’s work; a distinct set of professional norms; a claim to serve the public interest; and journalistic voice (Esser 2013: 168–170). There are clear difficulties in easily operationalizing these dimensions: the conceptual issue of defining terms such as ‘autonomy’ and the ‘public interest’; the methodological problem of assessing ‘growing autonomy’ over time; and the extent to which one can generalize about journalistic norms and behaviour across different media platforms (press, broadcasting, online) and outlets (public/private, national/regional, quality/popular) even within a single national political communication system.
In the French Fifth Republic political journalists, especially in broadcasting, have in the past suffered from restricted autonomy, particularly with regard to the executive. Commentators have often pointed to the functional proximity between elite politicians and journalists across media sectors, leading to an interrelationship based on close cooperation and even complicity (Carton 2003). Yet while political instrumentalization of journalists is a feature of Hallin and Mancini’s polarized pluralist model, evidence from a historical account of political journalism in the postwar French press (Kaciaf 2013) suggests a more nuanced picture with, for instance, journalists placing greater emphasis on professionalism over partisan attachment than in the past (306–312), unpacking the media strategies of the political class for their readers (168–182) and becoming more critical observers of the political scene (161–168), all in a working environment where frequently commercial pressures and societal changes, as well as political considerations, exert an influence on their political coverage (217–296).

Journalists in public broadcasting, elite print media and independent news websites (Plenel 2014) would certainly claim to be serving the public interest, while all journalism needs to serve the interests of its target audiences if it is to survive in a highly competitive news media environment. The French public is sceptical on both counts. A majority of citizens (58 per cent) assert that journalists are not independent of political pressures (31 per cent think the opposite), while 53 per cent think that journalists are not independent of financial/commercial pressures (30 per cent take the opposite view) (TNS Sofres 2015: 17). Finally, with regard to journalistic voice, it is clear that there remains a strong tradition of ‘opinionated journalism’ especially in the national press, with individual journalists showing support for or opposition to particular parties, policies or individual politicians. This culture of political
engagement and interpretative journalism has meant that commentary and opinion have often been more highly prized than accuracy and objectivity. In contrast, neither investigative nor watchdog journalism has ever been a particularly strong feature of the French news media culture, despite some progress from the 1980s onwards (Charon 2009) and more recently with the revelations of Mediapart. In short, the journalistic culture in France is one where professionalism is being accorded greater emphasis, in part as a result of political changes (for instance, a decline in ideological conflict and more alternations between right and left in government), in part because of the recruitment of more educated personnel to the profession and in part because of the transfer of journalistic practices across national boundaries (Kuhn and Neilson 2014).

The mediatization of Sarkozy and Hollande

As aspirtants to the presidential office Sarkozy and Hollande shared many characteristics in common. Of virtually the same age, with only five months’ difference between them, in terms of their personal media acculturation they belong to the television, rather than newspaper or internet, generation. Both acceded to the presidency when they were in their fifties: Sarkozy was 52 in 2007, while Hollande was 57 in 2012. Their respective victories came at their first attempt to win the supreme office. Both had previously been leaders of their political parties, which were by far the dominant forces on the right and left of the party spectrum (Grunberg and Haegel 2007). Both were directly elected president for a five-year term of office by nationwide popular vote, with electoral turnouts hovering around the 80 per cent mark in the two rounds of both contests. In their successful presidential election campaigns
each led in the first round and then won the decisive second round run-off with similar vote shares: 53.0 per cent for Sarkozy, 51.6 per cent for Hollande.

In their occupation of the presidency Sarkozy and Hollande enjoyed virtually identical constitutional powers, while also benefiting from a majority in a parliament elected for five years at the start of their presidential term. Both faced similar challenges in office, governing a country facing difficult, long-standing social, economic and political problems, including the tensions of a multicultural society, terrorist security threats, adjustment to the globalized economy, constraints arising from France’s membership of the eurozone, a high level of unemployment and the destabilizing impact of an electorally popular extreme-right party. The essential features of the national media system and the journalistic culture were essentially the same for both leaders during their presidential terms. In short, in carrying out the presidential function, Sarkozy and Hollande were operating in broadly similar political, socioeconomic and media contexts, enjoyed equivalent levels of institutional resources and were faced with similar policy-making challenges and constraints.

What then were the key differences between these two elite politicians? One lies in their educational background. Hollande had the classic curriculum vitae of a Fifth Republic presidential candidate, having graduated from the Political Science Institute in Paris and then the prestigious École Nationale d’Administration (ENA), the training college for top civil servants and elite politicians, where frequently lifelong personal political networks are formed. In contrast, Sarkozy had not attended ENA, which allowed him in his electoral positioning to present himself as an ‘outsider’ with regard to the political establishment. In terms of their political careers, one main contrast is that while Sarkozy had had considerable ministerial experience before acceding to the presidency (as Minister of the Interior and Minister of Finance), Hollande had never
occupied a ministerial post, of even a junior nature – he had no direct experience of being in government.

A third difference lay in their presidential style. Sarkozy presented himself as hyperactive, involved in all aspects of governing, the so-called ‘hyperpresident’ (Maigret 2008). In contrast, Hollande initially projected the image of an ‘ordinary’ president (président normal), seeking to differentiate himself from Sarkozy’s association in the public eye with a flashy lifestyle and a series of financial scandals: in the 2012 campaign Hollande presented himself as the anti-Sarkozy candidate (Perrineau 2013). He initially promised to stand back from day-to-day intervention in policy-making, although his growing unpopularity in opinion polls compelled him to become more visibly active in a governing role soon after the start of his presidential term.

Another key difference between the two presidents can be found in their relations with the news media. Public communication skills, the effective use of symbolic politics and the management of voter expectations via news media agenda construction and issue framing are now part of the essential repertoire of leadership qualities for heads of state/government in established democracies. Yet in performing their presidential function Sarkozy and Hollande presented significant elements of contrast in this area of executive leadership activity. A public evaluation of their presidential communication, for instance, revealed that Hollande was considered to outperform Sarkozy in emotional terms: 46 per cent considered Hollande more sincere than Sarkozy (36 per cent), while 50 per cent judged him to be closer to the French people (34 per cent for Sarkozy) (BVA 2015). In contrast, Hollande lagged behind Sarkozy in terms of rational pedagogy: only 32 per cent declared that Hollande better explained what he was doing (son action) as against 54 per cent for Sarkozy, while
only 34 per cent judged that Hollande gave a better image of presidential communication (la meilleure image de la parole présidentielle) as against 54 per cent for his predecessor. To help explain these differences in voter assessment of the two incumbents’ public communication, and with a focus on the front stage part of political processes (politics) rather than the backstage part (policy), this section examines three interrelated aspects of their presidential mediatization: news management; image projection; and the mediatization of intimacy.

**News management**

Sarkozy paid particular attention to proactive news management, both before becoming president and then during his presidential term. First, in terms of personnel he was served by a communication advisor, Franck Louvrier, who had performed this function during most of Sarkozy’s political career – as mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine, Minister of the Interior, party leader, presidential candidate and finally president. Louvrier was an integral part of Sarkozy’s 2007 election campaign team (Achilli 2006; 2007) and following the election was one of the inner circle of advisers at the Élysée. The two men had thus built up a close professional relationship over a considerable period of time. Not only was Louvrier the undisputed key top figure in the Élysées’s communications hierarchy, but he had also cultivated a strong reputation for professionalism among journalists.

Second, Sarkozy had built up strong personal links, and in some cases friendships, with several media moguls in the private sector, such as Martyn Bouygues (TF1) and Arnaud Lagardère (Europe 1, Paris Match, Journal du Dimanche) (Mamère and Farbiaz 2009). Third, before becoming president, Sarkozy had enjoyed close relations with several political journalists, using a combination of seduction and intimidation to
keep them onside (Ridet 2008). He was well known for understanding the needs of editors and journalists in terms of news deadlines and copy. Finally, Sarkozy had a news media management strategy that involved dominating the news agenda and imposing control over the framing of issues with a succession of new policy announcements that did not give journalists time to subject his initiatives to close scrutiny before the president had already moved on.

In contrast, during his long period as leader of the Socialist party (1997–2008) Hollande had not worked closely with any single high-profile communication advisor. Moreover, during the first two years of his presidency there was no clear head of communication at the Élysée; rather responsibility in this domain was shared among different advisors, with nobody in overall charge at the strategic level (Amar 2014: 115–123). Nor was Hollande known for having strong personal links with media owners. In addition, during the first two years of the Hollande presidency there was no clearly delineated, coherent communication strategy (Pingaud 2013). Jacques Pilhan, the communication advisor first to President François Mitterrand and then to President Chirac, believed in the rarity of presidential media appearances on the grounds that the more the head of state spoke, the less impact their message had (Bazin 2009). In contrast, Sarkozy believed that the president had to occupy and dominate media space on a daily basis. Hollande chose neither of these options in any consistent manner, but instead reacted to events in an apparently haphazard and impromptu fashion (for instance, Hollande’s television adress in 2013 on the Cahuzac scandal, in which a Minister of the Budget was exposed as holding illegal accounts in foreign banks and of having lied to the president and parliament) (Arfi 2013).

More broadly, the first two years of the Hollande presidency were characterized by a lack of communication coherence at the heart of the executive. One classic
example was the case of the Florange steel furnace closures in late 2012, when Hollande allowed his government to look indecisive, with the Minister for Industrial Regeneration, Arnaud Montebourg, publicly supporting a provisional nationalization, while Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault adopted a quite different line (Astruc and Freyssenet 2013). The problem was not that members of the executive had different views on how to manage the Florange issue; rather it was that these differences were allowed to emerge into the public sphere and to be given a full airing in the glare of media spotlights, with the result that a picture of confusion was allowed to prevail in the absence of any sense of collective executive responsibility. Indeed, during Ayrault’s premiership (May 2012–March 2014) there was a series of communication spats between government ministers played out in the news media, with Hollande unwilling or unable to impose his authority.

It was not until the spring of 2014, when a new government was formed under Prime Minister Manuel Valls and a simultaneous shake-up of staff at the Élysée took place, that a plan to professionalize the organization of presidential communication was implemented. A new director of communication was appointed, Gaspard Gantzer, who assumed responsibility for relations with legacy media as well as the presidential presence on social media platforms. A graduate of the Political Science Institute and ENA, with no journalistic or media experience, Gantzer was only 34 when he took up his post at the Élysée. As well as professionalizing the Élysée’s media operations, Gantzer was also credited with encouraging Hollande to adopt a strategy of more direct contact with voters through presidential visits and question-and-answer sessions with members of the public on radio and television programmes (Revault d’Allonnes 2015a).
French voters, however, remained to be convinced. In a survey conducted in April 2015 the results were quite negative for the president: only 26 per cent considered that his media appearances were reasonably useful; 26 per cent that they were reasonably informative; and 24 per cent that they were reasonably interesting (BVA 2015). Even among his natural constituency of left-wing voters, Hollande was not evaluated in a particularly positive fashion: only 54% found his media appearances reasonably useful; 52% reasonably informative; and 56 per cent reasonably interesting. In these circumstances it was hardly surprising that 24 per cent thought that Hollande appeared too often in the media, only 8 per cent not enough, while 63 per cent thought that it was about right (juste comme il faut).

**Image projection**

Sarkozy had always paid close attention to his mediated political image. As Minister of the Interior during the early 2000s he projected an image of a man of authority, seeking to maintain, indeed restore, order across France. His language, for instance, was particularly straightforward, even crude, in describing the measures required to deal with the problems of ‘the riffraff’ in the housing estates on the outskirts of Paris and other large cities (Nay 2012). Sarkozy’s self-projected image was in accord with both his political brand of a ‘right-wing without any complexes’ and his electoral strategy of seeking to win across extreme-right voters to support his presidential candidacy in 2007. Sarkozy’s image prior to becoming president, therefore, was clearly delineated: a man of action, rather than reflection, with a no-nonsense emphasis on traditional values (work, family, authority) coupled with a rejection of the libertarian values of 1968.
As president, Sarkozy continued to project an image of firmness, order and strong leadership. At the start of his presidency, for instance, he established a Ministry of the Interior and National Identity as a sign of his opposition to multicultural values that he argued threatened to undermine the integrity of the Republic. One of his most infamous declarations was made in the summer of 2010 when he was highly critical of the behaviour of the Rom community in France, which he associated with criminality. He also began to be increasingly critical of aspects of the behaviour of French muslims, introducing the so-called ‘burqa ban’ in 2010. There was an overall coherence to Sarkozy’s mediated image (in stark contrast to his ideological pick-and-mix approach) (Marlière 2009) that tended to polarize public opinion, leaving few voters lukewarm. As a result, the 2012 presidential election became a de facto referendum on Sarkozy’s presidential leadership, both substance and style.

In contrast, Hollande’s political image has always been more fluid and amorphous. As leader of the Socialist party Hollande acquired a reputation of being a consensual manager of the different factions that made up the party rather than a dominant leadership figure (Raffy 2011). Although party leader, he did not consider that he was in a strong enough political position in the run-up to the 2007 presidential election even to stand in the primary to choose the party’s candidate. After resigning as party leader in 2008, Hollande devoted himself to preparing his candidacy for the 2012 presidential election, losing weight and smartening up his appearance. Yet for a long time he was not considered as the favourite to win the party’s nomination for the 2012 contest. He emerged in pole position only after the self-destruction of the opinion polls’ favourite, the head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, in a lurid sexual scandal in a New York hotel in May 2011. Hollande has been described as the ‘accidental candidate’ (Cole et al 2013), whose election to the presidency reflected the
electoral unpopularity of Sarkozy more than a strong voter attachment to himself or his policies. In short, Hollande’s mediated image prior to becoming president was that of a brokering-style leader, competent but uncharismatic.

As president, Hollande often failed to project an image of effective leadership in the mediated public sphere. The result was sometimes catastrophic for his image. A notable example was the Leonarda affair in October 2013 when Hollande effectively ended up in a two-way televised dialogue with a young Roma girl, Leonarda Dibrani, who along with her family had just been expelled from France in controversial circumstances (Devars 2015: 69–72). Faced with growing criticism of the initial decision and the manner of the family’s expulsion, including street protests by high school pupils, Hollande’s proposed compromise – that the girl could return to France to pursue her education, but without the rest of her family – was greeted with incomprehension by his supporters and derision by the media and his opponents. In trying to satisfy all sides, Hollande ended up by pleasing nobody. Leonarda’s refusal to return to France without the rest of her family came in a highly mediatized rejection of Hollande’s offer that had a negative impact on public perceptions of his presidential authority.

Mediatization of intimacy

One of the biggest political communication differences between Sarkozy and Hollande is in the mediatization of intimacy, where in terms of the dominant media and societal norms the approach of Sarkozy could be regarded as transgressive, while that of Hollande could be presented as conservative. Sarkozy deliberately publicized his private life for electoral purposes. This in itself was not new in the French political context; Giscard d’Estaing had marketed his wife and family during his presidential
election campaign in 1974. What was new in Sarkozy’s case was the degree to which he was prepared to reveal details of his private life to the media, to the extent that his private and public lives seemed at times to be conflated in a long-running soap opera. In a presidential press conference near the start of his presidency, for instance, Sarkozy commented that ‘With Carla, it’s serious’, a comment which, coupled with highly mediated photos of the president and his new partner (and later wife), alienated sections of his right-wing electorate. His long-running on-off relationship with his second wife, Cécilia, had became a mediated political saga in the run-up to his successful 2007 campaign, not as a result of an intrusive, far less investigative, media, but because Sarkozy himself was so willing to put aspects of his private life into the public sphere. As a result, when his relationship with Cécilia began to turn definitively sour in the months prior to the election, the French media considered that Sarkozy’s private life was fair game for critical coverage: in the opinion of journalists he, not they, had rewritten the rules.

In contrast, Hollande has sought to play by the traditional norms in France, whereby an elite politician’s private life is deemed to be exactly that – private. During the 2012 presidential campaign, for instance, Hollande was critical of what he regarded as Sarkozy’s excessive emphasis on his private life for political purposes. Occasionally after becoming president, Hollande referred in public to his relationship with his new partner, Valérie Trierweiller, but in general he was discreet about this aspect of his life. In stark contrast to Sarkozy, the exposure of Hollande’s private life into the public domain was not a voluntary act; rather the opposite. In January 2014 a paparazzi photographer took photos of the president visiting the flat rented by his lover, the actress Julie Gayet. The photos of Hollande wearing a motorcycle helmet in an abortive attempt to disguise his identity featured on the cover page of the French
version of the celebrity magazine, *Closer*. Hollande’s response was to condemn this intrusion into his private life and to refuse to go into any detail in a press conference held only a few days after the media story had broken. Later in 2014, after the presidential couple had split up, Trierweiler published a book in which she made revelations about her relationship with Hollande, his character and his alleged political dishonesty (Trierweiler 2014). Once again, Hollande’s private life was laid bare in the public sphere, once again this was in contradiction with his expressed wishes and once again he refused to engage in any discussion on the subject.

**Conclusion: the role of agency**

In agreement with the view that ‘mediatization is a matter of degree and an empirical question’ (Esser and Strömbäck 2014b: 241), this paper has applied the concept to a specific institution/actor within the same national political communication system and argued that the degree of mediatization has differed between two recent incumbents of the French presidential office. How can this difference be best explained? If the argument made above that both were operating in similar political, socioeconomic and media contexts is accepted, then the answer is not to be found among these environmental factors; rather it must lie in the two protagonists’ different relationship to and performance of the presidential function. This differentiation in their appreciation and exercise of presidential leadership in turn reflects distinctive personalities with contrasting temperaments, aptitudes and skills (personal variables), distinct political judgements regarding the best way to embody the presidency, to perform the role of the supreme executive office-holder, to portray leadership and maintain appropriate contact with voters (political variables) and dissimilar
evaluations about the extent to which the news media are and should be implicated in the political process (communication variables).

In short, the answer to the contrasting nature of the interdependent relationship between the media and the presidency in France under the two most recent incumbents of the office lies in the role of agency. Sarkozy did not just accept the mediatization of key aspects of his presidential tenure, he positively embraced it: he was not a passive victim, but rather a willing participant in the process of self-mediatization (Esser and Matthes 2013: 199–200). In contrast, for the first two years of his presidency, Hollande had difficulty in incorporating media logic into his performance of the presidential function: during this period his was a mediated rather than mediatized presidential leadership style. Only after the appointment of Gantzer as director of communication at the Élysée in 2014, did Hollande professionalize his presidential communication, with a notable success being his faultless use of the media to respond to the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy in January 2015 (Revault d’Allonnes 2015b: 175–201).

The role of agency as an explanatory variable is a useful reminder that a French president enjoys some relative autonomy in how they interact with the media. Even within the bounds of a single national political communication system and over the short time frame of only a few years, the mediatization of presidential leadership may vary in important ways between incumbents of the office. The contrasting experiences of Sarkozy and Hollande demonstrate, therefore, the need for caution in accepting at face value deterministic structural explanations regarding the mediatization of executive leadership; due account needs to be paid to the variable of agency. Moreover, the role of agency applies not just in France, but by extension in other established democratic polities. Studies of the mediatization of leadership within advanced democratic systems need to take due account of the national political
framework, news media environment and journalistic culture; but they must also include personal, political and communication variables associated with the agency of the leader which may affect their news management strategies, image projection and mediatization of intimacy.

At the same time the French president’s relative autonomy as an institutional actor in the field of political communication should not be overstated. There can be little doubt that since the establishment of the Fifth Republic the importance of media logic in the politics of presidential leadership has grown. This is due in large part to the changes in the news media system and journalistic culture briefly outlined above, but also to the need felt by presidential incumbents to appear in closer touch with voters’ concerns, a need in part driven by constant electoral surveys. A contemporary French president ignores these changes in media structures/functioning and voter expectations at their peril. Yet as this paper has argued, the trend towards a more intrusive media logic in presidential leadership is not necessarily linear.

It is tempting to argue that in seeking to employ the techniques of ‘telecracy’ (Esser and Matthes 2013: 198–199) Sarkozy was more at one with the needs of contemporary presidential leadership than Hollande, whose failure to accommodate a certain degree of media logic in the first couple of years of his term of office might be said to show a certain naivety about the way in which political communication functions in audience democracies. Yet the reality is that both presidents in their different ways could be said to have failed in their use of the media: Sarkozy by an excessive emphasis on communication and publicization of his private life, Hollande through poor organization and a certain disdain for news media management in the first two years of his presidential term.
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