The mediatization of the Hollande presidency
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Abstract

This paper examines the mediatization of the top political leadership function in contemporary France – the presidency of the Republic – with specific reference to the current incumbent, François Hollande (2012–). The French president benefits from significant resources structurally embedded in the office and exercises power within a set of institutional constraints, both political and media. Any incumbent of the presidential office needs to mobilize the resources as effectively as possible so as to overcome the constraints. News media management and public communication form an integral part of the presidential ‘toolkit’ in this regard; they form part of any incumbent’s operationalization of the presidential function.

The paper analyses, explains and evaluates the news media strategies and public communication activities undertaken by president Hollande during a presidential term that so far has been punctuated by certain high-profile events (including the Leondarda affair, the Valérie Trierweiller/Julie Gayet affair, the Charlie Hebdo massacre and the terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice) and has been played out against the backdrop of very low economic growth and rising unemployment. The empirical core of the paper analyses and evaluates the mediatization of the Hollande presidency with reference to three analytic dimensions: news management; image projection; and the public/private leadership boundary.

The paper’s central argument is that for roughly the first two years of his presidency, Hollande largely failed to integrate a coherent public communication and news media strategy into his conception of the functioning of the presidential office. After a relaunch of his presidency in the spring of 2014 (new prime minister, clearer affirmation of economic policy direction, more coherent parliamentary majority, appointment of new head of communications in the presidential office) a professionalization of presidential news management and image projection took place. The presidential response to two major terrorist incidents in Paris in 2015 symbolized this more professional approach to presidential communication. Yet despite the greater emphasis placed on public communication, the president’s popularity in opinion polls has not improved.

The Hollande presidency exemplifies many of the problems facing executive leaders across established democracies in respect of their news media management and public communication activities (divided executive, source competition, critical media commentary, public disaffection). While the paper explicitly focuses on a case-study of French presidential leadership, therefore, its key themes have broader cross-national relevance.
Introduction

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 current incumbent, François Hollande (2012–).

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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).

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 and government in established democracies. 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 French presidencies have been much better covered than others in the academic literature, notably those of the first incumbent, General de Gaulle (Bourdon 1990; Vassallo 2005; Brizzi 2014), and of Hollande’s immediate predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy (Jost and Muzet 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 contemporary 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 officeholders (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).

**Hollande and the media**

*The president: political career and leadership style*

In 2012 Hollande was elected president for a five-year term of office by nationwide popular vote, with an electoral turnout hovering around the 80 per cent mark in both rounds of the contest. His victory came at his first attempt to win the supreme office. In many respects Hollande had the classic curriculum vitae of a Fifth Republic presidential candidate. He had 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. He had also been the leader of a mainstream political party, the Parti Socialiste. In contrast, and unusually for a serious presidential candidate in France, Hollande had never occupied a ministerial post, not even at a junior level – he had no direct experience of serving in government.
In his occupation of the presidency Hollande has benefited from a majority in a parliament elected for five years at the start of his presidential term, even if his government has had to withstand considerable criticism in parliament from the left, including some Socialist representatives, over its economic policies and responses to terrorism. Hollande has faced major challenges in office, governing a country facing difficult, long-standing social, economic and political problems, including the tensions of a multicultural society, terrorist attacks, 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 on electoral competition.

In terms of his presidential style, Hollande initially projected the image of an ‘ordinary’ president (président normal), seeking to differentiate himself from his predecessor’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.

**News management**

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). This was in sharp contrast to the Sarkozy presidency when Franck Louvrier had been the undisputed head of communication at the Elysée. Nor was Hollande known for having strong personal links with media owners, again a contrast with Sarkozy. 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. In the first two years of his presidency 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 address 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, this period of the Hollande presidency was 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 so much 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 the media spotlight, 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.

Other communication errors were related to the chosen media outlet. For instance, in June 2013 Hollande was interviewed at length on the weekly business magazine programme Capital on the M6 television channel. Much trumpeted in advance publicity, this special episode attracted only 2.8 million viewers, not just well short of the five million hoped for by the programme’s producers, but also a below-average audience for the programme. It was not just that Hollande had little new of substance to announce. More importantly, the format of the lengthy political interview broke with the programme’s investigative documentary style, putting off traditional viewers without attracting new ones in sufficient numbers. The programme was deemed a flop by critics, who argued that this type of traditional interview format was more appropriate for one of the mainstream channels, such as TF1 or France 2 (Renault 2013).

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 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.

The comparison between Hollande and Sarkozy in terms of presidential communication was instructive. 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. 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*

Hollande’s political image has always been 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 contest 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 with new glasses and new suits. 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. A notable example was the Leonarda affair in October 2013 when Hollande effectively ended up in a twoway 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.

The public communication of any leading politician in a democracy is more of an art than a science. Certainly in television appearances there are norms regarding matters such as dress code, body language, hand gestures and camera etiquette – a host of informal rules that a politician ignores at their peril. Some elite politicians, notably Barack Obama and Tony Blair early on in his premiership, seemed to be naturally good television performers and public communicators; others, such as George W. Bush and Gordon Brown, experienced great difficulty in coming across well on television, albeit for different reasons. On the international leadership spectrum of
public communication performance President Hollande has come somewhere in the lower middle ranks, reasonably competent at best, somewhat dull and unconvincing at worst.

In terms of his image management Hollande quickly became associated with negative ‘signs’: his tie, which seemed to be permanently askew; the too short sleeves on his jackets; the crash helmet from the photos of his affair with Julie Gayet (see next section); even the rain, which had been such a feature of his investiture celebration and then seemed to mar several of his subsequent public appearances. Media coverage of his Liberation commemoration speech on the île de Sein on 25 August 2014, when Hollande delivered his speech in the open air in the middle of a torrential downpour, rebounded to his disadvantage. As the speech coincided with a major political crisis – the appointment of a new Valls government following the resignation of Montebourg as Minister of the Economy – the symbolism of Hollande struggling against the elements was too obvious an image for political journalists to ignore. In seeking to re-establish control of the imagery, Hollande later tried to adopt the position of a president being in contact with the people, of empathizing with their situation, however arduous. The mediatized images of his île de Sein speech, however, were open to other interpretations; they suggested a president being battered by the elements, at the mercy of forces beyond his control, like King Lear in the storm on the heath. More generally, Hollande frequently appeared to be the victim of critical and even hostile media coverage, as ‘Hollande bashing’ became a favourite sport of the French media throughout (most of) his presidential term.

Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 Hollande sought to reconstruct his image around the idea of the head of state as ‘Father of the nation’ and ‘protector president’. His handling of the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo massacre was widely praised across the French media and by public opinion, leading to a short-lived increase in his popularity at a time of national unity. In sharp contrast, the response from the right to the terrorist attack in Nice in July 2016 took place in a different political context, as candidates of the mainstream opposition prepared to engage in the primary contest in November from which would emerge the nominee for the 2017 presidential election. Hollande and his government were forced on to the defensive with regard to both the specifics of the attack (were operational mistakes made?) and the general nature of the government’s response to the situation of France
being ‘at war’ with terrorists (did the legislative measures previously introduced go far enough?).

The public/private leadership boundary

One of the biggest political communication differences between Sarkozy and Hollande lay in the management of the public/private leadership boundary. 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. 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.

Well before his electoral victory in 2012, Hollande had been a stern critic of the way in which Sarkozy, both before and after becoming president, had mediatized aspects of his private life. For instance, during the face-to-face debate between the two candidates prior to the second round Hollande asserted that if he were to become president he would ensure that his behaviour was always exemplary [‘Moi, président de la République, je ferai en sorte que mon comportement soit à chaque instant exemplaire.’]. Earlier in the campaign, following a television programme in which Sarkozy had referred to the marital problems that had adversely affected the start of his presidential term in 2007, Hollande argued that he respected people’s private life, including that of the president, but that there was no need for it to be exhibited in public. With regard to the mediatization of a politician’s private life, therefore, Hollande presented himself during the 2012 presidential campaign as very much a ‘traditionalist’ in contrast to the ‘transgressive’ approach adopted by Sarkozy. 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). Supported by extensive free media publicity Trierweiler’s book, *Merci pour ce moment*, was a huge commercial success in France, becoming the highest seller of the year, even though some bookshops initially refused to stock it on grounds of taste. The author and her publisher had taken careful steps to ensure that total secrecy was maintained prior to the book’s publication, with the result that Hollande, like everyone else, was taken totally by surprise. The book not only laid bare aspects of the president’s private life, including the fallout from his affair with Gayet, but also criticized Hollande for hypocrisy in his attitude to the less well-off in French society, whom he allegedly called ‘the toothless’ ['*les sans dents*']. These intimate revelations from someone recently involved in a close personal relationship with the president marked a further step in the erosion of the public/private boundary in media coverage of leading political figures in France. They also destroyed the last remnants of Hollande’s pretensions to incarnate an ‘exemplary Republic’, which he had hoped would mark a contrast to Sarkozy’s widely perceived failings in terms of appropriate ethical behaviour in the presidential role.

**Conclusion**

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). Hollande’s 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. Moreover, by the time he had addressed his public communication problems, Hollande was already the most unpopular president in the
history of the regime, with prospects for re-election in 2017 looking inauspicious to say the least.

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