Katrin Voltmer & Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten:

Public Policy and the Mass Media: Influences and Interactions

Outline of topic

Over the last decades the role of the mass media in the political process has changed fundamentally from a rather passive conveyor of messages to a political actor in its own right (Page 1996). As a large body of literature suggests, the media are now taking an active part in the public representation of politics by shaping the agenda of the political discourse and by contributing their own preferences in political controversies (Bennett & Entman 2001; Iyengar & Reeves 1997). Some authors even argue that the growing dominance of the media has led to the emergence of a new type of democracy – 'media democracy' (Meyer 2002) – where the media's logic of operation is increasingly 'colonising' the political process to the effect that political institutions are, at least to some extent, losing control over the course of politics.

Most of the existing literature on the political impact of the media in modern democracies has focused on two large areas of enquiry: media effects on citizens' attitudes and participation and the 'Americanisation' of election campaigns as a response of political parties to the changing electoral environment. However, it remains an open question whether these changes in political communications are confined to the public representation of politics or whether the dynamics of mass communication goes further to also affect the substance of political decisionmaking. In other words, do the media influence the process and content of public policy making? This aspect of the media's role in democratic politics has only recently been addressed (Voltmer, forthcoming). Existing literature based on various case studies provides a rather mixed picture with some instances where policy decisions were made without any media interference and others where media coverage had a significant impact on the outcome of the policy process (Kennamer 1992; Molotch et al. 1987; Spitzer 1993).

The proposed workshop will provide an opportunity for developing a broader and more systematic understanding of the interplay between public policymaking and mass communication. Bringing together scholars from different disciplines, such as political science, international relations and communications studies, to discuss the subject in depth over a period of several days will contribute to establishing and further developing an emerging and fascinating area of research that is highly relevant for the quality and performance of modern democracy.

Relation to existing literature

For most observers the significance of the mass media for public policymaking arises from the fact that the media shape public opinion, thereby forcing political actors to respond to popular preferences. Page & Shapiro's (1992) long-term study on the dynamics of American public opinion confirms that the media play an important role in shaping citizens' issue positions, which in turn has a significant impact on policy decisionmaking. Brettschneider (1996) finds a similar relationship between public opinion and the agenda of the German Bundestag.

Moreover, like the general public policymakers are themselves consumers of media coverage and might be affected by the way in which the media report on current issues and events. Using the case of gun control Callaghan & Schnell (2001) found that elite policy discourse was shaped by the way in which the media framed the issue which eventually shaped the outcome of the decisionmaking process. Further, Herbst (1998) shows that policymakers regard media coverage as a shortcut to public opinion, which they view even more important than public opinion polls.

Whilst most of this research has been carried out by students of public opinion and mass communication, policy research so far has largely ignored the role of the media in the process of policy formation and decision making. In his seminal study on policy agenda formation Kingdon (1984) found only little evidence for media influences on policymaking arguing that policy preferences are relatively stable over time and therefore rather resistant to something volatile as the media agenda. In contrast, Baumgartner & Jones (1993: 103-125) come to a different conclusion. Employing extensive data on both media coverage and policy agendas in a broad range of public policy fields this study provides convincing evidence that the media do affect the course of policymaking. The authors argue that due to the media's preference for sensational and controversial coverage they frequently promote extreme and clear-cut positions making it hard for moderate views to be heard. Consequently, policymakers are driven towards fast and risky solutions that would have fewer chances of being implemented in a less media-saturated environment.

Research from international politics supports these observations. Beginning with the first Gulf War in 1991 students of international relations have become aware of the changing role of the media in international conflicts. According to the 'CNN effect' hypothesis the new, pro-active role of the media in foreign policy has been driven by new communication technologies and further commercialisation and globalisation of the media industry (Bennett & Paletz 1994; Robinson 2001). Over the last decade the media have significantly raised their profile by reporting on crises around the world. Entman (2000: 17) concludes that US national media 'seem to provide the most consistently interventionist elite voices in post-Cold War America'.

However, the assumed causality of the apparent correlation between media coverage and policy decisions has been challenged by various authors. Bennett's (1990) 'indexing theory' states that the media largely reflect, rather than lead, policy debates. It is only in a situation when elite consensus on the dominant policy paradigm breaks up that the media develop an adversary stand in the policy debate. Althaus (2003) confirms this to some extent but points out that instead of generating policy alternatives the media focus on procedural aspects of policy implementation thereby influencing the public's evaluation and acceptance of policy decisions.

The brief discussion of the literature suggests that the role of the media in the policy process is complex and by no means unidirectional. Most of the existing research focuses on US politics and only a small range of policy fields. In order to develop a more valid understanding of the media-policy link we need both further theoretical conceptualisation and a broader range of empirical evidence. The proposed workshop seeks to contribute to this discussion by exploring the following questions:

- To what extent and why does the media's influence differ across policy fields? Beyme (1994) suggests for example that the media play an active role only in controversial policy fields, whereas they are virtually irrelevant for policy decisions that are embedded in established routinised procedures.

- To what extent does the media's influence differ across different stages of the policy process, that is policy agenda formation, policy definition and implementation. It can be assumed that media impact is stronger during agenda formation and implementation when the watchdog role encourages criticism and the search for policy failure.

- How do different institutional contexts and policy network constellations affect the ability of the media to influence policies? It seems that corporatist arrangements of policy formation, as they are for example dominant in Germany, limit the role of the media to an outside observer (Koch-Baumgarten, forthcoming), whereas in a presidential system like the US 'going public' is a major power resource in the policy process.

- In which way do political actors instrumentalize the media in order to promote their policy proposals, and to what extent do they succeed? It can be assumed that the media do not generate policy preferences themselves and therefore willingly respond to public policy initiatives of political elites. However, once in the public sphere the media may add their own frames and interpretations that can shift the perception and subsequently the success of policies.

- To what extent have changes in the media system increased the opportunity of the media to interfere in the policy process? The hypothesis is that growing competition and technological innovations have led to a re-definition of journalistic role perceptions, whereas in countries where the public service ideology still dominates political reporting the media remain in a politically more passive role.

Participants

Prof. Klaus Armingeon (University of Berne, Switzerland)

Prof. Frank Brettschneider (University Hohenheim, Germany)

Dr. Robin Brown (University of Leeds, United Kingdom)

Dr. Neil Gavin (University of Liverpool, United Kingdom)

Prof. Peter Humphreys (University of Manchester, United Kingdom)

Prof. Martin Jaenicke (Free University Berlin, Germany)

Dr. Jan Kleinijenhuis (Free University Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Prof. Teresa Kulawik (Soedertoern University College Stockholm, Sweden)

Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (University of Milano, Italy)

Prof. Thomas Risse (Free University Berlin, Germany)

Dr. Piers Robinson (University of Manchester, United Kingdom)

Type of paper

Since the proposed topic is located at the intersection of various disciplines we invite papers from political science, international relations, communications studies and related fields. Authors will be encouraged to address the questions listed above. We welcome theoretical papers that contribute to the conceptual understanding of the relationship between mass communication and policymaking as well as empirical papers employing a broad range of methodological approaches, in particular case studies, elite research and content analysis. We are especially keen on including comparative papers that will enable us to discuss the questions outlined in a more systematic manner.

Funding

We will make strong efforts to bring in external funding from our respective national research councils.

Biographical notes

Priv.Doz. Dr. Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten is Associated Professor at the Free University of Berlin, Department Political and Social Sciences; German Political System and Comparative Studies. Her research focuses on German and international industrial relations and its actors, new forms of governance in national and international politics, parties and interest groups in the 'media democracy'. At the moment she is preparing a book on the power of the media in particular policy-fields ('Medien und Politik – Neue Machtkonstellationen in ausgewählten Politikfeldern').

Dr. Katrin Voltmer is Senior Lecturer of Political Communication at the Institute of Communications Studies, University of Leeds, UK. Her research focuses on political communication, in particular media effects on political attitudes and political participation, the structure and quality of news, and the role of the media in emerging democracies. She has recently published a book on 'Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies' (Routledge).

Bibliography

Althaus, S.L. (2003): When news norms collide, follow the lead: New evidence for press independence, in: *Political Communication*, 20, 381-414.

Baumgartner, F.R. & Jones, B.D. (1993): *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bennett, W.L. (1990): Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States, in: *Journal of Communication*, 40, 103-125.

Bennett, W.L. & Entman, R.M. (eds.) (2001): *Mediated Politics. Communication in the Future of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bennett, W.L. & Paletz, D.L. (eds.) (1994): *Taken By Storm. The Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beyme, K. von (1994): Die Massenmedien und die politische Agenda des parlamentarischen Systems, in: Neidhardt, F. (ed.): *Oeffentlichkeit, oeffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 320-336.

Brettschneider, F. (1996): Public opinion and parliamentary action. Responsiveness of the German Bundestag in comparative perspective, in: *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8, 292-311.

Callaghan, K. and Schnell, F. (2001): Assessing the democratic debate. How the news media frame elite policy discourse, in: *Political Communication*, 18, 183-212.

Entman, R.M. (2000): Declarations of independence: The growth of media power after the Cold War, in: Nacos, B.L./ Shapiro, R.Y. and P. Isernia (eds.): *Decisionmaking in a Glass House. Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield, 11-26.

Herbst, S. (1998): *Reading Public Opinion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Iyengar, S. and Reeves, R. (eds.) (1997): *Do the Media Govern? Politicians, Voters, and Reporters in America*, London: Sage.

Kennamer, D.J. (ed.) (1992): *Public Opinion, the Press, and Public Policy*, Westport: Praeger.

Kingdon, J.W. (1984): *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Boston: Little, Brown.

Koch-Baumgarten, S. (2006, forthcoming): Das Ende der Geheimdiplomatie? Zur Medialisierung der Tarifpolitik, in: Koch-Baumgarten, S. and Mez, L.: *Medien und Politik –*

Neue Machtkonstellationen in ausgewählten Politikfeldern, Wiesbaden: VS Sozialwissenschaften.

Meyer, T. (2002): *Media Democracy. How the Media Colonize Politics*, Cambridge: Polity.

Molotch, H.L./ Protess, D.L. and Gordon, M.T. (1987): The media-policy connection: Ecologies of news, in: Paletz, D.L. (ed.): *Political Communication Research: Approaches, Studies, Assessments*, Norwood: Ablex, 26-48.

Page, B.I. and Shapiro, R.Y. (1992): *The Rational Public. Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Robinson, P. (2001): Theorizing the influence of media on world politics, in: *European Journal of Communication*, 16, 523-544.

Spitzer, R.J. (ed.) (1993): *Media and Public Policy*, Westport: Praeger.

Voltmer, K. (2006, forthcoming): Massenmedien und politische Entscheidungen: Mediale Einflussfaktoren und Wirkungsbedingungen im Policyprozess, in: Koch-Baumgarten, S. and L. Mez: *Medien und Politik – Neue Machtkonstellationen in ausgewählten Politikfeldern*, Wiesbaden: VS Sozialwissenschaften.