

Assignment 4: Do the media colonize politics?

“Media democracy is a new political regime or constitution with its own rules, constraints, options, resources, channels of influence and limitations,” claims Thomas Meyer.¹ But is there already enough evidence that Western democracies today are different regimes like they used to be some years or decades ago? And do the media really “colonize politics” like the subtitle of Meyer’s book states? According to John Street it could also be the other way round: E.g. the techniques of packaging are helping parties, politicians and governments to develop “effective ways of using the media”². So does rather politics colonize the media? In this assignment I’ll discuss the relationship between politicians and the media with an emphasis on Germany and the United States using some additional sources from there.

In my opinion it’s obvious that policy decisions in Western democracies are still made by the politicians and not by the media. Anyway, something has changed within the last decades and today’s situation is quite different than it used to be before the introduction of television. Meyer characterizes today’s situation as a media democracy that is a “triangle consisting of the media public, political actors with high media profiles, and permanent opinion-polling, all of which reciprocally influence one another.”³ So using his words we can rather speak of a symbiosis than of a one-way colonization like the subtitle of his book misleads.

Agenda-setting approaches can be divided in the three main streams: The *top-down model* says that the governments are building the public agenda – they are profiting from their advanced communication structures (e.g. the Bundespresseamt in Germany, the government’s press office) compared to oppositional parties and can thereby even marginalize issues (which Noelle-Neumann called the “spiral of silence”). The *mediocracy model* sees the media itself as the agenda-setter: A good example from Germany would be the “Florida-Rolf”-case where a retiree received German Social Security while living in Florida. Some weeks after the tabloid “Bild-Zeitung” reported this story a new bill was passed which forbid to pay Social Security to people abroad. Contrary the *bottom-up model* gives the power to the

¹ Meyer, Thomas (2002): Media Democracy. How the Media Colonize Politics. London: Polity, p. XII

² Street, John (2001): Mass Media, Politics and Democracy. Houndmills: Palgrave, p. 187

³ Meyer: p. XIII

people: the audience uses the media as their mouthpiece to set the politicians under pressure in favor of their own concerns.⁴

Nevertheless, the symbiosis described by Meyer doesn't fit into these models. Rather it can be linked to a less known approach developed by the German scholar von Alemann: His theory says that the agenda-setting can more be compared to a "Biotope"⁵, an interplay between politicians and journalists, who are exchanging issues steadily and thereby are shaping the agenda. Manning supports this idea while putting other actors, on the map: "For labour correspondents, the most effective union press officers were those who [...] were willing to foster what can be described as 'exchange relationships' with journalists."⁶ And further on: "Once an environmental beat began to grow, it was possible for environmental organizations to foster exchange relationships with a group of journalists who were likely at least to listen because their professional careers depended upon the rapid acquisition of pertinent environmental information."⁷

Thus, the agenda-setting seems to be a business of giving and taking in both directions. Bodo Hombach, former secretary in chancellor Gerhard Schröder's cabinet and today the manager of Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, agrees with von Alemann's thoughts. But he sees a great danger in this development and demands to reverse it: He thinks that politics and media are way to much intertwined – not only on a personal level but also on an institutional stage.⁸ Even though it sounds strange to hear such critique from a former spin-doctor who changed the sides, it's an important point: Just watch the American news channel "Fox News" – it seems to be partisan in favor of the current administration. But the main question here is: Why does it seem biased? Is the administration colonized by the network or have the Republicans infiltrated Fox? There are some claims that the station reports biased because it's main shareholder Rupert Murdoch adores Ronald Reagan and therefore gave order to carry right-wing propaganda.⁹ But I guess it's simply some more proof for the biotope between politics and media respectively its exchange relationships: Fox News is a commercial organization and simply wants to sell advertisement times. Therefore it needs good ratings. Since the viewers stay tuned and like the way of Fox News' political coverage the station simply shows programs that the viewers

⁴ compare von Alemann, Ulrich (1997): Parteien und Medien, in: Gabriel et. al. (Editors): Parteiendemokratie in Deutschland, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung

⁵ ibid.

⁶ Manning, Paul (2001): News and News Sources. A Critical Introduction. London: Sage, p. 178

⁷ idid.: p. 191

⁸ Hombach, Bodo (2004): Medien als Akteur und Instrument der Politik. http://www.h-quandt-stiftung.de/root/index.php?lang=de&page_id=779

⁹ Greenwald, Robert (2004): Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism. Documentary movie, transcript available at http://www.outfoxed.org/docs/outfoxed_transcript.pdf, p. 7

like: Lots of reports about Bush and his policies. Bush's spin-doctors are acquainted with this and certainly also know how to make use of it: They bring the tool that Meyer calls "stage-management" into play: They work with "pseudo-events, image projections and pseudo-actions"¹⁰, because parties "have to sell themselves"¹¹ by "packaging politics"¹² and gain as much airtime as possible: Since Fox News in their coverage likes to follow every step the President takes, it's important to offer the network and the other media what Street calls "photo-opportunities".¹³ George W. Bush patting a cow¹⁴ might be a good example: "The key resource for the political system to manage its access to the media stage lies in the theatricalization of its own performance".¹⁵ Political leaders therefore also tend to have private meetings as much as possible in public because they want to "encourage the voters to see their (would-be) leaders in a new light".¹⁶

Concluding this, the often conjured power of the media should be questioned: The media is not that powerful as some critics claim. Moreover the media nowadays is just the best stage for leaders to present politics to the public and – sometimes – to manipulate it. In Street's words: "It may be that the traditional forms of political communication are being replaced, and that politicians are becoming performers in popular culture's circus, but this does not mean that politics has stopped. It has just moved on."¹⁷ Even if the media sometimes sets the agenda – the politicians still have the power to decide: "There is no question that the logic of political processes continues to define political competition, even as the influence of media logic keeps spreading," as Meyer concedes.¹⁸ Thus, even if the media stage does more and more substitute the parliamentary stage like e.g. the "Sabine Christiansen"-show in Germany and other chat-shows do, this is no indicator that the media itself becomes powerful. While media-staged politics offers the public a chance to follow at least some part of the political discourse, the "'iron triangles' involving elected political representatives, civil servants and pressure or policy groups"¹⁹ and working behind closed doors are threatening the idea of representative democracy even more than the media does. Contrary the discourse about mass media should be stressed on its positive function as the so-called "fourth estate" once more: Without high-quality

¹⁰ Meyer: p. 66

¹¹ Street: p. 195

¹² *ibid.*: p. 185

¹³ *ibid.*: p. 190

¹⁴ Greenwald: p. 84

¹⁵ Meyer: p. 72

¹⁶ Street: p. 191

¹⁷ *ibid.*: p. 277

¹⁸ Meyer: p. 73

¹⁹ Manning: p. 141

journalism there would be almost no chance that the people would ever get to know how the political process really works and scandals like Watergate or Abu Ghreib would almost never be public without the media.