Views from the other side

Party perceptions on news media in Swedish election campaigns 2010-2022

NIKLAS BOLIN
Mid Sweden University

LARS NORD
Mid Sweden University

Abstract

The study explores the perspectives of political parties regarding news media coverage in election campaigns. By analyzing official post-election analyses produced by Swedish political parties from 2010 to 2022, the study offers a novel approach to the study of political party views of news media. The findings largely support the arguments proposed by mediatization literature, highlighting the significance of media in party communication. Parties display eagerness to attract positive media attention while expressing regret over inadequate or negative publicity. More surprisingly, there is a lack of references to media bias in the reports, suggesting that the hostile media effect is not a major concern among Swedish parties. Despite criticisms related to irrelevant reporting and perceived negative coverage, party perceptions towards the media remains predominantly neutral. The study contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between political parties and news media in the context of election campaigns.

Looking back to go forward

News media coverage of elections has been a distinctive feature of political communication studies for long time in the Nordic countries and has been approached from diverging perspectives, not at least in national content analyses (e.g. Johansson & Strömbäck, 2019 and 2023; Blach-Örsten & Eberholst, 2022). At the same time, less is known about the perceptions on news media and elections from the main counterpart of news media in election campaigns, namely the political parties. Even if sporadic emotional reactions from party representatives on this topic certainly are common – especially soon after electoral defeats – there is a lack of more systematic observations on party perceptions of news media performances during election campaigns.

This study intends to fill this gap by analyzing political party perceptions of news media performances during four national elections campaigns in Sweden 2010–2022. The study is based on the official post-election analyses produced by the political parties after every election. Sweden is an interesting case to study as political parties are relatively transparent and accessible, regularly produce official post-election campaign analyses and make them public.

Party comments in post-election analyses are normally expressed by leading representatives of the party in an early post-election stage. The most prominent and exclusive documentation of party post-election reflections is probably when the party appoint a joint task force of prominent party representatives with the special mission to investigate and analyse party activities during the campaign, to shed new light on successes and failures and to come up with recommendations and road maps for future election campaigns. These documents offer internally sanctioned party analyzes of possible explanations for the electoral outcome, and normally also reflect upon the role of news media during the election campaign.

Such political party perceptions of news media performances are interesting to study for several reasons. First, there is a general belief in political communication studies – confirmed in several observations of late election campaigns – that news media has gained importance in political opinion processes over time (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Esaiasson & Håkansson, 2002; Davis, 2019; Taras & Davis, 2022). This change has often been characterized as a process of mediatization where news media have become more central and decisive for peoples' understanding of politics and consequently with greater potential power to influence voter behavior (Mazzolini & Schulz, 1999; Asp, 2014). Second, and given the assumed importance of news media, the debate about media bias in political reporting has raised questions around news media potentials to

influence the outcome of elections, (Wolfsfeld, 2011; Kreiss & McGregor, 2022).

If the common experience is that news media have become more influential in setting the political agenda, framing political issues, and determining party popularity on public opinion by more or less partisan reporting, it is plausible to believe that news media performance and activities are regular topics in the post-election evaluations, and to some extent also an integrated part in general discussions about reasons for party successes or failures. The basic assumption here would be that news media will be more positively described in post-election analyses if campaign activities have been successful and gained substantial media coverage, if the party agenda has been mirrored by the media agenda, and if the party and party leader has been portrayed in a favorable way. Correspondingly, less media coverage without focus on party salient issues and perspectives can be assumed to result in more negative evaluations of news media performance during the election campaign.

However, such patterns are most likely to appear if the ideas of mediatization and media bias are commonly acknowledged by the parties and integrated in their evaluation schemes. If not, successful parties may claim that their skills in using direct or digital communications have made them less dependent on news media performances, while less successful parties focus on internal miscalculations when discussing the electoral defeat. Consequently, post-election analyses serve as a useful tool for understanding to what extent party perceptions of mediatization and media bias in terms of hostile media effects are relevant in the evaluations of election campaigns,

Knowledge about how political parties most often interpret electoral developments in relation to their perceptions of the news media is limited. By systematically investigating official party documents in terms of post-election evaluations in Sweden 2010-2022, the intention of this article is to contribute to our understanding of how political parties look upon the role of news media in electoral contexts, to what extent such views are influenced by news media performances and, finally, to what degree the theoretical concepts of mediatization of politics and hostile media effects are acknowledged by the political parties.

The comparison of post-election analyses from Swedish political parties offers an excellent opportunity to investigate to what extent such references to media influence and mediatization of politics as well as hostile media effects appear in the party documents, as well as observing the most prominent themes when news media are portrayed positively, negatively or neutrally. The findings largely support the arguments proposed by mediatization literature,

highlighting the significance of media in party communication. Parties display eagerness to attract positive media attention while expressing regret over inadequate or negative publicity. More surprisingly, there is a lack of references to media bias in the reports, suggesting that the hostile media effect is not a major concern among Swedish parties. Despite criticisms related to irrelevant reporting and perceived negative coverage, party perceptions towards the media remains predominantly neutral.

The next section in the article discusses theoretical points of departure – mediatization and hostile media effects – for examining relations between political parties and news media. Then follows a section of the study, methods, and material. The result section displays data and illustrative themes from the post-election analysis and is followed by a discussion section answering the research questions in the study and analyzing the relevance of mediatization and hostile media effect theories in understanding party perceptions of media performance.

Theories of influential and partisan media

The traditional perspectives on media-and-politics-relations during election campaigns in liberal democracies have been an adversary and conflict-oriented model, and an exchange model based on mutual interdependence between media and parties where media offer politicians access to an audience and politicians offer journalists information (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). However, mediatization theory suggests that both media content and political actors are today mainly guided by media logic (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). By systematically examining political parties' perceptions of news media performance and importance over time it is possible to determine to what extent mediatization theory in this dimension is valid in a long-term perspective. This study thus contributes to the understanding of mediatization theory by exploring political party perspectives on news media power and the most prominent themes in party evaluations related to news media influence.

Parallelly, leading news media have been associated with the idea of objective reporting based on professional journalistic norms and routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Schudson, 2018). However, there is a widespread belief that news media do not manage to balance different political viewpoints properly and thus offer the public articles and news features that are slanted, either ideologically biased, directly favoring specific political parties or candidates in content or structurally biased, indirectly favoring parties or candidates

in the ways news are framed (Cushion & Thomas, 2018). This study contributes to the understanding of hostile media effect theory by exploring political party perspectives on news media partisanship and the most prominent themes in party evaluations related to news media bias.

Mediatization

Mediatization is a theoretical concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other. (Couldry & Hepp, 2013: 197). Mediatization refers to social change processes in which media have become increasingly influential in, and deeply integrated into, different spheres of society and where society becomes dependent on media and the media logic (Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2008; Asp, 2014). In this article, mediatization is analyzed in line with an institutionalist tradition where media are perceived as independent institutions with their own set of rules and where mediatization refers to the adaptation to these institutionalized roles (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Lundby 2014).

In the context of politics, mediatization has been defined as 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 (Mazzoleni, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008). Political communication studies have also indicated that contemporary political party campaigning is increasingly mediatized and that political institutions adapt to the news media logic (Cook, 2005; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014; Davis, 2019; Author, 2022).

Mediatization also appears in several analytical dimensions (Asp, 1986; Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; Asp & Bjerling, 2014). In one of these dimensions, political actors or organizations are assumed to increasingly adhere to news media logics to influence the political agenda and reach citizens and possible voters through news media channels and platforms. Mediatization at this organizational level may be defined as a reaction of political organizations following their perception that media and mediated communication gain importance in their environment and implies change in organizational structure and behavior (Donges & Jarren, 2014).

Empirical work firmly rooted in the mediatization concept is still relatively scarce (Hepp et al., 2015, Bolin 2023). Some empirical frameworks have been elaborated (Landerer, 2013; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014) but there is a great need for further empirical research on the extent to which politics in its different facets has gradually become mediatized (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). However, one

study of political party organizations argues that the dimensions of mediatization on an organizational level could be studied empirically by examining explicit indicators such as perceptions (growing importance and relevance of media), structure (increase of staff or experts working with communication) and behavior (increase of media activities, diversification of communication channels) (Donges & Jarren, 2014: 189–191).

Even if empirical data do confirm that political actors today actually take news media into account when they plan election campaign activities and package political messages (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Author, 2022), the adaption processes of political actors do not need to be conform and static. Given the fact that political party responses to mediatization are assumed to be multiple and flexible it is interesting to examine party perceptions of, and reactions on, news media influence in post-election analyses and the thematic contexts in which they most aften appear.

The perceived importance and relevance of news media may be used as indicators of party 'reactions' to mediatization and improve the understanding of why political parties portray news media in terms of positively, negatively, or neutrally evaluations. Perceptions are of course not always based on reality but oftentimes it may be the "presumed" influence of the media that induces political actors to act in a forward-looking manner (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014: 11).

The hostile media effect

The hostile media effect is best illustrated when opposing partisans, representing diverging opinion on a topic, claim that the same news item is unfairly biased against their own point of view and are favoring political opponents. The hostile media effect may appear despite the fact media content is balanced if the topic covered is perceived as very important for the partisans. The hostile media effect thus illustrates the subjective character of information processing and how partisan audiences easily perceive information as contrasting their own positions. Previous research show that the hostile media effect is more evident among politically engaged segments of people with strong opinions on an issue (Vallone et al., 1985; Schmitt et al., 2004).

The hostile media effect has primarily been examined among citizens, and not among political elite groups. However, there are reasons to assume that also politicians will find media content biased when issues that are important for them are covered. One reason is that politicians' perceptions of journalism, compared to citizens, are more driven by political engagement and sense of self-esteem and by self-interests and strategic considerations, where media

coverage may be used as a factor for explaining electoral defeats (Matthes et al., 2019; Soontjens et al., 2021) or as one study puts it: 'Media criticism might help to shield the candidate in the minds of voters against further negative coverage they encounter' (Domke et al., 1999: 39).

In the few studies among political elites, the hostile media effect seems to have been more articulated among politicians to the far right (Matthes et al., 2019). A recent study of politicians in Belgium (Soontjens et al., 2021) showed that political elites seemed to be quite frustrated with the media and especially their influence on politics. There was a general tendency to perceive news as biased against the own party and politicians who got most media coverage was the most critical. The findings indicated that politicians were not only driven by strategic considerations but also by genuine perceptions of media bias (Soonetjens et al., 2021: 999).

A Norwegian study (Kolltveit et al., 2022) that compared the hostile media effect among politicians, journalists, and citizen indicated small differences among the three categories, but general perceptions of media as sensation-oriented and conflict-oriented were associated with higher hostile media effects than in groups who emphasized the societal role of media. Results also showed that overall, the hostile media effect was not very articulated in Norway, but politicians were slightly more critical to the media than other groups, and in line with previous research politicians to the right were most critical and claimed that media were biased against their own parties. The Norwegian study mainly analyzed local politicians' perceptions of news media.

As the existence of possible hostile media effects among politicians are less explored it is highly relevant to analyze whether such perceptions of news media performance appear in the post-election analyses and in different thematic contexts. This contributes to the understanding of possible mechanisms that may trigger party accusations of partisanship in news media.

To sum up, it is reasonable to assume that party perceptions of news media during election campaigns are formed by the possible strength and influence of news media and the possible bias in news reporting. The combination of these two dimensions on party perception of news media performance can be summarized as follows (fig. 1):

	Low degree of Mediatization	High degree of mediatization
High degree of media bias	Mostly neutral	Mostly negative
Low degree of media bias	Mostly positive	Mostly neutral

Figure 1: Model for exploring political party perceptions of news media performance.

As illustrated in the figure above, party criticism of news media during election campaigns are expected to be most articulated in cases where news media are perceived both as powerful and central in political communication processes and as partisan in election campaign coverage. In election contexts where news media both are perceived as less powerful and non-partisan media criticism is less likely to be expressed. In cases where media are perceived as powerful and non-partisan or less powerful and partisan media perceptions can be expected to be mostly neutral.

In this study, the official post-election analyses documents provided by political parties during the period 2010–2022 are used to compare party perceptions of news media performances and to shed new light on the debate of the validity of the theoretical concepts of mediatization and hostile media effects by testing them against robust empirical data, consistent over time but produced under varying media and politics-relations.

The study, data, and method

The study

The objective of the study is to explore Swedish political party perceptions of news media performances in post-elections analyses during the latest four elections campaigns 2010–2022. The following research questions are raised:

RQ1: How are news media performances perceived in party post-election analyses 2010-2022?

RQ2: To what extent do the parties' perceptions of the news media in post-election analyses express ideas about mediatization?

RQ3: To what extent do the parties' perceptions of the news media in post-election analyses express ideas about hostile media effects?

Data

To examine party perceptions of the media in election campaigns, we have collected and analyzed official post-election analyses prepared by political parties following each general election (2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022). These post-election analyses serve as reports that scrutinize and evaluate party activities during the campaign. Their aim is to provide fresh insights into the party's accomplishments and shortcomings, as well as to propose recommendations and strategies for future electoral campaigns. Consequently, these documents offer internally endorsed party assessments regarding potential explanations for the electoral results, while also reflecting on the role of news media throughout the election campaign.

To the best of our knowledge, despite the relatively wide availability of parties' post-election analyses as strategically sanctioned documents by party leadership, there is a lack of systematic research that has comprehensively analyzed their content (but, see Bjereld et al., 2018). Therefore, this study can also be regarded as innovative in this regard.

Although parties have been increasingly disclosing their post-election analysis reports to the public, this has not consistently been the practice. As a result, our sample of reports is not exhaustive. In this paper, we analyze 20 reports from the past four elections held between 2010 and 2022, encompassing seven of the eight parties represented in the Swedish parliament. The Sweden Democrats are excluded from the analysis as they have not made any reports publicly available. As previous research indicates that far right parties tend to be more critical of traditional media compared to other parties (Matthes et al., 2019; Bolin et al., 2022), we need to be cautious not to draw conclusions about party families not represented in the study.

On average, the reports consist of approximately 20,000 words, although there is considerable variation, ranging from around 6,000 words to nearly 40,000 words. In total, there are 316 coded statements of instances of media in the reports corresponding to about 16 instances per report. Despite longer reports generally containing a greater number of media instances, the correlation between the two is relatively weak, suggesting that shorter reports tend to

allocate relatively more attention to the media (see appendix, table A1 for a complete list of the analyzed reports).

Method

The analysis of the post-election analysis reports was facilitated by the use of Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis software (Rampin & Rampin 2021). The coding process comprised three steps. Firstly, each occurrence of the search term "medi*" was identified. Since our focus was on traditional media, any instances relating to social media were excluded. Moreover, occurrences of "medi*" in headlines or table of contents were also disregarded. Additionally, instances that were unrelated to media, such as "median," "mediocre," "medicine," etc., were removed.

In the second step, the remaining instances of "medi*" were categorized into two distinct groups: "description" and "future". The "description" category encompassed instances where the media was mentioned in relation to describing the election and campaign. This category was further divided into three subcategories based on whether the instance described something positive, neutral, or negative from the party's perspective. We also identified a fourth theme with instances that represented statements that discussed how the party might or should act in future endeavors. These statements can be either explicit recommendations regarding what actions the party should take in future endeavors or somewhat implicit suggestions on areas that could be enhanced. Nearly all of these statements revolve around different strategies to garner heightened and favorable media coverage. As this category is not related to the research questions, we do not include it in the qualitative analysis.

In the third step, we conducted an inductive process to identify recurring themes within each sub-category, aiming to obtain a more detailed assessment of the most significant perceptions about media in election campaigns. This step is closely linked to the research questions of the study by identifying to what extent and in what way parties perceive the media to be important and biased in any direction. As revealed in the empirical analysis, a distinction is made here regarding the extent to which positive/negative publicity can be attributed to the party's actions or if the media can be credited or blamed. This approach follows a bottom-up methodology where instances of medi* were read multiple times before assigning them to different themes. The most prevalent themes identified are presented in the result section. Some themes are accompanied by illustrative quotes from the reports. Throughout these steps, discussions took place within the research group to challenge interpretations and validate the preliminary categorization (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Before we turn to the qualitative analysis, we note some overall patterns in the analyzed data (see appendix, table A2). The most prevalent type of statement concerning the media is neutral. Negative statements are somewhat more common than positive statements. There are some variations both over time and among parties. Regarding the temporal aspect, apart from a growing trend of more positive instances of media in the reports, no linear patterns can be observed. It is also worth noting that left-leaning parties tend to have relatively more negative statements than right-leaning parties. While we exercise caution in drawing far-reaching conclusions based on this finding, it is noteworthy that existing research generally suggests that right-wing parties are more skeptical toward the media than their left-wing counterparts (Matthes et al., 2019).

In the following section, we present the findings derived from the qualitative analysis conducted on the post-election analysis reports. The analysis is structured around three primary categories, as outlined in the methodology section: positive, negative and neutral. Within each category, we delve into various themes identified through an inductive thematic approach, as described in the data and method section. Table 1 provides an overview of the most recurrent themes identified, accompanied by concise descriptions elucidating the essence of each theme. Furthermore, the table illustrates the frequency of occurrence of the different themes within the analyzed material. However, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting the exact numbers, as they solely indicate the frequency of occurrence and do not denote the significance and clarity of each instance. Therefore, while we argue that, all else being equal, higher numbers indicate a greater prominence of specific themes in the post-election analysis reports, our primary interpretation of the data is based on the qualitative analysis, which we will now proceed to discuss.

Theme	Description	Occurrences
Positive		
Successful campaign events and political announcements	Positive media responses because of well-planned campaign events or the introduction of new policies	27
Party leader effects	Party leaders draw attention to the party and generate positive response in the media	17
Positive media image	General statements of much and/or positive publicity	12
Negative		
Disappointment or criticism of the media agenda	Skepticism about what or who the media focuses on.	29
Negative media image	General statements of little and/or negative publicity	25
Political failures and scandals	Misconduct among representatives or internal disagreements within the party that generated negative publicity	19
Failed campaign events and political announcements	Actions by the party that did not generate positive attention by media or where the party failed to do things that might have led to positive media attention.	18
Neutral		
On media	Descriptions on the role of media and how it has developed	38
Campaign and organization	Descriptions about how campaigns are planned and conducted	33

Neutral statements on the media agenda	Descriptions of what issues were high respectively absent from the media agenda	27
Future	Recommendations regarding actions and strategies to garner heightened and favorable media coverage.	28

Table 1: Most recurrent identified themes

Positive statements

The positive statements that have been identified in the reports are predominantly those describing how the party itself has successfully generated media coverage through various means. There are three recurring themes that commonly emerge. The most prominent theme revolves around *successful campaign events and political announcements*. These statements illustrate instances where parties have received positive media responses because of well-planned campaign events or the introduction of new policies. For instance, the Left Party's 2014 report provides an illustrative example wherein the party's "demand to halt profits in the welfare sector" garnered increasing media attention, subsequently leading to a surge in support in the opinion polls. Another example is how the Moderates' post-election analysis from the same year reveals that the "emphasis on the Swedish diaspora garnered media attention at both the national and international levels". Yet another prominent political move that generated favorable publicity was when Ebba Busch, the leader of the Christian Democrats, used a traditional Swedish falukorv sausage as a visual aid during a party leader debate in the 2022 campaign. By showcasing the rising price of the falukorv, she aimed to symbolize the escalating inflation and highlight the negative implications for Sweden. "The falukorv received significant media coverage", the post-election analysis report succinctly summarized.

A second reoccurring theme is favorable mentions of *party leader effects*. This theme includes statements where it is suggested that party leaders skillfully draw attention to the party and generate what is perceived as a positive response in the media. This can be exemplified with how the Centre Party 2018 report simply states that "media's interest in the leader [Annie Lööf] of the party was high" or more elaborated as in how the Liberals report from the 2022 election summarized how their newly elected leader Johan Pehrson:

> In the media, came to be portrayed as easygoing, humorous, and down-to-earth, symbolized by the fact that he was often served hot dogs during campaign visits. He became known as "the guy at the grill."

Another relatively common theme is instances of general statements of a *positive media image.* This may be instances of how the post-election reports simply cite how various media monitors report that the party has gained a lot and/or positive publicity or how the party received the media attention they rightfully deserved. The Liberals report for the 2018 election, for instance, observed that the party's relatively poor electoral performance could not be attributed to the "quantitative media impact" or the party being "invisible".

Negative statements

Whereas the positive statements primarily are related to alleged successful party behavior, among the most prominent negative statements we find both those that are regarded as party failures and those that explicitly or implicitly blame the media and thereby partially express ideas about hostile media effects. The ones where media gets the blame are somewhat more frequent.

The most frequent theme identified is parties' *disappointment or criticism of the media agenda.* Basically, this theme includes various instances of how parties are skeptical about what and who the media focuses on. Several instances focus on how media instead of reporting on parties' policies and priorities rather emphasize game-theory and party tactics. In the Left Party's 2010 post-election analysis, it is observed, for instance, that "the substance of politics was overshadowed" and that the party could not do much "as media interest largely focused on the major parties in both blocs". An argument that resonates with the Christian Democrats' 2022 analysis:

> The election campaign primarily revolved around game theory regarding the question of government formation, with few other statements, proposals, or attacks gaining prolonged visibility in the news feeds.

This theme also includes several instances of how media reported on "wrong issues". The Moderates report of 2014, for example, decries how the media agenda favored the Sweden Democrats when the debate almost exclusively dealt with the magnitude of the immigration although "a majority of voters support the current migration policy and do not want to restrict immigration in the manner advocated by the Sweden Democrats". And the Left Party analysis of 2022 concludes that:

There is a clear discrepancy between the issues perceived as most important by voters and those that have received the most media coverage. Healthcare, which was the top priority for voters, ranks sixth in media reporting and received less than half the media attention that the energy issue received.

The Greens' report of 2022, in turn, warned that the media agenda could have unintended consequences:

The polarization between urban and rural areas was another issue that received significant media attention. There is a need to scrutinize the image that has been portrayed. It is a problematic image, and it fosters a decrease in trust in society, an increase in "us-versus-them" sentiments, and ultimately benefits the influence of the far-right.

A second theme that was almost as common was instances of general statements of a *negative media image*. The Christian Democrat 2018 report, almost gleefully, observed how "anyone who followed the party's media coverage was painfully aware that it was largely a matter of when, rather than if, the party would be ousted from the parliament."

There are also instances of how the post-election reports, in contrast to the *positive media image* theme, cite how various media monitors report that the party has gained little and/or negative publicity. As expressed, for instance, by the Left Party 2010 report where it is concluded that "a well-executed election campaign is not enough […], especially considering that we do not receive much free coverage in the media".

However, negative statements are not solely reserved for explicit or implicit media criticism that would indicate a hostile media effect. A number of instances can be referred to as *failed campaign events and political announcements* which are actions by the party that did not generate the anticipated positive attention by media or where the party failed to do things that might have led to positive media attention. The Centre Party report of 2022 describes a mismatch in how the party, rather than adhering to the concerns and everyday problems of the citizens instead "responded to questions that few voters and media outlets were asking" and the Christian Democrats' report the very same year acknowledged that the party was disadvantaged by the media logic's focus on the larger parties, but the situation "was exacerbated by their own choice to focus on issues where the party lacked a marketable differentiation from neighboring parties".

An additional related, but distinct, theme can be referred to *political failures and scandals*. This theme includes instances of misconduct among representatives that attracted negative media attention. The Christian Democrat analysis of 2018 for instance reports on how some of their MPs had made incorrect travel expense claims that created a negative media image. Other reports indicate how internal disagreements within the party have been unable to be kept away from the media, thereby generating negative publicity. In the Left Party 2022 post-election analysis report, it is for example described how "prominent party representatives demonstrated their support for the Kurds [...] by displaying a PKK flag" and how "this sparked a public discussion about whether the Left Party supports the PKK" although it was not part of the agreed-upon election strategy.[1] The Liberal Party's 2022 report provides a more general discussion on party behavior and how the liberals consistently fail to maintain internal disagreements within the party.

> The party is perceived to lack the ability to resolve conflicts. We are also unable to keep internal conflicts contained or sustainably unite all parts of the party in a common direction. Too often, engagement is channeled into taking positions in various internal debates and conflicts, which also spills over into the media portrayal and the public perception of the party.

Neutral statements

The most common instances of medi* are those that are categorized as *neutral*. This category includes several rather divergent themes. One relatively common theme refers to instances where media is mentioned in passing or in a way that does not refer to the overall question of the paper. These instances are, hence, disregarded.

The theme with most instances, we refer to as *on media*. This theme includes statements that more generally describe and discuss the role of media and how it has developed. It might for instance be descriptions of how "the media has a tendency to focus on the major parties in the final stages of an election campaign" as stated in the Centre Party report of 2018 or how "the significance of party leaders in the choice of party has gradually increased as election campaigns have become increasingly mediated" as the Liberals conclude the same year. More generally, it can be concluded that the relatively frequent occurrences of such statements lend some support for the mediatization theory and how parties become increasingly conscious of the news media's needs and adapt to a media logic.

The Social Democrats' 2014 report is perhaps the best illustration of this development in how it devotes considerable space to

describe the development of news media and amongst other things highlight the central role of media:

> From the 1960s onwards, broad commercial mass media increasingly took over that role [as agenda setters]. By making their own priorities, guided by the logic of the mass media, by examining what voters themselves wanted to prioritize, and by highlighting conflicts between and within parties in ways they had not done before, the mass media became more powerful as agenda setters. The competition among parties for media coverage largely revolved around influencing the priorities of the mainstream mass media, just as businesses, interest groups, and others sought to influence them to bring attention to their specific issues in the public debate. To a large extent, this still holds true today. Mass media remains the most important factor. However, the agenda is now shaped in a more complex interplay among actors, where social media, networks, and online platforms have come to play an increasingly significant role. To understand the agenda in an election campaign, all these factors—parties' own priorities, voters' priorities, mass media priorities, as well as the influence of social media—must be taken into account.

The second most frequent theme among the neutral statements can be referred to as *campaign and organization* which are references to how the party has planned and conducted its election campaign. Within this theme there are various descriptions of how the organization handle questions from the media, statements of how parties' budget for media issues are smaller than for other parties and general statements that media strategies had been developed. In some instances, some more elaboration on this later point is presented. In the post-election analysis reports of 2022, for example, we learn that:

> The Centre Party strategy for paid media prioritized reach and visibility, in other words, breadth over depth. The goal was to reach as many voters as possible on as many occasions as possible and to remind them that the Center Party existed as a liberal centrist alternative.

Whereas the Moderates "communication strategy for the election can be summarized with the motto 'media impact, personal influence'".

Finally, a third theme identified among the neutral statements refers to *neutral statements on the media agenda*. Most of these instances are descriptions of what issues were high respectively absent from the media agenda without explicit or implicit references to who may or may not be favored by this. In the Social Democrats 2018 report it is, for example, concluded that:

> The media coverage of serious crime, particularly gang-related murders, peaked during the fall and winter of 2017-2018, and so did the voters' prioritization of crime as a political issue.

In a similar vein, the Greens' report of 2022 in a neutral way described how public opinion and the media agenda aligned about a month prior to the election:

> In August, the voters' most important issues were unsurprisingly healthcare, law and order, education, and immigration. However, there was also an increase in concerns regarding personal finances and energy policy. These were issues that had a significant impact on people's everyday lives and received substantial media coverage, not just during the election period.

Conclusions: General acceptance of influential news media

The examination of news media coverage in elections has long been a prominent field of study. However, there has been limited attention devoted to understanding the news media perspectives of political parties, who play a crucial role in the electoral process alongside the news media. Although sporadic reactions from party representatives on this subject are not uncommon, there remains a gap in systematic observations regarding party perceptions of news media performances throughout election campaigns. To address this gap, the present study conducted a comprehensive analysis of political party perceptions by examining the official post-election analyses produced by Swedish political parties after each election from 2010 to 2022.

The analysis largely supports the arguments put forth by the mediatization literature. Most of the post-election analysis reports that were analyzed contained explicit or implicit statements about the significance of the media. Political parties perceived news media as important, party organizational structures were transformed, and party behavior changed. Parties demonstrated eagerness to attract positive media attention and expressed regret over receiving insufficient or negative publicity. More specifically, the analysis indicates that parties strategically seek positive media publicity. Planned campaign activities and political statements aim extensively to attract positive media attention. Simultaneously, political leaders emerge as crucial tools for the same purpose.

However, while the influence of mediatization theory is evident, the overall assessment does not indicate any extensive partisan

hostility towards the media. The majority of references to the media in the reports are neutral statements. And although negative statements are slightly more prevalent than positive ones, not all of them explicitly blame the media for poor or hostile performance. Parties do offer criticisms of the media, such as concerns about the reporting of irrelevant issues or a perception of inadequate or overly negative coverage of their party. However, there are very few references to media coverage being used as an explanatory factor for electoral defeats. In fact, we find a surprising lack of references of a partisan media bias in the reports and hence conclude that it does not seem to be perceived as a great problem among those Swedish parties included in the analysis. Even though there is generally relatively little negative criticism, it is worth noting that parties also very rarely consider themselves positively favored by the media. Instances where the media is mentioned positively in the reports instead revolve around the party believing they have done something deserving of positive publicity.

Returning to the theoretical discussion and the framing of party perceptions of news media as a two-dimensional concept, we can therefore conclude that Swedish parties generally perceive news media to be both influential and central in their communication. Simultaneously, we also observe a relative absence of perceptions regarding the existence of media bias. Party perceptions towards the media, hence, tends to be predominantly neutral. The result is thus in line with our suggested model for anticipating party perceptions of news media performances where these perceptions were to be mostly neutral in contexts with higher degree of mediatization and lower degree of hostile media effects.

In conclusion, it is important to consider our findings as preliminary and a result of certain limitations. The study was conducted over a relatively limited time period, primarily capturing party perceptions of news media during that specific timeframe. We also did not have access to all the post-election analyses conducted during this period. However, since we analyzed a majority of them and covered seven out of eight parties, there are good reasons to believe they are representative of the entire population. It is worth noting, though, that we were unable to include the post-election analyses of the Sweden Democrats. Previous research has suggested that both far right parties in general (Matthes et al., 2019) and the Sweden Democrats specifically (Bolin et al., 2022) tend to be more critical of traditional media compared to other parties. Therefore, the results of this study may not necessarily reflect the viewpoints within this particular party. So even though our results should primarily be interpreted as an attempt to paint a general picture of Swedish parties' perceptions of news media, it cannot be overlooked that there might

be time- or party-specific variations that have not been identified. Therefore, we encourage further research that includes a longer time span and all political parties.

It is also important to note that we have not explicitly compared party perceptions of traditional news media with their perceptions of social media, nor have we tested the argument within the 'end of mediatization' debate (Schultz, 2004) regarding how new media may make parties more independent from news media. Therefore, while we argue that the analyzed data provides relatively strong support for the conclusion that parties attribute significant importance to news media and that media logic appears to be significant in their actions, this conclusion should be made with the reservation that we do not make any claims regarding the relative significance compared to other components of the total media eco system, for example, social media.

NOTES

[1] PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) is the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a party that is designated as a terrorist organization by for example the United States, the EU and Sweden.

REFERENCES

Albaek, E., van Dalen, A., Jebril, N. & de Vreese, C. (2014). *Political Journalism in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139567367

Asp, K. (1986). *Mäktiga massmedier. Studier i politisk opinionsbildning*. Stockholm: Akademilitteratur.

Asp, K. (2014). Mediatization: Rethinking the Question of Media Power. In K. Lundby (ed.), *Mediatization of Communication* (pp. 349–373). Berlin: de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272215.

Asp, K., & Bjerling, J. (2014). *Mediekratin – mediernas makt i svenska val*. Stockholm: Ekerlids.

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

Bjereld, U., Blombäck, S., Demker, M., & Sandberg, L. (2018) *Digital demokrati? Partierna i en ny tid*. Stockholm: Atlas.

Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1995). *The Crisis of Public Communication*. London: Routledge.

Blach-Örsten, M. & Kaemsgaard Eberholst, M. (2022). *Valgbarometer FV 22: Krisevalget. Et jordskredsval mod den politiske midte*. Roskilde: Center for Nyhedsforskning.

Bolin, N., Grusell, M. & Nord, L. (2022). *Politik är att vinna. De svenska partiernas valkampanjer*. Stockholm: Timbro förlag.

Bolin, G. (2023). Mediatisation, Digitisation and Datafication: The Role of the Social in Contemporary Data Capitalism. *The Central European Journal of Communication*, 1(33): 7–18. DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.16.1(33).1

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cook, T. E. (2005). *Governing with the News. The News Media as a Political Institution.* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Couldry, N. & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions, Arguments. *Communication Theory*, 23(3): 191–202. https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12019

Cushion, S. & Thomas, R. (2018). *Reporting Elections. Rethinking the Logic of Campaign Coverage.* Cambridge: Polity.

Davis, A. (2019). *Political Communication. A New Introduction for Crisis Times.* Cambridge: Polity.

Domke, D, Watts, M. D., Shah, D. V. & and Fan, D. P. (1999). The Politics of Conservative Elites and the 'Liberal Media' Argument, *Journal of Communication*, 49(4), 35–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02816.x

Donges, P. & Jarren, O. (2014). Mediatization of Political Organizations: Changing Parties and Interest Groups? In F. Esser & J. Strtömbäck (Eds.): *Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies* (pp. 181–199). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Esaiasson, P., & Håkansson, N. (2002) *Besked ikväll! Valprogram men i svensk radio och TV* Stockholm: Stiftelsen Etermedierna i Sverige.

Esser, F. & Strömbäck, J. (Eds.) (2014). *Mediatization of politics. Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275844.

Johansson, B., & Strömbäck, J. (2019) *Kampen om mediebilden: Nyhetsjournalistik i valrörelsen 2019.* Stockholm: Institutet för mediestudier.

Johansson; B. & Strömbäck, J. (2023). *Valet 2022: Politiken, medierna & nyhetsagendan*. Stockholm: Institutet för mediestudier.

Kolltveit, K., Karlsen, R. & Figenschou, T. (2022). Elites and partisan news: Investigating hostile media perceptions amongst citizens, politicians and journalists. *Norsk statsvitenskapelig tidsskrift,* 38(4), 214–229. https://doi.org/10.18261/nst.38.4.6.

Kreiss, D. & McGregor, S. (2022). Struggles to Align Voters during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, In D. Taras, D & R. Davis, R. (eds.). (2022). *Electoral Campaigns, Media, and the New World of Digital Politics* (pp. 23–43). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

DOI: 10.3998/mpub.12013603.

Lundby, K. (2009). Media Logic: Looking for Social Interaction. I K. Lundby (red.), *Mediatization. Concept, Changes, Consequences*. New York: Peter Lang, 101–119.

Lundby, K. (Ed.) (2014). K. Lundby (ed.): *Mediatization of Communication*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Matthes, J., Maurer, P. & and Arendt, F. (2019). Consequences of Politicians' Perceptions of the News Media: A Hostile Media Phenomenon Approach, *Journalism Studies*, 20(3), 345–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1377102.

Mazzoleni, G., & Schultz, W. (1999) Mediatization' of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? *Political Communication, 16*(3), 247-261. https://doi.org/10.1080/105846099198613

Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Mediatization of Politics. In W. Donsbach (Ed.): *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, vol. VII (pp. 3047–3051). Maiden: Blackqwell.

Rampin, R. & Rampin, V. (2021) Taguette: Open-source qualitative data analysis. *Journal of Open Source Software*. 6(68), 1-5. https://joss.theoj.org/papers/10.21105/joss.03522

Schudson, M. (2018). Why Journalism Still Matters. Cambridge: Polity.

Schultz, W. (2004). Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept. *European Journal of Communication,* 19(1), 87–101. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040.

Schmitt, K., Gunther, A. C. & Liebhart, J. L. (2004). Why Partisans See Mass Media as Biased. *Communication Research*, 31(6), 623–641. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650204269390.

Shoemaker, P. J., & Reese, S. D. (2014). Mediating the Message in the 21st Century. A Media Sociology Perspective. New York: Routledge.

Soontjens, K. van Remoortere, A. & Walgrave, S. (2021). The hostile media: politicians' perceptions of coverage bias, *West European Politics*, 44(4), 991–1002. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1792671.

Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 13*(3), 228-246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208319097.

Taras, D., & Davis, R. (Eds.). (2022). *Electoral Campaigns, Media, and the New World of Digital Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. DOI: 10.3998/mpub.12013603.

Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Biased Perception and Perceptions of Media Bias in Coverage of the Beirut Massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 49(3), 577–585. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.49.3.577

Wolfsfeld, G. (2011). *Making Sense of Media & Politics. Five Principles in Political Communication*. New York: Routledge.

NIKLAS BOLIN
Associate Professor
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Mid Sweden University
niklas.bolin@miun.se

LARS NORD
Professor
Department of Communication, Quality Management, and Information Systems
Mid Sweden University
lars.nord@miun.se