Book Review

Thomas Schillemanns:
Mediatization of Public Services:
How Organizations Adapt to News Media.
Frankfurt: Peter Lang. 2012.

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Thomas Schillemans new book analyzes the mediatization of public organizations. His study is the first of its kind as previous related studies have more explicitly explored the mediatization of politics or other phenomena such as fashion, play, music, or religion. Organizations may be conceived of as phenomena as well, but they are also formal groups of actors that are, precisely, *organized* and therefore can be analysed as actors practicing organization.

When Thomas Schillemanns worked for a public organization in Holland, he found that the news was an ever-present companion for his colleagues and himself. At present, Schillemanns researches public administration at Utrecht University, and he has set out to study the mediatization of public services from a governance perspective. One good reason for doing so is that public and third sector service providers in Holland feature in a third of the daily news outputs. In the UK and Australia, the number is even higher (p. 15).

The book is among many recent empirical studies of mediatization that follow more theoretically informed works on mediatization by, for instance (and to mention just a few), Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999), Strömbäck (2008), Krotz (2009), and Hjarvard (2008). Schillemans does not place his study reflectively in relation to different definitions of mediatization, its elements, and causal explanations. However, Schillemans draws explicitly on Schulz' categories of social change related to the media, which will be further elaborated below.

Schillemans writes that his book:

> […] aims to shed light on the impact of the news media on public and third sector organi-
> zations providing public services. It basically seeks to describe and understand the way in
> which the news media have become an influential, external force that shapes, and possibly
> changes, public and third sector organizations providing public services" (p. 18)

His aim is also to transform the catch-all concept of mediatization into a "filtering concept
that sifts and selects in order to thicken our insights and to improve the quality of the
residue of knowledge" (p. 17). Finally, Schillemanns believes that a key question is whether
media pressure and the resulting mediatization of the organization affects a "loss of core
functions, goals and perspectives" (p. 123, see also p. 12).

The book's analyses are structured strictly by Schultz' (2004) three processes of media-
tization: substitution, amalgamation, and accommodation (Schillemans does not apply the
process of extension that Schulz also mentions). Schillemanns draws on a very simplified
model of organization in order to anchor the processes of mediatization as instances of
organizational mediatization. According to this model, an organization consists of inputs,
throughputs, and outputs (p. 52). The simplicity of the model is justified by the need to
contain complexity and to facilitate comparisons between many otherwise-different
public service providers.

Pursuing his aims, Schillemans has used a mixed methodology in order to analyze and
comprehend the complex reality of news media impact on public and third sector organi-
zations in Holland and Australia. Content analysis has been conducted in order to measure
the level of pressure on organizations by the news media as well as to measure the level of
personalization and pack journalism/news waves, comparing these with the coverage of
national politicians. Content analysis of organizational websites has also been conducted
in order to analyse and assess the degree to which the sites cater for the news media in the
form of contact details, presentation of facts and figures, etc.

Several respondents from public and third sector organizations have furthermore con-
tributed to the study. Focus groups with a total number of 42 respondents from different
kinds of public organizations were conducted. These respondents – as well as a few more
– also filled in a questionnaire. Finally, 36 elite interviews were conducted. All questions
were guided by a wish to explore the perceived media pressure on the organizations and
the mediatization of their inputs, throughputs, and outputs.

Unsurprisingly, the overall conclusion of the book is that "public services are provided
by public and third sector organizations that have all, to varying degrees, become media-
tized" (p. 123). The book contains many interesting results grounded primarily in the quali-
tative material. I shall mention a few of the most interesting. In the analytical framework of
"organizational inputs", Schillemans lets his informants describe how the news media are
monitored by organizations accommodated to this task and how the news media function
as a signal system informing them of stakeholders' future steps rather than informing them
of content. Organizational agents are thus much more aware of what is written between
the lines of news items than of the events to which these news items refer. In the analytical

framework of "organizational throughputs", news media pressure means increasing message control and the growing status of communication personnel within public and third sector organizations. This also affects policymaking, which is increasingly produced with due regard to anticipated media coverage.

In the analytical framework of "organizational outputs", Schillemans' informants show us how strategies for getting in and staying out of the news media dominate their daily routines. This should be understood from the perspective that public service organizations produce and have access to vast amounts of data that is of potentially high importance to the public and that news media may find this newsworthy too. Schillemans points out that the organizations perceive this data as important either because of their role as public servants or because of their interests in self legitimization *vis-à-vis* the public and the political system. However, precisely because of their role as public servants, the organizations are also subject to news media scrutiny. The news media are therefore a double-edged sword of which the organizations sometimes try to make use but just as often try to avoid. One respondent describes it – probably with unintentional humour – as an unavoidable evil: "The best way is being careful in providing details, not holding something back, but be careful how you explain. And just ensure that there's nothing more to find. Then it usually goes away" (p. 107).

However, Schillemanns underlines that "mediatization is not a direct effect of what journalists, editors and media corporations *do* – and might be blamed for doing – but is more properly understood as a structural development in complex systems of governance" (p. 9). One example of this may be the pattern through which the more dependent organizations perceive themselves to be of public goodwill or co-production, the more they are mediatized. An organization dealing with public health issues thus needs the public to actively engage in a perceived healthy life style, and a third sector organization working with public health would thus be the most liable to be mediatized in its outputs.

I have had to reread quite a few sections in the book because the practical use of Schulz' concepts does not match how I would use them with the empirical material. For instance, according to Schulz, amalgamation is when human interaction is simultaneously mediated and non-mediated, as for example when students communicate on a mediated backchannel while attending a traditional lecture. The effect of amalgamation is that mediated and non-mediated definitions of reality in social interaction *merge* and *mingle* (Schulz, 2004, p. 89). However, Schillemanns uses the concept to describe the mingling of unmediated media-related activities with essentially non-media activities (p. 51, 81) and thus modifies the concept into an actor-driven, practice-oriented concept. More theoretical clarification could have eased my understanding of the interplay between theory and empirical data in this study.

Generally, by using the concepts of effects, pressure, logics, and institution, Schillemans implies a certain approach to mediatization studies that is not, however, clarified in connection to current developments in mediatization theory (for example, see Hepp, 2012).

To a media researcher, the book is thus first and foremost an empirical contribution to the study of mediatization of public service organizations in general. To a researcher of public administration and governance, the distinction between different types of public organizations is also relevant as a more finely grained conceptualization of the conditions of these actors in a media-saturated society. From a media perspective, this could also have been interesting if contextualized within a macro study of mediatization where homogenization, globalization, localization, etc. are relevant analytical concepts.

To sum up, I believe that the book contains valuable empirical material and several interesting points and insights. I furthermore see the book as a major empirical contribution to the study of news sources although Schillemanns does not explicitly name this tradition himself. In my opinion, the book does not really answer the question as to whether media pressure and the resulting mediatization of organizations affect a "[…] loss of core functions, goals and perspectives" (p. 123, see also p. 12) and thus change the identities of public service organizations. The main reason is that we are never really introduced to a proposal of what constitutes the *primordial* public service organization.

References

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