The same chatter wherever you go?  
Media logic and politicians’ discourse in TV election debates

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Abstract

The paper reports an empirical analysis of party leader TV debates in Sweden and in four other countries: Denmark, Norway and Germany. The objective is to study whether the involvement of active journalists in the television debates has a systematic effect on the discourse of the participating politicians. Inspired by theories of media logic and medialisation, a number of hypotheses are developed: journalist control to produce a narrower time-frame (few retrospective+ more present or future-oriented discourse), more standpoints/positions taken and more negative discourse.

A content analysis is applied on in total seven different public service television debates prior to national elections. Within the Swedish case, debates with a format where politicians themselves control the agenda are compared with a debate where journalists play an active part. Journalist-controlled debates from the other countries are brought in as contrasting cases.

The results indicate that the introduction of active journalists in the debates have produced changes in the hypothesised direction, but only for a few of the aspects analysed, and typically only for the Swedish case. Except for the higher level of standpoints taken by politicians in journalist-controlled debates, the compared cases from Norway, Denmark and Germany do not show a pattern consistent with the hypotheses.

This paper builds on data collected in three different research programmes: Parties’ Opinion Formation and Electoral Rhetoric in Germany and Sweden, both funded by the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and Gender, Image and Politics in the Nordic Countries funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-S).

Please note: draft only!
Introduction
The mass media are frequently mentioned as a major cause for change in the political world. The way politicians appear in public and the messages they communicate are often interpreted as subject to a media logic (cf Altheide & Snow 1979; Meyer 2002). Typically, media logic is conceptualised as a principle that rules the public sphere and the actions of everyone who enters this sphere. To be seen and heard politicians must adapt to the norms, working conditions and format of the media organisations. Taken to its extreme, the media logic leads to a medialised (or, meditized) society. Politicians, citizens and the media are all slaves under one organising principle.

This is a familiar perspective for political communication scholars. It has a structuralist leaning giving little room for agency. However, if we choose to regard the public sphere and the actors populating it at a little closer distance, we may find different logics or principles abound. It is plausible to assume that several types of actors are involved in a struggle over how the political world is presented, and represented, for the citizens. In this study, the focus is set on journalists and politicians. Journalists as a collective are crucial for the picture of the political world, since the mass media is normally the most important source of information for the citizens. Politicians, as candidates or representatives for parties are the principal actors especially in ëlite centered models of democracy (Held 1996). The two groups of actors have different goals and different means for achieving their goals. The media output – the report on the political world – is a result of the struggle. If either group has more power over the production of this output than the other, we should expect an output more in line with the working logic of that group. That is, in theory, the simple argument this paper is based on.

Objective of the study
This paper addresses the question of what consequences the struggle between journalists and politicians may have for the political discourse in the television programmes where they both take part. It attempts to assess the impact of the presence of active political journalists on the messages that politicians provide in party leader television debates. I focus on three aspects of top politicians’ verbal communication: the time-frame, the amount of policy standpoints expressed, and the level of conflict and negative messages. All of these have bearing on the idea of media logic, since it is often argued that media reports of politics contribute to short-sightedness, to a negative account of the world, and to a preoccupation with concrete measures rather than abstract reasoning. After providing argument for each of them, a number of hypotheses concerning the three aspects are developed below. The leading idea is to put to an empirical test the assumption that the more journalists and editors have power over the agenda and format of television debates, the more the discourse will be coloured by tangible consequences of media logic.
Logic of the comparative design

The study is made in two steps. First, a comparison is made between the content of the most recent Swedish TV party leader debate prior to a national election (2002) with the two previous ones (1998 and 1994). This comparison is chosen since a change in the programme format provides us with a pseudo-experimental situation within the Swedish case. Before 2002 the concluding TV debates in public service television were held without journalists controlling the agenda. In 2002, this was precisely what was introduced. Apart from this single modification, other characteristics of these debates were left unchanged.

Second, I contrast the findings from the Swedish debates with data from similar debates in Denmark, Norway, and Germany. These debates all have in common 1) that they feature several top politicians of the main contending parties in each election, 2) that one ore more journalists are in control of the agenda and have the power to give permission to speak and to ask questions, and 3) they are part of a long-standing tradition of broadcast party leader debates forming a sort of climax of the election campaign. The idea is to put the results from the Swedish comparison in perspective. If similar results are shown in the compared cases as in the Swedish 2002 journalist-controlled debate, the hypotheses on media logic impact are strengthened. If there is no such pattern, it will weaken the idea that journalistic activity in the debate has an independent effect on the output.

The cases of Denmark and Norway are considered as most similar cases in relation to the Swedish case. The general political systems (proportional elections) and the party systems are similar in the three countries. Similar to Sweden, the media systems in the two countries have strong public service tradition. The final debates in the public service broadcasters DR and NRK, respectively, are part of a long-standing tradition in the election campaign coverage.

The German debates share some traits with the three Scandinavian counterparts. In Germany, too, television debates in the main TV channels are an established institution since the late 1960s (known as the ‘Elefantenrunde’). The media system is regarded as a dual system, but with a public service tradition in which the public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF still have a strong audience position (Holtz-Bacha 2003:112).

A number of caveats are appropriate. First, this is not a truly comparative design, as it does not provide the possibility to control for external factors when comparing debates from different systems. Neither do we have the possibility to bring in politicians-controlled debates from other cases than Sweden. As the contrasting cases consist of one (for Germany: two election debates) analysed TV debate each, there is more scope for occasional factors such as

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1 The term refers, of course, to the fact that the main contenders for power, the candidates for federal chancellor from each party typically appears. It should be noted that in the 1994 and 1998 debates in Germany, the top candidates of the CDU (Kohl) and SPD (Scharping/ Schröder) did not take part. The parties were represented by other top representatives (see appendix).
the personalities of the politicians and the particular political atmosphere of each election to determine the outcome. Overall, therefore, the study can provide only limited generalisations.

**Media logic, political logic and the TV debate discourse**

Politicians and the media may be viewed as parts of the same system in which they perform different roles. In our society, the two groups of actors on the public scene are dependent on each other. It is possible to describe them as being in an exchange situation where the politicians trade their commodity *the newsworthy event* for the journalists’ resource which is *publicity* (Asp 1997).

Although being dependent on each other, politicians and the media are in many respects on different wavelengths. Political parties have ideological goals (to realise their ideal society) and strategic ones (to maximise votes; to promote internal consensus etc). The mass media try to fulfil financial goals (profit), audience goals (maximise the number of readers, listeners, viewers), and professional goals (to produce “good journalism”; to inform, to investigate, to entertain). Is there a certain political logic that guides the doings of the political actors; a logic that is different from, and even opposed and incompatible with a logic of the media?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni (1987) introduces the notion of a party logic which departs from “the structural and cultural assets that govern the communications enacted by the parties”. This logic of political parties has discourse on political issues and policy as distinctive features. The party logic is in contrast to the media logic which is characterised by – among other things - an interest in political strategy and tactics, and in personal leadership, rather than in issues (Mazzoleni 1987:85). Thomas Meyer (2002) draws a sharp line between a logic of the political world and the logic of the media. Political logic consists of polity (the rules and norms), policy (finding solutions for common problems) and process (gaining acceptance). It is characterised by a need for deliberation and compromise as well as a generally slow pace in the making of politics. The media logic is based on the media principles for selecting news and the inherent rules for presentation. In many respects, it is at odds with the political logic, as it demands drama, simplicity, and conflict (Meyer 2002; Street 2005). Media logic in turn may be explained by a range of factors, such as technological changes, evolution of independent, scrutinising journalism and commercialization (Hallin & Mancini 2004:40).

An objection may be raised that the notion of the political logic gives an idealised picture of how the political world works, while many effects of the media logic are rather distortions of a communication ideal, such as negativity, strategy over substance, and superficial coverage. Setting the normative issues aside, the concepts will be useful to assess whether a change in media influence over the political discourse in a particular setting such as the TV debates has an effect on the content output. If we accept the idea of separate logics or principle guiding the news media and the politicians respectively, we may ask ourselves which logic will have upper hand?
As Hallin & Mancini (2004:29) put it “If political communication is being transformed, this cannot be understood without reference to the collapse of this old political order”. They suggest the term secularization to grasp this development, in which the traditional political institutions lose their control over the public sphere and the formation of opinions, just as the church has lost its control over people’s minds.

“The media” is of course more than journalism and the political world bigger than the parties and their representatives. Yet it is fair to regard journalists and politicians as the crucial actors in the public sphere in general, and in the presentation of the political world in television programming in particular (Neveu 1999). Four or five decades ago, politicians were less constrained by news frames imposed by journalists. Journalism had a more straightforward character. With new journalistic ideals, the focus shifted from informative and narrative journalism to more critical scrutinising. (Patterson 1996:100-03; Negrine 1994; Djerf Pierre 2000). Confrontational “rapid-fire” journalists appeared, and forced politicians to at least a temporary retreat.

As everyone knows, it takes two to tango – none of the contenders, journalists or politicians will ‘win’ the battle. Still, it is safe to say that in most countries the possibility for the parties to control the mediated election agenda has diminished over the last three-four decades, as interpretive and scrutinizing journalism has developed. In Sweden the disappearance of the party presentations and the ‘free’ format debates from the TV schedules exemplify this development (Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002).

The discussion on the media logic and the struggle between journalists and politicians is the point of departure for the empirical study to which we will return below. First, however, the role and character of the television party leader debates are considered.

**Why electoral debates on television?**

Electoral debates on television may be considered as a media genre in its own. Debates between the main contenders in a national election are recurrent elements in the electoral campaign in many countries. As such, the debates form part of the ritual of the election, and they usually attract large audiences (cf Coleman 2000:10).

The purpose of such debates depends from what perspective they are regarded. For the politicians they offer an opportunity to reach a large audience with messages intended to inform, convince and persuade (Gomard & Krogstad 2001:16), In an environment where the political campaigns to a high degree are filtered through the news media, the television debates constitute an attractive channel for politicians in through which they can promote their own agenda. For voters, debates may be both informative, entertaining and promote interest for the election (Martel 1983; Jamieson & Adasiewicz 2000:28; McKinney & Carlin 2004).

First and foremost, television debates constitute a basis for communication in which the politicians are granted a relatively high degree of freedom. This places TV debates in between
on the one hand *advertisements* such as TV “spots” and posters, which give the parties or candidates full control over the production and the messages without any interference in the communication from sender (politician) and receiver (viewer/spectator/citizen), and *news coverage* on the other hand, which gives the politicians little if any room to decide the output of the communication.

Despite the general high degree of freedom, however, the conditions of the debates may vary in terms of *journalistic control*. These variations provide an opportunity to study the form and content of television election debates as a result of direct journalist intervention. The Swedish party leader debates changed its conditions from a completely free format from the point of view of the participating politicians, to a model close to the one applied in television channels in many other countries, where journalists introduce topics for the discussion, and ask direct questions to the participants.

**Swedish election broadcasting: between media logic and political logic**

The history of Swedish broadcasting is largely a history of a public service monopoly and its balancing act between two norms: to inform the citizens on the one hand, and to be impartial on the other hand. When radio was established as a mass medium in the 1920s Sweden adopted a BBC-style public service broadcasting model. Early on the monopoly developed a cautious attitude toward politics. Fearing that the very topic of politics would endanger the reputation as a serious and impartial broadcaster, the monopoly simply ignored parties and election campaigns during the early years. News reports had a servile attitude to politicians, giving the incumbent government a clear advantage over the opposition. Little by little, however, politics made its way into the airwaves. The public service broadcaster (SR) guarded the impartiality principle in two ways: 1) by granting all parties equal air time, and 2) by keeping its own people out of the programmes: the public service corporation was very careful not to let its employees play an active role in the broadcasts. Representatives of the parties were invited to negotiate the conditions for the electoral programming in radio and television. As a consequence, the parties enjoyed a great deal of influence on the election programming, and considerable freedom to forward their agenda. The typical coverage of national election campaigns included interrogations of party leaders and several debates including a general party leader debate during the final days of the campaign. Occasionally, the parties made presentations, sometimes followed by debates and/or phone-ins. The common denominator was that no SR journalists took part in the production. Interrogations of party leaders were held by representatives from the opposing parties (typically party press editors or parliamentarians). The party leader debates featured only the party leaders plus a chairperson with a stopwatch to keep track of speaking time. The debates had no pre-defined agenda, and no questions were asked by either journalists or the audience.

The late 1960s saw a new model. As in most Western countries an investigative, professional journalism had emerged, and finally it entered the election programming of
Swedish radio and television. Interviews of party leaders and other prominent politicians were made by political journalists employed by Swedish Radio/Swedish Television. Party-produced presentation programmes were abolished from the TV schedules. From now on, politicians were subject to critical questions in whatever TV show, debate or news programme they appeared in. At the same time, the parties’ collective power to influence the conditions of the election coverage was weakened. The formal negotiations on the conditions of electoral programming in broadcast media were abolished.

One particular programme format retained its non-journalistic character, however: the concluding party leader debate, which still was the “show of the politicians”, until it was eventually abandoned after the 1998 elections.

In conclusion, from a previously passive role, the journalists assumed power over agenda and format in the election programmes, and conversely the freedom in the air for the parties diminished. The important exception being the party leader debates at the final of the election campaigns. They were exceptional with their free structured format, so exceptional that British political communication scholar Stephen Coleman (2000) questions whether Swedish party leader debates (the pre-2002 ones) in fact should be regarded as “joint press conferences” instead of proper debates.

Data and method
Systematic content analyses have been applied on verbatim transcripts of television party leader debates from three consecutive Riksdag elections in Sweden (1994, 1998 and 2002), from two German Bundestag elections 1994 and 1998, from the Norwegian Storting election of 1993 and finally from the Danish Folketing election in 1994. In each country the debates are major events at the peak of the election campaigns, institutionalised in the broadcasting tradition of the public service company. In each case, all parties represented in parliament by the time of the elections appear in the debates.

Below is an overview over the debates and their formats. For details about participants among other things, see appendix!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Broadcaster</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Journalist role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden 1994-1998</td>
<td>party-controlled</td>
<td>Sveriges Television (SVT)</td>
<td>3.5 hrs, 3.0 hrs</td>
<td>No active role, Stopwatch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden 2002</td>
<td>Journalist controlled</td>
<td>Sveriges Television (SVT)</td>
<td>1.5 hrs</td>
<td>Two journalists introducing thematic issues + posing questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway 1993</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Norsk</td>
<td>2 hrs</td>
<td>Two journalists introducing</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

2 The content analyses of the Swedish debates have been carried out by Martin Brandorf, Elin Naurin, Jennie Sjöström, Marie Uhrwing and the author. The Danish and Norwegian debates were coded by Monika Bauhr, whereas Markus Kärner, Peer Paulsen and Kerstin Martens did the coding of the German debates.

3 Occasionally parties outside the parliament have been represented in the debates, such as the Green Party in Sweden 1994.
The specific content analysis technique used is a variety of what usually is labelled ‘thematic content analysis’ (Holsti 1963; see also Weber 1985:22). Instead of using a unit of analysis which is determined by the form of the information (e.g. a page, a paragraph, a sentence), each ‘message’ is regarded as a unit. A message is defined as a part of the text which contain one, and only one, of the following elements: (1) a sender (the party or party representative), (2) issue content (e.g. foreign policy, taxes, health care, etc.), (3) a perspective that the sender puts on the issue, (ideology/principle; material/pragmatic; or none) (4) type of appeal (general goal, e.g. ”we stand for freedom of enterprise”, sharp proposition e.g. we will reduce income taxes by five percent”; descriptions of other parties e.g. ”party B has no policy at all on crime”; general descriptions e.g. ”crime rates are alarmingly high in our society”), (5) addressed actor (party A, party B etc..), and (6) evaluation of the object of description: the actor/ the situation (positive, negative or neutral). A change in any of the variables leads to the registration of a new message. The messages thus vary in length, usually around 1-2 sentences.

Each answer in the party leader debates has been coded for a number of variables. The aspects of the debates about to be studied are grouped in three general categories: time frame, position taking and negativity. The operational measures applied in the analysis for each aspect are found in the appendix. The scheme of analysis has been applied to all the television debates the study. The coding has been made by native speakers of each language.

Values in the analyses that follow represent the totals for all participants in each party leader debate.

**Time frame: Future-orientation and retrospection**

The first analysis concerns the time frame of the messages. Participants in television debates may devote their scarce speaking time to talk about the future, the past or the present. The future-oriented (prospective) messages may be general and visionary in character, or concern specific planned actions such as policy proposals. The participants’ backward-looking (retrospective) messages may for example relate to the achievements of their own party and/or the shortcomings of their opponents.

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4 For more detailed information on methodology see Håkansson (1999).
5 Thanks to the ‘Scandinavian community of language’, a Swedish research assistant carried out the analysis of the Danish and Norwegian debates, with the assistance of the ‘native’ participants in the project.
Relevance of time frame

The relationship between prospective and retrospective messages in political discourse is highly relevant in the discussion about mandate model or responsible party model of accountability (cf Schmitt & Thomassen 1999); Mandate representation, as opposed to accountability representation stresses the policy proposals and other forward-looking messages, as they form the basis for the mandate that the voters give the candidates standing for election. (Manin; Przeworski & Stokes 1999).

The prerequisites of voter relevant information will thus be different depending on which model of democracy one adheres to. The forward-looking mandate representation model requires information about the future actions of the political parties and representatives. The accountability model is more retrospective in character. The main criterion for choosing representatives is the previous actions – the “record” – of the representatives (cf Fiorina 1981). This is particularly relevant for the party or parties occupying the governing position. However, the issue of accountability and the scrutiny of past actions also pertains to other parties and elected representatives.

The models sketched above may be interpreted both as norms of desired voting behaviour and as empirical models of how voters actually behave. Few democratic ideals – to the extent they specify the information voters need – would exclusively prescribe one over the other. It is safe to assume that citizens as voters would benefit from information both on the future actions of and on their historical record.

Logic behind the relation between time frame and media format

News is without doubt about the past. But as scholars in news values often point out, an event is more likely to hit the headlines if it has occurred in the recent past (Shoemaker; Chang & Brendlinger 1987; Johnson-Cartee 2005:126-128). Media logic means, among other things, a demand for simplification in news report. Elaboration on the history of events does not fit well into this logic. Somewhat paradoxically, prospective reports about future actions dominate over backward-looking, or retrospective, reports in news coverage of the parties. Studies on Swedish election campaign coverage in different media has shown that news items with future –orientation were in majority both in quality newspapers, tabloids and TV news. Only few news items focused past actions of the parties, and critical and investigative reporting on the governing party’s actions were virtually absent (Strömbäck 2004). Similar results have been reported in earlier studies on political TV interviews (Bergström 1994; see also Esaiasson & Håkansson 2002; Håkansson 2003). Political journalists in Sweden have been subject to criticism for failing to scrutinize government performance in their electoral news coverage. The argument is that we have more than enough information about the political game and the opinion polls, even about policy promises, but far too little attention is directed at what was actually accomplished by the governing party(ies).
We may interpret the failure of the news media to look back and report on the government’s doings as the result of a clash between political logic and media logic. Party logic involves a complex chain from, say, a promise made in the campaign to simplify the income tax system, up to the final implementation of the reform. Several years of budgetary negotiations, changing parliamentary coalitions, and a hard-to-manage bureaucracy are but some of the constraints that prolongs the process. It is often hard to even determine whether an election promise has been fulfilled (Naurin, forthcoming). From this follows that it is a costly and time-consuming task for the media to investigate how the government has done its job.

Media logic, on the other hand, provides us with a theoretical instrument for better understanding the relation between media practices and the missing retrospective reports in the media. Media has a propensity to deal with the present, and what has recently occurred. Using the words of political scientist Thomas Meyer: “[t]here is a sharp tension between media logic and political logic and between the uncompromising presentism inherent in media production time and the time required for political processes” (Meyer 2002:47).

The question is whether there is a pattern in the television debates indicating that journalist involvement promotes “presentism” and future-orientation, and shifts focus away from the retrospective accounts. From the discussion above, two interrelated hypotheses are formed:

H1a: Present- and future-oriented messages will be more frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled debates.

H1b: Retrospective messages will be less frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled ones.

Results

Table 2. Time frame in the debates. Prospective and retrospective messages (percentages, ratio).

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=1159</td>
<td>N=1157</td>
<td>N=311</td>
<td>N=603</td>
<td>N=653</td>
<td>N=571</td>
<td>N=540</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time frame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Now+future</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The past</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ratio future/past</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages indicate the share of the total number of messages in the debate. Ratio is calculated as the quotient between the number of prospective and retrospective messages. Swe= Sweden; Nor= Norway; Den= Denmark; Ger= Germany. N refers to the number of messages coded (see Data and method).
The data give at hand that the generally future-oriented messages have increased continually over the three Swedish elections. At the same time few retrospective messages have become even fewer.

H1a and H1b are however only partially supported by the results. The greatest share of future-oriented speech is observed in the Swedish 2002 debate in which journalists took an active part for the first time. Yet there are two circumstances that cast doubt on the media logic argument: first, there is an incremental (rather than momentary) change in the prospective/retrospective balance in the Swedish debates between 1994 and 2002. Moreover, neither the ratio between prospective and retrospective messages, nor the percentages are anywhere near the Swedish level in 2002 (nearly twelve times as many prospective messages as retrospective). In most of the debates, the future-oriented messages are somewhere around 1.5 to 2.5 times as frequent as the backward-looking ones. This is true for all debates including the Swedish debate of 1994.

The reluctance to cover the parties’ past actions that has been reported in Swedish political news is found in the Swedish journalist-controlled debate. No such pattern is indicated in the compared debates.

**Position taking: clear cut standpoints and policy proposals**

Standpoint taking and policy proposals are both measures of the parties’ positioning on issues in the debates. Do politicians speak in an abstract manner about general ideas and principles, or do they rely on a down-to-earth style talking about the tangible outcomes of policies? To what extent do they provide us – the voters – with information on specific actions (policy proposals) and details about which standpoints they take in particular issues (Page 1978)?

**Relevance of position taking**

As voters, we expect to find party standpoints on relevant issues in our electoral information. This is crucial in a rational voter paradigm, regardless of the character of the democratic system one adheres to. Especially in the mandate model, party standpoints are at the core of the voter’s decision making. Already in Berelson’s, Lazarsfeld’s and McPhee’s *Voting*, the need to know the standpoints of the political candidates was pointed out as one prerequisite for rational voting (Berelson et al 1954: 308). If future-oriented messages in general are particularly relevant in the mandate model of representation, the party standpoints are at the core of the model. The parties’ standpoints constitute the basis for the voters’ choice of parties according to this model (cf Manin et al 1999).

**Logic behind the relationship between degree of position taking and media format**

When looking from the point of view of the parties, it is obvious that standpoints and sharp policy proposals are double-edged as rhetorical instruments. The parties certainly need to compete for voters on the basis of their ideas and their proposed actions. On the other hand, politicians are discouraged to make too many commitments and to be too unambiguous in
their electoral messages. Formal theories of party strategy come to the conclusion that using ambiguous messages is often the best winning strategy for parties on the electoral market. For example, if a majority of voters are in favour of tax cuts, but not likely to agree which taxes and what expenditure to cut, a general but ambiguous message about the desirability of lower taxes is likely to attract more voters than unambiguous and specific promises (Aragonès & Postlewaite 2002; Aragonès & Neeman 2000; cf Downs 1957). Applying the concept of political arenas (Sjöblom 1968), we may deem it rational for political parties to use vague and ambiguous rhetoric in the electoral arena, the internal and the parliamentary arena. Considering parties need to appeal to a broad range of voters, they must avoid scaring people away with too many tangible standpoints. The different factions within the party must also feel represented, something which is less difficult when not using too precise language. Moreover, future coalitions must not be blocked by strong commitments to standpoints made public in the election campaign.

Taken together, there are several reasons to believe that political parties have an interest in limiting their specific promises and policy proposals in their electoral discourse. Ambiguity fits well with political logic. When it comes to media logic, the picture is different. The propensity for clear-cut messages inherent in media logic combined with a conscious striving for simplifying issues, leads us to assume that the media generally wish to present political issues with less ambiguity. Journalists tend to ask for clear-cut information. The news value of a clear “yes!” or “no!” is obviously higher than that of a “it depends…”. To fit in with the demands of media logic we therefore expect politicians wishing to “hit the news” to see to that their messages are unambiguous in the sense that they take a stance in a given issue. It is also relevant to ask whether the politicians’ messages not only provide standpoints, but information about what they are going to do in the future. This argument leads us to the following hypotheses:

H2a: Clear-cut standpoints will be more frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled.
H2b: ‘Sharp’ policy proposals will be more frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled.

Results

Table 3. The expression of standpoints and policy proposals in the debates (percentages, ratio).

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear-cut standpoints</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio positions/§ valence positions</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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</table>
In the Swedish debate we find that the clear-cut standpoints’ share of the parties debate messages were more than doubled in the journalist-controlled 2002 debates as compared to the previous debates. Around four out of ten messages involved a standpoint indicating a party position on an issue. The levels are similar in the Norwegian and Danish debates, whereas the German debate from 1998 shows extremely low number of standpoints.

The ratio between clear-cut standpoints and valence issue positions (e.g. “we stand for peace/freedom/prosperity”) changes when journalists take over the Swedish debate in 2002. The standpoints, which previously were almost on a par with the valence positions, rose to a 2.6 ratio compared to the later in 2002. In the other studied debates this ratio is even higher, ranging from three up to five times as many clear-cut standpoints expressed as valence positions. H2a is strengthened by the results. Swedish party leaders become more unambiguous when journalists are in charge of the debates, although still not on the same level as their colleagues in the Scandinavian and German debates.

The second operational measure of the position taking level is the extent to which debaters express policy proposals. Here, a somewhat similar pattern can be found. The level of policy proposals rose to 25 percent in Sweden as compared to much lower figures in the previous elections (8 and 6 percent respectively). However, none of the compared debates with similar formats show levels of this kind. This is particularly obvious when we compare the ratio between general political goals (such as: “we aim to have the best schools in Europe” or “) and the policy proposals. When journalists in Sweden control the debate, politicians become less vague in their message than previously, and much less so compared to both Scandinavian and German debates. H2b thus holds good for the case of Sweden, but as no interpretable pattern is seen among the other debates, it cannot be fully supported.

**Conflict and negativity**

*Relevance of conflict-orientation*

The conflict level in political discourse has rendered a great deal of interest from a normative point of view. Negative campaigning is a much-debated phenomenon in political communication. The concept ‘negative campaigning’ usually refers to party or candidate campaign events designed to attack and discredit political opponents. However, there is also ample evidence from a number of countries of an increasing negativity in the news report of the political world (cf Patterson 1993; Norris 2000; Donsbach 2002). There is a fierce debate on whether the negativity is to be blamed primarily on the news sources (parties and
Håkansson

Media logic and politicians’ discourse

candidates) or on the news organisations. The effects of negativity on citizens’ perceptions attitudes and behaviour have long been debated. The main claim from media malaise (or the like) scholars is that negative reports of politics, especially attacks on persons, foster cynicism among citizens and turn people away from voting (Patterson 1993). In sharp contrast to this pessimist view, scholars like Pippa Norris offer a generally positive outlook on the news media as providers of relevant political information. Although political news coverage is often negative in its tone, it is not demonstrated that the effect is disillusion and cynicism on behalf of the news-consuming citizens (Norris 2000; 1999). It has also been argued that the polemic and confrontational messages parties and candidates provide in their own TV advertisements could be regarded as a source of information for the voters (Mayer 1996).

Logic behind the relationship between negative messages and the media format

Negativity fits well into the media logic. To emphasise conflict is a well-known feature of the news values criteria. *Ceteris paribus*, it is more interesting to report a story based on conflict between two contestants, than one with no clear conflict lines. The long-standing debate on negative campaigning also give at hand that criticism of opponents is an attractive option for political ad-makers (Kaid 2004). Although negative messages are clearly part of the political language of the parties also without the help of the media, we should expect an increase in negative messages in journalist-controlled programmes.

Negativity is measured both as *polemic messages*, involving direct criticism of other parties or participants), and *general negative accounts* which involve descriptive messages with a negative evaluation, but where no political actors are referred to (see appendix).

H3a: Messages with negative evaluation of political opponents will be more frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled ones.

H3b Messages featuring general negative accounts will be more frequent in journalist-controlled debates than in politician-controlled ones.

Results

Table 4. Negativity and conflict in the debate (percentages).

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative accounts</td>
<td>N=1159</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polemic messages</td>
<td>N=311</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall negativity</td>
<td>N=603</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: see table 1
There is no evidence in the data supporting neither H3a nor H3b. The share of negative messages taken together reaches its lowest point in the debate of 2002, which is also clearly lower than any other debate studied. Had we experienced a media logic effect we would have expected a rise in negativity as compared to 1998/1994. Looking a little closer, it is evident that the lower level of negativity is due to the considerably fewer polemic messages from the party leaders in 2002. In 1994-1998 almost one-third of all messages were devoted to criticism of opponents. In 2002 only little more than one out of ten was polemic.

The contrasting Scandinavian debates show levels of polemic messages comparable with the Swedish before the shift to journalist-controlled debates, which again goes contrary to the hypotheses. In Germany, the negative messages are more often general negative accounts, and relatively seldom carried overt criticism of the opponents.

To summarize...

…the results, the following is to be emphasized:

* Swedish debate discourse changes considerably when shifting from politician control to journalist control. This is true both regarding time frame, negativity and position taking.

* The hypotheses of media logic effects are only fully supported regarding the position taking (1a-b) (the share of clear-cut standpoints is higher in the journalist-controlled debates in all studied cases).

* The hypotheses regarding time frame (2a-b) gets partial support in the Swedish case, as the results in the Swedish case indicate a rise in present- or future-oriented messages and a drop in retrospective messages.

* The hypotheses regarding negativity (3a-b) cannot be supported, as, contrary to H3a, a sharp drop in polemic messages followed the introduction of active journalists in the Swedish debates. The comparative date did not show any consistent pattern interpretable as a media logic effect.

There is, of course, reason to be cautious when conclusions are drawn. The possible causal link between the presence of journalists in the debates and the politicians’ discourse can obviously only be suggested. A number of variables may be in play to produce the particular verbal outcome of each debate. Moreover, the number of debates in the study is small. On the other hand it is possible to look into the results for individual party representatives. The findings for the Swedish debates have proven robust insofar as the aggregated tendencies were true also for the seven individual party representatives taking part in five out of the six hypothesised outcomes. The exception being the time frame, where two opposition parties showed more retrospective messages in 2002 than in 1998, contrary to the overall tendency.
Concluding comments

In the early 2000s the last television fortress of the politicians fell in Sweden. Under the pressure of competition from commercial channels, public service broadcaster SVT abandoned the old style of TV debates, and introduced a much more controlled debate where the political journalists determine the conditions.

Although the possibility to draw long-ranging conclusions from this study about the effects of journalistic control over television debates is clearly limited, at least a few of the results must at least tentatively be regarded as an effect of the new format. The question we may ask ourselves is how it matters: Do we get a different type of debate when journalists are in charge?

One particular idea that this study implies is that the journalists’ standards for question politicians vary with genre. Media logic does not provide uniform results. Many sweeping accounts of media logic and medialisation and the like assume that “the media” in general produces similar effects on the outcome, such as negativity, simplification, polarization etc. There is plenty of empirical evidence to support this view when it comes to regular news media, in particular television. When the journalistic task is to lead a television debate there are other standards and norms in play than is the case for the regular news job. In particular, the propensity for negativity and polarization does not seem to be present at all in the TV debate format.

Even though a spectator may see and hear the same ‘talking heads’ in the debates from the politician-control era as in the recent debates with active journalists, the change has certainly altered the conditions for politicians. First, it is clear that they need to adjust to the topics that the journalists define and introduce. Second, the results indicate that politicians cannot engage in criticism of opponents to the same extent that they do without the presence of journalists. The journalists instead seem to hold back the actual debate by trying to keep the politicians on track talking about their own specific policies. This is well in line with a study on Swedish political interviews, which shows that journalists systematically interrupt politicians trying to focus on shortcomings of opponents (Esaiasson & Häkansson 2002). Stephen Coleman’s doubt about the old style Swedish debates is therefore somewhat misplaced (cf p6). The label “joint press conferences” fits better the new style of debates with active journalists.

Another finding is that the scrutiny function, which is a very important function for the news media, is not particularly salient in the debates. We should expect the previous actions of the parties to be more salient when journalists have the right to interrogate the politicians. Instead, we find fewer retrospective messages. As the debates deal with a large spectrum of issues it is obvious that the restricted time to assess each issue puts a limit on digging deep into the different matters. Perhaps this is another illustration of the credo of Meyer (2002: 40-48) that media time and political time are hard to combine?
As always, further research is needed. The results of this paper only suggest that politicians’ verbal behaviour varies depending on the journalistic influence. A system-comparative study would pinpoint the importance of independent variables such as a country’s particular media structure as well as the broadcasters’ traditions and policies regarding political programming. A comparison of different media genres could be useful as a key to our understanding of how journalists and politicians behave verbally in different settings. What is allowed or prescribed in a news interview may be against the norm in a talk show or a debate, interrogation. Such a study must obviously take into account the questions and remarks of the journalists, combined with an analysis of the motives of the journalists: what conscious (and, perhaps, unconscious) goals, norms and standard guide their work in different media genres?

Second, the competitive environment of the media would be useful as an explanatory variable. It could teach us more about the changes in power relations between journalists and politicians. Have tougher competition from commercial channels furthered the medialisation? Or has it lead to more freedom for politicians to decide the terms for their participation? Since 1992 when terrestrial commercial TV was introduced in Sweden only three general elections have been held. With longer time series of this kind we will be able to paint a clearer picture of the election programmes in the age of commercial broadcasting.
Appendix

Scheme of analysis
The following scheme of analysis has been applied on the debates in the study. For more information see the section on Data and method above.

Time frame
Time frame is measured by the extent that the message refers to 1) the past: actions or states (“in three years unemployment has risen by fifty percent”); 2) the near future: if speaker clearly mentions future actions within the coming electoral term (“before the end of next year, we will have proposed tougher actions on child abuse”) and 3) general future which includes messages with longer time frames and those with future-orientation but lacking specifics (“We are morally obliged to work together to end poverty in the world”).

Position taking
A sharp proposition is a message in which politicians explicitly propose specific policy actions. In principle, a sharp proposition can be translated into policy, and can be the subject of a vote in a political body (“Abolish the tax on real estate!”; “Introduce a mandatory language test for immigrants!”) The propositions should be distinguished from general goals (“we are in favour of low taxes”) which do not tell us about future actions to fulfil the goal.

Clear-cut standpoints are coded when a message includes a position taken in a (potentially) controversial issue, i.e. where different views exist among the parties (“expenditure on the defence should not be cut”). Most political issues belong to this category, whereas messages like (“we stand for peace and freedom”) are instead regarded as valence issues. (For a discussion on position issues and valence issues cf Butler & Stokes 1974).

Conflict
Polemic messages are defined as any message containing critical accounts of other political actors (“You [party X] have not done anything to stop the loss of jobs”) (cf Esaiasson, Jahn & Håkansson 1997; see also Surlin & Gordon 1977).

General negative accounts are descriptive messages in which the tone is negative, but in which no political actors are mentioned or no blame is implied, or where blame is placed on forces outside the sphere of political parties (“the rising unemployment is mostly due to globalisation”).
Appendix

Debates in the study

Sweden 1994
Swedish Television SVT Date 16.09 1994
Participants: Governing parties: Carl Bildt (prime minister), (m)/Conservatives; Olof Johansson, c/Centre Party; Alf Svensson, (kd) Christian Democrats; Bengt Westerberg, (fp) Liberals. Opposition: Ingvar Carlsson, (s)/Social Democrats; Vivianne Franzén, (nyd)/New Democracy; Birger Schlaug, (mp)/Greens; and Gudrun Schyman, (v)/Socialist Left.

Sweden 1998
Swedish Television SVT Date 20.09 1998
Participants Governing party: prime minister Göran Persson, (s)/Social Democrats. Opposition: Carl Bildt (m)/Conservatives; Lemnart Daleus (c)/ Centre Party; Lars Leijonborg (fp)/Liberals; Birger Schlaug (mp)/Greens; Gudrun Schyman, (v)/Socialist Left; and Alf Svensson, (kd)/ Christian Democrats.

Sweden 2002
Swedish Television SVT Date 13.09 2002
Participants Governing party: prime minister Göran Persson, (s)/Social Democrats. Opposition: Peter Eriksson (mp)/Greens; Lars Leijonborg (fp)/Liberals; Bo Lundgren, (m)/Conservatives; Maud Olafsson (c)/Centre Party; Gudrun Schyman, (v)/Socialist Left; and Alf Svensson, (kd)/ Christian Democrats.

Norway 1993
Norwegian Broadcasting NRK Date 10.09 1993
Participants Governing party prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland adn party chairman Thorbjørn Jagland AP/Social democrats. Opposition: Kjell Magne Bondevik, KrF/Christian Democrats; Odd Einar Dørum, V/Liberals; Kaci Kullmann Five, H/Conservatives; Carl Ivar Hagen, FrP/Progressive Party; Anne Enger Lahnstein, SP/Centre Party: Aksel Nærstad, RV/Red Alliance; and Erik Solheim; SV/Socialist Left.

Denmark 1994
Danish Television DR1 Date 19.09 1994.
Participants Governing parties: prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, S/Social democrats; Mimi Jakobsen (CD/Centre Democrats; Marianne Jelved, RV/Radical Liberals; Jann Sjursen, KF/Christian Democrats. Opposition: Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, V/Liberals; Hans Engell, F/Conservatives; Pia Kjærsgaard Z/Progressive Party; Holger K Nielsen, SF/Socialist Left; and Frank Aaen EL/Unity List.

Germany 1994
ARD Date 10,10 1994
Participants Governing parties: Wolfgang Schäuble CDU/Christian Democratic Union; Theo Waigl CSU/Christian Social Union, Klaus Kinkel FDP/Liberals. Opposition: Joschka Fischer (Bündnis 90/die Grünen/Greens; Gregor Gysi PDS/Socialist Left; and Oskar Lafontaine SPD/Social Democrats.

Germany 1998
ARD Date 16.09 1998
Participants Governing parties: Wolfgang Schäuble CDU/Christian Democratic Union; Theo Waigl CSU/Christian Social Union, Wolfgang Gerhardt FDP/Liberals. Opposition: Joschka Fischer (Bündnis 90/die Grünen/Greens; Gregor Gysi PDS/Socialist Left; and Oskar Lafontaine SPD/Social Democrats.

Some notes on context: the election campaigns
The Swedish material in the study consists of TV debates from three consecutive parliamentary elections 1994, 1998 and 2002. Although there is no room for an elaborated narration of the historical context, a few remarks concerning the elections and their circumstances are appropriate.

The general elections in 1994 took place in the shadow of an economic recession with historically high unemployment figures and an increasing national debt. The serious situation
for the public finances gave no room for promises of reforms or public expenses. Instead the main contenders of power claimed to have the best credentials for cutting expenses in a responsible way. The governing centre-right coalition was trailing in the opinion polls, and the social democratic party headed for a victory. The final results were somewhat ambiguous. The social democrats did not gain an absolute majority, and neither did the governing coalition. Social Democrats formed a minority government without institutionalised support by other parties.

In 1998 the main issues were education and health care. The social democrats in power defended the substantial budget cuts made during the election term as necessary for keeping the economy on a sound basis. The centre-right bloc increased their support as compared to the previous election, but despite a substantial loss of seats, the social democrats were able to form a new minority government supported in most of the issues by leftists and greens. Apart from the social democrats, the centre party and the liberals lost support, while the Christian democrats and the leftists were the winners.

The 2002 elections were the second in a row where incumbent Prime Minister Persson successfully defended his governing position. Primary education as well as issues of health and care for the elderly remained in focus. Unemployment, too, was a major issue. Although there were great drops and losses for the specific parties (major drops for the conservatives, the Christian democrats and the leftists; considerable gains for the social democrats and the liberals), the main political blocs were left with virtually identical relative strength.

At the top of the agenda of the Norwegian elections in 1993 was the upcoming referendum on European Union membership in 1994, as well as the ‘power issue’: which parties were to govern, and with whom. Gro Harlem Brundtland continued leading a labour party government, supported by the EU critical Centre Party.

The 1994 elections to the Danish Folketing focused around issues such as national economy, unemployment and the issue of government. Paul Nyrup Rasmussen continued as leader of the coalition government consisting of social democrats, liberals, and centre democrats.

The German elections of 1994 took place in the shadow of the social and economic strain caused by the German reunification. Head of government Helmut Kohl’s bid for reelection was successful, and the Christian democrat- Liberal coalition (CDU/CSU+FDP) could continue in a governing position. Tax issues as well as foreign policy and issues related to the reunification were high on the debate agenda.

In 1998, chancellor Kohl’s government was challenged by the social democrat chancellor candidate Schröder whose party gained considerably and could form a coalition government with the Green party, thus ending a 16-year old era of CDU domination. Unemployment together with other macro-economic issues were main concerns in the election campaign.
References


