

## **Ruth Garland, Damian Tambini and Nick Couldry** **Has government been mediatized? A UK** **perspective.**

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## Has government been mediatized? A UK perspective.

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### **Abstract**

There has been little empirical research to date on the consequences of mass media change for the processes of government in the UK, despite a well-documented concern since the 1990s with ‘political spin’. Studies have focused largely on the relative agenda setting power of political and media actors in relation to political campaigning rather than the actual everyday workings of public bureaucracies, although UK case studies suggest that the mass media have influenced policy development in certain key areas. The study of government’s relations with media *from within* is a small but growing sub-field where scholars have used a combination of methods to identify ways in which central bureaucracies and executive agencies adapt to the media. We present the results of a preliminary study involving in-depth interviews with serving civil servants, together with archival analysis, to suggest that media impacts are increasingly becoming institutionalized and normalized within state bureaucracies; a process we identify as mediatization. A specific finding is a shift in the relationship between government, media and citizens whereby social media is enabling governments to become news providers, by-passing the ‘prism of the media’ and going direct to citizens.

**Keywords** government, mediatization, agenda setting, policy making

## **Has government been mediatized? A UK perspective.**

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### **Introduction**

It is surprising that more extensive research has not been conducted within the UK on the consequences of media change for the processes of government, given a well-documented concern since the 1990s with 'political spin' (Moore, 2006; Sanders, 2011; Macnamara, 2014; Foster, 2005). Despite Schlesinger's appeal 25 years ago for empirical studies of how sources act strategically (Schlesinger, 1990), the study of government's relations with media *from within* remains a small, if growing sub-field, where scholars from different disciplines have used a combination of methods to identify ways in which central bureaucracies and executive agencies adapt to the media (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Fredriksson et al., 2015; Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014; Cook, 2005; Rawolle, 2005). The debates about political spin were prompted in the UK in response to the assertive news management of the 1997 Labour government and more recently by claims that politicians had become too close to the press (Leveson 2012). Study in political communication has focussed on concepts such as 'professionalization', 'presidentialization' and 'personalization' (Diamond 2014; Helms 2008;

Karvonen 2010; Langer 2011), that downplay longer term institutional changes that might underlie contemporary transformations in politics and government.

This paper examines what the concept of mediatization can add to research and knowledge in this field. We argue that a long-term structural shift has taken place in the relationship of government to media since the 1980s, accelerating after 1997, and that this is best understood as a process of mediatization. This may include both permanent and cyclical change but has still not been sufficiently examined or theorised as a long-term historical process. At the core is a concern that changes that make media more ubiquitous in time and space and so more influential on day-to-day political outcomes, have led to a decline in government efficacy and potentially troubling shifts in relationships between policy makers and media actors. Part of the explanation for the lack of research and theory is the difficulty in accessing the internal processes of government, and addressing empirically change over time. Where direct access is facilitated, it has largely focussed on the activities of communications professionals at a particular moment in time. Our concern here is wider; not only how politicians and their advisers struggle to control of the news agenda but how media impact on policy. The deep shaping by media of government processes, and hence outcomes, is among the most far-reaching set of consequences that media processes could have for society.

Mediatization theory argues that government is continuously influenced by interactions with media, whether direct (news management, sourcing), or indirect (the embedding of media

stories, values and time-cycles into everyday action). In the 'divided governance systems' typical of many modern democracies, government departments "steer complex networks of quasi-autonomous organisations" (Smith et al., 2011: 976) such as regulators, executive agencies and NGOs, all of which to a greater or lesser extent seek legitimacy through media attention (Magetti, 2012; Schillemans 2012; Carpenter and Krause, 2011). Esser identifies three distinctive "facets" of "political logic" operating within government which complicate responses to mediatization: the backstage area where policy is produced, the visible stage on which politicians seek power and publicity, and the institutional framework which limits what political actors can do (Esser 2013). In the policy planning process, governments in the age of 24/7 news must anticipate media reception of new policies and how others might use media *against* them.

Mediatization scholars argue that existing paradigms fail to address issues of systematic, longer term change in relation to media, and have called for more diachronic empirical studies to be carried out at institutional level (Hepp, 2012; Hepp et al., 2015; Hjarvard, 2013). Given the difficulties of extended ethnographic access to government, to research fully media's implications *from within* and over time requires alternatives to ethnography such as interviews, less intrusive observational fieldwork and documentary and archival analysis, and a theoretical framework that takes account of organizational complexity and social change. The theoretical framework we propose builds on the extensively researched mediatization of politics

(Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014), and the adaptation of political parties to media logic (Strömbäck, 2013), in order to address the mediatization of *government*. Within the literatures on mediatization, and specifically mediatization of politics, there are numerous accounts of how party politics is transformed by the drive for media representation (Altheide, 2004; Schulz, 2004; Helms, 2008; Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013; Strömbäck, 2011). Less attention has been given to the implications of such a transformation for the making and implementation of policy within governing bureaucracies, and, indeed, for the efficacy of government itself.

A fuller account of media's consequences for government must therefore research how media become integrated into government's long-term relations to society. Studies of politics and public administration that seek to understand the nature of contemporary pressures largely consider media as one factor among others such as 'reflexive modernisation' 'new public management' or the 'risk society' (Adam and Beck, 2000; Aucoin, 1996; Bakvis and Herman, 2012; Page and Wright, 1999). Mediatization approaches, though, have been criticized for being too general and media-centric (Deacon and Stanyer, 2014). Mediatization scholars have responded, arguing that, far from being media-centric, the focus should *not* be on media institutions or actors, but on "the illumination of some of the shifting relations between and across multiple actors and the media" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015: 1325), a view that we share. Jensen suggests that the concept of mediatization is too broad to deliver "a coherent,

robust and operational conceptual framework” and should instead be seen as a bridge into the empirical social world (Jensen, 2013, p. 218). Lunt and Livingstone argue that a more empirically focussed approach to mediatization can offer a heightened historical awareness, allowing us to reinterpret social transformations across a range of domains, and to examine the intersection of various meta-processes in a non-linear fashion (Lunt and Livingstone, 2016).

In the first section, we provide a selective review of productive areas of overlap between political communications, mediatization research, and broader literatures on government and bureaucracy. This throws up certain themes for closer investigation which are developed in the second section by presenting the findings of a small-scale preliminary study conducted in the UK which used archival and interview-based methods to identify themes for a larger study. Our findings raise a specific issue in relation to the use of social media by governments: social media are enabling governments to become news providers, by-passing the ‘prism of the media’ and going direct to citizens. In the conclusion we develop ideas for a longer-term study that could make use of a mediatization approach to critically examine relations between government and media in an internationally comparative way.

### **Mediatization of Government: process and consequences**

Among the drivers of change impacting on national governments, we argue that more attention should be given to the recent theorizations of mediatization as a meta process whereby whole

domains of life, including government, are transformed over the longer-term by their increasing permeation with media and communications (Couldry, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013; Krotz, 2009). This is neither a passive nor an inevitably irreversible process, and goes beyond the idea of 'media logic'. We begin by positioning our proposed study within the emerging literature on the mediatization of public bureaucracies, acknowledging the contribution of agenda-setting studies that have shown how media and political pressures condense to form particular political agendas. We then examine a sub-set of the larger literature on public administration which addresses ideas of risk, blame and compressed time, without necessarily examining media in detail, using case studies from the UK and elsewhere to show how media exposure, or its anticipation, can limit or determine policy decision-making. We touch on public administration and agenda-setting literatures insofar as they relate to government, noting that they have been extensively discussed elsewhere.

***Media and politics as 'mutually reinforcing' dynamics in public bureaucracies***

Political agenda-setting theory asked whether politicians or the mass media set the priorities for societal action. A range of studies since the 1960s explored how and to what extent news media or policymakers determine government priorities, and what constitutes news (Cohen, 1963; McCombs, 2004), although they rarely featured bureaucratic actors and settings. These studies suggest that rather than being a zero-sum game, where an increase in media influence reduces the influence of politics, they are mutually reinforcing. This endorses claims that,



although the political domain has become increasingly dependent upon and shaped by modern mass media, this does not necessarily mean that a “media driven democracy” is either irresistible or inevitable (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 259).

The interplay between political and media systems at the institutional, or meso-level, has been described as "a feedback loop in which media power and political power reinforce each other"(Van Aelst et al., 2014). A comprehensive review of agenda-setting studies contrasted the apparently ‘minimal’ links between political and media agendas, and the ‘massive’ influence of media as perceived by politicians (Vesa et al., 2015). Politicians’ concerns about media exposure allow the media to “act as a kind of anticipatory constraint limiting political actors’ manoeuvring space” (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2011: 305) (See also Strömbäck, 2011). Davis’s interview studies with UK media and political actors during the late 1990s, when news providers became increasingly dependent on information subsidies from “partisan sources” (Davis, 2000, p44; Gandy, 1980), found that British legislators were in daily contact with journalists, essentially becoming ‘quasi-colleagues’ (Davis, 2010),

Mediatization theory goes beyond agenda-setting or ideas of media logic to focus on systemic changes over time at the deeper, less visible “backstage” of governing institutions, drawing attention to the long-term consequences of such continuous feedback loops between media, public opinion, and government. This is consistent with Davis’s observations, and Cook’s work on how US government officials incorporated the news into the achievement of policy goals,

and his call for more research into the news management process from the perspective of officials and other political actors (Cook, 2005; Davis, 2010). Recent empirical work by mediatization scholars has examined various sites of government as being deeply impacted by media, not just in the form of a pervasive 'media logic' but as an interpenetration at the level of values and practices (Pallas et al., 2014; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014; Figenschou et al., 2015). One study of Finnish policy decision-makers found that both political and administrative actors in government settings either resist or respond to an increasingly frenetic competitive power struggle for *attention*, a form of capital that could "circulate widely and complicate other institutional orders" (Kunelius and Reunanen, 2012: 20). Even civil servants who were relatively insulated from media anticipated the media anxieties of ministers as part of their policy deliberations (Reunanen et al., 2010).

Rawolle identifies even closer assimilation between media and policy actors in his examination of the development of Australian education policy in relation to the knowledge economy (Rawolle, 2005). He concludes that they interacted to create political traction for certain policy themes while avoiding others; engaging in a struggle over the naming of social problems, the diagnosis of the cause, and proposed solutions. Waller found that Australian policy officials working in the controversial area of indigenous affairs were "scanning media endlessly and responding to it endlessly," a preoccupation which limited the range of conceivable policy options (Waller, 2014). To take a UK case, Gewirtz's insider observations of the

implementation of Education Action Zones by the Blair government shows how media representations of a policy can become constitutive of, rather than merely symbolising, that policy (Gewirtz et al., 2004). Here, we see the integration of communication-as-action and policy-oriented action, reinforcing Cook's claims concerning the closer integration of news-making and government policy-making (Cook, 2005).

Interviews and surveys involving senior public service managers in the Netherlands and Australia found that all were, without exception, heavy media users, using the news to "provide important clues and signals to the intentions and moves of other important agents", particularly ministers (Schillemans, 2012: 83, 85). A rare ethnographic study of mediatization from within a Norwegian government department found that news values had penetrated deep into the bureaucracy, providing an "infiltrating rationale" for "a description of reality that matters and has consequences" (Thorbjornsrud et al. 2014: 3), as officials adapted to the rhythm, language and format of the news, reallocated internal resources and even moulded decision making and law making in response to media 'noise' (see also Pallas and Fredriksson, 2014).

### ***The new 'hypersensitive' public bureaucracy***

A sub-section of public administration literature considers the impacts of media on bureaucracy as one factor among many in contemporary liberal democracies with volatile electorates and "an aggressive, intrusive and combative media" (Bakvis and Jarvis, 2012: 15).

To help manage reputational risk, ministers place a premium on public servants who can “assist in managing political crises and in dealing with the media” (Peters and Savoie 2012: 36). Some argue that the UK’s ‘neutral competence’ model of the executive (Diamond 2014), where an expert civil service offers impartial advice to ministers, has for some time been under threat from a “media-driven and ‘name, blame and shame’ environment” (Lindquist and Rasmussen, 2012: 188). A survey of policy officials in the Netherlands considered trust within elite policy networks, concluding that exposure to media, with its focus on conflict, made it harder to achieve compromise and damaged trust (Korthagen and Klijn 2014). Research into the “media-policy nexus” is still relatively new (Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer, 2010: 225) although Swanson raised the spectre of the “political-media complex” as far back as 1992 in relation to his critique of American democracy (Swanson, 1992). Some claim that decision-making in large governing bureaucracies is resistant to media influence, but others suggest that even “short periods of (media) attention affected outcomes and government policies for decades” (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 84).

The UK, with its centralised and adversarial political and media systems, a largely permanent, non-partisan civil service and a majoritarian electoral system tied to a practice of “executive dominance” (Lijphart 1999: 314), represents an extreme and relatively unexamined case. Officials working for the UK’s central governing bureaucracy (known as ‘Whitehall’) have been found to be adept at anticipating and responding to the needs of ministers (Page, 2012), raising

the question of how the mediatization of politics in the British context might be feeding back into bureaucratic behaviours and norms. The power of 'political spin' to destabilise government and undermine civil service impartiality is a recurring theme among UK commentators (Jones, 2001; Osborne, 2005; Ingham, 2003) but little systematic empirical evidence is available to substantiate these claims. The idea of speeded-up media time (Meyer 2002; Helms 2008) is seen empirically in Rhodes' ethnographic study of a UK government department where a minister is compelled to resign without substantive reason amid a media frenzy because the government has no time to establish the facts (Rhodes, 2011).

King and Crewe's analysis of costly policy failures in Britain found that the pressure on ministers to be constantly active (King and Crewe, 2013) resulted in the introduction of ill-considered and costly legislation. Hood described this new, hypersensitive environment as "blame world", a place of real and anticipated fear, which influences the decisions and actions of politicians and officials (Hood, 2011). These studies provide indirect support, especially in the UK, for a broader mediatization thesis, which claims that even the more insulated levels of government incorporate media concerns into their everyday practice. There is little empirical examination of the distinctive contribution of the social media in the shaping of the communications practices of government (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008).

British case studies conducted from the 1990s onwards illustrate further how elite political and media actors came together to define problems and solutions. As a working journalist,

Dean observed a growing “symbiotic relationship” between journalists and government. As Labour’s opposition home affairs spokesman after 1993, Tony Blair competed in a “penal populism war” with his Conservative counterpart, the Home Secretary Michael Howard, by announcing a series of “get tough” initiatives. He was rewarded with massive affirmative media coverage. In 2004, the recommendations of an expert review on vocational education was suddenly and unexpectedly vetoed by Blair, this time as Prime Minister, following a negative opposition and newspaper campaign (Dean, 2012: 109, 119). Silverman’s interview study with 44 crime and criminal justice policy experts, including six former Home Secretaries, concluded that policy makers were trapped by “an influential tabloid media” within “a tiny legislative space” (Silverman, 2012: 114). This tallies with Schlesinger et al.’s demonstration of the long term definitional struggles within the field of crime and criminal justice (Schlesinger et al. 1991). In the field of health policy, a case study showed how, in 2000, the Labour government shifted from support for “evolutionary change” as promised in its 1997 health policy document *The New NHS: Modern, Dependable*, to a tightly-controlled, top-down reform process, after the Prime Minister unexpectedly pledged on live morning television to bring health spending up to the EU average (Alvares-Rosete and Mays, 2014). These findings reinforce the claims of mediatization scholars that media impacts are deep-rooted and pervasive to the point of being both institutionalized and normalized within the policy process (Schillemans 2012; Thorbjornsrud et al 2014; Frederiksson and Pallas 2015).

### ***Research questions***

Our review of the intersecting literatures on media, politics and government suggests the need to address in long-term research the question of whether and to what extent the UK government has become mediatized. The evidence presented so far indicates that profound and unexplored changes are indeed taking place, which go beyond government communication or ideas of 'political spin' to the embedding of media within the governing process. The central empirical research questions arising out of these claims, then, are:

1. How do *servicing* senior policy and communications specialists perceive, respond to, and integrate media considerations within their everyday working practices?
2. Have there been marked and sustained changes over time in the daily routines and norms of government practice in relation to the demands of the media?

A longer-term study should address the extent to which different parts of the central governing bureaucracy have resisted or responded to mediatization, and how this impacts on, firstly, contested norms and values such as the public service ethos and impartiality, and secondly, relationships between ministers, policy specialists and communications advisers. Finally, it would be good to demonstrate change over time in government decision-making, the rhythm in which they are made, and the time available for internal policy deliberation.

These questions demand long-term empirical research about present trends, against the background of a non-idealized account of the past, which examines less obvious changes in everyday institutional practice over time in particular settings. In the next section, we present the findings of a small-scale study designed to clarify the starting-points for a larger empirical research project.

### **Methodology: archival research and interviews**

To gain an initial insight into long term change in how the government perceives its relations to media, we examined two tranches of UK archived government documents from the early 1980s, and contrasted these with data from interviews with *servicing* officials to find out to what extent government practices towards the media had changed. This approach is necessarily diachronic rather than continuous due to the 30-20-year rule which restricts the release of government documents.

#### ***Archival research***

The two tranches of documents examined included all Treasury papers relating to the new Conservative government's first annual spring Budget briefing of 1980<sup>ii</sup>, and all papers from the Prime Minister's office concerned with the presentation of the government's economic policy between 1981 and 1983<sup>iii</sup>. These were chosen because they represent a dominant theme



at a key moment of change in approach to mass media: the arrival of Margaret Thatcher as Conservative Prime Minister in 1979 with a controversial agenda for economic liberalism and privatisation that coincided with the advent of 24/7 media. While providing a stark contrast to modern civil service attitudes towards media, they show that many of the changes widely assumed to have been introduced *de novo* by the 1997 Labour government were actually taking place behind the scenes more than a decade earlier: the coordination of government presentation, the strategic drive for positive coverage, the demand from ministers for more persuasive communication, and the role of special advisers in providing more politically-inspired narratives.

In relation to the 1980 budget, almost immediately after the election victory, Mrs Thatcher instructed the Treasury to provide MPs with media-friendly 'snapshots' and 'press notices' to guide them in giving media interviews. Otherwise, the budget briefing process ran its traditional course and was administratively led. It was short – six weeks – and the chart of important milestones along the way was simple enough to fit on a single piece of paper. Briefings were developed by Treasury officials with little involvement from information specialists and followed a well-established routine culminating in the Chancellor's (finance minister's) speech in the House of Commons. News media were barely referred to in the documents.

The second tranche of documents relates to the Liaison Committee, a secret meeting of Conservative party officials, the Prime Minister, selected senior ministers, and civil servants, aimed at coordinating party and government presentation. So sensitive were its deliberations that the Committee's existence was not shared even with the Cabinet until March 1982. The documents show how the Prime Minister and her closest advisers, including her chief press secretary Bernard Ingham, challenged what they saw as civil service resistance, to develop a more persuasive, proactive and integrated approach to the government's media presentation of controversial issues, especially on the economy. In December 1981, for example, the Chancellor Geoffrey Howe complained that press releases produced by civil servants were neither clear nor persuasive enough and that press officers were not "ideally deployed for the proper presentation of the overall economic message." In a typical display of assertiveness, Ingham dismissed the complaint as "gratuitous", insisted on being included in meetings about the matter and offered to prepare a paper (PREM 19/720).

Later that year, Ingham briefed the committee on *Developments in The Media Expansion of Television*, examining the implications of the imminent launch of Channel 4 and Breakfast TV. He predicted more intense competition for news, and advised ministers to "summarise the essentials" and provide "crisp, clear and simple" answers to questions. He might have suggested an increase in staffing for the Prime Minister's press office: in his memoirs he recalls

that he had just one deputy, three press officers, two secretaries and an office manager (Ingham, 2003). In 2017, the press office was staffed by 24 press officers and three support staff<sup>iv</sup>.

The documents provide early evidence of friction between politically driven media strategists and a civil service culture which resisted overt advocacy or persuasion – a tension that surfaced publicly after 1997. In the struggle for control over the government’s media agenda, the balance of power appeared to be shifting towards ministers, accepted routines were being challenged, and shorter deadlines were being imposed. However, there is little sign here of the use of presentation *as* policy, as observed in some of the later UK case studies discussed earlier. This potentially far-reaching but largely hidden change in government’s relations to media underlines the value of archival accounts of insider decision-making as a means of accessing detailed, institutionally-based, empirical evidence for continuity and change.

### ***Expert interviews***

To consider the extent and scope of institutional and cultural change in the intervening 30 years, we conducted anonymous interviews with serving senior civil servants from a range of departments and disciplines. Nine semi-structured interviews were carried out in late 2014 and early 2015, of whom four were communications specialists, four policy specialists, and one with both policy and communications expertise<sup>v</sup>. Any access to serving civil servants is difficult given the sensitivity of the topic, and the publicity-averse disposition of UK civil servants. From

the tone of the interviews, it is clear that there were limits to how frank they could be<sup>vi</sup>. The interview topic guide was derived from the literature search, and from a scoping meeting with 30 or so senior academics, civil servants and policy specialists at the LSE in June 2014. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically around three major themes arising from the literature: the British context, agenda-setting, and media impact on bureaucracies, plus a fourth powerful new theme which, as we saw, has not yet been widely explored in the literature – insider perceptions of the impact of social media on government.

#### *The British context*

All interviewees were familiar with the working practices of the British media and had experience of dealing with or observing ‘media frenzies’ which although uncomfortable, were described as inevitable. The relations between government and media in the UK were judged to be distinctively adversarial, supporting claims in the agenda-setting literature that the UK is an outlier (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014; Van Dalen and Van Aelst, 2014).

*The media in this country, the national newspaper media particularly, is very competitive and the media’s obsession with personality and conflict (...) but it will ever be thus. We’re never going to change it. (IV2)*

“Accountability”, was a word that recurred, although parliament was not mentioned in this context. In their “naming, blaming and shaming” capacity (Jarvis and Thomas, 2012: 279),

media were thought to offset the imbalance between a powerful executive and a relatively weak legislature by holding government to account.

*It is particularly important in the case of the UK: partly because the media is a powerful force, and partly because at least until recently the executive relative to the legislature has been very powerful. The media has been a very important check and balance in the system in a way that is slightly different than in other countries. (IV1)*

This acceptance of intensive media scrutiny and the acknowledgment that in practice government is held to account more by media than parliament is substantiated by a former Liberal Democrat minister with the 2010-2015 Conservative-led Coalition government, who recalled: “we got quite remote from Parliament... It was much, much, much more about the media” (Cable, 2015).

#### *The agenda-setting power of media*

While some were ambivalent towards media and thought that its influence should be resisted, most saw the news media as powerful agenda-setters even influencing the timing and content of policy making.

*The centrality of the print media even as the population moves away from it, they are still in Whitehall and Westminster terms overwhelmingly more important than anything else. They are*

*the people who make or break individual careers and can guide policy decisions just by sheer muscle. (IV3)*

On the other hand, “you have to be quite resistant” to the fact that “the media can create its own dynamic” (IV8), by “not letting the media dictate what the agenda is” and “actually setting the agenda ourselves” (IV5).

There was some support for claims made in the literature that there is an increasing tendency in mediatized politics (Meyer, 2002) for news making or symbolic politics to merge with political action (Cook, 2005).

*The department is actually quite comfortable with thinking of the media's impact on its policy. It's a big influence on it all the time and I don't actually think that's a bad thing (...) the media is a big presence in what we do. (IV1)*

Journalists could facilitate otherwise “uncomfortable” challenges to ministers on the part of civil servants by legitimately questioning political narratives. One respondent admitted that, “you, to an extent, have to parrot the government’s line (...) which is not necessarily a balanced view”. Journalists performed a “very beneficial role” by proposing alternative viewpoints (IV9) and championing “issues which then feed into the policy debate” (IV6). Here, a positive role for media as an input to the policy process is being recognised, supporting the idea of a continuous feedback loop between media and government that has become normalized.

*Media impact within the government bureaucracy*

Mediatization studies of governments in a range of jurisdictions have suggested that officials closest to ministers, and those who are most senior, are more likely to be 'media savvy' (Rhodes, 2011; Schillemans, 2012). The interviews bear out those observations:

*For the top people, who regularly interact with ministers, it is all-important. You need to become much more aware because the minister will expect you to have seen or heard them on television the night before (IV4).*

There was agreement that ministers overestimate the influence of the media, especially the national press, and spend a lot of time trying to manage it, possibly out of insecurity. Indeed, for some, ministers' primary relationship was with those responsible for handling the media: "The key relationship on a day to day basis is the head of news or the press secretary. They see ministers every single day, all day" (IV3). Another respondent agreed that: "ministers are particularly attuned to what's in the news, because, after all, it's a very precarious job" (IV4). The pressure this puts on politicians is considerable: "I think anyone going into politics has to accept that they have no private life which is not subject to public scrutiny anymore" (IV6).

Officials are also under pressure to adapt their culture and working practices to media time and to prepare for possible onslaughts.

*The news cycle is incredibly quick now. Five years ago what set the news agenda was what Sky News was doing in the morning; now it's about what's trending on twitter. Where it presents a challenge for government is having time to establish the facts. (IV1)*

This is a deeper form of adaptation working at the level of the habits, norms and values of civil servants, as noticed in the Finnish and Norwegian studies (Reunanen et al., 2010; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). Case studies have revealed the intensity of media involvement at the top of government, and here respondents speak of feeling out of control, of this space being “uncomfortable”, “fluid” and “dynamic”(IV8) (Rhodes, 2011; Schillemans, 2012). Actors experience being: “in the eye of the storm” where “media can target politicians and hound them out of a job” (IV7).

*The level of scrutiny and the speed with which problems are created for you that distract ministers from their day job is huge. (IV3)*

*It can be very very uncomfortable when you've got a story running on mainstream 24/7 media and you haven't got a line...No one likes to see a vacuum. (IV8)*

Yet the demands of the news media, however discomfiting, are seen as an inevitable, even healthy part of life in a democracy, which can help to sharpen up policy.

*In my experience overall, media questioning can force government to think through its policy better and stress test it for coherence and vigour. (IV1)*



There was a note of caution, though, and a questioning as to whether this adversarial relationship really serves the needs of the public.

*You need a very active and competitive media for a healthy democracy to keep politicians on their toes but do the media exercise too much power without responsibility? The negative consequences of that on the national debate and on peoples' cynicism – can that undermine democracy? (IV2)*

Concern at the propensity of media to disrupt or distort government narratives led to greater efforts to reach citizens directly, as we see below.

#### *The impact of social media on government*

According to one respondent “the biggest single change has been the arrival of social media (as) a way of getting our message out more straight-forwardly” (IV1) but this went beyond simply adding more complexity to media management, or shrinking the time available to respond to the news agenda, though both of these were reported. Respondents sensed that they were on the threshold of a profound change to the print and broadcast media-dominated model that had persisted in government at least since the 1990s. An optimistic view of the promise of social media to enable governments to set their own agendas and bypass the mass media by engaging directly with citizens was evident (see Schulz, 2014).

*It gives us the opportunity to put our story in our words with our pictures... It doesn't have to go through the prism of the media. (IV8)*

Officials were excited at the possibility of using graphics and video footage to tell compelling stories through the voices of those on the frontline; an intensification of the mediatization process which has been referred to as “feed-forward” (Crosbie, 2015).

*A lot of government departments are writing direct to the web. We're trying to do that as much as we possibly can. Government websites are now news outlets (...) the direction of travel is very clearly digital (IV8).*

There were risks. The same respondent argued that “the space in which people are operating is potentially much more exposed than it was”, and that even street level officials dealing directly with the public needed to become more media savvy because members of the public “will film with their mobile phones in all sorts of different situations and stick those up on social media” (IV8). Another saw social media as a “more subtle” way of communicating, using channels provided by third parties: “people who are already trusted” (IV5).

Here, we see a second phase of normalizing media influences within government, when civil servants think of what they do as *making media*, a development that can be considered as a more deeply naturalized phase of mediatization (Kunelius and Reunanen, 2014). When civil servants start to think of themselves *as media that rival mainstream media* then we see a further

embedding of media *within government* that signals a shift in the underlying conception of the relationship between government, media and citizens. We also see the possibility of the re-emergence of government information delivered directly as news, but using “trusted” third parties to “amplify messages” as proposed in a UK government communications plan (HM Government, 2015: 3). As yet, the implications of this development for government, wider politics and for the mediatization of government are unclear, and so require further research, not least because this raises questions about the transparency of these processes.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This article has examined diverse literatures relevant to understanding government’s transforming relations to media *as a process of mediatization* and presents some preliminary UK-based research that defines the starting-points for a future larger-scale study of that topic in any country. In this concluding section, we draw together the threads of this discussion and propose an approach to such a study that could be applied across different media-governance systems.

Dominant paradigms in political communications research have tended to focus on agent-centred critical perspectives on changing practices of communications professionals or politicians (spin and professionalization for instance) or on questions of agenda-setting that reify a distinction between media and politics. Mediatization theory by contrast argues that

such approaches are insufficient to grasp the continuous feedback loops between media and government practice, and suggests that research should focus more on everyday policy and administrative practice, particularly in the UK with its continuing professed attachment to the *ideal* of a politically neutral civil service.

Our preliminary research suggests that government in the UK is mediatized, and that the shift towards more direct communication through social media both complicates and intensifies the process, allowing a further internalization of news values and news-making within government. There appear to have been marked, sustained and in some ways troubling changes in the everyday routines and norms of government practice, particularly in relation to politicians' sensitivity to the media representation of policy. The pressures of media scrutiny on politicians and the speeding up of the policy and media cycle appear to extend deep into the bureaucracy in ways that require further analysis.

Mediatization is most visible and disruptive at sites close to or occupied by ministers and their political teams, but we suggest that future research into the mediatization of government should examine the backstage and deeper levels of policy development and administration, and to consider not only adaptation and response but resistance, to mediatization. The literature review and interviews show that pressures exerted on central governing bureaucracies by mediatization can be considerable, even overwhelming, challenging wider cultural and institutional norms such as impartiality, and for some, threatening careers. Finally, in the

struggle for public attention, governments see social media as a mechanism for producing their own news, by-passing the 'prism of the media' and going direct to citizens. It is crucial to examine possible risks this poses for government accountability, transparency and efficacy. In common with findings by other scholars examining mediatization in public bureaucracies, our interviewees experienced 'discomfort' at the discrepancy between their ethical norms as public servants, and the everyday experience of mediatized policy deliberations (Pallas et al., 2014, Figenschou et al. 2015). This too deserves further investigation.

Predicated as it is on long-term change, a mediatization framework calls for an approach to research that examines change over time and is open enough in its methodology for replication within an internationally comparative setting. Government institutions rarely facilitate ethnographic access so alternative methods are required. Archival work, the analysis of internal working documents and anonymised interviews could be supplemented with 'oral history' type interviews with former political actors, and with reference to biographical sources, diaries and memoirs, although the complexity and fine-texture of everyday practice is most fully revealed through ethnographic approaches, where possible, as the Norwegian and Swedish studies have shown (Figenschou et al., 2015; Pallas and Fredriksson, 2014). A clear challenge in developing a larger-scale research project is building collaborative relations between academics and government, and especially with career officials, whose voices are rarely heard. Perceptions of governing politicians' relations with media underlie many critical

accounts of how government has changed in various countries over the last two to three decades but as we have shown, the deeper and less noisy implications of mediatization for everyday practices of government at all levels, need to be further explored.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> *Breakfast with Frost*, 16/1/2000, BBC TV

<sup>ii</sup> National Archives (T414/169 and 174).

<sup>iii</sup> National Archives (PREM19/720/721).

<sup>iv</sup> Accessed 2 February 2017 at <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/people-finder/search?organisation=prime-minister-s-office-10-downing-street&searchtype=department&page=3>.

<sup>v</sup> List of interviewees

Interviewee	Code
Senior civil servant, communications, government department	IV1
Communications director, executive agency	IV2
Former senior civil servant, communications	IV3
Senior civil servant, government department	IV4
Senior civil servant, communications, government department	IV5
Director General, government department	IV6
Senior local government politician	IV7
Senior civil servant, government department	IV8
Senior civil servant, specialist, government department	IV9

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<sup>vi</sup> One respondent explained after his interview that he had been speaking 'in role' and that "people will always be tight-lipped about certain things whilst in the post". To get round this he recommended interviewing former officials.

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