The growing interdependence of media and politics and its implications for democracy

All democratic systems are confronting the increasingly powerful role of the media in politics. The decline of party-controlled media and the rise of independent, commercially-minded media have transformed mass communication. One of the NCCR Democracy research modules studies the implications this process of “mediatization” – in which politics becomes increasingly influenced by and dependent on the media – has for democracy.

by Frank Esser

As an increasingly independent power center, mass communication today operates autonomously, according to its own economic and symbolic logic. Logic, in this sense, refers to the specific ways in which journalists select, interpret, and present “stories” – how they translate events into “news”. In the political world, mediatization can even have some positive effects by providing politicians with an additional arena in which to reach their goals and by making politics more accessible to ordinary people, for example through an engaging reporting style that relates to people’s lives. Scholarly discussion, however, is more concerned with the problematic implications of mediatization for democracy. Structural changes in the media system and changes in media coverage can challenge democracy in several ways: contemporary news media, for example, sometimes fall short of fulfilling the responsibilities allocated to them, i.e. their public information mandate. This problem is intensified by the tendency of some news organizations to become more “interventionist”, assuming functions and powers that had initially been the preserve of political leaders. An example would be if a group of newspapers mobilizes public opinion to one side of an issue and uses this public support to bring pressure on legislators to confirm this view. At its extreme, mediatization may even lead to a state in which politics “has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central... continued on page 2
functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media,” as Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz argued in a programmatic article that marked the beginning of systematic research into the mediatization of politics. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair complained, in one of his last speeches in office, that the media is overly driven by “impact”, meaning a desire to be striking, influential, provocative, and indignant in its political affairs coverage. He said that it undermined Britain’s institutions, and “reduced our capacity to take the right decisions” as political leaders.

No indications for a fundamental power shift

However, contrary to simplified assumptions about fully transformed media democracies, our NCCR research finds little indication of a complete “colonialization” of politics by the media in most Western countries – for sure not in Switzerland. Moreover, not everything that looks like media dominance can actually be attributed to the independent behavior of journalists. Often it is political actors themselves who use the mass media for their own ends. Even Blair admitted his “own complicity” in the strained media-politics relationship, due to his trying to manage and massage the press. Politicians may anticipate media logic by staging events whose sole purpose is to generate favorable news coverage; they may have an interest in playing up certain media issues and playing down others in an effort to hurt their opponents; or they may substitute political activities by mediated activities if it allows them to mobilize their base more effectively. On the other hand, it must be said that despite growing attempts by political actors to professionalize their self-mediatization strategies, there is plenty of evidence that they quickly lose control of the news agenda – not least because journalists dislike the feeling of being instrumentalized by politicians and resort to preemptive strikes, emphasizing the voice of the media.

How mediatization impacts politics

In order to gauge the degree of mediatization in Western democracies, the research in the NCCR module is organized into four projects. All of them draw on a framework that was originally developed by Jesper Strömbäck and was further elaborated when Jesper spent one semester as visiting professor at the University of Zurich in 2011. The framework distinguishes mediatization effects on four dimensions each covered by one of the projects – message contents, political organizations, political decision-making processes, and audiences of political communication:

• The first project, led by Frank Esser (University of Zurich), examines whether media coverage of political affairs is predominantly shaped by a media logic or political logic.
• A joint project by Otfried Jarren at the University of Zurich and Patrick Donges at the University of Greifswald analyzes how political actors – such as parties, governments, and interest groups – are guided by elements of media logic.
• Pascal Sciarini and his collaborators at the University of Geneva investigate in their project how political organizations and decision-making institutions are affected by media logic.
The fourth project led by Heinz Bonfadelli, Frank Esser (University of Zurich), and Claes de Vreese (University of Amsterdam) investigates the effects of mediatization on people’s knowledge, perceptions, and participatory behaviors.

The mass media have become the most important source of political information for the wider public, and hence the question of how “political reality” is constructed by the news media is of general importance. We assume that news production today is more closely linked to media logics that are driven by professional motives and commercial motives. We also assume that the growing importance of the media and their media logics has placed greater demands on political organizations and interest groups, on policy making processes, and on citizens. The four dimensions of mediatization are highly correlated. Since we understand mediatization as a developmental process and since the main drivers of media logic cannot be assumed to be universally consistent across countries, all projects study mediatization across countries and time. The results of the research module have already been presented to the scientific community at various international conferences. Some of them will be published in the forthcoming book “Mediatization of Politics: Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies.” There will also be a special issue of the journal journalism Studies forthcoming in 2013 that focuses on mediatization research. Both outlets have also been deliberately opened to other contributors as well and aim to discuss our NCCR research in the context of the broader debate on mediatization in the political communication literature. In addition, we intend to raise awareness among practitioners regarding the policy implications of our findings. The principle of media freedom forbids direct control of the media. However, encouraging an ongoing public debate among political actors, media entrepreneurs, journalists, and the news-consuming public on certain journalistic principles that foster democratic processes, and framework conditions that secure the orientation of the media towards the needs of society, shall certainly contribute to a healthier, better functioning democracy.

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Besides globalization, “mediatization” is considered to be one of the key challenges to democracy. The term describes the growing interdependence of politics and media and the increasingly important role the media play in politics. Due to commercialization, professionalization, and technical innovation, the media system nowadays increasingly operates autonomously and according to its own economic logic – that not necessarily corresponds to the needs of the democratic process. This has led to the worry that mass media are profoundly transforming political communication in liberal democracies and even undermining the functions of political institutions.

For more than two years now, political and communication scientists in one of the NCCR Democracy research modules have been studying the significance and consequences of “mediatization” for democracy. This newsletter presents the findings of the four projects in the module, each of which examines one aspect of political communication: media content, political actors and institutions, and audiences. In contrast to prevalent assumptions, they paint a less negative picture of the media’s influence on politics in Western democracies.

Finally, this issue also highlights publications in our new book series with Palgrave Macmillan and some activities of young NCCR researchers.

Yvonne Rosteck, Editor
How political reality is defined and constructed by the media

In order to find out to what extent political communication has become dominated by the media, it is necessary to investigate whether media coverage of political affairs is predominantly shaped by a media logic or a political logic. An NCCR research project at the University of Zurich aims to detect this degree of “mediatization” by analyzing the content of the print and broadcast media of several countries over a period of 50 years.

by Frank Eser, Florin Büchel, and Andrea Umbricht

Media logic is seen as the driving force in the process of mediatization. Media logic refers to specific story telling techniques, presentational styles, and production formats news organizations use in order to succeed in the society-wide struggle for people’s attention. Our NCCR project starts from the assumption that in Western societies the news media increasingly define and construct political reality. It expects this construction process to be guided by media-specific frames and formats and investigates systematically, across time and countries, whether the media content of political affairs is governed by a political logic or a media logic.

Political logic would serve the needs of political actors and institutions whereas media logic would serve journalists and their professionally and commercially motivated rules of selecting, interpreting, and presenting “stories”. Indicators of media logic are, for instance, journalists dominating politicians in news reports regarding the length of speaking time or fragmented reporting of a political discourse at the expense of debate. Another example is self-referential reports on the media’s own involvement in the political process. Furthermore, media frame political reality in a specific way, in particular by focusing on conflict, scandalization, sensationalism, “emotionalization”, dramatization, or depoliticization – as media logic is increasingly guided by a commercial logic. The process of globalisation tends to reinforce this effect, as global forces within national media systems promote the commercialization of broadcasting, the emergence of multimedia conglomerates, as well as the adoption of global media formats. Due to the transnational exchange of news values and reporting practices, political news across countries tends to converge, undermining the national identities of news cultures.

The aims of the project are to map news cultures in Western countries according to their media-centeredness, to link these news cultures to their respective political and media systems, and to draw conclusions on their performance regarding their information mandate and on the implications for democracy. In order to do so, it analyzes the content of television and print media in eight countries selected because they represent different types of Western news systems: Germany, Denmark, and Switzerland stand for the “democratic-corporatist” Central European media system in which press freedom has developed early, newspaper circulation is high, and journalistic professionalization is strong. The United States and the United Kingdom represent the “liberal” Anglo-American system in which press freedom and mass-circulation press also developed early but in which newspaper circulation is nowadays moderate. France, Spain, and Italy belong to the category of polarist-pluralized media systems in which an elite-oriented press with limited overall circulation, and television, dominate the media market.

While the TV analysis focuses on all eight countries, the print media analysis examines three news outlets in each of the following six countries: US, UK; GER, CH; IT, F. A dissertation by Katharina Hemmer, who worked on an earlier part of this project in the NCCR’s first research phase, offers a first tentative comparison of US-American, British, German, and Swiss newspaper journalism in the early 1960s and the mid 2000s. With the current project including television content analysis and the expansion of analysis to more countries and news outlets, it will allow for more robust and generalizable results. Two PhD candidates work on the current project: while Andrea Umbricht is responsible for the print analysis, the TV analysis is supervised by Florin Buechel.

First results regarding the content of print media

The findings from the print analysis show that the profession of journalism is undergoing a profound change. Media-centered news reporting intensified in all countries following the 1960s. In order to attract large audiences, sensationalal and emotional presentation styles as
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation. We cannot speak of a universal homogenization of reporting patterns. German and Swiss news stories are less guided by a commercial logic and resist the use of sensationalist and negative news. In contrast, British and Italian newspapers are much more vulnerable to the impact of attention-grabbing, conflict-centered news – their levels of negativity increase the most. Sensationalism is most prevalent in the American and British press which points towards the strong influence of commercialization in the liberal model. A more in-depth analysis of the data is in progress and will be published in 2013.

Figure: Analysis of election campaign coverage in eight countries

Denmark: DK Radio (public channel), TV2 (private channel)
France: F2 (public), TF1 (private)
Germany: ARD (public), RTL (private)
Italy: Rai1 (public), Canale 5 (private)
Spain: TVE1 (public), Ant.3 (private)
Switzerland: SF1 (public)
United Kingdom: BBC (public), ITV (private)
United States: NBC (private), ABC (private)

Analysis of TV news content: three distinct reporting styles

Television analysis particularly focuses on the question of how public and private channels cover national election campaigns across time and space. The first results from the television analysis are depicted in the figure above. It is based on an eight-country-comparison regarding the length of speaking time taken by politicians and journalists on prime-time news programs. The horizontal x-axis shows if the candidate or the journalist was more dominant. To the right side of the graph, the journalistic voice is dominant in election news reports – this means short candidate-statements and long and interpretative statements by journalists. On the left side of the graph, the political voice is dominant in election news reports – it
means long candidate-statements that are also prominently placed within campaign stories. The vertical y-axis shows the candidates’ campaign style. In the upper part of the graph, the campaign is very tightly controlled and the candidates try to avoid unwanted media confrontations – they prefer staged appearances in front of pre-screened audiences. In the lower part of the graph, the campaign is very interactive with the candidate allowing direct interaction with journalists at press conferences or in interviews.

This analysis reveals three discernible reporting styles: firstly, the United States and Germany show patterns where candidates run highly-controlled campaigns for which they are punished by journalists who compress their public statements to brief and de-contextualized snippets or “sound bites”. Secondly, Denmark, Great Britain, Switzerland, and France show more interactive campaign styles where the journalistic voice is still dominant and the candidates often need to defend themselves in press/politics interactions. Thirdly, Italy and Spain show very interactive campaigns and the journalists grant candidates rather long sound bites – indicating a “sacerdotal”, more passive reporting style. Concerning election campaign coverage, national differences seem to matter more than organizational differences (private vs. public channels).

In sum, both the TV and print study findings support the assumption that in each news system we observe a fusion of country-specific reporting patterns with elements of a transnational news logic. The study also shows that trends in news content cannot easily be integrated into existing media system typologies as empirical reporting patterns are more complex than parsimonious models. These national news cultures seem to be relatively stable, despite international trends.

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Publications


Upcoming events

Ethnic politics and electoral democracy
International conference
14–16 June 2012, ETH Zurich
www.bochsler.eu/ethnicpolitics/

Applications of social network analysis
International conference
4–7 September 2012, Center for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA)
www.asna.ch

Civic education 2012
Conference (in German)
7–8 September 2012, Center for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA)
web.fhnw.ch/ph/tagungen/politische-bildung-empirisch-1

The diffusion of democracy
31 January 2013, University of Zurich
Panel discussion with Beth Simmons (Harvard University), Valerie Bunce (Cornell University) and Kurt Weyland (University of Texas at Austin).
New NCCR Publications


How strong is the media’s political power in Switzerland?

Over recent years, research into the relationship between the media and politics has grown significantly. The common perspective is one of an increasing influence of the media on politics. Buzz phrases such as “the mediatization of politics” or “media democracy” refer to the idea that we are witnessing a transformation of the media’s political role and with it a transformation of politics itself. An NCCR project investigates the reciprocal influence of media and political actors in decision-making processes in Switzerland.

by Nino Landerer, Pascal Sciarini, and Anke Tresch

Recent examples of the media’s impact on politics abound: Bruno Zuppiger, for example, national counselor of the Swiss People’s Party and promising candidate in the race for the Federal Council in December 2011, had to withdraw his candidacy and also stepped down as president of the Gewerbeverband (the Swiss trade and industry association). This after allegations were published in a weekly news magazine: purportedly, his company, chosen as executor of a former employee’s last will and testament, had kept several thousand Swiss Francs for itself. Only a few weeks later, the governor of the Swiss National Bank, Philipp Hildebrand, was forced to resign in the wake of a scandal involving currency trades made by his wife. Again, the information was disclosed by a weekly news magazine and was followed by accusations from other news media. Going beyond such anecdotal evidence of the media’s political power in Switzerland, the NCCR project “The ‘mediatization’ of political decision-making” systematically investigates how the media influence political actors’ strategies and behavior in specific decision-making processes, and to what extent and under which conditions the media influence (or mainly reflect) issue priorities in decision-making.

Media and political actors’ strategic choices

In the debate on the quality of, and challenges to, democracy, the question of how the media report on decision-making processes becomes central. When, and to what extent, is media coverage governed by media logic? Do the media explain and discuss political decision-making processes in detail, providing a pluralist image of the different perspectives (political logic)? Or are they more interested in framing the debates in terms of a race between particular persons and parties, applying presentation techniques such as scandalization, “negativization”, and simplification (media logic)? More importantly, the project asks how parliamentary actors adapt to this media logic. In a consensus democracy such as Switzerland, political majorities in parliament develop through coalitions across party lines. The call for an optional referendum that can be launched against a law voted on by the federal parliament adds to this consensus-oriented thinking: political actors try to avoid the uncertainties of a popular vote through extensive consultations between involved governmental and non-governmental actors. In order to reach a compromise, however, a certain level of mutual trust and secrecy between the different MPs is necessary.

In this context, a dilemma arises for elected political actors who face a choice between the relative secrecy of compromise-oriented negotiations, and pressures from the public for more transparency. The dilemma involves a strategic choice between a compromise-oriented and rather elitist policy logic, and a constituency-oriented and rather populist electoral logic. The project investigates in detail how, if at all, political actors adapt their strategic behavior. It analyzes both media coverage (through content analysis) and political actors’ strategies (through face-to-face interviews) in selected parliamentary decision-making processes. Do political actors behave differently in different decision-making processes, and if so, why? Within the same process, do different parties behave differently with respect to media logic? And do actors behave differently in the different phases of a decision-making process? Answering questions such as these will provide new insights into the routines of political decision-making in a mediatized environment.

The political agenda-setting power of the media

Besides influencing politicians’ strategies and behavior, and possibly disturbing the search for consensus, media may also influence decision-making through the
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Allocation of attention: by emphasizing some issues and downplaying others, media are likely to exert an influence on the political agenda and to determine which political issues deserve attention and which should be ignored. This influence is usually referred to as the “political agenda-setting power” of the media. However, influence can operate in both directions, and the project therefore investigates reciprocal interactions and interdependencies between the media and political institutions and actors. The extent to which media coverage influences the issue-priorities of policymakers is contingent on various factors such as the types of issues (e.g. sensational, prominent, or governmental), of medias (e.g. TV or newspapers), and of political agendas (e.g. symbolic or substantial). In our research project we join the view of a conditional relationship between media and political agendas and look at the role played by additional factors such as the content of media coverage (i.e. whether it relates to international vs. national news, to policy vs. policy-making, or to Europeanized vs. non-Europeanized issues) and the specific decision-making phase at stake. To test these effects we rely on a large dataset which measures the allocation of attention in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung between 1995 and 2003, a set that we collected during the first two years of our project. Corresponding data regarding the “political agenda” was gathered during previous research at the University of Geneva. It includes parliamentary initiatives and motions, government communiqués regarding the creation of new (or the revision of existing) legislative acts, legislative acts themselves, and direct-democratic votes.

Growing independence of the media

Our first analyses show that the media report on a smaller number of issues than do political actors in the various decision-making phases. Whereas political actors have a problem-solving imperative and need to address a wide array of issues, the media have the liberty to focus only on the most relevant and newsworthy. Although the media concentrate on fewer issues than political decision-makers, the top three issues are the same: government operations, transportation policy, and macroeconomics receive the most attention from both the media and politics. Particularly in those decision-making phases that are commonly considered to be the most important in Switzerland – the pre-parliamentary phase and the referendum phase – we uncovered a high correspondence of issue priorities in the media and politics. Over time, however, this correspondence decreases: media and politics have increasingly different issue priorities. This finding suggests a growing independence of the media from politics, and raises the question of whether the media can still fulfill their democratic function to provide sufficient information about the decision-making process to contribute to citizens’ “enlightened understanding.”

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The chairman of the Swiss National Bank, Philipp Hildebrand, resigned after a media scandal over a controversial currency trade.
Becoming a democratic citizen in a multi-media environment

It is often assumed that the media play a key role in shaping political attitudes. However, our knowledge of the media’s role in the political socialization process is remarkably thin. An NCCR project at the universities of Zurich and Amsterdam addresses the fundamental question of how young people develop into democratic citizens in a society influenced by entertainment-oriented media and “mediatized” politics.

by Judith Möller, Ruth Kunz, and Frank Esser

For a democracy to function well it needs the involvement of citizens who vote, keep track of the decisions of the political elite, and who articulate their concerns about the direction the country is taking. Yet we are not born as complete, fully ready citizens. Instead, as the American economist Thomas Sowell once put it – “each new generation born is in effect an invasion of civilization by little barbarians who must be civilized before it is too late.” But how do teenagers develop into responsible citizens; how do they become knowledgeable about current affairs and the inner workings of the political system; how do they become aware of their power and convinced to use it in support of democracy? The answer to these questions is changing constantly as the society in which young people grow up is changing too. The rise of the internet, the demise of the traditional family structure, and the fragmentation of the political and media landscape have changed the ways in which children come to be citizens compared to the generations before them.

In the project, led by Heinz Bondadelli, Frank Esser, and ClAES de Vreese, we investigate the development of political attitudes and behavior among adolescents in Switzerland and the Netherlands in a multi-media world. In a panel survey we try to identify those factors that contribute to a growth in individual political participation. For this we survey representative samples of 1,600 Dutch and 1,600 Swiss adolescents in annual intervals from 2010 to 2012. The youngest respondents were 15 and the oldest had just turned 18 at the time of the first wave of surveys. Because we question the same adolescents several times we are able to identify influences that occurred earlier (such as a high-level of education or intensive news-media use) and which possibly caused a growth or decline in political knowledge and engagement. A panel study has thus the distinct advantage that individual trajectories of respondents can be analyzed in causal terms, although this must be done cautiously by checking for other influences.

Comparing political socialization of Dutch and Swiss adolescents

In our ongoing analyses we look at a host of factors known to be relevant to political socialization. They range from parents and peers to new factors such as online media. We are particularly interested in questions of process: at which age do adolescents start to participate and what are the stepping stones in the process towards political engagement? What is the role of the media? Does use of news media merely reinforce attitudes adopted from adolescents’ parents or does learning from the news open up new perspectives and issues to citizens in the making? We are also interested in those adolescents who are alienated from politics, have grown cynical and are no longer interested in playing an active role in the political world. Why are they tuning out? By comparing the background, upbringing, and education of active and inactive adolescents we hope to learn what triggers the rejection of politics and therefore provide insight into how to increase youth participation.

Another research interest in our project is participation itself. Being digital natives, members of the younger generation have far more opportunities to participate than those of their parents’ generation. The internet provides the infrastructure necessary to approach politics in new ways as the Occupy movement, countless online petitions, and actions promoting file sharing have demonstrated. The web enables the discussion of issues without the need for political parties. This creates new challenges and opportunities for debating and organizing politics. Online alliances are quickly formed and crowds can be organized in a matter of hours. At the same time these new, cause-oriented forms of organizations lack long-term dependability and accountability – they vanish as quickly as they appear. We want to find out whether these new forms of participation replace or supplement traditional forms of political activism such as writing a letter to an MP or supporting a
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Direct democracy fosters the political engagement of adolescents

We can already say that direct-democratic institutions such referenda and public initiatives seem to inspire young citizens to become more involved. Swiss adolescents participate considerably more in politics than their Dutch counterparts: they are more likely to donate, engage in political discussions online, or forward an email about a political issue. Our results indicate that the higher level of participation in Switzerland is linked to a higher level of perceived political efficacy – the feeling that one is capable of influencing the political world. This means Swiss adolescents feel considerably more able to engage in politics, with visible consequences. We were able to trace back one potential cause of this difference: the aforementioned direct democratic institutions, essential elements of the Swiss political system, are rare in the Netherlands. They provide countless opportunities to engage in the decision-making process, even long before adolescents are allowed to vote. Mavors can make up their minds about an issue at stake, discuss it, try to persuade their parents or other adults, and learn that there is far more than one solution to any specific problem. Having, during their lives, followed a number of campaigns leading to referenda or initiatives, Swiss adolescents tend to be more confident in their capacity to participate, which leads to a generally higher level of involvement. Given the ubiquitous concern regarding declining interest in politics, this study shows that political engagement can be inspired in the young by shaping the decision-making process to be more participatory.

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Publication


political party in an election campaign. We are also interested to see who benefits from these new online opportunities. Do they merely engage the already engaged, or does the accessibility of new offers inspire less motivated and less educated adolescents to contribute?

Finally, we have a comparative interest. Swiss and Dutch adolescents are asked the same questions at roughly the same point in time, enabling us to generalize and contextualize our findings. In terms of generalization we hope to identify those mechanisms of political socialization that operate similarly across political systems. In terms of contextualization we hope to identify those conditions that are conducive to political engagement and that help us understand differences in the behavior of Swiss and Dutch teenagers. One major organizational difference between the two countries is that Dutch democracy is purely representative whereas democracy in Switzerland is characterized by strong participatory elements.
How “mediatization” affects political interest groups

Interest groups play an important role in democracies as they serve as intermediaries between the state and society: they provide information and avenues for participation; they also foster legitimacy by explaining and implementing policies. The second project in the NCCR research module on “mediatization” examines whether, and how, interest groups in Switzerland have changed their communication repertoire and their organizational structure as a reaction to the growing importance of the media in politics.

by Erik Jentges, Patrick Donges, Otfried Jarren, and Matthias Brändli

In Switzerland, interest groups play a particularly important role in politics. Nearly 30 years ago, political scientist Peter Katzenstein commented that “Swiss democracy is geared to pressure groups; it is a form of government calculated to bring such groups into existence and give them power. The system could conceivably continue for a time without parties, but without pressure groups it would not work at all.” The adaptation of political parties to mediatization was studied in an earlier project also led by Otfried Jarren and Patrick Donges in the NCCR Democracy’s first research phase. The researchers’ attention has now shifted to political interest groups. The aim of the new project is to explore how a general transformation in political communication has affected these intermediaries between state and society. Studying political interest groups starts with the challenge of defining and counting them, as the term “interest group” covers a broad spectrum of organizational forms. A comprehensive register of interest groups does not exist and a costly manual coding was required to merge several lists from different sources. Thus, the project now possesses a large data set of Swiss interest groups. Based on the definition of interest groups as associations that are oriented towards policy makers, are institutionalized as organizations, and that – unlike parties – refrain from having their members elected to public office, there are 2,649 interest groups in Switzerland. Of these, 2,475 have an email address and were asked to participate in an online survey on their interactions with news media and their general communication behavior.

The Swiss interest group landscape

The geographical distribution of the majority of Swiss interest groups remains strongly focused on Zurich as the economic center and Bern as the national capital. Overall, 89% of these organizations are located in German-speaking parts of Switzerland, 9.2% in the French-speaking cantons and few groups in the Italian-speaking part of the country. This is not to be mistaken for political misrepresentation, and can be explained by the characteristic structure of the interest group system: national umbrella organizations in our sample often have local branches in all regions. The largest share of groups originates in the economic and employment sector (27.7%), followed by groups from the health and education sectors (around 10% each). Other policy fields have smaller shares. The density of interest groups is 24 per 100,000 citizens; a ratio that is about four times higher than in Germany. Switzerland thus has a densely populated interest-group landscape with a broad infrastructure for interest representation. Legal provisions, especially referenda and “initiatives”, provide accessible channels via which to move issues onto the political agenda. Also, informal consultations support and sustain access to politics. Overall, a diversified and tightly woven intermediary system has emerged and is a characteristic feature of Swiss democracy.

How interest groups communicate

Our survey is based on responses from 985 Swiss interest groups (response rate of 40%). The results are presented in the table below: regarding their external communication, nearly all interest groups make use of a website to portray their organizational profile to potentially large audiences. Classical instruments for disseminating information concerning their issues, such as flyers or leaflets, are often used and considered as highly relevant. Key importance is given to face-to-face interaction with politicians and also with journalists. Press releases are well established formats for formalized information dissemination. Membership journals serving both external communication and internal communication with members are frequently mentioned as important. Membership
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by an organization affect its contact with mass media. To a large extent, interdependencies are important in explaining organizational behavior. For example, civil society interest groups that claim to be politically independent are usually not financially independent – they tend to depend on publicity in the mass media. Such a “media dependency” can be observed with campaign organizations that finance their activities and their operating costs through donations from individuals. They need public attention to survive as an organization and hence develop sophisticated communication strategies, either with (costly) advertising or by staging media stunts that are reported by news media. Flyers, posters, newspaper ads, and television spots are rather expensive, which is why some organizations are betting on the internet. Campaigning can then begin with an attractive website for issue-related information, as a trust-building resource and as an interface between organization, activists, and supporters. YouTube clips, Facebook groups, and Twitter accounts are innovative options for marketing ideas and raising attention for issues – a few even go viral. If they reach large audiences, they are eventually picked up by journalists and reported in mass media, amplifying the organization’s brand image.

Our research into the mediatization of political organizations shows that only a minority of interest groups actually explore these new options. However, such a finding is not disappointing. It is rather quite understandable that the majority of interest groups first and foremost have to attend to their core business, the communicative coordination of members. Even for public relations officers of larger interest groups, testing new strategies in the social-media world is time consuming and initially offers little return. Some organizations can rely on activists that set up such campaigns. And an important point to keep in mind when talking about intermediary political associations: not all of them are primarily aiming to influence public policy. Most groups are more interested in building responsive relations between the organizational core and members or in coordinating the flow of information between stakeholders and other interest groups. They produce communication that is relevant for their concerns and areas of interest.

The influence of mediatization on political interest groups seems to be of a different kind than that on political par-
ties. Very few interest groups can actually be called “mediatized.” Most groups communicate, when necessary, in issue-specific editions of their specialist magazines and membership journals, usually below the radar of national news audiences. Their contribution to democratic politics is, thus, often invisible, which does not mean however that they are unimportant. A close-knit network of political interest groups is in itself an asset to any democracy, because such a sponge-like structure of intermediary associations soaks up and solves (or prepares to solve) an incredibly large number of political problems. It is a systemic benefit: they relieve parliaments and government agencies of their already huge workloads. Even within the broader process of the mediatization of politics, most interest group representatives continue to find ways to adapt and efficiently communicate with their stakeholders in their day-to-day work through interpersonal contact and their semi-public communication channels.

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Promoting democratic citizenship in Europe:
Young researchers initiate network in Zurich

In March 2012, several young female NCCR researchers organized a workshop in Zurich to launch the network DemocracyNet.eu. This network aims to promote democratic citizenship in Europe by connecting young researchers working in the field and by transferring academic knowledge on the topic to society in general.

by Karima Bousbah, Astoinette Scherz, and Rebecca Welge
Who is a citizen? What are the rights and duties of a citizen? What makes citizenship democratic? Central questions for democratic states, these points have been engaging academics and political actors in recent decades. Conceptual and practical conflicts about citizenship revolve around the questions of whose concerns are legitimate and what the duties and rights of citizens are. These questions recur and grow more acute in times of increased mobility, the internationalization of politics, and the questionable democratic legitimacy of supranational organizations such as the EU. In 2011, to promote collaboration among young academics working on the topic of democratic citizenship in Europe, female academics from several European countries created a network. DemocracyNet.eu is made up of young researchers from diverse disciplines, all dedicated to analyzing the aforementioned key questions of legitimacy, duties, and rights. In particular, the network focuses on two inseparable aspects of citizenship: how it should be and how it actually is. In other words, how political actors conceptualize the link between state and citizen, and how citizens themselves actually experience their citizenship.

The network pursues two aims: first, to connect academic discourses that have so far been running in parallel, by fostering collaboration and team work among young scholars. Second, to build a bridge between academics’ “ivory towers” and practitioners’ “real world.” A significant amount of effort will therefore be put into transferring academic knowledge to, and fostering dialogue with, the broader public, specific target groups in civil society, and practitioners active in the field of democratic citizenship in Europe.

Democratic citizenship – between theory and practice

While the research undertaken by DemocracyNet.eu members aims to create a more comprehensive picture of democratic citizenship in Europe, its practice-oriented activities are aimed at making European citizenship more democratic. In doing so the group links the normative question of how democratic citizenship should be constructed to the explanatory perspective of why citizenship exists as it does – taking into account all actors in a democratic system. The main research questions relate to several actors, affecting or affected by democratic citizenship: first, how do political and institutional actors understand democratic citizenship in Europe? Second, how is democratic citizenship under-
The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation. This NCCR PhD students Valeria Camia, Karima Bousbah, Rebecca Welge and Antoinette Scherz (from left) took part in the DemocracyNet.eu’s first workshop together with other academics from several European countries. stood by Europeans and by civil society? Third, regarding institutions, how has democratic citizenship been implemented within Europe? Lastly, the group investigates whether and how citizens make use of the different opportunities they have to participate in the decision-making process. All these research questions clearly take national differences into account. In order to collaborate with other researchers, the group will regularly organize joint conference panels. Further, DemocracyNet.eu workshops will take place twice a year. The opening workshop took place at ETH Zurich in April and enabled the development of initial joint activities. The next workshop is scheduled for October 2012.

Apart from research, the group is deeply interested in collaborations that aim to transfer academic knowledge into society and foster exchanges between academics and practitioners. For 2012, two projects have already been planned: Firstly, DemocracyNet.eu is collaborating with the institut franco-allemand (dfi) to create a chat session in which participants in the forum “It’s our Europe!” (www.its-our-europe.eu) discuss with researchers their ideas regarding institutional participation mechanisms in Europe. Secondly, DemocracyNet.eu will take part in a symposium on “creative participation” in October 2012. The event will be held at the educational institution Haus am Maiberg in Germany and addresses representatives of the education sector.

In order to facilitate collaboration, the group has launched an online platform – www.DemocracyNet.eu – providing information concerning the group’s goals, the participating researchers, and projects such as upcoming workshops or other collaborative activities.

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The NCCR Democracy is a Swiss research centre for the multi-disciplinary study of the challenges to democracy in the 21st century.
NCCR Democracy Alumni: Career paths

In each edition of this newsletter, we track the professional advancement of our former NCCR PhD students. This time we present Regula Hänggli and Alexandre Afonso who have both continued their careers abroad.

Regula Hänggli, Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the Department of Communication Science, University of Amsterdam.

In 2011, you were appointed assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam, approximately one year after having finished your PhD. What do you think were the most important factors in your getting this professorship? What advice would you give to doctoral students?

A friend from Denmark sent me the advertisement. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have noticed it. I think that my thematic fit with the research group “Political Communication and Journalism” at the Amsterdam School of Communication, my teaching experience, my network, and a bit of good luck were decisive. Besides the importance of publications, I would recommend active participation in projects and networks, and the teaching of courses.

What was the topic of your dissertation?

My dissertation was about the flow of arguments in three direct-democratic campaigns in Switzerland. I examined where the arguments come from, what journalists pick up or edit, and whether and how the arguments influence ordinary citizens. My model of this flow of arguments drew on the literature on framing. Framing means to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a text. The main focus of my dissertation was on the first part of this process – frame building – an area that has seen less empirical testing and is less theorized. My dissertation, in particular, improved our understanding of the differences between the input to the media and the subsequent media content. The literature often assesses media quality without taking input to the media, such as press releases, press conferences, etc. into account.

My main findings were, first, that the various political actors and parties in a campaign focus on one or two main arguments that they feel are “strong” and compelling. Political actors react to their opponents’ arguments by using them defensively, i.e. by trying to prove that they are wrong. Political actors are the main source of the arguments that appear in media coverage – the flow of arguments being from partisans to journalists. Journalists mediate the process by ensuring that media content is more balanced than input to the media, influenced as it is by resource imbalances, might imply. Journalists do not however tend to be independent sources (except in a very limited way), and strong communication arguments will be those that influence individuals in coming to their decisions.

You are still working on this topic as member of an NCCR project on political communication led by Hanspeter Kriesi. How does being part of the NCCR network help you in your current position?

It is helpful to still be a member of the NCCR project and module 4 because I can exchange ideas, data, and feedback. Besides the professional advantages, I appreciate this contact on a personal level. It is motivating to work in this team. Also, we’re working on an interesting topic.

How would you describe your experience at the NCCR Democracy? What did you learn most?

Working in the NCCR module 4, a joint module of political and communication scientists, I learned how to conduct content analyses and panel surveys, became familiar with the challenges of interdisciplinary work, and learned about new theoretical approaches from communication science. In the NCCR doctoral program, all PhD candidates presented their research designs – this gave me a grasp of what a good design should look like.

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Regula Hänggli
Alexandre Afonso, currently Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne.

After leaving the NCCR Democracy, Alexandre Afonso took the opportunity to work at different research institutions in Europe. Thanks to a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, he spent 18 months at the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS) at the University of Amsterdam where he wrote up the PhD thesis that he defended at the University of Lausanne in June 2010. Later, he moved south to take up a Max Weber Fellowship at the European University Institute in Florence. “Even if the hills of Tuscany are probably better suited to writing poetry than academic articles, I managed to write a few papers based on my doctoral research, and worked on a book proposal drawing on my dissertation”, he says. After a short research stay at Johns Hopkins University in summer 2011, Alexandre moved as a postdoctoral research fellow to the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG) in Cologne where he is currently finishing his book and working on a number of new research projects.

His research lies within the field of comparative political economy, and deals more specifically with labor market policies, the welfare state, the role of organized interests in policymaking, and the political economy of reforms. In his PhD dissertation he investigated the political determinants of cooperation and conflict between governments, trade unions, and employers in Switzerland, Austria, and Ireland. A revised version of this piece entitled “Social Concertation in Times of Austerity” will come out through Amsterdam University Press later this year, and articles drawn from this research are forthcoming with Governance and Socio-Economic Review. At the moment, he is working on two very topical research projects which are partly offshoots from the dissertation. The first deals with the economic policy agenda of populist, radical, right-wing parties, and more precisely their role in state welfare reform. He is currently revising an article which investigates these changes in Switzerland and Austria, drawing on empirical material gathered during his doctoral research. The second project deals with domestic responses to the Eurozone crisis. A paper co-authored with Yannis Papadopoulos (Lausanne) and Sotiris Zartaloudis (London School of Economics) comparing austerity reforms in Greece and Portugal is a first step in a broader project for the coming years.

Asked about his experience at the NCCR Democracy he says that it was an excellent springboard to the international career path he has engaged upon: “The NCCR doctoral program was perhaps my first opportunity to discuss and become familiar with perspectives and research traditions that were not very common in my ‘home’ university, and the activities and workshops organized within the program were very stimulating. It is perhaps only after I left that I realized how good research conditions in Switzerland are in comparison to other countries. Being able to teach, to take part in a research project and attend a structured doctoral program was an excellent combination as it allowed me to develop my doctoral research in a fairly structured manner, and demonstrate teaching and research experience that PhD students in other countries probably do not have. In the UK for example, PhD students are considered more as students than as professional researchers. In this respect, the NCCR was clearly a very good step towards learning the ‘trade’ of research.”

In September 2012, Alexandre will be taking up a permanent lectureship in the Department of Political Economy at King’s College London. He will be teaching classes in public policy and comparative politics at both undergraduate and graduate level.

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How to promote democracy in international relations

Political decisions are increasingly taken by international bodies such as the EU. Quite often these bodies are confronted with the reproach of not being democratic and therefore not being legitimate. But according to what standard of democracy should a multi-national union be judged? What should be the guiding principles for transnational cooperation and integration in order for them to be considered fair? In his recently published book “The Government of the Peoples”, Francis Cheneval examines these questions and develops a new model of multilateral democracy.

by Francis Cheneval

The classical model of international relations recognizes only nation states as actors. Democracy in the form of the direct political action of citizens is not envisaged. Promoting democracy in international relations would mean governments better representing their citizens’ preferences at an international level and being held more accountable to these citizens.

This may sound like a minimalist concept, in many cases however to respect these two preconditions would already enable an enormous democratization of international relations. There may be good reasons to weight the votes of certain countries, making them more significant in international bodies. However, if these countries are governed by dictators this does not enable democratization. “One dictator, one vote” is not democratic.

International relations have undergone profound changes in recent decades: first, more rights have been conferred on the individual. Since the mid-20th century, international relations have been characterized by a shift towards the individual as anticipated by the cosmopolitan philosophies of the Enlightenment. This means that the individual is given greater importance as a subject of international law. Conventions on human rights, international criminal law, international humanitarian law, and the like give a legal status to the individual. In the European human rights system individuals can even take legal action against states. The individual, however, still has no active role in the legislative process of international law.

Second, the current growth in technological, economic, and social interdependence has led to a situation in which internal decisions taken by states increasingly affect the external world and have unintended consequences for other states and the international community as a whole. In the face of pressure exerted by global and regional problems, states are forced more and more to act jointly and make binding commitments. International bodies such as the G20, WTO, Mercosur, ASEAN, and the EU are only some examples of such joint actions.

How much democracy is possible in relations between states and peoples?

Democracy so far has been restricted to the level of the nation state. In our contemporary “multilateralized” world, however, this is no longer possible. We do not currently have a better prêt-à-porter model available that could be applied to the aforementioned international bodies so strongly criticized of not being democratic. On the other hand, it is not clear if the nation-state model of democracy is the measure for all democratic systems. Democracy and democratic theory have their roots in ancient city states and small, manageable tribal communities. Democracy also existed and still exists on the municipal level, and if we took these structures as a benchmark, the nation state would not qualify as a democracy.

Democratic theory has often focused on the internal aspects of a nation rather than the relations between different nations and peoples, although there is no apparent reason why peoples should be introverted, self-centered entities. Human beings and the groups they create such as families, companies, and non-governmental organizations are mobile and transnational, and peoples themselves are interlinked.

Upon which criteria could a new model of a legitimate democracy between peoples be based? It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. Switzerland, for example, is a democracy with different peoples organized into a multi-level system. Multilateral organizations such as the European Union, however, are far more complex. This already becomes clear when we keep in mind that Switzerland has four and the EU 23 official languages. It is therefore not possible to “copy-paste” and apply the Swiss model to the EU – nevertheless a number of structural elements are similar.
Key prerequisites for democratic international relations

As indicated above, a key prerequisite for the democratization of international relations is internal democratization within states. The EU imposes this as a condition for EU membership: only democratic countries can join the EU. But this does not mean that we should reject international organizations that do not consist entirely of democratic member states. Democracy is based on the rule of law, and international organizations such as the WTO promote the rule of law in their member states. Rome was not built in a day and international relations will not be democratized by a “big bang.”

This does not yet answer the question of how to strengthen the political rights of individuals on the international level. Since individual human beings are already members of the political entities of peoples, the solution cannot be to demand that only individuals should have political rights in the future. The theory of democracy between peoples should be based on the precondition that both individuals and already constituted peoples should have political rights. Especially with regard to the creation of and access to international bodies, there is no political alternative to already constituted peoples. Democracy in this respect means first of all that accession to multilateral organizations and approval of their general rules must arise from the will of the people. But national parliaments inadequately guarantee this prerequisite as the example of the EU clearly demonstrates: the national parliaments have ratified all the treaties, but the citizens’ approval of the EU, since the political union brought about by the Maastricht treaty, is below 50%. Even the existence of a supra-national parliament – and the EU is as yet the only multilateral organization to possess one – does not change this situation.

Hence it would be desirable to “parliamentarize” multilateral organizations made up of democratic member states. Multi-level and multi-ethnic systems, however, tend to prolong their chains of representation and to negotiate opaque political solutions. The more nations are involved, the thinner the “democratic air” gets. Representative democracy also remains essential for democracy between peoples. Periodically held elections are the constitutional substitute for a permanent revolution and the basic constant of democracy. But they fail to connect multi-national systems of governance with the preferences of the people.

The EU has recognized this problem with the result that, since April 2012, we can see the first delicate seedling of direct democracy in a multilateral organization: the European Citizens’ Initiative. One million signatures issuing from at least seven member states create a non-binding invitation to the EU Commission to deal with a certain topic and prepare a legislative proposal. Referenda, however, are not anticipated. While one can only wish this initiative every success, as an instrument it is inadequate for the job of strengthening the individual political rights of EU citizens.

Optimists view the right to request that the Commission submits a legislative proposal as a promising beginning as it puts EU citizens on the same level as the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. Pessimists consider it little more than a fig leaf. Both, at least, can agree that the path towards the democratization of the EU and of comparable multilateral organizations will also increasingly involve direct-democratic instruments.

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Publication

News in brief

New NCCR Democracy Director

Hanspeter Kriesi has been appointed Stein Rokkan Chair of Comparative Politics at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. He will resign his office as Director of the NCCR Democracy and join the EUI end of August this year. The members of the NCCR Democracy are very grateful to him for all he has done in the last eight years in starting and constantly promoting this research program and making it a success.

Daniel Kübler, Professor of Democracy Studies at the University of Zurich and the Center for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA), will succeed him. He has been appointed by the University of Zurich and the Swiss National Science Foundation and will take office in September. We wish both, former and new NCCR Director, all the best in their new positions.

Thomas Bernauer receives prestigious ERC Advanced Grant

NCCR Democracy project leader Thomas Bernauer figures among seven scientists from ETH Zurich who have been awarded an “Advanced Grant” by the European Research Council (ERC). This highly prestigious award is conferred on top-level researchers in Europe who, in the past ten years, have made outstanding achievements in their field. Overall, 294 European researchers have received the ERC Advanced Grant. The financial award is used for innovative projects to afford prize winners the necessary freedom of research. Thomas Bernauer’s project focuses on climate policy and its legitimation within states. It analyzes how, in global cooperation, certain forms of representation, of decision-making, and of cost-benefit-distribution have an influence on public support for climate policy.

Book vernissage: Political communication in direct democratic campaigns

At the beginning of this year, the NCCR Democracy launched a new series of books on the challenges to democracy in the 21st century. The first book in the series was presented at a public roundtable discussion on “Media and democracy – political communication in Switzerland” in March in Zurich. NCCR Director Hanspeter Kriesi discussed the NCCR research results with Head of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation SRG Roger de Weck, and Res Strehle, editor in chief of the Swiss daily newspaper Tages Anzeiger. The discussion was moderated by Daniel Binswanger of the Swiss magazine Das Magazin. For the occasion of the launch, publishing house Palgrave Macmillan is offering all books published in the series in 2012 at a 50% discount, valid until 30 June.