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# Mediatization of companies as a factor of their communication power and the new role of public relations

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### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to explore and analyze the mediatization of companies, and argues that companies are entering a new phase of mediatization that is no longer evident as an adaptation to the logic of mass media but now involves the incorporation of media logic into the company's own media practices and communication structure. Companies are (i) transforming into producers of owned media and media content, and (ii) through their owned media, managing communication with stakeholders, which is (iii) significantly altering the role of corporate public relations. In the context of a case study of a company from the financial sector, the paper brings together three concepts – communication power, mediatization, and strategic communication – toward a new conceptual framework for assessing the characteristics of the communication dimension of modern companies. Such an analytical position enables the phenomenon of mediatization to be analyzed both in its historical dimension and structural dimension.

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## 1. Introduction

Corporate communication activities are nowadays to a large extent conducted via the media (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014; Krotz & Hepp, 2011; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Verčič & Tkalac Verčič, 2014a). These activities are planned and implemented to establish and develop relations with stakeholders, and through these relations, to influence the views and actions of key stakeholders.

Corporate media communication practices, including media relations, are changing and evolving (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014), and some practices that were viewed as quite marginal until recently now are gaining in importance. One such practice is owned media and media content production (Baetzgen & Tropp, 2013; Pulizzi & Barret, 2009). Owned content and media – mostly digital, but also electronic and print – are being produced to a greater extent by an increasing number of companies (Pulizzi, 2014).

Modern companies are developing individual owned media, along with increasingly complex systems of owned media, as an important component of integrated communication strategies. These new corporate media practices bring up a range of questions: Does the changing of companies into media producers signal a new phenomenon (Scott, 2007)? What are the effects and why is this happening now? And what relationship does this have to the existing media communication practices conducted as a part of media relations or corporate advertising practices?

Cases of corporate owned media can be found throughout the history of companies, including in the period before the development of the public relations function. Yet the widespread nature of the phenomenon and the diversity of owned

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media and content production, as well as the reflection of this phenomenon among communication practices and analyses (Lieb, 2012; Pulizzi, 2014) as new communication paradigms labeled *content marketing*, establish a context for the research questions: What do owned media and content production in companies look like? What does it mean in terms of the generation of communication power and corporate influence over stakeholders? And what will this mean for public relations, especially for the function of strategic communication management in companies?

The current study also addresses broader issues of the communication dimension of companies: Does the production of owned digital and traditional media and media content, as an increasingly important part of the communication practice of companies, point to a new phase in the process of company mediatization, which is developing because the media matrix (Finnemann, 2011) within which companies operate and which define the basic characteristic of media-related communication has changed? Can the existing form and method of mediatization of companies – tied principally to the mass media (Ihlen & Pallas, 2014) – still ensure adequate production of communication power for companies as an ability to influence stakeholders?

To answer these questions, a qualitative study with public relations and marketing professionals from a selected company was conducted.

## 2. Literature review

The conceptual framework that enables analysis of the development and changes in planning and implementing media communication with key corporate stakeholders is mediatization (Lundby, 2014). Mediatization is the concept that helps one see the traditional issues of communication studies and the media in a new, relevant way, and in so doing helps in understanding the influence of mediatization on communication in modern society (Lundby, 2009, 2014).

The concept of mediatization, as Lundby (2009) says, can be defined within a matrix among communication, culture, and hegemony, and it is also defined as a process of social change that brings media logic into the social and cultural fields while its roots lie in the development of modern media technologies (Silverstone, 2005). Krotz (2009, 2014) also has stressed the importance of mediatization to understand the societal and media changes.

Lilleker (2008) defines *mediatization* as a theory explaining how the media formulate and frame the process and discourse of communication. Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) point out the consequences of these processes because institutions and society as a whole are shaped under the influence of, and with dependence on, the mass media. Hjarvard (2009) emphasizes the institutional aspect and defines mediatization as a process in which society becomes subordinated and dependent on the media and their logic. Lundby (2009) draws attention to *media logic*, which is a key mechanism within the mediatization process. Media logic relates to both the institutional and technological modus operandi, including the method of distribution, the symbolic resources, and the use of formal and informal rules (Hjarvard, 2008), while Couldry and Hepp (2013) point out that different media have different logics, which must be taken into account in the analysis.

In their analysis of the development of corporate mediatization, Ihlen and Pallas (2014) proceed from the definition of mediatization as an adaptation of corporations to the logic, working practices, and preferences of the media, and that the different media thereby crucially shape the environment and operating conditions. In their analysis, however, they remain within the framework of corporate relations with the mass media, as is the case in a study by Pallas and Fredriksson (2013).

When speaking about mass media, it is important to bear in mind the warning by Krotz and Hepp (2011) that media should not be equated with mass media, as the latter is only one type of communication media. They say a definition of media should refer to the characteristics of all relevant types of media. At the same time, such a definition should be independent of the specific way that people individually use certain forms of media (p. 142).

When we speak of owned media, we therefore need to expand our understanding of what the media are, a task that was performed in the mediatization analysis by Krotz and Hepp (2011), who define media very broadly as something that modifies and transforms communication.

A definition of media that is too narrow or unclear leads to confusion. For example, a single phenomenon such as a corporate Facebook channel could be designated as a medium, a network, or a communication channel.

Yet specific forms of mediatization derive, in Finnemann's definition (2011), from specific media circumstances in the current media matrix. This means that the mediatization in the 21st century is different from the mediatization in the 20th century, which was defined by a media matrix in which mass media was predominant. For this reason the establishment of media relations and marketing departments in companies, with the primary responsibility of advertising in the media and thereby influencing various stakeholders through mass media, can be understood as a historically defined form of company mediatization (Verčič & Tkalac Verčič, 2014b).

Current media circumstances are characterized by the shifting role, operating method, and influence of the digital media. Under the influence of technological, informational, and associated social change, which we label digitalization, individual media and the entire media matrix within which companies operate are changing (Gillin, 2007; Hiebert, 2004; Zerfass, 2010). The new media environments emerging in the digital environment, especially on the Internet, are taking on an increasingly important role in communication (Finnemann, 2014).

The issue of the media has always been one of the central issues of public relations (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), and for this reason media relations commonly are understood as the most important media communication practice of companies to influence stakeholders and audiences via the media (Verčič & Tkalac Verčič, 2014b). In line with the predominant role of the mass media, analyses that deal with the processes of mediatization of companies to a large extent have been aimed chiefly

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