Introduction

While the previous chapter focused on the political power attributed to the media in political communication, this chapter attempts to describe how political communication actors perceive changes in news reporting and peculiarities of media logic. In discussions about political communication and its implications for the structures and cultures of political decision-making and democracy, changes in news reporting, such as personalization, commercialization, entertainment-orientation and negativism, are frequently mentioned as playing a vital role. Habermas, for instance, fears that “issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment” and maintains that “besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promote civic privatism and a mood of antipolitics” (Habermas, 2006, p. 422). According to Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009, pp. 172; 175), “politics is often projected as an arena of gamesmanship, failure, scandal and gaffes rather than the deliberative discussion of issues”, and “television’s emphasis upon political personalization continues unabated”. Furthermore, the empirical evidence of a general trend toward changes such as personalization is not as clear as it seems. Critics emphasize that content analyses of changes such as personalization are often unsystematic and ahistorical, and that in some cases there is evidence that personalization does not actually take place (Karvonen, 2010).

The discussion about changes in news reporting and its implications for politics is embedded in a wider debate about media logic and the process of mediatization, which is defined as the intrusion of media
logic into the political process (Asp and Esaiasson, 1996; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). The developments in media coverage are said to be “at the heart of the broader changes that the relationship between political elites and mass media is argued to have undergone” (Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden and Boumans, 2011, p. 92).

In addition to this debate about the empirical evidence of mediatization and changes in news reporting, it may be assumed that their implications for the structure and culture of political decision-making and democracy are not as much a question of “real” changes in media content as of changing perceptions about these changes. With this assumption we follow the Thomas theorem, which states: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” If politicians and journalists believe the media to have changed, they might have internalized this perspective and act accordingly. Specifically, there is an influence of presumed media influence (Cohen, Tsfati and Sheafer, 2008; Gunter and Storey, 2003). This has consequences for the nature of political communication.

Therefore within the analytical framework of political communication cultures in Western Europe, we examine whether political and media elites perceive changes in news reporting that can be interpreted in terms of mediatization. We ask whether there is a different perception and understanding of these changes and their underlying interpretation of the “media logics” between the analyzed countries. Theoretically, our main argument is that there is no single and homogenous “media logic”, but that media logics and the perception of changes in news reporting vary in different political communication cultures in Western Europe. One important aspect of political communication culture is how the actors perceive trends in mediatization that are rooted in the media system changes. Therefore, it is important to describe the orientation of political communication elites with respect to their beliefs about how the media has changed in recent years and how this might have affected political communication. The principal focus of the empirical analysis is on i) on whether the politicians, journalists and spokespersons converge or diverge in their orientations and ii) whether the patterns of convergence or divergence vary across Europe.

Mediatization and media logic(s) as frameworks to describe political communication cultures

Although frequently used, the term “media logic” is seldom clearly defined. Altheide and Snow (1979), who broadly defined it as a way of