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„Media democracy’ as a description of the relation between media and politics – Self-observation of the media system and its consequences

1. Political Communication Research and the topic of ‘media democracy’

Research in the so-called field of political communication has diagnosed a massive transformation of the political system due to the influence of the mass media. According to the respective scholars, with the spread of mass media and in particular private television the mass media increasingly impose their operational logic on the political system (see Blumler/Kavanagh 1999). Politics must compete for media attention with a variety of other, usually more entertaining, topics. This is only possible by following the rules guiding media attention. Political communication research observes that politics relies on short, emotional messages instead of detailed material arguments whenever media coverage is desired. Since voters are primarily reached by mass media, the desire for media coverage and therefore the dependence on mass media is ubiquitous. Public relations activities and political consulting thus become more and more important within the political system (see Sarcinelli/Geisler 2002: 159f.). Political communication research regards a loss of political substance as a consequence of this change in the relation between mass media and politics. Scholars fear the dominance of purely symbolic politics over attempts at solving policy problems.

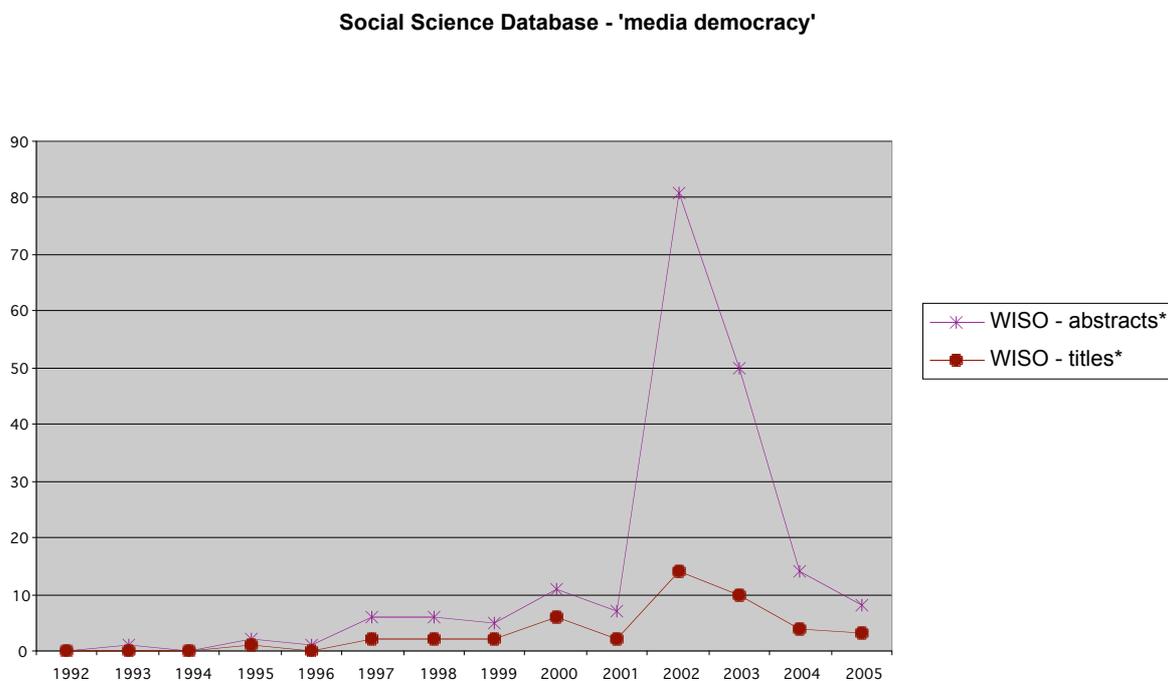
“Media democracy” is one prominent expression that is employed to name the developments I have sketched. Others would be “Americanization” or – more neutral – “modernization of political communication” (see Sarcinelli/Geisler 2002: 155ff.). They are all used to point to the growing importance of mass media for politics. But “media democracy” is a particularly attractive term, because it directly points to the linkage between media and (democratic) politics and it states a genuinely new situation and not just another instance of well-known processes like modernization or many things being first developed in the United States. At least in Germany, media democracy has become a keyword to be used in several different contexts.

2. Where is the term ‘media democracy’ employed?

‘Media democracy’ is on the one hand a term used in the social sciences, namely in the aforementioned political communication research. Checking a major German scientific database it becomes clear that the attention the term receives is a rather new phenomenon. Before the

1990s there are very few occurrences in German social science papers and books (WISO database)¹. Moreover, these early contributions still have a different conception of media democracy: they are concerned with the inner structures of the media system and to what extent they reflect democratic norms. In 1993, the term appears in its current sense for the first time: to reflect the fact that voters get aware of political decisions and processes mainly via mass media. Until the end of the 1990s there are a few occurrences each year, but then the interest in topics related to this term surges, reaching a peak in 2002 and 2003 (see figure 1). After that it seems to lose its prominence, but without disappearing from scholarly works. However, for the beginning of the current decade one can clearly observe a fascination with media democracy in Germany's social sciences.

Figure 1:



This fascination is shared and seemingly prepared by the media. Checking the online archives of major German newspapers² one finds remarkable changes in attention (see figure 2)³. Although there are some differences between newspapers – with the FAZ showing an early peak of attention in 1993 and 1994 – we can see several common aspects. The term is used

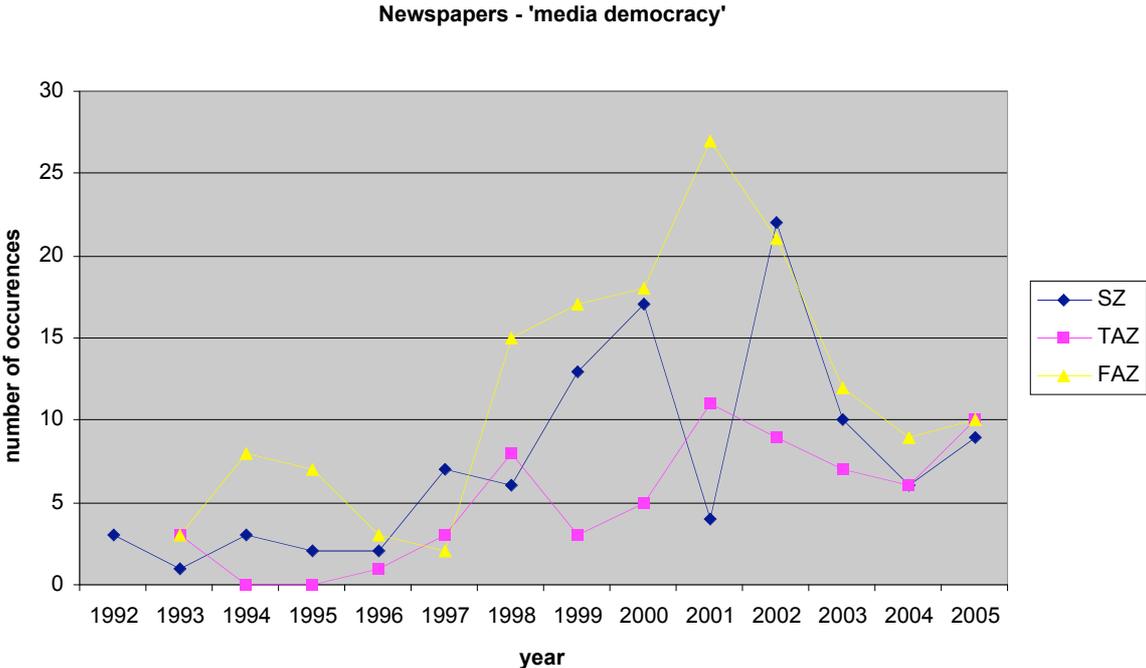
¹ Occurrences of 'media democracy' were checked for titles of papers or books and for their abstracts as available in the database. Thus it is possible that the term circumstantially appears in papers or books which were not counted. But since title and abstract provide information on the topics of a work, one can assume that 'media democracy' draws scientific attention to it only when it is mentioned there.

² Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ), Tageszeitung (TAZ)

³ As newspaper online archives are only available since the early 1990s I was not able to check possible earlier occurrences of 'media democracy'.

from time to time throughout the 1990s and there is an overall rise of occurrences starting in 1997, reaching its peak in 2001 or 2002. Since 2003 the term appears in rather constant frequencies, still more often than in the first half of the 1990s but on a far lower level than during the peak years.

Figure 2:



In order to get an idea of the degree of attention the term “media democracy” received in the realm of politics, I suggest to look at the transcripts of the plenary meetings of the German parliament. Although the media have access to these debates and the members of parliament are aware of this and may try to create media attention with their speeches (see Sarcinelli/Tenscher 2000), plenary meetings are a part of the political process and especially the use of a term like “media democracy” is not susceptible to influences of media coverage since it does not have any news value in itself. The most striking result of analysing the plenary meetings (starting from 1992) is the complete absence of the term until 1999. From then on, it is used occasionally (see table 1). We can even distinguish a small peak of attention at about the same time as in the other realms – in 2002 –, however it remains a rare word in parliamentary debates. On the other hand, it appears from time to time, which suggests that it is somehow a plausible concept for politics as well.

Table 1: Plenary debates in German parliament – ‘media democracy’

<i>Year</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2005</i>
Occurrences	2	1	1	3	0	1	0

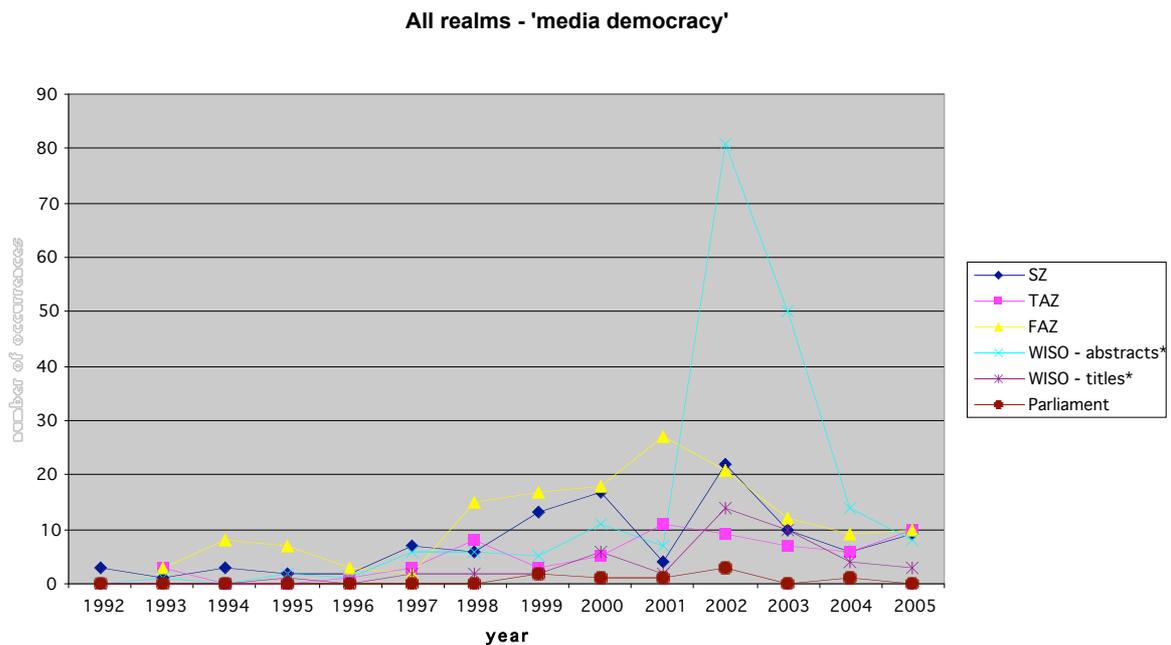
The observations suggest that the idea of a media democracy has caught fire in several function systems of society, but to different degrees and in different ways. Within the political system ‘media democracy’ appears to have become a natural part of the framework in which political processes work. It is not an issue in itself, but rather a constraining or enabling aspect of political action. Looking at the contexts in which the few references to media democracy in parliament occur one finds considerations about elements of direct democracy and what a media democracy means for their feasibility, furthermore concerns about the priority of short-term perspectives in political decision-making or the selectivity of the political agenda due to media democracy. Thus, communication in parliament seems to regard media democracy as the inevitable basis for political work nowadays. Starting from 1999 it is used as an established concept in parliamentary speeches, needing no further explanation, but references to it remain rare.

For the science system, ‘media democracy’ is an attractive catchword to mark research as genuinely new, contributing to the description of a phenomenon previously unknown. The sudden attention is enormous, but extremely short. This cannot be explained by a correspondence with changes in actual relevance of media democracy for politics or mass media, since the term designates long-term developments. But considering the logic of publishing, the intense but short attention is not surprising. The newness of talking about “media democracy” is exhausted soon. Research on the concept continues, but it becomes one topic among many others, no longer attracting extraordinary attention.

It is the media system which seems to fuel the fascination with media democracy in science and politics. In 1992 and 1993 – at a time when social science has not yet taken any interest in a phenomenon called media democracy – the admittedly few occurrences of the term in the sampled newspapers are already linked with descriptions of the relationship between politics and media that point to the importance of media attention for politics and to the carefully staged performance as the adequate form to deal with the resulting demands (e.g. SZ 25.02.92, SZ 12.06.92, TAZ 03.11.93). In this context, it is important to not confuse actors and the communication belonging to the function system. The newspaper articles do also

contain statements of political actors using the term ‘media democracy’. Nevertheless there is the contrast between occurrences of the term in the media system since the beginning or middle of the 1990s on the one hand and the complete absence of the term in plenary debates in parliament – to be understood as undoubtedly part of the communication within the political system – until 1999 when it starts being used there as well. Around the turn to the new decade something happened with regard to the plausibility of a media democracy.

Figure 3:



The peaks of attention in all three functional realms of society point to this change (see figure 3), but the situation before these peaks suggests that it was in particular the media system which fostered the idea that we live in a media democracy.

‘Media democracy’ as an instance of metacoverage?

Especially before elections, political actors have always tried to use the media for the purpose of increasing the sympathies for a party or candidate. Political communication research would argue that it is the professional character of recent efforts that makes the difference and provokes the diagnosis of ‘media democracy’ (see Jun 2004: 115ff.). But it is hard to distinguish between an actual increase in the level of professionally managed communication and the image of more professional political actors linked with the idea of media democracy as it is discussed in the mass media. Following Esser et al. (2001) one could argue that the

talk about media democracy is part of a new style of political journalism, called metacoverage. The authors understand metacoverage as “self-referential reflections on the nature of the interplay between political public relations and political journalism” (ibid.: 17). They distinguish between self-coverage, where media report on the character, extent or quality of media coverage, and process news, featuring stories about the attempts of political candidates or campaigns to influence or deal with media coverage (see ibid. : 18ff.). Esser et al. welcome both types of metacoverage in principle as tendencies towards a self-reflection of the important role mass media have for today’s politics. However, they notice that process news actually tends to be adversarial in the sense that political public relations are denounced as manipulative activities of sinister ‘spin doctors’. The authors explain this bias in coverage as a self-defensive reaction of the media against the professionalization of political public relations. Thus, metacoverage – and the interest in media democracy as a part of it – would be caused by a mixture of actual changes in public relations practices and a growing media awareness of their own role in politics.

Looking at Germany it seems that it is in particular the figure of the external media consultant that attracts the attention of the media. Thus, reading the articles containing the term ‘media democracy’ in the peak year 2002 one notices that the discussion was often connected to the fact that during the general election campaign the candidate of the conservatives, Edmund Stoiber, employed a personal media consultant and made this consulting relationship a public matter by announcing it in a press conference and having his consultant appear in various TV shows in the months before the election. It was this consultant – a former journalist – who seemed to embody the preoccupation of politics with impression management and the corresponding neglect of future-oriented programmatic work. But in fact, there was only one man advising a chancellor candidate on how to speak in front of the cameras. This was not even a new phenomenon – the first explicit media consultant for a chancellor candidate appeared already in 1974: Gerd Bacher, former general director of Austrian public television (ORF) took care of Helmut Kohls personal image; other consultants followed (see Hetterich 2000: 152f.). The main difference is that they were not as openly presented in their role as Michael Spreng. Therefore the existence of an external media consultant does not at all point to an increased professionalization of political campaigning. In contrast, the election campaign of the social democrats was retrospectively judged to have been far less professional than the one they put together in 1998. Surely, it was not the case that in 2002 media democracy got propelled to a new level in terms of professional communication. It simply got personalized by Michael Spreng, the media consultant of Mr. Stoiber.

This is not surprising. – If personalization is an important element in the logic of mass media, a topic like media democracy will gain more media attention if it can be linked to a concrete person. But there are other reasons for the fascination with the personal media consultant. He does not only stand for the idea of media democracy as such, but he embodies the problematic relationship between political public relations and political journalism. His professional experience, qualifying him for the job of media consultant, comes from journalism. When he started working for Stoiber, Spreng described his situation as that of “a journalist on an eight-month adventure travel” (cited in Nieland/Kugler 2004: 90). Later he changed the understanding of his role to that of a service provider with Stoiber being his client (cited *ibid.*). Thus, the person of the media consultant points to the fact that the skills required for journalism are much the same as those necessary for public relations. Michael Spreng embodies the blurring line between journalism and public relations at the individual level. In Germany the growing interest in media democracy was paralleled by the prominence of one other example of a media consultant: Klaus-Peter Schmidt-Deguelle, personal media consultant for the minister of finance Hans Eichel between 1999 and 2002, who had also formerly been a journalist. Similar to Spreng, his role was very public and newspapers published features about his career and his methods.

But if media consultants at least for chancellor candidates have been common before, how to explain the extraordinary interest in the two examples and media democracy at the beginning of the new decade? It was at the same time that a major economic crisis shook the German mass media, especially the newspapers (see Wolff 2003). Revenues from advertisements dropped massively, triggering efforts to cut fix costs and consequently to reduce editorial staff. Many observers see a growing influence of public relations on the content of journalistic products as a result. Less personnel is more dependent on the information provided by public relations and has less capacity to check information or research independently (see Kocks 2003; Löffelholz 2003; Speth/Leif 2006). In other words, apart from the individual level the problem of separating journalism and public relations gains also relevance on the organizational level of the mass media system when public relations material increasingly finds its way into supposedly edited material due to economic pressures. The media consultant may just be the personalization of this problem, triggering a reflection on the relationship between mass media and politics.

The blind spot of the media system

It may seem that the person of the external media consultant provides an anchor for reflections of the media on their relationship with politics, reflections that are summarized by a term like media democracy. However, the descriptions predominantly focus on the consequences of media democracy for the character of the political system, which is seen as deteriorating: more and more ingenious attempts at media manipulation on the one hand, a lack of efforts to develop effective policies on the other hand – this is in short the picture of media democracy in the media.

The theorist observing this description wonders about the other side of the relationship between politics and media. If the consequences of media democracy for the political system are so severe, what about the impact on the media system? When politics is aware of its dependence on mass media and makes its public relations activities more professional, the media can hardly avoid reporting professionally manufactured events if they aspire coverage at all. They have more difficulties to find political aspects or topics that are not yet adapted to the fact of being a potential object of media observation. It could even become doubtful whether there are any such political instances that are genuinely and purely political in the sense that they do not take into account the possibility of media observation. Systems theory in the Luhmannian tradition would in fact argue that the mutual observation of media system and political system implies that the media do no longer observe anything that could be called ‘political reality’, but always staged communications, in the sense that all political communication is aware of being observed. The political system and the media system continuously observe each other as observers of the respective other system (see Luhmann 2000: 274ff.). This mode of second-order observation is, according to Luhmann, not at all unusual but rather a distinctive feature of modernity. Function systems do away with all ontological certainties and establish the observation of observers in addition to the simple observation of objects considered given entities (see Luhmann 1997: 766ff.). Even though the dominance of second-order observation is characteristic for modern functionally differentiated society, it also requires first-order observation. Continuous second-order observation produces eigenvalues (Luhmann 1990: 320f.), which then function as anchors for first-order observations. They are taken for granted and not questioned as results of observations using contingent distinctions. In spite of all second-order observation, all function systems require a reality assumption, operationally secured by the condensed results of past operations. A radical reflection on the ubiquity of second-order observations would question this reality assumption. Thus, the media system could not deal with reflecting that all media observations

of politics observe only media-aware political observations. Considering normative expectations addressed to journalism and its self-description in the form of ethical norms, this problem becomes obvious. How to report objectively when the object of coverage disappears into a series of dramatized acts, performed *for* those reporting?⁴

To openly reflect this problem would block the operations of the media system. Consequently, it is made invisible by the description of the relation between media and politics as ‘media democracy’. First of all, it is a description one-sidedly emphasizing the dependence of politics on mass media. The media point to their own importance for political actors when commenting on how politics is more and more focused on impression management instead of political programmes. They may accept that such priorities in the political realm are due to mass media influence or reject this idea and attribute the lack of political substance to failures within the political realm (e.g. the focus on the median voter). In contrast, the repercussions upon the media system itself are touched but not described as damaging the basis of media work. Second, the way these repercussions are framed affirms the reality basis of political journalism by contrasting it with the manipulative efforts of political actors the media naturally see through. The concept of ‘media democracy’ itself brings with it the distinction between staging and the reality behind. It protects the blind spot of the media system – that there is no reality as such about which to report⁵.

I would like to suggest that the phenomenon of the external media consultant, especially with a media background, increases the need for a concept like ‘media democracy’ within the media system. Those persons embody an irritating blur between the side of public relations, specializing in staging for the media, and the side of journalism with its ambition to report what is behind the stage. They provoke a new level of reflection about the relationship between politics and media, but the ensuing metacommunication instantiated by terms like media democracy is not as reflective as Esser et al. (2001) believe. It is a reaction to the

⁴ In contrast, Merten (2004: 61) argues that the media system is indifferent as to where the information it processes originates and whether public relations determines journalism or not, since this does not affect the fulfilment of the system’s function. This view is not surprising considering that the author treats both journalism and public relations as subsystems of the media system, with public relations pre-selecting information from which journalism then selects its information. However, the code guiding public relations communication is not the code information/non-information of the media system, but the code of the system attempting to gain favourable media attention. As a consequence, political public relations will keep quiet about all the things that would be highly interesting information for the media system but detrimental for political actors or organizations – it is the political code power/non-power that is decisive (see Raupp 2004: 229). That is why the problem of mutual observation between media and politics comes into play.

⁵ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002) refer to the term ‘meta-imaging’ in order to describe how journalistic or documentary filmmakers’ observations of political campaigning affirm a distinction between reality and representation that hides the ubiquity of image construction. However, whereas they adhere to the idea of hyperreality (Baudrillard), I suggest to employ the more sophisticated means of systems theory for the analysis.

“interplay between political public relations and political journalism” (ibid.: 17), but one that makes invisible the deepest irritation deriving from this interplay for the media system itself. Talking about media democracy affirms the distinction between staging and reality for the media system, which might otherwise be questioned.

Consequences of media self-observation for the political system

If we take the parliamentary debates as an indicator, the political system only belatedly adopts references to media democracy and they never gain the same prominence as in the media system. Nevertheless the term appears to be widely accepted, considering this statement of a representative: “It is – who in this room am I telling this? – in the nature of a media democracy that different positions are pushed too far and presented in a bolder and simpler way in the public...”⁶. Everybody in parliament is supposed to know about the features of a media democracy and to see certain constraints for political work deriving from them. It is important that from the point of view of the political system the problem is really addressed as one of additional constraints, but certainly not of a fundamental change of political work. The idea behind this view is a separation between ‘real’ political work and the necessity to present politics to a media public. It is a distinction between reality and staging, as suggested by the media system. But the consequences from the point of view of the political system look different. The fact of media coverage may constrain the political process but it does not inherently affect it. Media democracy from the point of view of the political system mainly poses the problem of how to deal best with this constraint. And the answer seems obvious when looking at the media coverage: to engage a consultant who can manage the irksome new tasks of politicians in a media democracy, while the true competences of the politician remain in the realm of ‘real’ political work.

Thus the framework of media democracy fosters the belief within the political system that political decision-making and public presentation are two separate tasks and that consultants are a precondition for political success. This view takes no account of the fact that political actors have long before dealt with the media and have found ways to do this without employing specialized consultants for every aspect of their performance. Tänzler (2003) criticizes the separation between the politician as an actor and expert within the political process and the politician as a lay performer for the media, introduced by the semantics of media democracy. He suspects that professional consulting, the necessity of which is deduced

⁶ Detlef Dzembitzki, 15th legislative period, 04.12.2002; translation I.K.

from this distinction, will lead to a stereotyped and recipe-like staging in contrast to former decades. In other words, the concept of media democracy, which helps the media system to deal with the circle of second-order observations between the media system and the political system tends to increase problems within the political system. It suggests a separation between politics and performance that does hardly provide an appropriate picture of political processes, in which the search for material solutions and the testing of public support for potential solutions with the help of the media are always intertwined (see Japp/Kusche 2004). However, the current mushrooming of political consultancies in Berlin suggests that political decision-makers in Germany increasingly believe in the necessity of such services. Another indication for this belief was the way the former government of social democrats and greens reacted to the unpopularity of its social security reforms (Hartz IV) in 2004. They interpreted it as a problem of better communicating the objectives of the reform, engaged a public relations firm to develop a communication campaign, and hoped for the best. However, the result of last year's election showed that this was not enough. Moreover, I would like to suggest that we can expect further political failures if the idea of a distinction between politicians as content experts and consultants as packaging experts, implied in the talk about media democracy, prevails.

Summary

The description of the relationship between media and politics as media democracy is primarily anchored in the mass media system. There it fulfils the function of assuring the system of the difference between staging and reality under conditions that could undermine this distinction. But the media prominence of the idea of media democracy has effects on the political system as well. It fosters the interest in the potential of political consultants and their techniques, although the separation between 'real' political work and media presentation is unlikely to help political practice. However, the result is a self-reinforcement of the idea of media democracy as the mass media (and social science) observe this growing relevance of political consulting.

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